

headline

**FRESH
BLOOD**

EXCLUSIVE EXTRACTS FROM FOUR KILLER READS

www.crimefilesinternational.com

CUCKOO

JULIA CROUCH

Their first mistake was inviting her in....

Cuckoo is the debut novel from Julia Crouch in which she deftly explores the complex and obsessive nature of female friendship. If you liked Erin Kelly's *The Poison Tree*, Barbara Vine and Tana French you will be gripped by this compelling psychological thriller, which taps into the irrational fear of a friend stealing one's identity.

Rose has it all – the gorgeous children, the husband, the beautiful home. But then her best friend Polly comes to stay. Very soon, Rose's cosy world starts to fall apart at the seams – her baby falls dangerously ill, her husband is distracted – is Polly behind it all? It appears that once you invite Polly into your home, it's very difficult to get her out again...

Tense, emotionally wrought and menacing from the get-go, *Cuckoo* is filled with foreboding and a terrible sense of the inevitable. Inspired by Simone de Beauvoir's *She Came to Stay* and Nick Cave's album *The Boatman's Call*, Crouch builds a feeling of claustrophobia and in doing so delivers a gripping psychological thrill.



Hardback 3 March 2011 £14.99

www.juliacrouch.co.uk

headline

www.crimefilesinternational.com

CUCKOO

JULIA CROUCH

headline

Aftermath

It could be the scene of a crime, but the real crime happened somewhere else. Nothing is what it had been: everything is cut, or torn, or ripped. Great globs of flesh-coloured paint blight the surfaces; shards of paper curl over edges.

Propped up against the walls are painted repetitions of the same, naked, skeletal form. She is arched, ecstatic, beautiful. And her eyes have been gouged out, stabbed with scissors, sliced with a blade.

It is, in short, a total mess.

One

WHEN ROSE HEARD THAT CHRISTOS HAD BEEN KILLED, SHE didn't think twice: Polly and the boys must come and stay. She and Gareth had the space now, and Polly had been her best friend since primary school. There was no doubt about it: they must come, stay, and let Rose look after them.

The phone call came on the last day of February. Anna and baby Flossie were asleep, and Rose and Gareth had just lit a candle and opened a bottle of wine at the kitchen table. The image of such a nightly routine had been held in their minds throughout the two and a half years they had spent renovating this house in the Wiltshire hills. Now, just one month after they had finally moved in, the vision had been established as firm fact.

The phone echoed across the flagstone floor, breaking into the rural silence they still found a little unnerving. Gareth had wanted a proper, resounding phone bell just like the one he had grown up

with in rural upstate New York. One you could hear wherever you were. He said it signified, for him, a conscious intent, a state of being here by design, rather than by accident. Rose couldn't see how he took it to that conclusion, but a loud bell was practical because they couldn't get any sort of mobile phone reception out where they were, out in the sticks.

Taking her glass of wine with her, Rose went to answer the phone.

'Christos is dead,' was the first thing Polly said.

Rose had to sit down at the window seat, the cold stone freezing into her legs.

'What?' She didn't believe it, of course.

'He's been killed. In a car crash. He was drunk.'

'What's the matter?' Gareth drew his chair over and sat by Rose, holding her hand as she took it all in and fought for air.

Rose thought of Christos, the big bear. Christos was, of everyone she knew – except Gareth and the girls – the last person she could ever imagine not living. He was all about life. Once, knowing she craved scallops when she was pregnant with Anna, he had cooked her a full twelve. 'You must follow your body, because it knows you better than you do,' he had said with his infallible Greek logic. She and Gareth had his paintings all over their house. Bursts of colour, life, sex and food, they lit up the cool interior they had made, clashing beautifully with the restraint and symmetry of Gareth's own, more cerebral, work. They even had one of the most erotic paintings Christos had ever made – of Polly, as it happened – hanging in their dressing room.

'When?' Rose asked. She needed facts to help her take it in.

'Two weeks ago.'

Rose thought she could hear the sound of the sea at the end of the line, crashing onto the stone of the shore. She imagined Polly sitting on the terrace of the house in Karpathos, the one that led

straight onto the beach. She would probably have a large glass of Metaxa in her hand. But then it was February, so she probably wasn't outside. Was it cold in Greece in February? Rose didn't know – she had only visited in the summer, and the last time she had done that had been two and a half years ago. She and Polly hadn't spoken at all for six months, she realised.

But, however long they spent apart, they always seemed to be able to pick up where they left off. Rose and Polly were entwined. They had grown up together; they lived together in their late teens and twenties. They had both married artists, and had surprised each other by both rather unfashionably moulding themselves around their men and their children.

'He always drives too fast on the roads round here,' Polly was going on. 'Thinks he knows them because he was born here. But he doesn't. It's all bollocks.'

'Poor you.' Rose didn't know what else to say.

There was silence. Just the sound of the sea: crash, pull; crash, pull.

Rose put her hand over the mouthpiece and told Gareth the news. Gareth gasped, closed his eyes and collapsed his face into his palms, pressing his fingertips into his brow. He and Christos had been friends once, before Polly. In fact, it was through Christos that Rose and Gareth had met.

Rose went back to Polly. 'How are you?' She tried to hold her own shock and upset back for the sake of her friend. She wasn't as entitled to grieve for Christos as much as Polly.

'We've buried him and I've been wished an abundant life a thousand times by all the aunts and cousins and his bloody mother. We're waiting for the memorial service, then I'm out of here.'

'And the boys? How are they?' Rose had difficulty finding a voice for this. Nico and Yannis were Polly and Christos's two sons. Rose and Anna had spent a fortnight snorkelling and sunbathing with

them, that summer they'd visited, just before the house project had kicked off. Rose remembered Nico, aged seven, surfacing in front of her with a perfect sea urchin shell, his smile as wide as the sandy sweep of bay behind him. Christos's whooping for his son's find reached them across the sparkling sea. Rose thought with a shudder that she should have visited more often. Now there would be no chance of return.

'All I want to do is to touch him,' Polly said. 'And that shocks me. I didn't want to so much before, when I could – but now it's all I can think of. It's like a fire has burned everything.'

'And the boys?' Rose asked again.

'They're too young really to know what it means. They'll realise soon enough, but for now they have no idea of the permanence of it. Fuck.' There was the sound of a glass crashing onto stone.

'I'll come out tomorrow,' Rose offered, catching the warning look Gareth darted at her through tear-rimmed eyes. She knew the minute she said it that the whole idea of dropping everything and taking the baby out to the eastern lip of Europe was ridiculous. Gareth was supposed to be getting back to his work; she was needed to run everything else.

'No,' Gareth mouthed. Despite the painting in the dressing room – which he put up with partly for Rose's sake, and partly because it was an example of Christos's best work – he had never liked Polly. He once said that she gave him the creeps, which was pretty strong for Gareth.

'No. You stay put. Me and the boys are coming back. We're out of here,' Polly said.

'Well then, you must come and stay here,' Rose said, looking directly at Gareth. 'Stay as long as you like.'

Gareth went over to pour himself another glass of wine, his back to Rose.

But what can he say? Rose thought. He'll just have to like it.

Two

IT WAS A LONG PHONE CALL. AFTER SHE PUT THE RECEIVER down, Rose realised that Gareth wasn't in the kitchen any more. She searched the house, but she couldn't find him. Pulling on her Barbour, and slipping her feet into boots, she took a torch and the baby alarm and, still reeling from the news about Christos, still unable to absorb it, she headed off into the moonlight to where she knew he would be.

A slow, deep river ran at the bottom of the field, and beside it stood a big old willow with a flat, smooth stone at its base. Rose had first discovered the spot fifteen months ago, after she had told Gareth she was pregnant.

It had been an accident, the pregnancy – the result of a rather messy topping-out night, when they had farmed Anna out to a friend's house and invited the neighbours round to help them consume a lot of awful local cider. They had hauled a Christmas tree

up onto the rooftop, there was a lot of whooping and dancing, and then everyone staggered home. Andy – Gareth’s brother, who had come over from France and was helping out and camping in the Annexe with them – collapsed in a drunken heap on the floor of the main house. Rose and Gareth covered him with blankets and tiptoed on their own up to the Annexe, where, after a nearly chaste eighteen months of sharing their bedroom with their small daughter, they let all caution fly to the wind.

So it was that, a few weeks later, when Rose did the test and it came out positive, it came as something of a blow. The plan had been that when the house was finished, Rose would find teaching work for the hours Anna was at school. This would take the financial pressure off Gareth, allowing him to pursue the more creative possibilities of his work. While he had enjoyed the practical satisfactions of putting doors up and knocking walls through, he had begun to feel stunted. In order to reboot his work, he needed uninterrupted, unpressured days in his studio – once he had built it.

Rose had known that this new baby would put paid to all that. She also knew that, for many reasons, Gareth had only wanted one child. So, with a chill in her heart, she had gone out to tell him. He was out in the rain, repointing an old stone wall that had been consumed by ivy. When she gave him the news, he jolted as if she had hit him with a stun gun. Then he dropped his trowel, stood up and just walked off.

She had spent ages trying to find him that time. She ran through the fields for a whole wet afternoon, calling out like a madwoman, growing increasingly desperate at how easily their happiness could be punctured. Eventually she found him sheltering under the willow, smoking and staring at the brown swirl of the water.

‘I suppose an abortion’s out of the question, then?’ he had asked, looking up at her.

It was, absolutely. Rose wanted that baby, and despite Gareth

taking to his bed for three days, her pregnancy began to take shape.

‘We can make this work,’ she coaxed, offering him tea on the first day of his retreat, as the perpetual rain battered through the windowless ground floor of their unfinished home. ‘We’ve still got a bit of money, and I’ll give you all the practical support you need.’

Rose knew, from the almost weekly contact that Gareth was getting from the gallery, that there was a demand for his work that his absence had only made stronger.

‘And if you have the right conditions you can really work prolifically,’ she said on the second day, after she and Andy had worked side by side weatherproofing the house by battening blue plastic sheeting from lintel to sill on every gaping window hole.

By ‘right conditions’ Rose meant the light, airy studio that they were making from one of the outhouses. By ‘work prolifically’ she meant churn out more of the same old same old. Gareth didn’t have a leg to stand on with the financial argument. But he had planned a return to his more conceptual roots, and there he was being forced back to the commercial concerns he had tried to escape.

‘It could be perfect, Gareth. Just think, a baby,’ was her offer on the third day, when the first hard frost of what had been up till then a mild, wet winter finally set in.

Gareth eventually managed to get up and back to work on the house, but he wasn’t himself. His reaction had heralded a long and difficult period for them, from which they had now only recently emerged.

Rose had a nagging worry that this news about Christos – and, more specifically, the bit about Polly coming to stay – might kick everything off again. She knew that quick action was needed, so, drawing her Barbour around her, she hurried across the silvery-blue field towards the river. The picture of a laughing, sun-shot Christos hung in her mind so vividly that she reached out for him in the night

air. And that's when it jolted into her that she would never again hear his voice, never touch his skin again. She stopped and held her breath, as the awful fact of his death struck her fully for the first time. For a moment she felt lost, marooned in the middle of the field. If she didn't hold on to herself, she thought she might disappear altogether.

Then she looked up and saw Gareth's willow. Outlined by the moonlight, it looked like a drooping troll in the night. Rose could smell Drum tobacco, and she knew her husband was there. Her bearings recovered, she moved on towards the tree and crept into the tented circle made by what remained of the leaves.

She sat down next to him, joining him in silence.

'Christos. I can't believe it,' he said, his eyes shut.

'No,' she said. 'It's too horrible.'

'He was so . . . ' Gareth looked up at the river with red eyes, searching for words.

'He was your friend.'

'She's had the funeral, I take it?'

'Yes. I'm afraid she has.'

'I would have liked to have been there to bury him.'

'Me too.'

'That woman stole him and kept him to herself.'

'I know, but—'

'She should have told us sooner.'

'Yes.' She put her arm around him. The river flowed on at their feet, filling their silence with the sound of its journey from hill to ocean.

'It's the wrong time for this to happen,' he said finally, digging his boot into some mud at the water's edge.

'I know,' she said, taking his hand.

'We've had the most difficult two years of our lives, and now, just as we're beginning to settle in and start really living this life we

have worked so hard for, we've got to open our doors to that friend of yours and her kids.'

'It's bad timing,' she said.

'Why should we risk it all for her?' he asked, looking straight at her.

'Risk?' she said. 'That's a bit strong, isn't it?'

'It's an invasion.' He threw his dog end in the river.

'Don't be like that.'

'How do you want me to be?'

A breeze ruffled the willow, and they both listened to the rustle and scratch that encircled them.

'But look,' she said. 'We've got the space. We've got the whole big house to ourselves, and Polly and the boys can stay in the Annexe. They'll be entirely separate. They can even cook their own meals. We'll hardly notice they're there.'

The Annexe stood at the front of the property, just off the lane. It had been a glorified chicken coop for decades, and the first job had been to convert it into a comfortable, if basic, bed-sitting room for Rose, Gareth and Anna, with a tiny antechamber for Andy when he came. There was a fairly well-equipped kitchen area – Rose had to be able to provide good fuel for the workers – and a shower room. She had missed soaking in a bath, though.

'And besides, who else do we know with this amount of space to offer?' Rose went on.

It was true. All their other friends lived in London in tiny flats. Or, if they had children, they were in small terraced houses that were bursting at the seams. No one else they or Polly knew had the money for this sort of property. Even from Polly's music business days nobody was left who ticked all three boxes of unwasted, wealthy enough and still living in the UK.

If it hadn't been for the death of Rose's parents, Rose and Gareth wouldn't have been able to afford a big house either. Her father and

mother had gone, one after the other, from, respectively, liver cancer and bowel cancer. Their legacy – the proceeds of the sale of their house in Scotland and a hoard of savings amassed through a result of clever house-buying in the days when that sort of thing had been possible – had been enough to allow Rose, their only child and their great disappointment, to dream a bit. The fact that they had thought to acknowledge her in this way had surprised her. She had expected the money to go to their church, or to a dogs' home, or to distressed gentlefolk. Anywhere other than her.

This old house, The Lodge, which Rose and Gareth had first seen as a ruin with Buddleia growing where the roof should have been, had seemed to be just the stuff of a good dream. They decided to do almost all of the work on the house themselves, partly to stretch the money, and partly for the experience. Gareth had declared that he wanted to do it so that they could truly connect with their home. His enthusiasm was infectious. Once Gareth got something – good or bad – into his mind, there was no holding him back. He liked to see things through. And that was why Rose was determined to nip his objections to Polly coming to stay before they even came into bud.

The moonlight wove into the wind-rippled river and Gareth tugged at a strand of willow.

‘It’s not possible not to notice Polly,’ he said. ‘She doesn’t exactly blend in.’

‘That’s why I love her,’ Rose said. She looked at Gareth as he stared at the water. A nerve was flickering in his cheek, and his jaw was tense.

‘Are you OK?’ she asked.

‘I’m just tired,’ he said.

She sighed. This was his way of telling her to leave him alone. But she wasn’t going to do that this time. If she left it, there would be a disaster.

Back in London, when he was like this, he would throw himself into his work. He'd disappear to his studio, only to emerge a couple of days later with two or three pieces which went straight to the gallery.

This approach worked for him, but for Rose, stuck at home alone with Anna, it was less satisfactory. She wished sometimes that they could work things out together, that they could sit and talk about things until dawn, like she imagined other people did. Perhaps if they had done that, the whole pregnancy thing wouldn't have made their lives so difficult. She also wished she didn't have to be the gatekeeper, fending off Gareth's behaviour around Anna, who wondered why she didn't see her daddy.

'But he's at work, love,' Rose would say, and they would go off and bake a cake.

This had been easy in Hackney, where the studio was far away, on the other side of Victoria Park. But in this new house, especially during the build, the work was all tied up with the life. There was nowhere for him to go, and he could infect them all with his downturn. It had happened once already, and she didn't want it to happen again.

'Look, Gareth. Christos, your friend, your old, old friend, is dead. For Christos, can't you see a way?'

'I'm not going to get a say in this, am I?' he said, ripping a Rizla out of the packet and rolling another cigarette.

'We're talking about it now, aren't we?'

'But you're decided. I can see that.'

'If you like, I can phone Polly right back up and tell her not to come,' Rose said. Part of her wanted to do that. She knew that Gareth had a point, that it was indeed the wrong time. But she couldn't fully admit it, not now.

'I just wish we could have discussed it before you said she could stay,' he said.

‘But what else could I do? Polly and I practically grew up together. She’s like a sister to me,’ Rose said, counting the points off on her fingers. ‘We shared everything until we met you and Christos. And now Christos is gone, she’s widowed with two kids, she wants to come back and there’s no one else for them to stay with. I don’t even know if she’s got any money.’

They sat in silence. It was a cold night if you were still. Despite her sensible waxed coat, and the protection of the willow, Rose shivered.

‘Man,’ Gareth said. ‘Christos dead. I can’t believe it. Shit.’

‘I’ll miss him so much,’ Rose murmured.

‘Me too.’

Rose leaned her head on his shoulder.

‘Look. I want us to be together on this,’ she said, after a while.

She didn’t want it to be like her pregnancy, when she had felt as if she were carrying both Anna and the baby on her own. It had been frightening, feeling so alone. The endless work on the house, and the blustery, wet, psychotic English weather seemed to grind Gareth down. He was tall, with big hands, thick hair, and solid legs. But, over that period, he seemed to get smaller and smaller. Rose’s belly had swelled in counterpoint to Gareth’s decline, but she had been determined to pull her not inconsiderable weight on the building work. She remembered aching everywhere. Her tenacious optimism, which usually saw her through anything, had started to desert her.

Everything had begun to seem hopeless, when, unannounced and two weeks early, the baby arrived.

The labour was an unseemly two hours, far too short to get to the hospital. So Andy and Gareth – who had been wrenched from his slough by the pressing nature of the event – delivered her with telephone support from the emergency services.

The minute the baby slipped into his hands, Gareth was smitten.

He declared her to be Flossie – not the prearranged Olivia that Rose had whittled out from all the possibilities. Rose was so relieved at Gareth’s instant transformation that she would have agreed to Weasel or Troutface if that was what he had wanted.

This new joy had taken them through the last stages of the build – the final fixings, the colour schemes and the flooring decisions – into the completed house, where life was ready to begin as an ordered, organised existence. There was a cupboard for everything; shelves displayed only books or the useful and beautiful. They had space, at last. It was so different from cramming their lives into a one-bedroom flat with no garage and no attic as they had done back in Hackney. And this space was special: they had punched and pulled and sweated to create it. Spring was on the way, and the sun would soon begin to warm their bones again. The forecast was for a great summer.

Rose knew that her instinctive reaction to Polly’s situation had posed a threat to all this balance, but she also knew that neither she, nor Gareth, had any real choice now. And she was pretty sure he saw it like that, too.

‘Look,’ she said to him. ‘They’re not staying for ever, and if it doesn’t feel right, we can always ask them to move. It’s only till they get their feet on the ground here, really it is.’

The air shifted slightly in their willow shelter. Very, very slowly, he began to smile, and she knew in that moment that it was going to be all right.

‘Oh yeah, I can really see you asking her to move on,’ Gareth said. ‘You’re too softhearted, Rose. You’re a pushover, always looking out for something to look after.’

‘That’s why I chose you,’ she said, and he drew her in close.

‘But I’m serious, Rose. If it goes tits up, then I’m going to be the one to send her on her way, and I won’t take any sort of opposition from you, OK?’

‘OK,’ she said, curving into him. ‘Besides, we’re rock solid now, aren’t we?’

‘Too right,’ he said, and he threw a stone into the river, skimming it so that it bounced four times.

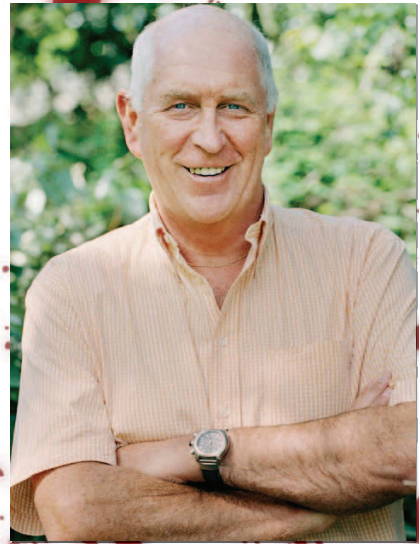
THE LONER

QUINTIN JARDINE

**A brilliant new stand-alone crime thriller from
Scotland's Crime Master**

Xavier (Xavi) Aislado is a gentle giant, half Spanish, half Scot, brought up in Edinburgh by his grandmother, Paloma Puig, a ferocious old lady whose grim brand of care sees him into his teens, until his father moves back to Spain, leaving him to grow up fast. His emergence into manhood is colourful, and eventful. After a short career as a professional footballer, he turns to journalism, and has a bloody introduction to the trade, as his first assignment ends in violent death. Inevitably, remorselessly, as his autobiography unfolds, Xavi's life and his love become entwined with his work, and he is immersed in tragedy, loss and betrayal, going halfway round the world in search of a truth that may destroy him.

Quintin Jardine's evocation of Xavi's fated world, of the towering being that is Grandma Paloma, and of his love, the beautiful, wilful and hypnotic Grace Starshine, is an unforgettable story of a man riding a one-way train to oblivion. Will he escape, before it hits the buffers, full-speed?



Hardback 31 March 2011 £12.99

<http://www.quintinjardine.com>

headline

www.crimefilesinternational.com

THE LONER

The life of Xavier Aislado
as told to

Quintin
Jardine

headline

Co-author's note

Xavier Aislado has been a part of my existence for around three years, although I suspect that he's lurked in the background for rather longer than that, without either of us being aware of the fact. We were introduced indirectly, by a friend we have in common, Bob Skinner, whose acquaintance with Xavi goes back even longer than does mine with the man who's currently chief constable in my city of Edinburgh, and my near neighbour in Gullane, my home village.

When finally we did meet, I suspected from the outset that this massive man was going to play an appropriately large part in my life. Then he vanished, and I guessed that I had been wrong.

Xavi's an impressive and imposing guy. People who've met him will never forget him, and they've all tended to make assumptions about him, some well founded, others less so. However, there were two things about him on which everyone agreed. One was that from his youth he was a naturally sombre individual. The other was that an air of sad serenity enveloped him like a bubble in the last fourteen years of his life in our community. Its cause was a matter of record, and so when he did leave our midst, without warning, without farewell, many of us thought that he simply couldn't stand being him any longer.

I was among those, I confess. I shared that foreboding. My fear was that he had sought a way to end it all, and that if Lord Lucan was ever found, the remains of the late managing editor of the *Saltire* newspaper, the monument he left behind, would be close by.

Nevertheless, when the post lady rang my doorbell one morning, asked me to sign for a package, Spanish stamps and postmark, and I saw the sender's name, on the back . . . Sr. Xavier Aislado . . . I wasn't really

surprised. Indeed, I berated myself for my own foolishness. That great, serious totem of a man is far too big in every respect ever to have done away with himself, and I, of all people, one of his few confidants, should have known that all along.

However I was taken aback when I opened the parcel. Inside I found a four gigabyte memory stick, and a covering letter from the big fella, printed on personalised stationery. It read:

Dear QJ

I've read your work, and I believe that you're the guy to help me. My life is on this gadget. I'd like you to take it, consider it, and then do what you can to give it book form, in the hope that it might interest others, and even more, in the hope that it will provide a fitting tribute to those who have made me what I am, for better or worse; my dad, and his mother, the greatest and most remarkable human being I've ever met.

If you're prepared to undertake this task with me and for me, go ahead in your own time and get back to me when you're ready. If not, please shred this letter and destroy the stick.

Yours ever

Xavi

When I plugged the device into my computer, I found a Word document and two MP3 audio files. I listened to those first and they scared the shit out of me, especially the shorter of them, the second in order. After that I could do nothing but go on. I read Xavi's documentation. It was a series of notes and recollections, a very long series at that, the kind a journalist would compile in researching a story. It told a remarkable human story, long and ultimately tragic. For all that he might appear to be now, and for all that he might possess, this man has borne a share of ill fortune that would have broken a lesser being.

Of course, I knew some of the tale; so did most of our city, and a good chunk of the rest of the country. It couldn't be otherwise, as Xavier

———— THE LONER ————

Aislado was his country's leading journalist in his time. Yet behind those headlines, behind those 'exclusive' tags, there was a secret world, one that's been hidden until now from everyone who didn't live in it, or through it. I was amused, surprised and, finally, shocked, as I read his largely unreported saga, and I'm sure it will have much the same effect on you.

I've done my best to tell this life story in the manner in which Xavi hoped I would. Mind you, I haven't followed his instructions slavishly. I wasn't content simply to be his sub-editor. In preparing this work, I've spoken to those who were part of the Aislado years, those who've survived, that is: the recently retired John Fisher, his mentor at first then his right-hand man, Tommy Partridge, his friend and counsellor, Alexander Draper, who helped set him on the road, Simon Sureda, a distinguished scribe whose example Xavi set out to follow, and of course Bob Skinner. Much of what they've told me has found its way into the following pages, which include a series of objective interjections among Xavi's account of his life. Some are direct quotes, from my own knowledge, others are conversations that I've assumed took place, while being fairly certain of their accuracy.

Xavier Aislado has been many contradictions in his time. He has been gentle, yet his physical appearance, his genetic inheritance, has made him seem, unknowingly, fearsome. He has been naturally kind and caring, and yet he has been unintentionally cruel, by failing through his single-mindedness to appreciate the needs of others. He has been a great reporter who shone light upon many scandals and many crimes, and yet he has been blind to those closest to him.

He has been the keeper of the flame of truth for many, and yet he has dwelt alone in darkness.

This is his life.

One

There was a time when a few of the sun's rays shone into my life.

There was a time when I supposed that people were inherently good. There was a time when I lived in a world where my first instinct was to trust, rather than suspect. There was a time when naivety was an endearing trait rather than a potentially lethal character flaw.

There was a time in my schooldays, in a different life, when I was almost gregarious, and my friends laughed at the irony of my name, Xavier Aislado, or in English, Xavi the Loner. Now I have few friends beyond my own front door. Because I seek none. Because friends ultimately mean hurt and I've known too much of that. Believe me, I'm Xavi Aislado now . . . in every respect, locked in my own world, because that's the way I want it.

I was given my prophetic name by my dad, a childhood refugee from the Spanish Civil War who grew up in wartime Scotland and stayed there for a while after that, since his father had been violently anti-Franco and was in exile for a lifetime . . . either his or Franco's: the former as it turned out, since he died in November 1961, three months before I was born. Grandpa was Xavi the First. (The Catalan 'X' is pronounced 'Ch', by the way, as in 'Chocolate'.) My dad was christened Josep-Maria, but the second of those forenames remained his secret, in Scotland, at any rate. There, everyone outside the family, and these days that means almost everyone but me, calls him Joe, the name he was given when he arrived from Spain as a four-year-old, in 1936.

I can't remember a time in my formative years when I truly liked him. My dad was born a son-of-a-bitch, and he'll probably be that way till the day he dies. He's perversely proud of it too. He says that his

nature was his gift from my grandmother. I have memories of her from my infancy. They are of a grim-faced old harridan . . . when we are very young, every adult is very old . . . with a scowl like a black flag draped across a coffin. Those images are still imprinted in my memory, sixteen years after she went to dance the great Sardana in the sky. They make me smile now, for I have others, the product of acquired knowledge in our later years.

My dad inherited some of Grandma Paloma's (that's what I called her from infancy) thunderous nature, and the running of Grandpa Xavi's business. I'm told that the old guy called himself a socialist, and that's what put him on the Caudillo's death list. Whatever the truth of that, like all Catalans, he was a capitalist in his heart and soul. Grandma told me, when I was ten, once she had decided that I was ready to absorb her wisdom, that he made his first fortune by opening a string of hotels in the cities of Girona, Figueras and Olot, then selling them to an idiot French investor in 1935, the year before the Civil War erupted. As I say, that's what she told me; I didn't learn the whole truth until several years later.

Grandpa Xavi and his little family unit arrived in Edinburgh with enough money to buy another hotel, but instead, grasping the essential nature of the people amongst whom they had chosen to settle, he went into the pub trade, and as a result, became even more prosperous than he had been in Spain, while Europe tore itself apart. By the time he died, he owned a chain of forty-five boozers across central Scotland, and a small brewery which supplied them. Yes, that cunning old fox had the foresight to anticipate the real ale craze . . . or so I thought for much of my life.

After he was gone, my dad developed the business shrewdly, carefully and very profitably, for fifteen years. One of his first acts was to sell the brewery to a couple of Asian entrepreneurs for an eye-watering profit. He used the money to double the number of outlets in the pub chain, and to move them upmarket, with carpets on the floor rather than cigarette ends and empty crisp packets. After that, he kept on expanding;

his business philosophy has always been: ‘To settle for what you have is to embrace stagnation.’

I knew nothing of this as I was growing up. I have very few early childhood memories of him; he seemed to be always at work, leaving me in the care of my mother, a quiet unsmiling woman from Falkirk, maiden name Mary Inglis. I didn’t know it at the time, not surprisingly, but she had been a clerk in my grandfather’s office when the eye of the son and heir had fallen upon her, followed by the rest of him. Yes, there was a lot I didn’t know.

I didn’t want for anything as a kid. That wasn’t down to my dad, who was never there, or my mother, who was entirely indifferent to me and gave me nothing but the occasional slap across the legs when I annoyed her. No, it was all Grandma’s doing. She was a proud woman, with a small circle of acquaintances from the Catholic Church, with which she had a fitful relationship over the years, and from the Scots-Italian merchant community . . . the closest she could find to Spanish, I suppose . . . that thrives in Edinburgh, and she made damn sure that I lived up to the image of our family that she wanted to project. At her insistence, I was enrolled in George Watson’s primary department when I was five, over my mother’s fairly limp protestation that she had wanted me to be educated in the state system. I wasn’t bothered either way; school was the means for me to meet other kids, as I hadn’t until then, and I didn’t care whether they wore fancy uniforms and spoke nicely or were snot-nosed, with their arses hanging out of their trousers.

Watson’s was a relief to me, although I was too young to recognise it as such. For a start, it got me out of our loveless house in Merchiston. (It didn’t take me long to realise that’s what it was. The very first time my best class friend Bobby Hannah took me home for tea, aged seven, I knew that the way his folks behaved towards each other was the way it was supposed to happen.)

I did very well at school, almost from the start. I might have lagged behind in English initially, thanks to Grandma Paloma’s habit of speaking Spanish and Catalan to my dad and me . . . and even to my

mother when she was reproving her for something . . . but I caught up quickly, and I was always ahead of the game numerically.

I found that I was popular too; it didn't mean anything to me at the time, but looking back, I must have had something going for me. Nobody ever bullied me, or made jokes about my name. Mind you, I was a big lad even then. When teams were picked for playground football, I was an early choice, until eventually I became one of the pickers. In truth, I sailed through junior school, and when I won the medal for top boy in the final year, nobody seemed surprised. I thought that might have drawn a small smile from Grandma Paloma, but it didn't; she seemed to take it as a fair return on her investment, no more.

My mother wasn't around to congratulate me. When I was nine, she gave up; I assumed it was in the face of my dad's disinterest and Grandma Paloma's undisguised contempt. I arrived home from school one October afternoon and she was gone, back to Falkirk, back to the dour and ill-tempered Inglis grandparents whom I had met eight times in my life, at their place on each occasion, for they were never invited to Merchiston. For a couple of years she sent me birthday cards, then she gave up on that too. For the rest of my childhood, she was lost to me; not that I missed her.

There was one thing that Grandma deigned to teach me herself, and that was music. She had been raised in the era of real home entertainment, the kind that you make for yourself without the aid of computer game designers or television production companies. She was an accomplished pianist, and began to teach me almost as soon as I was old enough to sit on the stool and reach the keys of the baby grand in the music room of our big house in Merchiston. My dad was tone deaf; when I was eleven years old, she told me, once I had attained a standard of proficiency that satisfied her, that I was a second chance, given her by God, to pass on her skill. Actually, He'd had help, but I was too young to point that out to her at that time . . . indeed maybe I was never old enough! She taught me to play in her own classical style, but when

I was twelve, I discovered Thelonius Monk, and that was it for Chopin.

In 1975, when I was thirteen years old, Franco died.

You should understand this; I had never heard of the Generalissimo until his death was reported on telly, and Grandma Paloma roared, ‘Yes!’ from deep within her armchair.

‘Who’s he?’ I asked.

She glared at me. ‘The Devil,’ she replied, ‘gone to hell.’

I remember thinking, but being smart enough to keep it to myself, that there was an element of contradiction in what she had said, since by definition, if he’d been Satan he’d been there all along.

My dad always played his cards very close to his chest . . . literally, as one of his old poker buddies told me many years later. He sat tight for two years after the old Caudillo was put in the ground, watching as King Juan Carlos led Spain to democracy. And then, with no warning, without a single leak to Scotland’s ferret-like business press, he sold the booming pub chain, one hundred and twenty outlets by then, to a major UK brewer for a sum that might have made Grandpa Xavi burst out of his grave with pride . . . or perhaps that would have been astonishment.

As I should have expected in my family, I found out about the sale at school. I had just started my fourth year in Watson’s secondary when the news broke, with a bang that was loud enough to make the front page of the *Scotsman*. Scott Livingstone, another of my class pals, although not as close as Bobby, thrust a copy of the paper into my hand as we walked into morning assembly, folded so that the story was all I could see.

‘You’re a dark horse, Xavi,’ he said, loud enough to draw a few others towards us, including the delectable Grace Starshine, a blonde Jewish girl whose Hebrew name had been anglicised a few generations before.

Grace and I had started school in the same class, on the same day. We were both chubby kids aged five; she was as fair as I was dark. But we grew at the same pace, shed our puppy fat at the same time and entered the adolescent world together. Grace hung with the girls and I

hung with the boys, until the time for kids' play was past, and then quite naturally we hung with each other. A few years later, Bobby remarked that we had been joined at the eyes from the start. He was a good objective judge, for he had no interest in Grace himself, nor in any other girl, or woman.

As I took the paper, I stared at the headline, then scanned the first paragraph. (I was on the editorial committee of the school's semi-official newspaper, and knew even then that every good story stands on its intro.) 'Fucking hell,' I gasped as it sank in, drawing a tut from Grace. 'If you think I'm secretive, mate,' I told Scott, 'you want to meet my old man. This is news to me, and I've just had breakfast with him and my grandma.'

'They never said?' Grace exclaimed, forgiving me for the first of many expletives that I was to utter in her presence.

I shook my head. 'Not a fu . . .' I strangled the second before it emerged. 'Not a word.'

'So when do you think you'll be going?' Scott asked.

'Going?'

'Read on. It says your family's moving back to Spain.' He glanced out of the school hall window at the September rain. 'Lucky sod.'

'You reckon?' I muttered, as I thrust the paper back at him.

I wasn't at my best that day. It was all I could do to keep from bolting out of assembly and running all the way to my dad's office. But it wasn't his office any more, was it? He'd sold the bloody place, and as I saw it, he'd sold my inheritance, without a murmur in my direction. So, instead, I festered through classes until mid-afternoon, when I cut rugby practice (rugby was the winter team game for boys at Watson's), with the approval of a sympathetic games master, and walked the short distance back to Merchiston, my mood growing darker with every stride.

As I stalked up the drive, I saw my dad's Mercedes in the garage: he'd left the up-and-over door open. There was another car, parked to the side, one I hadn't seen there before.

Grandma Paloma spotted me coming, from her upstairs eyrie in the small sitting room off her bedroom. She rapped on the window which overlooked the front garden, and beckoned to me, a summons to her presence. As I'd grown older, the old lady and I (actually, she was only seventy-three at that time, but in Scotland she always dressed like an ancient) had developed a degree of mutual respect. She might have been stern, but I recognised that she was fair with it, and maybe even kind, although she'd never have admitted it if I'd put that accusation to her.

She was no miser, that was for sure. Whenever there was shopping to be done for me, clothes, for example, or other school stuff, she took care of it. We'd get in a taxi and head for Jenners, or Aitken and Niven, where she had accounts, and that would be that. (I didn't set foot in Marks and Spencer until I was eighteen years old.) She made my twice yearly appointments with the dentist, and took me there until I was old enough to go by myself, and could be trusted to turn up. She handed out the pocket money too. Periodically she'd ask me how much my school friends were getting, I'd pick the highest weekly amount that I knew (Scott Livingstone was my usual benchmark; he claimed to be market leader in that department) and she'd give me a little more than whatever it was, from a stash that she kept in her sitting room. As a result I was always flush; there wasn't a Stones, Clash or Sex Pistols album that I didn't have. (Looking back, I suspect that my incipient dark side had made me reject the clean-cut freshness of the Bee Gees, the Eagles and the like, for their anarchic rivals.) She paid the domestics from the same cash box. We'd always had a gardener, and since my mother had left, a cleaner. My dad could have afforded a cook, but that was out of the question. Grandma Paloma was old-style Spanish: the kitchen was hers and hers alone. Not even her son was allowed in there, although I got to watch, and help, occasionally.

I knocked lightly on her door . . . she expected that, even when she'd summoned me . . . and went in at her call. She was standing in front of the window, looking up at me, but not by much. Even in her seventies

her back was ramrod straight. Me? At fifteen I was six feet one, on my way to being one centimetre over two metres tall.

‘You’ve seen the newspapers, I suppose,’ she began. She spoke English, and so I knew we were in for a serious discussion, not the household chat.

‘Yes, Grandma Paloma,’ I replied, ‘I’ve seen them.’

‘I thought so, for you arrive home with a face like thunder.’ Coming from her, I took that as a compliment.

‘He never told me, Grandma,’ I said . . . or maybe I growled.

‘That was his choice. I might have done differently, but I wouldn’t tell him what to do. It’s grown-ups’ business, and you’re still only a child.’

I bridled at the word. I was a teenage hormonal maelstrom, capable of some very grown-up feelings, especially when it came to Grace Starshine. ‘I’m fifteen,’ I protested.

‘Exactly,’ she snorted.

At some point Grandma Paloma and I had crossed a line, on the other side of which intimidation didn’t work. I sensed my dad was a little afraid of her, but I wasn’t; I knew his mother better than he did. ‘Exactly nothing,’ I shot back. ‘It said in the *Scotsman* that we’re moving to Spain. I don’t want to.’

Her natural frown turned into the scowl that I’d known since infancy. ‘Xavi, what you want is not the most important thing in the world.’

‘It is to me.’

‘Then you are selfish, boy,’ she snapped. ‘Your father did not choose to come here, neither did your grandfather, and neither did I. We were forced to, by the devil Franco. Now he’s gone, and with King Juan Carlos, Spain is safe for us again, so we can go back.’

‘But I’m not Spanish!’ I protested. ‘I’m Scottish; I was born here and all my friends were born here. I’ve got a British passport,’ I added for good measure. That was true; I’d been on a school cruise in the Mediterranean two years before, and had visited Rome.

‘You are your father’s son,’ she said stiffly. ‘That makes you Spanish.’

‘I’m my mother’s son as well, and that makes me Scottish.’ That was the wrong thing to say.

‘Your mother will not be mentioned in this house,’ Grandma Paloma hissed. ‘She was happy to leave it.’

‘And . . .’ An older version of me tried to retort that I was capable of making the same choice, but she was right; the child that remained in fifteen-year-old Xavi Aislado couldn’t get the words out. All I could do was glare back at her, knowing that I couldn’t win. Much of what I grew into may have come from Grandma Paloma, but at that stage I was still a shadow of her.

‘Your father has made his decision, *nino*,’ she said, more gently. ‘He is with his lawyer now, telling him to sell this house. We are going to live near Girona, and we may also have a place by the sea.’

‘And me?’

As I asked the question, I heard knuckles tap the door behind me. ‘Come, Josep,’ Grandma called.

My dad stepped into the room, unsmiling, stocky, three-piece-suited. He looked me up and down . . . no, probably just up, since I was four inches taller than him, even then. ‘You’re angry,’ he said, simply, in the almost-but-not-quite-refined Scots accent that he’d acquired in his childhood. ‘You’re standing there like you want to banjo somebody.’

‘I don’t want us to go to Spain, Dad,’ I repeated for his benefit.

‘So what do you want? Do you want to move in with those folk in Falkirk? Your mother’s married a fucking policeman.’ That was complete news to me. He nodded a quick apology, for his language, to his mother; it was a token that I’d seen a few hundred times before, and learned myself, the same gesture I’d made to Grace a few hours before. ‘Maybe he’ll take you under his wing,’ he added. I said nothing but I must have blanched, for he gave me a grin that might have been a sneer. ‘No, I didn’t think so,’ he said.

The half-smile melted. ‘Here’s the deal, Xavi,’ he continued, bluntly. ‘You’re in your fourth year, and you’ve got exams coming up. If I

withdraw you from Watson's now, then all the money that Grandma Paloma's made me pour into the place will have gone down the crapper. So you'll stay on there, as a boarder. I've checked with the headmaster; you can do that. You'll have your own accounts at Jenners and at that other place. You'll get the same allowance your grandma gives you, with a bit more for books and stuff. Pass your O grades, and you'll stay on to do your Highers. After that, we'll talk about university.'

'In Spain?'

'Not unless you want that. As I'm sure you've told Grandma Paloma, you're Scottish. Fuck me . . . sorry, *Madre* . . . so am I, to all intents and purposes.'

'Then why are you going?'

'Because I promised my father, before you were born; he made it a condition of his will that when the time was right I'd take your grandma back to Spain, and he made me sign a declaration that I'd do that.'

'But not me? I wasn't mentioned?'

'I just said; you weren't born at that time. Plus you'd been conceived on the wrong side of the blanket. He didn't give a fuck . . . sorry, Ma . . . about you.'

And that, I suppose, is when Xavi Aislado started to live up to his name.

‘How did a miserable cunt like him ever get to be managing editor of a paper like this, Mr Fisher?’

‘Mitch, son, if you listened to him, rather than throwing a paddy every time he rips a piece off you, you might just make a journalist. But if you carry on like that, then next time he tells me he wants to fire you, I’m not going to say a word to talk him out of it. You just got your arse kicked because you filed a story yesterday that we put on page three when the Scotsman and the Herald ran their versions as page-one lead. We are pissing against a hurricane like we always have; we’re the Saltire, the independent voice of reason that strikes a balance between the two establishment Scottish blacktops. We don’t just have to be as good as the opposition; we have to be better. That piece of yours will have them both laughing their rocks off at us.’

‘I didn’t put it on page three, Aislado did. The story was okay. The company’s gone bust and the workforce is on the dole. That’s the important part.’

‘That’s Mister Aislado to you, chum. Your story was deficient in one major fact . . . Mister Connor. The business in question, AlgeBra, the one that’s just gone belly up with the loss of two hundred and fifty jobs, is owned by a guy who’s the subject of a Canadian arrest warrant, and who hasn’t been seen since he was bundled into a car outside his house in Toronto last Sunday afternoon, by two guys who were definitely not the Mounties. You missed that.’

‘The police never told me!’

‘They didn’t tell the other papers either. They found out because their people followed up properly, and made inquiries in Canada about the guy. You made yours in our cuttings library. Now I’ll answer your question. Xavi Aislado got where he is because he’s the best journalist I’ve ever met in my fucking life.’

‘Aye, sure, plus his old man owns the place.’

‘And you know why? Because Xavi made him buy it after that Russian bastard ripped off the pension fund and had the banks about to close us down. Xavi didn’t have to do that. He’s turned down better jobs than the

one he's got now. He could have gone anywhere, even to bloody Spain. But he didn't; he stayed here and he leaned on his dad . . . a guy he's always fought with, by the way . . . so that ungrateful wee shites like you could stay in work.'

'And you too.'

'Aye, and especially me. I'm sixty-two years old, boy, and my pension was stolen by that fucking Russian. Remember what happened? No, maybe you don't, maybe you were too wrapped up in yourself even then. Xavi found out that something was going on, and he did an investigative job on his own boss. Then he ran the story, in the man's own fucking newspaper, no less. The Russian did a runner to North Cyprus, and the finance director went to jail. All the assets had been stripped out of the company, and out of the pension fund; the Saltire was bust. Then, just when it looked like we'd all be out on the street, InterMedia Girona stepped in and bought the show off the receiver. They couldn't save our pensions, though, so I still need a job and I need Xavi and his dad to make the profits that are going to fill up the fund again, so that maybe, just maybe, one day I can retire. Now fuck off out of my sight and think about being a proper reporter while you've still got the chance.'

'Okay, John, I get the message. You sound like you and he are really good friends.'

'Xavi wouldn't say that. Xavi has colleagues, and that's the way he wants it.' But he calls me Jock, he thought. Only my friends do that. 'You called him miserable, and I can see why. But he's not. He's sad, the saddest man I know, in fact.'

'What's he got to be sad about? He's a millionaire's son and he runs a successful newspaper.'

'None of that makes you happy, lad, not by itself. Now fuck off and get to work. I mean it.'

ISLAND OF BONES

IMOGEN ROBERTSON

Cumbria, 1783. A broken heritage; a secret history...

This gripping historical page-turner about a disturbed tomb reunites forensic duo, Harriet Westerman and Gabriel Crowther, who set out to uncover its deadly secrets.

The tomb of the first Earl of Greta should have lain undisturbed on its island of bones for three hundred years. When idle curiosity opens the stone lid, however, inside is one body too many. Gabriel Crowther's family bought the Greta's land long ago, and has suffered its own bloody history. His brother was hanged for murdering their father, the Baron of Keswick, and Crowther has chosen comfortable seclusion and anonymity over estate and title for thirty years. But the call of the mystery brings him home at last.

Travelling with forthright Mrs Harriet Westerman, who is escaping her own tragedy, Crowther finds a little town caught between new horrors and old, where ancient ways challenge modern justice. And against the wild and beautiful backdrop of fells and water, Crowther discovers that his past will not stay buried.



Hardback 14 April 2011 £19.99

<http://imogenrobertson.wordpress.com>

headline

www.crimefilesinternational.com

ISLAND
OF
BONES



I M O G E N
R O B E R T S O N

PROLOGUE

Evening of 3 February 1751, Tower of London

There was a peculiar hush around the Tower the night before an execution. The mist from the river shushed the streets and people moved quietly. The guards nodded to each other, stamped their feet and wished for dawn, then thought of the man in the Tower; they looked at the light showing faintly from his rooms and shivered again.

The fire could do little against the damp air of a February night, and nor could the wine warm the two men keeping vigil in the white-washed cell. They had been silent a long time. It was clear they were brothers – they had the same hooded eyes, the same slender figure – but they were turned away from each other, thinking their own thoughts. The younger of the two, Charles, glanced sideways at his brother without turning his head. Lucius Adair Penhaligon, 2nd Baron Keswick, was shivering and flushed; his silk waistcoat was undone and his hands were working one over the other as if he were trying to wash something from them. Charles looked back into the yellow flames, a little nauseated.

The fire cracked and Adair started at the noise; then, as if woken suddenly, he looked around at the plain walls with an air of disbelief.

‘What a little life I have had, Charles,’ he said. ‘And now I am afraid to lose it.’

Charles picked up the decanter and filled his brother’s glass again. His own was still full. He set it back down on the table between them and returned to his contemplation of the fire without replying.

‘How can it be I shall be dead tomorrow at this time? I cannot imagine it – I cannot.’ Adair then downed the contents of his glass. His voice quivered. ‘Can nothing be done? Can *you* do nothing?’

Charles shook his head and heard his brother begin to snivel.

‘I did not murder him, Charles!’ Adair shook his head slowly from side to side, as if trying to shift some weight across the floor of his mind. ‘No one believes me, but I did not, I swear I did not. Where is Margaret?’

‘You have had her letter. She is in Ireland now.’

Adair looked around the room as if the matter was not settled, as if their sister might appear in the shadows. ‘Yes, of course. And has no one else come, Charles? Have none of my friends come to sit with me tonight?’

‘No.’

The sound of his weeping grew louder, and Charles wished he could block out the noise. The stones around the fire were charred black with the ghosts of other flames. Charles watched, willing the sparks to fly free of the grate and consume it all – his brother, himself, then the whole city – and leave not a trace of them or their history behind them. The flames continued feeble and sullen. Very well, if he could not burn away his past, he would abandon it. Once the estate was sold, he would sign himself into the student roll of the University of Wittenberg and lose himself there and in his studies; after that, Padua perhaps. Then he could forget the gothic horrors of his family, the blood and money. Finding himself thinking of his own future, he glanced back at his brother. The sobbing had eased. Adair wiped his face and snuffled into his handkerchief.

‘What will they say of me when I am gone, Charles? Will they say anything, as they lose the money they won from me at the card table? Perhaps they will laugh. They used to laugh at me. I would be so sure of winning, I wore my coat turned inside out for luck, and each night they would ask if I were certain of my success, then laugh at me – but I *was* sure, I was sure every time. I only needed a hundred, and it seemed like such a simple thing. Oh God! Will it hurt, Charles?’

Island of Bones

Charles turned away. 'If the hangman knows his job, it will be quick.'

Adair scrambled suddenly to his feet and ran to the corner of the little room where a jug and ewer waited and bent over it. Charles heard the splatter of his vomit on the porcelain, the dry heavings of his stomach. After some moments Adair returned to the fire to find his glass full again. He could hardly hold it to his lips, so violent was his trembling.

'Charles, do you think there is a God? The priest tells me I shall be saved if I repent.'

His brother did not answer him.

'You think I am a coward?'

'You fear what every man fears.'

Adair suddenly stood again and threw his glass with a cry. It smashed, and the last of the wine dripped down the wall.

'For God's sake! Will you not weep for your brother, Charles? How are you so cold? I was no better a brother to Margaret, yet her letter was so sodden I can hardly read it. Do I not deserve your tears? Can you weep? Are you a man at all?' Adair dropped back into his seat as if that small act of outrage had exhausted him entirely. When he spoke again, it was as if he was talking to himself. 'I did not kill him – and yet no one believes me. It was the other man, the man with a hundred pounds. It was not my fault. Why does no one believe me?'

Charles stared at his cuffs and would not look up, willing the time to pass.

'Oh, leave me to the priest, Charles. He will weep, if only because it is his pleasure to see a man pray.'

Charles stood and turned towards the door.

'Charles?' Adair tumbled out of his seat and on to the brick floor at his brother's feet, grabbing hold of his hand. Charles felt the soft damp flesh on his own and was revolted, but Adair's grip was too desperate for him to be able to pull free. 'I swear I am innocent of this! The old man wanted to see him alone, and I needed the money – what was the harm? Father was dead when I found him! I took the knife out

of him, but he was gone, then I ran. I was afraid. Oh God! I am innocent and now they are going to kill me, and you shall let them. Why don't you believe me?'

Charles looked down for a moment, then crouched beside him. 'I don't believe you, Addie, because you have always been a bully and a liar. I don't believe you because you were found with the knife in your hand, and confessed the crime . . .'

'I only meant I had *caused* it by arranging for the man to meet him! Please, Charles, I am begging you . . .'

Charles felt Adair's fingers kneading his own.

'I don't believe you because you had the money you stole from our father's notecase in your coat. It was bloody, Addie, our father's blood was on the bills.'

'I found him, and I pulled the knife out and then I meant to throw the money away so it got bloody from my hand . . .'

his voice was whining, 'but I needed it, Charles! I could not throw it away. It was the other man, the—'

'The man whom no one has seen.' Charles's voice was hard. 'No one, Addie! The man you only conjured in your mind when you found you had neither the courage to take your own life, nor stand trial for the crime. If you had not retracted your confession, there might have been some mercy for you.'

'But I didn't do it!'

His grip relaxed. Charles pulled one hand free and put it around his brother's neck, then with his thumb lifted Adair's face till they could look each other in the eye. Adair's face was soaked with tears and his nose dripped; his eyes were bloodshot and a thread of bile hung from his lip.

'Yes, you did, Addie. May God forgive you, and I shall forgive you for it if I can.'

He let Adair's head drop again then stood, reached into his pocket and drew out two gold guineas. These he placed carefully before his brother on the cold floor. 'Give these to the hangman when you reach the scaffold. Goodbye, Addie.'

Island of Bones

He opened the door to the outer room where two guards looked up from their cards, then turned back. Adair remained kneeling on the floor, the fire making silver on the silk of his embroidered waistcoat, gold in the expensive weave of his britches, jewels across his close-cut coat with its porcelain buttons. He was staring at the coins in front of him. The only thing left in the world he could buy was a quick death. Charles closed the door and was escorted out into the dark and stench of the city.

The following day, Tyburn on the edges of London

Thomas Goffe, a rather nervous gentleman in a bad wig, shot to his feet.

‘Carmichael! Over here, man!’

Such was the crush on the stands that Goffe had to resort to standing on the rickety bench and waving his hat to attract the attention of his friend.

He was spotted, acknowledged, and soon joined by an extremely handsome man who carried himself with such an air of superiority that his neighbours almost climbed on top of each other to give him all the room they could.

The open fields below them were thronged with a great mass of people. Here in the stands a considerable number of gentlemen sat tightly together and chattered with a slightly feverish excitement, but those who could not afford this elevated view joined the swarm of people below, churning the field to a mud bath. Hawkers wandered through the crowd selling chap-books of the most popular last confessions for a penny, others offered felled pastries from covered baskets. All around, a competing chorus of street singers declared their territory with their damp lungs like cockerels and stamped their feet against the cold as they sang. Jugglers and fire-eaters sweated for pennies at the edges of the crowd and a little army of pickpockets danced among the unwary for handkerchieves and shillings.

It was carnival.

‘Where did you get that monstrosity?’ Carmichael asked. Goffe was confused. He touched his hat; Carmichael gave a tiny shake of his head. Goffe then touched the white curls of his wig, and with his face falling into childlike dismay, watched Carmichael raise an eyebrow.

‘Thompsons on the Strand, Carmichael. You recommended them yourself.’

‘Did I? Their standards have declined considerably.’ Goffe dropped his chin into his collar. ‘How long have you been here?’

‘Lord, an hour at least, or I should never have found a place.’ The pride of having done so brightened Goffe. He dragged out from between his feet a basket, which he uncovered with a flourish to show three promising-looking bottles and a number of cold pies. Carmichael smiled, and Goffe went a little pink as he handed one of each to his friend. Carmichael was an easy man to disappoint. ‘So, did you see him?’

Carmichael drank deeply from the bottle before replying. ‘A glimpse, no more. What’s to see? A landau getting more and more covered with the muck the people throw at it, a dozen men-in-arms, and a coffin. I came the back way. The crowd is pressing all along the route from the Tower. He’ll be here in half an hour.’

Goffe gave a little high-pitched giggle and bit into his pie. ‘How will he take it, you think, Carmichael? You must be willing to guess, having been his friend so long.’

Carmichael brushed flakes of pastry from his sleeve. ‘Yes, poor Lucius Adair. I once met his father, you know. Lord Keswick was a clever man with money perhaps, but brutalised by all those years spent beyond the reach of civilisation. If he had been *my* father, I might have killed him.’

Goffe slapped his thigh so hard, gentlemen on the bench above heard the vibration. ‘Oh, oh Carmichael! You could teach the Devil himself new tricks!’ He slid his eyes over Carmichael’s fine blue coat and wished he had one like it. ‘You’ll miss Adair’s pockets though,’ he added quietly.

Carmichael shrugged and sucked at the bottle again before looking up and becoming suddenly still. Goffe noticed the fixity of his attention.

Island of Bones

He craned his neck to look the same way, swallowing once or twice. 'What is it? Are they coming?'

'No, not vet. See that man on the end of the bench, three below with his back to us?'

Goffe wiped his mouth and peered. 'What, thin fella? Looks like a parson? He'll get no kind of view from there.'

'That man, my dear Goffe,' drawled Carmichael, 'is Charles Penhaligon now, and will be the new Lord Keswick before I have finished this pie.'

'No!' Goffe said in delight. 'The brother! Did you ever meet him then?'

'Once or twice. An odd sort of creature. He can play the gentleman, but always seemed a little touched to me. Cuts up dead animals and calls it natural philosophy.'

Goffe shuddered. 'Disgusting – the whole bunch of them. Oh look! They've spotted the carriage. Not long now till we see how nicely Adair dances the Tyburn jig.'

The excitement of the crowd had deepened, and as the first of the spectators caught sight of the soldiers leading the procession from the Tower a wave of jeers and whistles broke and rolled over them. The jugglers and singers paused in their work and struggled for a view with the rest. Goffe noticed a pretty, hard-eyed woman near the bottom of the stands, her skirts tucked up. Her hands were clenched into fists and her red mouth was open and snarling. Goffe licked his lips.

'It does bring out the whores, doesn't it?'

Carmichael nodded. 'The hanging of a nobleman? Why, of course. High holiday for us all.'

Charles did have something of the parson in his manner. It was his dark-coloured clothing and the severe planes of his face, his cold eyes that made even those passing him in the street feel examined, judged, and keen to pass on. A woman, swinging her fat hips down from the highest benches, also noticed him, his hands lying empty on his lap

before him, and took the chance, as she reached the lower level on which he sat, to thrust one of her pamphlets between them.

‘That’s a penny, lover.’ He looked up at her, and she was struck by the bright blue of his eyes in his pale face. A firm chin, dusted with dark stubble. Sharp bones in his cheeks, a young man. ‘Every word gospel – all writ down at the trial. Horrid murder! He sliced up the maid too, you know. Near killed her.’ She tried a wink.

‘I do not want it,’ he said.

‘Come on, sweetheart. Only a penny.’ She touched her hair.

He turned his eyes towards her again and something in them made her step back; they had a violent glitter to them. ‘I do not want it.’

‘All right, lover,’ she said, plucking it from between his fingertips and hurrying over to a red-faced countryman who held his coin in the air as summons. She couldn’t help looking back at him though. His stillness was so strange in the fevered flurry of the crowd.

The thin man folded his hands on his lap again and studied his cuffs. The roar of the crowd told him that the coach was approaching. There were jeers and laughter flowing from every side. Then a hush fell, spreading out from the gallows like a wind. Charles lifted his chin.

His brother Lucius Adair stood on the back of the hangman’s cart looking small at this distance. In front of him stood the priest from the jail. Addie’s lips were moving as if in continual prayer, then he lifted his voice.

‘Good people . . . he began’ Charles wondered if Addie had spotted him in the crowd. No matter. He had said he would attend and he had kept his promise. His eyes were fixed on the little figure. Addie had always liked to be looked at. Well, he had his wish now. ‘I go to my death a guilty man.’ There was a great roar, and Adair had to strain to make himself heard again. ‘But not of the crime of which I am accused.’ Stamping and swearing from all quarters. Charles had not expected him to admit it now. The crowd hallooed and mocked. Charles’s contempt for his brother was absolute. He had made their family an entertainment, like a chained bear. There had been a woman playing

Island of Bones

a hurdy-gurdy in the crowd as Charles found his seat. He thought now that fairground music would follow him for his whole life.

His brother continued: 'I have sinned. I blame no man but myself, and so may God have mercy on my soul!'

Only at the last did his voice quaver and rise. The crowd was divided between cheers and curses. Loud laughter rocked and swayed over the people in places. Addie offered his hands to be tied and seemed to stumble a little. Charles swallowed. There was a man in the crowd who kept looking at him. Escape was impossible for Adair now, but might it be possible for Charles to flee? He could abandon the title that would fall on him when the hangman had done his work, and choose another name. Yes, it was possible.

The hangman had to hold Adair steady and whispered something to him as he slipped first the hood and then the rope around over his head. To Charles, it seemed at once as if the hood had covered his own face. He saw the fierce triangle of the gallows, the thousands around him, but at the same time it seemed that everything had disappeared — that he saw only black cloth, felt the pinch of the ropes on his wrists behind him, the weight of the slack noose round his neck, his own panting breath drawing the weave to his lips. Its stink that of the sweat of other frightened men.

The rope snapped tight and Charles felt his own breath choked out of his throat as his brother's legs began kicking free in the air. He put his hand to his collar and struggled to breathe. All around him was this impossible noise, the elation of the crowd. Its roar became one with the rushing of his blood in his ears. His mouth tasted bitter. The hangman grabbed onto Adair's legs and pulled hard. Charles felt his throat constrict still further; it was as if some invisible beast had its thumbs pressing down on the hyoid bone of his neck and was weighting for the snap. Two minutes, perhaps three. All eternity.

The struggling ceased, the people cheered and whistled, and Charles gasped in air again. He lowered his face, waiting for his heart to slow. The body was cut down, and at once the hangman began to divide the

rope into portions and sell them to those in the crowd who had managed to push close enough to reach him.

When Charles could look up again, he saw the body being rolled into the coffin. A man he knew vaguely from the College of Anatomy took a seat on its lid like a dog guarding a bone. Would the men he knew feel troubled about dissecting the body of his brother? Perhaps a little, briefly. But bodies were valuable. He had taken no steps to prevent their taking it. Adair had been wearing the same buff coat and silk waistcoat he had worn the previous evening; they would belong to the hangman now.

Charles took a deep breath and stood. Already the crowd was thinning out. The spectacle was over, so the usual day-to-day business resumed.

A man tapped him on the shoulder. ‘So that makes you Lord Keswick now, sir?’ Charles turned his blue eyes on him. ‘What?’

The man looked unsure and glanced over his shoulder to the place where Carmichael and Goffe had been sitting. ‘Fellow up there said you were the brother – the heir to all that money. It’s an ill wind, your lordship.’ He shook his head. ‘Still, that’s some bad blood to inherit.’ There was a gleam in his eye, a certain wet hunger in his lips.

Charles drew on his gloves, his hands shaking only very slightly. Interesting, the strange effects on the physical body the emotions could have. If he could draw his own blood now, at this moment, what would he find in it, he wondered.

‘They were mistaken,’ he said, looking at the man very steadily. The man’s smile faltered and he began under that gaze to look almost afraid.

‘My apologies, sir. And forgive my asking. Only natural to be curious, I’m sure you’ll agree. Such a tale.’

‘Indeed, and I pity Lord Keswick that he must be associated with it.’

‘Of course, sir. My apologies again, sir.’ Charles took a step away, but the man raised his voice. ‘Your name then, sir?’

Charles paused for a second. ‘My name is Gabriel Crowther,’ he said, and disappeared into the crowd.

The summer of 1783 was an amazing and portentous one, and full of horrible phenomena; for besides the alarming meteors and thunderstorms that affrighted many counties of this kingdom, the peculiar haze or smoky fog, that prevailed for many weeks in this island and in every part of Europe, and even beyond its limits, was a most extraordinary appearance, unlike anything known within memory of man. By my journal I find that I had noticed this strange occurrence from June 23rd to July 20th inclusive, during which the wind varied to every quarter without making any alterations in the air.

Gilbert White *Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*, 1789

The universities do not teach all things, so a doctor must seek out old wives, gypsies, sorcerers, wandering tribes, old robbers and such outlaws and take lessons from them . . . Knowledge is experience.

Theophrastus von Hohenheim (1493/4–1541), called Paracelsus

PART I

I.1

Tuesday, 1 July 1783, St Herbert's Island, Derwent Water, Cumberland

‘AN EXTRA BODY? What do you mean, an extra body?’ Mrs Hetty Briggs spoke a little more loudly than she had intended and her voice echoed in the stillness of the ruined chapel. Her steward lowered his head. He could not think of what else to add. They were silent a moment, and the hot wind that had so troubled them this summer shook the trees together. In spite of the warmth, Mrs Briggs shivered. She touched her steward’s sleeve and said more quietly, ‘My apologies, Gribben. You had better show me, I think.’

Turning away from him, she remembered the lady and gentleman who had accompanied her here to this little island, part of her husband’s estate amongst the lakes and hills of Cumberland. They had stood a little apart from her while she spoke to her man, but were now frankly staring at her. The gentleman was the local magistrate, Mr Sturgess, and Mrs Briggs was suddenly very glad indeed that he had decided to come with them. The lady, very beautifully dressed for a trip across the lake and a visit to a ruin, was her house-guest for the summer, the Vizegräfin Margaret von Bolsenheim. Her lips were slightly parted and there was a shimmer in her eye.

‘That is,’ Mrs Briggs added, ‘perhaps you should show us all.’

* * *

Mrs Briggs had always considered her ownership of St Herbert's Island as accidental. It was just another feature of the estate her husband had purchased, like the walled garden behind the main house of Silverside, or the lawns that dropped down in front of it to the lake, and like them she regarded it as purely ornamental. The island was a pleasant spot for a picnic and known for its magnificent views of the surrounding hills. In addition, the ruin of the old chapel added something romantic and picturesque for visitors to the area to discover. It was known that Mrs Briggs had no objection to local people, or travellers from elsewhere, drawing their boats up onto the shingle, therefore many took advantage of her generosity and arrived sketchbooks in hand to sample the scenery. Her one nagging concern about the island had always been that the chapel, disused for a hundred years before Mr Briggs acquired the land, still contained the altar-tomb of Sir Luke de Beaufoy, 1st Earl of Greta, and his wife. There they had lain since the middle of the fifteenth century while the walls decayed around them. On the one hand Mrs Briggs did not think it right that they should be disturbed after resting over three hundred years in one place; on the other she knew the walls of the chapel must give way at some point and when they did, the tomb would be smashed and their bones ground back into the clay. That did not seem fitting either.

She had given the thought voice one evening a few days previously while playing Quadrille at Silverside with the Vizegräfin, the Vizegräfin's son, and Mr Sturgess. The Vizegräfin declared she had always thought the place absolutely perfect for a summerhouse. 'So medieval that the local people persist in calling it the Island of Bones,' she had said, laying down her cards. 'Let the First Lord Greta and his wife be moved to Crosthwaite Church – far more suitable – then they can call it something nicer. Briggs Island, perhaps,' she added, and sniggered a little into her cards. Mr Sturgess had supported the Princess wholeheartedly. The Vizegräfin's son, Felix, had contributed nothing to the conversation but a yawn.

Mrs Briggs had presumed the subject would be forgotten as the cards

Island of Bones

were laid down, but the following morning Mr Sturgess had called at Silverside to tell them that the vicar of Crosthwaite would be happy to receive the tomb and the bones it contained, and to give Sir Luke and his wife a home on consecrated ground. The Vizigräfin began to draw plans for a summerhouse. Mrs Briggs was still not convinced about the necessity of rebuilding, but at least the nagging guilt about the First Lord Greta's mortal remains would be removed, and she was hopeful that the Vizegräfin and her son would leave Silverside before she had to commit to constructing any of the gothic wonders that now decorated that noble lady's sketchpad.

The Vizegräfin moved swiftly towards the tomb, leaving Mrs Briggs to follow her. As she passed, Mrs Briggs noticed spots of colour on her guest's cheeks. She bore down on the two labourers whose efforts had finally dislodged the cover from the tomb. Thin-faced, mean-looking men, they stood behind the opened tomb like penitents with their heads lowered and their caps in their hands. The Vizegräfin's dark-blue skirts brushed over the stone flags, stirring last autumn's dead leaves. She walked with a straight back and a quick even step that had been perfected by a number of expensive dance masters in her youth, so she gave the impression of floating from one place to the next in time to some unseen music. To the men at the tomb, it seemed as if one of the prettier saints had broken free of the stained glass in Crosthwaite Church, but she aged as she approached through the shadows of ruined masonry and overhanging foliage. The young and graceful female became, as she drew closer, a woman something over forty whose dress and deportment were perhaps a little more hopeful than wise.

Mrs Briggs glanced at the effigies of Sir Luke and his wife. Their stone faces had become washed and worn with rain and snow. They looked weary and ready for a warmer bed. Their hands were held over their chests in attitudes of prayer. At the lady's feet, a greyhound was curled with its alabaster nose tucked into its tail, and its ears flat; at the gentleman's sat a tiny lion, its mane carved in carefully tumbled locks.

It reminded Mrs Briggs of the style Felix von Bolsenheim had of arranging his hair. He had avoided their party, calling his mother morbid, and taken his longbow out to hunt rabbits on the fells instead. The Lady had apple cheeks; the Lord was bearded and had a long nose. Mrs Briggs had recently donated, from the collection at Silverside Hall, a portrait of this gentleman to the new museum in Keswick. She had always felt that the portrait disapproved of her and had been glad to be rid of it, having deserted it in an upper corridor for thirty years. The painted face seemed to her always to be stiff with outrage that his lands were now in the possession of a man who had started life as a clerk.

The Vizegräfin reached the lip of the tomb and looked down into it, then gave a little screech and hastened away. Mrs Briggs approached more carefully and took in the sight with less eagerness and greater calm, Mr Sturgess at her side. There were two wooden coffins within, as had been advertised by the effigies, and though worn and rotten, their structures had held. But across the two coffins lay this extra body, a corpse incongruous even in a tomb. It was curled head to knees, its flesh turned leathery, its clothes faded, its mouth pulled wide open. There was a dry, almost sweet scent to the air. Even Mr Sturgess looked pale and Mrs Briggs so far forgot herself as to bite the side of her thumb. She thought the Vizegräfin noticed and frowned at her.

They were silent a moment. Mrs Briggs could hear the call of the lapwing on the Walla Crag, and the regular beat of the woodsman's axe in the park on the opposite side of Derwent Water.

'How very odd,' she said at last.

'What are we to do?' the Vizegräfin questioned, glancing between them. 'Mr Sturgess, as magistrate here, can you advise us? Who is this man?'

'I cannot possibly tell you, madam.' He stepped away, considering. 'This body may be nearly as ancient as those on whom he lies, or he may have died within five years. Who can say? But perhaps the body might rest at Silverside Hall while some enquiries are made, Mrs Briggs? One of our older residents may remember a man gone missing, though

Island of Bones

I myself cannot recall any such matter in my time here. If not, then I suppose Crosthwaite Church may give him a Christian burial. I cannot see what else might be done.'

'Perhaps we should summon my brother Charles,' the Vizegräfin said quietly, then, as she found the others looking at her: 'You know he has become quite renowned at ferreting all sorts of information from a body. It might interest him. Will you be so kind as to invite him, Mrs Briggs? And there is a woman, a widow now who seems to involve herself in his interests. You had better invite her too. They might arrive in time for your party if you are willing to go to the expense of an express.'

'They would be very welcome at Silverside Hall, Vizegräfin.'

'I understand from the newspapers that my brother lives in Sussex now, and goes by the name of Gabriel Crowther. The woman's name is Harriet Westerman.'

SATORI

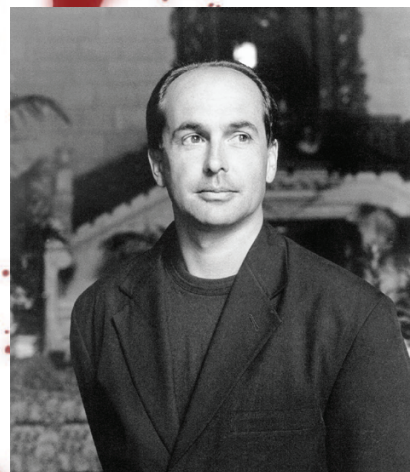
DON WINSLOW

Bond watch out, Nikolai Hel is back...

Published in 1979, Trevanian's *Shibumi* was a landmark bestseller, selling over 2.3 million copies. It is revered by many as one of the greatest thrillers of the 20th century – now Don Winslow returns with the gripping prequel, *Satori*.

In *Satori* we discover how Nikolai Hel became the world's most dangerous assassin. The novel starts with a twenty-six year-old Nikolai in solitary confinement for the murder of his mentor. He is offered the chance of freedom by his American spymaster Haverford and tasked to kill the Soviet Union's commissioner to China. From the glittering corruption of Beijing to the darkest shadows of the Vietnam jungle, his mission will sweep him through a world of chaos, violence and imminent betrayal.

Winslow renders breathless suspense with ease, delivering an intricately plotted, fast-paced thrill ride – a must-read for fans of Sam Bourne, David Baldacci and John Le Carre.



Hardback 28 April 2011 £14.99

www.donwinslow.com

headline

www.crimefilesinternational.com

SATORI

Don Winslow

A Novel Based On
TREVANIAN'S *SHIBUMI*

headline

Part One

TOKYO, OCTOBER 1951

1

NICHOLAI HEL WATCHED the maple leaf drop from the branch, flutter in the slight breeze, then fall gently to the ground.

It was beautiful.

Savoring the first glimpse of nature that he'd had after three years of solitary confinement in an American prison cell, he breathed in the crisp autumn air, let it fill his lungs, and held it for a few moments before he exhaled.

Haverford mistook it for a sigh.

'Glad to be out?' the agent asked.

Nicholai didn't respond. The American was as nothing to him, a mere merchant like the rest of his compatriots, peddling espionage instead of automobiles, shaving cream, or Coca-Cola. Nicholai had no intention of engaging in meaningless conversation, never mind allowing this functionary access to his personal thoughts.

Of course he was glad to be out, he thought as he looked back at the bleak gray walls of Sugamo Prison, but why did Westerners feel a need to voice the obvious, or attempt to give expression to the ineffable? It was the nature of a maple leaf to drop in the autumn. I killed General Kishikawa, as close to a father as I ever had, because it was my filial nature – and duty – to do so. The Americans imprisoned me for it because they could do nothing else, given their nature.

And now they offer me my 'freedom' because they need me.

Nicholai resumed his walk along the pebbled path flanked by the maple trees. A bit surprised that he felt a twinge of anxiety at being outside the closed, small space of his cell, he fought off the wave of dizziness brought on by the open sky. This world was large and empty; he had no one left in it except himself. His own adequate company for

three years, he was reentering a world that he no longer knew at the age of twenty-six.

Haverford had anticipated this, having consulted a psychologist on the issues that face prisoners going back into society. The classic Freudian, replete with the stereotypical Viennese accent, had advised Haverford that 'the subject' would have become used to the limitations of his confinement and feel overwhelmed at first by the sheer space suddenly confronting him in the outside world. It would be prudent, the doctor warned, to transfer the man to a small, windowless room with voluntary access to a yard or garden so that he could gradually acclimate himself. Open spaces, or a crowded city with its bustling population and incessant noise, would be likely to upset the subject.

So Haverford had arranged for a small room in a quiet safe house in the Tokyo suburbs. But from what he could learn from what there *was* to be learned of Nicholai Hel, he couldn't imagine the man being easily overwhelmed or upset. Hel displayed preternatural self-possession, a calm that was almost condescending, confidence that often crossed the line into arrogance. On the surface, Hel appeared to be a perfect blend of his aristocratic Russian mother and his samurai surrogate father, the war criminal Kishikawa, whom he had saved from the shame of a hangman's noose with a single finger-thrust to the trachea.

Despite his blond hair and vibrant green eyes, Haverford thought, Hel is more Asian than Western. He even walks like an Asian – his arms crossed behind his back so as to take up as little space as possible and not cause inconvenience to anyone coming from the other direction, his tall, thin frame slightly stooped in modesty. European in appearance, Haverford decided, Asian in substance. Well, it made sense – he was raised by his émigré mother in Shanghai, and then mentored by Kishikawa when the Japs took the city. After the mother died, Kishikawa moved the boy to Japan to live with and study under a master of the impossibly complicated and nuanced board game Go, a sort of Jap chess, albeit a hundredfold more difficult.

Hel became a master in his own right.

So is it any wonder that Hel thinks like an Asian?

Nicholai sensed the man's thoughts on him. The Americans are incredibly transparent, their thoughts as obvious as stones at the

SATORI

bottom of a clear, still pool. He didn't care what Haverford thought of him – one doesn't solicit the opinions of a grocery clerk – but it did annoy him. Shifting his attention to the sun on his face, he felt it warm his skin.

'What would you like?' Haverford asked.

'In the sense of what?'

Haverford chuckled. Most men emerging from long confinement wanted three things – a drink, a meal, and a woman, not necessarily in that order. But he was not going to indulge Hel's arrogance, so he answered, in Japanese, 'In the sense of what would you like?'

Mildly impressed that Haverford spoke Japanese, and interested that he refused to surrender such a small stone on the board, Nicholai responded, 'I don't suppose that you could organize an acceptable cup of tea.'

'In fact,' Haverford said, 'I've arranged a modest *cha-kai*. I hope you find it acceptable.'

A formal tea ceremony, Nicholai thought.

How interesting.

A car waited at the end of the walk. Haverford opened the back door and ushered Nicholai in.

2

THE *CHA-KAI* WAS not only acceptable, it was sublime.

Nicholai savored each sip of the *cha-noyu* as he sat cross-legged on the tatami floor next to the lacquered table. The tea was transcendent, as was the geisha who knelt nearby, discreetly just out of hearing range of the sparse conversation.

To Nicholai's shock, the functionary Haverford knew his way around the tea ceremony and served with impeccable courtesy, his ritual flawless. Upon arrival at the teahouse, Haverford had apologized that there were, by necessity, no other guests, then led Nicholai into the *machiai*, the waiting room, where he introduced Nicholai to an exquisitely lovely geisha.

'This is Kamiko-san,' Haverford said. 'She will serve as my *hanto* today.'

Kamiko bowed and handed Nicholai a kimono to put on, then offered him *sayu*, a cup of the same hot water that would be used to brew the tea. Nicholai took a sip, then, as Haverford excused himself to go prepare the tea, Kamiko took Nicholai outside to the *roji*, the 'dew ground,' a small garden that held only arrangements of rocks but no flowers. They sat on the stone bench and, without conversation, enjoyed the tranquility.

A few minutes later Haverford, now kimono-clad, walked to a stone basin and ceremonially washed his mouth and hands in the fresh water, then stepped through the middle gate into the *roji*, where he formally welcomed Nicholai with a bow. In turn, Nicholai purified himself at the *tsukubai*.

To enter the *cha-shitsu*, the tearoom, they had to pass through a sliding door that was only three feet high, forcing them to bow, an act that symbolized the divide between the physical world and the spiritual realm of the tearoom.

SATORI

The *cha-shitsu* was exquisite, elegant in its simplicity, a perfect expression of *shibumi*. As tradition demanded, they first walked to an alcove, on the wall of which hung the *kakemono*, a scroll with painted calligraphy appropriate to the day's occasion. In his role as guest, Nicholai admired the skillful brushwork, which depicted the Japanese symbol for *satori*.

An interesting choice, Nicholai thought. *Satori* was the Zen Buddhist concept of a sudden awakening, a realization of life as it really is. It came not as a result of meditation or conscious thought, but could arrive in the wisp of a breeze, the crackle of a flame, the falling of a leaf.

Nicholai had never known *satori*.

In front of the *kakemono*, on a small wooden stand, was a bowl that held a single small maple branch.

They stepped over to a low table, on which was a charcoal burner and a kettle. As Nicholai and Kamiko knelt on the mat by the table, Haverford bowed and left the room. A few moments later a gong sounded, and he returned carrying the *cha-wan*, a red ceramic bowl that contained a tea whisk, a tea scoop, and a cloth.

As *teishu*, the host, Haverford knelt at his proper place at the table, directly across the hearth from Nicholai. He wiped all the utensils with the cloth, then filled the bowl with hot water, rinsed the whisk, then poured the water into a waste bowl and carefully wiped the tea bowl again.

Nicholai found himself enjoying the old ritual, but did not want to be lulled into complacency. The American had obviously done his research and knew that in the few years of freedom Nicholai had enjoyed in Tokyo before his imprisonment, he had established a formal Japanese household, with retainers, and had observed the old rituals. Surely he knew that Nicholai would find the *cha-kai* both nostalgic and comforting.

And it is both, Nicholai thought, but be cautious.

Haverford presented the tea scoop, then opened a small container and paused to allow his guest to appreciate the aroma. Nicholai realized with surprise that this was *koi-cha*, from plants one hundred years old, grown only in the shade in certain parts of Kyoto. He could not

imagine what this *mat-cha* might have cost, then wondered what it might eventually cost him, given that the Americans had not gone to such extravagance for nothing.

Pausing for precisely the correct time, Haverford then dipped a small ladle into the container and scooped out six measures of the finely powdered pale green tea into the *cha-wan*. He used the bamboo ladle to heap hot water into the bowl, then took the whisk and whipped the potion into a thin paste. He examined his work, then, satisfied, passed the bowl across the table to Nicholai.

As ritual demanded, Nicholai bowed, took the *cha-wan* with his right hand, then passed it to his left, holding it only in the palm of his hand. He turned it clockwise three times and then took a long sip. The tea was superb, and Nicholai politely finished his drink with a loud slurp. Then he wiped the rim of the *cha-wan* with his right hand, turned it once clockwise, and handed it back to Haverford, who bowed and took a drink.

Now the *cha-kai* entered a less formal phase, as Haverford wiped the *cha-wan* again and Kamiko added more charcoal to the hearth in preparation for making cups of thinner tea. Still, there were formalities to observe, and Nicholai in his role as guest began a conversation about the utensils used in the ceremony.

‘The *cha-wan* is Momoyama Period, yes?’ he said to Haverford, recognizing the distinct red tincture. ‘It is beautiful.’

‘Momoyama, yes,’ Haverford answered, ‘but not the best example.’

They both knew that the seventeenth-century bowl was rightfully priceless. The American had gone to immense trouble and expense to arrange this ‘modest’ *cha-kai*, and Nicholai could not help but wonder why.

And the American could not quite contain his satisfaction at pulling off this surprise.

I don’t know you, Hel, Haverford thought as he sank back into his own *seiza* position, but you don’t know me either.

In fact, Ellis Haverford was something quite different from the Company thugs who had beaten Nicholai to a bloody pulp during three days of brutal interrogation. A native of Manhattan’s Upper East Side, he had spurned Yale and Harvard for Columbia, as he couldn’t

imagine anyone choosing to live anywhere but on the isle of Manhattan. He was majoring in Oriental history and languages when Pearl Harbor was bombed, and was therefore a natural to go into an intelligence desk job.

Haverford refused, joined the Marines instead, and commanded a platoon on Guadalcanal and a company in New Guinea. Purple Heart and Navy Cross on his chest, he finally conceded that his education was being wasted, agreed to go into the covert side of the war, and found himself training local resistance movements against the Japanese in the jungles of French Indochina. Haverford was fluent in French, Japanese, and Vietnamese and could make himself understood in some parts of China. As aristocratic in his own way as Hel – although he came from far more money – Ellis Haverford was one of those rare individuals who seemed comfortable in any setting, including an exclusive Japanese teahouse.

Now Kamiko served thin tea and brought out *mukozuke*, a tray of light snacks – sashimi and pickled vegetables.

‘The food is good,’ Nicholai said in Japanese as Kamiko served.

‘It’s garbage,’ Haverford answered, pro forma, ‘but I’m afraid it’s the best I can offer. I am so sorry.’

‘It’s more than enough,’ Nicholai said, unconsciously slipping into Japanese manners that he had not had the opportunity to use for years.

‘You are more than kind,’ Haverford responded.

Aware of Kamiko’s passive attention, Nicholai asked, ‘Shall we switch languages?’

Haverford already knew that Hel spoke English, French, Russian, German, Chinese, Japanese, and, randomly, Basque – so there was quite a menu from which to choose. He suggested French and Nicholai accepted.

‘So,’ Nicholai said, ‘you have offered me one hundred thousand dollars, my liberty, a Costa Rican passport, and the home addresses of Major Diamond and his apprentices in exchange for my performing a service that I assume involves a murder.’

‘“Murder” is an ugly word,’ Haverford answered, ‘but you have the basic elements of the deal correct, yes.’

‘Why me?’

‘You have certain unique characteristics,’ Haverford said, ‘combined with specific skills required for the assignment.’

‘Such as?’

‘You don’t need to know that yet.’

‘When do I begin?’ Nicholai asked.

‘More a question of *how*.’

‘Very well. *How* do I begin?’

‘First,’ Haverford answered, ‘we repair your face.’

‘You find it unpalatable?’ Nicholai asked, aware that his once handsome countenance was indeed a lopsided, swollen and disjointed mess from the fists and truncheons of Major Diamond and his associates.

Nicholai had worked for the Americans as a translator until he had killed Kishikawa-san; then Diamond and his goons had beaten Nicholai before subjecting him to mind-altering, horrifying experiments with psychotropic drugs. The pain had been bad enough, the disfigurement still worse, but what hurt Nicholai even more was the loss of control, the terrible helplessness, the feeling that Diamond and his disgusting little helpers had somehow stolen his very being and played with it the way a twisted and stupid child might have toyed with a captive animal.

I will deal with them in due time, he thought. Diamond, his thugs, the doctor who administered the injections and observed the results on his ‘patient’ with cold-blooded clinical interest – they will all see me again, albeit briefly, and just before they die.

Right now I must come to terms with Haverford, who is essential to achieving my revenge. At least Haverford is interesting – impeccably dressed, obviously well educated, just as obviously a scion of what passes for the aristocracy in America.

‘Not at all,’ Haverford said. ‘I just believe that when you damage something, you should repair it. It seems only fair.’

Haverford is trying to tell me, Nicholai thought, in a quite un-American subtle way, that *he* is not *them*. But of course you *are*, the clothes and education are but a patina on the same cracked vessel. He asked, ‘What if I do not choose to be “repaired”?’

‘Then I am afraid we would have to cancel our arrangement,’ Haverford said pleasantly, glad that the French softened what would be a harsh ultimatum in English. ‘Your current appearance would

prompt questions, the answers to which don't match the cover we've taken a lot of trouble creating for you.'

'“Cover”?’

'A new identity,' Haverford answered, reminded that while Hel was an efficient killer he was nevertheless a neophyte in the larger world of espionage, 'replete with a fictitious personal history.'

'Which is what?' Nicholai asked.

Haverford shook his head. 'You don't need to know yet.'

Deciding to test the board, Nicholai said, 'I was quite content in my cell. I could go back.'

'You could,' Haverford agreed. 'And we could decide to bring you to trial for the murder of Kishikawa.'

Well played, Nicholai thought, deciding that he needed to be more cautious when dealing with Haverford. Seeing that there was no route of attack there, he retreated like a slowly ebbing tide. 'The surgery on my face – I assume we are discussing surgery . . .'

'Yes.'

'I also assume it will be painful.'

'Very.'

'The recuperation period?'

'Several weeks,' Haverford answered. He refilled Nicholai's cup, then his own, and nodded to Kamiko to bring a fresh pot. 'They won't be wasted, however. You have a lot of work to do.'

Nicholai raised an eyebrow.

'Your French,' Haverford said. 'Your vocabulary is impressive, but your accent is all wrong.'

'My French nanny would be greatly offended.'

Haverford switched to Japanese, a better language than French to express polite regret. '*Gomen nosei*, but your new dialect needs to be more southern.'

Why would that be? Nicholai wondered. He didn't ask, however, not wanting to appear too curious or, for that matter, interested.

Kamiko waited at their periphery, then, hearing him finish, bowed and served the tea. She was beautifully coiffed, with alabaster skin and sparkling eyes, and Nicholai was annoyed when Haverford noticed him looking and said, 'It has already been arranged, Hel-san.'

DON WINSLOW

‘Thank you, no,’ Nicholai said, unwilling to give the American the satisfaction of correctly perceiving his physical need. It would show weakness, and give Haverford a victory.

‘Really?’ Haverford asked. ‘Are you sure?’

Or else I would not have spoken, Nicholai thought. He didn’t answer the question, but instead said, ‘One more thing.’

‘Yes?’

‘I will not kill an innocent person.’

Haverford chuckled. ‘Small chance of that.’

‘Then I accept.’

Haverford bowed.

3

NICHOLAI STRUGGLED against unconsciousness.

Yielding control was anathema to a man who had lived his life on the principle of firm self-possession, and it brought back memories of the pharmacological torture that the Americans had inflicted on him. So he fought to stay conscious, but the anesthesia took its course and put him under.

As a boy he had commonly experienced spontaneous mental states in which he would find himself removed from the moment and lying in a serene meadow of wildflowers. He didn't know how it happened or why, just that it was peaceful and delicious. He called these interludes his 'resting times' and could not understand how anyone could live without them.

But the firebombing of Tokyo, the deaths of friends, then Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the arrest of his surrogate father General Kishikawa as a *war criminal* – that cultured man who had introduced him to Go and to a civilized, disciplined, thoughtful life – had robbed him of his precious 'resting times,' and, try as he would, he could not seem to recover the serenity that had once been natural to him.

Tranquility was harder to achieve when they put him on an airplane with blackened windows and flew him to the United States, taking him off the flight with bandages around his face as if he had been wounded. He found it harder yet to maintain his equanimity when they rolled his stretcher into the hospital and put the needles into his arm and a mask over his nose and mouth.

He woke panicked because his arms were strapped down to the gurney.

'It's all right,' a female American voice said. 'We just don't want you rolling around or touching your face.'

'I won't.'

She chuckled, not believing him.

Nicholai would have argued further, but the pain was acute, like a horribly bright light shimmering in front of his eyes. He blinked, then controlled his breathing and sent the light to the other side of the room where he could observe it dispassionately. The pain still existed, but it was now a detached phenomenon, interesting in its intensity.

'I'll give you a shot,' the nurse said.

'It isn't necessary,' Nicholai answered.

'Oh,' she said, 'we can't have you wincing or clenching your jaw. The surgery on your facial bones was very delicate.'

'I assure you that I will lie perfectly still,' Nicholai answered. Through the slits that were his eyes he could now see her preparing the syringe. She was a Celtic-looking healthy type, all pale skin, freckles, rusty hair, and thick forearms. He exhaled, relaxed his hands, and slipped them through the bonds.

The nurse looked terribly annoyed. 'Are you going to make me call the doctor?'

'Do what you think you must.'

The doctor came in a few minutes later. He made a show of checking the bandages that covered Nicholai's face, clucked with the satisfaction of a hen that has just laid a splendid egg, and then said, 'The surgeries went very well. I expect a successful result.'

Nicholai didn't bother with a concurring banality.

'Keep your hands off your face,' the doctor said to him. Turning to the nurse, he added, 'If he doesn't want anything for the pain, he doesn't want anything for the pain. When he gets tired of playing the stoic, he'll call you. Take your time getting there if you want a small measure of revenge.'

'Yes, Doctor.'

'I do good work,' the doctor said to Nicholai. 'You're going to have to beat the women off with a stick.'

It took Nicholai quite a while to work through the idiom.

'There will be some minor paralysis of some small facial muscles,

SATORI

I'm afraid,' the doctor added, 'but nothing you can't live with. It will help you keep that indifferent front of yours.'

Nicholai never did call for the shot.

Nor did he move.

4

CAMOUFLAGED BY NIGHT and the monsoon's slashing rain, the one they call the Cobra squatted perfectly still.

The Cobra watched the man's feet plop down in the mud and slosh onto the trail that led toward the bushes where he would do his personal business. It was his routine, so the Cobra was expecting him. The assassin had sat and waited many nights to learn the prey's habits.

The man came closer, just a few feet now from where the Cobra waited in the bamboo beside the narrow footpath. Intent on his destination, the man saw nothing as he wiped a sluice of rain from his face.

The Cobra chose that moment to uncoil and strike. The blade – silver like the rain – shot out and slashed the man's thigh. The victim felt the odd pain, looked down, and pressed his hand to the bloody tear in his pants leg. But it was too late – the femoral artery was severed and the blood poured around his hand and through his fingers. Already in shock, he sat down and watched his life flow into the puddle that quickly formed around him.

The Cobra was already gone.