

THE LOVE MEISTER

by

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Sample chapter

I. Egyptian-scarab-beetle-green shoes.

It was one of those days when you can't tell what the time is. Grey layered on grey, as the polluted air hung over the King's Road like a funeral shroud, while below Saturday shoppers dragged their sorry asses around in a sulk.

Felix stared down at the shoes in the window. They were green – an unforgiving iridescent beetle green. They seemed to leech the colour from their grey world around them, leaving it even more pale and anonymous. The more Felix stared, the more the glow of its spectrum grew: it was almost as if they were alive...

"Gonna buy 'em then?" asked a shop assistant as she stepped out onto the street and lit up. "Go on, you've been staring at them for ages," she said blowing smoke into the breeze. Felix blinked at her, her face masked by a ghost image of the shoes.

"I think so. They're very..."

"Egyptian- scarab - beetle - green," she quoted off pat.

"Ah – aptly named," replied Felix.

"Buy 'em, they'd suit you."

"Really? I can't see them suiting anyone."

She shrugged. "I think they've a certain 'je ne says cuwars' about them. Very hot on the club scene."

Felix smiled. He knew that she recognised that he had no idea what a club scene was, let alone what the attendees were wearing on their feet.

"Go on, you know you want to. If you do – tell 'em that Elspeth helped you, right. See yer." A smile skimmed her lips as she turned and slipped into the stream of

shoppers. Felix looked back at the shoes. He felt he needed them, though he wasn't quite sure why – he suspected it had something to do with the party that evening.

Felix didn't mind Algee's parties; at least he still had parties, having not given into the lure of the more mature and intimate dinner party that the over thirties filled their social calendar with these days.

Algee was an old school friend, and although their lives had strayed in different directions, they had somehow remained friends, for reasons neither of them ever cared to consider. Algee worked in "IT" for one of the big financial firms in the City, and had a job that, when mentioned, always came with air-apostrophes. Felix worked for a garden centre, and had no title, nor aerial punctuation to go with it. He had little or no understanding of Algee's world – except that the city was nothing more than one huge legalised casino that gambled with other people's money.

Then there were all of Algee's friends that came along with his air-apostrophised life. Apart from a few, most assumed that Felix was his gardener. Felix didn't really care though; they led flashy lives but he never envied them, because there was a healthy lack of mutual interest – it was like two dogs in a park, one sniff of each other's arses and then off they trotted in opposite directions. Felix found most of them dull, and so rapturously self-centred, that he often wondered if they lived in houses with internally mirrored windows.

To those who did know him for who he was, he was 'Algee's luckless-in-love friend'. This inevitably brought on a line of questioning that was linear and to the point. "Are you seeing anyone? Are you shagging anyone? Are you stalking anyone?" And to make it worse they were not really interested in his answers; they only wanted to lob

the question in like a dud grenade, then move on. This suited Felix, as he never had much to say on the matter anyway – at least the shoes would provide a ‘quick hit’ option for them.

There were some positive reasons for attending his parties. The first being Algee, the second his sister Daphne, and third, the often overwhelming presence of office totty. Algee always made sure that there were plenty of young babes there to keep his other more fickle friends interested. To Felix this was a utopia. Girls like that never worked in, let alone visited, garden centres. He would wander around wide-eyed and panting, like a dog in a dinosaur exhibition; he knew he lacked the wallet power and the looks to make any impression, but he could drool as well as the rest of them.

“Would you like any polish with that sir?” asked the mangeress, as she unleashed a smile crowded by a line of teeth, all jostling for pole position in her mouth.

“No thanks.” replied Felix.

“Are you sure? It will keep them in good condition,” she added, her teeth leaning forward in expectation.

“Is the polish green too?”

“No it’s clear.”

“Clear? How can something clear, polish something green?” asked Felix.

“It kind of lets the colour show through its clearness by polishing the surface,” she reasoned. Felix remained unconvinced but acquiesced; his attention now transfixed by a small bubble of saliva that had made an untimely appearance on her bottom lip. The mangeress, thinking he was staring at her teeth, handed over to an assistant, with a perfect teenage smile, while she busied herself with the till.

Felix's eyes momentarily flicked down as the white of the assistant's bra showed through her blouse as she produced a large folded oversized carrier bag.

"I'll wear them."

"Oh... okay," she replied, backing off while Felix removed and dropped his repellent trainers into the bag.

The mangeress handed Felix his receipt, saying to the assistant. "Now remember Sophia... Women like their receipts *placed* in their bags, while men like to *stuff* them in their wallets."

"Like everything else," added Felix. He then smiled, turned and left, waving the pungent bag around unnecessarily.

Felix meandered up Primrose Hill; it was one of his favourite parts of London so he liked to take his time. The sky seemed to be bigger here than anywhere in the city. No matter which way he looked, the line of a path, or the silhouetted tree against the sky, always looked like one of those photos you see exhibited in a photographic retrospect about urban life. His green shoes seemed to almost breathe, reflecting the sky above and enjoying being surrounded by other things green.

As he cut up onto Elsworthy Road, he stopped to admire the white blossom on a large Hawthorn tree that stood guard in the corner of one of the front gardens. He nodded a hello to a dustman, who stood reading the contents of an empty cereal box, while waiting for the newly logoed-up council 'Sanitation Wagon' to arrive. Soon they'll be calling themselves 'Sanitation Engineers', mused Felix to himself – the neutering of our language was spreading like used newspapers on the wind.

Felix rented a small attic flat - at the top of a large run down house overlooking Primrose Hill. Normally, he wouldn't be able to afford such a sought-after area; but in return for tending to his landlady, Phyllis De Coeur's small excuse for a garden, he could live there virtually rent-free.

Algee always referred to his landlady as the 'Miss Haversham of the occult'; he was convinced she was some kind of weird medium who enjoyed notoriety in the twenties: throwing wild sex parties out in the country while delivering Crowleyesque teachings to revelling followers. Algee's imagination always seemed to see salacious shadows everywhere, and always lived in hope that there was a filthy side to everyone; which was probably why he still held parties.

The truth of it was that Phyllis had been a small-parts actress on the stage in the late thirties. She had bought the house for £300, after she had come into a little money from a distant uncle who had a heart attack while treading grapes. The arrival of war brought her acting career to an end; she continued to make a living selling contraband cigarettes down the tubes during air raids. After the war, she met and married an overseas diplomat, stationed somewhere in North Africa. It was out there that she developed a passion for Moroccan design and set up an import business on her return to England. To Felix her eccentricity didn't matter, she always made a fuss over him, and, although prone to the occasional psychic outburst and frantic tarot card sessions, he'd become quite fond of her colourful caftans, jangling earrings and idiosyncratic ways.

Phyllis was waiting outside the door to her part of the house, playing nervously with her thick grey hair, her head nodding as if in anticipation of their conversation.

“There you are... I was beginning to wonder...” she hesitated. It was obvious she had something to get off her sagging bosom. “I’ve done a remote spread – and something interesting has turned up. I want to do a verification spread if you don’t mind.” Her eyes dropped to the shoes. “They’re so you!”

“You think so? I thought they might be a little over-zealous... but they feel good and they’re amazingly comfortable.” Felix looked down, doing a Chaplinesque shuffle.

“I don’t believe in all this wearing in crap myself... If you’re meant... to wear the shoes they feel right... straight away. None of this manufacturer’s bull... shit.” Phyllis said during a coughing fit.

Those cigarettes are going to kill her one of these days thought Felix.

“If you ask me they’re just too lazy to make shoes that fit people these days, they just want the people to fit the shoes,” she concluded hoarsely. She led him into her apartment. “I don’t know... the way I see it, fashion is neither popular nor populist. Sometimes I wonder just how much choice we really have – shall we?” She linked arms with him, brushed aside a plush velvet curtain and ushered him into her ‘Boudoir’, as she always called it.

“You know what I reckon. I reckon the shoes pick you and that it’s you that’s on sale when you walk into a shoe shop,” said Felix looking around him.

Phyllis laughed and ruffled his hair. “Sit while I make some mint tea. Then we’ll spread some cards.” She pointed to a large collection of cushions, and disappeared behind a screen.

Felix slumped, and took in the kaleidoscope of patterns around him. It was like Escher had dropped a tab while doing crochet.

“So how is that job of yours at the garden centre?” Phyllis asked, returning with two cups of mint tea.

“Coming on. I’ve been moved out of pots onto outdoor shrubs and trees.”

“Oh just where you want to be.”

“Can’t break trees.”

“Oh?” She took a sip of her tea, and then opened up a small, heavily riveted tin-coated box, and produced her cards wrapped in black silk. She spread them out in a long arc and Felix picked his cards. He always wondered how it worked, because no matter how deliberately random he made his choice, the spread always told him something.

Phyllis was silent while she studied the spread. “This is bigger than I thought. Look at all the Major Arcana. Something big is in the offing. Wow.”

“Oh – the fool – that’s me.”

“Oh yes, it’s you– the innocent wide-eyed you – going on a journey.”

“Death. Just what I need,” Felix pointed out.

“Not to worry, Death is a good card, signifying natural change,” she soothed. “The Tower, which lies over you, is the worry.”

“Worry? What kind of worry?”

“Well, like Death, it means change but in a big way – not necessarily bad, just dramatic. There is no such thing as a bad card, just a bad interpretation; your life is going to be tipped upside down, ripped apart. Constants are going to disappear and new ones are going to re-emerge. You are going to find out a truth that has burdened you all of your life.”

Felix squinted at the cards. “Does it feature anyone else,” he asked.

Phyllis laughed. “Here we are with one of the most powerful readings I have ever had, and you want to know if you’re going to meet someone.”

“Well... you know. There’s a party tonight, I thought...”

“I know, believe me. It’s hard to tell; each spread communicates one aspect of your condition. There is the Two of Cups here... but it is reversed. So you never know.” She didn’t sound too convincing. “There’s an endeavour – I think, that’s why the Fool is there. I find this Ace of Wands intriguing. It implies, as it lies in your future, that something creative is going to happen, an explosion from within.”

“I could do with a bit of ‘exploding’,” said Felix without thinking.

“Couldn’t we all. I may be an old girl, but I still like a good seeing to, every now and again.”

Phyllis was referring to her gentleman friend, the smooth Mr Benson, a retired farmer who sold his land to developers and moved back to London. He would turn up every now and again and take her out to dinner, which often involved Greek food and a lot of Retsina, after which they would return singing songs and then have sex that sounding like they were rearranging furniture. Images of Phyllis riding Mr Benson like a bucking bronco flashed through his mind. Felix looked down at the cards and changed the subject.

“So, this change then?”

“It comes out of your past, as if something catches up with you. Do you have a record?”

“Of what?”

“Do you have a criminal past?”

“Me? No. Well apart from the fare evasion on the Underground and TV licence—the two tube offences... hardly a criminal with a past.”

“Well, something from your past is going to influence the unfolding of your future. Exciting times I’d say.”

Felix glanced down at his watch and made his excuses, he had to start getting ready for the party.

His flat was small, consisting of a lounge-bedroom-kitchen, and a separate bathroom with a small chipped white enamel bath and a toilet with a noisy cistern. What more than made up for its cramped dimensions though was the view looking out over Primrose Hill, with London spread out on the far side of the hill like a grey lumpy rug.

Felix liked to walk around naked, not caring whether anyone on the hill could see into his window. While he shaved he hummed a hideous jingle that he’d picked up like a virus while he’d been out shopping, and continued with the same tune while he ironed his shirt. The escaping steam from his iron heated up his genitals, probably killed a few thousand sperm in the process. He looked down at his shoes that sat there patiently waiting for their new master; he was going to wear them with pride tonight. The cards had suddenly given his life a direction and potential – even though it was going to be picked up and slammed on its head like a hairy wrestler. The tune surged in his head and he momentarily dropped into promo mode and danced a little, he was actually looking forward to the party.

2. Camberwick Green and all that Jazz.

The party was in full shout, by the time he got there. As he pushed the door open he could hear the conversations competing with each other in the kitchen. The lounge was empty apart from Daphne, who was rifling the CD rack in time to the latest Ibiza chillout that was putting the woofers through their paces.

“Hiya Daphne!” he yelled over the beat. Daphne turned and looked down at his shoes.

“Felix. Nice shoes.”

“Nice – um,” hesitated Felix, his eyes dropping to her full bosom. Daphne stuck them out and ran her hands over them.

“They’re back– want a feel? They’re amazing.” She shouted over the music.

“No thanks but – nice one – ones,” replied Felix, a little unsure how to complement a girl on her breast augmentation.

Daphne was Algee’s sister, a candid woman who called a spade an implement designed for helping gardeners, killing rats and burying people. Felix used to have a crush on her until about the same time she had had a breast reduction. Her breasts had played such a fundamental role in her development, and interaction with the world, that when they were reduced, her sparkle went with them; the surgeon, quite literally, had taken the fun out of ‘fun bags’. Guys actually started to look her in the eye when they talked to her, and soon she started to feel too exposed; she discovered she liked the idea that men talked to her tits first, they were a kind of safety screen. So she had them enlarged, to a cup size larger than before, and her old self soon resurfaced.

“Looking for something?” asked Felix.

“That ‘Frank’ album he used to have.”

“Yeah, chillout eh? Club music for the over thirties, if you ask me, designed to make them feel they are part of a scene they were never part of in the first place!”

“No, I like this, it’s just that I wanted it for the kareoke machine we’ve got at home.”

“Oh.”

The kitchen was packed. Most of the men were hanging around the drinks counter, talking mountain bikes and house prices; while the women menaced the food table with three separate interchangeable cliques, that chewed the fat about the complexities of a purchase driven lifestyle.

“Green man.” Ron nodded at the shoes, then smiled and moved on; the shoes were working.

Felix thought that it would look good if he hung around with the lads for a while, then he would sidle over and talk to Daphne and get a friendly introduction to the new girls that had gathered in the far corner discussing sexual harassment.

“Great shoes!” said Algee as he squeezed the life out of his hand.

“You like ’em?”

“Not really... but they sure as hell make a statement. And that’s what’s important.” You remember Bob? He’s in Futures now.” Their hands connected and more blood was pushed back up Felix’s arm. Bob was one of those tall heavy chested guys, with thinning hair and rugby ears. He was married, but the few times he had made an appearance at Algee’s parties, he had always been on his own. Algee had always suspected that there was something going on between him and his sister, although nothing had ever been confirmed.

“So Felix what line are you in?” asked Bob earnestly. Felix smiled as he remembered they had already had this conversation at a previous party, the memory of which had obviously escaped Bob.

“Shrubs and borders.”

“Right.” Felix could see his brain trying to work out a reply to this one.

“Interesting. Do you ride?”

“Depends what?”

“Bikes. Off road. You know that kind of thing.”

“Algee took me once – but no good really. Couldn’t get out of first.”

“Really? Nothing like a good cold hard saddle between the legs, and a mountain to conquer,” said Bob going distant eyed for a moment. Felix glanced across at Daphne and wondered which particular range he was thinking of.

“So, old boy, getting laid?” said Algee, returning to save the moment from a long embarrassing silence.

“Err, no actually.” He looked down at his scarab beetle shoes, realising their effect had worn off too quickly.

“What, no new babes at the garden centre?”

“Garden centre – you’re the gardener,” said Bob putting two and two together.

“Well there are a few, but they’re kind of... robust girls.”

“Red cheeks and solid, know what you mean,” nodded Bob in agreement.

“They’re lovely girls but they’re all spoken for,” countered Felix.

“Yeah – married or lesbian,” sneered Algee.

“Like a fit bird myself,” added Derek, another of Algee’s city mates.

“Talking of fit... how was that Sooky the other night?” Algee asked Derek who was busy trying to retrieve a soggy Twiglet from his beer.

“Fit... body on her... magnificent mahones. Couldn’t get enough of it.”

“An all nighter eh?”

“Fives times and a blowie in the shower in the morning.”

“Cahones Del Perros!”

“The what?” asked Felix.

“Dog’s bollocks, in Spanish.”

“Oh, that explains everything.” Felix’s attention started to stray across to the women on the far side of the kitchen. Daphne was getting an appreciative grope from Stephanie, who then compared them to hers.

“You seen them Algee?” asked Bob.

“Leave it out, she’s my sister.”

“She offered me a grope,” the group turned their attention towards Felix.

“Well you’re family. Hell, even Derek has a grope,” laughed Algee.

“No I haven’t,” Derek retorted realising he may have missed out on something.

“She offered you a grope – what else?” Algee continued.

“She offered me a grope, I didn’t...”

“Mate, that is why you – I know she’s my sister, but you’ve got to take the opportunities when they arise or you’ll never – Bob tell him, you’re the expert.”

Bob mocked offence then slipped into babe magnet mode. “Look, that is the way of it. They prey on you as much as you on them.”

“That’s a little harsh isn’t it?” replied Felix.

“Hey, it’s a dog eat... bitch world out there,” shrugged Bob.

“Actually, I prefer bitch eat dog,” said Derek. The group laughed while Felix looked on blankly.

“No, we need to find Felix here a good bitch. He hasn’t seen a shag in a while... unless of course you’ve been doing the old girl?”

Images of Phyllis panting and wheezing flicked in front of Felix’s mind’s eye. “No. God no.”

“Women love Felix, they adore him. The trouble is – they just don’t fancy him. They want to be his friend.” The lads winced collectively. The shoes were definitely a complete failure.

“Too soft,” Felix concluded.

“They like soft,” said Algee encouragingly.

“It’s hard they want,” said Derek accompanied by a forearm boner gesture.

“Hard or soft, it doesn’t matter. Your problem is that you’re too open. Too honest,” said Algee.

“They like a bit of mystery,” added Bob.

“Not a lot has changed from when you were teenagers really,” Derek mused.

“I hope not,” replied Felix, whose teenage years were buried in an anonymous grave somewhere deep in his psyche.

“Well, think about it. What was the fundamental law you learnt back then?” continued Derek.

“Do the opposite, to get what you want,” replied Algee.

“Sounds complicated if you ask me,” said Felix.

“That’s all very well when you’re with them – but they’ll never go for that before, but you’ve got to dance first,” said Algee slapping him on the back.

“Dance?”

“Yeah show them what you’ve got.”

“They do like a bit of six pack,” smiled Bob tapping his annoyingly flat stomach.

“Well I’m afraid all I can offer is a party seven.”

“Got to work out a bit more.”

“Work out what? That women just don’t want to sleep with me.”

Daphne’s breasts appeared followed by her smile. “I’ve come to bust up this boy-girl disco thing.

“You always were the first one across the floor,” said Algee.

“You calling me a tart?”

“Slag actually.”

“God, brothers honestly. Now why can’t you guys be as nice as Felix here.” The guys looked at Felix and then each other. Daphne picked up on it. “Okay what did I just say?”

“We were just saying how girls like Felix, but don’t fancy him.”

“Oh stuff and nonsense,” replied Daphne.

“Do you?” Derek asked her breasts.

“He’s family. We’ve known each other too long for all that.” She put her arm around him and pressed her shapely form into his side. “We go back a long way.”

“I hear you offered him a grope of the new um...” Derek continuing the conversation with her breasts.

“That’s right and the offer is still open Felix.”

“Go on then,” taunted Algee.

Daphne liked an audience. She stood back and thrust her ample roundness towards Felix. He looked down at them and then at the lads watching him.

“What you waiting for?” urged Bob. “If you don’t I will.”

“You will not. The offer is only for Felix. Go on don’t be shy.” She gently pulled his hands and placed them under her breasts. Felix just stood there motionless; they felt full in his hand. Daphne moaned a little as she squirmed her breasts into his hands, while Bob and Derek drooled.

“They feel very real,” Felix pointed out, as if reporting on some experiment.

“Don’t talk Felix– just feel.”

“Yeah put some feeling into it boy!” cracked Derek. Everyone laughed; the moment passed, and eyes, hands and boobs disengaged.

Time passed listlessly on and soon the room started to mingle. A few of the girls tried to get the dancing going but the boys didn’t want to play. Soon the numbers swelled with new arrivals, giving an opportunity for people to break out of their various groups and reform into new ones.

Felix gave up trying to penetrate the group of new girls that had formed in the lounge by the stereo and retreated back to the kitchen and wormed his way into the corner of the kitchen where he could get an eagle eye view of the whole room. The subject of conversation was that perennial party favourite – the ‘nostalgic recollection of childhood programming’.

“So Felix, who was your favourite?” asked Stephanie.

“The Angels in Captain Scarlet.”

“Interesting.”

“Melody, Rhapsody and...”

“Harmony,” concluded Algee as he joined the discussion. “Blonde chics in white leather, flying fast planes.”

“Nothing sexier,” added Felix.

“Did that do it for you lads?” asked Samantha, one of the new faces on the scene.

“They were my first masturbatory fantasy,” admitted Algee.

“Wow – puppets” said Samantha in child-like awe. “That’s so messy.”

“Yeah, and they came with strings attached,” laughed Daphne.

“Yes, with their posh Sloane accents, little microphones that flicked down in front of their mouths, sunglasses that are in... but, above all, a desire to shoot things up mercilessly.”

“Did anyone ever notice that Captain Scarlet sounded like Cary Grant?”

“Yes, and one of the dullest heroes ever.” said Daphne rolling her eyes.

“But he had cool cars – like the SPV.”

“The what?” asked Samantha.

“Spectrum Pursuit Vehicle. It was blue, with a gun up front, door at the side and when inside you travelled backwards.”

“Sounds silly,” pouted Samantha.

“Boys stuff... silliness is an imperative,” advised Felix.

“S I G.” Felix and Algee chorused.

“Eh?” smiled Samantha.

“Forget it,” nodded Algee, realising he might have pulled.

“Lady Penelope and her pink Rolls,” continued Felix.

“Par-ker, will you go down on me?” imitated Algee.

“Yes Mil-ady.” Felix aped back.

“She’s the reason why women go for collagen implants these days – it’s been ingrained in our minds since childhood. Like that other one with the floaty dresses, big eyes – never spoke,” said Daphne.

“Marina!” said Felix and Algee simultaneously.

“Stingray – different show,” continued Algee.

“Are you sure she wasn’t in Thunderbirds?”

“No... that was Tiffany or something like that, probably the same head with a different wig on.”

“You know, I wish I had a swimming pool like that,” Felix mused.

“What it slides open and you emerge on your scooter, palm trees thrashing away as you blaze your trail,” Daphne laughed. Felix smiled, making sure he looked her in the eye. He wasn’t about to spoil things by pointing out that the palm trees were part of the Thunderbird two take off routine, and not that of Thunderbird one.

The conversation gradually moved on, weaving from one show to another, which included all-time greats like Camberwick Green, Hector’s House, the Herb Garden and Dog called Dill, Bill and Ben, Lamb Chop, The Wombles, The Clangers and the soup dragon, Noggin the Nog, Magic Roundabout, Bannarama and...

“Captain Pugwash!” shouted Stephanie; excited she had at last remembered something. “Master Stains and Seamen Bates...and Rupert the cabin boy.”

“Roger – the cabin boy, and it was Master Bates and Seamen Staines.” corrected Algee.

“Oh I knew it was something like that,” shrugged Stephanie.

But no journey into such increasingly fond and foggy memories was complete without that well-known mantra of “Pewe, Pewe, Barley, Magrew, Cuthbert, Dibble and Grub!” And with that repeated a few times, the ritual was complete and normal conversation could resume.

Algee seemed pleased with the turn out. “My formula for parties is if you invite a hundred people only fifty of them will turn up, but they will bring along a further twenty five more,” he imparted to Felix just as more people arrived. Soon even the stairs were packed. The food soon started to look plundered; all that remained were fragments of twiglets in the browning humus, soggy crisps and something that looked more like terrier’s puke than pasta salad. The drinks counter wasn’t much better. No beer, no spirits and a few bottles of unopened white wine that had obviously been purchased from a small off-licence three dinner parties ago, and had be palmed off by each new owner ever since. Luckily Trevor, who works in a pub, arrived after closing time with two ‘slabs o’ beer’, while a bottle of cheap Vodka in a flashy bottle turned up in the back of a cupboard in the dining room.

The chillout went up-tempo and everybody was ‘giving it large’, as one of the inebriated girls had put it as she emerged from the toilet breathing the scent of her fresh puke over Felix.

Eventually Felix cornered one of the new invitees from Algee’s work. The shoes worked beautifully, hooking her in, and then providing a perfect spring-board

into an entertaining conversation that allowed Felix to show off his wit and charm – until she went the same colour of the shoes and threw up on them.

The downstairs loo was engaged. So Felix took the shoes off and holding them out in front of him, he weaved his way up the stairs to the toilet on the top floor. As he came to the top of the stairs he could hear a rhythmic slap of flesh on flesh. He froze, not wanting to alert the participants to his presence and slowly turned to descend, trying not to drip puke on the railings.

“How’s that?” asked Daphne’s voice.

“They’re great,” replied Bob with a little strain evident in his voice.

“Are they better than before.”

“Oh god are they... they’re...uhhh.” Felix turned to go and the stair squeaked.

“Someone is outside.”

“I’m...” the pace of the slapping had picked up.

“Don’t you dare... not on my clothes...”

“But...” strained Bob.

“Watch the hair... here...hmm...” Bob tried to keep the climax low key but ended up thumping on the wall and calling upon a few middle-eastern deities. Felix stood spell bound, while a piece of sweet corn slid off his shoes onto the carpet. Now was a good time to leave.

“It’s a good thing I bought that clear polish,” he muttered to himself as he narrowly missed Algee bundling a giggling Samantha into the coatroom.

The party started to thin and all the inebriated newcomers, except Samantha, had gone, leaving the die-hards slumped around on the sofas, passing a joint around the conversation.

Mal, one of Algee's drinking pals, was serial PA shagger and was in mid confession when Felix joined them, after having stood outside a toilet for ten minutes, before realising that the occupant was a dripping tap.

"She's my PA and, yes, I shagged her," said Mal.

"Ooooooh doorstep," taunted Derek.

"You can talk, what about Sooky?" teased Algee.

Mal had his name on the door at a through-the-line agency somewhere off Oxford Street. He wasn't the world's most attractive man, but he had a kind of symmetry, lilt and charm, along with a few hints of self-accumulated wealth, that seemed to draw in the ladies with unerring proficiency.

"I thought you were off the booze, fags and birds," asked Daphne as she inhaled.

"Well, she's new and we've been so busy recently, I hadn't really paid her much attention. We were in the Light Bar. She tells me she gets a little more 'touchy feeley' with a drink. Before you know it I'm drinking, smoking my head off. We end up in 'liddle Italy', then back to Hotel Hampstead for a bit of duvet dunking."

"Why do you do it?" asked Daphne.

"He preys on the predatory female." Derek pointed out.

"What's a predatory female?" asked Daphne.

"You." replied Algee.

“I think he means a confident woman, who knows what she wants and gets it,” said Felix trying not to burn his fingers with the toke.

“It’s all about confidence at the end of the day,” continued Algee. “Both sexes are attracted to someone who is confident, because they have something to be confident about. That is what intrigues them.”

“I have a friend who’s a DJ and he gets laid every night he plays. He stands behind his little electronic altar and weaves his magic. He is the man in charge, so he always gets laid,” recounted Daphne.

“Just like film directors, skiing and diving instructors,” added Mal.

“Yeah, but he had a tiny todger,” replied Daphne.

“What that Rog guy... small really? How do you know?” asked Algee.

“I blew him in his limo on the way to the show because he was feeling stressed once. We never had sex though.”

“A blow job is sex isn’t it?” asked Felix.

“No it’s fore play, sex is – penetrative.”

“So is a blow job surely?”

“Yes – but it’s not the same as we are in control. Blowies allow a girl the opportunity to size things up without going too far. A taster if you like.”

“Do you think he deserved all the attention of these women?”

“No not really – most men don’t – but he had something attractive about him. I’m not sure I could put my finger on it.”

“Sounds like you put more than a finger on it,” chuckled Algee.

“He was the Alpha dog – best sperm, the best genes. Theoretically, the man in charge has these things. More often he has just the same as everyone else but during that moment, in that isolated space, he is the one with the qualifications.”

“What, even if he has a tiny todger?” asked Bob.

“I remember these guys out in Thailand; sweaty, corpulent white guys that ran the bars on the islands. Back home they couldn’t get their own grandmothers to look at them, but there they were surrounded by the most stunning Thai girls you can imagine.” Trevor added dreamily.

“My grandmother’s dead,” added Bob mysteriously. The room ignored his comment.

“Precisely. Those guys were the top dogs in that particular microcosm and those girls did what was natural; they went for the top of the food chain,” said Algee.

“Wouldn’t you say that was because they were rich,” said Felix.

“You never know, it could have been love,” said Daphne.

“Yes it may have been but the reality is that money was an environmental dictate, often a lot of the money they get is sent back to their families,” replied Algee.

“Have you made some kind of a study or something?” asked Daphne.

“No. I have observed.”

“Observed what, drunk secretaries?” she sneered at Samantha slumped in an armchair.

“Shhh. You’re talking about his lay tonight,” whispered Derek.

“I read this article once that said that women have sex with several different men to increase their chances of a healthy child. In the animal kingdom there are many

examples of the female of the species being promiscuous in order to ensure the health of the species. Having the right gene code doesn't necessarily mean you're the best provider. Moving around means women get the best of both," said Stephanie nodding.

"So where did all this male promiscuity come from?" asked Daphne.

"They know about it. Deep down inside they're also programmed to realise their role. Mal here instinctively preys on women that want to prey on him. It's mutually beneficial and life goes on."

"So in this world of yours everyone sleeps with everyone else, but women more than anyone?" observed Felix.

"We can't help it and neither can men, it's why we are so fucking successful at populating this planet."

"This is either a profound bit of anthropological reasoning or a load of old bollocks," said Algee.

"Actually it is actually a complete and utter load of bollocks," said Felix. The room went quiet and looked at him. "Yes. You see... scientists have proved that promiscuity in the female of the species can be linked to the size of the male testicles."

"Our balls are barometers?" asked Bob, squirming a little in his seat.

"Yeah, with chimps, the female is very promiscuous, and so the male's balls are massive; so they can produce the sperm to flood out the competition. The female gorilla is very loyal so the male has got small balls. Man is in the middle. So our women are somewhere in the middle too."

"We'll always just be apes," Daphne sighed, shooting a look to Bob who sat crossed legged, picking wax out of his ear.

A loud knocking at the door broke the ensuing silence; the first taxi had arrived.

Mal kindly gave Felix a lift back in his taxi. They sat in silence for a while staring out at the orange neon world flicking by.

“Did you honestly believe all that crap back there?” Mal asked finally.

“Well...”

“I like your bollocks bit. I have unusually large testicles. Do you think that is why I sleep with these women, who are only having sex with me because I’m an alpha dog?”

“I wouldn’t know,” replied Felix.

“You know, I like you... why on earth do you hang around with that mis... mis-reable excuse for friends, you’re way too goooofor them,” he slurred.

Felix didn’t want to reply, just in case anything got back, but he knew that Mal had hit on a key point. He really did not belong amongst them, it wasn’t his scene– but then what was his scene – a sad lonely existence at the top of a house on Primrose Hill?

“Algee has been good to me over the years, he has helped me out on more than a few occasions.”

“Name one.”

Felix couldn’t so he laughed instead.

“You see. I’m right. I bet you’ve helped him out a few times.”

“Not really. I guess we... I represent a part of his life from the past. A part of his life that he misses.”

“What about you?”

“Me?”

“Yeah. You.”

“I like his life. Well, some of it. The buzz, the social scene, the friends... sort of...” he didn’t want to elaborate too much just in case he offended Mal, although he was probably to drunk to care.

“Most of them are not friends. You’re probably the best friend he has.”

“He has great girls at his parties.”

“Ah ha! Now we’re getting somewhere – there’s hope for you yet. You stick it out for the girls.”

“Kind of... but...” Felix was beginning to feel uncomfortable about the way this conversation was heading. He hated people he didn’t know, spotting the truth in him.

“No butt talk here pal.”

“Okay. He has really stunning women that I would, under normal circumstances, never get the opportunity to meet... converse with.”

“So if Algee was a boring accountant, who had boring dinner parties with boring couples– you’d be forever making excuses.”

“Yeah. No. I dunno.”

“Good man. I knew I liked you.” Mal slapped him on the knee.

“Does it work?”

“No. I’m going home with you aren’t I?”

“Good point.”

The conversation was then interrupted by complex driver instructions, which finally led to them arriving at the end of his road. Felix offered to pay, but Mal declined saying he was going to charge it.

As Felix was getting out, Mal stopped him. “Listen I know this great girl. She is fantastic.”

“No. I’m fine it’s really not that bad.”

“The thing is, she’s blind.”

“Oh... I... really...don’t...”

“Say nothing.” He took out a note pad and scribbled down a number. “Here take it. Her name is Willow— she’s about thirty-two, tall brunette, good listener and talks dirty. If you don’t want to call, then don’t... but she’s special, and once you get used to the eye contact thing, your life will never be the same. Hey, at least you’ll be able to get away with those shoes.” He handed the paper to Felix and for some reason he accepted it. Perhaps it was fate.

3. Blast from the past.

“Have you got any of that Hysteria?” asked an old lady ramming Felix’s ankles with her trolley.

“Yes madam, the Wisteria is over there, between the Clematis and Honey suckle.” The old lady wheeled off without saying thank you.

“I find, the older they get the more impolite they become,” said Liz as they both watched the old lady barge her way through the trolley traffic.

“Guess they can’t be bothered any more. Too old to care,” shrugged Felix.

“Just shoot me if I ever get like that.”

“Deal,” smiled Felix. Liz was a small roly-poly kind of woman, who would mother a lump of coal if she had the time; between her six kids, absent lorry driver of a husband and two jobs, she always found time to make a fuss over Felix.

“So – how was it?”

“Same old.”

“No girls?”

Felix smiled at Liz and shrugged. “There were a few, not my sort though. Shoes went down well, until this girl threw up on them.”

“Ooh well”

“Well– I got a number, but not from a girl there. This guy called Mal gave it to me. Said she would change my life.”

“Sounds promising – have you called yet?”

“No. You see, she’s blind.”

“Well what’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing really – except the eye contact thing I suppose,” said Felix scouting around for an excuse without know what he was talking about.

“Nonsense.”

“Well, you know, if you want to know the truth, it sounds too much like hard work. Why can’t I get one of those bubbly ineffectual girls that giggle and fawn... you know the ‘ookay’ go with the flow sort, hair up, smiles a lot.”

“Because they don’t exist.”

“They do, I’ve seen them.”

“Your mind has interpreted what you see like that – no one is bubbly and ineffectual, and if they are it is because the person they are with make them like that. You like strong women; you are drawn to them, and they are to you, because you allow them to be like that.”

“Like Sarah?”

“Well, she is the mangeress, but having a drunk employee lurching after her at the Christmas party was not good for her company image. You just picked the wrong moment.”

“Burnt my bridges more like it.”

“Where d’yu want these?” asked the brusque voice of Sedge from behind a new delivery of bamboo.

“Over there,” he pointed. Sedge’s face appeared between the foliage to clock the directions.

“Shed!” he yelled to his ever present assistant. “Over here by the firs!”

“Okay boss!” Shed yelled back.

Sedge and Shed were the two lunks of the centre who were responsible for moving stuff and handling deliveries. Sedge was an old boy well past retirement age who couldn’t stay away from the business. Shed was his nephew, so called, because he was as large, and as square as some of the sheds they had on sale at the back of the lot. The bamboo shook and started to move in the right direction.

“So – I think you should call this girl. Remember: what you don’t put in you don’t get out. These girls in your mind are all complex emotional beings in reality. We

all require a little bit of effort,” nodded Liz with one eye on Shed as he negotiated the lavenders with his load.

“You’re right,” said Felix, pulling the paper out of his pocket.

“You see, you could have left that at home but didn’t, you brought it out with you. Deep down you know you want to.”

She was right of course and Felix knew it, but it was a path that could end up making his life way more complicated than was necessary. Then again, the fear of experiencing the new would also explain why he was stuck in the quiet little cul-de-sac in the housing estate of life. It was time to do something about it.

Suddenly the slightly chilled voice of Sarah echoed out through the PA system, requesting Felix’s presence in the office.

“You rang Milady,” said Felix, knocking politely on the half open door.

“Ah Felix, it’s your mother,” she said, nodding to the receiver on the desk.

He picked it up. “Uh huh. Yeah. Yeah.” Sarah pretended to be looking at forms, but Felix could tell by the inactivity of the top sheet that she was listening in. “Is she – shhh...when? I’ll be straight over.”

He put the phone down and Sarah was already looking up. “Bad news?”

“Yes... well they’re...it’s my Grandmother. She’s had... um, not good.”

Sarah’s features softened. “Oh, I am sorry. Is it?”

“They’re not sure. She’s in for tests at the moment. My mother...”

“Go now, take as much time as you need.”

Felix’s grandmother had been admitted to Guy’s Hospital, where Felix found her wired up to a trolley of machinery. She looked like a Roswell crash victim,

swamped by the alien neon-lit surroundings. The drip taped to her thin arm looked brutal and invasive against her almost transparent skin. Her head turned in his direction and he felt a sense of relief sweep over him. Her eyes remained closed but she held up her hand as a greeting. It struck Felix, as he reached out and held her hand that he had never seen her in this kind of revealing light before, as he had only ever seen her in recent years in her dark and pokey flat in Stockwell. In fact, he couldn't remember the last time he had seen her outside of the flat. Felix promised himself that if whoever decides these things, gives her another chance; he would take her out more often.

Felix's mother appeared with a coffee in one hand and her comfort-hanky in the other. If she'd removed that from between the cushions of the sofa, then his mother was worried, Felix noted.

"Felix darling, you're here. She was asking after you." They hugged and Felix could see the pre-formed tears glistening on the edge of her eyes.

"How is she?"

"I'm fine," a voice croaked from the bed. "Take no notice of this fuss and nonsense. I'll be home by teatime. I've got some of those Lincoln biscuits in – your favourites."

"Dora, you will not be out by teatime. This time it was serious," huffed Felix's mother, Mandy, as she smoothed out the sheets on the bed.

"Felix, help me up." Felix carefully moved her frail weight further up into the pillows. "That's better. Now sit down the two of you, we've got some talking to do." Felix smiled; even in this state she still took charge of everybody. He imagined the doctors were made to comb their hair, tuck their shirts in and polish the backs of their

shoes – top and tailing she called it. She was a stickler for such things, believing those ‘little unseen details’ were the only true way to tell the depth of a man’s character. It was then that he realised what was missing – her lipstick. Dora never strayed out of the inner sanctum of her bedroom without putting on her bright red lipstick; he glanced at his mother realising that Dora was in a serious way.

“Now...” This was Dora’s usual start to any speech that involved giving instructions, telling someone off, paying the milkman or taking requests for tea. “I have been thinking. Mandy – I think we should come clean about Felix.”

“Oh mother don’t start that again.”

“Clean about what?” inquired Felix.

“About why you don’t have a lady in your life.”

“I do,” he lied.

“No you don’t,” his Grandmother informed him.

“Perhaps he doesn’t want one,” added Mandy.

“Nonsense.” replied his Grandmother, the twinkle returning to her eye.

“I have a phone number.”

“That may be so, but your mother has been keeping a secret from you, against my better judgement, and I think it is time you knew the truth.”

“Mother, this is ridiculous... It’s ridiculous Felix, honest.”

“Why don’t you let him decide for himself.”

“Because it is RIDICULOUS!” Mandy looked around to see if anyone had heard her raise her voice, and then started to fidget with her hanky.

“Mother I think we should respect Gran’s feelings on this matter don’t you,” said Felix, knowing how to pick a safe line between the two.

“You see, the lad talks sense as usual.”

“Dora this is not the time and place.”

“Well, it will have to do because I’m dying.” This brought the conversation to a rubber-burning halt and the three of them just looked at each other. Then Mandy started to cry. “Oh come on girl – Felix hand her those tissues will you please before she floods us out.”

“Of course,” whispered Felix, handing Mandy a tissue.

“I’ve seen enough ER to know when someone is about to shed her mortal coil and take the great journey. Listen.”

“Okay – Dora if it makes you happy,” said Felix, happy to let her continue.

“It would. And I will tell you why – it is only fair while there is still time.”

“Still time?” asked Felix.

“All will be revealed. Now... many years ago your grandfather did a terrible thing. So terrible, I was forced to divorce him.”

“Divorce him? I thought he died building a bridge over the Gangees.”

“Well... no. The old bastard ended slipping on a tea bag in his flat in Hackney North and the fall killed his outright.”

“So he wasn’t in India?”

“Never”

“And the tiger...”

“Untrue. I saw it in a comic,” said Mandy in a half whisper.

“I know, I had that comic and I told all my friends that it really happened to my Grandpa Nelson,” said Felix.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay– they never believed me anyway.”

“I think the tea bag came from the Indian shop round the corner,” said Mandy, after thinking about it for a moment. Dora started laughing, Mandy looked down at her coffee and started to snigger and soon all three were laughing their heads off.

“So what did he do to make you divorce him?”

Dora stopped laughing. “He got a girl pregnant.”

“What, while you were...”

“Yes, we had been married five months, and I was pregnant with your mother at the time. Anyway he’d met this Gypo picking hops down in Kent one summer.”

“How old was she?” Felix asked.

“Twenty.”

“Thank god, when you said girl then...”

“When I think back, I always see her as a young girl – she was twenty going on twelve – because she wasn’t right in the head, if you get my meaning. She was beautiful in a rustic kind of a way, but she was simple and her family didn’t take too kindly to our Nelson knocking her up.” Mandy tutted and shifted in her seat. “Neither did I for that matter, but I was pregnant and it wasn’t an easy pregnancy. He was lucky to escape with his life. He would have done the decent thing but he was married to me. So they cursed him, and they not only cursed him but his line too.”

“His line?”

“Yeah, all his male heirs – i.e. you. They said that he and his male line would never find true love.”

“That’s why you wanted a girl.” Felix said to Mandy.

“That is not true.” Mandy looked shocked, but Felix knew he had hit a note of truth.

“You always wanted a girl. I heard you saying that to Dad once.”

“When?”

“When we were on holiday in Blackpool that time. When those guys picked on me, and stole my pocket money.”

“That was the heat of the moment.”

“And all those dubious looking outfits that you used to bring back from the jumble sale, saying they were all the rage.”

“Look,” said Dora cutting in. “The fact of the matter is that Nelson got cursed, we had your mum, so she was okay – but then she had you.”

“I never believed in it. I refused. It was just a silly old curse. Hocus jumbo nonsense,” scoffed Mandy as she plucked away at her hanky. “These things are like voodoo, they are only true if you believe in them.”

“But it is true. Look at me. I’m nearly forty and I have never met anyone I could fall in love with, because I’m cursed. That explains everything.”

“That’s not true Felix and you know it.”

“Go on name one then.”

Mandy looked down at her coffee mentally flicking back through Felix’s life for a girl. “What about Iona?”

“Her! She ran off with a bass player of a two bit band called the ‘Prefab Kittens’, because he had a car – a Volvo estate I seem to remember – and by all accounts they put its suspension through its paces in the car park of the Red Lion between sessions.”

“Listen,” said Dora cutting in. “The reason why I brought this whole subject up is because this curse has a cancellation clause.”

“Cancellation clause,” repeated Felix.

“Cancellation clause. Since when?” asked an amazed Mandy.

“Pass me that water.”

“Is this part of it?”

“No – my throat’s dry from talking.” She took a gulp, while the bottom of the glass magnified her dentures. “All curses have cancellation clauses. It’s just not everybody knows about them. I found out a few years ago from some warlock chappy who is a part-time member of a coven down in Hastings.”

“How the hell did you meet a part-time warlock?” asked Mandy

“He goes to bingo with his sister sometimes.”

“Bet he knows how to swing the numbers,” Felix added.

“And - we got talking, and I asked him about the curse and he said he would look into it. The curse will be lifted if either he or any of his male heirs find true love for twenty other people before they reach forty.”

“Twenty!” exclaimed Felix.

“How did he come to that figure?” asked Mandy.

“One for each year of the girl’s life.”

“You said she acted more like twelve because she was...”

“No twenty. You have until you’re forty – which is double that – in order to cancel it out and make right the anguish caused.”

“Now that is ridiculous,” Mandy sighed.

“It’s all a matter of karmic maths according to this warlock.”

“I’ve got three months to make twenty people happy in love.”

“That’s ab...out it,” coughed Dora before her head sagged and she exhaled her last breath.

“My god, she’s gone,” said Mandy in a hushed tone.

Felix leant over and felt her pulse. “Poor Dora,” said Felix reverently.

“Jesus, what’s that smell?”

“Whatever she ate over the past few days.” Felix looked down on the calm expression on Dora’s face; she’d cleared her bowels and conscience and now she was at peace with herself.

However, for Felix his tower was beginning to topple.

Mandy managed to hold it together all through the dealings with the hospital staff and administration. Dora’s body was taken down to the morgue, where she would stay in cold storage until the undertakers came to collect her. Thankfully Dora had one of those pre-arranged packages, and had pestered Mandy to keep the phone number of ‘Wallace and Cogell home of rest’ in her bag at all times, just in case. The call was made and the hospital asked if she would like her to be displayed in their Chapel of rest for relatives in the meantime: but as they were Dora’s only relatives Mandy didn’t see the point.

It wasn't until they were on the bus going back home and she caught sight of an Age Concern poster, that she let her emotions loose. Felix had felt the swell of emotions working their way to the surface, but when they broke, it wasn't a case of donning the life jackets, but stand back as the blue touch paper flared.

"She had no right!" The rest of the upper deck took a sideways glance at Mandy.

"How do you mean?"

"The meddling old cow. Things were fine. Bloody curse. Fucking Nelson I wish he'd kept his knob in his trousers."

"Well, if he hadn't, we wouldn't be here," replied Felix thoughtfully.

"Men, you always stand up for each other," she cussed.

"Well it's true isn't it?"

"Well – you know what I mean. He was just like your father.... couldn't..."

"Leave him out of it – it's okay. I'm fine."

"Really?"

"Really."

"I told you that curse was ridiculous," said Mandy, rearranging her bag after her little outburst. "It wasn't even a curse – more like a warning with intent."

"I know, you're right. Stupid thing."

"Put it behind you. I mean – you just haven't found the right girl; that's all. You're special."

The mention of the word 'special' reminded Felix of Willow's phone number. His hand searched it out in his trouser pocket, and he decided that he would call and

put an end to the nagging doubt of the gypsy's curse that was loitering in the back of his mind, like an unwanted dog.

"Is anything the matter?" whispered Mandy as she reminded the bus of her presence with a loud trump in her comfort hanky.

"I thought you never blew your nose in that one?"

"Oh this is just a plain old hanky."

"It's your comfort..."

"No it's not – it's just a plain old hanky. Probably throw it away now," she said as her attention drifted out of the window. Mandy had exorcised the knot of tension that had been building up over years. When it came down to it, she had been the only one who had really cared about Dora, and Dora had not been an easy woman to care for. She had been prone to urinating in strange receptacles and hiding her false teeth in the garden. Mandy had seen it all and had devoted her life to Dora, and now she was gone Mandy could get on with what was left.

4. A right dog's dinner.

Felix watched the little bubbles in his coffee slowly spiral into the centre. The sound of the spoon on the draining board was unusually noticeable, as was the noise of the soles of his shoes sticking to the tacky linoleum.

The doctor had told them later that she had suffered massive cardio-vascular infarction and had been 'running on empty' for sometime. Felix wondered whether

Dora had hung on especially so she could tell of the curse, or whether it was just one of those timing things.

As much as he would like to be able to blame something else. The speaker cleared his throat and the cranial parliament rose to their feet voicing their opinions: his looks, his personality – or lack of it – penis – or lack of it, synchronicity, the right girl, the wrong girl, any girl. Whatever the reason it would be highly improbable that a curse would be the real cause of his lack of success with women.

Suddenly his hand found the bit of paper with Willow's phone number on it, and the discussion was brought to a halt. The numbers were beginning to fade from rubbing, so he wrote it down on a used envelope and slotted it under the phone for safety. As his hand reached for the receiver, he mouthed the numbers to himself: suddenly the phone rang, and he picked it up.

"Hello"

"Hello darling." It was Mandy. "Just wanted to say I've spoken with the— er— coffin fella."

"Funeral director."

"That's right, Mr Wallace, they have picked her up and she's being... you know"

"Yes."

"Day after tomorrow. 2 pm at the Chapel of Rest. The Minister Thompson presiding."

"That's judges mother."

"Oh. Anyway so do you want to do the tribute, or read the lesson?"

"Oh I'll do the lesson." The thought of doing the tribute made his skin itch.

"You know I can never read my own hand writing when I'm nervous."

“True. They’ll tell you what it is, when you get there. It’s printed on a card to make it easier for you.”

“Okay. Anything else I can do to help. Flowers?”

“That would be nice. There will be flowers from us; it’s all part of the package. Funny really, she loved life so much, but she had a funeral package.”

“Well I guess it is a kind of a holiday she’s gone on, except she won’t be coming back.” There was a silence on the other end of the phone. “Hello Mum?” He could hear a faint snivel and a whimper. “Mother are you all right? I’m sorry that was a bit...”

“...No, it’s good to make light of these things – it helps. In many ways, you’re just like her. So I’ll see you there, I’ve got a bit of ringing around to do.”

Felix felt bad. Then the subject of Minister Thompson was taken up by the voices in his head. Felix didn’t like the man at all. He could never forgive him, because he was responsible for the first major career failure of his life.

He had only been ten, when he had successfully interviewed for the holiday job as a mute, only to be disappointed the following day when Minister Thompson called to renege on the offer. ‘God moves in mysterious ways, my son’ had been the minister’s only patronising excuse, before promising that ‘something else’ would come up. Of course, nothing did – which about summed up the rest of his working career. Minister Thompson jinxed him that day, and he was never going to forgive the man.

He took another sip of his coffee and sat on the chair by the phone. The thought of trying to get a blind date with a blind woman didn’t appeal; she would more than likely be able to hear how he really felt in his voice – another time maybe.

The morning before the funeral Felix popped into his local supermarket. There was a new girl on the checkout. Her nametag informed those that paid attention that her name was Charlotte. She didn't suit her ill-fitting uniform somehow, she was either too skinny or it had been designed to fit someone with a more noticeable figure.

She carefully scanned each item with a tight-lipped expression on her face. "That'll be £7.83 please." She looked up and smiled. Felix handed her his card and she hesitated. "I'm sorry I don't know how."

"Don't worry, here." He handed her a ten-pound note. She tapped a button and nothing happened.

"Oh god. I'm sorry, it's my first day and – Miss Tranter Miss!" But Miss Tranter had disappeared by washing powders.

"Use the intercom," advised Felix, pointing to the microphone.

"Oh yeah. MISS TRANTER – CALLING MISS TRANTER – CHARLOTTEWHEEEEEEEK– ON THE WHEEEEEEKTILL!"

"I think you need to turn the volume down a little," said Felix waggling his finger in his ear.

"I think we need a new microphone– bad feed on it.

"Oh?"

"Help my brother out a lot. He's into equipment and that, cameras, security, PA systems –especially eastern block stuff, very collectable. He also kits a lot of shops out with all sorts of stuff."

Miss Tranter appeared, smiled and tutted at Charlotte: then put things right.

“Thank you Charlotte for all of your help,” Felix said making sure Miss Tranter heard.

“Pleasure. Anytime,” she beamed.

The funeral, like most funerals, was a quiet affair. There was a scattering of mourners, Felix and Mandy were the only family present, while the rest consisted of the ‘back-benchers’ from the bingo hall. Mandy sobbed quietly into a brand new hanky, while Felix delivered a seamless monotoned rendition from the Book of Revelations, that brought on much nodding from the ‘back benchers’, who were either agreeing with his words, or were just falling asleep. After a hymn and a psalm, the Minister Thompson glided over to the lectern and spoke insightfully about Dora, which was remarkable considering he had never met her before. Felix couldn’t help but feel the years had been kind to the minister, in a polished bald headed, saggy jowled, kind of way.

They sang ‘And did those feet in ancient times’, which was one of her favourites; then as the curtains slowly gathered round, her bingo group chorused ‘FULL HOUSE’ so loud, that Felix was surprised Dora hadn’t come racing out from behind the curtains waving her winning numbers.

After the service, the mourners shook their hands, nodded and passed on their condolences before evaporating from the scene, like the smoke rising from the chimney at the back of the chapel.

Mr Wallace appeared from nowhere to mutter his condolences. He was skinny, with a vulture’s stoop, hair reminiscent of an eighties rock guitarist and long fingers that looked ideal for scooping people’s innards out. The minister glided over to join them.

“That was beautiful,” said Mandy to the minister.

“Thank you. I am sorry, she will be sorely missed,” his tone sounding well rehearsed.

“Thank you Mr Wallace. Minister – for everything,” emphasised Felix looking the Minister in the eye. The Minister just smiled, it was obvious that he had no recollection of him at all – well, it had been twenty-five years or so.

“Aren’t you going to put her ashes in something a bit nicer than that?” asked Felix staring over the rim of his tea cup, at the grey pallid container sitting on his Mum’s dining table.

“Don’t know where yet. I haven’t quite decided on what to do with her yet.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well I’m not keeping them in here – too spooky. Thought I’d spread her ashes somewhere, but don’t where yet.”

“Don’t you need permission?”

“They let dogs crap wherever these days, surely a few ashes blowing in the breeze won’t do any harm.”

“But you’ve got to do something that she’d want.”

“I know – I know! What about Richmond!”

“What the park?”

“No, the river, she loved it down there. We all used to go for a Sunday walk when you were little. She liked to watch all the boats, drifting back and forth.”

“Sounds perfect.”

“How about Sunday next?” said Mandy, checking the calendar on the wall.

“Deal,” said Felix knowing he’d be free.

When Felix got back to his room, he could smell the pungent presence of ‘Shake and Vac’ in the still air. The monthly cleaner had been in to kill off any evidence that anyone lived there: everything had been sterilised, folded, and tucked down. She had even reorganised the cupboards in the kitchen, into some order that only she could fathom. The Vim stood sentinel on the draining board, as a stern reminder that the sink should be spotless at all times.

He made a coffee, messed up the surfaces a little, took everything out of the cupboards and rearranged them back to the way they were. Now would be a good time to call Willow he thought.

At first he thought the envelope with the number on it, had slipped under the phone. No. So he tried the drawer. No. On the shelf by the front door? No. The bin – empty.

Felix felt sick, he had debated and delayed and now fate had stepped in and denied him his opportunity. Perhaps this was the curse at work? He sat down and thought about it, under normal circumstances he would have talked himself out of it, using lame excuses and an excess of self-denial– but not this time. This time he was going to triumph, and prove this curse was a sham. There was only one place it could be.

The Dumpster bin, even though it had been recently emptied, was already half full, and emitting a stench that was reminiscent of something one would find out the back of a curry house on a busy Saturday night. It took three goes and the help of an

abandoned kid's bike to get up the side of the Dumpster. The smell got worse the deeper he delved; he couldn't understand why the FBI ever contemplated rummaging through people's rubbish.

"Honestly, it's not the kind of thing you'd expect in an area like this,' tutted an old biddy, as she and her husband passed by arm in arm.

"Seems like a nice chap too, well dressed and all that, not like the guys you get down the Sally Army."

Felix kept his head low in case they recognised him. Suddenly he spotted a plastic bag from the local supermarket that had been lining his bin. He reached for it, got his fingers through the tied loop and fell headfirst into the bin.

"They're all drunks you know, can't stay upright, that's why they're always lying around in sleeping bags." Felix heard the old lady comment in an unnecessarily loud voice.

He waited a while then tried to clamber out; after a brief struggle he made it over the rim and ended up in a heap on the floor because the abandoned bicycle had been reclaimed during his sortee.

He hoped that Phyllis wouldn't come out and invite him in for a sherry, but luckily enough he could hear laughter from behind her door, she was obviously entertaining someone.

He took a shower, scrubbed himself clean three times and doused himself liberally all over with after-shave, and even gargled with it for safe measure.

"Hello, can I help you?" Her voice belonged in the moonlit shadows – soft and alluring with a hint of mystery.

“Perhaps. I am a friend of Mal’s, well actually not...”

“Not another friend of Mal’s. Boy you sleep with a man once and he’s handing your number out to every Tom, Dick and Harry.”

“Felix actually.”

“Well you got me there. How can I help you?”

“Well – um I’m not sure.”

She chuckled to herself. “You called me remember.”

“Okay I er, that is he reckoned that it would be a good idea...”

There was a pause, Felix thought he could hear her drawing on a cigarette. “I can tell a lot from a voice, to me speech patterns to me are like reading palms; do you know why?”

“Because you’re...”

“That’s right – blind. I like the sound of your voice. And if Mal likes you, I’ll like you.”

“Good, he’s a nice guy. It’s nice that he looks out for you.” Once again Felix regretted his choice of words, “I didn’t...”

“It’s okay. I exaggerated before; he doesn’t hand my number out willy-nilly, so don’t worry. Most of his suggestions don’t this far – there’s a new restaurant called Pippa’s that overlooks the river at Putney Bridge. The view is inconsequential to me, but it does great bistro kinda stuff and serves a half-decent bottle of house red. Saturday at eight?”

“Yeah, see you there.”

“I’ll be the one with the dog.” The phone went dead.

Felix smiled – he had a date.

The next few days seemed to drag its heels deliberately. At night Felix lay in bed staring at the theatre of shadows on the ceiling. He played every conceivable outcome to his 'date' with Willow through his head, and then replayed a few favourites over and over again until he fell asleep. The next night he covered off a few worst case scenarios, in the belief that by thinking about them they wouldn't happen, then returned to the one that involved a car chase, dinner at the Savoy and a penthouse somewhere in Mayfair. It was a long way away from Putney Bridge, but what the hell, it was his imagination and he was paying the bill.

Saturday came, and he was called into the garden centre to help deal with a new delivery of willows and silver birches, because Sedge and Shed had booked time off to re-landscape someone's garden. Sarah was particularly off with him, but Felix didn't care– he had a date.

Liz was over the moon that he had made the call. "Fantastic. Oh the mystery of it all."

"A blind date with a blind woman," said Felix as he put his back into lifting a willow.

"What's her name?" Felix stopped and laughed, and pointed to the tree. "You're not serious – Willow – really? Is she some pagan or something? She could be a witch?"

"She has a dog, not a cat."

"So what, it's a familiar."

“Well, whoever or whatever she is, saddle up and don’t look back,” said Liz excitedly. Felix suspected that there was a little more to Liz’s private life than her motherly aura let through.

“It’s just dinner you know. Nothing else.” He pointed out trying to look indifferent.

“From little acorns.”

“Sprout big things with thick skin, deep roots and a long history,” he said eyeing up the next silver birch on the back of the lorry.

“It’ll be okay, you’ll see,” said Liz, slapping on the back.

Felix got home early, and Phyllis was there at her door waiting for him when he slipped in through the front door. He hadn’t told her about the date because he didn’t want to build up any expectations; hope and night-time fantasies were one thing, but cold light of day expectations, were unfortunately just another cookie ready to crumble.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked.

“Tell you what?”

“About the date.” Felix knew she had a talent or the cards but this had been the most accurate yet.

“Have you done a remote reading?”

“No, it’s just your phone has been ringing all morning – and what with your grandmother, god rest her soul – I thought I’d better answer it. Willow asked if she could meet later – she has a client or something.”

“Oh fine.”

“I told her that it wouldn’t be a problem.”

“Thanks.”

“She has a beautiful voice,” cooed Phyllis.

“She does, doesn’t she.”

“Shall I do a spread?” Felix hesitated and Phyllis detected his nervousness. “I tell you what, let’s do a little digging. I have spoken to her now, so I’ve made a connection.” Felix acquiesced reluctantly.

The smoke from the incense coiled lazily up into the air, like a noon-baked adder on the move. The whole room seemed to crowd round, as Phyllis laid the cards out on the table.

“Swords. Air. Intelligence – cups, passion, but a kind of hollow love too – two kinds of passion.”

“So she’s passionate about her work?”

“Or her work *is* passion.” The words ‘passion’ and ‘client’ met and held hands. What kind of passion was she in to? This worried Felix.

“She’s intelligent and resourceful – she has to be – see here the Queen of Swords – but there is an absence – a kind of loneliness.”

“She’s blind. Not that that has anything to do with it,” mumbled Felix, trying to be as PC as possible.

“I see.” Her fingers ran across the cards as she looked for more clues. “There, you see the Two of Cups in her future. The start of something new – fragile, but there

is hope, a union – perhaps she is able to bring some of that passion she works with into her own life. It could be you.”

“Am I there?”

“There is the Fool, here.”

“Oh him again.”

“But it may not be you this time. The Fool as we know is someone on the start of a journey – the initiate. But it could be the spontaneity that is welling up inside of her. She accepted your offer of a date quite readily?”

“Er. Yes I suppose so.”

“Then there is a dangerous side to her, the Fool here is her rash side, her willingness to throw herself into adventure.”

“Desperate then?”

“Oh no, she knows what she’s doing all right. Here it is balanced by the Swords – and the pentacles here imply she has some kind of success financially, clever, thrifty – no that’s not the word – more like ingenuity which kind of links in with the swords.”

“Devious then?”

“No, she’s open and frank, not embarrassed about who she is.”

Felix sat back in the chair and looked at Phyllis. “Sounds intriguing, she did sound kind of reassured on the phone. Took control of the conversation if you know what I mean?”

“I see that all here. Hang on to your hat and above all be yourself.”

Be yourself, that’s easier said than done, Felix thought to himself as he plodded up the stairs to his room. On the whole he found the company of women easy, he had

grown up with just his mother, with little or no male influence in his life. His father appeared every now and again but preferred the more remote parts of Scotland, and sheep farming to any regular contact with his family. As he got older he had found the company of women easier than men, which unfortunately had a reverse effect, when the theme park of sex opened for business somewhere in his teens. He liked girls and could get frustratingly close to them, but when it came to taking the big rides, girls just wanted to be 'his friend' and nothing more. They would confide and search him out, because they felt at ease in his company; he had even been beaten up and 'wedgied', because a girlfriend's boyfriend felt threatened by his ease of familiarity. But, whenever that little blip on the 'fancy-you-radar' started to 'ping', that ease would seize, and his personality would pull up its collar, and go queue for the merry-go-round. Perhaps this was the way the curse worked. Let him get tantalisingly close— close enough to hear her hair brush her shirt collar, close enough to smell her real smell under the perfume— but never close enough to open the purse strings of their hearts.

Willow's voice sounded beautiful, and if half of Phyllis's reading was true, she sounded like his kind of woman.

His shave was perfect, not a nick or drop of blood spilt. He decided not to use after-shave, because it might come across as trying too hard. She is more than likely to have a heightened sense of smell, and start telling when and where he bought it, and the fact that it is eight years old and he's still using the same bottle. His shirt too was perfect: one thing being single had taught him was how to iron a shirt worthy of the hangers in a shop.

He looked down at his Egyptian scarab green shoes sitting at the bottom of the cupboard and hesitated – should he or shouldn't he?

It was at times like this he wished he still had his scooter, but it had never recovered after being trashed by an inebriated knob in his X5, during a needless bout of road rage. The bus would have to do. Since the introduction of congestion charging their service had improved– you now got five buses at once, instead of the usual three.

The conductor eyed his shoes with a hint of suspicion.

“They're lucky,” Felix pointed out.

“They'd have to be,” replied the conductor.

Oxford Street was still packed and was under going the seamless transition between shoppers and early evening diners and bar hunters. Harrods looked as if it was still entertaining people's credit cards, and it was chucking out time at the Natural History Museum. ‘The Horse’ at Parson's Green was already packed with early antipodean revellers, and the restaurants were welcoming early reservations. A hen party flagged the bus down and boarded, and came upstairs to spread the word of Sarah's impending fortune. Sarah said nothing from beneath her colourful veil, which on closer inspection turned out to be packets of condoms hanging like bags of bar nuts from a bit of cheese cloth.

“Ere, this one is ribbed,” pointed out a bouncy black girl in the seat in front of Felix. “And this one is mint. See.” She continued as she pulled it from the veil, ripped it open and slipped the condom over her fore finger. She then slipped the protected finger into her mouth like a girl enjoying a flake. “Lovely. Want to try?”

“No thanks, I’ll spoil my dinner,” replied Felix trying to break eye contact by glancing out of the window.

“Well you’re no fun,” she said as she swivelled back thrusting the now soggy minty digit in the face of the bride-to-be.

“Sonja, save it will you,” the bride hissed, obviously more than a little embarrassed by the offer.

The girls disembarked at the Firkin pub by the approach to the bridge, leaving the upper deck gratefully silent. Felix disembarked a few stops on, outside the cinemas on Putney High Street and then dodged the traffic and headed down to the river.

The restaurant was all chrome and beech with tidy cushions and large paintings of abstract life on the river. Willow was already seated at a table by the window; she stood as she heard his approach through a blockade of chairs.

“Hi I’m Willow,” she said, holding her hand out towards him.

“Hi. Felix,” said Felix, shaking her hand.

“And this is Cohort. My all-seeing companion,” she said pointing to a slobbering British bulldog that had fixed its stare on Felix’s shoes.

“A British bulldog, I’ve never seen one of them as a guide dog.”

“I know, great isn’t it? Trained him myself. Wanted a dog with character, not one of those doughy eyed Labradors.”

“Well – sorry I’m late,” apologised Felix, as he sat down.

“That’s okay. Got my vodka and a nice view.” This threw Felix, and he failed to hide it. She laughed. “I know, strange thing for a blind person to say but I can hear a view; like you can see it, if you get my picture.”

“Really, that’s amazing.”

“Not really, product of sharper hearing. If you walked around blindfolded for a day, you soon start to picture what you hear in your head.”

“So you know what things look like then?” Felix said, instantly regretting it.

“I haven’t been blind all my life. I lost my sight during a boating accident when I was eight. Not far from here actually – I was born in Hammersmith.”

“Stayed local then?”

“It helps.”

“What would you like to drink?” enquired Ramone, their waiter for the evening.

“I’m fine,” said Willow, a little irritated.

“I’ll have the same.”

“Good Vodha-ka and tone-ic. Menus?”

“It would help,” breathed Willow. Ramone frowned, then noticed the dog at her feet staring out Felix’s scarab green shoes.

He raised an eyebrow and asked if the dog would like a bowl. Willow looked down at the dog and the dog looked at her, there was a moment’s pause, “Still from a bottle, not tap thank you.” The waiter bowed and retreated. Willow then lent forward, squashing her ample breast up against the edge of the table, “I hate it when they interrupt you like that. We are here because we choose, and not to make their jobs easier.”

“Yes I know what you mean,” said Felix realising he could have a good gawk without being caught. Then out of the corner of his eye he noticed Cohort was

watching him closely. The dog growled a little, and shifted position. Willow looked down at her 'eyes' and smiled, then shifted so her breasts sat on the table.

"Is that better?"

"What?"

"My breasts. Can you see them better now?"

Felix was speechless. He shot a look at the dog that had by now resumed his vigil over his shoes.

"Don't worry. I don't blame you. I've been told I have fabulous tits," she purred.

"But..." stammered Felix.

"As I said before – I trained him, so we know how to communicate – call it telepathy. Plus you're a bloke and given the opportunity, no man will turn a blind eye to an invitation like that."

"So it was a test."

"Yes. And you passed with flying colours."

Felix busied himself with the menu, while Willow sat sipping her drink and staring blankly out of the window. She was an attractive woman with dark hazel eyes that stared out from beneath a dark fringe flecked with low lights. She wore little or no make-up, but had beautifully manicured nails. There was something about her, around the nose and mouth that reminded him of someone. But it was her voice that Felix found most intriguing, it was soft and inviting with a hint of reassurance.

"You'll have to tell me what's on the menu, they don't do Braille here. Most restaurants don't."

“What do you fancy?”

“Fish?”

“They’ve got a ‘Salmon encroute’, Sole...”

“Lemon or Dover?”

“Lemon.”

“Lovely. I’ll have fries with that. Why watch your figure when you can’t?”

“Wine?”

“I’ll leave that to you.”

Ramone re-appeared, digital note pad at the ready. Felix ordered the salmon and Willow’s sole along with a bottle of Pouilly Fume.

“So tell me about you. How do you know Mal?”

“I met him at a party. Algee Bennet’s party.”

“Algee? Oh yes Mal has mentioned him before.”

“Well I shared a cab with Mal...”

“I have a confession to make.”

“Oh?”

“Mal is my brother and I have never slept with him. I just say things like that sometimes – it kind of just comes out. Guess it’s just a reaction. He’s always ‘looking’ out for me and sometimes I find it a little annoying. Like I can’t find dates on my own. But over the years I discovered he’s got taste, so I tend to go along with it. He’s always trying to convert me or save me.”

“From what?”

“Myself. Don’t worry he doesn’t do it all the time. I’m not some kind of slapper – in my personal life anyway.”

Felix noticed the distinction immediately and pushed the line of conversation.

“And work?”

“Ah. Well that’s a little different?”

“Really?”

“Yeah. You don’t ring up chat line numbers do you?”

“God no.”

“You should, it’s very liberating. I work a fantasy number called ‘0800 - Slut me’.”

“What – dirty phone calls.”

“Yeah. That’s it,” she said spreading her napkin on her lap. “ Easy money, easy for me anyway – you know, the picturing thing,” she said tapping the side of her head.

“How did you get into that – line of work?”

“My friend Sarah used to work the line until she fell in love with one of her regulars who she met, by some weird chance, while on holiday in Greece.”

“What were the odds on that?”

“What meeting him, or falling in love?”

“Well both really. I mean, did she know who he was? She recognised his voice – you tend to after a while because they always say ‘It’s me’ when they call, expecting you to know instantly who they are, like they’re the only one you speak to. Anyway she recognised him, liked what she saw, bedded him and then let it slip.”

“How did he react?”

“Confused at first, suddenly his little fantasy world had burst out of its bubble and had come to life, which then caused a bit of a synaptic over load. But she rode it out – literally – and he soon came round – literally.”

“Did she match up to his fantasy?”

“More. I mean that girl could talk real dirt, but she could act too. She soon put the vaginal vice to work – the poor man stood no chance.”

“Can you?” Felix again immediately regretted asking the question.

“The phone creates a strange world, where men like to be led by the conversation, when it comes to the physical side I have found they behave differently. They try to be more assertive I guess. Probably because they feel they have to be. Deep down, all men like the thought of total surrender, to be led by the hand and dominated.”

“I guess so. I’ve never really thought about it.”

“Oh come on,” her voice dropped a little and seemed to shift up a gear. “Don’t you want a woman in her prime, to come on to you, open you up – strip, tease and fondle you, then throw you down and pour her passion over you, like hot treacle. I know men who ache for that kind of attention.”

“I wouldn’t say no,” admitted Felix, unsure whether this was another test. Luckily the food arrived and allowed him a little breathing space. Cohort continued to watch his shoes with suspicion while they ate.

“So,” she said at last. “I never gave you the chance to tell me about yourself.”

“Well I work in a garden centre.”

“Really,” said Willow without portraying any emotion one way or the other.

“Yeah. Shrubs and borders.”

“Do you have family?” She quickly retorted in an attempt to move the subject on.

“Mother and my Grandmother passed away recently.”

“Father?”

“Somewhere, he left us when I was young.”

“Another woman?”

“No – sheep.”

“He wasn’t Welsh was he?”

Felix laughed, as an image of what he assumed his father looked like, ran through his mind, in wellies after a flock of Rastafarian sheep. “No Scottish, he left us and lives somewhere north of Inverness tending a flock of Icelandic sheep. I think it makes him happy.”

“What, to abandon his family for a flock of sheep?”

“He was never really cut out for fatherhood, so my mother tells me.”

“Ironic he chose to become a shepherd then.”

“I suppose so.” Ramone appeared to clear the table and handed then dessert menus without saying a word, he had obviously overheard Willow’s earlier observation.

“Do you have any girlfriends?”

“I have friends, but not as lovers. Do you?”

“I had a steady for a while, but he didn’t get on with Cohort so we called it a day.”

“What did Cohort have against him?”

“A number of things. He hogged the remote, picked his nose incessantly, left bad smells behind in the bathroom and ate all of his food – he likes the odd scrap now and again. It’s a bonding thing.”

“He certainly pays attention to the details.”

“Well I had a problem too. He was a grunter.”

“What when you...”

“Oh yeah, he used to bring the house down. No I don’t mind that. It was the rest of the time. He’d grunt when he got up or sat down, when opening and closing doors, when took lids off things – that kind of thing. After a while that really starts to grate, when you’re blind, the noises one makes become the personality after a while. You make them. You bite your bottom lip when you’re thinking for instance.”

“You can hear that?”

“Yeah and you shuffle in your seat when you’re nervous.” Felix realised he was shifting in his seat when she said it.

“You’re a head scratcher too.”

Felix was beginning to feel really paranoid, but at the same time he could feel that strange feeling in the pit of his stomach beginning to well up. With all this talk she was rapidly becoming one of the horniest women he had ever met. Then as if she could hear his thoughts Willow lent forwards again, giving him a very revealing view of her cleavage. Felix moved his feet, hoping it would distract Cohort and let his eyes drink them in. Her breasts were full and inviting, he could see the black lace filigree trying to disguise the fact that there was plenty of bra supporting plenty of breast. Ramone

appeared and broke the spell. Neither of them were interested in dessert or coffee and so Willow ordered the bill and insisted on paying.

Soon they were on the steps outside the restaurant. Willow shrugged, which was always a sign that things were not going well, and then she crouched and checked Cohort's strapping.

"I'd ask you back for a shag, but it's not a good time at the moment," she said straightening up. "You know – girly things,"

"That's okay. I..." She put her finger to his lips to silence him.

"If I wasn't, I would take you back to my place and give you the best seeing to you ever had; I thin we both need it. But that would be it. Never again."

"Well maybe I could..."

"No tomorrow would be different. We would have moved into 'I'd like you in my life' the next time. We would both be there for the wrong reasons. And I don't want that – sorry." She looked down at the dog and shrugged again. "Besides Cohort couldn't live with a man that buys shoes like the ones you're wearing. Like I said before, he's a sensitive soul – it just wouldn't work. He'd be all on edge, that would irritate me and the rest would be consigned to the rather uglier side of our histories, and I would prefer we don't go there." With that she kissed him lightly on the lips and let Cohort lead the way. As she stopped at the road, the dog looked back and then down at his shoes. This had to be a first, turned down by a dog, who didn't like his taste in footwear.

The next day Felix ran over the details of their conversation in his mind. Women, he decided were a strange lot that confused the hell out of him and were best

left alone. Why couldn't he be gay? Things would be so much easier. He wondered if the curse would apply to people of the same sex. That had been one worse case scenario he had not thought of, and he decided that he would be more thorough with his worse case scenarios next time.

If it's not one thing, it's always the dog, thought Felix as he stirred his coffee. Somehow he felt he had brought it on himself. He had gone out to disprove the curse existed, and consequently proved it was alive and kicking the shit out of his love life. There was no other explanation for it: one might call it synchronicity, but Felix now had the black hooded spectre of a gypsy's curse haunting the empty halls of his mind, planting seeds of doubt in his grey matter. His mother had been right in her assessment; it was like voodoo – once the idea of the curse had taken hold, it would slowly fill his life, consuming his every thought. Something had to be done about it – and soon.

5. Fingering pies.

Taking a walk during confused times is always a good idea, it allows one's mind to breathe and provides enough less taxing distractions to let the brain slip into free-fall mode, and deal with the issues subconsciously. Well that was the theory anyway. Felix followed the pathways, oblivious to his surroundings, while his mind kicked through the fallen leaves of his life. The answer to his problems had to be in there somewhere.

He stopped at a junction and pondered on which path to follow. Around him Sunday life was out in force. Families gathered around tartan rugs while kites sliced through the air currents above. A fit lean jogging couple, with their ears attached to the same Walkman, whistled by, leaving a scent of fragranced sweat on the air. A sheep dog with odd coloured eyes caught up with a ball that landed nearby; she wagged her tail then darted off after her owner. Felix took a deep breath and smiled.

"Hi there!" called a voice. Felix looked up and saw Charlotte sat on bench with a half-eaten KFC burger.

"Hello. What are you doing here, shouldn't you be at work?"

"It's my day off – thought I'd come out here and brush up on my aisles."

"Your what?" asked Felix as he approached.

"My aisles. You know where everything is – got to learn it all sometime," she said, waiving a bit of paper in the air. "Want to test me?"

"Oh, okay." Felix sat down next to her and took the paper. Charlotte seemed a lot older now she was out of uniform, even though her clubber's tank top and ripped up jeans seemed to be trying their utmost in not covering her body. She beamed a smile at him and Felix started to feel better about the world. "Let's see shall we?"

“Be harsh, I’ve been staring at that bit of paper for days but it still doesn’t want to stick.”

“Okay. Beans?”

“Oh beans – yeah – hold on – six halfway down next to pasta.”

“Nope. Four, next to cake mixes.”

“Shit.”

“That’s a good one to learn because we’ll always want beans, they’re in our blood, it’s part of our national identity.”

“Yeah. That along with fried breakfasts. You know I think they should make it our national dish. Not chicken tikka masala: when you go abroad, hotels always call a fried breakfast an ‘English Breakfast’. We should lend recognition to this fact and elevate it above its greasy spoon status.”

“Makes sense. Let’s lobby parliament. I’m sure they’ll agree it will help cull the population growth with an increase in heart disease.”

“Yeah, but then we’d all be in deep shit. Evidently, there is this huge bulge in the amount of people heading for retirement and the government will not have the funds to support them.”

“Oh that’s easy. You make life really shit for all those people, like they are doing now. They migrate in droves to better places, encouraged by bad climate and Euro-convergence. Then at some point they cut off all ex-pat responsibility, while they open the floodgates to asylum seekers, and turn them into a huge underpaid migrant work force that enables Britain to re-construct its industry, at rates that can compete with Asia. Don’t get me started on the subject. Cake mixes.”

“Oh...don't tell me. Seven, next to bread.”

“Correct.”

“Yes!”

“Dishwasher tablets.”

“Okay – household, that's nine to eleven. Ten at the far end.”

“Close, eleven, between bog rolls and household cleaners.”

“Maaaaan.”

“Red peppers?”

“Easy. All fruit and veg is aisle one, as you come in through the door.”

“Why is that?”

“Guess it makes the store seem healthy, interesting and colourful.”

“I think it is the least costly to replace because of shop lifting.”

“Matches?”

“Lightbulbs. Six.”

“Correct.”

“Pasta – fresh?”

“Oh cold cabinets, at the back.”

“No. Two.”

“I'm never going to get this. Listen, you want to continue this over coffee?”

Felix agreed. He watched her walk ahead of him, the bottoms of her jeans scuffing the grass; for the first time in a long time, he'd talked to girl without once looking at her tits; in Charlotte's company he felt relaxed, almost as if he was with his sister. It was a good feeling.

Charlotte helped herself to several portions of the free morsels of muffin on the counter, while Felix collected and paid for the lattes. They had just timed it right to get a window seat, along with a complimentary copy of *The Times* that the previous occupant had left behind.

They didn't talk for a while; Felix scanned the headlines and opening paragraphs of the main section while Charlotte busied herself with the sports pages.

"Oh yes! Arsenal won five – nil at White Hart Lane."

"Is that of some importance?" asked Felix, without taking his eyes from the paper.

"Do you know anything about anything. Arsenal-Spurs hate each other?"

"Then why play?"

"Not the players – the fans. It's not religious like Celtic and Rangers, or Liverpool and Everton. I guess it's always been like that because the grounds are so close to each other, the local rivalry transferred to the terraces."

"We really are strange."

"Who?"

"Humans."

"It's what makes us who we are."

With that Felix pulled out the bit of paper, but Charlotte snatched it off him. "Sorry, I've just realised what the time is. I've got to go." She had arranged to go and help her brother, on his stall at Camden that afternoon, and invited Felix to join her. Felix glanced at his watch, under the pretence that his life was filled with a stack of

neatly arranged appointments; then after a little prevarication he threw caution to wind and accepted.

Camden was packed with weekend browsers, the main stay for what had to be one of London's largest recycling depots. Trying to cross the bridge was like salmon swimming up stream. In the end they had to resort to risking it on the road. They cut down by the canal and passed several food stores selling a variety of cuisine that was either overcooked or undercooked and used a lot of spice to mask the fact. A couple of Japanese girls stopped them and asked them to take a photo of them standing in front of a stall that sold military wear and 'Kitty' items. Charlotte obliged, and then tried to explain how they could find The Comedy Store.

Charlotte's brother, Barry, had a small stall somewhere round the back tucked away in a small courtyard. It was mostly stocked with out-of-date electronic equipment from the former eastern block countries that attracted a specialist interest that liked to collect such things for their novelty rather than their usefulness.

Barry was waiting for them; he was keen to get off and go and see his girlfriend who worked in a pub round the corner. He left Charlotte and Felix in charge.

"She gets him a free meal and a pint when she's serving," explained Charlotte. "Talking of which, fancy something to eat?"

"What are you having?"

"I quite liked the look of those Singaporean noodles back there," she said, thumbing over her shoulder.

"Not for me. Can I have a sandwich?"

“A sandwich, my god you may have hit upon the one culinary shortfall of this place. I’ll see what I can do.” She disappeared into the crowd, leaving Felix alone with the stall full of communist era hardware.

“Is that Spavata 950?” asked a small balding man pointing to an aluminium box with a black plastic fascia and few utilitarian styled knobs.

“Your guess is as good as mine. I’m just baby sitting.”

“I’ll give you fifty for it,” the man said, sticking his hand into his pocket.

“Fifty what?”

“Quid. It’s a good deal. The owner would be very pleased with it.”

“I dunno, I should wait. His sister will be back in a minute,”

“Okay, Sixty-five, that’s my final offer.” Felix looked down at the box and thought Sixty-five was a good deal.

“Okay.” The man pulled a roll of notes and quickly flicked out the agreed amount. Felix should have guessed that something was wrong by the way the man carefully placed the box in a duffle bag and then slid off into the crowd looking around him all the time. He was about to call out after him, when Charlotte turned up with food.

“I found you a sandwich, not much but I think it still counts.”

Felix still had his eyes on the little bald man, “Thanks.”

“What’s up?”

“I sold something.”

“Oh – my god you didn’t did you?”

“Why oh my god?”

“I’m sorry it’s my fault. You never sell anything; you only part exchange for better. Them’s the rules. What was it?” her eyes dropped down to the table.

“A Spavata 950?” shrugged Felix. “I got sixty-five for it?”

“Sixty fucking five. I’m dead. Do you know what a Spavata 950 is?”

“No but I get the feeling...”

“It is one of most prized possessions from the Cold War era. It was used, decode KGB encrypted internal communications.”

“How much was it worth?”

“I dunno at least four hundred, maybe more.”

“Jesus, for that box?”

Charlotte went off her food, but Felix found his ham and Swiss cheese with pickle surprisingly tasty. Barry turned up with a smile on his face and walked up and kissed Charlotte on the cheek and gave her a big hug immediately.

“You my girl, are a star!”

“What? Well you won’t...”

“I’ve just seen that fucking Derek Stanner slinking away with my Spavata 950.”

“Well it’s all my...” stammered Charlotte. Felix stood and readied himself for the onslaught.

“I’ve been trying to catch that little fucker out for months, ever since that Kroitsov convergence emitter fuck up. Oh revenge is sweet.”

“What do you mean?” asked Charlotte.

“It was a fake, knocked up out of spare parts last weekend, put the word out, set the trap and Badda fucking bing!”

“It was all Felix’s doing actually.”

“I got sixty-five for it,” said Felix waving the notes in the air.

“Sixty fucking five! Dinner is on me. Where did you find this guy? He’s got talent.” Charlotte beamed a smile at Felix; his whole day had been worth that brief flash of enamel.

Barry took them to the Dome in Hampstead, where they sat and watched the rich kids eat and text people paying little or no attention to those they were sitting at the table with. The reason Barry had chosen such a shallow environment was that they had jazz on Sundays; tonight’s billing was ‘Eduardo and La Habana Banana Boys’.

“They kind of do an Acid-slide Bueno Vista with Cachao kind of baseline to it,” explained Barry to Felix.

“That explains everything.”

“Yeah. You’ll like it. Trust me.”

And he did. Although a little ear splitting, the intricate rhythms succeeded in getting Felix’s feet working with the beat. He particularly liked the ‘Guantanamo Bay shuffle’, which evidently had strong political overtones, but Felix failed to get the point, as there were no lyrics to help drive the message home. Barry’s explanation that the squealing sax was a reference to the stand off at the Bay of Pigs didn’t help either.

The band took a well-earned break from their first set, and the Dome resumed its normal low hum of conversation accompanied by the notes of fingers on phone pads. Felix had enjoyed the day, but in the quiet of the restaurant, recent events soon started to raise their ugly heads.

“You okay?” asked Charlotte, touching him lightly on the arm.

“Er – yes thank you. Just you know...”

“Taken the sixty-nine bus eh?” inquired Barry.

“Bus?”

“Thinking about you know what – men are supposed to think about sex every fifteen minutes. So they say.”

“Believe you me, I wasn’t thinking about sex. Quite the opposite in fact.”

“Barry,” scolded Charlotte. “Is everything all right?”

Felix wondered whether he should tell them about what troubled him, but he was afraid. Afraid they might laugh. The concept of being plagued by a curse was laughable, unless you had really started to believe in it. He especially didn’t want to bring up the subject of his love life in front of Charlotte, he was very fond of her and he didn’t want it to get in the way, but most of all he didn’t want to appear to be a failure. But his mouth fell open and the words ‘I’m cursed’ fell out.

“Aren’t we all,” replied Barry.

“Barry, be serious will you?” She looked at Felix. “Go on.”

“Many years ago, my Grandfather did a terrible thing and he and all his male heirs were cursed because of it.” Charlotte glared at Barry who was about to lob another gag into the proceedings. Felix continued. “Evidently we are unable to find love unless we make twenty people happy in love before we are forty.”

“God what did he do?”

“ He got a gypsy – pregnant.”

“Oh so he didn’t refuse to buy one of their sprigs of lavender then,” mused Barry.

“Will you...” started Charlotte.

“Does that include people that have fallen in love with you?” interrupted Barry with a smile on his face. “Because if it did...”

“Barry I won’t tell you again,” hissed Charlotte.

“I don’t know if it includes people that have fallen in love with you, because with me it wouldn’t make the slightest bit of difference.”

The table sat in silence while Felix chipped away at the label on his bottle of beer with his nails.

“So let me get this right,” said Barry at last. “You are cursed. And you really honestly believe you are cursed.”

“On evidence to date – yes.”

“Right. So to rid yourself of this curse you have to make twenty people fall in love with you before you are forty.”

“No – happy in love.”

“What like Cupid?” asked Charlotte.

“I dunno,” shrugged Felix. “The wording wasn’t that accurate. My grandmother told me on her deathbed. She thought I should know, thought it might explain a few things.”

‘And has it?’ asked Charlotte in a soft caring tone.

“Well it might explain why I’m three months off forty and never had a serious relationship in my entire life. Those that I have had were all unmitigated failures.”

“So let me get this right. You’ve got three months to make twenty people happy in love, whether you are doing the love thing or someone else is?”

“In a nutshell – yes.” Felix couldn’t help but smile at how ridiculous it all sounded. Charlotte was now looking at him with pity in her eyes, and this was not what he wanted to see, especially from her.

“Bummer,” said Barry with an edge of finality.

“You’re a great help,” said Charlotte.

“Well come on, this is the twenty first century. Curses belong in mummy films.”

“Well you might find it all very amusing, but to Felix here it is very real.”

“Like voodoo,” added Felix. “Once you believe in it, it’s real.”

“But surely there must have been some kind of love in your life. I mean love comes in many guises. It’s all a matter of subjective opinion. Someone can’t define how you are going to love someone for you, or how someone is going to love you. I mean what about your mother, for instance, she must love you for a start,” said Charlotte reassuringly.

“I know you’re right. Which makes me think that the correct interpretation of the curse is, that I have to find love for others – the emphasis being on ‘find’.”

“Well I know what I’d do,” replied Barry emphatically. “Start a dating agency.”