

STRANGE
HAPPENINGS
ABROAD



in the series

CANDIDE KARMA

As Lived By Lesley J. Phillips



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CANDIDE KARMA



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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

CANDIDE SHORTS

POEMS

CANAL CANDIDE - ECOLO BABY

CANDIDE KARMA

CANDIDE COURTS

SASHART

SASHART HAPPY BIRTHDAY

THE AUTHOR

Lesley J. Phillips is an English language consultant and translator, photographer and artist, who married a French musician and has lived in Paris ever since, travelling often back and forth to the Isle of Wight which she loves and where she grew up.

Each time surprised by her own reluctant mediumnic potential and with no desire to develop it, she believes that all humans have such potential but that only some wish to use it.

These stories, which she calls “Spook stuff” are all true to the letter with one exception only, the end of the story “Jackpot at the Blue Moon”, the final truth being unknown.

For Laura

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DEATH ON THE WATER

I

Omens

I was at Christopher's. It was a typical English autumn afternoon, lukewarm, low gray cloud, a bit misty, damp and very calm. I was standing alone on the terrace in front of the house, a big old gray stone manor farm at the top of a drive on a rise in the undulating lush green fields of the Isle of Wight, not far from the sea.

From the terrace, a vast, uncut lawn surrounded by high hedges of thuyas, laurels, privet and hawthorn sloped softly down towards a lake bordered by tufts of grasses and reeds at the bottom of the front garden and the road beyond. There reigned an air of heavy surreal silence; not the song of a bird, not the breath of a breeze, not the sound of a passing car. The whole scene was frozen, expectant. The surface of the lake was of a serene immobile silver with barely a ripple, like a gigantic mirror reflecting the dark gray sky and its extremity was so distant, so misty and seemed to blend in with the clouds so perfectly that I couldn't distinguish the end of the lake from the beginning of the sky.

This lake didn't exist when I used to visit Chris and the house, approximately twenty years before, but I felt no surprise at seeing it. As I stood contemplating the scene, in the corner of my left eye I saw a sudden movement in the thuyas at the top of the lawn near the house which disturbed the dream-like, motionless atmosphere of the garden. Then I saw a man, dressed in black like a vicar, his head down, his face shaded and undistinguishable, emerging from the thuyas, who started to walk calmly down the lawn towards the lake.

Another movement on my left. Another man, quite similar to the first, followed on. And then another, and another and another and yet another and more... all walking slowly down to the lake. In the meantime, the first men had arrived at its edge, and each had stepped into a canoe with no paddle and, their backs turned to me, had started drifting away to the blurry horizon in two's, one pair after the other, slowly, silently floating on the calm silver lake as if attracted by an invisible, irresistible current... And then more men, all in black, all in twos, their backs turned, followed suit... And suddenly I woke up, troubled, and thought to myself, "My God, there must have been more than forty of those men, drifting away across the lake in their canoes..."

This strange dream, or rather this nightmare, had stayed in my mind for a long time and was gradually fading as its meaning continued to escape me when one day the telephone rang with news that finally made it fall into place...

Two months after having this dream, I went home to the Isle of Wight for a holiday with my parents and, as usual, in the small village community, I very soon bumped into Chris in a local shop. We had first met on the beach where a group of us used to hang out and water-ski in the summer on his boat. I was sixteen and he was twenty-two. It was a new feeling, something different from my high school friends because of this age difference which impressed and pleased me; I saw him as a man of the world, intelligent and spirited and I was fascinated by him. For him, it was love at first sight. He had courted me extravagantly to the absolute disapproval of his mother, a paragon of snobbism, who fortunately for me lived somewhere in South Africa with her husband. My heart still quickened at meeting Chris, and I could see that he too was moved by emotion; it had been a long and meaningful relationship and had not left me untouched.

In spite of his mother's negative comments about me Chris, considered to be the most sought after single man around, spent all his free time with me until I left school when I was eighteen. I met his friends, I drove his car, we went to restaurants and parties and events. Then when I left school he asked me to marry him and I said no. I had no desire to stay buried in the seaside-countryside of a small island however comfortable the conditions, to get married, have children, to grow old and die there, even with him, without first discovering the world outside for myself. I had been advised to continue my studies, I was good at languages and through reading adventure books and Sagan, and the French cinema, I was so drawn to France, to French culture, to Paris, that I enrolled at the Sorbonne before studying French for two years in London, far from parental constraints and the small bourgeois society on the island.

I left for Paris and the Sorbonne that autumn to follow my destiny. Chris made several trips to see me, and so did I that year to see my family, and him. It wasn't finished... but I wanted to be free, to meet new people, new men. And I did. But it didn't work out, and I made the mistake of telling my sister. Fortunately it was in June towards the end of the school year, and a couple of days later Chris arrived without warning and said, "Pack your bags, we're booked on the four p.m. plane!"

But it wasn't the same. I still had the wanderlust and I was only on the starters. This time I left for two years of studying French in London and met lots of new people. Chris realised that I wasn't staying home in the evenings, although I did go home to the island at the weekends. In December, he left for South Africa where his parents were living saying it's finished between us. Then, at the beginning of the Christmas holiday, he reappeared on the train from London that I usually took to go home for the weekend, searching for me along the corridors, looking into all the compartments, but although I was not indifferent, my heart was now free.

That summer, Chris appeared daily on the beach with a very beautiful sixteen year old girl. He had bought a new cabin cruiser, and the water-skiing fun of the past became like a competition! Unlike me, even if I felt free, it sickened me to see how she did everything to please him. Then in November, during lunch in a restaurant, my parents told me that they had got married, and I nearly fainted with surprise. In May my mother told me they had had twins, but I was getting less afflicted! Five years later, I was married too, but every time we met, always by accident, Chris and I obviously still had that feeling in the plexus and lips that trembled a bit when we spoke.

Seventeen years had passed, when in the middle of August we met in the village, and one evening we went for a nostalgic dinner together on the mainland in yet another new fast cabin cruiser he had recently bought. He said he and his wife had separated the year before, that she had left him and gone to live with someone else. They say you never forget your first big love, and I still had its skeleton in the cupboard – and clearly so did he. I thought it would help to exorcise it by seeing him again. At sunset we chugged out of the harbour and opened the throttle and sped to a little creek on the mainland where we tied up the boat and went to an old pub for a meal like we used to, and caught up on our news like a couple of old friends – which we were. Then we went back to the boat, happy with our evening, and in the moonlight we took turns at the wheel and zigzagged happily at top speed over the calm mirror-like sea in the moonlight, back to the island.

Two days later I went back to Paris, to my husband, my daughter, my home, my job. Then a week later I had a phone call from my sister in England.

“Lee, I’ve some very bad news to tell you,” she said. “Sit down.” My heart started pounding uncomfortably in fear... “Is Chris... dead?” I said.

“... How did you know?”

“I just know, that’s all...” I managed, breathless with emotion. “Why? What happened?”

“He was coming back from the mainland on his boat with his twins and three friends after dinner last night. He drove the boat between two other boats, both cargo ships. He didn’t see that the first boat was towing the other boat with a huge metal rope, which was not sufficiently lighted. He took the rope in the neck and was thrown from the boat, neck broken, into the sea. A helicopter and lifeboat were soon there searching for him with spotlights. They found him. Of course he had been killed instantly. The accident made the front page of all the daily press. They’re still searching for the twins’ girlfriend who was on the boat, but the two other friends had only minor injuries.”

My dream came back to me like a flash. It seemed to explain what had happened, as if I had foreseen Chris’s death by a premonition. I should have searched for its meaning. The lake in his garden wasn’t normal, it doesn’t exist, but water symbolically flows like eternal life; Chris had died age forty-six, hence, I supposed, all those faceless men in black with their backs turned to me that I

could have counted, there must have been over forty of them, all drifting into the misty distance as if carried by a surreal, invisible current two by two – two killed... Retrospectively it seemed obvious. Yes, obvious.

DEATH ON THE WATER

II

The Ghost on the Back Seat

The Bembridge Ball is the last of the Isle of Wight yearly summer yacht club balls and it closes the August Cowes Week regatta season. Chris had taken me to the last two when we were an item. I hadn't been since then, mostly because I no longer lived on the island and I'd somewhat lost touch with my friends there. But this year my company was solicited, as I had met up again with Chris's friends at his funeral nearly a year ago. I accepted the invitation with pleasure and nostalgia and not without emotion, knowing that Chris's widow, who had left him two years before he was killed would probably be there, and maybe also their twin girls. It would almost be like seeing him again, the girls looked so like him. In spite of passing time I felt some emotion at seeing them, especially because of the tragic accident that had killed Chris.

Once the dilemma of finding an evening dress for this grand event had been solved, on the evening of the ball I set off at the wheel of my parents' car at sunset to join up with my friends. Bembridge is at the eastern extremity of the island; we lived in the extreme west. It was a drive of twenty-two miles and took almost an hour through scenery you could call a jewel in the crown of the English countryside. The bending road led me over hills of chalk with splendid views all over the island and as far as you could see to the distant mainland in the north, and down dale into shady hollows under tunnels of leafy trees between the fields, green with the richness of nature and coloured with festivals of summer wild flowers, grasses and bushes. It was a feast of delight for the eyes as the sun went down and I arrived in Bembridge in high spirits, looking forward to the party.

The evening went well, as I had hoped, talking to old friends and drinking Champagne and then a rock band started up and everyone was dancing in the huge marquee put up to create a discotheque. The twins came over and said "Hi" and briefly gave me their news, their mother introduced me to her new boyfriend and everything was in order, as it should have been for the occasion. Around two in the morning I got back in the car feeling great with the success of the evening and not in the least tired.

My route back first took me up a very steep hill at the edge of Bembridge village, which leads to the top of a long, exposed ridge of chalk cliffs spread across the centre of the island like a backbone. A new moon shone bright in a tranquil, clear sky. The view from the top was magnificent as usual, especially in these conditions, with the diamond-shaped island stretched out darkly all around, surrounded by the sea which reflected the silver moonlight. I could see a few yachts and sails dotted here and there and little lights blinked a few miles away on the mainland. The road follows down into a valley between the hills through a town in the centre of the island then climbs out again on the other side up another very steep hill with Carisbrooke Castle looming high on the left, then levels out as it enters a tunnel of mature trees.

Then it takes off across country, bending and winding between the fields, and a few miles further passes at the bottom of the garden of Chris's old house that I knew so well and where his brother now lives. Instinctively I turned my head to look at it as I drove past. It looked dark and quiet with no lights on and nothing seemed to have changed except that the thuyas and laurels had grown very tall. I sighed, and opened the car window a little to breathe in the fresh, night country air as the road climbed up a slope from the top of which I could see the silhouette of the church and graveyard where Chris's funeral had taken place and where he was buried, before diving down into a bend past a lonely pub at a crossroads. I looked down the road towards the church and as I passed I said out loud, "Goodnight, Chris," and then concentrated on taking the next bend. A fraction of a second later, an extremely strange and unusually freezing cold current of wind for the season rushed noisily through the car window like a mini tornado, ruffling my hair and brushing my cheek and neck and blew over my shoulder and stopped, just behind my back... Its violence was such and it so surprised me that I nearly missed the bend and almost went for a tour over the hedge and into the next field. Then followed an anguishing silence. I was conscious only of the soft purring sound of the engine as my energy field started detecting something abnormal and changed with fear to alert mode, and the horrible certitude took hold of me that I was no longer alone and that something or someone had entered the car and was just behind me and I knew, and I know

it was true, that this was not my imagination and that this something or someone was sitting on the back seat and just had to be Chris... A dizzying dose of adrenaline pumped through my body and covered me in goose pimples as all the hair on my head, neck and shoulders prickled and stood on end and I felt his eyes upon my back... Then the nerves in my cheeks began to burn and I felt as if I was going to faint and suddenly the inside of the car was filled with an infernal heat and the atmosphere became so heavy, so unreal, so expectative... was it the cold cold tomb or the fire of the devil? "Whatever, whatever you do, please, please don't speak to me, don't appear, I don't want to see you," I said out loud... and turned the rear view mirror sideways so as not to see what was on the back seat behind me, imagining some sort of half transparent ectoplasm of a decaying human body with eyes alive leaning on my mother's purple and mauve satin cushion and thinking it's not true, it's not true, but knowing it was. And then I said, "If that's you Chris, please don't manifest in any way, please don't show yourself... Or if it's some pal of yours from the graveyard having a joke... don't either! I might have a heart attack!"

To die of a heart attack is one thing, but in the meantime my reflexes had put my foot down on the acceleration pedal and the car was moving at a terrifying speed round the many bends and up and down the hills and hollows in the road. "Do you want to kill yourself?" I thought, and forced myself to break before the next bend. My sole desire was to get back home to the relative security of my parents' house. My neck was still prickling, my eyes were fixed over the bonnet onto the road lit by the headlights so as to see nothing else out of the corner of my eye, my heart was pounding with anticipation, my hands clutching fiercely the steering wheel, my body rigid and barely breathing. I had always thought that I'd never believe in ghosts until I actually saw one, but right then, the last thing I wanted was to see one... especially not just half a yard away! Somehow I forced myself to slow down and get enough of a hold on myself to defy the unholy presence and I started singing, "Feelings, nothing more than feelings" as loudly as possible, as if nothing unusual was happening, in a cowardly and unconvincing attempt to show him I simply wasn't ready to accept the situation...

So, with much effort on my part, and with an entity probably creased up with laughter and frustration at my reaction, we drove slowly, so slowly together, towards the village of Freshwater and home. The atmosphere in the car had gone back to cold and was indescribably heavy, intense and surreal, but... he or it must have heard my prayer and stayed quietly behind me without a word, thank The Lord! I heard nothing, I saw nothing, I called myself a stupid coward at having refused such an experience as we seemingly limped along,

wondering if Chris was capable of having such a joke on me or if he just wanted to be with me for a while now, especially tonight after the ball, or if it was one of his cemetery neighbours having some Saturday night fun. Or maybe Chris, whose neck had been broken in a terrible accident on the sea, could not rest in peace... The road seemed eternal as my mind raced with fear and with questions. We drove uphill and down dale and around the bends and through woods and across the fields in the bright moonlight – but what did he want and where did he want to go? Entities, I imagine, don't need to hitch lifts in cars! And I, why should I invent such stories...?

As we neared the entrance to the village of Freshwater, the road passes in front of the entrance to the manor house that Chris had bought when he got married. There is a high grey stone wall with tall gateposts opening onto a long drive across the fields to the house. At the very instant we passed these gates, the violent little gust of chill wind rushed again over my shoulder as noisily as before and left through the window, as it had entered. I was immediately engulfed with such relief that I almost stopped the car and collapsed, panting, as I realised that indeed it had to be Chris, it was just so clear now, he wanted to go home! I hadn't thought of that, because his family had sold the house after his death. No way, however, did I wish to stick around the area so I limped the car slowly home, so slowly, trembling and breathless, thanking all the saints I could think of for this deliverance, convinced now of life after death, of contact with parallel existences, of visiting spooks and entities around us and probably vampires too, and... heck, of the devil!

It took me a long time to get to sleep that night, with my arms in the form of the cross on my breast, in fear of receiving another visit from I don't know what unhappy, restless soul from the great beyond. I wondered whether Chris would have got out of the car if I had closed the window! I imagined him roaming the house where he had lived, in search of his family and of happier times gone by. I wondered if he would manifest again (actually he did, but that's another story) and I prayed, I prayed for his soul and for his salvation and for my salvation and that he find acceptance of his passing, and for his eternal peace.

The next day, I went to the local library and consulted several books on the subject of this kind of phenomena. It transpired that the "hitchhiker ghost" is a fairly classical one and not rare. The Isle of Wight is very deep and has a reputation for having many ghosts – in fact, at least sixty have been declared as permanent!

I decided just to believe what I know for sure... That that night, someone or something got into my car at a precise time and place, and got out at a precise place, and that I did nothing more than nostalgically say "Hi" to a boyfriend as I drove past the graveyard where he is buried. That's all. But this experience has marked me for life, and for a long time I avoided going anywhere near that road alone at night, although retrospectively it tempts me... because if ever, if ever anything like that happens again I must find the courage to look at it, to speak with it too...

JACKPOT AT THE BLUE MOON

Cannes in July, with our children, without our husbands. And in the conditions that I love, I mean, in a villa on the mountain behind the town, swimming pool just for us, outings on the water in my friends' boat, jumping in the sea far from the beaches and the crowds cooking in the sun, evening drinks in a café on the Croisette and a local seafood restaurant for dinner. Two weeks in another world, a perfect holiday which went so fast.

For our second-to-last evening before packing up and driving back to Paris, Katia and I decided to celebrate our holiday and go for a drink at the Blue Moon, a disco club off the beach near the harbour. At one o'clock in the morning the place was heaving with happy holiday makers dancing, the music was good, the atmosphere was festive. Over the rims of our Pimm's-Champagne we chatted on stools with the barman, and were joined by a tall, slender, broad-shouldered, fair-haired blue eyed man, very nice!

He said he was working with an organisation which did business. Vague... He lived in Cannes. OK. He bought us a drink. OK. Everybody danced. He and the Pimm's started having a pleasant effect on me and when Katia and I left, he said come for a drink in a café on the Croisette the next evening.

It was a mistake and I should have known better. But I went, shielded by my little daughter in her push chair. Before we met up at the café-bar-tabac where you can buy cigarettes, newspapers and magazines, I bought a magazine to pass the time and looked up my stars for the week in the horoscope section. "A new meeting could have some unexpected consequences." I had been warned!

He arrived. We ordered kirs. Still on the stars page, I asked him his astrological sign. Aries. That's normal, there are plenty of them around me, a fire

sign which my air signs seem to attract. I consulted the predictions for Aries and read them to him, thinking that these horoscopes are too generalised to be anything more than some kind of social fun.

“A lucky period for Aries subjects. Your lucky numbers for this week are 2, 3, 8 and 14.” We laughed. “Let’s see about that,” he said, and went into the “tabac” shop and bought a “Quarté” lottery ticket, and played those “lucky numbers”.

We chatted about this and that for over an hour. He was really charming! The attraction was evident and the vibes were quite strong. But... we exchanged phone numbers, knowing that no-one would phone anyone, and then off we went on our separate ways towards dinner time.

A new meeting, a holiday meeting, short and sweet, and without any consequences, as the astrologer could have said. The next day, Katia and I loaded our luggage into the car, added the three children and took off in the direction of Paris and our husbands, and I forgot all about the gorgeous holiday guy.

A month later the phone rang. It was him! I immediately regretted having given the right number so easily to a fleeting holiday acquaintance. But I answered. “I’m in Paris! You’ll never guess what has happened!”

Help. I’m trying not to guess.

“Er, what?”

“You remember that you read me my horoscope and I played the Quarté numbers you said were my lucky numbers? Well, I won a hundred and fifteen thousand francs! I must see you!”

Incredible! I helped a guy I’d hardly met to win huge sums of money, and do you think I’d ever won anything for myself?

“Oh! Oh, OK!”

So that afternoon I drove from my suburb into Paris and we met in a café in the 8th Arrondissement. It was Wednesday and the school day off, so I took my little daughter with me again. He was very, very excited! He had never had such a sum in his life. He wanted to buy me something to thank me, and a present for

my daughter. He was going back to Cannes that evening. Aha. But he couldn't cash in and get the money he'd won because he had no identity papers and no bank account, and he wanted to get it in cash because he was in a hurry. Would I go and claim it in his place?

I really inspire confidence, don't I? But of course! No problem! I just love to put huge sums of money into my joint bank account with my husband and go and take it out in cash the same day at our bank with no warning and drive around Paris and the suburbs with piles of bank notes stuffed into my pockets. And my husband will find that absolutely normal and not ask me any questions. No problem at all!

But, idiot, I did it. I accompanied him to the Tiercé office. They gave me the cheque. I drove back to my suburb with my daughter, went to my bank and cashed it. They were not at all pleased at my not giving them the usual 48 hours' notice of my request, as is the norm in cases where large sums of money are concerned. They accompanied me down the stairs to the basement vault, walked me through a mass of iron bars and put me in a cage where they handed over the money in small denominations as he had asked and made me count it all out in front of the bank teller. This took some time, and then the bank teller checked it out himself with his super non-slip index finger rubber thimble, taking less than a quarter of the time. Then he put it in an envelope and with a big smile I stuffed it into my handbag and took leave of the cage and the bank, got back discreetly to the car feeling like a gangster who had just done a job and drove again to the 8th Arrondissement of Paris, to a corner table in another café, where I pass him the envelope under the table under the eyes of my little daughter who looked on unquestioningly. The afternoon's mission accomplished, we went to a big brand leather goods boutique where he bought me a super handbag, and another boutique where he bought a lovely little necklace of ivory beads for my daughter. Before leaving for Cannes, he took a chunky gold signet ring off his finger with the initials "HB" engraved upon it and offered it to me.

"Those aren't your initials," I said.

"No, it belonged to a man I did a favour for, he gave it to me," he explained. He seemed to want me to have the ring so badly that I ended up accepting it, then we separated again, this time, I hoped, for good, and off we all went, back to where we came from.

Almost another month went by, and then one day I got a letter from him, in an envelope with a Toulon postmark. There was a letter for me, and a folded envelope with another letter inside, not for me but addressed "To whom it may

concern.” Oh Lord, what now? Decidedly, he continued to surprise me but in view of the global context I was beginning to suspect that he wasn’t quite the gorgeous man I’d imagined and even that he wasn’t a desirable character at all, and that if I wasn’t so naïve and trusting I’d have said he was clearly up to no good... and I hesitated to speculate on the rest...

“Dear Lesley,

I’ve had a great time with the money but there are some people looking for me. I don’t know why. I haven’t done anything wrong. But if by chance you hear of my death in the papers, please take the enclosed envelope to the Police. It will tell them who did it.”

Many thanks,

Not H.B.”

Human bomb! Holy crikes...! Palpitations! The envelope was burning my fingers... I must get some gloves so as not leave any incriminating fingerprints on it! Or smudge his, come to think of it! By now I was torn between destroying it all and doing him this last favour... Visions of gangs of Hollywood-type Mafiosies breaking down the door of my flat and torturing me for information as to his whereabouts and assassinating me before I can take the envelope to the Police flash around my mind. Why the hell did I pick up blue-eyed fair-haired guys in night clubs in Cannes or rather why did I let him pick me up... Whatever, the lesson is learned and I’ll be good on holiday from now onwards. But what to do? I got a pair of scissors and I cut up the letter to me into half-inch square pieces which I took to the kitchen and burned in the kitchen sink and washed the ashes down the drain, evidence lost for ever. Then I rushed back to the living room and frantically pushed all the furniture to one side of the room, rolled up the fitted carpet with much difficulty and placed the envelope “To whom it may concern” on the parquet floor in the very middle of the room and rolled back the carpet and replaced all the furniture. To put it in a nutshell, this “new meeting which could have unexpected consequences” was beginning to have very unexpected consequences, quite out of proportion with the actual meeting which had, until recently, been rather pleasant but which I could now frankly do without.

I started getting into new habits, like listening to the news on TV and radio; I started buying the newspapers and combing them from cover to cover for articles and obituaries with his name on them. No murders of the sort! No bodies of his description floating around the port of Toulon! The weeks go by but I remained vigilant, my heart pounding at every phone call and every unexpected knock on the door, and skirting the walls every time I go out in case I’m being followed by murderous thugs... But no news, of course. My father

always used to say I had too much imagination...

And then one day I opened the newspaper and saw a short article, a name, no photo. His body had been fished out of the water in the port of Toulon about two weeks after death. He was a bad boy, that's for sure. Shit! I do not feel in the least reassured...

The letter "To whom it may concern," felt as if it were burning a hole in the centre of the living room carpet, and I thought about it every time I, or anyone, walked over it. I waited till everybody was out, and once again, just as desperately, dragged the furniture from one side of the room to the other, put on some gloves and removed the envelope, dusty and dirtied by bits of trodden-on carpet backing, and placed it in a larger envelope, addressed it to the Commissariat de Police in Toulon, rolled the carpet back against the wall, dragged the armchair, a sofa and all the cushions, two small tables with their lamps and some plants on some bookshelves back into place, got the car out, got a stamp from the local "tabac", stuck it on the envelope and, fearing being traced to my tranquil garden suburb, I drove into Paris and posted it a little nostalgically in the 8th Arrondissement.

DEFLATED

“Desire For You”

It was Giz who brought her home one afternoon. Vanda... She was around fifty and getting a bit plump and definitely menopausal. She had been an actress and a screenwriter, but had been out of work for a long time, and she latched on to Giz in the hope of writing lyrics to his songs. I can't even remember how he met her. Giz, a singer and the man I lived with, was working on the music for his new CD and had several melodies lined up waiting for lyrics.

I suppose you could say that Vanda had some sort of talent as a songwriter if you go for love in unlikely metaphors, sentimental poetry set to old-fashioned French melodies and soppy romantic lyrics by a spare-time blacknologist about travels in Africa and trips down the Okavango, with a bit of voodoo thrown in. Not very rock'n rythm'n blues, which was what Giz was into, so nothing much came of their few afternoons together in the cellar of our house in the Parisian suburbs where he had a home studio. Nothing but a song called "Desire For You." It wasn't a bad song, but it just wasn't good enough, so they split company quite soon after they met. But Vanda kept in touch. With me.

I remember it perfectly, because it was at that same time that Giz and I started having problems. Giz wasn't having any luck finding a producer or a record company to back him, and it was getting him down. I had become the buffer for his bad temper, and was bored with not working myself. We had started to fight. Then he had a break-through and began working with a production team on a CD album for a new female singer, and didn't always come

home at night. They even had the cheek to ask me to do "made to measure" lyrics in English for her, like I'd get a phone call at nine in the evening for a song to be recorded at ten the next morning. And I even did it, sitting in the kitchen all night over cups of tea writing love songs for her and trying to be objective about it, but I was never invited to meet her or go to the studio. The pressure went on for almost six months and I was imagining all sorts of reasons for it, especially the female singer, I mean. We had always had an honest relationship. It was the first time anything like this had happened between us, but Giz wasn't saying much about it.

Vanda would call in occasionally to catch up on the extent of the damages to our relationship, or phone to ask me if I wanted go with her to sell some paintings and other assorted not very valuable old objects and works of art in her possession. She obviously needed money badly. She had written a film script for which she hadn't been paid, she said, and the person she had worked for had kidnapped her Siamese cat and started sending her menacing letters of blackmail. Then two of her three dachshunds suddenly died mysterious deaths, and on top of it all, she was asked to leave her lodgings and didn't know where to go...

By then, the female singer's CD was recorded; to my relief she left for California, and her producer started producing Giz's own single. They were working long hours but things were looking up, and Giz and I had a much better month getting back together. The CD came out, then, just when I thought things were okay again between us, Giz met this twenty-three year old model girl and from then on hardly ever came home at all. I was scared. I started keeping a calendar and blocking out the days when he didn't appear with a red felt pen, and after three or four months the calendar was red all over. When he did come home, it was just to pick up some more of his belongings to take to her place, and sometimes he would be wearing one of her man-size pullovers or jeans jackets which smelled strongly of her perfume and drove me crazy with panic and disgust. She couldn't have made the point more strongly if she was doing it on purpose, which of course I suspected she was. I would empty out his pockets when I did a clothes wash in the machine, and torture myself by finding all sorts of painful traces of infidelity in them such as a plane ticket to her home town in the south of France for a weekend, or a little note saying "When you get home, come to bed and slide my pants off," or a pathetic poem about their "impossible love." From where I was sitting, it looked more as if it was my side of the situation that was impossible, not hers.

Giz's CD had taken off and this bitch was getting all the benefits of his success while I moped alone at home. Giz's band and our friends were visibly ill at ease on the rare occasions that I appeared and they did everything they could to keep me from meeting her, but I was kept informed by "well-wishers." Each drip of information made me feel more nauseous, and I took it all so badly that I got depressive. Couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, couldn't think, and lost a lot of weight. After all, Giz and I had been together for a good eighteen years, and our daughter was only thirteen years old. The fear inside me of losing him completely made me feel as if I had a nasty black lump growing in my solar plexus and my instinct told me that something really bad was going to happen.

Vanda remained faithful to me! She said she wanted to help me find a new direction in life, as if she knew that Giz and I had irrevocably broken up, and asked if she could come to our house with a friend of hers who was a karmic astrologer to help me find guidance. I had never met a karmic astrologer and was clutching at straws to keep myself going, so I said, "Okay." They came to tea one April afternoon. The karmic astrologer seemed to be a very nice woman, and while Vanda was out of the room she told me that Vanda's soul was very, very old, that she had been reincarnated many many times, and was doomed to wander in despair and ill-fortune through all her lives. Then she told me, after studying the date and hour of my birth, that Giz had "gone off on a long, long voyage," and that it would be a waste of time to wait for him. This sent me over the edge into a sick panic and the beginnings of a nervous breakdown, especially as the well-wishing friends around me had recommended various crystal ball psychics and ink blot interpreters and tarot clairvoyants and I had seen them all. They were united, they had all said the same thing - don't wait for him. Judging by the situation between Giz and me, it was obvious they had something going there, except for one tarot reader who said Giz would try a comeback but in a long long time, and so I weepily started looking into how to get a divorce.

But I did take pity on poor Vanda whose survival problems were getting even worse and who didn't have a decent place to live. She was staying, she said, at a friend's shack, with no kitchen or bathroom, in the middle of some woods way out in the sticks of Normandy, and it was costing her all she'd got left in petrol driving to and from Paris trying to find work. By this time it was July, and my nervous breakdown was nicely under control with the help of a hefty drugs prescription from the doctor, something which I hated to resort to but which was doing the trick nicely. I was at last sleeping and eating again and even felt quite strong. I was leaving with my daughter, Laura, for a two-week holiday at my mother's house in England on the Isle of Wight. Naturally, I asked Vanda if she would like to look after our house and our four cats while we were away. It

was so much more convenient for her, she said, that she was delighted to accept, and moved into the spare bedroom with her remaining dachshund, a big black cat with huge yellow eyes and a car-full of belongings.

The holiday was a wonderful break, except that I had a really hair-raising nightmare while we were there. It was about Laura and me. We were lying on the beach near my mother's house, my favourite haunt as an adolescent, taking up the sun, when far away to the south-west on the horizon of the sea I suddenly noticed some strange movement. Then I realised it was a huge tidal wave, and it was coming our way very fast. I watched its approach with fascinated horror and growing fear in the pit of my stomach. I started to panic and grabbed Laura's hand and ran off with her, dragging her behind me, climbing up to the top of the cliffs as fast as we could. I must have thought that the higher we got, the less we would be in danger. There was nothing more we could do. The ghastly, gigantic, unbroken pale green wave approached from the sea, engulfing boats and swimmers and lowland in its path until it finally and miraculously swept closely past our cliff, leaving behind it a turbulent, swirling flood and the two of us, somehow high and dry, in safety on the top. I woke up panting and trembling with relief. I immediately consulted my Dreamer's Dictionary and it told me the tidal wave was a very rare dream, and symbolic of a major obstacle the results of which depended on the outcome of the dream. So I concluded - having taken it as a premonitory dream - that whatever was going to happen to us it would turn out alright, and thought it must be to do with Giz. Our divorce, which I still looked upon as a defence mechanism, however costly, and which was mostly designed to scare him into coming back, was going as slowly as were the seconds ticking by without him.

When we got back from our holiday, we found Vanda in the kitchen, standing happily by the bread bin where she said she had made the acquaintance of a little mouse, while we were away. Okay, okay... Hmmmmmm... I simply didn't believe her and decided I was sheltering someone subject to hallucinations. I'd never seen a mouse in the house and didn't expect to - especially not now with five cats and a dog around - and suggested she remember to close the bread bin from now onwards. Then she asked me if she could stay on with us until she got organised. I'm too soft to say "no" to such a request, and there upon started a particularly complicated cohabitation... A young teenage girl, sane so far, thank God, a deserted wife and mother in the process of having a nervous breakdown and drugged up to the eyeballs, an unhappy, old, old soul with a karmic existence of maybe several millenniums, dragging her heavy load around my house, five cats, one of which had to be kept apart from the four others at the expense of the fitted carpet in the spare

bedroom, and a dachshund... I can tell you, it was difficult to organise and the atmosphere was really heavy.

One morning, Ice, an out of work musician and friend of Giz's, who lived in a neighbouring suburb, turned up on our doorstep asking for Giz, obviously unaware of the split. We got to talking over a few cups of tea and coffee, and the next day we started working together on some new songs in my cellar studio. Giz had taken away most of his music equipment but I had bought some of my own, and Ice was very creative and energetic as well as being quite a clown. We spent days and late nights working hard on new songs and laughed a lot, and his company did me a lot of good.

But unfortunately, you could say that the vibes between Ice and Vanda were more like violent thunder storms than anything else. They disagreed, barely politely, about absolutely everything, which was a great strain on me. Ice thought she was totally sinister, creeping round the house and garden with a black cat in her arms and a dachshund at her heels. But it was Vanda who opened the hostilities more actively while I was out one day, by wanting to "play the electric piano," and erasing two full weeks work of our compositions by reinitialising my synthesizer "by accident." Ice went hopping mad and called her a senile delinquent, and as we hadn't thought it necessary to make a copy our work, there was nothing we could do about it except start all over again. This took another two weeks, of course.

Then one afternoon, on our way back from Ice's house where we had been to pick up some new musical equipment he had bought for recording our demos, one of the tyres on my Volkswagen 181 Jeep got a puncture. Apart from the inconvenience to us, there was nothing particularly unusual about this except that I'd never had a flat tyre before, so we just put on the spare tyre and didn't think any more about it. But then about three weeks later we got another puncture in the middle of the busy traffic on the day of a public transport strike, on our way to an important appointment with a big international music publisher in Paris who was interested in listening to our work. Again, we changed the tyre and got so late and filthy and wet, in the pouring rain I might add, that we had to postpone the appointment to a later date from a phone booth (year 8 before mobile phones) at the Porte Maillot. Ice, deeply disappointed at missing the appointment, laughed cynically and remarked that

two flat tyres in such quick succession was definitely not normal, and jokingly added that Vanda must have cast a bad spell on us through jealousy.

These two incidents were only the beginning of a whole series which was getting more and more dangerous. Another tyre burst at a hundred and thirty kilometres an hour on a busy motorway in the country an hour outside Paris. We were driving back in the late afternoon after a day's mixing session in a recording studio, on our way to another appointment with the same music publisher we had postponed the month before. Fortunately Ice, who was driving, kept control of the car beautifully and we limped off the motorway safely, found a phone booth and postponed the appointment again, to the cynical comments of the publisher who obviously didn't believe us the second time. Then we had a fourth puncture on the Paris ring road on our way to see a producer who wanted to discuss a contract with us. Once more, we had to phone and cancel our appointment, and it was beginning to get really embarrassing.

Ice just couldn't believe it. Every time he told the story of our practically systematic breakdown antics to our friends, they all creased up with laughter. At least we felt better after a good laugh. But how could we be taken seriously by the music profession if we kept on having flat tyres left, right and centre and cancelling half our appointments? Ice said he thought it must be his fault, that he was bringing us bad luck. But he wasn't. I had a whole load of flat tyres without him, like when I was on my way to see an estate agent about selling my house, and when I went to visit a flat for sale in Paris, or at Charles de Gaulle Airport in the car park with my daughter before catching a plane to London (which, incidentally had left the day before, but that's another story). And then, as if to confirm that it was some kind of weird and evil jinx that was on me, not on Ice, I had three flat tyres in England with my mother's car, one of which burst while I was driving across a bridge over the Yar estuary on the Isle of Wight. I could have ended up in the sea if I hadn't been driving quite slowly and my "amphibious" VW jeep would finally have been put to the test.

The amount of time I spent in garages buying new tyres and having others repaired and the wheels of my car rebalanced! The whole thing was costing me a fortune, not to mention the inconvenience of it, and not to mention the danger! You have no idea of the kind of objects they removed from my tyres. Half a pair of scissors, a screw-driver that had lost its handle, a jagged, triangular-shaped piece of sheet metal, a broken steel rod used in reinforced concrete, a four inch long screw, a horseshoe nail (from the bridge over the Yar estuary incident), and an assortment of various different nails... My local garage mechanic couldn't believe it either and said, "What, you again!" every time I drove in for repairs,

and recommended me to go to the shop and get a subscription card which would give me a ten percent reduction off the sale of new tyres.

And then on top of it all, one morning when I was leaving a bit late for an appointment with an estate agent friend of mine in Paris who had a flat for or sale for me to view, I tore out of the house as usual, jumped into my poor old Volkswagen jeep, turned on the engine which always started first go and drove off quite smartly, over what felt like a bit of a bump. This I thought strange, so I stopped the car and got out to see if I didn't have yet another problem with one of my brand new tyres, but this time it wasn't a puncture. It was a black cat, spewing blood and bile and not quite dead, and I had run over its stomach. It must have been asleep on one of my wheels, the poor thing. I love cats so much, and was still feeling very emotional about Giz, that I just stood there and started to sob! I couldn't bear to touch the cat which had now died, and I was getting very late for my appointment, so I ran to my next door neighbour's front door and rang the bell and amidst sobs, with tears and mascara streaming down my cheeks, and somehow managed to tell him what had happened. He looked disdainfully at me and said the equivalent of "Hang on a minute," in French and came back with a garden spade, a dustbin liner and an uncontrollable rictus. With the spade, he shovelled up the black, bloody, furry dead body, put it neatly into the dustbin liner, and walked back to his front door muttering things under his breath about much worse things happening during the First World War. By the way the neighbours smiled at me after this incident, I reckon the story must have gone round the whole neighbourhood.

But it wasn't Vanda's black cat, thank heavens. It, Vanda and the dachshund were still holed up in the spare bedroom. And in the meantime, I had met someone. I mean, Someone, capital S. His name was Em, and he tolerated Vanda much more than Ice did. Nevertheless, it was getting very inconvenient having her around the house which, when everyone was home, was more like a hotel-cum-menagerie. One day I plucked up my courage and asked her kindly if she could make other living arrangements. She quite understood, she said, and finally did, and wondered if she could leave some of her belongings in our garage for the time being. I was so relieved that this heavy, incompatible presence was at last leaving that of course I said "Yes." I asked her to keep in touch because I knew it was just a question of time before I sold the house and moved to Paris, and then, one afternoon shortly after, she piled her suitcase and her pets into her car, and drove off.

We never saw her again. I continued working on songs with Ice, enjoying a delicious and healing relationship with Em, had a couple more punctures, both

while the car was stationary for a change - one parked in front of my uncle's house and another in the garage - and sold the house after negotiating a four month period before having to move. During those four months I tried to contact Vanda through the people she knew to ask her to come and fetch her belongings, but she had vanished. Even her karmic astrologer friend had had no news from her. A week before I was due to move I went down to the garage to look through her things and decide what to do about them. An amplifier, a tuner and a double cassette deck, an old sewing machine, a very old barometer, some cutlery, glasses, dishes and tablecloths, several decorative objects including three enchained brass dachshunds, a framed photo of same, lots of books, clothes, shoes, curtains and antique linen, an old carved wooden oxen brace with chains, a collection of old fob-watches, an ancient and crumbling Neolithic type spear-head and an assortment of stones, rocks and crystals. She must have liked archaeology.

Thinking of my move to Paris, I put a pile of books I wanted to read aside with six nice wine glasses and a lovely old tablecloth, and then spent almost half an hour impeccably padding, protecting, wrapping and sealing the antique barometer which I thought would look smashing on one of my new sitting room walls. Then I closed up her boxes and bags again, thinking that a lot of her stuff could be useful to myself or maybe to some of our friends, and went back upstairs into the kitchen to make some dinner, still hoping she would phone me before we moved.

The next evening I was going out for dinner in a restaurant with a friend of mine I hadn't seen for a while and I told him my news, including the twelve punctures and all about Vanda. He contemplated me pensively for several seconds, then lowered his head mysteriously towards me across the table and half whispered, "Be very careful. Whatever you do, don't take any of her belongings with you when you move to your new flat." Fascinating, I thought. "Burn everything you can, break what you can't burn, and at worst, disperse anything you can neither break nor burn. Particularly anything that looks very old."

"I can't do that," I said. "Supposing she turns up at the house before I move?"

"She won't. She might already be dead. Do what I say, promise me, and don't take any risks. She might be planning on going to live with you in Paris. Whatever you do, don't take any of it with you, especially not the crystals."

"But there are lots of books that I'd like to read," I said.

"Burn them! This is not a joke."

He looked so serious that I began to find the whole thing quite sinister, notions of wicked witches' spells and evil reincarnated spirits and voodoo curses and black magic invading my mind. So the next morning, Sunday, I brought all her stuff up from the garage into the sitting room, put a pile of newspapers, twigs and logs in the fireplace and lit a huge fire.

The books, magazines and wooden spoons burned nicely. But not her pullovers, woollen coats, leather shoes and boots and plastic handbags. They made a thick, black, pollutive cloud of smoke which was quite suffocating to work near and penetrated the very depths of my lungs and then invaded the whole house. I had a lot of fun though, shattering the wineglasses by hurling them Russian-wise, like after a toast, against the back wall of the chimney followed by the plates and cups and saucers and cutlery. Into the fire, which by now was more of an obnoxious-smelling fuming black mass, I threw the three brass dachshunds, still enchained, some pictures, note-books, a framed photo of a Siamese cat and a whole load of bric-a-brac. A friend of Laura's called in to see her just as I was about to throw in the cassette deck and tuner and the collection of fob-watches, and asked if he could have them, and Giz, visiting the house for the last time, went off with the amplifier. I tried to warn them, and told them the story of Vanda and the punctures, but they both looked at me with a sort of concerned pity, then shook their heads in despair. "Well, whatever happens, if you take anything it's your responsibility now," I said to them both, trying not to feel ridiculous.

There remained the oxen brace and chains, the sewing machine, and the old barometer. I put the oxen brace and the sewing machine onto the fire, but when I went to pick up the barometer, I noticed that some of the mercury had managed to escape in spite of the extreme care I had taken when I had wrapped it up in wads of newspaper in the garage and the plastic bag I had put it in, and was rolling around in little silver balls towards my own packing cases.

"Aha!" I said aloud, "so she wants to come to Paris with me, does she!"

Just try catching dozens of tiny balls of mercury! I pursued them on all fours with a dustpan and brush, and then with a wet sponge, as they headed towards my packing cases and dispersed all over the terracotta tiles of the sitting room floor. It seemed that every time I got one it would split into more tiny balls

and roll with others further under the boxes. It was like a war. So I went and got the vacuum cleaner, turned it on full blast and did a fanatical cleaning job of the whole floor, which I then inspected with a torch and a magnifying glass on all fours; and when I was pretty convinced there could be no mercury left in the sitting room apart from maybe a drop in the barometer which was now smouldering in the fireplace, I took the bag out of the vacuum cleaner and burned that too. Then I went upstairs and drowned the vacuum cleaner's nozzle in a bath full of water and rinsed the whole bath with the shower spray, inspecting the water as it ran down the plughole. I wondered, as I had read that witches can't drown, that maybe the mercury, if there had been any left, couldn't drown either. The whole business was indeed getting ridiculous.

And towards evening, when the fire in the sitting room was finally just a smouldering pile of stinking black ashes, I put on some rubber gloves and meticulously sorted out the broken glass and plates and pieces of metal from the remains, shovelled it all up with the dustpan and put it into plastic bags, which I carried out to the car. Then I drove, as the sun set and darkness descended, to the local rubbish dump which was in a field on a deserted plain in the suburbs. I dispersed the bags in the huge different skips of the dump as far away from each other as possible, and with much effort threw the remains of the heavy old sewing machine over the edge of a huge bin reserved for metal, followed by the three enchained little dachshunds which were now all warm and blackened, and thought how pathetic the whole scene was.

When I got back home it was night, and I was shivering and feddup, and looking forward to moving into my flat in the centre of Paris, far from all these sad memories.

I had no more punctures, not even on the day I moved, and still no news from Vanda. Everything went perfectly. What happened the day before the move is a mere speculative anecdote.

I took the car to go and pick my daughter up after school at the local train station, and at about one kilometre from home, not very far from the rubbish dump, three little wasps suddenly appeared in the car and started to buzz annoyingly around my face and hands. Since I'd already heard of people having car accidents because of wasps, I immediately stopped the car by the side of the

road and opened all the windows and doors. With an old newspaper I tried to coax them out of the car, but they just didn't want to know, and buzzed straight back in again. This new war must have gone on for a good five minutes, and then I had a brainwave. I took the hood off the jeep, folding it nicely into place at the rear, then I jumped back behind the wheel, turned on the engine and tore off at full speed, hoping to leave them behind.

That did it! I had escaped the wasps, but I was really perplexed. One wasp in a car in March when the weather is still cold must be quite rare, but three of them... And where did they so suddenly come from and how did they get into a closed car? I just couldn't help thinking that Vanda, having failed to kill me by puncture, had sent three reincarnated little dachshunds to finish off the job. A most unlikely story!

But no less likely than twelve flat tyres in the space of eighteen months...

DEATH IN PERSON

I

Murder On My Mind

Hatred, born out of death. Born of the death of a love, of the assassination of a marriage and little home full of happiness, dead... because of a... a... bitch!

He shouldn't have left all those photos in our house. My house, now. Four hundred photos of the fucking filming of the video of his stupid song on location in Morocco, it was cruel, sadistic... Did Giz do it on purpose? Was it the only message he dared send me? I had taken the photos, thrown them violently to the ceiling, screaming at the top of my voice, hot tears of fear rolling from my eyes. They rained down and scattered all over the terracotta tiles before the big chimney-place of the living room where I trampled all over them, stamped on them, kicked them all over the floor in a delirious rage of frustration, helplessness and despair and scraped them around under my big black and white Santiago boots. If there had been a fire in the fireplace they would have burned, torn into millions of micro pieces... And when they had become crumpled and filthy, I wiped the floor with them face downwards as I gathered them up, sobbing with grief, spoiling them with my tears, and put them back any old how into their envelopes which I placed where he had left them, right where I was sure to find them, so casually, when he had come to pick up his belongings. Like when he had come home with her sweater on, stinking of her perfume with the air ticket in the pocket of his jeans jacket at Christmas after he lied about being busy working... The traitor, the bastard, the sadist...

If it had only been that, I might have been able to pull myself together. But I had reached the limit that a heart can bear when the mind is saturated with hurt at such unfeeling nonchalance, such utter, utter indifference towards me, his wife and friend for so long. It seemed to me that everything a man could do

to hurt a woman he had done, and yet he did more, and more, and each insult, each stab in my back in front of our friends was another blow to my ego and the pain was destroying me, killing me... Those photos were the straws that broke the camel's back, the last, the very last straw, and my head throbbed as if it had been split open with the blow of an axe and it was driving me over the frontier into blind panic...

Now it's my turn, you murderers, you mother-fucker, you frivolous little slut, twenty-three years old! There is better to do than to set fire to your illicit photos together! May they remind you both forever of what you have done! Shaking all over, moaning with pain, I closed down the house; I drew all the curtains of every window, closed all the shutters, all the doors... I even took the phone off the hook and turned off the gas and electricity at the mains. I fed the cats and watered the plants – it wasn't their fault. I visited the house for the last time from the basement to the attic, carefully tidying up as I went so that there would be no doubt... A good wife to the last! May my four months of isolation, rejection and exclusion be symbolic of the torture they had inflicted upon me.

I went back down to the kitchen and took the boxes of Ludiomil and Lysanxia that the doctor had just prescribed for me from the cupboard. He had trusted me enough to prescribe a three-month treatment. I had never been into drugs. How can such things console a woman despised, pissed upon by such abuse and depression? I took the bottle of whisky that I couldn't drink because it was incompatible with the drugs, anticipating the effect that the mixture would have on me. I climbed back up the stairs to our bedroom and threw it all on our bed, and sat, doubled over my plexus with my spoils, sobbing, and looked my death in the face.

Suddenly I felt very calm. The snow was falling outside, there wasn't a sound outside in our quiet suburb, and there was nobody, nobody to help me. Not even the idea of my lovely little daughter, at school, could make me want to live... Only him. But he didn't care; all he wanted was that empty-headed little bitch marriage-breaker.

Actually, she was quite tall, even taller than him in fact. A brunette from the South of France, in contrast to my English blondness, with decent tits to my flatness, and a button nose even more turned up than my own. Pretty... OK. But not without ulterior motives, I bet; his CD was a big success now, he was famous. I could tell by the way she had draped herself all over him, her arm possessively on his shoulders, sitting opposite me at the table in the restaurant, defying me with her eyes and smiles – and he let her! Why had he invited me to that

restaurant that night? His excuse was that she didn't know he was married, my foot. I could see I was in for big trouble, it was the first time I had really felt I could lose him, and so I had left them all, driven back scared, and he hadn't come home that night.

I opened the bottle of whisky. I piled all the tablets of drugs from both packets onto the bed. Frankly, there was probably enough to kill a bull, as I'd hardly just started the treatment. I contemplated them, fascinated for... I don't know how long, I had no notion of the time that passed.

At some time later, I closed the bottle of whisky and put all that druggy shit back into its boxes. I had become very, very calm, as if my heart had finally become an ice-cube... cold as ice. That's exactly what I had accused him of, the hypocrite, the absolute sod. This calm feeling didn't cure the nausea I felt, as if the knot that was riveted hard into my plexus was a cancer that had spread all over my person. I felt rotten body and soul, in an advanced stage of decomposition, couldn't eat, couldn't sleep, for the past two months. I'd lost weight. I now weighed 106 to my usual 125 lbs and my bones were sticking out all over me skeleton-wise. Okay! Since I was rotting, and he was rotten, and his bitch was rotten and everything was rotten, may the rot set in and be useful!

It will be the knife! A stab for every stab you carved up my heart with! First the slut. I had a plan. And then, well I'll deal with him myself!

I had a friend who had a friend who said they knew someone who did contracts... some sort of Mafiosi, I supposed. I phoned my friend and asked for the contact. A meeting in a car parked in a deserted street... I expose my plan to him. "Make it look like a handbag snatch," I said, something perfectly banal, but with a sadistic little extra bonus. Take everything in her bag to make it look real. She will fight, I guess, so you show her your knife. That will probably shut her up and whatever, whatever, don't let her make any noise. Stuff something in her mouth... do what you like, but add a few extra presents on my behalf. Cut off her tits! A nice little vivisection! No, you don't need to bring them to me, this isn't Snow White! Throw them into the nearest bin in the north suburbs (I live in the west suburbs). Then, and this is the best part, you make a deep incision from the clitoris to the navel, just to make it look like a sex crime. That'll teach her to mess with me and with other people's husbands. And you keep it shut, your mouth I mean. She mustn't hear your voice, but under your breath you say to her, 'This is from Lesley!' I want her to die slowly! You just leave her there, just like a vicious handbag snatch by a pervert! Money? Name your price! I don't give a shit! We had plenty enough in those days, let him pay for it! I had had them followed by a

private detective to find out where she lived. It had cost me a thousand for three hours. That had been for starters...

As for him, well, I'll take care of it. Since I can't sleep anymore, I'll wait for the sound of his footsteps on the path and his key in the lock. I've got a fabulous butcher's knife which I sharpen each day. I'll wait every night and all night for as long as it takes, behind the front door of the house, ready to strike as he enters, with an industrial excess quantity of negative adrenalin filling my very aura, no doubt. First a stab in the back for the deserter of our child, and next, for the murder of our love and friendship, in the heart, and then I'll cut off his balls and stuff them in his mouth...

A month of waiting behind the front door is a very, very long time for the Gemini ascendant Libra with her moon in Capricorn and murder on her mind. It tired me even more, until it burned out and I almost collapsed with fatigue. God alone knows what I would have done if he had reappeared. Probably a nasty, violent quarrel of incomparable vulgarity followed by hysterical sobs on my part. He always stayed quiet, he never got uptight. He could even fall asleep while I cried, his back turned; that was one of the things I had accused him of, this seeming indifference... The prick! The asshole. But he never turned up. He was always lucky, born under a lucky star, the creep...

DEATH IN PERSON

II

Murder With A Kink

Dear God, how well I've been sleeping recently. Thank You for my delicious, oblivious sleep. He had been right, the doctor; the choice of drugs he prescribed, Ludiomil and Lysanxia, are doing a perfect job on me. I even feel fit! I eat well, sleep well, live a little... or rather, survive, my heart and mind sublimated in a sort of vegetable no-man's land. My skin looks healthy (no alcohol for several months!) and although my expression is a bit empty, I suppose, those tranquilisers are certainly working. I feel a bit empty because I'm not working at the moment so it's my daughter who's the only one around to keep me really together since I was dumped for that lobotomised little bitch brunette but... empty is so much better than the pain which had gnawed at me body and soul last winter like fully blown cancer before I had started the drugs treatment.

So off to bed alone again really cool, as usual, around eleven o'clock, all alone in my house in my suburb. My lovely little daughter was spending the night at a school mate's house. So much the better for her to get away from a middle-aged vegetable still too deep in the mire to be good company for an adolescent aged fourteen. Better for me too; I was still picking up the pieces of my life with an egg spoon and trying to stick them together again after the end of a long marriage which had sunk like the Titanic with me on board and drowned me in a vertical fall to the dark depths of a nervous breakdown.

The only problem now was Cucumber, my eldest cat, the only male in my life, my only remaining faithful companion. He was dying of old age. Everything inside of his beautiful soft ginger fur was failing him, and I didn't know how much longer he could last. This magnificent, deeply loved cat, such good company, so intelligent and so funny, with whom the three of us used to play, howling with

laughter, for nearly seventeen years, was also going to leave me, like my husband.

I had told him, through my daughter of course when she visited him, about the cat. After all, it was he who had brought Cucumber home with him one day from the country, having saved him from being thrown down a well and drowned, so long ago. It seemed that he will come and see me, as soon as he has time, between his work and his stupid “princess” with whom he was now living.

Long story short, I was sleeping the sleep of the just, with Cucumber curled up and in a semi-coma on my husband’s pillow next to my head. How long I had slept I have no idea; I certainly didn’t have time to look at the clock at my bedside. But I was woken up by a sound like the rustling of plastic wrapping paper. I lethargically opened my eyes and was immediately seized by an engulfing rush of negative adrenalin which paralysed me on the spot with mortal fear. Standing just inside the open bedroom door to my right was a man, silhouetted from behind by the light of the streetlamp outside the landing window at the top of the stairs.

I dared not make a sound or a movement in case he realised I was awake. I could hardly breathe, I thought I was dying of a heart attack in spite of the tranquillisers. I could only stay paralysed by fear, incapable of reacting, terrified at the idea of what could come next. Cucumber too, was not reacting, but I didn’t blame him, little love, because of the state he was in. All I dared do was to stare at the man, with exorbitant eyes, mouth open, like in a horror movie.

He was tall and slim with good shoulders, a bit like my husband. His face was in shadow and I couldn’t distinguish one detail of his features. He was wearing a dark suit and a black polo-necked sweater, a bit like a priest. My thoughts, nevertheless, were working overtime, and I could see he was rather well dressed for a burglar, which I presumed him to be, maybe as surprised as myself to be confronted by another person in the middle of a quiet night, especially as he, neither, moved an inch. We faced each other, Mr. Evil and Mrs. Vegetable for... how long? It seemed to be happening in slow motion, time also seemed to freeze. And then, oh Holy Jesus Christ, he put his left hand in his pocket, and slowly, very slowly, sinisterly pulled out a black Nylon stocking!

I started to have palpitations and prayed for help, panting almost inaudibly but still unable to move let alone to cry out, my body outstretched under the covers with my arms along my sides. My mind started racing... If I had leaped towards the window he would catch me before I could open it and then there were the closed shutters to deal with... but the idea of jumping from the

first floor seemed to me like the perfect solution if I could make it. The door was impossible – the man was standing just inside and could have grabbed me without a step. I was trapped! No way out, no escape plan, nothing to defend me... You've had it, my girl, you can only die by a heart attack or by him... You could try and fight him off... A big man like that, he would win easily... I was helplessly waiting to be strangled with a black stocking, and maybe raped, where I lay in my very own bed! And in spite of my depression of the last nine months it was then that I realised how sweet was life and how much I wanted to live...

Now what...? Oh sweet Lord! Just as I was thinking that, the man lifted his arms and started to pull the black Nylon stocking slowly and deliberately and sinisterly over his head, hiding his face, down to his neck, I supposed so that I wouldn't recognise him, and took a step towards me. As I was practically dead with fear, there wasn't much longer to go! Terrified, my heart pounding uncomfortably, I closed my eyes, wondering how long I could fight, and waited to be raped and strangled.

Time stopped its flow. I again heard the sound of rustling plastic paper, much nearer, and I knew he was almost on me. My heart was thumping so hard that I wondered why I wasn't already dead without his help. And when finally I couldn't wait any longer for death to come and I dared open my eyes... Holy Mother of God, he had vanished!

Still rigid with terror, still paralysed, I remained stuck to the mattress, eyes fixed on the doorway. I waited without moving, hardly breathing, without a sound for what seemed like an eternity. Half an hour? Three quarters of an hour? An hour? My mind was alive and racing, analysing each and every sound, each creaking of the wooden staircase, each cracking of the walls, each rose bush tapping on the windows in the isolation of my home, convinced that the man was lying in wait ready to play some perverted, sadistic game, the two of us in the middle of the night. Oh Cucumber, my darling pussycat, the only male in my life now, why do you look at me like that? This ambassador of death, has he come for me... or for you?

Little by little I eventually gathered my wits. You'd better react, stupid girl! Do something! Don't think for one second that if you survive you can get back to sleep, ever! He has given you the opportunity to work out a plan, just do it! So silently, I moved an arm, a leg, another, so discreetly I sat up and rose from the bed, forcing myself to put on my slippers and my dressing gown - as I never wear anything in bed. I tried to think of something I could use as an arm, but all I could find, after opening the cupboard door as quietly as I could, was a red snakeskin,

very high stiletto-heeled metal-tipped evening sandal... It would have to do, it was better than nothing. I picked it up and made softly for the door on tiptoe, shaking with fear, and then suddenly I felt inspired, as if I was in a TV crime series and quickly exited the bedroom with the stiletto heel held high, sliding along the wall to cover my back. At the top of the stairs, no one. I continued to slide frame by frame along the wall to the back of the corridor, and forced myself to check out the two other bedrooms and bathrooms and toilet, opening cupboards, inspecting behind the curtains and under the beds. Nothing! I came back onto the landing and started going down the stairs, my back against the wall. The wooden steps under the carpeting made one hell of a noise, creaking with every step, each making me freeze to listen, not breathing for long moments in the half-darkness, but I heard no other sound. So I continued, hardly breathing, my mouth open and dry to the bottom of the stairs where I paused again, saw that the front door was well closed, before entering the kitchen at top speed and grabbing the huge butcher's knife from the drawer and, thinking he must be just behind me I turn, violently slashing the air with the knife in all directions. Nobody! I go back to the door and slide along the wall cinema-style into the living room then search the whole ground floor, he had to be hiding somewhere, but where? There remained the basement... Down another flight of creaking stairs to the cellar and the garage with fear in my heart and a trembling hand brandishing this time a huge great butcher's knife and in the other, a sandal with a stiletto heel.

No door had been forced open. All the windows, all the shutters of the whole house were intact, normal, secure. Every corner where someone could hide was empty and I found no burglar, no dark intruder, no one hidden, no clue anywhere. Why didn't he attack me? Why scare me to death and then disappear into thin air? How did he get in, by osmosis? The situation was beginning to seem unreal. I'd searched the house from top to bottom and found nothing abnormal and was beginning to feel a little reassured. I was still shaken, but in the end as dawn came up, exhausted, I managed to go back upstairs and sit on my bed, unable nevertheless to lie down, armed with the knife in one hand and the sandal in the other, waiting for the reassuring light of day as Cucumber still slept peacefully on the pillow.

Next day I phoned Giz and gave him an ultimatum. "I'm going to pick up Laura from her friend's house. We'll be back by five, and when we get back, either you have been and picked up your belongings and you never come back, or you come back and stay." It was the sixth of September. When we got back of course, he wasn't there and nor were his things.

On the seventh of September, Cucumber could hardly stand and staggered around in pain. I phoned Giz, who came over a few hours later. I take note that he came for the cat and for his belongings but not for me. We called SOS Veterinary. A very kind lady arrived, declared Cucumber lost, suffering, and advised us to put him out of his misery. I sobbed my heart out, and even Giz had tears in his eyes; we gave our agreement and signed a sizeable cheque, and after the lady vet had gone we buried our dear old friend in the garden under the cherry tree and covered the earth with rose petals in the warm September afternoon sun and I with death and loneliness in my soul.

I asked Giz if it was he who had visited me the night before last for a joke, and told him what had happened. After all, it had to be someone who had a key to the house, in other words him! Angry, he said he had better to do than play jokes like that on me. I didn't doubt that and off he went again, mission accomplished, back to his idiotic princess. I stayed alone, arms dropped, emptied, shattered by all these emotions and all this loss.

Next day I bought a gun, and there it stayed on my bedside table for a very long time.

VOULEZ-VOUS VOUDOU

Devil Doll

The fourteenth of July in Paris, and the city is invaded by visitors from all over the world, as well as from the French suburbs and provinces who come to see the fabulous firework display on the Eiffel Tower, and line the banks of the river Seine and pack the Champs-Élysées in thousands and swarm all over the main streets and pavements. I'm going to a party and I'm driving there via the back streets. If I have to stay in the capital for the long weekend I certainly don't intend to sit trapped in a traffic jam with the crowds all evening like I did last year amidst shouts of "À la Bastille!" with everyone standing on their car horns, and have beer-loaded youths leaping down the Champs-Élysées on the roofs of the cars and trampling all over MY car, again. And miss half the party...

So four of us set off from my place around nine thirty p.m. armed as requested with a bottle of Champagne each, having mapped out an intelligent route away from the main traffic trouble spots. The weather was hot and the sun was going down and kids were letting off bangers all over the place and vandalising telephone booths and Prince was singing "You Sexy M.F." on the car radio and there was a high energy, hyper-festive atmosphere everywhere.

On arrival our bottles were immediately transferred to the bathroom and into a bath full of ice cubes. Glasses of champagne were stuck into our hands as we fought our way into a huge sitting-room which had been cleared for dancing and was full of people and music and looked onto a terrace with lots of tables loaded with lots of food. The whole scene looked full of promise for a great evening.

Things quickly warmed up to full swing and people started to dance. Stuffed with guacamole, tacos, chili and champagne we drifted back from the terrace into the sitting-room and joined the crush around eleven thirty, and gathered in a corner to digest and watch and listen and chat with old friends and new friends about anything that came into our heads.

I was leaning against a wall next to a really tatty old wooden doll hanging on a nail at head level when somebody started speculating about the doll's origin. This led to an animated conversation full of ironic comments and humorous insults about the doll's appearance, especially as you had to more or less shout to be heard over the music. We thought the doll could equally well have come from Peru or Mongolia or Indonesia as from the Flea Market down the road and round the corner. She'd certainly had a rough time. She was wearing a moth-eaten dark red cloak over a long, dirty, multi-coloured striped dress with a full skirt but the interesting thing about her was her face. It was round and flat and pale with high cheekbones, a brightly-painted hard, thin red gash of a mouth, and the most ill-tempered, naughty expression in a pair of dark eyes under the thin black eyebrows. We decided she was a central-American whore of the turn of the last century and to check out this hypothesis I turned to have another look at her, and in doing so I accidentally jostled her with my shoulder. She did a clockwise, ninety degree turn on her nail and stuck there at a pathetically strange and unbecoming angle, and at that very instant the music stopped dead in the middle of another Prince song called "Let's Go Crazy."

For a few seconds the room was plunged into surprised silence. The dancers stopped dancing, the drinkers stopped drinking then everyone shouted "Oh-oh!" and started to complain. My friends burst out laughing because of the poor skew-whiffed doll and shouted "Now look what you've done!" as we all left the corner to find out what had happened or get something more to eat or drink.

It's the prime time of the party and it's getting on for midnight and it's the fourteenth of July and everybody's feeling high and wants to dance - and the music breaks down! This cannot last! People rush to help. They try a different compact disc. Nothing. They check the on/off button, the wires, the connections, the plugs, the wall switches, the fuses, the mains. Nothing. They try changing to a cassette system and press all the buttons. Nothing. They open up elements of all the set with screwdrivers and close them again. Everything looks completely normal. They walk round and round the sound system scratching their heads and gesticulating and arguing and fumbling with the wires. No result. They stand back baffled and perplexed then try again. Self-professed amateur technicians who know all about sound systems try. Others try. There is absolutely nothing doing. The system sits there like a big black block on its table as if on strike and defies everyone. The party is In Jeopardy.

After about twenty-five minutes two guests go off to get another sound system. Our unfortunate host announces a forty-five minute wait till it arrives. Impatient guests shake their heads and decide to leave, knowing full well that

the traffic situation on the fourteenth of July plus the time it takes to install another system... This could take anything up to an hour and a half. Loyal friends carry on trying to locate the problem but the place is already beginning to look emptier. Everybody is visibly disgusted by this terrible bad luck.

Around one thirty, the new sound system arrives. Huge sighs of relief echo through what is left of the party. The experts rush over to assist. They announce that there will be music within the next ten minutes. They plug in the system and turn it on and press the buttons. They stick the Prince CD back in and stand back, all proud and pleased. Guess what! Nothing doing! Not a light. Not a hiss, not even a crackle. This really gets them! This really makes them sweat. They test an electric razor in the wall plug. It works. They plug the system back in. Nothing doing. They try a different wall plug. They change the plugs. Rien! Merde!

They give up. They get hopping mad. They start having a row. People really start leaving. My friends and I, disappointed, return to our corner to plot an alternative course of action, armed with new glasses of Champagne. At least the Champagne system hadn't broken down! But...we wanna dance! We decide on our favourite disco and drink up. Bottoms up and then we go. I look at the "Peruvian" bitch doll with disgust. She was still askew, still leaning sideways at a quarter past and still looking furious. "Look folks," I say, and grab her and turn her back upright with a nonchalant twist of the wrist. And guess what?

At the same instant the music blares out loud! They all absolutely gawp at me in catatonic astoundment, their glasses and cigarettes in freeze mode half way to their lips and their eyes bulging. "How did you do it?" they whisper in awe, hoping nobody else has realised what's going on.

"Bloimey," I utter, and head for the nearest bottle, seized by a gigantic shiver. "Wow! Help..." I think to myself!

Wow. Some coincidence! It was tempting, but my curiosity didn't get the better of me. I decided not to check out my mediumnic powers by trying it again and run the risk of spoiling the party even further.

SATURDAY NIGHT IN THE ASTRAL

Someone had their hand on my right breast and was tweaking my nipple, but it was so dark in the tunnel that I couldn't see a thing, not a thing. What a cheek! I tried to resist but they didn't desist and it started to seriously annoy me. I couldn't tell whether this harassment was supposed to be sexual or simply playful; it was therefore incomprehensible, especially as I couldn't see who was doing it, and they were taking advantage of the pitch black. Then I thought, how outrageous, how unjust! Waking someone up in the middle of the night by groping their tits in the dark was Not On. Then I began to worry about what would happen next and my imagination ran away with me... I was probably about to be raped, maybe even murdered, and I got frightened. I said "No!" very loudly with no result. So I started to struggle and kick to fight off the palpating hand and struck out violently with my elbows and arms and tried to wriggle out of the depths of this suffocating dark space around me in a growing panic. I spluttered "No!" several times again and cried out, then I managed to emerge from the darkness and sit up and finally the hand let go. I opened my eyes, and found myself in my bed panting with terror and turned on the bedside light. Holy Moses, what a dream! What a nightmare! But wait a minute, what the heck, what on Earth is going on, am I hallucinating or what? Kneeling beside me on my right was a young woman, very beautiful, who was looking at me kindly, sweetly, a bit surprised, and with great amusement.

I was stupefied, outraged, relieved! All she seemed to want was to wake me up. She could have found some other way of doing it, I thought, instead of playing this frightening, childish game, and now she looks surprised at my fear! My heart was still pounding hard and she continued to smile and my jaw dropped further and further with surprise, as we affronted each other, no more than sixty centimetres apart, both of us staring with curiosity.

She was wearing a sort of Ancient Greece-style tunic dress made of some sort of fine white fabric and her body was fairly small. She wore no jewellery. Her whole appearance and attitude were so natural and so radiant that she seemed

to come from another dimension, another world. She suddenly moved back on her knees to escape my flailing arms and elbows revealing her naked legs as I emerged, furious, from my bedcovers.

Her face was a lovely oval. She had a soft, serene expression in her light hazel eyes, and with her shiny, smooth, long dark hair falling down over her breasts, her skin a natural pale olive and her pink lips - she had not a suspicion of any makeup - she was beautiful. Impossible to guess her age... she looked somewhere between twenty-six and forty-six but she could have been much more, her attitude was youthful and yet mature at the same time. She waited, smiling, for me to calm down. We continued to stare into each other's eyes. We even contemplated each other lengthily, she the smallish brunette and I, the tall blond, sitting together on a bed in a flat in the centre of Paris on a Saturday night in September, in the middle of the night.

There was a strange, silent pause. She still looked delighted and amused at my expression of "what a cheek" and "what the heck" that obviously she read on my face. We were in a very intimate situation but she was absolutely not embarrassed. She wanted to play? Okay, I'll play too! I love the idea of beautiful girls landing as if by osmosis in my bed in the middle of the night and twiddling my ends without any consultation or foreplay and expecting my complicity. Whatever next! It was beyond reality! I felt like a curious little apprentice compared to her superior serenity. Then her expression became very serious, as if she had sensed my need for some kind of explanation and wanted to say something. Her eyes left mine and she turned her head prettily and slowly to the right towards the open door of my bedroom, and then I understood... she hadn't come alone!

Seven steps go down from my bedroom, three in the bedroom and four down into the living room, and beyond the stairs, in the half-light, standing in the air above the table, just below the living room ceiling, floated a young man, absolutely gorgeous, not too tall, with blond hair and blue eyes who was looking at me with a frank, normal expression. He was wearing white trousers and boots, a red closely-fitting top, and his body was athletic, virile and gracious. He looked fresh and healthy and strong and intelligent and... relaxed.

Long seconds of surreal silence passed as if time had stopped. I thought to myself, oh my God, it's not true... and the man and the girl captured my thoughts immediately and transmitted a reply, "Yes it is, it's true!" They, on the contrary clearly found the situation completely unsurprising, completely normal. And then the penny dropped, and I realised that after years of searching for

information and my desire for truth and asking for proof on the fascinating subject of not being alone in the Universe, I was witnessing the reply with a very close encounter!

Nobody said a word! But thoughts were flashing telepathically back and forth in all directions. I was no longer expecting to be raped or invited to participate in some three-way orgy but my mind was stretching its boundaries in order to believe my eyes. I had always imagined that one day I would see a UFO which would quite convince me of extra-terrestrial life, but I had never imagined I'd meet a couple of E.T.s in my flat! And the man, standing in the air a couple of meters off the floor and about seven meters from me, captured my thoughts and my questions, "Who are you? Where do you come from? What do you want?"

The reply came back by telepathy immediately, but not a word was spoken out loud. "Now you know that we exist. There is life in similar forms to yours in other galaxies. Your planet Earth is often visited and many people know that now. Some of us even live amongst you. Most of you have much work to do before you have learned to use your full potential and be able to communicate and travel as we do," and I was receiving him loud and clear in my mind. It was incredible and I was in wonderment! He and the girl locked eyes. Then the girl turned back towards me and the two of them looked fixedly at me simultaneously. I could feel a strong current of energy passing between them, a sort of understanding, a complicity, and I knew they were having a conversation from which I was excluded. Then, I received a message from them which said, "Look!"

And then the man lay down onto his side in the air and in total silence started to advance from the living-room beyond my bedroom towards the door on the stairs and, in perfect control of his body, came up horizontally, very, very slowly into the bedroom and started crossing the room from right to left just below the ceiling. I looked up and watched him, my eyes probably popping out of my head and my jaw still dropping, as he passed above the foot of my bed where I sat with the girl and admired this show of absolute perfection. The privilege of witnessing such a unique demonstration filled me with great emotion and exhilaration. I watched him as he floated over to the left and when he arrived at the wall he slowly flew straight through it as if neither were material, and disappeared...

Words cannot express my feelings of surprise and delight. Talk about super gravity fields and eleven dimensions and the M Theory! I was so shaken

and excited, and would have loved to be blessed with more! I turned to the girl in wonder – but she too had disappeared!

“Holy...” was all I could utter, terribly disappointed to be alone again and not be able to ask them all the questions that had been running around my brain for years and years, and to thank them.

But I guess they had felt my gratitude. Maybe they could still receive me... wherever they had gone... and maybe they would come again...

MA'S MYSTIC RUBY

Sometimes I suddenly do something totally unpremeditated and out of the blue that I've never done before, just for a laugh, and that this something turns out to have incredible consequences quite out of my control and inexplicably mystical... Or rather, there could be explanations, if you believe in the occult and the possibility of mediumnic contact with entities in other dimensions which manifest spontaneously in different ways?

Very positive consequences, in fact, as it turned out. Where this sudden and fortunate gesture came from is itself a bit mystical, as if I was remotely operated by an invisible force. But who or what in that case was on the other end of the line I could only guess, and no, I don't tell people about it, they might think I'm weird.

It was in the early afternoon of the Saturday before the Monday on which my daughter, Laura, was due to start her end of school exams, the French version being the baccalaureat, the BAC. She was disillusioned and pessimistic about the result, having been failed the previous year on the English oral by an examiner who she considered had been bad-tempered, unjust and cruel. The BAC pass had depended ultimately on the mark he gave her for this oral and she had worked hard and knew she deserved to pass. To her surprise, he had failed her! She and the examiner had had words, very strong words (*mal baisé* = needs a good lay, she had told him!).

Still furious at such injustice, Laura had half-heartedly repeated her school year, convinced that bad luck was more of the issue. She was so unmotivated, in fact, that panic was now setting in. I myself was feeling guilty about it. It was true that I had been recovering from my divorce and wasn't good company; we had

moved on April the 2nd from our house in the suburbs to a flat in central Paris which was much smaller, unfinished and therefore uncomfortable. The outdoor temperature was two degrees centigrade, and it was barely more indoors. There were signs of continuing masonry and plumbing works everywhere, the kitchen was unequipped, there was no hot water or central heating for the first ten days, it was damp and there was a thick layer of plaster dust everywhere. We had to sleep on the sitting room floor in all this mess because the men were late in finishing the bedroom fittings, the works foreman had threatened me because I complained he hadn't respected the delivery date and I refused to give him the last payment... The list of complaints was incredibly long. Not the best conditions for a high school student to work in, so at Laura's insistence, we had found her a studio flat where she was to start living alone in September.

Because of the move and the repetition of the school year, during the summer holidays we had also chosen together what is called in France a "BAC machine," a different school in Paris which had a reputation of getting students through their exams. The headmistress was highly respected, encouraging and optimistic and had a maternal attitude towards her "flock" and was convinced that Laura's BAC was "in the pocket," as the French say. "It should be," Laura said, "on condition I don't get another ill-tempered examiner. It's crazy, last year I really worked and I was failed. This year I've hardly worked at all, and yet I passed! What is that?"

In fact, it was crazy, she did pass, and it was destiny with its magic wand and my unpremeditated out of the blue act that was the reason...

In the middle of June towards the end of the next school year Laura, who was now living about half an hour away, phoned me in desperation on the Saturday to ask for my help in revising for her English oral exam. I immediately took the Métro to her place. Since April, she had nevertheless started to revise for her BAC, without much hope of a pass, her pessimism driven by her disgust at the attitude of the philo teacher examiner who had failed her the previous year. "It's double or quit," we all said in the family. We just couldn't guess what might be the outcome; had she revised enough or not? We certainly weren't expecting a miracle.

When I arrived at her place, Laura was in despair. She had fourteen subjects to revise for her English oral on the history of America through to modern times and she would be questioned on two of them. She was in the mood for dropping the lot, of course, and brandished the list of fourteen subjects at me as if she wanted to tear it up so, to try and calm her down and make her laugh a bit, we chose a press article by Art Buchwald, journalist and critic, who had a stringent, ironic, amusing sense of humour. Then we looked at texts by Ernest Hemingway, James Baldwin, Ed Bullins...

“Ma, we’re not going fast enough!” We haven’t got enough time, I thought to myself. “If only I could know in advance what subjects I’ll get,” she said, exhaling strongly. “We haven’t got time to revise them all.”

True.

“No problem,” I replied jokingly. “I’ll consult my magic pendulum!”

Where this idea came from I really don’t know. An inspired instinct? A guidance from the divine? I’d never done it before, but I took off my mother’s ruby pendant on its chain from around my neck. It is probably from the thirties when my mother did a bit of modelling. It is cut about half an inch square, set diagonally in marcasite and silver, and drops like a red raindrop or a falling star with a shiny trail. I love its mystic shape and over the years I must have asked my mother a hundred times to give it to me, or at least lend it to me but she never would, but when she passed it came to me and has never left me. It had been admired by many. I had been wearing it when, desperate after the breakup of my marriage and lost for a new direction, I had consulted a medium who had stared at it longingly, as if fascinated or in a trance, and had made effusive and almost embarrassing and compliments about it.

I took the chain between the thumb and the forefinger and swung the ruby, as I had seen magnetisers do, about six inches above Laura’s paper on which the fourteen subjects in English were printed. “Okay,” I said confidently, we will ask the spirit of the ruby! If it starts to swing clockwise over a subject, it’s because that’s a subject you’ll be tested on.”

“We’ll see,” said Laura, not in the least reassured by this esoteric solution to her problem and quite rightly so, but delighted at putting off the work for later.

So I pass the ruby on its silver chain all over the list of subjects one by one just to wake up the spirit of the ruby and acquaint it with the subjects, and then I start again at the top of the list over the first title and say, "Spirit of the mother's Ruby, what are the subjects that Laura will be examined on for her English BAC oral?"

We wait. A long moment of suspense! At last, slowly, the ruby starts to move as if emerging from a long long sleep of a hundred years or more. It shivers a little, then shakes a little, and that's it.

"Okay..."

I go to the next subject. The ruby doesn't even move! Nor on the third subject either. Oh dear. On the fourth, the fifth, no reaction. Laura breaks the expectant silence with a noisy cough, and I begin to feel stupid! Nevertheless, I continue to go down the list of subjects one by one, title by title, giving the ruby enough time to react on each, but nothing, nothing happens! No reaction at all. But, it was amusing, it relaxed the atmosphere for a while, the two of us concentrating on a ruby on a silver chain, hoping for a breakthrough, a miracle, without really believing in it. It was a game, sitting cross-legged with our cups of tea on the carpet on the floor of my daughter's studio, trying to feel better.

We are getting towards the end of the list of subjects, the eleventh, starting to yawn with growing boredom and worrying about the time, when suddenly the ruby awakes!

"Ah!"

"Ah!"

The ruby starts to turn, slowly, clockwise, and the movement increases to a large circle, wider and stronger and wider and stronger into a crazy frenzy with violent kicks in the corners and shaking as it goes!

"The Red Indians!" we shout.

"Oh no, ma, very funny! Shit! I haven't revised them!"

"So we will revise them!" I shout. After all, there was one chance in fourteen that she be tested on this chapter and as far as we were concerned at this late date, we hadn't much to lose and something, at least, would be learned.

So we settle down again over the paper and reactivate the ruby, holding it above the next title. Slowly it starts to oscillate, it turns, stronger and stronger again until it's practically going crazy and shaking all over, just like over the Red Indians!

"Indian Voices!"

"The voice of the Redskins!"

"Walking Buffalo and Crazy Horse!"

"That's amazing!"

"Both texts are on the American Indians!"

"Better start swatting immediately!"

"Wait!"

Because of the outrageous reaction of the ruby, there seemed to be no doubt. It had to be those two subjects. I hold the ruby down in both hands to quieten it and then, just so my conscience is clear, I hold it over the last two subjects, one by one. But this time there was no reply.

"It's perfectly clear!"

"He's gone!"

"Supposing it's not true!"

"Supposing we were in contact with some smartass spirit or some joker out for fun!" I say.

Well, whatever, Laura, trying to feign indifference and I, with the guilty conscience of a bad mother, we study together the two selected subjects in her school textbook. I was really interested to learn about these people, deprived of their lands, their culture, their ethnic identity, a whole race with such spiritual richness, almost destroyed by the paleface while there is so much space in North America for everyone. The extract of Walking Buffalo's speech in 1958, in London, age eighty-seven on the Great Spirit is a jewel... and Crazy Horse, the visionary spiritual warrior... I am fascinated.

But... time flies, and back to the system, and the BAC exam being imminent, we worked on these texts and then I went back home after advising my daughter, "Keep cool; revise the other subjects too before going to bed."

"But I've also got my maths oral on Monday!"

(Ouch... Oh dear...)

I worry about her all Monday morning. I pray, I do incantations, I clutch my lucky stones... Finally, at lunchtime, the phone rings.

"Hello?"

"Ma." She sounds very excited. You'll never guess what!"

"...No!"

"Yes!"

"You're joking!"

"No!"

"No!"

"I swear to you that I got them!"

"Are you having me on?"

"No!"

"Holy Moses..." I can tell you, it made me feel quite strange.

"And did the actual exam go well?"

“...I think so...” she said, slightly reticent.

“This is incredible!”

“It’s absolutely crazy!”

And then, “Ma?”

“Yes?”

“Well... since you seem to have a gift for predicting things, tell me if I’ll get my BAC!”

Mmmm. Well, that could be pushing it a bit. “Laura, it’s not because I did it once that I can do it again. Oh.... Alright!”

And so, inspired by this unprecedented success which I was hoping could be the start of a long career in pure clairvoyance, I got out a piece of paper on which I wrote, “Yes” and “No” which I placed over a photo of Laura. I took off the ruby necklace and held it still like a pendulum over the paper and asked, “Tell me ruby, will my daughter pass her BAC? Thank you for telling me if Laura will get her baccalauréat diploma!” I stood, holding the ruby over the paper, trembling a little with apprehension.

All of a sudden this business seemed much more serious. We all wanted Laura to pass her exams so much. All the family had encouraged her to work, but last year’s incident had discouraged her so much that she said she just didn’t care. We all knew that wasn’t true, and that it would do her self-confidence so much good to succeed, and we all knew as well that it would take a major stroke of luck this time. And I knew that what the ruby said now would have an influence on her state of mind. So I concentrated on the ruby, scared it would move to the “No” and wondering if I would tell her if so, but... it started shaking around in a big clockwise circle over the “Yes!”

“Laura, you will pass!”

“Oh, ma!”

“Wait...”

And just to be sure, I hold the ruby over the “No”. The ruby started to swing over the “No” as well!

“Laura, now it’s reacting over the “No” as well! I don’t get it...” I said, feeling like the ignorant amateur medium that I am.

“What’s going on?”

“The ruby said without a doubt that you would pass, then it said you wouldn’t when I checked it out over the “No”!

Silence. On both ends of the line. Oh, dear...

Laura, inspired, “Ma, ask it if I’ll pass on the retake exam.”

So I write, “Pass on the retake exam” in the middle of the paper between the “Yes” and the “No” and hold the ruby by its silver chain above the new words.

The ruby starts agitating more and more strongly!

“That’s it, Laura, I get it! You’ll pass on the retake exam!”

“Oh ma!”

“Go Laura! Revise! You’ll pass this bloomin’ BAC! Hang on in there, it’s not yet finished!”

We had to wait a whole week for the result. The suspense was unbearable, to quote Oscar Wilde, without hoping like him that it would last. I was praying she would be able to remember her school work of the past years and that she was at least revising properly in spite of her lack of motivation and fear of more injustice. Every day I phoned to ask her how the exams were going. “How should I know!” she would reply, or “We’ll see,” at best, or “I suspect it doesn’t just depend on me!” when feigning indifference.

On the day before the results were due to be published I could hardly stand the waiting any more. Laura, on the other hand, had freaked out and was out every night with friends. The school principal phoned me to repeat,

“Madam, it is in the pocket!” ... again!

But no, the principal was wrong; in fact, Laura needed another fourteen points in order to catch up and get her diploma! The principal simply couldn't believe it! She had been so sure it was okay. Phone calls were being exchanged in all directions between me, the principal, Laura and all the family, wondering what would happen next.

It was panic with Laura. She was due to go for the catch-up oral exam the next morning at eight o'clock, and the catch-up subjects had to be chosen with the school principal. Barely enough time to get back into the books and revise. They chose history/geography and philo. Laura was saying that it should be alright, more or less, for the history/geography exam and felt fairly sure of herself on philo. She said she knew the texts of Plato and Freud pretty well but there was one author, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, that they had studied towards the end of the school year and that she hadn't worked on much.

It was obvious, as you might have guessed, that I was solicited for a further consultation with the ruby, by telephone, to make sure that she wouldn't be tested on Rousseau. If she was, she would have to revise overnight.

“Well,” I thought to myself, if we've gone this far we might just as well see it through,” in spite of my feelings that this irresponsible sort of game was going a bit far. It was encouraging, however, to know that I had correctly predicted the subjects she would be tested on for the English oral; but this time Laura was feeling more confident about the situation and was better prepared, in view of last year's defeat, saying anything can happen, and this time she had two out of three chances on the choice of subjects for the exam.

On my side, I was convinced that through the ruby we had been put in touch with an entity, the spirit of Walking Buffalo most probably (later confirmed by a real medium!), or that we both had a guardian angel in common who had been there to help us contact the souls of the spirits of some kindly Amerindien entities. So why not try it again?

I wrote “Plato,” “Freud” and “Rousseau” on a clean piece of paper which I placed over Laura's photo, took the ruby by its silver chain again and steadied it over the name, one by one. The ruby reacted, of course, over Rousseau!

No luck! I was discouraged, Laura was discouraged... but then, who believes what ruby pendants say? Its predictions had been confirmed once, but there could be a doubt as to whether it could do it again, that we could be in

touch with the soul of some errant joker in the ectosphere who was just having a bit of fun with us. Whatever, the only thing to do was to go home, open her books, and swot up overnight on Rousseau! “Just do it!” I shouted down the phone.

Laura was now worried and getting depressed. The atmosphere was heavy and expectant. In a panic, she called a friend and asked him to come in and help her work. He was brilliant. He immediately went to her place and swotted her up until she exploded with fatigue and rage!

And of course, the next morning she was questioned on Rousseau. The spirit of the ruby had struck again, but possibly not Walking Buffalo this time! I was astounded into a jaw-dropped silence when I heard the news, but that’s not the end of the story!

Worse, the worst that could possibly have happened, happened! Her examiner was no other than the same man as last year, the one with the bad temper, the one that had failed her, and that she had insulted!

This in itself is absolutely incredible. It just doesn’t exist, you just don’t get the same examiner twice. And yet, as she looked up from her seat, waiting in the corridor with the others for her turn and saw this person arriving, she simply couldn’t believe her eyes. It was so unlikely, so unjust and so depressing, and when their eyes met, he walked over to her and said, “So, I believe we have already met!” in such a cynical tone that it was obvious he hadn’t forgotten the incident, nor very probably what Laura had called him either...

She awaited her turn for her exam in the corridor in a state of utter resignation. “Obviously there is no way I’ll pass my BAC now. Just my luck, I can’t believe it and the ruby must be wrong this time. When she entered the exam room the examiner said, “So... I see you have finally decided to redouble your year and try again!” in an imposing, intimidating, cold tone and then, “Rousseau! I’m listening!”

Poor Laura! Disgusted and in a loser state of mind she did what she could. “I don’t even remember what I said,” she told me later. I thought I did so well last year but this year... I felt I just gabbed on any old how...”

Later that morning she had taken her history/geography exam. The same day she went to get her final results. On the steps of the school entrance one of the teachers was distributing the report books of all the students, calling them

by name. She thought she saw a pink slip sticking out of the report books of those who hadn't passed and found that she was one of them, and so didn't bother to open hers. It was one of her friends who had come to see her who opened it for her. When he arrived, he said, "So, did you pass or didn't you?"

She was still choked. "I haven't looked! There's no point! I'm sure I've failed again! He tore the report from her hands and opened it. "No you haven't, you've passed!"

And I, waiting to hear, knew nothing of all these rebounding developments. Laura phoned me around half past midday, incredulous and completely re-boosted. She was with her girlfriend, she told me that of course, she had been examined on Rousseau and that by some weird miracle she had passed her BAC. Oh blessed relief! The heat was off and we had done it again! When she told me she had had the same examiner I just couldn't believe my ears! "But in the end," she said, "he was unexpectedly cool and he passed me!" Then she said, "Mum, would you do a last prediction? Ask the ruby whether or not my girlfriend has passed too. We know the answer, of course!"

So this time, life being wonderful again, I did it for the fun. I asked the ruby if Laura's girlfriend had passed her BAC and the ruby said "No" and then said "Yes!" and by this time I knew how to interpret the reply.

"Well, ma, you're right again! She didn't pass last year but this year she did!"

I tried asking the ruby other questions after that. I asked it if we were in contact with an extra-terrestrial and it replied "No." I asked if it was a spirit and it replied "No." Maybe whoever it was didn't want me to know. I believe that in other parallel dimensions God isn't called by the same name as we call Him, because when I asked the ruby if it knew of God it said, "Yes" then "No" and seemed very agitated, so I thanked it deeply for all its help, whatever its reasons for doing so. Who knows...

I bought a lottery ticket for the first time in my life and tried holding the ruby over the numbers, but not a shiver! It didn't want to know. At that, I

decided that no one was on the other end of the connection and that maybe I was being too greedy... or maybe the message was that money is not all... or maybe Walking Buffalo knew nothing about the lottery or nor did the benevolent spirit who had helped us so much.

May the Great White Spirit be with you!

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From time to time I come down from my bubble to put things in order below where I've got a suit of armour in the cupboard and an auto-selective memory, and that's not all...



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SPOOK STUFF!

NARRATED BY A RELUCTANT MEDIUM

An invisible presence irrupts into a car on a bend in a lonely country road on a moonlit night on the deep, spooky Isle of Wight. It scares the living daylights out of the driver who nearly goes off the road and ends up in a field.

She thinks she knows who this ghostly hitchhiker is, or at least, who it should be... because of a unique and surreal premonitory dream she had about a violent death which turned out shortly afterwards to be reality...

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*

This is a collection of true short stories told by a very candid, often unwilling channel, and makes for light and humorous reading.