



## Extract

### one

The house was called Plato Villa. It looked shabby, even empty. Slimy old bench of rusted ironwork under a blackened willow. Rambling roses mottled and straggling. Inside was another old widow needing help shifting things about, maybe some shopping. Her name was Mrs Pollenfex. Just fetch some Chicken Supreme then tie up a bundle of newspapers, cart them down to the shed where they'll be found fifty years later.

The footscraper and bell-pull were disused, seized up, so I went down the side looking for the Tradesman's Entrance. There was a conservatory on the southside catching the sun. Inside, under the stained glare, a woman in a rocking chair. I stood watching, adjusting to what I actually saw. She wasn't in a rocking chair. She was just rocking slowly back and forth in an armchair. I still thought I was visiting an old lady, so who was this? A nurse, because her arms were dressed in white. I thought maybe she'd put off-duty clothes on over her uniform, a pair of dungarees. But the white... her arms were stiff, her eyes were closed. They were bandages, from her knuckles to her elbows. She must've scolded herself, and she was in pain. This was Mrs Pollenfex then. She probably needed me to do the washing up or peel the potatoes. I imagined her carrying a vat of boiling water, slipping on a kid's toy, her arms blistering in the spillage. I was about to tap on the glass when I saw the floor. There were dozens of pictures scattered everywhere. Coloured pastels, each portrait identical. A neck cut open, a severed heart. Christ almighty, what was going on here?

I backed away slowly till I was alongside the wall again. She couldn't see me, she hadn't seen me. Back in the porch I yanked the bell-pull, primed it a few times till it put up a decent fight. I expected to hear it bounce off the wall and crumple to the floor. I expected to wait, but she was there in seconds. I knew she must've leapt up and run. She had trouble with the door of course. She had to walk backwards with the handle, then step aside, arms too stiff to manoeuvre. The smell was sucked out into the spring air like it had been trapped all winter. Disinfectant from the bandages, followed by a sharp stab of tobacco smoke. And then the winter apples. I fell in love with the smells first. These were the scents of the other life. Everyone has another life all ready and waiting for them if they find it. Usually you wait 45 years, and when it comes along you're too worn down to enter. You let it float by. You spend the rest of your life with your head in your hands. But to've found it already, in Tunbridge Wells, in 1973, when I was only 17!

It was all there, the whole of a better life. A lament with food, a threnody with beauty. A benediction with care, an idyll with sadness. An ode with weirdness. It was a

scene from my life with Kafka and Rossetti. It was stepping through the page into an old blurred photo of the doomed. I was an exiled writer in Paris 1925. I was a poet returned from the war. I'd come to meet the decaying actress in her mansion on Sunset Boulevard. There was no room for doubt: I was that young writer come to resurrect beauty. All my precious fantasies in one.

I walked straight through a sheet of glass unharmed. It never occurred to me that she was in a parallel time. That she was trapped in a mirror. That she was really part of the doomed world I saw. And how willingly she invited me to cross over. Into that world where hands clutched straws, and lips sucked like quicksand.

-I haven't asked your name, she said.

She hadn't asked anything. I'd just walked in, closed the door behind me and followed her down the hall towards the light. Mrs Pollenfex was expecting me. I mean it was obvious I was the student volunteer. I had my green canvas bag with a ring file and a copy of Middlemarch. My hair was long and cotted. A couple of spots on my face were drying out in the spring air. My scrotty beard looked political, libertine I should say. The hacking jacket made me look like the pencil sketch of DGR in 1848, self-portrait with black loons. The Dr Who scarf was draped at full wingspan, inches off the floor both sides. This gave me life and movement. I was an element of the wind. My green shirt with round collars earthed me, made me pastoral enough to be visiting. The multi-colour patchwork jumper was of course a hint of the cosmopolitan. The desert boots were just desert boots unfortunately. But that was me alright. By chance in all my glory.

There were girls at college who dressed like Mrs Pollenfex. By that I mean I didn't wonder about her age. The difference between us seemed natural and essential. She filled my world so instantly that all former values were meaningless. She appeared to me in close-up, like I'd always seen things from a distance. There'd been no distance leading up to this. She materialized in my face. I trusted her. I'd blank myself out and say: create me. Show me.

-I'm Maxine Pollenfex, she said.

-I'm Henry, Chambers. You can call me Pisspot.

That jazz club laugh was full of smoke. She blew knowledge rings. She reeked of boredom, puked confession. She knew what it was to be ecstatic. You could see she'd negotiated her own terms with Death. I knew who she was now. My Angel of Death. She'd burned her wings off in an accident. Or the sun melted the wax. She needed me to help her fly back to the bar. Or regain the perch from which she'd fallen.

-I can't call you Pisspot, darling. I can't call you darling either. Henry, just wait there a second.

She went into the sunlounge, glasshouse, whatever it was. I heard her trying to gather the paintings and I knew she wouldn't manage it. She came back and showed me the pastel smears all over her fresh bandages.

-The nurse only dressed them this morning. Promise me, Henry, don't look at the pictures, just help me stack them up and shove them out of sight. Promise?

-Yes. I promise.

-Under the sofa, she said. Just boot them. Well done. Can you make tea? No let's have coffee. Do you smoke?

The kitchen was full of things I'd never eaten. Egg plant, avacados, red cabbage, olive oil, bay leaves, lemons.

I ran some water into the kettle and lit the gas. She took her coffee black with no sugar, so I said that I did too. I carried our mugs to the sunlounge and put hers on a

folding table by the sofa with the ashtray, lighter and packet of Chesterfields. She offered me one and struggled to flip the top back and pinch one clear.

-I'll light it myself, I said.

-No! I have to. I want to. I'm not a fucking cripple.

-What do you want me to do? I said.

-Just keep me company, while I smoke my cigarette. Tell me about yourself.

I wanted to melt into that sofa and keep the clock on 2.30, but I still had Miss Flack, the real old lady, to go and see. But Maxine was *that* beautiful, so powerful, everything else could wait.

Telling Maxine about myself was all I'd ever wanted to do. I began with the essential Henry Chambers. Last week I'd been a Georgian who wrote Nature/ War Poetry. This week I was a Beat.

-I'm a Beat poet, I told Maxine.

-Really? she said, and meant it.

-I paint too, I said.

-I don't fucking paint, she said. That's just therapy. But this is great, listen, hey, I write poetry, I live for poetry.

I asked who her favourite poet was.

-Sylvia Plath.

-I've got a first edition of The Colossus, I said. Knicked it from Tonbridge Library.

I'd actually knicked it for someone else, but I could get it back.

-Knick some poems for me, Maxine said.

I promised I'd be in the glass case at Tunbridge Wells reference library that very evening. And then I did tell her everything, in one stupified sentence. Until I'd clapped eyes on Maxine rocking in the sunlounge, it was like I'd never noticed the world around me. Like you had to live somewhere, so I lived in Hawkhurst. Parents were just parents, old baggots moaning day in and day out but they didn't matter. You just got on with the little discoveries you had to make yourself. But now all that was unbearable, being down in the bum class with shameful parents at a college full of Summerhill cories, dumped by your girlfriend right in front of them.

-Poor Pisspot, she said.

-How did you hurt your arms? I said.

-I hurt them, she said. Don't worry. Come into the kitchen now.

She wanted me to cut and peel some vegetables, squeeze a lemon, butter some bread, peel an orange. She said she'd damaged her tendons and couldn't grip anything properly.

-What else can I do?

-Do you really mind?

-No, but I do have to visit... this old lady...

-No, she said, don't go...I mean don't go yet.

-I can come again, I said.

-Another week's no good to me, she said.

-It doesn't haff to be weekly. I can come tomorrow, I said, at two o'clock.

-Come for lunch, she said, 12.30. Will you? Promise?

-Yeah, I promise.

-Cross your heart and hope to die ?

-Cross my heart and hope to die.