

Powerhouse

Meeting her here was never going to be easy. The turbine room was cavernous, much bigger than Isaac thought it would be, after the conversion, all the hoopla surrounding the opening of the Tate Modern more than justified. But she was nowhere to be found, and all the faces of all the partygoers were closed to him. And to open them, to ask if anyone knew her, would require a reason. Saying 'I have a blind date tonight by the name of Lily Simonian, do you know her?' was hardly an open door policy—instead, he'd just have to hover by the canapés.

"Welcome," the voices swirled around him, each their own farewell to his hopes.
"Goodbye—hello—goodbye!"

Hello? He wanted to shout, straight down the hall which seemed to stretch past forever. He'd been here an hour, an eternal amount of time. Outside the glass doors he could see a flame eater plying his trade; what happened, he wondered, if the fire didn't die in the belly? How many nights has this man spent in Accident and Emergency? Watched from his hospital bed the white man dashing through the green exit sign, flickering on the wall like a taunt?

I need a new strategy, Isaac thought. *Maybe she's trying a game of hide-and-seek. Maybe I should play along. Or maybe enough time will pass that she'll get intrigued, and search me out. Wouldn't I love to lord that over her. Follow the leader, my arse.* But to absent himself from the crowd meant giving up, and no one, especially not his date, would respect him for that. Besides, he told himself, his brain hadn't had a good workout in weeks. Intelligence was like any other muscle, from time to time it needed a good, sleek run around the track—and not the kind you could get from books.

From across the hall he spied a sundress stained with daffodils snake past the bar. Who was *that*, he thought, with legs like a priestess and god knows what other mysteries. Weaving past a clutch of curators to the central stairwell, he found a step fairly high up and looked over the milling crowd. *Nothing down low that colour*, he lamented. *But get a grip, no reason to be sad yet.*

"So happy to meet you!" A smile to the left of him exclaimed. It was too sunny in here, everyone chattering away; in conversation, Isaac preferred shade. By now the turbine room was so thick with people there was no distinction between one body and the next; but again, to escape would merit a seductive demerit—for now, he reckoned, he just had to take it on the chin and keep an eye out for her. Suddenly, through a wine glass, he saw—was it—"Mark?"

'Isaac, you old bastard, it's been ages—since your anniversary party, no? Or was it mine? Must have been yours; mine was about as fun as a sleepover in a graveyard. Nothing like a little fire in the marriage, no?'

Or in a coal mine, Isaac thought. His former coworker stood there breathing expectantly, waiting for Isaac to banter in response. Not likely—Mark was sucking up all the remaining air in the room. Besides, five sentences in and Isaac was already bored. A different tack: "So, have you made chairman yet, or is Wilkins still running the place with his velvet grip?"

"Hardly," Mark chortled, "The old man's been there so long even the investors are bored of his returns. Sure, everyone's feeling the fulfilment of margins through the roof. But another year and Wilkins is done. Dusted."

"Sounds like he'll make a clean getaway," Isaac mused. A man pushed past, wearing a steel spring for a hat.

"Oh, he's water under the bridge. The only thing we lack is enough votes. We'll need them sooner or later—there's a real hunger for new vision at the top, like Cowley."

One thing Isaac admired about Mark was his ability to constantly speak in abstractions; his meaning was always changing, depending on the light. It was a useful skill in a room full of people who wanted your job; it was also partly why Isaac decided he didn't want to play that game any longer, and had left the firm, despite its philanthropic interest in the arts, a year back.

"But Cowley can be violent," Mark continued, "lately he's been treating the new partner like a real punching bag. I think it's because his son fell in with a bunch of yobs, been spending

nights in lockup, and he needs someone to take it out on. That whole culture, the drinking, the fighting—it's a mould on society, don't you think?"

"Sure—yes," Isaac mumbled, distracted by a dress the colour of mildew. Green, shot through with tiny dark stippling—what was the designer thinking, a garment made out of grass? Or was it a more iridescent green, that shifted and silvered in the light?

"And Cowley's house is falling apart too. Heard from Sanders, the new bloke, that the electricity men came round the other day to check his power supply, found half his wiring had rotted away."

Another of Mark's strengths: the ability to instantly bond with any new hire. A chicken in every pot, a spy in every office—Mark's motto. It was a little crazy, but at times, in his office, Isaac had felt he was in one of those houses where a hole had been drilled behind the eyes of a portrait—it was an unpleasant memory, and excusing himself to the men's room, he shook it off.

—"I planted bluebells the other day."

—"Are those flowers?"

More voices from the party; a heavy rain had begun to fall outside and the crowd swilled back inside the hall. Wet hair; wild eyes; the only thing missing was a lightning strike to punctuate the evening.

—"The word 'thing,' you know, in Shakespeare, is slang for..."

A thought cut short by a hand across a face. An arm, grazing the space left behind. The injured guest picked himself up, one leg at a time; began peddling apologies about as well as fish peddle a bicycle. If there was any trajectory to the evening, Isaac thought, it was trained upon the random: each new moment a rocket waiting to burst over his head.

At the bar the spigot suddenly exploded at the hand of a hapless waiter—spattered with beer, a pack of guests wheeled round in shock. They were not even drunk yet; who was *he* to be driving the comedy of the night?

"I might as well stand outside in the rain," one woman shrieked.

"Don't forget your umbrella," her partner smirked. "Unless you prefer to stand alone."

Isaac reached over to take a cheese canapé from a floating tray. *Give yourself a break*, he said to himself. *Take it easy. She's not a mouse; this room isn't a trap. You're no mouse either. Don't they prefer peanut butter to cheese, anyway?* Isaac had kept a mouse as a child—his father had brought it to him after returning from one of his corporate trips. Denis was away on business most of each week: flying first class all over the world, selling money to people who bought it. It was a mark of distinction, Denis used to say, to sell not goods or services but symbols. There was no honour in selling paintbrushes; rather, the true glory came in selling a man the means of buying any paintbrush he pleased. Tales of such power thrilled Isaac: each weekend the house rang with his father's exploits, told over and over again. Leaving home each Sunday night, Denis would promise to bring Isaac back some new tale of symbolic conquest and dominion. And the boy would watch him close the door of the car and drive off.

"George! How the devil are you?"

This is madness, Isaac thought: *though in a crowd like this one, genuine anger would be a luxury*. Harriet, the woman from regional management, alongside whom he'd worked for a solid year, had forgotten his name.

"Fine, thanks, keeping things under control." The instant supervision of eye to brain to nerve to arm to handshake was exquisite—he really must look over his old exams notes from anatomy, remind himself how it worked. Making eye contact, he saw a moment of stress flicker over her face—had she realised that she had just dropped the mnemonic ball?

"Tell me, what's your play these days? Now that you're out of the game?"

Hunting the bar, he thought. *But a deer will do just fine. What was its name—Bambi? From the Disney flick?*

“Watching cartoons alone in my flat,” he replied. “I’m quite keen on Tom and Jerry.”

Her face shot cartoon white under her inky black hair. *Jesus*, he thought—*this character thinks I’m serious!*

“When I’m not at work, you see”—he continued—“as a government assassin.”

After a moment a slim twitch of a smile began to stealth its way across her lips. But he had slipped off again, the bomber squadron of doubt had already flown off, its lethal cargo still falling to the ground. A spot of dust on his jacket begged attention. A tray of potato crisps greased past. *Bloody Yanks, calling them chips*. On the stage at front, a man dressed as a polar bear drew himself up to his full height; his assistant dropped coconut shavings from a ladder to mime a blizzard. *Modern art*, he thought, *wouldn’t last five minutes in a hurricane*.

Then there—across the hall—was that Higgins? His old professor? Bloody hell, was he still on the faculty? But Isaac had heard there had been trouble at Cardiff after he’d left; the institution hadn’t made the RAE and had lost most of its funding. To make ends meet the brass had turned to embezzlement and was now in a local prison; the magistrate, apparently, had not been able to stifle his laughter as he handed down the sentences. “Gone from in the black to wearing it, I see?” he had chortled, and sent the president of the university inside for ten, eight for good behaviour.

Peaches topped in rose petals. Cupped oranges with cream and kiwi inside. Various coloured tomatoes. “Whoever this zippy little caterer is,” Isaac heard a posh accent behind him, halfway through a bite, “I want their number *tonight*.”

Mr Bungle joined the polar bear on stage and now they began to dance. *All that’s needed now is the grey bloke from ‘The Jungle Book’, and they’ll be set*, Isaac sighed. Higgins had disappeared; around him the voices rose like a fever as the party swelled. It was, admittedly, quite hot in the hall. He wanted to stuff his napkin into his pocket but it was damp from the sweat on his hands. In school Isaac used to carry a square of paper that he would fold and unfold until it became as soft as cloth; it made him unhappy to see normal lined paper forced to stand sharp at attention. Not sad, just unhappy—all he wanted to do was help the paper relax.

“Happy.”

“Clappy!”

“Happy, goddammit! In the books her name is Happy!”

A crisp debate shot past Isaac’s shoulder, clipping his ear. “Listen to me, Quentin—I edited the novels before I left Penguin! The name of the good queen is *Happy*, and the evil snow goblin is *Clappy*. The series is for pre-college age, for youngsters—it needs a gimmick for them to remember the names!”

“Oh, so we should infantilise them prior to entering sixth-form?” Quentin shot back. “That’s a text-book means of preventing them from seeing the complexity of the world, Karennia, of stifling their development!”

“Look, we’re not suggesting their reading habits are so insular that they only read our series. *The Polar Starfall* will, and never should, replace *The Wind in the Willows*. Or *Alice*, or *Watership Down*, or *Paddington Bear*, or any of them—we’re not even in the same league, and we know it.”

Isaac could have walked right up and given this Karennia a hug, such was his fondness for the books she was defending. *If you ask me, literature stopped after Lewis Carroll*.

“But don’t you take my point?” Quentin retreated.

“Of course I do, darling, and it matters so much to me that children read everything they can get their hands on. And it’s up to us. To provide them. To put the books in their hands, to make books fall from the sky and land on their heads. You were the one who said that every crib should have its own library attached!”

Its own suite of maps, too, Isaac thought, *so they can see that some of the places in these stories are actually real*. His father had liked to show him on the globe the countries he was going to; countries that Shakespeare never could have dreamed would exist: America, the USSR, Brazil.

From a tiny Dorset hamlet to the greatest civilisations in the world, every week—such was the fearful power of flight.

“A cigar is never just a cigar,” Karenna rejoined.

“Whom are you asking—me or Freud?” Quentin laughed. Isaac felt his interest slip away. They were back to just flirting, no longer teetering on the brink of any dangerous word or phrase into which they might fall. Which was either unfortunate or unlucky, he wasn’t sure.

“If he’s going to be at the opening, I’d love to meet him, absolutely.”

“I think his name is Almquist, but I can’t quite remember.”

“Well, you know Abba got its start with Eurovision...”

The dance of shoulders, elbows, and ankles swerving and pivoting to receive and refuse people continued on. Faint, tinkling music wafted through the hall; on the stage the man in the polar bear suit had melted away. Nearby Isaac found a stuffed aardvark in a glass case; layered at the bottom were the first pages of a dictionary with all the entries for *A*, with *aardvark* prominently scratched out in sharp red marker. The rest of the words littered the case as though the beast had made a nest of them prior to its death. A deft picture, he thought, if a bit ambiguous. But moving nonetheless.

“Emotional, isn’t it,” came a slender voice from behind him.

“Or perfectly rational,” he replied, still looking at the piece.

“Well, you can’t have both, so what’s your decision?”

“I think the maker wanted it both ways,” Isaac said, after a moment. “To be creator. To play god of both nature and culture, of animals and our names for them.”

“If that were true, what kind of prayer ought to be offered to him?”

“Or to *her*—people pray to the Madonna, don’t they?”

“Only to get to her child.”

Still facing the artwork, Isaac began to get a little heated. Willy Richards, his religion teacher in college, used to try these Socratic stunts on his students, and he hated the cheapness of it, the artifice.

“Prayer comes in many different styles to many different people. Right now I’m praying that this isn’t the latest fashion in art, to kill animals and stuff them for personal gain.”

“What if I told you”—and here she stepped up beside him, in her bright yellow sundress, streaked with rain and delight—“that I cut him out of cloth? With scissors, and needle, and thread?”

She extended her hand—“Lily Simonian,”—and Isaac’s turned to paper. His tongue turned to rock, his name a pebble he sputtered out.

“Oh, don’t be so hard on yourself,” she said, laughing, soft as a night breeze. “You play well. Not like the last boy I met on a blind date. He used to annoy me so badly with his ‘command’ of contemporary art that after he told me what my work ‘meant,’ I blocked his calls for a month. But his anger didn’t last as long as I thought. He turned to self-harm, and I had to take him in for treatment. Sad, isn’t it. People who can’t laugh at themselves must lead such lonely lives.”

Allegedly the planet had continued to revolve whilst Lily spoke, but Isaac seemed fixed in the same place as when he had first seen her. He would put down roots in this patch of earth, he thought, so long as she would feed and water him, and talk to him every day.

“You’d think this place was Hollywood, wouldn’t you, with all these A-listers,” she continued. Isaac looked round—some of these people clotting the hall had looked familiar, but he’d not seen the stars for the constellation. “Maybe they’re shooting a promo film?” he ventured.

“In that case, I’ll have a double shot of methadone, thanks,” Lily trilled.

“Novocaine for me,” he smiled, “wouldn’t mind sleeping right through it.”

“You’re a trip,” she said. “Do you want to hit the road?”

Distracted by a papier-mâché zebra crossing the platform, Isaac stared at the question. “Wait—now—but—I—I’ve left my car at home,” he coughed, “and it’s pissing down outside.”

“Park your excuses in the lot,” she jabbed him in the arm, which he noticed was now entwined with hers. “It’s not my nature to waste time. It’s a wild night out there, and someone’s gotta keep me out of trouble.”

Out of nowhere a side of raw beefsteak, a full four kilos, richly marbled and dripping with viscera, fell from the ceiling and landed at Isaac’s feet—*what, wilder than in here?*

“Goddammit, Sebastian,” Lily shouted into the crowd, “I have had *enough*—this is war!”

Calmed, oddly, by something that needed doing, Isaac crouched down and began wiping the blood from his shoes with his handkerchief. “Friend of yours?” he asked quietly, “Or relative?”

“In theory,” Lily fumed, her eyes glinting like a spark leaping off an anvil. “But at this rate this bastard half-brother of mine is going to end up an abstraction—I’ll do him in myself. He makes art out of animals—out of *meat*. High-impact, performance work, usually, like this, but he sometimes puts it into a design for a larger piece. He’s probably planning something else for tonight—it’s unlike him to be so...brief.”

“I take it this isn’t the first encounter you’ve had,” Isaac said. “And you call this brief?” He had come so close, so fast, but was already feeling his relationship with her to be somewhat more crowded than he’d expected.

“I...” she trailed off, seething at the sight of the red spatters on his white handkerchief. “It’s like—a test—he does this to test me, like we were still in school. I hate it—my beliefs about animals shouldn’t be an exam.”

“He shouldn’t cause you such stress,” Isaac agreed. Despite his patient exterior, his pronunciation, blossoming into a shared anger, had grown curt and clipped; he felt his accent returning unheeded to the terse, windblown fields of his Dorset youth. *Kick ‘im in ‘is yarbles!* he would yell, fights breaking out like acne on the football pitch. *What are you malchicks doink now*, Mr Antonov, their headmaster, would bellow as he stormed onto the grounds, sending the boys scattering. This was long before now, and before the Orange Revolution, when Antonov, a shadow of his former twenty stone, went back to his home country for the first time to cast his ballot. Like clockwork it was annulled by the Kremlin vote counters; he flew home during the recount, spitting on the tarmac at the airport in Kiev.

—“I heard they served mouse at the reception.”

—“Tom, darling, don’t you mean mousse?”

—“Of course, dear—I’ve been bowling all day, must be the heat.”

—“Oh, do you play cricket?”

—“Only since last summer—I played in school, but...”

—“Oh yes, we’ve been loving our new back porch. You wouldn’t believe how much we use it! We let our girls play out there for hours...”

—“We’re thinking of doing ours, too—how much did your studs cost?”

—“Well, we were going to pay out the nose until Janice called her cousin, who lives on a farm, and knows this brilliant carpenter...”

Arm in hand, Isaac and Lily, quieter now, drifted through the crowd, glancing at new pieces which had been brought out by the curators and stopping in front of a painting of an animal they had never seen. Resembling an armadillo but longer and sleeker, the creature’s bones lay on the outside of its body, and its tissue and organs were wound tightly around them, its eyes set deep within its chalky sockets. The placard—which Isaac said was the animal’s name, and Lily said the artist’s—read *Ezekiel*.

Lily blinked at the curator who had just finished hanging the canvas: “Cassandra?”

“Lily?—Lily!” the woman shrieked, her piercing voice belying her tiny frame, “Darling, it’s been *ages*—you look as ravishing as a hurricane!”

Where the real danger is in the wind, not the rain, thought Isaac. People were beginning to mill round the canvas, so the three of them stepped back.

"Well, there was that trouble at the Pinakothek," Cassandra resumed saying, shooing her assistants away with her clipboard, "and after the divorce I knew I wanted to come home, so long story short, there I was and here I am! Maria in the Continental wing, another of Ricardo's exes, was simply too good—she completely rescued me from the pile. It would have been such a problem, fresh off the boat, living in a bedsit in Hampsted, trying to find work in a city where you have more curators than you do paintings."

"What a lovely solution," smiled Lily. "And such a miracle to find you here, too. Looks like you've got your headache sorted, but have you found any cure for heartache?"

"That'll be the same day I find the one for cancer," Cassandra cackled, as Isaac tried in vain to slip away, anchored by Lily's hand. "Honestly, he was an old crab anyway. I'm a Gemini; he's a Capricorn, there's no way we could have lasted. Even after a shotgun wedding in the tropics—which I might add you missed, you old goat."

A cheese plate veered just out of reach.

"But excuse my terrible manners, tell me, who is *this* tasty morsel?" Cassandra raised her eyebrow at Lily, who flushed. "Food for your own heart's hunger, darling?"

"Only a portion of a larger meal, I'm sure," Isaac broke in, "We've just met tonight."

"My, my—such control over that tongue—*he* can stay, can't he," she giggled again as she took Lily by the shoulder and led her away to another painting, Lily mouthing *sorry* as she went. Isaac didn't know over whom Cassandra had authority in the museum, but he wanted to find them, and reach out with a little human kindness. If he had known he was keen on art itself prior to this evening, the enlightenment about who arbitrated it was strangely unwelcome.

Outside in the full darkness, his irritation began to dissipate with the wind rising fresh after the rain. They had only known each other for an hour, but already he felt his heart lurching in strange directions, as if against gravity, when he thought of her. It was not that he felt it skip a beat, rather, that it beat twice in one second—like those funky ensembles he had seen on holiday in Ghana. Having wandered upstairs from the turbine hall, Isaac came out onto the fourth-floor observation platform, where below him in the park an organ grinder cast a monkey out like a fishing line to the gathered children, reeling him back in only when he had a shiny pound coin in his claw. *Cheeky*, Isaac thought. *Clever little scamp*.

He wondered if Lily had been a tomboy when she was a child, whenever, wherever that was. A tenner in its teeth, the monkey vanished up a tree. He wondered about the rest of her family; if she had grown up well-adjusted and domestic, or was a rebel from the start. About the violence her brother seemed to bring to her. Whether Sebastian was merely a prankster, or genuinely meant harm—whether, if what she said was true, she had ever sought protection. His body gave an involuntary tremor at the thought: *you're no bodyguard, you idiot*, he winced, *you're a retired consultant. Your idea of security is a car that has a clicker on the fob. The only things you ever kept safe were corporations, not homes. Otherwise you and Diane would have had the children she wanted, and you wouldn't be going on blind dates at this age*. She had wanted one named Kane, which he thought was absurd. "Shall his first name be 'Citizen,' then?" he'd asked, incredulous.

"Kane was my uncle's name!" She cried out in wrath. He had seen her rage before, and knew it would pass; it was like a reliable old machine, whose clanks and rattles were like a second language. Isaac's age on her—he was forty when they were married, Diane, twenty-nine—deluded him into thinking that he could accurately predict her feelings; *old*, he repeated to himself, was just a state of mind. So his own parents had consoled him after she left him—she had stormed out of their house at dawn, their argument still ringing in his ears. Isaac made a resolution that day, after she didn't come home, had phoned to say she would be round only for her things: he vowed never to underestimate a person's need for independence. The next day, he gave notice at the firm, bought a rucksack, a tent, and a map of Hadrian's Wall.

"No, Doris got her Guggenheim by cavorting with one of the trustees, everybody knows that. It'll be a cold day indeed when her work earns anything for itself. And then five months later, when she was in Antibes, she gave birth to Ricardo's child, which she'd been carrying all along—how do you like that!"

"Well, she never could control herself, especially not at art school," replied Lily, as Cassandra swirled her champagne.

"Oh, she *was* a freak, wasn't she? Strange that she never ended up in hospital, treating her body like a revolving door like that."

"Sounds like quite a unique character," Isaac remarked as he joined them. "Is that all you culture vultures do, natter on about who's sleeping with whom in order to sell art to whom and vice versa?"

"The gap between her legs, honey," Cassandra lowered her glasses, "would embarrass the Panama Canal."

"The Strait of Gibraltar at the least," echoed Lily.

"And her work is just dire. Her piece called 'The Consequences of Breathing' involved filling balloons with helium then deflating them into the mouths of dogs and recording their barks—which, as you might imagine, was like the sound of an angel weeping, and which set all the animal rights groups upon her. Then she dubbed these sounds over the endings of Disney films, just so she could get sued for infringement. She was set upon by both the activists and the lawyers—it was the beginning of her most 'productive' period," Cassandra finished with a snort.

"But hold on, doesn't that end up with two different artworks?" Isaac asked.

"To her they weren't separate," said Lily. "She did them both in the same room at the same time in her house in Suffolk."

"Her bungalow," corrected Cassandra. "To call that shack a 'house' is to call *me* the director of the National Gallery."

"Did you see that review by Hugh Laurie of her latest exhibition?"

"You mean the Hugh," Cassandra squealed, "who when he was courting me, used to fry his art books in duck fat and eat them page by page?"

Isaac couldn't help but smile, realising, finally, that most of this banter had been made up especially for him, though who had started it he couldn't tell. Just as he was about to break in with a story about an artist he'd known who lived in a glass box for a year, a wave of applause began to crest over the room—up on the stage, the speeches were about to start.

"Don't everyone race over at once," somebody behind them snickered.

"Oh come off it, you know it's just a popularity competition," a second voice scoffed.

"Too much art just isn't healthy," mocked a third. "All that food and wine and standing around must be so good for you."

"Well, aren't you just a ray of sunshine?"

"...it brings me great happiness," the director of the Tate was saying, "to welcome you all here tonight to the opening—or should I say, the reopening—of this glorious building. This has been a labour of love for all involved; one thing in particular that needs mentioning is the huge effort put in by..."

Near the bar, a waiter was trying to jig a cork from the bottle. Curiously, even though the spotlights were full on the room, Isaac saw a pool of shadow momentarily cover him, then pass on. A soft plume of dust feathered down from somewhere, but with a poke from Lily, he turned back to the stage.

"...proud to feature an early monochrome Warhol in that gallery too. Our educational team will reach out to schools, universities, and television programmes"—*you were right about the cameras*, Lily whispered. "These works are a priceless part of our history and heritage, and it is only right to showcase them to the world. Scholars will author new works in our resource library;

and soon an exhibition on the censorship of art, designed in part with the Courtauld, will open in our temporary wing..."

"You should have seen Doris when she heard she wasn't going to be in that show," muttered Cassandra, "She nearly staged a personal auto-da-fe for the curator. I've never seen such murder in someone's eyes. Agatha is lucky she wasn't buried alive in Disney films!"

Isaac turned back to the bar, where another minor mystery was unfolding. The waiter with the stuck cork was now deep in conversation with a colleague; he had set the open bottle down on the white tablecloth where the shadows were now rotating regularly around it. Isaac looked up, but couldn't make anything out in the glare.

—"I thought that commission was yours!"

—"She was truly shocked, as you might imagine."

—"Yes, well, I was madly in love with him at the time."

—"Isn't that Ezekiel creature bizarre?"

—"I find it extraordinary."

The voices began to collect as Serota finished his speech, and the band swiftly picked up a rendition of Gershwin.

—"Yes, well, it's just a copy."

—"What's the difference between that and a print?"

—"Whatever it is, that and thirty pence will get you a dial tone."

—"You draught in pencil?"

—"Ink, usually. Pen is so much more—alive."

Isaac looked back up at the top of the turbine hall, but still couldn't see anything. "Yes, I was in his textiles class at Goldsmiths," Lily was saying to a young woman with spiked black hair. "Ah. The aardvark? Well, I pulled down my dictionary from the shelf, opened it to the first page, and..."

"Imagine if you'd tried that with a thesaurus," the woman laughed.

"Oh, that's a lovely idea," Lily said, "watch out or I'll parrot it for my next show!"

"Over my dead body!"

Interrupting their conversation, a team of installers marched straight through them, carrying a large canvas of iridescent moonlit fjords. Called *Pining for Night*, it was by a Swedish artist. Cleese—or was it Claus—they were moving so fast, Isaac couldn't see.

"John, dear, *do* mind where you're going," Cassandra scolded one of them, "we were just here!"

"Wait till I bring past the live python we've got in the back," he replied with a heavy Liverpool accent, "You'll see me coming then, won't you, love? Reckon you'll hit the carpet faster than the floor!"

"That's right," chimed in another, "Don't get yourself all bent out of joint!"

"Just respect us as much as you respect the art, is that too much to ask?"

"Sure thing, Aretha," John replied.

"For the third time, it's *Cassandra*, and so help me if I have to drive it into your head like the national anthem..."

From across the hall a choir of shouts suddenly began to rise, one after the other, shouts not of joy but of shock, shouts edged with alarm, with confusion, and with fear. Shouts that rise when a king's head topples into a basket.

"Great Zog," somebody nearby cried out, "What the—"

As it began to unfold the scene gradually reminded Isaac of when he was in Albania, consulting for an Italian bank during the war. Bunkers. Concrete. Block houses tattered by artillery fire. A dog's head in a ditch; no time for thinking before dashing to the next safe corner in sniper's alley. The mad song of a cricket punctuating the nights as he stood on his hotel balcony and smoked. A lone bat flitting just past his head. Above all, nowhere to turn for normality, nowhere to rest one's mind.

All across the turbine hall, dead animals were falling from the ceiling—birds, cats, rodents, fish with worms still dangling out of their jaws, a calf—and randomly hitting the floor with sickening *thumps*, *thuds*, and *squelches*. All creatures great and lowly seemed to be included in this carnival of death—regardless of spine, fur, bone or wing. Everywhere in the room people were shrieking, scrambling about for cover as the torrent of falling corpses grew, crawling underneath tables and trying to push their way through the shop doors. It was as if the whole of London Zoo had been uprooted, slaughtered, and crudely taped to the top of the power station where the glue that bound them had just now, at the height of the evening, given way. As he grabbed Lily and Cassandra by the arms and dashed for the central stairwell—the exit at the top of the ramp was much too far away—all Isaac could think was, *Christ, this must have taken money to pull off*.

“I am going to have you *shot*, you fucking bastard, I *hate* you!” Lily screamed, sobbing as more animals fell broken and mangled all around them. “Put me down, stop it, let me go!” She began flailing at Isaac, scratching at him, ripping his shirt and knocking off his glasses; she seemed on the cusp of breakdown.

“Not until it’s safe, goddammit”—Isaac hissed as he flung the two of them under the stairs—“you’re not crossing that space and getting flattened by a horse!” Lily spat in response—*I could marry you this instant*, he thought—and as if to prove his point, a fat grey pelican flopped to the floor where they were just standing. Before seeing one up close, Isaac hadn’t realised just what a big bird it was, how long and sharp its beak. By this time the main gallery had emptied of people, the corpses strewn about the hall like rubbish on an abandoned street, and still falling at the rate of one or two every minute. “Stop fighting,” Isaac said more calmly, and took out his handkerchief. “Right now we don’t have a chance. Whatever Sebastian’s doing, right now he’s got a monopoly on the board.”

“My money’s on the police, wherever they are,” Cassandra mumbled; for the first time that evening, her voice lacked conviction. Lily wrested free of Isaac’s grip and stepped out into the void outside the stairwell. Kicking aside a copy of Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* dropped by a panicked guest, she spat again and said, “I think that’s it.”

“Your brother is an absolute psycho,” Isaac growled. “He makes Norman Bates look like Ethel Mermin. Do you honestly think it ends with one shower?”

“It ends with me strangling him with my bare hands,” she said, as the emergency system began to sound and fine jets of water began to sprinkle down over the hall. In the garish light the misty spray seemed to wink and split, and Isaac found himself blinking to correct his vision before he remembered that his spectacles were on the floor. Bending down to retrieve them he saw the pelican’s wing muscle twitch as the water struck it, and he feverishly hoped that the beast wasn’t still alive. The thin tones of police sirens began to pierce the dripping walls; wading through the sheet music scattered from the stage, the three of them silently picked their way through the wet, blood-speckled carcasses up the ramp to the exit.

Outside the turbine hall the scene resembled a war film, the police huddled in clumps, dazed men and women wandering around without purpose, several angrily shouting at one another, one woman clutching a tree, another hiding under a park bench, a third having skewered a dead pigeon in her high heel and staring at it blankly as though she expected it to speak first, the whole landscape transcending any surrealist artwork any of them had ever seen.

“We’ve got it all sorted out, thank you, if you can just move along over here,” a young policeman said to them in a condescending tone, despite Lily’s objections that she knew who was responsible, and what his address was, and his mobile number, and his birthday, and his bank details... The atmosphere was soaked through with confusion; the streetlamps gave off a sickly tangerine glow over the Bankside terrace. “Tell me again what you were saying earlier about dreams,” she asked Isaac as they were herded over to where the police were taking statements, Cassandra having joined the staff queue.

“What, that in space, nobody can hear you do it?”

She gave a short, surprised laugh, and stopped short along the path, “Look, I know you’re nearly twice my age, and you’ve been married before, and this is probably not how either of us expected a first date to go, but—” She paused, then wiped her hands on her dress and ran them through her hair: “And even though we’ve just met, I really, well, I know I must seem like some kind of hippie artist cliché to someone like you. I mean, you probably even remember the first Woodstock.”

“Yes, but I was about seven, and watched it at home with my uncle in Oxford, thank you very much,” he said, half-amused.

“I’m sorry, I know, that wasn’t a very good road to go down, was it,” she blushed. “There’s no real strip map for this kind of conversation, is there.”

“Lily, after the pornography we’ve just seen—survived—I’m amazed that we can speak to one another at all, much less have this exact conversation.”

“Would it make you not want to see me again, if I told you that sometimes I pole dance for money?”

“I think I’d move to Warsaw and become a monk in protest.”

“And that my flat is in the ghetto in Epping and that I won’t ever bring you back there?”

“*Dziś dobry*, my daughter, would you like to take confession?”

“Maybe tomorrow morning, after I’ve sinned,” she said, some of her earlier quicksilver coming back into her voice. “Against you by dawn; and against Sebastian by dusk.”

“You’re waiting as late as twilight?”

“Well, I tend to zone out for a while in the afternoons, have tea relax, then do my best work as darkness falls. Art is war—and we all need comrades in the trenches, don’t we,” she said, slipping her hand in his.

Isaac had reached his saturation point; anything more would overwhelm him, cause his cup, which was already full and brimming over, to split, to shatter, to melt. Stepping towards the waiting police car, he felt like Monty Clift on that fateful ride, but knowing exactly what kind of wreckage he would wake up in at the bottom of a cliff. The inevitable heartbreak he was about to don like a new suit. The desire, so like an albatross.

Benjamin Morris
bam32@cam.ac.uk
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<http://www.powerhouse.me.uk/index.html>