

INTERRUPTUS

A short story

by Campbell Black

She watched him from the window of an antique shop. He bore little resemblance to the photograph she'd seen. Pale and lonely, he was just another old man aching for company.

She thought, *That's him.*

Dr Steiner sat at his usual table in The Bean & Gone, savouring his one coffee of the day while he watched people pass in the village street. At 81 he suffered from an arrhythmic heart, high cholesterol, and intermittent chest pains, some mild, others painful.

He was coming, he realized, to the end of his time.

He had no religious beliefs. God was no more than an illusion of comfort as you expelled your last sigh.

The trick was to laugh at oneself. If one could.

He'd never been entirely a frivolous man. As a student at Cambridge, then later in California, he'd been conscientious about his work. But his life hadn't been restricted to academic

gratification - he'd been fortunate enough to know the love of many good women over the years.

He enjoyed the memories of his lovers. The damned thing was their faces wouldn't come back to mind when he tried to summon them, as he often did. For mystifying reasons auditory recollections were stronger – the creak of a bedspring, a shoe kicked off with erotic urgency. But never a face, a specific body, as if his women had all been passionate phantoms.

He remembered old liaisons in hotel rooms in Vienna, Paris, San Francisco and elsewhere. Now he lived in the chintzy Berkshire village of Sudburgh, where he'd married Marjory and followed a life of monogamy for thirty years – and yet he couldn't see *her* face either without looking at photographs.

He stepped into the street. The little bell on the cafe door rang behind him with a rusty note. A wind dragged brittle leaves along the pavement. He heard somebody call his name and he turned stiffly.

"Hey, Doc Steiner. How you doing?" The speaker was an enormous man in a tight t-shirt with the slogan *Nice is Nice*. He had a big plump good-natured face.

Dr Steiner recognized him. "Ah, Henry, Henry. How are you?"

“Fit’s a fiddle, Doc. Touch of leg cramps every now and then. All that driving, I suppose.”

“Bound to have side effects, Henry.”

“Southampton to Madrid, quick turnaround. Hours on motorways. Bad diet. Chips with everything.”

“Long hauls,” Dr Steiner remarked.

He turned up the collar of his old camel coat just as his attention was so suddenly and unexpectedly *captivated* by the sight of a girl stepping out of an antique shop on the other side of the street that he might have been pierced by a blowdart of joy. His pulses fired up at the sight of such a bedazzling creature, a heartbreaker, tumbling yellow hair, slim figure, long confident *electric* strides. She moved as if gravity was no impediment to her, and she had sole ownership of the space all around her.

His mouth was dry. His hands began to tremble so badly he stuck them in his pockets before Henry noticed. How he envied youth its vitality. This passing girl – oh sweet Christ, years ago he would have pursued her without *thinking*. He’d have been on her scented trail before she’d even *reached* the next corner.

She turned to look at him, then she was gone. Did she leave a barely noticeable smile before she vanished?

Henry said, “*Whoa*. Bit of a stunner, Doc, eh?”

“Quite,” Dr Steiner said. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen her before.”

“Name’s Minto, I think. She isn’t from round here. Passing through, spose.” Henry shrugged.

“Odd name,” Steiner said in a voice that sounded like that of a young man who has just seen the love of his life and can’t stop his joyful heart tap-dancing.

Henry smiled and nudged Doc Steiner slyly. “Keep your eye in, eh? You old rascal.”

Steiner was about to say that his eye was probably *all* he could keep in, but he restrained himself. There was something pathetic, he thought, in the idea of an old man lusting after a young girl who, if she even deigned to speak to him, would probably do so in that patronizing manner the young often reserved for the aged. They were always in a hurry, an appointment to keep, a crowded life, no time for chatter.

After Henry had gone, Dr Steiner stood without moving. He was *certain* he’d locked into the girl’s aqua-green eyes a second, and he was *almost* certain she’d offered him – if not a quarter-smile - then a fraction of one. Or was he rummaging for conviction like a half-blind seamstress fumbling in her sewing-basket for a specific colour of cotton?

He had no plans: the day ahead of him would be exactly the same as yesterday and the day before that. He realized that this deepened sense of his dun-coloured existence was connected with the sight of the vibrant girl. How could two such different entities as old Dr Steiner and this lovely young woman belong to the same species?

He walked slowly past the butcher's, the ironmonger's, the brash new 24 hour convenience store, and then turned into Willow Drive, shuffling toward the house in which he and Marjory had lived all their married life.

Whitewashed walls, skyblue windowframes peeling.

He imagined this divine Minto welcoming him as he walked the gravel path. *Minto, My Minto*. His heart took a hooked salmon's leap when he pictured her in the doorway and heard her say, *I've missed you, Jacob. You have no idea how much. Come to bed.*

She beckoned suggestively, then went back inside the house, and he followed her with all the mobility his frame permitted - but whatever sense he'd had of her was lost the moment he stepped into the hallway where pallid afternoon light filtered through the coloured glass panes of the door.

He hung up his coat with a hand that still shook. The garment slid to the floor, but he didn't bend to retrieve it.

He addressed the grandfather clock as he usually did.

“And how was your day, old boy?”

The clock ticked.

He laid a hand on the side of the clock’s face. “Nothing unusual, mmm? At our age I suppose we expect that, don’t we? Mind you, my dear fellow, I saw a gorgeous girl in the village. An amazing creature.”

He patted the clock. The house was normal again. Life had leeches out of it. There was no Minto. He’d been dreaming. Even as he stood at the foot of the stairs and looked up he realized he’d fooled himself. He’d imagined Minto’s glance. And the tiny smile.

Yes, of course he’d invented it. How silly he’d become with the passage of time. How solitary.

The house was too big for one person. He seldom went upstairs, because the climb drained him. Anyway, he had nothing up there he needed. He lived his life on the ground floor.

In the sitting-room he was pleased to see that Mrs T, his part-time housekeeper, had set a fire. What a dear Mrs T had turned out to be. She must have been quite comely in her day. There was a quiet spark about her eyes, a look of life. On certain days she wore lipstick and rouged her cheeks. Sometimes she suggested he might join a local club like The Pensioners’ Lawn

Bowling Team, or the SNTLG (Say No To Loneliness Group, held in the crypt of St Mark's church). They do ever such nice sandwiches and cakes and tea in St Mark's, she told him. *None of that cheese and toms on white bread slathered in deep mayo guff.*

He always thanked her for her concern. But the idea of joining a club bored him. The church bunch especially - he'd rather jump from the steeple of St Mark's than clamber down into the crypt for cup-cake and chatter.

This house was cold. He went down on his knees, struck a match, applied it to the dry kindling. He stared until flame curled round the logs. He rubbed his hands briskly, bathing them with fire.

Then, with difficulty, he rose. Stiff bones, cold bones. His knees ached. He remembered playing cricket at school. Oh, a time of easy breathing! Unexpected erections! Youth in all its brazen flower, fearless of the ultimate withering. He'd been a promising batsman. He remembered the grass-smudged whites and the rap of ball on bat and the calls of *Well done, Jacob* – and there the memory evaporated except for one adoring glimpse, fired by his imagination, of the divine Minto applauding him from the clubhouse, beating her palms together as if to show she could sustain enthusiasm longer than anyone else in the world.

And that she loved him as nobody else ever could.

The idea flooded his heart and he blushed.

He missed her. He felt her loss. He was like a house with a spare room for rent and no prospective tenant.

Wait, Doc, slow the carriage, hold the horses, he'd never even spoken to this girl and yet he missed her?

Flushes of dementia already?

One last woman, he realized.

There. That was it.

That was all he wanted.

One flight of passion.

He moved slowly across the corridor to the kitchen, opened the fridge, saw that Mrs T had prepared him a supper of chicken and rice and mixed vegetables. She'd pinned a note to the clingfilm that incarcerated the food: *HEAT IN M-WAVE 3 MINS. FIRST PIERCE FILM.*

She'd underscored 3.

She knew he never used the appliance. He couldn't get the hang of the settings. He took the cold casserole from the fridge and sat at the kitchen table. What now, what to do next, what to do with a day that might turn out be his last?

He gazed through the window at the ruin of Marjory's herb garden. Basil, thyme, lavender – he'd let it all go. Marjory had spent hours out there, busy with secateurs. Before she died she informed him, in a voice already reduced to a husk, that he

shouldn't even *think* of keeping the garden up. You don't have the *touch*, Jacob, she told him. You lack empathy. He agreed. She was dying - of *course* he would agree. A man does not fight with his terminally sick wife.

He remembered her bent over her plants. Her face was always turned away in these recollections. He recalled her grey-white hair bunned back like a pudding in a muslin bag and the big yellow rubber gloves she wore.

He got up, seized by the need to look at a photograph of her. A stick, he thought, with which to beat the stubborn donkey of memory. Inside the sitting-room he noticed how clean Mrs T had left it. The air smelled of furniture wax. He opened his old walnut bureau and took out a photo album and flicked until he found one of Marjory. The picture, he remembered, was a carefree little shot he'd snapped on the Pont Neuf in the first year of their marriage. What year? What bloody year? Damn.

His own shadow created a dark pool in the foreground of the photo. Marjory was caught in an enigmatic half-smile. High cheekbones, wide mouth, the jaw rather too long - not classically beautiful, he thought. But the tiny smile suggested layers of mystery that ran deep in her.

He enjoyed that quality in a woman. All women. The unknown lurking under the surface. The hidden promises, the

sudden revelations, the tantalizing first kiss that could lead to secret chasms where he could lose all trace of himself.

That was truly the goal of passion, he thought. To lose yourself.

Now he remembered Nina, who'd been an enigma too, and Lynne, so beatific and secretive, and Jocintha, ah Jocintha, had a mysterious romantic streak. What drew him to these women and others whose names had fallen over in his mind like gravestones in a neglected cemetery? He'd loved them all. He'd treated them well. He'd never used them. The affairs ended with neither recrimination nor regret. *We'll always be friends, close friends.*

And yet a sense of failure stalked him. He hadn't delved as deeply as he might into their hearts. Now he wondered if these women were puzzles to be solved, souls to be exposed - had it been his purpose on the Planet to understand the ticking of other people, especially females?

Purpose, he thought.

Whose purpose?

Maybe he wasn't an atheist after all. Just a poor old fellow who hadn't heard God calling to him.

He stared at Marjory's photo and remembered the razor jab of her elbow as she turned toward him in her sleep and murmured the words of dreams. *Coracles, barnacles, carbuncles.*

He remembered also that Nina snored deep in sleep, and Lynne sometimes gasped as if she'd encountered a vast nightmare fish in a dream aquarium. Jocintha moved her feet rhythmically like a girl listening to the music of her dreams. And Marjory loved to foxtrot, albeit with a certain lack of grace. At the Midsummer Ball held each year on Lord Tansley's estate she wore a carnation in her hair.....Now he thought about it, all his women had enjoyed dance in one form or other.

And Minto? Does she enjoy the dance?

Oh, get out of my head, child. Leave a silly old man be.

He got up from the desk and looked out into the garden. In dimming light the trees drew close to one another as if to create an encampment against night.

The mystery of women.

He wasn't sure if their secret was attainable anyway.

He fetched his casserole and forked a bite to his mouth. He heard himself utter a tiny strangled croak. A gob of cold chicken caught in his throat. He dislodged the half-chewed white meat and coughed it into a big khaki handkerchief. Then he stalked the room aimlessly.

He paused beside Marjory's old piano. She used to play scales on it. Then she'd mastered some show tunes. Once he'd begged her to chance a rendition of a jazz song called *Let's Get Lost*, but she lacked the feel for it, and ballooned the timing. She didn't have the jazzy heart of Nina, say. Nina, who loved to sing in Spanish in a voice overloaded with inexpressible longing. In Buenos Aires he remembered her singing *En la triste oscuridad, Hoy tenemos que cruzar, Este río que nos llama mas allá...* a song of borderlines, of places left behind.

Nina had been tiny on a makeshift stage, her face devoured by shadow. The voice, oh the voice that trembled from such a diminutive frame. He could smell Nina's scent, a crushed clove aroma so strong it made him close his eyes. If I look, he thought, I will surely see her. I'll see the pleasure on men's faces as they listen to her. He'd never felt jealousy, never any need to possess his women – in fact it pleased him if others appreciated their qualities, be it their beauty or wit.

Wait, bloody hell, was he confusing Nina with Jocintha?

Was it Jocintha who'd loved to dance the tango with him at Club Estrella in San Francisco and sing melancholy little songs into his ear? He smelled on her lips that bewitching combo of mint leaves and vodka as her song turned into a low, intimate whisper uttered in a language only he and she could truly understand. And his body had sweated from the anticipation of

passion and how he longed to lose himself in the deep damp flowers of tango.

He sat in his favourite armchair, a sagging gravy-coloured velvet thing, and opened a book he'd been reading in desultory mode the last six weeks. A novel by a writer about a pair of virginal newlyweds on honeymoon – he found it thin soup, the characters dull. Why was he reading it if he disliked it so? Because it was something to do. Reading was like whittling. This is what I do to keep from hearing the minutes go past. Listen. Time is liquid from a faulty tap. Hear time drip. Wait for each drip. Anticipate it. There it comes. Another liquid moment. Life leaks.

He snoozed, awakened by the ten chimes of the grandfather clock in the hallway. Dear old thing. All it ever demanded of him was to be wound weekly. Clocks led a simple life. He'd come back as one if there was any return journey from death.

He opened his eyes. The clock rarely aroused him from sleep. Something else. He turned his head toward the window. Dark out there, starless. Footsteps crunched on gravel. Somebody was in the driveway. An intruder. He stood up just as his telephone rang. Who'd call at this hour?

He picked up the handset. "Yes?"

The line died instantly.

A phonecall from nobody, and another rattle of gravel. He wondered if he should telephone the local gendarme, but he knew Constable Pickens would be in the snug at The Gooseneck by now, downing the second of his three evening rums.

He walked to the window and peered out at the driveway. His doorbell chimed. Marjory had installed that bloody infuriating light-hearted electronic chime. Ding-dong-ding. He much preferred the old-fashioned bell she'd just ripped out without consulting him.

He went slowly to the front door. "Who's there?" he asked.

Nobody answered. He pressed his eye to the peep-hole and saw an eye staring back.

Fumbling, he turned the handle. He ran an unsteady hand over his thin silver hair, once so black and thick it was almost resistant to combs and brushes.

She stood facing him. She arched an eyebrow in scrutiny. She wore a black hooded coat. Tendrils of yellow hair strayed across her forehead. She brushed these aside with her long fingers. A pianist's hand, he thought. No, a lover's hand. Her palm was a perfect enclosure.

"I'm coming in," she said.

"I was asleep."

"Of course you were. Old men do that." She stepped past him, tossed her head back to release the hood, and turned to look at him. "Close the door, Doc."

Steiner didn't obey at once. "Did you just phone me?"

She offered no answer. Without invitation, she walked inside the living-room. He shut the front door and hurried after her, stumbling into a chair and rapping his knee against it. He suppressed an ouch.

"Did I just phone you," she said, roaming the room, touching things on the mantelpiece. A porcelain jug, a candlestick holder. All Marjory's stuff. "Did I just *phone* you."

"That was the question, I believe."

She picked up a small lacquered pot. "Chinese or fake?" she asked.

"I really don't know," he said.

She raised it in the air, let it fall, then bent to catch it before it struck the hood of the fireplace. She laughed. "Fake or genuine. Things break when you drop them, no matter what. Hearts especially."

"Hearts, yes. I imagine so." How edibly delectable she looked, the way the hood hung from her shoulders now and lanks of hair had tumbled down her back. She belongs in this room. This house. He remembered his earlier apparition, and

how convinced he'd been that she'd stepped inside. *I've missed you, Jacob. Come to bed.*

She picked up the book he'd been reading and looked at the title with just a hint of scorn. "Mediocre. Your reading taste surprises me, Doc."

"I was passing time. I fell asleep."

"Little wonder. This book's a sedative."

She sat on the sofa and stretched her long legs and gazed at him with such searching intensity he found it hard to hold her look.

He heard himself say, "You're welcome here, of course... although to be honest I'm not, ah, sure why you've come to visit me."

She seemed to smile, a tiny dimpling of her cheeks. Her teeth were so white and perfect they might never have been used. "Do I merit a drink, Doc?"

"Of course. Forgetting my manners...I have wine somewhere. French. Red."

"I like French things. French cinema. French cooking. French kissing."

French kissing. He didn't know what to say. He ought to have had a quick response, a witticism, but his mind no longer operated at the speed of repartee. He found the bottle in the drinks cabinet and tried to pour out two glasses. He willed the

tremors in his hand to still. He managed the task finally, growing more and more self-conscious under the girl's curious watchfulness. He handed one glass to her, and she reached out for it and raised it in the air.

"Salut," she said.

"A toi aussi, Minto," he replied. The personal *toi*, wasn't that forward of him? He tasted the wine. It smelled of crumpled old plums and mouldy blackberries. He knew he shouldn't be drinking alcohol, but what difference would a small glass of wine make?

"Ah, so somebody told you my name," she said.

"It was mentioned, yes."

"It's only one of the names I use." She paused, glass to her lips. "I have several."

"Why?"

"I didn't ask for them. I have my mother's name. Audrey. My grandmother's name, Ingrid. I was christened Minto Audrey Ingrid Dasker. Quite a mouthful, you think?"

"Dasker?"

"German, Germanic anyhow."

Without taking her eyes from him, she licked the rim of her glass with the tip of her tongue. A knot of frustration formed in his head. He wished with all his *soul* he was fifteen years younger. Even ten would be acceptable, just about. He'd deal

with the Devil for the return of lost time. He longed to reach out and touch her. The back of her hand, the side of her face, a fingertip on her lips. Any part of her.

She'd recoil, naturally.

No, he wasn't so certain of that. There was something in her expression that suggested she was expecting him to touch her. It was all too vague, that 'something' – too easy to misinterpret. A false move here, a bold move, a stupid one, and she might rise and go, and he didn't want her to leave.

Oh, Steiner, why would she be interested in a frail old stick of a fellow, for heaven's sake? She could pick and discard any young man. He caught his reflection in the mirror over the fireplace, and failed to recognize the image. The face looked older than he'd ever imagined, sunken, capsized. *I might be a charcoal drawing of The Ancient Mariner.*

"You haven't explained why you're here."

"You need company."

"I do? What makes you think so?"

"My grandmother Ingrid had the same look about her as you. I noticed that when I saw you on the street..."

"What look?"

She shrugged. "Ingrid died lonely."

"I imagine we all die lonely," he said.

“But we don’t all die broken-hearted.” The girl finished her wine, asked for a refill.

Steiner obliged. To die broken-hearted, he thought. How very sad. He was intrigued, but didn’t want to pry. He was more interested in the messenger than the message.

“That wasn’t the *official* explanation of her death, of course,” Minto said. “I can’t imagine anyone writing out a certificate with Broken Heart under Cause of Death. But I knew.”

“How?”

The girl gazed into the last glow of embers. A memory of sorrow made her beauty contemplative. “She told me so... We were close, Doc. Like sisters, you could say, from different generations.”

Steiner, an only child, remembered wishing he’d had a brother or sister. He had a flash of himself from very long ago, a small child in a tiny sailor suit standing in front of a vast Christmas tree, hand clasped in that of his adoring Mother. She’d been a tall woman, so tall that in childhood Steiner rarely saw her face. She was a warm hand. She was a pair of lips pressed to the top of his head.

“Are you listening to me, Doc?”

“Why, yes, of course – “

“You’re a poor liar. You were miles away. Where did you go?”

Steiner said, "Trying to remember the past."

"And did you find Ingrid?"

This question startled him. "Ingrid? Should I have?"

"Probably." Minto sighed and took an envelope from the pocket of her coat. She slipped a letter into her hand and cleared her throat before she read aloud. *"Jacob was everything to me. Everything. I have been foolish, my dearest M, to have given a lifetime to a man I deemed worthy of my entire love, but the heart, such a flawed vessel, makes so many mistakes - "*

Steiner interrupted. "Jacob?"

"Let me finish, Doc...Even now I am silly enough to live with the ridiculous anticipation of seeing him come through the gates and walk the drive to the house. I imagine he begins to hurry, hurry because he regrets wasted time and wishes he had the power to go back and begin again. Back to the place where we met, where we pledged our love. The wind tugs his coat, and flaps behind him, making it seem like there are two versions of him approaching the house - "

Minto held the letter out to him. "Here. You read the rest."

He didn't want to touch it. He remembered no Ingrid. He'd never met anyone by that name. *Never*. He'd remember 'pledging' his love, wouldn't he? No, he couldn't be absolutely sure. He shut his eyes tight and concentrated as if seeking a forgotten address book he'd left in a distant corner of his brain.

"I believe there's been a mistake," he said.

“Check the letter. Go on. It won’t bite you.”

It might, he thought. “I don’t want to read it.”

“You broke her heart. You ruined her life. And you won’t read the letter she wrote on her *death*-bed?”

He thought this letter was beginning to suggest an Edwardian romance, a pale consumptive woman standing in a window watching for signs of her lover on a driveway of poplar trees, and in the distance a willow with an empty swing hanging from a branch, and somewhere the whinny of horse.

Minto was making up this Ingrid story for reasons he couldn’t begin to understand. Was she here to tease him? If so, why, why had she selected him of all people for such a purpose?

“Sure you don’t want to *touch* it, Doc?”

“The letter?”

“Yes, the letter. What else could I mean?”

He set his wineglass on the mantelpiece and clenched his hands behind his back. “I wouldn’t break anyone’s heart. It’s not in my character. I’ve always parted from women on good terms. All my life.” He spoke with the quiet authority of a physician informing a patient that the X-rays had revealed an incurable tumour.

“I didn’t know you had a doctorate in self-deception.”

“That is very unfair,” he said.

“Below the belt.”

“Yes. Exactly.”

“You haven’t got a clue, have you? She always spoke well of you. She never hated you for failing her. She would have preferred to think you were a casualty of some bloody war than a shallow bastard who made her a false promise of love – “

“And I’m telling you I didn’t know her,” Steiner complained.

Minto ignored him. “She bestowed a weird kind of mythic thing on you. You were an angel, she said. I always wanted to shake her by the shoulders and tell her to get on with her fucking life and forget all this hopeless shit she entertained about a guy who was a cheap gigolo, a liar.”

A cheap gigolo? Never! Angry blood flooded Steiner’s head. He couldn’t cut through her perception of him. She was convinced he’d wrecked her grandmother’s life. Words he might have said in his own defence died on his tongue. You’re confusing me with someone else. I never knew Ingrid, I swear.

Minto continued to shove the letter at him, and he continued to ignore it. She got up, thrust the paper toward him, and he took a step back.

“I’m truly sorry her heart was broken,” Steiner said. “But honestly, I never met her - “

Minto dismissed the remark with a chopping hand gesture. “You fucked her over, Doc. You just kicked the struts out

from under her life and walked away into the pale blue yonder. What did you leave her? A few trite remarks? Lines from some corny old poem? What did you do to make her waste her life? Was it your charm? Your good looks? Your smooth sentences? Your *prowess*?"

Steiner looked down at the rug which was dotted by burn-marks from sparky old fires. The tips of his ears felt hot from the girl's scolding accusations.

"Was it the way you stroked her breasts? Or did you just fuck all the sense out of her?"

"I don't like that kind of speech," he said. He sounded prim, he knew, and wished he didn't.

"I bet you don't. Avoid, avoid. You're a coward, Doc. You hide from reality. You live in this comfy box in a poxy village, and you evade everything. Newsflash, Jake. You can't shrug off everything forever. It catches up with you. Run as fast you can, it's still going to get you." Her eyes were bright with anger.

He almost wished he could *admit* he'd met Ingrid and abandoned her. He almost wished he could go down on one knee and beg this girl's forgiveness for the sin he'd committed against her grandmother. The broken promises, the lies. That would be enough to stop any further admonishment, wouldn't it? Then she'd leave satisfied.

Wait. He didn't want to go. He wanted to keep her in this house for as long as he could. He wanted to lock the doors and the shutters to prevent her from ever going. He had the crazed romantic thought they'd make a life for themselves in the unused upstairs rooms. She'd learn to trust him. She'd overlook the age difference. She'd come, in time, to love him. His heartbeat changed again, *ticka-tick*, like the bent wheel of a shopping-trolley.

"Show me," she said. She took a step toward him. "Go on, show me. I'm curious. What have you got that left Ingrid so spellbound and mindless?"

"Show you, show you what?"

She grabbed the sleeve of his cardigan. "What you're made of, Doc. Show me what addled Ingrid's heart."

"Oh for heaven's sake, I know nothing about Ingrid or her heart - "

She pulled him closer. She was strong, unexpectedly so. He tried to shove her hand away but her grip was too firm for him. She brought her face very close, kissing distance, a matter of inches. The torment of this intimate proximity. Warm pools of sweat formed in his armpits. She lowered her hand and hitched it around his belt and drew him even nearer.

"What's in there, Doc? What have you got?"

He experienced the stir of a very feeble erection, like a faraway pulse that wasn't his own. He looked into her eyes and saw a determined mischief there. Her hand fumbled with the buttons of his fly. He swayed a little, feeling fevered and wondering how long it had been since a woman had touched him. The last had been Marjory, years and years ago. He imagined he saw her at the piano hammering out stormy warning chords.

The girl had dropped to her knees, her face level with his fly, her fingers working the buttons open. He couldn't breathe. Then he realized – ah, Christ - she'd exposed him and was stroking the skin of his flaccid penis. His failure embarrassed him. No, far worse, a momentous *humiliation*. Ashamed and desperate, he tried to force messages from brain to groin, but the route was long and convoluted and commands went astray inside his system, codes were lost, cellular links malfunctioned. As for willpower, what a useless joke. He heard himself groan in annoyance. He looked down at the girl's face and saw she was smiling.

“Ingrid,” she said. “Think of Ingrid.”

How could he picture somebody he'd never seen?

“Imagine,” she said. “Go on, imagine. You and her. That first time. The moment you first had her.”

He drew back from her. She stayed on her knees. He didn't know what to say. He was furious with his body. He felt exposed, in more ways than the obvious one. This useless appendage between his legs, shrivelled as if from immersion in a hot bathtub, was no more than a nub, an elongated wart, a canker to be severed by surgical means. This *thing*, once of such importance in his love-life, once as demanding as a spoiled child seeking approval, had transmuted into dead tissue.

The girl said, "Please don't give up, Doc."

"*Up?*" he asked. "Hardly the operative word in this situation."

"Take this," she said. She smuggled something into his hand. "Take it. Trust me."

He looked at a small blue capsule lying in the creases of his palm. "What is it?"

"Makes a new man of you...I want that new man, Jacob. Show me. Show me, Jake."

There was an appeal in her voice. And almost, *almost* a tenderness. He was seized by an urgency to prove to himself, and to her, that he could still Do It. The force of purpose. Evidence he was still alive. He wanted her. He wanted her like nothing else he'd wanted in years. Her flesh, the entrance to her, the thrill of union. To be alive again, nerves singing like harps. To feel young.

And she was a gift from the sky, and her story about Ingrid, whether true or false, amounted to nothing.

“Take the pill, Doc. The years will drop away. I promise you.”

He didn't stop to consider side-effects. He guessed what the pill was, and he'd prescribed it years ago to his own patients of a certain age. It was a different shape and colour from the tabs he remembered, but that didn't matter. Pharma companies were always revamping their products and improving them. He tossed it into his mouth and took a sip of wine to wash it down.

The girl smiled. “Well done.”

She held his hand. He took comfort and encouragement from her touch. The back of his throat was parched and a his fingertips tingled a little, but since it was too soon for the tablet to work he attributed these sensations more to imagination than medication. The girl kept watching him. She pressed her head to his shoulder. He thought of the capsule dissolving in his blood and had the feeling he was waiting for dynamite to detonate inside him.

She kissed his forehead. “Anything?”

“It's too soon,” he said.

“No, it's quick-acting.”

She stroked the side of his face. His blood sloughed in his ears. It was the sound a slow tide might make. It grew in

intensity. It deafened him. Then he experienced a quick hack of pain in his skull like the infliction of a blunted ax. None of this scared him. He was brave suddenly, no longer the old shuffler who couldn't hang up his overcoat properly. He was bold the way gamblers are bold when the roulette wheel spins and the steel ball clicks round. He was the brave young batsman saving his team from defeat. Whack whack, boundaries. He turned the girl's face toward him and kissed her on the mouth, then parted her lips with his tongue. If his dentures slipped and clicked, he didn't give a damn. If his breath was sour, so what?

He was liberated from infirmity and decay. He was free. A new sun rose in his head. He felt her fingers curl around his erection and he thought, I'm home at last. Home.

She whispered. You're ready, Jacob.

She edged him back toward the sofa and he plumped down, his legs spread. She climbed on to him. He raised her skirt above her knees and slid his fingers up the softness of her thighs. This is life, this is the way it has to be lived. Not in crabby solitude, nor in the fading taste of old memories. In the now. Here. The Moment. Warmth in the blood, desire in the heart and the means of fulfilment.

Come inside me, she said. Come for me. Let me feel you come. Do me, Jacob. Do me the way you did Ingrid.

Yes. Yes, yes. Yes. He looked directly into her open eyes.

Zigzagging lines torpedoed his vision. These harbingers of migraine had rarely happened in his life but he recognized them. He shut his eyes, the lines grew more intense, jagged rainbows under his eyelids. And there was pain stretching from his forehead to the back of his skull. He opened his eyes.

Are you ok, she asked.

Just a headache.

Now the girl was unclear in his vision, as if she were an image transmitted by a weak video link from a faraway continent. The pain plummeted to his chest.

Jacob?

Couldn't hear her properly. Her voice was distorted. She was in deep space talking via a brokendown satellite. Meteors crashed through black sky. Space was so chill. He shivered violently. He was losing body heat. Mercury fell rapidly in his universe. He couldn't feel his feet. They were shards of ice. His hands were so chilled they were sufficiently brittle to break clean from his wrists. He might have been immersed in a deep freeze chamber, a candidate for future defrosting and resurrection. The bright sun he'd seen minutes before was dimming, then it was gone, abandoning the sky.

Hold me, he said. Hold me.

I can't hear you.

Hold me...

He thought he saw her drift away. He wasn't sure. He understood she wasn't answering him and she wasn't holding him. Her absence was another eclipse. He moved his head to check the room and his neck creaked like old timber. He was a galleon on the wind, unprepared for sail. The room had dwindled, and Marjory's piano had shrunk to the size of a toy. The windows became tiny. And so did he, so did he. The ceiling was getting lower. In the distance he heard the whisper of tango, an accordion and drums in perfect synchronicity. But quiet, quieter all the time. He smelled crushed flowers and mint leaves and a whispered phrase from a song, *There are no doormen nor neighbours.*

And then there wasn't even that.

Only a strange sadness. Inexpressible sorrow. He barely felt the tears that rolled over his cheeks and barely heard himself whisper, *I never knew an Ingrid...*

Bea Tessdale parked her old bike where she always did, propped against the fence that surrounded the late Mrs Steiner's herb garden. Gone to ruin. Of course, the old Doc wouldn't keep it up. It wouldn't even cross his mind. Flowers and herbs? No, not him. She liked him well enough, and he paid her good money to come in and clean and cook for him, but sometimes he gave her the creeps the way he seemed to be watching her.

Oh, she knew how men looked when they undressed you with their eyes. At his age, what a lark. He wouldn't know what to do if she suddenly raised her brown cotton skirt and showed him her knickers and kicked her legs up. *Woooooeeee.*

Poor old sod, never knew if he was coming or going, did he? She let herself into the house. She called out, "Doc Steiner? Just me, just me."

Usually he called back in that old man's voice of his. This morning he didn't reply. She looked into the kitchen – her dominion – but he wasn't there. He tended to avoid the kitchen anyway. She crossed the hall, checked the time on the old clock. Doc Steiner, daft bugger, sometimes held conversations with this clock. *Morning, Mr Clock, having a good time, are you?* Then seemed to wait for an answer that never came.

She knocked on the closed door of the sitting-room. Only polite, she thought.

No sound of the Doc. She pushed the door open.

At first she thought he'd dozed the night away on the couch, although he usually made it to his bedroom before dropping off. She wouldn't want to disturb him if he was still asleep. But he was lying sort of odd, with both legs bare and stretched out.

She'd never seen such white legs before. Pale, certainly, but his were the colour of boiled rice. And skinny, sticks really, like the canes blind men carry.

She sucked air deep into her lungs when she saw that his underpants, grey and baggy, were drawn down to his ankles. His johnson, as the late Mr T called his *thing*, was limp and shrivelled and hardly visible against the inside of his leg. She moved a little closer. It was a shrimp, she noticed, nothing compared to Mr T's tallywacker. Not in the same league.

His shirt was unbuttoned. His scrawny bare chest was like an X-ray, he was that thin. You could count his ribs, if you had a mind to. His hands lay flat on his thighs. Maybe he'd been trying to jazz on his johnson, as Mr T liked to say.

Well, he was a lonely old fart, Doc Steiner, and you had to feel a little sorry for him.

What shocked her most was the fact his eyes were wide open. From her angle, it appeared to her that he was somehow observing her, even if there was no sign of life about him. More than observing, *spying*.

Made her feel a little queasy.

She'd have to close those eyes and rearrange his clothes and make him presentable before she called the Constable. If he was left like this, he'd become a subject of cheap gossip round the village and in the pubs.

Hear the Doc wanked himself to death?

No, she couldn't allow that.

She didn't fancy the task of touching a dead man, but somebody had to do it, right? She sat down in the Doc's old armchair and wondered what she'd do first. Cover him, she thought. Hide his private places. Not that it mattered to him now, she supposed, but it was just a small thing, giving him some dignity at the end.

Everybody wanted that much, right? Everybody wanted to go out with a certain decorum. Well then. She'd make sure Dr Steiner would get his.