



Sweet Dreams

I climb from the bed and wander through the large apartment. Though I do not live here, it all seems familiar. I move quickly through the darkness, drawing back heavy curtains to reveal a tall window. The moon is up and I look out at an inner courtyard. In the night air strange plants are blooming, pulpous growths drained of colour. Something clouds the glass, like a smudge of lipstick. As I lean closer, I become convinced it is a smear of blood. Outside, there are broken statues in alcoves overgrown with vines. The place seems an utter ruin. It has the stillness of a vast painting I have seen long ago in some dusty national gallery, though the perspective seems all wrong to me. As I try to recall where I have seen this before, my eye is drawn to a movement in part of the scene.

Far back, a cloaked figure emerges from the shadows, dragging an unconscious woman by the hair, quite effortlessly. She is naked, a torn night gown trailing from her ankle. Her body looks as if it has been cruelly dragged through thorns, daubed with long cuts and scratches. The figure stops and looks over in my direction, twisting the hair of the woman, slowly turning her head to one side. I am transfixed with horror as I recognise the face of my wife, horribly beaten. From deep within me, panic wells up. I can't make out this fiend's features but I am suddenly possessed with the notion it is *smiling* at me, gloating with wicked satisfaction. The blood seems to glow on the glass. *Fresh slick blood.* I feel the urge to shatter the glass and leap through into the courtyard. I press my hands against the glass and they pass through like liquid. With a sickening sensation of falling, I slip through. I realise this thing desired me to enter into this scene, to cross over to this

other side. At the very moment my bare feet recoil from the touch of the chill flagstones, I feel its triumphant glare like a blast of heat.

Letting go of my wife, it quickly moves forward. The body crumples and seems to shrink and lose shape. *Was it my wife?* I am now confused. Anger deserts me. The thing comes forward with unearthly motion, holding out a curved dagger. Its smile is unbearable. So close now, I can smell its fetid odour. I look down and see I am slit open like a fish from groin to gullet. The trap is sprung. Life blood pours down my thighs. I stare down, my vision blurring, *darkening*. No, I tell myself, this is not happening. This *really* is a dream. This is something seen on late night TV, that my mind has dragged up from its murky repository. This is why I can't feel anything, I reason. I can feel no pain. Then an awful sensation of nausea comes over me, as if my whole insides are about to be expelled.

I wake up shivering. The hairs on my legs are standing up. This dream has come three nights in succession now. My wife lies calmly asleep beside me, her broad back swathed in waxing moonlight. I place my hand on her hip and feel her warmth. I rise and go to the open window, breathe in the cool salty air. The surface of the sea is still as a mirror.

My wife, Rose, is a professional artist of some notoriety, with a fixation on food and the body. 'One of too many' the critics note sourly. Furthermore - with a special interest in herbalism - she writes a regular column for a mail order magazine *New Nature*, providing us with a tidy stipend to support leisurely visits abroad such as this. I believe Rose is a fine example to us all - if you quietly persist at something for long enough, you will achieve some measure of acclaim.

However, her current reputation as an artist stems from a piece called *Clothes Horse* which - relentlessly pursuing her belief in interactions in public spaces - involved shoplifting desirable items of size 10 clothing from high street shops. The performance continued in a case at Nottingham Crown Court, with an unsatisfactory conclusion from the point of view of the plaintiffs. The court records were later reproduced in a piece for a German gallery, writ large in white chalk on matt black walls, assuming an eerie hieroglyphic quality. It amazes me how, in almost all fields save those trodden by politicians, negative media coverage will reap benefits in the longer term.

My work is more modest. I am employed as an Inspector of Public Health for Birmingham City Council and in my professional capacity I avoid such controversy wherever possible. I have a fancier, more corporate title, more befitting my role in analysing our policy frameworks, but I think of myself as essentially a scrutineer, seeking to protect fellow citizens from unscrupulous businesses.

Rose and I first met, several years ago, on the Costa Brava, amid the Greek and Roman ruins of Empúries. Wandering through these excavations, I found myself admiring the remains of the sewage system. She sat cross-legged on the

ground, sketching the clay pipes with commendable detail. I was en route to the Pyrenees; she was staying with expatriate friends in Barcelona, a Los Angeleno 'doing Europe'. After a pleasant afternoon's flirtation, we met the next day in Figueres where she insisted on photographing baskets of local mushrooms, of which there seemed a great many varieties in the market shops. We visited the Dali Museum (a man surely obsessed with hygiene!) and exchanged email addresses. I thought nothing more of it, until our paths crossed at a conference at Edinburgh University, where she was a guest lecturer. I was admiring her peculiar installation on the subject of diuretics, and making terribly cynical and witty comments to fellow delegates about the artist's intent, elaborating on the idea of Duchamp with a colostomy. And there she was, standing behind me, only slightly amused by my deprecatory sense of humour. 'How very dry. How very English,' she whispered in my ear. I remember one of my colleagues later described her as 'a tremendous dish.'

I was entranced by her pearly teeth, though she claimed never to visit a dentist and only used minute amounts of natural toothpaste (with propolis and myrrh) on her brush. I have noted that, in the mouth, this natural toothpaste froths excessively. Unlike myself, after brushing her teeth at night, she would never take a glass of orange juice to bed, or even take a vitamin c tablet or a cough lozenge. No, doing that would mean another round of oral ablutions.

Rose - Roseanne actually, though she favours the foreshortened version to avoid comparison with the comedian - spent the summer as Artist-in-Residence at the Beaux Arts in Le Havre. At the close of her work, I took the car ferry from Portsmouth across the Channel to join her. Our plan was to spend a few weeks in leisurely exploration of the Normandy countryside and the opportunities it offered for gluttony. While she finished her business at the gallery - indeed, there was quite a mess to clean up - I was happy to spend a day or two wandering around the harbour. As far as I could discern, nothing of the original port remained, or the streets that had inspired Sartre to write *La Nausée* when he taught here in the Nineteen-Thirties.

I have always had a fascination with ancient sea ports, having served my apprenticeship, such as it was, with Weymouth & Portland District Borough Council. That area, previously known for introducing The Black Death to England in the Middle Ages and for the quality of its stone, received a public boost when royal physicians sent George III there to recuperate after a long illness, and it soon became a fashionable resort to visit and 'take the waters'. Ever since that distant time, it seemed to me that Town Hall officials have maintained an almost Masonic obsession with the quality of its air and water, and all matters affecting public health.

It was there I learnt to conduct lightning raids on fly-by-night culinary establishments and to prosecute without mercy. It was there that my mentor, the Chief Public Health Inspector, proudly displayed - on the wall behind his desk - a large reproduction of *The Last Supper* by Sir James Thornhill, a painting he often used to illustrate the dangers of reheated food and salmonella contamination. I recall that, in his view, even Saint Paul was a culprit, guilty of numerous public health omissions in his *Epistles*. I have remained rather fond of that particular style of painting, though there are countless imitations and lesser incarnations.

It was also there, in that not unpleasant seaside resort, that I learnt how to use my nose. The most devastatingly effective organ on the body, my mentor insisted. In the backwater harbour at low tide, for several days running, I was encouraged to detect that distinctive odour of ammonia which results from the bacterial breakdown of sewage. This process of degeneration led to phenomenal growth in some species of seaweed – ‘sea lettuce’, we used to call it. On that coast, at that time, the seaweed blanketed the mud and blocked harbour installations and water inlets to power stations. It rotted down to an evil smelling mud, giving off fumes which blackened the paint on nearby buildings. It was a moment of intense illumination that led to my life-long fascination with all things microscopic.

At the docks behind Quai Colbert, I could smell tar, fish, oil, grease, wet rope, the droppings of seabirds and various effluvia consistent with the life of a busy port, but no whiff of ammonia. I almost missed the smell and was unsuccessful in trying to conjure it up - though the sense of nostalgia was powerful.

There was no doubting my nose, though I have less of an opportunity to use it professionally these days. Two enjoyable exceptions have been the field research required, over a twelve month period, to compile *The Big Brum Balti Trail* and the opportunity to write a research paper - for the University of Central England - on health issues within the local Chinese community. I soon became an expert in steaming, boiling, stir frying, stewing and avoiding excessively greasy food.

In my work, I have had occasion to document food in the filthiest conditions known to mankind, so much so that the adjective ‘savoury’ can never be visualised without the necessary prefix ‘un’. However, eating in restaurants is still one of my little hobbies. My wife, strictly a vegetarian, thinks that I perhaps take a perverse pleasure in calculating the amount of cleanliness required for the production of each delicacy or, conversely, the regulations that have been infringed.

We left Le Havre on Tuesday morning, first taking the road to Honfleur and Trouville. We had a circular route in mind, going west to the D-Day beaches, striking inland and working our way round to Rouen and finally back to the ferry terminal at Dieppe. Green fields with fruit trees, balmy in the last flush of summer, passed us by. We would stop as it pleased us, at roadside crêperies, at neon lit bars, at food markets. Perhaps one day at Caen, a few pleasant days at quiet Luc-

sur-mer, a visit to see the famous tapestry and cathedral at Bayeux of course. We had no rush to be anywhere in particular, though I was keen to see the famous landing beaches.

In the warmth of the car, with my tourist guide chatter providing a lullaby, Rose soon dozed off. I well understood how the intensity of her art-making exhausted her mind and body, so I rarely roused her on this stretch of our journey. Her hair smelt of myrrh, a delightful treat for my nostrils. She took a few drops of the oil and massaged it into her scalp occasionally. The aroma filled the car as I slowly drove along the coast.

Her Grandfather and his two brothers had served in the Pacific Theatre of War, so she had only a cursory interest in this area. At Arromanches, I tried to wake her briefly to see the remaining artificial Mulberry harbour jutting out from the beach. I took a photograph of it to remind her.

We found Omaha beach packed with holidaymakers, windsurfers and small pleasure craft. The tide was a long way out. We strolled down to the sea and paddled for a while. We didn't visit the American War Cemetery at St-Laurent.

'They're all the same,' she commented, eyes closed. 'Neat lawns. Tidy. Regimented. American.'

'And you, my darling,' I said, 'are the exception that surely proves the rule.' I don't know if she heard me, as she soon drifted off again.

Later, I contented myself with scrambling about the nearby Pointe Du Hoc, sheer cliff heights pockmarked with the ruin of German bunkers and fortifications.

'Did you know that,' I said to her as we looked down at the rocks far below, 'that an American sergeant was up here just five minutes after the first landings and this whole complex was taken in around fifteen minutes? Incredible, isn't it?'

'And why would I know that?' she said, pulling a face.

Feats of arms were of little interest to her, whereas I could be a treasure trove of trivia about such matters. Since school, European history has been to me what trainspotting or birdwatching is to others, though I usually keep this obsession in reasonable check. She insisted this preoccupation had a 'cultural bias'. However, I sometimes did feel that her version of history was, at best, negligent. I expected her to know more than the myth of Davy Crockett. I cheekily pointed out to her that he had, while a US senator, made one of the first attacks on publicly funded art. It seemed to me that she knew more intimately the short-lived meanderings of a Kurt Cobain rather than the persistent anarchism of an Abbie Hoffman.

'You know Californians don't think about all that stuff,' she said. 'They just want to hang out at the beach and can't understand why everyone else doesn't feel that way.'

I am not complaining - I spend enough hours a day observing the shortcomings of others in a managerial capacity. I am aware there is a seam of

perfectionism that runs through me which mildly irritates her because it reflects some unacceptable part of her inner self.

She peered into a crack in one of the bunker walls. ‘Anyway,’ she said, ‘Remember, I come from a system running out of control. Information is withheld or censored. They’re still burning books in some States. That’s why I don’t live there.’

Further inland, we visited the artery-destroying Normandy you associate with cheeses, creams, ciders, fine apple and pear brandies. Once we tired of looking at old lumpen medieval keys, iron spurs, floor tiles, and ecclesiastical seals, we followed the less travelled back roads south of Argentan, eventually coming to a small town on a river, with a lopsided ruin of a castle set upon a rocky hill. It was our seventh day and, as such, appropriate to rest.

We booked into the Hotel Grand-Mare, a lovely ivy covered building overlooking a park, and were not disappointed to find that we were the only English speakers to have discovered this quiet spot. At dinner that evening, the place remained half-empty, with only a scattering of locals taking advantage of the cuisine, along with an old patrician looking fellow who dined alone. Despite his familiar bonhomie with the waiter, the deference he was shown led me to suspect he may be some important local aristocrat or - perhaps - the proprietor.

After dining on Jerusalem artichokes, braised in olive oil and chives alongside red-onion and goats cheese tarts, we retired to a corner of the bar, soon followed by the older man. To our surprise, he introduced himself as Francis Howard-Payne, formerly of the 2nd Northamptonshire Yeomanry.

‘Excellent cuisine, don’t you think?’ he said. ‘This is a sweet little treasure that so few of my country folk have yet to discover. May I join you? I do so enjoy practicing my native language.’ Imposingly tall and stick thin, he stooped over our table. In his silvered hair, traces of the original sandy colour could still be seen,

‘Yes, of course, please do...’ He shook my hand firmly. ‘Ian Williams.’

He nodded. ‘And your good wife?’

She offered up her hand, which he took and held gently between his. I noticed his hands were remarkably clean and smooth, and almost wrinkle free.

‘Rose,’ she said quickly.

Sometimes, mischievously, I use her full name, but I could see her raising her eyebrows at the thought. She disliked the American predilection with what she called ‘Trailer Park’ names - Cheryl Anne, Shari Lynn, Kaylee, Shanine, Desteny, Kourtney Sue, Lynda Lee and so forth.

‘A wonderful name, if I may say so! My late wife was also called Rosemary. A herb carried by bridesmaids and dipped in the wine.’ His grin was delightfully ferocious. He held her hand for what seemed to me a very long time, as though he were carefully measuring its weight and texture. ‘Rosemary, *incensier* in Old

French of course, was at one time burned in French hospitals to purify the air. Rosemary lifts the spirits, does she not?’

He unfolded his story with a seductive ease. Though doubtless this tale had been told a thousand times, we felt we were his most prized guests. It turned out he was not the proprietor, though of course he knew him well. He told us his father had been killed at Dunkirk and that he himself was a veteran of the Normandy Invasion of 1944. His division had come ashore at Arromanches, his first time in France. He joined the brutal fighting outside of Caen.

‘Dead cattle in the fields, as far as the eye could see’ he said solemnly. ‘I’ve never been fond of beef since.’

He told us that he lived in Caen for a time. He had reason to believe his family was originally Norman, and thus had become fascinated with the region, returning again and again to finally make his home in the Fifth Republic.

‘All I know about the Normans is that they severely kicked your ass in 1066,’ said Rose, with a mischievous smile.

‘How unkind of you to remind the both of us,’ he chuckled. ‘Of course, Caen was The Conqueror’s City, capital of the province of Basse-Normandie and seat of the Duchy from which William took ship to add England to his property portfolio. So perhaps it was poetic justice that in order to liberate the city in 1944, we razed it to the ground.’

At first, I had difficulty placing his accent. His French was demonstrably impeccable, but his English was curiously clipped, hovering between vintage BBC and something else altogether. He proved an entertaining and erudite companion for the evening, though I noticed his attention subtly gravitating towards Rose. For her part, she seemed genuinely entranced by this old soldier’s tales. I didn’t think she was just being polite.

‘It must have been so strange,’ she said. ‘I mean, to be at war that long, to have that siege mentality every waking day. No wonder the English are suspicious of Europe.’

‘Oh, I think that goes back to Metternich,’ I managed to interject.

Francis shrugged. ‘Ah, dear Little Englanders! We fail to take so much into account!’

‘Whoa, slow up,’ she laughed. ‘I’ve been brought up on the Walt Disney version of history.’

He smiled. A thin, slightly cruel smile I thought.

‘I believe,’ he said, ‘it was Arnold Toynbee who wrote, *The barbarians are brooms which sweep the historical stage clear of the debris of a dead civilisation...*’

I thought my wife would be more likely to use The Grateful Dead or Joni Mitchell as a reference point, but I kept quiet.

Soon they moved on to the world of contemporary art, a subject which clearly agitated him. ‘Why don’t people paint anymore?’ he asked. ‘You can go and *live* in

a painting! I love the names of paints. Turkey Umber, Venetian Red, Frankfurt Black, King's Yellow, Flake White. All this *Modern Art*, with cathode tubes and theatrical lighting, has passed me by. Paint and canvas, that's art! Wood and metal and stone, that's art. The careful nurturing of a garden, that is truly art. How can an artist *fail* to be affected by the vast detail of a garden?

'The Persian word for garden is, apparently, Paradise,' said Rose. I noted how she had deftly avoided giving too much detail of her own studio practice. 'I like to garden but I'm afraid I'm a bit inconsistent in looking after my plants.'

'Have you visited Monet's garden at Givenchy?' he asked. 'Now *that* is a masterpiece! It would inspire you, I'm sure.'

'You know, artists can't keep looking over their shoulder,' she told him, 'Techniques change. Artists are always experimenting with new forms. When Seurat originally exhibited *Une Baignade, Asnieres* in New York, it was criticised as the product of a vulgar, coarse and commonplace mind.'

'Ah, by a citizen of the New World no doubt!'

'Art should never be an easy option. It shouldn't pander to popular tastes. It's sad that people try to put it in a box...'

'My dear, one of the sadnesses of war is that it always destroys art. Yet Modern Art destroys itself...'

The never-ending supply of alcohol lulled my senses and the conversation continued in this vein long into the night. I have no idea what time we finally retired. I slept soundly, with a pause in the dreams of phantasms and murder. When I awoke, I saw our breakfast was laid out in our room. Rose sat by the window with her notebook.

'You missed the storm last night. Tremendous thunder. Took out a third of the National Grid apparently.'

'I didn't hear a thing,' I yawned. 'What happened to me?'

'You passed out. Far too much cognac, my sweet. Just slumped in your chair. And snored...'

'I didn't, did I?'

'I'm just teasing. Francis helped put you to bed.'

'On his own? Did he drop me? I have a terrible headache.'

She pointed to the aspirin placed on the table. 'No, he had some assistance from the barman. I was also a little unsteady on my feet.'

'How old do you think he really is?'

'It's hard to tell. He seems pretty sprightly. He reminded me of my Grandpa – all those stories and never short of an opinion. Sparkling eyes.'

'He was flirting with you.'

'No, he wasn't.'

‘Oh, come on, you encouraged him. I could hardly get a word in edgeways between the two of you.’ I tried to look just a little hurt. ‘Your Grandfather was a bit of a ladies man too.’

‘Hey, honey, he’s just a charming old guy. I hope you’re as charming when you’re that age.’ She poured me some coffee. ‘Wouldn’t it be nice to live here?’

Nice is one of her least favourite words, but sometimes it’s appropriate. ‘Maybe,’ I muttered. ‘I’m not sure we have enough of a nest egg to move to another country.’

‘I’ve always said you could be an environmental consultant. All that stuff you hoard in your head about preservatives and fertilisers - and some of those beaches look like they need a good cleaning.’

‘Don’t tell the French that.’

‘Francis invited us over to see his place today,’ she said breezily. ‘I accepted.’

‘And what about our previously carefully laid plans?’ I joked.

‘Come on, it’ll be fun. We can change our plans. He has a business colleague, Monsieur Girault, ‘a much respected man in these parts’ as he put it. Owns lots of property *and* a gallery. Could show us round, make some introductions. He seemed keen we should meet up with him.’

Good humouredly, we argued a little back and forth but there was something that troubled me about this invitation. In light of a new day, I had to admit I felt uneasy with the man. He had seemed a little too solicitous towards Rose. An incongruous detail came to mind, a smell of tobacco about him, laced with an odd fragrance. I went back to bed for an hour, and after a lunch of crepes, fruit and strong coffee, I felt a little more refreshed and able to cope with this diversion.

Rose, thankfully, offered to drive. She seemed to have memorised the instructions and didn’t once ask me to check the map. After what seemed an inordinate amount of time driving around tiny back lanes, many of which were still flooded from the storm, I finally said, ‘Are you sure you know where this place is?’

‘Absolutely sure. Look, it’s just over there, see? Behind those trees?’

Indeed, there it was, a few hundred yards off the road. A rutted track led towards it. Screened by a line of old chestnut and oak, it was less of a house and more of a fortified châteaux. It looked un-lived in, closed up for the winter that was still months away. A squat building with two pointy turret towers, it was enclosed on three sides by a walled garden. A huge barn jutted out on the remaining side, half of the roof collapsing. The gardens, no doubt wonderful at one time, were overgrown and in places looked impassable. I noted the strong unpleasant smell of wild parsnip. There was a profusion of raspberry plants and a sweet briar hedge at the front of the building.

We saw there was a note pinned to the door, on a yellowing piece of paper, written in spindly capitals:

JUST POPPED OUT. BACK SOON.
PLEASE LOOK ROUND.
FEEL FREE TO WANDER.
(YOU WON'T DISTURB ANYONE)

'Trusting old fellow,' I said. 'Then again, perhaps not...' The door was firmly locked. I pulled on the bell. 'You know, I doubt if this thing works. And I'm afraid I might break it.'

'We'll go round the back. Come on, let's be nosy,' suggested Rose, immediately leading the way. We followed a gravel path around the side of the house and through a crumbling arch, on which was carved – in English - the motto:

*Secure the shadow 'ere the substance fade,
Let Nature imitate what Nature made*

The gardens at the rear had been terraced at some point in the past and featured a huge, now stagnating, ornamental pool. We went down some steps and found the back door ajar. We looked down a long wide corridor, which seemed to traverse the central axis of the house. Rose called out. 'Hello, Mr. Payne? Francis? Anyone home?'

'It's *Howard-Payne*,' I whispered to her. 'I do remember that much.' There was complete silence. Nothing stirred.

'We got here far quicker than I expected,' she said, looking over her shoulder. The sun was still shining brightly, though storm clouds were gathering again in the west. 'He did suggest we come in the early evening for a bite to eat.'

'You forget to mention that part. I could have stayed in bed for longer.'

We stepped inside. I could feel the coolness of the flagstones through my shoes. To one side was an old style scullery in which we found some evidence of recent habitation – the remains of a meal on a wooden table. A magazine was left open on the chair. I noticed two places had been set. Piled up in the double sink was at least a month's worth of dirty crockery.

'Let's not offer to do the washing up,' I said, privately wondering at the spurious correlation between ageing and the decay in good personal hygiene. I took in a deep breath.

Summoned by a solicitous district nurse, I had once visited a rented house on a large municipal estate; the family who lived there seemed primarily to subsist on meals from the local fish and chip shop, and threw the used grease paper behind the settee where it had mounted into a large glutinous mass. The smell of vinegar was overwhelming. But this was something else. Ancient and mildewed, a hint of putrid crabmeat and, yes, ammonia. And behind it, a smell that came after something forgotten had rotted and dried.

‘Perhaps we’ve got the day wrong,’ I said. ‘Perhaps we all got mixed up in our drunken haze. You thought he said Wednesday. He thought you said Thursday.’

‘I guess that note on the door could have been there some time,’ she said glumly.

‘Maybe it’s not even meant for us,’ I said, ‘though that doesn’t make sense to me. He didn’t give the impression there were any other English people in these parts.’

Though feeling rather timid, we decided to explore further. The first two doors were locked. Through the third door we gained access to a shuttered room packed high with items of furniture covered in greying cotton sheets.

‘Enough dust to start an asthma epidemic,’ I said. I flicked the light switch to see better. No lights came on.

‘Must have been the storm,’ said Rose. ‘Maybe he ran out of candles and he’s gone to the village store?’

‘He may be some time,’ I murmured.

Several of the doors led to cellar-like rooms that were also used for storage. Even the smallest of them seemed cavernous.

‘Wow, studio size!’ Rose said enviously. ‘Maybe he’s looking for an artist in residence to do the place up.’

‘Or some foolish English tourists to sell this place to...’

One door led to a substantial dining room, shutters closed as well, which contained a circular oak table. In the dim light we could make out two imposingly large paintings, 18th century at a guess, one an image of the chateaux in a state of ruinous repair, one a seascape with a schooner far out on the ocean under the light of a full moon. There was also a small Renaissance style painting hanging above a huge walk-in fireplace. It depicted the figure of St. Sebastian, pierced by a single arrow. On the mantel above the fire grate, sat a cinerary urn flanked by two oriental jars.

‘Perhaps I could get a job inspecting places like these on behalf of the French equivalent of the National Trust,’ I suggested.

Rose pointed to the bare floor. ‘Look, we’re leaving an impression.’ Sure enough, you could see a trail of footprints left in the dust.

‘Here’s another,’ I said, running my finger over the surface of the table and drawing out a smiley face and the words *IAN WUZ ERE*. Then I thought better of it and rubbed it out. The dust felt a little sticky on my hands.

‘Does any one actually live here? Is this some kind of practical joke?’ She was beginning to sound exasperated. This was not quite what she had expected. ‘What date do you put on this place?’ She bent to examine the huge blocks of stone at the back of the fireplace.

‘Parts of it may date back to the 16th century,’ I said. ‘Sometimes they used stones from old abandoned castles to build new places. Waste not, want not.’

Off to one side, where a wall appeared to have been removed, there was a small sitting area and a huge bookcase. I recognised Hermann Hesse’s *Narziss and Goldmund*, the cover with a painting by Caspar David Friedrich. *Fruits of the Earth* by Andre Gide, *Beyond Good and Evil* by Nietzsche, *The Outsider* by Albert Camus, and *The Longest Day* by Cornelius Ryan. There were shelves devoted to Balzac and dozens of volumes on the exploits of Napoleon.

‘I’ve actually read some of these,’ I said, running my fingers over their powdery surfaces.

To one side of the bookcase, there was a smaller thinner door, partly concealed by a ceiling to floor curtain. It opened onto a tiny staircase that wound sharply down. ‘The tour continues *this* way, Madame...’

Rose frowned at me. ‘I’m not sure that’s such a good idea. I feel we’re trespassing.’

‘Come on, at least someone’s left a light a light on down there.’ A dim yellow glow emanated from below. Holding hands, we carefully descended. We went down about thirty worn and twisting steps to find a short passageway. Beyond this was what I can only describe as another cellar, though big enough to be a ballroom. The source of illumination turned out to be a single bronze and crystal chandelier with half the electric bulbs missing. Most parts of the vast space receded into the darkness. I noticed the light was swaying, caught by some hidden gust. On the edges of this poor glow, the shadows ebbed and flowed, almost imperceptibly. At least a dozen sturdy columns reached to the curve of the roof.

‘Jesus, it looks like Tim Burton’s darkest fantasies of Wayne Mansion,’ Rose said under her breath. ‘Well, I guess I mean the Bat Cave underneath Wayne Mansion.’

‘You’re thinking of The House on Haunted Hill.’

It was indeed a place of deepest shadow that stretched back to goodness knows where. There was a beautifully tiled floor of such an inky blue to be almost char black. Near to us, we could make out another fireplace large enough to walk into, whose chimney disappeared into lightless unknown places. A tall window was just discernible. More appropriate to the transept of a church, shuttered and locked from the inside, it gave the room a strange perspective. I walked over to it, reached up. Though six foot two in my socks, I couldn’t even touch the bottom of the sill.

‘Do you remember seeing a window like that on the outside?’ said Rose, very quietly.

‘I don’t remember.’ I tried with no avail to calculate distances and location. ‘Anyway, we didn’t walk round the whole of the exterior.’

‘What a stink,’ she said with a shudder.

It was as cold as a vault down there and the walls dripped with damp but, oddly, I couldn't smell a thing. Below ground - as we surely were - I expected some mustiness in the air, something. But I could smell nothing at all. This perturbed me more than anything else. I tapped my nose theatrically. 'Damn, the battery's run out!'

'I don't like it, Ian. Let's just go. This place is giving me the creeps. It's furnished like some weird Hollywood backlot.'

Straining my eyes, I could just make out a tall throne-like chair, toppled on its side, some pieces of redundant unidentifiable armour in a heap, some shattered pieces of timber and a pile of sand. A set of oil portraits in peeling gilt frames were propped against one wall and two very worn figurative sculptures stood in one alcove. Some of these were items too big to have brought down the narrow staircase, so there must be another entrance. Maybe there was more to be found, but we were unwilling to advance into the vast gloom.

'Count Dracula has left the building,' I intoned. There was a slight echo.

'Don't!' she said sharply. She gripped my arm so tightly I could feel the bruises blooming beneath her fingertips.

We heard a creak from somewhere in the dark which made us jump. 'Probably rats,' I said, but we retreated and climbed the stairs as quickly as we could. I had an absurd feeling that the door at the top would suddenly be slammed shut in our face. We hurried down the corridor, out of the house into the fresh air. The old man was nowhere to be seen and we were disinclined to linger any longer in this strange place. Our enthusiasm for this particular adventure had seeped away. I admit I felt a huge sense of relief to be leaving. The sky was now overcast and twilight grey. It began to spit rain as we drove away.

Two days later, on our way back to the coast, we once more encountered Francis Howard-Payne. In a back street of Lisieux, away from the construction and traffic, we sat at a pavement café with biere blanche and salade bressane. The rain that threatened all morning had arrived in a sudden violent downpour and both customers and passer-by's huddled together under the shelter of large canvas umbrellas. The rain pelted down with considerable power, running between the gaps in the awnings overhead, filling empty coffee cups and glasses, quickly overflowing and splashing off the tables. From within the interior of the crowded café, Dixieland jazz played out a different rhythm. The waiters, with good humoured grimaces and shrugs, held their trays above their heads as they scurried back and forth.

'Looks like we'll be here for some time,' I said, shuffling my chair to avoid another torrent of water from the roof of the umbrella.

'Just relax,' said Rose. 'By the way, now that there's no sun, you look a little silly in those sunglasses.'

‘Gallic cool,’ I said.

‘So cool you’re shivering. Honey, are you OK?’

I looked at my hands. They were indeed shaking and I felt a flood of sudden apprehension. It was then I looked up and saw him standing the corner of the street, watching us, a sodden newspaper in his hand, his clothes utterly drenched. He stepped briskly towards us, with an urgency and speed that belied his age. He pushed insistently through the throng at the café.

‘Oh, *there* you are!’ he called out, full of chumminess. ‘I do hope you’re having a splendid break despite the unpredictable weather.’

‘Yeah, thanks, we are,’ said Rose, quite unflustered. I smiled a very false smile, feeling relieved I was wearing impenetrable sunglasses. I didn’t say a word, simply raised my hand in a weak little wave. He caught me by the wrist and pulled me closer as he bent forward. His face was moist and soft and unreadable. There was an unpleasant odour about him. He pressed a card into my hand. It read:

Monsieur Girault
Fine Arts & Antiques
Normandie Maine
Time is on our side

‘You really *must* meet Monsieur Girault,’ he insisted. ‘He was *so* disappointed not to meet you and your *dear* wife.’ He glanced over at Rose with a grin that was positively vulpine. She chose to stare determinedly towards a shop window at a display of pottery.

‘I do so *hope* we will keep in touch,’ he whispered.

He released me, rubbing his fingers together as he did so and sniffing at their tips. He went back into the rain. With a wave of his newspaper, he called out one final thing.

‘*Rêves doux, Monsieur Williams. Sweet dreams...*’