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The second Jacob
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Chapter 1

Obviously no one wants to turn sixty, not if you've got to celebrate it anyway, and obviously no one in their right mind wants an event in their honour, but although I had done everything in my power to prevent it, I had slithered into the inevitable ruts and now it looked like I really might end up stuffed like a peacock and paraded around, just to suit the audience, as an important artist, a respected public figure and the rest – all the tributes that herald the grave and oblivion. Such nonsense normally starts ten or fifteen years later, but as they had no one else much here in the provinces I would do nicely. I had already agreed a while ago with Luzie that when the time came we would be traveling round the States together, just me and her, father and daughter, arriving somewhere on the West Coast, perhaps San Francisco, on the 21st December, the very day the big event was supposed to happen, but then everything unravelled several months earlier.

My whole life long I have been the next best thing to a Christmas baby. My due date was Christmas Eve, as far as that can be predicted, but then there were complications, contractions began and I gained three days of life, three days each year for free, in which I had a God-given right to act as if I didn't exist. Once I realised that, these were the three days of the year I loved the most, because for these three or even four days I allowed myself to drop out of the world. Certain 21sts, 22nds, 23rds and 24ths of December have been the happiest days of my life I reckon, the shortest days of the year, the longest nights, nights full of bright lights: those birthdays on planes, on the way somewhere, fellow passengers heading home in the Christmas spirit; that birthday in Brighton, my sudden realisation out on the pier that life was good; the birthday in Tangier, dizzy with happiness at the view over to Gibraltar; the birthday in Nazaré, north of Lisbon, where the surfers were gearing up for the giant waves season and I watched them doing their wild rides, their tricks for staying on top again and again without being buried under the crashing water and breaking their backs. It had to be the sea, so I could

long for the opposite shore, or at least have my back free as I turned and looked inland, without the fear someone could come up behind me – foe, rival, compatriot or friend.

I had long begun flying to America once or twice each year, renting a car there and driving two or three thousand kilometres. I could never describe it properly to anyone but when I traced the routes in the atlas they formed an increasingly dense network right across the continent. A lifetime ago I had done a year of school in Montana, and just for something to say, I said I was going to reprise that year because it had been the key year for me, because in answer to the age-old question why I had become an actor, I could only start with the Missoula theatre group and my friend Stephen, who began his career there and only a few years later had already appeared in half a dozen major films and later roped me into the business. We both claimed we only went to the rather rigid lessons, led in the best Moscow tradition by a quite defiantly refined Hungarian, to meet girls. But in reality that wasn't true for either of us and what brought us there was the usual mix of boredom and chance which draws you into so many things in your youth you could just as easily not have done but you later construct as essential.

Stephen was none other than Stephen O'Shea, who I kept in contact with, and when he suggested I come back to Montana for a few weeks, ten years after our shared school year, he was already famous and I was just a student, behind with my course work and short on prospects. When he offered me a tiny role in the piece he was putting on at a festival in his home town I didn't attach much weight to it and, not least because I held no ambitions in that area, it never occurred to me that this first small stage role might be followed by my first film role, not so small. All I had to play was a guest in a bar, just a living background for a couple arguing in the foreground, someone there by chance who steps in with the words, 'I hope you know what you're doing,' as the man raises his hand towards the woman, so I was all the more surprised when I was approached after the premiere by a man in a tie, coughing non-stop, who didn't especially look like someone from the industry but introduced himself as a director, handed me his card and congratulated me. He said my poise had ensured the believability of this otherwise pretty unbelievable performance. Just to sit there as naturally as I had sat there was no mean feat; some actors never achieved that their whole careers. And six months later he called by on a trip

through Europe to invite me, out of pure extravagance I felt, to play the role of Theodore Durrant in his film about Maud Allan, the famous early 20th-century Salomé dancer.

So my movie debut was as the figure of her brother, the figure, no less, of a femicidal madman who slashed his two victims and dismembered them, leaving one in a library, barely recognizable, the other laid out as if for an anatomical examination in the bell tower of the neighbouring church. Little was actually required of me, as the murders themselves weren't shown. I simply had to slip into the skin of an introverted medical student who went stalking girls, show his pitiful desperation when faced with them, show him sitting withdrawn in court, withdrawn in prison, and walking, equally withdrawn, to his execution then casting one last furious glance at the world before the noose was laid around his neck.

America had brought me luck, nonetheless, and I imagined going there with Luzie for the first time would be a new experience. I told myself I could show her the country before its fall from grace, as if that had happened in the singular, as if one thing hadn't followed another, and not as if there were just a few spots still worth visiting in the handful of places it hadn't yet been wrecked. She had moved out just over six months ago, after the four years she had lived with me, and this would finally give me the chance to see her on a daily basis again and observe how she behaved. Although it was still a long way off we had already started planning the trip and she had become that child again who couldn't stop asking for more and more alternative options, wanting the outside world explained in minute detail before she risked stepping out into it. Although she was making a game out of this now and laughing, when she saw my anxious face we both knew how little it would take to tip her over the edge, till she was locked into her peculiar habits, unable to escape her own tangles. As a four, five and six-year-old, and later as a schoolgirl too, before she went to the boarding school at thirteen, she had only understood the world in terms of isolated events, and when you explained something to her she wanted dozens of examples to illustrate your explanation, opening up dozens of parallel worlds which apparently had nothing to do with each other although they differed only in the finest gradations.

'What does love mean, daddy?'

I attempted to explain it to her.

'How can you see it?'

I said it was something you felt.

‘Give me an example.’

I said, ‘When two people cuddle.’ I said, ‘When two people kiss, when they hold hands, when they like being together, when they like looking in each other’s eyes,’ and she wanted another example and another and was already having enormous difficulties looking me in the eyes, withdrew her hand from me when I touched her, stiffened up during cuddles and turned her head away at each kiss.

‘I love you, daddy.’

It was early July when she announced I would have to do the trip on my own; she would not be coming with me. Three months earlier I had given her the manuscript which was meant to be my biography to read, scheduled for publication on my birthday, if I hadn’t stopped it in its tracks, so to speak, before it reached the printers. She was saying you didn’t discover anything really terrible about me; the terrible thing as far as she was concerned was how it made me out to be some bland individual. As a result of this I was careless enough to answer her question, what was the worst thing I had done in my life? At first I tried being evasive, but she kept insisting, and I was already ensnared by the time I realised it had been a mistake.

‘Not being at your birth, Luzie.’

‘I mean something really bad.’

‘Being away half the time in your early years.’

‘Oh dad, listen to yourself.’

‘The way we sent you away to England and I didn’t intervene to stop it.’

‘You know I don’t mean that,’ she said. ‘I mean something like whether you’ve killed someone or driven someone to take their own life.’

[...]

I was having that conversation with Luzie in the restaurant we often went to, while she still lived with me, when neither of us could rouse ourselves to cook anything. They knew us there and left us in peace – no bowing before the oh-so-famous actor, however ironically meant, no over-enthusiastic welcomes, no attempts at ingratiation, no overfamiliar behaviour – and when she came in she sat down opposite me in that expectant manner intended to show I had her full attention. Since the last time we’d met, her hair had changed

colour yet again. She'd gone from blonde to brunette and back to blonde and acquired a piercing in her upper lip which – despite my best intentions – I must have stared at so intently she asked if it was bothering me; she could always take it out. I said no, but she had already reached into her mouth and extracted it with a couple of swift moves and now there was place where a tiny hole contracted and expanded as she spoke, and on the table in front of her lay a shiny jewel. She had just finished reading the manuscript and said it was a good thing I'd refused to do any more interviews and had extricated myself from the whole enterprise when I did because the biographer's writing had no style or energy whatsoever.

'No wonder his last two subjects were a heart surgeon and a gourmet chef,' she said, speaking English again now after her first few words of German. 'His next victim will be hairdressing champion or something in that league. It reads as if he could drive a bulldozer through just about anyone's life, gather up the pieces he fancies and shovel them into a useless heap. At the end each one gets trimmed to fit the same format. Not a trace of love in it, or hatred. Not the flicker of a flame.'

'That bad?'

'Worse than that. It reads like a report compiled by a secret service bureaucrat at pains to leave out anything remotely interesting, or dialling it down so it stops being interesting in the first place, so if he needed to account for himself in the future he could say he hadn't harmed anyone with his revelations. So risk-averse it makes you puke.'

That was my clever daughter. Because she wanted to avoid saying anything superficial she had to take every thought the long way round, which invariably ended in crazy but erudite contortions. To pass muster it needed not only to be true but also original.

'The way he levels everything off you'd think nothing beautiful ever happened in your life, dad,' she said. 'But I can remember at least one time you were happy. We went on a merry-go-round together. We were in Southend-on-Sea and we walked down the promenade. We ate candyfloss. What does that idiot know about you?'

Happy at least once! That came under the category of 'British understatement', which she had established and maintained with due sarcasm, whenever and wherever she could. I should have said, 'Well now', and added there might perhaps have been one further occasion, then offered a

suitably unspectacular example, but although she might still have enjoyed that, she suddenly changed her tone, the earnestness in her voice audible.

‘What was the most beautiful thing you ever experienced?’

‘You want the truth?’

‘I know what you’re going to say, dad,’ she said. ‘I’m the most beautiful thing you ever experienced. That may be true. But I mean apart from that and apart from all the other niceties and banalities.’

So I thought about it and while I was thinking she changed it and said we could also start at the other end, what was the worst thing, except of course for the thoroughly unnecessary encounters with the most deplorable and uninspired Mr Biographer, who she would refrain from describing as such in the future. The next minute she had narrowed it down from what I had experienced to what I had done. Then she added that perhaps there was something in my past I was ashamed of, and by this point, after my initial, vaguely playful evasions, I had already been ensnared into answering honestly.

‘I’ve never killed anyone, and I’ve never driven anyone so far they took their own life,’ I said, ‘but I was once part of a rather unfortunate thing.’

At that point I could just about have drawn a line under it still, and the expression in Luzie’s eyes should have warned me, a mixture of curiosity and incipient defensiveness.

‘A thing?’

‘I don’t think you really want to hear it.’

‘That might be true,’ she said, ‘but now you’ve started and you have to finish.’

She still seemed half to be hoping for a joke, half that I just wanted to give her a fright before everything was resolved in a good-natured way again, and I drew the story out by attempting to establish an wholesome setting, saying she had only been five at the time. She looked at me as if I was trying to make what was coming even worse. I made one last attempt at evasion, leafed through the wine menu and played at being distracted, but she simply kept her eyes on me till I had no option but to come out with it.

‘I was the passenger in an accident,’ I said. ‘A colleague was driving and someone died.’

‘What do you mean, a colleague?’

‘An actor,’ I said. ‘She failed to notice a woman at the side of the road, and I was sitting next to her.’ That still wasn’t the whole story, and I could still have swerved out of there, taken a sharp turn in my narrative and emerged unsullied, but her eyes were directing me, her eyes forced me on, and I stumbled into damnation. ‘We just left her lying there.’

At first I thought the sound had come from somewhere under the table, but then I saw Luzie had brought her hand up to her mouth, and although she had barely moved her lips, that miserable whimper could only have come from her.

‘You did what, dad?’

‘We stopped, and walked back to her, but there wasn’t anything we could do.’

‘Nothing you could do?’

‘She was dead, Luzie.’

‘Dead, dad?’

I still didn’t realise what I’d just done, but as she asked me how I could have been so sure, and I explained to her, as she then confirmed that we’d really left her on the side of the road and hadn’t called anyone, not the police or an ambulance, I had one last stab at saying no, but could only say yes. In all that time I had never told anyone about it, while all the time, for so many years – fourteen, no fifteen – living with it, so that it became a part of me and I was incapable of predicting the shockwaves it might unleash. Of course I knew it was better if I didn’t speak about it; no one could condone something like that or have any understanding for it if I simply described the circumstances. Once or twice I had been about to do it but thought through the consequences just in time, not so much the legal consequences – they seemed the least of my worries after all that time – but the consequences between me and the person I might confide in, in both cases women, the thought of how they might then see me. I hadn’t been driving when the accident happened but of course that didn’t render me innocent. Of course I was involved and of course I had shared the decision to leave the dead woman lying at the side of the road.

For Luzie – there’s no other way of putting it – a whole world fell apart, our shared world. During the time she was living with me we had done so much work to help her understand how you chart your course through life there was no leeway whatsoever for something like this. You mustn’t do anyone any harm, and if you did, you tried to make it good again, and if it couldn’t be made good you took responsibility

for it and did penance. It must have stood on one of the countless lists she had made after her two years in England, and her moral sensitivity was so intense that the tiniest black stain on a white vest threatened to spread unchecked into a diffuse grey unless she cleaned it immediately. She was capable of apologising to someone weeks later if it suddenly occurred to her she had done them an injustice, and then she'd be standing in front of someone asking them to forgive her for something that really only existed in her head, when all she'd done was think badly of them.

Now there were tears in her eyes, and it didn't help that I said once again there was nothing we could have done, and that if we'd reported the accident it wouldn't have brought the dead woman back to life and would have ruined my young colleague's future. Luzie shook her head as if she couldn't believe I was talking such drivel. She could easily have thrown my own principles back at me to refute such a flimsy argument, but she didn't even make the effort, instead poking about at her food the way she hadn't for years before eating it in her preferred order, first the meat, then the vegetables, then the salad.

'Only a doctor can declare someone dead,' she said finally. 'So apart from anything else there's the problem that you probably left a dying woman on the side of the road.'

We didn't talk about it again over the following weeks. When I met her or we talked on the phone and I tried to mention it, she said there was nothing more to be said on the subject. Finally she did ask if I'd at least tried to find out who the dead woman was and whether she'd had relatives and refused to accept my wavering, asked if it had never occurred to me, in all the years since, to help out her bereaved dependents, even just with money, as was my wont, even anonymously. To that I said yes, but for her it was an inconsequential yes because ultimately I hadn't done anything. In the end she punished me for it.

'You're going to have to go to America on your own, dad.'

'Not because of this business surely!'

'I'm not coming with you,' she said. 'I need time to think this through. I can't say more than that. It's better if we don't see each other for a while.'