

Neat Vodka

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sphere

SPHERE

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For Grace.

It's so nice to have someone to share Moscow with.

Prologue

Moscow 1989

There was a do at Dom Literatov, the literary house. I remember that much. Some author, Limonov maybe, was launching his book and all the foreigners with pretensions to speaking Russian or knowing anything about anything were going. I wore a short, tight, black velvet dress with puffed sleeves that dropped off my shoulders. My landlady, Zinaida Petrovna, sewed me into it, pins sticking out of her puckered mouth, a greasy apron wrapped around her enormous middle.

‘Real velvet,’ she muttered into the pins. ‘Real velvet.’ She stroked my back and looked as though she might actually cry. It was snowing from the heavy grey sky and the old men queuing up at the beer cellar in our courtyard wore the flaps of their shapkas down, raw red hands clutching their huge empty jars. There was one man with a swollen purple face, weeping red eyes and a running nose that dripped into his beard who always shuffled his way towards the front of the queue with a particular desolation – not chatting to the others, not even looking up.

‘His mother loved him,’ Dimitri used to say. I wasn’t so sure.

Zinaida Petrovna tutted every time one of the men came over to our wall to urinate. The snow was banked up high, nearly reaching the window. My nineteenth-century double glazing had a foot's width between the interior and exterior panes and I was keeping a chicken, frozen, in the gap. I worried that Zinaida Petrovna might steal it while I was out.

She was charging me three-quarters of my monthly salary as rent for my one room and I paid her because I was living there illegally and Dimitri, my Russian husband, my cover, the person who was officially renting the place, had gone back to Ryazan after our last big row and showed no signs of coming back any time soon, thank God. But my documents hadn't come through and I still had none of a Soviet citizen's rights (surprisingly many, mostly concerning the procurement of food and housing).

Tonight, free and possibly even single, I was meeting Scott Weisman at Dom Literatov. It was Scott, in fact, who was indirectly responsible for my new status. Dimitri and I had had a row about him in the Savoy hotel. Well, I say row. It was more of a prolonged silence really.

The Savoy had opened three months earlier, the only half-civilised place in Moscow and with stricter entry procedures than the other hotels, so the prostitutes and seedy thugs who populated pretty much everywhere in those days couldn't get in. Unfortunately, though, neither could Dimitri. Not without a certain amount of effort at any rate. It was not a good start to the evening as far as the impending row was concerned.

We had pulled up in Dimitri's maroon Lada Samara, which had no heating (me in a big black fur and him in a thin, cheap imitation of a presidential great coat), and we skidded to a stop in the deep snow, just brushing against the brass barriers with red ropes that surrounded the entrance. Inside the barrier, under the hotel's glittering canopy, the actual pavement was carpeted. Doors guarded by policemen and hotel staff in top hats and old-fashioned frock coats revealed the warm wealthy glow of the foyer within – a chandelier, gleaming marble floors and pretty

girls in smart uniforms with their names on their badges, all just graduated from Moscow State University's English faculty.

I had been having dreams. My nights were haunted by plummeting lifts, plunging planes, gangs with guns, buildings ablaze. I had woken up that night gasping for breath, with alcoholic dehydration and a pounding heart. I ran barefoot across the freezing, unpolished parquet to the kitchen where I stirred a spoonful of crystal-shining orange KoolAid into a glass of tap water. Tap water they said one shouldn't drink, but I didn't see any Russians dying. Actually, I did, but not from drinking the tap water. Dimitri, my husband, who slept with one hand flat against the wall (his little finger scarred from when he fell over running for the loo at school when he was six), woke up, like he always did, lit a cigarette and tried to comfort me. Sometimes he went easy on himself and we just went out for a drive. I would tell him about girls who got cars for their seventeenth birthdays, the keys presented in a box by their beaming parents, friends clapping round the blazing candles on the cake, the surprise gift parked neatly outside, a ribbon round the aerial. Or I described people who winter in the Caribbean or restaurants where they serve lobster and make crêpes Suzette at the table. I don't think he really believed me.

That night of the separation he took one sympathetic, though exhausted, look at me and said, 'You need to go to the Savoy.' And he was right. The dim greyness of Communist Moscow was too accurate a reflection of my mental state. He felt that only a Russian could really be expected to cope with this life. It amazes me now that he was then only twenty-seven. Judging by his eyes he could have been fifty.

I showed my passport to the policemen and the doormen and Dimitri walked manfully by my side, snowflakes melting on his shoulders, speaking to me in English. They usually fell for this at the Intourist but they weren't having any of it here. Dimitri lowered his voice to a whisper and one of the policemen leant down to hiss into his face. I lit a cigarette and waited, watched the fat

snow fall. Dimitri stood on his tiptoes and whispered into the policeman's ear. That seemed to do it. One little threat and we were in.

The doors were opened and we went and sat down in the pink and gold bar. They served microwaved ready meals in here – that was how glamorous it was. Outside, where old ladies huddled in underpasses, their feet wrapped in rags, there were shortages so severe that even German food parcels were being accepted. People remembered the war and the Germans had not been forgiven. In the Leningrad blockade people ate rats.

'I wish you wouldn't threaten everyone,' I said, my hands clamped round a Campari and soda. I knew I shouldn't have said it. I knew he didn't want to be in the Savoy in any case. He did it for my sake. Taking me back to my world. A world in which he, of course, would always be uncomfortable.

Still, none of his generosity, in my view, justified an hour and a half's thin-lipped silence. Well, OK. Not total silence. He did say one thing. It was: 'I don't know why you don't just go out with Scott Weisman.'

He had met Scott. He did not like Scott. The easy American superiority, white teeth, blue passport, pocket full of dollars.

Good point, I thought as I rolled my eyes and sighed. When we got back to the dark, stinking doorway of our dingy flat, the symbol of our pathetic attempt at a relationship, he left me there, got into his car and drove away into the night.

I put my big iron key in the door and went inside. There was a dead rat in the bath. I had brought poison from London and it made them die of thirst. I sat on the bed in my fur coat, my knees pulled into my chest, and cried until I was empty. Not for Dimitri really. For myself, for my dad, who was killed in Belfast when I was nine, for all the other desolate people crying alone in the night. A lot of them, I thought, were probably in Moscow.

Then in the morning after the row (maybe even separation?), shaking with hangover, I phoned Scott and he invited me to the

Dom Literatov party. He was a Russophile Californian doing an internship at the *New York Times*, intrepidly trawling round meetings of mothers of dead Soviet conscripts (there were a lot of them), attending memorial rallies for the gulag-dead outside the Lubyanka at which nobody got arrested (unthinkable even six months earlier) and hitting on damsels in distress (me). He was sharp and funny and looked like a Martian in Moscow with his cute glasses, short back and sides and pressed khakis. Maybe the GIs looked like this in sepia wartime Britain. He mistook my depressive sarcasm for searing intelligence and he loved me. He brought me jars of bacon bits from the salad bar at the American Embassy and he sat on my dirty floor with me drinking sweet champagne, singing Billy Joel songs and saying he didn't know any other girls like me.

Tonight was the night of our date. Zinaida Petrovna came round to the front of me for a look. 'Pryelyest!' she whimpered. I almost liked her. I put my stilettos in a carrier bag, pulled on black zip-up waterproof boots, my coat, hat and gloves, and trudged out into the gloom. I walked down the boulevard with my head bowed against the snow. There was an old woman sitting on a bench selling ice creams in squat cones out of a cardboard box for ten kopeks. An ancient orange and white tourist bus juddered outside the circus, choking everyone near it with thick black exhaust fumes.

At Dom Literatov people stood around in the slush smoking in groups and talking quietly.

'Hey, Zanetti,' Scott whispered into my ear, coming up behind me and putting his hands round my waist.

'Fuck off,' I said, and turned to kiss him on the cheek. 'I've left Zinaida Petrovna alone with my chicken,' I told him.

'That's the last you'll see of that,' he nodded, pulling his woolly hat off and treading the snow off his Timberlands, the stamp of his nationality.

The foyer was dimly lit and stuffed full of middle-aged men in appalling suits standing in front of clouded mirrors and combing

the remains of their hair. I sat down on a stool and changed my shoes and Scott took all our stuff to the cloakroom and handed me my greenish plastic tag. Limonov (which translates as ‘of the lemons’), or whoever it was, was already talking and most people were standing round the rostrum listening reverently. Scott took two shots of vodka off a trestle table and handed me one. I’d never drunk this stuff neat before. We clinked glasses and sank them in one. Hmmm. I could get a taste for this. We did it again and it is at this stage that my memory gets slightly blurry.

I remember throwing my arms round Limonov’s neck and congratulating him. I remember throwing my arms round Scott’s neck in a corridor we found behind a black padded door. I remember a KGB stooge telling us we were in an unauthorised area. I think I remember falling soon after that down a stone flight of stairs, though that may be a retrospective memory, constructed from my injuries. Something flickering at the back of my mind shows me a girl in stilettos slipping down the boulevard on the ice dangerously late at night.

And then it was morning. I was lying on my front and my mouth tasted of vomit. Someone was banging on the door and thin grey light was coming through the windows. My hand was right in front of my eyes and there was blood on it. I sat up and put my feet on the parquet. There were shoes on them. My knees were badly grazed and I was still in my dress. I touched my face and felt what could be a dramatic wound on my forehead. My jaw hurt. I looked round the room and saw that I had thrown my outdoor clothes on the floor. I must have left my boots at Dom Literatov. I ran through the memories I could dredge up. No big deal, humiliation-wise. So far I could cope with the damage. I took my shoes off and went to the bathroom to wash my face. When I had rinsed the blood off it was only a scrape really. Amazing how much blood can be produced from a scalp wound. I went to the kitchen where the old lady, whose name I never did find out, was boiling some cornflakes in a saucepan of water. She was houseridden and smelt of decay. A boy called Lyosha brought

her useless food aid – dried goods with instructions in English, all of which told the recipient to add eggs or milk or some other unattainable thing.

‘Good morning,’ I said.

‘Good morning,’ she said.

‘There’s someone at the door,’ I said.

‘Yes,’ she said.

I couldn’t answer the door because of my illegal status. Apparently, my Russian sounded like an Estonian’s but that wasn’t good enough. Estonians would be told to produce documents too.

I took my KoolAid back to my room and it was only then that I saw Dimitri. He was asleep with one hand against the wall. Had he been there when I got home? Had he come in the night? My scream of surprise woke him up. He looked at me blearily.

‘Your head,’ he said.

‘I know. There’s someone at the door,’ I told him.

He got up in his Y-fronts, lit a cigarette and heaved our enormous and ornate front door open. When I saw the policemen I ducked into the toilet. There is a Soviet joke which involves banging on friends’ doors and shouting ‘Police!’ It is a very bleak Russian-style joke with reference to the 1930s purges. Anyway, the sight of actual police at the door was very chilling indeed. I assumed they had come for me. Dimitri and I once ran through the crimes I had committed against the Soviet state and estimated that I was fixing to spend about thirty years in a camp. Trading hard currency, smoking illegal drugs, travelling outside Moscow without a visa, living without a propiska and so on.

They stood in the hall and made Dimitri produce his passport (although it was called a passport it did not entitle the holder to travel anywhere. For that he or she would need an ‘international passport’ and there was pretty much no chance of getting one of these unless you were directly related to Gorbachev himself). Neither the policemen nor Dimitri reacted in the slightest way to the latter’s near nudity. Dimitri smoked, the policemen checked his details.

‘You’re not registered here,’ the more acned of the two stated.

‘It’s my mum’s flat,’ Dimitri said. I wondered if he had already told Zinaida Petrovna to confirm that or if he was planning to threaten her later.

Realising this wasn’t about me, I came out of the bathroom, still in my velvet dress.

‘This is my wife,’ Dimitri said. ‘She’s mute.’

Hello? I raised my eyebrows at him in disbelief and nodded at the policemen, lips sealed.

‘You are covered in blood,’ the chatty one said.

I nodded in silent admission and then went and lay back down to die quietly of alcohol poisoning. I hoped Dimitri would not be staying.

The muttering in the hallway continued and Dimitri came into our room to put some trousers on.

‘S going on?’ I asked.

‘Something next door. They want witnesses.’

The room between ours and the old lady’s had been empty since we’d been living there, but last week, while Dimitri was away, a young couple had moved in. Though we theoretically shared a bathroom and kitchen, I had seen the girl only once, very late at night when I was running to the loo. She was coming in, drunk and heavily made up. The man I had seen three times, coming in and out, smart and slightly westernised. We had never spoken.

Now the policemen were opening the door to the room, their big leather boots noisy on the wooden floor, hammers and sickles on their steaming hats, an effect always achieved when coming in from the snow. You stand there steaming.

‘Just in here,’ they told Dimitri.

‘Yes,’ I heard him say. That was before he groaned loudly. ‘Oh God,’ he said, staggering back into our room followed by the boys in khaki.

I put my hand up to my forehead.

Dimitri signed a form to say he had witnessed the crime scene.

I was next. I hauled myself up. Dimitri was white. They didn't speak to me and I, being mute, didn't speak to them. I peered round the edge of the door they had opened to look at the bodies of my neighbours. An axe lay on the floor. A woodcutter's axe. Fairy tale thing. The girl was lying on the single bed the couple must have shared. Her head, I think, had been completely severed. She was dressed in outdoor clothes. The naked man's injuries were, if possible, more horrific. I surmised, as I retched into my hands, that he had killed her and then killed himself by cutting off his leg above the knee and bleeding to death. There was blood everywhere. But I mean absolutely everywhere. The smell, overpowering, was of steak that has sat in the sun for a couple of days. Sweet and thick. At this point I threw up on to the floor in front of me.

That was sixteen years ago. I was nineteen years old. And that is what I remember. That and the fact that my chicken had been stolen in the night.

Chapter One

This is the first proper posting I've had since my breakdown. Moscow. It's not the first time I've been back since I left Dimitri for good, but I haven't lived here since I was a teenager and, since that night, I certainly haven't worn any velvet dresses.

I didn't want the job especially, but I thought I'd better show willing in case I got sacked. Might have seemed churlish to refuse. You don't want to come over all prima donna-ish when you are busy grappling with your sanity. I went mad in Qatar during the war with Iraq. Like, really mad. That's what falling in love can do to you. Anyway, I needed to rebuild a bit of trust on the paper.

Tamsin (who, amazingly, is still the foreign editor. It's not often people cling on to that job for more than a year or two. The senior people like that are the first to go when there's any kind of regime change. And there's always a regime change) and the op-ed (opinion and editorial) bloke took me out for lunch at that big seafood place in Butler's Wharf and we sat outside squinting at each other and cracking lobster claws with big metal tools that flashed in the sunlight.

'How's your Russian, Zanetti?' Tamsin asked, sucking butter off her fingers.

‘Haven’t seen him for years,’ I muttered and she blinked at me questioningly. ‘No, er . . . It’s fine. It’s good. It’s fluent,’ I said. ‘Why? Where’s Toby going?’ Toby wears three-piece suits into the Moscow office (a shabby room in a big compound full of foreigners) and runs an illegal caviar business from which he scrapes off a profit.

‘Miami,’ Tamsin said, lighting a cigarette. The op-ed bloke coughed and dabbed at the corners of his mouth with a big white napkin. He is running for a Tory seat in the local elections next month. He will get it.

‘Miami?! Miami?! What the fuck is he going to Miami for?’ I laughed, feeling for my own cigarettes and then taking one of Tamsin’s.

‘We’re opening a bureau,’ she told me defiantly.

‘Toby McFarquhar is going to be the *Chronicle*’s Caribbean correspondent? What’s he going to do? Intrepid pieces about whether or not you really can have a relaxing time at a spa on Nevis?’ I actually once read a piece about exactly this in the *Financial Times*. Somebody must have been very very pleased with his assignment that week.

‘Zanetti. I am not about to start defending the paper’s decisions to you. There are a lot of stories we are missing out on by covering them from New York and Washington.’

Uh-huh. He’ll be writing picture captions for big splashes about which celebrities have been spotted on the beach that day with their tits out/in/bigger/smaller. And the odd murder, I suppose. All those mad Brits kill each other over affairs from time to time – nearly posh enough for a title but not quite, minds addled by the heat and the booze. I will definitely be lobbying for that job when I am in my dotage (not far off at this rate).

The only hope of Moscow’s being remotely interesting is if Chechnya or somewhere explodes. It’s not an attractive thing to admit, but if there isn’t a war going on it’s hard to get really enthusiastic about a job. Once you’ve been at the very edge of life it is hard to concentrate on the middle.

There is something about covering war (and, Lord knows, plenty of my colleagues have written books about it) that gives you an unshakeable, though perhaps warped, sense of perspective. When you have seen the absolute horrors of it, then nothing else seems to matter at all. The papers are full of articles that suddenly seem absurd in their banality. A Prime Minister lied about his motives for something? The public shouldn't eat fish?

Look, babies are having their legs blown off somewhere, men are torturing each other, women are being raped by soldiers, murdered in front of their families. Don't tell me about some dodgy paperwork and a health scare involving farmed salmon.

Well, that's the kind of attitude you pick up doing this job. And it feels like the truth. The trouble is that if you despise everyone who genuinely has an opinion (!) about fox hunting then you are going to end up pretty lonely. Most of us are pretty lonely. And it's not as though we are charging round the world putting an end to war and injustice either. We're just watching really (though my colleagues' books would mostly have you believe otherwise).

I suppose the big stumbling block to this 'I've seen the horrors' thing is that when a horror happens to you personally you are not quite sure what to do with it. You've spent so much time watching that you don't notice that you haven't learnt anything at all that you can apply to yourself. Look, I am already talking in the second person. Have you noticed that whenever anyone talks about something horrible happening to them they talk about it in the second person? Disaster victims on television never say, 'I was terrified, I thought I was going to die.' They say, 'You just feel terrified. You think you're going to die.' It is a way of distancing oneself. And so, of course, is writing. That is what we do. Watch something, digest it and spew it out again on to a screen so that we don't own it any more. But it doesn't work. It stays in there festering and finds some other way out. I discovered this when I went mad in Qatar. I thought my suitcase was a bomb.

Actually, I'm still not completely sure it wasn't but I'm not telling my shrink that.

Anyway, my point is that when a horror happened to me, a real emotional horror, I didn't know what to do with it. I (and it is an effort to keep in the first person here) felt that it was something I should be able to deal with. Something that happens to everyone. It was not violent, it was a natural part of the ebb and flow of life that should happen if war does not interrupt it. So I ought to take it in my stride and carry on with my own life – better than the kind of people who have not seen what I have seen. I couldn't, though. You see, my mum died.

I was on holiday – a break before taking up the Moscow thing. I am not very good at going on holiday. I take my computer with me and check my emails all the time. I buy all the papers whenever I see a stand that sells them in any language that I can conceivably read and I drink too much coffee, scouring the headlines and rapping my fingers on the marble tabletops of pretty cafés while I smoke. So as to avoid this at all costs, I had offered a feature to the weekend section and gone to see my friend Leonore – she has this ranch in Zimbabwe that Mugabe hasn't stolen off her yet. That way I could work without feeling like an idiot and I could relax while feeling that I was working. Ingenious.

I was doing news as well for a couple of weeks (they told me this just before I left for my feature writing holiday and I was secretly pleased). The Africa correspondent was going to a residential rehab centre in Surrey to try and deal with his drink problem once and for all. No chance. When I talked to the desk about the feature I wanted to do on some veterans Tamsin said the following: 'Sounds like a bit of a downer, Faith.' That's for sure.

It was great though. I travelled around in a dusty Jeep past a green pool of hippos and jaggy hills of bouncing impala. The feature was grim (of course) – about what had happened to the

whites who fought and lost for what used to be Rhodesia. I sat under a passion fruit vine in blistering equatorial heat and talked to a wreck of a human being, so destroyed by the things he had seen and done that he seemed to have gone into some unusual psychological state where he functioned on autopilot though in fact he'd died years ago. 'If there had been a war crimes tribunal,' this grisly dead-eyed alcoholic told me, 'we would all have been convicted.' Terry, his name was. He had his blood group tattooed on to his forearm.

Leonore, who had introduced me to Terry, said that actually he had very nearly come before a tribunal. It was for presiding over and participating in the torture and gang rape of seven women and children in a village out in the bush. He and his men hadn't slept for five days, they had far too little water, the heat had been incredible, the hardship barely endurable. Apparently. He pleaded insanity and got off, believing himself to have successfully pulled the wool over the eyes of the psychiatric investigators. All I can say is that if he wasn't insane then, he is now.

I thought, not for the first time, that you don't need to punish people who have done unthinkable things. That just gives them something to rail against. They punish themselves if you leave them alone. They shrivel and twist themselves into a sleepless, peaceless, screaming ball of agony. I wanted to pity him. Then he told me about the things he had done personally in the villages and I sipped my beer and smiled blankly and thought that he deserved to live a very long life so that his torture was not unjustly curtailed by the longed-for sleep of death.

Death. Yes, that was the link. I was cleaning my teeth when I got the news. My room on the ranch was vast and bare with an enormous teak bed swathed in mosquito nets and with bamboo doors out on to the veranda. It came through as a text message to my mobile phone. 'Call me. Bad news. Eden.' Eden Jones. Colleague. Sometimes lover. He was staying at my flat in London while I was away, doing a stint on home news at his paper to see out his contract. He had just got an incredible new job writing for

the *New Yorker*. Don't know how he pulled it off. Can hardly string a sentence together, but perhaps the fact checkers write it all for them.

I lay down on the bed under the nets and lit a cigarette. It was like a whole world under there. Ashtray, cold cup of coffee, newspapers, phone, laptop.

'S up?' I asked him when he picked the phone up.

'Faith, your mum's dead,' he said. I was grateful to him for not finding it difficult or embarrassing. For just telling me and not being desperate to get off the phone, cringing with the horror of his responsibility.

'Oh,' I said, wondering how I felt about this. 'What happened?'

She was sitting at her kitchen table with her friend Pauline eating Chinese takeaway. Pauline is Nigerian and is always trying to make Mum go on holiday to Lagos with her. I ask you. I mean, when I lived in Moscow all those years ago it was full of people from Lagos trying to catch a break. If they came to Moscow then, all I can say is that Lagos must be a real slime pit. That was my mind trying not to digest what Eden was saying.

So, they were eating chicken with cashew nuts, spinach in garlic sauce, Shang-hai dumplings and special fried rice. Mum told Pauline she had a headache and pinched the top of her nose. They were sharing a bottle of some crap by Ernest and Julio Gallo. Mum stood up. 'I feel a bit funny,' she said. Then she fell over on to the parquet of the kitchen floor. Dead. This, say medical people, is pretty much the best way to go. Painless, sudden, certain. An enormous brain haemorrhage. She was sixty-two. A decade ago I might have thought that was a reasonably respectable innings. Now it seems young.

I had been leaning up on one elbow to talk to Eden. Now I lay down on my back and watched the lazy brass ceiling fan slice through the thick air. There was a mosquito inside my net and I blew a stream of smoke at it. A song came into my head. By Mike and the Mechanics, I think. Anyway, it's all about death making everything too late. And now it is. Too late.

I stopped hoping she would come and find me years ago, of course. Though when I was first moved away to live with Dad and Evie I couldn't believe she'd let me go. I lay awake in bed waiting for the doorbell to ring. Believing she would come for me. If not tonight then tomorrow. I didn't know then that she would have been arrested if she'd tried. That is, she was arrested when she did try.

Then, not long ago, after I'd been doing a harrowing child abuse investigation in Jerusalem, I went to find her. Not that it was difficult. I knew where she was. I had her number. She'd always kept in touch with Evie, even before Dad was killed. I took her an olivewood nativity scene from Bethlehem. She gave me some conditioner for my ridiculous blonde Afro. She cried a lot. Then, after that, we were officially in touch. But it turned out I was in touch for her sake, really. So that she wouldn't be sad, wouldn't feel she had let me down, wouldn't feel a failure. There was nothing in it for me. For I suppose I had hoped what we all hope. All of us who go to find someone, whether a parent or a lover – we hope they will take us in and hug us and give us all the security and certainty and love we have longed for all our lives. I don't imagine it ever happens. I was looking after her again, like I'd done when she was drinking. Like I'd always done. And now it was too late. Too late for her to brush my hair again, for her to take me to school sober, for her to make biscuits on my birthday or sing me a lullaby. Of course it's too late. I am thirty-five.

The hearse broke down. We all stood on Streatham High Road, about twenty of us, while a teenager in a black suit phoned head office to get another one sent out. He put one of those red triangles up in the road to warn other drivers and he rolled his eyes at me, not imagining that I might be the chief mourner. Nobody was crying.

I leant against the railings of a primary school that was protected by high glinting fences with razor wire on top of them and I smoked a cigarette. This flesh-slashing wire apparently keeps out the fathers who might come to snatch their children.

Another hearse pulled up and flashed its hazard lights on while the pall bearers dragged Mum out of the back of one hearse and put her in the other. I had bought one of those flower arrangements that reads 'MUM' in big white chrysanthemums and one of the blokes in black tails held it while the transfer was made. The flowers were supposed to be a joke, but actually they just looked depressing. Funereal humour – not funny.

'Right, we're off,' the driver said, and we all got back into our big black cars to follow him to the church. I understand that for a hearse to screech round corners at ninety miles an hour would be inappropriate, but the speed they do go at makes me breathless with anxiety.

'I don't think you're allowed to smoke in these things,' Pauline pointed out. I put my cigarettes back in the pocket of my leather jacket and drummed my fingers on the arm rest.

I had got in from Harare three hours earlier and I had not slept on the plane. I had drunk quite a lot on it though and now my lips felt dry and my thoughts were acid and tangled. I wished I'd eaten the British Airways slime-class muffin they'd brought me for breakfast.

Evie was waiting for me in the church. I sat next to her and held her hand. She smelt of violets and looked, today, like Coco Chanel. If anyone had been my mother it was Evie. She had her own children now, grown up and half gone, Mo to university and Shash to India to find herself on a mountain or whatever it is that people do. Evie's husband is based in Hong Kong and nobody ever sees much of him. A happier arrangement perhaps than the one she'd had with Dad – she looked after his daughter while he travelled around to wars and got killed.

Eden slouched in during 'The Lord's My Shepherd'. I thought if I could keep singing I might stop crying. 'In death's dark vale I fear no ill.' I felt that I spent a good deal too much time in death's dark vale. It seems to be part of the job. Eden had raked up a black suit from somewhere. He looked as though he'd slept in it but that's just how he always looks. His hair was wet from the shower

and he had shaved seconds ago (very possibly in the taxi). He shuffled his way into my pew and put his arm round my shoulders. I looked down at his feet and saw that he had trainers on.

‘Did you buy that, Zanetti?’ he whispered, nodding towards the ‘MUM’ chrysanthemums.

‘Mmm hmmm,’ I said.

He shook his head and muttered, ‘Christ.’

I looked at the altar and didn’t really see it. It is hard to know what to do with grief. Perhaps if your spouse of thirty years dies you can bury yourself in the enormous reorganisation of your life that will be necessary. Maybe if a beloved parent dies you can talk to all their friends, paste photos of them in albums, tell your children about them. Tell your children . . .

But I didn’t even know Mum very well. I was supposed to plough on as usual now. Even talking to Eden about it seemed a bit self-indulgent somehow, seeing as how I’d had so little to do with her. But there was a coil of pain in the pit of my stomach and it wouldn’t go away. I told myself it didn’t matter – that death is a part of life for everyone and that surely the death of most people’s parents was a worse experience than this. I know Dad’s seemed transparently cataclysmic. I shrugged to myself in my mind and thought of the Russian way of saying ‘byvayet’ (it happens). But here is my question: if, in evolutionary terms, this is just what happens, no big deal, comes to everyone, then what is the use of it hurting so much? Really. If it doesn’t matter then why is it so fucking painful?

I think being English probably doesn’t help. Or, that is, being English today. A hundred or so years ago everyone would have met death by about the age of five. I would by now probably have a few living and a few dead children. Death was then, and in some places is now, very much a part of life. Coffins were open, children were not protected from it. Nowadays we devote all our energy to pretending that we won’t die and nor will anyone we love (if we fasten our seatbelts, have vaccinations, don’t smoke, don’t drink, eat broccoli, drink a litre and a half of water a day) so

that when they do (and they do) we are left bewildered and confused. Not that those are two adjectives I would ever want to apply to myself.

And it was different from when Dad was killed. I was little then and I just longed for him to come back. I even prayed. I prayed that it might not be true, that he would turn up on the doorstep, dishevelled and apologetic. Of course, those kinds of prayers don't get granted. Which ones do, that's what I'd like to know? Asking for what you really want is always asking too much. So what is the right amount to ask? An exam result? A glance from a good-looking man?

We were out in the churchyard now. Eden seemed to have an arm round me still. Evie had slipped away. She was probably relieved to see the back of this woman who had come into her life unwanted and done so much to disturb it. But no, Evie was kinder than that. A supermodel from Pittsburgh, she never forgot where she came from and she always said that if she hadn't gotten this face on her, she'd have been living in a trailer park like her daddy, drowning herself in liquor. She laughed when she said it, but it was true.

'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust . . .'

I threw a handful of earth on to the coffin and felt dizzy and inexplicably angry. I have seen so many people all over the world weeping on top of coffins, their sons killed by some moronic militia or another. I've seen enough of this. Can't something nice happen for a change? I smiled at my own belligerence and turned away.

Pauline had wanted to make some limp sandwiches (well, I don't suppose she would have planned for them to be limp but that is how I thought of them) and tip some booze into everyone to numb the pain, but I couldn't face it. I just went home to Rosslyn Hill with Eden, who had irritatingly broken my coffee machine.

I lay down on the bed (a mattress on the floor piled with white duvets and pillows) and shut my eyes. Eden was fiddling around

in the kitchen (a fridge, a cooker and a sink against the wall in the front room).

‘I am an orphan,’ I said.

‘Me too,’ he shouted back. ‘Drink?’

‘Yes.’ I sighed. ‘Might as well.’