

Welcome to Miss Ida Parrot's Bed & Breakfast

by

C. Bradford Eastland

...it had been forever since he'd flattened his ear to a door:

"Come-come now, young man, listen *veddy-veddy* closely, I haven't *got* all bloomin' *day!*"

...the accent isn't so sharp, he thought, but that tongue is a razor:

"Now then, perhaps if I go slowly. What—do you take—for *breakfast?*"

...make that a loud, sarcastic razor. He couldn't help but be pleased at how easily he could pick her up, even through thick

English oak, but quickly lost that smile somewhere within the concentration required to catch the soft reply...

"Uh—vee vill have—how you say—oggs?—"

"*Eggs!* It's *eggs*, in the name of bloody God, not *oggs!* You've simply *got* t'learn t'speak our language better if you're to get *about* over here! Oggs. Bloody unb'lievable. Now then—I'll just put you down for scrambled eggs, bacon, mushrooms, toe-*mah*-toes, and a spot of cold baked beans, my usual. And of course tea and toast...unless you'd seriously prefer coffee?"

"Cafe, si—uh, yes. Coffee, yes. Yes-yes, coffee eeza vetty vetty good—gratzi!"

"No no no *no!* Say *thank* you, for bleedin' heaven's sake, not *gratzi!* Go ahead, *say* it!"

"Thank you," came the young male voice, louder this time, vibrating the wood with near-perfect Shakespearean diction.

"Veddy good. Now then—that wasn't so terribly difficult, was it?"

At that well-chosen moment the American, smiling again, emerged from his tiny upstairs bedroom (which he had not ten minutes before checked into) intending merely to enquire, in a tone as innocent and respectful as he could manufacture, about proper and timely use of the shower facilities (and thereby thrust himself, of course, squarely into the middle of the action).

"Mister Barnes! Can't you see that I'm conversing with this *Italian* chap at the moment? Now go back inside y'own room for 'bit, put on a bloomin' *shirt* f'godsake, and I'll be right in to mark

down *your* order for tomorrow morning. Go on then, get *on* with you!"

Not used to being caught so completely off guard (even by a woman) the American remained speechless, exaggerated the sheepish smile, removed his glasses to give him something to do, and then backpedalled a somewhat cowardly retreat into his assigned quarters. He had to duck his head. He did, however, remember to take a quick reading of her dimensions...no more than five-four, but no less than one-eighty?...hell, round it off to thirteen stone. He did not get a good look at the Italian...

"I *am* sorry, Mister Constantino, you know how *pushy* the Americans can be, but I've *so* much work t'do and only *so* many hours in which to do it. Now then, I suppose your young friend will have the

same as you? Hm? Good! Less to remember. Breakfast is at half-eight, and I must ask you to please, *please* be prompt, I'm on *such* a shedjule, and the little girl I have helping me must be out the door'n gone by ten o'clock to catch the bus back up to Amesbury," the squat proprietress concluded, talking very fast, and with the y in Amesbury barely free of that quick mouth she thundered frantically down the stairs to answer the telephone.

"Thank you so very much, for every...thing," the Italian man said, slowly and carefully and near-Higgins perfectly, but probably not quite loud enough for her to hear.

The resounding *thub thub thub* of a thirteen-stone woman climbing stairs was all the signal he needed that he'd be next. He scrambled from his narrow, child-

sized bed, stood "at ease" as far away from the door as he could get, about twelve feet, which placed him next to the room's one window, which, like the bed, was unusually narrow, and which, at some not-too-recent juncture, had been rendered permanently closed by too many coats of black paint. She knocked and entered in the same motion.

"Now then, Mister Barnes. What shall *you* require tomorrow morn?"

Per her order, he had hurriedly pulled a gray *Lacoste* sportshirt over his wide square shoulders, and all the way down, down over the suddenly adventurous waistline finally fed up with three-plus decades of living within his lanky frame. The house was kept unreasonably hot, blotches of sweat already beginning to seep through the belly of gray cotton. He'd tucked the damp shirttail into a pair

of faded beltless bluejeans. He now tucked his hands into the front pockets of those jeans, leaning slightly forward in reply:

"Well, I uh...Missus, uh..."

"*Miss* Parrot, young man, Miss Ida Parrot—you *can read*, can't you?"

"Read?"

"Oh honestly, Mister Barnes, how I *wish* you Americans would try to be more *respectful!*"

...confused and in enemy territory, best to play along:

"I'm truly sorry, Miss Parrot, I certainly didn't mean any disrespect," said this confused American, this Mr. Barnes, Mr. Charles Edison Barnes, thinking it had been a long time since anyone had called him *young* man. "Scrambled eggs, bacon, mushrooms, toast and coffee, yeah. That'd be just fine

for breakfast, thank you. But you can *lose* the tomatoes and baked beans!" he chuckled; but when she didn't join him he soon stopped, coughed, let his hands again borrow the glasses from his head, and continued: "Listen, I was gonna ask you before, is it alright to take a shower pretty much anytime I—"

"No no no it is *not* alright t'ave a shower any bloody-well time you please! This isn't the States, we're not *made* a-money here! That's the *trouble* with you blinkin' Americans—you think *your* way is the way o'the whole bloomin' *world!*" She was shaking. He squinted to make sure. Sure enough, her eyes were quivering insanely in their sockets. He imagined he could even see the sweat bead and gather above thick, blurry eyebrows. She stopped just long enough to draw a new breath, briefly close her

eyes, perhaps calm and organize her thoughts, and noticeably (which is to say grudgingly) modulate her voice; and when she began again the eyes were, for a moment, still closed: "We have an economy hot water system in this house, young man, and that means we don't *heat* the water during the middle of the day. And that's *another* thing. During the middle of the day, I would *veddy* much appreciate it if you would *not* be around while we are trying to clean up. If you stay in your room all day that's your business, I suppose, but you *won't* get a clean room and you'll *just* be a nuisance...now then, is that clear?" Though less violent in her delivery, she had nevertheless discharged these concluding words at a rate of two to the average tongue's one.

"Perfectly clear, Miss Ida," said Barnes, feathering a delicate arrow of sarcasm covertly through his words.

"Best 'go into Salisbury, that's why you're *here*, isn't it? Salisbury is a veddy fine city, a *wunde'ful* city in fact, capital city of Wiltshire and one of the *finest* little cities in the whole of England—no point in coming all the way *over* if y'going to just stay in *bed!*"

Barnes employed a tight-lipped smile to hide his thoughts, a flat, courteous smile. His squinting pale blue eyes were equally bright with congeniality, but they, too, were a sham. Behind them lurked plots, twists, paper schemes. They were not eyes to be trusted. He dropped his head just long enough to return the glasses. The lenses were two perfect circles, like a fashion-conscious owl might wear. Still smiling congenially as he

looked up, relieved at no longer having to squint the world into focus, he now took a more thorough inventory of the woman who would be his landlady for the next three days. Her hair was an equal crime of black and white, not so much gray as just plain worn out, hanging down not very far and in no particular style. It was so nondescript, he knew even *he* would have trouble describing it. He ran his eyes swiftly through the deep grooves in her sunless, pasty-white face, and around the crow's feet, predictably, that flanked each bushy eye. It was a delightfully homely and perfectly unattractive face, just wonderful. But it was the face's resultant collective physiognomy which played flint to his dulled mind, not its component parts. This sternness of expression seemed to him cemented in place by an almost fanatic self-assurance,

as if the years of thankless toil had case-hardened the mold, or perhaps some higher authority had long ago convinced her of the unchallengeable rightness of her views. Life had obviously trampled all over her. And all these things made her marvelous raw material for Mr. Charles Edison Barnes. People like her, he mused, must be why their two countries once went to war...make that twice.

(As an appendix to these quick thoughts, he couldn't help feel a little sorry for her. Her having to work so hard. But not as much as he could empathize with his own sorry plight; that of paying twelve pounds a day just so some annoying old lady could order him around...)

No doubt weary of waiting for him to contribute something, the old woman turned to leave. "Miss Parrot..." said

Barnes finally; and misrepresenting himself again he smiled innocently and respectfully in her direction: "You may continue to call me Mister Barnes. For the sake of propriety, you understand."

"Veddy good," she said, in total agreement, and without the slightest hint of hesitation she added, "Remember, breakfast is at half-eight, and I do mean half-eight *sharp*. Please do *not* try my patience by being late...Mister Barnes." And then she left the room.

But the oak door had barely clicked shut behind her when right back through it came the muffled postscript: "And *do* put on a clean shirt, man—y'sweatin' like a bloody *pig!*"

* * *

Eight-thirty comes early to the American on vacation, especially this particular owl-breed of American—nocturnal by

necessity, not choice—and it was a groggy and discouraged Mr. Barnes who made a careful descent of the stairs. This being a so-called "working vacation" he was more tired than he might otherwise have been, having been up most of the night wondering why he couldn't get any work done. (On nights like this, he would have mortgaged his soul to the devil to get something accomplished.) He remembered looking at his watch as late as 5:30 a.m. Awake at that wee hour, he made sure to re-set his alarm clock for exactly 8:27, providing for maximum slumber and still allowing for a couple minutes to slip into what he considered proper breakfast attire; faded bluejeans, sweat socks free of shoes, and a gray sweatshirt with LOS ANGELES RAIDERS lettered large and aggressively across the front. It was unusually dark in

the house and Barnes, a myope, wished he hadn't left the round-lensed glasses in his room, but he decided during the same brief brainwave that he was far too tired and lazy to think about it much less actually do anything about it. He took his time going down the stairs. A hunched-over walking style was necessary, due to the low ceiling clearance. He was well aware that most of the old houses in this country weren't constructed with people over six feet tall in mind, but was just as sure that this staircase represented an extreme case of shortsightedness even relatively speaking. He made a mental note.

He pulled open the French double doors to the breakfast lounge, and was immediately greeted by his first splash of sunlight of the day. It angled in through the large bay window as a single narrow

beam, where the tiniest of cracks had been made in the drapes, and banked off a white china plate before hitting him in the face. He took a step to the side and his eyes adjusted quickly, and it became, again, a dimly-dark room. The bay window was the only window, and none of the lamps were on. Even the French doors leading in were curtained top-to-bottom. His first inclination was to fling the drapes hiding the bay window wide open, let rush in the eager light of the world, but he was besieged by a strong, intuitive feeling that this was the very last thing in the world he should do, and so he didn't.

He took the seat at the head of the table, at the plate that had temporarily blinded him, the one seat facing the window. There were two seats on either side of him. The two on the right were

empty; the two on the left were already occupied by the two Italians.

"G'morning," he said, extending his hand. "I'm Charlie."

The older and larger of the two Italians shook Barnes's hand in a firm, confident vise and said, "Allo, Challie, I am called Silvano!" His skin was dark, his hair jet black, and he was built like an Olympic swimmer. He could just as easily have passed for Central or South American, the American decided...or maybe even a run-of-the-mill L.A. Chicano. "Thees eeza Paolo," Silvano said.

Barnes reached for the smaller Italian's hand and shook it, gently, as it was a soft, delicate thing offering no resistance whatsoever, and there wasn't any point in hurting the little guy: "Howya doin', Paul," he said with a big brother's smile, and the young Italian gratefully smiled

back but said nothing. He was scarcely half Barnes's age—decided Barnes—and at least half a dozen years Silvano's junior.

"Heeza Engleesh, Challie, eeza notta vetty good!"

"No sweat," said Barnes, his mood brightening from the anticipation of food and the proliferating notion that he was awake. "My Italian's lousy, so we're even."

A young English girl about Paolo's age entered the room next, carrying a large Tupperware container filled with something that looked like granola.

"Please 'elp y'self 'ere t'muesli, gent'lmen!" the girl said in a pert Wiltshire accent, smiling creatively. The American grinned back the way he supposed an aging, dissolute rake should grin, and threw her what he hoped was a suggestive wink. (Concurrently, he wrote

himself a quick mental note that the accent was much stronger than that of her boss. No h's.) The Italians did not look at the girl. She walked very slowly from the room, looking back once over her shoulder at the American.

"So Silvano, are you guys here on a holiday or what?" Barnes inquired, just to create the illusion of conversation.

"Oh no, Challie, I—uh, I mean *vee* study. Si—atta' university!"

"Oxford?"

"Si—uh, yes. That eeza correct, yes."

"I'll be darned," Barnes said, simply because it seemed the correct conversational rejoinder in that situation. It had always seemed silly to him that strangers should try so hard to converse at the bed-and-breakfast table, especially when they did not even share a common language. He found himself *wishing* he

spoke Italian, because that would mean he could extract that much more data from this particular stranger, but since he did not he knew he would simply have to use his imagination to render the stranger worthwhile. And he needed the work. Perhaps his dulled mind did not lack the flintspark of inspiration so much as it required the whetstone of practice. (As a pleasant afterthought, he decided he couldn't help but like the guy.)

He poured himself a full bowl of muesli, splashed on some milk, and munched up a concert with the Italians. It hit the ear like horses at feeding time, and the three traded fraternal smiles with one another. In a blink, the American imagined that the three of them were partners in some wild international intrigue, a sinister *quid pro quo*, everything hinging on the ultimate

cooperation and rational disposition of their wildly eccentric proprietress—indeed their common adversary—but realized just that quickly that his compatriots back home would probably not support such fantasy at the bookstores. His mind tended to wander like this when he was struggling. He knew he was a slave to the public, what they wanted, what they would believe. And who'd believe a crotchety, provincial old broad like this would have *squat* to do with helping out a blunt, pushy American, much less the lowly unwashed of some *other* screwed-up foreign country...though he did smile inside at the delicious absurdity of the idea. Some people will believe anything, he reminded himself, if it's written down...yeah, wait a minute...don't forget who you're dealing with here...no. No, in

the final analysis, he was convinced that even the gullible constituency he served would treat this half-baked notion with rejection. And as if to underscore his fears, this perfectly tranquil breakfast atmosphere was shattered by Miss Ida Parrot's entrance into the room. She fairly flung open the French doors with her free right hand, as she was balancing three plates on her left arm in a manner which suggested that she had, once upon a time, endured quite a lot of penance as a waitress. She was muttering like a crazy person. His back to her noise, Barnes dropped both the smile and his spoon; and instinctively hunched his shoulders up around his neck...

"There you are Mister Constantino, Mister Delacorte, and here *you* are Mister Barnes, eggs and bacon with mushrooms—no toe-*mah*-toes, no

beans!" she rattled off barmaid-style, setting the three plates firmly down, one-by-one, in front of each corresponding border. The American dissembled his amusement behind a neutral smile, secretly quite pleased with himself. She was just too perfect. Immediately upon seeing her his eyes fired off crisp, urgent dispatches to his slumbering nose. Still a little groggy, he only now succeeded in matching the room's familiar, overwhelmingly foul odor with the proper corresponding compartment of his memory...it was his grandmother's house, equally stuffy, equally gloomy, the international, unmistakably acrid aroma of old people growing older in dark, cooped up, hermetically-sealed quarters. For an instant it was the early 60's, he was a boy of seven, and the four other chairs were occupied by his father, mother,

sister and brother, the five of them being served some endless 4th-of-July meal in the hottest, dreariest, mustiest house in Peoria, Illinois, by an old woman he didn't really know and could barely understand. This sublime union of memory and fresh experience produced sweet electricity in his brain, and awakened him more thoroughly than would have a bucket of cold water in the face. And the operative word to describe the overall sensation—DECAY—jumped into his mind as if the letters had been scratched into the thick atmosphere in front of him. Oh, the familiar decomposition of rotting, roasting, aging human flesh...*stop!* He stopped and shook himself out of it. He ordered his sense of smell to concentrate on the bacon and eggs. The Italians traded whispers of seemingly great import. Miss Parrot, at all

times broadcasting an aura of complete authoritarian control over her brief domain, glanced about in silent, frantic rage. Something was terribly, inexcusably wrong:

"God almighty! Which of you, you, you *people*, has gone and opened the bloomin' drapes—*you*, Mister Barnes?"

Barnes started to laugh, then thought better of it. He shook his head.

"Mister Constantino, I would *veddy* much appreciate it if you would *please* refrain from playing with the drapes as *long* as you are a guest in this *house*! Me-eyes *don't* take well to the light anymore, and those drapes are drawn shut ev'ry morning for a *purpose*—do I make myself *clear*?"

"Yes yes, uh, I...apologize signora, scoozi, scoozi!"

"No no no, not *scoozi*, my dear young fellow, *I'm sorry* is perfectly acceptable 'round here if you are trying to *say* you are sorry, please at least make an *effort* t'speak our language while you are in residence, I, for one, would *greatly* appreciate it, thank you veddy *much!*" the old woman somewhat wearily exclaimed, but nevertheless in an astounding partnership of pace and perfect enunciation. She leaned over and re-closed the drapes. Instantly, the house returned to its eternal state of gloom, the only light to speak of having to fight through the translucent cheesecloth of the cheaply-made curtains.

"Miss Parrot, could you tell me where the racecourse is from here?"

The old woman now regarded Barnes with a pinch of disgust mixed with a dash of old-world provincialism: "Mister

Barnes, I suppose only *God* knows why a perfectly intelligent young man such as yourself, with all of Salisbury at his disposal, would choose to fritter away both the day *and* his hard-earned readies on a flock of dumb animals! Why, did you know that the spire of our Cathedral is the tallest in England? And I don't suppose you could *spare* the bloody time to drive *seven* blinkin' miles up to *Stonehenge*—it just *happens* to be one of the true wonders of the ancient world, and a *whole* lot more interesting I'm sure than which *farm* animal can outrun *another!*"

"I'm sorry. I'm so ashamed."

The Italians snickered quietly, then whispered amusing comments to each other.

"Well if you absolutely must know...go south on Exeter Road, through the

round-a-bout, and then get on the A-3094, which goes through Harnham. It's about five or six miles southwest 'the city, I should imagine there'll be signs posted to guide you along."

"Why thank you, Miss Parrot, thank you *veddy* much," Barnes said, rolling his eyes as he said it so only the Italians could see. And again they both giggled, two disobedient schoolboys.

The old woman snorted, muttered, and brightened the room with her departure.

Breakfast was winding down when Miss Ida Parrot and the young English girl returned. The minute the French doors opened, all vestiges of attempted conversation ceased. Miss Parrot carried a steaming fresh pot of coffee, while it was the girl's job to clear the table.

As she poured a cup for the older of the two Italians, Barnes could tell from the way her grooved, pasty-white face was squinched up that she was dying to say something. It was a quality of the human face that over the years Barnes had observed almost exclusively in the female. And when the Italian's dark smiling face finally went up to her, she simply could not help herself: "Mister Constantino, just why is it you *Italian* chaps refuse to make any effort a'toll t'speak our *language*? It *is* our country, you know."

While Silvano Constantino struggled to formulate an appropriate response, Barnes studied the young girl tidying up the breakfast area. When it came time to take his plate, he picked it up and handed it to her. "Why thank you, guv'nah!" she said with a sly half-grin. Barnes nodded

suggestively for a reply. He had reached that stage of life where girls half his age could legitimately be imagined his illegitimate children, and it made him feel particularly lecherous for an attractive, fresh-scrubbed girl of this ilk to call him "guv'nah". At once—two halves of the same fantasy—he felt a father's studdish pride and a prospective lover's tingle. He couldn't help it.

Finally, Silvano was ready to reply to the landlady's question. His reply was a question of his own: "But-a Meeza Parrot, do you-a speak Italiano?"

"I don't *hafta* speak Italian!" Miss Parrot was quick to rejoin. "There's no *reason* for me t'speak Italian! I neve' *go* anywhere, let alone *Italy*—in fact I have no *social* life a'*toll*! I work veddy-veddy hard 'round here, from dawn till late ev'ry night, there's simply *no* time for me to do

anything, let alone take the time to travel as far away as that. So you see, young man, there's absolutely *no* reason to waste me-valuable time learning to *speak* a language I'll neve' bloody *use!*"

The young girl was busy clearing the plates and silverware from the Italians' side of the table. He squinted, wishing he could see her better. But she's obviously a pretty little thing, the American did observe, her shoulder-length blonde hair continually falling in front of one eye in a sort of "peek-a-boo" style, every time she would lean over their shoulders to pick something up. The occasional pearl of sweat running from temple to cheek did nothing to diminish her appeal. The blonde hair and fair skin meant that she could, theoretically, indeed have sprung from his very loins, and he smiled at this easy self-confirmation of his theory. She

smiled back. In leaning over, various parts of her body would rub against Paolo's right shoulder and Silvano's left, but again they took little note of her presence. In fact, they both seemed perfectly spellbound by Miss Ida Parrot's dissertation on the Italian language:

"Please don't misunderstand me, gentlemen, I'm as aware as anybody else what a beautiful language you have, it's the most beautiful language in the world for opera—when I get the time, which is *extremely* rare—but that doesn't mean I should bloody *learn* the language if I am *not* going t'be required to *speak* it! Surely that distinction from *your* situation cannot be all that difficult to perceive."

Now it was Barnes who couldn't hold back: "Oh I don't know...I myself have always preferred Italian sausage to Italian

opera," he said. He rolled his eyes again, and again the Italians giggled in stereo.

"Well there's *no* reason f'you to openly make *funna* me—I suppose you don't think I already *know* yer takin' the Mickey outa me the *moment* I'm out 'the *room!*" the old woman said, stomping a loud path to the door. But just before she withdrew, an ingrained sense of duty compelled her to ask the obligatory question: "Now then—have you...gentlemen, enjoyed your breakfast?"

The younger Italian, Paolo, as fate would have it, was at precisely that moment biting into a terrific piece of dark toast, which he had taken considerable time to coat meticulously and liberally with lime marmalade. He'd been saving it. Out of involuntary reflex probably more than anything else, and in the first

thrilling example that he was capable of the faculty of speech, he exclaimed (albeit somewhat squeakily), “*Molto bene!*”, twice, to no one in particular.

She was muttering vows and curses as she squeezed through the French doors.

* * *

Traffic oozed along the A-3094 like ketchup from a just-opened bottle, but Charlie Barnes didn't mind. He'd just beaten the races for a pound or two, not much mind you (especially for a man who had once made his living at it), but he had reached that stage of life where just being at the races, and winning at all, were far more precious commodities than the bottom line itself. To be sure, he was bemused as to why the bottom line wasn't bigger, all gamblers participate in such lifelong wonder, but at the same time he was vaguely aware that it was his

own fault, for convincing himself that he could beat all six races on the card and wagering accordingly (And twice, a character flaw that was a source of eternal bewilderment and chagrin, he had actually changed his mind at the very last minute, right at the betting window, jumping off a winning animal and—financially, at least—onto a losing one.). This time, he blamed his chronic indecision on the fact that he'd never been to the Salisbury course before. He'd never wagered over a course shaped like a needle with an eye. It was as good an excuse as any. But for Barnes, win or lose, racing was one of the really good things about England. Each grassy racecourse has its own distinctive shape, unlike American dirt tracks which are all shaped like an oval, and that curiosity alone was always worth the inflated price of

admission. He liked not knowing what to expect. And he liked not knowing whether it was success or failure that was conspiring covertly with his destiny...

It was a brilliant day. The five-o'clock sun was alive and working in the western sky, behind him as he drove west-to-east, operating in that manner peculiar to English summer suns that involves burning brightly without actually generating much heat. (In England, summer is the season that got lost.) It had drizzled a bit around 3:30, as it always seems to do in the southern counties, leaving behind a world of misty-clean air and a sunribboned sky full of interesting gray-on-white cloud formations that Barnes was rarely exposed to in his native Los Angeles; where the sky can be cloudy without any clouds. As traffic picked up on the A-3094 the clean-tasting air rushed

through his open window, fogging his sunglasses, pushing back his wavy light brown hair. He sucked it in through his nose and then his mouth, alternating, trying to decide if it was more akin to menthol steam or a vanilla milkshake.

(Whichever it was, he found himself asking whichever gods might be listening if they might perhaps inhale a houseful of it, and then mercifully displace the infernal miasma of his prisonlike barracks with a collective blast of their nostrils.)

Miss Parrot was right about one thing; Salisbury was indeed fine, a magnificent little town. Or actually a "city", because for some reason a little town in England gets to be called a city if it happens have a cathedral in it. The cathedral spire was indeed magnificent as well. As he approached the Exeter Road turn-off it towered above him on the left, and

looked even taller than its 404 feet due to Salisbury's obviously intentional dearth of buildings over two stories. He couldn't stop his mind from playing upon this conspicuous digit, this impertinent, thrusting thing. Does a city not officially achieve its manhood until it erects for itself a gigantic, skyscraping sexual structure? The way this one ripped the smooth, chaste skyline asunder couldn't have helped but affect a mind like his. He was at once reminded of its many relatives he had seen; its campanile brothers in Berkeley and Venice, the needlesque nephew in Seattle, its patriotic penile clone in Washington, the hundred-story arrogance of its many famous Manhattan cousins. Paris had always suffered from a sort of split personality...the painfully stiff, metallic fantasy of Monsieur Eiffel; the

circumcised simplicity that is Concorde. San Francisco has the same problem, he thought...the Transamerica Building is larger, stronger, more magnificent, and therefore just not as realistic as the softer, stubbier Coit Tower (short for coitus?). And of course there were the stubby, square-bodied mutations of London and Pasadena, two hands forever circling each brick face, neither structure very attractive but both at least able to tell time. The way the subconscious mind can manage it, the car was left to drive itself while he pondered the absurd linkage of these cities. That was one thing about L.A., he mused...one town far too laid back and apathetic, and downright shy for that matter, to embarrass itself by erecting one building that might somehow stand out from all the others...But even though Salisbury's

erection is—in its discrepant height from all buildings that surround it—the most conspicuous erection of them all, for some reason it struck him this bright damp day as the most fitting. In its conspicuousness it had become strangely natural. It wasn't merely the symbol of Salisbury, it *was* Salisbury; as it will forever be for any foreigner who will ever come here...

Finally, as more or less a brief epilogue to his musings, he amused himself by reflecting on how Silvano and Paolo would probably attach "special" significance to the spire, laughed out loud at his cleverness, rubbed the tired, reddened blue eyes hiding behind the aviator-type prescription sunglasses, and resumed control of his vehicle.

He followed a pre-planned route home, north on Exeter, which soon

became St. John's Street, then a quick left on New Street and a right-turn acceleration up High Street. Upon weaving through those pedestrians courageous enough to cross High at New Canal he immediately down-shifted into second with his left hand, decelerating and leaning into a right-hand turn onto Silver Street, then a quick left lean onto Minster Street, thus effectively zigzagging between the old Poultry Cross and the Haunch Of Venison Pub. Again heading north he pushed the gear shift lever back up into third, swerved left, then slalomed back to the right to shoot right through the alert, scattering shoppers infesting the flea markets along Blue Boar Row (there really aren't any traffic laws in Britain, regardless of what anyone tells you), which placed him on Castle Street heading north again.

Castle Street is lined on each side by irresistibly quaint pubs but this time Barnes resisted, his left hand instead pulling the shift lever down into fourth. His new car, a used Ford, with an enthusiastic rebuilt engine, virtually stolen from a Surrey mechanic via some fancy Yankee horse trading out behind the mechanic's garage for 200 pounds and no questions asked, responded with a generous burst of speed, accelerating the wind through his window, the cool air coaxing his right elbow back inside. He approached the Ring Road round-a-bout by down-shifting from fourth to second. The Ford lurched over its front axle from the sudden change of orders, objecting vehemently with a prolonged whining sound, but obliged its master just the same and handled the round-a-bout nicely, hugging the outer edge while

circling in the familiar clockwise search for the correct exit. Barnes kept a cool eye to his right, always aware of the high likelihood that some crazy local in one of the inside rings might try to cut him off, in a frantic, foolish, routine effort to make his exit within the first revolution.

But the good thing about roundabouts, Barnes knew, was that if you missed your exit you could always catch it the next time around. Or the next time. Or the time after that. There had even been occasions, in less-familiar territory, when he'd had to circle three or even four times before finally veering off left and onto the proper carriageway. But this time he knew exactly where he was going, Salisbury being one of those mystical little towns (or cities) where you wind up knowing your way around practically from the day you arrive, almost as if you'd

grown up there. And since he was perfectly placed in the outer ring of this three-ring round-a-bout, all he had to do was veer off left when the proper sign approached him, and he was heading due north again

Immediately north of the round-a-bout Castle Street changes its surname and becomes Castle Road, for reasons Barnes was never able to discover, strangely enough, even from interviewing several of the friendly local pub crowd two nights running. The bill-o-fare changes, too. The pubs abruptly disappear, only to be just as abruptly replaced by bed-and-breakfasts. Lots of them. As he roared up Castle Road they were everywhere, both sides, seemingly every other front yard displaying a sign with the familiar insignia B&B next to the name of the establishment. There were

cute, clever names like "Wiltshire House" and "High Wycombe" and "Tudor Manor", names obviously designed to impress the tourists with their authentic "Olde English" quality. First-time tourists, he figured, probably can't help but be impressed. The signs approached his advancing windshield like the billboards which line the freeway leading into Las Vegas...He stopped counting at forty. The more there were, the more ridiculous that made the odds, he lamented, that he should wind up at the very one he did.

When he finally approached the outskirts of town Castle Road changed its name again and became, simply, the A-345. Almost there. A couple more miles, almost to where the houses finally disappear into endless dunes of tall, sandy-colored grain, and finally he spied

the dull, paint-chipped, somewhat grayish black facade of his temporary work cell. He down-shifted into second and turned into the makeshift gravel parking area that might have, under different circumstances, been some nice family's grassy front yard. Just before he got out of the car he noticed a cardboard sign taped to the lower left corner of the outside surface of the bay window. A large and conspicuous sign. Strange. He hadn't noticed it before. Printed freehand, in a small child's crooked capital letters, were the words WELCOME TO MISS IDA PARROT'S BED & BREAKFAST. He couldn't help but laugh at that. For good measure, in response to a practiced discipline to document his material, and because he was sure that no one would ever believe it if the story ever came out, he snapped a

picture of it with a Polaroid instamatic before getting out of the car. The side door of the house was unlocked. Standing just inside this absurd dwelling place, the stifling heat already attacking his outraged lungs, his sunglasses conspired with the eternal state of gloom to render him nearly blind. He removed the dark glasses but it didn't help; it got a little brighter, but without the prescription lenses he lost visual acuity. Screwed either way. He was just about to gallop up the stairs to prepare for a late afternoon nap (his usual preface to a night of pub crawling) but stopped himself when he heard the low buzzing prattle of someone muttering urgently to herself. It struck him as almost a religious chattering. He walked around behind the staircase to where the old woman, in a white bathrobe, a damp towel wrapped tight

like a beehive around all but the most renegade wisps of nondescript gray hair, was fervidly and feverishly composing something at a compact wooden writing desk, which fit quite naturally under the stairs in the acute angle the staircase made with the floor. A single narrow candle provided the only threat of illumination.

"Why, I didn't know *you* were a writer, Miss Ida Parrot!" he exclaimed. The track, as always, had placed him in remarkably good mood.

"Oh! Mister Barnes! You startled me...Good God, young man, I would so *veddy* much appreciate it if in the future you would *please* refrain from sneaking up behind an old *woman* like that! I find it *most* discourteous, most discourteous indeed..."

"I'm deeply sorry, Miss Parrot," said Barnes. "I'll refrain, I promise."

"I hope so. Well then—there's tea and biscuits in your room, if you require more milk please let me know...but not *too* late, I have more important things t'do 'fore I retire than run to the kitchen ev'ry few minutes—oh, and if you happen to be awake when those *Italian* chaps finally drag themselves in, I would be *most* grateful if you would tell them I would like them *out* of here *before* breakfast...I've had enough, I've simply had *enough!*"

Without his regular glasses (which in his haste to make the first race he had again forgotten and left in his room) it was too dark to make out the detail of her facial expressions, so all he could do was squint in the general direction of her blurry, turban-toweled head.

"Is that really necessary, Miss—"

"Is it *necessary*? Mister Barnes, do you have *any* idea how difficult it is to run a bed-and-breakfast? *Do* you? Well I'll *tell* you—I don't have any social life, *none*, because I'm bloody-*chained* to this place sixteen *bloomin'* hours a *day*! Why? Because guests the like of your *Italian* friends bloody-*insist* on coming in late, so I hafta be up to lock the door behind them, not to *mention* the late phone calls from bloomin' tourists, like yourself, calling at *all* hours attempting to find a *room*! I can put up with just about all of it, Mister Barnes, just about all of it, but when those, those...those *foreign* chaps insist on making funna me behind me-back...well I've had enough I have, and that's why I'm writing this letter to the Dean of Students at *Oxford*!" It was a prodigious speech, yet Barnes, employing

ears to lend strength to faltering eyes, was unable to detect the intake of a second breath, indicating, incredibly, that she had managed the monologue with a single blast of hot air.

"Yer writin' this guy about Silvano and Paolo?"

"Not that it's any of *your* business, Mister Barnes, but yes—yes I am. I bloody-well *guarantee* you that I will see them disciplined for their behavior, and I *further* guarantee that I shall cause as much commotion as possible to prevent these wet-nosed Oxford whelps from coming down to Salisbury and polluting our fine little *town!* " She meant city, of course, but because she was so upset Barnes naturally assumed that she didn't know what she was saying...

...Then something jerked inside him. It always did in situations like this. Her

attitude reminded him that he had never been that impressed with his own species, as much as he enjoyed certain individual products of it. Like Silvano and Paolo. They're not hurting anybody, he said to himself, all they want is to be left alone...He could feel his face flush violently red with anger. He'd promised himself he wasn't going to rock the boat, he had promised, but, what the hell, he now rebutted himself, who would know? After all, he was what he was; just a blunt, pushy American...

"Listen, Ida, couldn't you at least *try* and be a little more pleasant? I'm only gonna be here two more nights, at the most, and since I actually gotta *pay* to stay in this stuffy old-world morgue, can't you at least *try*?"

The old woman, perhaps not used to being angry to the point of speech-

lessness, puffed up at the gills like a 180-pound blowfish. Brows bristled, white cheeks flushed red, drops of sweat lining the forehead soaked up the irregular dispatches of candlelight. It was several wonderful seconds before she could blow her stack, but blow she did, and Barnes knew he was in trouble when he suffered a plosive salvo of Olde English profanities he had never encountered before.

"No, I guess you can't..." he said, this time with intentional impishness, pleased and proud to be an American, scurrying up the stairs very quickly and locking his bedroom door behind him.

Before slipping out of his clothes and into a much-looked-forward-to nap, Barnes was compelled, like all worthy practitioners of his craft, to chronicle the events of the day. He ferreted out a simple yellow writing tablet from his

suitcase, a tablet marked U.K. JOURNAL at the top, and commenced writing while lying on his belly:

August 17, 6 p.m.

Won L25 at Salisbury. Turf quite heavy and yielding from all the recent rain. Rumor has it that it's August here too, but I'm happy to report that it's still cool enough during the day for my old letterman's jacket (summer here is a joke, thank god). Guess I should've bagged a lot bigger elephant than 25 pounds, actually found some real decent plays out there, but I just made too many bets. Didn't lay off a single race. Damn. Just couldn't help myself.

Being disciplined is sure as hell harder than when I had to be

disciplined! As for the course itself it's strictly minor league stuff, horses bottom-of-the-barrel cheap, nothing special.

And the other jocks just can't stay with Cauthen and Eddery. Those two just keep taking turns, per usual (Makes a guy wonder if they take turns at night!). Love the screwy layout, though, a mile-long straight with a loop at the end. Of all the ones I've toured this trip, this is the one the hacks back home would be the least likely to swallow.

Should make Newbury no later than the day after tomorrow, York by the end of next week.

(That'll make 7 courses in 16 days. Not bad.)

The two other guys staying here are pretty decent joes. Silvano is quite friendly and outgoing, he's apparently doing some graduate work at Oxford, while his sweet young travelling companion Paolo is/////well, let's just say he seems devoted to Silvano. Luckily the landlady is too stupid to realize what's going on, or she'd no doubt give them even more grief than she currently insists on giving them. Which brings me, again, to my ever-charming proprietress...

Miss Parrot, who continues to challenge the imagination. Her picture should appear in the dictionary next to the word "crotchety".

Maybe she just seems ornery because everybody else in this

ridiculous country is so compulsively nice, who knows. Sometimes I could just slap her. She's a hard-headed idiot, but unfortunately she's also great material; 'like to blow this tube right now, but the way things are going I've got to stay at least one more night. Can't afford to run away from anything even remotely inspirational. Who knows, maybe she'll come through for me and show me some sort of an angle. I could use a break.

That's all for now, good journal. Very tired. Must catch a quick nap before I hit the Castle Street pubs. Folks in the pubs here very chatty, by the way. They'll tell you anything.

And I think if you asked them they'd give you the folding money right out of their own pockets. I will

always love the English people...But I'm going crazy waiting to be able to work.

Experiencing withdrawal symptoms from lack of baseball box-scores. Would kill for one decent cheeseburger. And I'm sick to death of hearing about this Iran/Contra thing. If just one more self-righteous prick comes up to me and asks me what we were trying to pull, I might not be able to keep from punching him in the nose...

His eyes were shot. He made one last attempt to get some work done, just a haphazard little sketch about the Italians, but it was no good. Certainly not something he would ever let anyone see. So he shredded it into little pieces for the trash can. The updating of his journal was

the best he was going to do. He stripped naked and crawled beneath the amazing warmth of a goose-down duvet, realized at once that he could roast alive under the circumstances, peeled the duvet back down to his waist, replayed the day's six races in his head, cursed himself, and was asleep in ten minutes.

* * *

Eight p.m. His Ford skidded to a stop on the rain-slick cobbles, a parking space in the town square close enough to the Haunch Of Venison Pub that the fresh spray of merriment could whisper to him. Laughter was just the tonic he needed for his nerves. The nap he had so craved gave him but the cruelest illusion of sleep, a war of anger and frustration, specifically his nemesis' treatment of his adoptive Latin allies versus his inability to render it. And so, denied his rest, he had decided

the next best thing was a few more pints than he might have managed had he reached this destination at 9:30, as originally planned.

As fond as he was of Salisbury, Barnes had a problem with her town square. He stood now in the middle of it, in a sea of asphalt, glancing in all directions, trying to understand. What were they thinking of, he wondered. A square formed by four of the most quaintly-named streets in the world, and all the modern-day city planners could come up with to fill the inner quadrangle were a hundred parking spaces and a couple of underground toilets? And while he applauded the preservation of Ox Row's City Arms Pub (est. 1780), as well as the charming and equally well-preserved Duchess Of Albany, it was difficult to countenance the incursion of Kentucky Fried Chicken

on Oatmeal Row; so close to the old Poultry Cross as to be offensive. And how was he supposed to stomach the sight of Blue Boar Row's new Pizza Hut franchise? Barnes had nothing against these sacred cows of American junk food, but finding them here challenged—no, *violated*—his concept of historical integrity, and made him wish he was born and had died in a prior century. He could just imagine, years from now, some as-yet-unimagined child skimming over something of his and asking, "What's this town Salisbury like, Daddy?", and he responding, "Well, little one, I don't know about now, but back in the 80's it was a place where a fella could drink a beer on a street called Ox Row, pick up a bucket of chicken on a street called Oatmeal Row, then take a stroll through the town square, go pee-pee right in the

middle of it without even getting in trouble, put the chicken in the car, then head over to Queen Street and then up to the travel agency on Endless Street to make an airplane reservation home—all in less than half an hour! And by the way, sweetie, if it's got a big church you must say city, not town." good god...

He fled the square in a purposeful jog, fearful that he might drive himself to distraction with his own imagination.

Of the several score pubs, bars, taverns, watering holes, and assorted hostelries of drinking that Barnes had personally researched and chronicled in his many tours of the island, none shone brighter in his mind than the Haunch Of Venison. Built centuries ago (the sign says "about" 1320, so as to be vaguely precise) its 20th-century proprietors had the good sense not to poison with

progress the establishment's essential character, though Barnes certainly wouldn't have minded if some far-sighted chap had at least raised the ceilings a trifle, simply to accommodate the gradual, relentless growth of the species. He had to hunch over and duck his head just to clear the door. But even then there was no relief for his spine. The ceilings in each of the astonishingly tiny, cube-like rooms could not accommodate a full-grown man, observed Barnes, at least no full-grown man exceeding the average height of his 14th-century ancestors. Glancing about the front room, he was delighted to spy grinning handfuls of ale-crazed men, all stooped over, their equally jovial female companions leaning against them at impossible angles. And with the walls and ceilings painted as black as the Middle Ages, the scene

titillated his creative palate as that of a roomful of drunken Normans driven mad by the confinements of their benevolent Saxon dungeon. A chamber at once so stark and theatrically surreal...he couldn't help but be delighted.

{Actually, though indeed quite low, the ceiling in the front room wasn't nearly so low as those in the back rooms and the kitchen, indicating that at some point in the pub's history it had indeed been raised; however slightly. But as a result of an optical illusion caused by a couple of low-hanging, iron candle-chandeliers, the room's truly astonishing smallness, and the beer about to be swirling mischievously in his head, Barnes had convinced himself, wrongly, that the ceiling was scarcely five-and-a-half feet from the floor—as subsequent entries in his journal confirm.}

Moving forward with the improvised gait of an arthritic old man, the American proceeded directly to the bar. "Courage," he said. It was dark, but he sheathed the round lenses in the pocket of his gray sportjacket anyway. The bartender, a chatty, compulsively nice youngster with red hair and freckles, short enough of height, amazingly, to be able to stand fully erect at his station, drew a pint of John Courage Bitter and set the glass frothing on the bar. "Seventy-one pence," said the short English lad, interrupting his own discourse with at least half a dozen customers on at least half a dozen topics that were dear to him, and then grinning open-mouthed he cheerfully soaked up the excess foam with a wet rag. "Nice round number," said Barnes. He dropped a one-pound coin on the bar and told the boy to keep it.

There was a vacant seat over by the window. A tiny wooden plank that resembled a miniature picnic table, to Barnes it might as well have been the throne of England. He waddled over to it as quickly as a severely bent-over man can waddle, lest it be taken from him. He sat down. His lower back offered up messages of praise. Much of the beer having been spilled from his irregular gait, his right hand was sticky. He wiped it on his jeans, and took a huge gulp of the bitter ale. Wonderful...and his window-seat view was equally so. The Poultry Cross sat right across the street, Minster Street foot traffic provided a fine free theater, and the ever-quaint Oatmeal Row was only half a block east of the pub, in case he should be seized by an uncontrollable urge to stroll himself into sobriety along its cobbled sidewalks.

Satisfied with the exterior view, he now examined the interior of his drinking cube. He liked the musket on the far wall, while the long brass horn above the south wall mantel—displayed just above the fireplace that heated his left leg—reminded him of the hornblowers peculiar to American racetracks and made him, briefly, think of home...Looking up at the ceiling, the rows of low black beams, he noticed that the recessed gaps between the beams were painted orange. Fueled by the incessant buzz of close-by conversations, his imagination was able to conjure up the threat of a giant drunken bumblebee, and, pleased with himself, he smiled. This is truly a pub, he mused, complete inside and out with its own singular, custom-built atmosphere. He wondered how many more beers he would have...

Suddenly they were staring at each other.

"Oh!...'ello there, guv'nah!"

He was astonished at how different a teenager could appear when liberated from her daily work station. The "peek-a-boo" hair style was the same, one eye always covered, but he couldn't tell what was affixed more snugly to her torso; her tight red sweater or his unchaperoned stare. And there was a welcome, wild look in the girl's green eye. She was the prisoner on weekend furlough, the kid alone in a candy store, the vamp. He loved it.

He beckoned her with a sideways flick of his head, and, after disengaging herself from a young man's formidable-looking arms, she came over.

"Good to see a familiar face!" said Barnes.

"Tha' makes two!" said the girl. She sat down next to him, surprisingly close.

"What's yer name, anyway?"

"Lesley. Lesley Anne." Her voice was deeper than he suspected it could be, and her eye was half-closed. "An' there's a dash in between, guv."

"Lesley hyphen Anne, huh. Like Lesley-Anne Down."

"Tha'sit—that's why I *put* it there! I din' think a *Yank* bloke would know who she is!"

"I liked that movie she was in with Harrison Ford," said Barnes, smiling with the purely masculine pride that comes from a man thinking he has a girl right where he wants her. "You know, the one where he plays this American pilot who has this steamy affair with the wife of a Brit spy? You see it?"

"More than once!"

"That girl was so hot she was cool," Barnes amazed himself by saying.

"An' 'e was *cute!*" contributed the girl.

"By the way, no more a'that 'guy' stuff," Barnes rejoined quickly. "Call me Charlie. It'll make me feel better."

"Okay, love—it's Charlie, then."

"Beer?"

"Lovely. I'll joost 'ave a spot a-yours." Barnes stared with rapt delight as she raised his glass to her rose-glossed lips, flicked her hair aside, and entertained a man-sized mouthful of the bitter. Her tiny Adam's Apple bobbed up and down in steady swallows. What she couldn't hold in her mouth drooled nonchalantly down her cheeks, chin, her thin white throat. Were only her American sisters so unabashedly free, he said to himself.

"Say, Lesley hyphen Anne, aren't you a little young ta be out drinkin' in a place like this?"

"A place like this?"

"A bar," the American said.

"Oh, f'pittysake, love! Doon't be such a dinosaur!" She took another drink of his drink. "Sorry. My error," he said, and timing his move accordingly he draped his right arm around her shoulders and casually kissed her forehead. "Umm!" she said.

The young man who only minutes before had been the lone target of the young girl's affections was watching them, sending over scornful expressions from the fireplace mantel he was leaning against. His mates either sat or crouched around him, whispering suggestions. Barnes returned his glare, but took care to fashion no expression that might

indicate either too much self-satisfaction or too little indignation. He wanted to maintain his neutrality. The rejected one was not the biggest of the lot, and Barnes was sure he could take him, but he knew that fighting them all *and* their home-court advantage would be foolhardy. But he did not lift his arm from the girl's shoulders.

"Do you think yer regular boyfriend's mad at me?"

"Y'mean Randy there? Oh, 'e's no' me-boyfriend, no' *really*...And even if 'e was, what could 'e do? The bloke bloody-*knows* if I want 'im back he'll come back. The bloke's joost no' masterful enough t'sort me out! Besides, I already told 'im yer a guest at Miss P's, so as long as we no' doin' anything...right in front of 'im, I doon't see—"

"Yeah, whaddaya think of Miss Parrot? What's the deal with her? Isn't she more than just a little weird?" He tried too late to hold back. The last thing he wanted to do was conduct an interview. He knew if there was one thing all females hate it's being interviewed. He could've kicked himself...

"Aw, she's alright, love." She wiggled closer, apparently not at all put off, and as if to prove it ran her hands along various surfaces of his body. "Miss P's alright. She treats me good, she gives me things...I suppose she treats me like 'er own."

"She treats everybody else like dirt."

"She's changed, she 'as," the girl rejoined, and there was more than a hint of loyal defensiveness in her voice: "All them poxy tourists, they changed her. She wasn't always this sharp...it was them."

His ever-wandering eyes floated out the window. The old Poultry Cross, only thirty feet away, was lit up to resemble a great stone monument against the dark background of the city. A hexagonal stone gazebo supported by six stone pillars, with a hexagonal stone bench surrounding the post in the middle, the Poultry Cross, in olden days, served as the center of the town's marketplace; a designated, town-sponsored, open-air supermarket for poultry merchants to trade their fowl for cheese or linen or coin of the realm. {The cathedral hadn't necessarily been built yet, thus the stubborn use of "town".} His eyes climbed up the middle post, through the inverted-cone roof, up the stone spire to the cross forty feet in the air. He remembered that he'd read somewhere that the Poultry Cross was built around

1335, and gazing now up at the stone crucifix he imagined he was suddenly living in that year, having a beer, observing the construction of this future historical landmark. He knew he could theoretically do this, because the Haunch Of Venison, of course, was built fifteen years earlier. How he *longed* to have been born in about 1280! If so, he would have had the requisite youthful energy at age twenty to properly celebrate the turn of the century, could easily have raised the first flagon of ale at this venerable pub, and could perhaps have even been commissioned, by the town council, to chronicle the construction of both the pub *and* the Poultry Cross for posterity. He knew there wasn't much of a market for his material back then, but he figured every town could use a good 55-year-old historian. He'd sort of been feeling fifty-

five lately, and so he didn't mind all that much losing two decades of his life in transit...and since he certainly wasn't getting any work done in the *20th* century...

Finally he squinted, and the stone gazebo immediately fled the clarity and simplicity of 1335, returning with regret to the dull, mottled spotlight of 1987. He couldn't tell where the illumination was coming from. With the beer and without his glasses, it could have been either the moon or some well-placed streetlamp. There were two human forms sitting on one of the stone benches.

"Seventy-one p, mate!"

He whirled back around, and the ruddy freckled lad had left his post at the bar and was standing over him. Another pint of bitter sat sweating on the table.

"What gives?"

"Oh! You were done, love, so I 'ad Terry bring over anotha'—y'do *want* it, right?" The girl and the bartender shared a sly smile.

"I dunno...thanks, I guess." He gave the lad a one-pound coin and told him to keep it. "Cheers, me-old knob-end!" said the lad. He winked at the girl, and his red-orange hair seemed to paint the ceiling as he walked away.

"Knob-end? *Knob*—"

"Tha' means 'e likes you," she said. She turned to him, leaned against him, pushing her breasts enthusiastically into his chest and right shoulder. So young, he thought. Firm as rubber...

"Oh look, Charlie—it's y'friends!"

"My friends?" he said. "Where?" He followed her eyes out the window. "Why in the old Poultry Cross!" rejoined the girl. He looked back over his left shoulder

and out the window. It was the two formless blobs in the gazebo. They were alone. He squinted, but it wasn't enough. Reaching inside his jacket he produced the glasses, and when he put them on the characters of Silvano Constantino and Paolo Delacorte crystallized before him.

"Oh yeah. My friends," said the American. Even through eyeglasses, his instinct was to squint at something he was concentrating on. The two young men were sitting next to each other. They were sitting close but they weren't actually touching, and it surprised him. And he was both surprised and disgusted that it did surprise him.

"I think they *fancy* each other, don'*choo*?"

"Why doesn't Miss Parrot just leave them the hell alone," he said without a question mark.

"Oh, it's no' that, love. She's joost 'ad the most terrible luck with foreigners, y'know. It's either that they leave without payin' or else they lift lit'l trinkets from the breakfast lounge or take the towels out 'the loo. She doon't trust them, that's all."

She mashed the left breast again against his right shoulder. He could feel himself beginning to stir.

But in spite of the unrefined genius of her technique he continued to study the Italians, still sitting alone in the Poultry Cross. Funny...In days of yore it was a place wherein merchants could sell their chickens, now it was merely a sitting room for confused tourists. Sitting by themselves, it reminded him that they were in trouble. Suddenly it was important to him that they leave before Miss Ida Parrot followed through on her

promise to make even more trouble. It was an intrigue, and he was the key player. He wanted to help them. He wanted them to blast their proprietress—verbally, at least—and take her down a peg. He wanted the drama of a confrontation, for his own selfish purposes. He wanted, at the same time, to find a way to avoid getting involved. He didn't know what he wanted...

"I live up Amesbury way," the girl now said to his left ear.

He turned back to her. "Is that so," he said dryly.

"Only 'bout fi'teen minutes from 'ere," she said a little more musically. She took a big swig of his caramel-colored ale, licked her lips, smiled. Her fingers fumbled through his short, wavy brown hair. His right ear now the one more accessible to her, she traced the ridges

and furrows with her tongue. He fought both her and his own body for control of the situation:

"And you're thinking that maybe you'n I could make that fifteen-minute drive together, in the interest of improving foreign relations...hm?"

"If y'mean what I *think* y'mean!"

"But are you sure you've had enough to drink?"

He didn't hear her confused response. He was looking over to where the gang of young toughs was plotting his demise.

"I'm not sure your current not really boyfriend over there would understand," he said with a rakish smile.

"Aw, 'e get over it! I already *told* 'im why I fancied the idea. He knows it's joost f'kicks."

"What idea?"

"Why you'n me, love! I told 'im it sorta set me to *quiverin'*, the idea a-doin' it with a bloke old 'nough t'be me-father."

Suddenly, instantly, he was through with her. He had reached that stage of life when a man (perhaps to the actual surprise of the women who utter them) becomes sensitive to such comments. She wiggled closer and said something, but for him she was no longer useful. Abruptly, then, and without warning, his allegiance had shifted wholly to the Italians. He looked out the window. They were still sitting in the darkening solitary of the Poultry Cross. Silvano's arm was now draped over Paolo's frail shoulders. He stared until it didn't bother him. He wanted to help them. It wasn't completely in his creative self-interest to help them, but still he wanted to. Perhaps it was the intrigue. Or maybe he was

simply a more inherently decent person than he suspected he was. He hoped so, but he didn't really know. Perhaps, like most everything else, it was something he had no real control over...

The young girl having defused any incentive to remain in the Saxon dungeon, Barnes suddenly bolted to his feet, bent to avoid the ceiling, and dug into his jeans for another one-pound coin.

"I'll see you at breakfast tomorrow," he said.

"What? But wha' about—oh, y'joking!...yer not joking?"

"Here," he said, tossing her the coin, "have yourself another one of my beers. Tell your partner to keep the change."

"Did I do something wrong?" the girl said ingenuously, and then, "I mean is there really something wrong with me?"

Part of him felt like blasting her to smithereens, making her a paying example for insensitive females everywhere who believe that the swells and crevices of their bodies somehow indemnify them against the consequences of anything flippant they might say, but her youth was indemnification enough so he did not. But he also figured she deserved at least *something* sharp, something *somewhat* punitive. So he drew a deep breath and split the difference: "Not really. In fact your tits are really quite rubbery. Downright galvanized in fact. Where I come from, you'd be very popular." And then, retreating behind the phoniest smile he could imagine, and taking quick little hunched-over steps, he freed himself forever from the Haunch Of Venison Pub.

"Hey! Silvano!"

It felt good to stand up straight again. His lower back rewarded him with a warm surge of blood. He didn't hurry his way across the street to the Poultry Cross. He needed a few seconds to come up with a line, an angle, something which would serve the situation better than the truth...

"Challie! So vetty, uh—wonderful to see!"

The Italian rose to shake the American's hand. He's no Olivier, thought Barnes, but at least he's trying...Paolo, smiling shyly, remained seated.

"Howya doin', man," Barnes said. Busy with covert thoughts, he stalled with silence and a smile. He wanted the Latin to know he liked him. And suddenly it had become equally important to torpedo Miss Parrot. So he needed to aide his new

foreign friends, and at the same time put this tyrant in her place, but only in a way that would effectively ameliorate his own difficulties. Quite a complicated puzzle. He was confused. He wanted to safeguard the feelings of his allies, but not nearly as much as he needed the confrontation. And if the whole thing didn't wind up ultimately benefitting *him*, of course, there was no point. It was too much for one man to figure out. He wished he had more time to think it through..."Listen, Silvano—I'm afraid Miss Parrot's got a problem."

"Meeza Parrot? Challie! What is wrong?"

Barnes looked down. He put his left hand in his pocket, and with the right he ruffled the waves of light brown hair into a tangle, stroked and massaged the

various puckered regions of his face, everything as convincingly as he could.

"Well it's like this, my friend. Miss Parrot was checkin' her appointment book earlier, and she noticed that she'd...accidentally booked another family in your room, yeah. Yeah, that's the story. These other people called her to confirm the appointment, and she realized she'd made a mistake and that she doesn't have room for both of you. I know you were there first, but evidently that doesn't make any difference to the old bitch. I'm sorry, man."

"But-a Challie...I no understand!"

"Silvano, you and Paolo hafta go."

"But—"

"It's simple, man. Either you or these other people hafta go find someplace else to stay, starting tomorrow, and Miss

Parrot has decided that that's you. She's kickin' you out."

The Italian leaned over to discuss the situation with his companion. They spoke in their native tongue. The smaller of the two Italians remained seated, and rearranged his facial expression very little, despite the expressed urgency of the situation. Barnes glanced over at his car, alone on the street, and noticed its open window. He turned up the collar of his gray jacket. It reminded him how cold a cold Wiltshire night can be...

"Gratzi, Challie, uh, thank you. Thank you, my friend. I will—"

"No-no, I don't wanna know what'cher gonna do. That's yer business." Oh, how he *loved* not knowing what to expect! "I told Miss Parrot I'd give you the word if I saw you, and I did my job. So now I wash my hands of the whole

mess—but if you ask me, it's a pretty lousy thing to do seein' as how you guys were there first."

(Perfect...either a confrontation with the landlady or they leave without paying...perfect either way. He couldn't wait.)

Silvano Constantino, his smile as broad as the distance between their two countries, again reached out to shake the American's hand. "Thank you, Challie. Gratz!" Paolo Delacorte, still disinclined to stand, tugged at Silvano's sleeve: "Oh Challie—Paolo, he vant-a me to say you, uh, how you say...you are most exceptional friend vee have heer!"

The American dissembled a sheepish smile. "Don't mention it," he said. He left the Italians alone in the Poultry Cross and jogged to his car.

He tried to continue his drinking up on Castle Street, but found himself no longer in the mood. Something out of his distant past was calling to him. First thing they teach you back home, he chuckled to himself, from the time you're a kid till the day you die; don't get involved. What was it the history books said, something about no entangling alliances?...Two sips into a Mann's Brown Ale he knew he had made a mistake. But then he remembered Miss Ida Parrot, the way she looked, the things she did, the way she was, and then he remembered how desperately he needed that fleeting spark of inspiration which might at least justify sharing the same roof with her, and when the dust finally settled in his head he found that he had decided that she "deserved it", which made him feel "better". He was alternately in and out of control of his

emotions. But he knew that if nothing happened soon to quicken his pen, if nothing happened soon, he would have to pack up and go try it somewhere else. He sure needed something...and she *did* deserve it! And thus he allowed himself to be satisfied that his actions, in this case at least, were justified. Sort of.

But he was no fool. Regardless of what she was, he knew his actions had boiled down to the black, oily residue of his own self-interest. Period. At least he knew it.

He left the rest of the brown ale standing useless on the bar and quitted the establishment. This was a man who had never been good at drinking through a depression. Besides, it was after ten-thirty, and he knew the pubs would be closing in a few minutes anyway. His drive back was thoughtfully slow. A key had been taped to the door, and he let

himself in quietly. He went straight to bed. He did not attempt to add to his journal.

* * *

"...oh my God...*oh my God!*"

It was a high-pitched scream, or at least the voice carried the all-or-nothing urgency of a scream, the type of desperate shrill cry that commands all within earshot to come a-runnin' and that's just what Barnes did. He'd taken two or three steps out of his room before he remembered he was naked, retreated, grabbed his robe and put it on even as he bounded hunched-over down the stairs.

The sobbing was coming from the breakfast lounge. He stood transfixed and cloudy-headed at the French doors, trying to decide whether or not to go in. Having barely adjusted to the unwelcome circumstance of being awake he was still a

touch disoriented, and in point of fact wasn't entirely sure what time of day it was, such was the eternally gloomy state of this establishment. He looked around. Although no light was allowed in, there were plenty of clues pointing to it being very early in the morning; the welcome, cool taste of forbidden moist air, the faint wisp of coffee nibbling at his nose, muffled bird songs barely fighting through the stark, forbidding walls. Too early. He reached into the pocket of his robe and found, luck finally with him, the round lenses. Before putting them on he rubbed some feeling back into his face. Somewhat more in charge of his faculties now, his pause at the French doors was an utterly conscious one. He had intended, naturally, to burst upon the scene as he was summoned to do, yet now the closed doors seemed to him a

reprieve, a warning, a last chance to remain isolated from foreign difficulties that didn't concern him, a chance to finally succeed in not getting involved...but no. Not he. He threw them open anyway and stepped inside.

The curtains of the bay window had been parted halfway, amazingly, allowing dawn's earliest light to flood the breakfast table in yellow. Miss Ida Parrot was slumped heavily in one of the chairs, staring blankly at a card of some kind. On the table, bathing in the warm swath of light, was a bouquet of flowers. A fiery, stupendous bouquet. It was as if the flowers were an irresistible vacuum for the light that angled in, or that perhaps, in grand, chromatic opposition to this eternally gloomy enclosure, the twin forces of Gaiety and Reason had conspired to light this room with a

collage of spontaneous floral combustions. Barnes didn't know beans about flowers, but he did have a professional's appreciation of color, and there was plenty of it exploding from this out-of-place centerpiece; reds, lavenders, whites, pinks, yellows...and green foliage to tie it all together. The colors didn't seem to go together, but that's the way it always was with bouquets and he reminded himself that he was no expert and that it probably wasn't the point. It was a welcome aberration. The more he looked at it the prettier it got. But his proprietress continued to cry. He approached her cautiously, not sure of what to make of it. She seemed genuinely unaware of his presence. Even as she whimpered he lifted the card from her fingers:

Signora Parrot,

Me and Paolo, we musta go back a school.

So verry sorry for short notice. You hav a verry nice place heer. Good food to! You will finda extra night of money in onvelop.

Many thanks for thee lessens in Engleesh!

Thank you so very much, for every thing.

Silvano

"I mailed the letter!" she cried, pathetically aware of him now. "Dear God, I mailed the bloomin' letter..."

And suddenly he knew why he was there. This pitiless old woman was finally piteous in her unfamiliar grief, and the contrast touched him, touched him as deeply as anything had touched him in

over ten thousand miles. With the sterile walls of authority torn away he saw her as a microcosm of what is most essentially, most definitively, human. He couldn't help but feel sorry for her. He felt sorry for all people, for all the flawed and frail members of his species. He now realized that this insubstantial old soul had no more control over her frailty than she did over which phylum her personal, sovereign germ of life happened to be born into. Had she been born a dog she would have bitten people and cats and smaller dogs; had she been born an insect she would have freely spread some epidemic plague with her bites, not maliciously, perhaps, but spread it she would have just the same. And he knew she could have no real, lasting control over what she did, anything she said, anything she thought, what she was. He

knew that no one really does. Standing right next to where she was sitting, sobbing, quivering, he reached for her, half intentionally half involuntarily, cupping her head in his hands and drawing it to the yellow terrycloth of his robe. Her face disappeared into his stomach, the cries became muffled, the tears finding sanctuary in the towel of his garment. She sobbed and she sobbed. His hands stroked her unkempt hair, a petting stroke, smoothing it again and again while he rocked her back and forth, while he cradled the haggard head of this old woman, who through it all seemed strangely unconcerned with his being a stranger, a border, a temporary intrusion upon the mediocre crawl of her life.

In this respect, too, he realized how fully consistent she was with her race. She was not unlike the rest of this planet's

chosen creatures; reactive rather than proactive. And reacting only within the limitations placed on her by her creator. She was the cop on the take, the housewife on the make, the priest no longer on the wagon but keeping it between him and his wrathful god. She was the kid stealing quarters off his father's dresser, the father embezzling corporate overflow profits to supplement his six-figure salary. She was the "best friend" who consistently lies to the other half of this ironic label, lying simply because it happens to be convenient, or hangs him out to dry and twist in the wind because it's personally expedient and because his subconscious mind is sure the fabric of the friendship will withstand it. She was the drunk. She was the oh-so-sure gambler and the oh-so-self-righteous bigot. She was the sad soul

whose unrequited love of the needle will always supersede the love of mere human beings. She was the politician who changed his platform because the voters demanded it, who lied to his country because the times encouraged it, who changed back to his old platform when a new generation of voters insisted on it. And she was just as surely the man who cheats on his woman because society expects him to, and the beautiful woman, or girl, who eventually cheats on all her men because she knows her beauty means she can get away with it; and get away with it as many times as she needs to.

Indeed she was even the "artist", the storyteller, who would cultivate a friendship simply—or at least primarily—because it might one day make a good yarn...

She was anybody and everybody who was ever compelled to do anything deceitful or despicable or petty or wrong, and then must one day go mournfully and melancholy to the grave without ever discovering why. She was every man and every woman. She was Mankind. And it was Barnes's job to see it, to know it, and then to tell it. And then move on.

Not used to being ignored, a redundant telephone called out its brassy indignance from the hallway. An unattended frying pan sent messages from the kitchen. A gathering of invisible birds played loud and derisive tunes from the tree beyond the bay window. The notes grew louder in their ridicule, as if the thick, forbidding windowglass was temporarily powerless to mute them. Presently, the sun shot its glare over the top of the curtain rod, a half-inch

horizontal scythe that split the ceiling in two. Blessed dawn. The kinetic reprise of morning, a daily second chance for every darkened corner of the world. The young man released her head from his benign grasp, barely conscious of his one final stroke of her hair. His compassion had a short attention span. Already his thoughts were rife with Newbury. He couldn't help it. He mentioned something about smelling something burning, but she didn't seem to hear him. She continued to whimper, a raw, pathetic dirge, then looked out the bay window for a long time, then finally up and into the strange, distant face of the American.

"Those poor boys!" sobbed the old woman. "Those poor, sweet, dear *Italian boys!*"