

It's later than you think

By Jack Tollers

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Smashwords Edition

Dux foemina facti

‘No, I mean... you can't be serious; I mean, how can you possibly belie——’ She anxiously twisted the telephone cord one way and another.

‘It isn't a question of, uh, *believing* or not, it's a question——’

‘...and there's absolutely no proof at all, I mean, there's no proof at all, is there?’

‘No proof? I ask you. I mean, what better proof than——’

‘I mean, I *talked* to him only yesterday... surely you've got it wrong?’

Jimmy heard the rising tones of a soft question travelling down the line.

‘Listen, Victoria, be reasonable. Nobody's going to make up a story like that, it doesn't make sense.’

‘But it's just doesn't make sense, Peter always——’

‘...won't officially tell us about this until the report goes through all the red tape, but, listen——’

‘And anyway I don't *want* to believe it, that's all, I don't care if it's true or not, but——’

She was suddenly aware of a rush of tears that blurred the room and she impatiently brushed them away. She renewed her twisting of the telephone cord.

‘Well, all right Victoria, what's the use? Grow up, will you? I mean, what's the use of talking to you if you don't even want to listen... I don't even *know* why I'm bothering to tell you all this, what the hell.’

There was a long pause on the line, until Jimmy began to think that he had lost her.

‘Victoria, you there?’

‘Yes, I'm here. All right, sorry, I'm just being stupid. Please tell me. But first, let me light a cigarette, will you?’

She feebly rummaged through her handbag until she found a pack and its lighter, and slowly walked up to a little table by the window from where she retrieved an ashtray. With a sigh, she sat down on her bed and blindly took the handset. ‘Very well. Fire away.’

‘Well, listen,’ he sighed before launching his report, ‘I’ve heard it straight from old Suter who managed to speak with Puerto Argentino this morning. Apparently he heard it from Captain Vásquez who was deployed only a couple of miles from Mount Darwin; I mean, he was *there* when the British managed to storm through the line of defence where Peter was stationed with only a couple of soldiers and no support. I mean, no artiller——’

He distinctly heard a broken sound and paused for a while. After a short pause, Victoria’s husky voice was on the line once again. She was speaking so softly that he had to press the tube against his ear.

‘All right. I think I’ve heard enough for the moment. Thank you for telling me first, Jimmy. But right now——’

‘...perfectly all right, old girl... I mean, I can unders——’

‘...end this conversation for the time being.’

‘...call me, uh? I’ll be waiting to hear from you anytime.’

Victoria sat on her bed and looked vacantly through the window, through the trees, through the grey skies, through long memories that flashed by. She could picture Peter at the Falklands, fighting gallantly against the cold, his own fears, and the British. Yes, she could see him, all right, fighting for her too——just as he had promised.

It would take a long time before Victoria returned from the Falklands.

And in a sense, she never did.

Chapter One

Love at first sight

Nobody remembers when Victoria started with this quaint habit of hers of talking to herself. Sometimes she contrived to do it in very low tones, conferring with herself barely moving her lips. But most of the time people could actually hear her soliloquizing, talking quite freely to apparently no one. This of course, brought some chaff on her. But as it happened in Victoria's world with so many other things, she just didn't care. And then, if someone picked up the thread of her voiced reflections she was prone to express wonder at her interlocutor's omniscience.

Which is what happened when her father barged into the kitchen that Saturday morning when she was finishing her breakfast. He had heard her musing on the lyrics of a certain song they had been listening to on the wireless the night before.

'Well, my girl, happy birthday and all that,' he lightly kissed his eldest daughter on the forehead, turned round and shuffled towards the fridge, 'But I think you've got it wrong... err... Tell you what, "Linen Flower" isn't a story about unrequited love, you know, absolutely not.'

He was a bulky man. As a youngster he had played rugby in the local club and had made quite a name for himself as 8-man, and now was only a bespectacled half bald professor whom her daughters referred to as "the old chump". Apparently, he couldn't care less, unvariably answering with his favourite *diktat*: "We're coming on". On this occasion he was sporting a tattered dark brown dressing gown which no amount of objections from the whole family could make him surrender.

He opened the fridge humming to himself, took out two baby bottles and put them in an enormous kettle with water, which he used to warm *à la bain-marie*. 'As a matter of fact, I think the opposite is more like it.' Professor Wade laughed at his own words.

Victoria frowned. She found it rather early in the morning for fatherly guffaws. 'The opposite?'

‘Yes, well... As it happens with any narrative, you have to decide who’s telling the story, right?’

Victoria nodded from her table while munching a piece of toast.

‘So it’s quite clear from the beginning that it’s the boy, not the girl who’s telling it.’ He started to sing out of tune, a thing her daughter found even more distasteful than his bouts of laughter.

Presently the dreadful tone-deaf sounds came to an end. ‘Excuse me a sec, I’m coming back in no time’. The old man took the bottles, wrapped them up in a dishcloth and left the kitchen.

There was silence for a while, while Victoria had some more toast, looking reflectively through the kitchen window at the back garden. Its outlines were gradually appearing with the first morning lights.

Eighteen! She suddenly remembered again. The Wade’s didn’t make much of birthdays—no presents for one thing. But eighteen seemed to be an important affair and this time she had organised quite a party. She checked the weather through the window. It looked quite promising. That night’s barbecue was to be quite a big gathering of school friends, relatives, neighbours and what not, and it would’ve been quite impossible to have them all indoors.

On Saturday mornings the house was haunted by an eerie hush. You could, as it were, feel the silent walls impregnated with the echo of many voices, the faint ringing of music, of endless talks and arguments, the dances and parties, the poker games and the door bells, the vacuum cleaner in the mornings, dogs barking at night and children crying. Every wall, each sofa, each bookshelf silently echoed the usual din of the house. Naturally, the living room was always in a mess—a sock lying on the carpet, an open book on the stove, half a glass of wine on a window sill—it all told about a very forceful life-temperature that seemed to reverberate all over the place. But on Saturday mornings one could only surmise what sort of a noisy house it habitually was by the pointed grumble of the old fridge in the kitchen.

Victoria had been an early riser ever since she could remember, partly to avoid what in her family was referred to as the ‘bathroom battles’ because the house’s two toilets were usually very much in dispute after seven in the morning. As a result, these morning

exchanges with her father in the kitchen were not unusual. He appeared again at the doorway with a resolute smile on his red face.

‘I tell you what, dear, the whole story told in *Flor de Lino* hangs from those first lines.’

He hummed another bit, took a cup and saucer from a cupboard, sat down heavily in front of Victoria and asked unnecessarily, ‘Is that tea, do you think?’ An enormous earthenware pot could be nothing else. Victoria reflected for the first time that his father sometimes sounded rather like Lord Emsworth, and couldn't refrain a smile. The man rambled on while serving himself a cup. ‘Er... you see? As I was saying the story revolves around those first lines, I don't know if you follow...

Victoria shook her shapely head, her black flocks following suit.

‘Well, I mean, life can be just like that,’ he sighed. ‘You happen to want something very much, something wonderful... I don't know... Let's put it this way: you want to go right to the top of the ladder, right?’ Professor Wade frowned, concentrating on his trail of thought while Victoria poured some tea for him, ‘Well then, you're so intent on that, that you don't even imagine going up step by step... Now, my girl, pay attention here! This is the photograph: the girl is waiting for a simple kiss, and he's thinking of uh... What the devil?’ Victoria's father shrugged and raised his eyebrows in mock surprise, ‘He's thinking of the whole world bidding him with earnest solicitousness... With “jealous zeal” as the song has it,’ he paused for a sip of tea. ‘This, my dear girl, keeps him dreaming with great expectations—that's a Dickens's title by the way—and because of this, oh dear, this gets a bit tragic I'm afraid, he never even *sees* that little girl that was “stripping evenings”, he doesn't *realize* she's there, if you see what I mean.’

Victoria nodded silently while buttering a toast for her father.

‘Maybe he actually looked at her once or twice, but, you see, he never *saw* her, never heeded her... not really, poor fool.’ He sighed with a characteristic frown.

Victoria looked out through the window and saw a couple of red-bellied thrushes in the kitchen garden. She opened the window and threw some crumbs at them.

‘But why is this youngster “embarrassed”?’

‘Well, bless you, a sort of shame, you know, typically found in those farm boys,’ he munched at his toast, ‘I mean that very special modesty that those diffident boys from

the countryside tend to display when they appear at a village dance with their new clothes which they find extremely uncomfortable—you know, just feeling clumsy,’ he paused in search of words, ‘I don’t know, they just don’t know what to do with their rugged hands, they try to hide their new shoes under the table, they’re unable to leave their ties alone... Well all that is signified in this song.’

‘Oh yes! I know what you mean, they feel awkward. It makes them rather lovable I find...’

Her father laughed at that.

‘But I do. I’ve seen that somewhere.’

She hadn’t. Everyone imagines Argentina as an enormous countryside place, even Argentines do. The Pampas would be most of the show. But very few people have actually been there; a simple glance at any map shows that a great percentage of Argentines actually live in cities and towns. All the same, it works as another national delusion made up of bits and pieces of literature, comics and paintings as well as folk music lyrics like *Flor de Lino*, the waltz Victoria was trying to figure out. But, despite being eighteen, Victoria had never been there.

‘You visiting Mum?’ her father enquired, changing the subject abruptly while rising from his chair.

Victoria nodded. ‘As usual—and going to the Guides in the afternoon.’

He didn’t seem to be much interested and soon enough was humming again to himself while filling the kettle with more water.

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It must have been almost seven in the morning when Victoria opened the old wooden gate, keeping the dogs at bay and avoiding their display of affection since they were bound to leave dirt marks all over her tidy clothes. Walking slowly, letting herself go amid the spring fragrances all around her, escorted by the song of a hundred birds, the morning light changing every colour by the minute, Victoria walked, as always, talking to herself. She couldn’t quite remember the linen-flower’s colour. Wasn’t it mauve? Yes, something like that. Victoria walked leisurely that morning and sang a little bit to herself.

*I saw her blossom like a linen flower
In an Argentine field, ripened by the sun.*

Presently she reached that magic Boulevard called *Avenida Francia*, one flanked by sycamore-trees soldierly arranged in neat files on either side. The chinaberry trees on the main avenue were in full flower and their delicate fragrance made Victoria a bit dizzy. Those delicate flowers would only last till the next rain, she thought, a case of one or two weeks of glory in Spring, not more. Once again Victoria reflected on how fortunate it was that this ample avenue had never been paved. Of course, in those years there were few cars in Bella Vista, but all the same, you couldn't see or hear one on this long boulevard, which became quite a trap after half a day of rain.

She turned to the right after a quick sign to a small image of the Blessed Virgin that guarded the entrance to the boulevard. On her right, a derelict railway with a very narrow gauge silently accompanied her stride with its rusted tracks and wild flowers growing among the stones.

Her father had informed her that the song they had been discussing had been written by one Homero Expósito, but she knew nothing about him, except that he had a brother called Virgilio who was a poet too and that he had also penned some very celebrated tango lyrics. Homer and Virgil, she thought, Well, well, well, she grinned to herself, the whole of western literature in two names...

A gardener passed by on his bicycle and eyed Victoria curiously, but she didn't notice. She was thinking of the Expósito brothers and their tango music.

Tango was something that in those times was not generally listened to by the Argentine middle or upper classes but Victoria's father was something of a melomaniac and had induced his children to listen to and appreciate it with surprising results: the old songs frequently cropped up in the family's singing sessions.

In any case, Victoria was out of her class.

She had lately discovered that she didn't like people who straggled with their feet pointing like the clock's needles at ten to two, to east and west while they moved northwards. She found it quite inelegant to walk in that manner ("like a duck" she used to say) and so after considering this for some time, she had resolved to keep her feet

pointed straight forward, carefully stepping in perfect parallel lines, a discipline that came to her easily, an instinctive reflection of her natural modesty.

Suddenly a dog frightened her out of her wits with a gnarl, flinging itself against a fence by the sidewalk, only a few inches away from her tartan kilt. She lost her step and put a foot in a small puddle. ‘Now I’ve put my foot on it,’ she said reproachfully, a bit to the snarling dog, a bit to herself. She cleaned the tarnished shoe with one of those minute handkerchiefs that young girls use, swearing under her breath while she inspected her imperceptibly stained white socks.

Presently she resumed her walk along the old sidewalk made up of French bricks laboriously put together over the uneven surface. Some patches that had escaped the sun were covered with slippery moss, so she reduced her pace and walked carefully. At seven o’clock of this particular October morning it was still a bit chilly. But at that time of the year people avoided wrapping up too much: at midday one could easily find oneself carrying cumbersome coats or jackets to no purpose. So Victoria only had a white sweater on, a sort of screen against which her long dark hair projected hanging loosely down to her waist. She was proud of her hair, and rightly so. On the other hand she didn’t like her spectacles that, in addition to her thin lips, gave her a grave demeanour and a rather stern air, which, she thought, kept most boys away. So she only used them when reading. A tall girl, she had fine blue eyes, very white skin, a small nose and a single charming dimple only an inch from her mouth’s left corner that appeared when she smiled. A stunning girl by any standard.

And, of course, she knew it. Not that it mattered much to her. She was too much taken up with her books and her music, her ideas and her dreams. She played the guitar quite well but her voice wasn’t exactly a singer’s voice, with those husky undertones of hers. Such a low pitched voice coupled with Victoria’s looks invariably surprised people. But she sang all the same, unconscious of the effect it had on those who listened to her. Victoria had her shortcomings, but never ‘the-girl-will-not-play-the-piano’ syndrome. In fact, she could play the piano just as well but usually preferred the guitar.

When she got to the station (it was on another railway line, a few blocks away and parallel to the narrow gauge one she had previously crossed), she bought a ticket—a small cardboard affair in two colours, orange and white, with the date mechanically impressed on the back—and sat down to wait for her train. It was a very English

station, as they all are, part of the national landscape by now, like the Australian wind mills and eucalyptus trees, bits of foreign lands that have made up this one, like the old French houses, the English clothes, the Italian gestures and the Spanish food. Someone once said that Argentina is a place full of Italians who dress like Englishmen, eat like Frenchmen, and speak in Spanish. But of course, that was before the American way of life took over the national aesthetics and the whole country was submerged by Hollywood films, hamburgers, blue jeans, rock and roll, chewing gum and Coca-Cola. However, in those years, all that was barely beginning.

She opened a book, threw away the week-old ticket she had been using as a bookmark and replaced it with the one she had just bought. Even since a child, Victoria had acquired settled habits; she was a methodical girl whose life seemed to be punctuated with little rites and diehard habits like this one. And, of course, the most odd one of all, she smoke 'black' cigarettes, an exceptional thing in itself.

She was absorbed by Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis* that she was reading in a Spanish translation, a book she had picked at random from one of the chaotic bookshelves at home; except Victoria's father, nobody ever knew how any particular volume had arrived there and the books themselves were usually unhelpful without a signature or an *ex-libris* that could give a clue as to who had acquired or read them before. That is, until Victoria had had a go at them. Because she loved to read with a pencil between her teeth and the traces of her readings could be found all over a book she had perused, frequently full of notes written in minute calligraphy at the end of the chapters or in any space available for such a purpose.

Now Victoria bit her red pencil intent on her book and remained perfectly silent. She only spoke out loudly when *thinking*, but she kept silent while reading because she was, so to speak, *listening* to the author, a telling frown on her bespectacled face which contributed to her well earned fame for being bookish.

When the train arrived—for once on time—she hurriedly put down her book, stamped out her cigarette, and in a single gesture, put away her pencil and handkerchief while she hopped into a carriage going straight to a seat by the window. She enjoyed the trip, probably because she had never had to commute during weekdays when that same train was head to toes full with rough workers and loud voiced females. One could never get a seat except on weekends. But on Saturdays it was all quite civilised, not

particularly clean and always a bit smelly, but, on the whole with a bit of luck you could get hold of a seat and maybe enjoy an uneventful journey. Out came the book, the pencil and the spectacles, and in plunged Victoria, oblivious of her surroundings.

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Three stations later, a pair of military cadets boarded the train chatting away while they remained standing in one of those empty spaces between the carriages. They were looking most elegant in their brilliantly coloured uniforms, their short swords swinging at their sides, their big black bags on the floor by their side, talking shop intently in low voices. One of them was Peter, a tall sprightly fellow, with a big mouth that showed a resolute mien and an easy laugh, especially on this occasion, when just released from the hard weeks of drilling and studies and the general routine of long and demanding days full of activity and short hours of sleep. He was dead tired but in excellent spirits with the wonderful prospect of a long weekend (there was a national holiday that Monday, and he only had to be back at the Military Academy by daybreak on Tuesday). And then, he was young, and it was a wonderful spring morning and he was going to visit his old friend, Jimmy.

The cadet that had got on the train with him left at one of the intermediate stations while Peter remained in his place looking through the open door at the French designed parks of Palermo. He was wondering how he would be received by Jimmy. They had recently argued quite a lot. They had had differences. They didn't see eye to eye on more than one subject, but... this! First, Jimmy had taken to criticising the school, then the Army itself as a whole, and finally, most of the world. Peter frowned while he tried, for the umpteenth time, to figure out what the deuce was the matter with his friend. He could not fathom it. Jimmy had come down from the military school a fortnight before, leaving behind a depressed Peter to go on with the dreary military routine all by himself. He was left at the Army Academy brewing over the fact that his best friend was throwing his career down the drain, after nearly four years of excellent companionship, years of extremely hard work—and lots of laughter. On top of it all they were in their last year, only a couple of months away from graduation. They had entered the school together with high hopes, and now... what was Jimmy going to do? But Peter was

conscientious enough to know that what really saddened him was his own fate, carrying on alone for the rest of a career that they had both dreamt about so many times. Officers and gentlemen who were going to fight for the good of the country. It all sounds terribly naive now, but it must be remembered that there was a time, not so long ago, when young people adopted a military career with splendid ideals, professional considerations relegated to the backstage by dreams of heroism and glory. It had to do with the welfare of the country. In those days a military career was wound up in an inextricable fashion with patriotism and courage. So, inevitably, Jimmy's defection had an apostasy-like ring which wouldn't easily wear off.

Peter sighed while getting off at the terminal station and walked slowly towards the gateway in lower spirits than when he had got on that train.

Until he saw Victoria. We've always thought that part of Victoria's magic had to do with her long dark hair hanging loosely down her back, sometimes blowing in the wind or just swaying along with its graceful and unselfconscious owner. Anyway, that particular day she had put on her white sweater, which, of course, made her back all the more alluring. Black magic woman. Peter couldn't keep his eyes off her. In those days many people, especially among the lower classes, were given to dedicating flirtatious remarks to any female within earshot. Of course, one would have to have Latin blood in one's veins to really understand the flattering compliments dedicated to a female in a most delicate mix of love words, a bit of irony, and the inevitable sexy undertones (without the dreadful impudence you so often hear nowadays). Until some years ago these *piropos* were something of a national sport, and Peter would have loved to have the hang of them, but, belonging as he did to a class that didn't indulge in these word plays he was particularly *maladroit* at dedicating passing love words to a perfect stranger. Apart from the fact that, in any case, he probably hadn't the necessary chutzpah.

Also, he certainly was not a womaniser, and though half engaged at one time, was only 22, quite timid with girls in general and not much given to accosting perfectly strange females in public. So, there wasn't much sense in following her. A case of love at first sight. Or maybe a little less than that. Maybe we should say love at *half* first sight since he had only seen her back. But, what he actually did was adjust his pace to his quickening heart beats so he could complete his view of this walking wonder.

A case of love at first sight seeking the whole picture.

Completely unaware of all this, Victoria stopped at the 132 bus stop queue, right in front of the gateway at the Retiro terminal, and Peter only just managed to edge unobtrusively into the same line before the bus arrived. He now saw her profile and was rewarded by the full view of her distinguished nose. He liked what he saw, but was confused with the situation. Luckily he had to take the same bus anyway, even when he wondered where she would be getting off.

Victoria bought her ticket and sat down in the first seat of the bus, a double seat with a free place next to her. Peter clumsily sat down beside her, his sword clanging against his side while he deposited his big bag on the floor in front of him. Victoria took stock of him glancing sideways in a discreet fashion before plunging again into her Oscar Wilde. Peter glimpsed at the book and was surprised again. Oscar Wilde! He was well read——exceptionally so considering his age and the fact that he followed a military career——and he loved *Dorian Gray*, but had never even heard of *De Profundis*.

Well, *ask her*, he ordered himself in military fashion, silently stressing the urgency of the circumstances. To no avail. She must be about twenty, he thought, getting it wrong because of her spectacles. ‘Well, that’s all right,’ he thought, ‘So... Come on! You must start from *somewhere*...ask her about her book.’ But he was paralysed with fear; he just couldn’t.

The bus turned into Córdoba Avenue and crossed the broad main avenue called 9 de Julio and Peter saw through the window his bus stop go by without getting off. He felt helpless. That is, until Victoria got off at the next stop. Peter followed her more self-conscious and muddled than ever, as she turned down Talcahuano Street and walked a couple of blocks until she suddenly stopped at number 1246. Peter couldn’t conceive on the spur of the moment a good enough excuse for stopping there, so he continued on his way with as much an air of detachment as he could muster, not without a quick glance at the electric bell she was pushing. 8 - D. ‘Got it!’ he repeated to himself triumphantly, ‘Got it! Talcahuano 1246, 8th. floor, apartment «D». Got it!’

Chapter Two

At the Elizalde's

Jimmy's place wasn't far away and Manuel, the Elizalde *fac totum*, opened the door to find a still flustered Peter standing at the doorway, his bag in his hand, his black eyes brilliant.

'*El niño* is resting,' said the old Spaniard who had been with the house Heaven knew since when, and called Jimmy *el niño*, an old fashioned and sophisticated expression, common enough in Spain but quite unusual in Buenos Aires in those days. He showed the way to the living room as if Peter hadn't been there a hundred times before and left with the promise of waking up 'the boy'. Peter smiled to himself assuming that Jimmy would throw something at the poor Spaniard if he dared to do such a thing at that time of the morning.

The chimney fire was blazing away unnecessarily at that time of the year—but always a great comfort thought Peter, while he took off his jacket, got rid of his equipment and sat down to a cigarette and some thought. What would her name be? He shuffled a number of patronymics in his head but very soon, dissatisfied with the exercise, began to look around.

Rays of sun on that brilliant spring morning came in through the mullioned windows that looked on to the yard covered with wisteria, its sweet fragrance only a few weeks away. He went to the bar and served himself some scotch and soda. 'What the hell,' he thought. It was a bit early in the morning but all the same he needed something to allay his stirred heart. He knew that Jimmy's parents were in Europe and no one would miss a bit of the stuff if the bar ever came under close scrutiny, an unlikely thing in any case. Owing to its expense, few people drank Scotch in those days, but Jimmy had hooked him with his established formula, half whisky, half soda, no ice. His eye caught the old 'Grundig' record player in a corner and he sat on the carpet with an enormous pile of L.P.'s hesitating between a bit of tango, some pop music (mambo, twist, bossa nova and the like), some concert or other by Tchaikowsky or Bartok. They were old records, bought by Jimmy's parents years and years ago. He smiled at the garish covers, the

typical girls with swirling skirts and brilliant smiles, the old red sport cars, and among them the solemn face of a Beethoven looking censoriously from the top of his 9th. Symphony. It was quite a standard assortment: the old Mexican and Peruvian records, quite a lot of Argentine folklore, a couple of music hall celebrities, 'Oklahoma', 'My Fair Lady' and others, next to a Dean Martin L.P., a young and serious red headed Edith Piaf keeping Mozart's marble bust company with "The Mamas and the Papas's" featuring Mama Cass sitting in a bath tub in full clothes. Peter was one for trying to get things right from the start. As when he started singing in the morning, under the shower, or at any musical gathering for that matter: he always found himself intent on hitting the right note from the start.

'That's why I never even started something with that beautiful girl on the bus,' he reflected. 'It's not so easy to hit the first note and get it right from the outset,' he thought dejectedly, finding no consolation in his musings.

Jimmy saw him from the top of the staircase, a cadet sprawled on the carpet, without his short jacket, his braces in full view, his sword on a sofa, the records all around him and a glass of Scotch in his hand. Leaning on the oak banister, Jimmy, with his ruffled brick-red hair and his freckled face who looked like a figure of fun in his preposterous pyjamas—a yellow and pink affair suggesting oriental nights—, spoke with a raucous voice, surprising his friend. 'Nothing romantic, my romantic friend, nothing romantic, please! I've a bit of a headache this morning and we can do without your horrible tangos and jazzy blues!' One of Jimmy's affectations was that classical music was the only thing worth listening to. These weren't his true feelings, but in those days he liked to think so. Without looking up, Peter simply said to a small chair in the corner: 'Please go and have a bath before speaking to me in that horrible hangoverish voice of yours. I bet you've been at it again... Have a bath, will you, and then maybe we can talk about what's romantic and what's not.' Jimmy disappeared into the background mumbling dark words while Peter set the gramophone going with an especially strident tango.

He smiled to himself while sipping his drink, letting the morning sun soak the room with brilliant beams, the long weekend stretching luxuriously before him with all sorts of beckoning promises. And then the record went on to band two with a funny waltz he had never heard before. The simple music and the two first lines caught his imagination immediately. *Linen flower*... I wonder what those lyrics mean, he thought. And then,

with a wider smile, he turned a button to louder tones, which would certainly reach Jimmy's bathroom.

I saw her blossom like a linen flower
from an Argentine field matured by the sun
Oh! If only had I understood her
My cottage today would be full of love...

Understanding women, Peter thought, that's a tall order. But he enjoyed the waltz and when it had finished, played it all over again knowing all along that Jimmy would be having a rough time listening to it for a second time. He gave the volume another upgrade with a malevolent grin. Giving hell to Jimmy on this wonderful Saturday morning was just perfect.

Eventually his friend came down while, with perfect timing, Manuel appeared out of the blue with a silver tray crowned by an enormous green kettle and Jimmy's *maté*. Peter frowned at the infusion of which he had had too much during the long week behind him, especially during the long nights when he had been on watch. But his friend sucked at his *bombilla* with evident relish.

'Would you please turn down that infernal machine?' Jimmy pleaded. Peter complied and sat down on one of the sofas in front of his friend who was sitting on a small stool near the fire-place where he held his *maté* sessions. He was a well built young man, a bit shorter than Peter; nevertheless his red hair and ingratiating smile won him the favour of most girls, much to Peter's envy. Since coming down from the Military College he had let his hair grow wild and his new habit of using small rim-less spectacles had begun to give him a deliberate John Lennon-like appearance.

Peter hadn't been able to quite forget the girl he had met that morning and surprised himself by suddenly blurting out: 'I saw a girl today...' ending his phrase lamely.

Jimmy didn't show any particular interest, 'So what?' he asked despondently.

Peter fumbled with his words. 'No, I mean, a *real* girl... I mean, you know what I mean... a girl out of this world.'

‘A smashing girl, what?’

‘No, not that. *Smashing* is exactly what she is not.’

He seemed quite definitive. Jimmy put the kettle closer to the fire and asked Peter her name. Peter blushed but said nothing. By now Jimmy was wide-awake and most interested.

‘I say! Do you mean you don't *know*? She must have a name... I mean, do you only know her by her nickname, Betty or something?’

Peter waved his hand impatiently and rushed into his story of how he had seen her at the railway terminal, and had felt overwhelmed by her *je ne sais quoi*.

‘For instance, when I first saw her walking at the railway station I thought to myself, “She isn't walking, she's *sailing*”, if you see what I mean, and then——’

In a most uncharacteristic fashion, Jimmy, for once, didn't laugh at his friend. He listened seriously and frowned in silence for a minute.

‘And then what?’ he prompted.

‘Well, I don't know,’ Peter blushed again, ‘Something terribly attractive about her, I don't know how to put it, I mean, something like an aura of loneliness about her, I wonder if you know what——’

‘Loneliness? What the devil do you mean by——?’

‘Yes, well, don't make me say sillier things than usual, but——’

‘Well, come on mate, come out with all you have to say,’ Jimmy delicately prompted, ‘It's too late now that you've given yourself away this much. Wouldn't it be *tristesse*?’

They had recently discovered Chopin's small piece and Jimmy couldn't resist including any French word—he had lately taken to *reverie*—in every chat, anywhere, somehow. But Peter shook his head.

‘No, not that... I don't think,’ he paused searching for the right words, ‘Uh, let's say a sort of estrangement from her surroundings, something like an unsolved enigma.’ Peter looked up at Jimmy frustrated with his efforts to put into words a definite yet not easily ascertained mystery. ‘I tell you, I can't make myself clear, but there was certainly something like... something of a *solitude* about her... I'm sorry, I mean, it's not exactly that... but however... Oh hell, I don't know.’

There was a pause while Jimmy reflected, sucking at his *bombilla* and looking into the fire.

‘So all you’ve got is that address where she rang a bell?’ he asked.

‘Yup, I’m afraid that’s all,’ Peter confessed, beginning to recant as it dawned on him that it all seemed a ridiculous non-story.

‘What’s the address?’ asked Jimmy.

Peter told him, surprised at the question. ‘Do you think we could actually find out who lives there?’ he asked with renewed spirit.

‘We *might*’, said Jimmy, ‘but I don’t quite know how we could follow the lead, except by asking its tenant about a young girl with long black hair——’

Peter couldn’t refrain a laugh.

‘Who has a *penchant* for Oscar Wilde and indulges her whim in big spectacles?’

Jimmy frowned at the fire. ‘To be sure, it looks like a lost cause but, who knows? I’ll take note of the address just in case someone happens to know who lives there.’ He rang a bell and presently Manuel brought him an agenda where he carefully wrote down the address following Peter’s dictation.

‘Are you staying here this weekend?’ he asked after that, ‘Manuel is making soup for lunch with some cold meat.’

Peter nodded, a bit ashamed about not going home to see his mother. And it wasn’t the first time he was shunning her either. But he knew that if he stayed at Jimmy’s he would enjoy his weekend one way or another... and anyway he thought it was high time he had a long talk with him about everything.

‘Why did you leave us?’ he suddenly bursted out, ‘I mean, why didn’t you say anything about coming down, and then so suddenly, without crying wolf... leaving?’

The question had more or less involuntarily escaped his lips and he repented immediately. Jimmy didn’t answer and turned to the fire and his *maté*, his silent back a testimony to his strong feelings and disturbed spirits.

‘Stop that, will you? I told you I had a headache... Where shall we have lunch?’

Peter went to his room, the guestroom he always slept in, and had a shower while he thought about a girl who read Oscar Wilde. What was the book called? He couldn't remember and made a mental note of looking up Wilde's complete works to single it out and have a go at it. Something Latin, he thought. Some time later Jimmy went out through the front door and walked slowly to the florist shop a block away. He went in with a wide grin, his agenda wide-open and ordered two dozen red roses to be sent to such and such an address. The plump employee behind the counter enquired about the sender's name but was promptly and laughingly informed that no card was to be attached.

When he got back Peter hadn't yet come down, and presently they sat down to a delicious home-made soup in the patio where a big teak table was set under the wisteria. It was a wonderful day and they had a bottle of Cabernet between them while Jimmy asked Peter all about the doings at the Military College, how was so and so, and what had happened with the horse one of the cadets had deliberately let into one of the most hated officer's bedroom while he was doing a typical unscheduled night patrol.

'The joke didn't go down exactly well with him and he poured his anger on us all,' Peter grimaced remembering that particularly hard week with a double ration of night exercises and what not.

After the dessert Jimmy brought out his guitar and played some old *zambas* that they sang at the top of their voices, quite a good duet, they thought. Eventually they turned to some old Spanish songs from the civil war with pungent lyrics designed to mock the communists, lyrics that they had learnt from a Fascist uncle of Jimmy's.

Manuel could hear them from the kitchen and looked on with a disapproving frown, being as he was from a family with strong Republican loyalties. But presently he was smiling to himself while he silently contemplated the couple of old friends singing and laughing away while they emptied the bottle of red wine. He had known them since they were very small children and he couldn't get over the fact that they were very nearly full grown men by now. He shook his head. No, he told himself, they will always be children for me, Peter hiding under a bed when his mother came to fetch him and little Jimmy crying because they wouldn't let his friend stay overnight. Manuel sighed at the old platitude as if he were considering it for the first time in his life, how fast life

goes by, how speedily we were all getting on. And also the other Spanish truism, not so common nowadays: it's later than you think.

*

Not three blocks away, Lady Felisa was slowly stirring her coffee while she gazed at her grandchild with renewed interest. She was a frail woman hard on sixty and made no secret of her soft spot for Victoria. The girl was now making faces at her Cointreau; she was tasting the liqueur for the very first time at her grandmother's insistence and was finding it rather strong for her.

‘Well Victoria, you must tell me now? Who on earth sent you those roses? And why did they come without a card?’

But Victoria was nonplussed. ‘Search me. Maybe we should enquire at the florist shop,’ she suggested.

The old lady waved a hand impatiently. ‘But surely you have at least an inkling... Who could possibly send you such a gorgeous bunch of roses to my home?’

Victoria smiled with a sudden idea. ‘Maybe someone sent them to *you*, grandma.’ She did not know it, but indeed, the idea had actually occurred to Lady Felisa. A widow for the last fifteen years, and going on to seventy, she still had quite a lot of charm, and more than once it had been suggested to her that she should meet so and so.

‘You’ve got a nerve young girl!’ she said affecting displeasure.

But Victoria was quick on the uptake and warmed to the subject. ‘Well, why not? After all, they were sent, as you say to *your* place. Very few people know that I come to see you weekly, if and when this mysterious admirer you suggest could find out the proper address. And I know *no* boy of my age with enough romantic leanings, let alone money, to do a thing like that. Not in these times anyway. On the other hand, it seems typical of *your* time, and I can quite easily believe that more than one gentleman would find himself interested in winning your golden heart.’

The old lady laughed at that. She was fascinated with the torrent of eloquence from her grandchild—and couldn’t quite resist a touch of feminine vanity. They were having

lunch on the balcony looking over the low city skyline, their first meal out of doors after a particularly harsh winter. While the old lady went in to take a telephone call, Victoria toyed with her liqueur and with the idea that the roses were intended for her and that some Prince Charming was just around the corner, one whom she would soon meet properly, with a name attached to a face... And then, it suddenly came to her in a flash, could it have been the young cadet she had seen on the bus? After all, she reflected, he had seen where she had stopped... No, she said to herself, what a silly idea, and anyway, she thought, she couldn't even remember his face. She looked at her watch and thought that she still had a good half an hour before going to her usual Saturday meeting at the San Martín de Tours parish.

Grandma Felisa had heard most of Victoria's musings and, sitting again in front of the girl asked her all about the young cadet she had recently seen to an ever surprised Victoria, caught once again talking to herself.

Chapter Three

Friends

After lunch Jimmy went to the library and sat down on an old ravaged sofa where he usually read, while Peter made for the guestroom. The sun was beaming on a white linen bedspread and the fire-place had no fire, for Manuel had justly thought it unnecessary. It was a small whitewashed room that looked northwards, very sunny in the afternoon and with a small Constable reproduction hanging on one of the walls as the only decoration. Peter opened the French windows that gave on to a small balcony and smoked a cigarette, leaning on the railing, alone with his thoughts while he watched Manuel cleaning up the table where they had been singing. Eventually he lay down on the bed, fully dressed. It was just as he was beginning to feel drowsy that he remembered his mother. Better call her now, he thought.

‘Hello, mother?’ His voice sounded a bit diffident, even to himself.

‘Peter! Where are you?’ the wailing voice came clearly across the line, ‘I thought you wouldn't have leave this weekend——’

‘No, but I'm out this time... I've come straight to Jimmy's house and will probably go home for lunch tomorrow. What do you think?’ He stood up clutching the phone, his eyes fixed on Constable's Suffolk water mill. ‘Well,’ sighed Peter's mother resignedly, ‘I'll cook some spaghetti if you like——’

‘That'll be wonderful, mother’, Peter said hastily. He had heard the sigh. ‘I'll be there by midday, big kisses and hugs and all that.’

He rang off before the old lady started on anything else and fell back on his bed with mixed feelings, a bit of a traitor but unmistakably relieved too. He loved his mother all right, but home was somewhat lonely, what with her being a widow and Peter having no brothers or sisters——the Cayol family was indeed a small one. And also his home was quite a long way away from downtown Buenos Aires where most of the parties took place. In every way the Elizalde's house was a more promising prospect.

A faint curious beep indicated that someone was calling from inside the house. Peter stretched out his arm to the phone while he fumbled with a cigarette pack and matches.

‘Hello?’

‘Look Peter, do you know what I'm reading just now?’

A one handed Peter lighted a match to a cigarette and lay down comfortably on the pillows, an ash tray at his elbow and a beautiful view through the French windows of an old oak tree that screened the other buildings around the house.

‘No, I don't. Last time we talked about books you were into Castellani, wasn't it?’

‘No, no. Listen. Have you seen *Napoleon's Spectre*?’

‘Er, yes, I *have* seen it in the library. And I actually read it also, if you want to know.’

Peter smiled at the ceiling enjoying the fact that for once he had read something that his friend hadn't.

‘Do you know who translated it?’

‘Yes, well, as a matter of fact I happen to know *that*. It was Julio Irazusta. Argentine historian. Born in the province of Entre Ríos. Author of a life of *Rosas reflected by his correspondence*. Educated in England. Actually a friend of Santayana if you want to know.’

Peter was well read, and Jimmy knew it: since their childhood they had both read the same books and had talked about them again and again; but this bit of learning came upon him as a surprise.

‘How do you happen to know all that?’

‘Well, you know how it is. All we know about anything is because we read it somewhere or else we saw it somewhere or at least somebody told us. In this case, somebody told me... I think it was Thomas.’ Thomas was an older friend of both boys who had taught them many things over the past two years and had whetted their literary appetites. ‘So now my good friend, do you think I can resume my siesta?’

‘Uh, all right. But I was thinking that... well... thinking about Liddel Hart and Irazusta and Napoleon... you see... well...’

There was a pause in the line.

‘That’s why I left my military career. Definitely. It’s like Charles Ryder’s affair with the Army. It’s over. I’m fed up with this story of looking smart in time of peace and getting killed in a war for nothing.’

Peter sat upright on the end of the bed, clutching at the tube with white knuckles.

‘I don’t think I quite underst——’

‘Well it’s easy. It’s enough with a couple of years in the——’

‘You know very well——’

‘... there are too many Hoopers around. Modern armies are only one more professional arrangement. You could just as well fight for another country. A modern soldier is not much better than the next mercenary... They *pay* you for being a patriot... it’s obscene, like a priest on a salary.’

‘Well, for that matter, do you think priests don’t have salaries?’

‘I know, I know... more often than not. But listen, it’s like the old sophists who received *wages* for their words, or like the merchants at the temple trading in sacred places.’

‘I don’t quite see——’

‘I mean, the Army hasn’t vocations because it does not have a true vocation itself, and it hasn’t a proper calling because it serves the *State*, not the country... and if you get caught up in a muddle like that one, you’ll probably end up dying miserably for nothing. It just isn’t worth it... I’m sure it isn’t worthwhile... I mean, do you follow me?’

Peter remained silent, wondering what on earth had happened to his friend. He couldn’t figure it out. And he was beginning to get angry.

‘I’m afraid *your* mind seems——’

‘Listen, I *used* to think——’

‘...in a muddle. We always knew what we were in for when we signed up, nearly four years ago, remember?’

‘That was *centuries*——’

‘You can’t back down four years later on the well known fact that we live in a world that doesn’t quite come up to our ideals... What the devil is wrong with you?’——he

was standing up again, walking around with small steps as far as the telephone cord would let him.

‘All right, all right. You think I’m in a muddle. I’ll tell you some——’

‘Yup, some mudd——’

‘...I *was* in a muddle before reflecting seriously about my vocation. I haven’t, repeat, have not a mercenary’s vocation——’

‘I just can’t believe my——’

‘I’m out. I don’t know what I’m going to do with myself because it’s been a long time for me at Military College, and I was so... enthusiastic about it all. But it’s over. Game over. I’m through with an Army that will not let Irazusta lecture us——’

‘What the hell has that got to do——’

‘... an Army that only thinks of the country as a State... I ask you. Of all things... I mean, I’m fed up.’

‘Because of that damned *Irazusta* lecture... You must be out of——’

‘... and then, when we finally graduate, we’re expected to sign a *contract*! Ha! So then we’re considered *professionals*... And the fact is that you and I know that it’s an amateur Army anyway, conducted by the so called professionals who don’t care a damn about this country or for anything else for that matter, except getting promoted. And you and I know that the whole thing only works to the extent that *real* military people, people with a *vocation*, with ideals, keep the machine going... And then *they* don’t get promoted.’

‘Oh I... I mean, I don’t happen to think it always works like *that*, I mean, not——’

‘So the valiant soldier sows and down comes the counterfeiter to reap... and it cannot go on like this for much more, this artificial, mendacious, hypocritical state of things. And I’m telling you, I will not go along with it... You can count me out.’

‘Well a fat lot of——’

‘I will not give up my life to such a bastard, such a whore.’

‘Hey, hey, hold, hold it, wait a minute my friend! Hold your tongue will you?’

But Jimmy had already disconnected. Peter replaced the phone on the crib with a bang and sighing let himself fall on the bed reflectively looking up at the ceiling. But very soon he was fast asleep.

*

By the time he came down from his long siesta, Peter was feeling a bit sluggish and it was dark outside. He found Jimmy's sister, Veronica, curled up on a velvety easy chair, her bare feet tucked beneath her while she nonchalantly leafed through an old Vogue magazine. Jimmy was nowhere to be seen. Veronica lifted her eyes and was surprised to meet Peter coming down the stairs.

‘Hi! Why, I didn't know you were out and around.’

‘Yup,’ said Peter, vaguely looking around the place, ‘They actually *do* give us leave from time to time, you know.’

‘Jimmy said he would be taking me down to Bella Vista tonight... are you coming too?’

Peter sat down on a sofa in front of the girl and contemplated her with a critical eye. She was definitely not pretty. A tall, bony, lanky girl, Veronica was not very popular among Jimmy's friends, even if she could sometimes be rather funny in a detached, quietly ironical way. She wasn't exactly ugly. Her face was all right, with wide green eyes and long eyelashes that were rather engaging along with her long fairish hair; but her forehead was too prominent and a faint scar of a harelip definitely ruined her looks. Nevertheless to Peter she was the sister he had never had and he was more fond of her than he liked to admit, to a degree that Veronica was never quite aware of. That evening she was dressed very simply with blue jeans and a light black jersey with a polo neck. There was a faint perfume in the air, which was a sort of trademark of hers.

‘Bella Vista? Where the hell is that?’ asked Peter feigning ignorance of the geographical location of an impossible place. In fact he knew Bella Vista quite well because half a dozen cadets from the military school lived there and he had been to one or two parties at their homes, not far away from the Academy, for that matter.

‘Oh, come on, Peter! Don't be such a snob will you? You know perfectly well where it is and Jimmy is taking me by car. So shall we count you in?’

Peter acknowledged the invitation with an impatient wave of his hand and got up and went to the kitchen to see if he could make himself some *matés*. It was always the same old story, he never felt entirely himself after a long siesta and it would take the better part of an hour before he would entirely recover his temper. He should have had a shower before coming down, he thought, but just couldn't muster enough energy to do so. Instead he had put on a sports shirt and his light blue jeans, a pair of moccasins, and no socks. It wasn't all that warm for such an outfit, but it all contributed to making him feel holiday-like. Manuel wasn't around so he put the kettle on the stove and sat on a small wooden table in a corner while he critically observed the kitchen, which exhibited its usual state of cleanliness and neatness. The door opened and Jimmy barged in with a broad smile, ready to talk to Peter at the top of his voice, knowing that the other chap would probably feel quite edgy when just up from his siesta. Apparently he felt no grudge against Peter because of their argument over the phone.

'Ho, ho, ho! *Maté*, what? It's a bit late for that if you ask me. More like boozing time, don't you think?'

Peter shuddered at the mention of the stuff. They had had more than enough at lunch time, he thought, and the mere echo of Jimmy's words actually started the idea in his mind that after all maybe he was suffering from a bit of a hangover. An odd mix up, he thought, what with having whisky in the morning while Jimmy drank his green potion and now the roles reversed. But they had actually coincided on the red wine at lunch; so after all, maybe the hangover was worth it, he reflected. *Elaborate* he ordered himself, while Jimmy tinkered with something in the refrigerator. Well, maybe that was the way their lives would always be: most of the time tuned to different frequencies, but now and again on the same one—even if that meant serious headaches afterwards. For himself. Or perhaps for both of them? *Enough*, he told himself, enough of soul-searching.

He got up and served his first *maté*, the astringent infusion immediately lifting his spirits. They went to the living room with their respective gear, Peter a kettle in one hand and his *maté* in the other, Jimmy with a big glass and a soda siphon, and they sat at the coffee table in front of Veronica who hadn't moved and was reading intensely a romantic and sentimental story designed to entertain wistful women.

There is a mystery in the gathering together of three friends, and anyone who has experienced them knows that in the meeting of three something quite distinct makes all the difference. So it was with Peter, Jimmy and Veronica, a familiarity reflected in common jokes and long-standing friendship established a singular mixture of serious prospects and ideas wrapped in a package of light bantering and fast one-liners. Peter's presence somehow dissolved Jimmy and Veronica's usual brotherly-sisterly bickering, and Veronica's femininity softened the more aggressive moods of her boy friends. On the other hand, Jimmy would always play on Peter's brighter side while Veronica could make her brother laugh in a way he wouldn't allow himself to do if alone with his sister. And so on. They felt comfortable with each other, not always quite conscious that recently their gatherings had a nostalgic ring to them that took them back to their golden childhood. The long hours playing at *Estanciero*, an Argentine variation of the North American *Monopoly*, or perhaps, spending long afternoons at the Ital Park, a now disappeared recreational park that was a sort of paradise for Buenos Aires's children in those days (Jimmy's parents would frequently send them off with Manuel and some money to pay for the rides, mostly on Saturday afternoons). Naturally they weren't exactly aware of all this, but whenever the three of them were alone together, it always was, as it were, a joint trip back to the lost country of childhood.

'Who's throwing the party tonight?' Jimmy enquired.

'Oh, you don't know her. It's a friend I've only recently made. It's her birthday.' She smiled knowingly. 'You know, we made friends at the Guides.' Veronica used to go once a week to the Girl Scouts meetings at the San Martín de Tours parish, one of the fashionable parishes in those days. Peter and Jimmy thought them quite ridiculous though they had to admit that they liked the way the uniform suited one or two of Veronica's friends who sometimes came back from their Saturday meetings for tea.

'You know the definition of Scouts?' Peter quoted with a grin, 'a group of small nits dressed up as grown ups, lead by a grown up dressed like a nit.'

'Ha, ha. We are not amused.' Veronica enjoyed the Guides gatherings, and would always stand up scoutishly for her one part religious, one part sporty and one part social association. In any case, she cared very little about what these two thought about the Guides. All the same, she was in high spirits that evening and wanted to go to her friend's place, so she prudently sailed away from the subject.

‘It's one of those huge run down houses in Bella Vista. Tonight's host has an enormous family, you know, a dozen brothers and sisters, no——’

‘A dozen brothers!’

‘Well, I don't know, but they're actually about ten brothers and sisters in all. Yes, and no money, and a big weedy garden with an old ‘olympic’ swimming pool, and huge trees that tower over——’

‘Ten brothers!’ Peter exclaimed who had not even one.

‘Well,’ said Jimmy, ‘we can always throw someone into the pool if the going gets good.’

‘Yup,’ Peter grinned, ‘especially if old Suter appears.’ Suter was a military cadet who lived in Bella Vista with whom Peter and Jimmy had no patience. In their opinion he represented the worst sort of military goon, self-centred and rather haughty, who typically thought that having acquired a uniform and a few stripes put him into a superior class.

‘What's wrong with Suter, may I enquire?’ asked Veronica who had danced once or twice with him and found him quite handsome.

Peter moved over to the gramophone and started to sort through another pile of records.

‘Well, allow me to say that he's a conceited brat. And on the solemn side too, you know...’

‘And solemnity is fools's glee’, Jimmy quoted.

‘That's naughty of both of you,’ Veronica said chidingly. ‘You should try some charity one of these days... You start deriding the Girl Guides and now you're hammering on and on at poor old Suter... What's wrong with you this evening?’

Peter suddenly shouted merrily, while he turned on the gramophone: ‘Hey, look what I've found!’ He put on a new record and walked towards the kitchen while challenging the two Elizalde's to guess who was singing what.

When he came back with a glass, brother and sister were dancing and trying to keep pace with Django Reinhart's rendition of "I'll see you in my dreams". He filled his glass and sat on the floor next to the gramophone laughing at the way Jimmy and Veronica convoluted round the sitting room trying to Charleston in a proper way.

After the record finished, while looking for another one, Peter asked: 'So tonight it's Bella Vista, what? And what sort of a party do we expect? A small gathering or a big one? Will there be any dancing, do you think?'

Veronica lit a cigarette, sat comfortably on her sofa, got rid of her moccasins once more and gathered her legs under her.

'Well, my friend says they expect quite a lot of people. Apparently she's celebrating her birthday but also, so I gather, it's a farewell party of sorts for a brother of hers who is going to be a priest... No, I wouldn't expect any dancing but knowing her family, there *would* be a lot of guitars and singing.'

'A priest?' asked Jimmy, intrigued. 'Where is he going up to for his studies?'

'I don't know, but I must say it's a shame; he's awfully good looking, you know.'

'Well,' said Peter 'if there's nothing else, we'd better get going. In the worst of cases I'll get chatting with the *awfully good looking* would-be-priest and find out what the deuce is the matter with him. Your friend's home sounds rather bizarre, if you ask me, what with a dozen children and your friend being a *Guide* and everything, and coupling a birthday party with her brother's calling—they seem to be sort of queer people.'

'Oh, you'll see' Veronica said with a smile, 'I believe you'll rather like them all, once you get used to the remarkably odd collection of characters that seem to assemble in that house.'

Presently Veronica went to her room to change while Jimmy got on to the phone to find out if any other friend would join their Bella Vista spree.

Peter had discarded most of the records until he stumbled on Cole Porter. He was amused with the lyrics of "Let's fall in love":

Even some Argentines without means, do it.

He sat on the sofa and smiled. But after a while he wasn't really listening anymore.

He couldn't get that girl out of his head.

Chapter Four

Stormy weather

It had been decided that they would go in the old family car, an archaic Ford Falcon, one of the first that had been introduced into the country at the end of the fifties, painted in jade with loud red tapestry on the inside. Jimmy's mother hated the looks of it and refused to move in the dreadful object quite unruffled by her husband's expostulations and tirades on the advantages of American mechanics, which he staunchly upheld against anyone siding with European motorcars. However, being of a more theoretical turn of mind than an effective driver, he had not used the car much, and when Jimmy came of age he benefited from this, being one of the very few young men that in those days had a car at his disposal. What is more, it was always in good condition owing to his father's loving care, having it washed once a week and constantly controlling its tyres, oil pressure and what not. On the other hand, he was surprisingly generous in lending it to his son in an offhand way, only recommending them not to drive after more than a beer or two. Little did he know about the clumsy driving the car was subjected to when Jimmy and his friends came back from their binges quite drunk more often than not.

It was in this vehicle that the three took to the streets on that Saturday evening. Jimmy had arranged to pick Thomas up and, sure enough, he was duly waiting for them on a prearranged corner. He hopped in beside Veronica in excellent spirits, though in a rather dishevelled condition. He was an unassuming but blithe-spirited young man, of middle height and juvenile looks even if his thin fair hair revealed patches of premature baldness here and there. He dressed in the conventional way of those days, when black moccasins, blue jeans and a blue or red tee-shirt were absolute musts, as well as abundant brilliantine for good measure. Thomas had a startlingly high-pitched voice and a characteristic tendency to sway a bit to his right and left while talking. Nobody in his senses would have catalogued him as handsome or anything like it, but a lot of girls were attracted by the very force of his personality, if not by his good looks. Thomas was older than his friends, in his mid twenties, and had met Jimmy a couple of years before on occasion of a spiritual retreat preached by one of the few well known traditionalist

priests who hang on to their cassock and Latin mass against all odds. The retreat had ended with a tea party and Thomas had happened to sit at the same table with the officer candidate. They got on like a house on fire. Under the stimulating influence of three whole days of absolute silence they were soon chatting away about six topics at the same time and eventually found out that Thomas lived only a few blocks away from Jimmy's home. That evening they had gone to his place and had continued their enthusiastic conversation over one bottle of wine after another—their most recent ascetic purposes and promises discreetly vanishing in the midst of that so very particular enthusiasm that grips young people when they happen to strike up a new friendship. Jimmy soon introduced Peter to his new friend and before long he discovered that Thomas was always willing to talk about any subject under the sun, quite capable of going on and on until the small hours in the morning, as was the case that first night. Thomas appeared to be rather timid when one first met him, but after some time, if and when he had decided that you enjoyed books the way he did, and music, and history, and philosophy, and girls, and so on, he elaborated on any of these subjects with unusual wit and unabashed verbiage.

Of course, by now they knew each other quite well, and, as usual, Thomas keenly dived into the conversation. Peter, Jimmy and his sister soon learnt about the circumstances that explained his appearance, uncombed and not dressed like his usual prim self.

‘The problem with the Nationalist tradition is that it is, precisely that, *nationalist*,’ he blurted to his bewildered audience while Jimmy deftly swerved the car to his left to avoid collision with an absent-minded cyclist. Veronica made a face at him through the car's window.

‘What on earth do you mean?’ asked Peter, not quite able to suppress a grin. He well knew that these peculiar Thomas-tirades announced fun.

‘Well, the way I see it is that in this country Nationalists have quite obvious shortcomings and faults when not showing themselves as outright fools—and you can find more than one of them among us if you look around a bit.’

Thomas opened the back window and lit a cigarette, while he gave a wink to Veronica. The other two in front couldn't see it, but they could well hear it, so to speak, in his tone of voice.

‘Faults?’ Jimmy graciously entered the game, ‘Shortcomings?... In Nationalists? I can't really see where...’

Thomas leaned forward to ensure his friends heard him over the traffic din and the crackle of the car engine.

‘Yup, namely, if you ask me, trying to fix enormous problems... No, I mean, er, *sacred* problems, with their fists and pistols——just like us, half an hour ago.’

Presently they heard about the circumstances in which Thomas had decided to go to Mass that Saturday evening having figured that by the end of the service he would still have ten comfortable minutes at his disposal until Jimmy appeared with his car on their way to Bella Vista. Apparently in that church, St Nicholas of Bari, a group of juvenile Catholics had arranged with the young priest there to play the guitar and sing some profane and sentimental songs during the ceremony——the sort of things young girls would sing around a camp fire——an unheard of practice till then in that Parish, and quite a contrast with the old church music, on occasions punctuated by an organ, but never before by any other instrument.

‘When I got to the parish with a most pious disposition I happened to see two comrades giving quite a beating to a couple of young bigots, while a third one——I don't know if you happen to know old Coco De Napoli——was shattering a guitar against a wall.’

Except Veronica they all laughed at the preposterous scene so depicted. Encouraged, Thomas' voice reached higher pitches.

Veronica just couldn't believe her ears.

‘No, but, I *say*...’

‘Well, anyway, when I got to where the brawl was in full force, I discovered that our comrades there were only four or five and that the enemy was made up of quite a crowd of fresh youngsters eager to spill their blood in the name of Vatican II's celebrated spirit. So there was nothing I could do except enter into the fray and do my bit in defence of the by now surrounded troops. Fortunately the Police arrived and I just managed to disappear among the shouts and general chaos, not before having delivered one or two good blows myself——as well as receiving my due.’ He nursed his left ear.

‘Well, as I was saying, this is another case of the blatant Nationalist tomfoolery which will never get us anywhere and it pertains, as I say, to the best Nationalist tradition.’ He sighed affectedly while throwing his cigarette butt through the window.

‘Well, but, I mean, not always...’ Peter protested.

The car had stopped in front of a railway barrier, waiting for a train to pass so Thomas now had no need to talk at the top of his voice, and accordingly his tone of voice scaled down to something closer to normal.

‘I mean, the very idea that you can stop liturgical desacralisation by breaking old guitars against old walls, I ask you. It's a rum thing. Might as well try to stop the American way of life and its gobbling up this country with a whip... or a pistol, or the atomic bomb, for that matter.’

He paused for breath and a bewildered Veronica chipped in. ‘But why did you join in the fight then?’ she naively asked.

Thomas replied with a frown. ‘There are a dozen answers to that one, but I'll give you three for a start. One, I love street fights.’ He used his right hand fingers for the counting. ‘Two, a couple of comrades were losing a battle and that appeals irresistibly to any Nationalist *comme il faut*; losing battles is the speciality of the house,’ he chuckled, ‘And thirdly,’ he paused, ‘thirdly, uh, well I forget.’ They all laughed at this.

‘All right. But why the devil do you call yourself a Nationalist then, if things are as you say,’ Jimmy asked.

‘Well’, Thomas was obviously enjoying the cross-questioning, ‘in the first place, it's the only *live* tradition extant. Show me another one and I'll happily subscribe to it as soon as I have proof of its being a *real* tradition, and not one of these oriental fakes your Woodstock youngster goes for. But again, let me tell you that you don't exactly *choose* a tradition. Things work the other way round. Nobody chooses his parents, or country or, for that matter, baptises himself. When you are born you land, as it were, in a place where a tradition is waiting for you.’

Jimmy was trying to remember who the devil had said that civilization is a place where you receive so many blessings that in a lifetime you'd never be able to pay back enough.

By now the car was well on its way on the Panamericana highway, an ambitious road project that would connect Buenos Aires with Miami if you were to believe the current military authorities.

With the car's speed, Thomas's verbosity gained new impetus.

'Last and not least, because I love Nationalists for some of their faults which are difficult to find in others, such as staying up all night arguing about French poetry, Bauhaus architecture, jazz music or the Crusades.'

'Or, perhaps, the sex of angels?' quipped Jimmy.

'Exactly.' Thomas smiled. 'That is the reason why I love Vocos Lescano's sonnet to Lucas Padilla.'

He proceeded to recite it at the top of his voice while the old car arrived at Bella Vista.

It was dark by now and they had some difficulty finding Veronica's friend's house.

When they eventually got there, Jimmy fumbled around the car for a pencil and a piece of paper while Peter was asking Thomas who the hell Lucas Padilla was.

Veronica disembarked moodily fighting off a bit of mud she had picked up with her sandals as soon as her feet had made contact with Bella Vista's somewhat inhospitable ground. She left the three boys in the car, shaking her head at their quirks, while searching for a bell to ring at the gate.

Through the hedge one could see a glow from a fire burning in the back garden. While she waited for someone to answer the bell she distinctly heard Thomas's dictation set against some guitar playing in the garden and a couple of dogs barking in the distance.

While passions are kindled, aflame by the night,

And all our joys ring at the «Tropezon» bar

Let's talk, Luke, philosophy, see who was right

And spend all the worries that come from afar.

Come out with the logic, unfold reason's might:

«Plato would say so, Aquinas would say...»

Bring out all the music but sing before light

Unwittingly carries the magic away...

*

Very much to her dismay Veronica soon discovered that after all Victoria wasn't there. The master of the house, Victoria's father, welcomed her with a beaming face, a booming voice and a glass of red wine to which he held absent-mindedly, spilling a bit now and then when he inadvertently used it as a pointer. But he was a hearty man and Veronica took to him from the very moment she had met him some months ago, when Victoria had first invited her to Bella Vista. He told her that Victoria had just phoned from Buenos Aires and that a sudden train strike had caught his daughter unawares in Retiro station and finding herself without any commuting alternatives, she had gone back to her grandmother's house where she was forced to stay the night.

‘The very day she throws a party to celebrate her eighteenth birthday, can you believe it?’

All of this was conveyed to her by the old professor with low noises that proceeded from somewhere deep down his enormous belly and that to all purposes seemed to be chuckles. Veronica wasn't at all amused with this piece of news, but the man seemed to enjoy his daughter's quandary as one big joke. By now the two cadets and Thomas had reached the gate and were duly introduced by Veronica, but the man didn't seem to take much notice and cheerfully repeated the whole story of Victoria and her difficulties in getting back home. He then took Peter by his arm and forcibly led them round the house introducing the four youngsters through a side door into the kitchen from where you could see through a casement window what was going on in the back garden. A large group of people could be seen congregated around an enormous fire. Next to it one could also see a big gridiron on the ground from which a cloud of smoke tellingly announced that there was quite a barbecue underway. The sound of laughter and songs reached the kitchen where the professor was serving wine from a glass jug to the newcomers, first handing glasses over to his visitors, and then clumsily pouring the stuff. Jimmy thought he detected a faint stutter in his vociferations. The professor

fumbled with the jug apparently unsure where to put it down and finally settled for the kitchen sink.

‘As you surely understand,’ the professor gleefully bellowed, ‘with these enormous Bella Vista families, as we parents get on... well, the fact is, it becomes increasingly difficult to, uh, *identify* your son's and daughter's friends and by now I have indeed given up and hopelessly resign myself to... By the way, does any one of you know any Geology?’

The astonishing question caught them all unawares. Peter was beginning to get a bit impatient. How could the man ramble so?

‘Pardon me?’

‘Yes, Geology, perhaps some of you actually know a thing or two... But come over to the sitting room, I must show you something. Bring your glasses with you,’ he grinned at Jimmy, ‘they may serve as an inspiration’. They all followed him into a big room in the middle of which stood a grand piano. On top of it, under a yellow cloth, there seemed to be quite a chunk of rock which the professor, after depositing his glass of wine on the keyboard, tenderly took in his hands showing it proudly around.

The boys passed it from one to the other, weighing it and observing it carefully until finally Veronica gave it back.

‘You know what *that* is?’ The professor delicately put it down on the yellow cloth, and began a search for his lost glass of wine. Guessing what he was after, Jimmy promptly took it from the keyboard and handed it back to its owner.

‘Thank you very much. Well? Any idea?’

The youngsters were clueless and couldn’t even begin to fathom what the black rock could be—let alone why on earth it could be of any interest to anyone.

The old man beamed triumphantly, ‘I’ll tell you, then. It’s a meteorite. Fell from the sky heaven knows when, right into the middle of my brother in law’s farm, down south. Apparently one of his *gauchos* stumbled on it last month, when hunting in the forest. He thought it most strange and brought it over to my brother in law who in turn gave it to me... see what I could make of it.’

They all looked at the black rock with renewed interest.

‘It’s been a rather difficult quest, but what I’ve eventually found out is that apparently it’s a rare type—never can remember its technical name—and quite valuable because of that... Apparently they’re people out there that collect these things and *pay* for them, believe it or not.’

‘People actually *buy* these rocks?’ Veronica enquired quite fascinated.

‘Yup. And from what I heard, quite a fortune, so with a little bit of luck if I can secure a buyer I’m in for the commission.’ He imparted this last bit of information with a chuckle and made for the kitchen again. ‘And you, my friends are invited to the ensuing celebrations,’ he added with more laughter. Veronica thought he might be a chump, as Victoria said, but a lovable one, at that.

Once arrived to the kitchen he started inspecting the place. It was quite clear that his mind was already wandering in some other direction.

‘Any one seen the wine jug by any chance?’ Peter handed it over.

‘Ah, thanks young man, thanks. I can do with a bit more of wine, anyone want some more?’

But they had all only started to sip their own glasses.

Jimmy walked up to what seemed to be a music stand that stood in the middle of the kitchen. He expected to see some musical scores on it, but found instead a copy of Rommel's memoirs. Aware of this, the professor came round bellowing at the top of his voice that that was the most sacred place in the house, where he read every morning while preparing breakfast for the whole family.

‘That lectern keeps me going, and you'd be surprised to learn how much you can actually *read* while you wait for a kettle to boil or for the toaster to complete its job,’ he explained with relish. After a short bout of Veronica's yelling explanations, the old man gathered that Jimmy and Peter were military cadets and consequently they were soon subjected to an enthusiastic lecture on the battle of Alamein, professor Wade elaborating on the fact that Monty was better than the Desert Fox when it came to *matérielenschlacht*.

Veronica and Thomas managed to slip out of the kitchen unobtrusively.

Thomas happened to know a couple of young men who were standing around the fire with old Suter—he was there all right—and an odd assortment of boys and girls

who were singing and chatting away on and off. Two or three of them, quite indifferent to the jolly musical party, were eagerly arguing among themselves about the railway trade unions rights and wrongs and the future of what looked like a rather wobbly government. It was quite apparent that they had no interest whatsoever in music or folklore, or, more probably, had been at these parties before and had heard the old songs and jokes over and over again.

Thomas was duly introduced to them all but concentrated on the young man who had been playing the guitar, someone who immediately aroused his interest, being as he was a bit of a fan of folklore music himself. The guitarist stood up while Suter introduced him and Thomas only managed to retain his name—one Andrew something or other—apparently a Wade's relative. He also gathered that the young man lived only a couple of blocks away.

Thomas had a good look at him while the boy sat down and renewed his guitar playing. He played well enough and had a startlingly raucous voice for his age, which Thomas guessed to be somewhere between sixteen and eighteen. He had an engaging way of laughing blatantly, suddenly interrupting his songs with a bit of a joke or some jocular reference, borrowing the lyrics of one particular song and irreverently applying the words to one of his teachers or a well known neighbour that immediately drew fits of laughter from those around him even if they didn't happen to know the victim in question. Thomas hadn't known him for more than five minutes and was already quite fascinated with this sunny teen-ager, full of beans and infectious high spirits. Indeed, Andrew seemed to be the class of chap that make up a party by their presence alone. In those days, young people dressed with certain fastidiousness, although few social occasions required a formal dress. But even by Bella Vista's standards where muddy shoes and torn trousers were quite the usual thing, this boy was noticeably slovenly, his dishevelled clothes, unshaven face and decidedly uncombed hair, was something a well brought up young man from Buenos Aires city was unused to.

But his unprepossessing appearance was soon drowned and forgotten once the young man sat down to play his guitar and sing. Thomas delighted in the deep voice and articulate songs, for Andrew faultlessly remembered the lyrics—a somewhat unusual feat in those who happened to indulge in folk songs. Some of those gathered around the fire joined the song with surprising vigour and a particular affectation in their manner—the deliberately boisterous voices evidenced a certain *camaraderie*, the sharing of a

peculiar sense of humour. Soon enough Thomas couldn't refrain from joining in, laughing freely with Suter and the rest of them, singing at the top of their voices.

Meanwhile Veronica had found Victoria's mother in a corner of the garden where the frail woman sat at a long table deep in discussion about her son's future with a young priest who apparently had had some say in the boy's recently announced decision to take up holy orders. Victoria's mother, known to all and sundry simply as 'Mummy' was a frail little woman—one you would never have expected to have such a prolific offspring—with a sweet, if often tired, smile. She was of an amiable disposition and invariably showed great interest in the doings of her children and their friends.

Accordingly, she rose to welcome Veronica with a warm kiss while she changed the subject of her interest diving into Victoria's predicament. She introduced Veronica to the priest who extended his hand forlornly.

'Father Mole... nice to meet you'. But he seemed rather unhappy by the interruption—this new turn in the conversation that made the whole subject of the boy's vocation recede into what looked like oblivion. He did not enjoy women's company and one of the things that most irritated him was their habit of fluttering over one subject after the other without ever finishing any train of thought. He got up and went in search of his breviary thinking that he could easily pray before dinner while walking through the silent streets of Bella Vista. Quite unaware of this, Victoria's mother eventually told Veronica that she should phone her friend and then promptly switched her talk to culinary matters, this time addressing a young boy who apparently was in charge of the grill.

By asking one of Victoria's little sisters, Veronica presently found out that the only phone in the house that worked was in their parents' bedroom. She felt inhibited by this but the girl promptly took her to the upper floor and ushered her through the door, shutting it behind her. It was a very large room and had a big bow window that looked over the top of the chinaberry trees that flanked the sidewalk. The bed was unmade and on one side of it there was a kitchen size table full of books piled up in disorderly fashion. Veronica couldn't help observing that there was some sort of a leak in a corner of the room where someone had put a pail that collected the water and bits of plaster that fell from the ceiling. But when she looked over to Victoria's mother's side of the bed she froze with surprise at the most unexpected of scenes: in perfect silence two baby twins were standing in their cots holding on to their respective railings and staring

at each other with stirring steadfastness. Veronica nearly fell over herself while the astonishing couple remained quite indifferent to her. Victoria had told her over and over about the twins, and she had seen them before, but somehow this time a sudden surge of maternal instinct unexpectedly assaulted her with tenderness unknown to her until that moment. They were both dressed in white pyjamas and the only discernable difference between them was their dummies, a blue and a pink one, respectively sucked with baby-like concentration. In a moment she had picked the boy up and kissed him while his sister looked on inquisitively. Then she changed her mind, put the boy carefully in his cot and took up the girl. Until then the twins had remained perfectly silent but this last move somehow unnerved them and to Veronica's consternation set them wailing at the top of their little voices. The door opened and Victoria's little sister, the one who had indicated the phone's location, dexteriously took both of them in her arms and moved out of the room not before dedicating a reproachful look at Veronica, before she could explain herself. She sat down on the bed by the phone and was going to detach the handpiece from its catch when it started ringing.

It was Victoria who appeared to be in a dreadful temper with the way things had turned out.

'*Stranded!* I'm stranded here in Buenos Aires...', her voice sounded irritated over the line, 'I mean, the very day I throw a big party at home... This is some birthday, I can tell, you, I'm furi——'

'Can't you find someone to bring you over?' Veronica enquired, 'I mean, can't you find someone to bring you over?'

'Can you believe it? I mean *stranded*... Nope, apparently no one is going to Bella Vista that I know of and——'

'Well, maybe you should——'

'...very well to be here and all... but, I mean, can you believe——'

'...came along with Jimmy, for one.' Veronica started to play with the telephone cord, winding and unwinding it around a little bronze knob from the table's drawer.

'... so *you're* perfectly established at my place while I'm stran——'

'...and a friend of his that I was looking forward to introduce you to. And Thomas, you know——'

There was a brief silence on the line. ‘Thomas? Thomas whom? Not Thomas Vega?’

‘Yup.’

‘Ho, ho, ho.’ Veronica heard the distinct chuckle from the other side of the line and could not hold back a smile.

‘Ho, ho, *what?* What's wrong with Thomas, may I enquire? I mean, what are you “ho-hoing” about?’

‘Oh nothing's wrong with *him*, to be sure.’

‘...all that “ho-ho” stuff, I mean——’

‘... only that... well... Listen, will you——’

‘... can't quite get *what* you mean with——’

‘I think you like him more than a bit. And,’ Victoria mischievously added, ‘I must say he's quite good looking.’

This last statement made Veronica pause. She had never revealed her feelings to her friend and had always thought that nobody could possibly surmise them. But, of course, she felt relieved now that the cat was out of the bag. She felt very much like venting her romantic inclination and was not at all tempted to deny Victoria's guess.

‘Well, maybe,’ Veronica admitted ‘but nobody on earth knows this, except yourself, so please keep it secret will you?’

‘...he's not my type, if you want to know. In fact——’

‘Well I'm glad of *that*, anyway,’ Veronica said.

Victoria changed the subject. ‘Well, I don't feel like discussing this over the——’

‘...last thing we need is a——’

‘Please Veronica, will you please get someone to come out and fetch me? After all, it *is* my birthday you know.’ Victoria's impatience clearly rung in every syllable. It was a tall order, what with forty kilometres one way, and another forty back, it seemed quite impossible to convince any of the few boys with a car to go up to Buenos Aires to rescue the damsel in distress.

‘Listen, Victoria, it's most unrealistic of——’

‘...but it's *me* that has to *stay* in this horrible city while——’

‘I mean, the whole thing would take the better part of three hours. I mean——’

‘...I mean, you know... come over and fetch me?’

‘... and it's half past nine already. You would be arriving here at midnight. And I would only ask Jimmy to do that if it were a matter of life or death which clearly isn't the case, birthday or no birthday, old girl.’

Victoria sounded subdued when she finally rang off not before asking her friend to call back in a couple of hours and keep her updated as she would probably still be up and around boring herself to death.

‘I mean, the very day before Philip was leaving for the *seminary* and all, can you believe it?’

Veronica tut-tutted while she came down the narrow staircase that led into the big sitting room where two cadets and a seminarist were hotly arguing over that week's kidnapping of an important industrial CEO who's ransom was being asked for by some guerrilla faction or other.

She glided through to the kitchen where Victoria's mother was battling away with two baby bottles while listening to Veronica's report on the telephone conversation she had just had with her daughter. This was soon interrupted by another of Victoria's brothers who managed to topple a jug of wine on to the floor littering it with broken glass and staining Veronica's white trousers, prompting a string of reproachful words from Victoria's mother. While Veronica helped Victoria's mother to clean up the mess, the twins appeared again, this time in the arms of two other sisters and still wailing away. Apparently their bottles had been delayed beyond their baby patience.

Veronica sighed resignedly while trying to remove the stains from her once white trousers with a wet rag and thought that Bella Vista was all very well in its way, but one couldn't quite deny that things now and then seemed to take odd turns.

Thomas appeared at her back with a meat sandwich which he offered her while showing interest in Veronica's useless efforts to wipe out the wine stains with a damp cloth. He suggested some salt, which the girl promptly sprinkled on her trousers. She accepted her sandwich and went back to the garden in Thomas's company, this time reflecting that maybe Bella Vista's entanglements were, after all, well worth their while.

But it had been a difficult night. Father Mole came back from his prayers in a terrible temper having had his cassock torn by a stray dog that apparently was of a somewhat anticlerical disposition. Victoria's mother insisted on the priest taking it off and stitching it and would not hear of the reluctant priest's protests. Finally he gave in and took it off revealing a rather tattered pair of trousers and an outrageous orange shirt he had been wearing underneath his discreet cassock. Thomas and Jimmy thought it rather funny and laughingly commented on the way some priests tend to use loud colours in private. This didn't go very well with the unfrocked priest who turned his back on the irreverent blighters and pretended not to have heard. At the same time someone tripped over the grill and half of the roasting meat fell into the ashes. Just at the same moment all the house's lights went off owing to one of those unannounced electricity cuts that were habitual in those days, especially in Bella Vista where people took them as commonplace routine. One of Philip's friends started singing another *zamba* and stringing a well weathered guitar.

Meanwhile, Peter was deep in conversation with Victoria's brother sitting next to a corner of the long table by the fire. They were talking about his calling that according to the boy manifested itself in one of Father Mole's retreats. Peter had heard Thomas and Jimmy talk about Father Mole and his retreats on one occasion and well knew that neither of them thought much of this priest because of his well known tendency to put pressure on his flock to the effect that the bewildered youngsters would finally discover God's will. 'Which, inevitably,' Thomas had hilariously added, 'would end with the unanswerable conclusion that if you aren't married, such state of things could only signify that Providence had reserved you for higher callings.' His crackling laugh had echoed in Peter's ears when he found out that Philip had been told exactly this, word for horrible word, by the priest himself.

Victoria's brother was nineteen and had finished high school the year before. He had been thinking of becoming a lawyer, like his father, until this retreat. He was a lively youngster, full of beans and with a well-known tendency to play practical jokes on his friends. However he had recently assumed what he thought was a more becoming poise for a future priest, and consequently affected a gravity of demeanour which was signified by wearing his reading spectacles all day long. Some of his friends chaffed him because of this, but apparently no one took him seriously and for the most part

treated the whole thing as one big joke. But Peter had found out serious trouble underneath this disguise. The boy had said that he wasn't interested in girls.

‘What on earth do you mean?’ Peter enquired.

‘Well, the truth is,’ said Philip, ‘that marriage isn't for everybody, and I for one, can do without.’ The boy paused for reflection. ‘I think that in today’s world raising a family is too risky, too complicated, and then, of course, there’s always the possibility of failure...’

‘Failure?’

The boy emptied his glass of wine ignoring this. ‘On the other hand,’ he looked meaningfully at Peter, ‘*everyone* has a calling, even if some of them don’t have the courage and generosity to respond to this vocation as the Good Lord expects.’

‘Failure?’ Peter repeated his question.

Philip was temporarily lost. ‘What failure?’ he asked.

‘Well... you've just said that you're afraid of failing if you eventually marry, didn't you?’

‘Well, you know...’ Victoria's brother wrinkled his forehead, ‘I mean adultery, divorce and scandal.’

‘Yes,’ Peter said, ‘I do understand your contention, you know. With little children wailing and asking where the devil is Papa.’ He was fighting to keep his temper. ‘All the same, seems to me quite flimsy reasoning,’ he retorted, ‘For instance, what about a priest then? He can fail also, I believe... We've seen more than once case recently.’ In those years after the Vatican II Council one heard almost monthly about the defection of one priest or another.

‘Hmmm,’ Philip drank some more wine, ‘but that is because they haven't been properly taught. Orthodox religion should keep you out of trouble if only you abide by it... And God will always protect you if you are faithful to his Will.’ He put his glass down with a small bang as if to underline his words.

Peter slowly rose from the table with the excuse of going to find out how the barbecue was doing. Philip looked on with a smile, quite sure that his ideas as presented were unanswerable.

In a sense, Peter was thinking exactly that. While he walked around the more isolated sections of the garden an attentive listener would have heard his dark mutterings and half-spoken remonstrances. He had never seen religion in such a lame light, put in such ridiculous terms, and had begun to think that maybe the ‘progressive’ Catholics were not, after all, the Church's worst blight. Eventually he found Jimmy and the two of them began to walk in the dark around an old swimming pool they had found at the back of the garden. They were soon completely absorbed in their conversation, going over their new-founded perception of Father's Mole so-called ‘orthodoxy’. Peter was especially vexed with the silly mumbo-jumbo he’d just heard from Victoria’s brother.

‘Sometimes one hears things from Catholics that are more than flesh and blood can stand.’

By now the weather had taken a typical spring turn and one could feel the barometer falling while flashes of lightning could be seen through the cedar-trees that stood at the back of the garden. Jimmy turned to the south and frowned.

‘This looks very much like what the late Pope John called, in a most unfortunate turn of phrase, the Church's second spring.’ He gave a short laugh. ‘One minute you have birds singing and beautiful flowers and lovely fragrances around you and the next it's raining like hell and you risk being hit by a lightning bolt.’

‘But,’ Peter laughingly added, ‘there were quite a lot of signs of the approaching storm.’

‘Such as?’ Jimmy enquired.

‘Well, for instance, the big bunch of priggish Mole-type priests and laymen who thought that a call to religious orders was a sure sign of superiority... I mean all that clericalism... And that if you rose up to such digni——’ A flash of lightning followed by a bolt of thunder drowned his last words.

‘They should’ve read Newman for one.’ Jimmy mused.

‘Not *Cardinal* Newman?’ Peter enquired.

‘Exactly. Apparently some bishop or other was surprised by his thesis that historically it had always been laymen and not clerics who saved the faith when it was at stake.

‘Laymen?’ the bishop asked, ‘What’s the use of laymen, I ask you?’” Jimmy repeated the Cardinal’s answer with relish. “‘Well, we would look rather silly if it weren’t for them, wouldn’t we?’”

They laughed at this while going back to where Thomas and Veronica were sitting by the fire where Philip's cousin, Andrew, continued strumming a guitar and was singing a well-known *Chacarera*. By now the barbecue had been removed to a corner and a big fire illuminated the scene, the shadows playing games on the intent faces of the gathering youngsters, some with a glass of wine, some eating meat sandwiches. Apparently, once back in possession of his cassock, Father Mole had retired and Victoria's parents were nowhere to be seen, nor the little children who up to then had been dancing around the fire and would not go away until they got their ration of meat and bread. A couple of candles had been lighted in the house and one could see their pale reflection through the windows.

Veronica had just discovered that Thomas could sing quite well and seemed to know most of the lyrics. She looked at him again and thought that he was a most attractive man now that he sang at the top of his voice with a glass in his right hand and a cigarette in his left. But what with one thing and another she had utterly forgotten her promise to call Victoria back and keep her updated on the party's proceedings.

However, as the night wore on matters seemed to take on a hotchpotch quality. Until now they had challenged the ominous signs in the dark of the night singing and laughing at the top of their voices for the better part of two hours. But suddenly the storm was on top of them with quite eerie thunderbolts which eventually silenced the company; one minute the singers *et al* were contemplating the raging skies, and the next they were rushing helter-skelter to the house—the girls shrieking under the first shower that instantly drenched the fire.

Shortly afterwards, Veronica, Thomas, Peter and Jimmy were trying to get into the car under the pouring rain. Jimmy seemed to be quite drunk and with utter disregard of what seemed obvious to the rest of them, took a hard stand and successfully confronted his two friends' suggestions to the effect that anyone but him should take the wheel. It was pouring when they managed to get into the old car, and before starting the engine Jimmy began to fumble with gears and switches eventually managing to break the windshield lever. After that there was quite a row on board until Thomas got out of the back, opened the driver's door and started to tug at his friend with the undisguised intention of pulling him from his seat and assuming command of the machine. The other suddenly tired of the tussle and stopped resisting letting go of the wheel which till then had acted like an anchor of sorts and consequently they both tumbled into a ditch full of

water. Peter's laughter could be clearly heard over the storm. Eventually, cursing and shivering, Thomas took control of the machine while Jimmy sat at the back railing against the conspirators that had succeeded in depriving him from office.

Finally Thomas started the machine and *andante ma non troppo* turned to the left at the corner, carefully nosing his way while trying to get some sort of a view of the road by sticking his neck out of the window and steering all the time through what looked more and more like high seas. When they got to the boulevard that Victoria had been walking on that very morning, he suddenly decided to turn to the right. 'Hullo, what's this?' he exclaimed, suddenly perceiving that it was a dirt road in no condition to receive heavy traffic. Soon enough the car was skidding this way and that until Thomas decided to apply more power in a vain effort to steer the ship along a more conventional course. 'Look out!' cried Veronica who had just discovered an enormous ditch full of water to their left. Too late. In a last desperate turn to the right Thomas lost control of the stern, the left back wheel of the car promptly dived into the ditch and in no time the whole vehicle tilted leftwards eventually laying on its side. After a cough or two the motor petered out. Veronica peered through the window at what looked like a small hedge while Jimmy laughingly ridiculed Thomas's clumsy driving. Thomas managed to start the motor again only to find that the car would not budge for love or money. 'All hands ashore and start pushing if you please!' he gave his orders in a commanding voice, not losing poise. They all got out and went to the back where they soon discovered that the mud was stickier than they had thought and that their scrub efforts were against a particularly heavy pack. Thomas began to make the wheels go round faster and faster, the motor roaring away and the skidding wheels heating up while a blue smoke and an acrid smell of burnt rubber contributed to the atmosphere of general confusion. At this point, quite a chunk of mud flew through the night right into Jimmy's face who started to cry 'My eyes, oh my eyes!' Somehow Thomas heard Jimmy's expostulations and stopped the motor while Peter offered him a handkerchief with which he proceeded to clean his face.

'It never rain, but it pours,' Peter complained.

All four of them celebrated then and there a quick council under the showering rain, deciding unanimously that the best course would be to leave the car in the ditch and retreat to their point of departure.

They were a peculiar set, retracing Victoria's morning walk under the rain in the small hours of the night, Peter and Jimmy arguing about the best way of driving through muddy streets while a few yards back Thomas and Veronica followed in silence.

Thomas looked up at the towering eucalyptus-trees that were dangerously swaying in the storm and remembered that the town was famous for its numerous trees though he was in no bucolic mood just at that moment. It was completely dark. In those days Bella Vista had no streetlights—the few ones available were hanging at every street-crossing although with broken bulbs more often than not: most people forced to walk around after dark would usually carry a torch (those long, silvery and heavy gadgets that required about four big batteries).

At some point Veronica shivered and Thomas put his arm around her shoulder. The girl reflected once again that all things considered, there were worst things in the world than Bella Vista's difficult nights.

When they eventually got to the house they could only see the pale reflection of a single candlelight that dimly lighted the kitchen. It was decided that Veronica was the best suited to go forward and ask for help. Thomas and Peter were feeling rather doubtful at the prospect of unsettling the whole house with their transport problems and the need of some sort of asylum. Evidently Jimmy felt no such trepidation and took to singing an old Mexican song at the top of his voice. He was silenced with difficulty by the rest.

Having discovered the old bell dangling from a nearby fir, not without boldness Veronica rang it and soon enough a familiar voice rang out in the wet night. 'Who's there?' When Veronica shouted, 'It's me, Veronica!' the girl from the porch gave the necessary clearance and they all trotted to where she was standing, out of the rain.

When Veronica got to the porch she suddenly recognised the girl standing there and was quite beside herself with surprise.

It was Victoria.

Chapter Five

Duc in altum

They huddled into the brightly lit kitchen, Veronica and Victoria prattling away in chaotic chit chat, warming coffee while Peter and Jimmy dried themselves with towels that Victoria had promptly brought from upstairs. Thomas was seated at the kitchen table fastidiously cleaning his shoes with a bit of newspaper while he listened to the girls chattering away.

Peter shivered with fright. He had been quickly introduced to Victoria and——because she was now unspectacled——it was only when he shook hands with her that he actually recognised her. At the same time, he was relieved when she made no sign of recognising *him*. All the same he trembled with a mixture of cold feet, a dizziness that made him feel half-sick and traces of the same elated feelings that had aroused him that very morning. The same girl, in the same clothes, on the same day. The strange coincidence made him feel a queer flutter in his guts, the fortuity of this new encounter making him suspicious about this new turn of affairs——an inkling that someone was pulling the strings of his life without misgivings. He was bemused.

So was Jimmy. Apparently the struggle with Thomas, the muddy business of trying to heave the car out of the ditch and the walk back under the rain hadn't entirely sobered him. But, eyeing a bottle of Scotch on top of the fridge he rose to the occasion, got up and served himself a good measure and began looking around the place in search of a bottle of soda. He finally settled for a jug of water that Victoria offered him and sat down heavily in front of his friends.

‘So!’ he exclaimed boisterously, ‘So!’

‘So what?’ Thomas asked.

‘So we're all under arrest aren't we? Nobody moves. This is, so to speak, some kind of meteorological prison, don't you know?’ he rhetorically asked while having a swig at the booze, ‘All the same, I must admit that I've seen worse prisons than this one,’ he stage-whispered while eyeing Victoria's back with a mischievous grin.

Fortunately Victoria hadn't heard, but Peter felt uncomfortable with his friend's drive and tried to catch his friend's attention with a nudge. In vain; Jimmy was sufficiently drunk as to notice nothing. The girls joined the table handing around cups of coffee which were greedily accepted by all except Jimmy who disdainfully ignored the black stuff holding on to his drink with exaggerated unction.

Victoria explained her surprising presence in Bella Vista to Veronica. Apparently her old grandma had caught her despondently listening to the wireless and in a sudden bout of generosity had called her taxi-chauffeur, one Mr. Rossi, who agreed to take the girl back home——at an outrageous price.

'But of course,' Victoria winsomely smiled at Peter who felt he was shrinking by the second, 'by the time we got to the Panamericana it was raining like hell,' the girl cleared her forehead with a quick gesture, 'which was a good thing all in all, considering that Mr. Rossi stopped his dreadful soccer-talk and concentrated on his driving. Even so, I never thought that the party would be over just because of the rain. Most times people continue the binge inside.' Victoria got up to get another cup of coffee while she added: 'I was quite prepared to go to sleep when I heard you calling from the gate.'

Then Veronica proceeded to tell Victoria about their adventure driving through Bella Vista's muddy streets and Victoria laughed gaily at the girl's description of the place where they had got stuck. Peter listened in a daze, feeling he was somehow being driven farther up and further into uncharted territory. Also, he couldn't quite suppress his suspicion that Victoria's melodious laugh would probably ring in his heart for a long time to come.

The girl went on and on, unaware of the storm she was concocting. 'Actually,' she told Thomas, while lighting one of her black cigarettes, 'that boulevard is one of the worst in town. That turn of yours was a bad move. You had only to carry straight on and eventually you would have found your way back to Buenos Aires.'

Thomas explained Jimmy's contribution to the general chaos by breaking the windshield lever and they all laughed when he mimicked his own driving position——half inside the car, half out. Victoria found this particularly funny and laughed once again sending renewed shivers up Peter's spine.

They were quite at ease in the kitchen half lighted by a flickering candle, the storm raging outside with all its might, five youngsters chatting away about this and that over their coffees and cigarettes. Peter nudged Jimmy again with the intention of conveying the urgent message that he wanted to get through over Victoria's identity, but his friend, this time detecting some bother at his side, simply drew apart.

‘What the hell do you keep nudging me for?’

Peter mumbled inarticulate sounds. Fortunately the girls didn't actually hear this as they began to figure out where they could put the boys up for the night, having decided that getting help for the car at that time of the night with the storm still raging, was out of the question.

Jimmy helped himself to another whisky and began to sing an inspired version of ‘Raindrops keep falling on my head’ until Veronica told him to shut up, sisterly explaining that they were making enough noise as it was and that they risked rousing one of the children or something. Victoria shook her head and told them that you could hardly hear a thing from upstairs and that, in any case, everyone was used to noisy night gatherings in that kitchen. ‘We had Poker on Thursday,’ she added, ‘and Daddy surprised us all by coming in at six in the morning in his dreadful dressing gown, just as I was dealing the last hand.’ From the girl's story it was quite clear that there had been no reprimand, and quite on the contrary, the old professor had offered to make coffee for the mixed company. ‘It was only then that we discovered that it was already dawning,’ she said with that low laugh of hers that Peter was beginning to get familiar with. He smiled at her dumbly and it was then that Jimmy, with typical alcoholic shrewdness, caught the full significance of his friend's wane expression.

Thomas had begun to recite his Lucas Padilla's sonnet again, but he was interrupted by Jimmy who suddenly started off a new line of conversation.

‘The Army is getting on Peter's nerves, don't you know?’ And before anybody could stop him, he retold the whole story of Peter's encounter that very morning with the girl of his life. No amount of nudging could stop him. He pointed at his friend with a malicious grin and asked him again about the magic of that girl in a lovely kilt, the charm he was subjected to that had made him actually *follow* her through Buenos Aires's streets in that most uncharacteristic manner. Peter looked down at his coffee

while Veronica started to ask Jimmy for more details about this story which was completely new to her.

Peter just looked down at his coffee, blushing like a schoolgirl and muttering the most dreadful menaces against his big-mouthed and irresponsible friend.

Nobody noticed that Victoria was blushing too.

But the situation was somehow saved by the most unexpected circumstance as suddenly the door opened and Father Mole appeared in the kitchen in what looked like a hell of a temper.

‘What do you all think you’re doing at this hour of the night? I need to get a bit of sleep you know...’

The subsequent homily to the young bunch was ringed with forceful expressions he usually reserved for his flock on the darker days of Lent. After he had retired to the guest room, not before closing the kitchen door with pointed tardiness, Thomas stood on his stool using it as a pulpit and began to silently mimic the priest's gestures with great effect, sending the whole party laughing in a smothered way which only added to the general hilarity.

It was only then that Peter dared to give Victoria a quick look. To his amazement she wasn't laughing but was instead looking back at him with a reflective face. He blushed again with this stupid smile he couldn't get off his face and swore for the hundredth time that he would strangle Jimmy as soon as he could get his hands on him.

Just then Thomas suddenly fell from the stool with a crashing noise that sent everyone into a renewed attack of not so smothered laughter. Jimmy made the sign of the cross on the mute door beyond which the cleric had retired, all of which made matters worse, and then spilt his whisky, which sent Veronica into new fits of laughter.

They were young, and on the merry side.

Outside, the storm was reaching its climax and the trees swayed dangerously this way and that with strong winds, the rain lashing against the windowpanes and drumming constantly on the roof gutter. Anyone peeping through the window would have had a certain difficulty in identifying the youngsters having the time of their lives in that dim light. But the scene would have required a really keen-sighted observer to notice in that hobbledehoyish gathering—with Jimmy hooting with laughter and Thomas giving

renewed versions of Father's Mole homily——that Peter and Victoria, in the middle of it all, were serious as serious as you can get.

*

Eventually they retired to sleep. But like anyone who happens to sleep in new surroundings, Peter woke up after a few hours of rest to alien smells and noises. The night before Victoria had produced a couple of mattresses where Jimmy and Thomas were now sleeping next to him while he had settled for the old couch in the sitting room, where he lay fully dressed. One or two springs prodded his back contributing to his general discomfort and a broken window let in a steady current of air that had persistently blown on his neck throughout the night. He could feel certain cramps creeping up his back, but disregarded them with juvenile and military presumption hoisting himself to a sitting position and relieved to find that the night was over. Outside it was still raining.

Peter looked around curiously. He was sitting in the middle of an enormous sitting room, disproportionately long and incongruously narrow——a fact made ever present by the grand piano that dominated the centre of the room (the yellow cloth and black rock were nowhere in view) and which forced a small detour on anyone wanting to cross to the other side. At one end of it you could see the door through which you entered the kitchen (and that had lately been used by Father Mole in memorable circumstances). On the opposite side there was a big dining room with a table long enough to comfortably accommodate some fourteen people. On top of it a vast pile of un-ironed washed clothes seemed to be silently demanding attention. There were several windows much too small to light up the big rooms, the builder having conceived the house on Alsatian lines, fit to weather north-European winters, but somewhat inappropriate for Buenos Aires's tempered climate. The house however, was airy enough. It had nine bedrooms, six on the top floor, the rest downstairs (among which was the guest room where Father Mole had tried to sleep the night before), the professor's study, two stairways and two balconies, a garage, a large basement, a winter garden, and, the distinctive feature of the whole place, books everywhere. There was no free space on the walls that hadn't been requisitioned by Victoria's father for more

shelves and bookcases from where all sorts of volumes dangled in confusing disarray (even if Victoria's father claimed that they had been originally arranged on sound library management principles). There were books on the stoves and books on the piano. A couple of old volumes had been put to service balancing an old sofa, and there was an open detective novel on the chair in front of Peter's couch. There were two big boxes in a corner full to the brim with books on the Romans (the professor used those for his classes) and you couldn't quite walk in his study without tripping over heaps of books on Etruscan art, Communism, or Argentine history. Eventually Peter would also discover the small room in which Victoria's father used to spend most of the day and that was in itself a small study in book-lore with tall cases that lined three walls of the room, some of the volumes dangerously leaning from high shelves, others covering every inch of the big desk where an enormous Bible Concordance on another lectern competed for space with the old Olivetti type-writer. A wide array of biographies and poetry books sat on the windowsill and it was only with some difficulty that you could actually open the window a few inches without tumbling them on to the floor. But the professor didn't seem to mind, much too concentrated as he usually was on his reading or writing to bother about such minutiae. There was a wide choice of short stories and quotation books in both bathrooms, and the garage had no car but three complete encyclopaedias instead, the Espasa-Calpe alone adding up to more than seventy volumes. They were frequently consulted by the professor and he was usually found there long after the meals had begun, Victoria's mother despairing of ever finding her husband and constantly forgetting that he was prone to spend whole days in the damp garage, perusing enormous books and going from one concept to the other, quite unmindful of his surroundings. Next to the garage there was a small tool shed where there were no tools, except an old electric lawn mower. But, again, here there were several piles of juvenile books, whole collections of children stories and magazines along with old painting books that had been used at one time or another.

Peter woke up to a house like that, that unforgettable Sunday morning. There were ten children in all, Victoria being the eldest, succeeded by four girls and five more boys all sorted out in an age range that went from the baby twins to her sixteen year old sister. Two very old women came in every day to help with the domestic service, one in charge of the washing and ironing of the never ending heaps and renewed heaps of

clothes while the other cooked and gave a hand with the sweeping and general intendance of the place. Which was always something of a lost battle.

And then, well, there was the music. On top of one of the bookshelves in the sitting room where he had slept, Peter discovered a violin next to some yellowish scores. He had seen a guitar in the kitchen, and another one——minus a couple of strings——was lying on top of the piano. But, above all, there was the old gramophone, one of those big record players, which stood majestically against one of the sitting room's walls, disputing wall space with a couple of bookcases on each side. One of them had been used to put the records on and Peter got up with interest to have a closer look. He soon found out that most of them were classical, a lot of Bach and Mozart, the complete Beethoven symphonies, a Wagner and so on. But on a lower shelf there were some twenty records of an entirely different genre. Peter did not know German but it wasn't difficult to guess that they were all military marches from World War II he thought, knowing as he did one or two like 'Erica' and the 'Horst Wessel Lied.' On the highest bookshelf he also found a big pile of old tango records and, in the middle of it, two Gilbert & Sullivans and a musical labelled 'South Pacific' which he couldn't quite place.

The odd circumstances in which he found himself suddenly dawned on him, this inspection of old records on a rainy morning in this strange house in Bella Vista: the fact that this home belonged to a girl he had ridiculously followed only the day before, and that after that adventure he had been looking at old records at Jimmy's home.

He shook his head at the queer coincidences and walked up to a small door he found next to the piano hoping it would be the bathroom, but felt reluctant to try it when he discovered you had to pull it open, rather than push. He wondered if it wasn't Father Mole's resting room and figured that he could do without a renewed encounter with the cleric in what would certainly be embarrassing circumstances. Finally nature's call got the better of him and with a sigh he opened it only to find that, in effect, it *was* a toilet after all, a small one full of magazines and books loosely piled in the evidently disused bath tub, but for the rest of it, to his relief, a place that gave the minimum functional services to be expected.

After having washed his face with cold water (apparently the hot tap didn't work) he felt better and with an inquisitive disposition he made his way to the kitchen cursorily

glancing at his two friends who slept in the best of worlds, Jimmy snoring disgracefully as was to be expected. He was about to open the kitchen door when a sound from the other side froze him in his place.

It was Victoria huskily humming to herself, now and then breaking into the song with lyrics he immediately recognised as those from Butch Cassidy's main theme that Jimmy had been trying to sing the night before. He crouched next to the door hoping that Victoria wouldn't open it and find him in such an awkward position. However, nothing of the sort happened. The sweet voice enraptured him and he was quite surprised to discover how this girl humming could actually trap his soul to the point of making him feel quite dizzy. However, presently the gentle singing petered out and there was silence. He guessed that Victoria had sat down for there was a noise of a chair moving around. Peter straightened up and looked at the door, which seemed to assume a Narnian appearance and, for the second time on that Sunday morning, opened the door on to the unknown.

Victoria looked up with her red pencil between her teeth, her wrinkled forehead and spectacles all clearly telling that she had been concentrating on the wide open book that lay on the table. She took her eyeglasses off and smiled while greeting Peter with her grave voice. She seemed quite at ease, so Peter sat down rather heavily in front of her and accepted the *maté* she offered him, glad to busy himself with anything as long as it would take his embarrassment away, even if he couldn't quite delete the stupid grin he was sure was still glued to his face. On the other hand, Victoria seemed to remain quite unselfconscious and Peter found himself answering perfunctorily Victoria's small talk queries about how he had slept and so on. However, soon enough he had dived straight into proper *talk* with her in that unabashed way that timid people can sometimes do.

'Is that the same book you were reading yesterday on the bus?' he asked pointing to the volume on the table.

Victoria had another go at the kettle and served herself a *maté*. She didn't see him blush.

'Yup.'

'In Latin?' he asked 'did Oscar Wilde write it in Latin?'

Victoria laughed and shook her head.

‘It’s the title of a Psalm, you know... *De profundis*... I believe it’s Psalm CXXVIII.’ She pronounced the Roman numbers as letters which made Peter laugh, not sure if she had done it on purpose or not.

But to his surprise and as if triggered by the innocent question, she hastily proceeded to elaborate praising the book's merits and excellent language, and, most unexpectedly, its spiritual value. She lectured as if impatient to get her ideas behind her, using her spectacles, as it were, as a pointer. She weighed Wilde’s rhythm and praised his use of poetical images, and then she compared his style with other authors. She kept talking uninterruptedly for the most part of four minutes at the end of which Peter felt much more relaxed. There she was, lecturing on the Reading letters, this unassuming teenager with the low voice, smoking unaffectedly and punctuating her discourse with frequent smiles and clearing her forehead now and then with an impatient gesture that Peter was beginning to get familiar with. Peter had never in the whole of his life heard a girl talk like that and was quite fascinated even when her infectious enthusiasm was a bit disconcerting.

‘Spiritual?’ he asked pugnaciously, ‘how can Oscar Wilde with his well known decadent life style and salacious nature be called spiritual?’ He did this bit of enquiring with the clearly cut resolution of finding out what this girl knew about Wilde and what she didn't.

Victoria got up with the kettle and turned round to put it on the kitchen stove and Peter could not but notice that this time she was wearing a different kilt with a green tartan. He caught himself thinking that she had put it on *for him* after Jimmy's impertinent comments about magic kilts the night before. He knew it was a silly idea, but, all the same, it tickled him in a pleasant way. The kilt turned gracefully round and Victoria sat down again at the table and renewed the *maté* with a couple of spoonfuls of the green stuff it's made of.

It soon became apparent that Victoria knew nothing about Oscar Wilde's life having only read ‘Dorian Gray’ so that inevitably Peter found himself in the uncomfortable position of having to explain to her the rather nefarious circumstances that eventually had landed the Irishman in jail in the first place and how Wilde actually happened to be a bit of a Dorian Gray himself.

She listened attentively to Peter while looking with renewed interest at a photograph of Wilde that the book sported on its cover. She took in her lower lip, then set it free.

‘Well, maybe you're right, but all I can say is that I've never read a more *spiritual* author than this one, his rendering of the *real* Jesus Christ is incomparable... You can only compare it to the Gospels.’ She evidently searched for words and concluded rather lamely, ‘You must read this book... it's absolutely tops.’

Even when her words included a few teen-ager colloquialisms Peter could see that this girl was really into Religion, something that as any would-be suitor he immediately recognised as a possible obstacle to his dearest wishes. Accordingly, he prudently steered the conversation to more trivial topics.

‘Are you still at school?’ he asked.

‘Uh-uh,’ Victoria made a face, ‘Horrible, isn't it? But I've only a couple of months to go and can definitely finish with it—before it finishes with *me*.’

She laughed again at her own joke and asked him while tending him another *maté*: ‘And what about yourself? When are *you* finishing school?’ There was evident relish in her voice as she played with the analogy between their respective centres of learning.

Peter smiled trying to hide the general rebounding effects of Victoria's laughs. ‘Well, with a bit of luck, I'll be also finishing school by the end of the year and hopefully will be soon assigned to my first military destination.’ He lit a cigarette and added: ‘Which, if things turn up as I hope they will, would be somewhere in the South of the country.’ They soon discovered that they both much preferred cold climates to warm ones and, with this, both felt that they were warming to one another, and by now Peter wore a smile that wasn't half as stupid, genuinely enjoying himself and chatting away in a more relaxed manner about this and that.

Suddenly they heard someone playing the piano next door. Peter was quite surprised.

‘Who's that?’

‘Oh, that's Daddy. He usually plays at these early hours. He likes to wake the house with that. He's recently been wrestling with Debussy,’ she smiled.

‘Not bad at all,’ Peter assented. Sure enough, one of the *Arabesques* was clearly heard from the kitchen.

Peter looked out through the window and thought that it was particularly apt music for a raining Sunday morning.

Some church bells tolled in the distance. Victoria looked at her tiny watch and stood up in a hurry. ‘Gosh, it's later than you think!’ she took off her spectacles and grabbed an old umbrella that was lying nearby, ‘I must rush now if I want to get to Mass on time.’

Without quite knowing what he was doing, Peter soon found himself walking under the rain with the girl of his dreams——himself off to Mass for the first time in many a long day.

Fortunately, he thought, the umbrella was a small feminine thing quite incapable of sheltering two people from the steady rain and so they walked leaning against one another, the two of them getting wet by the minute and not caring a fig.

They sat together in the back of the church just as Mass was beginning. For Peter the whole thing was most confusing. He tried desperately to get his liturgical responses right——after so many years he couldn't quite remember them and for the most part could only mumble what he felt to be appropriate noises——while feeling apprehensive that Victoria would find out any moment about the awkward fact that he didn't usually go to Mass in the first place. On the other hand the old priest in charge apparently seemed to be flustered with the way some women dressed in Church and Peter couldn't repress a quick look at Victoria's jointed knees that appeared where her shortened kilt ended. He was so distracted by this vision that when the priest suddenly appeared to indicate it and feeling the flock's general movement, he knelt down——only to find out too late that he had got it wrong, and that Victoria with the rest of them were all standing up. He could feel the girl looking down on him and in a most inappropriate fashion he silently blasted himself for his awkwardness and stood up clumsily feeling his face reddening by the second. And then he started to think about what was coming next. He knew perfectly well that he was in no state to receive Holy Communion and that Victoria would most certainly ascertain the fact. He dreaded the moment, feeling it would put him miles away from the girl he knew he had fallen in love with. He suddenly felt dizzy with all this and made straight for the doorway having decided that he could always tell Victoria that he wasn't feeling entirely himself, which wasn't, after all, exactly false.

He waited for her outside the church where a small porch sheltered him from the rain only to eventually find out that while most people left the place immediately after the service was over, Victoria remained inside, praying or something, he thought.

A small boy with a little umbrella appeared at his side while Peter was lighting another cigarette.

‘I’m waiting for my mother,’ the little boy announced with a glum face, ‘I hope her confession won’t take too long.’

‘Hmmm,’ Peter wasn’t much interested and certainly wasn’t used to delving into small talk with eight-year-old boys. *Par contre*, the little chap felt quite at ease.

‘What’s your name, mister?’ he enquired, looking straight up at Peter’s eyes.

‘Peter.’ He was rather disconcerted at the direct question and rather amused at the straightforward way in which the dwarf questioned him.

‘That’s funny,’ said the boy while kicking at a small pebble on the porch’s floor, ‘that’s really funny,’ he added.

Peter was rather taken aback and wasn’t sure he liked being informed that his name was funny.

‘What’s so funny about it?’ he asked.

‘I’m called Peter too,’ the boy replied, evidently implying that he was the *first* Peter and that anyone else had no right to use his name.

‘Well, well, that’s quite a coincidence isn’t it?’ said Peter with a grin while flicking his butt gardenwards. He looked at his watch and decided the service had been over for the better part of ten minutes. He wondered what Victoria was up to and began to feel impatient.

The child started to make a grating noise with his teeth and suddenly blurted another question: ‘You waiting for Victoria?’ he asked with childish perseverance.

Peter was surprised at this bit of clairvoyance. ‘Yes,’ he answered, ‘How do you know? Do you happen to know her?’ he asked, recognising that the elf had succeeded in arousing renewed interest in the conversation.

Apparently the boy preferred to ignore Peter’s first question. ‘No, I don’t think I *know* her... no, not that... but...’ he put on a puckered face and started grinding his teeth again

while searching for the right words, 'I mean, we've never talked or anything like that... but... well, she lives next door to my house... so, yes, I do know *her*...' The boy renewed his teeth-grinding, the grating getting on Peter's nerves.

All the same he couldn't refrain from asking: 'You mean that you've *seen* her, what?'

'Right. I can see her from my bedroom window that looks on to the Wade's garden,' the boy informed, now beginning to play with his little umbrella making it spin slowly, 'She's very lo-ve-ly, and on account of the future I keep an eye on her whenever I happen to be in my bedroom and she goes out to the garden.' The little Johnsonian gnome blushed a bit, looked to his left and right and added in lower tones, 'I once saw her in her bathing suit'.

'You did, did you?' Peter affected some reproach in his voice but couldn't quite suppress a smile. 'And may I enquire what do you mean by "on account of the future"?''

'I'm gonna marry her when I grow up.' With that, a lady in a red mac came out of the church and took the boy by his hand. The small one hopped by her side and the solitary cadet could not but hear how he proceeded to plaintively impart to his mother the frightful news that he was *not* the only Peter in the world.

When Victoria came out of the church she found Peter standing in the porch all by himself and smiling to apparently no one.

'What are you smiling about, may I enquire? And why did you leave in the middle of the service?' asked Victoria while she opened up her umbrella as they both stepped into the rain.

'Uh, I wasn't feeling too well and decided that a bit of fresh air would put me right, and indeed I feel perfectly O.K. now.'

'Oh you sure looked all right to me when I came out of Church, you were smiling at no one in particular and looked like on the verge of actually laughing,' said Victoria.

Peter thought about it for some time while they walked together shunning the puddles here and there. 'Well, I was thinking that we all live in a small world, and that that accounts for many of its coincidences,' he slowly said.

'And so?' Victoria encouraged him.

'Well, I was just talking to Peter, your little neighbour, you know who I mean?'

Victoria waved at an old woman that crossed them as they sailed through the gates of the church's garden on to the sidewalk. 'Oh yes, that would be Peter D'Angelo. They live next door. He's a darling, don't you think?' Victoria asked with a smile.

'Well, I don't know about that, now,' said Peter trying to keep a straight face. 'No *darling* to my mind. Apparently there's more than one Peter with the same idea, and frankly, I don't know that I like little daredevils stepping on my toes with unabashed ruthlessness and highly strung up passions.'

'The same idea?' Victoria asked, 'High passions? What on earth are you talking about?' By now they were only a block away from the house and Peter caught sight of Father Mole and Philip coming straight to them from the opposite direction immersed in what looked like deep conversation. To his dismay a forceful idea entered his head: it was now or never, and this was no time for hedging.

'Well, how can I put it? It's a bit of a coincidence if you ask me,' he said resting his arm on hers, 'but apparently there are actually *two* Peters in the world who want to marry you.'

It took a couple of seconds before Victoria grasped the implication. She stopped dead in her place and looked at him straight in the face. 'I don't think you should joke over things like that...' She looked towards the priest and her brother, by now about fifty yards away and approaching fast. She breathlessly added: 'And if you're not joking, surely you're rushing things a bit?' She was blushing, and her words came out huskier than ever.

By now they were in a rather uncomfortable situation, the two of them intensely talking to each other under the rain, glued to their places while the priest and Victoria's brother were nearly within ear reach and looking with interest at the petrified couple under the rain.

'No I'm not,' Peter answered with a serious face, 'I'm definitely not joking, and yes, I actually plan to marry you, if only the other little bastard who also pretends to be your beau will get out of the way.'

Victoria couldn't help herself and laughed while they were accosted by Father Mole and Philip.

‘Have you two been to Mass already?’ asked the priest with a disapproving frown on his face, and without waiting for an answer, ‘Do you think I can get hold of the parson? I must celebrate Mass *somewhere* you know,’ he elaborated with the clerical presumption that most people are, or, anyway, should be, very interested in their doings. ‘Yes,’ Victoria answered. ‘And I believe you can find the parish priest at his home right now. He should be having breakfast. Philip is sure to find him.’ The boy nodded gravely and they continued on their way.

Victoria and Peter resumed their walk towards the old house in embarrassed silence and at a slow pace, until they got to the gate.

It was there and then that Peter took her hand and kissed her knuckles and formally asked Victoria if she would marry him.

Eighteen-year old Victoria was frightened to death with the way things were going. They were young and inexperienced but both of them knew that this was no frolic. It is quite a peculiar phenomenon, though it happens from time to time, even when generally disregarded by older people, but even youngsters sometimes know the gravity of what they say and do—the transcendence of certain moments, their lifelong consequences, the long lived import of a flickering instant in time, no matter how young you may be.

Victoria put her doubts forward once again, seeking for respite. Her heart beat at a fast pace and she couldn’t quite help herself, flustered as she was.

‘Aren't you rushing things a bit?’ she asked, blushing once again, ‘I mean, aren't you rushing things a bit too much?’

Peter felt inspired and had lost any second thoughts he could have harboured only ten minutes ago. He was at sea. *Duc in altum*. It was simply a question of swimming or sinking.

‘Listen, Victoria,’ It was the first time he had called her by her name, and he relished its pronunciation that tasted delicately sweet somewhere inside him.

‘Victoria,’ he said again, not letting go of her trembling and surprisingly cold hands—even in these eminent circumstances, the words *Che gelida manina* found a way of shaping themselves at the back of his mind—‘This is serious business, and I know it doesn't look like it, but no, I'm not rushing things one bit.’

It was a bold thing to do, even a crazy one, but Peter couldn't help himself and he kissed her on her forehead while holding her firmly with both his arms. Victoria clumsily tried to steady the umbrella under the rain. Peter looked straight into her blue eyes, and added slowly:

‘It's later than you think.’

Chapter Six

Brave new world

That Friday evening it had been Thomas's idea and Peter had jumped at the opportunity. As for Jimmy, he didn't feel half as enthusiastic. He had recently taken to constantly twitching an incipient reddish-brown moustache. It was typical, Peter thought, of young men who came down from the Army Academy: for one reason or another they took to hairy looks though in this case the interspersed red filaments lining his friend's upper lip——combined with his newly grown hippie-like long hair——enhanced his friend's churlish appearance.

For the past couple of weeks Peter had been in low-spirits, his dejected countenance an unmistakable witness to love sorrows.

Thomas had recently been reading *Historica Calamitatum* and, as usual, had told his friends all about the medieval legend surrounding Abelard and Heloise.

'You remind me of Abelard and his misfortunes' he said, looking meanfully at Peter.

The three of them were drinking beer, sitting at their favourite table in a corner of the Bar they used to frequent, less than a block away from Jimmy's home.

Peter looked interested. 'Why are you saying that?'

'Well, apparently he wrote to a friend telling him about his misfortunes with Heloise, and that's how we happen to know all about the famous love story... Indeed, one could rightly consider it *the* very first modern love story in the Western world.' Thomas paused in search of words. 'As a matter of fact, all things concerning Abelard are modern... except that he was tempted by the red medieval demons of passion; the blue devils of fear would appear some centuries later, in our adult times.' They laughed at this piece of banter. But he added, 'Which to my mind is Peter's case——a case of cold feet if you ask me.'

He was referring to Peter's reaction some time before, to his proposal.

'You don't mean, just hop into Jimmy's car and go to this fellow's place?'

‘Well... why not? Andrew specifically invited us all, didn’t he?’

‘Not too specific, I thought, more like “anytime”, “any day”,’ Jimmy said.

As Thomas had secretly anticipated, Peter’s face lit up at the prospect of going near Victoria’s house, not entirely discarding that she might conceivably appear at Andrew’s home. After all he *was* her cousin and she *lived* only a couple of blocks away.

On their way back that first Sunday from Victoria’s house——following some rather cumbersome exertions by which they finally extricated the old Falcon from its ditch——Peter had sullenly told his friends all about his proposal, and how he had been rebuffed by a troubled Victoria who had recurred to the ontological argument that they had not met often enough and that she would not be hurried, or, for that matter, harassed, by an impatient suitor. Both of his friends laughingly advanced that unmistakably the girl had a point and that he had indeed pressed the matter a bit prematurely. Peter was not in the least amused.

‘Fat lot of comfort one can count on from one’s friends...’

But two weeks later, Thomas had begun to think that Peter and Victoria were excellently suited to one another and that *any* move in *any* direction was better than just hanging about in that rather foreseeable joint where they had met so very often in the recent past. He couldn’t help feeling rather impatient with Peter’s gloom, his apparently unconquerable *ennui* with everything, and thought that anything was better than just sitting around drinking beer and talking about nothing but unrequited love. What’s more, he couldn’t quite suppress a small voice in his heart that reminded him of Veronica: half an hour before Jimmy had incidentally referred to the fact that his sister was staying for a couple of days at Victoria’s place and he couldn’t entirely deny that this seemed a case of the wish being father to the thought.

‘Not *again*, you don’t think! We’ve been there only two weeks ago, and it’s a hell of a...’ Jimmy began to say, but was quickly interrupted by his older friend.

‘Oh dear, what a wet blanket. I mean, Andrew just plays and sings magnificently, don’t you think?’ Thomas said, while gesturing to the barman for another round of beers.

‘Yes, well, we can listen to him any day. I’m not *that* keen on...’ Jimmy complained.

But he stopped, as it were, in his tracks, when he caught Thomas’s wink while he was saying, ‘Well... I think our friend Peter here could do with a bit of...’

‘Oh! Of course! Bolster. Silly of me not to... Let’s go now. Let’s help Peter out.’

Peter was surprised at this change of mind, and thought his friend was only fielding for some fun at his expense.

‘It’s all very well for you to make fun of me... I know I’m making a fool of myself, but...’ Peter looked defiantly at Jimmy, ‘*You* don’t have the least idea what real love is *about*,’ he paused for a second, ‘In the first place it’s not like something that one goes and chooses for oneself... I sometimes wish that you’d all remember the way the English talk about *falling* in love...’

Thomas began singing a Marlene Dietrich song from ‘The Blue Angel.’

Falling in love again,

What am I to do?

‘More like falling into a *trap*, to my mind,’ Jimmy said.

Thomas stopped his song. ‘Yes. They say that there’s always a bit of sorcery in these cases,’ he smiled at Peter, ‘for instance, our friend here, he most clearly has been bewitched.’

Peter acknowledged this with a laugh.

‘Well, I don’t know. I mean, calling our Victoria a *witch* seems a bit thick,’ Jimmy protested.

‘You can say what you will—whatever... but I for one, happen to know that one day I’ll actually marry her,’ Peter solemnly said. And he suddenly added pointing a finger at Jimmy, ‘and *you* won’t even be invited!’ He chuckled at his own impudence.

‘Hear, hear!’ Thomas rejoiced at the parade, ‘Peter’s brag! That’s my boy. We’ll win every war with such swaggering, confident soldiers.’

‘...and, if lucky, be rewarded with the Victoria Cross,’ Jimmy tacked on.

But Thomas, who had had the initiative in the first place, had begun to wonder if it was a good idea after all. On the famous night at Victoria’s, before the storm broke up the party, Andrew had repeatedly invited them all to come along whenever they wished

although it hadn't been a very formal invitation, to say the least. Nevertheless he had managed to indicate his address between bolts of lightning and the rumbling of menacing thunder. Thomas had easily retained the street and number, interested as he was in listening again to Andrew's boisterous songs and guitar playing. It is true that in those days—especially in Bella Vista—social occasions required little formalities, but the fact that Andrew wasn't exactly a well known friend had made him rather uncertain about this bit of gate-crashing. He said as much.

'Do you think we should phone first?' Peter asked, nervously playing around with his coaster and evidently *wanting* to go.

'Well, maybe', said Jimmy, 'but we haven't the number, so we'll just have to fetch the old Falcon and off we go...'

In the prompt way that young people act on a sudden after protracted deliberation, they finished their beer in a hurry and in no time were once again driving towards Bella Vista.

None of them had ever been to the Borelli's, but they had heard from Suter and other Bella Vista cadets plenty of stories about the place, which was quite a legend in its own right. In effect, it was something of a *locus* among Bella Vista's youngsters based on the fact that Andrew's bohemian parents kept an open house giving refuge to any outcast, boy, or girl, who was having trouble with their own parents, school authorities or, for that matter, the Law. Everyone in Bella Vista seemed to know about the Borelli's offhanded ways, and their house was frowned upon by most people who rightly considered it an unreliable sanctuary for all sorts of bohemian gatherings, card playing, long talks into the night, guitar playing and singing, a meeting place for would-be fiancés, and so on. To be sure, one of the family's most distinctive features was Andrew's father, a grocer of sorts who would appear at home at unseemly hours, a bottle of Scotch under his armpit and half a dozen cigarette packs which he generously shared with anyone around, no matter their age, sex, doings or *status*. There could be a tramp invited to dinner by Andrew or his mother, there could be one of the girl's fiancés, or perhaps a couple of Andrew's numerous friends staying the night with the official purpose of studying for an exam or something, even when the actual gathering was for a poker game. No matter, when Andrew's father appeared, an altogether different party began, with the whisky bottle that he scrupulously held at arm's length

and cigarettes liberally distributed among those present. These meetings would usually kick off with a long *tirade* against the current government, but the ensuing conversation could end up with the most unseemly arguments on any topic under the sun, from soccer to great cinema stars, the merits or demerits of the current Pope, Argentine history controversies, or different local subjects such as the latest beauty seen at this or that party or detailed adventures with local stray dogs (in those days, one of Bella Vista's favourite topics). Andrew's father was well over fifty, but he enjoyed these varied get-togethers meetings which would quite frequently continue well into the small hours of the next day, no matter if some of those present had studies, school, or work obligations pending.

During the trip Peter brought up the Abelard and Heloise subject again and Thomas dived into the story with relish, satisfied that, even if their excursion didn't turn out to be quite the best idea, the change in his friend's mood was well worth it. And anyway, he always had thought that most of the time any price for a bit of good conversation was well worth it.

'How did he happen to seduce Heloise, who was so much younger than he?'

'Actually, 22 years younger. But Abelard was an extraordinary man and had more than one string to his bow: he also happened to compose the most wonderful love-songs which added to his remarkable fame...'

'Troubadour songs, do you mean?' Peter asked.

'Exactly. Songs to be sung to your loved one... Some say Abelard actually started courtly love.'

'I suppose our *serenatas* come from there,' Jimmy chimed in.

'Well, they are not exactly *ours* you know, I think the serenade is originally Mexican.'

'Maybe Spanish.'

'Maybe Western, as *all* the best things come from that tradition, and no other one,' Thomas sentenced, 'It's always a good idea to point westwards if you don't want to lose yourself. As a matter of fact, that's exactly our course. We are, you know, driving westward.'

'All? All things? All things good?' asked Jimmy, a ring of contention in his repeated questions.

But Thomas stood his ground. ‘Absolutely: from hospitals to kindness, from *haute cuisine* to poetry...’

But they had almost arrived and Jimmy stopped the car near the railway station and got out in order to ask for directions. He came back with a smile on his face.

‘Easy enough, it’s only two blocks from the Wade’s... I think we passed by the place the other night when we were walking under the rain owing to *this* man’s dreadful driving.’ He looked meaningfully at Thomas.

The ‘dreadful driver’ continued his harangue undisturbed. ‘Well, and then you have beer, haven’t you. Best drink ever discovered.’

‘If in heaven there’s no beer, let’s drink it here,’ Jimmy chimed in. But Thomas proceeded with his contention.

‘...bicycles, biscuits and Bishops, if you ask me...’ By the time they arrived at Andrew’s home he was on to the ‘D’ arguing that the myriad of different dances one could find all over Europe was quite without equivalent in the rest of the world.

He would’ve kept on and on had it not been that Peter and Jimmy got out of the car and stared through open gates into a dark and empty drive lined by huge trees, at the end of which one could just discern a pallid light bulb hanging over a very small porch.

Thomas joined them as they assessed the house, not entirely giving up his discourse.

‘No, I say, modern science is not exactly Western, because it comes of age exactly when Western tradition begins to——’

‘Shhh! Can’t you shut up for a minute?’ Jimmy and Peter unanimously censured their friend, and for a couple of minutes the three of them remained in silence.

They were eyeing the house that loomed in the darkness. It was a bit of a mansion except that it didn’t exactly convey a stately impression. It was very big, but even in that light, they could easily see it was very much in want of repair, the old walls badly needed paint, and some loose tiles seemed to dangerously hover over the roof as if ready to fall on top of the first absent-minded straggler to walk under the house’s shadow. Jimmy thought that it was ideally suited for a horror film.

‘Looks as though it’s *haunted* to me’ he reflected.

‘Oh, come on!’ said Peter repressively.

The garden didn't look too healthy either. The lawn hadn't been mown for weeks, and the thick powdered brick layer that had originally been spread over the path in order to fend off the mud and decorate the drive now exhibited weeds and several pools that gave the alley a bedraggled appearance.

They hesitated under the small canopy that hung over the open gates, but eventually marched up the drive to the small porch where a sleeping dog lay on a deteriorated garden chair under a naked twenty-five-watt bulb that barely illuminated the place. Peter and Jimmy looked suspiciously at the animal but Thomas resolutely knocked on the massive door, and to their relief the dog only looked up uninterestedly and yawned. They could now hear what seemed to be a rather heated quarrel between two or three people, and their intruding precisely at that moment made them a bit uneasy. However, apparently no one had heard Thomas knocking while the resounding voices inside the house seemed to be picking up vehemence by the minute. He pounced once more on the daub wood with force, pounding a series of five successive knocks that would have unsettled a less formidable door, and soon enough Andrew himself opened the door standing on the threshold with a glass of Scotch in his hand and a broad smile on his face. He took a cigarette dangling from his mouth to give his visitors a proper greeting, shaking hands vigorously and laughing off their excuses for not having announced themselves.

'Come in! Come in!' he said, ushering them into the house and promptly introducing them all around.

They found themselves in a medium-sized hall with a big couch and an odd assortment of armchairs, stools, folding chairs and the like where half a dozen people were sitted around an unlit fireplace. An adjacent coffee table exhibited a bottle of whisky presiding over several ashtrays up to the brim and an odd collection of all sorts of vessels, glasses, jars, a coffee pot, two or three beer tumblers and a teacup for good measure. A *maté* with its companion kettle could be seen on a smaller table next to Andrew's stool. The atmosphere was dense with tobacco smoke and the conversation kept circulating even while Andrew introduced the three young men to all present.

Thomas gathered that two of the teen-age girls sitting right behind their father would be Andrew's sisters, one of them apparently called Sarah though he didn't catch the other girl's name. Next to Sarah sat a young man in his mid-twenties who was noisily arguing

about soccer with a very fat boy, who seemed to be sweating all the time. Andrew introduced them as school friends, and then proceeded to do the same with a man next to him, a man of about Andrew's father age who was drinking wine. He looked rather disreputable, with his muddy shoes and long hair, but especially because he sported a long beard—in those days, quite a statement in itself, as it had come to be a sort of badge for left-wingers and guerrilla sympathisers, probably due to the 'Che' Guevara cult, in those days so very fashionable. They were all talking more or less at the same time and at the outset the newcomers felt a bit confused but soon got used to it turning their attention to one piece of conversation or another amidst the general hullabaloo.

They all made space for the visitors who sat where they could around the coffee table, while the talk resumed with renewed vigour. Andrew's father offered Scotch and ordered Andrew into the kitchen for more ice.

It was quite obvious that this middle-aged man had the leading voice, sitting as he was on the biggest armchair in the room as if it were a throne or something. He was smoking away and in an unlikely fashion kept half turning his head to the back of his chair, booming away at one of his daughters who was knitting right behind him.

'Your mother should've left me alone, I mean, what with the incredible silly things Cantoni preaches about every Sunday...'

The girl looked up from her knitting at his back and spoke with reproving tones: 'You know very well that Mother was only trying to avoid another scandal.'

Peter observed that the lady was nowhere to be seen while Andrew explained with a raffish grin that that Sunday his father, whom everybody seemed to know as *Pelusa*—a not too distinguished nickname to say the least—had gone to evening Mass after a big barbecue previously concerted with their neighbours and that the old man had ended up the worse for liquor. *Pelusa* heard this and guffawed again. He was half bald, with very thin fair hair, a stubbly moustache, piercing blue eyes, and a gruff voice underlining his ribald utterances in a diacritical fashion, gesticulating and impersonating one or another of those who happened to appear in his stories. But the man's most distinctive feature was a prominent nose that gave him a ludicrous appearance. Soon the three guests were laughing away at his preposterous story and by the time they were comfortably seated and had dipped into their first drink they had learnt that Cantoni was the local parish priest, and that he was well known for his rather unilateral preference

for the passage where Jesus reproved Martha while emphasising Mary's good choice in not working but listening to what the Master had to say.

Meanwhile, Sarah's fiancé and the fat boy continued to argue at the top of their voices about the relative merits of River Plate's latest football star, unheeding of what Pelusa was saying. He didn't seem to mind a bit.

'Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things!' Pelusa impersonated the vicar with a studied *falsetto* that set the boys laughing. 'Martha, Martha! I ask you? What sort of a sermon is that? We've heard it a hundred times and there he goes again! We, the gentle flock from Bella Vista deserve better!' The man had another go at his drink and burst out again, 'Martha, Martha! To hell with the damn hairdresser!'

Andrew laughed at this and explained that Cantoni, in effect, had been a hairdresser before taking up Holy Orders. But there were several present who reproached the accuser for his uncharitable *sobriquet*.

'Uncharitable, my hat!' Pelusa counter-charged, 'I ask you, what could be more uncharitable than to subject us to this 'Martha, Martha' mumbo-jumbo every single Sunday of the year?' he complained while lighting up a cigarette and winking in Peter's direction. 'Martha, Martha, I'm fed up to the back teeth with the bloody hairdresser's sermons!'

This drew more protest and more laughter from different quarters and it was quite evident that Andrew's father was thoroughly enjoying himself.

Meanwhile the fat boy and Sarah's boy friend kept on with their soccer prattle.

'I'm telling you that any *real* River Plate fan can see a mile away that this will be our ruin... The whole concept of *jogo bonito* will be the end of...'

'But anyone can see that just now we're playing wonderfully, so what need to...'

Andrew was trying to play "Martha my dear" on his guitar but was finding it devilishly difficult.

'That doesn't entitle you to go to church entirely drunk, Daddy,' said the girl that sat behind him with the knitting. Peter found Victoria's cousin quite attractive, even if she offered a rather dishevelled appearance. He guessed her age at something around twenty.

The man kept half turning his head and actually talking, as it were, to the wall next to him. Apparently he thought he could compensate for this lack of eye contact with a bellowing voice. ‘Well, listen my girl, a man has a right to protect himself from a clumsy hairdresser who takes advantage from his office to absolutely stultify his flock with this never ending ‘Martha, Martha’ bombastic drawl.’ He emphasised this last part with a piercing voice that made them laugh again. ‘If it’s a sin to go to Mass with a few drinks too many, I’ll bet you any day that it’s a much worse one to make a mess of things and keep on going with this ‘Martha, Martha’ nonsense till you’re blue in the face!’

Andrew told the boys that his Mother had sent him round to the church to try and pull out his Father from the place, since one of the girls had come back reporting that the old man was in no condition to be in Mass in the first place and was actually *snoring* in his pew and drawing more and more attention to himself. The scandal was gathering force and the girl had run back to ask for help knowing as she did that the man’s snore could reach thunderous proportions, especially when he happened to be fuddled.

‘Mummy was terrified and begged me to run to *San Francisco* and somehow get Daddy out of the church before...’

‘You should’ve left me alone,’ said Pelusa to his son. ‘I was only sleeping which was what the circumstances required. Please bear in mind our hairdresser’s somniloquence.’

‘Things got a bit thick then, because Father suddenly woke up and rose to the occasion mimicking the ‘Martha, Marta’ bit at the top of his voice.’ The boys couldn’t stop laughing at this while Pelusa heard his son’s report with an imperturbable grin.

‘So, what did you do?’ Thomas asked Andrew.

‘Well, I just left him there because he wouldn’t budge anyway... I just hoped that if only I left him alone he might fall asleep again which seemed to be, all things considered, much the best bargain...’

They laughed at this.

‘And did you...’ Jimmy left the question half formulated, a bit intimidated by his own bluntness.

‘I don’t remember a thing,’ said Pelusa. ‘As a matter of fact, I believe the whole story has been made up by this deceitful family in order to discredit me with I know not what obscure purposes...’

Andrew laughed at this one and continued: ‘Yup, I just stood at the back of the church until the service ended, but unfortunately...’ he eyed his new friends with affected unhappiness, ‘the show hadn’t finished yet, because....’

‘No show, I can tell you, my boy...’

‘...didn’t he get up and proceed with unsure pace toward the queue for communion?’

This piece of information set off new ripples of laughter while Pelusa assumed a saintly face that effectively achieved an interruption to the *raconteur’s* story while he promptly choked with laughter himself as he recapitulated the scene.

‘Well, I ask you, who’s being *unkind* now?’ Pelusa rhetorically asked around, ‘Fancy the bigotry! I suppose these youngsters here can say when I’m fit and when not for Holy Communion!’ he bellowed defiantly. But Andrew unremittingly kept the ball rolling.

‘Worse part of all was that, in an unexpected bout of piety, he suddenly broke out singing at the top of his voice...’ he laughed again, ‘and quite out of tune, at that.’

Pelusa disputed this last part, insisting dogmatically that here was the proof that the whole story had been made up, since it was well known to everyone, he said, that he had a well tuned musical ear and that it was quite impossible to catch him singing out of tune. This drew peels of laughter from Andrew and his two sisters.

‘Anyway, after that he went back to his pew and during thanksgiving the old man fell asleep again, fortunately with no snores this time... So all is well, that ends well,’ Andrew concluded, while lighting a cigarette with evident relish, ‘After the *ite Missa est* I just walked back home and soon enough, Daddy appeared with the most innocent smile on his face.’

Thomas wondered how on earth Andrew happened to know the old Latin formula with which the priest used to end Mass. This was a most disconcerting family, he thought.

‘Innocent?’ said Pelusa, ‘Well, why not? There’s the old Spanish saying... How did it run?’ He suddenly remembered the old lines and proceeded to recite them with his pitched voice.

*Those who drink tend to slumber
And those who slumber do not sin.
Now, sinless people go to Heaven
So if to Heaven we're surely bound,
Let us drink, I'll pay a round!*

This drew more laughter, especially from the newcomers who hadn't heard the old rhyme before. But there was no stopping *Pelusa's* tirades.

'Anyway, I don't see how you can accuse a man because he happens to be a bit tired and falls asleep while a cloaked hairdresser keeps going on and on with his "Martha, Martha" drivel...'

As the evening lingered on Peter worked out the old man's gleeful formula: clearly most of his jargon was made up of extravagant exaggerations and extraneous nonsense fastidiously chosen to enliven what originally could not have been of any great interest. The other component, which contributed decisively to the general alacrity created by his histrionics, was the constant repetition of his stories, repeatedly going back to parts of them with ding-dong determination and perfectly oblivious to the chorus of protests that his reiterative narrative drew from those present. All of this made for the general merriment of the gathering and when Andrew's father's drollery was in full swing nobody could quite refrain from cheering up, like Peter that night, or actually laughing their heads off, like Thomas and Jimmy.

But Thomas particularly noticed what he thought was so very *Mediterranean* in the house, partly poor, partly cultured, partly decadent; but basically a buoyancy and ease that could only proceed, he reflected, from a deeply rooted assurance that all was, in the end, well. He also thought that these elements were the basis of the Borelli's rather special hospitality, the offhanded way in which you felt immediately accepted, no matter who you were and what your business.

After what seemed quite a long time during which Andrew's father hammered on and on with this part or that of the same story, he suddenly ceased in his intemperate verbiage.

‘Hey, who’s there? Can you hear those odd noises?’

They all fell silent and listened, and sure enough, there was a grinding and scratching noise that proceeded from somewhere behind a large window next to the front door.

‘I told you the place was haunted,’ said Peter on the side to Jimmy, who impatiently hushed him.

Behind a closed curtain the window seemed to be shaking while the scratching and gnawing sounds seemed to gather force.

‘Who’s there?’ Andrew boomed, while getting up from his stool and making for the window.

At that precise moment the window gave way with such violence that the curtain fell off from the railing and one of the window panes gave way with a clatter of shattered glass. Andrew’s sisters shrieked in panic amidst the ensuing confusion, while Peter and Jimmy stood up with set faces, determined to stop a tall man who hopped into the hall with an odd grin on his face and whom, before one could say jack, walked up to where Andrew was and jauntily asked for a cigarette.

The visitors were flummoxed.

‘But, *I say*, Manolo, what do you mean by entering the house in this way?’ Andrew asked, quite incapable of suppressing fits of laughter. The boys were surprised to see that all the rest of them were laughing uproariously and couldn’t detect a sign of reprehension or anything like it.

‘Hello, hello, hello, hello. Er...grrreat Jove, dreadful thing isn’t it? I mean, hello, er, I couldn’t get in this place, and have been sttt... stttanding out there for *years*... I mean, out there in the cold all by myself... er, waiting for someone to open the door,’ he looked around while violently rubbing his nose with a yellowish tobacco-tarnished hand, ‘Hello, hi, how’s doing, er, hello... I’m vvv...vvery sorry about that window but I absss... absss... absssolutely *needed* a cigarette...’ And suddenly perceiving strangers in the place, he turned to them: ‘Hello! Hello! Who are, er, these folk?’ and without waiting for Andrew to introduce him he shook their hands repeatedly with disproportionate force and an inordinate waving of his, and their, arms. He showed no sign whatsoever of embarrassment or sense of blunder and proceeded quite unruffled to

sit in Andrew's stead, taking a cigarette from a pack on the table which he lit up and finished off with a few violent puffs.

They all sat again in relative peace while no one seemed to pay the slightest attention to the broken window while Andrew loudly explained that Manolo was a friend who lived in the neighbourhood adding that he had recently been discharged from the Borda Hospital—a well known lunatic asylum—after a five year period of internment.

The three boys looked at him doubtfully while Manolo stammered rather inarticulate words that they couldn't quite decipher though it was apparent that he was corroborating the current version about his forced stay at that particular madhouse.

From Andrew's family—each in turn supplying bits and pieces of information about him—the bewildered boys gathered that Manolo had been sent down on the unreliable premise that he was much better and could actually *live* with his old parents, only a block away from the Borelli's.

Manolo was an unlikely character, an *opéra-bouffé* fool. Despite being thirty years old, apparently his mental development had been arrested somehow by a stone someone had thrown at him when a child and that unfortunately had hit him on the head. Anyway that was his rendering of the story. But nobody knew much about him, except what he himself chose to say, usually making absurd propositions and telling preposterous stories that sent Andrew into infectious fits of laughter. The man kept rubbing his nose with considerable energy while trying to surreptitiously inspect the newcomers. He kept swearing from time to time and seemed to be suffering from some sort of hyperkinesia, constantly shifting in his chair and apparently quite unable to keep still.

'Grrreat Jj...ove, er, I mean Grraaaat Jovvvve! It's so cc...ccolddd out there!' He rubbed his hands with exaggerated vigour and looked sideways at Peter who was next to him; his big eyes, savage looks and some snorting sound he repeated from time to time made Thomas laugh. Manolo had a distinctively equine aspect, he thought, not only because of his heaving and grumbling sort of personality, but also because of his very long face and nose. One found oneself expecting to hear him neigh at any moment. But what was really funny about him was this way of his of looking at people sideways like one of Walt Disney's anthropomorphic animals—his face a complex mixture of aggravation at the world in general and a queer expression of permanent suspicion if not downright

paranoia. Maybe he actually suspected that people found him ridiculous, thought Peter, which was substantially the case.

Not two minutes after Manolo's arrival there were more knocks at the front door, to which Andrew answered at the top of his voice refusing to budge from where he sat tuning his guitar.

'Through the window, please! Through the window!'

And in effect, through the window entered a fifteen-year-old boy whom the newcomers immediately recognised as another of Victoria's brothers. He was the spitting image of his elder sister, with blue eyes and black hair and that distinctive clear forehead of theirs. A case of Viola and Sebastian, Thomas thought.

'What the hell? I mean, what the heaven....???'

'Manolo's doings again...'

Joseph looked down at Manolo reproachfully.

'I just can't believe...'

'It wasn't, er, me, I have nothing to do with that window, I did nnnnot, er, Grrreat Jjove, hello Joseph, hello, hello, Grrreat Jjovve.... I'm telling you, mate, someone must've, er, broken it...'

His infantile lying and preposterous vagary drew renewed laughter and Andrew nearly choked over his drink.

'Manolo! One thing is breaking up the house, but *lying* is quite another! I can understand your breaking the window, but breaking one of the Ten Commandments is quite another story,' he said with mock reprehension.

Manolo just rubbed his nose with more violence than ever and looked sideways at *Pelusa* who demurely joined the tomfoolery.

'Well, I'm afraid we'll just have to *tell* Cora all about this.'

This piece of information acted like an electric shock on the young man's body: he suddenly stood up, overturning the stool he had been sitting on, a panicked expression in his eyes while vigorously rubbing his big nose.

'Grrreatt, er, Jovvve, hello, I mean, you won't tell Cora will you?' An expression of childlike innocence suddenly appeared on his face. 'Anyway I just came in thrrrough

the window because I wanted a cigarette... but... don't, er, tell Cora, will you, Grrreat Jovvee, hello, I mean, what?' he said with a woeful look in his eyes.

'Take it easy, Manolo, relax,' Andrew chimed in, 'be a good boy and we won't tell Mum...'

But without warning the young man suddenly leaped out of the window into the garden amid a chorus of futile protests.

'Manolo, come back! We won't tell Cora! Come back!'

He didn't and Andrew explained to the boys that Cora was his mother and that being a very early riser was usually in bed when Manolo came for a cigarette or something. For the fun of it they had made up all sorts of terrible stories about poor old Cora ——a kind and amiable mother, if ever there was one——. It was a joke of Andrew's, shared by his friends and Manolo had come to believe that this woman was a bit of a witch prone to wield dark powers. Andrew had even told him that his mother practised occultism. It had been a very useful invention and they resorted to it whenever Manolo seemed to get too excited and required some kind of restraint. Of course, one could overdo this, like Pelusa had just done: in such cases inevitably Manolo would take flight and keep away from the house for a couple of days.

'Daddy, you've done it again! You've frightened poor Manolo out of his wits!' Sarah reproached his father.

But Andrew was already playing the guitar, and started a well-known *zamba* at the top of his voice. They all soon joined in. Thomas was delighted. He observed how Andrew played, his eyes shut, the guitar's bridge in a nearly vertical position, his resonant voice echoing in the hall, well above the rest.

Thomas checked his watch and discovered that it was already two in the morning, high time to withdraw, but he was enjoying himself so much that he just shrugged the thought off and poured himself another glass of wine. Then Andrew's classmates and *Pelusa* said good night at one time or the other and so did his sisters who quietly retired, as well as the rest of the visitors.

Eventually only Andrew, who had stopped playing, remained in the hall with Sarah's fiancé, Stephan——he was the hairy, Che Guevara type they had been introduced to——and Victoria's brother, Joseph. The boys took to talking about themselves and

soon learned from Joseph that Philip had received a call from the Seminary to the effect that he shouldn't present himself until the end of the month. Conversation soon drifted to other topics from where they also learnt that Stephen wanted to marry Sarah but was poorly off since he worked at Andrew's school as a prefect and was badly paid. It was then that Thomas thought the time right to play his cards.

'Our friend, Peter here, he also...'

'Now stop it, will you? We've only just met these boys here and there's no sense in telling——' Peter protested.

To no avail. Jimmy and Thomas soon put Andrew and Stephen and, what was worse, Joseph, into the picture. Andrew was fascinated with Peter's unrequited love story, and asked for details again and again, trying to get the facts straight.

'Well, Peter, I think your choice excellent, as a matter of fact, if it wasn't because she happens to be my first cousin, I'd have a go at her myself,' he commented with a ripple of raucous laughter.

There was consensus here, and for a while they all commended Victoria's good looks. Joseph seemed bored to death with this and Peter thought it all very unnecessary, but was soon explaining that he well understood that he hadn't a chance with such a girl, etc.

'One never knows with women, you know,' Stephen chimed in, 'As a matter of fact I never thought Sarah would actually——'

'You better be careful with my sister or——'

It was then that Thomas was struck with the idea.

'I say! What we need here is a good serenade'

'Whattt???' Peter had immediately known what his friend was driving at. He was quite alarmed and looked around at his friends, see if any one of them had the sense to reject the preposterous idea.

'My uncle,' Thomas added, 'always used to say that it *never* fails,' he laughed.

'What *can* you mean?' Peter asked.

'Exactly that. A serenade *never* fails if you want to win a girl. We've seen that in Abelard's case, don't you remember?'

By now everybody seemed enthused with the idea and suggested one song or another as appropriate for the occasion while Andrew began to strum his guitar again.

‘Well, I for one, say that a serenade is a very nice thing in *any* circumstance,’ Jimmy insisted, adding as though it were an afterthought, ‘And if Peter doesn’t want to come he doesn’t have to.’

They laughed at this while Thomas derisively suggested that if Peter had cold feet he could stay in the car while they all sang at Victoria’s window.

‘I say! This is an excellent idea!’ Andrew chimed in, ‘I’ve just remembered that Victoria’s room *does* happen to have a small balcony, so she can come out and appreciate the show.’

Joseph wasn't so sure.

‘Only problem will be the old man. If we wake Father up, he’ll probably...’

‘Ring for the Police?’

‘Come at us with the old gun?’ Andrew guessed.

‘Nope. Knowing the old man, he’ll probably join us and wake the whole neighbourhood with the subsequent racket.’

Peter was not relieved by this piece of news and looked like a trapped mouse.

‘Listen boys,’ an air of supplication in his voice, ‘be sensible, we can’t go out there and start singing in the middle of...’ He felt quite unmanned.

‘Well, why not?’ Andrew asked, ‘it’s not as if it were *wrong* or something,’ he laughed, ‘and Victoria will just love it.’

‘My uncle used to say that it *never* fails.’

‘Well... I for one think that this is no time for shilly-shallying.’

By now they were all getting rather tight, except Peter who felt his resolve dwindling by the minute. And then they started to argue over the best song for the occasion and question Peter about those he happened to know, and Andrew started to play different *boleros*, until they found out that they all new *Algo contigo*. They rehearsed it a few times, laughing away at its improbable lyrics.

Before he knew what was happening, Peter found himself piled up in Jimmy's Falcon, crushed between an excited Andrew who had hopped in with his guitar and Joseph who had managed to get hold of *Pelusa's* whisky bottle while Thomas was bellowing away in the front. Stephen couldn't get in so he just lay down on the car's hood holding on to the windshields for dear life as Jimmy slowly drove round the corner bound for Victoria's house. Peter couldn't stop laughing while they all sang out of key and at the top of their voices.

By the time they got out of the car and started to sing the sky in the horizon began to light up with the first colours of dawn.

Chapter Seven

Street Serenade

It seemed a dream but that morning he actually *was* once again all alone with Victoria in the kitchen. Of course, it had been a very long night and there had been nightmarish moments when he actually felt that they had all made a hash of things and, that he, Peter, had made a perfect fool of himself.

‘Who rang the Police?’ he enquired.

Victoria turned her blue eyes on him with a chaffing smile; she also repeated what now seemed to Peter a trade-mark of sorts, her most distinctive feature——an impatient movement of the hand pushing back a long wisp of jet-black hair that kept falling over her forehead. Must be part of the black magic, Peter thought inconsequentially, since she could easily save herself the trouble with a hairpin or two.

‘Could’ve been anyone... any neighbour happening to live nearby... I mean, anyone within earshot of the racket you were all making. You made enough of a row to wake the dead,’ she laughed again, remembering, ‘I mean, that sort of hue and cry can carry quite a long way in our little town at half past five in the morning.’ Peter couldn’t detect the least sign of reproach in her voice. On the contrary, while they went over the night’s riotous events she laughed repeatedly, a delightful cataract of mixed sounds that sent shivers down his spine. He couldn’t quite stop remembering Thomas’s *ritornello*: ‘My uncle always used to say...’

All the same, he tried to justify the clatter. ‘It started in a perfectly civilised way, I thought, with all of us singing quite in tune *Algo contigo*,’ he smiled remembering the unabashed lyrics, ‘I think that beast of a dog you’ve got was wholly responsible for disturbing the neighbourhood. He has no musical sense, let alone any appreciation of romanticism and serenades.’

She laughed again.

‘Poor old Kaiser, he’s always shown himself to be rather thick-skinned where art is concerned, poor chum,’ she grinned mischievously, ‘or perhaps he was just a weeny bit jealous.’

‘Police should’ve put *him* in the jug instead of my good friends.’

True enough, they had gingerly approached the hedge just below Victoria’s window and had begun to sing quite nicely when the Wade’s dog rushed against them on the other side of the fence and promptly started howling and yelping in a frenzy. Not even Joseph could shut him up, and the rest of them resolved that the only way out of their quandary was to increase the sound of their singing voices in an attempt to outdo the brute. The row woke Victoria (and the rest of the household) and peeping through the curtains she immediately recognised her cousin Andrew, and her brother, with what looked like a gang of drunkards. But there was no question that their singing was addressed to her balcony. Some may think that she reacted rather improperly, but not Victoria, she felt honoured. She hurriedly put on her dressing gown and opened the French windows leaning over the railings of the small balcony that overlooked the singing choir. She was smiling at them radiantly until she saw Peter among the singers and instantly recognised that *he* was effectively serenading *her*, even if he was singing rather timidly next to Andrew whose voice carried much more powerfully than the rest of the company. In any case, any doubts she could’ve harboured would have been easily dispelled since her brother Joseph—— who was right behind Peter——kept indicating the suitor with an obvious and unnecessary pointed finger.

Some lights in the house indicated that they had woken more than one member of the family, and two small heads appeared in a little window next to Victoria’s room. Peter began to get cold feet again and stopped singing, but the choir seemed to take no notice, Andrew going on to a second, and also well known, serenade song.

Meanwhile the dog had discovered an opening in the fence through which it uninterruptedly barked at the musicians. It was then that Jimmy, exasperated by the noisome dog took to pouring Scotch down the animal’s throat through the hole in the hedge. This initially drove the beast into what seemed a state of derangement but soon enough it stopped barking and took to yelping, eventually backing off into the shadows with an unsteady gait that inspired Andrew and the rest of them into such fits of laughter that they just stopped singing.

Peter who hadn't quite registered the scene kept his eyes fixed on Victoria and was quite surprised when Joseph sounded the alarm.

'Christ! Police coming! Damn it!'

Sure enough a police-car had turned into the Wade's street and was coming at them at top speed. It was a disaster. Peter and Jimmy knew that an incident with the Law, however insignificant, could well be the end of his military career. They had seen quite a few of their comrades being sent down over the most minor misdemeanours.

'Through the hedge, now!' Jimmy urged his friend in a frenzy 'You've got twenty seconds to dive into the garden before...'

In effect, events seemed to require quick action and without a second thought Peter toppled over the fence while the rest of the company turned to face the car in an attempt to shelter him from the policemen's watchful eyes. The car stopped with a screech of tyres and two bulky constables resolutely got out while the driver remained at the wheel. Thomas advanced a couple of yards towards them with diplomatic intentions. There followed a rather long conversation between the Chief constable and Thomas who was appealing to all his dialectics and casuistry in what looked like a vain attempt to persuade the man that they had in no way broken the law.

'And, anyway,' he regarded the policeman with an air of innocence, 'we only meant to serenade the lady up there,' he pointed at Victoria who remained safely secluded benignly smiling at the suspicious officer. 'It's all finished by now. As a matter of fact we were about to go home, I mean,' he fiddled a bit with the well known lines, 'Why don't we just let bygones be bygones?'

Peter crouched next to the hedge while the other policeman seemed to be searching for him with a torch. He just hoped to God that the dog wouldn't come back and give him away. Victoria watched from the balcony and just smiled at him, which wasn't very prudent either, thought Peter, though he would have willingly given up his career at that very instant as long as she kept looking down at him with that particular smile on her face.

'May I please see your identity cards?' It began to be clear that the bobbies would not be dissuaded by Thomas's explanation and that they meant business.

They all produced their cards except Andrew who started to play the guitar again, this time singing ‘*The Angry March*’, an emblematic left-wing song with revolutionary lyrics meant to defame all manner of State repression. In those years to sing such a song under the authorities nose was asking for trouble. Anyway, on this occasion Andrew succeeded in undermining Thomas’s efforts to appease the officers.

*Angry at them when they laugh with might
‘cause beforehand they’ve bought all their rights.*

*Angry at them when they moralise
And then our artists start to victimise...*

‘Now listen to me, young man...’

But Andrew was clearly encouraged by the booze and in no disposition to stop his solo, not even when Thomas decidedly wrenched his guitar from him in an effort to assuage the policeman. Not in the least disconcerted by this, the other one carried on *a cappella*.

*Angry when in the face of the day
Their hypocrisy they promenade.*

This time the chief constable with a grim smile gave a step or two towards the rebel and was about to handcuff him when the house’s front door opened and Professor Wade appeared in an old fashioned smoking jacket. He briskly walked up to the gate and engaged one of the policeman with a commanding voice.

‘Look here, Sergeant, what the devil? Uh, I mean, what’s going on here?’ he asked peremptorily.

The police officer discreetly put away his handcuffs and turned to face this new character who appeared to wield some sort of authority. The man had in fact heard something about Professor Wade and seemed to remember that this neighbour in particular taught in some military institute or another. He sighed. It was difficult to do

his job when one in three of Bella Vista's neighbours were in some way or other connected to the Courts, or the Military or something. A case in point was the incensed neighbour who had denounced these youngsters. As it happened, he was a wrathful Navy officer who lived half a block away and one could be quite sure that he would be peeping now through the window to ensure that the trouble-making gang would be effectively taken into custody and his interrupted rest avenged.

'Well sir, we've received complaints from a neighbour to the effect that these youngsters here have been disturbing their rest and——'

'Absolute nonsense!' Professor Wade broke in, 'These men uh... these men here, these youngsters happen to be my guests. In fact they were just preparing to leave when you, uh, appeared. And I'm prepared to bear witness that they were only singing *at* my house, which is, to my mind, not exactly a...'

Apparently this bit of jesuitry was lost on the policeman who shrugged, recurring to the official jargon.

'Well sir, all the same I'm afraid these young men will have to come with me to the Station,' he looked around at the by now silent bunch, 'And I'm sure once we've checked their records they can carry on with... uh, whatever.' He grinned at Andrew who was by now defeated by the man's irony while Thomas couldn't quite stop thinking that he was an unusually likeable man as policemen go. Thomas resignedly gave the guitar to Professor Wade while one of the policemen took his place at the wheel of Jimmy's car. The other one opened their car doors and gravely signalled at Thomas and Jimmy to get into the back. The Chief bade Victoria's father good night and took Andrew and Joseph with him to his patrol car and in no time they whisked off leaving the incensed Professor with a dumb guitar in his hands helplessly fuming at Bobbies and all manner of authorities in general.

Once the Police had decamped Peter emerged from the dark discovering that his trousers were torn over one of his knees and that he had soiled his shirt when jumping through the fence. However he was much more concerned with the immediate future and turned half a face towards Victoria's balcony. She wasn't there and he hoped that she would appear to assist him in such awkward circumstances. Despite his disinclination he pluckily walked towards the gate that Victoria's father was trying to close, clumsily fumbling its padlock while somehow hanging on to Andrew's guitar.

‘Good evening, sir.’ But he hadn’t finished his respectful address when he happened to trip over a soft something that lay in the dark and fell sprawlingly while the beast gave a muffled yelp. The dog was evidently still suffering from a hangover of sorts and his stupefied howl seemed to underline his astonishment at the prodigious developments of that night.

‘What the hell?’ the professor was dumbfounded at the mixed sounds at his back and very nearly dropped the guitar. ‘What the devil...?’

Peter stood up feeling ridiculous and began trying to explain at top speed the foolish circumstances that had led him to trespass in such a preposterous manner but before he could quite finish his first sentence Victoria appeared out of the blue. Peter sighed with relief.

‘It’s all right, Daddy, they were only singing a serenade you know,’ she said, holding tightly the lapels of her dressing gown.

‘Well, I mean... But how the devil did this blighter...?’

But before he could question his daughter much further, she was softly but firmly pushing him inside the house with Peter following in an embarrassed way, uncertain of what to say or do. Apparently Victoria had no such hesitations.

‘Now, in we go and I’ll make coffee for you,’ she looked at her escort with a beaming smile, ignoring the Professor who seemed all at sea while looking for a place to deposit the guitar in the drawing-room. The old man protested that it was much too early for *that* and apparently had entirely forgotten the intruder’s presence. Peter discreetly withdrew into a corner of the room. Victoria’s Father yawned, proceeded to thrust the guitar into his daughter’s arms and made straight for the stairways shuffling along and muttering to himself what Peter thought amounted to non-stop gibberish where serenades, police authorities and useless dogs seemed to be the main subjects.

Suddenly they were all alone, and through one of the drawing room windows Peter saw that the morning was well on its way. They smiled at each other and Peter boldly took her in his arms while Victoria gave a worried and significant glance at the stairway.

But that had been nearly two hours before, and now they were drinking coffee in the sunny kitchen while two of Victoria’s smaller sisters were toasting bread and wrangling

over the jam and butter. He concentrated on the little girls that seemed quite deft at making their own breakfast all by themselves.

‘Don’t you think that we should better go to the Police Station and find out how things stand over there?’ he asked, ‘Or is it too far away?’ He was feeling a bit edgy at having to face Professor Wade again that morning—or Victoria’s mother who could appear at any moment. Also he felt a certain degree of compunction at his own happiness while his friends remained in custody.

‘No, it’s only a couple of blocks from here. But sure, I’ll change in a minute and off we go,’ she smiled brightly at him, her adorable dimple showing up on her left cheek.

It was a wonderful springtime morning, the dew clinging to every bud, the sun softly caressing them as they walked hand in hand on that memorable day towards the Police Station. Peter couldn't care less about his dishevelled appearance and Victoria felt that she was treading on heavenly clouds. About half way to their destination they met their recently released friends, a boisterous group in remorseless spirits that were still rehearsing ‘*The Angry March*’. On seeing them hand in hand Andrew burst out into all sorts of congratulations.

‘Hey! What? Are you engaged or what? I say! My compliments.’ He seemed quite excited with everything.

‘I told you! Thomas exclaimed, ‘My uncle always used to say...’

They all laughed at this.

‘You make a very nice couple, I must say,’ Jimmy chimed in.

‘Hey, my brother in law, what?’ said Joseph.

They all laughed again when they saw that both Peter and Victoria were blushing like mad.

Nevertheless, the two of them remained firmly hand in hand.

Chapter Eight

Messy Stuff

She was annoyed. It was *ludicrous*—a perfectly *absurd* situation, Victoria thought for the umpteenth time. She couldn't quite refrain from thinking that fortunately Peter had not yet arrived, and maybe, who knows, they would be rescued before that. But she was also beginning to get a bit edgy.

Initially Jimmy had made comforting remarks pointing out that they were in no danger at all and that while the whole thing was rather boring, there was nothing to worry about.

‘I'm not *afraid*, if you want to know,’ Victoria protested. But she kept thinking of Peter and had to admit to herself that she would very much prefer to be set free from that trap before he arrived. It was a preposterous situation and she felt that some frightful cosmic joke was being played on her which she just didn't find funny: the worst part of all, she thought while making faces to the mirror in the lift, was that there was no one to be angry with, no scapegoat, and in a small compartment like that one, you couldn't very well vent your indignation without making a fool of yourself; as things stood, the circumstances were sufficiently ridiculous as they were.

Eyeing her grimacing face in the mirror, Jimmy laughed.

‘We'll be out of here in no time,’ he remarked. ‘At any moment someone will find out that this thing isn't working and will surely give notice to... hmmm... well, the service people.’ He kept to himself his doubts about who the hell was in charge of the elevator's maintenance and the fact that whoever it was, in any case would probably be out that night. He wondered fleetingly how he could possibly have lived in that School for the better part of four years without identifying the people that attended to the lift. Well, he thought, that was only one of his distractions: if only he'd been a bit more attentive, he told himself, he would probably have saved himself a lot of lost time in that place anyway.

For all her unselfconsciousness, Victoria could not but feel an acute discomfort confined as she was in such reduced circumstances with Peter's best friend. Jimmy looked quite handsome. He was sporting a becoming dinner jacket, his rather long ginger hair carefully combed, his by now well grown moustache which made him look older, and some very elegant silver cuff links, even though the overall effect was somehow spoilt now that he sat in a corner, his arms around his knees, with an impish grin on his face. She apprehensively hoped he wouldn't start any monkeying which would be typical of him, she thought. Just in case and to put him off, she began to powder her face looking into the mirror with deliberate concentration.

They had met on the lower floor and Jimmy had offered to call for the lift for which she had been grateful, unsure as she felt of going up the stately stairs wearing the rather uncomfortable high heels and long dress she was wearing for the very first time. The lift had only started on its short journey when it suddenly stuck midway and refused to budge notwithstanding Jimmy's all manner of exertions with its buttons. After a bit of shouting and some hammering on the wooden panels he had finally resorted to the red button but the alarm bell didn't seem to be achieving much, ringing against the noisy reception downstairs and the orchestra in full swing on the upper floor. After the first three minutes of sounding the bell continuously he finally resigned himself to their predicament and squatted in his corner while waiting for someone to find out that the lift was out of order and proceed to rescue them. But he showed no sign of being in the least bothered by their plight.

‘Rotten luck, isn’t it?’

He began drumming his fingers against a wooden panel rhythmically following ‘Proud Mary’, the hit that seemed to defy fashion and that could be distinctly heard in the lift. Victoria felt an increasing urge to smoke a cigarette despite the fact that she could easily see that the last thing they wanted was to fill the chamber with tobacco smoke. They were prisoners, she thought with compressed lips, and wondered for how long, and thought more and more about getting out, and less and less about anything else.

There was nothing to do except wait. And talk.

It began, of course, with small talk, Jimmy enquiring about Peter and Victoria informing him how they had arranged to come separately and meet at the ball.

Jimmy cracked a first one with a facetious reference to Peter and his ungentlemanly ways seeing that this cavalier hadn't even bothered to collect her lady personally, delegating the task to old Suter instead of handling the transportation of such a treasure himself. Looking at Victoria's face he instantly regretted his irony, deciding that it would be better to steer the conversation to lesser topics.

Because, in effect, Victoria was gradually losing poise. She felt like taking her high heeled shoes off but checked herself and explained instead that Peter had no car and that they had both thought that meeting at the ball was the best arrangement. As a matter of fact the two of them had indeed thought that he, Jimmy, actually *could* have offered his services and car for the occasion——and hadn't.

‘We are not on the best of terms lately,’ Jimmy explained into the silent censure. He looked at the floor, feeling Victoria's tenseness.

‘I know that,’ said Victoria eyeing the red button with a worried look, ‘but offering your car surely would have gone a long way to make amends.’

Jimmy sighed while detecting the first intimations of sweat in his underarms. She was right, of course. He gave her a quick glance and saw that she was putting away her powder case into her tiny handbag. She shifted it from one hand to the other and firmly crossed her arms in a silent and unmistakable statement.

‘Well, the fact is that Peter is really so much taken up by his new destination, what with all the excitement of his new post in Covunco, he just doesn't seem interested in anything else.’ He shook his head. ‘One hell of a hole, that’ he added disparagingly.

Victoria remained silent and began to feel a bit dizzy. She well knew that Jimmy had thought Peter's posting as the worse possible for a young officer. But Peter had only shrugged his shoulders at the other's comment. Their friendship was certainly cooling down and Victoria was beginning to suspect a little envy in Jimmy's bad tempered and opinionated views on everything concerning his friend's professional future.

She shifted uncomfortably and started to think that by now surely Peter must be out there, looking for her in vain. If only that damned lift would move a couple of feet they could get out of there. Just a few feet she thought again, and they would be free. She made an effort to control her increasing dizziness. No good fainting in these circumstances, she glumly thought.

Jimmy laughed at this, for, once again, Victoria had voiced her thoughts.

‘Can women actually decide when to faint and when not?’ he asked.

‘Sometimes,’ she said, without smiling.

They were silent for a couple of minutes listening to the remote voices and music, but presently Victoria decided that talking would somehow relieve some of her tension.

With an effort she decided to say something, *anything*.

‘I wish you two——Peter and you——would stop arguing over this and that...’ she said, ‘I mean, life is complicated enough without having to get into such——’ She sighed, not quite knowing what she wanted to say. ‘Well, you know... I mean, friends for such a long time, and now not even on *speaking* terms. It’s a bit thick don’t you find?’

Jimmy got up and pushed the alarm bell again for a full minute. Then he crouched in his corner again with a torrent of abuse against the military in general, and more to the point, against that damned lift. It was getting warm in there and he felt the sweat under his armpits. Then he thought that at any moment an urge to pass water would considerably complicate things. He impatiently brushed the idea aside. He was also beginning to feel self-pity, which perhaps should have served him as a warning.

‘Life is a bit like this lift,’ he sighed, ‘you embark expecting it to take you to higher places and suddenly you’re stuck and uncomfortable and you soon find yourself deploring the whole idea... Whose idea was it in the first place, eh?’ he asked rhetorically to the door. ‘And all you want is to get off, and, well, you just can’t... You know, stop-the-world-I-wanna-get-off... and you depend on others to rescue you.’ He sighed again. ‘I’m sorry I ever offered you a lift,’ he added with a disarming smile.

Victoria wasn’t sure of the meaning of all this divagation but well knew that there was more to it than met the eye, and was afraid that Jimmy would overstep his limits any moment. She felt new knots in her belly and anxiously thought once again of getting out of there, somehow, soon. However she mustered just enough self control and energy to change the subject——as well as she could.

‘Peter has told me that you’ve been into *poetry* lately,’ she remarked, biting a nail distractedly.

Nothing was very clear from recent reports on Jimmy's doings since he had chucked his military career on the basis of what Peter called a few hastily concocted ideas. But she did know that he hadn't taken up a proper job, was not even *considering* a university degree, was not socialising with his old friends any more but had instead taken up with a new bunch he had picked up at some bar or another. Thomas happened to know one or two of them and disdainfully considered them an assortment of 'dirty hippies.' The poetry part had come up in one of Veronica's long pieces of gossip about this or the other. Peter had grunted at this bit of news, dismissing it as unacceptably frivolous. 'Poetry, of all things. I'd like to see one or two of his pieces. I ask you, Jimmy into poetry!,' he had commented with half a smile.

Jimmy grinned at the disdainful way she had pronounced the word "poetry" and immediately recognised Peter's views behind the curtain. And, of course, he smiled thinking how most women tend to express their fiancé's views as if they had actually thought it out for themselves.

'Yup,' he grinned again, '*into* poetry, as you say.' He gave a short laugh, but suddenly adopted a grave demeanour. 'I don't want to miss Beauty's Funerals.'

She felt lost. 'Beauty's what?'

'Yes. Funerals. The whole Western world is going down the drain, but poetry is going faster. On the whole, I don't think that even *painting* has degraded itself to such an extent... Hmm. Or, for that matter, cinema, though if that's art or not is certainly a debatable point. Anyway I intend to be present at the funerals of beauty and, if I have my way, will declaim on that occasion my odes to the death of poetry——poetically, if I can.'

'I don't think I can quite follow you.'

'Well, how about trying to explain it to you in verse?'

Victoria shifted uncomfortably. The last thing she needed, under the circumstances, was to listen to... but there was no stopping him.

'Very recently I've concocted a sonnet that I shall proceed to recite for the benefit of the whole of my audience of one.' He stood up and pushed the red button for a full minute while concentrating on his next lines. 'Listen,' he said, a raffish grin on his face.

*We're stuck in a lift, Victoria and I
While people are dancing and singing away,*

‘Stop it, will you?’ Victoria, pleaded. Her acute discomfort was reaching panic levels. Jimmy was so enthused by his bardic display that he didn't quite measure Victoria's alarm.

*Life is a promise that never will pay
For all your misgivings...*

Suddenly a somewhat muffled cry interrupted his oration, ‘You all right in there?’ someone was yelling behind the waxed wooden panels, ‘Hold on! We'll get you out in no time.’

A bit ruffled by the interruption, he yelled back that they were all right and with a blink at Victoria unnecessarily added that they were in no hurry to get out.

The relief was somehow too much for Victoria and she could feel her strained nerves beginning to give way, like a cracked damn to high pressure. She felt so distracted that she couldn't even understand what Jimmy was now saying and she failed to see why he just wouldn't stop talking. She could only think of getting out of there, as fast as possible.

‘... maybe I should stay here... maybe I should refuse to come out, and stay here for ever and ever... After all, there are worse fates than being stuck with...’

The flow of balderdash made her feel dizzy, hot and cold in turns, and Jimmy's voice in the lift took on a nightmarish echo that made her want to scream.

And then suddenly he shut up, and the lift moved and in no time she was extricated from the cage and carried off by three solicitous cadets who took the dazzled girl out to the big balcony that overlooked the vast college gardens. One of the three was Peter who was fanning the fresh air with a magazine repeatedly asking her if she was all right. Presently she pulled herself together, sat down on the balcony and gratefully drank a glass of water. Eventually she smoked a much needed cigarette and felt the better for it.

Jimmy explained offhandedly that they had only been trapped for no more than a quarter of an hour and that they had been perfectly all right. Victoria looked out on the gardens silently assenting. But she was beginning to digest what Jimmy had been driving at in that beastly lift—and found that she didn't like it at all. A whiff of vanity barely made up for the implications of Jimmy's attitude. And she really thought it rather disloyal of him to Peter. On the other hand, taking advantage of that trap didn't appeal to her sense of chivalry either.

Peter was trying to handle his mixed feelings as best he could—partly relieved, partly jealous—and contented himself with holding Victoria's hand in an effort to regain, as it were, possession of his temporarily lost lover. Presently Jimmy and the other two cadets discreetly left them alone and headed for the bar.

Chapter Nine

A grief observed

Victoria was dead tired when she finally arrived home and dropped with relief the cumbersome sack she had been carrying. With its bulky drawing board, dozens of pencils, gouges, water-colours, temperas, folders with sketches and all the rest of the paraphernalia thought to be necessary for an Art School student, that bag was a pain in the neck. She enjoyed her classes all right but had soon found out that carrying this heavy bundle to and fro from Bella Vista to Buenos Aires——using public transport and, worse, the twelve block walk from the railway station to her place——was as irksome as inevitable.

She had started Art with girlish assurance and had naively thought that perhaps her melomania could be expressed and transferred into painting, a craft in which she had done passably well at high school. But she soon discovered that before anything else, she would have to undergo hours and hours of an exacting drill by which she was supposed to acquire the necessary expertise in drawing, a difficult technique if ever there was one. She always knew that she would have to learn to draw before going on to anything else, and yet she only began to fathom what it takes after long hours of sweat over perspective exercises, shadowing techniques and what not. The truth was that she hadn't even completed her first term and already was beginning to have second thoughts about her chosen career. On top of it, being forced to struggle daily with her impedimenta sometimes seemed to be just too much. It was usually on these excursions that she could only dejectedly think that she was probably in the wrong business. Only thing was, she couldn't think of anything else to do. And then, her granny Felisa was paying through the nose for her school fees, let alone for the expensive and bothersome gear. It was always with great relief that she dumped the bag as soon as she got home, the bang on the floor a clear announcement that she was back home.

'Daddy refuses to come out. He's done it again and just won't come out,' Lucy, her sixteen year old sister mournfully informed her with a wrinkled forehead, 'He hasn't

even *shaved*,' she added with plain disapproval, 'and Annie's told me that he's been asking for his ear-trumpet again.'

Victoria sighed. Lucy was quite different from her elder sister, a small plump girl with a rather mouse-like face in which two very black eyes made a surprising contrast with her white skin and sandy tousled hair that she always kept quite short. But what most surprised anyone meeting the two sisters was the fact that Lucy had a sharp high-pitched voice. She was of a jocular disposition and her easy-going ways captivated most of the boys she met. She was in charge while Victoria was out; there was no one else who could decently run the house since Philip had left for the Seminary and the rest of her brothers and sisters were too young to ask much of them, except Joseph who sometimes, and then reluctantly, did the shopping at the grocer's or the bakery a few blocks away. Lucy counted heavily on the two old female servants for the laundry and cooking, but even then there was all the beds to be made, the sweeping and sewing and the infinite number of requests her little brothers and sisters would daily come up with. 'Where are my socks?' 'Will you come up and see me act at the school play?' 'Where can I find a comb?' 'Who's going to comb me?' 'Madelaine won't let me comb her', 'So and so has thrown the comb at me again' and so on and so forth. Victoria found that the worse part was everything linked to their schooling, homework, uniforms *et al*. In those days, teachers were not as tiresome and exacting as nowadays, requiring parents and tutors to be constantly peeping over their children's shoulders and ensuring that they do their homework, but all the same, Victoria thought she had enough on her plate as things stood without having, on top of everything else, to help the little ones draw maps or do their exercises.

Since their mother's death, a few months before, Lucy and Victoria had had to handle the house between them, and had soon found out that it was no easy thing. Their daughterly grief was soon allayed with the responsibility that had suddenly fallen upon them. The two girls had bravely faced their bereavement but, all the same, there were times when they both just felt like sitting down and crying—which they actually did on one occasion. After that, they only had to remember the despair, the moaning and general self-pity which had been displayed on that rather morbid occasion to avert any relapse in the same direction. The girls had sensibly decided that *anything* was better than that.

The worse part was Professor's Wade sudden collapse. He had sailed through the first few weeks of widowhood with a grave countenance and sad smiles and remained unusually silent when he showed up for family meals. It all seemed natural enough. But for the better part of the day he remained aloof in his study listening to Bach from a small tape recorder and looking vacantly out of the window. He certainly knew nothing of the family's ups and downs. Things had worsened when a couple of months after his wife's death he applied for a long delayed retirement and stopped lecturing. He wasn't even busy these days. And recently, he had returned to his old habit of feigning a case of progressive and most irritating deafness. Of, course, it didn't mean much to them all, having seen him during the last couple of years on several occasions loaf around the house with a ridiculous ear-trumpet he had acquired some years ago. He seemed to remember its need when particularly worried by something or other, and his late wife used to humour him while affecting not to notice it inducing the children to speak near the trumpet's mouth at the top of their voice. That usually did the trick, and for some months the extravagant artefact was not to be seen, until he somehow stumbled, so to speak, on the trumpet, and the number was on again. An old and tired man, maybe defeated this time by grief, Victoria reflected, taking refuge in his eccentric foibles.

She sighed once more and headed for her father's study. For the last two days he had refused to eat except a few biscuits with his tea, and would not budge from his study for love or money, just snoozing from time to time in his armchair and not giving the least sign of interest in anything under the sun. And now he hadn't even shaved, which seemed most uncharacteristic of him.

Victoria was about to enter the study when suddenly the door opened and an old man came out in something of a hurry bumping into the young girl.

'Oh, sorry, I'm in a bit of a hurry.'

It was Díaz, the physician. In effect, Lucy had summoned the family doctor, who had been examining his patient when Victoria arrived. Doctor Díaz was an old friend and promptly paid the requested visit—only to come out of the study shaking his head at the girls' anxious questions. The quack was an impersonation of the typical family doctor with huge white whiskers, very small spectacles and his emblematic dark brown leather bag. Victoria remembered that when she was a child the old man used to come round in the evenings for a drink and a game of chess with her father, though that

seemed ages ago. The times when she still had a mother, she thought, making a wry face.

There was nothing wrong with the Professor, the old man informed——nothing, that is, that he could do anything about. And he certainly was not deaf.

‘Well, what *can* we do?’ Victoria enquired.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. ‘I don’t really know, dear girl,’ he answered while lighting what seemed to be a very old pipe. ‘I should try *everything*, from music to card playing, from gardening to the cinema or even...’ he winked at Victoria with an impish grin, ‘or even... I don’t know, getting him to meet interesting people.’ He laughed at Victoria’s censorious face. ‘Listen, my girl,’ he said assuming a grave but more sympathetic tone, ‘I’ve already tried to get him to play chess with me, and do you know what he said?’ The doctor let go of his bag and sat down on a stool that happened to be in the middle of the room. Victoria looked down at him with a mixture of interest and tiredness. ‘He said that it was too late, that it was too late now for anything but his own death.’ The old man puffed at his pipe with concentration. ‘I think he might well be right if it were not for all of *you*.’ With a vague swish of his right arm and a critical eye he pointedly surveyed the untidy room. As if to underline his words, one of the twins started to cry somewhere upstairs. Victoria sighed and furiously fought back a couple of unwelcome tears that inevitably welled up.

‘So, what did you say to him?’ Lucy asked.

The man turned to Lucy. ‘Well I told him as much, but, not much more, dear girl, not much more.’ The medic got up, took his bag with a firm grip and headed for the door while Victoria followed him. He gave her a quick kiss and a pat on her head before disappearing into the evening twilight leaving a pensive girl standing on the porch.

Finally, she turned round and went to her father’s study without bothering to knock on the door. To all appearances Professor Wade was dozing but as soon as he heard her coming in he opened his eyes. ‘Oh? It’s you Victoria? Hello, dear. Please, uh, sit down. Have a nice day?’ he mumbled in a rather drowsy voice. She sat down on a little stool by her father’s armchair with a stern look on her face. He smiled at her rather wanly and took her little white hand in his; she was surprised to discover how cold he was. All the reproaches she was prepared to deliver were instantly drowned in a wave of filial solicitude. ‘Father, are you warm enough? Do you think you have a temperature?’ She

put a hand on his forehead. ‘Shall I make you a cup of tea?’ she asked anxiously, ‘Won’t you have something to eat?’

He straightened himself in an unwieldy fashion on the enormous armchair and shook his head, with a fond smile. Maybe Victoria wasn’t quite aware of it, but he clearly loved her more than the rest of his children. She was his eldest daughter, and they had chosen her name because it was the name of all his expectations and all his hopes. ‘No, thanks, dear’, he smiled again, ‘I don’t feel like *reading* at all,’ he said, relishing the deliberate misconception with an affected drawl. Victoria deliberately shouted her question again only inches from his left ear, and that put an end to the old man’s pretence of deafness. ‘No, dear, I’m all right. Maybe I’ll muster enough energy to have dinner with you all tonight, but just now I’ll have a cigarette instead, if you don’t mind. Please.’ It was an open secret that Victoria had been smoking since she was sixteen years old, but only now did the Professor acknowledge it. So, blushing a bit, she handed over a pack and matches to her father who proceeded to light and puff at the thing as if it were a pipe, the end of the butt brightly signalling that it was well alight.

‘Do you happen to know where my ear-trumpet is?’ he asked distractedly. She shook her head impatiently.

The man sighed affectedly. ‘Do you know what old Doctor Díaz has been saying to me?’ he asked. ‘Well’, he puffed slowly at his cigarette while looking at a bookcase in front of him, ‘he reproachfully accused me of not trying to get *over*... I ask you... And, well, I suppose... you know, he rather bullied me a bit... uh——nothing new, what? Just what quacks usually do anyway——to the effect that I should *pull* myself together and get on with life and everything.’ He glanced inquisitively at his daughter searching for signs of intelligence in her face. Victoria looked on impassively. ‘Might as well try and pull myself out of a hole by tugging at my hair...’

Victoria sighed. ‘Yes, well, he actually *did* tell me that, yes.’ She straightened her skirt across her joined white knees and added: ‘And I must say, I find it quite a sound piece of advice.’ She sighed again, before saying straight to her father’s face: ‘We all need you, you know... so much.’ This time she couldn’t repress her tears, which flowed freely down her cheeks. The old man tightened his grip around Victoria’s hand and said nothing. There was a pause, while Victoria got hold of her handkerchief and dried her eyes. After that she lighted a cigarette, the first ever in front of her father.

‘I *know* how much you need me, especially now that your mother isn’t around.’ He got up with visible effort and slowly shuffled over to the bookcase where he arranged one or two books before sitting down again rather heavily. ‘But the truth is that there’s... how shall I say, Victoria?’ He shook his head. ‘There’s not much *left* of me to help anyway.’ He shrugged his shoulders and cleared his voice a bit, while Victoria looked up at him with interest. It was the first time since her mother’s death that her father was actually saying something. ‘I’m a bit dead myself, if you have to know.’

Victoria waited while she smoked in silence. She knew her father well enough to know that he would elaborate without need of any encouragement.

‘I like that... *Pull* myself together, what?... I ask you... when half of me isn’t even there... No, old Díaz couldn’t understand it—he wouldn’t find anything about that in any of his mumbo jumbo treatises of his anyway—but the truth is I’m half-dead, you know, since your mother passed away. We were married till death would us part, and now that she’s gone I feel half dead, that’s all. I mean, uh, I never thought one could feel like this, but there it is, I don’t think I can quite get over this... Living without half a life, half dying all the time.’ He sighed and seemed to be on the verge of tears, except that he belonged to an older generation of men who were trained not to, ever. Certainly not with self-pity, and certainly not in front of his daughter. All the same, Victoria knew about his feelings, if not from his words, from his grip that tightened now and then like poetic overtones as it were, emphasising with his cold hand the accents of his grief.

‘It’s all very well, you know, to repeat all that cheap modern voluntarism so dear to our priests, and doctors, and aunts, and shrinks... All that crap you know, about being strong, stiff upper lip and so forth... uh... I don’t know. That I *must* think of the rest of the family, that life goes on, that I must be a *man*... I ask you, they’re telling a dead man to be a man. Well, half dead, anyway,’ he added with a weary smile. He sighed and emptied a small ashtray into a waste paper basket that was conveniently located at his side. Victoria noticed that he had put on the same black tie, as he had every single day since Saint Patrick’s day, the date of her mother’s death. On the other hand he hadn’t bothered to change his slippers, a blatant incongruity in his outfit. But the old man kept on with his ruminations.

‘I need time, you know. I’m only asking for a bit of time to get over this... if and when.’ He suddenly stopped and vacantly gazed through the window.

‘Get over... get over *what?*’ her daughter delicately prompted.

The old man remained silent.

But Victoria had been brought up by her parents to talk things over, as extensively, as plainly, as simply or as elaborately as possible. It was like an infectious game that had been played with relish over and over again in the Wade family, and the old professor was responsible for it. For instance, if you happened to be in that house and said that you had a headache, everyone would suddenly turn round and inquire all about your ailment, when had it started, was it recurrent, what did one do about it, could you link it to what you eat, or were you especially worried about something or the other. All the family, even the little ones would ask all sorts of questions about it and you were generally forced to admit that you hadn’t thought much about the damn thing in the first place, and yet, all the inquisitiveness was easily compensated by the general interest in your plight, and the display of good wishes would generally supply unusual comfort for anyone subjected to the Wade curiosity-game. At the same time, there was always a bit of a private joke underlying such disproportionate interest.

‘You say that you have to get over... Well? Get over *what?*’ she insisted.

He smiled knowingly and felt rather proud of his daughter not letting go, just as he had taught her. ‘Get over what? I’ll tell you, dear Victoria, if only you’ll listen for a while,’ he sighed again, ‘I never knew one could feel so miserable and keep on living.’

Victoria wouldn’t let go. ‘I’m listening,’ she said.

‘When I met your mother nearly a quarter of a century ago, I was reading Victor Hugo: *C’était une femme, donc malheureuse*. Means something like, ‘she was a woman, and therefore...’ Well it can’t be translated... ‘unfortunate’ or something like that. Anyway I thought that if Frances would ever consent to marry me——something that seemed quite impossible then——’ He smiled at this, already deeply submerged in his memories, ‘As I say, I promised that, if she ever consented to such a preposterous project, I would always strive to make her happy, as happy as I could.’ He sighed again. ‘I know it sounds sort of dreamy, put that way... unless you happen to see what I’m driving at.’ He looked at his daughter suspiciously, but Victoria’s face revealed nothing. ‘Happiness is a big suitcase, full of things... but I thought I could amuse her, and cheer her up, and make her laugh, and please her, and make her feel proud of me and her family...’ The old man smiled wanly at her daughter. ‘As you see, it was a tall order and

a silly thing to promise; but then, you see, I was in love and when one is young and in love, one is prone to say and do foolish things... And on the other hand, is there any other way of loving truthfully and *not* saying and promising impossible things? Indeed, can someone love seriously and remain self-possessed, discreet and prudent?... Indeed, be in love and not enthused?' He looked through the window as if someone would answer back. 'Plato says differently. And then what actually happened is that I soon forgot all about my promises and *she*, without having promised a thing, actually made *me* happy... Now don't misunderstand me, it's not that I *made* her unhappy, with a few exceptions here and there—and I'll go into that in a minute—but, what I'm saying is that I really, completely, absolutely *forgot* about that. You know, about trying, at least very frequently, to ensure her a joyful day... I probably made all these rash promises only to seduce her, you know the way we men have of...' His voice faltered while he seemed to think about what he was saying.

After a pause he gestured to his daughter for another cigarette and puffed a bit while looking down at the floor. 'And then, as I say, *she* actually went out of her way to make *me* happy, daily, in a consistent, determined, resolute, obstinate and cheerful way. She would see to this business of having a happy husband every minute of every day with a drive, an unconquerable will, with grit and aplomb, with a decisiveness that I hadn't imagined... It was all so *invisibly* done, you know. And now that I realise it... what's the use?' The smoke from another cigarette rose slowly towards the ceiling, and Victoria couldn't help thinking that there was an unusual stillness in that study, that evening. She remained as quiet as ever.

'The French poet, was it Claudel? Yes, Claudel. Well anyway, he once said that a woman is a promise she cannot keep. Well, I'll tell you something, your mother kept it all right. Indeed. She was the most beautiful girl I had ever met, and beauty is only a promise, you know. I think Goethe once said something like that, didn't he, something to the effect that beauty promises more than it actually delivers. But your mother was so... and to me, when we met years ago, with her swirling skirts and young laughter, seemed to be such an enormous promise. I couldn't quite believe she had actually fallen for me. And yet she had. And she *delivered* so much.' The joke hovered on his lips. 'All of you, in the first place.'

Victoria smiled for the first time that evening.

‘We got married rather young, you know...’ he sort of hedged with different angles, juggling with each possible approach to what he wanted to say, even if the subject was only one. ‘I had to get away from home... hmmm..., Well, I suppose I’ve told you all about this before, you know—all about your grandparents and... well, anyway, I got away from them, sure enough, and the idea behind the whole thing, of running away from home and getting married was this fantastic project we had of building a *new* home for us. These things are easily said, but are very difficult to realise you know... And it’s not only a question of money. For one thing, I couldn’t very well run away from myself, and I carried my own bag of resentfulness and inconsistencies which made me a young man of difficult disposition, if you know what I mean.’ He smiled as he looked back on himself. ‘Still am, up to a point. Men make houses, but women make homes. She was a balm of sorts, you know, the remedy of so many... a real pick-me-up. There’s more than meets the eye in a youngster who hasn’t been happy for most of his life. Some hidden sore spots can secretly remain there, lurking in darkness, doing quite a lot of harm, breaking you up and turning you into a thoroughly unreliable character, you know... But Frances your mother saw through me and just *cured* me...’ The old man sighed again. ‘Not only with caresses and fond kisses... though, mind you, there was plenty of that too...’ Victoria blushed unobserved by her father who by now was too much immersed in his memories to notice the typical embarrassment of children when they hear about their parent’s intimacies.

‘She could be quite severe too if need be. I remember the day she locked me out of home just because I was in a terrible mood and had started insulting the whole household because one of you had lost a screwdriver... That also was a *cure* of sorts... I finally got in through the skylight and promptly broke my leg in the process, much to your mother’s distress—and laughter. Anyway, that was the last time I made a scene because of lost tools and the like.’ He looked at his eldest daughter in a most endearing fashion, a mixed formula of laughing eyes and the tiniest of smiles. ‘She gave me all of you, she delivered excellent cooking and cordial smiles, and love words—we men need them as much as women do, you know——, and then, I don’t know... She *sacrificed* herself. But not a trace of bigotry there, or elsewhere for that matter, thank God. She gave herself up to all of us with such energy and purpose, devotion and kindness, with unflinching merriment—I will always remember her humming in the

kitchen, despite the fact that usually there wasn't much food to cook, we were quite poor some years ago...' His discourse seemed to dwindle now, but Victoria knew better.

'I'm sorry to ramble on like this, Victoria, but... anyway, housewives like her have been the backbone of the world such as we knew it, the invisible net that held together so much merriment for so many generations.' He inadvertently took on somewhat professorial airs. 'And now they are being scoffed at... Our wonderful modern and oh so, so, *progressive*, progressive!, I ask you, *world* has convicted them all, uh, sentenced all our grannies and aunts, and mothers without even hearing out their case. But their work is surely the most important job—Wasn't it Lewis who asked what do ships, railways, mines, cars, governments, etc., exist for except that people may be fed, warmed, and safe in their own homes? And all this stuff and nonsense is not only foolish, it's also quite sad. This world, Victoria, is losing glee by the day, and no one seems to notice, let alone *do* something about it. And one of the reasons for this, dear girl, is that women like your mother are getting scarce, are constantly being mocked at, the systematic object of ridicule and derision by all that devilry of journalists and feminists, psychologists and modernist priests, liberal politicians, etc. You know, the progressive blokes that Chesterton knocked out decades ago. Intellectually, that is. But no, they never give up.' Victoria silently observed the irate old professor she had always loved, and couldn't quite repress a smile.

'Just like Saint Exupéry, I hate this world with all my guts.' He was evidently feeling a bit better after his anti-modern outburst. 'But Frances, your mother, she didn't. She just ignored it, peacefully. She brought you up in the sacred tradition of songs and prayer, of joyful meals and all the good old stories. She wasn't even interested, you know, in newspapers or T.V., never questioning my decision of not allowing that silly box in the house—even when she enjoyed seeing a soap opera now and then. You could say, as I have heard more than once, that she was old fashioned... So what? She didn't care for fashion... However, she could dress up with prim decorum when the occasion required it. And all the time, you know, she just *adored* The Beatles,' he frowned a bit at this, 'and even if she couldn't exactly make me come round, I used to love hearing her hum "Penny Lane" in that quiet way of hers.' He shifted in his armchair and his voice took on a slower pace, as if he were picking his words. 'I hope you marry Peter one day and make him as happy as your mother did with me, bless your heart.'

Victoria couldn't quite stop her tears now, suddenly awash by waves of glimpses coming back to her from her childhood. But the old man still went on and on, steeped in his own thoughts and memories.

'She didn't care much for what was *going on* you know. For instance, I remember telling her about Kennedy's murder, or about Armstrong walking on the moon for the first time... She wasn't very much impressed by that sort of thing because she would be typically worrying about the butcher's mother's state of health or something. She *believed* in her neighbours in a religious sort of way if you know what I mean. They were ever present to her, because she felt them, I don't know, so *near*. And that's the reason why she was so attentive, so heedful of all and sundry. Anyone in her presence could instantly feel how absorbed she would be by *your* problems, *your* life. She seemed to have a soft spot in her heart for the most unseemly people... I always liked her for that. Simone Weil says that you can't quite love God in a direct way. Not unless you first love your neighbour. Implicit love, she calls it. I don't know... she even says that there are times when even *thinking* of God separates us from him, believe it or not. Well, your mother, she knew all about that without having read Simone Weil—or anything else, for that matter.' Victoria's mother's illiteracy had always been something of a family joke. 'I stumbled over Kierkegaard's distinction between Religion 'A' and 'B' only a couple of years ago, for God's sake. But she knew it all along. She only *talked* to you about God, or Religion, when you were little, but as soon as you could reason and began to understand the world, she wouldn't even mention the subject to you—or to me, for that matter.' He wrinkled his forehead, stretching his memory. 'She prayed all right, I know that, but in an unselfconscious manner, not a trace of bigotry in her. I've been re-reading her letters...'

Victoria looked up with sudden interest. She knew nothing about her mother's letters. But he was referring to recent letters written to Philip, her brother, not love letters to her father.

'Philip thought of bringing them up so I could read them. There are only two, written to him just before... uh... just before he joined the Seminary. You should read them, you know, they show in just what class your mother was. No devotional turn of phrases. No *religion*, in the ordinary sense of the word. Just common sense and motherly advice. Be good. Be patient. Be a good boy... And yet... There's a quality in the way she phrases these platitudes that one can only begin to fathom after reading them a couple of times,

you know. You end up seeing that if you're not *nice*, in a general sort of way, you might as well chuck away the whole of your religiousness. That if you're not patient and kind to *whoever* you happen to have as a neighbour you're done for. She even writes that one should be pleasing to *oneself* in the first place, which to my mind sounded quite heretical. *Aversio creaturam*. And yet I happened to look it up in my Concordance and, by Jove, didn't I find the same idea in one of David's Psalms?'

'Well, what about the First Commandment, then? Not to mention "Please, please me"' Victoria said with a grin.

'Eehhh?', the Professor only knew about The Beatles what his wife had told him—which wasn't much, in any case.

'Nothing, nothing, Father.'

'Well, my girl, don't be cheeky, taking advantage of an ailing old man like me.'

'It's a song by The Beatles, Father.'

'Is it?'

'Yes, Please, please me.'

He hunched his shoulders at this piece of information.

'Not a very *Christian* way of putting it,' he snorted, 'but anyway, I suppose that's the general idea.' He took another cigarette from Victoria's pack and left it between his lips while looking through the window. It was dark by now and you could only see a distant light from the neighbour's house. Victoria shifted on her stool and waited for more.

'Please please me, and don't let me down, what?'

Victoria was quite surprised at this.

'Oh, so you *have* actually listened to The Beatles, Dad, haven't you?' she enquired.

'Not me, young girl. But as you well know, your mother was quite a fan so I couldn't quite help *hearing* some of their songs... I ask you. Took quite a lot of patience from this soul I can tell you, but yes... and I once took your mother to the cinema to see that dreadful film of theirs, what was it called?'

'Let it be.'

‘That’s the one. I fell asleep instantly and only woke at the end to find these hairy blighters singing rowdily on top of a terrace or something while the police went after them... A frightful film, if you ask me, with that horrible hairy character, George Lennon or something, all wrapped up in furs and crying out “Don’t let me down” or words to that effect.’ He turned towards Victoria with a smile. ‘Your mother just ate it.’ He sighed again. ‘But anyway, as long as she was happy I felt happy also, and then all of you felt better and the family seemed to benefit with all this... so it seemed a good investment, humouring her with all this Beatle nonsense.’

‘Maybe if you listened to them now, you’d change your mind,’ Victoria hinted with a grin.

The professor shook his head. He got up from his armchair and started a small walk along the book shelves, his back turned to his daughter, shuffling this way and that in front of them, the unlighted cigarette in his right hand.

‘You’ve got a nerve, young girl. The very idea. It would only remind me of your mother and the fact that she’s gone for ever and not, repeat, *not* coming back.’ He reached for the box of matches and lit up with a trembling hand. Then he turned to face the long lines of books, picking at the back of one or another. Victoria could only hear him by stretching her ears.

‘She didn’t let me down and she always pleased, pleased me until... until...’

Victoria thought she heard him sob or choke or something but didn’t dare move. By now she couldn’t quite repress her own tears.

After what seemed centuries, the old man turned and sat down in his armchair again, with a semblance of regained composure. His wrinkled face was dry and he managed to smile at Victoria.

‘Very well, young girl. Enough. Run along now and leave me for a bit. I’m dead tired. I think I’ll just have a nap until dinnertime, and then, maybe you can tell me more about that song... Now that your mother isn’t around I... uh, it’s just possible that I’ll let you harass me with those confounded, hairy, bleating upstarts. Now run along, young girl. I want to be alone for a while. Please, please me, will you?’

Victoria left the room and nearly bumped into Lucy who was in the next room waiting for news.

'So? How's he doing?' the anxious girl asked.

'Getting better,' smiled Victoria.

Chapter Ten

Lunch at the Courts

‘Whaaattt? You can’t be serious, I mean, you can’t,’ he raised his eyes to the ceiling.

‘How shall I put it? It’s *wrong*.’ Thomas was completely bewildered.

‘Oh I know that. But before being wrong, it simply *is*. It’s a fact, and I can’t help it.’

‘I can’t believe my ears.’

‘I knew I shouldn’t have given myself away just like that... All along I thought you might come up with a bit of squeamishness, but no, uh, I don’t know, maybe I shouldn’t have told you.’

They were in a small restaurant near the Courts where Thomas worked as a kind of under-secretary to a Judge. He had just been paid his monthly salary and had invited Jimmy for lunch. They had not seen much of each other recently, despite the fact that Thomas frequented the Elizalde’s home quite a lot since he had got engaged to Veronica. But for one reason or another Jimmy never seemed to be in, and Veronica was always rather vague when it came to her brother’s comings and goings, except that he hadn’t found himself a proper job, nor was he actually doing much anything at all. There was some talk of a trip to Europe—an idea sponsored by his worried mother—though when referring to the topic Jimmy talked about it as if some one else was going, not him. On the other hand, his father had offered him to manage one of the family’s farms, but Jimmy seemed equally uninterested. Veronica just shrugged and declared that it was only a phase and that eventually her brother would settle down one way or the other. Thomas wasn’t so sure. He didn’t overtly say so, but to his mind there was quite a chance that Jimmy was on drugs as doubtless was the case with some of the rather worthless characters he now frequented. ‘Bunch of good-for-nothings,’ was his judgement when asked by Peter about their friend’s new chums, ‘Some of them were at high-school with him, I know one or two of them... Uh, you know the type, the good-for-nothing offspring of the Northern District, from highborn ancestry... I don’t know, just useless hippies living on their father’s wallet and doing nothing productive. And, naturally, they know *nothing* about this country out of what can only be described as

criminal indifference. One of Argentina's greatest blights, If you ask me, uh, that the best people from the greatest lineages don't care two hoots about this country. And that's how the rabble takes control.' He sighed. 'It's the secret of Perón's success... well, we need not go into that right now.'

'But Jimmy isn't like that, at all,' Peter had protested.

'Yes, I know.' He quoted Shakespeare in Spanish with a wry face: "'Now is the winter of our discontent'" and proceeded to explain that resentment was a very dangerous passion.

'Do you actually think that behind Jimmy's bitterness with the Army there's resentment of some sort lurking around?'

'Yes, well, I'm not sure about that. We all have to handle different levels of anxiety, loneliness and fear... Worst of all are our frustrations... We all do what we can. I don't know, but Jimmy has somehow dwindled back into his class these days seeking refuge among his equals because he didn't quite like what he'd seen in other places. So now the spoilt brat goes back to his old frivolous mates for comfort.'

'What do they do all day?'

'Well, that's it you see. Nothing. They just laze about and drink screwdrivers and listen to the noisiest rock & roll they can get their hands on... you know the stuff, Jimmy Hendrix——'

'Oh, *that's* nice!'

'Yes, and Janis Joplin, and the Rolling Stones, and all the rest of them.'

'Led Zeppelin?'

'Quite.'

That was after the summer holidays. The four friends had seen a lot of each other that summer in Bella Vista, where they had gone almost on a daily basis to parties and football or card games or to bathe in a swimming pool or just spend long afternoons chatting away. To Peter, Veronica, Jimmy and Thomas, Bella Vista's social life seemed to be inexhaustible and they soon discovered that few other outings were as entertaining and rich in terms of diversity and original amusements. That very summer, Thomas had got engaged to Veronica, Peter had spent most of the day with Victoria and Jimmy had

seemed to have developed a certain interest in one of Andrew's sisters. There was no trace of trouble looming in the future, and Jimmy had been his usual sunny self, even when he was prone to get drunk, more often than not. Through Andrew they were introduced to other unusual Bella Vista friends of his, notably George and Edward, two incredibly book-learned characters who got on with Thomas like a house on fire, the three of them conversing eruditely until dawn about all manner of subjects, from the state of the Church, through Edith Piaf's love-life, up to the benefits of lighting a cigarette with matches instead of a lighter. However, as the weeks passed by, Edward was seen less in the other two's company because he had developed a certain *penchant* for Victoria's sister, Lucy, with whom he spent a long time chatting away. This made quite a ripple among them all because of the difference of ages between them: after all, Edward was twenty-one and Lucy only sixteen. Then, there was Henry, Andrew's best friend, who also played the guitar. They had been school mates and seemed to be wrangling all day long about this and that; and yet, possibly because of their shared musical passion they seemed to be drawn to each other and stuck together most of the time. Henry was a dark, serious, chubby chap. He was of a taciturn turn of nature but from time to time a bit of Indian blood inherited from his ancestors showed up in his irascible character. He was a most friendly young man, even when now and then he could flare up without previous notice which invariably caused laughter on account of the discordance between his tiny body frame and the irate insults he would dedicate to one or the other. On such occasions only Andrew could calm him down——something that he did not always choose to do, frequently preferring to fuel his rage for the fun of it. However, and for all that, Henry was much appreciated by his friends, and it was plain to all that he was a most innocent young man. When he wasn't around, Andrew singled him out frequently as the best of friends and the two of them spent endless hours playing and singing away——when not arguing about this or that——no matter where they happened to be or what their circumstances. Peter had been quite surprised to find out that they could play and sing while walking along any of Bella Vista's streets, going from one party to another.

But all that seemed ages ago; it was cold now, and Peter had left for Covunco. With the exception of Veronica who sometimes stayed over at Victoria's place, they now seldom went to Bella Vista at all.

“Now is the *summer* of our discontent,” Thomas thought and frowned as he served Jimmy more wine. By then they had finished lunch and were lingering over the remains of an excellent red wine (‘Rincón Famoso’ from López, that most Argentine vintage) that Thomas had ordered for the occasion.

‘I suppose you don’t plan to...,’ he hesitated.

Jimmy grimaced and his freckled face took on a painful look.

‘No *plans*, relax, my friend, no plans at all. This is my damned secret and I hope you’ll keep it to yourself. I won’t be telling anyone else about this and you can sleep tight and forget about the whole business if you feel like it. For the moment, as you can see, I can’t.’ He shook his head. ‘It all started in that blasted lift at last year’s party——and it seems a hell of a time since then.’

‘Lift? What lift?’ Thomas enquired.

Jimmy told him, and hastily added, ‘But I don’t plan to tell Victoria about my feelings, let alone Peter, poor chap, who deserves better friends.’

‘It would be, among other things, the end of our friendship, you know,’ Thomas said repressively.

‘I suppose it would be the end of everything.’ Jimmy budged uncomfortably in his chair. ‘But you can relax, my friend. There hasn’t been the least sign from Victoria’s part except to underline again and again that she’s perfectly in love with Peter, so even when——’, he paused uncertainly, ‘Even when, er...’. Jimmy decided to let what he didn’t want to say at that. ‘All the same, I thought we could do without platitudes like these——I mean, I hope I don’t appear as a traitor in your eyes just because I happen to fall for my best friend’s girl. It’s not like something I deliberately looked for. After all, it’s an old story, this *ménage a trois* business, isn’t it?’ he wanly smiled, ‘this “Tristan und Isolde” stuff, what?’

‘It sure is,’ Thomas reluctantly agreed. ‘But it has always been a rum thing and I sincerely hope you soon get over it,’ and with a thin smile he added, ‘Preferably without a “Liebestodt” and all those German excesses.’

‘So do I,’ Jimmy sighed.

‘After all, we’re Catholics aren’t we?’

‘So was Wagner.’

‘I don’t know about that, but no, not his operas, they certainly were not Catholic, I can tell you. But get me right: it’s not that there’s too much passion, or too much love, or too much nothing for that sake. We Catholics can digest that and more too. It’s a matter of getting your priorities right.’

‘Well, I’ve lost you now. Priorities, what priorities?’

‘Quite easy to understand if you only give it a bit of thought: values are hierarchical. All Tristan’s passion for Isolde is perfectly all right as long as his passion for his King and friendship and loyalty is equally intense.’ And as an afterthought, ‘Or more so.’

‘What if it’s not?’ Jimmy enquired with a frown.

‘Ah! Well, then you’ve lost your way. But if you can conceive such strong feelings for the one, surely you can also for the other, no matter what the circumst——’

‘I’m not sure about that, I can tell you.’

Thomas paused for reflection. He was quite aware that he was treading on dangerous ground and yet he thought it his duty to try and help his prospective brother-in-law out of the swamp where he seemed to be stuck. He decided to back down for the moment and give himself some time before trying anything. Jimmy was obviously subject to one hell of a storm and it would take time and patience to calm those boggy waters and help him see what was to be seen.

‘I think we’re facing a clear-cut case of one Jimmy losing his way,’ he reflected. ‘After all, since you came down from Military School you haven’t seemed to know *what* to do with your life——not to mention your love-life,’ he added rather grimly.

Jimmy listened dejectedly. On the one hand he felt relieved after telling *someone* about his falling in love with Victoria, but on the other he knew he was in for quite a few reprimands as soon as he confessed this and he wasn’t quite sure he was in a mood to put up with it all.

‘One doesn’t lay open one’s heart to a friend just to get scolded, I mean——’

‘You’re not being scolded, young man,’ Thomas interrupted, ‘I’m only trying to help you out of this labyrinth where you seem to have lost your way, that’s all.’ And as an

afterthought, 'Have some more wine. As Marechal used to say, there's a sure way out of every labyrinth.'

'Such as?'

'Out through the top.'

They laughed at the literary reference and drank in peace for a while, delving lengthily into what one and the other had read and thought of Leopoldo Marechal, an Argentine poet that they both admired. Gradually they relaxed and ordered more wine and talked about the films they had been seeing. Thomas had seen *A Night at Casablanca* with the Marx brothers and they laughed their heads off remembering some of its scenes. It was like old times, Thomas reflected, with that peculiar nostalgia young people can have for moments not six months away.

Then they took to talking about Thomas's wedding plans, though he told Jimmy that without a flat or a house or something, the prospects looked rather grim.

'It's not that we can't live on my salary, but it wouldn't cover our minimal expenses if I were forced to pay for a rent, you know.'

Jimmy looked enviously at his friend who was so concerned with real problems, in the real world. He felt a bout of self-pity for his imaginary problems from what seemed to him a dreamy world where real things just didn't happen.

'Maybe Daddy can help you out,' he said.

Thomas shook his head. 'No, I wouldn't want anything like that, you know. Nothing wrong with your old man, but I do prefer to start off with a bit of independence, if you don't mind.'

Jimmy knew what Thomas was pointing at——namely, his mother's tendency to interfere with her children's lives, specially Veronica's——and nodded.

By six o'clock in the afternoon they were quite drunk and had started to sing one or two tangos they happened to know. That was when the restaurant's owner appeared and courteously invited them to leave, since, he explained, the place was closing. With typical alcoholic shrewdness Jimmy instantly knew that this wasn't true, and said so. Things would have become rather sour except that Thomas got up, asked for the bill, paid it with unsure hands, and after some rather lewd comments dedicated to one of the waitresses they eventually left the place walking unsteadily towards Jimmy's home.

It was while they were walking through the park in front of the Colón Theatre that Thomas returned to Jimmy's quandary. 'Maybe it's not your fault, you know. To be perfectly honest, uh, we're all a bit in love with Victoria, if you have to know,' Thomas laughed, while Jimmy stopped dead in the middle of the park. 'Oh, don't pull that face, my friend. Or do you believe you're the only one in the world who knows a spade when he sees one.' He laughed again. 'After all, she's a remarkable girl, no question about that.' The good wine appeared to be doing quite a job. 'In fact, the most stunning, beautiful, clever, original, gay and loving girl I've ever met.'

Jimmy was completely taken aback by this bit of news.

'Oohhh? So you think so too?'

'Of course, you silly chump, and I'm not the only one,' he winked knowingly as they started again on their crooked walk. 'But she's Peter's that's all, and good for him. You've only to reflect a bit on what kind of a bloke Peter is and you'll fall out of love in no time.'

Jimmy doubtfully shook his head.

'I've tried that for the last couple of months, and err... yes, I do feel a bit of a traitor, but what can I do about it? She's in my mind most of the time, and no amount of distract _____'

'Have you ever listened to any of Wagner's operas?' Thomas interrupted.

'No, only fragments now and then,' Jimmy said, remembering that he had stayed up most of the night listening to the Woodstock concert, 'I think I prefer The Who any day,' he added with an innocent smile.

Thomas preferred to ignore that. 'All right, tell you what. I'll find out when there's one on at the *Colón*,' he indicated the theatre's imposing canopy with a finger, 'And then we'll spend a couple of evenings listening to its *leit-motifs* and I'll try to explain them as best I can.'

'Hasn't it got to do with Nazism too?'

Thomas smiled back. 'Everything has to do with everything,' and with a grin to accompany his non-sequitur, 'That reminds me, have you any Scotch at home?'

He got back home at about nine o'clock completely drunk and let himself fall on his bed fully dressed. There was a flicker of remembrance before he fell asleep and it made for some uneasy dreams that refused to give way for the rest of the night.

Chapter Eleven

Breaking the engagement

That very night, Victoria was about to go to bed when one of her younger sisters—— eight year old bespectacled Annie—— barged into her room.

‘You should knock before coming in, you know,’ Victoria reproved the little girl.

The urchin had golden locks like her sister Lucy, with blue eyes and curly hair that gave her an angelic air. She stood in the middle of the room and looked down at her elder sister who was sitting on her bed.

‘Isn’t mother *ever* coming back?’

She had fired the question with the unselfconsciousness of small girls, honestly, only concerned with the answer, no second thoughts attached. The matter was grave, her demure solemn, and yet... Victoria reflected that there was always something fairy-like in the way children addressed this and other issues of import. She sighed. Nevertheless, she thought she could do very well without such gruesome questioning that stirred her in such a disquieting manner.

But she answered all right, rather catechetically even when she was also responding to her maternal instincts.

‘No, Annie, she’s not, Mummy’s not, definitely *not* coming back. But, on the other hand, *we* are going to meet her, soon enough,’ she smiled at the little girl, ‘in Heaven, if, uh’ she added with a demure smile, ‘if we’re good enough.’

Annie smiled back with a sort of ‘I told you so’ look on her radiant face.

‘Well, I *told* Diana that now Mummy isn’t here at least we aren’t going to the dentist anymore.’

Victoria couldn’t refrain from laughing at that and kept to herself that any day she would have to take them over herself, dear oh dear. She was still smiling to herself when Annie suddenly reappeared at the doorway apparently remembering a commission

she had been given. She then produced a large envelope and waved it at Victoria with a large grin on her face.

‘Lucy sends you *this*,’ she said, throwing the letter onto Victoria’s bed. She left the room mumbling something to the effect that Lucy had forgotten to tell Victoria about it. Victoria followed her and leaning over the stair’s banister shouted at the top of her voice.

‘Lucy? Lucy!!! *When* did this letter arrive and why on earth didn’t you——’

Lucy ran up the stairs to the first landing, from where she talked back to her sister. A dishcloth hung from her waist and a pair of rubber gloves indicated that she had been dish-washing.

‘I’m so sorry Victoria,’ she had a worried look on her face, ‘but, I don’t——’

‘But when did it arrive, I mean, when——?’

Lucy wore a glum expression and finally admitted that she *thought* it had arrived a couple of days ago. Victoria sighed and kept to herself uncharitable thoughts about sisters forgetting to deliver love-letters as soon as they arrive. All the same the blonde girl got the gist of the sisterly reproof.

She returned to her room slowly shutting the door. It was a cold night, the first intimations of winter filtering through the naked windowpanes; but Victoria——as indeed her whole family——was immune to cold, quite used to not having stoves or a fireplace in the house, not even bothering to draw the curtains at night. There was always a look of surprise from any member of the Wade family when you came into the house and commented on the low temperatures. From their expressions you gathered that maybe the fact that you were freezing was somehow *your* fault or something. ‘You think so? Oh!’ And you could bet that they would change the subject, indifferent to the atmospheric conditions as if they pertained to another world. As a matter of fact, one of the window panes in the drawing-room had been broken sometime or another and had been hastily patched up with a piece of newspaper that was yellowing one winter after the next without anyone taking any notice. Peter had tried to guess the date from the news he could hardly read on the old parchment but could only decipher that it was related to some horse race or another.

Victoria rested for about a minute, leaning against the door holding on to the doorknob with both hands firmly interlaced behind her back. Despite the cold a few beads of sweat appeared on her forehead. The glittering white envelope seemed to be looking at her from its station in the middle of the bed. A small lamp glowed from her bedside table reflecting the light on the white quarter where her name and address had been firmly penned by her lover. She felt rather wobbly and finally walked slowly round the bed, took the letter and put it on a drawing board she had pitched in the darkest corner of the room, next to an easel where a nearly finished painting silently waited for the final touches. She sat down on the high stool in front of the drawing table where she usually did her homework (though most of the time she would draw in a standing position). She rested her right cheek on a closed fist while curling her long black hair one way and another with her other hand. She had mixed feelings, on the one hand reluctant to open up the envelope, on the other, impatient to read Peter's letter. It was the first one since her mother had died and it seemed ages since Peter had written to her for the last time. She wished he were a more regular correspondent even when his letters, she admitted to herself, were long and loving and made up with their extension for their spaced frequency. She clicked on the overhead light and opened the envelope using a stylet that happened to rest on the base of the board along with a couple of Caran d'Ache pencils; then she extracted Peter's letter that, sure enough, was quite bulky. She counted a total of eleven pages, written in black ink in his neat and rather small handwriting.

'My darling love,'

She left the unread pages on the drawing board, put out the overhead light, got off her high stool and went to her bedside where she retrieved a pack of cigarettes and a box of matches from her handbag. She remained standing by her bed and smoked reflectively while looking out through the cold windowpanes into the night. With her free hand she rummaged through a small drawer in her bedside table from where she retrieved a hairpin. Once found, she left her cigarette on a small ashtray, sat on her bed and fastidiously fixed the fringe of dark hair that kept falling over her forehead. She drew on her cigarette until it very nearly burnt her fingers and put it out with a succession of impatient movements——prolonging the operation well after it had been extinguished. She sighed again, hedging between reading Peter's letter right away or leaving it for the morrow. Of course, she knew that eventually she would have to get up and without

more ado just *read*. But she had a premonition of sorts that warned her against it. Finally she concluded that one way or another she wouldn't be getting much sleep anyway so she rose and protractedly walked towards the drawing table holding the pack of cigarettes and matches in her right hand. She sat down again on the stool, put on the light, reached for her spectacles, and read.

It was raining, I don't know if you remember, and we huddled under an umbrella, ages ago. And in the end I gave in. You were the damsel that kept the door and asked the little, the silent, the innocent question: 'Art not thou also one of the disciples?' Disciples of love, lost for all things, desperate of everything except the object of their love. As I remember, it was raining on a Sunday morning in Bella Vista. And no amount of denying it would get me off the hook. It's enough with one single glance from the loved one, and you're lost. So finally the cock crows, damn it, and you're condemned to keep hearing as in a litany the repeated question, again and again: Peter, do you love me? And one's hooked all right. Hook, line and sinker. Lock, stock, and barrel. Hell, do I love you, my darling Victoria, the damsel that kept the door, that was trembling with fright next to me under an umbrella, under the rain. But there's no denying that your quest was older, your question came before, silently, compellingly, insistently. Peter, do you love me? After what felt like ages of this drumming interrogation I finally gave in. And you opened the door. And yes, it was already later than we thought.

No, I don't know. Nobody knows anything unless it actually happens to you. I can't even imagine what your mother's death has done to you, my love, let alone help you with that particular grief. Oh dear, I always thought that love was enough, and it isn't you know. As you well know, I love you desperately, but it isn't, somehow, enough. It makes me miss you in a way that makes me sick, and love isn't the cure. You are. Your presence. Being with you. Love did this to us, but it won't remedy the distance... Hell! I don't know. I sometimes feel that we are so near, and the next minute I can't remember what your eyes look like, for heaven's sake. No photograph, no amount of remembering and day-dreaming will bring me back the look of your serious blue eyes... And yet. There was that time that I happened to see your face screened by a jacaranda at your back. It was in full blossom against the darkening skies... Your eyes seemed to compete with those blue/violet flowers. No, I can't quite forget that, I don't think I'll ever will. I've never quite liked photographs, you know. I've quite enough with my own memories. Oh dear, I must be mad or something. Love did that to me, and it won't provide a balm

for this affection. You can say that I'm madly in love, but I think that saying that this love for you is driving me mad puts it more neatly. Hell, I don't know what I'm writing about, except that your absence makes me sick and is deranging me. To the point, mind you, that I wouldn't have it any other way.

Your mother was a dear. I didn't get to know her very well, as you know. But... through her eldest daughter, some of her endearing traits were revealed to me in a most clear light. Sorry about this non-sequitur, but I hope we can marry soon and have lots of children and then I'll be able to corroborate what I now only see in clear—but very brief—glimpses, insights, intuitions, or what will you. I'm sorry to be so cryptic my darling, but when all is said and done, I'll tell you what: you'll be the best mother in the world, for any child, for any number of children. And, as you may perhaps understand, I've a strong mind to give my children, as it were, as good a mother as yours was, and, if I can't have that, I'll have you. I love you as much as just that, I hope you follow, I mean, I'm in love with exactly the right person.

No Wade will appreciate what follows but I must tell you that it's freezing cold here in my room, rather cramped quarters near the C.O.'s mess, no stoves, no coffee, and only a couple of cigarettes left. I'm going to light the last but one in your honour—there it is—and smoke it slowly, see if it helps me write the best love-letter in the world for the nicest girl I ever met—or ever will. It's now seven o'clock and has been snowing for most of the afternoon. I've put on my favourite record of Neapolitan Songs and listen to the lyrics with a wandering mind. Well, not exactly wandering, because while I try to pay attention to the wonderful poetry, my mind has a way of always finishing with a close-up of a blue-eyed, dark-haired, husky voice, cute soul, small feet and freckled face with a lovely dimple, that happens to be called Victoria and whose name sends shivers down my spine, accelerates my pulse, and has generally tormented me for the last couple of months.

I wonder if you remember my favourite Neapolitan love song:

Sto core se conzuma,

Fatella mia pe te.

Well, that's exactly it. Only that Piccini probably was never quite in love as I am, so I know about this more than him—to the point that I couldn't compose a song as true

as his, if you know what I mean. As the old lady had inscribed on her gravestone, I told you I was sick. Ha, ha.

The young girl was so concentrated on Peter's letter that she hadn't heard the knock on her bedroom door, nor seen Lucy come in softly, take a magazine that was lying on the ground, and tiptoe out again. She did, however, hear her sister slowly shutting the door behind her, and she took her eyes off the paper for a second glancing cursorily at the back of the door where her dressing gown was hanging. She tut-tutted but was soon immersed in Peter's epistle again.

Would that you were here with me. When are we getting married? Say soon, my darling. At least say yes so I can definitely get rid of these pining feelings (will I ever?).

You know, I keep remembering last summer in Bella Vista, do you? You also opened the door to Bella Vista and all its mysteries to me, you naughty girl, the damsel that kept the door. And then we had a hell of a time, I think, didn't we? Of course, you're used to it, but, isn't it the best town in the world? Victoria's town. The long afternoons shuffling from Andrew's house to yours and back. Going to buy cigarettes to that little kiosk at the corner and arguing with the old woman there over soccer, of all things (by the way, what's her name?). And playing in the swimming pool (I hadn't realized how white you are), playing volley in your garden, playing the guitar in the evenings. Oh Bella Vista's playful evenings! And your mother inviting us to say the Rosary, of all things! (I must admit that she never pulled a face when most of the time we declined her mystical propositions, but I did understand, for once, why the old folk used to call crepuscular, twilight time, prayer time). I don't know, my mind wanders so. And yes, all the same, some of all your religiousness spilled over in my direction. How about going to Mass every day? The very idea! But I couldn't quite stay behind when the whole bunch of you kept insisting on this particular exercise. And then I'll confess here and now that I felt rather jealous when you all started arguing on this or that fine point of liturgy or I don't know what. I did gather of course that most of you are not too well disposed to recent changes and rather hate Vatican II, just like Thomas does, but what can I do? I just love you—and through you have become very fond of your friends, specially Andrew—and, for all their quirks and fastidiousness about this or that they will always remain in my memory as the best friends ever... What a whopping time last summer! That evening when we started playing old tango records and you began to teach us to dance. Hell, I'll never learn, but only to see you dancing around while

Carlos Gardel sang away... That reminds me, please don't dance with anyone until we see each other again. 'Do nothing till you hear from me' will you? I never thought I could actually enjoy tango so much. And I'll tell you what: best of all was your Father's little lecture on Brasillach's novel that we found so enjoyable, four or five of us drinking maté under the oak tree and listening with interest to all about Patrice and Catherine's love story. Please tell your Father that he must translate 'Les Sept Couleurs.' I was particularly impressed by Patrice telling his girl friend how her absence doubled every one of his moments. I wish I knew French. All the same, your Father wrote it down for me and I keep and venerate the piece of yellowish paper where he inscribed the magic words: 'Ton absence double mes instants.' He smiled at me knowingly when I asked him to write that down—the old pirate must've surmised that I was already missing you, as it were, 'avant la lettre.' Well, there you are now: I didn't know I knew that much French!

Ton absence... hell. Is hell. I can quite understand now that hell's worst punishment is the absence of The Loved One. Which, in my case, idolatry be blasted, is you, my love. Love does something to space, sure enough, but it also does something to time, stretching it in such a torturing way when we're apart, and contracting it so nervously when we're together. Upon my soul, if we're ever married, I suppose time will as well as be annihilated. Let's buy a big grandfather's clock and see how our love definitely wipes out time. But over here, in this uncouth place, I hate clocks, calendars and whistles, bells and sirens that keep reminding me I won't be seeing my love for ages. Oh hell. I sometimes think maybe Jimmy was right in leaving the Army. Sometimes I even catch myself dreaming of resigning my commission, taking the train and just appearing by your side, unshackled and free from the drudgery of this place. If only you'd come over, it would be suddenly Heaven. As you see, there's not such a distance between Hell and Heaven—and yet, oh my dear, what a distance! Sorry about all this rambling, but I told you I'm unhinged. The only good thing I have is those memories of you that I treasure deep down in my heart, despite the fact that each memory 'double mes instants.'

I keep remembering one particular evening when we decided to lit up a fire and make a barbecue under the trees in the back garden at your place. It was funny but we had quite an hour for ourselves—I think that Thomas and Veronica and the rest of them went to the butcher's to buy the meat or something. Do you remember my darling? You

know, the fire quietly kindling while the first stars appeared and the absolute silence, and just the two of us——‘and nobody else’——in perfect companionship, just looking at the fire, and dreaming, never mind the rest of the world. There was, there certainly was, ‘a kind of hush’ then. I can still feel it somewhere, in my sick heart.

A tear fell from Victoria’s cheek onto this last word. She didn’t try to dry it, and the drop dissolved ‘heart’ into an unrecognisable smudge.

I can still feel it somewhere, in my sick——

She now finished the letter in a single quick reading, urging herself to get to the end somehow or other. There would always be time to read it again, she thought, while scanning Peter’s calligraphy at top speed impatiently brushing her tears with a sleeve.

Please write to me soon my darling. A word from you is like a drop of water to a nomad lost in the desert of loneliness. Anyway I’ll try to phone you every Saturday at the usual time. A hundred kisses and all that,

Peter.

She was reading these last lines while an audible noise was somehow interfering and bothering her at the back of her mind until she recognised that someone was banging on her door.

‘Victoria, Victoria!’ She heard little Annie knocking. She sighed, took off her spectacles and brushed away a fresh wave of tears that had smeared her face.

‘What is it?’ she enquired with a smothered voice. Actually it was quite a miracle that Annie interpreted this while remaining behind the shut door.

‘Telephone!’ the little girl cried at the top of her voice, ‘Veronica’s on the phone!’ she bellowed. She would’ve gone on and on if her sister had not got up and opened the bedroom door indicating that she’d heard all right and that she was taking the call.

These exertions helped her pull herself together. She dried her face with a handkerchief and took the phone extension she had in her room. The extension had been recently fitted by Joseph at her request and did not always work properly. For one thing the bell had been somehow definitely muted. However, this time it appeared to be in order and she could hear her friend on the other side of the line quite clearly.

‘Victoria!’

‘Hello? Veronica?’ Victoria’s voice wobbled a bit, but she hoped she would be getting a greater hold of it by the minute.

‘Victoria, have you heard the news?’ Veronica sounded elated.

‘News? What news?’ she enquired, while sitting down on her bed, looking reproachfully at her desk that stood miles away with her cigarettes on top.

‘Well, hold on, here it goes: we’re getting married!’ and she added unnecessarily, ‘Thomas and I are getting married! Can you believe——?’ There was a mixed sound of telephone interference and a chuckle of sorts that travelled down the line.

‘Congratulations old girl!’ Victoria had more leverage over her voice by now and was certainly very happy on account of the unexpected news.

‘He proposed to me a couple of hours ag——’

‘But, hadn’t you all gone to dinner to——’

‘...and on our way back, he stopped the car in a most unseemly——’

‘...I mean weren’t you supposed to go to dinner with Jimmy and his——’

‘...and produced quite a traffic jam, what with all those cars behind us blowing their horns, shouting the typical “Come on old Charly!” sort of curses——I don’t know what. And what with the ongoing racket I couldn’t quite hear what——’

‘Well, I mean, it *is* rather a surprise isn’t it? I mean he had never even men——’

‘...so he finally parked the car putting it into a small space next to an enormous “No Parking” sign and popped the——’

‘...but where will you live? I mean, Thomas never——’

‘...a dear you know, the old poppet. He just asked me to marry him for ever and ever, and the thing is, I never expected——’

‘Well, yes, it *does* come as something of a surprise. I wonder if you’ll manage on his salary... I mean, where will you live and everything?’

‘Yes, well that did it. Apparently an old aunt of his, Auntie Louise or something, decided to give away a small old English house she had in Belgrano and that she used to rent.

‘Not one of those gorgeous bow-window hou——’

‘Exactly.’

‘I can’t believe it, I mean they’re worth a fortune!’

‘Yes. It’s on Conde street, just round the Athletic Club’s premises. And Thomas not only promptly accepted this but on the strength of such a present he decided that there were no more excuses for further delay and just *proposed*. We were just beginning to embrace when a constable came along and was about to give him a ticket, except that _____’

‘Can you hold on for a sec, Veronica. Hold on, I’m coming right back.’

Victoria trotted up to the easel, gathered her cigarette and matches and in no time sat down on her bed again while lighting.

‘I’d never heard of any Aunt Louise before.’

‘Neither had I... but, listen Victoria, I’m so excited, I couldn’t very well go to bed without telling you all about it. Tomorrow we’re going with Thomas to see the house. It’s in Belgrano, can you imagine? I tell you, I don’t know how I’m going to sleep tonight.’

An old house in Belgrano! It was quite a posh part of Buenos Aires, and even Victoria detected a faintly green wave of envy welling up. But envy is a bit of a brownie that disappears as soon as you think you’ve seen it, and such was the case now. She sighed and congratulated her friend again.

‘As soon as we can arrange it, you have to come over and help me with so many arrangements, what with the big wedding party we want to throw, and the house decoration, and so on... I mean, I haven’t even thought about our honeymoon... isn’t it all so much fun?’

‘It certainly is, and we must begin to think——’

‘I think I’ll be fixing the date pretty soon, something like three months from now.’

‘Three months!’ Victoria sort of whistled down the line. ‘Well, *now* I begin to think you’re talking seriously, I mean——’

‘Yup, somewhere around September, don’t you think springtime is exactly right?’

Veronica sighed contentedly and added as an afterthought, ‘Do you think Peter will be able to come? And, by the way, when are you two getting married?’

Victoria unexpectedly lost control of her voice again and a kind of choking sound was distinctly heard over the line.

‘Victoria? Something wrong? Have you and Peter——’

‘It’s all right,’ she sobbed, trying to get hold of herself again, but not quite making it, ‘It’s only that I’ve just received a letter from him and, well...’

Veronica was listening intently and she delicately prompted her friend.

‘And?’

‘Well, as a matter of fact, he’s urging me to marry him too, but——’

Victoria heard someone take the line downstairs and repressively asked who the hell was interfering with the telephone. It was Victoria’s Father and the old professor excused himself, saying that he had no idea Victoria was on the blower and promptly hung up.

‘But what? I mean, it’s not as if you don’t love him anymore, is it?’

‘No, no, don’t be silly. It’s just that I can’t.’

‘What’d’ya mean by “I can’t?” What’s all this “I can’t” business? Of *course* you can, I mean, the Army’ll give him a proper house wherever he’s posted, so I don’t quite see ——’

‘On account of my family.’

There was something of a pause in the until then intense conversation.

‘Oh...’

‘Listen, Veronica. I can’t very well leave Daddy and all my little brothers and sisters to fend for themselves. Think of the twins for example. They alone are demanding enough, let alone all the rest of them. I know all too well that between Lucy and Joseph they’d make a real hash of things, and I cannot see how I could properly abandon them in the foreseeable future... So, what can I say? I don’t know...’

‘What does Peter say about all this?’

‘Well, actually I haven’t gathered the courage to explain all this to him. It’s so difficult to put him in the picture through letter writing. I just don’t know the proper words. And

it's out of the question to try and tell it to him over the telephone. And then... there's something else.'

Veronica was completely absorbed by all this and had by now quite forgotten all about her own marriage.

'Something else? What else?'

'Hmmm, I'm not sure that I should tell you, but I will if you keep it absolutely secret.'

'I'll keep my tongue between my teeth.'

'All right. The question is, how long can I make Peter wait for me?'

'How long?'

'Yes, how long? I mean, I don't think I can legitimately keep him on hold for two or three——'

'Oh, he'll wait for you all right if he loves you.'

'Yes, I know. But that's not the point. The point is if it's fair to keep him waiting *ad calendas graecas*.'

'What?'

Victoria sighed impatiently. 'Well, keep him waiting indefinitely. You see there's no way I can promise him that we'll marry on such or such a date. Greeks had no calen——'

'To hell with the Greeks. Why don't you fix a date, say two years from now? By then your house should be in running order, don't you think?'

'Well, that's exactly it. To tell you the truth, I don't think so. I don't frankly see how on earth they'll all manage without me two years from now. You know Lucy is only sixteen and Joseph is perfectly useless when it comes to managing the house. It took me two months to get him to put the phone extension in this room, and it doesn't even work properly. That reminds me. They can't even handle the damn correspondence. I mean, do you know they almost *lost* Peter's last letter? The whole house is a mess. Who's going to prepare little Diana for her First Communion? Who's going to take Annie to the dentist? Who's going to look after the twins? I mean who the hell is going to pay the damn telephone bill, get hold of a plumber so he fixes the water tap in the kitchen, go and see Julian's teacher about his troubles at school, help him with his homework? And

so on. And then, I don't even know if Daddy will get better or finish needing more attention than ever... I mean, it's all quite difficult now and I don't see things looking up in the next couple of years, so...'

'Are you going to put an end to your engagement?' Veronica bluntly asked.

There was a long pause, while Victoria wrestled with her box of matches and lighted another cigarette.

'I don't know *what* to do. I think——'

But at that point she started to cry and ceased any effort to restrain herself. Veronica started to weep also which made matters worse. After a good minute of this, they finally agreed to talk it over the next day.

Victoria looked out through the window at the dark night. By then a full moon had appeared and she smoked reflectively looking straight into its brilliant face. She had stopped weeping but her fit of crying had somehow abated the deep pain she felt somewhere in her heart, and she resolved to write to Peter that very night, no matter how late it was.

She felt peaceful for the first time in quite a few months. She was determined. She had to do what she had to do, and that was the end of that.

She had decided to break off their engagement.

Chapter Twelve

To extinguish a fire

‘Can you imagine who the devil could’ve sent *this* as a wedding present? Who could have such disgust——’

‘No. Put it away with the other presents we want to exchange.’

Thomas was sitting on the floor of his old-new house in Belgrano, the small drawing room with no furniture in sight and most of the available space littered with unwrapped wedding presents. There was a cleared spot where he sat under a lamp that stood in a corner and next to the telephone that also stood on the carpet. Veronica had entered the room frowning at an unseemly painted glass vase she was holding.

‘We can’t do that, you know. We can only exchange those presents given to us by our best friends who have actual——’

‘Well, I don’t know about that. What will we do with that frightful Chinese painting that old Zulema gave us?’

Zulema was an old maid that had worked at the Elizalde’s for years——a sort of nanny to Veronica and Jimmy. She and Manolo used to bicker all day long, and Veronica was very fond of both of them.

‘Oh, I’ve thought of that. We’ll prop it up against the wall behind the couch, and any day that Zulema comes along we’ll hang it somewhere visib——’

‘Veronica, that’s a ridiculous thing to do,’ but he couldn’t quite refrain from laughing at the very idea.

‘Well, whatever. I’m telling you that there are several presents we’ll have to keep just in case. Suppose someone comes along on a visit and asks to see where we’ve put this or that? That would be a most uncomfortable situation that we must avoid at all costs. No, I know what I’ll do with this vase. I’ll put it on top of the fridge, what do you think?’

Thomas was having some trouble with his temper. He had been finding the unwrapping of presents a rather lengthy and tiresome procedure and was just beginning to discover that his bride had a rather lengthy way of dealing with these practical matters that got on his nerves. He had calculated that by four o'clock in the afternoon they would have finished with everything and he had planned to bring up a couch that now sat incongruously in the passage. He had been looking forwards to getting it out of the way and placing it under the lamp where it would be just right. And he had been longing to sit there and get on with a most interesting book on the Crimean War that he had recently acquired. During his honeymoon he had discovered that Veronica was very little inclined to reading and consequently he had felt compelled to entertain her most of the time, one way or another. But now that he had secured his own house, he thought he could set apart an hour or so and just read. And now it was nearly dark and there were no signs of any progress in the clearing up business. He wondered how Veronica would manage the rest of the house and sighed telling himself it was too late now, anyway.

'Veronica, I say, please be sensible. We can't very well keep every piece of horrendous _____'

He was interrupted by the telephone that sat next to him and took the call.

From Veronica's and Thomas's point of view their wedding party had been a success. Of course, it must be remembered that in those days the newly wed usually retired from the party around one o'clock in the morning while some guests would linger on, dancing long after they had left. So they hadn't heard about Jimmy's doings until they returned from their honeymoon.

It was Andrew who was putting him into the picture.

'What do you mean, by this "fire alarm" business?' Thomas couldn't quite understand what Andrew was talking about while Veronica was fastidiously unwrapping *another* horrible vase. He grimaced.

'Well, it's rather funny in a way, though, I don't know,' he chuckled, 'some of Veronica's girl friends were rather shocked.'

'What on earth are you talking about?'

Veronica stopped her work and turned towards Thomas with an eager ear making eloquent signs with her hand that clearly indicated that she wanted to know who was

calling. Thomas covered the mouthpiece with a hand and told her before renewing the conversation.

‘I’m sorry, no, no, go on.’

Apparently Jimmy had sounded a fire alarm at about three in the morning when the party was going full tilt and appeared in the middle of the dance floor with a fire extinguisher shouting ‘Fire! Fire!’ at the top of his voice before proceeding to empty the thing all over the place. Thomas couldn’t believe his ears.

‘I was at the Bar at that moment, but the confusion was something worth seeing, what with dozens of guests running away from the dance floor all soaked up with this dreadful snowy stuff these fire extinguishers produce. And then, the alarm kept wailing, uh, quite chaotic, what. Someone turned off the music. I tell you it was quite fun——’

Thomas laughed at this. ‘This is incredible... I mean, what the hell, it must have been ——’

‘Oh well, mate, you lost it. It’s all very well for you to go and tie the knot and all that, but I must say that it’s a shame that as soon as you marry you begin to lose touch with the real——’

‘...but he’s no right to make a mess of his sister’s wedding just because... I tell you my revenge will be terrible.’

‘Just because what, indeed?’ Andrew and Thomas couldn’t stop chuckling over the phone and Veronica looked critically at Thomas, not liking a bit of what she could guess.

‘Well, you know what. He must have been blind drunk to do a thing like that.’

‘Oh, sure enough. By then we were all quite plastered, you know’ he laughed again, ‘Best wedding party I’ve ever been to, by a long way.’ All the same, Thomas also knew that Andrew could put away a good many drinks without their having any noticeable effect on him. ‘Yes, quite. But none of you felt the need to create trouble in that way, did you, I mean——’

Andrew chuckled gaily.

‘And you should’ve seen Dr. Rivarola covered with this ash stuff, he looked like Snowy, you know the——’

‘Oh no! Don’t tell me *he* was——’

‘I’m telling you. And his wife was shrieking to the effect that her dress had been completely ruined.’ Andrew laughed again.

‘Goodness. Dr. Rivarola! Don’t tell me he hadn’t left by then!’

‘I’m telling you.’

Thomas made a curious noise, somewhere between a laugh and a groan. Dr. Rivarola was the Judge with which he worked and was well known for his severe manners and stringent personality. He would be asking embarrassing questions as soon as Thomas went back to work.

‘I tell you, with George and Henry at the bar we had a hell of a time.’ He chuckled again. ‘Best wedding party we’ve ever been to. All hell broken loose. The girls in a frenzy rushing towards the door and tripping over their long dresses, and all that smoggy stuff all over the place. Even if we didn’t quite believe it was for real, George and I contributed to the general anarchy crying out “Fire! Fire!” also for good measure.’

‘You didn’t!’

Andrew giggled, remembering the scenes with renewed glee. ‘We sure did. But the confusion grew to a point in which we were forced to retire from the Bar and continue the party in the street. Fortunately George thought of taking a bottle of Scotch with him. That’s where Henry hit it off rather well with Rogelio who happened to appear at our side. A very good sort. He was most interested in——’

‘Hold on, mate. Who’s Rogelio?’

‘Oh I don’t know. A beggar or something. No way of finding out what his profess——’

‘What? A *beggar* do you say?’

‘Yes, you know. A mendicant or something. He and Henry got on like a house on fire—the metaphor being particularly apt don’t you think?—and in no time we secured a glass for him too. Presently we found this trash bin or something with a solid lid on top which was a perfect observation post. As a matter of fact then and there we improvised a little bar for ourselves.’

Thomas could picture them easily and laughed again.

‘I must say the tramp was quite an entertaining addition to the party and he told us that he had once seen a real fi——’

‘Did you know it was a hoax?’

‘No we didn’t, not at first anyway. We all believed it was a real fire. Then the firemen arrived.’

‘The firemen! Don’t tell m——’

‘Hey mate, what’s the matter? Will you please refrain from keep telling me not to tell ——’

‘All right, all right. But it’s an unbelievab——’

‘The firemen contributed to the general chaos with two red lorries that suddenly appeared with their fire alarms in full blast. Then they jumped from their trucks and started to deploy the hoses which contributed to the general excitement. It took quite a bit of persuasion from the catering manager to convince them that it was all a hoax and nothing more. These chaps seemed terribly inclined to turn the tap on which would’ve been——’

He choked at the very idea.

‘The manager was quite desperate, I can tell you. And then George and I suggested to him that maybe it wouldn’t be a bad idea just in case. And then Henry contributed his piece saying that he actually *smelt* smoke... The funn——’

Thomas looked up at Veronica who was now openly frowning at him, and couldn’t smother another fit of laughter.

‘There’ll be a hell of a lot of explaining to do... Jesus! I’ve a mind to look Jimmy up and teach him one or two lessons.’

‘Yes, well there was quite a group of chaps at the party that apparently had the same idea and were looking for him with what looked like ominous intentions——they seemed quite prepared to execute the criminal. And then Jimmy appeared by our improvised outdoor bar. Fortunately it was in a rather dark corner but I guessed that as soon as the two firemen’s truck backed out we would be dreadfully exposed.’

‘So what did you do then?’

‘Well, we had to give this Rogelio chap a few *pesos* and what with that and a glass of Scotch he agreed to play ball and they quickly exchanged clothes. I must say the Rogelio beggar then looked quite spruce in his new evening dress.’

‘And what then?’

‘Yes, well, you should’ve seen Jimmy what with his dirty clothes and big hat, he would’ve passed any tramp casting for ‘Les Miserables’ I can tell you. In fact, one of Rivarola’s sons came along and asked us if we had seen Jimmy and gave a suspicious look at him—and at Rogelio. But fortunately Jimmy kept his head down and slowly moved down the street, affecting a limp which sent us laughing again.’

By now Thomas was quite infected by the other’s laugh.

‘What happened afterwards?’

‘Well the old bugger now seems to have repented or something. He’s so ashamed—or frightened, I don’t know, at the general hue and cry he’s unleashed—that he’s run away with, uh, the tail between his legs.’

‘Where is he now?’

‘Search me. He’s just vanished into thin air. Nobody knows where the hell. Probably at one of the Elizalde’s farms for all I know. Your mother in law is quite worried and you’ll soon hear from her too, I can tell you.’

‘Oh Lord,’ Thomas sighed. He thought Veronica’s mother a rather tiresome old lady as it was. Another chuckle came down the line.

‘Edward told me that he bumped into the old lady downtown in Buenos Aires and that she was quite upset, what with the mess of things Jimmy had made, and now nobody knowing his whereabouts.’

‘Yes, I suppose he’ll appear any day now. I tell you I’m starting to plan my revenge this very minute and if the bastard ever gets married he’ll——’

They arranged to have lunch together the next day and ended their chat then and there.

Thomas returned the hand phone to its crib, with a grin.

‘What’s the matter? What did Andrew tell you?’ Veronica enquired.

Thomas told her and that finally put an end to the unwrapping of parcels and presents for the time being. Veronica made a terrible fuss about this piece of news and reprimanded him quite severely considering they were such a newly-wed couple.

‘I mean, how *can* you laugh at this. It’s just awful.’

Thomas laughed again. He stood up and went to the kitchen with the idea of making himself a cup of tea while Veronica sat on the carpet next to the phone and immediately proceeded to phone her mother. After what seemed *ages* to Thomas, she then called Victoria. He retired to his bedroom that at least afforded a comfortable position and threw himself on the bed to read. All the same he could distinctly hear her chatting over the phone.

‘No, I mean, it’s not even *normal* is it? This is terrible—I mean, how can he even *think* of pulling a stunt like that on his sister’s wedding day? I mean how can he be so naughty?’

Naughty? It was exactly the same expression her mother had just used, a somewhat pale one, Thomas thought, that seemed to suggest that her brother was of a lesser age and consequently, not to be too severely punished. On the other hand, Victoria laughed the whole incident off in the same vein that her cousin had just assumed when talking to Thomas.

‘No, I wouldn’t say *terrible* you know; after all, nobody got hurt or something.’

‘I’ve just talked with Mummy and, uh, *she* says that some of the women were pretty frightened and that she actually saw a girl *crying* over her ruined dress... Oh I wish this never had happened.’

Victoria consoled her friend as best she could and refrained from telling her that Jimmy had invited her out to dance immediately before the incident and had reacted to her rebuff in this most peculiar way. Peter hadn’t been able to secure a long enough leave to come over for the wedding and by now it was public knowledge that they had broken off their engagement. All the same, Victoria remained desperately in love with him which was something most people that happened to know her well enough easily acknowledged. Except Jimmy of course. But she was tactful enough not to put him in yet a worse light. Things were bad enough as it was.

‘Listen Veronica, it was a wonderful party and anyway most people had left by the time Jimmy——’

‘I *know* that. All the same: someone will spread the gossip and there’ll have to be endless hours of explaining which——’

‘...most people will forget the incident in a couple of——’

‘Yes, well, maybe. And apparently Daddy had to give the firemen a couple of bucks because *they* weren’t too pleased with the false alarm either. And then, the next day, they had to hire extra help to clean up the——’

‘Well, relax dear girl, it’s all over. How was your honeymoon?’

Some time later Thomas woke up with a start. The book he had been reading was on the floor and he felt hungry. He got up and sat on his bed for a while feeling rather dazed. From where he sat he could clearly hear Veronica still prattling on the phone. He looked at his watch and guessed she had been on it non-stop for the better part of an hour. The sitting room would be in the same mess in which he had left it, he sighed, with the addition of an ash-tray up to the brim next to Veronica, who would be sitting by the phone, smoking away and going on and on. He sighed again and headed for the kitchen shaking his head. While he made himself a sandwich, he wondered how much the phone bill would eventually amount to.

He was beginning to wonder for the first time if marriage was such a good idea after all.

Chapter Thirteen

Hell of a hole

One hell of a hole, Peter thought once again. Because, Covunco was, in effect, just that. Lost in that enormous desert called Patagonia, Covunco was a tiny town completely engulfed by an incredible sea of nothingness that appeals to one man in a million and exasperates, irritates, repels and causes the normal rest to shrink. No wonder it was depopulated. Who would want to live in such depressing surroundings? The worst thing, Peter thought, was the weather. Continuous, permanent, unremitting wind—he had heard stories of people going berserk because of it and well believed them—and if not that, rain, or worse, sleet. The rest, as Darwin once put it, was a lot of very cold unpleasant air. The regiment's barracks stood about a mile away from Covunco and looked bleaker, if possible, than the town itself. A punishing place, Peter thought as he stood against the window of his small room, looking out at the unfriendly yellowy, brownish, greyish landscape. Quite an eyesore in its own right. If only we had a couple of trees, he thought, but of course, not a chance of that in such windy weather. And then he receded back into his soul-searching exercises that had characterised those last weeks.

The inner landscape wasn't much better either. To begin with, he was at war with himself. There was a small misunderstanding somewhere and he couldn't quite iron it out. If Victoria was completely truthful—and he couldn't conceive a shadow of doubt about it—then why break off their engagement? Was it possible that her feelings had cooled off a fraction or something? He quite understood that marriage was out of the question for the time being, but so what? They were young, they could wait. He was quite contrite at what he had done, but fuelled by an unexpected flash of sadness, frustration and impotence he had torn up Victoria's letter the very day he had received it. He now thought that perhaps a careful scrutiny would have revealed the painful mystery behind Victoria's decision. Perhaps someone else? No, once again, he impatiently disregarded any such thought. And yes, he was thinking in circles, these horrible suspicions constantly coming back, only to be repulsed again and again. 'Hell of a hole, and hell of a life,' he thought with renewed bouts of self-pity. His phone call

had done nothing to clear the mess up, to say the least. The line was terrible, and Victoria seemed to be crying most of the time.

‘Please, darling, if you love me as you say, I don’t see why you have to break off our engagement.’

‘Well, Peter, I mean... please *understand*... I can’t very well keep you waiting without _____’

But sure enough, they were soon at cross-purposes as usually happens when trying to smooth things out with a telephone call.

‘Maybe it’s *you* who hasn’t the patience——’

‘Yes? Well that’s silly, isn’t it? That’s a downright silly thing to say... *You* can marry whoever you choose to whenever you want. I can’t. Can’t you underst——’

‘Listen, my love. I want to marry you, and if I can’t I’ll just not marry, that’s all, so why don’t we keep on as before and just wait? Time will say...’

‘It will. But in the meantime...’

‘You must be joking, I mean——’

‘No, Peter, this is no joking matter. You’re free. You don’t have to wait anymore. Go and live your own life. I know this is painful, but that’s the way things stand and I can’t see any other——’

‘Please listen Victoria, please: there is another way. Let’s wait. I can’t even conceive losing you——’

‘Let time do its——’

‘No, no, no! Victoria, I love you desperately, please——’

And so on and so forth. And then he had to interrupt himself because he clearly heard Victoria crying over the line. So finally he had only told her over and over again that he loved her, which didn’t seem to do much good either. He sighed. He wouldn’t have leave until Christmas which seemed ages away, especially in that abominable place, especially when he presumably wouldn’t be receiving letters from Victoria, especially when he knew not what to expect when he next saw her.

The wind was somewhere shaking a shutter to and fro and the noise was getting on his nerves. That must be Captain Espinelli’s window he reflected. It would be typical of

such a thoughtless, peevish, lazy man to have forgotten to fasten his shutter properly. He couldn't refrain from thinking that this was no man for military office. If there were ever a war it would be downright dangerous to go with him, let alone be under his orders. He heard a knock at his door that interrupted his musings.

'Report for Second Lieutenant Cayol!' It was private Gómez.

'Come in, soldier.'

A big chap from the northern part of the country came into the room. He was about nineteen years old, a stout, quite inarticulate young man, with teeth in visible disrepair. Peter had always had some difficulty in fully understanding some of his soldiers, what with their regional accents and marked tendency to drawl. He had gone quite a long way in his efforts to teach them to speak up clearly but with private Gómez it had been rough going and the results were none too successful.

'The mules, sir. I've counted them and three of them are... out, sir.'

Peter more or less understood what the man was saying but his temper flared up at the bad news.

'Will you please explain yourself clearly, damn it, soldier Gómez?'

He well knew that his reproof would get him nowhere and would only worsen the man's attitude.

'Three mules gone, sir.'

'What'd'ya mean, gone?'

'Lost, sir. Missing.'

'Well, go out and find them, will you?'

'Been out with soldiers Esparza and Trigo all afternoon and searched the hills. Haven't seen them, sir.'

Suddenly Peter let go with a shrug. He was fed up with all the mule business but he knew that they were his responsibility and that if they hadn't all been reined in before dark, he would be in hot water with Espinelli, of all people. He would have to organise the search personally.

'Very well, soldier. All right... call up the whole platoon and get them ready for a thorough search in ten minutes. I'll be conducting the operation myself.'

‘Aye, aye, sir.’

‘And stop saying “aye, aye” will you? This is not the bloody Navy.’

Soldier Gómez looked cryptically at Peter as if he had never heard that reprimand before and left the room with the more conventional ‘Yes, sir’ in a hurry. Peter looked out through the window and sighed. It was getting colder by the minute and he guessed that they had only a couple of hours before dark. He hoped to God that the mules would be easily found, though his experience had shown again and again that these animals had a way of wandering without any apparent purpose into the most outlandish corners. He was about to leave his room when soldier Gómez appeared again with a letter in his hands.

‘The daily post, sir.’

Peter looked impatiently at the back of the envelope and saw that it was from Thomas. He hesitated between reading the letter then and there or leaving it for bedtime, finally deciding to follow the latter course. He put on his greatcoat and resolutely went out to find his men. Outside a fine sleet welcomed him with typical patagonian irony.

That night after dinner he climbed into bed and read Thomas’s epistle slowly. It was Thomas’s first letter ever and Peter felt quite curious. He knew from long experience that despite his literary turn of mind, Thomas was a somewhat reluctant writer and this looked like a rather long piece. For a start there was a pretty hilarious account of Jimmy’s doings with a fire extinguisher at their wedding. One or two paragraphs actually made him grin. But then he went on to more metaphysical proposals and Peter read on with a wrinkled forehead.

I don't know why, but all manner of love affairs seem to go wrong. Except, perhaps, mine with Veronica. And this, mind you, despite our getting married... Well, you know what Kierkegaard used to say, that while the girl of your dreams isn't married, she's called Beatrice or Juliet or any other romantic name that excites all manner of romantic inspirations. But when she marries she goes on to become Mrs. Johnson or something. And now, to be honest, Veronica talks and walks rather like a Mrs. Vega, if you follow me. It's not that I'm not in love anymore or anything but I tell you, marriage is quite a terrible matter and I keep remembering the ditto that emphasises that it's a corral where everyone on the outside wants to get in while those inside——. Hell, I tell you, this is no picnic. We're all a bit nervous because time goes by and she still doesn't

get pregnant, but the doctor says nothing's wrong... except our getting into a state because of our impatience. Hope he's right.

But other love affairs seem to go sour also. Philip with the Church, Jimmy with the Army, yours with Victoria. I mean, what the hell, it sometimes looks as though love is, all in all, a rum thing, something to carefully eschew if you don't want a broken heart. Like Discepolo's tango, do you remember:

If only I had a heart once more / The heart I gave away...

From what I gather, I think Jimmy can't get over his affair with the Army. Between you and me, I think he's been seriously considering going back—even if another year at the Academy without you all would be pretty rough going—but the truth is... well, don't say a word, but I think there's quite a chance of his going back. I've persuaded him to work at the law courts with me—hope Judge Rivarola never finds out who this young man happens to be—and he seems to be doing quite well, working meticulously with amazing concentration and constancy. A bit listless at times, I admit, but all things considered, I think he's better off despite his grumbling at this and that. He finds 'civil' life perfectly horrible and apparently can't adjust to it. Of course, I can see that his critical views are sometimes quite justified, but I'm afraid that most of the time they proceed from some sort of silent resentment and not from an intelligence in search of truth... And his new hippie friends aren't much help either. There's no hiding the fact that when all is said and done, these people... All the same, as things stand, I think Jimmy has begun to see through this crowd.

Peter couldn't quite refrain from thinking that Thomas's contentions seemed much more amusing when he pronounced them with his high-pitched voice, and not so attractive when in black on white. He was, however, very much interested in what followed.

I haven't seen much of Victoria lately but she did come home to dinner a couple of weeks ago and, well, I found her a bit sadder of course, since her Mother's death.

I think, and so does Veronica, that she's still in love with you, but refuses to say a word about what happened between you two and doesn't ever mention you. So, well, sorry old mate if I discreetly prefer to keep away from that subject.

Peter lit a cigarette and sighed, watching the smoke curl slowly towards the ceiling. Life was perfect hell, he thought with frustration, what with Victoria so far away and not

answering his letters, Jimmy in a bitter predicament, Thomas, even Thomas, with his pessimistic logic... The entire world seemed to be a debased place and he wondered how many weeks of this sort of life he was disposed to weather. But he was tired to death and at last fell asleep thinking thankfully that at least those frightful mules had been found.

Chapter Fourteen

Heard it on the grapevine

‘I wonder what’s changed so much since last summer,’ Andrew reflected, ‘This year, everyone seems to be rather tired or sad or I don’t know what.’

‘And hot,’ Joseph wryly added.

‘Well, for one,’ Henry observed, ‘Peter isn’t here, and Jimmy has run amok.’

‘Where is he, does anyone know his whereabouts?’ Andrew enquired.

‘Thomas told me that he’s gone to Brazil on holiday with a couple of his new friends,’ Joseph informed.

‘Yes, and Thomas has *married* for Christ’s sake,’ Henry chimed in.

They laughed at that, but were soon rather glum again. This summer things were, in effect, very different. Andrew and his friends were drinking *maté* at his home, only a few weeks after Christmas, under the shade of a couple of big poplar trees. It was hot that afternoon and once again they deplored the old swimming pool’s state of disrepair.

‘Didn’t you ever fill it up, see what——’

‘We certainly did, a couple of years ago. Don’t tell me. We cleaned the walls, painted it and it took the better part of a week to fill it up, but apparently the floor is cracked somewhere and in three days we were back to square one, all the water had leaked away,’ Andrew told them, ‘And that was the end of that, I can tell you.’

They sighed, sweating in the shade.

‘Did any one see Peter last time he was around?’ Henry asked no one in particular.

‘Uh-uh. I saw him,’ Joseph admitted lackadaisically, ‘I happened to stumble on him and Victoria at home while they were having what to all intents and purposes looked like a row or something.’

Henry and Andrew were most interested in this piece of news and asked for more details.

‘Well, I don’t know. Victoria was in tears and Peter seemed dejected. He only *stayed* at home for a couple of hours and when I got back from the grocer’s he’d already decamped... I don’t think we managed to exchange more than a couple of words between us. He vaguely asked about you all and——more vaguely yet——promised to visit us all one of these days. No, I don’t think so. He was only staying in Buenos Aires for a week or so, because of——’

‘What about Thomas or Jimmy?’ Andrew asked, ‘did they see him?’

‘No,’ Joseph reported, ‘they did not. Apparently Peter’s leave was suddenly shortened because he’s been transferred to somewhere in Corrientes, I don’t know why.’

‘Corrientes? That’s on the other side of the map, isn’t it?’ Henry observed. Corrientes was a province with tropical weather, nearly two thousand miles to the north of Covanuco.

‘Is he being promoted, do you think?’ Andrew enquired.

‘Well, apparently not. I believe you have to serve three years as a Second Lieutenant before that,’ Henry explained.

‘The next rank being...?’ Joseph asked.

‘Lieutenant.’

‘Well, I for one am grateful to the gods for not having such a calling,’ Andrew declared with a grin.

They laughed at the preposterous idea. No one could picture Andrew as anything but his fat, unruly, unreliable, self. The *maté* circulated lazily and the boys kept on talking while the afternoon shadows lengthened.

‘And talking about callings, how’s Philip doing?’ Henry asked.

‘Not too well either, I believe,’ Joseph reported. They were surprised by this.

‘What’d’ya mean with “not too well”? Don’t tell me he’s thinking of——’

‘Yes, well, I don’t know for sure, but I heard Victoria speaking to him over the phone the other day and from what I gathered he’s undergoing some crisis of sorts... Apparently he doesn’t get on with Father Mole for some reason or other.’

‘I thought those two hit it off together rather well,’ Andrew said.

‘Yes, well, I don’t know. I asked Victoria to tell me what was going on but apparently Philip had sworn her to keep her mouth shut concerning whatever might be the trouble.’

‘I don’t happen to like Father Mole much myself if you ask me,’ said Andrew.

‘Yes, well, say what you want but I don’t think priests have to be *likeable* in any case. It’s quite irrelevant...,’ Henry said.

His two friends were taken by surprise. They weren’t used to hearing from Henry such contentious views. And this one in particular sounded rather out of character.

‘Who says so?’ Andrew shrewdly asked his friend.

Henry recognised that he had heard Thomas say so, more than once.

‘But *all* Christians are supposed to be of an amiable disposition. Much more, priests, for God sake,’ Joseph argued.

‘I’m not that sure,’ Andrew took up the line. ‘The old orthodox priests were severe and usually quite intimidating people, from what I remember. But they were truly faithful to their vocation. Now take a look at these modernist chaps, so sympathetic and easy going... give me one of the grim and rather frightening chaps of the old times, any day.’

‘No, I don’t think so,’ Joseph argued, ‘Oh, Lord! may the bad people be good, and may the good people be nice,’ he quipped, drawing renewed laughter from his friends.

Presently they got up and decided to buy some beer at the kiosk only two blocks away. Andrew set the pace as they trudged along the dusty streets of Bella Vista. On their way the talk turned back to Jimmy.

‘What’s the matter with him, do you think?’ Joseph asked.

‘Deranged, out of his mind, that’s all,’ Henry grumbled.

‘I’m not so sure about that,’ Andrew said.

‘You’ve a theory or something?’ Henry enquired.

‘Well... I don’t know. I’ll tell you what I think if you keep it secret,’ Andrew said, ‘I’d be in hot water if this starts to circulate, and I’ll downright deny that I’ve ever said it but...’

‘Fire away.’

‘I *think*, I’m not sure, but as far as I can tell... Stands to reason, doesn’t it? I mean, I can’t help thinking that he’s in love.’

‘Well, even if it’s true... I mean, you can be perfectly in love without—’ Henry said.

‘Oh, with whom?’ Joseph interrupted.

‘With your sister.’

They stopped dead in their tracks. ‘Not Victoria?’

Andrew silently nodded and Henry whistled loudly.

‘Blimey.’

The three of them stood on a corner clinging to the empty bottles of beer they had taken with them.

‘Hell of a mess if it’s true,’ Henry muttered, ‘one hell of a mess.’

‘I can’t believe it,’ Joseph said, ‘and what makes you think——’

‘Watch out!’ Henry cautioned, because, sure enough Victoria was walking towards them. She was wearing a rather short yellow dress that Henry thought most alluring, and for a fraction of a second he couldn’t quite help admitting to himself that there were times when he felt rather in love with her too. He hastily brushed these uncomfortable thoughts away. To cover up their track they simulated another argument about the merits and demerits of some soccer player or another.

‘Hello boys,’ she said when she reached them, kissing Henry and her cousin, ‘I was looking for *you*,’ she said, pointing her finger at Joseph.

‘What’s up?’

Victoria looked rather tired and her face exhibited a severe sisterly expression that Joseph particularly disliked.

Henry saw nothing of this. He was looking at her knees.

‘What’s up? You ask me? I’ll tell you what’s up all right. I’m all alone at home with all the children, and what do you know? When I need someone to do the shopping, all of you just disappear.’

‘Oh, stop grumbling, old girl,’ Andrew chimed in, ‘It’s not the end of the world or anything,’ and engagingly added, ‘Joseph was just telling us that we’d better go and see if you needed something.’ He lied with a perfectly straight face.

‘Very well, sister,’ Joseph said, ‘tell me what you need and I’ll do the shopping.’

‘All right. And please *don’t* forget the butter.’

Victoria handed over a shopping list and some money and turned back to the house, walking slowly under the sun. Henry looked the other way.

The three of them proceeded to the grocer’s at a slow pace. Henry and Joseph returned to what Andrew had been saying.

‘Well, how do you know? Who told you? Does Peter know about——’

‘Did he actually——’

‘Hold it, hold it, friends,’ Andrew laughed at their harping questions, ‘Don’t get me wrong. It’s only a theory of mine, only something I surmise... I don’t know, I may well be wrong for all I know.’

‘Well, but you must have something a bit more substantial than *that* to stir up such suspicions, I mean,’ Henry reproachfully said.

‘Listen I’m not stirr——’

‘Do you think Victoria actually broke her engagement because she——’ Joseph stumbingly asked.

‘No. I don’t think so. No, nothing like that. I don’t even think Peter even *knows* about this... Well, friends, now that the cat is out of the bag, I might as well tell you.’

This reduced the other two to new levels of curiosity. They knew that Andrew wouldn’t invent a story like that out of the blue. There must be something to it, they thought.

‘At Thomas’s and Veronica’s wedding I happened to be quite near to the table where Victoria was sitting and... er... Well——fact is that this was before he started to play around with the fire-extinguisher,’ he added with a smile, ‘but actually *before* all that Jimmy came up to her asking her for a dance, as far as I could gather.’

‘Well, nothing wrong with *that* chum, I myself——’ Henry said.

‘Yes. But when Victoria refused, he dashed into the toilet and, uh, on the spur of the moment I decided to follow suit.’

‘And so?’ Joseph impatiently spurred him on.

‘Well, I found Jimmy in the loo all by himself, looking straight into the mirror. And you know what? He was writing with *soap* on the glass.’

‘Did you see what——,’ Henry said.

‘Heaven knows,’ Andrew said, ‘As soon as he saw me he began to laugh and hastily rubbed out his soapy inscription... He said he was writing a new line for a poem he had recently concocted... but, no, he certainly didn’t expect to be caught like that.’

‘But didn’t you manage to read what he had written?’ Joseph asked.

‘Nope, not a clue. Except that I *did* recognize a capital "V" somewhere.’

Quite staggered by this piece of news, they walked in silence while trying to digest the unmistakable implications.

They were only a couple of yards from the grocer’s when Joseph exclaimed with a distinct note of dismay, ‘Hey, wait a sec., hold it boys.’

‘And now what’s the matter?’ Andrew enquired.

‘I’ve lost Victoria’s shopping list.’

Chapter Fifteen

A necessary trip

‘Well! You could’ve knocked me down with a feather! What are *you* doing over here?’ Suter asked with visible alacrity, ‘and you look a bit under the weather, if you ask me, I mean, have you had a bad sleep or something?’

Jimmy shuddered. ‘Come to visit Peter,’ he replied succinctly. He was rather dishevelled after the long night trip and had only managed to wash his face before hopping off the train.

Only the night before, after a couple of beers with Thomas and on the spur of what looked like a blind impulse, he had resolved to come up and see his friend. Without even fetching clothes from his home he had run from the Bar——leaving an astonished Thomas to pay for the beer——taken a taxi to Retiro Terminal and without hesitating had bought a ticket and boarded the train that was about to leave. It had been a long journey and he had arrived in the early hours of the morning. Asking for the proper directions he took a taxi that promptly left him at the 12th Infantry Regiment barracks, not far from downtown Mercedes. He was soon taken to the C.O.’s mess where he stumbled on Suter who was drinking coffee.

‘Oh... he’s in his room right now... I believe he’s gone down with flu or something.’

‘Well, that’s unexpected. Nothing too serious do you think?’

‘No, no. Should’ve got it down at Covunco, not here with this kind of weather,’ Suter vaguely indicated the air that was already pretty hot, despite it only being seven o’clock in the morning.

‘Hmmm.’

‘I say, old chap, and talking about unexpected events... What are you up to? What brings you to these remote parts?’

‘Oh, nothing much. Was on my way to visit an uncle who lives on a farm not far from here and thought I could pop in and say hello to Peter. I didn’t know you were posted here also.’

‘Yes, have been for the last couple of years. It seems ages since we were together at _____’

‘Yes, sure. You don’t think I could see Peter immediately? I’m afraid I’m in a bit of a rush,’ Jimmy interrupted rather rudely. He didn’t feel like dwelling on small talk with Suter and, even if he was in no haste whatsoever, he *was* anxious to get over his piece of business.

Suter shrugged his shoulders and summoned a soldier who was casually passing by, instructing him to the effect that he should show the visitor where Peter’s room was.

Jimmy slowly opened the door to find his friend fast asleep. He discreetly drew up a chair next to the bedside and reflectively looked at Peter who hadn’t woken up. On top of a small table in the corner a small portable wireless was gently transmitting a typical *chamamé*. On the floor by Peter’s bed the glaring cover of a magazine looked up at him. He picked it up with interest, but let it go as soon as he discovered it was an old number of ‘*Pelo*’, a rock & roll weekly. He looked around and found nothing of interest in the room and played with the idea of opening the wardrobe doors where Peter surely kept his books, but then discarded the whole idea. They looked like creaky doors and he didn’t want to wake Peter up. So he sat down again and gazed reflectively at his friend. A few pearls of sweat on his forehead seemed to indicate that he had a temperature.

It had been quite rough last evening, he thought once again.

‘Listen,’ Thomas had begun grimly, ‘I don’t know how or why——and I’m certainly not to be blamed for this——but the rumour has begun to go round and Peter is bound to find out any day about this most unfortunate turn...’ Thomas had left his sentence unfinished.

‘Well,’ Jimmy had defensively said, ‘It’s not my fault either, I never——’

‘No, no, no my friend,’ Thomas had interrupted, ‘I know very well that you’ve never explicitly declared your feelings in public, or to Victoria, for that matter, but,’ his wrinkled forehead clearly showed he was picking his words, ‘There’s no way the buzz could’ve spread if it were not true. So in one way or another you *must* have given yourself away. Showing that one’s in love does not always require explicit language you know. No smoke without fire.’ Thomas’s tendency to ramble on any subject showed up even in these embarrassing circumstances, ‘Conversely, it’s a difficult thing

to keep secret as any adulterer soon finds out. As a matter of fact, I'm thinking about writing a story about two lovers——'

'Good grief! No, no, I mean, how can you even *mention* such a thing?'

'All right, all right. No, I know, sorry, I'm not even suggesting such a thing.'

'Uh-uh.'

Peter groaned in his sleep and Jimmy actually thought he would wake up, but he only turned over in his bed with dim grovelling sounds.

They had remained silent for a while. But presently Jimmy had told Thomas what had been weighing heavily on his mind.

'As a matter of fact——' he started and stopped, unsure how to proceed.

'What?'

'Well, you see, at your wedding party I started to write a poem dedicated to Victoria when Andrew surprised me suddenly barging into the lavatory...'

'What *are* you talking about?'

Jimmy explained that he had been writing on the mirror with a piece of soap.

'I then thought that I had actually managed to wipe out the poem without Andrew noticing——'

'Yes, well, it was a silly thing to do anyway. One can't be careful en——'

'Well, I'm sorry old chum,' Jimmy had nearly lost his temper. 'As you've just said, it's not that easy to conceal a love affair——even if only a one sided one.' Frowning, he added, 'And it's not as though I've committed a crime or something, I mean...'

But Thomas had climbed down.

'Yes, I suppose you're right,' he had sighed noisily. 'Sorry about that. It's only that I wish to avoid Peter another blow... I mean, how would he feel if he got wind of this? Things are bad enough for him as it is. It would be dreadful for him and even Victoria would take it badly, don't you think?'

'Hmm.'

‘And by the way, does *she* know you’re in love with her?’ Thomas had adopted a parenthetic tone as if he wasn’t actually getting down to brass tacks. Jimmy remembered it with a grim smile. Some question. He was silent for a couple of seconds.

‘Yes, I suppose so.’

‘You write to her or something?’ Thomas’s curiosity had been getting the better of him.

‘No, no. But you know how these things are. Our eyes have met more than once. I know that she knows that I know,’ Jimmy had wanly smiled, ‘That’s all.’

Thomas had nodded. He understood all right.

But Jimmy hadn’t seen a way out of his quandary and had felt more depressed than ever. He had recently applied to the Army with fervent hopes that they’d accept him again but had kept the whole thing secret, feeling a bit silly about what looked like another example of fickleness. He was expecting an answer from the military authorities any day and had resolved to make a fresh start in every way. He had actually had a haircut and had vowed to shave his by now quite well grown moustache as soon as he heard from them.

And then Thomas had suggested this trip to Mercedes to talk it over with Peter. There was a just a chance, he had said, that Jimmy *could* straighten things out... in fact pour oil on the troubled waters and between them allay suspicions and otherwise inevitable misgivings.

Peter slept on with a light snore that made Jimmy smile, despite his gloomy recollections. Start anew. Probably that’s why Thomas’s sudden idea caught on in such a compelling way, he thought. Turn over a new leaf. But first he *had* to iron out this dreadful business with Peter. He hoped to God that his friend somehow would accept the fact as a fact whatever his feelings towards his friend from then on.

Suddenly, Peter woke up and hoisted himself violently up with wide-open eyes.

‘Jimmy!’ he exclaimed, ‘What the hell are you doing here?’

They hadn’t seen each other for more than a year and with a knot in his stomach, Jimmy recognised his old-time friend with that frank and welcoming smile of his.

‘Come to visit, old man.’

‘How? When did you arrive?’

‘This morning. Took that dreadful train last night and appeared here ten hours later. Do you think we can get some *maté* here in the hospital?’

Eventually a soldier brought them the stuff and Peter and Jimmy were deep in conversation about this and that. They gossiped enthusiastically, Peter asking about his parents, and Thomas and Veronica, and Andrew, and Henry. Just about everyone, Jimmy thought, except Victoria. But eventually Jimmy questioned his friend over his new destination, something quite unusual after only a year at his first posting.

‘Well,’ Peter said slowly, ‘As a matter of fact, it’s classified information, but...’

Jimmy looked at him with interest. He couldn’t make head or tails out of it all.

‘How can a second lieutenant like yourself gain access to classified——’

‘Well, yes, a bit of an accident I suppose. I was actually sent to Buenos Aires on a peculiar commission. I was at Intelligence Headquarters at the Chief of Staff building where I had to deliver an envelope to a certain General... And, well, was sort of questioned about my degree in English... I don’t know if you remember...’

Jimmy impatiently waved a hand. ‘Of course, of course... What General? And what the heck has that got to do——’

‘Hmmm... I’m not sure I can tell you all I know... which isn’t much in any case... Anyway, as I say this is class——’

‘Oh, come off it, mate. I’m not telling anybody... out with the Asian mystery will you?... If you do so I’ll tell you *my* secret in return,’ he added with a grin.

They both felt like schoolboys sharing confidential reports on this or that master and a whiff of nostalgia silently passed between them.

‘All right. But as soon as I tell you what little I know you’ll see that it looks like that this is no small matter.’

‘Yes, yes, well, will you tell me or not?’

‘Apparently this Regiment over here in Mercedes is being sent somewhere where my English could come in handy. That’s all I know.’

‘War with Chile, do you think?’ Not four years earlier Argentina had nearly gone to war with that border country after years of jostling over some complicated frontier disputes. But no one had heard any rumours of the quarrel getting out of control again. There was

absolutely nothing about it in the newspapers. Nor, for that matter, about any other conflict hypothesis. Jimmy was mystified.

‘I just don’t know,’ Peter said, ‘And if I knew anything else I wouldn’t be telling you,’ he added with a malicious grin.

Jimmy insisted one way or another, trying to extract more information, but Peter staunchly refused to budge.

‘I’ve already told you more than I should have and all I can say is that this whole thing is quite unintelligible to me too... I can only speculate, which I’m doing wildly. And that isn’t doing much good either.’ Peter spoke slowly and calmly, not showing the least sign of excitement.

‘All right then... what’d’ya think is going on?’

‘No, I really don’t know... I’m telling you, I’ve only been guessing, on account of being here in bed for the last couple of days, feeling rather feverish and bored to death. But I know nothing... and then...’ he didn’t finish the sentence.

‘What? And then what?’ Jimmy urged him on.

‘Tell you later. Remember to ask me about that later, will you? Now it’s your turn, mate, you promised to tell me *your* secret if I remember properly.’

So Jimmy told Peter all about his applying to the Army again and his high hopes that he could take up a military career once more.

The other secret would have to wait, he thought.

Peter was delighted with the peace of news and actually leaped out from his bed and gave his friend a vigorous hug while they both laughed with pleasure. Soon enough they got down to planning Jimmy’s future, Peter trying to remember what officers were in charge this year at the Army Academy, what chances his friend had of completing his pending year successfully, and so on. They presently went on to speculate on their chances of being posted together and when a soldier appeared with a tray of lunch, Peter jumped out of his bed without ado.

‘Let’s have lunch in town,’ he joyfully said, ‘I’m not staying a minute more in this damn bed.’

He looked quite all right, so, despite Jimmy's protests, Peter put on his uniform, shaved in a minute, went out to see a senior officer from whom he wangled a car and a clearance, and in no time they were out of the Regiment barracks, driving towards the town centre. Peter was in excellent spirits and prattled away about the merits and demerits of his new Regiment. He didn't look in the least bit sick. On the other hand Jimmy felt that that particular knot he had felt in his stomach had come back with renewed force.

He still had to get this thing off his chest. He still hadn't talked to Peter about Victoria.

Chapter Sixteen

Jimmy and Victoria

Jimmy cursed once again. He just couldn't understand the anonymous officials that had decided not to send him over to the Islands where there was a real war going on. It was quite unintelligible. After all, the military authorities *had* decided to shorten the military cadet's year and if by now he was a fully recognized C. O., why on earth didn't they send him over to fight, for God's sake. Or at least, he thought, give him a posting down south of the country where so much was going on. He walked despondently through the streets of Buenos Aires and cursed them all again. It was a rather bleak midday, the overcast weather making him shudder as he imagined how much worse it probably was over there in those remote islands. The worst part was to think—and he couldn't refrain a feeling of envy every time he remembered it, which was about a dozen times every hour—that Peter was already there, the lucky blighter. Even Suter had been mobilised with the 12th Regiment. But not Jimmy, no sir. He bitterly remembered what he had been told at the Military School.

'Some officers absolutely *have* to stay on, you know. Otherwise, who's to see to the training of the rest of the cadets over here?'

But the captain's eloquence was quite lost on Jimmy who thought that at least they could've asked around a bit. He was sure that more than one of his comrades-in-arms would in fact be rather relieved if they heard that they were *not* being mobilised. He well knew that there was more than one white feather among them, and the chances were that several of them would now be posted to the Falklands, God damn it. He kicked a dustbin with frustration and won a reproachful look from a passer by. He wasn't using a uniform, for his commission that day had been limited to fetch some papers from Telam, the State Press Agency that was rendering the official—and, to all purposes, only—version of all events in connection with the war. He did not know what the contents of the big brown envelope he had to take back to the School were about, but by the looks of the seedy looking chap in a black suit that had handed them over to him, it was surely a matter of no importance. That thin old bureaucrat could

easily have worked for *Pravda*, he thought. He cursed generally everything and everyone, as he trudged down Florida Street among the indifferent throng. He tried to think differently but he found everything he saw around him and everyone he met quite hateful. All that ongoing jingoism—especially irritating was the mix of bombastic triumphalism and superficial charlatanism that seemed to pervade it all, with the trash the media endlessly repeated and the yellow press publishing the most incredible stories, religiously read by people who ended arguing over military strategy in a perfectly ignorant way. And this was going on at every corner, in every bar, in every school, club, office and family meal. And these, he reflected, represented the better part of his countrymen for, after all, at least they *cared*. This was war and real people were getting and would get hurt over there. But then it seemed to him that large portions of his countrymen just went on with their business—theatres and restaurants were as full as always; there were hundreds of Argentines, he thought, that were more worried about the outcome of the World Cup than about the war. People that just didn't care about anything or people that cared about silly things, people that just carried on as if nothing serious was going on. And on top of it all, it didn't look as though Argentina would win the war despite the obvious strategic advantages.

'Not a chance, buddy, not a chance,' Thomas had said the other evening. Jimmy had gone over for dinner to his house in Belgrano—there was a noisy little idea at the back of his head that there was always a chance of encountering Victoria over there. But no, and after dinner Thomas and he had talked long into the night about the Falklands war.

'There's no way we can win this war against the Brits, so let's just pray that at least we win one or two battles and don't make too much a hash of——'

'What do you mean, not a chance?' Jimmy had interrupted with a piece of wishful thinking, 'I think Argentina has more of a backbone—I don't know, I mean... perhaps our men have more mettle than meets the eye.'

'Perhaps,' Thomas had conceded, 'but after World War II it isn't a question of pluck any more than nerve, you know, the English are *professional* soldiers, do you know what that means? I tell you, we haven't a chance.'

And it wasn't lack of patriotism on Thomas's part, Jimmy thought, just cool intelligence to see what there was to see, that was all. A matter of calling a spade a spade.

‘In addition, Argentines don’t know how to *organise* themselves. They can’t organise the Army, they can’t organise the country, and they certainly can’t organise their ideas, let alone their feelings. I’m telling you, there’s no way we can come out on top this time. No amount of jingoism can compensate Britain’s long tradition of administrative efficiency and outright genius when practical issues are at stake,’ Thomas vigorously shook his head. ‘A nation of shopkeepers, Napoleon called them. But at least very efficient at that, one has to admit, as eventually even Napoleon himself must have acknowledged I dare say. You only have to look at the mountains of red tape over here that make so many decisions fall apart, solutions melt away, clever ideas go down the drain.’ He half snorted with disgust. ‘No, my friend, and I’m not even starting on England’s distinguished educational record, general war experience and technological superiority.’ He quickly finished his drink and put his glass on the kitchen table with a bang, ‘I’m as good an Argentine as the next chap and don’t like to admit any of this, but there it is. And then, if we’re not to indulge in stupid reveries just remember what sort of man is the crazy, improvised and stupid drunk who runs the show in this country.’ He shook his head angrily.

‘Well, Churchill was quite a bit of a drunkard himself, for that——’

‘Ha, ha. Sure was, but we can’t even begin to——’

‘I know, I know. What I’m getting at is that we *do* have clear tactical advantages with all those troops already stationed on the islands, and the British face very complicated logistics before even beginning to think of setting foot on one of the beaches. If you bear that in mind, I think that we stand quite a chance of actual——’

‘Throwing them back into the sea?’ Thomas laughed hollowly and served himself some more wine. ‘An unlikely possibility, I’m telling you. Not that it didn’t happen in Gallipoli——by the way, one of Churchill’s many blunders——but then, those cliffs were quite unassailable and the Turkish soldiers had better training than our poor soldiers from the compulsive military service.’ And with a smile he added as an afterthought, ‘They were trained by the Germans.’

‘But all military manuals say that you need to have a numerical superiority of three to one before even *thinking* of setting up a beachhead.’

‘True——unless you happen to be fighting Argentina. When the English finally choose a beach, you can put your shirt on it, I bet there will be no Argentine defences waiting

for them. Those islands are small but there are just too many possible beaches they can choose as a beachhead, mark my words.'

And so on. One way or the other, Thomas had finally convinced Jimmy that the war was lost even before it had begun, even if they both thought it gave Argentina a chance to show the world that it wasn't just another typical Third World country and that its combatants were excellent soldiers notwithstanding some glaring shortcomings. To a certain extent, the first Air Force excursions seemed to bear this out but Jimmy was uncomfortable with the future.

He bought a newspaper to find out what the last news was and decided to go and have lunch somewhere where he could peacefully peruse it. Most of the places he tried were up to the brim, full of office workers talking away at the top of their voices. He saw an old man waving his hands this way and that in what obviously was a mimetic account of warplanes clashing in the air. He left in a hurry and cursing again, turned off Florida, walking down the less hectic Tucumán street until he found a cafe where there were fewer people. He sat by the window. After asking for a sandwich he spread the newspaper on the little table and was about to start to read it when a green dressed girl passed by. The thought crossed his mind that the girl had looked very much like Victoria.

What if...? he thought in a flash. Leaving his coat on a chair, he rushed out and ran after her, calling her by her name. The girl turned round with a surprised look on her face and greeted him with a smile.

'Oh, hello, Jimmy,' she looked at his flustered face with large blue eyes, 'This is quite a coincidence, isn't it? What are you doing over here? It's rather cold to be without a coat don't you think?'

She was wearing a very elegant green Loden overcoat her Granny had bought for her in Austria and Jimmy could see her dark glossy hair, playfully entangled in its lapels. He also fleetingly got a look at her blue jeans and high boots and thought, once again, that she was somewhat unique, that he would never get to know another girl like that, whatever happened.

'Do you have time for a coffee?' he earnestly asked, 'I was having a bite at that Bar over there,' he pointed to the rather withered joint, 'But we can always have something in a better place, if you want.'

Victoria laughed lightly and shook her head. For a desperate moment, he thought he was being rejected.

‘No, that place seems perfectly all right to me. I’ve already lunched but we can always have a coffee. What are you doing in B.A. without a uniform?’

Presently they were chatting away over the little coffee table, Jimmy telling her all about his useless commission and his failure to get mobilised.

‘The fact is,’ he said dejectedly, ‘it seems as though my whole life is as much of a failure as it could possibly be.’

‘Nonsense,’ Victoria replied, ‘Mummy always used to say to us that no one knows what life is worth or what’s in store for us.’ She smiled, ‘I’ve remembered that always and it’s done me more good than all that silly self-help gibberish people gobble up nowadays.’ She shook her head, ‘All that rubbish about *self-esteem*, I ask you.’ She drank a sip of coffee while Jimmy listened fascinated. For the sake of it, he said he hadn’t understood what Victoria’s mother was getting at.

‘Well, it’s like being in a film. If you think that you’re the star, every time the lime-light goes on to someone else you feel disappointed and that your presence is quite unnecessary. But that of course is because you’re not seeing the whole film, that’s all. At times you may feel like a very expendable extra, but the film won’t be complete without you.’ She smiled. ‘The paradox being that only by being self-centred can people actually deceive themselves as to their importance. They *are* important, everyone is, but not in the way they sometimes figure.’ She frowned at the newspaper that was on a corner of the table. ‘It doesn’t depend on what one feels, but on what one *sees*, I think——and for that you have to forget yourself, I don’t know if you’re following, never mind your self-esteem or whatever.’

Jimmy would have liked her to keep on elaborating, but she suddenly came up with something quite different.

‘Have you heard anything about Peter lately?’

‘Nope. No news at all. The last I heard was that he was stationed with the 12th Regiment at a place called Goose Green where there’s an air field, next to Darwin.’ He grinned at Victoria, ‘Apparently Charles Darwin *was* there at some point, studying a very peculiar type of fox he had discovered. In those days the only English resident was a certain Mr.

Dixon who,' he laughed, 'apparently had enough reason to have the Islands under the Union Jack.'

He asked Victoria if she would have another coffee but she shook her head.

'Anyway, I've been looking at the maps, and it doesn't look like a dangerous place to be——at present. I'd bet that their mission there would be to protect the air field and eventually counter any landings from the sea,' he frowned. 'From what I gather, unless he's very unlucky, he should be all right. Did he write to you or something?'

Victoria shook her head and looked out through the windowpanes onto the grey street where the throng had dwindled a bit. It looked rather cold out there.

'No. We had agreed not to write to each other for some time,' she waved her hand vaguely, 'but I thought the situation warranted a breach,' she smiled. 'Anyway I don't suppose he'll have the time now that he's in a war zone, even if he *wanted* to reply. And then——' she broke off the sentence.

'What? And then what?'

'No. I don't know. Maybe the Army's postal service isn't working properly. I believe they've stationed over nine thousand troops on the Islands, you know...it must be a mess.'

'Uh-uh.'

For some time they were silent, Victoria smoking one of her black cigarettes, her eyes on the empty coffee cup and Jimmy unabashedly admiring her good looks. After all, he thought, it was the first time in his life that he had Victoria all to himself. *Had* her? he reflected. Not a chance chum, unless you do something. He sighed and drew strength, as it were, from her presence.

'Have you heard that I went up to see him at Mercedes last summer?'

'No,' she looked up with interest, 'I did not.'

'Yes, well. I took the train one night after having something of a row with Thomas and went straight to tell Peter,' he looked away from her through the Bar's window.

'Apparently the news had made its way onto the grapevine and was becoming uncomfortably public, you know... it wouldn't have been right if he actually got wind of it all second hand.'

‘Got wind of what on earth? What on earth have you two been talking about?’ Victoria asked suspiciously, her feminine curiosity getting the better of her.

‘Well...’ he hesitated, ‘uh, you don’t happen to have another of those dreadful black cigarettes you prefer?’

‘I thought you didn’t smoke,’ she said while she handed the pack and lighter and waited.

‘Only in an emergency,’ Jimmy smiled.

Victoria remained silent. She surmised what was coming and didn’t feel entirely comfortable.

‘Well, the fact that I’m in love with you.’ He said it bluntly while looking straight into her troubled eyes. They seemed to him like the southern seas in a storm.

There was a pause while Victoria looked away from him. But she knew she had to say something.

‘Well,’ she spoke slowly looking back at him, ‘I’m sure I’m flattered. Thank you very much and all that. But even so, I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do about that.’ Her voice wavered a bit, but she had clearly made an effort to repress the inevitably censorious tone, the trick done by lifting her last words and giving them an interrogative slant. All the same, Jimmy felt cold shivers down his spine.

‘That’s exactly what Peter said.’

She looked up, taken by surprise. ‘Did he say that?’

‘Uh-uh. Apparently you two are on exactly the same wavelength and, well——there’s nothing I can do either, but wait until I get over this.’ He shook his head and smiled sadly. ‘I’m having a hell of a time, you know.’

‘So are all of us,’ Victoria assented, ‘We all of us are having one hell of a time. Argentina, 1982, will be something to forget.’

There was a pause, and Jimmy felt curiously relieved. His spirits had lightened up somehow even when events weren’t turning out, to say the very least, too favourable for him.

‘Yes, one hell of a time,’ he nodded. ‘Even Peter, I can tell you,’ he looked at Victoria intently, ‘When I went on this visit to Mercedes he actually told me he had had a nightmare or something...’ he shook his head, ‘On top of it all.’

‘What sort of a nightmare?’

‘Well, I don’t remember all the details——one tends to be rather inattentive when the next bloke comes along wrestling with all the nonsense attached to dreams——but I *do* remember he had dreamt that he was dying on a battlefield...’

Victoria’s face showed acute concern and he instantly regretted having brought this up. Hang it! Me and my big mouth, he thought. The girl was visibly affected by the story.

‘But there was no talk of war in those days, was there?’ she asked.

‘No, there wasn’t. But he guessed something was cooking because of his surprising change of destination from Covunco to Mercedes. And he knew it was on account of his knowing English quite well, so... as a matter of fact he actually guessed we were going to war, even if he couldn’t be quite sure with whom.’

‘A premonition,’ said Victoria hoarsely.

‘Yes, well, I don’t know,’ Jimmy shook his head, ‘I don’t believe in these things myself, and even Peter tended to disregard the whole thing as a product of his temperature. He had had that dream the night before I arrived, so, uh, well anyway, as a matter of fact I don’t think anyone can attach any importance whatsoever to it.’

‘Uh-uh, all the same...’ Victoria reflected with a frown on her face. ‘I’ll feel much better when all this is over.’

‘The war and everything...’

‘Yes. The war and everything.’ She smiled at the last word knowingly.

There was another pause and once again Jimmy regretted having referred to Peter’s nightmare. And now Victoria budged a bit, as if preparing to leave. He decided to change course then and there.

‘D’you know who sent you those roses?’ he asked suddenly with a malicious grin.

The unexpected turn in the conversation caught her unawares. ‘What roses?’ And then, she suddenly remembered, ‘Not those roses someone sent to my Granny’s place ages ago?’ She had forgotten all about them and if she actually *had* remembered the episode

now and then, she had shrugged it off thinking there must've been a mistake somewhere. She looked at Jimmy with wide eyes, took her lower lip between her teeth with wonder, and then released it to ask 'Don't tell me it was you, was it?'

'Yup,' Jimmy laughed.

'But, but... I mean, we hadn't even met in those days, and how did you know my Granny's address, and what was the idea anyway?'

'Hold on, hold on, old girl, wait a sec,' he faked confusion and distress. 'One at a time, and I'll tell you.'

He did. But in the end, after sorting out the circumstances, Victoria asked him again why on earth he had done such a thing.

'I don't really know. It's just one of those things that come up,' he smiled wanly, 'An inspiration you may say.' He laughed shortly. 'Anyway that fateful day I was so glad to see Peter in such an amorous mood, it was a lovely springtime morning, and he had described you with *such* enthusiasm... I suppose I was infected. And then, maybe, I thought, you were sad about something, so just in case, you know... "Red roses for a blue lady".'

Victoria looked at him quite mystified by all this.

'A song by Dean Martin.'

She shook her head. 'No, I mean, not the song, the *roses*...'

'Well, I thought that those roses would help Peter on his way to conquer you, if and when you ever met again. Little did we know that that very night...'

He laughed in such a way that Victoria couldn't quite stop laughing too. She eyed him curiously and asked him if he had ever told Peter.

'No, as a matter of a fact, now that you ask me, I never did.' He gave another short laugh. 'I suppose I was rather ashamed at the time, and later on I sort of pushed the whole incident to the back of my mind... oh I don't know.' He called for the waiter thinking that it was high time to get back to the Army Academy with the infamous brown envelope. He paid the bill and helped Victoria with her coat.

On their way out, she asked him why he was bringing up the story now. They stood talking on the sidewalk where it was getting colder by the minute.

‘Well, I don’t know. I suddenly remembered. You don’t send roses to an unknown girl and just forget. I’ve been lumbering along with this heavy burden for the better part of two years and,’ he sighed, ‘I don’t know. I’m giving myself away as much as I can. I’m fed up with all these secretive attitudes. So, well, I told Peter that I’m in love with you, and now I’ve told you. No more secrets. I’m in love with you, and you’re in love with Peter, that’s all. Life is life and now I’ve only to wait... see how it all sorts itself out. As your Mum used to say——what was it?’

‘No one knows what life is worth or what’s in store for us,’ she quoted again, ‘You never knew what was in store for *you* when you sent those roses, did you?’

For a second, Jimmy looked up with a glimmer of hope. He shook his head.

‘I certainly didn’t.’

‘I knew there had been a mistake somewhere.’

Chapter Seventeen

Peter's fight

He had been on those islands for nearly two months and the weather had noticeably worsened. It wasn't that he felt cold or anything: by now he was quite used to the freezing winds and uncooked rations, probably because he kept focused on the military situation most of the time. Nearly always, these days, he had his mind quite entirely taken up by the war—and Victoria. But anyway, there was so much to do that he hadn't even time to think about his personal comfort. That morning he had had a rather gloomy briefing from the Lieutenant Colonel in charge, a tall officer with a shaven head. Peter found him very much like Kojak, the T.V. detective, and each time he saw him he pictured him with a lollipop, a private joke of sorts. But the circumstances were no joking matter, and Peter knew he was in for it.

'Gentlemen, we the people of Task Force *Mercedes* will have to meet the British in our shirt sleeves,' he so summed up the situation. 'We have only two radios out on the Land-Rovers we dispose of.' They had taken them from the civilians at Goose Green. 'No other vehicles. Only eleven machine-guns when we should've had twenty-five. Few mortars and only one 105mm recoilless gun——without a sight.' The Lieutenant Colonel shook his head in despair. 'We should've had twenty five.' He paused for a second. 'And even if you prefer to be sceptical about our local intelligence, the BBC has released a report we can turn to: at least one British Parachute Company is on its way and an attack can be expected tomorrow or, at the latest, the day after.' He paused for a few seconds, letting the full import of this bit of news sink in. 'We've got to stop them along a 31 kilometre perimeter up North, and you know what that means,' said the Lieutenant-Colonel.'

Peter waited patiently. He knew what was coming and expected his orders calmly, even confidently. Perhaps the other officers around him had that effect on him. First Lieutenant Stevanovich was there, a very much-respected officer who had graduated second from a class of 250 at the Military Academy. And then, Second Lieutenant José Vásquez, a very likeable small chap from the Province of Córdoba he knew from the

Army Academy and had befriended at Mercedes. The fact that he was married to a girl called Victoria had made him all the more likeable, and Peter had told them both all about his love troubles. Victoria Vásquez had sympathised and so had her husband, and he had quite frequently been invited to their house in the Regiment. Vásquez was now next to him, waiting for his orders in silent expectation, along with all the others. True, there were one or two of the officers present that Peter found less likeable——old Suter among them——but circumstances now bound them together in a spirit of comrades-in-arms which he found comforting. For a second his mind wandered and he was reminded of his maternal Grandfather, a German Wehrmacht Captain, who had served in Von Paulus's entourage and who had been killed during the siege of Stalingrad. As a child he had more than once contemplated his photograph standing on a mantelpiece, a laughing good looking young man in full uniform hugging a little girl. The photo had 1941 written in black ink at its base: at the time, Peter's mother was only three. His thoughts were suddenly cut short when he heard his name.

‘Second Lieutenant Cayol will immediately take a platoon with him to where First Lieutenant Alí has dug up an outpost position, four kilometres to the north of ‘A’ Company's main line of defence.’ Peter assented while looking closely at his own map. That meant quite a walk up the Isthmus to Boca House by the sea, near where Second Lieutenant Alí had been posted.

In effect, it took them a good two hour trek to get there and it was dark and very windy when they finally arrived. It turned out to be a long-abandoned building in ruins. He soon found out that the troops there had dug up a complex line of trenches with interlocking arcs; a pretty good job, considering the haste with which it had been done and the peat's granite quality. After meeting Second Lieutenant Alí and having a short consultation with him, Peter gave orders to an N.C.O. that had come over with the platoon and they settled down occupying the trenches around the derelict house. Alí had had nothing new to tell Peter.

‘I'm afraid that by putting us in this place with the sea at our back as well as at our left and right plus the English coming at us from the north, we haven't a chance,’ he had shaken his head, ‘To all purposes we've been painted into a bloody corner.’ Alí was a tall, corpulent officer with a raucous voice, and notwithstanding his pessimistic outlook had seemed very much decided to put up a fight, something that in the circumstances Peter appreciated very much.

‘For that matter, this whole Isthmus is a bloody corner,’ Peter had replied with a shrug.

‘This sector has been drawing heavy fire from a frigate that some of the men have identified as the “Arrow”. That has somewhat complicated our logistics in this area but fortunately the ship has gone and for some time now no fire has been shot from any quarter.’

But a couple of scouts had relayed information to the effect that a fraction of the 2nd Para’s Company was only a few kilometres to the North, marching directly towards their position. The Lieutenant Colonel had certainly got it right.

Peter knew that his was a precarious situation and not having a radio was going to make the fighting a matter of groping in the dark. In any case he knew they could only hope to stop the English approaching their positions but that counter-attacking was out of the question. And by then it was common knowledge that the Brits much preferred to attack by night: they had the best equipment available, a good level of training—the men at 2nd Para were all professionals—and their state-of-the-art guns would give them a clear advantage in such circumstances. He went over to a nest where their single 7.62mm machine gun was firmly secured to its tripod and had a word or two with Ramírez and Escudero, the two soldiers that served it.

It started to rain and for once Peter welcomed the water. He knew that this meant that in that weather at least the English wouldn’t be able to call down close artillery support. It was a miserable night by any standard. A Sergeant came up to him and reported that one of his soldiers had all the symptoms of trench feet. He organised the man’s evacuation down to Goose Green and gave him some pieces of chocolate he had managed to grab a couple of hours before. The rain gathered force and he looked for cover from its wetness as well as a good vantage point from where he hoped to detect the presence of the enemy. A roofed trench next to the derelict Boca House seemed a good place for these purposes and offered some sort of a refuge against the rain.

He thought that these were probably his last hours. He remembered the nightmare he had told Jimmy about and recognised the same fear: the cold knots in his stomach and his dry mouth brought back the same feeling, the same impressions he had had that feverish summer night in Corrientes. There was no denying it: if this wasn’t the end it looked very much like it.

He thought of Victoria once again, so very much in his mind since he had received her letter a couple of weeks ago. He took out his torch and extricated a small plastic pouch from his shirt pocket. He had carefully preserved Victoria's letter which was however pretty wrinkled by now: he had read it a dozen times. By now he practically knew its contents by heart but he found great comfort drinking in again and again the adorable words written in delightful blue calligraphy.

...even little Peter, our neighbour, I don't know if you remember him, has asked about you. He has written a letter to you and has asked me to forward it, so you'll find it with this one. The whole country hangs on to any bit of news about you all, and even at my Art School students and professors seem to be talking all day long about this war. Now, don't get me wrong: it's not that they mention you by your name or anything, it's just that I can't keep from mentally replacing their words with your darling name, Peter. If they say, 'the Army has new marching orders' I hear 'Peter has new marching orders'. If they say 'Argentina will fight to the end' I think they're talking about you. And so on. Peter, Peter, Peter. Your name keeps coming up in this weird manner no matter where I am or what I'm doing. Darling, please come back. All right, yes, fight valiantly and all that, but please come back in one piece. After all, I'm fond of every single piece of you, my love. Please, please me, don't let me down and get back to where you once belonged.

And... well, I thought I would wait till you came back before telling you the good news, but I suppose I can't help myself, I'm so excited. Everything has changed over here and things are definitely looking up at home as I shall proceed to explain. Hang on a minute with your battles, let go of your war impedimenta for a second and read carefully: we can marry whenever we want to (as soon as you come back, right?). Things straightened up at home when Aunt Diana, my father's sister, God bless her, came to live with us. She's such an angel. You'll get on with her like a house on fire as soon as you meet. I keep telling her all about you all day long and she's most interested. She's a widow too having lost her husband nearly ten years ago, and, well, had begun to come over to Bella Vista on weekends. She used to live in Mar del Plata but had recently moved to an apartment in Buenos Aires and since February we began to see quite a lot of her. From the outset she would hear nothing about being treated like a guest and won't stop doing house chores all day long. You should see her, she's a perfect pet with the little ones, and is extremely successful with them, helping them with their

homework, taking them out to tea, playing cards, supervising the shopping and cooking like the gods. What more can I tell you? The children just love her, and, well, I don't know, she even tells them wonderful bedside stories that she makes up as she goes along. You can hear the little ones laugh away at bedtime, nearly every night. Having an Aunt like this is just heaven. She's always in a good temper and hums all day long (most of the time out of tune, but no one seems to mind). She's a perfect angel and things have changed so much since she began to stay with us. And then, even Father is much better. Between you and me, I think he's a bit afraid of her because now he's helping also—as in the old days—and dresses and shaves and behaves quite normally. He's actually got back to writing—a book on Catilina's Conspiracy, I ask you. Well, anyway, Aunt Diana started to stay over on Mondays too, and later on began to stay on till every Tuesday, until Father invited her to leave her apartment in Town and move over to our place. So that's exactly what's happened, and they're now building a small house in our garden for her so she can have a bit of privacy, and everything seems to be working wonderfully. Anyway, I don't know if it was her idea or Father's, but the other night they both managed to surprise me: they called for me from the study and when I went in I found them both smiling. Brother and sister have a way of talking in unison which is quite confusing at times but I managed to get the gist of what they were driving at when they laughingly announced that it was high time that I married (someone, anyone, Father said) and that I was not needed any more (which, I gladly admit, sounds a bit disgraceful). Well, basically, that between them they could manage perfectly, which is, as I've been telling you, quite true... So... how about marrying as soon as this dreadful war is over?

Peter suddenly looked up, listening to renewed artillery rumblings to the West, where Mount Darwin stood. Those were heavy guns indeed, possibly Light Anti-Tank Weapons, he thought, and they were a sure sign that something was cooking over there. Not having a radio was a curse, he thought once again. He still felt the cold knots in his stomach and even if not exactly frightened, his hands trembled slightly, the letter in his hands shaking a bit. Marrying Victoria! That would be heaven, and why on earth not? He looked out into the night, not seeing more than a few feet in front of him.

He had of course answered immediately and now wondered if his letter had reached Victoria. Marrying her was all he wanted, and nothing else. Except, perhaps, to read this letter again and again.

...realise it's not quite correct that a girl should propose in this manner, but, darling, the circumstances are certainly very unusual and I thought that, well, maybe the prospect would cheer you up a bit, bless your heart.

I hope you're not cold and that you're feeding yourself properly, they keep sending tons of food from over here and I hope some of it reaches you.

And again, darling, please come back... I'm praying every night to my good friend St Joseph—and my recent friend, St Peter—to protect you and, through our Blessed Mother's mediation, send angels to keep you company as promised in the ninety first psalm: 'He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways'. Just look it up if you have a Bible at hand (I wonder) and it'll comfort you as this letter isn't able to do...

The shooting started without any kind of warning and Peter hastily put Victoria's letter in his left trouser pocket surprised by the sudden din, the deafening noise of explosions around him paralysing him for a full minute. He then turned the torch off and tried to identify the enemy's location. He estimated that they were no more than four hundred metres right in front of him, down a steep slope. It was a rather bold move by the Brits, he thought, only possible in this dreadful weather and in the dark, for they had little cover. He rushed to where the machine gun was vomiting fire in a rather disorganised fashion and with signs he ordered the men there to hold their fire. He wanted to establish where the enemy was, and how much fire power they had. The answer came soon enough, and he identified at least two anti-tank rockets, the white phosphorus burning through one of his soldiers not fifty metres to his left. He heard the poor chap's cries quite distinctly over the general din. Just about then Peter realized it was beginning to dawn and he conceived a plan of his own. If he could get to the cliff at his left he would surely have a vantage point from which he could wipe the English out of their positions as soon as daylight discovered them. He selected Ramírez and Escudero, and tried to explain his plan to them, shouting at the top of his voice and gesticulating madly. Presently the two burly soldiers began to nod in understanding. They took the machine-gun and two boxes with ammo between them and followed Peter, who grabbed the tripod; then, in no time they were out of the trench, running madly. It was one hell of a run up the cliff—and they were under heavy fire—but they finally managed to nest it safely on a ridge that gave them some cover. Peter knew that as soon as the Brits identified the gun's location they were sure to try and blow it out with their own

artillery. But not, he thought, before he had cut out quite a few of them with his gun. Once it was properly placed he ordered his soldiers to fall back, but both of them refused to do so. They insisted on staying on to back-up Peter's machine gun with their F.A.L. rifles. An argument ensued but the men were adamant and there was nothing Peter could do except threaten the grimly smiling men with a court-martial as soon as the battle was over. Peter shook his head, defeated. It was an honour for him, he thought, to fight with blokes like these, privates Ramirez and Escudero, and he hoped to God they wouldn't be hurt, specially Ramírez who was married and had a little baby waiting for him on the continent: Ramírez had proudly showed him the baby's photograph only the day before.

The three men waited for a better view as the daybreak progressed while the battle wore on to what looked like something of a stalemate. Peter wasn't frightened anymore—— he had forgotten to be scared, he thought with a wry smile—— and the knots in his stomach had disappeared. All he could do was repeat again and again the lines of the Psalm: '*He shall give his angels charge over thee...*' He was thinking that he would get hold of a Bible as soon as he could when, suddenly, and quite to his surprise, he distinctly saw a British platoon moving through open ground, some three hundred yards away. He hesitated before opening fire, but when Ramírez started to fire his rifle, he thought it was now or never and his machine-gun started to harass the platoon, clearly bringing down two or three soldiers and pinning down the rest of them. He distinctly saw them retreat in search of the relative cover offered by a fold in the ground. But then Escudero indicated that down on their right flank a section of Paras was moving along the beach towards them using the slopes as cover. Peter turned his gun in that direction but could hardly find a clear target. And then, just as he fixed the gun on one man who came into view, a Milan missile hit their position, killing Ramírez instantly.

Peter himself was badly wounded, his right forearm bleeding freely. The concussion had nearly made him faint but he held on to his machine-gun and kept firing, bringing down another Brit.

It was then that a clean shot got him in the head.

He fell flat on his back, remaining quite still.

After that there was an eerie silence, the Brits evidently trying to appraise the situation.

Peter appeared to be saying something in his agony. Private Escudero had miraculously survived all this and heard him. He managed to wrestle his way through the soggy marsh and slowly approached the rock next to which Peter lay until he could actually hear him. But then he only gathered some arcane mumbling about angels taking care of him. And then he was suddenly silent.

The man closed Peter's eyelids. A piece of white paper had fallen out from his trouser pocket but, as Escudero picked it up he saw that the rain had already dissolved most of the ink on it. He remained in his place for a long time, looking down at what he deemed to have been his best officer ever.

Suddenly he was surrounded by British Paras and a Sergeant walked up pointing his rifle aggressively at the Argie soldier sitting dejectedly next to Peter's body. The Englishman was a big fellow with a tarred face and a grim expression. He used his rifle as a pointer and moved Peter's body to ensure that he was dead.

'This, your commanding officer?' he asked Escudero who had remained quite still, quite defeated.

To Escudero the cockney sounded like Chinese and he only managed to say, 'No *eenglaiize*'.

The N.C.O. shrugged his shoulders.

'Well, all I can say is that if I ever die in battle, I hope it'll be with a smile like this bloke's.'

Chapter Eighteen

A vision

It was autumn once again, and it was raining.

The water bounced on the bright paving stones of Belgrano district's time-honoured streets. There was little light, although it was only six in the afternoon.

Thick drops of rain slid slowly down the misty bow-window panes and through them one could have possibly perceived the drawing room's main features in a dim light.

It was raining.

Suddenly some white knuckles cleared the blurred window making a kind of porthole through which one could clearly see a young blue eyed girl. She was looking out at the rain. She seemed to be crying, but perhaps it was only an illusion because of the drops on the outside of the windowpanes.

There was a dark green armchair behind her at the back of the room and a big woolly white dog sleeping next to it. By the doorway that led into the room a red-haired young man leaned against the open door, slightly balancing himself to and fro. He was looking at the chimney-place in front of him where a fire was blazing away. He was looking sad too. He was stooping a bit, and his worn out brown tweed coat seemed wet. So was his curly red hair. Every now and then he shrugged, as if it were a nervous twitch or something.

Outside it kept raining.

He shrugged one last time and——but the windowpanes were blurring once again.

It wasn't exactly cold. Just miserable, that's all.

A minute later the main door opened and the two young people took leave of each other. He seemed to be about to kiss her but she shook her head. The dog had woken up and looked towards the street with big dreamy eyes.

The young red-haired man shrugged yet once more and walked out slowly into the unsheltered street, his hands in his pockets. The yellow tree-leaves on the sidewalk seemed brighter than ever. It was nearly dark by now, and he walked all alone.

And it was still raining.

Chapter Nineteen

Emmaus

Naturally, Bella Vista is quite different nowadays, but some things remain, like the old railway and the aggressive dogs. Nevertheless, time has taken its toll and few people care to remember what it was like. I mean the *old* Bella Vista of course, the one with venerable houses and glorious pasts, very little money, very few cars, lots of bicycles (which you could leave lying around with no fear that someone would pinch them), cracked swimming pools, muddy boots, a faint smell of kerosene stoves in winter, or of coils that kept the mosquitoes at bay in summer, rosaries on the walls, books and more books, children playing at hide and seek in neglected gardens or flinging stones at each other on the streets, making paper boats to float where the ditches were filled with water, or flying home-made kites, smoking in clandestine hide outs (tobacco, pot was unheard of in those days——there were kiosks where you could buy cigarettes by the unit) or playing polo on bikes. And of course there were those festive weekend barbecues, lots of wine and guitar playing and arguments and discussions about everything and anything under the sun, but mainly about politics, or history, or soccer. And the long afternoons playing ‘*truco*’, that most subtle and rowdy and enjoyable card game.

Gone now, the old Bella Vista with street vendors yelling their wares, the baker driving his incredibly graceful cart with its exquisitely painted designs and his characteristic whistle which you could always hear at the same time every morning, going from house to house delivering bread muttering to an old horse with enormous earmuffs. It was a delightful place, this place where Victoria was born.

On that particular day, Victoria was walking thoughtfully at a very slow pace. That autumn evening everything seemed especially quiet, and Boulevard *Francia* was magically lit with the rosy last rays of the sun. The sycamore-trees proudly displayed their glorious yellow leaves and a lighted bonfire slowly smoked——and scented——its surroundings as if it were incense for some cosmic ritual.

But Victoria was thinking of the disciples of Emmaus and their words to the Stranger that had approached them and walked by their side: ‘Abide with us: for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent’.

Far spent, indeed.

However, on seeing her that evening one would have thought that Victoria walked with a certain purpose, her jaw showed a determination of sorts and her forehead was high. She was thinking of God’s games of hide-and-seek. The Emmaus companions had been practically compelled to ask the Stranger to abide with them because he had ‘made as though he would have gone further’.

The great pretender, she smiled. And then, sure enough, the day was far spent. It was later than they thought.

Twilight.

She looked up and saw the first stars looking down at her, those comforting bright spots in the middle of the darkening skies.

Abide with us, oh Stranger, the Great Pretender.

It was getting cold, and she shivered in her dark green Loden coat. She had thought of lighting a cigarette but then thought better of it and left her hands well dug into her pockets. She sighed.

She was thinking, of course, about Peter. Her ideas drifted inconsequentially and she thought that maybe he was in Heaven singing with St Peter a glorious litany: ‘Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee’.

Once again, Victoria was talking to herself: anyone nearby could have heard her repeat ‘Thou knowest that I love thee’.

Except that she was thinking of Peter.

Chapter Twenty

De descriptione temporum

That particular evening, the talk drifted on to Victoria's plight.

'Well, as a matter of fact there was a time, not so long ago, when people used to talk. I mean, really *talk*; they were trained to. People knew their logic and how to handle words, ideas, images, metaphors, and so on. Not anymore, it's something that has nearly disappeared.'

That was old Thomas all right. I've always thought that his arguments had a bit of an artificial flavour especially when he suddenly kicked off on one subject or another without warning. But no one could deny that without his dithyrambs, his sweeping remarks and his absurd *tirades*, those meetings wouldn't have been half as amusing as they usually were. That's why there was always someone ready to challenge his dialectics with a view to moving matters on and spurring controversies.

'What can you mean? I mean, people have *always* talked to each other. And indeed, they still do if you look around a bit,' someone said.

Thomas shook his head vigorously and drank from his tumbler. 'No *talking*, to my mind. More like a general catharsis where everyone just vents his own feelings and doesn't care a hoot for what the next man is saying... As a matter of fact, just the other day I was——'

'That's exactly what's happened to Art, I mean nowadays the actual product doesn't matter at all as long as the market chooses to ignore it.'

'Well, I don't know. Maybe, uh, you should say that people don't *listen* anymore. But they still do really talk to each other. What on earth are we doing now, if——'

'Yes. I think Brasillach was right when he said that the public was more important than the artist.'

'¿Did he? ¿Is it?'

'Yes, they once argued over that with——'

‘Only last week I was introduced to a loony doctor, a shrink of sorts, and he was saying precisely that: that when his patients started to listen, he knew that they were on their way to recover——’

‘Have you ever observed that silly *ritornello* that frequently appears in so many American films? You know, the chap who blurts out with an imperative wail: “Talk to me! Talk to me!”’

‘Yes, I know, I know... it’s repeatedly said to a badly wounded friend lying in a gutter rigged with bullets and quite unable to move, let alone *talk*.’

‘...and the only thing that seems to matter is that the bloody artist can finally *express* himself, with no consideration for the public, I ask you.’

‘Quite. Or maybe it’s a harried husband crying out to his unfaithful wife whom he’s just found in bed with——’

‘...and the adulteress just keeps silent.’

‘Yes. Talk to me! It reminds me of Henry Higgins’s precise question: “I ask you sir, what kind of word is that?”’

‘So now we have *happenings* or *installations* or I know not what the hell.’

‘Warwohl and the lot.’

‘Actually, it’s Warhol.’

‘Whatever.’

‘There you are, there it is!’

‘...reminds me of Goebb——’

‘What? Well, what we were just talking about. *There’s* a classic, you see. You know, a film that resists the destructive pounding of time, the irresistible flood of time passing... I mean, time carrying nearly everything away into the land of forgetfulness.’

‘It wasn’t a *film* originally, you know.’

‘You don’t mean “My Fair Lady” do you?’

‘I ask you, sir, what kind of film is that?’

‘Exactly. It has a quality, it has a humour, a spin——probably Bernard Shaw’s making ——that will continue to delight generations, whatever else happens. In any case, Shaw, for one, loved talking——’

‘Mostly gibberish to my——’

‘...because he loved words. He put into Professor Higgins all his love of language, and logic, and the powers of educated communication.’

‘No, I don’t think so.’

‘What’dya mean “I don’t think so?”’

‘There’s no way “My Fair Lady”, or “Pygmalion” for that matter, will resist this last wave of forgetfulness, this sweeping last strike against memory, culture, civilisation and classic... I mean, if people don’t even *know* who the hell was Cervantes, or Dante, or Shakespeare... I don’t very well see how Bernard Shaw, of all people will survive this wave of forgetfulness.’

‘He was progressive enough to deserve a quiet disappearance.’

There were some chuckles at that.

‘Now Victoria didn’t care about catharsis or whatever... her sonnets were, how should I put it? Clever. And I liked her songs, they were so——’

‘Optimistic.’ George said.

‘What songs and sonnets?’

‘Well, after Peter was posted at Covunco she took to composing some very nice——’

‘Before the piano was sold.’

‘What *can* you mean by that?’

‘Too much... uh, well I wonder how to put it... Say a sort of presumption that human nature can actually——’

‘...happen to see eye to eye with you on this one. People have always been basically philistine. And that’s the way it should be. Education is not for everyone, you know. That’s one of democracies greatest lies. Just teach the masses to read and in comes the yellow press, and you suddenly have half-literates, dim-wits who think they actually

know things when... You only have to check out the dates: Lord Northcliffe comes along only a few years after the first compulsive education act.'

They were half a dozen middle-aged men, sitting around the huge fireplace, some of them resting on a somewhat deteriorated couch, others in old armchairs and one or two were sitting on straight chairs. They were old friends who had known each other for decades, most of them from Bella Vista, most of them had even gone to the same School. Victoria's school, by the way. Most of them were smoking and drinking red wine. Two of them smoked pipes. It was dark and cold outside and it was about ten o'clock. They had been meeting just like this particular night every Sunday evening for the better part of twenty years. They had argued and disputed every subject under the sun. They had laughed at the same old jokes once and again. They had shared their joys and sorrows. They had cursed one government after the other. Of course, over the years their Sunday meetings had occurred in different places: for a couple of years, memorably so, in a little Bar at the local Station that now has disappeared.

Recently they had taken to getting together at the old Wade's house. After all those years, the drawing room had changed little, except for the fireplace that had been built into the wall more or less where the grand piano used to stand. It had been sold shortly after Professor Wade's passed away, when it became quite clear that Victoria would not play again. Also, there were a lot less books around; each of the children had taken one lot or another as they had, over the years, moved out of the old house to take up new, and smaller, lodgings. By a lucky chance Henry's wife had inherited quite a packet some years before and they were able to buy the old house which gave cause to general rejoicing among all the Wade's old friends, except, perhaps, Philip, who seemed to resent the fact that the house had changed hands and gone out of the family.

Some time after his mother's death, Philip had given up his religious studies, relinquished his calling and determined to become a lawyer. In effect, he took up law and eventually finished his career with considerable academic achievement. He now worked as a partner of sorts with Thomas who had left his job at the courts and had set up as a solicitor, doing passably well. But it was Philip who was getting the big clients. After marrying Veronica and after some years living in the Belgrano district, Thomas had moved to Bella Vista which made it all the easier for him to attend these Sunday coteries. But Philip hadn't married and lived all by himself in Buenos Aires, coming down to Bella Vista once a month or so to visit his brothers and nephews. He had

become quite liberal in his ideas, and very rarely stayed over to attend these Sunday gatherings, not feeling entirely comfortable with the *entourage*. Then, some years later, Joseph surprised us all by taking up religious orders and now was a well beloved priest in Salta, miles away from Bella Vista, way up North of the country. They seldom saw him, except once in a blue moon when his religious duties brought him down to Buenos Aires to preach a retreat or something.

But Jimmy saw him from time to time, living not far from his Parish. He had married a girl from that northern province, a *salteña*, whom he had met when posted with the 19th Regiment in Tucumán. Some years later he had retired from the Army as a Captain and married the girl, and now rusticated on one of her family's huge farms. He had three children—the eldest was called Peter—and his poetry appeared quite often in the local literary magazines. He hardly ever came to Buenos Aires—but when he did, he was prone to stay over for a week—coming over to Bella Vista on weekends armed with cases of wine. On those occasions they would gather in Andrew's or Henry's house for cheerful barbecues and long conversations until dawn.

'Hey! Wait a minute! George over here says that Victoria was much too optimistic, I ask you,' said Edward with a loud voice drawing attention to the rest of them all.

They all looked at George with interest. He was a Spanish Professor and most of his friends recognised that he was among the cleverest among them, though always a bit stringent in his way of putting ideas forward.

'Well, I'm not too sure, uh, but—but for that matter we were all much too optimistic, not only Victoria.' He sat in that funny way of his, cuddling one foot under his behind, just as he used to do when a young twenty-something timid scholar. 'We belonged to the seventies, all right, but most of the sixties optimism staved off for a while the dreadful pessimism that later came to be so familiar to us.'

'Well, may I ask, what exactly *was* the sixties optimism?' someone asked.

George impatiently waved a hand. 'Oh, you know. I mean Kennedy, and Vatican II, and the moon-race, and The Beatles hooked to a satellite and singing to the whole world "All you need is love"—'

'I actually heard it on a wireless by a soccer playground in Switzerland, of all places. I can distinctly remember—'

‘And the pill, and Woodstock, and Paris’s *événements*, you know, May, ‘68. It was silly, but it was infectious. Even us, the pessimist Nationalists, were in high spirits most of the time and thought that things would eventually look up. Not any more, what?’

Someone quipped to the effect that a pessimist is only an illustrated optimist, but then Henry started to sing “Something’s in the air” to general laughter.

But George remained undaunted by these interruptions.

‘Despite the Cold War, and the Cuban crisis, and the Berlin Wall and Vietnam, and the drug peddling, people were mostly optimistic... I mean, take a look at Flower Power and all that silly... You can’t explain what happened afterwards if——’

‘Because of the arts?’ Edward ventured with a grin.

They laughed at that, because the week before he had read out loud one of Tolkien’s letters in which he explained to his editor——a prospective publisher of ‘The Lord of the Rings’——that true Art cannot actually stop the general decadence of Time, although it can certainly delay it, or at least mask its more deleterious effects.

Edward was about forty, with big spectacles and quite bald. He was well known to them all as something of a Philosopher and a really cryptic one at that. He reflected that the sitting room was dense with smoke and conversation and masculine laughter as it always had been since he had first been to the Wade’s so many years before. Edward had married Lucy, Victoria’s sister, but hadn’t enough money to buy the house when it had finally been sold. However, he thought it was a very fortunate turn of events that they had all somehow been able to keep it.

‘Is there any whisky, do you think?’ Andrew enquired. Henry promptly went to the Bar and came back with a bottle. Andrew had aged most notably, by now nearly completely bald. He had also fattened to quite scandalous proportions. But he remained the most anarchic, unruly, ungovernable and joyful friend. He had married one of Peter D’Angelo’s sisters. Peter, Victoria’s little neighbour, had made a good career as an accountant and was actually posted in Edinburgh, of all places. They all had prolific families, seldom getting them together because of the logistic problems posed by such huge number of children. All the same, most of the little ones went to the same school and, what with one thing another, their mothers frequently met. They were relatively poor——most of them didn’t have a car——relatively successful in their professions, and relatively happy. They loved Bella Vista and tried to hand down to their offspring

some of the magic, something that raised quite a noticeable disapproval among a lot of the more recent Bella Vista neighbours, people who had a more modern bourgeois outlook, who preferred loud cars, less trees and fewer dirt roads, who sought refuge in gated communities, fenced districts where they had built American looking houses in a protected atmosphere——something that kept them quite apart from the real town life.

A middle-aged woman dressed in black came into the room with an ice bucket and gently deposited it on the table next to the fireplace. Everyone stood up courteously to greet her. One or two of them dedicated a couple of compliments at her and she smiled back winningly and laughed at her old friends with natural gaiety.

‘We’ve been talking about you, again,’ Thomas laughingly confessed.

‘Well, well, well. I wonder what makes you lose your time like that. Surely there are more interesting topics than that.’ All the same, she smiled at them knowingly, a dimple appearing on her left cheek.

‘George over here says that as a young girl you were much too optimistic.’

George protested to the effect that he had said no such thing and sent ripples of laughter around the room.

Victoria had lived with Thomas and Veronica since the house in Belgrano had been sold and had built a small cottage at the back of the garden where she dedicated long hours to her Art classes. She had plenty of pupils and was an Aunt of sorts to Thomas and Veronica’s numerous children. Time had certainly taken its toll, and even if she looked her usual distinguished self, the lines on her face eloquently told about a girl that had never been entirely happy. Behind her heavy framed spectacles her once twinkling blue eyes seemed to have acquired a greyish, a somewhat clouded tint. There was something like ‘Northerness’ in them, Edward once remarked, borrowing C.S. Lewis’s expression.

Victoria remained standing straightening her dress with pale un-ringed hands while they all sat down again. She focussed her bespectacled eyes on the blazing logs in the fireplace. A barely discernible air of gravity seemed to follow her at all times, and this time there was no exception to that.

‘Optimistic, sanguine? Quite. But then, so was Peter. So was this dear country of ours.’

With that a silence fell over them, a kind of hush. Thomas reflected once again how, after all those years, they still missed Peter even when quite aware that their feelings were small fry compared to Victoria's.

Victoria sighed and beamed at the company.

‘Anyway, as the old saying has it, an hour in the morning is worth two in the evening.’

George shook his head and looked up at a photograph of Peter that stood on the mantelpiece. It showed him as a spruce officer in full uniform with a wide smile across his juvenile face. This time it made George smile back.

‘I don't know, I think we all did our best, but I also have this feeling that it was later... you know, I mean, we hadn't realized how late it was.’

This last sentence took Victoria back into time and in a flash old memories came back to her. She dwelled on that famous Sunday morning when Peter had impulsively kissed her on her forehead and impatiently courted her under the rain.

‘He was in such a hurry,’ she smiled to herself, ‘what with Father Mole coming along the street and everything’.

To her bewilderment, the whole party burst out laughing.

‘Good gracious! I've done it again’.

Victoria had been thinking aloud.

* * *

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