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Opening Extract from...

The Little Girl of the Favela

Written by M. K. Bates

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Prologue

The four-year-old girl lay ill in the dark, shuttered bedroom. She had been running a high fever for days, with an aching head and body. The sounds of the *favela* (shanty town) where she lived, shouting, children playing, motorbikes, music, the occasional gunshot, had all become distant to her. Her grandmother was sitting on the edge of her bed, stroking her hair with bony fingers. The pair were normally inseparable, doing everything together, including sharing the same bed at night.

"I want some mango juice," the girl whispered to her granny.

"Yes, we will get some mango juice, only for you." The granny said it in a baby talk voice, a singsong way of speaking, still stroking the little girl's hair. She turned her head. "Fetch some mango juice," she shouted through the open bedroom door.

The little girl's mother entered with a glass of juice and handed it to her mother-in-law.

"Here, sit up," the granny said. The little girl sat up and sipped the juice, looking at her granny's wrinkly face and smiling. She knew nothing could harm her if Granny was there. She finished the juice and lay back down. "You look a little better. You look like you might be able to eat... I put a mango here." The granny rubbed the little girl's palm and put an imaginary mango in it. "I put a date here." She rubbed the girl's wrist. "I put a banana here." She moved up to her elbow joint. "I put an orange here." She squeezed her upper arm. "Where have they gone?" She tickled the girl under the arm. "They're here, aren't they?" She patted the girl's stomach and peered into her face laughing. The little girl dissolved into a mass of giggles. "You sleep now, little one."

The granny stood up and went to the door of the bedroom where the girl's mother was standing, looking anxious.

"Is she going to live?" the mother asked.

"Of course she is." The granny was known as something of a visionary in the *favela*, with quite a following of devotees,

and even rich people from downtown Rio would sometimes come to see her. "She will have a charmed life and be adored by everyone who meets her, not because of her looks or wit, but because of the love she gives. She will live for love. She will be very successful and rich. She will perform an act of great courage in order to save the lives of others."

"Oh, please God let that be right." The mother put her hands together as if in prayer.

Meanwhile, a pristine, shiny black Mercedes had stopped on the road at the foot of the *favela*. The lady in the back took off her Rolex watch and handed it to the chauffeur.

"I'll be three quarters of an hour. If I'm any longer, send out a search party."

The chauffeur laughed. "Yes, *senhora*. I'll be here. I won't go home without you."

The lady stepped out of the car and looked at the *favela*, sprawling up the hillside in front of her like an enormous rubbish tip, but one made of compact, bunker type houses of all shapes, sizes and colour, randomly sited, squeezed in close together. She was wearing simple beach clothes: a white blouse, light blue cotton trousers and sandals. This was in order to try and hide her wealth, yet any *Carioca* (native of Rio de Janeiro) would have looked at her and known, just by the stylish cut of her hair, her manicured hands, and her calm, comfortable body language, that she was a well-to-do, from downtown Rio or one of the coastal neighbourhoods. She took a handkerchief, doused in lavender oil, from her pocket and held it to her nose. She had prepared it earlier to protect herself from the stench of the *favela*, which was already invading her nostrils, even though she stood at the very edge of the slum. It was a mix, in variable quantities, of sewage, diesel fuel, nicotine and cooking oil, a noxious potion, like being downwind to a glue factory.

She left the safety of the car behind her and slowly picked her way across a piece of rocky waste ground, to a gap in a high wall, where two tough looking *bandidos*, in their early twenties and dressed in sportswear, were sitting on old wooden chairs. They were guarding a path that ascended into the township. A box of firecrackers was at their feet, to let off as a

warning in the instance of a police raid, telling everyone to take shelter from stray bullets.

"Good morning, *senhora*." There was deference in the voice, despite the fact that it was the gangsters who had the guns on their laps.

She held the handkerchief discretely by her side. "Hello. I've come to see the fortune teller."

"Of course. You wouldn't visit for any other reason. Come with me. I will guide you. You will be safe. The cocaine baron of this township has granted safe passage to anyone wanting to see the old lady fortune teller. She brings honour and respect to our community."

The coffee coloured gangster, who had done all the talking, left his black companion behind to guard the *favela* entrance and proceeded to guide the lady up the hill, up the narrow path, past the little houses, the piles of decaying rubbish and the little groups of children and teenagers who stood and stared. They turned off the main path and started to twist this way and that down a labyrinth of smaller alleyways. As they turned one corner, the gangster looked back at her.

"*Senhora*, don't look to your left."

Instinctively, the well-to-do lady looked to her left. The dead body of a mixed race young man, dressed in a white T shirt and navy blue shorts, lay face up on the side of the path. His feet were bare, and his face was swollen and bruised from a punishment beating, the skin broken in a few places and already attracting flies. The lady let out a gasp of shock. The body would stay there till the man's relatives came to take it away. No police or medical teams would be entering the *favela*, for fear of hostility or attack from the local gangs. If the police were to enter, it would be in a small armoured personnel carrier, and in order to capture drugs or shoot-to-kill gang members. The gangster saw the lady's distress.

"Aah youth!" He shook his head. "The things they get up to. Very bad."

Her face looked crumpled. "The poor boy...why?"

"Oh, for a reason," the gangster said enthusiastically, beckoning to the lady to continue walking. "I heard about it. He

put baking soda in the cocaine he was selling, to make it go further. He brought a bad reputation to our *favela*. People will stop coming to buy cocaine from us. He kills our business, so the cocaine baron said, 'we kill him.'"

The lady looked down at the ground and sighed, as though overwhelmed and thinking her visit may have been a mistake.

After ten minutes, halfway up the hill, they reached the fortune teller's house. Inside, the old granny sat on the edge of the bed, watching her little granddaughter sleep and gently laying her healing hands on the girl's head.

"*Mamãe*." The little girl's mother called to her mother-in-law from the living room. "A lady has come for a reading. I'll stay in the bedroom until you've finished."

The granny gently stroked the little girl's hair, got up and went to the front door.

"Hello, *senhora*." The granny smiled, and then nodded, as though in deference to the visitor. She turned to the gangster. "Wait there." The voice was less respectful as she pointed to a chair, just outside the front door. "We'll be about half an hour." She turned back to the lady. "Please come in, *senhora*." She ushered the lady into the living room and shut the front door behind them. "Sit down." She indicated the place at the table where the lady should sit, fetched her fortune-telling kit from a sideboard and sat herself down opposite. She then spread a brown, velour cloth over the table, placed a crystal ball on a stand in the centre and put a pack of tarot cards in front of the visitor.

"Why I've come... " the lady started.

"I know why you've come." The granny's voice was definite, almost fierce. "You think your husband's having an affair, and you don't want to lose him. He's very wealthy, he's a good father to your three children, and you still love him."

The lady's mouth dropped open in astonishment as she took an inward breath. "Yes," she said softly.

"Shuffle the cards." When they were shuffled, the granny spread them face down across the cloth like a fan. "Pick ten cards." The lady hesitantly picked out ten from the pack, and the

granny laid them out horizontally and proceeded to turn them over one by one to reveal the picture underneath. The first card said The Lovers, a naked man and woman. "Yes, he's having an affair." The granny nodded. "It's with his secretary."

"I knew it was her. The bitch. He always stays late at the office now. She's only interested in his money and glamorous lifestyle."

The lady sighed as the granny turned the second card. It said The Devil, ugly with horns. "He could not resist the temptation." The granny looked up at the lady.

"She's very alluring. She wears very revealing clothes to the office."

The granny turned the third card, The Tower, a teetering inferno of mayhem. "You're worrying. Stop worrying! Everything will be okay for you."

"You think so?" The lady looked so sad, like she didn't believe things could work out for her.

The granny turned the fourth card, The Empress, a motherly looking queen. "You spend too much time with your children. Remember he needs your attention as well."

"I'm a good mother. Surely he appreciates that? Our children are so precious to me."

"Yes, you may be a good mother, but do you want them to have a father in the house too?" The granny's face had lots of lines, but it was still handsome, and she had piercing, dark eyes. They burned into the lady who flushed and held her head down as if in penance.

"Yes. You're right. I must make more time for him."

The granny turned the fifth card, Queen of Pentacles, a serene, homely woman on a throne. "You have become too much of a mother. In the bedroom, you must still be sexy. You can be the Madonna in every room of the house, except the bedroom." The lady continued to look down as the granny turned the sixth card, Two of Pentacles, a man juggling. "He will continue the affair for a while, juggling the two of you in his life." The lady sighed as the granny turned the seventh card, The Hanged Man, a man suspended upside down against a tree. "You still have some difficult times to go through." The granny turned

the eighth card, Three of Swords, piercing a red heart. "There will be three of you in this marriage for a while." The granny turned the ninth card, Ten of Pentacles, a domestic scene, but with the woman looking concerned at the man. "You feel everything is upside down in your world right now."

"Maybe I should divorce him." The lady said it in an empty headed sort of way.

"Don't run away. Fight for your man. Don't expect everything to be easy." The granny gave the lady another piercing look. She then turned the tenth and final card, Two of Cups, a happy, harmonious couple facing each other, looking like they were renewing their wedding vows. "See. Stop worrying! It will be just you and your husband together again. Everything will be good and happy for you." The granny gave a big chuckle.

The reading was finished. The lady smiled for the first time.

"Really? Is it possible everything will work out?"

"Of course it is. Stop worrying. Just do as I said. Do you have any more questions?" The granny looked at the lady.

"No. Thank you. Thank you so much. I feel much better." The lady had a relieved look and reached across the table to grasp the granny's bony hands. "How can I repay you?"

"Put a donation in the dish." She pointed to a glass bowl on the television in the corner of the room and the lady got up and put some notes in.

"But how else can I repay you?"

"That's enough. I don't need any more payment."

"No, really, I want to help you."

The granny looked distant for a few seconds. "I would never normally say this, and I don't know why, but okay, there is something. Come through here." The granny opened the bedroom door. "This is my granddaughter." She said it quietly, in order not to wake the sick little girl, who was sleeping. A chocolate coloured teddy bear lay in bed beside her.

The lady leant over the little girl and touched her hair. "Oh, she's so cute." The lady half closed her eyes and placed her hand across her chest, as though to contain her feelings. Some

tears started to well up in her eyes. "She's so adorable."

"You can help her, when I'm gone."

The lady thought for a few seconds. "Yes. I can be her godmother. Here's my phone number." The lady took a card from her pocket and handed it to the granny. "Any time you need help, just ask."

The granny scrutinised the card. It said, "Maria Josefina de Alencar," which meant the lady was descended from Portuguese aristocracy.

"Thank you. God bless you." The granny bowed her head slightly, in deference.

The lady's tears were flowing more freely now. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I'm crying. I've been so worried. I think all the tension's being released."

"Come back to the living room and I'll give you some healing."

After the lady had left, the little girl's mother emerged from the corner of the bedroom where she had been sitting quietly. She went and sat on the bed by her daughter, who was still sleeping, and looked at her mother-in-law.

"What you said earlier, about her having a charmed life, is it true?"

"Of course it is. I can see it so clearly, but I won't live to see it happen. Your daughter will be the saviour of your family, but I will be gone by then. I will be with you in spirit only."

FIFTEEN YEARS LATER

1. Hamburg Arrival

He had been travelling all day, and it was a January late Sunday afternoon and getting cold and dark, as Shaun Johnson arrived outside the apartment. In the one hand he was holding a weekend bag, which he put down beside him, and in the other, a bouquet of yellow roses, which he tucked behind his back. He stood for a few moments staring at the doorbell and the name 'Neddermeyer,' written above it in small, typed letters. He took a deep breath and puffed out his cheeks as he expelled the air. He twitched his mouth to one side.

The words of his friend Pete, down the pub in London the night before, were still ringing in his ears. Pete had been holding Shaun's shiny black iPod phone in the palm of his hand and looking at Christiana Neddermeyer's photo.

"Are you going to Germany, just to get into a tart's knickers? You're not, are you?" Yorkshire men often answered their own questions.

Shaun laughed and gave a big smile. "No, I'm going on business. But if this girl puts out," Shaun tapped Christiana's photo, "two birds with one stone."

Pete nodded. "Aye. I remember the beautiful Hamburger alright. I remember you raving about her." He studied Christiana's photo for a moment, peering through his black rimmed glasses, perched on his beaky nose. "Aye. She's a looker, alright. So she's invited you to stay in her apartment?" Pete's brow furrowed beneath his greasy black hair, as though he was put out. Where women were concerned, Shaun could get away with things that other men couldn't."

"Not exactly. I haven't been in contact since we met six months ago."

"So how are you going to stay with her?" Pete challenged.

"She gave me her address and said I could visit any time, so I'm going to turn up on spec, unannounced, just knock her up."

Pete shook his head and looked away, as though he needed a moment to take it in. "God, you've got some guts. I wouldn't have the nerve to turn up without any warning. What if she's got a boyfriend?"

"I beat a hasty retreat and find a hotel." Shaun mimicked a running motion with his arms.

"You're a lad, Shaun." Pete shook his head again. "Let me show you something I learned recently. Give me your hand. Hold it out straight." Pete took hold of Shaun's hand and examined the ends of his fingers. "Ah yes, I thought so. You see how your ring finger, your third finger is longer than your index finger?" Pete demonstrated by tracing a line between the two. "That means you're a risk taker."

"Maybe that's why I'm so attractive to women."

"But you've had a dry patch lately." Pete gave Shaun a quizzical look.

"Well at least I haven't had to spend any money on girlfriends."

"But I think you've spent quite a bit drowning your sorrows down here. You know what? I'm going to put money on't table." He opened his wallet and slapped a note down. He was a teacher of physics and maths, so not overly paid, but as Head of Department, he could indulge himself with a few extravagant gestures. "I'll give you fifty quid if you get her in the sack, and vice versa."

Shaun raised his eyebrows at the amount of money Pete was willing to risk, but they shook hands on it while Shaun laughed.

It wasn't so funny now he was actually standing outside Christiana's apartment. She had seemed like someone who might spread herself thin, everybody's friend, when he had met her in London six months previously. She had been talking and smiling to everyone in the bar near enough and plenty of men had been

buzzing round her. But it was Shaun who had got to sit on the barstool beside her, making her laugh with a string of jokes. Did she take seriously inviting him to Hamburg? Would she remember him even? Was she at home or might some caveman of a boyfriend answer the door? There was only one way to find out. He took another deep breath and rang the bell.

The door flew open and there she was. Christiana didn't look particularly German, more a smouldering Mediterranean beauty with black hair down to her shoulders, a long face and a full sensual mouth, which she emphasised with red lipstick.

"Might you possibly be interested in buying a set of thirty six encyclopaedias, printed in English?" Shaun smiled at her.

Christiana blinked and looked down at Shaun's bag beside him. "No, thank you," she said softly in her beautiful, refined voice, and started to close the door.

"Christiana." He brought his arm round to reveal the bouquet of flowers. "Have you forgotten me already?"

She opened the door wide again and stood looking at him, like she was trying to puzzle something out. Suddenly her eyes and mouth opened in astonishment. "I thought your face was familiar. Shaun, from London?" she said in her broken English. "What are you doing here?" She sounded more surprised than pleased.

"I've come on business, for a meeting tomorrow morning. You said I could stay." Shaun maintained his smile.

"Did I? Oh no!" She tapped her forehead as if to say, 'silly girl'. "How much had I had to drink? My apartment's very small."

"I don't mind squeezing up with you."

She laughed momentarily, but then looked serious, her face tense, like she was trying to make a decision. In the silence, he gestured for her to take the flowers. She hesitated, gave a nervous laugh and then accepted the bouquet. She gave the blooms a sniff, and then just stood there.

Shaun wrapped his arms around his body and pretended to shiver. "I'm not a polar bear, Christiana. It's cold out here."

She frowned. "You're a naughty man, Shaun, surprising

me like this." But then she sighed and looked a little more relaxed. "Anyway, don't stand out there. I suppose it's okay for you to come in. It's not like I have a gorilla or a boyfriend lurking inside."

She gestured for him to enter and he felt like he was breaching a fortress wall as he stepped into the warmth of the little hallway and put his bag down next to a pair of ice skates and some football boots that had been thrown carelessly into a corner. He wondered who would be the owner of the pair of boots, but said nothing. She embraced him and gave him a kiss on both cheeks.

Christiana was wearing a green silk skirt, quite short so that it showed off her shapely legs and on top she wore a thin white V neck jumper that did not leave the shape of her ample breasts to the imagination. The jumper had no sleeves and revealed her well-developed biceps and forearms.

"Leave your bag in the hall. If you're staying, I'll have to sort your bedding out later." She sighed, as though it was going to be some bother for her, and led him from the small lobby into her living room. "Sit down." She gestured to the sofa. "You must have been born under a lucky star. Twenty minutes later and you wouldn't have caught me." There seemed to be a touch of resentment in her voice, that he had just managed to catch her. "I'm meeting some friends tonight. We're going to see the Hamburg Freezers play the Berlin Ice Barons... hmm... so what would you do?" She thought for a few moments. "You like ice hockey, if I can get you a ticket?"

"Great. That would be the first time I've been to an ice hockey match. They fight with their sticks, don't they?" He gave her a cute smile, trying to turn on the charm.

She suddenly looked more relaxed and laughed. "I've never seen them fighting." She gave him an intense gaze, like when he had first met her in London six months previously. It seemed to promise quite a bit, that he might be in with a chance. "Let me put these lovely flowers in some water and I'll make you some tea."

With that, she disappeared into the kitchen and Shaun sat alone in the living room. He sank back into the sofa, feeling

relieved, thinking she could hardly throw him out now he was in. The atmosphere in her apartment was easygoing. For six years Christiana had been an English teacher in a tough Hamburg School, but she had given up the well-paid job, she hadn't told Shaun why, for a life on social security, which she supplemented by translating English into German in her spare time. Sunday was her day of rest.

The living room was large and dominated by two book cases, facing each other from opposite sides of the room, both sagging under the weight of the hardbacks and paperbacks. There was a music system next to the book case on the right, with a pile of albums set beneath it and next to that was a small portable television tucked away, as though it was only occasionally watched. In the left hand corner by the only window, which overlooked the street, was her desk with a laptop, lamp and chair, and above was a cork notice board, covered in photos and yellow sticky notes. Opposite the window was the sofa on which Shaun was sitting, and apart from that the only other seats were large cushions scattered around the floor.

She popped her head round the living room door.

"Settling in okay?" she enquired.

"Fine, thank you." He pointed to the corner of the room, where there was a pile of knitting magazines and a basket of wool with knitting needles resting on top. "I've heard about the new craze for knitting and that you have your own website, 'StitchyBitch' isn't it?"

She laughed. "It's 'Stitch and Bitch'. It relaxes me... not StitchyBitch!" she said as she left the room again.

She returned a few minutes later with a plate of cream cakes and some tea on a tray. There was a coffee table by Shaun and she leant across it to put the tray down. He could see so much of her breasts as she bent down, he thought she couldn't have been wearing a bra.

She sat beside him on the sofa. "You've thrown me into a state of shock, Shaun. I still can't believe that you'd turn up after six months. Sorry if I was a bit off with you. Did you hire a car from the airport?"

"I did, but look, I can't eat all those cakes." He made a

feminine gesture with his face and hands, "I have my figure to consider."

She suddenly gave him a hug. "Oh! It's a nice surprise to see you again."

He was a handsome man with fair hair. A broad forehead and a strong chin made him look confident, but his features were not too angular, so he had the more refined looks of a Hollywood leading man. She knew he was a businessman, she remembered that from their meeting in London. She had the impression he wasn't so successful at the moment, but he was young and there was always the chance that one day he might be wealthy.

Shaun was enjoying Christiana's welcome and her come-hither clothes. It seemed to him, alone with her in her little apartment, that he had her on a plate. He took hold of her hand.

"There's something I wanted to tell you."

She looked down at the hand holding hers and raised her eyebrows slightly in surprise, but she carried on smiling and leant her head forward in anticipation. She smelt of soap and freshly laundered clothes and quite a heady perfume which he hadn't noticed earlier, so he presumed it was freshly applied following his arrival.

"Okay..." She hesitated. "But I managed to get you a ticket for the ice hockey, so we'll have to leave soon, or we'll miss the start of the game."

He had intended to tell her he found her very attractive and that he hoped she might feel the same. But the moment had suddenly evaporated. "It'll keep. On a serious note, will there be food tonight? I've only had aeroplane food today."

"Well, there's lots of beer on sale, and you can get things like sausage and chips, not quite your," she put on an English gentleman's accent, "bangers and mash... but also there's an Indian restaurant, with live music. We could go after the match if you can wait that long."

"Great. Maybe I could make a quick sandwich? Would you mind? Just to sustain life for a few hours? Don't want a corpse on your hands, do you?"

He made one from some ham Christiana had in her

fridge and placed it in a plastic carrier bag which he stuffed into his coat pocket. Christiana put on a red, skiing puffer jacket over her skimpy clothes and they set off for the ice hockey match in Shaun's rented car.

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They had streamed down the road with the crowds of fans, passed through the sports arena entrance and were now standing in the open space of the services perimeter. Christiana's friends, about twelve of them, looking well dressed and relaxed, were mingling with drinks in their hands. After a few minutes, one of them handed Shaun a plastic *stein* of beer.

"Hi, I'm Wolfgang. Good to have you in Germany. Where are you staying?" He was a large man with a long nose and muscular build, and stood smiling at Shaun.

"Cheers!" Shaun raised his glass. "With Christiana."

"Oh, her flat is very small. Mine is much more spacious, and in a more stylish part of Hamburg. You're welcome to stay with me if you like."

"That's kind. I'll see how I get on." Shaun took in the size of the man for a moment. "Wow, you look fit. How many times a week do you go to the gym?" He touched the man's bulging bicep. It was not something he would normally have done, but he was maybe tired from the travelling.

"Every day." Wolfgang lurched forward to move his head closer, invading Shaun's personal space and breathing beer fumes over him. Shaun backed away in an involuntary movement.

"So you can have all the beer, pizza and ice cream you want?" Shaun looked uncertain as he said it and didn't wait for a reply. "Will you excuse me?"

He had glanced across and saw that Christiana was looking annoyed. She was talking to a long-haired young man, who was wearing a leather jacket. He had been holding a crisp above Christiana's head, like he was feeding a dog, but then he ate it himself. Shaun went over and the young man turned to him.

"Hiya. I'm Gunter. What brings you to Germany?"

"Hi, I'm Shaun, here on business. I'm an entrepreneur."

"Good for Christiana." Gunter looked at her knowingly and winked. She let out a sigh and looked away, as though exasperated.

Shaun was puzzled and was going to ask her if everything was all right, but at that moment her group of friends started to move, to go through to the auditorium to find their seats and Shaun just went with the flow. He sat next to Christiana, with Gunter on his other side.

"Here's a programme," said Gunter.

Shaun opened it and studied the team line-ups for a few seconds. "Hang on, all the players are Canadian."

"Correct." Gunter nodded. "They're mostly Canadian, with a few Czechs and Russians. The Canadians invented the game, you know."

"But why no home-grown players?" Shaun looked at Gunter.

"We don't have so much ice. Canadian babies have ice skates strapped to their feet as soon as they can walk."

Shaun laughed. "Good answer! Sold, to the man in the leather jacket." He turned his head at that moment to look at the players who had come out to warm up, the Freezers in white, the Ice Barons in red, and caught sight of Christiana pouting at him, as if annoyed that he wasn't paying her any attention. He looked back at Gunter. "Excuse me," he said and then turned to Christiana. "Beauty is in the eye of the beer holder." He raised his *stein* of beer and took a sip. He leant towards Christiana. "Your friends are okay. I've already had one offer of a place to stay, if you were thinking of throwing me out."

She laughed. "No, you're okay." She put her hand on his arm and gave it a squeeze. "But who invited you to stay?"

"Wolfgang, the muscle man. He gave me this beer."

"He lives in the St. Georg district on the other side of the Alster Lake, it's the gay area... you're better off with me, Shaun."

"I'm sticking with you." He squeezed her arm in return and then held on to the material of her coat, tugging at it for a few seconds. "I thought Gunter spoke very good English."

Christiana frowned. She leant forward like a conspirator

and whispered, "he's a hippy and a freak. I don't know why I bother with him. Let's ignore him."

Shaun was again puzzled. He wondered why Gunter evoked such a strong reaction in Christiana. "Of course. No problem," he said softly. "Look, I've turned my back on him." He angled himself round a little further so that he was facing Christiana square on.

She gazed at him intensely for a few seconds, like she was getting full on, and then put her face close to his. She whispered in his ear, with her soft, seductive voice, "you're not my usual type, but you're cute." With that she kissed his hair and then resumed sitting back in her chair. The match started at that moment and the crowd began to shout encouragement to the players, but Shaun didn't notice. He was numb. It was the first definite come on she had given him. He sat there in a haze, like he was drunk.

The game came and went without Shaun noticing much. In any case, he was not really a sporty kind of man; he didn't play golf or watch football. He was more a music, theatre, stand-up comedy, artistic sort of person, but what he mainly cared about was making money. With time he settled down to nibbling his sandwich and sipping his beer to keep the boredom at bay. Nothing seemed to be happening, in any case. No side was able to slot the puck into the little area of the goal. That is, until about half way through the second session when the Berlin forward barged into the Hamburg goalie and pushed him over. The Hamburg goalie got up and punched the Berliner. A fist fight broke out, looking like a scene from a Laurel and Hardy film. Shaun chuckled and leant forward in his chair, at last showing some interest in the game.

"I told you they like to fight." He nudged Christiana.

"But they're not using their sticks." They both laughed.

After that, with the delinquent players placed in the cooler, Hamburg's substitute goalie, being more of a field player, started to let in a goal every five minutes. The game ended 11-0 to Berlin.

As everyone stood up to make their way out of the auditorium, Gunter was busy collecting up empty *steins*.

"You're not paid to do that." Shaun looked at him with mock seriousness.

"There's a euro refund on each one," Gunter replied.

"Wow. Can I help you?" Shaun gave him a thumbs up.

They went back to the hospitality and services perimeter and Shaun slipped away to the toilets. Suddenly he was aware of Wolfgang standing at the urinal next to him.

"We bought it here, so we may as well leave it here," Shaun joked, but the smile dropped off his face as he caught sight of Wolfgang's monster penis poking out from his trousers.

Wolfgang turned his head to look at Shaun. "The offer's still on for my place."

"That's really sweet." Shaun gulped as he fastened his zip. "See you around." He patted Wolfgang on the back as he walked off.

"Aren't you tempted then?" Wolfgang, still mid-flow, called out.

Shaun rushed back to the hospitality area. "Shall we go to the restaurant now?" He looked at Christiana. "Wolfgang's getting up close and personal."

"Of course, let's go."

They returned to the car and Christiana navigated the drive to the restaurant.

"Did you do anything to encourage him?"

"Not really... well maybe... I don't know."

At that moment, Shaun's mobile rang.

"Sorry, I'll take this in case it's my mother worrying if I'm alright."

"Have you touched base yet, you haven't have you?" Pete's voice boomed through the car.

"Hi Pete. I'm just driving right now. I'll catch you later. Give me an hour." Shaun switched the phone off.

"What did he mean, have you touched base yet?" Christiana asked.

"Oh, just checking up on me. Did the plane touch down okay, did I pick up the hire car okay, that sort of thing."

"He's a good friend. I would like to meet Pete. How do you know him?"

"We go to the same pub. It's our local."

"I notice he speaks differently to you."

"He's from Yorkshire in the North of England."

"Ave you tooched bayse yut." She imitated Pete's accent.

They parked and went in to the Indian restaurant that had advertised live music. The German waitress wore Arab style clothes, with red, baggy trousers, a blue waistcoat, a turban headdress that concealed all her hair and a little curly dagger hanging from her belt. She looked slightly embarrassed about being in the costume and her wan face peeped out from beneath the overlarge turban. They both gave her an order for *Thali*, which they could see from the photo on the menu would come as a selection of eight different dishes, served in small stainless steel bowls on a round tray. When it arrived, it looked and smelt delicious: rice, dhal, vegetables, chapattis, papadams, raita (yoghourt), chutney and pickle.

There was just the sound of appreciative chomping for some time, until Shaun broke the silence:

"Is it okay?" He looked at Christiana, who was sitting opposite him.

"Hhmm, except the vegetables are a bit oily."

"Yes, and they don't give you much either." Shaun held up the little dish of vegetables to emphasise his point.

"Indian food is so tasty. We have very few Indian restaurants in Germany, but I think you have four or five on every high street."

Shaun nodded. "India and Pakistan used to be English colonies. You would really enjoy London. There'd be lots of opportunities for you, and anyway, you can come and work for me. I have a little office and warehouse of ten staff. It would be a wonderful chance to improve your English." Shaun often got carried away when he was on holiday, offering attractive women jobs. No one had ever taken him up on it though.

"Thank you. That's really kind of you." She reached across the table and squeezed his hand. "I'll think about it."

Shaun was at last beginning to feel mellow and relaxed after his long day. A little wave of euphoria swept through him. "What made you give up teaching? That must have been a really

good career." His voice was upbeat.

"Yes, it was." She hesitated. "I suppose you could say it gave me up. I had an affair with one of my students." She stared at him, like she was trying to read his face for a reaction.

"Wow!" He started to choke and took a sip of water. "Excuse me," he wheezed. "A bit of chilli took me by surprise... So," he thumped his chest and then gave a nervous laugh, "is there anything else you need to tell me, young lady?" He gave another nervous laugh while she continued to study him, unsmiling. "How old was he?" Shaun added in the awkward silence.

"Fifteen, but he had the body of a twenty-year-old."

"Christiana! You'd have gone to prison in the U.S. for that." Shaun's face had flushed slightly, but he hoped it was not noticeable in the subdued lighting of the restaurant.

"We are more liberal in Germany, not embarrassed about our sexuality." There was some anger in her voice and she continued to look at him like she was working out whether he was judging her. "Do you think I was wrong to sleep with him?"

"Hey... no, of course not... I'm a live and let live sort of person. Every youth develops at their own speed. The age of consent is a very generalised thing." He glanced at Christiana's bosom and sculpted arms. "I understand how it happened, obviously."

She gave a satisfied smile and nodded, like she was content with what Shaun had said, but he turned his head to look at his surroundings, as if trying to defuse the situation. It was by now late evening and the restaurant was quite full, the promise of live entertainment having attracted a large amount of diners. The band was on a break, but Shaun could see their set up in one corner, a sitar, tabla drums and a bamboo flute, arranged against a colourful backdrop.

"I'd give my right arm to be able to play a musical instrument properly." Shaun gestured to the little tableau when suddenly, the three musicians emerged from a back room, a tall man and two women. They sat down behind their instruments. The man, sitting at the tabla drums, picked up his microphone.

"Good evening ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to our final set of the evening. For those who missed the first one, we're

Indigo Eye and we're from Brighton, England."

"Hey, I came to Germany to get away from English people." Shaun shrugged and turned to look at them as they started their first number.

They began with slow, resonating drone notes from the solo sitar, sounding like the Aborigines' didgeridoo. Then the flute entered with a few melodic snatches in a low register, also very slow. This became faster, higher pitched and more mellifluous as the minutes passed. The flute player looked like she was in a trance. After about seven minutes, the tabla entered, slow single beats to start with:

Dhaa Dhin Dhin Dhaa, Dhaa Dhin Dhin Dhaa, Naa Tin Tin Taa, Taa Dhin Dhin Dhaa

After a few minutes, the man upped the tempo to double time:

TaTe TeTa TeTe TaTa, TeTe DhaGe DhiNa GeNa, TaTe TeTa TeTe TaTa, TeTe DhaGe DhiNa GeNa

Everybody had warmed to the atmosphere and was either engrossed in conversation or watching the band. Two street boys, in their late twenties, wearing sportswear, had slipped in to the restaurant unnoticed by everyone except Shaun. There was a smaller one, talking on a mobile phone, and a taller one, quite muscle bound, carrying a shoulder bag. Shaun thought they looked out of place. He would have expected them to eat in a fast food joint. The muscular one disappeared into the toilet, while the smaller one waited in the corner nearby, talking on his phone but casually surveying the diners. After a few minutes, the muscular one emerged from the toilet and exchanged a few words with his accomplice. The smaller one started to talk more loudly on his phone and went up to a table of diners.

"Excuse me, speak English, speak English, you speak English, yes?" His tone was loud and emphatic, commandeering everyone's attention. Meanwhile, his friend had deliberately dropped some coins on the floor behind the table and was crawling underneath the chairs. He picked up a lady's handbag and dropped it into the shoulder bag he was carrying.

Having watched the whole thing, Shaun strolled over.

"Oi mate, that doesn't look like your bag, or are you getting

ready for a sex change operation?" Shaun stood between the thief and the exit, grabbed the shoulder bag and removed the lady's handbag concealed inside. By now some of the diners had caught on what was happening and were looking round. The thieves casually walked out, but the muscular man shot Shaun an angry glance and raised his middle finger to him.

"Next time you wave, use all your fingers, pal," Shaun called out, waving goodbye.

"*Danke, danke schoen*," the lady, reunited with her handbag, shook Shaun's hand.

He shrugged off her thanks and returned to his seat.

"You're a hero," Christiana said, as Shaun sat back down.

"Ah, it was nothing."

The band had continued, oblivious to what had happened, the flute player still in her trance and the tabla player still absorbed in his rhythms.

Shaun settled the bill and they left and were soon back at Christiana's cosy little flat. It was an unusual situation, in that they were virtually strangers in a small, intimate space, having only met six months previously for about half an hour in London in a hotel bar. Christiana went to make some tea and Shaun thought he would, in the meantime, poke his nose into her life. He went over to the notice board above her desk. There was what was obviously a family photograph of Christiana's mother and father, still young and in summer clothes, with their four children outside the door of their cottage. It had a freshness and simplicity of a bygone age. Shaun could see the young Christiana at the front of the group, down on one knee, and in a striking pose, shouting and waving simultaneously as though some electricity was flowing through her. She seemed to stand out from the photo in three dimensions. Everyone else was posing normally, but it was as though she wanted all the attention for herself. As if in confirmation, in each corner of the board, she had pinned a postcard of iconic beauties from the Golden Age of film: Marilyn Monroe, Ava Gardner, Hedy Lamarr and Marlene Dietrich, and superimposed at the bottom of the photo of Dietrich was a verse and the chorus from the diva's signature song:

*Men cluster to me
Like moths around a flame
And if their wings burn
I know I'm not to blame.
Falling in love again
Never wanted to
What am I to do?
I can't help it.*

Suddenly, Shaun noticed a photo of a very muscular man, aged maybe late thirties, taken at a picnic, sitting there grinning. He was wearing a sleeveless vest and very short shorts, which seemed to contain an inappropriate bulge. It was a strange photo, incongruous amongst the family snaps. It was almost like a piece of soft porn beefcake. Christiana entered the room at that point and placed a tray of tea on the floor by the sofa. Seeing Shaun scrutinising the photos, she came behind him and put her hands over his eyes from behind, squidding her breasts, like sea sponges, into his back.

"These are all in my private collection... only joking, you like my photos?" She let go her hold and came to stand beside him, slightly in front, smiling. She pointed to the man at the picnic. "This is my boyfriend, Ralf. He's a cage fighter in Berlin. I was there over the New Year. I'm planning to move to Berlin to live with him. He was an old boyfriend from years ago. We've got back together."

Christiana did not notice that Shaun had turned his face to the window. He had hoped he might get a girlfriend out of this trip, even if she did live in Germany. Christiana was busy looking at the family photograph.

"This is my family outside our weekend cottage: my parents, two sisters and one brother. Look at me shouting. I was always climbing trees, cycling, playing football, always boys' things. I never sat playing with dolls or doing anything girlish." Only a minute had elapsed when she turned her head to look at Shaun. "Oh Shaun! I'm so sorry!" She put her hand on his arm. "You must have had a really long day. Maybe the ice hockey was a

mistake. Or has Ralf being a cage fighter upset you? You look so tired."

"Yeah, all of a sudden, I've run out of juice. No, I'm not scared about Ralf."

"I spoke to him this afternoon. He's in Berlin! That's 250 kilometres away."

"Really, no problem. You've been a great hostess. Let's just drink our tea and then I must get to bed. My business appointment is at 11 a.m. tomorrow and I'll need to have my eye on the ball as we'll be talking numbers."

They sat on the sofa and drank their tea, Shaun at one end, Christiana at the other.

"So what's your usual type of boyfriend, if it isn't someone like me?"

"I didn't say I didn't like you. Don't take it the wrong way, but I usually date cage fighters, bodybuilders or footballers."

"So how come one of them hasn't tied you down, how come a beautiful, nubile woman has reached the age of thirty and is still unmarried?"

"Well, I've had lots of affairs, but I don't like to settle. I get bored easily and then I like to move on. Why do I need to be married? In fact, you know something?" She became a bit breathy, as though nervous. "I've had three abortions rather than get tied down to a man. The men wanted me to have the baby in every case. They wanted to marry me. But I wanted to stay free. I cannot be tied down."

Shaun was looking serious and trying not to frown. He was thinking Christiana was promiscuous and silly. She was more like a man, sowing his wild oats, and she had made the same mistake three times. She was not describing his ideal woman. He was normally attracted to girls who combined warmth with orderliness, someone who could support an ambitious businessman. He wasn't often wrong, but this time his instincts had led him down a false trail. He had been taken in by her glamour.

It was about midnight when they finally retired. Shaun's made up bed was in the living room, which had no door to the hallway. He was already settling down to sleep after his long day,

when Christiana passed by as she returned from the bathroom to her bedroom. She came into the living room and knelt down beside his bed, so her head was right by his. She looked at him.

"Everything okay?" Her voice was soft and warm and he could smell the peppermint toothpaste on her breath.

"I'm fine, thanks," he said drowsily.

"I'm glad you came. I wasn't sure when you first turned up. I almost didn't let you in, but I've enjoyed your company. Goodnight, then. Sleep well." She kissed him on the forehead, got up and went into her bedroom.

He was confused as to why she was encouraging him. She already had a boyfriend, and in any case, they were not each other's type. He fell into an uneasy sleep, but hoped his business meeting the next day would lead to good things.