

# **WATCH THE SLOW DOOR**

A NOVEL  
by  
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## PART 1 - BERGAMOT

It's after work and I'm sitting by the window of my favourite café. The waitress is smart and interesting... and I'm on my second drink. Can there be anything more irresistible than the second drink? The first, after all, is just pure greed.

Everyone has their own mind disease. Mine is creating life. I've named the waitress Jean, after a wonderfully dissolute actress from the glory days of cinema.

A siren sounds. I peer through a large plate-glass window into the half-there world of dusk. A couple are kissing by the statue of God but their hearts aren't in it. As the siren sounds again, the white limousines of the elite stream out of their underground lairs; gliding silently around the Square. Even our hard-working Impresarios have to go home some time. A man rushes his bicycle onto the pavement and lights a cigarette. He either does not want to risk life and limb or is just thinking what to do for the rest of the evening. Ask yourself this: Has any great uprising, love affair or assassination, taken place at six-thirty of an evening? Answers on a postcard, please. I mean, the love duets from *Butterfly* don't kick in for at least another two hours.

By the way, I'm known to the waitress as 'The Kid'.

'You slouch like a cowboy but you've got the softest voice,' she'd confided on my first visit.

'Better eat something,' she says, handing me my third drink.

'When you finish here, can we walk down to the pier?'

'You've never been on your feet all day!'

Jean wears green a lot. I watch her as she drifts off to serve some of the other oddities. Warren, the chicken man, pats her bottom. I daydream about Jean all the time. At the moment, she's floating naked in seaweed, lying across a rock under the sea. Then as she panics, trapped by the fronds, I rescue her and we float gently to the surface where I kiss her salty mouth, twisting her long hair around my neck.

'Salmon with egg mayonnaise baguette and don't take - forever!' I shout.

The other inmates of the café - and *they* are prisoners of habit, give me a dirty look. I've never been able to decide if I'm loved or loathed. At night, very few strangers come in. I think about my day; its frustrations and boredom.

Jean brings me tuna and avocado. 'You really want to go on the pier?'

'Only if you wear your emerald raincoat.' I imagine my finger tracing the scar on her lip. She asks how I know she has an emerald raincoat and I say that I often follow her home when I've nothing better to do. She narrows her eyes in an attractive way. 'Thank you, very much!'

Warren goes to the juke box and chooses a tune from 'La Ronde'. After all, this is a sort of love café. Warren's *amour* is chickens and by the way, mine is caterpillars. Anyhow, Warren works with chickens and always smells rubbish but no-one has the heart to ban him. Another Warren peculiarity is that he always carries a small megaphone dangling from a cord around his neck. 'To scare the bloody canines!'

*... I run after her and realise that I don't know how long the pier is as I've never been to the end. Suddenly, she collapses, gasping for breath. A missile crosses the sky – its intense turquoise tail streams out across the night. I grab her by the shoulders but she pushes me away and tears the name badge off her blouse – holding it at arm's length, protecting herself, like the cross in those old-fashioned vampire films. I reach out...*

'Kid, old sport...'

Warren sits opposite me, his plump, necrotising body so different from his handsomeness of a few month's back. But I'm irritated that he's broken my reverie; not to mention his repellent smell.

'Don't look now, but Jessica is the stuff of dreams tonight.'

He refers to the mystery of our little fraternity. Jessica's a young woman who pretends to be other people. Once she was my first wife; another time, Jean's dark night of the soul, which of course was very beguiling; then the famously nasal mistress of the City Commissioner; Peter's slimy boss and most successful of all, Warren's mad blind old mum. 'I'm going down to the

harbour tonight...' Warren speaks softly, poking me lightly on the chest, 'I'm telling you this, because... well, if anything untoward happens to me, would you be a sport and collect my things?'

'Got anything of value, old sport?'

He gets up abruptly and leaves the café banging the door.

Jean immediately brings out her spray. We all love the scent. 'You lot only really tolerate poor Warren so when he goes you'll know I'll get out my air-clean.'

Kim, who has a long sea-horse like face and who's always perched on a bar stool, says: 'Bergamot! That's what you should use. Clean and fresh with a hint of sultry. They say it makes for a healthy mind.' She eyes Jessica. 'But I don't want a healthy mind around you, my lithe-y little lullaby... there's my dreams...'

A newcomer yells out: 'Dreams! God bless 'em! Keep us going, don't they?' Another customer talks to Jean about the latest casualty or illness. The disease depresses everyone but talking about is not done, well not in public. In the few month's I've been coming to the café, we've lost three. I'm now at the critical stage of my reverse drinking. After the seventh, the point of no return, I get Jean to bring me weaker and weaker drinks until the last one is pure water. That way I stay sober, solvent and healthy.

Jessica is hovering by my table. 'I know I was being talked about just now.' She is speaking as my first wife – or rather, what she believes my first wife was like, picked up from little scraps of gossip and drunken indiscretions. 'Were you rude to Warren? Is that why he left in a huff? You always do this!'

'He told me you were the stuff of dreams.'

But at that moment there's the loudest rooster call you've ever heard. Jean rushes to the door and runs out into the road.

'Bloody megaphone. He can't have got far...' I shout out to no-one in particular. Jean is white as a sheet and I see that Jessica is hanging onto her arm and looking even worse. Then the rooster call again but fainter with much less bravado, followed by a gun shot. Well, not everyone agreed about

that but the general consensus was that it sounded very like a gun being fired.

It's now nearly midnight and because I broke the terms of my 'little arrangement', I'm quite pissed. Jean and Jessica have been in cahoots ever since Warren's unhappy demise – for we take it for granted the poor sod's dead. I call over to Jessica, whom might she be tonight? Did she fancy giving us a Command Performance? Perhaps she'd give a whirl to being Warren's poor old Mum at his funeral. I even got up and gave my imitation of the tragic old soul limping behind the coffin – well, these people can't take a joke. I try to read the paper but there's too much mystery. I wish I'd been a bit nicer to Warren. Still, I would visit his lodgings and see if he had anything worth having.

Jessica approaches me warily. She seems not so antagonistic, even has a nice smile. Her eyes, which I'd swear are normally flinty and malicious, are now definitely misty with half-formed tears. I delicately dab her cheeks with my handkerchief. That sort of thing turns me on. And her thick chestnut hair looks lovely tonight. Why had I not noticed this before? I tell her that except for her thin nose, she could have modelled for a hair advert. And laugh: 'Perhaps I need a deep intake of Bergamot to cleanse my mind.' Her hands are clean as well. 'I'm so tired,' she says, reaching across the table. 'I just want to go to bed.'

'Don't let me stop you.'

She pulls away. Jean draws me aside and tells me that Jessica doesn't want to go home. The café is now almost empty. 'Anyhow, I can't go to the pier but Jessica will.'

'No, I bloody won't!'

'Jessica, you promised. You know how needful you are...'

I stand up and Jean helps me on with my overcoat, whispering: 'She can't go home, her husband's a shittite.' I laugh at the word; tell her that she's being overly dramatic and that we only have Jessica's word that her husband's a bastard or that there's even a hubby gracing the hearth at all. There's a shout from the patron – something's burning. Jessica has already left. Jean looks at

me thoughtfully, 'I saw the way you were looking at Jessica... If you were really in love what would you do? How would you conduct yourself?'

The jukebox is playing a Viennese Waltz. Time for me to go.

As I leave, Jean asks: 'Am I forgiven about yesterday?' (Distracted by someone suddenly collapsing, she had accidentally scratched my face with her order pad, then licked the blood off my cheek). 'Isn't that what a good waitress should do? Look after her favourite customers.'

It goes without saying, that after that, I certainly dreamt to my full potential!

The pavement is silky; a slight covering of snow, the finest and most powdery snow imaginable. No other country can match the delicate quality of our snow. I decide to go down towards the port near where Jessica lives. The least I can do is to check if her lights are on and whether she got home safely. Two 'enforcement' patrolmen are standing over a roped off 'Scene of the Crime'. Probably where Warren was shot. I go down a small grove of trees – the only truly verdant area left in this part of the City - hand on my gun all the way, though. The block of flats all have balconies and it suddenly strikes me that it's odd Jessica lives in such a swish place? I hear voices and hide behind a hedge. I feel nauseous and dizzy and I'm angry with myself for breaking my drinking arrangement. A strange thought: Outside of the café, I can't visualise Jean at all. But perhaps that's the way I want it. Still, what a waste of evenings...

Jessica's voice floats towards me – she is laughing, such an infectious laugh. Never heard her laugh before. Is this the real Jessica hidden from the café regulars? Her companion, a man, says something and she laughs again. Her laugh is heavenly. Have they seen me? They are at the edge of the Grove, lingering... not wanting to say goodbye. I can see nothing of Jessica because her back is towards me and the man has a hat pulled down. In one breathtaking moment, I visualise her, my Jessica, ravishingly, radiantly beautiful; just standing in front of me, doing nothing, just holding my gaze. Not in the Coliseum being eaten by lions, not lying under an apple tree with blossom showering down and certainly not under the sea like Jean.

I start shivering. I must show myself. Not to come out and see her properly would be like dying in some cold place. She must talk to me! The man has

slipped away. The moon turns pale blue, probably an effect of a vapour trail or my being pissed. Jessica is still looking back down the Grove towards her lover. I feel the only way back to life is to see her face. I call out. But it is such a weak pathetic little voice. I sense her loss – the man who'd just left her, who might never return... She is doing up her long winter coat, putting her belt through the loops again... I'd obviously missed something. Had she taken her coat off? The man is probably still in view. I dream of following her to her place, wresting the key out of her hand... Then I get a shock, she is walking away, away from her flat... a handkerchief pressed against her face... At that moment, I'm violently sick. I feel ashamed and glad Jessica does not see me. I'm sure it's the first time I've felt ashamed in years.

It seems a lifetime ago. Sorry to speak in clichés but that's the feeling. The moon has returned to its natural colour so that must be a good thing. Of course, I followed her. I was never more than a few yards from her but she seemed in a world of her own. 'Jessica!' I repeated her name, softly, to anyone who passed. I was ignored of course; always am. What was she doing in the roughest part of the port? I began to imagine her scent. Like the horse-faced woman said: a hint of sultry but with freshness also. What would I name it?

A fog had begun to smother the City. Jessica seemed unsteady and a couple of times almost fell. All the time a troubling thought had plagued me: Could Warren still be alive? The sounds of the port were now quite loud. A big shipment of oranges were due or so I'd read in the paper. I turned a corner of a warehouse and there she was, her back towards me, no more than a few feet away, trying to light a cigarette. I retreated out of sight. Then a voice, a woman's, sounding vaguely familiar, asking: 'Were you followed?'

'Unless Warren...'

'Yes?'

'Warren's OK.'

Kim was right in front of me, reaching up to Jessica for her cigarette. 'We ought to stop him gabbing...'



'No!' Jessica was adamant. 'Don't meddle with Warren, he's already dealt with one of them tonight.'

Kim gasped as I showed myself. She spat out something rude and melted back into the fog.

So I took Jessica onto the pier and all my old worries about where it ended meant nothing as the fog was now impenetrable. 'I'll tell you a story,' she said.

'Are you in love with Warren? I saw you together.'

'We were close once... He's letting me go because of his illness. I still see him as he was – wonderfully attractive.'

We walked slowly along the pier, the metals stanchions dripping with moisture. Past a decrepit old structure used for variety acts of the last century, though it was difficult to understand people's passion for entertainment on water.

Jessica tripped on a loose board. As I helped her to her feet, she gripped my arm: 'Sorry, I'm so weak... I need blood.'

'What about a hospital transfusion?'

'Can't risk it – contamination and all those forms!'

'Jessica, I had wicked thoughts about you...'

Her lips were pale and her face grey. 'After all this time?'

I mumbled into her hair: 'Where would you draw blood?'

'The wrist would do fine. I'm bloody desperate so don't mess around.' Her belt was trailing along the ground. I threaded it back through the loops for her. At that moment, I knew I loved her. I buried my face in her slightly musty hair.

'I had special dentistry,' she whispered, kissing me as we collapsed onto a soaking wet bench before taking off my watch and bringing my arm up to her mouth. 'One specially sharpened incisor, it'll cut through the vein painlessly and when its over...'

'Yes?' I asked, both terrified and yet beside myself with the promised pleasure.

'Well, I have a first-aid kit for nervous givers like yourself.'

I could hear distant voices, arguing. I could just make out the choppy sea through a broken plank.

'Its quite sensual,' Jessica whispered, lowering her head – 'nothing to fear.'

'But how do you know, I haven't got the disease?'

'I'm mad for it and you appear healthy. I mean, the tremor usually gives people away.'

As she bled me, initially not quite as painlessly as she had promised but soon the lapping movements of her tongue became extremely pleasant; as was the rhythmic tapping of her finger on the other side of my wrist. I sensed the couple arguing were getting closer.

'Jessica, I'm feeling a little strange...'

She raised her bloodied mouth, 'Nearly done. I can hear the others, can't you?'

'What others?'

'You know... Warren and poor Kim.' In a quick delicious movement, she inserted her tongue into my mouth, her other hand tightly gripping my wrist. 'Now, just one final pleasure...'

A while later, I seemed to have an enhanced sense of life. The light dusting of face powder Jessica wore smelt wonderful. My hand was around her waist, the warm beige coat I loved; the woman I loved. I could not believe how quickly it had all happened. I don't know what we talked about, but every smile, every cough, every glance made me kiss her again and again. Make no mistake, I was bewitched. But to be bewitched needs exactly the right circumstances – one is not bewitched by people but by a mysterious power that hovers over you. Some people go their whole lifetime without this infection, this wonder of wonders.

The fog had almost gone. And as Jessica murmured: 'Just too many kisses... I want to sleep.'

Warren suddenly appeared in front of us, smoking contentedly.

'Where's Kim?' I asked. 'I heard her just now and she's up to no good.'

'She is... within this world somewhere or other... Peeling an orange would bring her back like a shot. Kim's pure! Fruit is her energy.'

He sterilized and bandaged me up as Jessica lay back in some sort of dream.

We walked along the pier. 'Don't worry, Kid, you're not going to pass out.' I looked back and saw Jessica stretched out on the bench, one hand shading her eyes; the crescent moon was now barely noticeable in the palely emerging dawn. 'Tell me what's going on, Warren? Kim said you were going to blow the beans. Jessica promised to tell me the whole story only she needed blood. In fact, she hasn't told me anything.' Warren always paused before he spoke, it was one of his most irritating habits: 'I don't suppose anyone will ever tell you everything... the night is very thorough, it hides the dead from the living. But they are out there tonight... Now, say something nice to Kim.'

A caterpillar was crawling up my sleeve.

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