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A Novel Cuisine

by

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A novel submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the
degree of MA Creative Writing

Faculty of the Humanities

University of Cape Town

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This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN
GRADUATE SCHOOL IN HUMANITIES

**DECLARATION BY CANDIDATE FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER IN THE FACULTY OF HUMANITIES**

I,

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of

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do hereby declare that I empower the University of Cape Town to produce for the purpose of research either the whole or any portion of the contents of my novel entitled

A Novel Cuisine

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ABSTRACT

A Novel Cuisine

By

John Skotnes

This novel tells the story of an eccentric, forty-six year old writer, critic and consultant, Norman Frye, whose speciality is all things culinary. He lives with his pet rat in a converted cellar below an early 20th century city town house in Kenilworth, Cape Town.

The action takes place over fifty days as the central characters and their complicated lives interweave towards a resolution. These interactions are sometimes characterized by acts of absurdity, anger and bitterness, but mostly the story is underlined by a wry humour and candid honesty. Although the central theme of the novel is of Norman coming to grips with a sense of emotional abandonment through childhood to his current circumstance, each character in the story participates in the narration of the unfolding events. This device serves to reinforce the complexity of human relationships and to illustrate that the taking of sides in emotional conflict is psychologically destructive. Norman's daily blog postings provide a supportive subtext to the drama.

The story opens when Norman returns home from a school reunion to find his partner of many years, mother of triplets and agony aunt Ivy Lynch engaged in an act of infidelity. Ivy moves out, taking their gastronomic journals with her, which she then threatens to publish. She is offered a place to stay by her petulant eldest daughter, Julie, for whom Norman finds a job. She declines the offer. The ongoing tensions between Ivy's family and Norman remain fertile ground for family disagreement and hostility.

Norman begins writing a cookbook, *The Divorced Man's Table*, as an antidote to his shattered sense of self. At the same time he is contacted by a film-maker, Gabriella Sloane, who asks him to participate in the writing of a film script, the action of which centres on what she enigmatically calls 'dark food'. Their association moves quickly into intimacy, with all the consequences typical of a rebound relationship. Their liaison isn't sustained because Norman cannot commit to it. Both Gabriella and Ivy emotionally pull him in opposite directions.

Counterpointing these dynamics is Norman's relationship with his overbearing mother, Olive-Jean, a columnist for the Big Issue who has dedicated her life to humanitarian causes. When the story opens she is planning a meal to take place after her death at which a stranger is set to inherit a third of her estate. At the end of the novel, Olive-Jean goes on radio to talk of her life and to reveal the mystery of her 'last supper'.

The story sets up some expectations that are not fulfilled as it becomes apparent the real crisis in Norman's life is his relationship with his mother. He is incapable of moving forward until he has found some closure, which he does at her death. This leaves open the possibility that there might be a rapprochement between Norman and Gabriella at a future date.

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University of Cape Town

DEDICATION

To my daughter, Abbie and my mother, Thelma, who always believed I could become a writer.

A novel cuisine

by John Skotnes



Chapter 1

Such is the human condition that moments of high drama creep up unsuspected, to shatter the patterns of daily living. So it was with me this 1st day of September, 2009. The road to the abyss or to the machine that will spit out a winning lottery ticket is not generally sign-posted, and gives no warning that life is about to change at its T-junction.

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 2/09/2009

Stick to cooking. Opening liners to your postings will be less pretentious.

Posted by Jane Austen 2/09/2009

You're my kinda gal! As Arnold Wesker would say, 'breeding babies and eating chips with everything'.

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 3/09/2009

Norman Frye, professional food critic and blogger, aged forty-six, bearded and slightly craggy around the eyes, arched his back to remove the stiffness. Although a man of slender build, he was strong and lithe on his feet. He attributed his health and youthful demeanour to years of running. He'd risen earlier than usual, to begin writing the introduction to his latest idea, *The Divorced Man's Table – Comfort Cooking for Reparation*. He tapped his fingers on each side of his lap-top computer, trying to muster the effort. Across the table from where he sat lay a tub of mascarpone cheese, crystallized ginger, honey and orange juice reduction, Grand Marnier, Frangelico liqueur and a tray of overripe pears. Alongside was a bunch of withered Azaleas. They'd lain, strewn and untouched, since he'd returned early from a school reunion.

'Time to get your act together,' he said to himself, against the backdrop of a bitter, revolving memory. 'That was a week ago, pack this shyte away.'

He stood up and binned the flowers, recalling how he'd climbed from his '73 golden-brown Granada Ghia and walked towards his front door, conjuring up the pudding he planned to prepare that evening. Poached pears, glazed with a bitter orange sauce. The fantasy of meeting his old school chums, informed by several Hollywood movies with 60's and 70's soundtracks, had lasted until a stripper had arrived and he'd abruptly terminated the rest of the weekend's jollifications, catching the first available plane home.

After fumbling in his pocket for his key, he opened the door to his living room and stepped out of his own reality. He recognized the white bum with the beauty spot that was framed by the light of opposing lava lamps but there were too many legs and arms and another body underneath it. There was his favourite recording of Bruch's violin concerto, yelling abuse at him. The room smelled of stale booze, slithers of pink fish and body fluids. Perhaps it was the pollen from the flowers but his eyes started to water and he began to see double and then double and then double again. Four legs and arms became eight legs and arms, became sixteen legs and arms, and became thirty-two legs and arms. The actors in that little drama were approaching the denouement and were unaware of an audience. As disbelief turned to hallucination, the scene before him morphed, in unison with the illuminated bubbles of orange, into a gigantic bowl of gyrating pasta with a large meringue floating on the top.

'You... You... You... Fuck you, Ivy!' Norman dropped what he was carrying onto the table. The shock caused him to retch but he composed himself enough to pick up a pair of unfamiliar flannelled trousers, into which he puked, as he fled his walls.

Chapter 2

Chapter 1

Page 1: The Divorced Man's Table

'If some part of the psyche is injured, dislocated or wrenched, one has to coddle another healthy aspect of it to facilitate recovery. The symbolic language of such a journey to healing is to be found in the preparation of food.'

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 10/09/2009

How does gluttony help? Apart, that is, from chalking up yet another deadly sin on your eternal charge sheet.

Posted by Weight Watchers and proud of it 11/09/2009

Oh weight watcher, stick to your day job... running a penal colony, no doubt. Come coddle me, Norman... anytime.

Posted by JuicyLucy 12/09/2009

The small act of clearing the table also made space in Norman's head to begin work, and after a few hours of writing he posted the first page onto his blog to test the reaction.

'I suspect I'm psychologically correct,' he leaned back, pleased with his morning's effort, 'but I *must* use simpler language when addressing a buying public of divorced people, stewed in bitterness and rage, and recently dislocated from the familiar patterns of domestic life.' He turned to his pet white rat, Trotsky, who'd stuck its head out from his gown pocket. 'The trick is how to do it,' he grinned and stroked the little creature under its chin, 'and certainly not with opening sentences like that.'

Norman was an intuitive writer with an eye for detail. The writings from his blog, his cookery books and his journals crisscrossed and merged with each other, making them very accessible and bringing to the fore his quirky and expansive personality. He'd hosted a dinner party the night before. His analysis of the evening, he had decided, would be the hook upon which he'd hang the introduction to his book. It had all started with a list and then phone calls to several friends and acquaintances, asking them to dinner.

'Sorry, Norman,' the first person he called had said, 'as a friend of Ivy's I have to decline. I can't do it to her.'

'Friends are divided in two as they hive off into their loyalties. The problem with divorce or separation,' the first paragraph began to flow, *'is how isolated you become.'*

He crossed off the second person for the same reason.

'Then, because you're generally 'hard work', depressed or self-absorbed by your new status, the half that is left on your side, divides itself in half again.' He could see his readership nodding in agreement.

The third person consented but the fourth was painfully blunt.

'Sorry, old sport. Only get a little time in my week to socialize. Can't find the energy to be with an overriding sense of depression.'

'Oi! How bitchy was that?' he asked Trotsky. *'Don't worry,'* Norman smiled, *'I'll get another chance, sometime soon, to review your food.'*

'Friends who remain friends are largely married but they soon dwindle in number after a couple of brief, stage-managed dinners, with the intention of matchmaking.'

'Norman darling, we'd love to come but it's finding a babysitter at this late junction and then there's homework... Tell you what, why don't you come on the weekend. We've a friend we think you'd find more than a little interesting.'

He crossed off the fifth.

'Their choice of an ideal mate is always another lost soul.' He typed quickly even though it was only with three fingers. *'How cheering up is that? So your circle of friends, within months, hovers to around five.'*

Luck does not end there.

'To a couple, you inevitably owe money and the others are narcissists who have never learnt the art of listening and have not quite grasped the fact you are now single.'

The sixth and seventh embraced the invitation and as usual arrived empty-handed.

The stock market, crime and dissatisfaction hung over the table like thick smoke above a jammed toaster. Norman's night turned into an exercise of self-empowerment. He produced a bottle of calvados as an antidote and proceeded to mix a number of heady cocktails, to try and lift the earnestness of the evening. Gradually the conversation became lighter and more animated. He began to feel like a conductor. Social

inhibitions were diluted, in extravagant cocktail glasses with swizzle sticks, by adding layers of both rosso and dry vermouth to the apple brandy. Later he experimented with crème de cassis and orange juice and by midnight, Cointreau and Pernod.

‘A person who can mix a cocktail is a social asset. It shows flair. People with flair attract people with a sense of fun. A good cocktail disguises the alcohol. It lightens the spirits, unruffles the edges and opens a crack in a small door leading to a veritable garden of delights. Trust me, dear readers.’

The book he planned would be filled with images of celebration and people tailored for a night out. Sophisticated décor and soft music would percolate from the pages.

‘Ah, dear Trotsky, I shall teach my divorced readers the art of experimentation and panache! Perhaps I shall whisper into their ears a magical recipe for a good calvados-based sauce, with bacon and mushrooms in the grand French style.’

Had Trotsky been able to speak, he would have pointed out that Norman was conflating several ideas. It’s a truism that most men who leave their marital home cannot cook, and most men and women going through a separation wouldn’t be bothered in any case. What Norman failed to grasp was that on the one hand he was addressing an audience who’d actually recovered from their divorce and were ready for the ‘world’ again. On the other hand he was proposing a book to lead, à la Moses, the disinterested and gastronomically incompetent out of their emotional wilderness and through the kitchen door. But most importantly, Norman needed to harness his own creativity as an antidote to his upended sense of self.

Trotsky might also have noted that without a structure, his book, combining the ‘Idiot’s guide’ to comfort cooking and the joie de vivre of culinary psychology, was almost impossible.

The telephone rang. *Her* name popped up on the little screen.

‘Frye speaking’

‘Hello, Norman, it’s Ivy.’

‘I’m unable to take your call right now, please leave a message. Beeeep’

‘For God’s sake!’ She bristled with irritation at the end of the line. ‘Can’t you behave a little intelligently, just for once?’

‘Why are you phoning?’ Norman felt his chest tightening as the tension rose inside.

‘I’d like to suggest something. I’ve an idea.’ Her voice relaxed a little. ‘Are you prepared to hear me out?’

‘I can’t believe you’ve the gall to suggest anything, at the moment. If it’s about coming back, forget it.’

‘It’s not, and I’m not apologising and I can understand you’re pissed off with me. But I’ve an idea. Are you prepared to hear me out?’

Norman counted slowly to five, while Ivy waited saying nothing. Finally he agreed.

‘I’m listening. Why the call?’ He tucked the portable phone between his shoulder and his ear and began preparing a Hollandaise sauce. He hadn’t eaten breakfast and this conversation was going to need eggs Benedict and a glass of *méthode cap classique*.

‘I’d like to call a truce,’ said Ivy.

‘Just like that? After what you’ve done, just like that?’

‘Just like that.’

‘Well shoot some holy crows! Why, I thought you’d made a lifestyle out of sniping and skirmishing.’ He tried not to be sarcastic but failed. He opened the fridge door and eased the cork out of the bottle. The bubbles burped into life and the golden liquid landed in the glass.

‘I’m being serious, Norman. I’m calling about the journals.’

‘I want them back, or destroyed.’ Norman’s anxieties about the journals welled up inside of him.

‘Not negotiable!’ She was firm. ‘I’m phoning to explore a creative way around the impasse.’

Norman lapped in the precious liquid, while simultaneously seeking out dry sherry and tarragon vinegar.

‘You want a truce but what’s half mine is not negotiable?’

‘You’ve got to the heart of the matter. This is the deal: let’s edit them into a book. You’re evidently being defensive, because you’ve been less than judicious in the way in which you’ve rubbished several people in the food world. But that only makes up a tiny portion of our work. There are so many rich and wonderful entries in them.’

‘I know, I wrote half.’

‘We can change the names with a bit of clever editing.’ Ivy had wanted to write a book for years, but he couldn’t understand why she was initiating a discussion now, a mere week since they had separated.

‘I’m going ahead anyway. Come in on this with me.’

‘You have got to be bloody joking. Whose knickers are you smoking?’ He was outraged. ‘You screw up my life and now you want to steal my ideas. How dare you phone and try to sweet talk me into some screwball scheme.’

‘I know you’re angry with me, but the whole appeal of the book will be in the erotic nature of food and eating. Our journals are infused with that.’

‘You want me to conspire in the publication of my own embarrassment because you lack the imagination to fuse erotica and creativity?’

‘Grow up! I’d moderate my insults if I was you.’

He began beating egg yolks with more determination than was necessary. It was not that easy to prepare food with his head at a sixty-five degree angle while absorbing the full flavour of Ivy’s proposal.

‘I’m not going to be intimidated.’

‘As I said I’m writing this book anyway. The backdrop will be life with you.’

‘So what would you write?’ He produced a singsong voice. ‘Life with Norman was as exciting as Vienna sausages bedecked with mild mustard...’

‘Oh yes, I could that! Thinking on my feet... the average pink Vienna congealing under your local café’s warm globe has more passion per millimetre than that little chipolata you used to wave proudly under my nose in a vainglorious attempt to get lucky.’

‘I seem to recall a time when you begged and pleaded!’

He slammed down the phone. All that the fight had succeeded in doing was to magnify the trauma of finding her with another man. He removed the double boiler from the heat, added melted butter and Cayenne pepper and continued whisking.

The telephone rang again. His reflex was to take the call.

‘How dare you hang up on me?’ Norman said nothing. ‘Well, lover boy, I called back to remind you - they’re mine. Maybe you remember, maybe you don’t. Inscribed on page one of the first journal, in a slightly shaky hand because you’d returned from a bachelor’s party, is this little message –

“Darling Ivy. My muse! Take my rambles and my foibles and make of them what you will. They and I are yours to do with as you wish.” At a guess I’d say that pretty well gives me the right to do with them as I please.’

‘You’ve got to be joking!’ He decided bravado was the better part of valour. ‘Write your pathetic, plagiarized book at your peril. I’ll fight you all the way. I’ve intellectual property rights and they’re not going to be yours for the taking.’

Even as he said that Norman felt backed into a corner. It would take some pretty smart footwork to get him out of this.

‘Talking of intellectual property or the lack thereof, do I remember you boasting how the aforementioned bachelor’s party climaxed with an Oxford and Cambridge boat race in the bath, which at the time was also housing the punch cocktail?’ He groaned as she brought it up, *yet* again. ‘The winner was to be kissed by a Polish house guest, who chanced home early and by mistake took off her clothes to the tune of “Do that to me one more time.” I’ve left nothing out? What an adult activity! Yet you also never adequately explained how you came home with the photographs of the tattoo. The fox diving into the best man’s navel and the rabbit running out of his bum.’

‘God, please, give me a break.’

‘Oh, I thought it was your way of introducing your foreign guest to the delights of Western classical life and thought. No wonder she immigrated here.’

It was time to back-track completely. He needed to process what was happening. Norman cut the English muffin in half, placed it on top of the bedevilled ham and started poaching two eggs.

‘This is all too soon even to begin mulling your proposal on a truce, let alone decide on working together. I’m very fragile. Can we please drop it? I apologise. I was vulgar and foul and yes, I did write that the diaries were yours to do with as you pleased. I also found a puerile bachelor’s party funny. I’m sorry we reverted to type in this way. It’s childish in the extreme. I’m going to put the phone down now, Ivy. I just can’t talk. Maybe when some sort of reason has returned.’

Click.

‘Thank God for Monroe Première Cuvée Brut '99.’ Norman picked up a Vasarely cushion to throw at his fish tank but pulled back. ‘Trotsky, this is so overwhelming in its preposterousness, I’m utterly stunned. When do I wake up I wonder?’

“Oh pardon me thou bleeding piece of earth that I am meek and gentle with this butcher”.’ He set a place mat and the wherewithal to eat.

Norman was a food-writer and critic who could *really* cook. He lived in a converted cellar below an early 20th century city town-house in Kenilworth, Cape Town, where the small windows close to the ceiling were but a few inches above street level. He affectionately called it his ‘dugout’, but ‘warren’ was a far more apt description. His garden, above him, was a strip of lawn and landscaped shrubbery cut neatly in two by a set of stairs that ran down from the road to his heavy panelled front door.

He had fancied himself in an earlier time as an interior decorator and had painted the walls in the living and bedrooms a matte black. His furniture and objects d’art were illuminated by pools of cunningly placed light, which gave the impression he lived in a Dickensian antique shop. It was an affectation he had once enjoyed, but as a creeping cynicism replaced the humour and quirkiness of youthful taste he tinkered with his environment in a manner that became, for friends, more claustrophobic than amusing. Clocks surrounded him and he boasted there was not an angle in his home that did not tell the time. His lounge featured a three metre long ‘built-in’ couch, whose upholstered frame was supported not by legs, but secured atop a fish tank. This, in turn, was fixed to the back wall. The fabric was in twirling black and white Vasarely square blocks. When the room was darkened he could flick a switch and the purple light from inside the tank created silhouettes of any legs hanging down from the cushions above. This sight was made even more bizarre by the gliding of exotic fish from behind.

The kitchen was the one room that paid homage to a modern era. It bristled with culinary technology and stainless steel, which cosseted his fridge, freezer, stove, microwave and storage drawers. It was a masterful layout of convenience. It appeared uncluttered, yet stored to hand even the most obscure item needed for transformation or embellishment. Off the kitchen was a ‘cool’ room for vegetables and spices, a wine cellar complete with tasting tables and chairs and a red telephone booth. This he’d refurbished to house his gadgets. The graters, blenders, peelers, shapers, shearers, even his jelly moulds of descending Nordic trolls, all slotted into their own unique housings. Invitations to his parties were known to arrive in embossed envelopes or digital attachments, labelled ‘Your presence is a prerequisite to a little caper.’

Over the years he had occasionally exhibited a ruthless streak. He prided himself that he could reconstitute ‘back home’ any dish or flavour he’d recently tasted and put it all together with added nuance and humour. Once, after being embarrassed by his hostess with an accusation of culinary plagiarism, he had re-invited and re-served all four courses to her and her dinner guests, from the same party he’d attended six months before at her home. Beginning with the preparation and presentation of the food, to the vintage of the wine, each dish in its perfection highlighted every shortcoming and lack of originality that was the original meal. No guest drew attention to the comparison, just as no one seeks to notice an inappropriate birthmark. Like the birthmark, never was a point more obvious.

Yet there was something in his charm that ensured he made remarkably few enemies. He was an imposing figure on the epicurean circuit. People who found themselves at his table generally seemed to make that extra effort to have fun. Those who did were rewarded with unexpected interactions and turns of events.

He looked up from his deliberations. It was time to get going. He put a stopper into the bottle of bubbly and returned it to the fridge. Norman flicked on the radio, set in motion the dials and knobs that would produce a caffeine rush, collected the newspapers dropped down to his door, fed the fish, set his answering machine and within an hour or so was current, clean and clad.

The esteemed critic picked up one of his two walking sticks. Both were made of a light fine-grained beautifully polished wood, mounted with ornately chased sterling silver handles. With a deft movement either handle could be removed to reveal a compartment that in the case of the one contained a dispenser of delicately combined salts and spices with a base of paprika, and in the other the same salts but with a base of cumin. Today was a paprika day. He rubbed his hand lovingly along the shaft.

Norman’s diary, largely a repository for quotable quotes and cryptic observations, showed only one appointment for the day. Her name was Gabriella Sloane and they had, over the years, lost contact. Her call to him gave nothing away and he agreed to meet, more out of curiosity for how she looked after all the years than for the business she was about to propose.

A sudden uncertainty overtook him. Perhaps it was the dyed black hair. After such a long time, might she not suspect an act of vanity? Was he, when they’d last seen each other, starting to show signs of turning grey? He was irritated at the slight insecurity but could not shake it off.

So he glanced around the kitchen, lifted a bite-sized Roquefort cream quiche left over from pre-dinner nibbles, and dropped it into the rat's cage.

'Be happy with that and no bloody complaints. A white rat cannot live on melted mozzarella and Parmesan bites alone! If you behave, tonight you'll enjoy some crisp vegetables and leftover tofu brochette.'

A moment later he was blinking on the lawn above, heading off for the centre of the city.

University of Cape Town

Chapter 3

I used to think of her as a reincarnation of Jeanne Hébuterne, Modigliani's lover and model. When in Paris some years before meeting Ivy, I'd bought a block mounted poster of the artist's exquisite 1918 portrait. She shared, at a certain angle, Jeanne's long curved neck, elongated, oval face and almond-shaped eyes, so characteristic of the painter's mature style. What made the comparison so compelling was that the same auburn hair framed Ivy.



Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 11/09/2009

Ivy was an agony aunt and her advice enriched the readers of various publications of the less than salubrious stripe. Her strength lay in her simple language and analysis. She said it as it was. In a world of glitz, mirrors and political correctness, honesty earned her a fortune. Her training was in social work.

Her appearance so contradicted the stereotype of the 'social worker', that friends who knew her often wondered how she was able to establish control in some of the more intense human dramas she must have been instrumental in diffusing. She did, and did so successfully. One day, waiting for a plane at Rome airport, she had seen a poster of Marino Marini's *Horse and Rider*. The impact of the image, in an instant, had changed her view of life. She discovered a metaphysical world that existed in parallel to the one she'd been living in. So had begun a voyage of discovery. She was liberated, and bathed in the warmth and headiness of that understanding.

Ivy had set out to find her creativity. She had enrolled for courses such as art, cooking, wine, yoga, books, birds, theatre and jewellery. She had a real feeling for pottery. Then she had taken up Toast Masters, bought into alternative medicine, loved

fashion and furniture and even found her way onto a workshop that taught water divining. She had read the Tarot, palms, eyes, pendulums, the I-Ching and sand trays. She had gone on 'breathing' seminars, sweat-lodges and had sworn by homeopathy. She had meditated and where possible had tried to remember to do her Ohmmmmms. She had learned to draw. She could now take a pencil for a walk into the most unlikely places and along paths that few mortals were privileged to access.

Above all she had cooked, bringing people together around her sumptuous table. What Ivy loved most was observing the human connections that such interactions encouraged.

Having left her 'Salvation Army home', she was determined to escape the austerity and the constant upheaval that followed her parents 'servin' the gud Lord and the "gin-soaked" of society. She could not remember staying in a place for more than two years in her childhood. The first thing her mother ever set out, upon arrival at yet another mission home, was the copper 'Dürer hands'. Oh God, did she hate those hands! Her insides yelled out in rebellion at her parents' selflessness. Couldn't they just once, for bleeding once, say to eighty-five derelicts who had arrived for shelter and feeding after a day's bumming and abuse, 'Fuck off, I don't care if you *are* hungry! I need to spend quality time with my daughter. Take the collection money and order out pizza'?

She'd been upstaged by Jesus all her life and the resentments burned deep. It was only on reading a Robertson Davies novel, years later, that she was able to moderate her anger. Mr Davies pointed out that Jesus had died far too young, for if he'd lived to a ripe old age, he'd have discovered that life is not to be seen in absolutes. Black and white, with years, gives way to the understanding of greys and nuance. The world may have been spared the dogmatism that characterized the fervour of Christian civilization, if only he'd he been crucified at 65.

Bless her and the inherited 'sins of the father', on the first day of leaving home she enrolled for a course in 'social work' at the local university and was accepted.

When she was a child, God had put a damper on a vast range of activities. Amongst those things that were banned were dance halls and alcohol, along with gaudy and provocative posters of pop idols. Fashion and girlie magazines were seen as the thin edge of the wedge. Bosoms in Wonderbras, costume jewellery, mini-skirts and wet T-shirts proved to be a premonition of the last days. Movies were judged by their age

restrictions and masturbation and idle hands were chalked up as deadly sins numbers eight and nine.

God did allow the brass band and approved of moderation, sacrifice and discipline. Scripture readings and bible study on Thursday nights were compulsory, as were endless protests, with a collection box, at horse racing afternoons.

Her mother and father weren't mean-spirited, but their lives *were* dedicated to the 'greater good' and Ivy was just another sacrifice along the way. They loved Ivy according to their lights, but in truth they were too busy with God's work and in the end she grew up in spite of them.

She was addicted to colour; red peppers, beetroot, watermelon, aubergine, mango and lettuce at their freshest and at their greatest sheen all gave her a sense of well-being that almost ached in its wonder.

In her imagination colour kept her little girl's spirit transfixed with the promise of a greater world 'out there'. Her adolescent sense of self was empowered by colour and then, as an adult, when the shackles were broken, she lived in it, dressed in it, garnished it, framed it, painted it and applied it in swathes across her existence. Not even her first mutt escaped her obsessions. It was an ugly dog of no known brand, but recognizable for its bright and zany collars and gentian violet highlights in its hair.

Yet she moved into the 'warren' with its black walls and inexplicably asserted nothing of herself. She acted like a deer, stuck in the designer pools of light, frozen and resentful, and quietly died inside. When she left to 'find herself' she failed to ask the one question she would have posed and answered to any 'Dear Ivy' reader...

"Why, 'shafted and pissed off', did you not invest in 20 litres of cheery coloured paint, a bottle of turpentine, a roller and two brushes, a few men 'from the side of the road' and change your life in an afternoon?"

Chapter 4



Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 12/09/2009

When Ivy moved out she took the journals! Her taking them was not negotiated with Norman, they simply went with her. It had been Ivy's idea from the start but as with most things that Norman embraced, it expanded into a magnificent obsession. Some six or seven years earlier, Ivy had suggested that as critics and aficionados of all things culinary, they should keep a diary or a journal. Norman was originally quite dismissive, saying that he kept his notes as a food writer should.

'The great moments,' he had said, tapping his head, 'are stored nicely upstairs on the right hand side, where they belong!'

Since she'd left, Norman hated being at home. The ghost of Ivy seemed to whisper to him from every corner of the warren. He wandered into the cellar and looked over his wines. There was no escaping her even amongst the bottles.

'But there's more to being a chef than recipes and jottings. You, we, *have* to keep a journal,' he recalled her saying.

He could see her feeding the fish and fiddling with the backwash pipe. He smiled. He remembered her flicking her wet hands over the water and watching the ripples spreading out, like ideas.

'I don't get it.'

'You never do, but I'm starting one for us anyway,' she had said.

Ivy had bought an A3 drawing portfolio with an attractive hard cover, some paper glue, a Faber-Castell drawing pen and pencil set, a box of watercolour paints and four good brushes.

‘There we are. You used to be at art school, expand your horizons. Creativity in one art form needs the nourishment from many other sides of the creative arts. I’ll leave it on the table in the wine cellar as a work in progress.’

Several weeks later, alone, after Ivy had left for work, Norman had opened her journal. She’d evidently kept a record of their recent culinary encounters, alongside some exquisitely charming pencil observations of food, in an ‘architectural’ style she’d developed over the years. Essential shades were washed in with one or two brush strokes. In some places, a line had developed into script; and her notes and recipes were thus integrated into her drawings. He was entranced as he digested every word and image. When Norman had read her final entry entitled *Lamb infused with Rosemary – The Last Outpost of Comfort Food*, he had picked up the pencil alongside and crossed out the word *Rosemary* and substituted it with *Lavender*.

That evening, when Ivy had arrived home, the table in the cellar was ablaze with candles. Norman jumped out from behind the door. He held Ivy’s waist and twirled her in a clumsy but excited Ginger and Fred impersonation. He dropped on one knee, lifted her shirt above her belt and kissed her belly button.

‘Da da dahhh de dee de dee dummm!’

The lamb and the lavender, after slowly cooking for several hours, was ready to eat, needing just a little sherry to be added to the sauce he’d prepared. Their journals and a passionate dialogue had begun.

Chapter 5

What is Dark Food?'

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 13/09/2009

Food from the seedy places, the chilling places and the confined places?

It is for me, dear boy, the food of the dark countercultures, the hidden tastes of psychopaths. Tastes trapped in the mouths of the powerful, the ruthless and the mean.

In my mind, dear Norman, flash images of rain and dank and doorways. I see neon signs, bars and menace. There are streetlights and reflections in puddles of oil and water. I can feel skin bristling with both excitement and desperation and nobody looks around for fear of seeing anything. I know these places and these people. I see their kitchens at the back of tips with stray dogs and smell their waste as I push open swing-doors into dining spaces of dim lit veneer.

Posted by Jacques Michelin 14/09/2009

Gabriella Sloane and Norman were sitting at an outdoor café on the slopes of Signal Hill, at one of five little round pavement tables. He was glad he'd suggested it, as there was no wind blowing that day. In front of them stretched a magnificent panoramic view of the city bowl and the harbour. Behind them, on the opposite side of the street, rows of double-story Victorian town-houses stood like a guard of honour, resplendent in their renovated and sealed wooden window frames, manicured gardens and fresh paint. The sun felt comforting upon his back. They were sharing a chicken salad with American sourdough bread, washed down with a 'very quaffable little fruity white'. The smell of honey and mustard, infused with a hint of paprika and normality, eased any tension. The years were peeled back and Norman felt happy.

Gabriella was dressed in white with a black waistcoat. Pinned to it was a brooch. It had started life as a fridge magnet, depicting a metamorphosis by M.C. Escher of fish turning into birds. She seemed more beautiful than when they had last been together. The fine lines around 'those' eyes were soft and he realised no bitterness had etched them, just the passing of accepted time. She was peering at him with amusement.

'Tell me, have you still a deep and lasting relationship with Che?'

‘Oh no, Che was a complete philistine when it came to the finer things of life. He died unable to tell the difference between good Brie and cheddar-flavoured Salticrax. I admit after him there followed a few brief friendships with the fathers of the South American struggle. However, I’ve finally found a soul mate. Trotsky. A fine fellow with a far more discerning palate, who accepts me for whom I am and twitches with delight if presented with anything that does not fall into the low GI category. My kind of rodent!’

‘And that ghastly fish tank?’

‘I specialize in piranhas now, Gabriella, a ripple away from a feeding frenzy.’

‘Piranhas, eh? You are such a bloke!’ She looked at him quizzically, changing the subject. ‘Be honest. How do I look after all this time?’

‘How honest?’

‘Depends on what you say.’

‘Ah, a rock and a hard place.’ He fortified himself for the challenge by taking a sip of wine. ‘I’ll come at this obliquely.’

‘This better be good.’ Her eyes narrowed in playful severity.

‘The clue is in the jewellery you’re wearing.’ He pushed his glasses up his nose and beamed with pride at the oncoming thought. ‘Gabriella, imagine a wide flat beach that stretches out for kilometres... let’s say Noordhoek beach. It’s night. The moon has risen above the horizon and is reflecting silver light upon the calm water.’

‘Ok, the image is fixed into my brain.’

‘Good. Now add a couch on the beach under the moon. It’s the only object on the white sand. It’s a white, modern, clean-lined, low-backed and ‘L’-shaped couch.’

‘That’s a lot of detail for me to imagine. Where are you heading with this?’ She looked a little coy.

‘The devil’s in the detail, Gabriella. You’re a moviemaker and a camera boffin, you should know.’

‘Ok. I’ve composed the shot.’

‘It’s bedecked with black, square leather cushions. Here’s the rub. If I was M.C. Escher and I set out to paint Gabriella Sloane lying on it, you could easily metamorphose, if such a word exists, into an image of Juliette Binoche gracing the famous black and white, head and shoulders poster advertising *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.’

‘Careful, Mr Frye. You are about to leave the beach for choppy waters. You are describing a metamorphosis here. Am I an ugly duckling turning into someone else’s swan?’

‘You’re the swan! Goodness, you’re *far* more seductive on my couch than she and infinitely more so, were it you upon white bedding and under *that* black hat.’

She burst out laughing. ‘With your unbearable lightness of touch, no doubt.’

Norman leaned towards her, his bushy eyebrows resting on the rim of his glasses in a conspiratorial way. ‘Yes, that’s right. You’ve a presence that resembles her in the movie, but more intriguing.’ It was time to get to the nub of the matter. ‘Why did you ask me here?’

‘Dark Food! A collaboration.’

‘Like the bio-café?’ Norman shuddered a little at the memory of it. ‘That was our first date, remember. I took you to the last bio-café in town.’ He felt again the ‘rush’ as her arm and thigh had touched his in the darkening theatre, and revulsion at something that had floated in the flat Coke, served up as part of the cost of the movie ticket.

‘I want you to seek it out,’ she said, ‘and write about it. I’ll reconstruct your ideas in a little film I’m going to make.’

‘The bio-café?’

‘No, Norman.’ Gabriella seemed not to remember the date, or if she did, showed no interest in reminiscence.

‘*Babette’s Feast* but from a dastardly point of view?’ Norman sought more clarification from his companion with the Escher brooch.

‘I don’t know, I haven’t thought it through.’ She became a little sheepish. ‘It’s just an idea. They have to start somewhere.’

Norman took off his glasses and polished them with the serviette. Finally, he returned them to the bridge of his nose and his face relaxed into a smile, revealing one of his most endearing assets, a slight gap in his front teeth. It was this gap that gave him a ‘roguish’ schoolboy charm. He secretly flattered himself that many women found it irresistibly appealing.

‘My initial reaction is that I would be very happy to workshop your idea with you. There is a ring to the concept ‘dark food’.’

‘Brilliant! I was hoping you would say that.’

‘Thinking selfishly, there must be a cookbook I could write, inspired by your motion picture?’

‘I don’t see why not. That’s an excellent thought.’

‘I’ll write it to titillate and seduce. It will be devoured by people leading loveless, horrible, domestically fraught and harassed lives.’ Norman warmed to his idea.

‘Oh yes, you’ll turn women into sorceresses. I’ve no doubt.’

Norman nodded in agreement even though he knew he was being buttered with intent.

Gabriella knew it was the habit of a lifetime that he’d never commit to anything until he’d ‘slept’ on it for 24 hours or so. This resolution was going to be no different. It was by an unspoken understanding that the subject closed. She was quite pleased with the turn of events. She too had felt a little anxious when Norman had accepted the invitation to meet her. The fact that he had latched so enthusiastically onto her idea was a start. She needed his expertise. She wondered if the hint of corporate grey that had formed the warp of his beard ten years ago had been dyed for this appointment. She said nothing, but was amused at the thought. Sweet talk was definitely in the air. This proposal just needed to bide its time in the marinade. They ordered another bottle of wine.

‘Tell me about Ivy. You said on the phone you’d broken up.’ Gabriella probed gently. ‘I remember meeting her once or twice.’

‘Poison Ivy, that’s how I feel about her now.’

In fact, to Norman, Poison Ivy didn’t even come close. She had fallen, in his view, from a goddess to a man-eater. She was a Venus flytrap who’d wrestled a monster scorpion to the ground and spat it out because the blood in its veins lacked chilli.

Ivy was a great cook and it was her chaotic table that had first attracted Norman to her. Hers was a kitchen filled with fruit and vegetables, bought more for the colour they provided than their nourishment.

‘Why did you buy three dozen peppers that we’re not going to eat before they expire?’

‘Because, clot, the yellows, reds and greens in the bowl fill me with pleasure!’

Gabriella put her hand on his. 'You seem very angry, Norman.'

'I am,' he said simply. 'It could have been a relationship based in heaven but for one or two small problems, me being the central one.'

'Why? You're both foody types.'

'Yes, but as the years passed, that which she found quirky and loveable about me became theatres of battle.'

Even as he said it, their heated disagreements came flooding back. His home, which was once heralded as the quintessential artist's garret, was derided as 'locked, like your brain, in a time warp. It's out of date, pretentious and excludes me, the person'. He could hear her say it. 'I'm a stranger here, Norman, and you won't let me in!'

'You've been living here for close on ten years.' He lamely defended his position. 'If you're a stranger it's because you haven't even tried to introduce yourself.'

He had felt painted into a corner and could not escape, because nothing had ever seemed good enough. To him, no amount of loving, no amount of contrition, no amount of raging and banging of heads against walls would make the slightest difference to their relationship. He just did not measure up.

'Your black walls and your lava lamp and your doilies and your pretentious shit, fuck I'm so bored with you!'

Her three adult children, who constantly rallied to their mother's point of view, ensured family occasions had become strained over the years. As a result Norman had felt himself becoming more and more isolated.

'Sorry, Gabriella, I thought a moment ago I could talk about it, but I can't. It's all too close. Do you mind if we drop it?'

'Of course. Sorry, I shouldn't have asked.'

'Thanks. Are you involved with anyone?'

'No, not for a little while.' Norman thought he saw a mere trace of a wink.

'Though I'm not closed to the idea.'

Chapter 6

The Peachy Oozy Floozy cocktail.

1 part ouzo, then add 1 part peach schnapps and 1 part blue Curacao. Stir in a long glass and add 2 parts Red Bull to get a lovely shade of green - a very sweet and surprising taste to put you in the mood for anything (www.cocktail.uk.com/Cocktail-Recipe).

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 14/09/2009

I went to the site – glad I'm not a hobbit.

Posted by Jacques Michelin 16/09/2009

‘You have to meet her!’ Norman was back home fulfilling his promise to Trotsky to serve him crisp vegetables and the left-over tofu brochette.

When he was satisfied the little fella was well nourished, he sat down at his computer and tried to concentrate on his *Divorced Man's Table*, but his thoughts kept returning to Gabriella.

‘I'd forgotten how engaging you are.’

They had been friends at art school in Johannesburg at an inner city campus close to a park. Student life had been a heady mix of hard ‘dives’ and mellow, leafy afternoons. His thoughts were concentrated on one particular Friday when he and Gabriella had been ‘house sitting’ her parents’ home. They’d spent the hot, sticky evening mourning Bobby Dylan’s ‘great betrayal’ under the shadow of her father’s booze cabinet.

“I've turned thirty and grown too old to protest. The fact is I've grown up now.”

‘Bastard!’

Around midnight, with their modesty and inhibitions washed clear away by a cocktail of first wine and then ouzo, they had made love for hours in a gazebo that graced the centre of the lawn. Finally the night had become cold, the dew had settled and a hangover had intervened. Although they had tried to recapture something of the passion of that time, she had finally fallen back into a relationship with a ‘ghastly’ fellow called Wayne.

‘Married him eventually. The poor and foolish thing! She is now divorced.’

Chapter 7

Food must be an expression of the creative minds of evil people as well as of good, and I believe there is a difference. You are what you eat. We all know that. But what does it really mean when food becomes a metaphor for whom you are?’

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 16/09/2009

I’m just a little ol’ Savoy Truffle

Posted by JuicyLucy 16/09/2009

Gabriella lived ‘up’ in stark contrast to the ‘down’ of Norman’s existence. Hers could not have been more different. Loft living was an apt description. It was a 270-degree view. Apart from a large entrance hall there were three spacious rooms trimmed with brushed stainless steel. Although much of the appointment was wood, it was not of that heavy yellow Oregon pine that yelled ‘rustic’ to the tune of Ralf McTell’s ‘Streets of London’. Gabriella’s choice was a close-grained white maple. Her bedroom and living room breathed a huge sigh of relief that her daughter was no longer staying at home. There was order and crisp lines, leather furniture and discreet alcoves, housing objects ‘in homage’ to her schooled taste.

Then there was her study, her hearth. It was beautifully light and featured the biggest window, almost from ceiling to floor, as well as a French door that opened onto a small roof garden. It housed her life, from her books to her 1950s matchbox toy collection. In the middle was her desk, supporting a computer and mini-editing suite. It was also the home to tactile objects, her photographs, costume jewellery, the coloured, the shiny and the quirky mementos of her journey down the last three decades. It smelt a bit like Tea Rose eau de parfum and shoe polish and was definitely a woman’s hideaway. She was not a regular smoker but occasionally stepped through the door and lit up a small cigar, ‘for thinking purposes’. Then, seated on a garden bench, facing her ‘inner sanctum’, she would draw the smoke inwards, not deeply but enough to allow the calming effect to work its magic.

Gabriella seamlessly shed her shoes, removed her waistcoat and tossed it onto her bed as she passed the door and headed for the kitchen cupboard that housed the Gilbey’s and the diet tonic.

‘Sundowners, ready for dispensing.’

‘Coming, mum.’

‘Well hurry on, no good mucking about.’

‘Coming, *mum!*’

‘And tell me about your day. Full disclosure!’

‘Coming, mother!’

Her daughter, Zoë, had invited herself to dinner, ostensibly to ‘catch up’ because her boyfriend Shane was having a night out with a few pals. In reality, Gabriella knew, she needed a few bob to tide her over till month end. No prodding was needed, just a little attentiveness and stroking. With a bottle of wine under her ‘Italian leather’ belt, Gabriella would be sure to slip a few crisp notes into Zoë’s palm and conspiratorially whisper, ‘don’t let Shane get his gorgeous hands on these. Go on, treat yourself to a spoiling.’

Shane and Zoë were both postgraduate students. She was reading for an architectural Masters and he for a Masters in industrial design. Shane’s skill lay in understanding the nuances of the rules of engagement Gabriella expected from a potential son-in-law – no mean feat for someone not yet thirty. In fact he was charming far beyond his years. His hands were beautiful; something Gabriella had immediately noticed when they had first met. It showed a sort of breeding worthy of her daughter! This was a sentiment she’d have denied had someone accused her of harbouring such class-conscious notions, but it instinctively registered him as being good for Zoë.

‘Sit down, darling. I’ve dispensed with singles and we’re kicking off with a double.’ Gabriella tucked herself up on the sofa and ‘squeezed’ at her daughter through the glass.

‘Thanks, mum.’ Zoë sat down next to her, ‘squeezing’ back with genuine affection.

‘I saw my old art school boyfriend, Norman Frye, today.’

‘Norman? What were you doing with Norman? You know dad thinks he’s pretentious.’ Zoë was still peering through the now totally frosted tumbler.

‘I know he does, but since Wayne has shacked up with the delightful Daphne, he doesn’t have a teensy-weensy, peg leg to stand on. Cheers!’

‘Does he still have that disgusting rat and fish tank?’

‘I’m afraid so. Though he’s been through several since you saw him. Rats, that is.’

Zoë contorted her face into an exaggerated look of horror.

‘He does make me laugh. His latest is called Trotsky. I want him to do a spot of legwork for me and then design four or five great meals.’

‘Legwork?’

‘Seeds of an idea for a film. The stereotypes have us believe that consummate evil relates to consummate gluttony. The more powerful and evil one is, the more exotically one eats. Because one can! One’s menu is an expression of power. “Bring me, for my delight, the eyes, wrapped in coriander, of the last five snow tigers in India”. That sort of thing,’ said Gabriella.

The younger woman’s internal ‘sceptical’ device began humming into life but she chose to say nothing.

‘There’s no nuance.’ Gabriella was firm. ‘It’s all crass, is it not? Last days of the Roman Empire.’

Zoë lifted the lemon slice from her empty glass and bit into it. The radar locked its beam onto Gabriella.

‘A refill, mum?’

‘Ta.’

Zoë’s hand was not quite as bold in the pour as her mother’s. Her flow of ideas needed a little reining in.

‘There’s a thriller in that notion somewhere, darling. Our Norman is just the man for the job.’

Zoë bit her lip. ‘He is?’

‘He is! He’s a very well connected person and leads a colourful life. He’s a genius with food. He hardly sleeps and is seldom at home. Where does he go and what does he eat and with whom? He tried a brief few years with someone who could’ve given him a settled life but they’ve split up. I like her and don’t blame her. I want him to find places and food that have an edge.’

‘Purely for clarity, mum, you want him to find places and food with an edge because you like his ex-wife or because of his connections and odd hours?’ Her mother made no sense to Zoë but she knew instinctively that Gabriella was going to get herself into a bit of a scrape.

‘So what’s new?’ she thought and flicked the device switch to the ‘*off*’ mode.

Chapter 8

*People like fatty foods and carbohydrates. So half the world is obese. If they want dark food, Jacques, they have to colonize my talents, not some self-inflated prick with a revolver and a few psychopathic friends. The so-called dark world would not be able to tell the difference, in any greater measure than my friend Trotsky, between a cordon bleu meal and a cordoned off street. Priests and psychopaths, little girls with frilly dresses and the bum on the Company Gardens bench eat the same stodgy muck. Good ingredients murdered and disrespected through ignorance, thousand island sauce and instant toppings.
Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 17/09/2009*

Gabriella was standing in a supermarket queue when her mobile phone rang to the tune of ‘Tupelo Honey’ by Van Morrison. It was the ring tone she’d assigned to Norman. She took the call.

‘How’s my favourite epicurean?’

‘Most probably not.’

‘What?’

Norman, after mulling Gabriella’s proposal to work with him on the story about dark food, had decided it was best to come clean.

‘I’m not understanding what you want from me. Dark food? There’s the ‘Mafia Cookbook’ by Joe Dogs. A very popular gimmick, and lots of others hopping on the bandwagon. That sort of thing?’

‘You were quite excited at lunchtime the other day. What happened between now and then?’ Her sudden irritation at having her idea criticized while she was at the impulse-buying wall resulted in several bars of chocolate and some wine gums being dropped into the trolley.

‘I’m still excited. I think you’ve a point that goes beyond the Naked Chef doing serial killers and penal colonies. What I’m not getting is the plot.’

‘You’re not?’

‘Are you proposing a stereotypical gangster movie? You can visualize the camera shot. Eight henchmen and their two bosses, armed to the teeth, sat down in a glitzy restaurant with some guy in an exaggerated chef’s hat, flambéing meat in a pan at the side of the table.’

‘Go on, Norman, I’m listening.’ Yogurt covered nuts, a packet of crisps and some biscuits wound up on top of the butternut and dental floss.

‘Gabriella, we’ve known each other a long time and I’m often inclined to bouts of pretentiousness. I suspect you haven’t got a plot, just a woolly idea that somehow you can mine dark food from my imagination.’

‘Food is always portrayed as sexy and elevating, deep and meaningful. Why can’t it be dark and menacing? All I’m saying is there’s a movie in that thought... somewhere.’

‘I cringe, but I’ll read what I wrote today before calling you. Let me give you a taste “*Give me a plot and I’ll design you a meal. I will take you in my imagination to the less salubrious places. I’ll show you life on the streets. I will articulate the experience with layers of flavour.*” Ouch! Sorry, Gabriella – I must be gently blunt but your movie can’t germinate from a romantic notion of a parallel epicurean world inhabited by those on the fringes of our reality.’

‘Is that a no?’ An O Magazine with an attached sample of non-aging face cream followed suit as the queue shortened.

‘No, I’d love to work with you. I’m just having second thoughts that such a thing as dark food exists, because at the teeniest excuse the underbelly of humanity slinks off to Kentucky. Come anytime, day or night, for a glass of wine, and let’s try brainstorming what this illusive movie is all about.’

The O Magazine was returned to the shelf.

Chapter 9

Buck up! Albert Camus or the Pied Piper would have been denied their lives of acclaim should your ilk capitulated to a square of Lindt dipped in a slug of grape spirit. Such delights have served man and rodent throughout history and through all sorts of crises.

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 18/09/2009

Ah, but Norman, read Kenneth Grahame's 'The Wind in the Willows' again. "Beyond the Wild Wood comes the Wide World," said the Rat. "And that's something that doesn't matter, either to you or me. I've never been there, and I'm never going, nor you either, if you've got any sense at all."

Posted by Jacques Michelin 18/09/2009

Trotsky was peaky, a little off colour. Norman put it down to the grappa he was sipping at the end of his day while savouring a bunch of frozen grapes and some Lindt chocolate. He'd given Trotsky a bit of the treat but the alcohol seemed only to have made it a little woozy.

'If you're going to loll around looking sorry for yourself, I'll cut out late evening nibbles and nightcaps. Come on my good man, you're not sick are you?'

The phone rang.

'Bloody late.' Norman took Trotsky out of his pocket and popped him back into his cage. 'Hello?'

'Norman? It's me, Gabby. I'm taking you at your word. Are you alone and is it too late to pop in?'

'Where are you?'

'Outside your door.'

'I'm not decent, I'm in my gown. Take your chances.'

'I went out to dinner and was driving past.' Gabriella's eyes became accustomed to the darkened room. 'For goodness sake, Norman, put on the overhead light - and while you're at it, let's switch off the glow from the fish tank.' Gabriella's eyes then alighted on the table.

'What are those?'

'Frozen grapes.' Norman waved his hand

'Oh, and grappa. I've not had a grappa for ages. I'll have a tot, thank you.'

‘I love you a lot but you’re bossing me about. It seems you’ll need more than a tot of grappa to calm you down.’

‘Like what? Don’t answer that.’ She grinned at him. ‘Norman, I think I’ve found a plot for my movie and I’m so excited. Chin-chin!’

‘Cheers!’

Norman could see, from the way she shut her eyes and pursed her lips in pleasure, that the exotic sensation of the Grappa, chocolate and frozen grapes had taken Gabriella by surprise.

‘Oh God, when they’re frozen like this, they taste like sorbet. What a delicious combination.’

‘Rather special, isn’t it?’

‘I could fall in love with a man who served this late at night, even under the purple light of his fish tank. You are very clever.’

‘No I’m not, it’s *Jamie’s Italy*. Tell me about the plot.’

The dreamy look was dispatched with another sip of grappa and Gabriella sat upright and assumed a Miss Jean Brodie expression.

‘The movie is about a series of incidents culminating in several murders. Left at each crime scene is a recipe for a three-course meal, including the wines. The detective fancies himself a chef. He cooks the meal after each homicide for five or six guests, who’ll help him unravel the mystery. The detail in each dish provides a clue. If we choose our guests at the table correctly, we can interweave psychology, detection, the mystery of food, human interaction and so on. We build the psychodrama over a series of meals and as each murder and dinner unfolds, it becomes apparent the murderer is one of the guests at the table. The lives of the characters become enmeshed. A bit of sex, a bit of deception and a bit of betrayal. At the final supper, each guest prepares something.’

Gabriella lay back along the couch, arching her back in the manner of a decoration on a Roman wine vessel, and dropped a grape into her mouth from arm’s length.

‘I’m relying on you for the culinary twist! Do I feel a poisoning in my waters, perhaps? It’s the tension of the murderer being part of the preparation of the meal, with each guest suspecting the other. Oh dear, I’m breaking out into a cold sweat already.’

She sat up and nibbled some more Lindt.

‘So there it is. What do you think?’ She waited. ‘You’re not saying anything. Can’t you see the beauty of the plot?’

Norman could not tell why but he thought a dose of disinterest was needed to dilute the effects of Gabriella’s enthusiasm. He felt a bit mean but couldn’t help himself. Why was he jealous? The insight rattled him a little.

‘Tell me, who’s writing the script?’

‘Ivy!’

‘*What?*’

‘Kidding! Kidding!’

Gabriella started giggling at her boldness and Norman’s face compounded her mirth. He was blinking like one of his goldfish. He kept opening his mouth to say something but closed it again. She was taking great pleasure in dishing out his just desserts for not acknowledging her idea. Finally, when he too started laughing, she picked up the last frozen grape from the ice bucket, held it between her teeth and came over to him. She bit it in half and popped his share into his mouth with her tongue as she gave him a kiss.

‘Oh Norman, you’re funny!’

‘Where were we?’ Gabriella was back atop the drama of aquatic life. ‘You know I often go onto your blog. I’ve decoded the reasons it works so well and why I get hooked on it. I don’t know if you want to hear this, but you and Ivy were a wonderful foil for each other. The illustrations by Ivy that you posted were very seductive. Contrasting that was your ability to place a dish on a table and watch what characters did around it. It was about human interaction around an object and your objects were culinary. Your contribution to the blog became a description of the human condition. I so enjoyed that.’ Gabriella pouted and half closed her eyes. ‘Norman, let’s write the script together.’

‘Yes umm... sorry Gabby, can I have some time to think about it?’

She watched him idly pick up a red, imitation baize moneybox in the form of the Madonna, which guarded his key rack. He pointed it at his computer.

‘You know, my blog ran loosely alongside our journal. She absconded with the journal. I feel quite aggrieved.’

‘Ask for it back, can’t you?’ Gabriella’s attention got sidetracked. ‘Put that horrible thing down! Goodness, you’ve made an art form of bad taste.’

‘Not as bad as I’ll look were it to be made public.’

‘The Madonna is looking somewhat disapprovingly at you, Norman. Are you beginning to make a confession?’ She tried to lighten the sudden change of mood.

‘Alongside the creative stuff, I also said some pretty ruthless things in the privacy of my own journal. I now believe a hatchet job is being carefully planned and will be executed in the full glare of publicity.’

‘Did she tell you that?’

‘No – she wants to create a coffee-table book on culinary creativity.’

‘So? What’s the problem?’ Gabriella thought a bit of reason should enter the discussion. ‘Being a bit paranoid aren’t you?’

‘Hell hath no fury!’

‘Norman, I liked Ivy when I met her. I’m not asking what happened between you two – sounds like a lover’s tiff. Patch it up or move on is my advice.’ With that Gabriella stood up, ready to go home. ‘Oh, that was a perfect nightcap. Thanks for listening.’

She came over to kiss him goodbye.

‘I don’t know, Gabriella. Can someone just publish my intellectual property? How would I separate hers from mine in this instance?’

‘It’s too late for legal argument, Norman.’ Gabriella changed the subject. ‘Will I be appearing in this little kiss and tell?’ He felt a little surge of interest. It was the first time Gabriella seemed to be acknowledging they’d once been more than friends.

‘Well, you don’t think you can avoid being mentioned after you bonked me and then brought your future husband around to be fed, do you? Remember, he freely admitted he filled up on hotdogs an hour before, in case there was nothing he could eat?’

‘So how did that moment come to grace the pages of your journal, all these years later?’

‘I was most probably dissecting a sweet and sour recipe and memories came flooding back. Ha! No, you never cracked the ‘journalistic’ nod. Sorry.’ He waved the Madonna in a pedagogic manner. ‘You’ll have to try harder.’ His lips pursed ever so

slightly. ‘Sit down and have a last nightcap. I promise I will not be nearly as forward with you as you were with me.’

‘Oh. What a pity,’ said Gabriella adjusting the cushions on the fish tank, ‘Just as the evening promised to get more interesting. Just remember I’ve got to drive. What do you propose to serve as a nightcap?’

‘A teeny splash of malt.’

‘Ok, a teeny then.’

So Norman and Gabriella, united by the comfort of years, sat sipping a little Laphroig.

‘Remember the Sugar Club entry?’

‘Ah yes, Ivy and I dined there and I reproduced the meal for her kids on our return. Peter Gordon, the man who started it all, stated the bloody obvious that so many chefs are too scared to admit. *“If it tastes good it works.”* Norman took another sip of the whiskey before continuing. ‘A lot of food journalism is a bit of an intellectual wank.’

Gabriella didn’t want to get into a philosophical discussion on food at that late hour. ‘It was quite vitriolic. How did your ex digest the oblique character assassinations you used to post every now and again?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Please, Norman, you know exactly what I mean. Take the hatchet job you did on her family in that very Sugar Club entry.’

‘Oh, that.’

‘Yes, that. You never even changed their names.’

‘I know, she made a fuss about it. Call it the family at their worst. I removed the post a few days later. I’ve forgotten exactly what I wrote.’

‘Don’t care to know the dynamics. Far too complex for little ol’ me.’ She stood up smiling. ‘Thanks, Mr Frye. I’m pooped and must be going.’

He saw her to her car.

‘Thank you for spontaneously popping in. I enjoyed that.’

As soon as he was back inside he opened his computer and went into his archival files.

‘What *did* I actually say about the family on my blog?’ He found it. ‘Oh yes, not my most sensitive moment. Does kind of encapsulate our interpersonal shyte,

though.’ His thoughts darkened over. ‘I should send it to Ivy for her book.’ He read it again.

The atmosphere dipped in temperature from person to person with military synchronization. Staring back at us from the table were both pan-fried and baked lambs’ brains; the first variation served with pear and date chutney and the second with feta, smoked paprika and labne. I indicated everyone to sit down.

‘Please don’t look so glum. You all remind me of Trotsky when he is told Mrs Du Vaal has to feed him because I’m going away.’

Ivy’s children and their partners gathered at our kitchen for a night of festivities.

Ivy had given triplets to the world and as a consequence Norman had inherited a ready-made family. Her children, now adults, had so far lived out a combined 78 years. Their names were Julie, Alec and Geraldine. Bonds from the womb to adulthood should have demonstrated a predictable enmeshment, but time saw them drift apart. On social occasions, Norman sometimes glanced at the assembled brood and offered up a silent prayer of thanksgiving that he had no children of his own. Two of Ivy’s looked like their father, but Geraldine was the spitting image of her mother. He liked her the most and she often supported him. She was a sales person for the 3M Company (in the Scotch Tape division) and drove a very, very fancy car. By general consent she was the least academically talented of the trio but in the course of two years, since joining the firm, she had sold enough Scotch Tape to wrap the moon. For every extra neuron her brother and sister had inherited from their parents, she matched them with an extra rand. Human frailty being what human frailty was, her financial success sometimes brought out suppressed feelings of envy amongst her siblings.

Alec taught geography at a school in the suburbs and Julie flitted from opportunity to opportunity bemoaning the unfairness of all the obstacles that others threw in the path of her happiness and fulfilment.

I masked my anxiety as I brought in the starter, knowing I was about to become a tad controversial, with a loud singsong cry.

‘Daaahhhh deee deeeeee!’

‘This is a little unexpected, Norman’, said Ivy.

‘Well, I’d promised you the replication of supper at the Sugar Club.’

‘I’d forgotten you had the brains!’

‘Never forget that. Ha!’

Her children’s’ partners were braver, or more polite than the three siblings. Barry, who belonged to Julie, was the newest inductee into the bosom of the family.

He'd not yet quite got the hang of the entrenched rules of being at their table and was the first to demonstrate a complete lack of political nous.

'Norman's right, his efforts hardly got a standing ovation. Thank you, Mr Frye I'll be happy to have a nibble.'

'Oh shut up!' whispered Julie, 'Norman, I don't want to be ungrateful but I'm a vegetarian and if my memory serves me well this is the third time in a row that you've prepared meat.'

'Yes, that's right, the last time was veal with a rowanberry and red wine sauce. But then, dear one, veal is not meat; it's a spiritual experience. I've never heard of anyone refusing communion because they resolved to give up bread made flesh.'

'Ok!' interrupted Alec, 'Norman, you've evidently gone to a lot of trouble, but sometimes I just wonder what point you are continually trying to make.'

'Body of Christ. People all over the world do it every week. Myth has it that human flesh is rather veal-like.'

'God, talk about smug.' Norman winced slightly.

'That's in poor taste and you know it'

'You're right there, Alec. Veal needs more than croutons and sweet wine. No wonder church attendance is in decline. Veal, if it is to have any attraction, is best served with something with a little punch. Sauces loaded with calvados, or anchovies, chicory, olives, asparagus, even curry paste.'

Norman recalled Geraldine entering the discussion.

'Excuse my sister,' she said, 'we're talking real principle here. If you'd half the brains that are displayed upon the table, sis, you would climb off your perch.' Julie unfolded her napkin. 'Don't you love family affairs, mother? We get on so well.'

Ivy withered.

'Oh dear. Can we not bicker?'

Geraldine's Tom, suddenly and without warning, said what he'd wanted to say for many a dinner.

'Oh for fuck's sake won't you all grow up!'

The injured silence that followed was so dense, I wished I'd diced and fried it. 'It was not my bloody idea; it was your mother's. Peter Gordon, the creator of the Sugar Club, is one of the greatest chefs on this planet and it all hinges on his fascination with the world out there and his common touch. Surprisingly enough I have reproduced our meal pretty accurately. Go on, be brave and try it.'

Julie, he recollected, was not going to let things go.

‘How dare you pick on me, Norman.’

‘I’m not, Julie. Look closely at the epicentre of your mother’s raku pottery dish housing the lobes. Observe what appears to be a gigantic hung-over eye staring back at you.’ He felt his pomposity building but was unable to restrain himself. ‘It’s a small red onion, chicory, asparagus and crouton salad made to accommodate the sensibilities of the herbivores around this table. That salad was your mother’s choice of starter at the SC.’

University of Cape Town

Chapter 10



Posted by Fryed - Medium Rare 18/09/2009

Norman took the bottle of bubbly from the fridge and removed the stopper. Even after a week it still showed signs of life. He'd slept well the previous night, after giving a well-received demonstration on Greek cuisine to a book club. He could have made a living out of his demonstrations and lectures, but he had determined not to give more than two or three a month. Although he enjoyed the stimulation they took up too much of his time in the preparation. He'd no sooner filled a glass and prepared a small plate of *mezethes* he'd brought home, when the phone interrupted his quiet repose.

He picked up the receiver. 'Fryed speaking, medium rare.'

'But soon to be well done, son.'

'Oh dear.'

'It's your mother. Phoning to grill you a little more!' Her laugh echoed down the line.

'Hello mother, I know it's you, I saw your name pop up,' said Norman, the last vestiges of strength ebbing out his tracksuit bottoms, over his sneakers and onto the kitchen tiles. 'Thank God for the mother's milk.' He raised his fluted glass. 'To beaded bubbles winking at the brim and Mr J. Keats.'

'What?'

'Never mind, mother, I'm having lunch. Shall I call you back?'

'No, thank you. I'm happy to hear you talk with your mouth full.'

Norman's mother didn't speak, she boomed. A lifetime of smoking had played its part in grizzling up the vocal chords. She sounded like car tyres on a thick bed of loose stones, her voice resonating as if was coming from the inside of a vast kettledrum. She was a woman close on 73 years yet she still wore the regulation denim trousers, the checked shirt and a peaked cap to hold her short straight grey hair in position. She sported a large silver ring in the shape of a lotus flower on the forefinger of her right hand and a copper bangle on her left wrist. The most obvious feature that linked Norman to her was a small gap between her two front teeth. To Norman, she'd have made a good-looking grandmother to Wyatt Earp.

Her name was Olive-Jean. She dedicated her life to non-pretentious utilitarianism. She abhorred affectation in anyone. What defined 'affectation' was something that grew largely from the power relationships around those with whom she engaged. She prided herself on being a hard hitting 'issues' analyst and critic for the local 'Big Issue'. Her interviews and reviews always left the reader in general and the subject in particular slightly uneasy that their efforts were somehow self-serving.

She was a woman who lived a life passionate about 'causes'. In the years that had followed Norman's father's death, she had been able to put Norman in boarding school and travel to disaster areas to 'lend a hand'. She was not scared of getting dirty; nor was she scared of hard work. She never feared the things that flew or crawled or slithered. Neither was her resolve diminished by body fluids, blood, gore, excrement nor filth of any sort. She didn't shirk from reminding others that, for the greater good, they should put aside their petty fears and phobias and roll up their sleeves and get involved.

Norman always felt on the back foot in front of his mother. Since he had been a toddler she had chosen to joust with him as opposed to parent him. By way of example, Norman's great anxiety as a teenager was his mother's views on sex. They were pretty strong and any girl he brought home would, just by virtue of being there, find herself interrogated as to her sexual proclivities, politics and practice. She delighted in being outrageous. Norman slowly learned to counter his mother in these situations by becoming slightly 'Monty Pythonesque'.

'And what is your position... er... is it Debbie or Deborah, on presidents and the use of cigars within the political discourse?'

'Her *position* is as always mother, Position 593. The male places his left foot on the card table, curling his right leg behind his head. The female, beginning from a

half lord of the fishes pose, or ardhha matsyendrasana, slowly extends the hanging scrotum towards the bowl of caviar....’

Olive-Jean turned to ‘journalism’ after a hip replacement.

‘I wore it out, sweetheart, helping the less fortunate.’

Norman thought it best to move the conversation on as rapidly as possible. His theory was that the sooner it started, the sooner it would finish. He just didn’t have the inner strength to deal with her in any large measure.

‘Mother, to what do I owe the pleasure?’

‘I am phoning to get you to do something for me,’ his mother said. ‘By the way, you never phone. Do you remember you even have a mother?’

‘That’s profoundly unfair and you know it. I spend half my day thinking up little unsolicited acts of kindness to bestow upon you.’

‘And half the day forgetting to follow up on any of those thoughts! I suppose you lead a busy life, chasing frivolities. I’d suggest the whole edifice of capitalist greed would unravel were we to return to the basics. I priced your coconut oil in a health shop the other day. I’m not saying I didn’t enjoy the meal you cooked, help me, a year ago? It was just wasted on me, yet you went to all that trouble and at such expense.’

‘Last week, Tuesday, mother. We meet every Tuesday. It’s our little ritual. If the coconut oil were left out, you’d have missed it. Can we leave extravagance in a world of poverty just for today? You wanted a favour?’

‘I’m planning my funeral. The very least you can do for your mother is to cook the meal. I want it to be a tribute to my life.’

‘Your wake? Are you dying? Is there some teeny-weeny snippet of news I should know about, mother?’ Norman raised his eyebrows at the Madonna.

‘Don’t be bloody ridiculous!’ The car tyres churned the stones with even greater vigour. ‘Why would I be dying any more today than yesterday? It’s called putting one’s affairs in order. I’ve asked nothing but to serve others in life; and in death I shall be as little trouble as possible. That’s my way. I expect you to co-operate. I have started a ‘to do’ list for all the role players.’

‘Ok, mother, let me run this past you. I phone with my *usual* regularity and for several days there’s no reply. I finally suspect something has gone terribly wrong. I proceed to your home, beat down your door and find you have passed on.’ The scene in Norman’s

mind was becoming clear. ‘You’ve retired from life. You’ve hung up your cap, your little red book and your Che Guevara T-shirt. You’ve folded your Swiss army knife for the last time and have slumped into a chair, clasping the Barefoot Doctor’s manual to your bosom. Next to you, on the card table, is a penny to get you across the River Styx.’ He liked that touch. ‘Because your affairs are in order, on the same table is a guest list *and* a ‘to do’ list. Each task has been crossed out and accounted for. All that remains is for me to issue invitations and prepare a meal. I presume your obituary hasn’t been left to chance.’ He became firm with her. He was just not willing to feed this nonsense. ‘Mother, this is a bizarre conversation on top of a pretty bizarre two weeks. Please, enough. If I did not enjoy Champagne-like beverages with my *pikilia* – an assortment of Greek appetizers – I could easily find sanity in a large gin and tonic.’

Olive-Jean did what Olive-Jean always did, which was to appear unfazed.

‘Well done, that was a finely honed speech. Son, while you are at the gin bottle, fish out a bunch of Juniper berries and prepare a rabbit or a quail. In fact, quails in an exotic nest of spuds and veggies, in a juniper berry sauce, may be a good homage to my life’s work. You once cooked that for me. Of course I should’ve asked you then, why quails when pigeons abound?’

Norman’s head was spinning, not from the *méthode cap classique* but from the stream of ideas pouring from his mother’s unfathomable worldview.

‘What? Are you implying that quails are higher up some cosmic pecking order and there would be a greater morality in the eating of a pigeon?’

‘Never mind, I’m rambling. The more I think of it, the more I see my idea for a menu as a symbol of freedom and nurturing. Now I’ve sown the quail seed, to mix a metaphor, all that remains is for you to harvest it and design the nest with layers of elegance and simplicity.’

‘Well, that seems easy enough, mother. What I’m not getting is this need for planning. There’ll be a wake, I’ll of course see to that. Friends will celebrate your life and I’ll prepare the food accordingly.’

‘Ah, Norman, my only child, this is not about the wake. That I am leaving to you. Though please don’t confuse your lamentations around my body with a bachelor’s party. You seem to have a rather appalling track record at those gatherings, if that sensible Ivy is to be believed. I’m planning the other meal.’

‘The other meal?’

‘There will be a guest list of several people in my will. I will direct you to a letter in a cardboard folder. You’ll follow the instructions which I’m still fine-tuning. The results will be surprising. It’s a bit like a reality show. What transpires at the meal will determine which one of the six will inherit one third of my worldly goods.’

‘A third?’

‘Well, something. It’s still to be determined.’

‘What demented chatter is this? Have you spent months or years dreaming up this little caper or did it just pop into your head over your All Bran this morning? Who are these people?’

‘Don’t quail. Questions, questions, questions Norman. Curiosity has killed more than it’s fair share of cats. All will be revealed, when the time is right.’

‘Have you got much to give away, mother? I’ve never inquired into your affairs, nor have I any interest in how you dispose of your chattels. You seem on the outside, comfortable. I always presumed they’d go to a good cause. Perchance some trust in perpetuity?’

Norman leaned across the table and with one hand cut himself a thick slice of walnut and prune loaf. This was used as a platform for a large lump of butter and a sea of fig jam. He gave a corner to Trotsky without the topping.

‘Do you mind if we chat about this later? I’m rather pressured to meet a deadline,’ Norman lied.

‘You’ve got your mouth full again. What are you eating now?’

‘A little Carrier number, that prune cake you like.’

‘I thought you were eating Greek.’

‘I am. It’s as odd a combination as this conversation.’

‘Don’t talk with your mouth full!’

‘I thought you gave me permission?’

‘Oh yes, you wrote the recipe down for me once.’ She ignored him. ‘Never quite came out as well as I thought. Have to admit yours was better.’

‘The secret, as Robert says, is to soak the prunes for 24 hours in strong tea to swell them up. It imparts a wonderful flavour! Bye, mother.’

‘Bye-bye, son. Nice chatting. We should do it more often. You should eat less cake too. It’s not good for you – I do worry about your cholesterol so. Where did I go wrong?’

‘You didn’t, mother.’ Norman remained unruffled. He knew she couldn’t resist a small moment of theatre. ‘Your gift to me has been calmness in the face of the unexpected. Remember the two house rules you set? No whinging and don’t panic! I live my life by them still. Bye-bye, mother!’

Olive-Jean was wise enough to know she wasn’t going to get another rise out of Norman so she reluctantly put down the phone. She’d have liked more of a reaction to her well-laid plans from her son but now wasn’t the time to share these with him. She still had to do some thinking. She liked the cold tea tip. Stewed fruit was a necessity at her age.

‘Norman has his uses,’ she muttered happily to herself.

She stubbed out her cigarette, immediately lit her last one, screwed up the empty packet and turned to the hatches, matches and dispatches columns in the classified section of her newspaper to see if she recognized any names.

University of Cape Town

Chapter 11

*When I was a bachelor, I liv'd all alone
I worked at the weaver's trade
And the only, only thing that I ever did wrong
Was to woo a fair young maid.
I wooed her in the wintertime
And in the summer, too
And the only, only thing that I did that was wrong
Was to keep her from the foggy, foggy dew.
Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 19/09/2009*

*Ha! If it was the Foggy Dew Irish Pub in Richmond, Canada,
you did well to keep her from it.
Posted by the Canadian Bar Association 19/09/2009*

Norman replaced the phone. He always took a few moments to settle himself after a conversation with Olive-Jean. He'd hardly had time to raise his glass when the phone sounded *again*. This time it was Gabriella's number that appeared on the screen.

'Gabriella.'

'Norman. Am I disturbing?'

'Not if I can declare a few ground rules.'

'Pardon?'

'No-go areas.'

'No-go areas?'

'I've just had an extended call from my mother. That on top of my last fortnight renders me unable to engage with wills and the law of probate, journals and ex-relationships, funerals, films and foody clues. Lastly, absolutely no debating if four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie should be substituted for pigeons.'

'Taking a bad day out on me?'

'No, just reached the conclusion that some of the more prominent women in my life have undergone frontal lobe lobotomies caused by shards splintering as they bashed their heads on some perceived glass ceiling!'

'Please don't tell me about it, Dr Strangelove. No-go areas, remember.'

'Touché!'

'My needs are of a more frivolous nature. If I've Parma ham and some delicious melons, what can I add that turns my starter from something delicious into something memorable?'

Ah, this at last was safer ground and Norman could not detect any part of this line of questioning that could become contentious.

‘Chill the melon. Cut it in half. Take a spoon and make balls out of the fruit. Try not to break the skin. Return the balls to the melon shells. Now here’s a little trick I’ve learned. Sprinkle white port over it. Food boffins always talk of *crinkling* Parma ham.’ He laughed. ‘Bloody pretentious. It’s then *crinkled* over the melon in an attractive manner and returned to the fridge until served. Now for the memorable part. Buy some fresh figs as an accompaniment. You can shave some Parmigiano over the lot. Oh, and champers. Definitely crispy cold champers. Pongracz is on special in most supermarkets at the mo.’

‘That sounds easy. I’ll buy figs and the white port. That will be your starter. I want to cook you lunch tomorrow.’ Her tone became that which women reserve for meeting babies or pretending to be distressed. ‘Pleeeeee say you’ll come.’

‘I’m a bit fragile. Who else’ll be there?’

‘My daughter Zoë will, for an hour, and then just you and me. She has grown into such a lovely young woman.’

‘Um.’ Norman was about to decline but suddenly decided that he should get a grip on himself. ‘No’ would feel like he was being churlish. ‘Ok, that’ll be great. What can I bring?’

‘Nothing, just yourself.’

‘I’ve got a bottle of Axe Hill white port. I’m told it’s a goodie. I’ll bring that.’

‘Thank you.’

‘May I ask the reason for this invitation?’

‘Of course not! Be satisfied with whim, a wee whim.’

Norman put aside any anxieties conjured up by Gabriella’s whims. He calculated that nothing could top the machinations of Ivy and Olive-Jean. Trotsky could hold the fort.

‘Would you?’ Norman chopped up some lettuce and pushed it through the bars of the cage. ‘Hold the fort?’ His pet appeared unmoved, so Norman fished in his fridge for a little beetroot in orange butter. Trotsky’s whole body quivered with delight as Norman opened the cage door and laid down a few slices of the red heaven.

‘Goodness, you are an old tart. So easily bribed!’

By the time he stepped into the elevator the next day on his way to Gabriella's penthouse, he was a changed man. The telephone hadn't intruded on his life for twenty-four hours, he'd rearranged some of his living space, watched a couple of DVDs and made progress with his *Divorced Man's Table*. The new chapter was titled 'Chick Flicks and Aphrodisiacs'.

'At long bloody last I've a peg upon which to hang this book,' he said to himself. 'The relief is exquisite.'

He'd devised a list of ingredients, enough to fill just one P n P trolley. At first glance they might've seemed quite ordinary, but he'd work magic with them. Norman categorized these into different groups, each grouping being assigned a colour. The contents of the trolley became a giant colour wheel. The primary and secondary colours were the meats and fish, starches, fruits and nuts, vegetables, dairy products and cereals. The tertiary colours were the herbs seeds and spices, oils, vinegars and alcohol. Just as an artist used a palette of colours, Norman believed he could show that a chef's ingredients worked in the same way. From this analogy he'd teach the uninitiated how to cook and present the preparation of food as a painting. The colours and form have a relationship. The relationship would be complex, with depth ('Chick flick'). Food, he would demonstrate, is a mood enhancer and evokes sensuality ('Aphrodisiac').

By the time the lift reached the top floor, the Eric Clapton lyrics running around his head had been translated into song.

*I feel wonderful
Because I see the love light in your eyes
And the wonder of it all
Is that you just don't realize
How much I love you'*

'Oh, thank you, Norman,' said Zoë as she opened the door. 'Don't tell mother you feel that way about me. She gets terribly jealous.'

'Hello, Zoë. We haven't seen each other in about ten years. I remember you with long hair. Short really suits you.'

Zoë had inherited her mother's stature and figure but in all other respects bore no similarity. Norman remembered her as an awkward youngster with blonde hair framed by two ponytails on each side of her face, but the confident person standing

before him now was nothing short of a revelation. She wore jeans and a tight black T-shirt bearing the words, in bright luminous green, '*Earn Mega Money. Become Psychic*'. A tousled chestnut brown had replaced the flaxen hair. Her skin was fair and glowed with youth. She'd painted her slightly pouting lips a stark red colour. Norman saw an image of her atop a horse in the regulation riding uniform, complete with helmet and crop. The new 'Helena Bonham-Carter' on the cover of one of those very British magazines, 'Bridle and Bit' or 'Horse and Hounds'.

'Mum says you still have the fish tank couch.'

'I do, though I'm thinking of reupholstering the top.'

'I was frightened by your house when I was young.' She affected a shudder.

'I hope you won't be now.' Norman was captivated.

'Mum's in her roof garden,' she said, breaking the spell.

'What's that about a couch?' A male voice interrupted.

'Meet Shane, my boyfriend. I've told him about the couch.'

They were joined at the door by a tall young man with a vaguely distracted air and slightly slouched shoulders. Should Norman have presented himself like that, he would have heard his mother's sharp rebuke to 'pull your shoulders back.'

'As an industrial designer,' said Shane, 'I can't believe you've solved the mechanics of a contraption that has taken on mythological proportions in this home.'

He held out a slender hand that befitted, in Norman's view, a concert pianist rather than the designer to whom he'd been introduced. Yet Norman was taken aback by the firmness of the young man's grip.

'Come and see for yourself, anytime. You'd be most welcome. I'm rather proud of it.'

'That'll be great, Norman. I'll phone you.' Zoë spoke for Shane.

'She's as garrulous as her mother,' Norman said to himself. To her, he said, 'You're just like Gabriella, a peach.'

'Norman, I'm here! Stop those youngsters from monopolizing you.'

Norman stepped through the French doors. 'Oh, there you are. I was just admiring your daughter. Telling her how beautiful she is, just like her mother.'

'Don't overdo the flattery, Norman, you'll be found out.'

The mountain swept from west to east and its presence was almost overwhelming. There sat Gabriella, on her bench, like a queen on a throne. Her kingdom? Devil's Peak, Table Mountain and Lion's Head. She rose to greet him.

‘Thank you for coming, I’m so pleased to see you!’ She squeezed him tightly and sighed.

Gabriella was in the same outfit she had worn to lunch when she had first floated the idea of dark food. The jewellery was different. Around her neck, on a bright red thong, hung a silver West African ‘ear-bud’. To the ‘western’ eye,’ Norman thought, ‘the box handle and the thin shaft supporting the little wax scoop could easily have been mistaken for a cocaine spoon.’ It was aged and granulated and utterly exquisite.

‘This is a very stunning home, you know.’

‘A jewel, indeed. I’ve tried to keep a quite formal garden, with the small table and those four garden chairs placed slap-bang in the centre. I’m lucky, I’ve a good man who works here once a week.’

From the table, akin to the ribbing of an open fan, tumbled rows of pots and sawn-off wine barrels containing glorious fountains of herbs and flowering plants. These led the eye to a large potted Yoshino Cherry tree, whose branches of white flowers blushed with pink shaded her ‘contemplation’ bench.

‘Well, as fabulous as the garden is, you’re looking a perfect ten.’ Norman gave a slight bow. ‘Being perfectly honest.’

‘I presume that’s on the Binoche scale!’ Gabriella stepped back and looked him up and down. ‘You, on the other hand, are in standard issue, so you aren’t as high as a ten, but a solid seven. Being perfectly honest, that is.’

‘It’s a good score. I’ll take it.’

‘Let me see,’ said Gabriella playfully, ‘that I’ve the no-go areas firmly demarcated and correct. No chats of movies and foody clues?’

‘I was a little fraught when you phoned. I’m sorry, it was quite aggro. I’m happy to be here now. Been working on my book, *The Divorced Man’s Table*.’

‘To exorcise an odd ghost or two?’

‘That’s about it, Gabby - it’s taken many a twist and turn, but after your call I spent a productive hour actually working out the structure.’

Norman inhaled the scents from the garden, and as he breathed out the gnawing tension that had dogged him slipped away.

‘Having lunch here is a celebration and an ode to the fog lifting.’

‘What of our little project?’ Her head dropped to one side and her eyebrows creased.

‘Funnily enough I think I found a formula this morning that may be a useful starting point for our discussions. I think I can adapt my *Divorced Man’s Table* and the hare-brained schemes of my mother into your motion picture.’

‘Schemes?’

‘Oh yes. I had a bizarre call from her yesterday. She wants me to cook a dinner after her funeral for a yet unnamed group of people and the results of that encounter will determine who’ll get up to a third of her fortune.’ He tapped his head with his forefinger. ‘Well, something like that.’

‘And Ivy and journals and ghosts of menus past?’ She took his hand.

‘I’m invited to my own beheading. Can we talk about all that later? This is too pleasant and I’ve no wish to break the mood.’

Gabriella disappeared into the loft and came out with an elegant green bottle.

‘French bubbles, everyone?’

‘Ta...good God! Marguet Père et Fils! Gabriella, this is very, very extravagant. I think I’ve asked you before, why the spoiling?’

‘Good is also mother’s little starter!’ said Zoë, entering with a large, oval, black silver-rimmed platter. ‘May I present the Parma ham, figs and melon?’ She placed them on the table.

‘Zoë love, thank you.’ Gabriella leaned forward. ‘Crinkled Parma ham. I’ll dish up. Sit down, Shane.’

Not to be rushed, Gabriella cast her eye around the now seated assembly, smiling at each in turn and, with a sigh that turned into a few hummed notes of *Voi, che sapete che cosa è amor*, cradled a fig in the fingertips of both hands and with her thumbs slowly tore it open to reveal the rich red flesh inside. She set the fig down and picked up another. When all the figs were in halves, Gabriella scooped some of the Parmigiano shavings from around the melon to use as a garnish.

‘Norman, I’m trusting you to open the champers without spilling a single drop.’

She heard him clear his throat as he accomplished the task and set down the bottle.

‘*You who know what love is, Susanna,*’ Norman hummed a few notes of his own. ‘I shall share out the wine.’

‘Thank you, Count Almaviva, or is it Figaro!’

A couple of hours later Norman and Gabriella were still seated around the dining room table. Zoë and Shane had excused themselves and left, and they were happily washing down cheese and a green salad with red muscadel.

‘So what d’you think of my grown up daughter?’

‘I’m thoroughly taken by her. She has an ease and charm that belies her years. She’s witty and intelligent.’

Norman was about to indulge in a little repartee, ‘like we were at that age,’ when caution suddenly overtook him. In that intimate moment, as Gabriella reached out and touched his hand, he suddenly realized he might’ve just passed some test. He squeezed hers in return and deftly changed the subject back to the lunch.

She had served a variation of Peter Gordon’s flagship dish from his Sugar Club restaurant, grilled scallops with sweet chilli sauce and crème fraîche. She’d been forced to leave out the galangal as there was none available in the local supermarkets, had balked at four chillies, using only two and hadn’t been able to source lime leaves.

‘That was a remarkable meal, sweet thing!’

‘Thank you. I was rather chuffed with it myself.’ Gabriella paused. ‘Let me change the subject. The other night, at your home, I suggested a plot outline. You were initially less than enthusiastic, but seemed to warm to it. If, for sake of argument, our central character is a detective-cum-chef, what could you extrapolate from the meal I’ve served today? Given this lunch was the first menu clue, left at the first crime scene. What would this meal suggest that could take our plot forward?’

‘*Our* plot?’

‘Yes, *our* plot. All you have to do is agree to work with me. You said you’d think about it. A simple yes and you can take ownership of it as well.’

Caution flooded through his pan-fried bones. This day was turning into a commitment ceremony. Norman decided to play for time and display all the hallmarks of a man deep in thought. He removed his John Lennon-styled glasses from his nose and tapped his teeth with the end of one frame-arm. He wiggled his tongue across the gap between his teeth. He leaned back and stared upward, avoiding Gabriella’s curious gaze. The hallucinations that seemed to dog his moments of crisis began overlaying themselves on the loft’s maple ceiling timber. The fine grain became a canvas for a modified version of Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel masterpiece. In his vision he saw Adam and

God, substituted with Gabriella and Olive-Jean, stretching out to give and receive life. Just as God in the Michelangelo painting was clothed, so too was his mother, *thank goodness!* Norman was amazed, for she'd borrowed God's rather drab pink nightie from the original painting. Gabriella was reclining on a hillock absolutely stark naked. He noticed goose bumps all over her because she was cold from the swirling breezes accompanying his mother's arrival. In her right hand Gabriella was holding a scroll with a pink ribbon marked 'Our Plot'. He tarried at the scene, following a lightly hennaed vine pattern that curled from under her neck, down, across and around the hills and dales of thighs and breasts to her extended hand and forefinger. He became, in an instant, deeply religious.

'God,' he said to himself, 'you look delicious!'

He lost all power to resist. The longer his brain crunched the news that he was going to agree to his hostess's little caper, the more aroused he grew. He was desperate to think of a way to get rid of his mother and her entourage. Suddenly he recognised a face amongst the cherubs behind Olive-Jean.

'Bloody Ivy!'

'Pardon?'

'Bloody hell!' He tossed Gabriella a cashmere pashmina shawl and sat forward, breathing heavily.

Norman took a second or so to work out which version of Gabriella was sitting across the table.

'You called me Ivy?'

'I did?'

'You did!'

'Sorry, sometimes my imagination runs ahead of me. I was visualizing the plot and Ivy popped into my mind.'

'How exactly?'

Norman could tell she was a little irritated at the thought.

'A series of images came into my head. There was you and people and a large swirling crowd and suddenly there was Ivy and my mother.' Gabriella wrapped a slice of Brie in a lettuce leaf and slipped it into her mouth, saying nothing, waiting for him to continue. 'Put it down to my state of mind this last little while.'

'I remember you had a sticker on your fridge, way back when you were a student. *Of all the things I've lost, I miss my mind the most.* That sort of thing?'

Norman reached for the Brie and the salad bowl, following Gabriella's lead. When he had swallowed, he pursed his lips into a hint of a kiss.

'Yes, that sort of thing.'

'It is?' She hinted at a kiss back.

'Yes.' He smiled affectionately at her. 'Not sure how you did it but I seem to have been quite brilliantly seduced into something.'

'Good. That might just have been my intention.'

'I'm about to throw caution to the wind.' He looked intently at her. 'It's true, Gabriella, I'm committing to this little caper.' Norman opened the palms of his hand in a dramatic gesture. 'All caution has just been overthrown!'

'Oh good, I knew you'd come round eventually. We're going to have such fun.'

Gabriella extended her arm across the table. Norman touched her forefinger with his, before solemnly shaking her hand.

'Sealed! We're going to write a script together.'

'Sealed! Now we have the formalities out the way, I'll let you off discussing clues from my cooking for an hour or so. Here is what I'm going to do, Mr Norman Frye, newly appointed writer of interesting scripts.' Gabriella got up, took a sip of her muscadell and walked around the table to Norman. 'Move your chair back slightly. That's better. I'm now going to give you the other half of that kiss from the other night.'

'Gabri...'

'SShhh!' She swung a leg over him and eased onto his lap. 'You're going to have to start obeying me now and do exactly as I say. *Exactly*. Kiss me!'

Norman let himself be cast off on a gentle paddle along a tide of mutual pleasuring. Light kisses infused with desert wine. Fingertips slowly, tentatively exploring hidden reefs beneath the ripples of cotton and denim, still protecting their modesty. He felt directed to an estuary of sensory delight that meandered along banks of willow and tall grasses, with purple flowers, hyacinth and lilies capturing the songs of dragonflies and rare birds. He was dimly aware of the current becoming stronger, taking them to where the water tasted of salt and the gulls searched between the low and high water marks. Without warning, Gabriella suddenly dispensed with the charm and pleasure of riverine life. She parted the waters and commanded a giant wave. Norman felt her

power strike him amidstships. He was flung back. The chair tipped and crashed over, beaching them on the Afshar under the table.

‘For God’s sake, Norman!’ She pulled him close, lifting up his shirt. ‘What,’ the whisper was urgent, ‘does your *director* have to do to get her clothing ripped off and subjected to an hour of intensive shagging?’

Chapter 12

Rats!
They fought the dogs, and killed the cats,
And bit the babies in the cradles,
And ate the cheeses out of the vats,
And licked the soup from the cooks' own ladles,
Split open the kegs of salted sprats,
Made nests inside men's Sunday hats,
And even spoiled the women's chats,
By drowning their speaking
With shrieking and squeaking
In fifty different sharps and flats.
Robert Browning, The Pied Piper of Hamelin
Posted By Fryed – Medium Rare 20/09/2009

I met a West African fella yesterday at the Gold of Africa Museum. We were chatting about some rings depicting 'porcupines'. Nonsense, he said. They are called that to defer to European sensitivities. Those are cane rats. Some grow up to half a metre long and are considered a delicacy. The farmers put traps around their fields, thus harvesting both meat and veg at the same time.
Posted by Jacques Michelin 21/09/2009

Norman woke with pins-and-needles running down his right arm from lying for a couple of hours on his side. His left arm was curled over Gabriella's chest, hugging her closely to him. She felt so different to Ivy. Ivy was taut and firm and because of her height seemed to occupy the entire bed all at once. It was like sleeping with an affectionate giraffe. Gabriella was much smaller and although not overweight, was soft and delightfully rounded. In a zoo she'd have been housed with the red panda or the fire fox. She fitted snugly into him and, sighing lightly, burrowed backwards deeper into Norman's midriff.

'Don't move, lover boy, or you'll wake me up,' she murmured sleepily.

He'd tried unsuccessfully to disentangle himself once or twice in the night but each time it had woken her she had just become amorous. The attention was wonderful and it felt affirming to be wanted but he was aware of being a little tender and therefore hesitant to encourage her. His greatest need at six o'clock on a Sunday morning was a large pot of coffee and some reassurance that his glasses were still in one piece. Norman lay for a while feeling a little disorientated in a very strange, very light room.

He blew aside a strand of Gabriella's hair and lightly nuzzled her neck. She smelt so nice, he thought. If he remembered nothing else from the last afternoon and evening, it would be the scent of her body. It stirred something quite primal in him. An infusion of deep-seated childhood memories, like hay and spiced cake, freshly-baked bread and vanilla, a quaint combination of musk and the evening fragrance of the yesterday-today-and-tomorrow flower. Added to that was the afterglow of the Hanae Mori Butterfly she'd sprayed, some fourteen hours earlier, on her wrists and behind her knees, while instructing him to await her pleasure under the duvet.

'Don't wake,' said Norman easing away and standing up. 'I'll be back.'

She didn't. She just rolled onto her stomach, kicking the duvet away and hugging the pillow with both arms.

He stared at her for a while, slightly out of focus. She was fast asleep, the exertions of the hunt finally claiming her. Her hair lay across her face like a dishevelled feather duster. She reminded him of someone, but as he stood there he couldn't pin it down. Definitely not that Binoche woman. Then it came to him. Sigourney Weaver, just the pocket version. She was the mischievous older sister from another marriage, whose resemblance would have been unmistakable but whose demeanour was much more playful. He set out to find his glasses and his phone.

Fifteen minutes later Norman was seated on the contemplation bench lapping at a large mug of plunged coffee, nibbling an orange biscuit and allowing the early morning sun to revitalize his bones.

'I wonder just how complicated your life has become,' he thought as he ran his hand above a shower of impatiens. 'She seems genuinely keen on me. I'll have to think of way of gently breaking the news to Trotsky. Our impending ménage à trois is something likely to disrupt the tenor of his days. He's not going to like the roof garden when he comes for a little sleepover. Not really rat territory, all this fresh air and sunlight.' Norman meandered further down the path of introspection. 'What do you think catalysed this rather startling turn of events? The demon drink? Surely not. Have you, in a moment of diminished judgement, bitten off a tad more than you can chew?' He drank in, along with the sweet coffee, the splendour of an early morning Cape Town day. 'Quo vadis, maestro? The lady is quite adept at getting what she wants. What if those 'wants' include a portion of you, larger than you can offer at the moment?' It was a question, the answer to which eluded him. Norman's sense of

comedy, most probably a defence at the sudden unease he was feeling, saw him directly address the herbs.

‘Should I just run with this and damn the emotional consequences?’

‘No.’ A basil plant to his right was firm. ‘With your record you’re crazy.’

Norman was peeved. It was not the logic he wanted to apply to this situation, however rational it might be.

‘On top of that there is the wee word ‘rebound’.’

‘You think so?’

‘It has a certain logic.’

‘I’m not going to discuss future relationships with a basil, especially a perennial. I might be eccentric but I have standards.’ Norman laughed at his own joke.

‘That’s fine, but you can easily imagine that a number of interesting interactions happen on that bench. Not much occurs by accident around here. Hard to believe that you’re sitting starkers on that piece of teak by an unplanned, simple twist of fate?’ A gentle south-easter rustled its leaves.

‘I’m sure you’re right.’

He summed up his internal debate. ‘It’s been such a good time. I might be a little anxious and the odd warning bell *is* ringing in my head but what I’m going to do now is ignore all that.’

He ambled through the study into the kitchen and poured more coffee.

When he had finished the last of the coffee Norman started to quietly pack the dishwasher. He began feeling a little claustrophobic, brought on by the unfamiliar surroundings. He guessed that just announcing he wanted to go home wouldn’t be entirely tactful. He was equally sure he needed time alone to process the emotions that were being liquidised inside his bearded head. He settled on a compromise. He’d finish tidying up, delight her with a little brunch, some pillow talk and then scarper within the hour.

Norman was so deeply in thought he failed to hear Gabriella, clad in a white dressing gown, come into the kitchen.

‘Goodness me, domesticated to boot! What more can a maiden want?’ She gave a little shiver of delight. ‘Order has, by a miracle, been restored from the chaos of

lunch and a midnight pasta.’ She chortled in pleasure. ‘More than that, I’ve chanced upon another naked chef, rummaging in my fridge.’

‘Morning, gorgeous. I didn’t hear you get up.’

‘What’s he cooked up for my delight?’ She studied her kitchen counter. ‘Let me see, some cold boiled potatoes, bacon, spring onions and cherry tomatoes. I’d suggest they’re just waiting to be sautéed? There’re also eggs.’ Gabriella padded up to Norman. ‘Don’t I get a good morning kiss?’ She closed her eyes, pursed her lips and waited.

Norman obliged. ‘I hope my clearing up didn’t disturb you?’

‘The sounds of tidying up never disturb.’ She rubbed his nose with hers. ‘You can in fact apply for a position as head butler and are almost certain to get the job!’ She kissed him again. ‘Sleep well?’

‘It was an enchanting night, full of innumerable delights.’

She stretched and put her arms around him and gave his bum a squeeze with her painted fingernails.

‘I must say,’ said Gabriella, ‘I only managed to drop off in small bouts. I kept getting pounced upon.’ The nails began to quiver. ‘Next time I have members of my scriptwriting crew over here for a light lunch, I must remember not to let them carbo-load. I fought off a particularly ferocious beast, a veritable Moriarty, as best I could, but alas alack, I failed.’ She screwed up her face in mock horror. ‘Such stamina!’

Those nails started to creep up his back like two crabs in luminous shoes.

‘You poor thing! Lucky I’m here this morning to protect you.’ Norman came in on cue and hugged her, lifting her off her feet. ‘You hungry? Can I make you a coffee? I’ve just had one.’

‘It was the smell of coffee that woke me, I’m sure. I’m also ravenous. First coffee, then you can come and protect me in the shower, I’m feeling *so* vulnerable.’ The crabs were now tangled in his hair. ‘Professor Moriarty is a master of disguise. He may be lurking anywhere, unnoticed.’ The crabs were on the march again. ‘Later, when I’m presentable, you can feed me.’

Norman disentangled himself, knowing he’d have to be more than a little tactful.

‘Sweet thing – I don’t want to appear rushed, but as soon as we’ve eaten I have to go home and get some fresh clothes and do the Sunday morning routines like clean the fish tank water and feed Trotsky.’

‘Pardon?’ Gabriella stepped back from him, biting her bottom lip. ‘I beg your pardon, Norman?’

Norman felt a bit flustered but held his smile.

‘You want to fuck off now, do you?’

‘I didn’t mean it like that.’

‘How, the fuck, did you, mean it, then?’ She enunciated her words in a staccato fashion before drawing the dressing gown tightly around her middle and knotting the sash in an exaggerated flourish.

‘Where does ‘fuck off’ come from?’ Norman sought to calm down what seemed to him a complete overreaction on Gabriella’s part. ‘Come back to my house with me after breakfast. I’m sorry if you felt discarded for my domestic habits. I’d like clean underpants and a shirt without wine stains. I have to feed Trotsky.’ He made the point firmly. ‘I also need to check his water and let him out of his cage for a little.’

Norman pushed his glasses up his nose. He wasn’t going to buckle at the altar of female disapproval. He said no more and waited for her to respond. It was some time coming.

‘Just a little thing to bear in mind, I don’t *do* rats, Norman. I don’t *do* white rats, brown rats, black rats, cane rats, mole rats or even exotic Polynesian rats. Come to think of it, not even rats found where the wind blows in the willows. I am happy to live and let live but I certainly won’t compete for space with a rodent of any persuasion. He can surely survive a morning without you. It’s going to be hard to get your head around the fact but I’ll risk saying it. Trotsky gives me the heebie-jeebies.’

Norman didn’t know how to respond to what seemed histrionic, so he said nothing. Gabriella wanted to say a lot more but also chose to say nothing. Finally she blinked, offering him a smile, and turned to go to the bathroom.

‘As an act of reconciliation, you might want to check if I have left the door unlocked. You may also want to think of innovative ways of applying shower gel while doing your Sherlock Holmes impersonations, that is, if I haven’t transmogrified into a satanic version of the Pied Piper.’

Chapter 13

*The honey-bee that wanders all day long
The field, the woodland, and the garden o'er,
To gather in his fragrant winter store,
Humming in calm content his winter song,
Seeks not alone the rose's glowing breast,
The lily's dainty cup, the violet's lips,
But from all rank and noxious weeds he sips
The single drop of sweetness closely pressed
Within the poison chalice.
Anne Charlotte Lynch Botta - The Lesson of the Bee
Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 20/09/2009*

*Poison chalice? Gee whizz, Norman, what happened to life's
great riddles? I thought out of the strong, not the chalice,
came forth sweetness.
Posted by Delilah 21/09/2009*

Norman went home for an hour after lunch and returned with flowers from his local garage's Woolworths Food shop. They went on a long mountain walk and returned to the loft in the late afternoon. Norman cooked a risotto which included all the leftover food from the weekend, to which he added lashings of Gorgonzola and Parmesan cheese.

'Comfort food is served!' He'd remembered to bring a bottle of Perdeberg Winery from home, boldly labelled 'Soft Smooth Red', which upon opening he declared as 'soft, smooth and red.'

They dined outside and sat above the city lights until the wind picked up. Reluctantly the two lovers decided it was time to move indoors. Norman was the first to leave his chair.

'Stay there, Ms S, I'll do this.' He collected the plates and for the second time that day packed the dishwasher.

'Thank you,' she said, 'that was simply divine.'

Norman found a line from E.E. Cummings but kept it to himself. '*You're divine said she, you're mine said he*'.

'It's suddenly getting nippy and the best place is bed.' Gabriella plucked a handful of the herbs and flowers from the garden pots as she moved to the door.

Once inside the penthouse, cut off from the reflected light of the city and the illuminated mountain, they fell back once more on the rumpled linen of the Sealy Posturepedic. Gabriella crushed the leaves and petals between her fingers and rolled the perfume into the palm of her hand. Slowly she massaged the bouquet across their arms and chests, thighs and faces, turning the queen size cotton nest into a giant pot-pourri. They never spoke, but lay feeling swaddled and satiated on the fringes of a trance. In mirrored unison and almost absent-mindedly they allowed their fingertips to roam across the landscape of the other's now more familiar body. They knew the lateness of the hour demanded they stop their explorations and get some sleep, but they could not find the will or courage.

'You're beautiful'

'So are you.'

'Thank you.'

'No, thank you.'

Then, as if directed by an unseen stage manager, the 'Deco' wall clock from the study suddenly sounded. Midnight chimes echoed discordantly through the penthouse, marking the end of the weekend and opening a small port of entry into the reality of a new week. Once the chiming had stopped and silence had spread across the manicured maple and into the first seconds of morning, Gabriella turned to Norman.

'I want to meet your mother. She sounds a character. Come on, invite her and me for dinner tomorrow night. I give you carte blanche to rustle up the unexpected and to do something that you haven't done for some considerable time. Foodwise, that is' Gabriella giggled and snuggled closer. Norman's view of Olive-Jean stirred a curiosity that needed some instant gratification. 'Go on, express your intense affection for us with a little Fried magic.' Norman didn't reply, just lay still with his eyes closed.

'Didn't you hear me, Norman?' Slowly the white noise of the city filtered into the room. 'Are you still there?'

'I heard you.'

'Well, say something.'

'Don't think it's a good idea.'

'Why?'

'Please, let it go.'

'No!'

Without warning Norman stretched across her and put on the bedside light. He sat up, cross-legged and dropped a pillow into his lap.

‘I don’t know if I’m ready for you to meet her, just yet.’

‘Pardon?’ She was confused by the mood swing and the light was hurting her eyes.

‘If ever!’

Gabriella jerked as if stung and disorientated. ‘If ever?’ She pulled back from him. ‘From what corner of your mind does that come?’

‘I don’t think I’m ready to let you two meet. This is all too sudden.’

‘And I’m not sure I’m getting the plot in this unfolding movie.’

‘Get it, don’t get it, there’ll be no soiree with my mother. I don’t need it in my life.’ Norman put on his glasses. ‘Nor pressure in my life.’

‘Fuck you, Norman!’ She got up, left the bedroom, slammed the door, went to the bathroom and only came back when she felt slightly more composed. She held Norman’s clothes in her arms.

‘Here. You’d better put those on and go.’ She dropped them on the end of the bed.

‘You’re throwing me out?’

‘What is it about ‘here’s your clothes and go’ you ain’t getting?’ She found her brush and started straightening her hair.

‘Don’t be silly, Gabriella. We can’t end the weekend like this.’ He gestured her towards him. ‘I just need some time.’

‘Pah!’ She spat out the sound.

She stepped back and stood with folded arms in the doorway. Gabriella felt disembodied to the point that she was able to look at the scene from afar. She was an observer at a museum, staring at a portrait of a woman framed by an architectural detail. It was a composition painted a hundred times over the centuries. But there was no whimsy to the picture, no hint of pleasure, no pathos. To her the tableau was a copy of a Vermeer masterpiece crudely painted from a box of paint-by-numbers.

‘Olive-Jean is overwhelming, especially to strange women that accompany me home. I don’t want what we have, spoiled. She’s tried, unconsciously perhaps, to sabotage every relationship of mine.’

‘Strange women, eh?’ She latched onto the word.

‘I didn’t mean it like that.’

Gabriella shrugged, clenched her fist and flicked open her fingers.

‘Ok, lover boy, tell me what you are hiding.’ This time there was no affection to the soubriquet. ‘I’ll start again but I’m not going to let you off this little obligation. Boys take their new girlfriends back to meet their mothers and *this* is going to be no exception.’

‘I’ve told you, no. It’s adult time. This has only been a week.’

‘And I’ve told you. I’m free tomorrow evening or the next night and I know you are too.’

‘Olive-Jean’s most probably not.’

‘Well, you can phone and ask or send her an email.’ She was flushed. ‘I’m happy to if you are not, and if she can’t make it we’ll do it another time. At least ask if she’s available’ Gabriella was almost shouting.

‘Stop telling me what to do,’ Norman raised his voice. ‘Anyway, you just don’t understand my mother. Why are you so keen to meet her? What’s the real issue here?’

‘To tell her how you fancy me and how I’m going to turn around your life and make you a famous scriptwriter.’ Gabriella suddenly softened. She came to him and kissed his forehead. ‘Oh come on, Norman. Stop being silly. I want to be a girl, taken home by a boy.’

‘My life does not need turning around. I’m very happy just as I am, thank you very much.’

‘Then fuck you!’

Gabriella experienced a moment of complete clarity about their relationship. She did not question it but knew much would hinge on how she expressed it. Now was the time for a little straight talking.

‘Norman, I want to meet Olive-Jean and then I want to spend the night with you at your home.’

Norman never read the change in mood. ‘We’re going round in circles for God’s sake. Why? We need time out surely? We need to, sort of, gather ourselves,’

‘For what? The seven lean years?’

‘No, that’s unfair. I arrived here midday Saturday and it is midnight Sunday. Apart from a lightning visit home to feed my pet we’ve feasted upon each other’s company. I’ve a home. I need, as you’ve rightly pointed out, to get dressed and go

back now. I'm sure we both have a busy day ahead. A little cooling off will do us both good.' He pulled on his underpants.

'Yes, Norman, I'm sure it would be good – for you. I'm equally sure that it wouldn't be good for me.'

'What the hell are you saying?' Norman stabbed his finger on the bedside table. 'You're like a bloody violin string. Can't you see the potential we have together? Can't we be adult about this now, or are you deliberately trying to sabotage us?'

Gabriella wasn't going to be hooked by what she saw as a bit of emotional blackmail and it couldn't deflect her from a path of unbridled honesty.

'I'm not your mother. I don't have to sabotage anything.'

'My my, we can be quite feral can't we?'

She came over to the bed. 'Before you go, just hear me out. It would be beneficial to us both if you did.' Gabriella passed Norman his shirt.

'We've wallowed in a truly Bacchanalian weekend, indulging, as you said, every whim and sensory pleasure we could dream up.' She then handed him his trousers. 'Yes, we were pretty good together. No, more than that, at times it was wonderful. But listen to this, Norman fucking Frye - I am, however, not prepared to have an affair.'

'An affair?'

'An affair. I'm coming into this with no baggage, but you are.' She weighed in with an analogy. 'You're stretched out like the only porter at a cross-continental railway station during the mid-holiday season!' Norman took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes as Gabriella continued. 'You've just separated from a long relationship, after chancing in on your own cuckolding.' She paused, choosing her words with measured care. 'I would love to see where this fabulous reconnection of ours goes,' she paused to emphasize the point, 'though not on your terms.'

'Oh. On yours?' He was bitter.

'The message to me, Norman, is that we can carry on our little liaison for the next little while, happily meeting at my place, provided, of course, I make no other demands.'

Norman replaced the lenses on his nose. Gabriella came back into view.

'This would no doubt satisfy your need for a little rebound sex, far from the reality of normal life. And be quite healing for you, to boot.' Gabriella held her composure well enough to continue in measured tones. 'For that's what this is at the

moment, nothing more than rebound.’ She waited for Norman to say something but he seemed to just stare right through her. Finally, she continued. ‘I know how this rebound thing works.’ Her voice was soft and resonated with sadness rather than resignation or anger. ‘Norman, I’m not Ivy! Perhaps I am a transitory and heady substitute. I gave you, over this weekend, the closeness and intimacy you so desperately crave.’ Gabriella held back the tears. ‘There’ll come a time when you have found yourself again.’ She turned away as if she couldn’t bear to look at him any more. ‘People mostly recover from these hurts. Why, you’re even writing a book about cooking your way through the trauma of betrayal. For God’s sake, if I allow this pattern to be reinforced you’ll simply leave me with the same enthusiasm you allowed yourself to embrace me. It’s not about just a week and let’s be adult.’ She let her gaze drift across the room and through the window to the lights below before coming back. ‘Here’s the deal. Here are *my* needs. The quid pro quo to my giving you time to come to terms with the loss of Ivy is for you to give ‘*us*’ the best shot at emerging from your emotional turmoil with ‘*us*’ intact.’ She still wasn’t sure how much he was taking in. ‘I’m being frank, fully understanding the consequences of what I’m saying.’ She took a deep breath. ‘If you want me, our relationship has to be out in the open. It means your mother knows about me. It means your friends, including Ivy, will get to hear about me. I’m not asking for a full time commitment and moving in, but I *am* insisting on being recognized as your current lover, for that is what I now am.’

The light in the room seemed harsh, the walls cold and unforgiving. The crumpled sheets seemed seedy and untidy. Romance evaporated and being together became a little embarrassing. Nonetheless Gabriella needed to finish saying what she needed to say.

‘I won’t hold you to the passion-infused promises you made, Norman.’ She bit her bottom lip. ‘Promises peppered with words like... ‘forever’, as you explored the heights of your ecstasy. Neither will I hold you to the comparisons that I was,’ her nose crinkled and despite the hurt, she giggled, ‘tastier than any porcini mushroom you’ve ever smothered in cream and bianchetto truffle.’ Gabriella ran her hands through her hair. ‘You’re not a hog with its nose to the forest floor, but I guess you found me juicy and delicious.’ She pulled a section of the duvet around her shoulders. ‘We can determine the pace of our relationship in our own way but we are not doing it in a

clandestine fashion. We're going to be squirrels, not rats. Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed squirrels living it up in the daylight.'

'God, Gabriella, I'm feeling backed against the wall. Be fair!' Norman was now fully dressed. 'Can't we just take it one step at a time? Why the rush? Let's just see how things pan out!'

'That's code for 'don't tell Ivy'. Norman, I understand this stuff. Part of your mourning process is an internal negotiation in an attempt to get her back, a fantasy of trying anything to facilitate reconciliation. Some act of commission or omission that'll make her so grateful to you, she'll come running, regardless of the fact you claim to have thrown her out. She even returned to our lunch table yesterday.'

Gabriella had only one more thing left to say. 'The point is, *she left you*, Norman. That too is a betrayal. She *refused* to stay home and take the punishment you wanted to dish out to her. Of course, we can take it one step at a time but I am not seeing how things *pan out* unless I'm recognized. Recognition starts now. Sorry, Norman.'

Norman's innards tightened into a knot. A veritable constrictor knot, atop a double overhand stopper knot and then secured by a sailor's whipping knot.

'I *can't* do it your way, Gabriella, I can't rush into things. I won't be bullied.'

'Apart from the rush these last 36 hours?'

'That's not what I mean and you know it.'

'That's ok. It was fun while it lasted.'

Norman stood up and wiggled his foot in a short circular motion. He'd tied the lace far too tightly.

'What the hell,' he thought.

He then simply walked past her, out of her room and out her front door without turning around.

Gabriella put on her gown and followed him to the elevator. 'Take your time, Norman. Have a big think about what I said.' She wanted to go up to him and just kiss him, but couldn't face being pushed aside. 'Well, I'm not going away,' she paused till the lift arrived, 'for the moment, at least.'

Chapter 14

I agree with Robert Carrier; when it comes to veal, milk-fed veal is best. It will be a delicate pink, finely grained with a firm white satiny fat. Avoid darker meat as this comes from older animals fed on grain and grass.

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 21/09/2009

Dear boy, have you tried Gordon Ramsay's Holstein Schnitzel?

Posted by Jacques M. 22/09/2009

Even better in my book is his 'Blanquette of Veal' in the London Times, 23 Feb 2008. From a sauce made from lemon zest, rosemary, pepper, carrots, garlic, leeks, chestnut mushrooms and Dijon mustard, the yolks of two eggs are beaten with cream and then mixed with a ladleful of the sauce. The mixture is then added to the rest of the sauce and reheated gently until it thickens to a velvety texture.

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 23/09/2009

Ivy postponed her appointments till the Monday afternoon. It'd been a discombobulated Sunday and the telephone spat with Norman upset her. Why did she get so angry with him? She was both pleased to be free of the relationship and mourning it deeply. She was feeling a mixture of hurt and anger and humiliation. The disorientation of waking in a strange uncomfortable bed in a strange cluttered room for the last few days added to her sense of disorientation. All three of her children had offered her sanctuary until she found her feet, but Ivy had decided to bunk down with Julie for fear of offending the sensibilities of her firstborn. The two younger siblings lived in much more upmarket surroundings and the politics of appearing to choose greater comfort over what her eldest daughter could offer would most certainly have been interpreted as a 'slap in the face' and some kind of proof of favouritism. Ivy felt she just didn't need to deal with that insecure and self-absorbed behaviour right then. To make matters worse, Julie believed that because her mother and Norman were separated, she could vent her dislike of him in an unrestrained manner. Ivy found the diatribe unhelpful. She didn't need to hear her daughter talk like that under the guise of being empathic. She was extremely irritated at her inability to make a choice, based not

on her own needs but those of the family dynamics. If she'd been entirely honest, her preference was to stay with Geraldine. There she'd have been given the spacious spare room, with freshly cut flowers and an empty cupboard so that she didn't have to live out of a suitcase. After a preliminary enquiry the subject of Norman would've been dropped unless she chose to bring it up and Geraldine would have conjured up a series of small entertainments to divert her mind. A meal out, a trip into the country, tickets to a play and certainly a day at the cricket if a match had been scheduled.

So that Monday morning, Ivy rose early and drove to Constantia to enjoy a long walk through one of the green lungs that graced the city, ostensibly to clear her head and work out alternatives that suited her. Around midmorning, feeling none the clearer, she made a U-turn into the mall for provisions to contribute towards her 'stay'.

She dawdled, looking at window displays, her heart not really into anything.

There was a small hubbub in front of her and to her surprise she recognised the woman at the centre of activity.

'Hello Olive-Jean.' An upmarket shopping centre was the last place Ivy expected to find Norman's mother.

'Ivy? Oh yes, Ivy, fancy bumping into you. I was saying to myself just the other day, I wonder what Ivy is doing with herself.' Olive-Jean was commanding a table outside a supermarket entrance, raising awareness of the emotional stress of abattoir workers.

'I believe you and my son have separated. I was quite upset to hear of it. Not that he tells me anything, I'm only his mother.' The crowd began to move off as Olive-Jean turned her attention away from them. She studied Ivy intently. 'You are looking *very* thin, dear.' She reflected further. 'However, I think it suits you. Last time we met you were squeezed into a denim outfit that could barely contain your bum and bosoms. I thought you looked a little pasty as well.' Few could offer a compliment with such a lack of grace. 'I suspected then it was due to too much red meat or perhaps the lighting against those black walls of which you and Norman were so fond.'

'Thank you.' Ivy produced her most dazzling smile. 'You're looking so well yourself. I am glad to see you seem *not* to be losing weight. I think the more mature figure should be softened by a little extra covering.'

Olive-Jean sniffed the air. She got a kick out of engaging with Ivy, as she suspected Ivy got from her. This was no pushover. She secretly wished for a marriage, but the weaknesses she perceived in her son's character, she feared, would always

count against him. Still, she lived in hope. On this occasion such thoughts were banished from her mind as she laid the groundwork to interrogate the reasons for the sudden separation.

‘I always hoped you’d have smacked some sense into Norman’s neurotic head before packing a suitcase and leaving. You seem so sensible. Your column is a constant source of sanity in very unsettling times.’ Olive-Jean paused as if gathering her thoughts. ‘It is a pity that real life solutions to marital problems are not as easily come by as those so often touted in our magazine columns.’ She popped a nicotine chewing gum into her mouth and gloomily philosophised. ‘The trouble with malls is that there is nowhere for a girl to smoke.’

Ivy was in no hurry and Norman’s mother’s view of the world was always an absolute fascination to her. She needed the continued ‘pick-me-up’ of a longer chat.

‘Fancy a coffee?’ Ivy lifted a pamphlet from Olive-Jean’s table and scrutinized it. ‘The anxieties of slaughterhouse employees can wait. There’s a great outdoor coffee shop across the road where you can inhale to your heart’s content. My treat. We can order something sweet to raise your blood sugar levels. A good way to ensure sufficient energy to continue the good fight!’

At first Olive-Jean appeared hesitant, but Ivy knew the desire for tobacco and the thought of eliciting more information as to the circumstances surrounding their separation would prove more attractive than conscientising the well-heeled.

‘That sounds lovely. I need a break,’ Olive-Jean said and, having tipped a security guard to keep an eye on her table, they strolled out the door of the centre and across the car park.

Fifteen minutes later they were perched on some high stools at Enrique’s Coffee and Pâtisserie, whose checked table cloths were the same pattern and colour as Olive-Jean’s shirt. After a brief cross-examination of Enrique himself they placed their orders.

‘Are you trying to make me blend in?’ Olive-Jean showed an eye for detail.

‘No. Maybe you’re a regular around here.’ Ivy grinned at Norman’s mother. ‘Colour coding is very fashionable, well done.’ It was not an amusement Olive-Jean seemed to share.

‘I would have to know how much they pay their staff before they got my regular custom.’

‘But not for a one-off visit?’ Ivy was suddenly unsure if they were about to embark upon a boycott or industrial action.

‘Not as you are paying.’

‘Phew!’

Olive-Jean found nothing in her attitude in the slightest way absurd and began fishing in her bag for her cigarettes. She located them and lit up, as Ivy laid a hand on Olive-Jean’s.

‘Are you well, Olive-Jean?’ She spoke kindly and hoped her tone would elicit a proper answer and not another round of repartee.

‘Oh yes, when I’m not worrying about Norman. Moping. I’ve never moped in my life. No time. I told him to pull himself together. Found he was drinking champagne the other day, before breakfast.’

The waiter arrived and spread before them two large cappuccinos, glasses of water and cheesecake. Olive-Jean carefully inspected her slice. At a glance it passed muster. Then she moved a section of foam to one side of the cup, creating a space through which to pour two sachets of brown sugar.

‘I must say this coffee tastes pretty good. Thank you.’ She came to her point directly, without fear of offending. ‘Apparently, Ivy, you’ve met someone else. Norman indicated he came home and found you having it off, in full view of the fish. Not that I want particulars, it is none of my business. Do your children know?’

‘Yes, they do, and yes, it was very embarrassing. I’m sorry to say it, but your son’s eccentricities became too much for me.’ She tasted her coffee before continuing. ‘Life with him was overwhelmingly fraught. He was away for the weekend and not due back for another two days. I suppose I felt a freedom unknown for some time.’

‘Yes, he was away at his school reunion. I warned him about such events. No one changes. Dullards become duller and bores become more boring. Teachers, if they are still alive, pretend to remember you fondly, which they don’t. Afterwards a stripper arrives, as in his case, with instant cream in an aerosol can and the jollifications turn from pretentious to foul. A bunch of middle-aged men trying to recapture something of their lost youth. It’s pathetic!’

The investment in cake and coffee was paying off. The older woman was in full flow.

‘Are you not being a tad extreme?’

Olive-Jean realized she was on a tangent and quickly reverted back to Ivy’s side of the story. ‘Sorry, Ivy, I seldom get hooked by trivia but reunions somehow do it. My 25th school reunion degenerated to a potty full of Fanta being passed around like the Holy Grail for us to share communion. Inside floated a large Flaky.’ She gave a little shudder. ‘It was rude of me to change the subject. Have you known your new man long?’

History should have warned Ivy that Olive-Jean was not the most suitable person with whom to share confidences, but she wanted to talk.

‘Hardly. I met him at an Exclusive’s coffee shop that very morning. A chance encounter when his table sported the only available chair. I asked if he’d mind sharing. Someone half my age and actually quite boring. When my espresso came he remarked he preferred instant,’ Ivy laughed. ‘Olive-Jean, I thought he was joking. It turned out he was serious. He’s single, works in a hobby shop that specializes in model airplanes and something called war games. His most endearing feature is that he’s not from this city.’

Ivy was giving away far too much detail for her own liking but seemed somehow unable to contain herself. ‘Someone whose entire cupboard of emotional baggage can be reduced to the scars left from his rugby team’s loss in last year’s Currie Cup final.’ She paused to remember. ‘He told me who won but I forget.’ Ivy looked a little embarrassed. ‘I don’t even know his surname but I do know he dotes on his pet Border collie.’

‘So why him?’

‘Now this *is* a bit embarrassing,’ she giggled self-consciously. ‘He told me I was hot, for my age!’ A plug was released and the whole bottled up story came pouring out. ‘He then spent some time telling me about the rosette he’d won in a ‘beginners’ obedience competition.’ She lowered her voice. ‘I suggested he could earn another rosette by coming to heel and accompanying me home.’ She laughed again. ‘Oh dear me, he didn’t make the connection. I had to spell it out.’ She wiped her eyes. ‘His normality was hugely seductive, as were his biceps.’ Ivy unconsciously held some blueberry cheese filling in her mouth until it melted away at the memory of it all. ‘Half an hour later I released the choke chain and was plying him with salmon and *ratafia*.’

She shook her head. 'Beer would have sufficed. He was soon jumping through hoops, doing his tricks and generally wagging his tale for the mistress, at an advanced level.' Ivy sighed and tried to hide from Olive-Jean just how emotional she was. 'Shit. I'm not myself. Bloody rollercoaster. I lost my head I'm afraid, and, it would seem, our relationship. I'm not sure it was there for the keeping, in any case.'

'I hope you were sensible enough to use a condom.' Olive-Jean was relentless.

'Something called Wet and Wild.' Ivy was not to be intimidated.

'So why did you leave Norman?' Olive-Jean seemed genuinely mystified. 'This seems quite unplanned. You took an opportunity afforded you, which in my book shows a gay abandon your dress sense sometimes belies.'

'Dress sense?' For a second Ivy was enraged but immediately let it go. This was Olive-Jean after all.

'Yes, dress sense. I am not saying mutton dressed up as lamb but sometimes you sacrifice good taste on the altar of fashion. I digress. I am on your side in this.'

'On my side?'

'Yes, on your side. You could have shown a modicum of contrition, blamed alcohol or neglect and after a bit of sweet talk found a way to address some of your issues.'

'What, to Norman? Oops! Excusez-moi, it won't happen again and by the way I've sent Rover packing in your corduroys.'

'No, of course not, that would be a lie. There is no way you, in good conscience, could make such a promise. No one can.' Olive-Jean's voice seemed to drop an octave. 'I shouldn't approve, but this is not the end of the world. Find a way and work it out.'

It was time to deflect the conversation from her infidelity. 'Are *you* seeing anyone?'

'I have one or two suitors I keep in tow and I have strict rules.' Olive-Jean seemed delighted to have been asked and proceeded to give what seemed a well-rehearsed summing up of her private life. 'I don't want to be owned and I don't want talk of commitment. I am prepared to offer what every man claims he wants.' She lit another cigarette before making her point. 'However, in my experience, men cannot, or seldom, deliver their side of the bargain.' She warmed to her theme. 'A nice meal followed by a bit of good uncomplicated sex once or twice a month and back home. I

have a golden rule. If a man gets possessive or wants more from the arrangement, I end it. I can't stand possessiveness.'

'It's always that simple?'

It was time for a bit of gender stereotyping.

'Yes, of course. Men always wind up getting possessive and making demands. It is simply their nature. They seem to think that once they have been laid, they have performed some sacred act and women are somehow beholden to them. Sex is not a prologue to a second covenant. Possessiveness is actually an expression of their neediness.'

She swallowed the last of her cappuccino in a grand sweep, hoping for some approval from Ivy.

'Feels a bit extreme,' Ivy shrugged. 'Wouldn't work for me.'

The fact that Ivy didn't fully embrace her perspective produced in Olive-Jean a rare moment of uncertainty.

'You don't think I am being unreasonable, do you?'

'Unreasonable? No.' This was vintage Olive-Jean, and Ivy sought to reassure her. 'I'm sure you make your position very clear before getting involved. Does tenderness fall into your rules?'

'Absolutely, I can be a lot of fun. I'm not coy, you know, and I like a good laugh. I just don't want them hanging around emoting after the fun is over.'

Ivy chose to say nothing. The pictures being painted by Olive-Jean at her most intimate and tender were too bizarre to be comprehended in a single sitting. All she could manage was to keep looking as detached as possible - something a number of patrons around them were unable to do.

'Happiness in any liaison lies in the knowing of where one stands. I make a point of making my feelings clear and unequivocal. I would never get into the mess in which you and Norman find yourselves.'

'Ouch! That's direct.'

'I speak my mind, Ivy. I don't partition blame in these circumstances. Men can be quite mentally challenged when it comes to understanding women. They have to be given direction in plain and unambiguous language; but they have their uses and we women have needs, even at my age.'

'More coffee or cake?' Ivy was masterfully outboxed.

‘No, thank you, this has been most unexpected and very generous. It’s very nice chatting to you. We seem to share our thoughts so easily. I’d call it the mark of a blossoming friendship.’ She inhaled her last puff, stubbed out her cigarette and changed the subject. ‘I should actually interview you for one of my articles. It would be a question of finding the right angle. Some sort of exposé?’

Ivy laughed. She wasn’t going to be drawn into that trap.

‘If you can think of one, angle that is. I’m actually going to write a book.’

‘What about? Your life and times as an agony aunt?’ She answered her own question.

‘No, though I’ve come across some pretty bizarre stories that could form the basis of something. Norman and I kept creative diaries. I have them. With a bit of editing they could make a fantastic coffee-table book. It could be full of anecdotes and a touch of scandal, recipes, drawings, photographs and loads of humour.’ Ivy picked up the last crumbs of her cheesecake with the back of her fork and popped it into her mouth. ‘Norman catalogued some of the culinary disasters we experienced at the hands of some pretty renowned chefs. They make fascinating reading. Quite libellous, some of them.’

‘You could even feature some of the great meals he has served up to his awful rat.’ It was Olive-Jean’s turn to get enthusiastic.

‘Precisely. You’ve grasped the appeal of the book immediately. I offered him a chance to work with me on it but he fudged his commitment, which is code for refused.’

‘Perhaps it is a bit soon after the event.’

‘The event?’

‘The event, you know, you and the young man.’ Olive-Jean ran her finger around her cup to scoop out the last of the foam. ‘Norman’s made an art form out of being overly sensitive. I’m constantly biting my tongue. I’m his mother, remember. It was very tiring raising a child, continually deferring to his sensitivities. He can be persuaded, though. Bribery or blackmail usually does the trick.’ Olive-Jean was so tickled with that thought that she managed to boom and beam at the same time.

Ivy paid the bill and the two women hugged goodbye.

‘Do pop in and see me sometime, Ivy. It was, as I said, very nice chatting to you. I hope you sort yourself with that son of mine.’ Olive-Jean now seemed to

presume that the past events were but a momentary glitch. ‘Oh, by the way, I have included you on my guest list at my funeral celebration. I have arranged a little soirée as part of my will. Norman will be catering. One of my guests will inherit a large slice of my chattels.’

‘Sounds like fun, Olive-Jean. I could say ‘can’t wait’ but that would seem unkind. However, if I know you, it’ll be an event of some surprise.’

‘It will certainly have a surprise element. I’m not taking this lightly.’

‘I’m honoured.’

‘I’m happy to help with the editing of the book.’

‘That’s kind. I’ll remember that, thank you.’

The two parted. Ivy watched Olive-Jean striding back to her picket and felt a small pang of empathy for that odd and wonderful man with whom she had shared so much and who now caused so much pain. In a Norman-like fashion she found herself talking out loud. ‘How the hell did you survive that mother, without even a hen-pecked father to back you up? You actually grew up an abandoned child. It’s amazing you’re as normal as you are.’

Chapter 15

*Today I thought of an old fifties Springbok radio ad.
'Singing in the bath tub,
Singing for joy,
Singing the song of Li-ife Boy.
Singing in the bath tub cause we know,
Life Boy takes away B O.'*
Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 21/09/2009

*Remember the Cremora ad, "It's not inside it's on... top"?
Ipana toothpaste's Bucky Beaver and "when you're feeling
low... ENO"?*
Posted by The Ancien Régime 22/09/2009

*Don't forget braaivleis rugby sunny skies and Chevrolet
Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 22/09/2009*

Norman opened his eyes and lay on his side, listening. The events of the weekend had induced an element of extreme caution. He felt disorientated and needed to process the reality of the events from the night before. The first thing was to check that he was alone. He didn't remember coming home or how he had got there but he did have vague memories of opening a bottle of red plonk. He remembered being very angry and some time later he must have passed out. At least he was in bed. Terror of holy terrors! Was there someone there with him? He listened for the sound of breathing. Nothing. He could also detect no other sounds amongst the ticking of the wall and alarm clocks that might indicate he was not alone. No noise of anyone rearranging his furniture or inspecting his fridge or poisoning his goldfish. He continued the checklist, eliminating all possibilities one by one. He let his leg move back across the belly of the pocket-sprung mattress. Its unrestricted journey to 'Ivy's side' emboldened him to turn around and confirm the glad tidings that he had indeed switched off the light on the joy of his own solitude.

'Morning, Norman,' said Norman to himself.

'Hello, Norman,' said Norman back.

'I'm still me?'

'You seem to be.'

'Good.'

Confidence surged through him now as he appeared to have awakened in the security of his own lair, not padding around some giant world of snakes and ladders

ruled over by she-wolves driven demented by the continual discordant cries of beached Greek adventurers and sirens. Norman breathed into his hand and sniffed.

‘I suspect I’m not the freshest flower in the window box this new day?’

‘I suspect not. I equally suspect a spot of exercise to relieve your system of the odd toxin, gathered over the last little while, could be placed somewhere near the top of your ‘to do’ list.

‘Good thinking.’

It was then that Rumpelstiltskin did verily rise up, clasping a four-pound hammer and did smite him an excruciating blow behind the eyes. His reaction to the pain bordered on the spiritual.

‘Oh God can this be true?’

He’d not been this hungover for years.

‘You think finding my running shoes in the circumstances is a good idea?’

‘An excellent idea followed by a better one, when the shoes are located.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Running.’

It occurred to Norman as he began looking for ‘new balance’ and filtering through the happy snaps of the more bizarre and memorable moments of his weekend, that Gabriella’s perennial made a good point that early Sunday morning. He was not entirely in control of his own destiny. No matter what had transpired the night before, no matter what he had said, he knew that on some fundamental level, Gabriella’s sexuality was going to override any attempt of his to set the pace of their commitment. When she wanted him again she would take him. Was it rebound?

It took some courage, but it was an answer he required from the universe.

‘Do I still sleep on ‘my side’, avoiding Ivy’s?’

‘You do. You still believe trespassers will be prosecuted. I might even go so far as to add persecuted.’

‘I do?’

‘You do.’

‘So this is what’s called ‘negotiating a reconciliation’ – being faithful to my side of the bed?’

Norman was suddenly aware of a deep, aching loss. He was in touch enough with his own feelings to understand the mood swing but he was still taken aback at

how unexpected it was. He sat back on the bed, a little stunned, and stared at his world, his mind desperately searching for a truism or a thought that could shift the moment, this ripping apart of his soul.

‘Divert yourself, even something quite silly.’

‘Like what?’

‘I don’t know, you’re always quoting something.’

He tried a spot of Haruki Murakami.

‘Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional.’

‘I know that. That’s what I’m trying to avoid. The suffering bit.’

Norman began to shiver.

‘You’ve got poisoned insides. Why do you do this to yourself? It’s going to be a long day. It’s still hurting and the pain is getting worse!’

Norman located his running shorts and a bright red T-shirt. He found himself addressing his blender as he tried to concoct a potion to lessen the alcohol poisoning. The base would have to be bananas if he was to avoid sloshing the hair of dog into the mix. Celery, a vitamin C tablet, tomato juice, all blended together with three painkillers. He pulled on the shoes, then the T-shirt, rubbed in a bit of sunscreen and swallowed the foul brew.

‘God. If this doesn’t change the mood, nothing will.’

Norman hadn’t run since the two-hander beneath the lava lamps. He was able, a decade or so ago, to run a marathon in under four hours, but he was content now to try and get on the road four times a week, with a long run on the weekend. It was his love of cream and cholesterol packed butter that initially forced him to exercise. The habit was cemented by the vanity, when he became ‘running fit’, of watching his middle-aged tummy disappear in direct proportion to the gradual reappearance of his belt buckle.

‘I’d like to teach the world to sing in perfect harrrr mon ee

I’d like to buy the world a pint and keep it com pan ee...

It’s the song I sing

Dee da dee de da da...’

Norman tried the lighter approach to lifting his spirits. He slipped on his running watch.

‘No, still not going away.’

‘I told you to add the vodka.’ The blender adopted the high ground.

‘Well, I’m not listening.’

Norman closed the door behind him and started off at a light hobble which would eventually give way to an endorphin-induced pace, the rhythms of which would shut him off for an hour or so from the emotional tyrannies that colonised his mind. He ran on for a few minutes and eventually turned into the inappropriately named Lover’s Walk. His route took him past Maynardville, Cape Town’s open air garden theatre and down into Constantia. Exercise is medicine and, unsurprisingly, as it always does the perspiration and the exertions, coupled with drinking water regularly on the route, ensured that his head cleared itself of some of the pain and the demons.

‘I should do this more often.’

‘I guess you should.’

‘Bloody women!’

‘Indeed, but you are invincible now!’

He’d stop for a coffee at Enrique’s before turning and jogging home.

University of Cape Town

Chapter 16

My mother always told me never to go about with holes in my underpants or socks. That was because I might have a fatal accident and how mortifying would that be in front of the doctors and nurses? Strangely she never made mention of the mortician. The older I get the more I realize that one should be equally fastidious when basting a chicken or a turkey, engaging with your electric beater or setting out in your joggers.

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 22/09/2009

Norman, now I know the state of your 'Y' fronts you can come and baste my little barnyard creature any time.

Posted by JuicyLucy 22/09/2009

Geraldine's name popped up on Ivy's cell phone.

'Hi, Mom, where're you?'

'Hello, love. Constantia. Outside Enrique's. I've been bumbling hither and thither, trying to make head and tail of my new circumstances. Bumped into my mother-in-law, or should I say my ex-mother-in-law, after a walk up the green belt. Took her out for coffee. It was hilarious.' Ivy realised she was babbling. 'Where are you, darling?'

As usual, the perky voice of her youngest never failed to wash her with anything but unbridled love and admiration for the gaiety that always accompanied the lass. Ivy's internal Wurlitzer Jukebox somehow selected Van Morrison's Brown Eyed Girl to set the beat for her mood whenever she connected with her daughter.

'I've just dropped Tom off at some stuffy meeting. He'll be away for most of the day. Hey, mom, I'm really, really wanting to spoil you.'

'What's on your mind? I have to do a bit of work later on.' She moved around to try and get better reception. 'I should be spoiling you.'

'I'm taking you for a facial, a foot massage, a spot of lunch and several cocktails and then I'll help you straighten out the flood of lame and broken ducks that are overpopulating your inbox. We can brainstorm together.' Her youth and exuberance effervesced across the ether. 'I hit target this morning with a fantastic order from Stuttford's Van Lines and it's not even the middle of the month, so it's celebration time. We're going to be thoroughly irresponsible.'

‘I don’t know if we should be irresponsible.’ Ivy assumed the role of the sensible adult.

‘Oh come off it, Mom. You’re sounding like my dear brother and sister. They’re too busy being shocked at your behaviour, as well as being relieved you are no longer with Norman. What a delightful little double bind onto which the high moral ground has popped them.’ Geraldine giggled at her attempt to mimic her mother’s turn of phrase.

‘Oh Geraldine, that’s naughty, they’re just concerned.’

‘Yes, yes, mom. This is your youngest daughter speaking from Battleship Galactic 3.’ She did her best to impersonate a radio operator from an SF movie. ‘Hear me, earthling, your daughter is not shocked that her mother has let her heart and hormones rule her head.’ She returned to earth. ‘And I’m not pleased that you and Norman have split up. In fact when I have adult children one day, I’d like to believe I could feel good enough about myself to be a touch predatory, with someone half my age.’ The thoughts flowed in a continual stream. ‘As for Norman, I really like him. He made me laugh and, unlike my infinitely more level-headed siblings, I won’t speak about the ‘situation’ in hushed tones. To hear them and our father talking of you one would suspect they were inside a church or an upmarket jewellery shop.’ She became characteristically firm. ‘You are please to let me make you feel special.’

This was an invitation that Ivy was dying to accept, but to justify it she unconsciously needed to demonstrate a resistance. It was, after all, a working day and she didn’t want to look like she was having too much fun when she’d been so wicked.

‘Mom, you’re not saying anything. You’re not going to turn me down are you? I booked the facial months ago and you *are* having it. It’s your prize for being you. Please say yes, before I run out of air time.’

‘Yes but, um, I sort of half promised Julie that...’

Geraldine was quick to interrupt.

‘Juuulie, mom? Half promising Julie is Barry’s job. You’ve spent no time with me since you and Norman split and I want to spoil my mother whether she wants to be spoiled or not.’

It was at that exact moment that Ivy saw the red running shorts and her old T-shirt supporting a well-trimmed beard approaching her at a gentle shuffle. The vision

appeared to be bearing down on Enrique's. They both instantly averted their eyes from each other and when Norman changed his direction, Ivy was quite thrown.

'That's it. I'm coming with you. That'll be great. Talk of the devil. I've just spotted Norman. We're pretending not to notice each other.'

'Yippee! I'm on my way. Wait there, I'll be with you in ten.'

The chance of a secure getaway, coupled to her heart rate doubling itself and wave upon wave of tiny electric shocks spreading from her midriff to her extremities, emboldened Ivy to shout after Norman.

'Hello, you!'

Norman stopped and turned, feigning surprise. 'Hello, this is unexpected.'

Neither moved for a few seconds.

'Running?'

'No, I'm herding lost sheep.'

'Thought so. Have you found one yet?'

She walked towards him.

'Feel like a hug?' It was only then that Ivy fully grasped just what she'd proposed. Norman exhibited all the glazed symptoms of one having just been savaged by a body snatcher, now emerging from a swamp. 'Perhaps just this once we can make it a handshake? You look dreadful. Did you have a rough night?'

'I'm sweating, I've been running for a while.' Norman said flatly.

'That's ok, none of my business, but I know you well enough to detect you're not in good shape this morning. Every pore is leaking mustard gas and something. Not roses, because for the life of me I'd swear you'd stumbled and fallen into a herb garden on your way down here. Mustard gas and basil.'

Norman felt the humiliation of Ivy smelling the last vestiges of his evening with Gabriella. It seemed to rise through him like nausea. His system froze in the manner of a computer, but there was no refresh button. He could not even step away from her. He was paralysed.

'Norman, I know you never planned this little meeting and you need time out but at some point we *have* to talk.' Ivy paused, waiting for Norman to say something, but he did not. 'Fair enough, this isn't the place, but you *are* sitting on a few pieces of my furniture and, believing the evidence of my own eyes, you spent a pretty intoxicated night on my mattress. We shared parts of our lives together. I'm entitled to

something equitable from that. I apologise for just taking the diaries – we’ll have to talk about those too.’

Finally Norman nodded and regained some of his voice. ‘Yes, we must. Sorry, another time.’

Yet there was something about this chance meeting that Norman found vaguely uplifting. He realised that there was no way Ivy could extrapolate, from his truly appalling condition, his weekend with Gabriella. He’d met the demon and she was quite reconciliatory. He took off his glasses and smeared them on his shirt.

‘God!’

‘Here,’ said Ivy taking them from him as she produced a tissue. ‘I guess I should be a bit jealous of your party last night. I’m bedding down with Julie for a while. Life there’s a little earnest.’

When Ivy had finished cleaning them she passed the spectacles back.

‘Thank you.’ He flashed her a smile that flickered and danced around his eyes as his world came back into focus. Hers was an act of familiarity that found its ease in the time they’d known each other. The recognition of it gave him pleasure.

‘Is that life I detect in that somewhat abused body? I do believe you’re smiling those eyes at me. You do know they are your sexiest feature?’

Norman smiled them again.

A little vein of connection, no matter how tenuous, was established. Both Ivy and Norman felt a need to acknowledge it somehow but were too awkward. Their discomfort from the uneasy silence was mercifully rescued by the arrival of Geraldine.

‘Hello mom, hello Norman. Goodness, you look terrible!’

‘Thanks Geraldine, you are looking a peach.’ Norman managed a grin.

‘It is so, so nice to see you.’ She sounded genuine.

‘It is?’

‘Yup. I’ve eaten brown rice, frozen peas and chutney since I was last sat around your table. You and mom still threw the best dinner parties, ever! I’ve told Tom, until he can measure up to your cold chocolate soufflé he’ll simply remain the second coolest thing in my life. Behind the soufflé, that is.’

‘Thanks, Geraldine, you’ve made my day.’ Her warmth inexplicably touched him.

‘Can’t chat. Must dash because mom and I have a full old day.’ She was about to usher Ivy away but changed her mind. ‘Can I offer you a lift home? You’re in no condition to get there under your own steam.’

Ivy and Norman exchanged glances but Geraldine assumed total command.

‘Ok, you two. Norman in the front and you, mom, squash into the back.’

A few minutes later the Alfa Spider headed off towards the warren.

University of Cape Town

Chapter 17

This was the first cookery book I was given – Len Deighton's Action Cook Book.

John Walsh of The Independent (18th June 2009) asked Len – 'When you got the dolly birds with the false eyelashes and the broderie anglaise tops into your kitchen, what exactly did you cook them? What constituted the perfect seduction dish?' 'Nothing fattening,' Deighton replied. 'Nothing I couldn't pronounce. And nothing that might burn or boil over if eating the meal was delayed...'

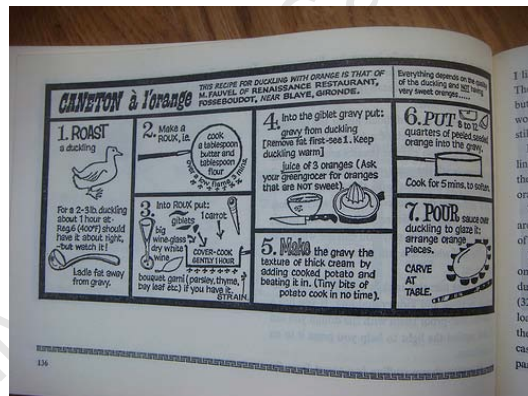
Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 22/09/2009

Norman, who wrote 'Forget love, I'd rather fall in chocolate'?

Posted by JuicyLucy 24/09/2009

Originally an unknown author, but do I remember Juliette Binoche saying it in 'Chocolat'? There's a book by Linda Maron under the same name. But I thought you'd rather fall in a little baste?

Posted by Fryed Medium – Rare 24/09/2009



I still have my copy

Posted by Jacques Michelin 25/09/2009

Geraldine chatted uninterruptedly about the advantages of reverse swing bowling, especially when dealing with the dry, flat pitches on the sub-continent for the six or so kilometres back to Norman's home. Both he and Ivy were grateful for being let off having to find conversation, yet they perceived some irony in the unconscious choice of topic with which the cricket-obsessed young woman had sought to neutralise what could've turned out to be an awkward journey. From the time he'd apologetically

clambered out the Alfa, Norman had sought corrective action in doing what he knew best. Food!

Once he'd showered and put his clothes and running paraphernalia into the washing machine, he pulled from the freezer a piece of Cob and set it aside to defrost. He prepared a leek and lime sauce with loads of butter. He washed a handful of fresh tarragon for the garnish. He chopped and diced a large sweet potato, which he intended to mash with a splash of olive oil. He took some frozen tomato and vodka 'sorbet' from the deep freeze. This was a mixture of celery, onion, cucumber, mint, lemon, tomato juice, loads of black pepper and a very generous splash of Mother Russia's finest. That too was set aside to soften. If Norman was going to succumb to the 'hair of the dog', it would at least be in a manner befitting the meal he was preparing, and decently garnished.

Norman laid a formal place at the table in the wine cellar, with his best crockery and a fine cut crystal goblet to take the 'regmaker'. Alongside that was a tall elegant tumbler and decanter which he filled with cold water from the fridge.

It was a late but restorative lunch. Norman ate slowly and gave himself over to the sense of well-being that the warm rich food infused in him. By the time he had put down the teaspoon and pushed aside the goblet, the day had begun to find some perspective. As the hangover lifted, his turbulent last week was catalogued into files and the bearded head became a more ordered and habitable place. The demons were beaten back beyond the barricades, the door slammed shut and, for the rest of the day at least, calm was restored. Norman sat down in front of his computer to update his blog. He remarked as much to Trotsky, with as fine an Alan Bates impersonation as he could muster, 'Butley is himself again.'

Norman pressed the 'on' button and waited for his desktop image to emerge from the darkness of the screen. He changed the image at least once a month from a selection of anonymous email humour his friends delighted in sending him. The bizarreness of the current picture meant it had held pride of place for almost three. It gave new life and meaning to 'ordering' out. The screen finally lit up.

'Gotcha! You little daily llamas of mine.'

He smiled, observing to the fish that at last he'd secured Ivy, Olive-Jean and Gabriella where they belonged, on the rack.



[Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 25/09/2009](#)

It was then that Norman started to giggle. What started as a quiet chuckle at first became increasingly louder and more riotous. The more he laughed at his joke the more he found it funny; that was until the pop up notifier on his screen indicated that one might have slipped binding and fled the car roof.

From milagro.beanfieldwar@gmail.com

‘Oh God, it’s mother!’

A strong wind from high in the Andes began rustling through the rows of neatly ordered emotions. ‘I’m not going there this afternoon. Forget it. Not even a description of your latest little soirée with Pamela Lillian Isley will make me open that bit of mail today.’

Norman instantly translated the reference for a rather baffled looking domesticated carp.

‘Batman’s most notorious super villainess, Poison Ivy!’

He opened his blog, returning to his original train of thought. It occurred to him that it might raise a small debate by introducing the delights of grilled llama into his repertoire of great culinary adventures. He’d never eaten a llama, let alone stroked one under the chin. A quick Google search revealed that they were bred in part for eating and that they tasted somewhere between lamb and beef. Most of the recipes were for that ubiquitous American speciality, hamburgers.

‘Oh hum,’ he thought as his eyes trolled down the list. ‘Meat is meat, I guess. Am I getting jaded?’ He resumed his conversation with the fish. ‘To hell with llamas. This desktop image is worth a thousand postings.’

He uploaded it to his blog.

Poison Ivy kept returning to his thoughts. He had been a child who was denied comics when at home from boarding school. He and three other boys on the block, whose parents shared a similar view, were forced to suffer Jeremy Johns from number 27. It was a simple trade off: you play my games and let me win and gloat for an indeterminate time and in return I’ll let you read one or two of my gazillion comics. It was a resented ritual but one to which they returned time and time and time again.

Poison Ivy was the first great ecoterrorist, with her flaming red hair and huge bosoms and leafy garments and green fingernails, who added her blood to the toxins of plants for nefarious activities. Norman could remember feeling the excitement of hating her on the one hand and being thoroughly and adolescently attracted to her on the other. He remembered reading she was number 64 on some list of the top hundred villains of all time.

‘Villain number sixty-four? Be damned!’ Norman’s great fantasy as a child was that his mother, who was at least villain number fifteen by his calculation, would get it into her head to go and rescue the desperate souls that fell victim to the earthquake at Gotham City. He was sure Batman could deal with her, but he feared for Robin. There’d be no doubt, were such an occasion to arise, that an epic battle for supremacy of Robinson Park would ensue between Olive-Jean and Poison Ivy. To Norman’s young mind, this was emotional conflict on a grand scale. Although he hated Dr. Pamela Lillian Isley and the threat she posed to his superhero, he was equally mortified that his mother could potentially destroy the power relationships that millions of like-minded kids around the world understood to exist in Batman’s home town.

‘Imagine if she struck up a working relationship with the Joker?’ He lamented to a friend one day. It did not bear thinking about.

He would not have seen it back then, when the world was understandable and ‘good’ always conquered ‘bad’, but Norman now understood what he really feared. His fear was that Olive-Jean would contrive to bring those sixteen orphans home. The ones Poison Ivy, for some inexplicable reason, had adopted from the rubble that was Gotham City! Household dynamics under such a regime would have been intolerable.

Norman sat musing.

‘Why are there these blurred boyhood boundaries between authenticity and fantasy? Why have I never quite structured the separation between the two?’

Did he, as he grew from childhood to adulthood, deliberately neglect to erect the white picket fence in his mind between imagination and reality? Was he really able to distinguish the difference that marked those two states of consciousness?

‘Does this mean I’ve not grown up and the border between the two will forever remain breached?’

An animal cunning had stalked his adolescent years. His unsupervised rites of passage were celebrated on the surface with little fanfare, few outward signs beyond the rehearsed bravado of buying, on his own, his first tube of anti-pimple cream, his first razor, his first ‘rubbers’, and his first single ticket to a ballet matinee one Wednesday afternoon. He disguised his first agonizing decisions to break from the ‘Boys’ Own’ stereotypes by going absent without leave from the testosterone bluster of the boarding school passages or dormitories. No one even noticed. Norman melted into the institutional eggshell white of the walls and the lavender floor polish, so beloved by matron.

Norman did develop a confidante. A sympathetic ‘tuck shop’ mother answered the many questions he wouldn’t have dared ask his own. One day she gave him a copy of *Len Deighton’s Action Cook Book*, which forever changed his world-view. Thenceforth he would seek out the creative and cultural things so missing from his surroundings. This included volunteering to be in a school play in standard six to get out of hockey practice. It also meant he was typecast for the next five years in the role of one or other leading lady. It wasn’t his natural acting talent that secured such high profile parts, but rather that he was a slender lad in an all-boys school with shapely legs and a voice that delayed ‘breaking’ for years longer than it should. His moment of greatest embarrassment came in his second year of high school in a play called *Sailor Beware*. He played a jilted bride and at some point in the drama the stage direction saw him collapse, drained and exhausted, onto a chair. The lights darkened and the spot light was held on him. It was exquisitely timed and he knew that the tension of the moment would be climaxed by enthusiastic applause within a few seconds. But out of the dark the voice of his English master, slightly plummy in the Caamebwidge style, echoed through the school hall:

‘Close your legs, Frye, you’re in a bloody skirt! Your balls are exposed.’

‘My balls are exposed.’ He scratched Trotsky’s head. ‘I’d better do the honourable thing.’ Norman flicked his fingers on the table to the beat of ‘Onward Christian Soldiers’. ‘Storming out of Gabriella’s home last night was a pretty ungentlemanly act. Time to offer a well-meant apology.’

University of Cape Town

Chapter 18

Never complicate the process. Lorenza de' Medici describes the traditional Sardinian recipe using a pit of coals. For those of us who rely on a stove, here goes:

'Porceddu', or roast suckling pig, (approx 3kg) requires but a handful of garlic, rosemary, salt and bay leaves, finely chopped and rubbed into the skin. Roast for approx 180°C for about 1½ hours, then increase temperature to 200°C and cook for ten minutes till the skin becomes crackly. Slice thinly and serve with an aromatic liqueur called Mirto (from the myrtle plant) using either the berries (red or rosso) or the leaves (bianco white).

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 22/09/2009

May you wind up with a glazed skin and an apple in your mouth!

Posted by A. Trotter 25/09/2009

Might I remind you that we escaped the tedium of a perfect world because our distant grandparents were fortuitously caught with a piece of apple in their mouths.

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 25/09/2009

Norman stood up and went into the lounge, where he fluffed up the pillows on the fish tank and lay down looking across the room. He was tired and knew that tonight he'd sleep in a way that would refresh and nourish him. The vodka sorbet had picked him up to the point where he felt a little malt might just elevate and add a touch of refinement to the day. He was mindful of the fact that although he'd survived the encounter with Ivy and that her tone suggested, at some future time, that the unresolved mess could find resolution, it wasn't to be now. He was pleased, though, that a chance meeting outside a coffee shop had exorcised some of the anger. His Batman and Ivy reminiscence had also been therapeutic.

The sun was setting and two shafts of light from the windows above the lawn slowly moved up and across the lounge in the manner of a searchlight patrolling a perimeter fence or restricted area. Norman lay doing nothing, just watching the steady progress of the beams and occasionally dipping his pointed tongue into the floral notes of the Aberlour, picking up just enough of the liquid to lightly glaze the inside of his mouth.

Several years previously Norman had found, at a Sunday market, an old school desk with its ceramic inkwell still intact. After some heated bickering over price, he had brought it home and placed it under a large still life. The perspective in the picture was a strange mixture of both real and abstract. Part of the painting presented a viewpoint of depth that optically seemed part of the room. Contradicting that perspective device was a flat two-dimensional table with a white tablecloth that stood vertically in the manner of the Italian, pre-Renaissance period. The décor and the food of the picture shared with the viewer the secrets of what Lorenza de' Medici, in her book the *The Renaissance of Italian Cooking*, called the *cucina-altoborghese*. 'The refined cuisine that is a far cry from the glorified peasant cooking most Americans think of as Italian.' The painting was in fact a similar cultural history to the book that Norman prized so much, and it was the reason, when Ivy and he were in Toscana, he'd bought it. Like the desk, he'd found it at a market, but in that instance the negotiation had honoured both seller and buyer. Italy, especially in the rural areas, is a society that has entrenched the rules of bargaining over many centuries. It was the villager's ability to engage, even with a foreigner, in an almost ritualistic manner that had made the purchase so pleasurable. Such attitudes instil a sense of self that promotes community life and gives succour to a pride of belonging.

The artist was unknown to him and he'd never taken it for an evaluation because he also loved the slight drama of not knowing if it really carried a monetary worth. It was a dinner guest, a well-known collector, who pronounced upon the idea that his still life painting was a work of real worth.

The food in the still life could almost have been taken from Lorenza's tome. Norman gave the dishes in the composition the names of the recipes that appeared in her book. On the table, he would tell friends, were *Granceola alla Scorza d'Arancia* or spider crabs with orange, and *Sarde al Pangrattato* or rows of sardines baked in breadcrumbs. He would point out a perfect portrait of *Costollete d'Agnello al Capperi* or lamb chops with a sauce of mushrooms and capers, between the stylized motifs of the decorated plates, crystal glasses and jugs. Most of all, Norman delighted in the *Porceddu* or roast suckling pig, surrounded by bunches of herbs. Interestingly it was the silverware that the artist had cleverly constructed as the focal point of the composition. The dining room in the painting was secured with wrought iron bars and decorated with elaborate wooden motifs. The windows opened onto a rich, manicured garden. The school desk created a little altar below the opulence of Italian aristocracy.

Alongside the inkwell, in the groove for the purpose, lay an original dipping pen. The flat top of the desk itself sloped down towards the seat and supported a finely carved but small Bambara headrest. On top of that Norman had placed a small brass anvil. His old primary school cap hung over the backrest of the chair.

Whenever he was asked to explain why he'd arranged that series of objects under the picture, he would enigmatically refer to a well-known quote from G.K. Chesterton -

'For similar reasons I suppose, "why the poets have been mysteriously silent on the subject of cheese".'

The sunlight slowly edged its way up the desk and lit up the painting. Norman wrestled in a distracted sort of way with how best to approach Gabriella and make reparation. As he looked up at the still life, one of the shafts of sunlight produced a halo around the head of the apple-mouthed *Porceddu*. On any day but today Norman might have found some meaning in the moment. If the gods were trying to tell him something he paid it no never mind.

'Trotsky old chap,' Norman said as the little fella popped out from his pocket, 'over the next few hours until bed time I shall no longer presume to understand the symbols and the knowledge of the universe. I don't care if some obtuse reference to my weekend with Gabriella is being pointed out by that sunbeam, which in turn is producing that halo. It's but a wee pig, born and suckled on its mother's milk until the fifth or sixth week of its life. It was then taken and slaughtered and after being roasted whole over charcoal, was presented, without pretence, in the manner that we see in my fine painting. It is a tradition that goes back many thousands of years, from Rome to China, I guess because pigs were domesticated so long ago.'

Norman finished the last of the malt.

'I'm plucking up the courage to phone Gabriella.'

He returned his pet to its cage and dialled the number. He was slightly relieved when he got her answering machine and slightly irritated to find she was not there.

'Gabriella, I behaved like a complete brat in storming out. I'm sorry. You didn't deserve it. All a bit much for me. If you could see your way to forgive me, your presence is required at a little caper under my still life. I'll cook, especially for you, a dish in the grand Italian style. I'll give it a regional bias, which I think could serve as

part of the first murder mystery clue. If you'd still like to meet Olive-Jean, I'll phone her and she can join us. Please get back to me.' He replaced the receiver.

'Phew, that could be construed as a climb down, what?'

Trotsky was settled in the box at the bottom of his cage and appeared to be sleeping. Norman answered for him.

'It is called a tactical retreat.'

University of Cape Town

Chapter 19

Let me lead you loyal epicureans, in your imagination, back to a wintry Canadian apple orchid.

The winter has set in and the snow has wiped the colour from the landscape. Barrels of frozen cider are stacked in pyramids on the flat white fields. The farmer has driven a metal pipe into the heart of one of the barrels and attached a tap to the outer end, to draw off the spirit. For, as the fermented juice turns to ice, the alcohol, which has a far lower freezing point, is forced to the centre. Here is to be found the purest distillation, the 'calvados', the unconscious core, and the psyche.

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 22/09/2009

Norman woke early to write and succeeded in drafting several pages of *The Divorced Man's Table* before breakfast. He expanded upon the idea that being in the kitchen was likened to being in a painting. He decided it was important to choose an actual work by an actual artist. Several criteria needed to be fulfilled. It should be a picture easily recognisable to his readers, even if some were not able to immediately name the man behind the brush. It must evoke a bohemian lifestyle and the obvious place to start seemed to be Montmartre in Paris of the late 19th century or Gatsby's America of the roaring twenties. He wanted it to have a slightly salacious edge as an unconscious counter to any flight of imagination that *'everything is beautiful and nothing hurts.'*

Such notions, Norman surmised, were fine in *Slaughterhouse-Five* but it certainly wouldn't do for his book. Depressed people found spiritual upliftment in fat-soaked take-away food covered in MSG, sugar or artificial spices.

'An hour after binge eating, depression sets in again because the blood sugar levels drop off dramatically. So the cycle continues along a predictable course of self-destruction.'

Finally, the painting needed to be rich in colour and have an obvious focal point, like the foundation of any great meal. In the end Norman settled on the great Post-Impressionist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and his painting 'The Salon at the Rue des Moulins' of 1894.

His mail that morning was mundane and six glances and six clicks on the 'delete' icon brought his mother's letter to the fore.

‘My dear son’, Norman said anticipating the opening appellation, ‘I wonder what she is dishing up for my delight?’

He’d waited twelve hours and was tempted to wait another twelve but his mood seemed unflappable.. He’d delay the moment no longer. With a flourish and a salvo over the battleground of the Milagro bean field, he brought Olive-Jean into his day.

From milagro.beanfieldwar@gmail.com

My dear son

I passed a rather interesting hour with Ivy at Enrique’s Coffee and Pâtisserie in Constantia, where I was trying to raise awareness about appalling conditions in the meat industry. We bumped into each other at the mall. I usually prefer a thermos flask when I am working but as I hadn’t seen Ivy for some time, I agreed to be treated. It is unpretentious but expensive. What we ordered was tasty and Enrique himself was attentive. You should try it some time.

As is the case with women who are at ease with each other, our conversation naturally turned to the more private and intimate side of our lives. I speak of a camaraderie that men can only try to emulate. In my experience, amity amongst men is sacrificed through the need to consume copious quantities of beer in social situations, and as a result empathy translates into much raucous backslapping.

‘So you have mentioned once or twice, mother.’ Norman took a deep breath and continued reading.

I am happy to say that the occasion on Sunday enabled me to offer Ivy a safe space to share her side of the events that led to the unexpected ending of your relationship. I’m very fond of her and I listened attentively, neither probing too deeply nor trespassing upon the privacy you as a couple would want me to honour.

‘Safe? A crocodile farm owned by the Grim Reaper’s delinquent brother is safe by comparison!’ Norman raised his voice at the screen.

As you know I have never been one to take sides and in Monday's instance nothing in my stance changed. I was touched when Ivy asked after me and I reflected that people seldom bother. Is it not strange? I suppose it's because I've been the 'rock' all these years.

Norman, my son, I am human, and so I was touched by the unexpected concern and found myself letting her share in a little of my intimate life and vulnerabilities. Believe it or not, my boy, even at my age there are one or two suitors who help fill an elderly woman's need for companionship. You never ask me about such things. At first I thought it a lack of caring, but as the years passed, I presumed it was a natural shyness on your part. Other counsel would have me believe that in the nature of things sons don't want to see their mothers as whole people, rather more like cardboard cut outs. Were you to enquire, I would naturally fill you in. Norman, I end the thought on a preposition, but I also leave the door ajar.

'Bloody hell, Trotsky!' Norman got up. 'I cannot carry on with this without also having a coffee.'

He took his time making the double espresso. After a good twenty minutes of mulling upon Ivy's reconciliatory words outside Enrique's, he'd strengthened his defences to face what was building up to a classic flanking manoeuvre on his mother's part.

He returned to the computer, wiping the last vestiges of foam off his lips and moustache with the back of his hand. Then, puffing out his chest in the heroic manner of a previous tenant at castle Dunsinane, he assumed his seat in front of the screen.

'Read on, Macduff, and cursed be he who first cries "Hold! Enough!".'

In the course of our conversation Ivy gave me to understand that she's taken responsibility for your journals. She's apparently offered you the chance to join her in a project that would give your life, as I know it, some direction.

Now I fully understand that, as things stand, you are a little upset and impulsive at the moment. I'm not condoning Ivy's rash behaviour but I'm led to believe that you declined her kind offer to co-author a lavish book, based on

those journals. I believe such a book would make a valuable contribution to the cultural life of the city.

I don't want you to be churlish in this regard, Norman. This project seems a perfect opportunity for you and Ivy to harness your creative energies and explore ways of re-examining what went wrong between yourselves.

Naturally I would not interfere if you elected to work with Ivy. I understand perfectly well this modern need for 'space' when building emotional bridges. However, my instincts are to help, so I did conclude our coffee by assuring Ivy that as a great admirer of her work I'd be more than willing to assist her in all aspects of this endeavour. She seemed quite keen on my support. She was also rather taken with the fact that I could offer some valuable pre-publicity in the form of an in-depth interview or an exposé.

Son, let me get straight to the point. Ivy is a determined woman and in that regard I have always thought she would be good for you. I have no reason to doubt that she will cobble together an outwardly impressive book. There is to be no underestimating your former lover, something I believe you have done to your cost. I do however think she needs your hand upon the intellectual rudder. It would be a shame if the Frye name and your talents were to be diluted by obstinacy, born from a spot of injured pride.

As always

Mother.

Chapter 20

The one thing I was asked to bring from South Africa when I last went to England was a Peppermint Crisp. Homesickness comes in the most curious packaging.

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 22/09/2009

After being in England for six months I passed a boerewors advert near Wimbledon. I was caught off guard and cried.

Posted by Ex Pat-ricia 22/09/2009

The thought of British boerewors would make me cry as well.

Posted by Jacques Michelin 23/09/2009

Gabriella listened to Norman's message on the answering machine late Monday afternoon but decided to let him stew a while. His powers of emotional recovery and the contrition he'd displayed were impressive. She was also amazed with the large serving of humble pie he'd managed to eat in so short a time. She had forgiven him by the time she woke on Monday morning but that did not detract from the truth of her analysis about their relationship. The weekend was great but the reality was Norman's unfinished business with Ivy.

She spent the morning tired but on autopilot, tossed on a tide of domesticity, righting the ship. By eight bells the forecabin and galley were deemed ready for admiralty inspection and all traces of midshipman Frye consigned to the bilge. Outside on the roof garden, the bottom sheet, pillowslips and duvet cover flapped on the retractable line, like sails, above the contemplation bench.

Gabriella made a light lunch of tuna salad and continued to edit a documentary shot in Bamako, the capital of Mali, for a large mining house. The subject of the film was an analysis of indigenous jewellery manufacturing technology. A group of seven educators from South Africa, along with Gabriella herself, a camera and a sound man, flew up to spend ten days under the tuition of local goldsmiths. It was a bit like Survivor mixed with Big Brother and for virtually twenty hours a day the camera rolled.

It was on that job, several months previously, that she had conceived the idea of writing a script for her dark food mystery and finding someone to produce it.

Around four o'clock Zoë phoned to ask for Norman's telephone number, as Shane was still obsessing about the couch on the fish tank.

'Hi, mum.'

‘Hello, darling, how are you?’ Gabriella took her portable phone out into the garden. ‘I see a big mist bank is coming in from the sea,’ she said, peering across the city to the harbour.

‘I’m fine. I know it’s got a bit chilly and I can smell the sea from here. What ya doing?’

‘Oh, editing Bamako. Tired now. It feels as if it’s been a long day.’

‘Thanks for a great lunch on Saturday. How were things after we surreptitiously left?’

‘Surreptitiously? You two bolted your food and ran.’

‘Mum, it was your daughter being sensitive,’ she laughed and added, ‘love was in the air and I could feel the old fogies didn’t want us around.’

‘What ever for?’ Gabriella became sheepish.

‘Oh *tch* mum! Must I spell it out?’

‘Spell what out?’

‘Given what you spent and the trouble you went to make that totally larney meal, I’d say you fancy Norman, a lot!’

‘I don’t know to what you are alluding.’ She was really on the back foot now.

‘Alluding to nothing mum,’ her voice hit a musical note, ‘Norman’s cool. I just asked how the afternoon went.’

Zoë decided not to mention that the next morning she and Shane had driven past her mother’s apartment on the way to the Waterfront. Lo and behold, parked across the road was the golden brown Grenada Ghia. Now, however, her curiosity on the Sabbath felt a bit like spying, and the younger woman felt a little guilty. She quickly returned to the purpose of her call.

‘Norman promised Shane we could see the mechanics of the fish tank couch. Can I have his phone number?’

‘Hang on, I’ll get it for you.’

Gabriella walked back inside, put the phone down on the desk and shuffled a few items on her table to make a searching noise. After 30 seconds or so she picked the phone up again.

‘Let me see.’ She paused. ‘Oh, here it is.’ Gabriella then proceeded to recite it from memory.

‘Thanks, mum. Will you come with us when we go?’

‘What? I’m sort of busy.’

‘You mean sort of coy!’

‘No I’m not, I’m busy!’

‘That’s cool. We liked him at lunch. He’s so funny. Not at all like I remembered him. I like his eyes, they sparkle and seem honest.’ She paused just long enough to take breath. ‘He needs a makeover though mum.’

The unease Zoë felt at checking up on her mother’s private life evaporated. Without saying as much, her mother spilled the beans and both women knew it.

‘A makeover?’

‘Yes, a makeover. You need to *jeuje* him up a bit. Those veldskoens and those baggy turn-up trousers – and where did he get such a ‘sensible’ shirt? Mum, if you’re going to be seen out with him, he needs a makeover.’

‘But darling, that shaggy dog look is his charm.’

‘No, mum! He looks like Hugh Grant acts, you know, kinda naff. Naff’s cool at ‘Four Weddings and a Funeral’ but not when my mother is going out of her way to lure him into her nest with a five-star meal and French bubbly.’

With that Zoë collapsed in on herself with laughter.

‘Zoë, you are sailing close to the wind!’

‘And I love you mum, I’m phoning him and I’ll let you know when we’re going to see him. Bye.’

Gabriella stood a little while with the portable in her hand. She finally returned it to the charging port.

‘Daughters!’

She went searching for something oral to do with herself. What she actually wanted was to go over to Norman’s house. Her first port of call was the kitchen. The fridge revealed little to titillate the senses, though there was a square of Peppermint Crisp, which she ate. She took out a bottle of white wine that still contained at least a glassful. Then she put it back. No, she didn’t feel like more alcohol.

‘Damn it, the fridge is well stocked, yet there’s nothing to eat. How can that be?’

Gabriella felt strangely lost as she padded about the penthouse. She closed down the editing suite and opened her e-mail. Nothing from Norman. She closed down the computer. Gabriella thought of a small cigar and, looking in her desk drawer, she

saw there was one left. It was only a passing thought, though, and she just didn't feel like the smell of smoke on her fingers.

'Bother. Bother. Bother.'

Finally she took off her clothes and emptied her last sachet of Dresdner Essenz thyme herbal bath salts into the bath and turned on the taps.

While the tide and foam rose in the tub she inspected herself carefully in the mirror.

'Bodies. Needy complex things, are they not?' The reflection she was addressing in the mirror was fading fast in the steam condensing on it. Gabriella felt the water.

'Perfect.'

She climbed in and closed her eyes. Once the fatigue of the day had been taken almost by magic through a process of osmosis into the fragrantly oily water, she opened her eyes. Visibility in the room was as far as an archipelago of breasts and knees protruding from the foam. The windows on the far side could not be seen.

'MMMmmmm... As bodies go, yours is in quite good trim. I wonder if that Norman person knows just how lucky he got,' she sleepily murmured to herself.

Chapter 21

A kitchen, with a full house of patrons out front on demand feed, is expected to produce perfect timing coupled to perfect results. To achieve this makes the events at Balaclava and the charge of the light brigade seem more like a county dressage competition than a battle.

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 23/09/2009

*'When can their glory fade? Oh the wild charge they made...'
That's the problem... – the bloody charges for a good night out!*

Posted by Alfred 23/09/2009

Norman disliked the drive back from Stellenbosch, with the setting sun on the N2 shining straight into his eyes, but he had enjoyed getting out of Cape Town.

'I should do it far more often.'

He'd been consulting at a farm bought by two brothers, Edward and Simon Steele, who hailed from a little village in Devon County, England. The 19.6 ha purchase stood high on the north-east slopes of the Helderberg Mountain surrounded by other wine estates. It was a subdivision of a productive working farm, with established vines, when they took possession of it. Norman had googled the estate after he had made the appointment. It was beautifully situated, overlooking the winelands down to the sea. The web site boasted superb *terroir* with excellent soils, cooling coastal winds and sufficient water. A few months previously the brothers Steele had produced their first 'boutique' wine.

During the first months of 2009 they'd renovated a small stone cottage near the main house and started a restaurant. They also planned to expand the out buildings into small guesthouses. The restaurant hadn't been as immediately successful as they'd hoped. Word of mouth created a small but loyal clientele, and that was a plus. Their chef was a man with fine credentials who designed some wonderful meals. The décor and ambience was welcoming but it lacked something. The sad truth was that unless some drastic remedial action was taken, it would not survive the next financial year.

When Norman got home he showered and put on a clean shirt and spent an hour going over his notes and jotting down ideas in preparation for the drafting of his

report, which he would begin the next day. He then picked up the phone and made a call.

‘Norman, to what do I owe the pleasure?’

‘Hello, Ivy.’

‘You’re recovered from yesterday? You weren’t a well person.’

‘I know, it was kind of Geraldine to give me a lift home. Have you got a minute?’

Ivy was happy to give Norman all the time in the world. Her head was reeling, and even Norman would seem an oasis of calm in which to luxuriate. She’d just walked out of an altercation with Julie, which was as predictable as it was inevitable.

This time there had been a difference, with no doubt an enormous consequence. Hopefully it would begin a process that inexorably changed the way she interacted with her daughter. For the first time, for as long as she could remember, she hadn’t deferred to Julie’s sensitivities and had decided to move out and accept the offer to stay with Geraldine. This was a particularly brave move, for it broke a manipulative pattern entrenched for years.

Ivy sat down and let out a sigh.

‘Yes, I’ve got a minute. What’s up?’

‘Now it’s you who’s not sounding good. Is everything Ok?’

‘Fine. Julie stuff. Don’t go there, please.’

Ivy had lived plagued with guilt since the birth of the triplets. The pregnancy had been unplanned. She’d met the children’s father, David, at university, and their relationship had begun under the shadow of their flexing wings. It was never going to survive in the long-term. He had been reading for a business degree, with neatly laid out plans for his career. A pregnant girlfriend didn’t even make the pre-SWOT analysis list. There was talk initially, but he had never married Ivy. After the recriminations and the accusations of both families had died down and the children had arrived, David and Ivy had moved from their little flat above Starke Ayres Nursery into the bottom level of a double-story house in St James. Ivy had got a government job on the medical circuit, which enabled her to hire a child-minder to look after the triplets. The pressure of working to support the ‘help’, the demands of three toddlers at night, and the exhaustion, the overwhelming exhaustion, finally snapped what little cords had kept her and David together. He had moved out and, although he was prompt with the

maintenance and had generally been helpful by giving Ivy time out on the weekends, his ever-growing stature in the corporate world had made him less and less available. David had also felt neglected by Ivy and struggled to understand her relationships with her children, as did Norman years later.

The angst and the struggle of those early years, especially up until the time the children had gone off to school, all constellated around a singular heart wrenching, guilt riddled notion.

‘I have two breasts and three babies,’ she used to say to him, ‘At any one time, one is forsaken.’

‘But they’re healthy. Those are the cards life’s dealt out to them.’

‘That’s fucking empathic!’

‘For fuck’s sake, I don’t understand!’

Her social worker training only compounded the emotional damage she had perceived she was inflicting on the three.

Alec had grown up a real ‘boy’, which in time became a relief to Ivy. He had blossomed at school and been thrilled when she consented to him going to boarding school for his high school years. He’d been an average scholar who hit the milestones dead on cue. He was popular, sporty and had revelled in the companionship of other boys. Perhaps it was the pressure of growing up in an all female household, but he had been contained by the routine and the structured ringing of bells. As matric had approached he’d determined to become a teacher. He had returned, after obtaining his degree and teaching diploma, as a housemaster to his alma mater.

Geraldine and Julie’s relationship was as complex as twins’ and triplets’ could be. Ivy was always secretly pleased they were not similar in looks, for it made their individuation one step easier. Identical twins were constantly being compared to one another. In the case of her daughters, they couldn’t have been more different in their growing up.

Geraldine was genuinely uncomplicated and if the big world around her was going to offer up a hurt or a hard lesson, such emotional setbacks needed to come with a label attached, otherwise she hardly noticed them.

Julie, on the other hand, was overly sensitive and reacted to any criticism by throwing a tantrum and storming away. In her relationship with Ivy it was a hugely

powerful tool she wielded. It fed the guilt her mother felt. Her deeply embedded emotional and psychological wounds were played out by constantly threatening the older woman.

‘I was forsaken, firstly by you and then, when I learnt to trust my surrogate mother, nurse Annie, she deserted me. Then father left. You’ve never understood my needs and if I’m unhappy with anything you do, I’ll simply go away, mother, and never speak to you again.’ Julie never openly said those words, but she acted them out in so many ways.

The fear that her daughter would carry out the threat had paralyzed Ivy so that she had found it almost impossible to set limits with Julie, and never did. Julie grew up uncontained and Ivy knew it, yet no amount of professional training or the collective insights of twenty years as a therapist and social worker could break the pattern.

If asked, Geraldine would have said Julie was her mother’s favourite child but if pressed further she’d have been forced to admit to being pleased it was so. The complexity of her mother and sister’s interactions seemed such a burden. There was a world so much bigger to be explored than being bogged down by the weight of all those *feelings*. When Geraldine was ten, she had unconsciously called Julie’s bluff and countered any outburst with a simple ‘Grow up, sis!’

Norman gave a little cough before proceeding.

‘Ivy, I’ve just come back from the Stellenbosch area, where I’ve been consulting with the owners of a small ‘boutique’ wine farm. They’re looking for a makeover and the upshot of all that is that they’re willing to train a young graduate to act as the public face of the estate and be in charge of marketing their activities. This includes the wine business, the restaurant and the guesthouses they are busy erecting. They asked me if I knew of someone.’

Ivy couldn’t see where this was going. She certainly did not want a job managing and promoting a hospitality business.

‘So why are you telling me?’ She was mistrustful.

‘Well, Julie, I know, is not settled and she has a marketing degree. She’s also a bit of a whiz kid on website design. If she’s not lashing out at the world in general, or at me in particular, she’s competent and very personable.’

‘Why the vitriol, Norman?’ The fine hairs on her neck prickled.

Norman backtracked. ‘Sorry, your retort, “why are you telling me”, seemed very defensive. I felt it unfair.’ Ivy was slightly mollified as she detected Norman was trying to step back from the old patterns. ‘Truce? Call it an olive branch. I thought of Julie. She’d be good at it. It would expose her to an amazing array of profitable contacts and open up vast tracts of career potential.’

‘But why, given our circumstances?’ Ivy was still suspicious.

‘Why not? She wouldn’t be working for me. Is she employed?’

Ivy felt herself getting angry again. Anything Norman said about her daughter she just took personally. She wasn’t employed at the moment, well in truth for nearly six months and was supported by both her and, to a lesser extent, Barry. Norman knew that, why did he ask?

‘Not at the moment. Things are tough out there. She works hard you know.’ Her voice was clipped.

‘Yes, when she works.’ Norman was not beyond retaliation. ‘That’s why I’m not an ogre by offering her the chance at this bloody job.’

Norman, too, was becoming irritated. The same old ever present hooks and the same ever present pathologies complicated their communication.

‘Tell her to phone me. If I haven’t heard from her by the weekend I’ll tell my clients to advertise.’

‘Thanks, Norman.’

It was Ivy’s turn to backtrack. She spent a few seconds drawing breath. She immediately recognized the great opportunity Norman was presenting, but she feared her daughter would simply reject it, given from whence it came.

‘I’ll have a discussion with her this evening. Thank you.’ She paused. ‘Just one small thing,’ Ivy was about to live dangerously, ‘given the Olive-Jean we both know and love, your term olive branch has to be the world’s quintessential oxymoron. Ha!’

‘Olive branch? Is it an oxymoron?’ Norman muttered as he put down the phone. ‘It’s a left field paradox, to be sure. Ah well.’

He hadn’t yet processed why he’d proposed Julie to the two charming men with whom he’d spent three very fruitful hours. It was a gut feeling and Norman generally trusted

them. The brothers were spread out in too many directions. It was a familiar story of holding on to one's creation too long before learning to delegate and as a result becoming overwhelmed. There was merit to every single facet of their business and even the wine from their first bottling displayed a grace and complexity.

If Norman possessed one skill in his professional life, it was an ability to walk into someone else's kitchen and conduct an intelligent conversation around the meals that were being prepared. No small feat. The ego of many chefs was comparable to, if not greater than, their counterparts in any other facet of the arts. They also operated in a far more intense environment, at the mercy of many more external factors that could destroy a moment of magic. His report would point out that key issue.

'There's a need to link the activities on the farm and then link those to the greater Cape Town environment.'

Julie would be given a role in managing the linkages.

Norman caught the eye of the Madonna with the red baize.

'I know, I experience Julie as pretty heavy going and I think she's turned aggression into an art form, but don't look at me like that. I'm not doing this, as some would have me believe, as an elaborate negotiation and part of the mourning process. Now if you'll excuse me I have work to do.'

The Madonna remained aloof.

There was one last piece of unfinished business that concerned Norman. He'd not replied to his mother. He opened up the computer and reread Olive-Jean's letter and within ten minutes he'd drafted a response.

From: norman@novelcuisine.co.za

To: milagro.beanfieldwar@gmail.com

Dear mother

Thank you for your concern. I went out to Stellenbosch today, on business, so I was able to digest in the car much of what you wrote in your usual direct way. I'm glad you were able to be of some consolation to Ivy. I'm sure there are reasons for her cuckolding me but I'm not really able to process that right now. After bouts of back slapping, the more sensitive of us men take time out for reparation and healing.

Nothing on God's little earth would or could force me into collaboration with Ivy at this juncture. I've no idea what might happen at some future date but we shall all have to take a chance that at best, in an act of good faith, she puts her plans on hold. At worst, I would expect Ivy to run whatever she has conjured up past me before publishing. I have intellectual rights to my own work and that is legally set in stone.

I'm sorry if I have been something of a disappointment to you. I have always cared about you and your welfare and I am sad that, in your eyes, we have not been able to connect on a level where you could have seen fit to introduce me to any of the suitors who have beaten a path to your door.

Your loving and affectionate son.

Norman.

To which came a reply so promptly that Norman presumed Olive-Jean was camped in her hard drive.

Norman my dear son,

'The lady doth protest too much, methinks!' I'm overlooking your bout of defensiveness because I know you are wrought up. We can chat about this in due course, when I think you are ready.

Maybe there are some other things I'd like to share, but at another time when my plans are more finalized.

Till then, you have a mother's love to support you.

As always

OJ

Chapter 22

The only non-negotiable rule I remember around meals as a kid was that about finishing what was on the plate. You said how much you wanted when mother dished up and woe betides not finishing what you asked for.

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 23/09/2009

The cracked plastic numerals on the wooden gate claimed it was number 23. Ivy noticed that the blue colour she'd once painted it had been almost completely removed by the elements. A proud and well-kept home with an unkempt gate. For the umpteenth time she wondered who lived there now.

‘That’s where your father and I used to live just after you were born.’

‘And it was so damp that your shoes turned green in the cupboard. Then when you moved out you found, behind the chest of drawers, a yellow mushroom growing from the skirting board.’ Alec completed the first part of the tale from a few feet back.

‘And lo and behold on the mushroom was a transparent yellow worm.’ Julie, in the voice of the village priest, wrapped it up.

‘A complete ecological system,’ Ivy smiled and then thought to herself. ‘These old familiar, oft and fondly repeated memoirs are the glue that keeps a family together.’

She and her brood were making their way from Boyes Drive, where they had parked, towards a restaurant right on the railway line at the harbour. The sun was setting on the other side of the mountain and a wind sliced through its shadow, lifting the swell. They all leaned forward into it. Her ‘boys’, Alec, Barry and Tom, were walking behind the women. Barry found it opportune to say a few quiet words to Geraldine’s man.

‘Julie is rather upset at Ivy suddenly leaving and going to stay with you guys.’

‘She is?’ Tom was confused. ‘It’s only for a week. I think she’s about to put down a deposit on a small cottage she’s thinking of renting. It’s only available at the end of the month.’ Tom was grateful that the wind acted as a sound barrier and Ivy was not privy to the conversation.

‘That’s not the point.’

‘Then what *is* the point, buddy?’

Tom’s intolerance of the interpersonal dynamics between Ivy and Julie was not as honed as Geraldine’s but it still took an effort to keep masking the prejudice he felt.

‘Let it go, boet. Shit, let’s give Ivy some time out.’

The evening was an attempt by Ivy to defuse the tension. Geraldine arrived around midday to help with Ivy’s move. As she loaded two suitcases into the Alfa, her mother suggested dinner.

‘Come on, let’s go out as a family and have a bit of fun. Please!’ she implored.

Circumstance worked in her favour and they were all free and willing. It was also an opportunity to raise the subject of the job offer. Hopefully, input from the others would help diffuse the tension should Julie choose to overreact.

Barry was happy to give Ivy ‘time out’ but not at the expense of his need to illicit a grovelling acknowledgement that Julie had been shamefully used.

‘The point is, in her hour of need, Julie opened our humble home to Ivy. Suddenly it seems our accommodation isn’t good enough.’ He was displaying bulldog characteristics.

Tom worked hard at keeping his voice well modulated, low and cheery on the outside.

‘Humble fucking home? Cut the fucking crap, mate.’ He grinned in an exaggerated fashion. ‘I’m grateful you’re sharing Julie’s feelings, like, quietly with me, but we all rallied when she and Norman split. Your place is small, and face facts, you three need time out from each other. It’s human bloody nature, buddy. My limit with my old girl is three days, tops! You’ve hosted ten, plus or minus.’ This soliloquy was as close as Tom was able to get to being understanding. ‘Though I’ll grant you, Ivy is perhaps more adventurous and less likely to make a fuss if she chances in on you lifting Julie’s Indian tie-dye than my mother would be. In short, Ivy’s easy, but three weeks plus is enough. Geraldine wants a turn.’

‘I just want you to know Julie is upset.’

‘What the fuck do you want me to do with the information?’ The men fell even further behind the women, who appeared not to notice. Alec felt the need to contribute.

‘Adventurous? That’s my mother you’re talking about.’

‘Yes, Alec, and she’s a great woman.’ The smile was beginning to become a little difficult to keep propped up under his nose. ‘Nonetheless your mother appears to be the type who makes Exclusive Books a hell of a lot less stuffy than most, don’t you think?’

‘You’re pushing me, Tom.’

Tom tried his best to look cowed. The years spent rucking out scrums at club rugby level gave him a sense of invulnerability and Alec, no matter how much he was cut from the Boys' Own mould, would've been unable to act with any positive result should Tom decide to push a little more. But he wasn't looking for a fight. He liked Ivy and the rest, even Julie. He was trying his best to be sensitive.

'I'm sorry, Alec. I actually think your mom's "sorry but unbowed", to quote a poet who I forget.' Tom looked duly pleased with his last observation. 'On top of that, she's lekker!'

'William Ernest Henley. And it's "my head is bloodied but unbowed."'

'Yes, that's right, I remember now. You've got it in one. That's what she is. You have to admit it, though,' he became conspiratorial. 'Every bloody one of us secretly admires her for having a bit of nookie with someone our age, or less, and we all can't help feeling a bit sorry for Norman.'

'We think he got what he deserved,' Barry piped up, still batting for Julie long after the bails were lifted.

'Bullshit, buddy! The royal *you* might think that, but you know as well as I, we all offered up a silent prayer of gratitude when we heard the news.' The other two were looking peeved but weren't about to say anything. 'Bloody grateful that it didn't happen to one of us, because worse than coming home and finding your chick bonking some beer-swilling fucker, is your beer-swilling mates finding out you came home and found your chick bonking some beer-swilling fucker.'

'That's out of line. That's my mother! And she is not a chick!'

'Oh fuck, spare me this shyte,' Tom thought, but decided not to say it out loud.

Ivy suddenly turned around.

'Come on, you slow coaches, stop dragging your feet and do hurry up. We'll have ordered by the time you get there.'

'I'm coming, gorgeous.' Tom sprinted forward and lifted Ivy off her feet with a huge hug. 'Tell you what, you be my date tonight. This lot are far too boring. They can't even keep up with you. Let's get Geraldine to babysit.'

He put his arm around her.

Ivy positively glowed.

Then Tom produced a conspiratorial smile, gave her waist a squeeze and led her into the restaurant.

Ivy looked around at her family and smiled contentedly.

‘Thank you for being so supportive.’

They ordered a bottle of white wine and bread for the table. ‘Thank you Julie, Barry, for making space for me these last weeks and thank you Tom and Geraldine, for relieving them and allowing me to come and stay with you.’ She raised her glass in a toast and the rest clunked and began to think of something to say.

‘Ivy, it’s a real pleasure.’ Tom stepped into the breach. ‘Is there anything you would like me to do? How are you moving your furniture? I ask because I’ve got a bakkie I can borrow from work.’

‘That’s kind, but I’m determined to make this move painless, with as little drama as possible. I’ll just phone up a removal company. I’ll have to chat to Norman and work out how to divide the mutual acquisitions.’ She moved to close the subject. ‘Can we leave aside Norman and me and just concentrate on having a fine evening?’

She picked up the menu.

‘What did you do today, ma?’ Alec, sitting quietly stewing at Tom’s flippant remarks about Ivy, suddenly made an effort.

‘I mainly worked. The flood of letters for September has been surprising. Usually they only pick up around November, as the prospect of Christmas looms large and people sense they’re spending Christmas alone. Then, of course, there’s the second wave, post-January. I’ve a particularly large amount of correspondence from the Virgin Islands. A local magazine has syndicated my column. If what I deduce is anywhere near correct, there’s a real cad roaming the streets of Christiansted, the capital of St Croix, declaring his fidelity to what would appear to be a mini telephone directory of lonely women. Someone even sent me a picture of him. It has to be one person. The modus operandi is the same.’

‘Has Norman moved to the Virgin Islands?’ It was Julie’s stab at humour.

‘Why, have there been reports of the local rats scrambling to leave the island for the safety of the sea?’ Barry moved to twist the knife.

‘Woo... Easy! I’m not following. Where’s this going? Are we all being cool here?’ Geraldine decided to rein the conversation in a little.

‘I’d say it takes brains to make the connection, but you forgot we ate them the first time I met him! Ha!’ Barry was now enjoying himself.

‘If I knew there’d be a reasonable chance of Norman making me my pet I’d also follow the rats.’ Julie looked around for affirmation but the closest she got was Alec’s smile slowly slipping down his chin and Ivy’s hurt eyes.

‘Fuck! You two are something else.’ Geraldine, not for the first time, could have strangled her pious sister and her saintly boyfriend. ‘Didn’t mom ask you to drop it?’

A waiter coughed at Ivy’s side and asked if they were ready to place their orders.

‘In the nick of time.’ She was grateful for the diversion. ‘Yes, please, I’d love the catch of the day.’ Ivy paused and mumbled almost inaudibly, ‘and better not make that fried.’

‘Pardon?’

‘Oh grilled please. I’ll have it with loads of chilli and as rich a sauce as you can rustle up.’

‘Sorry, is that on the menu, madam?’

‘I don’t care. I want loads of creamy rich sauce, full of chilli, oregano and ginger and garlic and rosemary and tell him to be inventive. Tell the chef to think of the fish as a barge laden with spices from the East.’

‘I’ll be back.’

And he scurried away. No one spoke as they waited for the chef. They stared out at the dark sky and the ever-brightening lights of the harbour, while sea broke on the rocks below and water sprayed up and foam ran back down the window. They could’ve been sailing to the East, given the spume and the wind and the wild sea. Apart from one small detail - the candles burned in the dimly lit room without a flicker. The drama of the elements was completely sealed from the inside. Ivy looked around and smiled at this group called family.

‘Is this the purpose of motherhood? To arrive at a table in well-appointed surroundings, with well-appointed children living out lives so removed from one’s own?’

‘Good evening, madam. My name is Albert. I hear you would like me to produce a special order.’

The chef fitted the stereotype. Rotund, with bushy sideburns growing out from below the mandatory hat. His face was red and his fingers looked like two bunches of bananas. But his demeanour was that of a country priest rather than a man whose

management style for the hours from sundown to midnight would, in all likelihood, resemble that of Attila the Hun.

‘Hello, I’m Ivy. My family.’ She went quickly round the table. ‘I want something off the menu, firm with bite, rich and varied. I want the fish to merely be a platform for a sauce.’

‘It will take a little time, but I will produce a masterpiece.’ He produced a slight bow and a smile worthy of a toothpaste advertisement.

‘I’m *sure* you will, thank you.’ Ivy was so blown away by his charm that she became extravagant. ‘And please select a wine.’

‘And the rest of the table, dear lady?’

‘I’m not sure, I think I’ll have a salad.’ Her eldest daughter entered the conversation.

‘Why don’t we have a large salad for all of us, Julie, into which you can tuck? Have a small portion of lightly grilled fish with lemon and coriander, if you don’t care for sharing in my need to be exotic.’ Ivy sought a compromise.

‘I don’t know, it is so difficult being a vegetarian, even if I do eat the occasional piece of white meat or fish. It’s all this special ordering. I sort of feel Norman’s still with us.’

Ivy made eye contact with the rest around the table and nodded at Albert.

‘Yes, we’ll all have your creation.’

‘Except me, mother!’ Julie was exasperated. Ivy seemed to have ignored her wishes. She turned to Albert and issued her instructions. ‘I’ll have the Caesar salad.’ She stabbed at the menu with her finger. ‘If you can just grill a slither of fish on the side for me, just plain, and once it’s cooked you can just layer a little of the anchovy mayonnaise over it.’

Geraldine raised her eyebrows.

‘Pot calling the kettle black,’ she whispered to Tom, and playfully bit his lobe.

‘That’s all for now?’

Ivy clasped her hands and nodded her head. ‘Thank you, Albert.’

‘My pleasure. I’ll send out another bottle of that excellent Sauvignon Blanc you’re enjoying and some more bread and a small selection of dips while you wait.’

The dips were brought, and some sourdough bread and the wine. It began to feel like old times for Ivy. She wondered if the pleasure of food lay in eating with one's fingers as much as with the taste. She brought it up as a question.

'Is it the tongue and lips caressing the fingertips, the pure sensual act of taking satisfaction and sustenance from one's own hand?'

'Are you saying, mom,' asked Geraldine, 'that cutlery diminishes the experience?'

'Yes, exactly that.' Ivy picked up a silver pepper grinder and held it in the palm of her hand. 'Is elaborate silver, stainless steel, linen napkins and all the accoutrements of elegant dining but an inherited ritual?'

'Knives and forks are a small dab of grey,' Tom tried his best to sound like Norman, 'in a kaleidoscope of human rituals?'

'Rituals that seek to dislocate humankind from their sensual selves?' Ivy was quick to elaborate upon the humour.

'Only if the fork and knife hasn't spiked a bit of truffle.' Geraldine pointed to the flaw in their hypothesis

Ivy winked conspiratorially at her youngest daughter.

'Cheers, N!'

The conversation was stopped by Albert's return. He brought the food himself, served on a flaming red platter. The fish, smothered in a cold pressed virgin coconut oil, had been sealed quickly on a hot pan. He'd then cooked it, in what was essentially a curry stock, with all the spices Ivy had suggested but enriched with a splash of Asian fish coulis and shrimp paste. This had been topped with roasted fennel seeds. Apart from the herbs Ivy had ordered, he'd added mint, basil, coriander and grated lime to an infused oil and puréed them into a thick paste.

It seemed, too, that the Caesar salad also measured up to expectations.

The meal proved wonderful and the wine gave the evening a warm glow. No one sought to notice Julie's plate ebbing and flowing with food from the main dish and Ivy never mentioned Norman, nor his job offer.

'It can keep for the morning.' She set it aside.

That was until a slightly tipsy Julie raised her glass in one hand and a sauce sodden crust of bread in the other and declared a toast.

‘Eat your f... fucken heart out, Norman! Here’s to never having to eat your pretentious second rate food again.’

It was as if someone had bumped a record player and the arm had scratched across the vinyl to the centre. A collective ‘oh shit’ moment.

‘Cut it out, sis.’ Alec spoke first.

‘Yes, cool it.’ Geraldine barked in unison with her brother.

‘Ok, please everyone, can we drop Norman just for tonight?’ Ivy was on the verge of tears.

‘Why, what’s he ever done for me?’ Her petulant first-born raised her middle finger.

‘That’s crass, sis. Get a grip on yourself.’ Alec showed some balls.

Ivy carefully lifted her napkin and placed it on the table. She turned to her daughter with narrowed eyes and in a voice measured and clipped, said what she had wanted to say for some time.

‘I’ve listened now for weeks to your diatribes, Julie. It pisses me off!’

Out poured the words she’d never directed at her daughter during all the growing up years, but which she’d projected onto the other two.

‘The time for bullying me is over. If you want to storm out, Julie, do. That is your pattern and that is your way. I have, because of my own insecurities, never called upon you to account and have set no boundaries. In my book, that constitutes child abuse. I apologise for that. It’s not going to happen again. You’ll be treated as an adult firstly, and as my daughter secondly, just like your brother and sister. You are now all adults. That’s the first thing I have to say.’ She looked at each of her siblings and their partners in turn. No one moved. ‘The second thing is, I received an unsolicited phone call today from Norman and he said he proposed you, Julie, to a client for a job. I believe it would be perfect. You’d be a PR for a wine estate. I was blown away. It is a break most people can only dream of, and in this economic climate too.’ She shook her head. ‘Quite amazing. By the sound of it, an opportunity even you would not be stupid enough to throw up. I’ll give you the details in the morning.’ She turned away from Julie’s ashen face and quietly asserted her authority. ‘I want no more talk about Norman or how I conducted myself. That conversation is over. I mean it! Over. No one here is going to judge me any more. I love you all, each and every one for the special people you are, but show me some respect. I deserve nothing less.’

Geraldine got up. 'We love you too, ma!' She put her arms around Ivy and just gave her a huge hug.

Chapter 23

My God my God my God!
Pour me another whissssskey
You bastard!
Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 24/09/2009

To: sloane.ranger@movienet.com

From: norman@novelcuisine.co.za

Dear Ms Gabriella Sloane,

My name is Ms Frye, Ms Norma Frye to be exact.

This letter comes as a directive from your good self to communicate with you once I'd set aside all notions of re-establishing relationships, sexual or otherwise, with a certain Ivy Lynch, now of no known address. I was further instructed to arrange a feast with my mother, in which you claimed you wanted to be an active, consenting participant. My God, woman, your innards are evidently of a steely nature. You also required that preparations for an overnight stay were to be finalised before festivities began.

My problem is this. I have spent the day travelling to a neighbouring town in a consultative capacity, doing good works and earning my daily keep. Part of my consulting and rehabilitation was to perform an unsolicited act of kindness for one of the less loveable Lynches and to inform her mother accordingly. Such acts of recompense are not to be seen as a desire to return to the scaffold. Rather they are to be understood to be much encouraged by the writers of the twelve step programmes so beloved by recovering addicts of whatever stripe. I also addressed a letter to my mother, one Olive-Jean Stanton, informing her that I would not be acting on her instructions to help edit the book Ms Lynch was writing based on *my* journal entries.

I thought you would at least concede this as progress and that the lynching addiction appeared to be broken.

Apparently not! A very high authority, since I left an affectionate and contrite message on your answering machine, has taken up your cause. The deity of wine and revelry, Dionysus, for that's how he identified himself, has been monitoring my road to recovery. Given the feasts and sensual pleasures provided under his patronage, it appears he was displeased at my inability to soften your heart and has somehow taken this personally.

Here is the problem. Late yesterday evening, a cloud descended over the mountain, which seemed to many the consequence of a savage and raging South East wind. Not so. Perched atop the cloud and driving the turbulence was Dionysus himself, with a little instrument in his right hand that closely resembled a relic from another, more mechanical era. This turned out to be an old-fashioned mincing machine.

I have an eye for detail and a pretty intuitive mind, resulting in a premonition of what was to come. Although I pleaded with him and threw myself upon his mercy, even suggesting a few services I may be fortunate enough to render unto thee, Ms Sloane, he was unmoved by my eloquence. It is hard to stop a muse, let alone the God of whom it is said to have invented the 'jolly good time'. I was unable to prevent him from getting his way. Before I knew it, the indictment was read out, detailing, amongst others, my inability to seduce you back into the Frying pan.

It would appear we mortals have but one shot at the cherry and my arrow seems to have fallen short of the mark. Your silence has been construed by the Gods as the gladiatorial thumbs down.

In a flash, sentence was passed and I was shackled to an oak tree and stripped naked. Your old friend (I am so hoping you still remember him) and his two closest aides-de-camp were inserted into the device and the handle was rapidly turned.

My shock and horror was beyond imagination. I did cry out in a loud and pleading soprano voice unto heaven... "Bloody hell, you baaaaaastard!"

Ms Gabriella Sloane, what flashed through my mind was my relationship with you. Herein, it would seem, lies the rub, or lack of it. Were we ever to reconstitute our alliance, it would, by dint of changed circumstance, become somewhat platonic in its nature. Clichéd as it might sound, I think I am accurate in my analysis that as things currently stand, I am up shit creek sans paddle.

I digress and hasten to return to my narrative. Once grinding activities had been completed and I was left alone, I cast a beady eye southwards. The once proud and upright citizen, a faithful confidant of mine, a friend, upon whom I could always rely in the heat of battle, lay mortally wounded. Alas alack, I believe he will never sound the reveille bugle call again. In fact, cottage pie best describes his current condition.

I was half hoping you would be able to offer a little help, as you have been partly responsible for the events that have befallen me. Such help could come in the form of a resuscitation mission, as I believe you are a devotee of a certain Florence Nightingale. Perhaps you could afford me an opportunity to cook you one last supper, prior to my going out and re-kitting myself with alternative underwear and a leisurely stroll through some upmarket online boutiques.

Does that in any way inspire you to mercy, madam?

Yours faithfully

Ms Norma Frye.

To: norman@novelcuisine.co.za

From: sloane.ranger@movienet.com

Dear Ms Frye,

I am sorry to hear of the rather traumatic incident you describe. Could I be even partly responsible for emasculating you so? This seems so unlikely. I am delicate by nature and my naivety appears part of my charm. The Florence Nightingale uniform is clean, starched and pressed and I'm willing to perform any ministrations that could return you to good health. I accept the invitation to dine with your mother. I am sure she is a gracious and charming woman.

In conclusion, I have one bit of advice to proffer next time your ego is gelded by the wiles of an Ophelia with whom you have tarried for a while before discarding. Flowers, dear Norma, flowers, hand delivered, are key to laying the ground for negotiation and compromise. It is such a little thing but such a powerful tool for drawing the claws of female retribution.

I wait, with my pen poised above my diary, to confirm our date with Mrs Frye/Stanton senior.

Yours as faithfully

Gabriella Sloane

Chapter 24

*'Norman's just a happy lad
And loving Gabby made him glad
And thinking how he felt with joy
Her gorgeous body warm and coy.
He kissed and stroked as he was told
And never let her loins grow cold.
But now today, this summer's day,
She screamed out – "take that thing away
Oh take his lamb shank far away.
I will not bonk that man today."*

*Next day begins his tale of woes
Quite lank and lean our Norman grows.
And though he feels so weak and ill
Our Gabriella haunts him still,
"Not any love for me I say
No nibbles hugs and hips that sway.
I will not bonk that man today."*

*The third day comes oh what a sin
To see our Norman pale and thin.
Yet when he pleads as he is able
To take her now upon the table
She cries out, "NO, no sex I say
And I'm not horny anyway.
I will not bonk that man today."*

*Look at him now the fourth day's come
The Goddess simply won't succumb
He's limp and flaccid on the bed.*

*And on the fifth day he was dead.
Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 25/09/2009*

The phone call to his mother to ask her to have supper and meet Gabriella resulted, two hours later, in him trying to detach a 'U' joint under Olive-Jean's sink. This turned out to be no ordinary operation. His mother had recently renovated her kitchen and the man with the bakkie, whom she had enlisted to do the job, had contrived to make the outflow pipe inaccessible. Norman's job involved removing three shelves, the doors and stripping two side panels. The architect of this remarkable bit of DIY hadn't considered such small details as placing the shelves, situated in front of the piping, on

top of small supports or 'L' brackets so that the shelving could just be lifted out. They'd been clamped, glued and bolted into position. To make matters worse they were not parallel.

'Where have I heard her name before, Norman? What is the occasion?' Olive-Jean was naturally suspicious of any conversation initiated from inside a plumbing problem.

Norman felt compelled to stray slightly from the line of absolute truth.

'No occasion. Your letter made me think twice about our relationship and if I have been neglectful, perhaps it would be good to start rectifying that.'

'A sudden change of heart is often a tidy way to camouflage some or other omission, in my humble experience.' Olive-Jean sniffed the wind and loped off into the undergrowth. 'Unlike you to want me over mid-week.'

'Don't be sceptical, mother. Just come and enjoy my cooking.' The frustration at the carpentry and his mother stalking his motives was making him irritable. 'She's an old friend, mother, and I'm working on a movie script with her. I knew her at art college. It's a script similar to the standard Agatha Christie. All the suspects are drawn to a final meal through a set of culinary clues. I'm being consulted on the gastronomic side of things.'

'So you are inviting me to a standard Agatha Christie evening. Who's playing Hercule Poirot? Ms Sloane?'

By now Olive-Jean felt the wind in her face.

'Mother, this is so exasperating. Can't you just accept an invitation to supper with your son?'

Olive-Jean put on the kettle, making an exaggerated point of filling it with water up to the 'two cup' level.

'Such an invitation to dine with one's son would, for most mothers, be a joy.' She closed in on her prey. 'It is just that this mother hasn't been invited to your home of an evening for donkey's years. We usually do a luncheon. I'm sure there must be an occasion. Is it my birthday, or perhaps is it yours?'

'Mother, you are being ridiculous. Just come and meet a charming friend of mine with whom I've re-established a working rapport.'

'And you're taking mother home to meet her?'

Norman shifted uncomfortably, trying to ease his ever-stiffening neck.

‘Won’t you pass the wrench, mother?’

‘Have you noticed, son, that you firstly never answered my question and secondly when you did tell me something, your head was firmly planted in the cupboard?’

‘Gabriella Sloane, I told you, was at art school with me and she was part of our group. You’re not listening to me. That’s where you most probably heard mention of her.’

‘Don’t get shirty with me.’

‘Sorry I’m getting a stiff neck and this job has already taken far longer than I thought.’

‘It’s not been easy for me watching you faff about, but I’ll accept the apology. I *am* grateful you are helping me unblock the drain.’ Olive-Jean became reconciliatory.

‘When do you propose this dinner?’

‘Tomorrow? Would that suit?’

‘Short notice but yes, thank you. I look forward to discovering the identity of the villain.’

It took the better part of another hour to complete the job and the relief that the shelving could now be replaced as water gurgled happily from the sink to the drain was almost exquisite.

‘There we are, mother. Good as new.’

‘What can I bring?’

‘Nothing. Do you want a lift?’

‘No thank you, my boy. I prefer to be independent.’

She handed Norman a cup of tea and placed a jar of lemon-scented hand cleaner next to him.

‘Does she have children?’

‘Who?’

‘Ms Sloane.’

‘A daughter. I met her when I went to lunch on Saturday.’

Olive-Jean flagged that bit of information. Two meals in three or four days seemed a little more than purely collegial.

‘Does she cook?’

‘She has a stove and the meal arrived hot at the table.’

‘Temper, temper.’

Olive-Jean changed the subject. She needed to know no more.

Norman was upbeat. He phoned to announce his mother’s acceptance.

‘Gabriella, have you ever read *Roald Dahl’s Cookbook*, co-authored by his wife Felicity?’

‘No, why do you ask?’

‘It’s actually very readable. It has a section towards the end of the book in which he invites several glitterati to design their last meal. There was an English tradition of the ‘last meal’ when the death penalty was still on the statute books. The night before the execution was carried out, the prisoner was granted the right to ask for a supper of his or her choice. Apparently their wish was granted, no matter what it was. It was called the hangman’s supper.’

‘Sounds macabre.’

‘Le Carre, Tom Marsden, Francis Bacon, P.D. James, Peter Ustinov, all sent him their ideas for a last meal. I ran it past Olive-Jean. I was at her home doing a bit of plumbing. Actually, Dustin Hoffman I thought was the most original. He wanted mother’s milk. “Might as well go out,” he said, “in the same way I came in.” I asked my mother today what she would choose. Surprisingly enough, she told me without any fuss at all. She emailed her menu today.’

‘How bizarre of you, Norman. Why’d you ask such a thing?’

‘For a dinner I’m going to cook. I think it’s a rather fun party trick. Google it. People have even picked up the idea on their blogs. Anyhow, I ran the grand Italian meal past Olive-Jean and she said it wasn’t her style. With the change of plan, I thought it would be symbolically quite apposite to cook a meal from Roald’s book.’

‘Symbolically apposite?’

‘Gabriella, you loosely used the word “bizarre”. You don’t even begin to get the word bizarre. My mother’s bizarre and I was just exercising my constitutional right to bring a bit of in-house humour to the party.’

‘So what did she order?’

‘Not telling. You’ll have to come to dinner tomorrow night and find out.’

‘Ah, so that’s where this convoluted tale was leading. I presume that’s my invitation. You’re as good as your word, Norman, I am impressed.’

‘You still bringing your toothbrush as planned?’

‘As long as you’re not serving cottage pie.’

Gabriella arrived the next day at around five to help Norman prepare the temple for the festive board. The black walls and the lighting, along with candles, gave the room a romantic glow not apparent during daylight hours. Norman’s table was simply set with woven grass table mats, hand blown wine and water glasses and a tall water jug in the same style.

She was wearing a long white skirt with a crimson sash and a matching top with an elegantly cut patchwork waistcoat, made from recycled materials and cotton off-cuts, decorated with a number of eclectic objects from buttons, coins and watch faces, pins, baubles and keys. On her feet was a pair of Yves St Laurent crimson high heel shoes. She appeared as if walking on stilts. Her lips were a matching colour. She’d evidently visited her hairdresser during the day and had emerged from the salon with slightly dishevelled, 1920s curls, cut at chin length. Norman couldn’t remember seeing anyone so offbeat and so stylish at the same time.

‘Do you think I look ok to meet her?’

‘One never knows with Olive-Jean. I can tell you one thing, she’ll not be as classy a vision as the one before me now. Utilitarian is her fashion label. Sensible shirt, shoes and pants. Cannot remember her otherwise. Your hair looks amazing.’

‘One tries to impress, my darling.’ She came over to him and gently took him by the ears and kissed him. ‘Time for a little pudding now, or do we have to see if I’ve eaten my meat first?’ She swooshed her curls and giggled. ‘I’m feeling all young again. What time’s she coming?’

‘She’ll be here soonish. I said seven. Don’t worry, you’ll be fine. And try not to take things personally.’

‘Norman, I’m not worrying. We’re not waiting for the arrival of Cruella de Ville. Be nice about her for a change.’

Norman lifted a shaggy eyebrow and padded off into the kitchen, from which Gabriella had been banned.

When the doorbell rang Norman was still in the kitchen, so Gabriella set aside her wine and went to the door to greet Olive-Jean. She took three deep breaths and opened it.

The two women stood for a few seconds taking each other in. Gabriella was first to speak.

‘Hello, you must be Olive-Jean. I’m Gabriella. Lovely to meet you.’

‘Likewise. I’ve heard all about you, in a Norman-like fashion. Where is he?’

Gabriella stepped aside and Olive-Jean strode into the lounge.

‘In the kitchen. Apparently you designed the meal.’

‘I played along with his little caper, as he calls it. Norman, come and greet your mother,’ Olive-Jean boomed.

‘Sorry. Welcome.’ Norman came striding out of the kitchen wiping his hands on an apron that bore the words, *and for this I went to university*. ‘I see you’ve met Gabriella. I’m nearly finished. I’ll be done in a minute.’

Gabriella poured the older woman a glass of wine.

‘Thank you, do you object to smoking?’

‘No, not at all. Every now and again I enjoy a small cigar.’

Olive-Jean settled into her chair and offered her cigarettes, which were declined. She lit up. She too had taken some trouble with her appearance. Although she was in regulation denim trousers and flat shoes, her pleated cream cotton shirt, with a fashionably wide collar and an embroidered autumn coloured pattern, nodded conspiratorially in the direction of haute couture. She had blushed a little rouge on her cheeks.

‘I see you have a keen sense of balance, my dear, and are certainly not plagued by vertigo.’ Olive-Jean opened the conversation. Gabriella smiled broadly.

‘Aren’t they divine? I’ve been waiting for an opportunity to show them off. Tonight’s the night, I thought.’ She stood up and the heel of the shoe pinned the skirt to the floor. As she moved forward she stumbled and almost fell into Olive-Jean’s lap.

‘Oops! Sorry, did I make you spill your wine?’ Gabriella took a second to compose herself.

‘More to the point, did you hurt yourself?’

‘No, I’m fine. Sorry, that was clumsy.’

‘It’s me. People want to fall into my arms all the time.’ Olive-Jean was enjoying herself.

‘Of course they do. I’ll get the hang of them soon.’ Gabriella eased herself back into her chair.

‘I’m of a more practical bent. As you can see I wear flat heels.’ She lifted her leg and pointed at her foot. ‘Still, I think you have a certain flair. I like the waistcoat, though with your figure it does need the hairstyle to carry it off.’

Gabriella was a little nonplussed.

‘What on earth do you mean?’

‘I used to wear my hair in a similar fashion to that in my youth. I am lucky. I was tall, so, unlike you, I never really needed stilts, or my hair, to lift my appearance.’

Norman came into the room and was stopped dead in his tracks by his mother’s reminiscence. She used to go to *his* barber. It was a childhood trauma. Mother and son every second week, together under the scissors of Yeoville’s Oom Freddie Nel. The only parallel to Gabriella was that they both grew hair.

He announced that dinner was served. When the women were seated, Norman brought on the first course. Olive-Jean’s request was a working men’s club meal. The starter was to be a small bowl of tomato soup. Norman poured the wine and raised his glass.

‘Lovely to have you both here.’ They all dutifully touched glasses and assured him they were equally pleased. Olive-Jean was the first to dip her spoon into the deep orange-red colour. ‘It’s a real peasant gazpacho, mother.’

Gabriella followed suit.

‘The addition of the pesto is a master stroke, darling Norman’

‘It’s got a bite,’ Olive-Jean remarked approvingly.

‘There’s more than a bit of chilli in it, mother.’

‘Well I must be honest, son, I’ve been to Spain but never eaten anything as tasty as this. I doubt the peasants ate this well. I’ve never tasted such an intense tomato flavour.’

‘Actually, you make a fine point but an incorrect one.’ Norman, in his anxiety to get the conversation flowing, started a small lecture – a habit Olive-Jean found intensely annoying, but she said nothing. ‘The trick is to use decent plum tomatoes, of course, but they should be slightly overripe. I suspect many peasants would have picked a crop of vegetables that would have ripened simultaneously, and soup was an obvious way to avoid wastage.’

They ate and chatted about nothing in particular and avoided any subject of a personal nature. Olive-Jean was at her most charming and light. Norman secretly offered up a silent prayer of ‘brief thanksgiving to whatever gods may be.’

‘Thank you,’ Gabriella put down her spoon, ‘I loved it.’

The bowls were gathered and Norman carried them off into the kitchen.

‘I’ve often read your articles, Olive-Jean. You’ve certainly met a lot of very interesting people.’

‘And a lot of dolts as well, let me tell you. I don’t want to run down your profession, but apart from estate agents, priests and politicians, the movie industry churns out a plethora of puffed up, over-indulged and entitled individuals whose scripted personalities seem to me to lack a script writer.’

‘Really, Mrs Frye, you’ve a lovely turn of phrase, but that’s surely a little unkind. I know some deeply caring individuals who have forfeited all the glamour and trappings of wealth to maintain their integrity.’ Gabriella felt the accusation needed a response worthy of the accusation.

‘I’m not disputing exceptions that prove the rule. By the way, I am not Mrs Frye. When Norman’s father died, I gave him back his name. I assumed my mother’s maiden name, Stanton.’

‘I do apologize!’ Gabriella was mortified at her gaffe. ‘Stanton as in Elizabeth Cady?’

‘I thought it appropriate. I like to think I continue the struggle.’

‘Your byline just refers to you as Olive-Jean Speaking Out.’

‘And so I always shall.’

Gabriella’s recognition of Stanton as a name deeply engraved on the wall of feminine activism warmed Norman’s mother towards her. She stretched out and topped up both their glasses from the Sauvignon Blanc.

‘Drink up. The next course will require a Red. As tonight apparently concludes a life well-lived, it’s no use holding back.’

The next course consisted of lamb shanks, each on a huge bed of mashed sweet potato, saturated in a sauce made from being slowly cooked in three cups of red wine, a cup of balsamic vinegar heavily infused with rosemary, an onion, loads of garlic and pepper.

The meat just seemed to fall off the bone. Norman's choice of wine was the Kanonkop Pinotage 2001 vintage.

'There we are, mother, if this is not working men's club comfort food, I'd be hard-pressed to know what was.'

Olive-Jean scooped another mouthful onto her fork and looked up at Norman with pride.

'Well done, son. I might almost come to believe you can cook as well as those around you have claimed.'

'Thank you, mother.'

'Tell me about your film, Gabriella.'

Gabriella went through her patter and told how she had been in exotic Mali on the banks of the Niger, partaking of a wonderfully unfamiliar cuisine, when she had thought that somehow there must be a way that the hidden cues of culinary tradition, the ritual and preparation of food could combine with a murder mystery.

'Norman pinned me down and refused to work with me unless we'd brainstormed a plot. Finally we found an idea that culminates in all the suspects sitting around a single table. The final meal will resolve the mystery.'

Olive-Jean listened tentatively, adding an observation here and a story there, but as the telling of it wound to a close, she seemed distracted.

'Does a dying woman get offered a last wish, beyond food?'

'Why yes, mother.'

Norman failed to see the little cloud on the horizon the size of a man's hand.

'So, why am I here?'

'So that you can partake in the last course you chose, the fruit basket. In this case it will be a pavlova and the basket, therefore, is meringue.'

Norman attempted a spot of humour. Olive-Jean smiled without finding anything amusing.

'You served a wonderful meal and I am sure you are going to extend yourself with the pud. I look forward to it.' The smile never left her lips. 'Out of the blue I am invited to supper to meet an old friend of yours, who is witty and articulate. I must partake in a little game and design my last meal. This gives you free reign to demonstrate your flamboyance, which has turned this into an evening of fine dining. It also breaks the spirit of what you asked me to do. In truth *you* not *I* designed my last meal, Norman, that's the truth of it. I ordered working men's club food.'

‘Hey, mother, is that fair?’

‘Fair or not, I have a sneaking suspicion that you and Gabriella here are pulling my paw in some way and I am not sure why. I am a friend of Ivy’s, and given the charm I’ve experienced here tonight I could easily become companionable with Ms Sloane. None the less it feels a bit awkward.’

The colour drained from Gabriella’s face. Norman’s turned bright red. Olive-Jean was only warming up.

‘Ivy was quite upfront with me as to what happened between you two. I suspect she would, in time, be happy to renegotiate a rapprochement with you. I gave her some advice that I thought would be useful, given how I’d perceived your emotional circumstances. If you and Gabriella are more involved than you have let on, then please come clean.’

‘Norman, you shit. You’ve embarrassed me.’

She turned and looked straight at Olive-Jean.

‘My apologies, Olive-Jean. I am feeling as uncomfortable as you. I’d like to think we *are* involved.’

‘None necessary. I like to know where I stand, that’s all.’

‘Of course Norman has issues and unfinished business around Ivy. I’ve said as much to him. I asked him if I could meet you because if we’re going to be together, it has to be in the open. I wasn’t prepared to be the ‘other woman’. I’m not prepared to be sniggered about or whispered about or only seen about with certain people. I agree that his relationship with his former lover is still unresolved. He says he doesn’t want her back. If he changes his mind it will be on the full understanding that there was another person and another set of feelings while they were separated. I’m not participating in a little secret ménage à trois, if you will.’ She avoided Norman’s stare. ‘I’ll leave with you, Olive-Jean.’ She leaned under the table and put on the high-heels she had kicked off earlier.

‘Surely not until we have our pudding?’ Olive-Jean was nothing if not practical.

Norman sat with his arms folded.

‘Ok, my turn.’ Both women looked surprised. ‘I intended no malice and my motives were honourable. I really wanted to do right by Gabriella, who wanted to meet you, as I wanted you to meet her. Ivy’s yet to collect all her things. I was feeling awkward too. You want an apology, you aren’t going to get one. Bad judgement call,

perhaps. I was planning the meal and picked up Roald's book. It was a bit of humour. Shoot me.'

He shrugged.

'Norman, your execution isn't necessary, but it is a theme of this evening.' Olive-Jean loved a crisis, as it enabled her to take command. 'A little time out will restore equilibrium. Take my advice: shuffle back into the kitchen like a good man while Gabriella and I retire to smoke. The two of us need a little chat. You might be somewhat dim-witted in the interpersonal stakes but you make a fine dessert. Go to where your strengths lie and lay low for a while.'

She took Gabriella by the hand and led her to the sofa.

Norman watched them move off, his mother filling the room with her disgusting smoke and control, and slunk off and did as he was told. He had been reduced to being seen but not heard.

'Let it go, lad, let it go!'

He started to construct the pavlova. He blanched the peaches and nectarines in boiling water and removed the skins, whipped the cream and spread it into the meringue. Having been treated like a child, he found himself dipping into memories of Struwwelpeter and Heinrich Hoffmann's wonderful but utterly frightening poems from his childhood.

'I do have something for which to thank Olive-Jean,' he thought.

Even now, as an adult, he occasionally took comfort in the memory of them. It was amazing how much he remembered. He worked, tinkering in his mind with the words of Augustus, the chubby lad who wouldn't eat his soup. By the time he'd cut the passion fruit in half and scooped out the pulp, nothing seemed to really matter. He wasn't maudlin or upset. He felt a kind of inner calm. It was a curious feeling. He began to enjoy it. When the pavlova was ready, he sat down on a chair and solemnly recited his edited version to ensure he could recall it later. He would upload it to his blog.

Norman picked up the dessert and carried it through to the table. He fetched a bottle of muscadell.

'Would anyone like coffee?'

They looked up at him and thought they might.

When they were all seated around the table and the dessert apportioned, the glasses filled with the sweet wine and the aroma of the coffee nestled between them all, Gabriella broke the silence.

‘I’m sorry, Norman, that such a nice evening was spoiled. You just don’t seem to be able to commit to even the simplest request. Your mother has been very supportive of my position. Her advice is to treat it as a storm in a teacup. I don’t know. On the one hand everything is now out in the open. It’s what I wanted. I suppose, I guess, your mother and I are prepared to let our disappointment go.’

Norman adjusted his glasses, drained his muscadel and looked at the two women.

‘I have fed you both at some expense and with much effort. I’m sorry you were both embarrassed. You claimed neglect, mother, and you, Gabriella, needed to be fast tracked to this evening to feel secure with me. How did you phrase it? “Dim-witted interpersonally”. Well up your collective yours!’ He’d never addressed his mother like that, *ever*. ‘That doesn’t give you licence to treat me like a child, either of you. It’s I who’ll declare this a storm in a teacup. Having now done so, I guess *I’ll* be prepared to let it go!’

‘Good God,’ Olive-Jean’s foghorn reached new depths of bass, ‘who’s the new version of Norman Frye that’s emerged from the cream in the pavlova?’

Chapter 25

What would be my choice at the hangman's supper? I think I'd have to make the grand gesture, seeing that this was to be my last night enjoying God's O₂ as a side serving. It would have to be my happiest food moment ever.

I remember once my mother came back from helping out at some unmentionable horror, somewhere on the planet. I was on holiday from boarding school. She cooked a fish in an open pan with chilli, ginger and garlic. I don't think I'd ever experienced that combination before. It was smothered in crème fraîche She placed it on a bed of rice. Maybe it was having her home again, maybe it was because I was home from boarding school, but I packed my fork with the food, put it into my fifteen-year-old mouth and cried with happiness.

Then I'd I ask for a bottle of single malt to ease the pain.

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 25/09/2009

The two women had found, by the time Olive-Jean stood up to leave, a certain rapport that to Norman's relief was not based on either his perceived faults or eccentricities.

'Gabriella, here's my card. You must pop in sometime. I think I've a few experiences I could share that would make for a fine documentary.'

'Thanks, Olive-Jean, I shall, and I apologise for the mistake with your surname earlier in the evening.'

'Think nothing of it. You weren't to know, but Ronald, my late husband, still manages to reach out from the grave and behave rather disgustingly.'

'Pardon, mother?'

'Let it go son, there *are* issues. Maybe one day.' She abruptly changed subjects. 'Of course, you realize there's some way to go before this emotional soup in which you find yourself reaches some rapprochement.'

'Mother!'

'Don't mother me, son. I have something to say,' Olive-Jean took her keys out of her bag. 'I'm only speaking my mind as I was drawn into this.'

'We've been through this mother, and you weren't drawn in, you provoked this.'

'And we're going through it again.' She wasn't going to be denied. 'Gabriella here is a breath of fresh air and I'm very pleased to have met you.' She scowled at

Norman. 'But it appears you both are far too invested in a relationship that is more or less than a week old.'

Gabriella bit her bottom lip, vowing to keep her counsel, at this sudden turn in the conversation.

'Ivy hasn't given up on you yet and she has your journals which you will at some point agree to edit and publish.'

'Don't tell me what I will or won't do. This is preposterous, mother.' Norman wasn't making any such pact with himself. 'Ivy has moved out and Gabriella and I feel good about getting together. You have no right to pass judgement.'

'You youngsters can take it from me.' Olive-Jean opened her packet of cigarettes and saw there were only a few left and popped them back in her bag. 'I'm going to say this in my usual calm way before thanking you and finding my way home.' She put her hand on Gabriella's shoulder. 'Take him out of the city for a few weeks, that's my advice. Spend some time together away from all this. But leave those shoes behind, Gabriella.' Olive-Jean got sidetracked for a second. 'Take some practical walkers.'

'Mother, you're being inappropriate.'

'Alright. If my advice is not appreciated I'll keep quiet. You actually need to get your priorities sorted out, son.'

'You're talking as if Gabriella is not sitting here. How dare you?'

'She is sitting here and that's why I'm saying it. Am I offending you, Gabriella?'

'No, but I am feeling a bit uncomfortable, to tell you the truth.' Gabriella got up. 'Besides, you seem to be offering contradictory advice. You tell me to away with Norman and yet you still want him working on projects with Ivy. I don't really want to be part of this conversation.'

'I don't either, mother.'

'Suit yourselves.'

Olive-Jean lifted both her arms and dropped them back at her side.

It was in that gesture that Norman experienced a moment of clarity. His mother's arms, raised in the shape of a cross.

'You,' he thought, 'are going to be pulled in opposite directions by Gabriella here and Ivy there. Crucified. At some point, either Ivy or Gabriella will yank you, one away from the other. You'll resent them for doing it. It's up to me to make the choice.'

‘Where’ve you gone, son?’ Olive-Jean brought him back from his epiphany.

‘Sorry. You going off now, mother?’

‘Of course I’m going, I’m standing at the door.’

‘I’ll see you to your car.’

‘It’s not my way to interfere and I’m not starting now. Thank you, son. It was a wonderful supper and I know you went to a lot of trouble. Don’t think I’m ungrateful.’ She nodded goodbye to Gabriella, ‘And do go away. At least give yourselves a chance to lay some foundation for your relationship. It’s not going to happen in this cluttered space.’

‘Please, mother, enough, please.’

‘In my day it was called a honeymoon. They work. They cement relationships, at least long enough to withstand the first salvo of reality, when one discovers what the other is about.’

Norman stood at the top of the steps watching his mother’s car lights disappearing from view.

‘Phew. She’s unremitting. Tonight was worse than usual.’ He felt a wave of exhaustion overwhelm him.

‘Phew indeed. I’ll be off too.’ She joined him on the lawn.

‘What?’ He took off his glasses and put them on again. ‘No, this appears to be the real world. I warned you about Olive-Jean.’

‘I suspect a lot of what she said is true.’

‘Then you’re making no bloody sense. She told *us* to go away. Perhaps I’m just being a bloke.’

‘I feel like a pawn in some family dynamic over which I have no control.’

‘Oh, cute. You were in control enough when you were a bloody breath of fresh air. You openly colluded with the idea that I was dim-witted in the interpersonal stakes and, while I think of it, you were happy to complete the treachery when you exchanged business cards with the thought of collaborating on some bloody project or the other.’

‘I was embarrassed.’

‘What the fuck about? You’ve read her columns. She turns being obnoxious into an art form. All she did is praise you, for God’s sake.’

‘No need to get angry.’

‘I’m not getting fucking angry.’

‘Now you’re shouting at me in the street. I’ll speak to you tomorrow, Norman, when you’ve calmed down.’

‘I’m not fucking shouting. I’m fucking trying to keep fucking sane.’

‘I’m going, Norman. Learn to swallow your own shit.’

‘Fuck you, Gabriella.’

‘Not tonight.’

‘By the way, I’ve read the Henry Miller essay on turning eighty. I took his advice years ago. Perhaps you should learn to swallow yours.’

Norman followed her across the road to the red Polo. She dramatically pressed the remote button to unlock the doors and climbed in, slamming the door. The cabin light never had a chance to come on. She put the key into the ignition and turned it. It gave a light burp and died. She’d left the headlights on.

‘I think I’ve just been given the ultimate proof of the existence of God, gorgeous.’ Norman came alongside the window. ‘The defence of the high moral ground, at this particular moment, would at best be nothing more than a grand quixotic tilt at a radiator fan.’ He cocked his head to one side and scratched his beard under his chin. ‘An ah ha moment?’

Gabriella put on a brave face in the presence of God’s meddling. ‘I’d say so, Norman.’

‘It’s time, methinks, to acknowledge that all this emotional reaction to my mother has been nothing more than a bit of inclement weather in one of my teacups. Come back inside.’

‘I’d like that.’

Norman’s eyes twinkled like fairy lights behind the lenses. Gabriella’s twinkled back.

‘Just checking, but we’re only going to look for my jump leads tomorrow morning?’

‘Only if you’ve the imagination to jump-start a more entertaining diversion.’

Chapter 26

It is the thin under-skin on each layer of onion that contains the oil that makes you cry. When peeling an onion, be careful not to break it.

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 25/09/2009

You're getting under my skin and that makes me cry.

Posted by JuicyLucy 25/09/2009

'I'm afraid, Ivy, that Julie just cannot face you at the moment and has asked me to convey the message to you. She felt humiliated at the restaurant.'

'For God's sake, Barry, stop being such a bloody prat.' Ivy snapped a bloom from its stem in frustration. 'Where did you acquire that tone of voice? I grew up a preacher's daughter, it takes years of practice.'

'Sorry, Ivy. Please don't shoot the messenger. I'm stuck in the middle of all this.'

Ivy retreated slightly. Of course he was.

'Ok, you're right,' she paused, 'on one level, I suppose.' Ivy searched for a reconciliatory but firm perspective. 'On another level, you defer to my daughter's tantrums, just as I've always done. It is not emotionally healthy. It's rather demeaning for me to have Julie's boyfriend stand before me like some sentry. I hope you see that. In fact, I know you do. If you don't want to be the messenger stuck in the middle of all this, stand aside, lad, and call my daughter as I asked. If she slams the phone down and is abominably rude it becomes my problem.'

'Ivy, you're making this very difficult for me. I can't take your side on this.'

Ivy fought back the desire to tell Barry to grow up and put down the phone, but then knew she would be behaving in exactly the same way as her first-born.

'No, you can't. But here comes a little unsolicited advice from your friendly agony aunty. Find a way of not colluding with emotional adolescence, no matter how justifiable it seems to you.' Ivy was exhausted already and she hadn't yet had her second cup of tea. Julie's petulance could last for weeks. 'Please give her a message from me that I expect her to make contact with Norman about the job and please don't dilute what I'm saying. Sorry, Barry, I need you to know I'm bloody pee'd off.'

Ivy put down the phone and unclenched her fist. The flower she had crushed stained the palm of her hand. She looked up. Geraldine was standing in the doorway of her room with the brew and a saucer with two rusks. She put them on the sideboard and came and gave her mother a hug.

‘Mom, it’s ok. My sister is very tedious on occasions and she presses all your buttons. You can’t let her be rude and that’s cool because you’re standing up to her now. But really, we’re actually a pretty normal family, and all individuals.’ She handed her mother the tea.

‘Thank you, my darling. This is just what I need. It’s hard for me. I so want her to be successful. I want her to take the job. I feel like shaking some sense into her.’

‘Why, mom?’

‘Pardon?’

‘Why’s Norman done this? From the moment you told us about it, I’ve wondered. You two split up and Norman, who spent years antagonizing Julie, finds her a dream opportunity.’

‘I don’t know. That sums up all I love and am irritated about him. His unpredictability was both a pain in the neck and an utter turn-on. It was wonderful living with someone who at any moment could produce the unexpected, with great panache, and more often than not he did.’

‘You miss him, don’t you?’

‘I do, terribly.’

‘Mom.’ She took the tea from Ivy’s hand and hugged her again. ‘I’m sure you two will work it out.’ She handed it back.

‘Thanks, darling.’ Ivy picked up a rusk and dunked it in the cup. ‘I can’t just go back to the way things were. I don’t want to live in the seventies any longer. I need to stamp my personality on my home. I don’t know how to do that. I resent Norman for my inability to stand up to him. If I could think of a way through the impasse I’d be prepared to try it. I’m sure Norman is struggling terribly at the moment. I feel immensely tender towards him. It’s not nice being betrayed. I’ve been pretty sharp, if not a little nasty. He calls it lashing out.’ Ivy paused, wondering if she was not being unfair to both her girls for sharing her feelings this way with Geraldine. ‘I wonder if I’m taking that frustration out on Julie?’

‘Mom!’ Her youngest by forty-seven minutes couldn’t contain herself. ‘What did you always say to me? “Don’t conflate issues”, because that is exactly what you’re

doing. Don't think Alec and I don't notice. We're making our way in the world and you're still supporting Julie. That's ok. I don't think Alec resents it and neither do I, at all. But mom, it's very irritating when she throws her toys out the cot and blames everyone but herself. We love her, mom, but she needs a rocket up her arse. I am so pleased you are standing up to her. It's for her own good.'

'Sorry, love, I don't mean to discriminate. Everything is just overwhelming at the moment.'

Geraldine knew from her many sale-training sessions that now was the time not to say anything. The two women sipped tea and eventually Ivy found her anxieties beginning to dissipate. Finally she broke the silence.

'I don't really support Julie, but I do help with things. She hasn't worked for six months. It's not for want of trying. She works so hard.'

'Mom, mom, listen to me. It's for want of *not* trying. I could've got her a job at my company. But that's not good enough. She squats discontentedly in that place in Obs. I also want what's best. But we all tippy-toe around her. What gets up my nose are the mythologies. One of the myths in our family is that Julie is hard done by. If she doesn't at least take up Norman's offer and go and see the farmers, and you fork out her rent this month, you just perpetuate the situation.'

'Geraldine, you're beating me up about this. Can we let it go now? I said to Julie I'd be supportive till she found stability. I can't not be there for her.'

'Sorry, mom. Let's leave it that I don't understand. I just don't understand why you can't listen to the same advice you'd give any other mother whose daughter was acting out.'

When Geraldine had left the room, Ivy picked up one of the journals and began to make some small sketches of objects without lifting her pencil off the page. She remembered a project about which Norman had enthused from his college days. He said the project was called Debris of a Meal. The 'brief' had instructed the students to host a dinner party. When the guests had gone, they were to draw the 'remains', the dirty dishes in the sink, perhaps the mess on the table, anything that reflected the detritus of a good time. One of the students had separated his drawing paper into two segments. On the left hand side he'd drawn an empty room with a table and a single stool. On the centre of the table was a plate with a roll of sausage. Nothing else. On the right hand side of his composition was the same room, the same table, the same plate,

in the same grey HB tone. It must have taken him hours and hours. The only difference between the two images was the plate: on the right was just half the roll of sausage. Norman had said it was the saddest picture he'd ever seen. For the first time, Ivy thought she finally understood what he meant.

Chapter 27

There is no in-between. Flash fry calamari for less than a couple of minutes to make it tender or let it bubble away in a stew for more than two hours, otherwise you might as well cook a tennis ball.

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 26/09/2009

Shame on you, Norman, a calamari has the same intelligence as a cat.

Posted by Squidgy from Benoni 30/09/2009

Barry came into the living room, where Julie sat staring morosely out the window.

‘That was Ivy. I think you and I need to chat.’ She didn’t even bother to look around. ‘Come, I’ll take us to breakfast and we can have eggs and coffee and just see if we can restore some perspective on all this.’

‘I’ve got absolutely nothing to say. I don’t need Norman or his fucking job. I don’t need my mother, either. How dare she insult me at the restaurant, in front of the whole family, too? All I did was offer her a place to stay when she fucked up with her boyfriend.’

‘Hang on.’ Barry put his arm around her. Julie pulled away in an exaggerated fashion.

‘Piss off.’

‘Hey. I’m on your side, remember.’

‘Then behave like you are. I’m going for a walk.’

‘That’ll do us both good.’

‘What is it about *I’m* going for a walk that you don’t understand? *I’m* going for a walk, not *we’re* going for a walk.’

Barry stood, watching her find her pepper spray, brush her hair and tie it into a ponytail, slam the door and leave. He walked into the kitchen. The sink was piled with dishes; there was food and jam on the surfaces. He went into their bedroom. The bed was unmade. Laundry was in the bucket, clothes were not hung up and old cups were next to the bed and on Julie’s dresser.

‘Can’t she even clean up?’ He picked up his jeans from the floor and tossed them on the bed.

Barry looked in the drawers of their desk. He found a highlighting pen and took a page of blank paper from the printer. He only planned to get going mid-morning. He

had an appointment with a woman, a certain Gabriella Sloane, at eleven-thirty but the petulance of the last little while had changed his plans. He wrote quickly and in large capitals.

JULIE I'M ALSO PISSED OFF.

PLACE IS A FUCKING, he crossed out fucking, TIP. I'M NOT CLEANING UP. I'M OFF TO WORK! GO AND SEE ABOUT THE JOB. LEAST YOU CAN DO.

B

He popped the paper down on the computer keyboard and walked out, taking the street map with him.

University of Cape Town

Chapter 28

*Rumpole's wife, Hilda, could boil a cabbage into submission.
Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 26/09/2009*

Julie let herself into the house more agitated than when she had left it. The walk had merely served as a catalyst to replay the unfairness of the universe over and over in her mind. She'd found a café and ordered a coffee, only to discover that someone else had filled out the crossword puzzle in the newspaper provided for patrons. Then she'd ordered hot milk and the waiter had brought cold. She was irritated with herself because she didn't complain. Frustration piled on exasperation.

Firstly she saw the note on the computer keyboard and scrunched it into a ball. Secondly the house *was* an overwhelming tip. Thirdly, as she sat on the loo relieving the pressure caused by the latte, she tried to throw the note into the bathroom waste-paper bin. It hit the rim and bounced away. Finding she had less control of the emotional environment than usual, was a vulnerability she hadn't experienced much before. She pulled the toilet paper with exaggerated force. The loo roll spun, discharging several meters of single ply around her feet. She kicked angrily and grabbed the strip at the roll holder and pulled again. It didn't tear but spun again, discharging more of the same.

'Fuuuuuuuuuuuck.' Julie burst into tears.

Her email inbox was the final straw.

From: norman@novelcuisine.co.za

To: julielynch@executeideas.co.za

Dear Julie

Hope this finds you well.

I spoke to Ivy the other day. I've recommended you for a job running the PR side to a wine estate just outside of Stellenbosch. I've not heard from you and I guess it has something to do with the present status quo that exists between

Ivy and myself. I also suspect our past relationship, which could be described as adversarial at times, may also have contributed to you not wanting to pursue the offer.

I'm sorry we didn't find a way to be more kindly disposed towards each other. I am also sorry if I rattled your cage on many an occasion. I always enjoyed the family around the table. I miss that sense of family, I really do. I took a less than adult pleasure in being controversial. It wasn't personal but I guess you found it at times humiliating. I'm also sorry we became entrenched behind positions that seemed at the time insurmountable. What a pity. I would however ask you to reconsider, as I think you would be perfect for the job.

I drive over tomorrow to hand in my recommendations and, if accepted, you would be automatically offered a trial position. I've also suggested a salary, but that would in essence be a negotiation between the estate and yourself. Why, you may ask? It's because I believe you would blossom in the environment, away from the status quo here in Cape Town, and prove a huge asset to the business. I also think you deserve to earn some 'proper' money. The work would be demanding but you would soon be in a position to impose your personality, to the benefit of the whole project.

Should you reconsider I would need to brief you. Either we must meet later today or perhaps you could drive out with me tomorrow and we could chat in the car going over there.

Love

Norman

Chapter 29

*The one way to get thin is to re-establish a purpose in life.
Cyril Connolly*

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 26/09/2009

Connolly also said that the reward of art is not fame or fortune but intoxication: that's why so many bad artists are unable to give it up.

Posted by Jacques Michelin 26/09/2009

Norman, nuzzling in a drowsy fashion into Gabriella's back, was suddenly startled into full consciousness.

'Norman, I suspect waking up with you is an experience for which not many women would volunteer themselves.'

'I, I beg your pardon? What do you mean by that?'

'Don't take it personally, but most women wouldn't have the steely core, to use your word, necessary to face these black walls.'

'What a thing to say. This is outrageous.'

'No, sweet thing, this colour is outrageous. It has to go.'

Norman rolled onto his back and folded his arms.

'Don't be a drama queen, Mr Frye. You have spent the better part of twenty minutes knocking at the back door and just as I was beginning to feel delightfully turned on, my eyes open and I discover I am being kept prisoner by Siraj-ud-Daulah.'

'What?'

'The Nawab of Bengal.'

'Who?'

'It's too early for a history lesson, Norman. Suffice to say I've not got the constitution to wake up in the black hole of Calcutta or become the one hundred and twenty-fourth victim to have died of suffocation there.'

'I can't listen to this shit. I'm going to make coffee.'

'Up on the wrong side of the bed now are we?'

Her words followed him down the passage.

Gabriella cosseted herself under the covers. She gave Norman top marks for his taste in bedding. Wonderful white combed cotton bed linen encasing the most luxurious

goose down duvet and pillows. ‘A woman could get used to this, but not to this room.’ She wondered how Ivy had nested here. For a moment she felt like a voyeur. Apart from a built-in cupboard there was a kidney shaped birds-eye maple Art Deco dressing table supporting a matching mirror. To the left of that was a walnut four drawer Chippendale chest of drawers that Gabriella presumed must belong to Ivy. There was nothing else in the house that remotely resembled the late eighteenth century. She was very tempted to take a look through the drawers. There was a G-Plan Danish chair, no doubt Norman’s, and a Bush portable radio with a big red round tuning dial on top of it. The bed itself was a large red leather platform, supported by six ball and claw legs, which acted as a giant tray for the mattress. A white island on a red sea framed against a huge red curvaceous headboard. Directly opposite was a reproduction of a large Andy Warhol portrait of Marilyn Monroe.

Gracing two double-decker artist palette-shaped bedside tables were lamps that suspended green, avocado pear shades from long, thin, tapering curved tubes. Lastly was a chrome room divider. To an untrained eye this was but a screen whose motifs appeared to resemble aluminium lollipops. To the kitsch aficionado, these were the pièce de résistance. Inside each pop was a small bulb and with a flick of a switch they would glow alternatively green and orange.

Norman returned from the kitchen in a lighter frame of mind. He rationalized that Gabriella was just trying to be funny. In each hand he held a tray of breakfast.

‘Sit up.’

‘Oh Norman, how lovely. You seemed to be taking your time. Now I know why.’ She sat up. ‘Won’t you find me a top, please?’

Norman fished in the cupboard and pulled out a T-shirt. She could not help noticing several of Ivy’s clothes hanging on the rail. Norman quickly closed the door.

‘Here we are.’

‘Thanks.’

He placed the tray before her. Scrambled eggs, toast and tea with proper English marmalade. He’d placed a flower next to the plate. Gabriella blocked from her mind the well pressed white pants and colourful shirts and determined to enjoy Norman’s affectionately presented fare. He hopped in beside her.

‘Bon appétit.’

They ate in silence. When they'd finished, Gabriella leaned over and put her tray on the floor with one of her pillows and burrowed back under the down.

'Norman, that was a delicious breakfast, thank you. Nicest scrambled eggs I've ever tasted.'

'My pleasure. Real butter does the trick, and a dash of cream.'

'God, Norman, I'm going to get huge.'

'Huge sounds good. Heard of a fellow once who married this extraordinarily large woman. Married life suited her. She shed pounds and pounds, and after a few months was positively svelte-like. Her husband apparently became more and more morose. When questioned he complained bitterly, "She's half the woman I married."'

'Don't get fancy ideas for me.'

'You're looking so good cuddled under there I'm not sure whether to find the jump leads or just keep you prisoner here for the day.'

'Sorry, cannot do prisoners, as enticing as that sounds. I have a young man coming this morning to fix my computer. It keeps freezing. If you don't snuggle down, lad, so will you.' Norman did as he was told.

'What's your day look like?' Gabriella asked.

'I need to clear my correspondence and finish my report. I've my book.'

'And our script.'

'And our script, and most probably have to meet with Ivy's daughter to discuss the job with her.'

'Oh yes, meet with Ivy's daughter.' She stared at the room divider.

'Let it go, please.'

'Sorry, I *am* trying. I suddenly feel like I'm an intruder and a bit cheapened.'

'Please don't.' The mood swings felt like a round-a-bout ride. They made him giddy. 'It's the clothes, isn't it? She's only just moved out. She's still looking for a place of her own.'

'Is she?'

'Come on, of course she is.'

'Whose bed have we slept in, Norman?'

'That's not on.'

'I seem to be constantly saying the wrong thing.'

'It's my bed, her mattress.' His voice was getting crispy.

'I didn't need to hear that.'

‘You asked, for heaven’s sake.’

‘Ok, when is she collecting her stuff and what stuff is she collecting? At the very least she could have taken her clothes, and all her toiletries, and her bloody jewellery.’

Ivy’s dressing table still displayed a few bottles of eau de toilette and some skin creams and a string of fresh water pearls hanging off the side of the mirror. ‘If her arrangements are such it wasn’t possible to take everything, then why haven’t you put them in a box or her drawers, especially as you knew I was coming. Is that her chest of drawers?’ Gabriella pointed to the Chippendale.

‘Yes. Ok, I’ll meet with her.’

‘About what? Phone her up and tell her to collect her shit. She’s either moved out or she hasn’t. This isn’t an estate you’re winding up, Norman. Her move is not governed by the law of probate.’

‘And it’s not governed by the laws of Narnia either. There is no fucking door on the other side of Ivy’s shirts.’ Norman got up and opened the cupboard. ‘See? Nothing. You want them out, you can have them out.’

He lifted the coat hangers off the rail and was about to fling the garments onto the floor, but was suddenly enveloped by Ivy’s presence. The familiarity of the cloth, a lingering scent, the images of her standing in her underwear, just where he was now, grappling with the great decision of the day, what ‘top’ with what ‘bottoms’? His hands squeezed the fabric for a few seconds and, suppressing an overwhelming desire to bring them to his face, he slowly put the outfits back.

‘Just clothes, Gabriella, give me a break.’

Chapter 30

I remember reading Jack Dempsey's autobiography. The day of his first title fight he ate bananas before the weigh-in to make him look heavier and less of a mismatch. Dempsey had it easy. Today I made scrambled eggs. I should have chosen brandied eggnog instead.

Posted By Fryed – Medium Rare 26/09/2009

Norman picked Trotsky up from his cage and put him on the table to feed him a little salad left over from the evening before. He was a rather dapper little creature with two orange patches over his head and eyes which made him look like he was wearing sunglasses. From the neck down he was completely white except for his pink tail. Norman put him into his gown pocket.

‘Just you and me, at last.’

Norman tidied out the cage and changed the water. The domestics that morning seemed endless. Gabriella had finally been dispatched. Ivy must have left with the jump leads in her car, so the AA were called and the battery replaced. The cooking and tableware from dinner and breakfast was safely showering in the belly of Merlin. The pecking order in Norman's kitchen was topped by the dishwasher; far and away the alpha appliance in the warren. He had a friend who had named hers ‘Babe’. He had always believed that to be an affectation until he bought his own. It was love at the first press of a button. As it wove its magic, Merlin seemed apposite

Finally Norman got around to the computer. Once he'd read through the report he opened his emails.

From: julielynch@executeideas.co.za

To: norman@novelcuisine.co.za

Norman you are so pathetic. Just keep your grovelling regrets about us to yourself. I don't *need* or *want* your job. Please don't contact me again and steer away from my mother, she doesn't need you either.

Julie.

‘Phew, Trotsky old chap, here’s a thing. Talk about a one person lynch mob.’

From: norman@novelcuisine.co.za

To: julielynch@executeideas.co.za

Cc: tellivyall@wordpress.com

Dear Julie

Mea culpa. Suit yourself. I suspect your rage has less to do with me than the enormous chip you carry upon your shoulder. I hope one day you discover you cannot fashion the world entirely to your liking. I hope too that you one day you realize just how appallingly badly you have treated your mother with your passive aggressive rages.

Norman.

His finger hovered over the ‘send’ button. He finally saved it to ‘drafts’. Norman looked at his watch. There was still time for a run before setting out to the winelands and forty minutes on the road might just quell some of the resentments generated by Julie’s reply. He suspected wiser counsel would be to just let go of it all. Say nothing more. Delete the letter. He put on his running shoes, slipped his rat into its cage and prepared to set off to jog around Maynardville.

‘Trotsky, to circumnavigate an outdoor theatre seems to me to carry a certain symbolic currency. What say you?’

When he returned he opened his letter to Julie and reread it.

‘Ag, what the hell!’ Against his more considered judgment, he pressed ‘send’.

Two replies soon appeared.

From: tellivyall@wordpress.com

To: norman@novelcuisine.co.za

Norman,

I can't tell you how I feel you have kicked me in the stomach. Julie is going through a really frustrating period in her life and she, I'm sure, will readily admit she's not an easy person at times. Both she and I struggle with that. You also know that I really wanted her to at least apply for the position. You, in this instance, could have behaved in an adult fashion. Instead of keeping the door open, you have simply slapped down whatever self-esteem she's still holding on to. I am deeply disappointed when kindness would have been a more appropriate adult response. Finally, I take exception to you telling Julie she has treated me badly, when over the years you have so undermined her. I am so proud of my daughter for standing up to you at last. Maybe that is more valuable than the financial rewards of the job she has turned down.

From: julielynch@executeideas.co.za

To: norman@novelcuisine.co.za

CC: tellivall@wordpress.com

Norman

I don't know why you persist in writing to me. What is it about leaving me alone you're not getting? Please stop harassing me. You have been nothing but a bully. I am so proud of my mother for leaving you at last. It always takes courage to leave an abusive situation. Hopefully she can pick up the pieces and find someone who will afford her the value she deserves.

Julie.

From: Norman@novelcuisine.co.za

To: tellivall@wordpress.com

Dear Ivy

What started out as a small gesture on my part to grab an opportunity I saw for your daughter has turned into you both doing a hatchet job on me. Julie does not want the position, resents my good intentions and has made that abundantly clear. Common sense seems one of the many casualties in all this.

It's a pity. Without being defensive maybe you should read the very loving and contrite letter I sent her when I explained the job. I thought I had cleared the air. So be it.

I think it's time you collected the rest of your things. I know there are many shared possessions we accumulated over the years but it shouldn't be difficult to come to an equitable sharing. As much as your leaving broke my heart, one cannot stop anyone from doing what he or she must. I cannot stop you. I wish you the happiness you evidently could not get from me. I should have read the warning signs after that meal in Todi.

Finally, I really hope Julie one day does stop demanding the world owes her a living. I further hope she charts a worthwhile career.

Fools rushing in where angels fear, etc.

N

University of Cape Town

Chapter 31

*The trick to making an asparagus omelette lies in adding grated Parmesan cheese. Nothing else will possibly do.
Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 26/09/2009*

Ivy pressed the sleep button and closed her laptop. She felt drained and battered and deeply resentful of everything and everyone.

‘How dare you, Norman?’ The fact there might be a little truth in what he said gave him no right to ‘round’ on Julie the way he had. She was also grateful she was alone in the house. The last thing she wanted was to face her other daughter. She wouldn’t have understood. Ivy moved to the bedside table.

‘Todi? Why did Norman have to be so low and dredge up Todi?’ She pulled off some of the dead blooms from the flowers Geraldine had arranged in her room.

‘You poor things. I’m constantly pulling bits from you. Ah well, that’s life, bit like mine.’

Italy was one of their happier times, apart from Todi. She went to the cupboard and took out the journal, and found the page marked

An old traditional Umbrian dish.

Palombe alla Ghiotta – wild pigeons stewed in red wine.

3 wild pigeons, heads and feet on preferably

1lt red wine...

As she read the recipe, the meal came back to her. She felt hungry and swallowed at the thought of it while she fished in the table drawer for a piece of nougat she had put away. *Slow, roasted and rich in garlic and rosemary, sage, anchovies, prosciutto, olive oil and capers.*

They’d spent three months walking through Italy’s Umbrian and Tuscan hills. Assisi, Arezzo, Perugia, Sansepolcro.

‘Yes, Norman, we both remember Todi, don’t we?’ She sat down on the bed. Tears welled in her eyes and a drop fell on the page, smudging the ink. Norman always wrote with a fountain pen. The ancient town of Todi was code for Norman at his consummate worst.

‘And not a particularly hot Todi either.’ She forced a smile at her own joke. ‘So where did it start?’ She found a tissue and blotted the page. ‘Damn it.’ She blotted her eyes as well. ‘That’s the question, isn’t it?’

The question from *that* night was as clear as if preserved in aspic.

‘They are completely wrapped up in themselves, aren’t they, Norman? I wonder when last you were so amorous with me?’

The young couple sitting opposite were in their mid-twenties. He was resplendent in a shock of tightly curled black hair and was dressed in white, save for a crimson collar on his jacket. She was colour coded in a crimson dress with a splash of white trim and a white belt that accentuated a very slender waist. Eating mostly with their fingers, the lovers seemed to fill the room with an intoxicated presence. They were animated, talking in whispers one moment, laughing and babbling to large gestures the next. Occasionally he would kiss her fingertips or lean across the table to touch her lips. He sometimes underlined a moment of intimacy by brushing back a strand of her hair or caressing her cheek. She no doubt felt the most prized and beautiful creature in the universe as he swirled and savoured her like a splash of cognac in a balloon glass.

Ivy and Norman were waiting for their order, passing the time by breaking heavily crusted bread and dipping it in olive oil and balsamic vinegar. This they washed down with a local red wine.

‘It’s all Mills and Boon.’ Norman was flippant. ‘If that’s what you want, I’ll saddle the charger.’

‘Hardly Mills and Boon. If only one could bottle such enchantments.’

‘Are you implying *this* bottle is losing some of his appeal?’ He tried giving the moment a lighter touch.

‘Perhaps where once was Opium there is now lavender water.’

‘Phew, from whence does that poke its bitter head?’ Norman dropped his bread onto his plate. ‘You *have* a way with words.’

They’d been based in Todi for a week. One particularly lovely spring day saw them walking amongst the green hills collecting wild asparagus. It was Norman’s idea to use the asparagus as a filling for traditional Italian omelettes or frittata but instead, by the time they returned, they were too weary to cook and so chose the convenience and

pleasure of a homely restaurant. They found one just off the Piazza del Popolo and were soon perusing a menu under the guidance of the chef himself.

‘People make pilgrimage to eat my *palombe*. You’ll never forget me!’ The master of the kitchen, one Colombano, warmed to his theme. The more he expanded upon his menu, the more he gave lie to the stereotype that all Umbrians were genetically modest. ‘You tell your children one day of the glories of ancient Renaissance cooking. Giotto di Bondone and Fra Filippo Lippi were devout, but such devotion to God and the arts must have been nourished by Signora Bondone or Signora Lippi’s home cooking. These recipes are handed down the generations. I continue the noble tradition. My *palombe* is unforgettable.’

It was difficult, after such an introduction to his culinary skills, to order the braised rabbit with leeks, Norman’s first choice, or the warm carpaccio of veal with black truffles and sautéed rapini, Ivy’s preference. They deferred to the speciality of the house.

‘Look, Norman they’re also having the pigeon.’ Ivy was delighted.

‘Looks good. Maybe Colombano’s *pièce de résistance* matches his claims.’

Norman’s prediction proved correct.

‘It’s the aroma of the rosemary and sage that’s quite intoxicating,’ said Norman as he took the meat off a small bone.

‘It could also be the wine.’ Ivy was more practical.

The day’s exercise and two shared bottles of local red, Scacciadiavoli, which literally translated means ‘cast out devils’, heightened Norman’s generosity as well as his appalling sense of timing. He called over a waiter and offered him a line or two of Catullus.

‘Lesbia said she’d love not anyone but me.

Not if Jupiter came asking or so it seems

But the words of a woman spoken in desire

Should be written on wind and running streams.’

‘Pardon, signor?’ Tourists were an odd bunch.

‘Send the young lovers each a Frangelico.’ Norman waved a fork expansively in their direction.

By the time the liqueur arrived at their table, the lovers’ need for conversation had gone. Their wine glasses, raised in a toast to pleasures yet to come, remained at

their mouths. Slowly, ever so slowly, her tongue hovered at the rim and then, like a sentry in the last minutes of the watch, made a slow final round.

The waiter banged the liqueurs on the table and nodded in Norman's direction, who produced a conspiratorial wink. For a second or so the young man locked eyes with him with the idea of making this personal, but the stakes were too low. Instead, with a measured look and exaggerated wink of his own, he turned to Ivy.

'Grazie. He ees yours?'

She closed her eyes in mortification. When she opened them, he'd turned back to his companion. The answer to his question hovered in the space between their tables and eventually followed them back to their accommodation and into the bedroom, now dense with the smell of wild asparagus.

Later they began to make love. At some point Ivy turned her head to one side.

'Would you mind if we stopped, Norman?'

'That's ok. No desire tonight?'

'Nor wind and running streams.'

Chapter 32

Make a resolution to experiment with different tastes and textures. Try, for example, a fish sauce with the delicacy of cucumber offset by the panache and bite of ginger.

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 26/09/2009

In Australia I had a beets-and-egg topping on my burger pattie... or is that an experiment too far? I'm partial to a little beeting if you're in my neck of the kitchen so to speak, Norman.

Posted by JuicyLucy 27/09/2009

You're relentless, JuicyLucy.

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 27/09/2009

And one day you'll relent.

Posted by JuicyLucy 27/09/2009

Gabriella smiled at the technician with his creased and earnest eyebrows. Barry, a computer boffin whose flyer she had found in her post box, advertised himself as *techno topped and tailed*, and was giving her computer the kind of attention an epidemiologist might give a microscope having delighted upon an unknown strain of E.coli. His hair needed a spot of grooming and a Tintin-like tuft stuck up above his forehead. His long elegant nose made his face, at a certain angle, appear to resemble a paintbrush.

‘Would you like a cup of tea while you work, Barry?’ Gabriella set down a tray on her office desk. ‘I’ve rather delicious biscuits here if you would care for one.’

‘Yes, please, great. I skipped breakfast this morning.’

‘What’s the problem?’

‘I think the start up disc needs to be repaired. Mrs. Sloane, do you have your installation disc?’

‘Everything I have around computers and software is in here.’ Gabriella opened a drawer and waved her hand across the contents. She poured the tea and handed the cup over. ‘I’ll leave you to it. Give me a call if you need anything.’

Twenty or some minutes later Barry wandered through to find her.

‘Mrs. Sloane, I’m going to have to uninstall all your third-party hardware

upgrades and re-install them one by one till I find the one that is causing the freezing. I suspect the problem lies with them.'

'That sounds intimidating. What are they, and how much am I in for?'

'Oh, they're your random access memory or RAM microprocessor upgrade cards and your Peripheral Component Interface or PCI cards. That sort of thing. If you can then use the computer without them, *quad erat demonstrandum*. Price – if that's the prob, just the callout fee.'

'*Quad erat* indeed.' Gabriella paused, her face mirroring the gravity Barry was giving his diagnosis. 'Non illigitimus carborundum, or is it illigitimi, I always forget?'

'I beg your pardon?' Barry looked genuinely puzzled. Gabriella's face gave no hint she might be gently taking the Mickey out of him.

'Don't let the bastards grind you down. Carry on, Barry, I'm in your hands'

'I've reinstalled Mac OS X. You're up and running.'

'Oh, let's see.' Gabriella sat down in front of the computer and opened and closed some of her programmes before clicking her e-mail. Barry hovered proudly behind her. A letter from norman@novelcuisine.co.za was waiting patiently in her 'Inbox'. It was rather grandly headed, in bold font, '**Lynch mob piss dry ice over job.**'

Barry might have been slow to recognise an aphorism in parodied Latin but was certainly able to put norman@novelcuisine.co.za together with Lynch.

'Is that by any chance Norman Frye? It reads like something he'd write.'

'Do you make a habit of noticing people's mail?' Gabriella said by way of a mild reproach, masking a rising sense of embarrassment that there was a connection between the Lynches and him.

'I never usually do, but when the surname of my partner and her mother pops up onto the computer I've just repaired, it's, um, hard to avoid.'

'You're referring to Ivy Lynch and the triplets?' She swivelled around in her chair.

Barry nodded but continued to stare at the screen, avoiding Gabriella's eyes.

'What a small world. And are you involved with Geraldine? Alec? No? Then it must be Julie.'

'Yes. We're living together.'

'They're a nice family.'

‘So you know them?’

‘I met Ivy several years ago. I haven’t seen her or her children for some time.’
In her own mind she’d yet to decide how to deal with this strange coincidence.

‘Norman Frye has not exactly endeared himself to the family.’ His face began to get flushed as he offered his unsolicited opinion. ‘Jerk!’

‘How odd. That doesn’t sound like the Norman I know.’ Gabriella thought to pour a little oil on discordant waters. She indicated him to a chair across from her.

‘It’s the Norman I know.’ Barry sat down. ‘Look at the e-mail. What a thing to say, piss dry ice.’ He hissed the words through his teeth.

‘We don’t know the content of the letter now, do we? We surely can’t judge Norman on the title.’ Gabriella turned the screen slightly away from Barry and opened the letter. She skimmed through it.

‘I know Norman,’ Barry filled the brief silence, ‘I’m sure he’s being as cutting as he always is.’ Barry bent his fingers back, clicking each in turn. ‘I suppose you know Ivy’s left him. For the better of all concerned, you can be sure.’

‘Barry,’ Gabriella continued the peacemaker’s role, ‘I think Norman’s a little disappointed and a little hurt. Yes, I know he and Ivy are separated. I’m a good friend of Norman’s. I also know Norman found a great job for Julie and that Ivy was keen for her to follow up on it. I think we’d call what he offered Julie, a great opportunity.’

Barry clicked the last two fingers on his hand, stood up and sat down. ‘He manages to fucking ruin anything that comes near him. He’s certainly screwing my life around. He’s a pathetic little man.’

‘Goodness, we’re angry.’

‘I am.’ The fight that morning with Julie, the restaurant meal with the family, the telephone call from Ivy, their financial situation all suddenly welled up in the young man.

‘Barry, you know nothing about Norman and me. I’m tempted to ask you to leave now because I don’t like being abused with this sort of inappropriate outburst. I’m also the paying client.’ She picked up Barry’s cup and side plate. ‘I’m going to put the kettle on and make us another cup of tea and we can clear the air. It’s no good you going back home and feeding more innuendo and gossip into an already difficult situation. Here, read the letter. I just have. There’s nothing personal.’

Gabriella turned the computer screen toward Barry and left the room.

From: norman@novelcuisine.co.za

To: sloane.ranger@movienet.com

Stop Press:

Mr. Norman Frye, of Thomas Road, Kenilworth, after a flurry of correspondences, was today executed for high crimes and misdemeanours perpetrated against Princess and Lady Lynch.

Good intentions not a mitigating factor and only added to the seriousness of the charge sheet.

Gabriella, all v tedious. Wrote reconciliatory letter. Got back to a flood of vitriol.

Blah, blah. Big mistake to write back to J telling her she had a chip on her shoulder. Ivy proud of her daughter for standing up to me. Phew!

I have asked Ivy to collect her things ASAP.

I am leaving at two-thirty for Stellenbosch. Why don't you come along and we can have an early supper and enjoy the country. Phone me at lunchtime or when your technician has gone.

Love

N

He read it again.

Gabriella came into the study with the tea. 'Ok, Barry, let's talk about it.'

She poured in silence and handed the cup over.

'I don't know what there is to talk about and I don't know why I stayed. I have other things to attend to.'

'That's ok, you don't have to stay. How much do I owe you?'

Strangely, Barry didn't get up to leave. There was a yellow Corgi Citroen 2 CV6 on the table to his right, which he lifted onto the mouse pad and, staring absentmindedly at the screen, he moved the car up, down and across the mousepad.

'How do you know Norman?'

'Old art school chums.'

‘He was at art school?’

‘A very fine interior designer. Graduated as top student, but food has always been his first love. If you’ve ever sat around his table, you can consider yourself quite fortunate. He actually is a great chef. In a world where labels like that are a dime a dozen, I believe it to be true.’ Even as she said it, she wondered from where she’d dredged the dime a dozen expression.

‘He always served very tasty food, I must admit.’ The CV6 was now driving in circles around the pad.

‘Often quite unappreciated and a little vilified.’ Gabriella brought to mind some of Norman’s blogs.

‘He’s always cooked to make a point, that’s my experience.’

‘I know, Barry, Norman often does things to get a rise if he knows he can get one. The adult way to deal with it is not to take it on. Charm and appreciation are very powerful weapons.’

‘I’d best be going, Mrs. Sloane.’ Barry finally got up and stayed on his feet. He handed her the car. ‘Sorry.’ He seemed for the first time to notice the rooftop garden and stepped through the French doors. ‘This’s a really nice view.’

‘Come and sit on my contemplation bench and look at the mountain and then ask me exactly what it is you really want to know.’ Gabriella brushed past the basil and sat down, tapping the vacant part of the bench next to her. She picked a white crepe flower and sniffed it. ‘Here, I won’t bite you.’

‘I’d best be going. Sorry if I spoke badly of Norman. Are you and Norman, you know, an item?’ Barry seemed to hover in no man’s land between the French doors and the Brazilian cherry slat-back bench.

‘Oh, is that what it was? A modern expression.’ Gabriella lifted one leg over the other and clasped her top knee. ‘We’re working on it.’

After an awkward silence, Gabriella went back inside and settled her account via an internet transfer. Barry took his leave and, after sitting in his car for several minutes trying to make sense of the bewildering events of the last couple of hours, took out his cell phone and phoned Julie.

‘Hello Julie.’ He was slightly out of breath in his excitement. ‘Guess what?’

‘Hello Barry.’

‘You won’t believe this, but that woman whose computer I repaired today, her name is Gabriella...’

‘What, Barry, I’m busy.’

‘She and Norman are...’ He got no further.

‘Norman? You phone me to talk about Norman? I’m simply not interested. You write me a crude note telling me you are sick and tired and walk out. You and Norman can actually fuck off.’

‘But...’

‘I said I’m busy. Speak to me if you have something interesting to say.’

Barry’s phone went dead.

‘Um, I was going to tell you,’ said Barry to his mobile’s wallpaper, ‘that your mom’s ex has a new girlfriend, and I don’t think she knows. And if you’d been less pissed off with the world in general, you might have read Norman’s job offer for what it was. A job offer, actually.’

Barry then scrolled through his contact list and found Geraldine’s number. He pressed dial and put the phone onto ‘speaker’.

‘Hi, Barry.’ Geraldine’s cheery voice sparkled over the ether. ‘To what do I owe the pleasure?’

‘Hello, Geraldine. I was half hoping I could talk for a few minutes.’

‘Is everything ok?’

‘I suppose, I just hoped for a bit of advice and I guess I shouldn’t ask.’

‘Then why did you phone, if you can’t talk?’ Barry heard her chuckle. ‘Where are you calling from? You’re echoing. You’re not on the loo are you?’

‘In my car, speaker-phone, in town. I shouldn’t actually be speaking to you, because if Julie knew she’d freak.’

‘Ha. I detect that you’ve had a row with my sister and, at a guess, you haven’t had a proper one before. That’s because you’ve towed the line and obeyed at all times.’ There was a loud clanging noise and a yell followed by a short monologue on motherhood and cats and the inserting of something somewhere with a complete disregard for normal human sensitivity.

‘Shit, Geraldine, where are you?’

‘In a factory in Paarden Eiland that does injection mouldings.’ Geraldine raised her voice to include everyone in the room. ‘I might add with my favourite administration officer, who buys all my office products.’ Flirting made her a fortune in

commission. 'He's unfortunately had a small crisis and can't take me to lunch as he'd promised. Bloody men. I'm being forsaken because he has a tiny ruptured part.' There appeared to be general merriment in the background and more shouting. 'If that's the best you can show me, I'm going out with Barry, the guy on the phone.' More laughter. 'Barry, they want to know who the hell's Barry. I'm not telling them. I'm almost finished up here. I'll phone you back in five and we can meet or just chat on the phone.'

Barry was irritated at himself for making the call. He was also irritated at the frivolity he'd encountered speaking to Geraldine, with a bunch of factory boys drooling over her charms. His irritation was further ratcheted up at the obvious comparisons between a morose Julie and her 'outgoing' sister. Finally he was irritated that Geraldine managed to read the reason for his call so accurately.

'Bugger! Those bloody Lynches piss me off.'

The Company Gardens is an historical park in the heart of Cape Town's central business district. When the Dutch first came to set up a victual station in 1652, Jan van Riebeeck, the first governor of the Cape, established a garden to supply green vegetables to Dutch East India Company merchant ships, sailing to the East Indies. The Gardens no longer produce food but still exist in the centre of the city. Parliament is situated on its grounds. It has wonderful exotic trees, rose and Japanese gardens, an aviary and a restaurant. Within its precincts is also a planetarium, the South African and Jewish museums, the National Art Gallery, National Library and a cathedral. Barry and Julie had decided to meet there, and they were strolling along one of its many paths, enjoying sandwiches and coffee.

'Barry, you can't mediate this. Don't be a dick-head.'

'I'm not trying to mediate anything. I think maybe someone should tell Ivy if she doesn't know.'

'I'm not talking about Ivy, whose circumstances, by the way, you can't mediate either.'

They walked passed a bin and Geraldine dropped her cup into it.

'That was *really* good. Best cappuccino I've had for ages. Thank you.'

'Yes, nice.'

‘Listen, Barry, you phoned for advice and now you’re reluctant to take it, but I’ll give it to you for what it’s worth. Fair exchange for the lunch.’

They found a bench under an oak tree and sat down in the company of two resident manic squirrels.

‘Life seems good for them!’

‘Yes, Barry, life is good for them. They, unlike most of us, spend their day chasing a nice bit of tail, but with no expectations or further demands when they get lucky and catch it.’

‘You are trivializing my circumstances, our circumstances.’

‘No, I’m not! Listen, my sister is a right royal pain in the butt sometimes and that’s because she gets her way, through being a pain in the butt.’

‘I’m not prepared to live with it.’ Barry sounded bitter.

‘Barry, you’ve had one lover’s tiff and she told you to fuck off for an hour. Yeeess and she’d be moooortified if she knew I knew, but here’s the thing.’ Geraldine ruffled his cowlick and giggled. ‘Develop a skin, Barry, a proper thick skin.’

‘I don’t want to live with a thick skin.’

‘Yes, she’s also being a dick-head for not taking up Norman’s job.’ She moved past the skin debate. ‘But she didn’t want it, because she doesn’t need it. She has you and mom to support her, because you do, and you can’t crucify her for turning it down. You’re fighting the wrong battle here, and it is soooohh not cool.’

‘You’re talking in riddles, Geraldine.’

‘Take out your phone now while we’re sitting here and Google a B&B. You’ve got my mother’s ex-boyfriend’s presumed new girlfriend’s money in your pocket. Take her away. Bonk her. Make her feel special.’

‘Bonk her? You reduce this to ‘bonk her’?’ Barry leaned forward and picked up an acorn and threw it at one of the squirrels. ‘There’s nothing wrong with our sex life.’

‘I wouldn’t know, Barry, but frankly you two look desperate every time I see you.’ She took his hand and locked her fingers in his. She felt him tense up but he wasn’t brave enough to pull away. ‘Listen, it’s the universal law of girls. We perform best when John Thomas is not another demand on us. My sister’s self-esteem at the mo, if you’ll excuse a sort of Norman-like analogy, can only be ranked alongside those who’ve missed the cut to get onto the Jerry Springer show.’ She let that sink in. ‘And don’t pull away from me.’ She gripped his hand harder. ‘It’s not your fault!’

‘This is rich, coming from you. You’re constantly bickering and shitting on her.’

‘Yes, because she’s so bloody annoying and self righteous, but she’s still my sister and I still want her to grow up and be happy and fulfil the potential she has. We share the same bloody DNA for God’s sake. We can bicker as much as we want.’

‘How will that help her get a job, me taking her off to a weekend away?’

‘It won’t, but it will make her feel less beat up and more receptive to you and to ideas. Barry, this isn’t rocket science.’

Geraldine sighed and let go of Barry’s hand. ‘Come on, let’s pop into the National Gallery and I’ll show you a lekker sculpture of triplets on a park bench. Help you understand our dynamics,’ said Geraldine laughing at a joke that just added more mystery to Barry’s already mystifying day. ‘I don’t have another appointment until three and you can tell me about Norman’s girlfriend.’

‘ Oh, ok, I’ve never been in there, actually.’

‘Well, it’s time you did, Barry boy.’

The two strolled up the rolling lawns and onto the piazza.



Chapter 33

A typical South African marinade for braai'd snoek is butter, a small tin of apricot jam and garlic... you gotta believe it. If it's well done it can be delicious...

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 28/09/2009

Olive-Jean popped her head out of her front door and summed up the weather.

‘Bloody hell. Sun’s about to go.’

It was a ritual all locals performed, especially in winter, for the sun drops out of sight in Kalk Bay far earlier than anywhere else on the peninsula. It may be visible for hours on the Atlantic seaboard, but from mid-afternoon on the False Bay side the mountain throws a damp shadow over the houses on its windward slopes. It is a rhythm infused into local life. Slowly the shadow crosses the main road, engulfs the businesses and restaurants, and from the harbour systematically blocks the warm light from yacht to yacht, fisherman to fisherman, until first the green and then the red lighthouses at the end of the piers succumb to the gloom.

‘Bloody hell.’

Her neighbour was also engaged in weather-observing activities. Her name was Doris, married to one of the few so-called coloured, as opposed to black or white, fishermen who somehow never moved from the village. Neighbour Doris was one of the constants in Olive-Jean’s life.

By the early eighties, many people of ‘coloured’ skin pigmentation, deemed unfit to stay there by government legislation, were forcefully removed from the area. Kalk Bay slowly became run down and slightly seedy. The harbour, still the hub around which life had turned, marked the end of a section of decline that followed the railway line from Retreat through Muizenberg and ended at the Brass Bell pub overlooking the moorings and the boats. In keeping with the surreal reality of South African life, those booted out had still commuted in every day from their relocations ten to fifteen kilometres away. They had still manned the fishing boats and dry dock, traded, worked as artisans, labourers or domestics, skinned fish or hustled the streets. Since the late nineties the estate agents and art dealers, antique storekeepers, potters and restaurateurs had sparked an economic revival of sorts. The house prices went

‘ballistic’, a term often used by Doris, and by the time legislation allowed for a return, the dispossessed just could not afford to do so.

‘Doris, let’s go and get some fish,’ Olive-Jean shouted into the southeast wind. ‘there is a boat just come in.’

Usually the fishing boats left early in the morning, returning at midday, but this vessel had not, and the presumption was that the fish were running in the bay and so it had stayed out much longer.

‘Ok, OJ. I’ll just put on my coat and doek.’ Doris was happy to get ‘outandabout’ even though the wind was gusting strongly. Olive-Jean was well known and liked amongst the locals. The women on the pier, who worked the catch after the boats came in, loved the banter that accompanied any OJ walkabout, a banter which at times became quite robust.

The two women met in the road and ambled down Boyes Drive and towards the harbour.

‘And how’s Mrs OJ Stanton today?’

‘I’m actually looking for a nice piece of kabeljou. I have a gentleman friend coming over tonight.’

‘A night for staying in. Ha. Attractive, I hope?’

‘We’re going to buy fish that have already been caught, Doris. There’s no need to go on a fishing expedition all of your own.’

‘I’ll take that as a yes?’ Doris warmed to her theme. ‘I was saying to my husband just the other day, there used to be a regular Thursday evening visitor but I’ve not seen his Cressida parked outside for quite a little while now. What happened to him?’

‘Doris, you are infuriating me with your prying.’ Olive-Jean quickened the pace. ‘I gave him his marching orders when he took me to the Olympia Café and proposed to me.’

‘Hey, OJ? I hope you ate your dinner first before turning the gentleman down.’

‘Bloody right about that! One cannot sit through injured male pride and the accompanying brave face without half a bottle of red wine and a square meal.’

‘Ag shame, OJ, how could you? Isn’t it time you looked for a life’s companion and settled down?’

‘Doris, if I want a companion, I take you with me to buy fish. I, as you know, married Ronald Frye; and never again.’

‘But you seemed so happy, I remember.’ Doris waited for her friend to repeat the old story.

‘Companions tend to let one down. I was a volunteer in Peru, helping with the 1970 Ancash earthquake and landslide when I got the news. I’m standing amidst the devastation, where seventy five thousand people are lying buried beneath all that rock and ice and snow, while Ronald is back at home lying on the couch, beneath a Scope magazine, no doubt, listening to rugby on the radio. So what does he do? Cans were different in those days, the ring pulled loose. He pulled up the ring to open his beer and dropped it into the can. Swallowed it he did, and choked to death. I could have killed him myself. Selfish bastard.’

‘It was a hard time, OJ. We all felt for you.’

‘I know, thank you.’ Olive-Jean was not to be diverted. ‘So where was I? “Jerry,” I said, “thanks, that is sweet of you but you know the rules.”’ They walked briskly across the road, Olive-Jean taking Doris’s hand. “I cannot possibly marry you.”’ She mimicked her sincerest voice.

‘And what did Jerry say?’

‘He told me he knew the rules, but over time had become addicted to me.’

Doris immediately recognised that Jerry, whoever he was, had chosen an unfortunate word.

‘Well, I said to him, I did, that there were support groups all over the city. I wasn’t going to be a substance for his abuse.’

‘Oh dear, OJ.’

‘He also displayed an appalling taste in engagement bands. He hauled out this vulgar thing that looked like a discothèque ball encrusted with glass chips. How well *did* he know me?’ Olive-Jean laughed loudly at an approaching joke. ‘A beer ring would have made a better impression, let me tell you.’

‘I suppose he meant well. Most probably thought of you as an old-fashioned girl.’

‘Well this old-fashioned girl told him to put that monstrous thing away. I tell you, there’s less vulgarity to be seen at a Mother City Queer Project or the Bronx over an entire year than he expected me to wear on my hand on a daily basis.’

Their chatter was broken off as the women reached the quay and busied themselves amongst the fish. Olive-Jean propounded a theory that as soon as the eyes of a fish started to cloud over or become grey and were no longer pink, it wasn't fresh.

'Not fresh? You must be joking, OJ, that fish was minding its own business at thirty metres an hour ago.' One of the women who cleaned and filleted fish was assisting Olive-Jean and Doris and was certainly not going to have OJ's opinion stake out the high ground.

'What, thirty metres of deep frozen ice? That fish dated a coelacanth in its youth.'

'How's your son?'

'Don't change the subject. I want fresh and I want firm.'

'We all do, OJ, but hard to get it right at our age.'

'None the less we never give up hope.'

'Like a snoek. It's a paradox. When it gets a bit stiff you know it's going to be pap.'

'In your case you could do with less pap.' Olive-Jean looked critically at the large woman in front of her. 'Cut out all the fat and sugar. You'll be Miss Kalk Bay Pier in six months. They'll come chasing after you.'

'Ai, no, OJ. Built for comfort I am, and proud of it. A lot of men from these parts are going to put on their tombstones, *In loving memory*.'

'And you?'

'There's life in the old girl yet.'

'Pap means soft. Pap also means porridge. Snoek is game fish but if it's not fresh it stiffens up and the meat tastes, some say, like blotting paper or old porridge.'

Doris translated for a bemused tourist who was trying to follow the conversation.

'The southeaster is blowing – where are the snoek?'

'Niks, for weeks.'

'It's like that at our age.'

After much haggling Doris and Olive-Jean agreed to share a cob. They walked across the road to the bottle store to purchase a special offer méthode champenoise.

Chapter 34

Bittersweet

You're gonna be the death of me

I don't want you, but I need you

I love you and hate you at the very same time

Bittersweet-- Kanye West

Posted By Fryed – Medium Rare 28/09/2009

Dear boy, the bittersweet song of my late twenties was Joni Mitchell's 'A Case of You'.

"Oh you are in my blood like holy wine and you taste so bitter but you taste so sweet. I could drink a case of you darling and I'd still be on my feet."

Posted by Jacques Michelin 29/09/2009

Ivy heard an advert on the local 'talk' radio station for a storage company situated in Tokai and went down the highway to investigate. She felt nauseous and there was a knot in her stomach, she couldn't slacken. She did not need to look at her watch. She knew this was the time that her daughter should've been driving out to Stellenbosch. Norman had been Julie's father figure all these years. How dare he say she had a chip on her shoulder? Why did he choose to pick on her at her most vulnerable?

'I hate you and I love you and I hate you because I love you.'

Norman wasn't a parent, how the hell would he understand?

The Storage Company seemed just what she needed. A bright and engaging young man, Ricardo, walked her through the various options and closed the deal when he pointed out that the company offered a truck that could be dispatched to collect her possessions, free of charge.

'Thank you, Ricardo. Organizing a removal company to move me was totally daunting. I was almost paralysed by the thought.'

She paid the deposit. She hadn't yet found a home, but as she walked back through reception she felt a profound sense of liberation.

'God, Ivy,' she muttered out loud, 'this is a rollercoaster ride you're on.'

Having her own space, even if it was a four by four metre windowless room sealed by a roll-up, roll-down steel door offered at last a sense of independence.

'I haven't felt so liberated since I was eighteen and came back home from my first visit to the 'clinic'.

The memory of it clicked on and off in synch with the indicator lights that flashed as her car unlocked itself by remote control.

‘I wish my darling Julie would find a little of her own power and courage.’

It *had* taken Ivy courage, not only because her course of action flew in the face of divine writ, but also because she was never to know if any of the staff or patients were in fact congregants at her parents’ church. She had wanted an intra-uterine device fitted, but the imposing and matronly woman who had examined her painted such a bleak picture of longer, heavier and more painful periods that she had been more than happy to leave the building armed with a six month supply of contraceptive pills to be carefully hidden and taken every morning, starting from the next day. That night, sitting at her parents’ supper table, she was asked to say grace.

‘For what I am about to receive may the Lord make me truly grateful.’

‘Amen,’ her parents chanted.

‘Ah, men,’ she chanted back.

Ivy climbed into her car and toyed with the choices of driving back onto the M3 and heading towards the sea or going to see a cottage advertised on Gumtree. She’d done the rounds and there was accommodation she liked in the City Bowl, Newlands and on the False Bay coast in both St James and Simon’s Town. Urban living would be more convenient, there’d be no endless struggle with rising damp and she’d be closer to her children and friends. Yet the thought of returning to live where she could go to sleep with the sound of the sea and step out of her back garden onto the slopes of the mountain felt hugely therapeutic after a decade of black walls. She’d have to make a decision soon. No matter how gracious Geraldine was being, she didn’t want overstay her welcome. At that moment, all she craved was to stand barefoot on the sand and just lean into the wind, watch the gulls and make some sense of the last hours.

‘Oh, bugger house-hunting, I’ll brave the wind in Kalk Bay. What’s a bit of sandblasting in the pursuit of clarity?’ The decision was made. ‘Maybe I can buy some snoek to take home to Geraldine.’

The pursuit of clarity on a windswept stretch of coastline was nearly scuppered as Ivy parked her car in the main road alongside the harbour entrance. She saw Olive-Jean and her neighbour walking past her and into the bottle store. Had she been noticed, she would have made an excuse and driven off. Olive-Jean was just too rich to digest on this occasion.

The wind was far stronger in Kalk Bay than in Tokai and the romance of pondering her universe in the wind at the water's edge soon evaporated. It was bloody hard work just remaining upright. Seeing Olive-Jean did cement a truth that she needed to confront face on.

'I have to learn to address Norman in unambiguous language. I have to take my cue from his mother. I need to find a way of not overreacting every time he engages with Julie.' She immediately felt angry. 'Damn it, this is so tortured and adolescent,' she mouthed into the gale.

No commentary on the situation, no matter how apt, could erase the fundamental truth that finding a new relationship with both Julie and Norman meant having to take a risk. She was going to have to do some growing up in relation to both. Changing old patterns was frightening.

'That awful fish tank has to go... and the furry Madonna... and the bloody rat... and the lava lamps and his school desk and the headboard and Marilyn and the black walls and... and... the telephone booth... The whole pastiche of kitsch that constitutes his life.' She put the brakes on the rolling thought. 'Is that what you want, Ivy? To scrape away the interesting toppings till you have pared him down to the blancmange? But you don't do blancmange, do you, Ivy?'

She suddenly felt very alone standing on the beach, chest out, nipples erect against the sand and the elements. A heroic Boudica, with her long dress flapping behind like wings.

'I'm just as bloody mad as he is.' Damp salt from her eyes stung her skin as it was blown back to her ears. 'Time to find shelter.'

Ivy walked back to the Brass Bell Restaurant and to the bar. She was cold and needed warming, both internally and externally.

'Please can I have a double Jack Daniels and something to nibble,' she said to the barman as she turned the face of her watch to the underside of her wrist.

While she waited for her drink, she typed an sms.

Sorry, I behaved a little irrationally this AM. Can we talk without rancour? I'd like that. Am so sad. Have found storage space so can collect my things. I X

Chapter 35

You thought the theatre world was bitchy, Jacques, I was at a restaurant the other night with a winemaker enjoying his latest bottling, when another vintner came over to our table and interrupted us. He looked at the bottle of wine. 'There are many crimes in South Africa: murder, rape, human trafficking, corruption and Pinotage'.

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 29/09/2009

Norman switched on his cell phone and it immediately beeped with the arrival of Ivy's sms. There was nothing to be done but to place his thoughts on hold. It was not the right time. Business had been concluded and the meeting had shifted to the patio outside the wine cellar, where Edward produced a bottle of their first release, some crisp bread, cheese, olives and thinly sliced beef and mustard. Norman's report had been enthusiastically received and he'd concluded discussions with the Steele brothers. It was agreed that the PR position would be advertised by word of mouth within the wine community and several people were short-listed to be approached within the next few weeks. He'd spent an hour with the chef discussing menus and combinations. The wine for the occasion was the brothers' first Pinotage. It was opened, decanted and poured into hand blown glasses with due reverence. While this was happening, Simon handed Norman a signed copy of Marco Pierre White's *In Hell's Kitchen* as a small mark of appreciation.

'For your help and expertise.'

'Thank you, this is most unexpected and generous! I met him when last in England – behind the reputation is a most likeable character,' Norman recalled as he placed the book on the side table. 'I can tell you a few choice stories about Marco, but important things must come first. Norman dropped his nose towards the glass while the others waited for him to pronounce on the wine. Norman took his time.

'Very promising. The pinot side of the grape is showing.' Norman sipped again. 'Gamey, forest floors, toned with a hint of raspberry. Elegantly mouth-coating. Well done!'

The brothers, the chef and the vintner burst into applause.

‘You can stay, Norman. Your mother evidently brought you up not only to appreciate the finer things in life, but to behave in an urbane and intelligent manner, saying the right things when appropriate.’

Norman beamed. Not so much from the fellowship and reverie of the moment, but from the thought of his mother passing on the knack of saying the right things in an urbane and intelligent manner and her gift to him of being appropriate.

‘To your future successes, sirs, which no doubt will be many!’ Norman raised his glass and they all returned the gesture.

It was nearly dark as Norman turned his Ghia onto the N2 and headed back to Cape Town. He continued to mull on the meeting and also on the fact that adolescent stupidity had prevented Julie from meeting a group of wonderful people who would have nurtured her into the job. Having sundowners above one of the finest panoramic vistas on the planet would have washed away any fears she might have had around such a commitment. Even Barry the computer boffin, with a tweak to his diary and a good Internet connection, could seamlessly have made the transition from Observatory to the Heldeberg mountain range.

‘You tried, lad.’

‘I know.’

‘I know you know.’ Norman turned into the Shell garage and stopped at the parking area. He pulled out his phone and re-read Ivy’s message and phoned her.

‘Where are you?’ Norman could hear the sounds of people and music.

‘I’m in Kalk Bay. The Brass Bell’

‘Ivy, what are you doing there?’

‘Watching the sun going down over the ocean and drinking Jack Daniels.’

‘Why?’ Norman was incredulous. ‘Are you with someone?’

‘Half of Kalk Bay. Why?’

‘I’ve left the winelands. Do you want to come over and talk as you suggested?’

Ivy hesitated. ‘Um, why don’t you come down to Kalk Bay? You can take the coast road and we can have dinner here in a nice neutral place.’

It was Norman’s turn to hesitate. Although it was a discussion that Gabriella wanted Norman to have, he felt a little guilty about the location. A meal in a fabulous restaurant might be perceived as being a little too cosy with his ex.

‘What the hell. It’s been a long day, Ivy, but let’s have dinner. I should be there in about forty minutes.’

‘Good, my treat. I’ll reserve us a table upstairs. See you.’

Norman closed his phone, then opened it again and dialled Gabriella.

‘Hello, sweet thing.’ Norman had been transferred to the answering machine. ‘Finished up. Very successful meeting. We never discussed plans for tonight so I’ve taken the liberty of presuming we aren’t going to see each other this evening. Just been contacted by Ivy. We have agreed to connect to discuss the spoils and divisions of our past life. Let’s do something special tomorrow.’

When Norman finally drove into the parking lot to the right of the Brass Bell it was dark and a little chilly. He pushed his way into the warmth and soft lighting and looked around the room. Ivy was sitting and staring out over the uneasy and restless sea. Her hair remained uncombed. She’d found a window seat. Norman caught her eye. Ivy flashed a smile that started with a small crease at the corners of her mouth, then spread until it seemed to fill her face before retreating demurely back the way it had come. Ivy slowly lifted herself up from her chair in the manner of a snake charmed from inside a woven basket. She was wearing what Norman remembered as her ‘Yves Saint Sarong’, a long off-the-shoulder olive green dress that was gathered above her breasts and held aloft by the architecture of her figure and a thin cotton sash that curved up and around her neck.

‘Hello, Ivy, aren’t you a little chilly?’ Norman asked, leaning forward and kissing the cheek she offered.

‘I started my day in bright sunlight.’

‘I see you’ve taken to drinking in the afternoon?’

‘That’s rich coming from a man who’s just returned from a wine farm. A dry run, was it? It’s unlike you not to propose a drink when standing under the shadow of someone else’s cellar.’ She couldn’t restrain the sarcasm.

‘Yes, we tried their new Pinotage.’ Norman sat down on the chair to Ivy’s right. ‘I’m happy to get up on my hindquarters and leave if you turn this into a carping session.’

‘Then cut the crap, Norman.’ Ivy retreated behind a look of lukewarm disdain. ‘We both know the subtext to “drinking in the afternoon”. You were being provocative. When I concluded my business I went for a walk on the beach, being this

side of the mountain. I decided to have a drink and watch the sea. It's good to be around laughing, happy people.'

'Perhaps you could've just been a touch lighter, that's all.'

'Perhaps you could have been a touch less judgemental.' Ivy found her chair again with a slight bump. 'Truce?'

'Ok.'

A waitress approached and handed them menus.

'Would you like to hear our specials, sir, madam?'

'Wine, Ivy, or a top-up of what you have?'

'Wine if it's red. No, bubbles, let's have bubbles. I feel like bubbles trickling down my throat while we wind up the last decade of our lives.'

'Bubbles sound good.' Norman glanced at the wine list. He chose the best there was on offer. 'A bottle of Pongrącz, please.'

Apart from Norman observing that she'd painted her nails in a similar green to her dress, they sat in silence until the Champagne-style arrived. The waitress carefully removed the cork and Norman indicated with his hand that Ivy should taste. She swirled the liquid and mimicked his flamboyant tasting style. After an exaggerated sniff and chewing upon the wine for a few seconds, she pronounced judgement.

'Perfect.'

Their glasses were filled and the smile she'd lost in the strained dynamics of their greeting returned to Ivy's face.

'Nice to see you, Mr Frye.' She paused before continuing. 'You press my buttons, don't you. I wish it wasn't so. Cheers.'

'Cheers.' They both drank rather more deeply than would have been their normal custom. 'We can be a little crispy with each other, can't we? Does seem silly.'

They settled back into comforting yet self-conscious familiarity.

'Will you tell me about the farm, Norman?'

'Sure. I'm sorry your girl wasn't there – they're good people, everything I've told you. They're going to advertise the position by word of mouth. It's a small community so word will spread quickly and the right person will come forward. Nothing's set in stone and even someone from Observatory could pick up the phone and make an appointment to see them. I'm not mediating anything. My job there is done.' Norman felt in his pocket for his phone. 'Here, I snapped a few pics of the place.'

He fiddled with the buttons and held the phone in front of her. She moved her chair closer to him, cupped his hand and looked without speaking as he scrolled through his photographs. Norman moved and his knee touched hers. She let it stay there.

‘It looks beautiful. What exactly did you say to them about Julie?’

‘I just said it was too rushed a time for her. I said I hoped she would see her way clear to making contact before the post was filled. I reiterated that I thought with mentoring she would be the sort of person who would grow with the business. I didn’t want to make an issue of anything.’

‘Thanks.’ Ivy squeezed his hand as she turned quickly to the menu. ‘I feel like having the line fish.’

‘Me too.’

Once the fish was served and another bottle of Pongrácz had been ordered, Ivy turned to the business at hand.

‘I took out a lease on a storage unit in Tokai today. They’ve a bakkie and will supply a driver. I’ve tentatively booked them for tomorrow. Will you be home, nine, nine thirty? I’ll need an hour or so to put my stuff into boxes. I asked them to come between eleven thirty and twelve. I gave them your address.’

‘That’ll be fine.’ Norman concentrated on his plate without looking up. ‘What all do you want to take with you?’

‘Well, my stuff.’

‘I know *your* stuff,’ said Norman. ‘I meant we’ve gathered together quite a bit over the last years. How are we going to share it out?’

‘Without fighting.’ Ivy adjusted her skirt. His knee was still touching hers and she pushed slightly against him. ‘Well, we can walk through the house and talk about the items. Don’t people have first choice and then second and then third?’

‘We can do that. Do you have anything specifically in mind?’

‘Well Tiggers know what Tiggers don’t like. They can be specific about that.’ She ate the last potato fry on her plate.

‘Do Tiggers know what Tiggers *like*?’ Norman put his knife and fork together, wiped his lips and fingers with his serviette and, after putting it back on his lap, patted her thigh and let his hand stay there.

‘Well, let me see. You mean what does this Tigger like, apart from Christopher Robin when he’s being friendly, if not a little bold in the paw department?’ She put his hand back on his lap. ‘Must go to the loo. I wonder what game Mr Robin’s playing? Does Christopher’s hand always have a mind of its own or is there a hidden motive directing it? I’m a little piddled, Norman dear,’ she said, laying some emphasis on the ‘p’. She leaned over and whispered into his ear. ‘While I’m gone you can think about how I am going to get home. Not sure I’m fit to drive. You have been plying me with champagne.’

Norman touched his mouth as she walked away from the table. She was threading herself past the other diners and moving her body under the Yves Saint as if to an old, fondly remembered tune.

‘Shit, man, what the hell are you playing at?’

‘Don’t rightly know.’

‘She wasn’t exactly discouraging, was she?’

‘Too much booze and unresolved and messy feelings. A pretty heady combination.’

‘Shit!’

Norman finished his glass in one gulp, then filled it again, but not before sending a short message and switching off his phone.

Suspect a long night. Let’s connect tomorrow. N x

Ivy returned to the table just as Norman had popped the cell phone back into his pocket. He noticed her hair was combed and a little colour had been applied to her lips.

‘You alright?’

‘I’m fine.’ She sat down. ‘Well Mr Frye, what happens now?’

‘Would you like a pudding?’

‘Which is Frye for, ”I don’t know, you make the decision?”’

‘Ok, why not do this?’ Norman decided to take the control he was being offered. ‘We finish, have a nightcap and go back to Kenilworth to walk through the house as we planned. We leave one of the cars here. Mine, if you like. We can come back here in the morning and collect the Ghia before your storage truck arrives.’

‘Good.’ Ivy opened her bag and took out her phone. ‘I’ll send a message to Geraldine and tell her my coming home plans are flexible and not to wait up.’ She

finished keying the message, pressed 'send' and was about to close the phone and pop it back into her bag when she paused.

'What the hell,' she said to herself and, like Norman, pressed the off button.

Chapter 36

Time flies. It's more than two years since Michael Jackson, the great whiskey writer and raconteur, died (30/08/2007). Found his tasting notes on Three Ships 10 Years Old. He called it nicely festive. Powerful nose, creamy palate, soothing, balancing root-ginger dryness on the finish.

Jim Murray labelled the Bourbon Class Three Ships a minor classic with the emphasis on mouth-watering lushness. Scored it a 91 (brilliant).

How many South African whiskey buffs have actually drunk their own whiskey without being snotty about it?

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 29/09/2009

We are still in mourning. We'll raise a dram with TS tonight. We'll post our notes tomorrow.

Posted by the Robbers Whiskey Club 30/09/2009

Henry Jameson arrived on time, armed with flowers and chocolate. Lack of punctuality, he remembered, was one of Olive-Jean's pet gripes and although she never commented, he knew she made a mental note.

'Make yourself comfortable, Henry. Let's not sit outside. Nice as the full sweep of the bay is, it's far too windy.' She took the flowers. 'Thank you, they're lovely.' She went into the kitchen to find a vase.

'Your home looks just as I remember.' Henry raised his voice so she could hear. He wandered over to a wall of photographs of her in various hot spots around the world. 'Gosh, look at you those years ago. You've hardly changed.'

'Bollocks, Henry,' came from deep inside a cabinet where her jugs and other glassware were kept. 'Even I know the years have taken their toll.' There was a pause. 'But I'll tell you, compared to others of our vintage, I'm but a pup.' She came out of the kitchen and turned her attention to the man in front of her filling out corduroys and a roll neck sweater. 'You're looking very good. I'm glad to see you've not put on weight – men your age tend to let themselves slip. I take it you avoid fried foods and manage to exercise?'

'You've summed me up in an instant. You may rebel at the notion, but you *are* looking lovely.'

'Oh very well, thank you. Vanity is not one of my strong suits. I have been blessed with good health and a damn good figure. I take nothing for granted and don't abuse my assets. Do you still smoke?'

‘I take a pipe or a cigar after dinner if the company does not dictate otherwise.’

‘Well, this company approves. We smokers are a pretty beleaguered lot these days.’ Olive-Jean decided the catching up needed a change of direction. ‘Enough chitchat. Do you still take whiskey or will you join me in a glass of champers?’ She gestured her guest to two armchairs in her bay window while she started arranging the flowers. ‘I like a glass of fizz of an evening. I discovered from Norman a cunning bottle cap that seems to keep the wine from going flat for days.’

‘Whiskey, please.’

‘Will you be enjoying it as is or drowning it in water, or worse, soda?’

‘Soda, if you can forgive a penchant for diluting my anti-freeze.’

‘As you will be murdering your drink with a form of Alka-Seltzer, I presume you won’t take it amiss if I don’t offer you anything more lofty than a tot or two of what Norman describes as “aqua-crematoria”’.

‘I haven’t come here to be bullied by you, Olive-Jean,’ he smiled affectionately at her. The woman hadn’t mellowed at all. ‘I won’t let you foist something on me against which even your battle-hardened constitution rebels.’

‘Really?’

‘It’s an evident ploy to get rid of the stuff. I remember you were never an Irish coffee fan so you don’t really know what to do with it. I’d say at a guess you were seduced by the word ‘special’. I see you’ve got a nice bottle of Grouse on your shelf, next to the rot gut. I’ll have some of that, please.’ Henry paused before delivering what he believed would be the coup de grace. ‘Since when, my dear, have you taken to being snobbish about alcohol?’

‘Not snobbish at all. I have drunk, with relish, some of the worst spirits ever concocted by man.’ Olive-Jean stepped back to admire her flowers. ‘But then I have also found myself confronting chaos and suffering on a grand scale. In such situations, Henry, beggars can’t be choosers, especially when it comes to a little fortification to carry on the good work.’ She peered gravely over the roses and carnations. ‘Do you do good works any more, Henry?’

‘I try to, I’m here for instance.’

‘Very well, help yourself. I won’t be party to sacrilege. You can pour mine at the same time.’

‘I’d forgotten,’ said Henry, drinking in a feistiness he had always found hugely attractive in the woman glowering at him, ‘how charming you could be.’

Olive-Jean and Henry Jameson went back many years. Henry, an advocate of some standing, was a tall man born on the same day, but a year after, Olive-Jean. He had never married. He still presented to the world a full head of hair and a parting so true it looked as if a chisel had incised it. His aquiline nose and chin stooped slightly toward each other and from a certain angle his face resembled that of a bird of prey. To anyone with the wit to notice, it gave credence to the notion of the legal eagle. His appeal lay in his presence, and neither age nor careless living had dulled a set of features formed from a base of 'good bone structure'. He looked five years younger than he was. Olive-Jean suspected that he, like her son, dyed his hair at the temples to maintain the affectation of youth. They had, over the years, drifted apart, but still sent each other cards at Christmas and on their birthdays. She regarded him as one of her oldest confidantes and for a brief time, when Norman was still at school, he had been one of her 'suitors'. He was surprised but pleased when she had made contact and invited him to dinner to 'pick his fine legal brain and ask for a bit of advice on a private matter with which she was wrestling'. She placed the flowers on the table.

'They look beautiful.' She wiped her hands on a dishcloth. 'I have been to a lot of trouble sourcing the freshest fish Cape Town can offer. I hope you still eat fish. I remember it as your favourite.'

'I most certainly do, my dear. I remember with great fondness the many meals you crafted with originality and style. They were special times. Fish sounds excellent.' He handed her a glass of méthode champenoise and settled into his chair. 'Chin chin.'

'Cheers, Henry. Thank you. You must be confusing me with another woman.' She was quick to offer a little home wisdom. 'I was only ever original in as much as I let the food speak for itself. Over cooking or the adding of superfluous spices is hardly my style. You will be getting a lightly grilled piece of kabeljou, brushed with a little olive oil, salt and pepper. I also have a nice lemon.'

'No confusion at all. I am delighted to be in the company of one of my favourite people. It is to my shame that I have allowed the demands of a busy life to neglect the friendship. I am so glad you have sought to rectify this. Your style lies in understanding the advantages of simplicity.'

Olive-Jean, under normal circumstances, would have cut such obvious sweet talk dead in its tracks. This time she chose not to make an issue of it. She sensed an

intention on Henry's part to rekindle a little of the fire they had once shared. She decided he should be given every encouragement.

'Thank you, Henry, you are being very sweet.' She took a sip from the tall glass. 'I've changed my mind, you may flatter me mercilessly.'

It was over supper that she brought up her concerns.

'My son and his partner of many years worked together on a set of culinary journals. On separating a few weeks ago, she took them with her and is now planning to use them as a basis for a book. Norman has asked them to be returned, as he says they are private. I think a book should be written from them but under his guidance. Has she a legal right to just use them for her own ends?'

'She has no right to his intellectual property but she certainly has a right to hers. It would depend in part on the nature of the journals and on the kind of book she was planning. I presume she would seek legal opinion. Norman publishes a lot on the Internet, doesn't he? That might have an influence.' He put down his knife and fork. 'Why are you so invested in this?'

'Pardon?' she boomed.

'Invested. There seem to be two points to be made. Firstly, their relationship has only just ended. These can be bitter and emotional times. People tend to make bad judgement calls. Wiser counsel generally prevails after a little water has flowed under their separate bridges. Secondly, Olive-Jean, it is easier to clear rubble from earthquake sites than the mess that flows from people's internal seismic activity. I would back off until you have something concrete to work on. No amount of theory will have any bearing until she, I don't know her name, moves to publish something. Until then I advise you not to do anything.'

'Her name is Ivy, she's an agony aunt, and don't talk nonsense, Henry. I'm not asking for legal opinion I don't agree with.' Olive-Jean picked up the bottle of red that had replaced the *méthode champenoise* at the table. 'That is but a sidebar. Talking of which, have a top up.'

'Do you think I should?'

'It depends on how alcohol inhibits your performance in these, your latter years.'

'Fires me up.'

‘Then what the Dickens are you burbling on about?’ Her voice became a drum roll.

Henry realized he’d been seduced but could think of absolutely no idea how to capitalise on his good fortune. He decided to wait for direction. It was not immediately forthcoming.

‘Norman’s father left him a tape recording. You won’t believe it but I found it a month ago’ She finished her last mouthful of the fish. ‘That was good, even if I say so myself.’

‘It was utterly delicious. Thank you.’

‘Finding it, the tape recording, I must tell you was a little unnerving after all these years.’ He encouraged her to hold nothing back and listened attentively. ‘I have a box of obsolete technology that I have kept for heaven knows what reasons. Norman has always been obsessed by what he calls “retro objects”. I’ve been dishing them out to him over the years at birthdays and Christmas. A B&O portable reel-to-reel tape recorder and a few reels in cardboard jackets were the last things in the box. I opened one of the jackets labelled ‘Pat Boone and Marty Robbins’ to see if the thing still worked. God, Ronald had foul taste in music. Inside was a reel carefully wrapped in plastic bearing the words – PRIVATE and CONFIDENTIAL. I was surprised, the tape player ran as smoothly as if I’d bought it yesterday.’ Olive-Jean took a deep breath, sighed and came to the point. ‘It was a monologue from Ronald to Norman. How peculiar was that?’

‘Was it?’ Henry sounded confused.

‘Of course it was. The boy was but seven when his father died. I presume he had intended to give it to him on his twenty-first birthday or his bachelor’s party or leave it to him in his will.’ Olive-Jean shrugged and suddenly looked fragile. ‘He was less than guarded in his opinions of me or the descriptions of his exploits with other bimbos. I’m glad Norman never got to hear his patriarchal, sexist, womanizing crap as a child. Ronald must have been drunk when he recorded it.’

‘I’m sorry to hear this, my dear. Would I be prying if I asked if you had had any idea?’

‘None of the details. His was my first ‘big’ relationship. I guess the way he was informed something of the way I chose to live my adult life. He was a cold fish and at

times a little cruel.’ She folded her serviette and puffed out her chest. ‘It’s been a few weeks of introspection, I can tell you.’

‘I’m sure it has. Are you alright?’ Henry leaned across the table and gave her hand a squeeze. ‘Chin up, OJ.’

‘When I recovered my composure, I hatched a plan. I was going to have it played at a soirée to celebrate my life, after my funeral. I thought to invite some of his dolly birds to the occasion. He never bothered to censor their names.’ She ran her finger around her plate to collect the last taste of lemony oil.

‘After the funeral? You could have twenty years left. What talk is this?’

‘Recent events have made me decide to bring the occasion forward, while I’m still alive.’

The energy that drove Olive-Jean’s internal combustion engines ignited again, flushing her cheeks and giving greater resonance and command to her voice.

‘I’ll tell you all about it, but first things first. I think we should leave the table and go over to the bay window again and enjoy the harbour lights. I have two Romeo y Julieta cigars that I have been keeping for a special occasion. You will ply us with some cognac, courtesy of Norman, and pay me any sort of little attentions that take your fancy.’

Chapter 37

*I passed by his garden, and marked, with one eye
How the Owl and the Panther were sharing a pie:
The Panther took pie-crust, and gravy, and meat,
While the Owl had the dish as its share of the treat.
When the pie was all finished, the Owl, as a boon,
Was kindly permitted to pocket the spoon.
The lobster quadrille in 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland' by
Lewis Carroll
Posted By Fryed – Medium Rare 29/09/2009*

They decided to leave the Ghia, with Ivy's steering lock, at the Brass Bell and travel back in her blue Peugeot 206, better known as Amorette.

'Be kind to her, Norman. Don't be rough with her and grate her gears. Amorette likes to purr all the way home.'

Norman decided it was less likely they would encounter a roadblock on Boyes Drive, which meant driving past his mother's home.

'Look, Norman, Olive-Jean's got company.'

'I'd rather not.'

'What?'

'Look.'

'But there it is, a bright and shiny bee-em wobbleyou wobbleyou parked outside the gate. I wonder who it is?' She lifted the release-arm at the base of the seat and eased it backwards so she was almost lying flat.

'I wonder how many times you've been had.' What began as a song turned into a mumble. 'And I wonder what dreams have gone bad and times you've had sex and, and who you know will be next. I wonder, Mr Rodriguez.' She pursed her lips and pushed her tongue through them. 'I saw her going into the bottle store today.'

'Who?'

'Your mother.'

'Are you sure I can't just drive you back to Geraldine?'

'No, Norman. Take me back to the lion's black den.'

He pulled up outside his home and offered a small word of thanks to the muse that the route he'd taken home was devoid of traffic officers. Ivy, after her rather rambling start to the journey, lapsed into silence. This gave Norman the opportunity to tote up the amount of alcohol he had consumed over the last four hours. The final tally amounted to at least three years in prison and a cookbook, if he was caught. It took a moment, but he found an amusing title. *The Detainee's Table – Jailhouse Roquefort or The Art of Slop*. The 'Yves Saint Sarong' had twisted, by accident or design, to reveal, as the dress fell apart at the side-slit, enough of Ivy's thigh to flash a mixed staccato message as they passed under every streetlight.

'Safely here.'

'Well done, Norman. I need some coffee.' She unclipped herself and eased out of Amorette. 'Do I look a wreck? Don't answer. The truth is I'm dreading this, but let's get to it.'

Norman found his keys and opened the front door. Ivy walked past him and into the lounge. She went over to the couch, flicked on the light and stood in the centre, surveying the room by the purple light. He followed. Neither of them said anything, each waiting for the other.

Tic-tock-tic-tock-tic-tock-tic-tock. Quietly at first, but then, coming in to play as if under a baton, the ticking of the clocks started to hammer at Ivy. Louder and louder and louder, remorseless and more remorseless and even more remorseless. From every corner of the room and then from the whole house they mocked and taunted her, never varying their tone or pitch, tic-tock-tic-tock-tic-tock. Ivy grabbed the sides of her hair, dropped onto her haunches and pulled. Norman came towards her but she gestured him away.

'Ivy.'

She cut him short

'Do you mind?' She stood up, walked across the room and lifted a clock off the wall. Calmly she went back to the couch, raised the seat and dropped it into the water. 'I've wanted to do that for some time.' With that she sat down amidst the cushions and wept.

The house filled with the smell of freshly plunged coffee and the familiar sounds of Norman in the kitchen. Ivy 'pulled herself together' as suggested by Norman, his

contribution to anger management. She went into the bathroom to straighten up and took a long critical look at herself in the mirror.

‘Phew. Not a pretty picture.’

She slipped out of her dress and padded into the bedroom, put on ‘her’ bedside light and found a pair of tracksuit pants and a woollen top in ‘her’ side of the cupboard.

‘Norman’s been rummaging in my things,’ she observed to herself. ‘He’s hung things in different spots and put my summer tops on the wrong shelf.’

She opened her bag, took out her brush and reordered her hair. Then she put the brush back on the chest of drawers. She picked up her ‘Kent’ comb and lined it up exactly parallel to the edge of the brush. Two faithful soldiers, ‘present and correct’. The habit of years. ‘Shit! Why?’ She could not believe she had just slipped into familiar patterns of order and place. She scooped them up along with some perfume, hair clips and earrings and dropped them into a large handbag she took out of the cupboard.

Norman arrived at the door.

‘Coffee? It’s in the lounge.’ It took him a second to realize Ivy was now dressed in different clothes. ‘You’ve got other kit on?’

‘My stuff’s still here. That’s ok, isn’t it?’

‘Of course.’ Norman felt foolish. ‘I’m not particularly practiced in the business of saying goodbye to ten years.’ He waited for Ivy to say something but she didn’t, so he bumbled on. ‘This is all so fucking decent even though you drowned my clock and I did buy it to celebrate my first ever totally successful soufflé and you did upset the fish by howling over their air space.’ Finally he found the will to ask the question he’d wanted an answer to since his world had unravelled. ‘Who was this person you were screwing? Why?’

‘I don’t know. I met him at Exclusive Books coffee shop.’ He’d asked, so she gave him the details. ‘We shared a table because the only empty chair in the establishment was at his. I think he likes rugby, I know he won a dog obedience competition.’ She stopped. ‘You want me to carry on?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’d been more foul and more difficult to live with over the last month than the previous month and so on back to infinity. Shoot me. It is as easy and as complex as that. We drank the last bottle of your *ratafia*. It’s a pity – I should have fed him your Black Labels.’ Ivy felt a mixture of anger and relief at the confession. She was on the

edge of bursting into tears again, so she turned her head away from Norman. 'I could drink a bottle with you, right now.'

'I could with you too, actually. In my book, *ratafia*'s the finest aphrodisiac on the planet. Perhaps that's what we need.'

'What are you saying? I'm not moving back in. Need to take stock.' She shivered slightly. 'It's a bit chilly, isn't it? Open something warming to go with the coffee. I'm dangerously sober for the task at hand.'

'I'm not saying anything other than tonight's been a bloody smörgåsbord of mixed messages you've telexed me. Affection and steel spikes seems a fair summing up. If I've misread them and behaved inappropriately it's because my head feels like it's hosted a barn dance for the psychotically insane.'

'If I'm going to miss anything,' she smiled at him, 'it'll be your turn of phrase.'

He saw in her eyes, tinted by the avocado green glow of her bedside lamp, the reflection of the room where they had once anticipated growing old together.

'At least there's that.'

'I can't believe I lived all this time amongst all of this.'

'Fancy a little malt?'

'Your stock in trade for tough moments.'

'Stay with me tonight.'

'Ok,' she agreed without hesitating, 'but you know I'm not going to make love to you, don't you, Norman.' She was still smiling. 'Can you handle that?'

'For a split second I thought you'd thrown a line across the chasm.'

'Not enough to support our weight at the moment.'

They walked through to the kitchen and found the malt.

'Look, Norman, there's a message.' An orange light was flashing on the little box of electronics under his telephone.

'You're not listening to it?'

'No.'

'That's unlike you.'

'This is more important.'

'You shielding something from me?'

'It's most probably Gabriella Sloane, the filmmaker. I'll speak to her tomorrow.' Norman switched off the machine to stop the flashing light, opened his kitchen cupboard and found his bottle of Laphroig.

‘Is that the bottle I gave you?’

‘Yes, I’ve been nursing it.’

The division took no more than an hour. Norman would have to buy a new mattress and some more linen, Ivy would need to get a bed. They took what they’d each bought over the decade and it amounted to about the same. They decided to swap gifts. Norman gave her the Italian still life. She reciprocated by telling him to keep the Chippendale.

‘There’s a ritual in the exchange of something precious that somehow symbolizes that what we had together wasn’t tatty.’

‘You’re right,’ said Ivy. ‘I’m pleased I’m leaving the thing I valued most.’

‘This is so bloody sad.’

‘I know, but I also know it’s time to heal.’

As they lay on their backs, side by side, holding hands and unwilling to sleep, Ivy brought up the unmentionable.

‘We haven’t talked about the journals.’ She felt Norman stiffen and grow distant. ‘I still want to write a book but I’m backing off from all the things I spewed out at you. I was hurt. Sorry.’

‘I don’t want my private stuff, public.’

‘Shhh, listen to me, please. There are several things I want to say. Firstly, you’re hurting my hand.’

‘Sorry, the J word makes my muscles spasm.’ He softened his grip, lifted her hand and gently kissed it.

‘Thank you. Norman, darling Norman, I’d do nothing that exposed or embarrassed you. I don’t know when or how or what I want to do with them right now. I guess my phone call was a desperate attempt to hook you, keep a connection.’ She winked at Marilyn, who she was sure winked back. ‘I’m not asking you to understand. I’m saying they are *our* journals even though you did give them to me and I want to keep them. I’ll make you a promise now. I’ll do nothing till I’ve consulted you. They are a remarkable archive of a magnificent time. They are worth publishing.’

Norman put his leg over hers. They were two toy soldiers, lying side-by-side, ready for a three-legged race.

‘Thanks. It’s time I cleaned up my blog. I think there are links to several snide references to you and your family that don’t do any of us any credit.’

‘I’d appreciate that. You wrote some despicable and hurtful things.’

Just before dawn, Norman slipped out of bed and stood at the door to see if Ivy would wake. When he was sure she wouldn’t, he tiptoed to the kitchen. He pressed the ‘on’ button, turned the volume right down and put his ear up close to the answering machine.

‘I suppose you’re still doing the business. Thinking of you. Shall I come round? I suspect you’ll need a little TLC? I’ve an idea. Tell Ivy to leave the Chippendale chest of drawers and make a straight swap for the screen. Throw in the bedside tables as a sweetener if she doesn’t take the bait.’ There was the sound of a long giggle. ‘Love ya. Call me later if you want me. Don’t worry about the time.’

Chapter 38

Marrons glacé.

Super idea if you have a spare two days to make it.

If you only have 40 minutes, roast and serve them with Brussel sprouts.

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 29/09/2009

Heard Sir Ken Robinson refer to 'the old chestnut' today - if a tree falls in a forest and nobody hears it, did it happen?

Posted by Jacques Michelin 29/09/2009

Alec was marking geography papers on the formation and structure of the features of the earth, desperate for a little distraction, when his mobile phone came to his rescue.

'Hello boetie, it's your sister'

'I know. When your smiling face pops up on my screen my heart sinks. Oh God, here comes another hare-brained idea, I thinks.'

'That's mean, Alec. I only ever have good ideas.'

'Naah, only joking. What can I do for my favourite sister on the planet?'

'I bet you say that to all your sisters.'

'Only the ones that bribe and praise and distract me from the adolescent understandings of fluvial geomorphology.'

'Sounds gynaecological, if not a little rude. Come tonight and eat with me and Tom.'

'Need a hand with mom? Have I not helped you enough?'

'Your job is to be there when I need you. Like Tom.'

'Like Tom?'

'Yes. He's just poured me a glass of wine and brought me my Mickey Mouse slipper-socks and now he's going to massage my feet while I chat to you.'

'He's well-trained, why the call?'

'Actually, it's a bit about mom and a bit about us. I received an sms a little while ago telling me she was in Kalk Bay, was going to have a dop and listen to music at the Brass Bell. Reckoned she would eventually have something to eat there. I'm not expecting her till later. Good time for us to have an informal family pow-wow. I saw Barry today and suggested we all meet here. Tom will cook, which will be less frightening than if I do. Oh, and perhaps you could phone Julie on the pretext that

you've also been invited to dinner and would be happy to slip by their place and collect them on the way.' Geraldine was at her best in organizational mode.

'But, um, I wouldn't be, sis.' Alec decided to be totally honest.

'Oh yes, I'd forgotten you like to engineer your life for a quick getaway at all times. Sister Julie can sometimes be an inhibiting factor.' Geraldine took a deep breath. She really did have annoying siblings. 'Barry was beside himself today. He'd a flaming row with J, and she told Barry to fuck off.'

Tom applied the body butter and began squishing it between her toes.

'Yesyesyesss, divine.'

'Pardon?' Geraldine didn't seem to be making sense. 'Have I just fallen into a word salad?'

'Japanese cherry blossom cream has just been applied to my toes and heels. That's why I live with him. I get pampered after a long day.'

'You might be experiencing total pleasure, but what sounded like a fun time to me a minute ago might just turn out to be hard work.'

'Don't be ridiculous.'

'What were they fighting about?'

'Norman and her career.'

'Oooh bloody no, not again. Think I'll score a pass, sis.'

'Absolutely not. You'll be here even if Tom has to massage your feet.'

'Like fucken hell,' asserted the part time masseuse from under her arches.

'That's right, don't distract him. My limited knowledge of reflexology tells me he is about to do some serious unblocking of my descending and ascending colon.'

'What do we need to discuss about mom?' The teacher in him hadn't ticked off all the subjects raised by Geraldine. 'If your pow-wow is about mom's next temporary residence, she positively can't come to me. I don't have the bathroom facilities for one. I'm still traumatised by my childhood. Growing up with three women and one bathroom wasn't easy. I had to leave home in order to be punctual for the first time. In fact, the bathroom was my personal Isandlwana.'

'Calm down, brother Alec. No one's asking you to have mom. She's no trouble anyway. Perhaps have her over for a meal once or twice, that'd be nice.'

'Ok, ok, sis.' Alec shared some of Julie's temperament. He got fractious if confronted or looked set to have someone tamper with his routines.

‘You asked about mother and then you went off on a rant.’ She tried to keep the irritation from her voice but found it impossible. ‘Barry repaired a computer for someone who she claims is in a relationship with Norman. She even got mail from him about Julie and her job interview, while he was doing whatever he does. I don’t think mom knows. I don’t want her to get more hurt, that’s all. I think there’s unfinished business with Norman and frankly, by the time Julie and Barry have embellished the story, all sanity will have gone out the window.’ She paused for breath. ‘I don’t think it’s our place to interfere.’

Alec gave a low whistle.

‘The truth will always out. He’s most probably kept that woman in tow for some time. Poor mom’s been made to look the baddie, meanwhile he can’t keep his fly buttoned up.’

‘For goodness sake, shut up, Alec.’ Geraldine finally snapped. ‘We know from nothing. Please just leave your prejudices behind and bring a bottle of wine.’

Tom put his forefinger to his mouth.

‘Shhh, don’t say a word.’ He took another scoop of cream and kept massaging till he felt the pent up energy drain from Geraldine.

‘I’m not sure just what will be accomplished by having them here, but they’re your family and so it’s cool. I’ll cook pasta. We’ve got loads of goodies in the fridge to throw in.’

‘I’ll tell you what we’re going to accomplish. I’m going to clear the decks. I think of my family and I think of mom’s favourite word, “splitting”. That’s what happens between us. We’re going to have a lekker meal and when everyone has downed a glass or two and we’re all at ease, I’m going to have my say.’

‘Finished.’ Tom screwed the lid back on the body butter and kissed Geraldine’s toes one by one. ‘Not only are these the most recent feet I’ve met but also the most sexy, with a hint of spring.’ He slipped on her slipper socks. ‘You’re round the bend, you know that?’

‘Why, exactly?’

‘Because neither Alec nor Barry, let alone Julie, has the slightest ability to *not* interfere, let alone stop splitting.’

‘Thanks for doing my feet. You are just the best.’ She put her arms around him and squeezed. ‘Aren’t you pleased we’ve got each other and we seem so normal?’

‘I am.’

‘It’s nothing to do with any of us, what she and Norman get up to. I worry about her sitting in a pub alone, but you know what, that’s her choice and she virtually raised us single-handed and the last thing she needs is us kids nosing into her business. She’s a big girl.’ Geraldine took hold of Tom’s ears and drew his head towards hers and rubbed noses. ‘I bet that boy who got lucky with mom was given a time he’ll remember forever!’ They both laughed. ‘I’ve got my mother’s genes. You’ll never forget or get another like me. Just remember how incredibly lucky you are, Thomas. Life without me would be bleak and barren.’

‘Barren, marron.’

‘What the hell is marron?’

‘Chestnut, dodo. Karen.’

‘Well then barren, marron, Karen, Charon.’

‘Who is Charon?’

‘He’s the bloke who ferries the dead across the river Styx. He charged an obolus or a Greek penny for his trouble. I did Latin at school. We all learnt Virgil.’ It was Tom’s turn to find a poem, now that Norman was no longer there to fulfil the role of poet laureate to the Lynches.

‘There Charon stands, who rules the dreary coast

A sordid God: down from his hairy chin

A length of beard descends, uncombed, unclean;

His eyes, like hollow furnaces on fire;

A girdle, foul with grease, binds his obscene attire.’

‘Very clever, Tom, but you’ll be requiring his services earlier than you expected if you don’t get into the kitchen and start chopping for supper.’

Chapter 39

Gabriella and Norman sat having a cup of tea, surrounded by the empty spaces that had stayed behind with the departure of the storage truck and the blue Amorette containing Ivy. Gabriella had arrived soon after Ivy and her items had left, with a bunch of flowers and a card. Norman took the flowers, left them in the sink and read the message. He shrugged at her. He didn't quite know what to say, so he didn't say anything except a cursory 'Ta.' He'd mechanically put on the kettle and made tea. Gabriella filled the silence by chatting about her evening with Zoë and not mentioning the last twenty-four hours, waiting for Norman to engage with her.

'You're not talking to me. I'll go after I've finished my tea if you like.'

He finally broke his silence.

'No, don't go. I'm just a bit shell-shocked.'

'I left a message. You seem also to have had your mobile turned off.'

'I did.'

'I drove past here earlier but I saw the bakkie and Ivy taking out stuff and so I drove on.'

Norman had put a few homemade rusks onto a plate. Gabriella dunked one into her tea.

'Yummy. You make a delicious rusk.'

'Thanks.'

'I was a bit worried when you didn't phone this morning.' Norman's mood was beginning to annoy her.

'I'm sorry, but we needed to sort stuff out, clear away a few demons.'

'I know it must be hard.' Gabriella took the initiative and 'topped them up'.

'Do you want to talk about it? I was thinking of you all the time.' She tried one last stab at conversation, deciding that if that didn't work she'd leave him to his own devices. She wasn't good at dealing with moodiness.

'Not much to say, really.' He dredged up the motivation to continue. 'We agreed I'd meet her at the Brass Bell because she was down that side of the mountain and I was coming back from that meeting. We both got a bit pissed discussing the last ten years. I was the most sober so I drove us back here in her car, leaving mine in Kalk Bay.' For the first time since she'd arrived, he seemed to perk up. 'The irony is that in

the ending of it we got closer than we've been for a long time.' Norman paused in his story and looked distracted. She waited for him to go on but he simply changed the subject. 'It was a bit insensitive, that part of your message about the chest of drawers.'

'Oh, come on. Where does that come from?' Her voice was gentle and loving. 'I was trying to be a bit funny in the face of... Well, maybe it was a bit inappropriate.'

'It was a bit.'

'I see she took the still life.' It was her turn to change the subject. She looked up at the wall.

'I gave it to her. If you must know she *did* give me the Chippendale.'

'Oh, I'm pleased. That's surprisingly generous.'

'She *is* actually generous. Why "surprisingly", Gabriella? What do you mean by that?' He was now being outwardly sullen. He got up and without saying another word walked into the kitchen and threw the rest of his tea into the sink. When he came back she felt obliged to respond.

'Norman, you have done nothing but bad-mouth her. In that context, her generosity is a bit surprising. Will you please stop being so distant? You're making me feel very uncomfortable. In fact your mood is slightly aggro.'

'I've just divided up my past life, which seems to have left a bit of a gaping hole in my internal decorating. I'm quite gutted.' Norman waved his arm. 'Like this room.'

'Ok, I'm trying to be understanding.' Gabriella was choosing her words very carefully. 'I am glad you found some closure. The atmosphere now is something I'm struggling to get a grip on. I came here because you asked me to. You wanted to do something special. I also want to be of support.'

'Not sure I need support.'

'Shit, you are being pleasant. Best I go.'

'I never said go. Stop pushing me.'

'I'm not pushing you.' She stood up. 'You evidently need time out. I guess you've gotten very little sleep. You must be tired. Did you take Ivy home very late?'

'I didn't.'

'You didn't what?'

'Take her home.'

'She stayed the night?'

'Stop interrogating me.'

‘I’m not. I’m just not sure how I’m feeling about this.

‘She stayed the night?’ Norman mimicked her in a singsong voice. ‘What’s that code for?’ He answered his own question. ‘I’ll tell you what the code is. That’s code for did we plant the mighty sausage one last time?’ Norman bitterly tried to fight back the anger and claustrophobia he suddenly felt in her presence. He failed. It was as if she’d barged into his private grief, an unwanted guest at a funeral, the sole and unexpected beneficiary of the will. ‘For your information she did stay the night, stayed in *our* bed.’

Gabriella was rocked back by a sharp, stinging, almost physical pain at the crassness of Norman’s reply.

‘You’re just being abusive. I didn’t fuck up your relationship, you and Ivy did.’ She was barely audible. ‘Yes, I do want to know about the level of intimacy that seems to have made your relationship better than it’s been for a long time. I feel you’ve been less than honest. I’m not some little bit of fluff whose presence can be regulated with an on/off switch. You want to project your shit, you can do it on your rat or someone else. Not on me.’

‘Couldn’t you have even let her drive away before,’ he searched for words, ‘before coming over here, staking your claim?’

‘You bastard!’ She walked up to Norman and slapped him as hard as she could. His glasses spun off his face and he staggered back.

‘Get out.’

‘I’m going, Norman. I suspect from the crassness of your reply you didn’t get to plant your sausage, as you so elegantly put it. Fuck you. I also suspect you will regret the way you’ve treated me, at some point.’

‘Get out!’ Norman raised his voice. He didn’t hear the front door open and movement in the entrance hall. ‘Get out.’

‘I said I’m going, I’m almost finished.’

Her instinct was to leave and never come back. Yet there was a part of her that knew this wasn’t about her. This was an emotional soup brewed over many, many years. Norman was a decent man, even though he’d overstepped the mark. Ivy was surely another loss in a life of rejection. Something *had* to dramatically change to repair the damage. Just what, she didn’t know.

‘Apologies via humorous e-mails aren’t going to hack it this time. You’ve slammed the door closed, but funnily enough I’m not going to lock it. That would be

too easy. To open it you'll have to shift somehow.' She shrugged. 'Make a grand gesture. Paint your walls white or something before speaking to me again.'

'Just get out,' he shouted. He wiped his hand across his face. His nose was bleeding.

Gabriella picked up his glasses.

'Here, before you stand on them.'

As his world came into focus, it also collapsed. There in its place stood some bizarre, schizophrenic, hallucinogenic joke. But it wasn't. It was Ivy.

'I'm sorry, this seems an inopportune time. I didn't realise you would have company. I came to give you back my, your, house keys.' She placed the keys on the side table. 'Hello Gabriella, it's been a very long time.' She drew in a deep breath. 'Your intuition was right, he certainly never got to hide anything last night.'

University of Cape Town

Chapter 40

Ivy wasn't sure how she got back to Geraldine's home. She must have driven. She was aware she'd had a conversation with her daughter, for there'd been words and gestures, even a light-hearted banter that she couldn't quite pin down. She felt detached, floating above it all.

'Mother, where have you been? I was worried sick when you never came home. Fancy you only smsing me at nine o' clock today. I'm going to ground you for a week.'

'I know, I need taking in hand.'

'You're looking drawn, pale and wan.'

'Mmmmm, it's been a time. I'm moved out from Norman's home, you can congratulate me, and placed my things in storage. End of an era, darling.'

'I'm so sorry, mom.' She came over and gave her mother a huge hug. 'I'll make you a coffee and a promise.'

'Sounds lovely. What's the promise?'

'No Norman talk, unless you bring it up.'

'God, that'll be a relief.' She looked down at herself and felt grubby from the moving. 'I'll take a shower just now.' She inspected her nails so as not to look up. They needed a good grooming.

'Don't shower, I'll run you a bath. I've got great smellies. You can luxuriate.'

Ivy slid into the hot water and closed her eyes. She had no sense of time, though the bath went cold several times and several times she turned on the hot tap with her toe. Eventually, she felt herself glide back into her body.

'I'm no longer a fish under Norman's couch. Phew!'

Once she was dressed and had applied some colour to her eyes, cheeks and lips, Ivy felt human enough to turn her mind to other important matters, namely food. She went into the kitchen and found Geraldine updating customer files and drinking a large fruit and frozen yoghurt smoothie.

'I've made a vast amount of this, mom, because I guess you need nourishing up. It's got loads of honey and flax seeds in it, as well a bit of vanilla.'

‘MMMMMMMMMMMMMM. What could be more perfect?’ Geraldine handed her a glass from the fridge. Ivy took a sip and the thoughtfulness and the consideration and the love she felt from her daughter was so powerful that she had to grab the kitchen table to prevent her legs from collapsing. Geraldine helped her to a chair and waited for Ivy’s composure to return. They drank in silence and each had a refill.

‘There was a final sting to last night’s tale,’ said Ivy, putting down her glass. ‘Thank you, that was lovely. Do you mind if I tell you?’

‘No, of course not.’

‘I left Norman and supervised my things at the storage depot. As I left I realized I still had Norman’s house keys. So I drove back to Wynberg,’ Ivy made eye contact with Geraldine and shrugged. ‘I walked in on a flaming row between Norman and someone he’s evidently been involved with since I moved out. She’d clobbered him and his nose was bleeding. I suspect because he’d told her I’d slept there last night. I don’t know what to say or what to feel.’

‘Let me guess. Gabriella Sloane.’

‘You know about her?’ She felt someone had hooked her up to a bare electrical wire and pressed the ‘on’ switch. ‘I’m gobsmacked. How? You haven’t been hiding this from me?’

‘Through Barry. I smoothed very ruffled feathers yesterday.’ She started the story from the beginning.

‘Good God, I wonder how long it’s been going on. I presumed, I just presumed it was after I left him. I feel so betrayed.’

‘No, I’m *sure*, only after.’

‘How was Julie? Have they patched it up?’

‘Yeah, all fine. I think a lot of little lessons have been learned all round. I don’t think you’ll be getting any more flak about Norman, mom. We sorted a lot of our shit out. In a way it’s good you never came home. In fact, I quite like the somewhat contrite Julie.’

‘Good, I look forward to meeting her.’

Geraldine went over to a vase of flowers on her sideboard and plucked a pansy. Then she came to Ivy and put it in her hair. ‘Time for a bit of spring colour in your life. You look like you’re feeling better.’

‘Thank you. I am, but there’s one last thing. Do you know what I thought of when I walked in on Norman and Gabriella?’

‘Do I want to know?’

‘Yes.’ Ivy was firm on that point. ‘As shaken as I was, I felt so... so jealous of the passion on display. It was an ‘ah ha’ moment in which I saw something I’d never felt with him. I don’t expect you to understand. I felt so old.’

‘Oh mom! I don’t know what to say.’

‘Then say nothing. I made a resolution. I’m never doing anything again that compromises what I want for me. Funnily enough, I forgave myself totally for picking up that boy at Exclusives. I don’t regret it for a second, even though it’s turned my life upside down.’

Ivy stood up and touched her flower to check it was still in place.

‘I’ve just made a decision. Last night Norman and I left each other something we both valued. I got his still life and he my chest of drawers. I’m going to buy three gorgeous pieces of furniture. I can afford it. Agony-aunting has been good to me. I would like my three children to each help me select a piece. We’ll troll up-market shops, both modern and antique. We can go to auctions and surf the net. I’ll enjoy them till I shuffle off into the ether and you can all inherit the one you chose. A piece that can grow old with you like my Chippendale did with my mother and her mother before her. I’d like to do that.’

Chapter 41

Gabriella drove from Norman's home to her 'friendly' pharmacy. She was just numb and seemed to have lost something of her fine motor control.

'Can you sell me a non over the counter sleeping pill?'

'Do you have a prescription?'

'Sorry, no.' She pre-empted his objection. 'Please, listen to me and make a judgement call. My life's a bit unravelled, I can't talk about it. I need something more powerful. I once tried the over the counter ones and they don't work. I need to sleep. I'm exhausted. Can you give me just one pill?' Her voice dropped almost to a whisper. 'I need to sleep.' She shook her head, desperately trying to focus. 'When I wake up after eight hours, I can make decisions. Look at me. I'm not a junkie.' She gave her words time to settle in. 'Pleeease!'

Perhaps it was because he'd taken the odd kick from life in his gonads, perhaps because he recognised a crisis, perhaps the government had just sent him his 'owed by you' tax return, but he put three pills into a medical sachet and handed it over.

'Get some sleep.' He looked straight at her. 'Don't get used to these. Two tonight. Darkened room. Switch off your phone so you don't get woken if someone calls. You'll feel worse if you get woken. If you wake up rested tomorrow, throw the last away. Otherwise, have one more and sleep again. Bloody addictive. I don't recommend them.'

'Thanks, promise I won't.'

'Good. Good luck. Whatever it is, sleep is most probably the best. No charge.'

'You sure?'

'Yes.'

'Thanks.'

Chapter 42

I remembered a book the other day, long since lent to a friend or guest and never returned, 'Freud for the Jung: Or Three Hundred and Sixty-six Hours on the Couch' by Irene Adler.

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 30/09/2009

Oh, Norman, your musings are 'Food for the Jung'. Thanks for the evening. I deducted an extra three points because I woke to find you'd left a sharpened swizzle stick embedded behind my eyes.

Posted by Jacques Michelin 30/09/2009

Norman tidied and reorganized his home into some semblance of order. The phone rang several times but he refused to answer it and whoever it was didn't leave a message. There was no internal order to his thoughts, no sense to be made of his circumstance. Loss, anger, humiliation and acute sadness prowled across the landscape of his soul. One childhood image kept lurking below the surface, its presence difficult to pin down. He felt in his heart its hopelessness. Hints of it kept returning, not as a complete memory but more as a discombobulated jerk, a fleeting gesture or a feeling of bewilderment.

He must have been about five years old when his father had taken him to the Tygerberg zoo. It was the caged lion that had upset him. It had not been the majestic beast of his childhood fantasy but a parody, the understanding of which he was unable to articulate. Imprinted in his young mind was the relentless patrol of the twenty-five metre fence. Up and turn and down and turn and up and turn and down and turn and up and turn and down and turn and up and turn and down and turn. It had worn a path to a depth of many inches. There was no respite, no pausing, no doing of lion things. He had known he would never to go to a zoo again and never had.

It was to this hypnotic and trapped rhythm that he instinctively cleared and rearranged his space inside the black walls.

The sun had set by the time Norman had finished his domestic tasks. He hadn't eaten and was hungry, so he made himself a slice of toast with a boiled egg as a stopgap. Then he showered, changed into warm clothes, fed Trotsky and drove into the city bowl to seek out calm, non-judgemental and forgiving male company. It was time,

he thought, to reconnect with friends he'd neglected these past weeks, to get a square meal and shamelessly drunk.

Norman soon found himself in the company of an old friend who used to answer to the name of Jack Mitchell, but had subsequently changed that to Jacques Michelin. In his early life he'd been an architect and had given that up to become a chef. No sooner had Norman sat down at the Po Na Na Souk than Jacques had come sidling up to him.

'Dear boy. I see you've dropped off your blog and have taken to hunting alone. So am I. May I sit down?' He waved at the cushions across from Norman. 'You're looking a little peekish. Are you alright?'

Norman was extremely fond of Jacques. In fact, it was he who'd given him his two canes for carrying spices. They'd met during his student days when Jacques had tutored for six months as a stand-in lecturer. They had discovered a mutual love of culinary experimentation which, despite their age difference, turned into friendship. As their lives had unfolded they saw each other less, but he kept in contact as Norman's most faithful blog follower. Jacques had opened a small restaurant on the Garden Route, but by the late nineties was back in Cape Town. He now flattered himself as a thespian, made commercials and took cameo parts in many productions throughout the Western Cape. He'd never, as far as Norman knew, been in a long-term relationship, which enabled him to refine a voracious taste for eccentricity. He wore a cape, a cravat, and was bedecked in jewellery. His shoes were of patent leather and sported gold laces.

'Jacques, I've come to town to cheer myself up. I intend to get blotto tonight. I was hoping someone would turn up to keep me company. You're just the ticket.'

'I'll order us their Marrakech Sling and you'll tell me all about it.'

'Do you think something that has gin as its base is a good idea?'

'No, but cherry brandy, Cointreau, bitters, lime, cinnamon and ginger certainly is. If my company and that heady mix fails to pick you up, we shall down a quick Casablanca Cooler for its Red Bull, schnapps and rum qualities and I shall take you somewhere else. In fact we shall visit several establishments!'

Jacques was the perfect foil for Norman's state of mind. As the ambiance and alcohol loosened his tongue Norman found in his friend a safe space to 'let it all hang out.' Norman unburdened himself via a long and circuitous route. They had a skirmish

with several Buffalo Soldiers and a Bomber at the Alba Cocktail Lounge in the Waterfront and lapped at several Pornstars in the Bar Asoka Son of Dharma in Kloof Street.

It was as they arrived at the Asoka Son of Dharma, their last stop on the rambling pub crawl, that Norman's story finally ran out of steam. For several hours Jacques had listened to his friend's heady saga without affectation, interruption or clarification. He made no value judgements now, but he did sum up.

'It's a pickle, to be sure. I'm glad it's not me. They serve a rather nice cocktail here. Essentially vanilla vodka and a shot of sparkling wine on the side.'

'A trendy version of a Pornstar?'

'Yes, you got it. Clever man!'

'It's usually made with Blue Curacao cream and a splash of Malibu.'

'It's the least a friend can do. An aide-de-camp to climbing back on the saddle if you will, dear, dear boy.'

Food was found in the cosy atmosphere of a bistro, situated in Tamboerskloof, a suburb above the city bowl. It was over several glasses of red wine wine and a fillet with Yorkshire pudding topped with cream of horseradish sauce that the two friends began an esoteric game that to an outsider would have seemed a combination of the BBC's 'My Word' and pin the tail on the (literary) donkey.

'He thought he saw an artichoke

Arising from a bog,

He looked again and found it was

The serpent's monologue.

"If Eve could lay her hands on that,

She'd write man's epilogue!"

There was a pause as the jury considered its verdict.

'No! No, no, too self-flagellating, too self-indulged. You must go three points down.'

'Three?'

‘Three. One for me identifying Lewis Carroll. General knowledge counts a point in this instance. Then I must get my other point for your desperate attempt at doggerel. Standards, dear boy, standards! The third is the bonus.’ Jacques looked well pleased with himself.

‘Standards? Bonus? I protest.’ Norman felt Jacques was being unjust.

‘It was a pretty lousy attempt at ripping off Carroll. “Write man’s epilogue”, indeed.’ Jacques had placed his serviette on his head to emulate a barrister’s wig. ‘That’s worth deducting another point. I was quite prepared to hear your convoluted odyssey for half of the evening, but that was before the arrival of the first Pornstar.’ He waved his glass at Norman. ‘How much bloody time did you think I was prepared to give you to unburden yourself? When you wrapped your hand around her bosom-shaped glass, timeout was officially declared.’ He thrust out his chest. ‘You’ve no business bringing your private life into a literary lampoon.’ Jacques swayed a little. ‘Even though this has evolved into a bit of a wake.’

‘I challenge you to come up with something more heroic, Jacques. I’ll even let you steal someone else’s verse, provided of course it has wit.’

‘You’ll regret it. My lead will become unassailable.’

Norman paused and sought an ally. ‘You think I’ll be wracked with regrets, waiter?’

‘I suspect neither of you will regret anything this evening, sir. The morning might bring on one or two small misgivings, though.’

‘Really, misgivings, whatever for?’ Norman didn’t appear to be following the man’s gist.

Jacques held up his hand. ‘Prepare yourself to concede more points. It’s by that honourable gent and man of letters, Mr A. Non.’

‘It’s a bet. If yours, judged by this fine waiter, is deemed better than mine, I’ll pay for Good Fellas to get us home.’

‘Thank you, sir.’ The waiter looked relieved. ‘Glad to hear that. I’ll make the necessary call when you’re ready.’

‘Stop babbling, I’m about to recite and win a bet.’ Jacques lifted his arm in a dramatic gesture and gave a little cough.

‘In the Garden of Eden lay Adam
Complacently stroking his madam,

And loud was his mirth
For he knew that on earth
There were only two balls - and he had 'em'

Chapter 43

*Do you know I've never eaten a McDonald's hamburger?
Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 05/10/2009*

Olive-Jean walked into the foyer of the local talk radio station, announced herself and was soon sitting in the office of the station manager.

‘Would you like a cup of tea or a coffee, Mrs Stanton?’

‘Would that be instant?’

‘Pardon?’ The station manager, Cailin Lowe, was a little taken aback.

‘I asked if the coffee was instant.’ Olive-Jean leaned forward and clasped her hands on the desk. ‘Please don’t take offence, but at my age when one is counting down the number of brews, one likes not to have any disappointments. If it is instant, I’d prefer a tea.’

Cailin pressed the button on the desk telephone.

‘Two teas, please, Mary.’ The manager closed some files and looked up smiling. ‘How can I help you?’ Cailin got straight down to business.

Olive-Jean opened her bag and pulled out the cardboard sleeve that housed the reel-to-reel recording tape.

‘I believe you have the technology to convert this to a disc.’ She opened the box and laid the reel on the polished wooden surface. ‘Can you do this for me?’

‘Pat Boone and Marty Robbins?’ For the second time within a few minutes the elderly woman was not making sense. ‘But you can no doubt order CDs by these artists from any number of stores in town. Are these perhaps very rare recordings?’

‘Those names are but cunning decoys. I only discovered that by chance a few weeks ago. They are not to my taste, so this label,’ she said, tapping the cardboard sleeve, ‘was more effective than a padlock. Who on earth would want to listen to them?’ Olive-Jean gave some thought to how to sum up the situation. ‘It turns out that this is a recording from my late husband to our only son.’

‘I’m sorry, my condolences. Did he die recently?’

‘Nearly forty years ago. Hearing the voice from the ‘other side’ gave me quite a start.’ Olive-Jean’s facial expression remained completely neutral and gave no hint of what she was thinking.

‘I’m sure our technical people can do that for you. I’ll get the head of our technical staff onto it.’ Cailin sniffed a story. ‘Mrs Stanton, this is most remarkable, a recording emerging nearly half a century later. One can only wonder what a father says to his son. I wonder if he’d had a premonition?’ She smiled as warmly as she could. ‘Would you like to share it with our listeners?’

‘I cannot speak for my son. It was wrapped in a plastic bag, addressed as Private and Confidential. I thought it was for me so I put it on the machine. After listening for a moment or two, it became evident it was not for my ears but for Norman’s – that is my son’s name.’ She became a little conspiratorial. ‘He was just seven. From the little I heard I am very grateful the lad never got to hear it at the time his father passed on.’ She coughed and continued. ‘I would never even read a postcard that was addressed to someone else.’ Olive-Jean slipped seamlessly from truth to falsehood. ‘He is a little fragile at present. I have to time the moment that it will be best for him to take possession of his father’s diatribe.’

‘Oh, dear. It sounds a difficult situation.’ Her ‘scoop’ detector rose up like a periscope. ‘You can rely on us!’

‘Confidential means confidential, Ms Lowe. I will have to be assured that the technician does not listen to the tape. I have sought legal opinion.’

‘I’m sure your privacy will in no way be compromised.’ The station manager was earnest in her assurance.

The tea arrived and Cailin called a technician. Within a few minutes he’d taken possession of the reel and, after mumbling some technical jargon about analog-to-digital converters, he disappeared into the bowels of the organization. While they waited she sought to probe a little into the life of the woman who sat before her.

‘What did you used to do, Mrs Stanton?’ She hadn’t yet made the Big Issue connection.

‘Used to do?’ Olive-Jean growled. ‘Just because one has reached a certain maturity does not mean one stops doing. I lead a full and active life.’

‘Oh, no, I’m sure you do. I didn’t mean you weren’t active. I suppose I thought you might be retired.’ Cailin sought to pacify the woman. ‘Please forgive my curiosity. I run a radio station and, as a consequence, I tend to be fascinated by people’s stories and lives. I was intrigued by your forthrightness.’

‘I have been fortunate to have the means to help my fellow human beings. You could say I specialize in getting my hands dirty. Wars, disasters and human suffering

have profoundly moved me. I get involved where I can. I have been in some very dire situations all over the world.’ Olive-Jean fed a titbit to the ‘fascination’ Cailin Lowe had expressed. ‘I was away helping with the earthquake relief in Peru, in 1970, when my husband died.’

An hour, two cups of tea and a wide ranging journey across the exploits and opinions of Norman’s mother later, an entranced Cailin Lowe suggested a tour of the station as a means of concluding Olive-Jean’s visit. When they reached the front desk she decided to grasp the nettle.

‘Mrs Stanton, I’ve a suggestion. Would you consider making time to come onto the station and be interviewed? Our listening public deserve to hear your most remarkable story, and I suggest your views on the world would spark a lively debate and make for riveting listening. I’d like to put you on our daily programme meeting. You’d make a fabulous guest on one of our mid-morning or afternoon shows.’

‘Please, call me Olive-Jean. I’d have to give it some thought. I’m quite a retiring person and shun any form of publicity.’ She pursed her lips in thought. ‘But as you have helped me, I might just be persuaded. I need time to think about it.’

‘Do you tune into us often?’

‘I have a few favourite presenters.’ She stopped mid-track and changed the subject. ‘Would you like a little advice?’

‘Um... yes... please.’ Cailin braced herself.

‘Your adverts. Generally they are pretty appalling and bloody repetitive.’ She went straight to her point. ‘I know that’s how you survive and run the station, but you don’t have to fawn at the altar of mediocrity. The whole point about radio is its flexibility.’ She was on a roll. ‘To trot out the same garbage, month in, month out, at the whim of the so-called client, when it is perfectly possible to make new, vibrant and creative ads in no time at all, means the tail is wagging the dog.’ She was about to leave it there but decided to reinforce her point. ‘Set standards, Ms Lowe! Either fire your in-house creative director, if such a person exists, or find a way to let your clients know that, if they want to advertise on your airwaves, you are not prepared to run rubbish.’

Chapter 44

Try the pan-fried venison at Kirstenbosch with sautéed spinach, mushroom risotto and two sauces of your choice. Highly recommended. Great value.

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 06/10/2009

I tried ignoring you, for I was convinced you'd eloped, never to be heard of again, but have decided not to – ignore you, that is. Welcome back, Norman.

Posted by JuicyLucy 06/10/2009

The Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens can be described as the most beautiful garden in the whole world. It displays five out of South Africa's six biomes and is situated under Table Mountain on the south-eastern slopes. Mother and son were strolling across the lawns prior to having a light meal at the restaurant. For years, Norman had faithfully honoured the lunch arrangement in the name of mother-son bonding. As much as Olive-Jean drove him to distraction at times, he harboured a romantic notion that under her bristles lurked a large helping of apple pie and ice cream. She participated in the routine, ever hopeful to bang him into shape.

'What? You've been asked to come on radio and be interviewed? That's wonderful.'

'I don't know. I am giving it some thought.'

'How did they get hold of you?'

'I went on a station tour and they asked me at the end of it. The station manageress said she liked the fact I was forthright. That was her word.'

'Well, I'm sure you'll be a hit, mother.'

'I gave her a potted history of my life, as well. She displayed immense interest and wouldn't stop probing my ideas.'

'Well, I think it's great.'

'But enough of me. You're in new shoes and pants, son?' She ran a critical eye over his exterior.

'And shirt, mother. There was a sale at Cape Union. Yes, I treated myself to a new outfit as a sort of pick-me-up. I was going to tell you over lunch – I seem to have been cut adrift by both women in my life.' Norman had also purchased a pair of sensible leather walking shoes from a Green Cross shop alongside Cape Union. He was

sporting a beige cotton shirt and a pair of brown corduroys. 'Must say that decent shoes are a complete treat.'

'I like them, they should last.'

The day was warm and cloudless and the light had a clarity that seemed to magnify the colour and crisp up the detail, from the peak of the mountain to the delicacy of the tiniest wild flower.

'I warned both you and Gabriella to go away for a while. I liked her. An intelligent woman. How do you manage to attract them, Norman?'

'Pardon, mother?' His shoulders dropped.

'Intelligent women, how do you attract them?'

'God, that says a lot about your opinion of me.' He regretted saying that the moment the words left his mouth. It was less from the weight of Olive-Jean's 'forthrightness' than from his own stupidity for rising to the bait.

'It's very hard to get it right, son. I'm not casting aspersions, I'm stating a fact. You often seem to me to box above your intellectual weight.' She seemed to enjoy the expression. 'You are more a *feeling* type of person, rather than a *thinker*. It is not a value judgement.' Norman said nothing and, as she got no response, she pursued her theme undaunted. 'If you want my opinion it's also because you cook well. A little extravagantly at times, but well, none the less.' As her son was still looking peeved she attempted to soften the stance. 'That is, I must admit to an intoxicating factor, especially for many women who have borne the drudgery of life round the stove while their men have sat burping beer on the couch.'

They were distracted for a moment by a breathtaking array of pincushions, but Olive-Jean soon returned to her analysis. 'It is keeping them that seems to me to be the tricky part.' She took his arm above the elbow as they walked on. 'What happened this time?'

'Gabriella and I had a dreadful row about Ivy. Ivy came with a van and collected her things. She'd no sooner gone than Gabriella arrived. I felt claustrophobic and took it out on her, I'm afraid. I suspect I behaved appallingly.' Norman sighed again. He felt a deep sadness in his marrow. 'I don't blame her for walking out. I guess I have to do a bit of internal probing and analysis.'

'Good idea. Have you thought of seeing a counsellor?'

‘God, mother, that’s a change of heart.’ Norman was so astounded he stopped walking. Up until this point Olive-Jean’s views of therapeutic intervention had constellated under the simple phrase ‘buck up!’

‘Nonsense. I always approved of Ivy’s advice. You seem to be struggling. You’ve taken one blow after another. I’m concerned that should something else come up, it could tip you over the edge.’

Norman took his glasses off his nose.

‘Can I give you a hug?’

‘You could, but why?’ It was her turn to be taken aback.

‘Because, mother darling, that’s the sweetest thing you’ve said to me in a decade.’

Over a lunch of ostrich bobotie, yellow rice and sweet potato for her and pan-fried venison for him, Olive-Jean raised the issue of her funerary celebration.

‘I’ve decided to bring forward the post-funeral meal celebrating my life. I’m going to be master of ceremonies.’

Under normal circumstances, such an idea would be heard in surroundings noted for the padding on the walls, or on an elevated stage under coloured lights, but Norman knew his mother was being absolutely serious. He showed no incredulity and just waited for the latest absurdity to be given flesh.

‘You’ll still be cooking. I’m making and fine-tuning the arrangements.’

‘Pigeon, not quail, right?’ Norman sought clarification.

‘Quite right.’

‘Where are we having this meal?’

‘I thought in your home. The black walls will add a macabre touch.’

‘You bet. And when will this come to pass?’

‘As soon as I have traced one or two people.’

‘So, other than to give away a third of your worldly goods, you’re still not letting on. Any reason why, mother?’

‘I’m giving it some thought. Nothing is set in stone.’ Olive-Jean speared a sweet potato. ‘To be frank, when I first phoned you it was a germ of an idea. That there will be a meal isn’t negotiable. I’m still wrapping my head around how I’m going to conduct proceedings.’ She looked magnanimously at Norman. ‘I shall instruct you on a need to know basis. You will be my right-handman in all this.’

‘Ok,’ Norman said, nodding. ‘I look forward to further instructions.’

‘Tell me son, apropos nothing.’ She put her knife and fork down and leaned forward, both forearms on the table. ‘Have I been a *good* mother to you?’

‘You’ve been the only one I’ve had, so there’s no comparison.’ He was struggling more than usual because the territory was so unfamiliar. ‘I guess given the material with which you’ve worked,’ he was at his most self-deprecating best, to buy a bit of time, ‘you’ve done a splendid job. I love you, never forget that. Ever!’

University of Cape Town

Chapter 45



Chapter 45

I was asked where I've had my best sushi meal in Cape Town. Simon's Town. Behind Just Nuisance is Just Sushi.

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 09/10/2009

That's because you've never tried mine! he he

Posted by SushiLuchy 10/10/2009

Henry Jameson waved at Olive-Jean as he climbed out of the car. She saw him pull up and came bustling out of the house.

‘On time as usual, that’s good.’

She was dressed in a pair of tailored black pants with a light, sky-blue shirt with a black collar. Over that was a matching Fair Isle black and blue woollen jacket. There was a hint of red on her lips and she’d brushed her cheeks with a little rouge. As she approached him, her sky-blue suede deck shoes clicked gaily on the pavement stones.

‘I wouldn’t risk it any other way. You’re looking very youthful and charming, my dear.’

‘Cut the crap, Henry Jameson,’ she chuckled, pleased to see him. ‘Where are you taking me?’

‘Cape to Cuba. I initially thought the Harbour House Restaurant, but no establishment could top your fish from the other night, so I thought a different cuisine would be better.’

Henry opened the passenger door of his five series BMW and Olive-Jean, after pausing to admire her house against the panorama of the bay and the mountain, climbed in.

‘Rather odd driving a couple of hundred metres down the road and then trying to find parking, isn’t it?’

‘Not as odd as you might imagine. The table is only booked for eight o’clock. That’s over an hour from now. It is an utterly perfect evening. I thought we’d drive to Simon’s Town and have a pre-dinner drink at the Lord Nelson Inn.’ He closed the door and went around to the driver’s side. He turned the ignition and pointed the car towards Main Road. ‘I have an eccentricity. Apart from the charm of the place I have a coaster collection. Quite a stunning one, actually. I don’t have one from Emily’s Den, which explains my choice of watering hole. Can we start our evening there?’

‘Of course.’

‘When were you last there, OJ?’

‘God, I don’t know. While Ronald was alive. He was a junior officer for the South African Naval Forces towards the end of the Second World War. Ha!’ She laughed loudly. ‘The only person, I believe, to be bitten by Able Seaman Just Nuisance.’ She shared a private joke with herself before giving a hint. ‘If his hand hadn’t got in the way he would have been Unable Semen.’

‘You’re joking!’

‘No, I’m not. At the right angle you could still see a faint scar on his inner thigh.’

‘Why, what did he do for heaven’s sake? You’re talking of the most revered dog in Royal Naval history.’

‘I’m not sure of the exact circumstances. He was most probably two sheets to the wind and got as belligerent with the animal as he used to get with me. I told him once that they would put up a bloody statue to the beast, and they did in the mid-eighties. I even met the artist, Jean Doyle. Pity Ronald wasn’t alive to see it!’

‘I thought I knew all about that bit of history, but I never heard of the incident.’ Henry began to plough through his war archive. ‘Just Nuisance, a Great Dane, the only dog ever to be officially enlisted in the Royal Navy, based here until he died in 1944. Buried with full military honours. I know his Conduct Sheet showed three offences.’ Henry adopted his legal voice. ‘Travelling on the railway without a pass, sleeping in an improper place and resisting ejection from the Sailors’ and Soldiers’ Home. Though,’ he added, ‘I know he resisted ejection from a number of pubs as well.’

‘Our Ronald was not one for boasting too loudly of his encounter with Nuisance, although the odd wartime buddy from those days would turn up from time to time and remind him. I’m also forced to think my late husband’s Conduct Sheet would have much in common with Just Nuisance’s.’

Once they were perched atop the stools in the tiny pub and had ordered gins and tonics, she looked at the gaudy yellow-headed bust of Lord Horatio above the bar counter.

‘You seem to share a similar affliction to the old boy up there,’ she said reaching across Henry for a handful of peanuts.

‘My apologies, my dear.’ He placed the bowl between them. ‘And what affliction might that be?’

‘You’ve put your telescope up to your blind eye. I don’t think you’ve noticed my signals. I’m waiting for news.’

‘I was going to discuss my successes over dinner.’

‘Why? I’m waiting.’

Henry rubbed his hands and looked pleased. He’d decided on a Taransay Harris Tweed jacket over a stylish red cardigan for his date with Olive-Jean. A beige white shirt with a faint red and brown linear check and a burgundy tie with a lavish knot completed the outfit. He slipped an elegant hand into the jacket pocket and produced several sheets of folded paper and some photographs printed from the Internet.

‘I’m happy to say that I have traced several on the list you gave me. I’m following up on one who appears to have passed on.’

‘Where to?’ As interested as she was in what was being said, the habits of a lifetime were reflex. ‘You mean, might have died?’

‘Yes, my dear.’

‘Well, carry on, Henry,’ she rebuked him gently. ‘You’re dithering.’

His legal mind caught a whiff of irony in her stance.

‘The difficulty comes if they have married, changed their names for another reason, or moved away. We’re a very fluid world population. I suggest you place adverts and mention them in the next article you write for the Big Issue. It actually is an intriguing tale.’ He dabbed the serviette over his lips. ‘The voice from the dead speaks four decades later. You’re looking for a woman in a red sixties hat who might have known Ronald Frye. Ask the question. Could any one of these be her? Give the names. Invite them to make contact with you. You can be enigmatic with a few judiciously chosen words, like ‘beneficial.’ He paused to nibble. ‘I asked my artiled clerk who is much more in touch with the whole social networking scene, like Facebook and Twitter, and she immediately produced results. Here are some printouts.’ He placed several images on the table. ‘Of course these might not be them, but the vintage is about right.’ He stroked his chin. ‘I should think.’

‘Crikey! To quote Ronald, age has wearied them and the years condemned.’ She tweaked Laurence Binyon.

Several middle-aged to senior-looking women stared back at her.

‘So these might be the floozies in whose company he found warmth and succour?’ She wrinkled her nose. ‘It doesn’t seem he set the bar very high now, does it?’ She thought about what she’d just said. ‘Perhaps I do him an injustice. The *bar* was very high on his list of priorities.’ She placed her tumbler upon the table. ‘I think we should have our second half.’

As he picked up her glass she placed her hand on his.

‘Norman is always banging on about Facebook and how I should join it. It’ll keep me in touch with all the people I’ve met around the world, he says. I think perhaps I should sign up, get with it.’

‘Yes, I think you should, OJ.’ He nodded approvingly. ‘And then you can trawl the site. I think that’s the expression.’

When they got back to the BMW, Olive-Jean asked Henry if they could make a quick detour.

‘Can you just make a quick turn to Jubilee Square?’

‘With pleasure. Why?’ He pocketed his cork coaster.

‘Do you have one of those fancy phones with a camera?’

‘It has one, yes.’

‘Good. I would like you to take a picture of me patting the bronze head of Able Seaman Just Nuisance.’

Chapter 46

Send me your favourite food poems?

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 09/10/2009

Adrian Henri:

“A nun in a supermarket standing in a queue, wondering what it’s like to buy groceries for two.”

Posted by St Rita 10/10/2009

A talk show host contacted Olive-Jean sooner than she expected.

‘Hello is that Mrs Stanton, Olive-Jean Stanton?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oliver Coquette. Talk radio. Our station manager, Cailin Lowe, spoke to me yesterday and shared some of the things you told her. Fascinating.’ He sounded animated. ‘My listeners would be enthralled and so would I. It would be a privilege to have you on my show.’

‘I said to her I’d give it some thought.’

‘Aaaaaand?’

Olive-Jean had indeed given it some thought. Henry’s idea of writing an article for the Big Issue was a good one but there was always a small lead-time from story’s submission to final publication. She didn’t have that sort of time. It would have been completely out of character for her to plod along that slowly with an idea.

‘Once I’ve a bee in my bonnet, I act. No good faffing around,’ was a sentiment she’d spread about with vigour over the years.

Such an article could be a follow-up. Radio was immediate and she could mention her quest to find an old friend of Ronald’s, just as Henry had suggested. She had already planned the angle she would take. It would be something along the lines of ‘My late husband once made reference to a woman in a red hat. I wonder if she is still alive. He wanted to give her something.’

Olive-Jean was not above drawing out the tension.

‘Aaaaand,’ she mimicked him, ‘Mr Coquette, I’d be honoured.’

‘Splendid!’

‘My diary is very full. When were you proposing it?’

‘Next week? If you agree, could we meet? There are a number of little coffee shops near the station or I could come to you, so we can have a discussion. I like being properly prepared for any show. Plus, I’ve always wanted to meet the person behind those wonderful, controversial articles. I couldn’t possibly wait for the interview to meet you.’

‘Yes, and I’m Greta Garbo. Let’s not start off on the wrong foot. I don’t do blatant flattery, Mr. Croquette. Still, there’s no time like the present.’ Olive-Jean got straight down to business. ‘I’ll come through to your side of the mountain.’

‘When?’

‘Tomorrow lunchtime.’ She put down the receiver and leaned on the bay window sill and looked out over the sea.

‘Is it really possible I can feel cuckolded and betrayed after thirty-nine bloody years?’ There was a box of Cadbury’s Dairy Milk Hazel Nutties on the side table next to her. Her hand went idly down and took a few. She liked to suck the chocolate away before eating the nut. She popped another Nutty in her mouth, closed the lid of the box and straightened up.

The doorbell rang. She swallowed the last of the chocolate and ran her tongue over her front teeth before opening the door.

‘Hello mother’

‘Son, come in. You’re on time. Good.’

‘I always am, and you always say that.’

‘I’m always pleased when you are. I’ve put my computer on. Come and introduce me to your master.’

Norman sat down at his mother’s desk.

‘You’re acting out of character, mother. There have been a series of surprises. Are you alright?’

‘Nonsense.’

‘You’ve asked me to come over and introduce you to Facebook. Forgive me if I remind you that the last time I mentioned it your response was, “over my dead body”.’

‘It’s an utterly appalling idea, the whole concept. But as *you* said it’s a very helpful tool to trace people. My friend Henry has also remarked on the power of the social networking sites. I’ve been convinced they’re the way to go.’

‘Who’s Henry, now?’

‘He’s an advocate friend. Our acquaintance goes back years and years. We share a birthday. We have an occasional dinner. We dined together the other night. I sought a bit of advice.’

‘He brought the flowers?’ Norman smiled at his powers of deduction. They would not have been Olive-Jean’s first choice. Roses she liked, but not carnations. She always maintained carnations were weighted with more symbolic baggage than a congress of Jungians or a Wiccan jamboree.

Norman sipped his ‘proper’ cup of tea. Olive-Jean had joined Facebook. Her profile picture showed her patting Just Nuisance’s head. She became officially her son’s friend, who then put a welcome message onto her wall and the privacy settings were negotiated. She lit a cigarette and Norman added a heaped spoon of sugar into his brew to counter the post traumatic stress of the last hour.

‘Thank you, Norman, that was pretty painless.’ She offered him a Nutty. ‘I shared coffee with the Jolly Coquette this morning.’

‘The radio man?’

‘I’m meeting him tomorrow so he can prepare for the interview. He’s read my articles.’ She was positively bubbling. ‘Now, I don’t want you phoning in and hogging the airwaves.’

‘I promise I won’t.’ Norman took advantage of his mother’s upbeat mood. ‘You’ll endeavour to leave me out of the conversation, won’t you, mother? I’d feel more comfy if you stuck to wars, genocides, lava, fire, earthquakes and floods.’

‘I’m sure you won’t receive more than a passing mention, if any.’ She waved the cigarette in her son’s general direction. ‘I may make mention of Ronald.’

‘Dad?’

She ignored his question.

‘You know, it’s true. I have been around the aftermath of all of those disasters. Quite amazing when one pauses to hear the list.’

‘So where does my father come into all this?’ Norman was not about to let go of the reference to Ronald.

‘I’ve told you, son, you will be informed on a need-to-know basis.’ She was equally determined. ‘I won’t be cajoled into revealing more.’

Chapter 47

*Take a pinch of white man,
Wrap him up in black skin,
Add a touch of blue blood,
And a little bitty bit of red Indian boy.
Oh like a curly Latin kinkies,
Oh lordy, lordy, mixed with yellow chinkees, yeah.
You know you lump it all together
And you got a recipe for a get along scene,
Oh what a beautiful dream.
If it could only come true, you know, you know.*

*What we need is a great big melting pot
Big enough, enough, enough to take
The world and all it's got
And keep it stirring for
A hundred years or more
And turn out coffee-coloured people by the score.*

Sung by Blue Mink, written by Roger Cook and Roger Greenway.

Posted by Fryed – Medium Rare 15/10/2009

The phone call came through to the radio station one minute before the end of the interview.

‘Hello, Olive-Jean. I guess I’m the girl in the red hat.’

‘You are?’

‘I do believe I am.’

‘We’ll have to see.’

The previous fifty-nine minutes had been riveting talk radio. The interview had opened simply.

‘Tell us a little of yourself, Mrs Stanton. Or may I call you Olive-Jean?’

‘Olive-Jean suits me just fine.’ She sounded, over the airwaves, as velvety as a concrete mixer in full throttle. She approached the opening question with the humble touch. ‘Not much to tell, really. I’ve lived a simple life, mucking in where I can.’

‘Has there been a Mr Stanton?’ Oliver asked a question to which he knew the answer, but he was probing for the beer ring story.

‘Oh, there was. He died, unfortunately.’ She sounded completely matter of fact. ‘I won’t go into the circumstances, save to say he left a seven year-old son without a father and a wife with a painting. An oil painting.’

‘I thought you were going to say, a wife without a husband.’ Oliver Coquette’s stab at compassion made no impact.

‘Yes, very sad. I returned from Peru after his death and found the painting in his study. It wasn’t really his sort of painting. He liked those stylized pictures of horses and hounds that clutter countless British-style pubs. You know the ones; the front legs of the horse extend forward and the back legs both extend back.’

‘Is that all he left you?’ Oliver wasn’t sure where this was leading.

‘No, I was sole beneficiary,’ she explained as if he was a backward child. ‘I’m talking of the oil painting. I hung onto it for a while, thinking he might have won it in a poker game or someone might turn up and collect it. Not the sort of thing I would have put on my walls.’ She looked for an adjective. ‘A sort of bleak picture, a bit desperate actually, of a minimally clad woman and a man in a frightfully tacky Midwest sort of saloon.’ She turned to Oliver. ‘Do the words Edward Hopper mean anything to you?’

Oliver was forced to admit his ignorance.

‘Didn’t mean much to me, either, and the man who valued the estate paid it no never mind. To cut a long story short, a few years later an American art dealer who was here in South Africa for a few months spotted it.’ The concrete in the mixer assumed a different resonance. ‘He might have had an eye for me but that paled to nothing compared to the way he hopped for Hopper.’ She concluded her story. ‘A few museums were contacted, some private collectors. I was told I owned a major work.’

‘Good heavens, that’s amazing.’ Oliver Coquette implored her to continue.

‘Not as amazing as the sum it realized. Wisely invested, I was able to help humanity in some small way.’

‘You never found out whose it was? That’s unbelievable.’

‘I have a clue. I chanced upon some information recently that it was given to my late husband by a woman who, it seems, showed a predilection for red hats. I’ve a list of six possible names. I thought I might spread a little largesse to her in return for what she has vicariously given to me.’

Norman, who was listening from home, could hardly believe what he was hearing.

‘Good God, mother!’ She’d never spoken a word to him about it. ‘That’s bloody peculiar. I remember it,’ he mused to himself. ‘She finally hung it up in dad’s old study.’ He was stitching the memories together. ‘And one day it was gone. I always wondered who those two people were and why they were there that night. They looked so sad.’ He shook his head. ‘An Edward Hopper indeed.’ Norman did a quick calculation of the time frames. ‘When she got rid of it, he was beginning to fetch dramatic prices.’

He made himself a cup of tea. He then remembered that his mother had replaced the Hopper with an early Walter Battiss depicting Fook Island. Norman loved that painting, colourful birds above a throng of naked people on a beach.

Oliver Croquette moved the interview forward.

Olive-Jean rose to the occasion and was soon in full stride. Her descriptions of the devastation of the 2004 tsunami, the last time she had volunteered for humanitarian work, the 2000 Mozambique flood, the Ancash and Guatemala City earthquakes of 1970 and 1976, as well as the Exxon Valdez oil spill in the Prince William Sound in 1989, were spellbinding. It was her ability to add a personal dimension that elicited a flood of responses.

‘What did you use to clean the seabirds?’

‘The same sort of stuff with which you washed last night’s dishes. Dawn dishwashing liquid was the preferred detergent.’

‘How many sea otters died?’

‘The figure given, my dear, is two thousand eight hundred. But that doesn’t tell the story. I was once helping out at a veterinary clinic outside Pietermaritzburg. That day we put down fifty-seven dogs. That made a mound of dead dogs that was higher than the top of the window. The sea otter is far bigger and heavier than a Labrador, especially the males. Imagine every classroom in your child’s school filled with oil-soaked dead otters.’

Slowly the conversation moved from catastrophe to the world according to Stanton. Norman began to get a little nervous as she expounded her views on AIDS, religion, climate change and pollution. The conversation took a dramatic turn when she ventured a comparison between the tinsel world of haute couture and abattoirs.

‘What’s the difference,’ Olive-Jean posed the rhetorical question, ‘between an overly pampered model, or a socialite hooked on gauche, glitter and adoration, surrounded by masturbating men in Armani suits, and a gentle cow called Daisy

hooked on a stainless steel gantry, surrounded by underpaid men in overalls and galoshes?’ She did not wait for the flood of sms’s and phone calls before answering her own question. ‘It’s in the *moo..lah.*’

‘I have a daughter who has done an amazing amount for charity by being a so-called pampered socialite, I’ll have you know, Olive-Jean,’ came the first indignant response, ‘there are many socialites who have lifted people out of the morass in which they found themselves.’ She ended her point on a triumphant note, ‘by being able to financially champion a cause.’

‘The only reason they were able to financially champion anything is because they forced those very peoples’ faces into the mud by climbing all over them to get to the top.’

‘You can’t just damn modelling and fashion, Hollywood and fame! Millions of people make an honest living out of it,’ said another.

‘I don’t know.’ Olive-Jean was cutting. ‘Your entire consumer society is predicated on the notion that everything is transitory; everything must be thrown away and replaced by something more tasteless and extravagant. Those poor anorexic girls, screwing and spiking themselves to get up another rung of a mirage, are just collateral damage at the very tip of a rotten pile.’ She gulped in air before continuing. ‘Read how DSM3 defines a psychopath. Corporate capitalism and the whole sick edifice of the stars, the bold and the fashion-conscious beautiful would all fit the description.’

The fast food industry, instant gratification, the turgid stockpiles of European butter and farm produce, the persecution of humble smokers and talk show hosts were all dissected as the clock ticked towards the hour.

The sales of the Big Issue were about to skyrocket.

As they left the studio, he, Oliver Croquette, a simple talk show host at almost his sell by date, offered a silent prayer of thanks to the universe for sending him Mrs Olive-Jean Stanton.

‘It’s all in the ratings.’

It was a thought he didn’t say out loud.

Chapter 48



Posted by Fryed - Medium Rare 19/10/2009

‘Look at my picture,’ said Norman, ‘and tell me what you think of this idea. If, with your years of experience you give it the thumbs up, I’m going to use it as the basis of a cookery book I’m currently writing. In fact,’ he became a little conspiratorial, ‘if you tell me this is a load of old codswallop, I’ll scrap the project.’ He raised his eyebrows in a look of feigned alarm. ‘I’m entirely in your hands.’

He projected a print of the Toulouse-Lautrec painting ‘Salon at the Rue des Moulins’ onto a screen behind him. He was giving a cooking lecture and demonstration to the Women’s ‘Exploring our World’ Club in a retirement village in Noordhoek.

‘Dim your eyes.’

They all followed his lead.

‘The tones in the picture are all red and warm and are contrasted by colours with flashes of white, tinged in cool blue.’ Norman switched on a little laser pointer. ‘Look at Madame with the angelic face. That’s ironic, isn’t it?’ There was a titter of amusement. ‘She’s next to a partially obscured woman adjusting her knickers, evidently just having serviced a customer. In front of her sits one of Madame’s ‘ladies’. Look at the device. You are drawn into the picture up her black stockings.’ He let the thought settle. ‘Isn’t that how all men are drawn to women... up their legs?’ The audience was beginning to love him. ‘That’s the centre of the composition. In the

background are another three prostitutes.’ Norman paused dramatically. ‘Waiting!’ He summed up. ‘It’s a room of velvet and seduction and somehow a hint in it of pathos. Wouldn’t you agree?’

The lights were raised.

‘Ok. Now let’s tell this story with food.’

There were a few blank looks.

‘This book is aimed at divorced men, so I’ll keep it simple.’

‘You mean you are recommending they visit ladies of the night?’

The women laughed. There was a joker in the audience. Norman decided to win her over. If she approved, his idea was sound.

‘Something has to lead your taste buds to experience the heart of the meal, to hold it like the Madame holds the space: enigmatic, delicious but with a hint of some secret you can’t quite fathom. Every other flavour in the dish supports this central taste.’

Norman cut some calamari steaks into strips. He diced a few sweet potatoes, chilli, ginger and garlic, spinach, some yellow, red and green peppers. He opened a tub of crème fraîche and winked at them. Finally he chopped up a bunch of coriander leaves. He then lit his portable gas stove and placed a large wok next to it.

‘On this tray, which one of these ingredients is the woman with the black stockings?’ He gave them a clue. ‘It couldn’t be the chilli, it needs to be more subtle. Neither the crème fraîche.’ They all agreed, too rich and opulent. Crème fraîche would represent the huge red couches. They settled on the peppers; enticing, crunchy, visually alluring, lightly blanched.

Madame, after much debate, was the chilli, the other ‘girls’ the ginger. The whore on her feet was the garlic, but not too much - the taste mustn’t dominate but the essence of it must infuse the entire dish. The detail in the room was the spinach and the coriander.

‘Ladies,’ said Norman bowing slightly, ‘you’ve all forgotten the calamari steaks.’ He dimmed the lights again. ‘I suggest the blue-white dress of the woman in the black stockings and her pale skin. There’s also the hint of cool colours in the background mirrors.’ They gave him a round of applause.

What was surprising to the women of the ‘Exploring your World’ Club is that Norman maintained that the proportions of the ingredients would come entirely from

their analysis of the painting and the weight they gave each element in the composition.

Under Norman's guidance they determined the ratio of each ingredient to the other. He then lit his portable gas stove. He boiled the sweet potato and made mash. Next he steamed the spinach and blanched the peppers. He set the large wok on the stove and lightly fried the ginger, chilli and garlic in a little block of butter with a swoosh of olive oil. When that was sizzling the calamari was cooked for a minute. Lastly came the crème fraîche. There was a garnished meal before them three minutes from the time the sweet potato was ready.

'Perfect,' declared the woman with the comic touch, 'with these skills you can wander into my salon anytime after your next divorce!'

Chapter 49

As Norman walked out of the village clubhouse he felt a lightness he hadn't felt for some time.

'Your *Divorced Man's Table* is going to work. They've affirmed your idea!' He continued musing as he climbed into the car, 'Just don't make it too highbrow. I can use any kind of image, be they illustrations, photographs or paintings.' It would be fun finding some wonderful, eclectic pictures. He turned and waved again at the ladies standing on the steps, who waved back.

'You must carefully plan the lists of ingredients that every good divorced larder and fridge should contain. Nothing complex.' He drove off but stopped just before the boom to call Olive-Jean.

'Hello, son, to what do I owe the pleasure?'

'Thought I'd pop by and see you. I've just done a cooking lecture and demo in Noordhoek. I'm at the entrance. Left takes me home and right takes me to you. I could be there in fifteen minutes.'

'I'm feeling unusually tired.' She sounded a bit flat. 'I would like to see you. That would be nice. Go and find a coffee shop and read the paper. Come in an hour. I think I should have forty winks.'

Normally, Norman would have found an excuse not to hang about for an hour, but he was determined to understand his mother's odd behaviour so he readily agreed. She had been evasive when he had phoned to congratulate her and 'chew the fat'.

'Mother, we have to talk!' He rehearsed his opening gambit to himself. 'Enough now, please.' He frowned as he pulled into Silvermine Road, looking stern. 'The list is too long for us to ignore it a moment longer.' He was determined he wouldn't allow her to interrupt. 'Mother, there are women in red hats, my father's leaving art masterpieces lying around his study, you want a wake before you've died, and with unknown people to boot.' He imagined Olive-Jean withering under his severity. 'Then there's your over-involvement with a coffee-table book based on my journals, and most extraordinary of all,' he paused, glinting an eye at the horizon, 'you hinted that therapy could be useful to me!'

There was a farm stall complex at the T-junction. He'd while away his time there. Norman smiled and tapped his thumbs on the steering wheel to the Gordon Lightfoot tune, *I'm on my second cup of coffee*. He remembered a pompous posting he'd written on his blog less than seven weeks ago. It seemed like half a lifetime.

'The road to the abyss or to the machine that will spit out a winning lottery ticket is not generally signposted and gives no warning that life is about to change at its T-junction.' He had the good grace to feel a little sheepish. 'What that lacks, dear Norman,' he said to himself, 'to turn that sentence into an iconic piece of kitsch, is the following.' He cleared his throat. *'It is a truth universally acknowledged that the road...'*

He broke off, unable to contain his laughter.

Norman was, as usual, prompt. When, an hour later, he was ringing his mother's gate bell, he got no reply and felt slightly irritated. He fished in his pocket for his keys, which contained Olive-Jean's spares. He opened the gate and walked to the front door. He knocked and called out. 'Mother, I'm here!'

'Shit, you *are* impossible. What is it about come in an hour I'm not understanding?' He remembered Julie's expression in her angry email. 'Perhaps she's gone to get something for tea.' He knocked once more and let himself in.

The first inkling he felt that something was wrong lay on the entrance hall table. There were his mother's keys.

'How could she have gone out and locked the door and left the keys inside?'

He saw the curtain at the end of the passage move. 'Mother!' he called again. Again no reply. Norman looked for something with which to defend himself. Olive-Jean's walking stick was in the corner. He picked it up and made his way down the passage and into the kitchen.

The door was open.

'If all's well,' he breathed deeply, 'she's outside.' But the little strip of garden to the washing line was empty. 'Mother?' Norman started to worry. Systematically and quietly he looked through the house. Scullery, spare room, study, lounge, bathroom. He pushed open her bedroom door. At first it seemed no one was there and then he saw her foot. She'd evidently fallen behind her bed.

'Oh hell!'

She was lying crumpled, like a discarded gown, as if an unseen hand had just lifted her a foot or two above the ground and let her drop.

Norman knelt beside her and felt her neck. No pulse. She was surprisingly cold. She must have taken off her clothes and put on her 'nightie' for her forty winks. Her eyes were open. He held out a tentative hand and touched her. He closed his eyes for a while, before closing hers.

Perhaps it was a protective instinct developed from living in South Africa, but Norman suddenly felt insecure. There still could be someone in the house. After all, the back door was open. He needed to check. Ever present was the clawing thought that this might be a crime scene.

'I'm not really ready for this, am I?'

He set off through the house again, being more thorough this time, checking behind doors and furniture. Finally he got back to the kitchen and locked the door. Norman made a decision not to phone the cops. He would first speak to the family doctor. He put through the call.

'Leave her as she is. I'm so sorry. I've a patient. I'll be over as soon as I can.'

There is no instruction manual on how to wait with a deceased mother for a doctor to arrive. Norman found a blanket and placed it over her.

'Sorry, mother.' He hated covering her face so he pulled it back to her shoulders. He gently picked up her hand. It was colder on the side that touched the floor.

'This isn't a joke, is it, Norman?'

‘I’m afraid not.’

‘Thought not.’

‘Do you think her spirit is still wandering around the house?’

‘Don’t know.’

‘Hello, mother. Just in case you are, this is appalling. I intended a stern chat with you.’

‘My God, my God, my God. Pour me another whiskey, you bastard.’

Those trademark theatrical lines, recited so often at parties to the huge amusement of others, wrapped his soul in barbed wire and crushed his heart.

“You are not particularly good at finding an appropriate time for chatting sternly to me.” Olive-Jean might have said.

‘You’re making it difficult, if you force me to be honest, mother.’

The doctor arrived an hour later and Norman left him alone with her.

‘I can honestly say she died of natural causes.’ He said as he came out from the bedroom. ‘Help me put her on the bed. Most probably a stroke, there’s no need for an autopsy.’

‘I’m pleased.’

Together they lifted Olive-Jean.

‘Goodness doc, she’s so small and light.’

‘Yes, she is a tiny woman.’ They put the blanket over her up to her shoulders, her arms over it, straight at her side. Norman straightened his mother’s hair with his fingers.

‘I didn’t know. She was larger in life.’

They chatted for half an hour and it seemed that Olive-Jean was as enigmatic to him as to Norman.

‘She didn’t buy into the “medical model”, but loved taking a pill. I can’t say I knew her terribly well but I knew a lot about her.’ He saw the contradiction in what he said. ‘If you know what I mean?’

‘Had she talked about my father recently?’

‘She always talked about your father. She was very angry with him for dying.’

‘She said on the radio she “chanced upon some information”. Did she mention it?’

‘No.’

‘Did she mention a wake?’

‘Oh, yes. She said I was on a list. It was a recent thing. I paid it no mind.’

‘What did you say?’

‘What I always did. Told her to stop smoking and there’d be no need for wake plans in the immediate future.’

‘She must have loved that.’ He squeezed his mother’s hand again.

The doctor stood up to go.

‘Let me know if there is anything I can do. Call Doves. I presume you’ll want to stay here with her for a while. They’ll collect her any time, night or day. I’ll send them the death certificate tomorrow.’

When he was alone, he phoned Ivy and told her the news. She asked if she could come over and see Olive-Jean. Norman agreed. He went next door and told Doris, who was inconsolable for a while. She came back with him and berated OJ for leaving her.

‘Not even a word of goodbye.’ She wagged an arthritic finger.

The news spread pretty quickly. Doris opened a mysterious communication system and ushered a succession of locals in and out of the house. Tea and coffee miraculously appeared on the lounge table before disappearing and appearing again, in sync with the ebb and flow of people paying their respects.

‘This is all a bit of a blur. Thank you.’ Norman was grateful someone was in control. ‘It’s been strangely comforting, all these people. Some familiar, most not. I didn’t know she enjoyed such a community life.’ Apart from the shock came the growing realisation that when he had lost his father, he had also lost his mother. She had emotionally abandoned him, putting him in boarding school so she could go off and save the world. ‘All these people, Doris, they’d another kind of relationship with her, hadn’t they?’

‘She loved you, Norman.’ She gave him a hug and a kiss on his cheek. ‘Not today, not the right time. You can come tomorrow and ask the questions you want to.’

‘Thanks. That’s kind.’

He phoned Gabriella and left a message on her home and mobile phones. Norman pressed the button on Olive-Jean’s answering machine. There was a message from a certain Henry Jameson. He paged through his mother’s telephone book and found his number to call him later or in the morning.

Ivy arrived and she and Norman spent a little time in the bedroom. At some point Norman left her alone with Olive-Jean and went and sat in the bay window. It was while he was sitting there, staring at the harbour, that Gabriella returned his call.

‘I’m so sorry, Norman.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Shitty timing, eh?’

‘Yes, pretty rotten.’

‘Are you ok? Do want me to come over?’

‘Ivy’s just arrived. Feels a bit awkward.’

‘Listen to me.’ She chose her words carefully. ‘Our shyte now is the last thing you need. I’m here for you. Pax, dearest Norman. If you want company, I’m a call away.’

When he was finished talking, Ivy came over to him with a large whiskey from a bottle she had found on the sideboard.

‘Oh God, Ivy, this is funny.’ Norman chuckled.

‘It is?’

‘In-joke. The whiskey with the worst reputation in the world is a malt called Loch Dhu. Some wag gave it the title Aqua Crematoria. Olive-Jean bought a bottle of MacAllister Pure Malt on a ‘special’ a while back. Combines the worst of single malts. Seemed to me it was blended with cheap hand cleaner. I plagiarized the Loch Dhu epithet.’

‘I’ll change it. There’s some Grouse. This looked special.’

‘Oh no, this is totally appropriate. We can have a Grouse next.’ He took the glass from her hand. ‘Cheers. Thanks for coming over.’

At around ten o’ clock, Doves arrived. Norman and Ivy watched two sincere gentlemen in black suits put Olive-Jean into a van and drive away.

‘Bye, mother.’ He put his hand up to wave at the disappearing vehicle. When he realised what he was doing, he slowly closed his fingers and his arm dropped back to his side.

Chapter 50

Hambe kahle, Mamma darling.

Posted by Norman – your loving son 20/10/2009

The next morning Gabriella phoned Norman. He'd slept reasonably well for a few hours and was about to shower after a run.

'I've been thinking about you all night. Are you alright?'

'I'm actually fine. Bit numb still. I can't believe she's gone and how tiny she was. A little bird in death, an overwhelmingly large person in life.'

'How did you sleep?'

'Not bad, odd dream of red hats.'

'What?'

'Olive-Jean spoke about a woman in a red hat on her radio interview. Did you hear it?'

'Yes, she was spellbinding.' She was going to explain why she hadn't acknowledged the interview, but changed her mind. 'You will definitely need company today to drive you around, deal with the funeral parlour, field the calls, buy you breakfast or lunch and all that stuff. Can I be it?'

'Yes, why not. Thanks.' He was very pleased by the offer.

Three hours after setting out, Gabriella and Norman arrived at Olive-Jean's house. They'd been through the 'surreal' interview at the funeral parlour, chosen a pine coffin, placed the death notices and arranged the cremation time. Norman listened to some of the shocked messages on the telephone, one of which was from one Elizabeth Dixon, who claimed to be the mysterious lady in the hat. The radio station had given Olive-Jean her number but she had not been called back. She'd looked Olive-Jean up in the telephone book.

His own phone rang. It was Oliver Croquette.

'News of your mother's death has reached the newsroom.' He would like to accompany a reporter over, if Norman didn't mind.

'Why?'

‘Well she was a vibrant member of the Cape Town community who led a life rich with danger and service. Public interest.’ She’d also used the interview as a platform to trace a woman in a hat. ‘How intriguing is that, Mr Frye?’

‘It was the first I ever heard of it, Oliver. Frankly, I’m as intrigued as you.’

‘Did you ever see the picture?’

Norman decided he’d given far too much away.

‘I don’t recall it. Mother bought and sold works of art.’ He decided he would take the Battiss home that very day. ‘She usually supported young up and coming artists. Now, if you don’t mind I’m very busy and I can’t talk. She hasn’t been dead twenty-four hours yet.’ He thought to cool a little of Oliver’s curiosity. ‘There is more than likely a perfectly innocent explanation.’

‘Goodness, they’re persistent.’ Gabriella came out from the kitchen where she’d put away the glasses, cups and saucers from the previous day.

‘I know. It’s a bit overwhelming.’

The late afternoon news carried the story of Olive-Jean’s death and there was a clip from the interview about the mystery surrounding the Hopper painting. He made the call to Henry Jameson.

‘Hello, Henry, my name is Norman Frye. Olive-Jean Stanton’s son. I’ve some bad news.’

Henry reacted with shock and disbelief to the news and after talking for a few moments agreed to meet the following day.

‘I think I should return Ms Dixon’s call,’ Norman said to Gabriella.

‘She can wait if you’re not up to it.’

‘No. Let’s get it over with.’

He dialled the number and, after introducing himself and informing her of his mother’s death, asked who she was and what the hat story was all about.

‘I was a friend of Ronald. We lost touch after he met your mother.’

‘Not all touch, yes? If you are who you say you are, you gave him a picture when he was very much still married.’

‘I’m not prepared to talk about this on the phone.’ She sounded a bit defensive.

‘Look, it’s a little soon. I’ve yet to find out the meaning in all this. I don’t know why my mother wanted to see you. It’s another pressure on me. I don’t really need more on my plate right now. Perhaps after the funeral. Can you understand?’

‘Sure. I’ll wait. You’ve got my number.’

Norman sat down and looked around at his mother's things.

'That whole life and this is what's left.' He folded the clothes Olive-Jean had worn and draped over the chair before dying. He gave them a brief kiss as he put them back in her cupboard. 'Not sure what to do with you. There's time to think about everything, I guess.'

'What did she want?' Gabriella came over to him. 'I'm going to make a late lunch. You looked whacked.'

'I'm going to phone several people from Olive-Jean's address book. After lunch we can go into the study.'

The meal was simple, a hot plate of soup and a salad using most of the food that was left in the fridge. A full stomach gave Norman a lift.

'Mother must have left a will. I'll start in the desk drawers.'

'Is there anything I can do? It feels strange me looking through your mother's personal things.'

'I don't even know who her attorney is.'

'Look, Norman,' her eyes lit up, 'an old reel-to-reel tape recorder. This is as good a piece of retro as your own!'

'I know. I've eyed it for years.'

'There are tapes, shall we play some?'

'Can do. Just no Pat Boone, please.'

Henry arrived at Olive-Jean's house the next day, on time. He offered his condolences as he shook hands with Norman, who plunged coffee and they moved into the lounge.

'What was your relationship with my mother?'

'I'm a lawyer and a friend. We shared a birthday. Did she ever mention it?'

'No.' He thought for a moment. 'No, that's not true. I'm just not remembering anything much. Maybe she did. You gave her flowers. Some have survived her.'

'What a sad thought.' He hesitated before asking. 'Do you mind if I take one? I'd like to press it and keep it.'

'Of course. I'll do the same.'

While they were having their coffee Norman asked about her will.

'Do you know if she had one? I've looked through her drawers and cupboards.'

‘I don’t think so. She wanted me to draw one up. She mentioned it last time I saw her. She indicated to me that everything went to you, barring an insultingly small amount to an unknown person.’

‘A woman in a hat?’

‘I believe so.’

‘She mentioned a figure of a third a few weeks ago.’

‘Then she changed her mind.’

‘Quite mystifying.’ Norman poured more coffee. ‘All I want to know is, what’s going on? I’m seeing the red-hatted woman sometime. It can wait till after the cremation, but I wonder if she is.’

‘What?’

‘The person she claims to be.’

Henry leaned forward. It was time to come straight to the point.

‘This is going to be hard for you Norman. There is a tape recording. I believe the contents were digitised and burnt onto a disc by your mother.’

‘Of what?’

‘I’m unsure of the exact contents. She’s lived with it for the last month.’

‘Where did she find it?’

‘She was going to give you her old tape recorder. There was a reel marked Pat Boone and someone else, I can’t remember.’ Henry put down his cup. ‘She put it on to see if it worked. It was a message. It was addressed to you.’

‘Why?’

Henry looked genuinely concerned.

‘I haven’t heard it. It was apparently a litany of invective detailing Ronald’s own infidelities and laying bare his anger at their marriage.’

‘I was seven when he died. Why would he say that stuff to me?’

‘Olive-Jean presumed it was alcohol-induced.’

Norman became agitated.

‘We need to put it on.’

Henry laid a hand on Norman’s arm.

‘Before we do anything rash.’

‘Rash?’ Norman interrupted. ‘Have you any idea how crazy this all is to me?’

‘Please. Please hear me out, Norman.’

Perhaps it was just the pause before saying his name, but Norman felt a bond between himself and the fine-boned stranger before him. An odd sense of trust that allowed him to reign in his anger, his hurt and curiosity.

‘Sorry. Please take your time.’

‘Thank you. I loved your mother and it’s from that perspective that I say what I do.’ He needed to get this right. ‘Your father never coped with being de-mobbed. The war gave him a place, a sense of purpose and order. When it ended, he was cut loose. Set adrift, to use a naval term. Your mother represented freedom and a new start, but that freedom required an understanding that he could not fashion her to his own making, or stable her spirit. The more he drank, the more she flew. One day she circled above his dependant, whiskey-soaked world and simply took off. I think she believed he would unshackle himself from his dependencies and follow her.’ He wiped his mouth with a white handkerchief and then wiped his eyes. ‘To protect herself she grew a crab-like exterior that shielded a wound she could not bear to confront.’ He took his time before continuing. ‘You see, you were an identical image of your father at the same age. I don’t think she came to terms with that. That you would grow up looking and being like him.’

‘Where are you going with this, Henry?’ Norman filled a long pause.

‘My point is simple.’ He tightened his mouth. ‘*Don’t* listen to that tape recording, no matter what mad, hare-brained schemes OJ concocted for some pre or post death dinner to embarrass the woman who cuckolded her.’ Henry was becoming more earnest than he’d been in years. ‘Don’t do it,’ he implored. Again he waited before going on.

‘I don’t understand.’ Norman said quietly.

‘Mourning, they say, is a process. Forgive me if I’ve got the sequence screwed up. Shock, denial, bargaining, guilt, anger, depression, resignation, acceptance.’ He hoped he wasn’t being didactic. ‘These stages have permeable boundaries. In some ways Olive-Jean accepted Ronald’s death, but never his life. In equal parts the kind of relationship you’ve had with her was a by-product of her guilt and anger, her monumental humanity and her unresolved and unworked through grief.’ He needed a moment to recover.

‘That’s ok. Take your time.’

‘Forgive me. A dinner party with a woman in a red hat will be a grotesque parody, Norman, a pantomime rooted in her fruitless bargaining with a man half her

stature.’ He winced as he said it. ‘It sounds uncalled for, for he was your father, but your job, in her death, is to set your mother free of him.’ He wiped the corner of his mouth again. ‘And set yourself free.’

Henry sat back in his chair and gently pulled the skin forward at his Adam’s apple.

After a few minutes Norman stood up, tapped Henry’s shoulder and went and found the Pat Boone and Marty Robbins reel. With it was a CD.

‘I usually sleep on big decisions, but today I’m going to break the mould.’ He breathed in and out slowly and composed himself. ‘Will you destroy these for me, please?’

‘Certainly.’

‘Good. Good-good.’ Norman grinned suddenly. ‘Care to participate in a cleansing ritual?’

‘Why ever not?’

‘Good.’ He went over to the shelf in the bay window. ‘I’m going to give us each a slug of Aqua Crematoria.’ He grinned some more. ‘And to test our mettle, we’ll have it with no ice.’

When the alcohol blended with hand cleaner had finally burned its way past the tonsils, Henry shuddered and offered to help Norman with the swamp that was the law and demands of probate.

‘Thank you, Henry. I shall certainly count on you.’

‘Please do. Call it my gift from Olive-Jean. It’s a minefield.’ He smiled at Norman. ‘Apart from the funeral and all that goes with it, any plans?’

‘Actually, I didn’t have until you offered to relieve me of Messrs Boone and Robbins.’ Norman topped up their glasses. ‘It’s too long and complex a story to begin telling now, but I think it starts with me going out and buying thirty litres of white paint.’

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List of Illustrations and photographs

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Amedeo Modigliani - Jeanne Hébuterne www.modigliani-foundation.org	page 13
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Jane Alexander - The Butcher Boys	page 165
Jean Doyle - Just Nuisance	page 216
Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec – Salon at the Rue des Moulins	page 227

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Quotations

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