

ADVERSE CAMBER

Ridiculous, I know, but I am staring through glass onto a world I no longer recognise. How can a line of terraced white cottages behind modest front gardens leave a person in such a state? How is someone rendered speechless by a quiet village street on a crisp winter's afternoon? How? Because the commonplace has suddenly been made alien by an event I simply cannot fathom. This may or may not be the story's end - where it goes from here I have no idea, but I can at least unpick a line of fine threads back to the point three days earlier where it all begins.

It is a somewhat surreal beginning: hobnobbing with hobgoblins, wisecracking with wizards and fantasising with phantoms, yet ironically this marks the last moment before the fabric of normality I've known all my life starts to unravel. I recall show-music spilling in from one room, amateurish tinklings on piano from another, and from a third the hubbub of paper plate chat - the sort where everyone laughs about nothing and listens to no-one, convinced that better conversations are to be had elsewhere, too wrapped up in preventing chicken wings and sausages, canapés and bread rolls from falling to the floor, or fretting about teeth made unsightly by salad.

I avoided the food altogether that night. To my mind, buffets are not meant for mere mortals. A buffet demands at least four hands: two to hold the cutlery, a third to support the flimsy plate and a fourth to cradle the wineglass. Admittedly I *was* no mere mortal that night, those long white fangs flecked with blood, the starched, upturned collar and sweeping cloak left no doubts there. But this buffet was the slayer of vampires too. I stuck resolutely to the drink, avoiding the unbranded beer and warm Chardonnay and using my borrowed bloodlust as reason to cling to the one decent bottle of red wine I could find. Cheap humour has always been my first resort under stress and I was on top form that night; a pun for every refill - 'Vintage fruit on the veins' - 'The art is in the arteries, you know'. Wit, one might say, with real bite.

Of course the whole unlikely evening had been little more than an excuse to recycle old Hallowe'en costumes, the theme a lazy one, if not without its perks. For me the highlight was going head-to-heads

with a feisty young Ann Boleyn, my words mostly aimed at the wiggled football under her arm as an excuse to stare shamelessly at her breasts. I might have made some headway had Henry VIII not arrived to deliver that crass-awful chat-up line: 'Well, well my dear, about time we had it off, wouldn't you say?' She soon lost her head to him.

But people's appetites for play-acting waned rapidly once the ice-break of those first encounters had melted away. It may have been the heat or the sheer impracticality of costumes, but one by one they began denuding themselves of masks, capes and pointy hats, and before long I found myself amidst an absurd gathering of caricatures in a state of fancy-undress. Minus those accessories and hired confidences, all their real demons could begin to surface; eyes that gave the lie to their promotions, foreign holidays and new cars, and spoke deeper truths of crippling mortgages, high cholesterol, failing marriages and a hundred other mid-life crises. By the time the chimes rang out over the radio and we jostled for the kisses we wanted and dodged those we did not, I felt an urgency to escape and get home. These witching hours may be the Count's favoured time to prey on his victims, but this lowly vampire was overdue his box of Transylvanian soil.

And so to the hunt for my partner - the elusive 'Mortitia Addams'. No sign at all of her at midnight. Half the evening she'd been chatting up the Marquis de Sade, our suitably sadistic bank manager from Totnes, and for all I knew she might even now be indulging some masochistic fantasy she'd never once thought to act out on me. Eventually I found her in the kitchen struggling to make coffee. The heavy lipstick, white pancake and eye-shadow remained (though the Marquis had left his mark all right), but her hair-piece had long ago become a chest wig for some ape of a comedian, and it was another twenty minutes before we'd gathered all elements of her costume together and could exit into the night.

Isn't it only in Hollywood that Christmases are always blessed with snow? A Devon Christmas promises little more than winds and drizzle. But while we steamed and boiled away the year's final hours behind double glazing, unknown to us the weather outside was having a late change of heart, silently laying out a Disney fantasy for our departure, a scene at once beautiful and awful, total white-out obliterating the borders between path and lawn. At the end of the

driveway another couple were busy ploughing snow from their windscreen and hurling it at one another. The sight was surreal, Satan himself taking one full in the face from Cruella De Vil, and marked a cool reversal of fortune for the old snowball; it was hell that had no chance out here.

Being among the last guests to arrive, we'd been forced to park some yards up the road from the house, and as we set off I could feel the ground already freezing beneath the fresh snow. We walked in silence, unsteady on our feet, arms linked for support, each still inwardly piqued by the conduct of the other, if safe in the knowledge that a day or two, a sarcastic word or two and a bottle of wine or two should put matters to rights. These episodes of mild betrayal had in truth become something of an aphrodisiac for us both; a kind of game we had to play. Our pact of silence was broken only by necessity as we approached the car.

"I'll drive," I insisted.

She did not protest.

I shouldn't be driving of course. Neither of us should. Natasha would have been on the Russian vodka all night, and though I'd paced myself I was still way over the limit. But we belong to a generation still willing to take risks, not only with our own lives but with those of everyone around us - the teenagers of the seventies (those lucky enough to survive) who hit driving age just as the campaigners were 'Thinking-before-Drinking-before-Driving'. We were to drink-driving what sixties youths had been to seat-belts: 'Clunk click every trip? No fear, Jimmy.' Back then, our measure of car versus bus would have had nothing to do with safety, only with policing policy: whether weekday or weekend, closing time or before, main roads or back streets. These days it's taxis rather than buses, but the criteria hasn't changed, and tonight it was to be a short cross-country trek through quiet B-roads, favourable odds even given the extra patrols promised for New Year's Eve.

The driver's door stood in the lee of the wind and opened easily. The passenger door was partially obliterated and had frozen solid. Natasha succeeded on the third attempt and nearly went flying into the road. Once inside, we just sat for a moment, perhaps enchanted, perhaps snow-blinded. A cat had recently crossed our bonnet, its tracks still visible but filling fast. Each flake that dabbed at the

windscreen spread out like the silent padding of white paws, leaving the wipers to lick them all away again as a cat's tongue might search its mouth for the last of the cream. No purring into life for this little engine however, more the rising-falling guttural wail that heralds a cat-fight.

To my relief, the car not only started, but moved forward out of the lay-by without problems. We edged slowly away from the party lights into the black abyss of rural Devon. Full beam was not to be an option - in the intensity of light the swirling snow became a new title sequence for Doctor Who; the viewing screen of the Starship Enterprise in warp drive. Even with lights dipped the effect was disturbingly hypnotic, as though I could do anything at all at the wheel without consequence. I began feeling dizzy and nauseous. As the edge of the road snaked in and out of sight, I found myself losing all sense of our speed and having to flick my eyes again and again over the dials, only to find each time that the car had crept back above forty.

We must have been going for about ten minutes. Natasha was still in a world of her own and had begun breathing loudly. To keep myself awake I reached across to the radio.

“Shi..!!”

Even before the air had squeezed between my tongue and teeth to cap the word, my foot had slammed on the brake and sent the rear of the car into a spin. I knew at once that we were hopelessly out of control - not only was the road on a slope, but it curved off to our right and seemed to bank the wrong way. Within moments the loss of external reference and the alcohol in my system had numbed all sense of movement - we might have been floating in space. Besides, I was still in shock from what I had seen. Someone had been standing in the road, I was sure of it. A woman perhaps, though the figure had caught the headlights only for a second. And maybe even someone with her - smaller - a child? For what seemed like minutes I studied this mental image before realising that we were still spinning, and made a last-ditch attempt to steer into the skid. All at once the feeling of weightlessness was gone. The lights caught the onslaught of the grass bank and we could do nothing but wait for the impact. When it came, inevitable and final, it wasn't quite the single thud I'd dreaded, more a series of bumps and grinds, the scraping of earth against metal. The engine stalled, we were thrown off the seatbelts back into our seats and it was

over.

“Sorry,” I whispered. “Really, really sorry. Did you see...? Just standing there in the road. A miracle we didn’t hit them.”

Natasha blinked drunkenly and turned on the light.

“No, I don’t notice. I had my eyes closed. You are okay?”

For a moment neither of us could act. My hands and knees had begun to shake. Natasha chewed on her fingers.

“Bloody hell,” I said at last. “Bloody *hell* that was lucky.”

It seemed to rouse her.

“You said there is someone out there?”

She looked first to her right, across my lap and out through the driver’s window. Then, as she turned away, the car was filled with a heart-stopping shriek. Plastered up against the passenger window, framed by the unremitting snowfall and blackness beyond, was the face of a man. His skin had turned yellow where it pressed hard onto the glass. I had the sickening sense that we had just pinned this man against the bank and killed him outright, but quickly dismissed it - we’d hit the bank head-on and there was nothing to our left but the road we’d just travelled. Natasha sat paralysed. The man’s eyes fixed her in a frozen stare. Their standoff lasting barely a moment but seemed to continue forever. Suddenly the face unstuck itself from the window and withdrew into the night.

I scrambled out of my seat and staggered from the car. Looking back up the hill, at first I saw no-one, then gradually a figure materialised out of the flickering white-on-black, like a shadowy image on a de-tuned TV screen. He walked into the light with the utmost reluctance and stopped a few yards off. It was then that I saw how things must look from where he stood. A car spins into view from nowhere and ends up nose deep in a grass bank. Inside, a woman all in black with huge shadowy rims around her eyes and next to her, the Prince of Darkness with blood oozing from either side of his mouth. Little wonder that he’d stood there gaping and then beat a hasty retreat.

“Fancy-dress,” I explained limply. I opened my cloak as if to show I was unarmed. “No-one hurt fortunately. We’re just a bit shaken.”

He looked singularly unconvinced. In fact he looked petrified. Perhaps after all I had not avoided hitting anyone. Perhaps he had a loved one bleeding to death not twenty yards uphill.

“We didn’t hurt you, did we?”

He shook his head and finally came forward to greet me. For all his assurance his face remained deathly pale. I could not fathom him at all. Despite the cold, despite the blizzard, he was making no effort whatever to warm himself. No attempt to cover his head, no self-embrace or beating fists. What the hell had he been up to out here? Walking home from some revelry? Maybe, like us, he’d misjudged the intentions of the weather when he’d set off for his party. But for Christ’s sake, when you have no decent winter coat with you, no proper boots, no gloves or hat, why put yourself through such torture, why not just call a taxi?

“I saw it happen,” he said quietly. “Seeing it has rather upset me. It brought it all back you see.”

This sounded like a preamble, so I waited. But he continued to stare bleakly into the darkness. It only fuelled my fear of what might be lying out of sight up the road.

“You are out here alone, I take it.”

He nodded but didn’t move. “Alone, yes.”

The word hung there awkwardly, unresolved in the busy silence of falling snow. If this guy wanted to stay here all night, then I most certainly did not. I shivered noisily, told him to get inside where it was warmer, and insisted we take him home once he’d helped push us off the bank. He seemed resigned to being told what to do and slipped into the back. By the time I’d returned to my seat, Natasha had already calmed down and introduced herself. He gave us no name in return. Instead he told us, “It’s a black-spot you see, this stretch. An unexpected incline on a corner with adverse camber. Eleven accidents in three years. The cars always spin the same way and end up on the left bank.”

I pulled a face.

“You’re left broadside to the path of oncoming traffic. But tonight you were lucky. If there’d been another vehicle behind you, because of the corner it wouldn’t have seen you in time.”

These words were spoken without emotion, but I was no less chilled by the scene he was painting. As I saw it, there was nothing to stop it from still happening. If another car was suddenly to round that blind bend and plough straight into us, both he and Natasha would be the first to cop it. I no longer had time for him to thaw out. I wanted

us off the bank immediately.

“Tasha, get behind the wheel. We’re going round the front to yank it clear. Don’t rev the engine, just put it in reverse and gently release the clutch when I say.”

It was no easy matter getting sufficient purchase between the bonnet and the raised bank. In the light of the headlamps I could see the bumper and grill enmeshed in brambles, the sill having ploughed a furrow of earth before latching itself over the mound. I was only grateful that this was Natasha’s car. The two of us would never have lifted my Passat out of there. Even her Clio took much heaving, cursing, revving, wheel-spinning and protesting of innocence before it finally lurched backwards. In its wake: one detached number plate, a plastic tow hook and a length of rubber skirting, all of which I scooped up and threw into the boot.

There was no waiting for my hands to stop shaking. The only priority was to get us home, to safety, as cautiously as my tattered nerves would allow, keeping a vigilance for awkward bends and ‘adverse cambers’. At the next junction we’d have a chance to divert onto safer, probably gritted main roads. But to do so would be one hell of a gamble. The police would be out in force by now. The whole incident had given me a heavy shot of adrenaline and I felt quite sobered, but a breathalyser would still have told a different story. As if to underline the point, our passenger unexpectedly made a pronouncement.

“There is a smell of drink in here.”

His tone was not accusatory; it merely conveyed the bald fact. His face bobbed in and out of sight in my rear-view mirror and never once changed its expression. I shifted uncomfortably and looked askance at Natasha. Her presence of mind took me by surprise.

“Sorry, you are right. It is me,” she grinned, turning round to face him, then cocking her head towards me: “David pulls the small straw tonight and he must drive.”

I was doubtful he would buy into this, given that only minutes before the two of us had been standing shoulder to shoulder, puffing and panting across each other’s faces. My next look to the mirror was met by an unbroken stare, one that challenged me to stay eye-to-eye and confirm her account. But the rest of his gaunt face was already delivering its verdict: don’t suffer me the indignity of another lie. I

could only drop my eyes in shame.

“He had been drinking too. I smelt it on his breath...” There it was. The indictment delivered. “...The driver who struck us.”

The meaning of those final words didn't strike me at first. But Natasha understood him at once. I saw her jaw drop and hand rise to her open mouth.

“Oh my God, you were in similar crash. Like the one you tell to us.”

He nodded, though not at us. His attention had moved elsewhere. Having delivered his bombshell, his whole demeanour had softened. Now he sat back in his seat, hands on lap and face turned toward the window. In a matter-of-fact voice he began to reveal why witnessing our accident had left him so distraught. On the very same stretch some weeks previously, driving home on a frosty November morning, his car had entered the lethal bend, skated across black ice and ended up nose first into the bank. No casualties on impact, but a mighty four-by-four, too heavy to be in the least troubled by slippery roads, had been just a fatal few seconds behind them. The driver was too drunk and going too fast either to slow down or to steer clear of the car that blocked its path after the bend. All the good fortune that might have spared his family that day had been ours tonight instead. With its thick chromed bumpers and heavy bull-bars, the vehicle had ripped into the passenger door of his car and dragged it broadside on for over thirty yards.

He brought his gaze back from the window onto my reflection in the mirror.

“May I ask you your name?”

“David,” I said. “David Carrigan.”

“I lost both my wife and child that day, Mr Carrigan. You cannot imagine how very, very lonely this last month has been.”

I can honestly say I have never been haunted by superstition. Even as a child I was quite fearless of the dark, of black cats and ladders, of spilling salt and breaking mirrors. To my adult mind, ghosts, demons and monsters are all strictly the province of the fancy-dress party, the costume racks of the joke shop, the horror film, the gothic novel. So there was no way I would ever speak the thoughts that crashed through my mind at that moment, but I knew what I had seen caught in the fleeting sweep of the headlights just seconds before our accident. Had

it not been for that woman and child I could have avoided the skid altogether - we were only doing a modest thirty or so - I'd have had no cause to apply the brake at all. We'd have passed this miserable soul on the roadside and been none the wiser.

Our commiserations offered (with an incompetence that was shameful in my case), the rest of the journey was travelled in silence. Doubtless the din of inner thoughts was as deafening for Natasha and our passenger as it was for me, but none of it was stuff we wished to share. Conversation only resumed as we pulled into his village and I was steered to the drop-off point.

A line of plain terraced houses presented themselves, about seven in all. One or two still pulsed to the tune of partying behind drawn curtains. The rest stood silent and in darkness. The house to which he pointed, and in front of which we rolled to a stop, gave out a singularly cold message - not a soul was sat up here awaiting his return. I had a sense that he was utterly loathe to enter. We waved goodbye and wished him well, but even as we turned the car at a junction a few yards on and came back around, he remained unmoved, one hand on the gate, this miserable figure, head naked to the swirling snow, thin jacket opened to the wind.

* * *

Our New Year's Days have always been low-key. A late morning fry-up might meander into one of our less taxing afternoon strolls in the country, catching the last of the daylight before making our one nod towards to the calendar with a bottle of Moët et Chandon. It's a chance to clear our heads, put another year behind us and begin the ritual of forgiving each other our indiscretions of the night before.

I gave up on resolutions long ago. When all is said and done, it's just another day, and why make sacrifices when there are still three months of long dark evenings ahead. Better to wait until the primroses reappear in the hedgerows, the buds return to the leaves and the blessed clocks go forward. Surely a better time to draw breath and make plans.

This New Year's Day got off to a particularly slow start. Though we'd made it to bed before two, we neither of us had had much sleep. Nothing was said in the darkness, no emotions shared, no physical

contact made, but I could tell from her breathing and later from her soft moaning that Natasha was having a troubled night.

The subject of the accident didn't re-surface until we were back in the lanes, heading down on foot towards our favoured spot by the river. But for the distant moors, the snow had now all but melted, leaving in its wake a horrid sundae of brown slush and tyre-tracks. Our steps were escorted by muddy rivulets, invisibly fed from the fields, hurrying from our left side to our right and back again in search of their escape, only to bubble in disarray around drains choked with leaves and twigs.

Pushing a hand into mine, Natasha suddenly declared, "Let us send to him a card. No, in fact we must take it ourselves to him."

I eyed her doubtfully. "You mean a sympathy card?"

"Well, no, I prefer it a thank-you card. For helping us from the grass. But we can have sympathy too, for sure."

Though the suggestion was out of the blue, I really should have foreseen it. Wasn't this just Natasha all over? Coming from me, an idea like that would almost certainly have been guilt-driven. My cards tend to be hastily scribbled notes of apology, not considered messages of gratitude. But Natasha had no cause to feel guilty over our passenger. She's a woman who sends cards in appreciation of dinner parties; cards for keeping an eye on the garden while we're away - a woman who'd send a card in thanks for a thank-you card if someone didn't occasionally intervene.

I felt nervous at the idea and sceptical as to the welcome it would receive. We could be stirring up emotions unnecessarily, intruding into the mourning of someone who, for all the events of the night before, remained a total stranger to us. In the end it took two whole days for her suggestion to bear fruit, after she herself had repeatedly thought better of it. With the passage of time, the whole experience was beginning to feel like a drunken dream anyway, easier to forget than to follow up (garage bill for the Clio aside). If there hadn't been a spare card in the drawer left over from some previous good-will gesture that never saw the light of day, I doubt that we would have ever gone through with it.

But now we are here, as I have remarked, parked once more before the line of terraced cottages. The last twenty minutes have been an experience from which we are still reeling. We stare ahead in

disbelief. We cannot begin to acknowledge the implications of what has just occurred.

Which is what exactly? Well, Natasha has the card on her lap when we arrive. It has been hard to write, but now the job is done. Only the envelope remains blank, the man having never given his name.

My lap, on the other hand, is empty. In a mad moment I'd suggested a bottle of wine, then chocolates. How does the saying go - what do you give to someone who has everything? More to the point, what do you give to a miserable sod who has lost everything and suddenly has nothing?

Then I know the moment has arrived. Down comes the passenger visor, the look to the vanity mirror, the flick to a hair out of place, the drop of the shoulders. She turns to me and I am suddenly weak.

"You go," I say. "I'll just wave from here."

She raises an eyebrow and her mouth tightens, but she thinks twice about an argument. Her hand reaches for the door handle and she is out and through the gate.

There's no response at first to her knock. She's all set to turn away and post the letter when a curtain shifts in a room above and a shape grows behind the window in the door. Not once have we considered the possibility of him having guests, nor how presumptuous it might be of us to write messages pitying him in his loneliness. As the door pulls open, there's a small boy standing shyly behind. Natasha is now explaining something and shifting from foot to foot. He shakes his head and then looks up, calling. I can see enough of the hallway to catch a pair of feet descending the stairs. A woman draws up beside him, holding his shoulder, and listens intently as Natasha repeats her lines. Then the door is slowly closing, Natasha stepping backwards and turning in confusion. I draw down the passenger window and lean across.

"This is not the house," she says. "They say there is no-one else lives there. You are sure to have the right place?"

And I remember that though he had stopped outside the gate, we'd never actually seen him go in. The house to our right had been hosting a party that night. So I suggest we try the house on the left. It seems to make sense. The front garden is neglected, the windows are curtained, the paintwork in poor repair. This looks to be a most

unhappy home. Little wonder he'd tried to disown it when we dropped him off.

It feels only fair now for me to do my share. Together we head for the door and ring the bell. How would he react to seeing us again? He might be pleased perhaps. Or he might remember me as the arrogant shit who drove around drunk, no better than the bastard who'd butchered his wife and child. I find myself praying that he is not at home.

Footsteps approaching along an uncarpeted floor. A dog barking - not so completely alone then. Latches sliding back. We are confronted by the same drawn expression, but a myriad of lines where before the skin had been smoother, and fine silver threads around a bald crown instead of a full head of hair. These are the features of a septuagenarian, not those of our forty-something year old passenger.

"I am sorry we trouble you." Again the words are Natasha's. "We look for someone we did a lift the other day who lives in this street."

I feel the need to move this forward quickly. "The family had been in a car accident about a month ago."

The old man looks at the blank envelope in Natasha's hand. She smiles. "We want to give to..."

"Oh, that must have been our Sam. Oh, how very thoughtful. You must come in."

Now we are standing in his hallway. The place smells of bereavement. It already feels like a desperate intrusion, but we are led through to the sitting room and offered a sofa.

"The kettle's on. You'll join me for tea won't you?"

He's in the kitchen by this time and the question seems purely rhetorical.

"Are you old college friends of Sam's, or work colleagues of Leslie's? Please forgive me if we've met before."

I'm beginning to wonder whether this might be another case of mistaken identity, until I see the face that had judged me so absolutely in the car mirror. The same searching eyes, but for once with the faintest trace of a smile. It condemns me again, mockingly this time, from within a photo frame on the coffee table.

The little old man is returning with a tray.

"How rude of me. I'm Leslie's father. Were you at the funeral?"

So I'd been wrong about the likeness. Father to the casualty, not

the survivor. He lays down before us two tea cups and a plate of biscuits and offers me a shaky hand.

“This is my second spell of mourning in this house. Sam and Leslie insisted on me moving here shortly after my wife passed on, God rest her soul. I hadn’t wanted to impose upon them. But I could see it was a sensible arrangement. I could be useful to them, you see, not just a burden, looking after Thomas when his mum and dad were at work. And it does get lonely being a widower, you know.”

I have been avoiding his eyes so far. But something draws me to them now and I see water mustering behind the lids.

“But then... oh dear. All this.” He looks across at the photo and then to Natasha’s card still homeless within her hand.

“We are very sorry for your loss,” she responds gently.

“Thank you my dear.”

We are left for a moment in an impotent silence. I want to get on with it, track down our man, hand him our card and be on our way. We’ve become gatecrashers into a father’s private grief for his daughter. We are impostors who have accidentally broken into an inner-circle.

“Did you know that the driver was drunk?” he suddenly asks. It’s as though a cloud is crossing his face and unleashing a deluge of words. “The police prosecuted him for manslaughter, but if you ask me it was out and out murder. Sam was lucky to escape with whiplash and bruises. But young Thomas’s injuries were much worse - the poor little fellow, with those glass cuts all over his face.”

I see Natasha react oddly to this.

“They hope he won’t lose an eye. Sam wouldn’t normally be the one driving, but Leslie wasn’t feeling well that day.”

I’m becoming a little confused. We’d been told the accident had claimed two lives.

“But wasn’t there another child? One who didn’t quite...”

“Oh no, thank Heaven, no-one else was hurt.”

My search for comprehension takes in the sweep of the room, from my wife to the old man to the derisive photo beside him.

“Your son-in-law - that *is* him in the picture?”

The old man’s eyes narrow with a hint of suspicion. “You mean my son. Yes that’s Leslie. I’m sorry, who did you say you were? Not his friends then?”

“It is a long time,” Natasha interjects before I can speak again. The man gathers up the photo with a sigh, staring into it as though craving forgiveness.

“You see, this is my real agony. As a loving father, I am bound to think, ‘if only’. If only my Leslie had not been poorly; if only Sam hadn’t insisted that she take the wheel. But if I rescue my son, I immediately condemn my daughter-in-law. And I could never wish to see harm come to Samantha. Nor see my grandson robbed of his mother.”

Natasha is first to pick up his shift of focus to a point behind our heads. When I turn around she is already transfixed by a second photo on the sideboard: our passenger flanked by a woman and small boy - the neighbours to whom she had spoken just minutes before.

“Do you know,” he continues, “it took them twenty minutes to cut his door away, and all the time he was still conscious.”

There is no air in this room. We’re all affected by it. I find myself at the door loosening my collar with no memory of having got up. He is standing too and becoming agitated.

“And that - you’ll pardon my language miss - that *beastly* driver, breathing his foul fumes all over my son, begging with the police to let him stay at his side till the bitter end. Disgusting. Forgive me for saying so, but I hope that man prayed for his own soul as well as for my son’s when Leslie finally passed away at the roadside.”

Natasha can sometimes be amazing. Occasionally she can exercise a self-control at which I can only wonder. Something no doubt in her Russian blood. With fingers trembling, she is now handing him the card. Undaunted by her flawed English, she’s able to convince the old man that there has been a misunderstanding, that the message inside is for him and that he should pass our condolences on to his daughter-in-law and grandson. With a single look she stops me from objecting or saying anything. Somehow she holds her decorum to the last, even down to replacing my cup on its saucer and thanking him for the tea. Her walk from the house is measured and she is careful to close the gate.

But now alone, the two of us back in the car, we have no need of such social mores. We are safely hidden from the outside world. And yet still we do not disintegrate. We are silenced. No matter how much we might trawl through the events of two nights ago, they simply don’t

fit with what we have just heard. I am sure we will soon invent an account to rationalise it all away, but for now we just sit and stare.

The keys rattle as they're pulled from my pocket. The sound reminds us to breathe. I exhale slowly, the air of defeat, as her breath is snatched with an air of authority. It feels important that the balance between outside and inside air is preserved - to stop our whole world from imploding.

"Wait," she says. Two fingers of her left hand are hooked around the door handle and the palm of her right is on my shoulder even before I'm done fumbling with the ignition. I'm left with an arm half raised towards my seatbelt mooring. Like a brush into paint, it sinks back onto my lap. Not once have we taken our eyes off the windscreen.

Wait. Wait for what? Is she going back to demand answers? To ask how we could possibly have given a dead man a lift home? I feel her eyes on me now, sizing me up.

"I will drive," she insists.

For a moment I sense a late November's chill. I am a child watching an ailing father and an adamant mother swap seats in front of me. Whatever fate Natasha's words have likewise just sealed, I do not protest.

25/5/08

© Copyright Christopher Best 2008