

THE SACRED WOOD

by

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Work-in-Progress

(Follow up Adult Novel to my Children's Novel 'The Madonna Lily')

1. THE WOMAN RELEASED

'I dream of spaceships and pretty women.'

'I dream of a cold snowy evening in early January 1896 when Puccini, the collar of his fur coat turned up, cigar crushed into his pocket, rushes into the *Teatro Regio* in Turin for a final rehearsal of *La Boheme*.'

'I dream of 50's men, slouchy hats, cigarettes dangling...'

'You have to bloody well mean it!' The director shouted at his actors.

They were rehearsing in the local park. 'It may be a crap play but our job is to convince the punters it's up there with Ayckbourn and Pinter. So, please concentrate! Mitzi love? You are totally unconvincing. Make me... *believe!*'

'50's men don't do it for me, darling.'

Woken from her doze, the schoolteacher leant forward in her deckchair and gazed down the slope; past the memorial garden to the fallen, past the beds of tulips, past what looked like a dead baby giraffe lying on the path and wondered what all the shouting was about. She saw, seated around a small lake, a group of fairly old people waving their arms and generally creating a lot of noise.

Seated at one of the outside tables close to the small cafeteria, a middle-aged man was speaking on his mobile: 'I'm sure it's her. It's the woman, Lilith. Right age, right looks... Perhaps a bit older than the photo you gave me... and what is really surprising, very smartly dressed! That threw me a bit. What do you want me to do?'

The schoolteacher got up from behind the exotic cactus and slowly made her way down to where the actors were still grumbling amongst themselves. She smiled at them which surprised her, as she never knowingly smiled. An attractive man of about sixty, made a flamboyant bow to her. 'You should come to the show!' he enthused. 'I'll dedicate a song to you! There's a bit of everything. A bit of malarkey and dancing fandangos, some exciting chicanery, a taste of the lovelorn, a beautiful scheming charmer – that's our ditsy, petitesy

Mitzi here...' he pointed to a small, vivacious woman who was wearing a dunce's cap... 'and of course, myself, as a very bold, bad, *bad* old boy!'

'Will it get me out of myself?'

The Company gazed at her with new interest.

'Probably not,' the one called Mitzi said, softly. 'What do you think, Powell?'

'I think this lady should toddle along and see what happens.' Powell, a really decrepit old actor with Peter O'Toole looks, went on: 'I see you're looking at the giraffe – not ours, I'm afraid.'

'It doesn't seem to belong to anyone. Why don't you use it in the show?'

Mitzi clapped her hands together. 'My dear, you're a genius! Listen, when most people see the show they are just going to amuse themselves for a couple of hours and of course to satisfy their rather prurient curiosity that 'oldies' can still...'

'Cut the mustard! But occasionally...' the handsome actor took over, 'they have a shattering experience. Perhaps two or three people a show feel something that goes beyond all our capering and larking...'

The director, interrupted. 'You'll put her off, darling. I wouldn't say 'shattering', more like, 'spectacularly life affirming!'

'It's just a show for God's sake. Take no notice, Miss. Just come and have a good time.'

'And get you out of yourself! You'll be a lot more comfy.'

As she left, Mitzi laid a hand on her arm and whispered in her ear. 'You do realize, my dear, that a weird looking man, sitting at one of the café tables – my God, he's got an incredibly bulbous head... well, he's been watching you intently ever since you started speaking to us. No, don't look! He's now pretending to read a newspaper. But if you come round after the show, I'll tell you what he does after you leave here.' She brought her voice down to a whisper. 'But don't let on you've noticed him.'

Inside the theatre foyer, Lilith wandered about, undecided. She picked up a publicity leaflet:

The Truly Ancient Acting Company

Would like to let you into a secret

The youngest of us is a mere 60 and the eldest a venerable 80 + something. Don't ask! Putting it bluntly, we're drawing our pensions! If you were around in the 60's and 70's you would have seen us on TV and we still pop up in old Brit movies. Why do we inflict ourselves on an unsuspecting public? Simple. We love performing. It's in our blood. But the Managers' say: Who wants to watch a Juliet who's 63? Even if she is still spectacularly beautiful. Who wants a Romeo who can't shin up a balcony however dashing he was at the Old Vic in '69?

So we made the choice. Do it ourselves! We make no bones (ouch!) about getting a little help here and there. Such as: skillful makeup, corsets, physio, exercises to lighten our voices, cunning lighting and we work out two hours a day. But this is no trendy shock horror gimmick. "Oldies kiss by pale moonlight." as one local rag had it. "This skinny, skanky, undoubtedly sexy Ophelia is... wait for it! A GRANNY!!!"

No, we do it for love and we play it straight. But come and judge for yourselves. The first half consists of a Pot Pourri. That is, general messing about and I promise you fun and songs for everyone and after the interval we'll give the World Premier of a local playwright's wonderful new one act play: 'What Happened in Bath Last Spring'. By the way, *our* Romeo can still shin up balconies and run marathons!

The schoolteacher suddenly felt faint and sat down on the nearest chair. There seemed a lot of people milling about. She felt sorry for the actors.

'Are you alright?' A tall, stooping man asked solicitously. 'You seem familiar. Do I know you?'

'I used to live in a village near here. Then I went to prison for six years and came out this morning.'

This shut him up so completely that she left the theatre to spare him any embarrassment. It was now spitting with rain. Various hotels and pubs beckoned. 'A glass of wine would do me, I think. What a mirage the world was – all my dreams, all that energy and wishing, gone. If I started painting again...' But the bleak prospect of painting alone in some cold studio, depressed her. The rain started pouring down and there was a distant rumble of thunder. She turned around and ran back to the theatre. At the box office, she requested the best Dress Circle seat.

'That'll be £18 please.'

She paid, trembling behind her smile and as she put the ticket in her handbag and looked up at the girl: 'Oh, and do you mind telling me what time it starts tonight?'

'Starts?'

'The show?'

The girl looked at her strangely. 'Oh bless, you! Not tonight, my lover. Don't open to Friday, do it? – that's three days from now, mind.'

Embarrassed, she retorted. 'I can count, you know.'

'Do you want your money back? I'd have to phone the manager of course.'

'Don't bother. It's something to look forward too, isn't it? And that's all any of us want, don't you think?'

This time she did not hesitate and went straight into the warmth of the nearest pub. She paid for her drink and took out the publicity booklet thrust at her by the silly girl at the box-office. There were photos of each member of the cast. Then it hit home what she had done; spent her last bit of money on the ticket. She now only had about five pounds left. 'I'll have sandwich and that'll be that.' The only thing that she wanted now was to die in the peace and quiet of the night. She had thought long and hard about the exact time she would 'shut the door' and had decided that two am would be about right. Unhappily, it was now only five in the afternoon. Somehow she had to kill the hours and get through the rest of

the day and night. She checked in her pocket for the tablets. 'I will never see the show and yet I bought a ticket. That sort of sums up my life.'

She was aware of someone hovering over her and saying in his pleasant voice: 'I'm not there - in the publicity. Not quite old enough, yet.'

It was the same man who had looked after her when she felt faint.

'May I introduce myself? Lorenzacio Halloran and don't laugh! I help the actors. Business manager and all that. Except they run rings around me. One hell of a Company,' he laughed. 'Don't exactly know why they keep me on but they do.'

'I'm sure you do a good job.'

Mitzi came rushing over. 'Oh, I'm so glad I've seen you again. That man I told you about, the one with the massive big head... He got up as soon as you left.' She turned to the man. 'Lorenz, get me a brandy please? And treat this dear lady. What would you like my dear?'

When he was off on his errand to the bar, Mitzi leaned close to the schoolteacher... 'So he followed you and I followed him! Right into the theatre. Bye the way, what was all that fuss about when you were buying your ticket... but no matter. Anyhow, when you left, he spoke to the girl in the box-office and handed her a ten-pound note. You must have a very lurid past, my dear.'

'Just sad.'

'Well, I won't pry. And look, I'm massively jealous of those darling tangerine pumps of yours with that awfully dinky sweet little bow on them. Must have, my dear!'

They spent the next few of hours in the pub. Then Mitzi left and Lorenzacio asked her if she fancied a meal. They went to an Indonesian restaurant and he told her all sorts of entertaining stories about the actors. She skirted round the reason for being in prison except to say that she had done a very wicked thing and that she was a bit crazy at the time.

'You look incredibly well dressed considering you've just been...' Lorenzacio was overcome by confusion.

‘Released? Let out? I saved all through my sentence to buy something special.’

‘Did you, my dear. I must say, you’ve chosen well.’

‘I wanted to leave that place looking like no woman had ever looked before. It’s what kept me going the last few years. So I wrote to all the fashion houses and one...’

‘Oh now, now... you mustn’t get upset...’ He handed her a handkerchief. ‘You’re out of that horrible place for good. Ready to start a new life.’

When they left, the air was much colder. ‘Are you feeling unwell?’ Lilith asked as he suddenly bent over holding his stomach.

‘I get this sometimes. Do you mind if I go straight back to my hotel? I’ve enjoyed the evening...’

‘You get back to the hotel and rest.’

She was alone. The abruptness of it shocked her. After the conviviality of the pub and restaurant, she was suddenly stranded between the sea and shopping centre. There was no-one about and at first she could not believe it but it had actually started snowing. The signs are good, she thought. I would have hated to die in a damp old drizzle. Without thinking, she walked over to the taxi rank.

But she still had three hours to kill.

Those hours were to drive her insane. She got in and her life changed.

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2.

As he drove home, Pablo was muttering aloud: 'I hate this pesky, wet cold weather more than...' and was already planning his evening. But for a moment he wished he were back in his village near the Severn bridges. He had left five years ago and at first was glad to be rid of such an unsettling place. The village had been famous for a few days, written about at the time in local and national newspapers and now in a children's novel that had just come out. Except that the writer had got a lot of the details wrong. So there it was - another mystery: Who was the mysterious author? They had used a non-de-plume and it was quite a guessing game among people as to whom it might be. However, when those few days of wonder and magic had gone and the media people had scurried back to London and Bristol, the villagers settled back into their normal lives again. But they felt bereft, unable to cope with the return to their usual mundane lives. A Welsh writer he loved had once termed the phrase: 'A battle for the marvellous.' Well, they had seen the 'marvellous' for a few awesome hours and much good it had done them. A deep, melancholic mood had engulfed the people thereabouts.

Some had left almost immediately, others waited and had tried to adapt, to follow the old village ways and a few succeeded but not all. There had been two horrific suicides. Would he ever return? Pablo saw no reason to go back. As the local radio station had put it after the village milkman was found impaled on his own broken bottles: 'How is it that the magical and largely benign events of the recent past can lead to this ever unfolding horror story?'

A taxi had pulled out sharply in front of him and the crash knocked both cars sideways across the road. Luckily there was little traffic about. The taxi driver who looked drained and anxious suggested that they both pull into the side of the road. Pablo got out and inspected his vehicle – hardly any damage. As he stumbled out of his car, the taxi driver looked really ill – he was shaking quite badly, with a nasty gash on his neck. Pablo said, turning his collar up as they stood under the dripping trees: 'Well, mate, we chose the right spot. Right outside the bloody town cemetery.'

'I think it might have been my fault,' the taxi driver, mumbled. 'You wouldn't believe me if I told you what happened.'

'Try me!' Pablo said. 'But you look awful. You should go to hospital.'

'I would like to sit down... I'd rather not get back into my cab.' He swayed and was violently sick.

Pablo who prided himself on never been thrown by events, answered that he could sit in his car. The other driver looked relieved.

'I hate this weather,' Pablo said, when they were both ensconced in the warmth of his car. 'Makes me want to emigrate. What's your name, mate?'

'Bill.'

'Well, Bill, if you don't want to go to the hospital perhaps I could dress your wound at my place – its only about half mile from here.

'You're most kind but the wife'll see to it, mind.'

Pablo offered the man a sherbet sweet.

'Thanks... Look, could you do me a favour and just take a look inside my cab?'

Pablo thought this a little strange but said OK and asked what he was looking for?

'A woman. Silly isn't it to be sacred of a woman but she caused the crash – I mean, she went crazy and threw herself on me and bit my neck.'

'Vampires amok in the West Country!' Pablo turned to his companion. 'Sorry mate, don't mean to joke but...'

'She was a good fare. I picked her up near the sea. We chatted a bit and she said she wanted to visit the cemetery and wasn't sure which one, then suddenly...'

'But the cemetery's all locked up at this time of night. Didn't that make you suspicious?'

'We get all sorts.'

'Right, I'll get out...'

‘Don’t open her door.’

‘Well, I’ll just take my tried and tested old torch...’ He got out of the car and made his way ten yards down the road where the taxi was parked, half on the pavement.

He shone the torch inside the car. There was no-one there.

‘She’s gone.’

‘That’s a relief.’ He handed Pablo something from his wallet. ‘Before she went crazy the woman gave me this and said I might enjoy the show. But look, you have it. I couldn’t go without the wife and I’m not into buying a ticket so... Funny lady. Remember I asked her about the cemetery and it wasn’t a night to go visiting such a place and she leant close and told me: ‘That’s my trouble. Can’t keep away from them; the *‘dirty dead’*, that is. At one point in my life, I painted them every day.’

‘Did she say that? That she was an artist?’

‘She did... Hey! You alright mate?’

Pablo mumbled something about them getting some air and looking over the cemetery wall so they got out and once again stood under the dripping trees.

‘Did she sit in the front with you?’

‘No. And I remember we went to one cemetery, which didn’t suit her at all. She was my last fare and...’

‘You just wanted to get back home to the wife.’

‘Mind you, she’d been in the cab for at least half-an-hour... Thanks Pablo. Here’s my card in case you ever need a cab.’

‘Is your neck hurting? I see you keep rubbing it.’

‘Do I? Well, its this bite mark, I suppose.’

‘What’ll you tell your wife?’

‘About the woman? The truth.’

‘What was she wearing?’

‘I couldn’t tell you much about any of my fares... but I think she had this sort of purple wool winter coat... Very smart it was and all. I thought she must have plenty of dosh.’

Pablo watched him drive away then walked along the wall beside the cemetery. You’d need to be some athlete to get in. He started sneezing. What I need is to get out of this foul weather, have a good meal then an early night.

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3.

At about one in the morning and unable to sleep, Pablo got dressed and drove back to the cemetery. 'I should have stayed in bed,' he thought, opening a gate and skirting the side of the house and into the back garden. To find a way into the cemetery, he had gone down a side road and picked the first house that looked to have easy access to the back garden. He half expected some dog to come tearing out but all was quiet. The cold rain had stopped and it was now fairly light with the moon showing through.

He found a way into the cemetery, but not without a few scratches. 'I must be a right nutter but when has that ever worried me,' he thought, and investigated what looked like a disused chapel but it was all securely padlocked. After about half an hour, he believed that he had covered every nook and cranny of the cemetery. Feeling tired, he made his way back up the slope and found a spot where he could climb over the wall and onto the pavement outside. As he swung himself astride the wall, he noticed an entrance building, on the side fronting the road – this time lived in, with lights still on. He felt this was a little odd, given that it was the middle of the night.

Wearily, he climbed back into the cemetery. The entrance lodge looked to have been built in Victorian times and was at best, a piece of half-hearted gothic, with just one small, mean turret. Very high hedges surrounded it. A small gate had been left open. Curtains were drawn in the upstairs windows; but both still had their lights on. The moon was now quite bright and he was just about to leave when he heard a strange sound. Later he was to describe it as a sort of hopeless groaning, but very subdued, very ladylike. 'I can help you!' he spoke in a fairly loud voice but not loud enough to draw the people behind the curtains to peer out into the darkness.

He jumped as a cat scurried past. He was standing on the edge of a small lawn looking up at the lodge. Another light went on and he moved back under cover of some trees. A window opened and a girl called out: 'Thomasina cat! Wherefore art thou? You stupefying vagrant moggie bitch! Stay out all bloody night and see if I care. But be careful, there are ghostly leopards roaming with the dead.' Then he heard a rustling behind him and as he turned something struck his left ankle really hard. The pain was indescribable. The woman smiled as she threw the piece of wood aside then kicked him behind the knee.

Pablo collapsed on to the grass.

‘I believe you were looking for me?’ she said, placing her foot against his throat. ‘I learnt that ankle trick, inside. So what’s your business with me? You’ve been following me, don’t deny it? Is someone paying you to spy on me?’

The woman took her foot away. Pablo got himself into a kneeling position and gasped: ‘You didn’t have to... half cripple me.’

‘Why not? I’ve only a few hours left on this evil planet, so I might as well enjoy myself.’

‘You were a schoolteacher once.’

‘We all make mistakes. Hold on, didn’t you live in the village? Don’t follow me... Go up and be friendly to that silly girl.’

Then the woman was gone.

Pablo wondered what he would tell his client. Gingerly, he got to his feet and immediately collapsed on to the lawn in agony. Suddenly a girl’s voice called out, softly: ‘You OK?’

‘I can’t move.’

“You poor man. I saw everything!”

The rain began to spit down again and with it a nasty gusty wind. He rolled onto his side and tried once more to get up. The pain was even worse this time. ‘I shall die of pneumonia!’ he considered.

He heard a door open and several people stood looking down at him. Someone brought out a chair and hoisted him into it. As they went inside the house, the man called out: ‘Julie? Come down and tell us what you saw?’

But Julie did not appear. Pablo fortified by a hot drink with brandy decided to tell them the truth.

‘Well,’ the man said, ‘you only tried to do a good turn – not that I much believe in your job - spying on people...’

His wife, interrupted. 'Don't! He thought the poor woman might commit suicide. He needn't have gone back.'

'Suicide? Here?' The man laughed: 'Never. People feel much too alive in cemeteries! Psychologically speaking, all life is here.'

'Dead life!' his wife sneered, quite nastily. 'The poor woman's probably still wandering about among the graves.'

'No, she's gone. I'm certain of that.'

'Is Julie your daughter?' Pablo asked.

'Our son's, girlfriend. I don't know why she hasn't come down. I think she saw what happened.'

Pablo tried to get up and thought for a moment he had managed it, but as he took his first step, the pain was appalling and he collapsed back into the chair.

'We should get you to the hospital, old chap.'

'No!'

'Then we'll make you comfy on the sofa. You're welcome to stay here the night and here are some pain killers. Make yourself a cup of tea if you like.'

After they had gone back to bed and the house was quiet, Pablo tried to sort things out in his mind. He agreed with the man that the woman had probably left the cemetery. He tried to remember what he knew about her from the village. Before the scandal, she had been well thought of as a good teacher. What did for her was her passion for Robert, the local author. He started to drift back towards the events of seven years ago: the strange house, the locked doors, the asylum... the beautiful creature from the woods... Yet, for all those fantastic events of the past he was sure Lilith played no part.

'Excuse me!'

Pablo became conscious that someone was whispering in his ear.

‘No, don’t get up.’ The girl knelt beside the sofa. Pablo saw that she was fully dressed with a white angora beret perched on top of her head and a thick black woolen scarf around her throat.

Pablo sat up abruptly. The girl fetched a chair and as she sat down undid the buttons of her winter coat stretching out her long legs. ‘I can’t be long. Do you remember me? No, I can see you don’t, after all I was just a schoolgirl who went missing and was found...’

‘Julie! Of course, I remember you! It is such a coincidence.’

‘You rest now. I’m going to check out this place and see if Lilith... yes, I did recognize her when she hit you on the leg. Don’t forget she drugged my poor Dad and he nearly died.’ She wandered about the room then leaned over behind Pablo and whispered: ‘I was no innocent. But you all believed me,’ she laughed: ‘And you Mr Pablo... I didn’t know what to make of you - thought you were a creepy old Pee-da-feely man! There’s lots you don’t know. Like who wrote that so-called, children’s novel about all the goings on.’

‘Did you?’

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4.

Lilith was sorry that she had hit the poor man with that piece of wood.

It calmed her – this aimless walking along suburban roads and cul de sacs. She realised that her cemetery idea was rather vainglorious. The picture of what she was now going to do gradually took hold. Would it not be so much more comfortable to be in a pleasant home, surrounded by a loving family? The problem was: which little house or bungalow? They all looked the same. Not a single light was on but of course it was half past two in the morning and but still there might be someone making a cup of tea in a back kitchen. This was silly – I must get it over with. My birthday will decide: the seventh street from where I am now and the twenty-sixth house. ‘I’m perished! You can be too tired and frozen to do anything, even top yourself.’ Thinking of a hot cup of tea, she was impatient with herself. ‘These silly games!’ The weather turned foul again. Sleet and rain together. ‘I’m wasting valuable time.’ She opened the front gate of a bungalow and rang the bell.

She tried three times before stepping back to look up at the windows. There were no curtains; the place was not lived in. So she moved on to the next bungalow. There were two gnomes lying down on the small front lawn. One wore a wooly hat and the other smoked a cigar. Both had been pushed over. After ringing the bell twice she put her ear to the door and soon heard someone descending the stairs coughing as they came down.

‘What you want?’ asked the rather charmless woman. ‘Waking folks up at this hour.’

‘I need you to let me in.’

‘Do you now! Not sure if I’m minded too...’

Her husband was now standing at the foot of the stairs. ‘Young lady, are you ill?’

‘She looks mental to me,’ his wife muttered, slamming the door in Lilith’s face.

The schoolteacher left and went back to the main road opposite the cemetery. Dawn would be breaking soon: a muddy, awful, sickly start to the day, of that she was sure. She might as well try her luck at the Lodge again. If that man with the big head was still hanging about the lawn... Suddenly, she felt terrible remorse. The poor man, I probably broke his ankle...

What came over me, hitting him so hard. I'm not a nasty person. I'm really not a nasty person at all. I was a conscientious and respected schoolteacher and then I got this madness for Robert and there was no going back... It was because my painting was driving me mad... Robert, after all, put himself in my way. She went back in time... saw herself driving along that evening, trying to clear her head after a frustrating day's painting, thinking of nothing much and there he was, standing in the middle of the road in the pitch dark. She remembered what he said: 'Lilith! Someone in a car, just before you, threw a baby out of the window – it's over there on the grass verge...' It seemed that he had had a row with Julie, his daughter, and had been wandering about all day. So what was more natural than taking him back to her place. The baby was in fact just a doll but that had been the start of something else which I was not really involved in.

The door had not been closed properly. She pushed gently and found herself in what looked like a small kitchen. Not a sound anywhere. Then as quietly as she could, made herself a cup of sweet tea and ate several biscuits. 'When you don't care about anything any more,' she thought, 'you can get away with murder.' Through a dirty window, she saw the dirty beginnings of the day. After washing up the cup and saucer and putting the sugar and milk back in the cupboard, she left the kitchen and went up a small circular staircase. One bedroom door was slightly ajar - she stood and listened for a moment but heard no sound coming from the room. She noticed that the staircase went up to another floor. 'I'm putting the moment off,' she said to herself.

Lilith found herself in the turret room she had seen from outside and thought that it must be that silly girl's bedroom and soon had to admit it was rather wonderful and not silly at all. She was drawn into the room by its elegance and peace. A beautifully carved Egyptian oil lamp stood on a small desk by the window giving off a wonderfully warm glow. There was a grandfather clock near the door and a pile of books on the bedside table. She saw that the whole of one curved wall a painting she recognized and had always loved: *Miranda, the Tempest* by the Pre-Raphaelite artist, John William Waterhouse. A strange mélange of melodramatic storm, loneliness and longing - without the terrible *kitsch* of some Pre-Raphaelites. This was what the night had been trying to tell her. Wait! Don't be so impatient and you will soon find your vast place of sleep. Why hurry yourself out of life?

She reflected on the painting. The artist (self taught) was not always very technically proficient. Miranda's left arm seems disembodied – not part of the upper arm at all. But the sweetness of the other hand, so small, holding her hair in place against the storm. Lilith

looked about her; it was a room of such intimate simple riches, of lightness and sensuality that death now seemed to her, a transition full of beauty and not a spiteful lonely obsession. Lilith had never had feelings for other women, but here, for the first time, she longed to *belong* to this girl. She tried desperately to remember the face at the window calling for her stupid cat. Why had she been so obsessed with that funny looking man with the large head that she had hardly noticed the figure leaning out of the window. I have wasted my life on silly creatures! What an arid, inward life I've lived, she mused, touching for the first time the sweet pillow and flowered counterpane of the narrow bed. In prison she had allowed her body to be used by a warder: the warder was fat and ugly and this she thought was her due.

There was a noise from downstairs. Some early risers, perhaps? She listened intently but all seemed quiet. Probably that damned cat! I'd happily strangle the shitty thing if it dares to come up here. For a moment, she indulged in a fantasy of the girl returning to her bedroom at the very moment she held the dead cat out at arm's length. What look would be in her eyes? Disgust? Admiration? Fear? She was drawn back into the room and noticed for the first time, various photographs stuck on the other wall. They were of theatrical folk; but perhaps about a hundred years previously. She sat in the rather hard upright chair in front of the desk and saw that the small vase of flowers needed watering – they looked like lilies: white with little pin pricks of yellow in their centres. Suddenly she saw, half in and half sticking out of the bottom drawer, a woman's lace handkerchief. She delicately withdrew the handkerchief and breathed in deeply. It was without scent or fragrant odour, no evoking of the sweet girl here... She opened another drawer and took out a beautiful Indian silk scarf, holding it against her neck. I want to die and go to a place where there are elegant clothes and scents to weaken a woman's heart...

It was like a blinding light – a revelation of purpose! I want to *die* in this room! She wrapped the scarf around her neck and looked vaguely about the room for a mirror. Then a voice from downstairs called out: 'Help? Help me!'

Her reverie had been broken. But the voice did not call out again. One irritation began to take hold – this cold heartless thing called morning was starting to fill the room. The angel of the night had deserted her. 'Do what you came for, you stupid bitch!' She leant over the desk and pulled the shutters in towards her. Now only the light from the little lamp would suffuse this room. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a bottle of pills. Just one more journey down to the kitchen for a glass of water...

5.

Pablo slept. He dreamt of the village and the old lady everyone called Granny who was handing a tall slender woman a cup of tea.

'How well?' The Princess asked of his dream.

'How well, what?' Pablo muttered with some irritation.

'They've written a children's book about me. Have you read it?'

'It's about everything that happened there... You're just one part of it.'

'I must ask what I've been dying to find out: Robert's wife, Julietta, who escaped from the mental hospital... Did she make it?'

His dream lasted twenty minutes.

...

Julie sighed as she came in from the brittle dawn and looked at the sleeping man. I did not like him all those years ago and I still don't trust him. What was he doing on our lawn in the first place? She went into the kitchen for a glass of milk and noticed that someone had been eating biscuits. She decided that her nocturnal ramblings meant that she would look quite tired when she met up with Ben again. This excited her as he liked her looking dark under the eyes. He also liked washed out pastel dresses on her. She wondered why she even bothered with him. Perhaps because she liked his parents so much and after the difficult time she had had with her father, they treated like a daughter. Julie realised that she was being unfair to her father. And dear Ben was always wonderful for the first day but thereafter he bored her.

The sleeping man muttered something and turned over quite violently. She instinctively put out a hand to save him from falling off the sofa... but there was some other sound going on. It came from upstairs.

She slowly climbed the staircase. The door to her room was closed and she never left it like that, ever.

She put her ear to the wood panelling. It must be a very quiet intruder, for there was no sound at all but she knew someone was definitely in her room. Her room! This had been Ben's parent's, present to her on announcing her engagement to their son. She wanted to push the door open. However, she returned downstairs, intent on waking the sleeping man. She was shocked to see him sitting up, running his fingers through his hair.

'Julie,' he spoke quietly. 'I just stood up without too much pain. Could you help me to my car?'

'Were you after me that time? When I was twelve? I thought so at the time. Would you like to have laid hands on me?'

'I think we were all in a heightened state.'

'You can say that again! But you haven't given me an answer.'

'I'm leaving,' he said, slowly getting to his feet.

'You won't get far!' Julie spoke, sharply. 'Listen, there's someone in my room. I'm not a nervous person or afraid but... I do have this dread of seeing an unfamiliar face...'

'In a familiar setting? I understand but I can't climb the stairs. Or fight off an intruder.'

'Just stay down here for a bit then I'll help you to your car. This intruder won't put up a fight.'

Climbing the stairs again, she hoped Ben's parents would not get up too early. Her cat was sitting quietly outside her door. She put her fingers to her lips and picked up the slightly damp creature and taking a deep breath slowly turned the handle.

Lilith was lying half across the bed hugging herself with a pillow, one of her arm's, bent at the elbow and held about a foot above her face as if shielding herself from some evil force.

Julie said softly. 'I might have known I'd see you again. Schoolteacher? Do you hear me? Very drama queen but if I were you, I'd put on some clothes.'

There was no movement from the bed. Julie saw the bottle of pills half spilt on the bed and floor. 'Come on! Can see you've spilt most of the pills so you don't kid me.' She shook the woman but to no effect. She turned quickly. 'Oh! You bad Thomasina!' The cat was now licking up the pills. She snatched the cat up and went back down stairs where Pablo was in the kitchen washing his face. She handed him a towel. 'Do you know how to make a cat sick!'

As he turned suddenly, Pablo winced with pain then hobbled back to the sofa. 'Give me the animal. What happened?'

'That schoolteacher is in or rather *on* my bed! She's taken some pills although I think Thomasina has swallowed most of them.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Nothing.'

Pablo looked up at her. 'She might die.'

'So what? I hated her when we were in the village and that hasn't changed.'

The injured man stood slowly up. 'Still...'

'Why were you watching her? I heard what she said before she walloped you. And... who are you working for? I mean, your spying game?'

'Can't say.'

'Teacher's got some lovely clothes, though.'

Pablo laughed. 'Pity she's not wearing them.'

'How do you know she's not wearing them?' Julie stared at Pablo with considerable unease. 'I remember now. You always seemed to be one step ahead of us in the thought processes.'

She shrugged and went back up the stairs and on entering the room was quite surprised to see the schoolteacher almost dressed. 'I'm too young to die!' she whispered, reaching out for Julie's hand. The girl startled, jumped back quickly. There was a squeal as she trod on the cat, lost her balance and fell heavily, hitting her head on the door. Pablo called up asking if everything was alright.

The schoolteacher stared for a long time at the girl. Then muttered under her breath: 'You think, I'm bad. I know what you did all those years ago and this time...' she swayed, 'Oops! Steady girlie. Got a few scores to settle and all that. Isn't life fun.'

As the schoolteacher passed Pablo on the way out: 'Look, I'm sorry about earlier. I didn't mean to hit you so hard. You'd better get help. The girl's passed out and I think the cat's dead as well.'

Pablo asked how many pills she'd taken.

'Not enough.'

After she had gone Pablo tried to climb the stairs but it was hopeless, his leg just gave way under him. The lady of the house appeared and on being told what had happened rushed upstairs to Julie.

