

Forgetting Soho

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In the hot, still summer morning the female fly, bulging with her future spawn, landed gracefully, like a monstrous kiss, beside the trail of saliva snaking down from Grace's slack, sleeping mouth. She knew exactly where to land. Generations of genetic female memories had taught her how to survive in the hostile world of carbon units.

As she searched amongst the soft, flaccid folds of Grace's cheek. Traces of the female units lingering make up and excess hit her sensitive olfactory system like a volcano. A mixture of excellent Clinique foundation and cheap powder covered her landing site.

'A seriously wrong base shade for her peptic skin colour,' the fly assessed expertly through the experienced lenses of a thousand eyes before deciding, with satisfaction, 'here's the spot.'

She sank her proboscis deep, and deeper still, into the welcoming greasy channel of one of Grace's many open pores. The first throb of blood surged upwards to the expectant fly and delivered its mother load directly to her eager greedy eggs.

'This is it, this is living,' the fly acknowledged as she distinguished a heady mix of cheap champagne, excellent Bordeaux and strong traces of nicotine and cannabis. In fact an excellent Moroccan from the reliable dealer in Litchfield Street, she surmised.

The woman's blood was thick and satisfying and almost completely toxic. Just as the fly liked it. How sad she had finished her life journey and would not return, yet the fly

had left in her offspring her memories and D.N.A safe and nourished, that was enough. She knew her lowly place in the Great Fly Nation and was content with her lot. Who knows, maybe one of her spawn might be one of the legendary immortal Master Flies. Gifted with super powers Master Flies were entrusted to protect the Great Fly Nation and the Nations future empowerment. How proud that would have made her.

Lazily she withdrew her proboscis leaving a small pink kiss that would, in time, flourish with infection and, hopefully, deactivate another carbon unit. Heavy with blood and child she flew to the centre of a perfect filthy cobweb to give birth and die in comfort, satisfied she'd done her duty and completed her job.

Grace woke with a start. Her head and heart felt heavy. She moved her thick-coated lips, still holding traces of salmon pink lipstick and red wine stains, together in an effort to re-hydrate them. Unsuccessfully. Her tongue felt as if it belonged to someone else and her teeth felt odd and strangely soft.

She opened her eyes cautiously to greet the hot summer day. One eye felt as if it had a piece of cotton wool plastered over it and the other rebelliously refused to open. With a monumental effort Grace shifted her bulbous body into an upright position, coughing her lungs out in the process. Reaching a point of reluctant oxygenation she sat quietly for a moment, then shakily removed her first Lucky Strike of the day from its uncooperative packet. Holding one trembling hand with the other, she slowly lifted the jewel encrusted Dunhill Rolagas lighter, her camp friend James had given her for her 50th birthday, to the cigarette and lit it. Slowly Grace inhaled the first drag of the day. Nicotine hit her like a soft fleecy safety blanket, rolling over her senses and, for a millisecond, giving her some

relief from her morning hell.

The flimsy curtains moved gently in the small breeze of the morning. Below she could hear the usual morning traffic of Soho; taxis, new-age cyclists, delivery vans, the shout of the Greek and Italian shop workers and, of course, the lost people. The daggers of pain in her head, put there by Satan's magician, prompted Grace to move. She swung her lifeless legs, like a ventriloquist's dummy, to the floor, belched loudly and looked hopefully for her kimono amongst the debris of the night before clothes, shoes, shawls, hats and handbags. With intense gratitude she spotted a corner of bright cloth and hauled out, from under the pile of debris, her kimono.

For the first time she wondered what had happened last night. Had she behaved herself? She couldn't remember, the tattered remains of her drink soaked memory had called in their union and now refused to work. The day would let her know eventually the secrets of the night before. Stubbing out her cigarette Grace reached out and pulled herself upright. She stood there swaying gently, like a condemned tree, her head swimming against the tide. She faced her finest hour. Eventually the nausea declined and Grace shambled into her minute kitchen, pulling on her food stained kimono as she went.

'Where's the sodding Resolve,' muttered Grace to herself.

The volcanic crash of a door overhead started Grace into an involuntary nervous jump. Any unnecessary movements exhausted her. Grace shrugged the grubby kimono closer around her. A trickle of sweat leaked down from her stubby armpit and slowly did the hurdles over the rolls of flesh that comprised her side, fading away into her crumpled Baby Doll pyjama pants.

The stale odours of her overnight, late night, pissed night body, overpowered her and made her head swim. A mixture of cheap American anti-perspirant and Femfresh mingled with the shaky menopausal scents of sweat and vagina.

‘Where is the fucking, shitting, fucking, fuck fuck, aspirin,’ Grace hissed.

Angrily she slammed the innocent cupboard door with such vengeance the handle flew off. It scythed elegantly through the air, landing neatly with a ding, into the dog's bowl, still encrusted with the rancid remains of yesterday's dog chow. Grace poured a large glass of water then, crossing the already steamy room, opened the French windows to reveal a minuscule rickety verandah. In one corner sat a dead plant in a pot, in the other, an ancient wickerwork chair dreaming of better days on the passenger deck of a grand liner.

‘Suzie...come on darling,’ Grace cringed back into the room in an effort to escape from the mutilating sunlight.

‘Come on cuddles. Time for poop poop,’ she continued in a wheedling scratchy voice.

From near the bundle of last night's clothes emerged a small, graying, and slightly balding poodle. After stretching out an arthritic leg behind her Suzie trotted out gamely to the verandah and, near the plant, squatted into her first full urination of the day before shifting around and emptying her bowels near a pile of dehydrating dog excrement that had obviously been there since kingdom come.

Satisfied Suzie scratched meaninglessly at the unforgiving asphalt in an attempt to cover her fresh gifts to the pile, the vague genetic memory of grass and earth still

embedded deep into a corner of her brain. The pool of dog urine meandered slowly like a miniature Mississippi along the cracks of the asphalt before dissipating slowly over the edge of the verandah, trickling onto the puzzled heads of the wandering passers-by below like an alternative baptism. Suzie, infinitely pleased with her ablutions, trotted back into the room.

‘Good girl Suzie,’ Grace praised her faintly as she wheezed into the bathroom to review the ravages of the night before. It was not a thrilling sight. Her multi-coloured hair straggled on to her damp face. Her skin, murdered by drink and lack of sleep, hung desperately onto her aching skull. Black circles surrounded her yellowing eyes, a mixture of flaking mascara and clotted capillaries making it impossible to shift the toxic load.

She looked like shit.

‘I look like shit,’ Grace told herself.

Grace constantly talked to herself, or Suzie. She didn't need to hear voices in her head, she heard her own voice constantly discussing the minutiae of her damaged life like an endless monologue by a second-rate actress. Yet Grace could be witty and was considered both irritating and a character by her large entourage of other damaged friends, who saw everyone else as sad but themselves and themselves as the only true bohemian and artist of the group. Another common fact united them. Lack of money, or at least they all had just enough to rub along.

Grace wondered if she could vomit, it might make her feel a bit better. She stuck her head over the begging-for-bleach toilet bowl and stuck her fingers down her throat.

At that moment the telephone rang, interrupting any anti-peristaltic action. Staggering the minuscule distance back to her bed Grace collapsed gratefully on to its unresisting chaos. Her head sank gratefully back onto the mascara stained pillow of, what was once, excellent Irish linen.

The phone rang on.

With an irritated sob Grace wrenched herself upright and angrily snatched the phone to her ear.

‘Yes...’ an annoying silence followed then the thin nasal voice at the other end of the phone spoke in wounded tones.

‘I’ve obviously phoned at an inconvenient moment, I’ll call back later.’ It was Ronnie, an American musician shaped like an elephant seal and with a similar attitude to life. Like many Americans living in the outposts of Europe he spoke in old-fashioned ‘Dickens speak’ and had assumed many of the emotional traits and habits he believed to be quintessentially English but which, in fact, made him seem like an anachronism. He was a dear boy with kind things to say about his friends but with an annoyingly sycophantic attitude towards the oddest people. Grace had known him for many years and had an honest, if sometimes tortured, relationship with him.

‘Ronnie,’ Grace exhaled with relief passing a sweaty hand over her forehead, ‘I’ve the most awful hangover so please speak softly.’

‘I know,’ Ronnie replied, ‘I was there remember. Another night of triumph dear Grace.’

The irony in Ronnie's voice further shredded Grace's already mangled nerves, 'Oh fuck, oh fuck. What did I do? Tell me,' Grace crashed back onto the bed causing a startled Suzie to leap to her feet in search of an intruder. Finding none she contentedly flopped back into her dream of being shagged by that handsome Alsatian in the porn shop next door, before chasing that ugly fat cat two doors down from the Greek takeaway and, having caught it, eating it slowly. Yummy. Suzie's eyelids fluttered and her nose snuggled happily into her mistress's distressed pink mules and discarded ripped laddered tights from the night before. Bliss.

'Are you still there Grace...?' Ronnie sounded worried.

'Yes unfortunately,' Grace replied as she shrank deeper into the comfort of the pillow.

'Actually you were fine at Gaudis and Rollos but then you kind of lost it when we hit the Minnow Room, about four'ish I think. He wasn't too bad, just a little bruising near his left ear. He was pretty cool about it,' Ronnie tried to reassure her.

'What did I do,' Grace steeled herself for the worst. Feeling the same as when at the age of sixteen she had faced the fury of her headmistress after yet another misdemeanor. This feeling had been a weekly visitor to Grace's conscience throughout her life

'Well...' Ronnie drew the word out in an attempt to sound stern and to give Grace the time to gather herself, but the real reason was to give his eardrums their last rites, 'well...' Ronnie repeated again, lamely but a little more decisively.

'For fuck's sake Ronnie get on with it,' snapped Grace her nerves strung tighter than the facelift that her dear friend Josie had recently acquired at the age of eighty-one and

that had left her looking permanently surprised.

‘Well,’ Ronnie repeated yet again, losing his nerve, ‘you hit the pianist at the Minnow Room because he laughed when you danced the tango with Charlie.’ Ronnie flinched, waiting for the humungous explosion. Nothing...nothing, then...nothing. Something was seriously wrong. Had she died or something?

Then a small voice echoed down the line.

‘Ronnie.’

‘Yes Grace,’ Ronnie replied.

‘I’m going to move to the country, I’ve decided,’ Grace shifted the phone to the other aching ear as she felt the tears begin to drip down the spidery veins of her face.

‘Grace,’ Ronnie replied patiently, ‘you always say that after one of your disastrous nights.’

‘This time I mean it,’ Grace sobbed angrily into the phone, ‘it’s all over. Done with. I look back on it all, what have I done. Nothing, that’s what. Going round in circles. If I’d tried, applied myself, slept with the right people I could have been something. Not a pathetic old bag getting pissed and hitting people. I feel like an amoeba, that’s right, an amoeba. All I sense is heat and light. That’s it. Just a shallow, meaningless, bloody amoeba person. No application, no relationships. Just crap...crap, crap, crap.’

Ronnie fought hard to stifle a yawn. He’d heard it all before.

Grace fought savagely to keep the catch from her voice and slid hopelessly into

silence.

Ronnie waited patiently and then quietly said, 'There's always Christian.'

For a moment the searing heat of Grace's pain left her. Her son Christian. How the hell had such a divine person erupted from her womb into the waiting world? He was the only good thing in her life.

She looked up to the photo of him passing out from Sandhurst next to the collage of photos of him as head boy, as captain of cricket and numerous other photos of his triumphs. It shone like a Russian icon, jeweled and Byzantine, richly surrounded by Grace's decorations of golden ribbons of his past successes.

Only one dusty photo of Grace graced a dark corner of the glut of riches. An old faded picture of Grace at nineteen from the National press winning a place on the British Olympic team on her horse Comet. Her shining hair neatly caught into a chignon, her waist nipped into an excellent riding jacket the exact colour of Comet's chestnut coat. It was like looking at a stranger now.

Comet had collapsed with an aneurysm and died during training for the Games and Grace hadn't the heart, or the horses, to go on. Strangely from that day nothing had ever gone quite right again. Her life should have been a series of expected steps through a comfortable privileged life, but she had destroyed all that without really knowing how.

At the time she had wanted more. Her ridiculous ego had misguidedly told her she deserved more, she was special she told herself. With looks and personality she should go for the 'Big One', a fascinating, funny, difficult exciting man who would be tamed by his

consuming love for her. She would live a life of constant creative happiness.

How hysterically funny, she decided. Now, the myths gone, she had gradually descended into the decadent flab of disappointment and lost hope.

But the Gods had given her one shining hand out of the crap, one piece of continued pleasure. Her son Christian. A new photo was already tacked onto the corner of the shrine, a photo of him wearing the blue beret of the UN. Already he was on duty in the newest hotspot abroad. But Grace wasn't worried. Surely God would not take Christian from her. That would be the final cruelty in her tortured life.

Ronnie's voice brought her back, 'Every-one loves Christian, you know that Grace.'

'Yes,' Grace replied quickly, 'I know. Let's meet later at Quiggles. A few Bloody Mary's will sort out my headache. About seven thirty. What do you think Ronnie?'

'Sure,' Ronnie replied, always keen to get out and about away from his depressing bed-sit above Tottenham Court Road. He'd moved into it fifteen years ago after a great friend of his, Arthur Kennedy, an old black, nearly blind guitarist from Ohio had decided to hang up his plectrums and take that last pleasure trip into his final overdose. This time he'd meant it. He couldn't read the dots anymore. He'd left behind him a pair of crocodile loafers, with holes in the soles, and two sixties suits: one Prince of Wales checked and the other a shiny green mohair crossed silk suit that in his day made him feel grander than the King of Persia. Now sadly they lay moth eaten and alone in a Marks & Spencer's carrier bag stuffed behind the mildewed sofa, where Ronnie had packed the cracked pots and belongings that had remained of a once fine musician. Finer than him he acknowledged. Arthur Kennedy had once been a contender.

Ronnie, newly homeless at the time, had been tipped off by a mutual drummer friend that Arthur had died. He'd forced the lock, moved in and assumed Arthur Kennedy's identity. After all what's the difference between one itinerant guitarist and another and, to the shame of the world, nobody official had noticed the difference. Ronnie lived on in a mild state of subterfuge, only occasionally breaking out into panic if an official letter arrived announcing plans to move the rubbish collecting days or appoint a new janitor or whatever. In fact nobody came to visit and in the time Ronnie had been there several musicians could have arrived and died in the eternal graveyard of the city bed-sit.

Ronnie cleared his throat carefully, 'Oh, by the way Grace I'm a little low on cash at the present moment but I could have a tenner by Friday...' his voice trailed away in this litany that had become like a mantra in his life. The words would be etched on his gravestone. Who was he fooling, there wouldn't be enough money for a gravestone. Oh well, the paupers' pit was good enough for Mozart why not for him?

Grace shifted a trembling hand across her chest and tried to squeeze some oxygen into her flagging heart.

'Don't be ridiculous Ronnie, I'll buy you a drink for Christ's sake. Just be there.'

2

Giles woke with a start and a piercing noise thundering through his eardrums. Just about to arrive through his windscreen, and directly through his head, was a rather large car transporter. He swerved vigorously out of the way, disrupting the line of traffic weaving around Buckingham Palace behind him and mounting the pavement momentarily, to the consternation of a small group of American tourists photographing the palace. Immediately, to the added annoyance of his fellow travelers, he swerved back into the mainstream traffic effortlessly. The noise of angry horns was deafening. A taxi driver traveling beside him smilingly gestured for Giles to open his window. With a heavy heart Giles complied with the request and slowly wound down the window of his vintage Morgan sports car.

‘You're a fucking prat you are mate,’ the taxi driver shouted cheerfully before speeding away towards Admiralty Arch.

Giles glumly continued his journey around the statue of Queen Victoria with the customary pigeon perched upon her stony royal head. In fact, Giles noted with curiosity, it seemed to be the same pigeon as yesterday. A particularly ugly version of the breed, its feathers ruffled and mangy, half its left foot missing from an encounter with either a cat or one of the many electrical wires that laced about the London skyline. Giles fancied the bird fixed him with a beady stare of reproach as he continued to travel around the corpulent Queen and noticed, with a prickle of embarrassment, that the flag was flying.

Her Majesty was in. He shifted quickly into gear and motored swiftly on towards Whitehall and anonymity.

Giles parked a little more carefully than usual in his official space marked No 8. Some wag, obviously with one of the office's marker pens, had turned the 8 into a little stickman with a set of tiny genitalia attached. Giles's name was scrawled beside it. He had an excellent idea who the perpetrator was, his Runner Mike, and had little intention of giving him the satisfaction that he'd noticed his feeble attempt at artwork. Wearily he gathered his briefcase. He really must get more sleep.

'Not poppy nor mandragora, nor all the drowsy syrups of the world, shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep thou owest yesterday,' ran through his head. Iago had got it right but jealousy was not the cause of his sleeplessness. Boredom, eternal boredom. That answered the question.

Giles stifled a yawn and catapulted up the crumbling steps of 'Arts. Private Building.' stenciled in a utilitarian style on a white painted square by the front door. Crashing through the, supposedly, bomb proof swing doors he found himself in the dingy and predominantly brown hessian wallpapered entrance hall of what was once a grand 18th-century townhouse. The original tiled patterned floor spiraled magnificently away from beneath his urgent feet into a black, red and cream sunburst design. Above his head rose a cupola topped by an elegant glass bowler hat, which in its day was much admired. Now, alas, it appeared dingy and neglected by all but the local bird population, who used it as their local toilet facility.

The Service Secretary, Maggie, awaited him in reception.

‘Giles you look like the proverbial again. I’m warning you, another late morning this week and I’ll have to make a phone call,’ the threat was laced with the innocuousness of the British Civil Service. Maggie watched over her Operatives with the vigilance she afforded her macramé hobby and, after fulfilling her days tasks whether good or bad, she returned home on the Dagenham line to Ongar. She walked the last two hundred yards to her 1930s house, to her extended family and a deep untroubled sleep. Maggie knew what happened when she made the ‘phone call’ but her dreams remained tidy.

Knowing the weaknesses and trials of relationships she intended never to marry. Perhaps one day she would get a man as a pet, someone to do the gardening and jobs around the house, but until that time she was quite happy with her own company. One day she would leave the service and buy, with her ample retirement fund supplied by a grateful government, a wool shop on the High Street. Nothing compared to mohair and angora in her estimation and absolutely nothing interfered with her deserved rest.

Maggie tut tutted and entered the dreaded late in a register, ‘Twice this week Giles. I hope you not going to be a problem.’

‘No,’ Giles emphatically replied, ‘just a few family probs. That’s all,’ he lied.

‘I understand families,’ nodded Maggie indulgently, ‘I understand families very well, but they must never make us late in our duty to our country Giles, you know that. I don’t need to tell you that.’

‘No Maggie,’ Giles replied quickly, ‘thank you.’

Giles tried hard to keep the sarcasm out of his voice as he shifted from foot to foot. To

his irritation perspiration started from his forehead. Why did this bitch get to him this way? He really didn't need this.

‘Maggie,’ Giles quickly shifted gear, ‘I really like your suit, Prada?’

Maggie laughed as she quickly turned her perfectly balanced office chair back and forth.

‘Really Giles, you know I only order Saville Row. I earn more than you my love, now go to work.’

‘Well you look....’ he struggled to find a flattering non-condescending adjective, ‘efficient,’ he ended lamely.

Maggie looked at him as if he'd trodden in dog shit before perfunctorily turning back to her work.

Feigning nonchalance Giles walked to the lift and impatiently punched the penthouse button. As the doors closed behind him he could hear the tinkle of Maggie's perfectly pitched laughter as she spoke fluent German into her multi faceted phone system. Giles had an Oxbridge First in Languages but that woman from Ongar spoke multiple languages, including Japanese, Mandarin and even ancient Sumerian. God how she got under his skin.

With a shudder the doors opened and Giles walked into his working day. Another day of art, subterfuge and sin. Waiting for him was the pock marked face of Mike, his Runner and car park artist.

Mike lounged insolently over Giles' chaotic desk, flicking ash from his roll up over

Giles' new set of art slides from The Ministry. Giles knew better than explode and punch Mike's stupid face back to front. This method had been tried before and achieved only the slightest flicker of recognition, followed by weeks of sneers and titters from Mike and some unexplained spectacular breakages and cock ups that were chalked up to Giles' account. He wasn't chancing that again. Giles casually rescued the Grade 1 Security slides from the deluge of ash and made his way to the haven of the coffee machine.

'Another late night piss up, eh?' the inquiring nasal tones of the despicable Mike grated through the air and crawled into the last delicate soft place of Giles' eardrum, exploding like a nail bomb against its gentle pinkness. Giles ignored him and drank a deep draught of hot strong Colombian. It performed its duty better than marching powder, instantly cleaning what remained of the throbbing neuron-cells of Giles eyes and focusing him on to the day's events.

He was here for a reason, two in fact. The first being he was an expert in Eastern European art and an A list Operative for Her Majesty's Government. The second, and the reason he had to put up with the Mike's of this world, was that he was addicted to both excitement and gambling in that order. This had once reached death wish proportions when he bet one of his pickup pilots that he could jump and land in Staines Reservoir without a parachute. He'd had a headache for a month after that one and on his next medical he discovered he'd lost half an inch in height.

Giles stared out of the window over the spectacular view of the City of London. St. Paul's Cathedral rose like a giant mother of pearl mammary against the morning sun. St. Katherine Docks beyond beckoned with its glittering yachts and, more importantly, the

Dickens Inn with its tumble down sofas and old dark wooden hidey-holes. The thought of a double whisky and ginger and one of their miraculous steak and kidney pies glimmered invitingly to him.

He sighed and turned back to his task, 'Any news from Simons Mike?'

Mike shifted his weight fractionally, just enough to spread his cancerous byproduct over Giles' expensive briefcase. He extracted a copy of The Daily Smut from his pocket and started leafing through it indolently.

'Yeah, he wants you in Poland by Tuesday. Some crappy bit of old art shit he needs you to get. Required by our so-called superiors as bribery for some dodgy trade deal 'The Great Turds' have on the cards.' Mike despised all types of government and all forms of authorities and took great pleasure in relieving them of vast amounts of money in his inflated wages and expenses claims. The Department Heads, although fully aware of Mike's creative accountancy, dared not question him. He was too valuable to the Department.

'And then there's a big job on the off... you've got to be really on form for that one, I'm reliably told on the grapevine,' Mike continued as he began to snigger at the latest pair of silicon implants on page 3, 'veeery windy apparently. The 'Great Arseholes Above' want you to check with Rogers for a session before you go.'

Giles groaned and banged his cup down, spilling scalding coffee on to his hand.

'Shit...shit, shit, shit!' Giles hopped about shaking his hand in the air. Mike watched lazily, a soggy roll up hanging from his flaccid ginger hair coated gob.

‘Lot of good you're going to be. You're getting soft and flabby. You know what happened last time. You nearly cocked up that last job in Australia 'coz you didn't have the puff. I should get insured if I was you, leave your old mum something.’

Giles glowered at Mike and sucked his screaming hand.

‘Thanks for your support Mike, you've no idea how often I think of your comforting words when I'm in the field.’

‘That's all right,’ Mike cheerily replied, pretending to be unaware of Giles sarcasm.

‘Now run along and take those slides back to the Ministry would you,’ replied Giles patiently.

‘Certainly you old plonker,’ Mike replied in mock civil tones as he started shambling towards the door, hitching his trousers up and manoeuvring his ginger balls into place, ‘by the way,’ he continued, ‘I had to do a bloody difficult run for you this morning and I don't like doing that before my fry up. It's not nice dodging those froggy Runners first thing in the morning. They've all had their first line of coke for the day and they're bloody trigger-happy. A Runner from Block B got snookered by them the other day. Luckily, they're such fucking awful shots he got most of it in his left leg and arm. I'm going to kick up a stink if that happens to me, I can tell you. Anyway,’ he waved his hand vaguely towards the desk, ‘it's over there under my burger box. See ya, if I see ya,’ Mike laughed ridiculously in his usual attempt to mimic Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*, showing the hideous decay of years of eating shit and smoking it too. Giles feigned indifference, trying not to show how this standard departure routine grated on him. With a last hyena shriek Mike crossed to the office door. He kicked it open expertly with a

thunderous crash that shook the entire building and vanished.

Through the open door Giles could hear his customary vaulting, moving smoothly from landing to landing. It was a sound he'd heard a million times in their long relationship. Mike never used the lift or the stairs, ever. He claimed more Runners 'copped it' in the lift or on the stairs than anywhere else. Giles waited for the usual last loud thud as Mike expertly dropped to the ground from the last three floors. How he did that without breaking his legs Giles would never know. Patiently he closed the heavyweight door. He crossed wearily to the desk and sank gratefully into his swivel chair. Crossing a sweaty hand across his aching eyes he picked up the phone and dialed the code for the dreaded Rogers.

As he waited Giles gingerly drew the high security package from the ketchup explosion of Mike's breakfast and opened it. Inside was a single photograph nothing else. Rogers answered the phone as Giles curiously and minutely stored the face onto his perfect memory files.

Rogers, without preamble, issued orders and time of orders. Giles affirmed and replaced the phone as his heart sank into his perfectly fitted Lobb brogues.

With an angry buzz the security door swung open.

Rogers' voice arrogantly echoed from the control booth, 'There you are Giles, another treat for you.'

In front of Giles stretched a vast expanse of...nothing, darkness, silence.

‘Thanks Rogers. Thanks a lot,’ muttered Giles. This was a new one. He took a tentative step forward as the metal door clanged shut behind him. Was there no end to Rogers’ torture? Now he was in total pitch, bastard, darkness. He stood rigidly still. He must get his bearings before Rogers first little teaser started. Then he heard an almost inaudible hiss as some kind of capsule hit the floor near him. Every sense strained to work out what it could be.

Giles started to trace the wall lightly, not a crack. There must be some kind of exit. The hiss became louder and suddenly an unmistakable odour hit Giles' nostrils. The hair stood up on his neck, it was Zyklon B, a deadly nerve gas. He would be dead as a kipper if he didn't make a swift exit...now!

He started to run blindly through the darkness into, what his senses told him, was cooler air and a possible way out. He had ninety seconds before all his systems would close down. Permanently. As he stretched into a sprint a light to his right flashed on. There, spotlighted in an alcove in the wall, was an exquisite Sevres bowl connected to a timed explosive. Giles hesitated, he had no need for soft paste china at this precise moment. But he couldn't leave it, it was beautiful. He disconnected the explosive expertly, it wasn't difficult and, after stashing it away, ran like a madman making up the precious seconds lost.

Suddenly he was falling, dropping like a stone. One minute there was solid ground, the next an open void. He could feel his clothes ballooning around his flailing arms. What was that unearthly noise? With a shock he realized it was his own voice screaming.

Just as he was starting to think that Rogers had found a lift shaft to the very centre of

the earth, he hit the cold water with an explosion. Giles bobbed back the surface and started to tread water. He didn't know whether to feel relieved or not. He was still in pitch-blackness. He paddled around for a while to steady his equilibrium. Then to his right he heard it, very, very faintly. The wind. He felt a surge of hope. Anno domini may be catching up with him but his sense of hearing and smell were still immaculate. They'd saved him on many occasions.

Giles swam swiftly towards the noise. He felt cautiously along the wall. He could hear the wind distinctly now. But there was nothing, absolutely nothing, no door or window opening of any kind. Then by his left foot he found it, an underwater opening. He'd have to go for it, not knowing what was on the other side or whether he'd get back. If it was one of Rogers well known bluffs, Giles decided, he was going to cut Rogers' balls off and stuff them up his arse. If he ever got out of here.

Giles took a deep breath. He used to be able to hold his breath for fifteen minutes using yogic methods taught to him by his Cambodian Master, but now he was pushed to do seven. It would have to do. Gingerly securing the Sevres bowl, Giles plunged down into the foul water and into the opening. He felt along the roof of the tunnel and pushed himself vigorously along the smooth walls. He fought panic as he felt the walls of the tunnel start to close in on him as it narrowed. Giles urgently squeezed along the tunnel, it seemed to go on forever. His lungs began to ache but there was no going back now. He urged every fibre of his being to keep going.

After what seemed like a lifetime he began to feel himself blacking out when, like a cork out of a bottle, he burst out of the tunnel and erupted like a mini volcano through the

surface of the putrid water. Giles gasped and gulped the air into his bruised body. He knew he'd put his shoulder out again, that old ball and socket joint had really had it.

He paddled about getting his bearings. It seemed a little lighter here and he started to make out his surroundings. He appeared to be in a completely round room. Giles strained to look upwards and with an unhappy sigh realized where he was, a disused chimney shaft. Well above his head he could make out a faint spot of light. There was only one way out and that was up. He felt along the crumbling walls for a foothold, luckily many of the bricks were missing. Now to deal with his shoulder. He found a sound solid brick parapet conveniently jutting out from the wall just above his head, it had obviously been used for some sort of leverage purposes years ago. Now it would suit him perfectly.

He painstakingly removed the belt from his trousers and looped it around the wrist of his limp and painful arm. With his good arm he fed the belt up and over the stone protuberance and, without giving himself time to think, he yanked the belt hard throwing the limp arm sharply upwards. With a crack the shoulder joint shot back into place.

For a moment Giles blacked out, thankfully consciousness quickly flooded back. Nausea and hot perspiration rushed over him, despite the chill of the water. Painfully he carefully replaced his belt, he might need it later.

'Thank you Mr. Gucci,' he murmured quietly to himself as he gathered his strength. He leant briefly against the wall and breathed deeply, gathering strength, before, with a mighty rush, he pushed himself out of the water and up on to the wall, gaining his first footholds. The ascent, although straightforward, was made difficult by the decaying and crumbling condition of the once excellent Victorian bricks. Through a fog of tiredness

and aching joints Giles' mind wandered back to his earliest climbing days.

It was near his eighteenth birthday and he had timed it perfectly. The school Climbing Club had decided to conquer some easier Scottish Munro's which, with little effort, they had achieved. Staying at the splendid Torridon Hotel they had climbed the most northerly Munro, Ben Hope, moving on to the more arduous Beinn Eighe.

But not Liathach. That was out of their league. Liathach was not only a climb for experts, but also heroes. And he decided he was going to climb it.

Liathach rose magnificently and mockingly behind their hotel. The sun remained blocked by the unremitting up-thrusts of the sheer mountain face, rising almost vertically to the sky without one vulnerability to tempt ascent. Terraces of impossible cliffs, interlocked with seams of scree filled gullies, laced the forbidding face of the mountain like a disastrous facelift that would resemble Frankenstein rather than Aphrodite when the stitches were removed.

Giles remembered trying, without success, to muster some spittle into his suddenly parched mouth as he'd looked up at the endless scarred face of Liathach. His screaming saliva glands had shut down in protest as he had searched, in vain, the darkened mountain face for any kind of rest stations for his upward journey. Just standing at base and gazing up made your legs turn to jelly. Even in summer advanced climbing equipment was needed as the icy mist could creep like a shroud around you and you were lost, left to stumble into oblivion and certain death.

It was a beautiful summer's dawn on the morning of his birthday. As he stood at base, he'd watched a golden eagle sweep slowly around Liathachs' summit. He imagined he

could see the majestic bird fix him with a beady stare as if to mock him for attempting to join him in his kingdom above and even though of tender years he knew that this day was to be his best. He had already seen the tragedy of human misunderstanding amongst his peers and elders and knew the climb of life was to be far harder than anything that could happen today.

He was six-foot four inches tall, the best climber in the county and today he was going to climb Liathach with zero equipment and the bravura of wearing only his cricket whites and he was going to be a hero or dead. Tonight, if still alive, he was going to drink the hotel out of Talisker and to the applause of his peers retire to bed a man, not a boy.

And so it had happened and that very night, to his astonishment, he'd been signed up to the Government Arts Ministry by old Bowers, the school Arts Master and Secretary of the Climbing Club. It all suited Giles perfectly. Already an accomplished artist Giles joined The London Art School effortlessly and had spent his time there larking about pretending to be an installation artist. Yet he meanwhile managed to study under the great etcher Ralph Tully, a resident tutor at the college. Cleverly Giles hid his real genius for lithographs and etching, even from the great man. Only the Arts Ministry knew of his progress.

He'd organised, for his amusement, student rebellions. Including one famous incident where one particularly talent-less tutor was regularly tortured by the sight of his students blindfolded executing meaningless scribbles on their canvases each time he attempted to take class. He didn't last long. Giles even had the nerve to arrange an exhibition of their scribblings, to great acclaim and considerable monies.

Later Oxford gained him a First in Languages, but it was just a cover for his real education, all supplied by first-class operators within the walls of the City of Dreaming Spires. Now his education was complete.

He had never regretted joining the Ministry, ‘That may come later,’ Giles thought as he toiled up the last few feet of pock marked brick. At last, with a final straining effort, he catapulted over the blackened edge of the chimney and collapsed on to the crumbling parapet. Every breath felt like fire rasping past his throat into his begging lungs. He was getting old. He deliberately shut his mind to the future and reveled in the now. The sky was bright with sunshine, swallows swooped past him into an adjoining chimney. He was high above the roofs of London.

Giles idly surveyed the horizon as he lay there panting like a dog. The Thames glistened lazily as it threaded through the ornamental toy town bridges of Albert, Battersea and Chelsea. But where were the imposing four chimneys of the now impotent Battersea power station? With a sickening realisation Giles knew where it was...underneath him! No wonder the climb had been a bitch. Suddenly nausea hit him like a truck. All the filthy water he'd ingested cleared his system and he slumped back gratefully against the once magnificent chimney.

A shadow crossed him and shielding his eyes against the sun he squinted up to see the malevolent black outline of Rogers looming over him. He was going to kill that bastard one day and stuff his body into one of those crazy contraptions at the Science Museum.

‘Getting slower Giles,’ Rogers drawled as he snapped shut his laptop and punched something briefly into his iPad.

Giles, still panting but with show of bravado, jumped nimbly on to the edge of the chimney and performed a triple somersault across the abyss, landing perfectly on the other side. He wasn't going to let that bastard get any ideas. With a studied nonchalance, he began to amble towards a set of fire ladders leading to the ground.

‘Giles,’ Rogers called to him.

Reluctantly Giles turned back to him.

‘Forgotten something, have you?’ Rogers asked him quietly as he tapped neatly on his iPad. Giles stayed insolently silent for a moment, before reaching into his trousers and extracting the Sevres bowl from its sweaty nesting place over his genitals, like a ceramic cricket box. With a deft flick of the wrist he frisbeed the bowl into the startled hands of Rogers who, with a look of pure disgust, gingerly and minutely examined it for any damage.

‘I think I can see a small crack,’ he announced with satisfaction, ‘you're starting to slip Giles.’

‘Bollocks, the cracks are in your head Rogers. Now fuck off back to your little toy cupboard before I clock you one,’ replied Giles calmly as he resumed his journey around the perilous edge of the massive chimney towards the fire ladder and freedom. Rogers' eyes narrowed, already deciding the next trial he organized for Giles was going to be a humdinger.

‘Of course I'll have to micro-analyse it before I put in my report,’ Rogers shouted after him.

‘Well put your glasses on before you do it. We all know how crap your eyesight is,’ Giles replied without turning round.

‘I don't need glasses,’ Rogers almost screamed at Giles' retreating back, ‘I've just trialed a new test on body byproducts. It monitors stress and panic levels. Quite a lot of perspiration and...other things in this bowl. Let's see if your little shows of bravura are covering up the real facts of life shall we,’ Rogers concluded with satisfaction.

The only reaction this elicited from Giles was a burst of scathing laughter as Rogers' gyrocopter swooped down, like a giant crow, and hovered neatly at his side. Still smoldering Rogers climbed aboard and shot off like an angry wasp in the direction of Whitehall.

Alone, Giles sighed and steadied his now shaking hands before climbing carefully onto the fire ladder to continue his downward journey.

What he needed was a bloody stiff drink.