

I

Elfrida Wing stirred, grunted and shifted sleepily in her bed as the summer's angled morning sun brightened the room, printing a skewed rectangle of lemony-gold light onto the olive-green-flecked wallpaper close by her pillow. Elfrida, wakened by the glare inching towards her, opened her eyes and considered the wallpaper, bringing it into focus with some difficulty, trying to force her comatose brain to work, to think. As usual, on waking she felt absolutely terrible. In front of her eyes, small sharp leaves seemed to be depicted there, in a stylised manner, she decided – or were they birds? Bird shapes? Or perhaps they were simply daubs and splatters of olive green that brought leaves and birds to mind.

No matter. Leaves, birds or random flecks – who really cared in the great scheme of things? She eased herself out of bed and slowly pulled on her dressing gown over her pyjamas. She slipped down the stairs as quietly as possible, wincing at each creak, hand securely gripping the banister, trying to ignore the awful hill-cracking headache that, now she was upright, had begun thumping behind her eyes, making them bulge rhythmically in sympathy, or so she felt. Then she remembered Reggie was long gone, up at first light, off to his film. She could relax.

She paused, coughed, then farted noisily and finished her descent of the staircase with careless din, striding into the kitchen and flinging open the fridge door looking for her orange juice. She scissored off the top of a carton and poured herself half a tumblerful before turning to the condiment cupboard and removing the bottle of Sarson's White Vinegar that she kept there behind the pack of sugar. She added a sizeable slug to her

orange juice. Sometimes she wished vodka had more flavour, like gin, but she recognised at the same time that its very neutrality was her greatest ally. Vodka and tap water in a tumbler was her daily tittle when Reggie was around. He never questioned her near-constant thirst, luckily, and never wondered why there was always a considerable stock of Sarson's White Vinegar in the cupboard. Elfrida sat down at the kitchen table and sipped at her vodka and orange juice, finishing it quickly, and then poured herself another, feeling the buzz, the reassuring hit. Her headache was disappearing already.

The title of a novel came mysteriously, unbidden, into her head – *The Zigzag Man*. She could almost see the cover in her mind's eye. A clever use of the two zeds; perhaps different colours for the 'zig' and the 'zag' . . . She poured herself more orange juice and went back to the cupboard for the Sarson's, emptying the last half-inch into the glass. Better buy another bottle of voddy, she told herself. Or two. She found her notebook and wrote the title down. *The Zigzag Man* by Elfrida Wing. She had noted dozens of titles for potential novels, she saw, flicking back through the pages. There they were: *The Summer of the Wasps*, *Freezy*, *The Acrobat*, *Drop Dead Gorgeous*, *A Week in Madrid*, *The Golden Rule*, *Dark Eulogy*, *Jazz*, *Spring Equinox*, *The Lightning Process*, *Cool Sun*, *Mystery in a Small Town*, *Estranged*, *Artists' Entrance*, *Berlin to Hamburg*, *The Windrow*, *The Riviera Gap*, *A Safe Onward Journey*, *Falling Away* – title after title of unwritten novels. And now *The Zigzag Man* could be added to their number. Titles were the easy bit – writing the novel was the awful challenge. She sipped her juice, feeling sad, all of a sudden. It was now over ten years since her last novel had been published, she remembered ruefully: *The Big Show*, published in the spring of 1958. Ten long years and not a word of fiction written – just list after list of titles. She finished her juice feeling a numbness overwhelm her, tears stinging her eyes. Stop thinking about bloody novels, she told herself, angrily. Have another drink.

2

Talbot Kydd woke abruptly from his dream. In his dream he had been standing on a wide beach and a young man, naked, was walking out of the modest surf, waving at him. He sat up, still half asleep, still in a dream-daze, taking in his surroundings. Yes, he was in a hotel, of course, not at home. Another hotel – sometimes he thought he had spent half his life in hotels. Anyway, he didn't really care: the room was generously large and the bathroom functioned perfectly. It was all he needed for his stay. London was close, that was the main thing.

Now he swung his legs out of the bed and stood up, slowly, blinking, and rubbed his face, hearing his alarm go off. Six o'clock. What an absurd time to start your day, he thought, as he always did when his impossible job made these demands. He stood, stretched carefully, raising his arms above his head for a few seconds as if trying to touch the ceiling, hearing joints crack satisfyingly, and then pattered through to the bathroom.

As he lay in his bath, steam rising, he thought again of the dream he'd been having. Was it a dream or was it a memory? Pleasingly erotic, anyway, and about a young man, pale and limber . . . Or was it Kit, his brother? Or was it someone he'd actually photographed, perhaps, one of his models? He could remember the body but not the face. He tried to recover more details but the dream-memories wouldn't coalesce and the young man remained immovably generic – alluring, slim, unidentifiable.

He shaved, he dressed – classic charcoal-grey suit, white shirt, his East Sussex Light Infantry regimental tie – and ran his two brushes through the near-white wings of hair above his ears. The bathroom ceiling lights gleamed brightly on his freckled baldness.

Bald at twenty-five, his father had once observed: I do hope you're my child. It had been an unkind remark to make to a young man self-conscious about his early hair loss, Talbot thought, recalling his father, who had dense straw-coloured hair, driven back from his forehead in tight waves, like a man facing into a gale. But then kindness was not a virtue you'd ever associate with Peverell Kydd so perhaps the slur was evidence of genuine suspicion . . .

He took the stairs down to the dining room and breakfast, expunging thoughts of the old bastard from his mind. Peverell Kydd, dead two decades now. Good. Fuck him and his shade.

He was almost alone in the dining room of the Grand as it was so early. A middle-aged couple in tweeds; a plump man with hair down to his shoulders, smoking, were his three companions. Talbot ordered and consumed his habitual kipper, drank four cups of tea, ate two slices of white toast and raspberry jam, all the while idly watching a rhomboid of sunlight on the maroon carpet slowly turn itself into an isosceles triangle. A sunny day – perfect for Beachy Head.

He had nearly finished his fifth cup of tea when his line producer, Joe Swire, appeared and ordered a pot of coffee from the pretty young waitress with the port-wine birthmark on her neck. Why did he notice such smirches, Talbot wondered, and not celebrate the young waitress's guileless beauty instead? And here was Joe, opposite him, a handsome young man whose good looks were marred by poor teeth, soft and snagged.

'Break it to me gently, Joe,' Talbot said as Joe consulted his clipboard with the day's schedule and business.

'The Applebys have postponed,' Joe began.

'Excellent.'

'But they've asked for another copy of Troy's contract.'

'Why? They have it. They countersigned it.'

'I don't know, boss. And Tony's off sick.'

'Which Tony?'

'The DoP.'

‘What’s wrong with him?’

‘Touch of flu.’

‘Again? What’ll we do?’

‘Frank will cover.’

‘Frank?’

‘The camera operator.’

‘That Frank – right. Is RT happy?’

‘Seems to be.’

They chatted on for a while, going over the schedule and anticipating potential problems. Talbot realised that he over-relied on Joe’s expertise to ensure the film ran smoothly. He didn’t enjoy the pettifogging nuts-and-bolts business of making a film, it wasn’t his forte. Which is why he hired someone like Joe, of course, to manfully shoulder what really should have been his burden. Talbot knew he should try harder and show more interest, such as remembering people’s names. It was one of Peverell Kydd’s salient pieces of advice. If you remember their names and what they do they’ll think you’re a god – or a demi-god, at least. As with most of his father’s proffered wise counsel Talbot was reluctant to take it. Whatever you choose to do in your life, my boy, don’t, repeat, don’t have anything to do with the film business, you’re absolutely not the right type of person, so his father had declared. And yet here he was – a film producer with more than a dozen films to his name. Just like his father – although not a legend, definitely not, and certainly not as rich.

Talbot sat back and exhaled. Why did he feel sour and cantankerous today? he wondered. The sun was shining, they were in week five, close to halfway through the filming schedule; there had been crises, of course, but nothing calamitous. He was wealthy enough, contentedly married, in good health, his children grown up and thriving, after their fashion . . . So what was chafing at him?

‘You all right, boss?’ Joe asked, as if he could sense Talbot’s darkening mood.

‘Yes, yes. All’s well with the world. Shall we go to work?’

3

Anny Viklund woke up and, as she did every morning as consciousness slowly returned, she wondered if this day was going to be the day that she died. Why did that morbid question come so quickly to her mind every single morning? Why was her first thought that this day, just begun, might be her last day on earth? Stupid. Don't think these thoughts, stupid. She lay there for a few moments, concentrating, then slowly became aware of the young man sleeping soundly next to her. Troy. Yes, of course, Troy had stayed the night . . . She rubbed her eyes. He had been so sweet, she remembered, and the sex had been good and energetic – exactly what she had wanted – what she'd needed.

She slipped out of bed and walked, naked, into the bathroom. She peered at her face in the mirror, always a bit shocked to see her newly cropped ink-black hair with its short fringe. So stark and transforming. Maybe she'd leave it like that and never be a blonde again. She urinated and cleaned her teeth and wandered back into the bedroom.

Troy was sitting on her side of the bed, rummaging at his thick brown hair with stiff fingers. He smiled, seeing her come back in.

'That was a bit of all right last night, wasn't it?' he said, obviously pleased with himself.

'You think so?' She climbed back onto the bed, hugging her knees to her.

Troy pointed at his morning erection.

'He's ready for more, I'd say.' He leant over and kissed her left kneecap.

‘We’re due on set in an hour,’ she said. ‘They won’t know where you are.’

‘Shit. Yeah. Good point.’ Troy frowned. He looked at her. ‘How come your pubic hair is a different colour from the hair on your head? Eh?’

Anny smiled. This, she now realised, was the sort of question Troy asked.

‘My hair is dyed. The hair on my head.’

‘Natural blonde, then? Like it.’

‘My family is from Sweden.’

‘Yeah. But you’re an American.’

‘It doesn’t affect my ancestry.’

Troy stood and wandered around the suite looking for his clothes.

‘Better get back to my room,’ he said, vaguely.

Anny watched him dress. He was twenty-four, she knew, making him almost four years younger than she was. Maybe that was why she had slept with him. I’ve slept with too many old men, she thought – first Mavrocordato, then Cornell, then Jacques – I’ve forgotten what it was like with a young man. He was cute, Troy, almost innocent, she decided – yes, he still thought life was full of fun. She bowed her head, resting her brow on her knees. The act reminded her at once of Jacques. It was one of his sayings: the world is composed of people who bow their heads and people who don’t . . . Where was Jacques, anyway? Paris? No, he had said something about going to Africa to meet a deposed president in exile. What was his name? Nkrumah. Yes. Very Jacques. A trip to Africa to meet a president – she kept forgetting how famous Jacques was in France. She unbowed her head. Troy was standing there, dressed in his jeans and his suede jacket, staring at her.

‘You all right?’ he asked.

‘Yes, of course. I enjoyed myself. I’m very happy.’

He sat down on the bed and kissed her.

‘What’ll we do?’

‘We can’t tell anyone,’ she said. ‘Nobody must know.’

‘But I want to see you again. A lot.’ He gently touched her cheek with his fingers. ‘You’re terrific, Anny. I really like you. I’ve never met anyone like you.’

‘Then we have to be very careful. Be discreet. No one can know. No one must guess or have a suspicion.’ She thought further. ‘When we’re shooting on set we just have to be professional – you know, like friends.’

‘Kind of difficult. Now.’

‘No one can know, Troy. My life is too complicated.’

He shrugged. ‘All right. Have it your way – we’ll be very careful. We’re actors, after all. Well, you are.’ He looked at her shrewdly. ‘You’re not married, are you?’

‘I’m divorced. But I have . . . Another friend.’

‘In America?’

‘In Paris.’

‘That’s all right then,’ Troy smiled. ‘Out of sight is out of mind, as they say.’

‘Out of sight, but very much in mind.’

Suddenly she grabbed the back of his neck and pulled his head towards hers, kissing him strongly.

They broke apart. Troy looked a bit stunned.

‘Go,’ she said.

‘Anny, I can—’

‘Go.’

‘No.’

4

Talbot looked at Reggie Tipton and smiled, trying to ignore his sour mood, trying to be friendly, trying to be convivially understanding, though he was actually thinking what an insufferable, deluded, self-important little man Reggie was.

‘I thought – forgive me – that we were meant to be at Beachy Head this morning,’ Talbot said, evenly.

‘We will be. I just need to get this pick-up.’

‘What pick-up? It wasn’t on the schedule, Joe says.’

‘Last-minute thought of mine. Joe’s up to speed, now. Just Anny – big close-up. Thinking, she doesn’t have to say anything.’ He joined up his thumbs and forefingers to make a notional rectangle and held it up to his face – as if, Talbot thought, I couldn’t quite grasp the concept of a ‘big’ close-up. He really could be tiresome, Reggie.

‘One big close-up. One shot, no more than ten minutes. Trust me, Talbot. We’ll get everything done today.’

‘Fair enough, you’re the director. Where is Anny, by the way?’

‘Hair and make-up. She was late. Unfortunately.’

‘Do we know why?’ Talbot still maintained a faint smile.

‘No. Or at least I don’t know. She was told the pick-up time, the car was there. We called her room – she didn’t answer. We waited. She came down an hour later.’

‘I see. Is she all right?’

Reggie scoffed. ‘How can Anny Viklund be “all right”, given her history? She’s behaving *fairly* well – we’re lucky – that’s the best we can hope for.’

‘You cast her.’

‘Sorry, Talbot, that’s not fair. I was under massive pressure to cast her, from you and Yorgos.’

‘Not true. Yorgos wanted her, for some reason. I wanted Suzy Kendall. Or Judy Geeson.’

‘Suzy Kendall would have worked. Could have been great . . .’ Reggie frowned, as if imagining his film in a parallel universe.

‘Or if not her, that singer. Whatsername,’ Talbot said.

‘Lulu?’

‘No. Sandra Shaw.’

‘Sandie Shaw . . . Can she act?’

‘Reggie, it’s not difficult,’ Talbot said. ‘At least not in this film. She’d have been perfect, Sandie Shaw – opposite Troy Blaze. Damn sight cheaper than Anny Viklund.’

‘It is difficult, acting, actually,’ Reggie said, a little petulantly. He lowered his voice and drew Talbot a few paces away from the camera crew.

‘Talbot, would you do me a huge favour and not call me “Reggie” on the set? If you must use a name please call me Rodrigo. Please. It’s important to me. I’ve changed my driving licence, passport, everything – it’s how I want to be known, professionally, anyway. It’s very important to me.’

‘I’ll try and remember. Sorry. It’s all very odd, I must say. I’ve known you as “Reggie” for years.’

‘I’m credited on this film as Rodrigo Tipton. It’s a whole new beginning for me – everything might change.’

‘All right, all right. *Rodrigo*.’

‘Thank you.’ Reggie/Rodrigo sighed. ‘Anyway, I suppose it is pretty amazing to have Anny Viklund in a little British film. Did you see how much money *The Yellow Mountain* has made? Tens of millions. And she looks stunning. And Troy seems to get on with her. There are lots of pluses.’ He held up his right hand and rubbed the tips of his fingers together. ‘It’ll pay off at the box office.’

‘It had better.’ Talbot stopped smiling.

'Hello, darling, what's brought you here?' Reggie said, looking over Talbot's shoulder.

Talbot turned to see Reggie's wife, Elfrida, approaching. The oddest woman, he always thought. Tall, slim, she seemed to be trying to hide her face behind her thick dark hair. She had a fringe down to her eyelashes and her ears and cheeks were concealed by two chin-length curtains of hair brushed forward like a sort of hair-helmet. She often wore heavy black-rimmed spectacles that made the barrier seem even more impenetrable, though, oddly again, her lips were always painted a lurid red. An intelligent woman, obviously, but very strange. He wondered how she and Reggie ever came to be married.

'Elfrida, lovely to see you.' Talbot shook her hand. He had read and enjoyed one of her novels, years ago – couldn't recall the title.

'Talbot, hello, hello,' she replied, her red lips parting in a quick smile. She had a husky voice as if she were a heavy smoker but he'd never seen her with a cigarette.

'I've run out of money,' she said to Reggie. 'And the cheque-book's run out of cheques.'

'Excuse us, Talbot,' Reggie said.

Talbot watched them walk away, talking quietly to each other. Elfrida was as tall as Reggie, if not slightly taller. Couples, he thought, how curious they are. He shook the idea away, thinking suddenly of the couple he made with Naomi – no more curious than Reggie Tipton and Elfrida Wing, he supposed.

He wandered off to find Joe and seek an answer to the question of when the hell were they ever going to get to Beachy Head? As he searched for Joe amongst the vans, caravans and the lorries of the set, he slowly realised that almost every transistor radio in the unit was tuned to the same radio station playing the same absurd song. He seemed to be moving from aural zone to aural zone when the song would die away, then, as he passed another group of lounging men, waiting, smoking, drinking

coffee, it flared up, playing once more. Something about a cake and a park, and melting green sweet icing flowing down. Oh, no! How long was the damn thing? He kept hearing the same refrain. A park, belonging to a Mr MacArthur, where a cake had been left out in the rain, and something about a recipe that could not be found. Oh, no! He was no admirer of modern 'pop' music but this one seemed unusually abstruse, from what he could understand of the snatched lyrics.

There was Joe.

'Joe! Save me from this madness,' he said. 'Take me to Beachy Head.'

5

Elfrida stood at the bar of the snug in the Repulse and ordered another gin and tonic. It was the pub she preferred in Brighton, two streets back from the Esplanade. Smallish, with a saloon bar as well as the snug, and decoratively unfavoured, it boasted only drab, neutral colours: browns, greens, dark grey – nothing themed, nothing garish. No music blaring, no gambling machines or toys for men to play. It was named the Repulse after an early nineteenth-century first-rate ship of the line that went down with all hands in some remote naval battle in the East Java Sea or somewhere – somewhere far from England, anyway, forever commemorated here in a modest Brighton pub, paid for by subscriptions raised by the widows of the crew. There was a framed parchment document in the short corridor on the way to the saloon bar that explained the history. Nice idea, Elfrida thought; a fit way of remembering the drowned menfolk. A place where you could drown your sorrows . . . She thought she'd quite like a pub as a memorial. Better than a row of books on a shelf. A little pub somewhere with a sign: 'The Elfrida Wing'. She took her drink back to her table in the corner, toying with the idea, imagining the pub – her stylised portrait on the sign, bright flowers in window boxes, benches outside, a little beer garden at the back . . .

The snug bar was quiet, afternoon closing time wasn't far off, and there were just three other drinkers, all men, apart from herself. She had a sip of her G and T and then searched her handbag (now heavy with a new bottle of vodka) for her notebook. She opened it in front of her and rummaged for her fountain pen. She had no intention of writing anything, she just wanted to

look like she was busy with something, thinking – not a drinker, drinking. She doodled some spirals on a new page and then some squares and cross-hatched them dark.

Out of the corner of her eye she was aware of a man who seemed to be looking at her; a man of her age, in his forties, wearing a suit and tie and reading a book. He kept glancing at her. She pushed at her hair and her fringe and then put on her glasses. Maybe he recognises me, she thought, how ghastly. Maybe he'd read one of her novels and was thinking to himself, 'Could that be Elfrida Wing over there?' Then she saw him swallow the last inch of his half-pint, stand up and cross the room towards her. She concentrated on her notebook.

'Excuse me, sorry for interrupting, but are you by any chance Elfrida Wing?'

Elfrida looked up.

'No. My name's Jennifer Tipton.'

'Sorry. It's just that you look like her. Like her photo, I mean.'

'Who is this Elspeth Wing?'

'Elfrida. She's a rather wonderful novelist. I've read all her novels.'

'I'm a midwife,' she said. 'Apologies.' She pointed at her gin. 'It's my day off.'

He smiled at her dubiously, as if not at all convinced.

'I wish I could write a novel,' Elfrida said. That much was true.

'Well, sorry to bother you,' the man said again. 'Enjoy your day off.' And he sauntered out of the pub, glancing quickly back at her as he stepped out through the door.

The encounter disturbed her. To think that even after ten years of silence on her part, after ten years of resolute writer's block, loyal, devoted readers might still recognise her. Terrifying. She had been much photographed and interviewed, particularly after the success of her last novel, she recalled, and then the film and then when she and Reggie got married in

Islington town hall. Reggie had arranged for lots of photographers. Reggie wore white and she wore black – it seemed to amuse people. Something about her face, her ‘public’ image – a young woman writer enjoying the acclaim – seemed to linger in people’s minds. Novelists should be – are – the least recognised of minor celebrities, she thought, almost invisible. Conductors, artists, dancers, athletes, magicians, sportsmen, weather-forecasters, quiz-show hosts are far more familiar. But certain novelists seem to remain in the public consciousness. Perhaps it was her hairstyle – her fringe. Maybe she should change that? She finished her gin and went back to the bar to order another.

She sat on in the gloomy pub, drinking, waiting for the call of ‘last orders’, thinking about the man and what he’d said. ‘A rather wonderful novelist.’ She supposed he had read her first novel, *Mrs Bristow’s Day*. How she hated that novel, now. It was short, around 160 pages, and related the day – in great, textured detail – in the life of an ordinary middle-aged woman, the eponymous Mrs Bristow, who was married and had three grown-up sons, and was simply getting on with the business of living until she died. She goes shopping; she has a bit of a row over a constantly barking dog with a woman who is a neighbour; she goes to a dental appointment. In the dentist’s waiting room she reads magazines and thinks about her sons, where they are and what they’re up to. She has an old filling repaired in a molar then she returns home, pausing to buy an evening paper. Back at her house she prepares her husband’s tea, waiting for him to return from work, then glances at the headlines, pondering the news at home and abroad. She hears a noise and goes to investigate and discovers a young man, an intruder who has broken in through the scullery window. In a panic he attacks Mrs Bristow and kills her.

The problem that then emerged, she realised, wasn’t the novel’s surprising success. It did exceptionally well for a first novel and she was only just twenty-five, relatively fresh from Cambridge

(Girton College) – no, the problem was that a famous literary critic, in his enthusiastic review, dubbed her ‘the new Virginia Woolf’, as if *Mrs Bristow’s Day* was a clever, modern reworking of Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*. She hadn’t thought anything of it at first, she hadn’t even read *Mrs Dalloway*, but when the epithet was repeated on the publication of her second novel, *Excesses* (‘Elfrida Wing, widely regarded as the new Virginia Woolf, chalks up a second triumph with *Excesses*’) she began to be a little irritated. Other critics repeated the comparison, thoughtlessly – recklessly, she felt. It was as if Virginia Woolf’s ghost was somehow haunting her life. Mention Elfrida Wing and someone would inevitably say, ‘Ah, the new Virginia Woolf.’ It was on the publication of her third novel, *The Big Show*, that she realised that her name was going to be yoked to Virginia Woolf’s for the rest of her writing life. ‘Elfrida Wing, celebrated and acclaimed as the rightful heir to Virginia Woolf, stuns with *The Big Show*.’

What made it worse was that she didn’t particularly like Virginia Woolf’s novels. She had read *Mrs Dalloway*, by this time, and was underwhelmed. She found the novels overwrought and fey. She could see no similarity between her spirit, intellect and style as a novelist and Virginia Woolf’s. But not so for every critic who reviewed her books. Nor her growing army of loyal readers, because the publishers repeated the claim – in bold – on her paperbacks. She began to hate the sight of her own novels. And that was why she stopped writing, she supposed. It was all Virginia Woolf’s fault.

She took a mouthful of her gin and tonic and closed her eyes as she registered the benign, the sublime, effect. Who would have thought that the berries of the humble shrub that was the juniper could inspire this elixir? She felt her head reel, satisfyingly, drew another square in her notebook and shaded it in.

Perhaps, she thought, as she drew a series of arrows, large and small, she was making excuses for what was simply a complete lack of inspiration. Had she merely run out of fictional steam

after three successful novels? Maybe – maybe – it had nothing to do with being regarded as the new Virginia Woolf at all . . .

After *The Big Show* had been published (sixteen translations, paperback rights sold for a good five-figure sum) she had met Reggie Tipton. Reggie, a very up-and-coming young film director, wanted to make a film of *The Big Show*. The film rights were acquired for a higher five-figure sum and for a while Elfrida realised she was actually quite rich. She bought a small house in the Vale of Health in Hampstead and she and Reggie had an affair, of course. Reggie's eventual film, now known simply as *Show!*, starred Melanie Todd and Sebastian Brandt but even their starry candlepower couldn't make it a success. It sold many more books for her, however, and she became even richer. Then Reggie left his wife (and children) and she and Reggie married. And then she had her miscarriage. Everything had gone wrong after that, yes, that was the crisis point.

She thought back to those days with some hesitation, reluctant to stir memories. Reggie, when she met him, was married to a humourless, pretentious woman called Marion ('The single biggest grotesque mistake of my life,' he had confessed to Elfrida at the beginning of their affair). Reggie and Marion Tipton had two daughters, Butterfly and Evergreen, eight and six. When Reggie formally separated from Marion, moved in with Elfrida and divorce proceedings began, she noticed that his allotted quota of visits to the girls steadily diminished. When Butterfly was sixteen she wrote to her father saying she never wanted to see him again. Reggie had shown Elfrida the letter, not seeming too perturbed. Elfrida was more shocked at its cold, unforgiving tone than he was. He continued to see Evergreen from time to time until she too was persuaded by Marion's undying bitterness to cut all ties to her father. Reggie – secure in the castle of his ego – took it surprisingly well.

For her part, Elfrida always had something of a guilty conscience. She hated the idea that she was in some significant way

responsible for this festering pool of unhappiness in the Tipton family, but the heady, alluring energies of their affair overwhelmed all other emotions. And then, shortly after they were married, when she became pregnant herself, she rather hoped that Reggie's new child would console him for the loss of the other two. But she miscarried in the third month. The resulting hospitalisation and her subsequent year-long mini-nervous breakdown, she now realised, was the watershed in their marriage. She slowly became aware that Reggie was actually somewhat relieved not to be a father again. Her miscarriage, as she put it to herself, led to a corresponding mismarriage. They tried for another child but without success and Reggie seemed to be losing even his faint interest in the idea, anyway, and so the dream of being a mother died. Nothing was ever the same again; Reggie began to have affairs and she stopped writing.

'Last orders please!' the barmaid cried.

Elfrida finished her gin and went to the bar to order a final drink and a packet of peanuts. That would have to do for lunch.

6

Anny and Troy sat in the banana-yellow Mini on the cliff of Beachy Head, in a warm stupor of sunlight, looking out at the refulgent English Channel, glinting silver. High in the sky above them a perfectly straight white contrail split the blue.

‘Nobody suspects a thing,’ Troy said. ‘You’re brilliant. You’re so calm. What’s the word? Impressive.’

‘Impressive or impassive?’

‘Both. Yeah. You look so cool with those sunglasses on. No one could tell you were madly in love with me.’

‘Ha-ha.’

Troy had his hand on her leg, slipping his fingers under her short skirt, and she could feel the heat of his palm on the inside of her thigh through the mesh of her ivory-coloured tights.

In front of them was an entire film crew surrounding a large camera mounted on a crane. Even though it was a sunny day, powerful arc lights burned strongly. The first assistant director was shouting at them through a loudhailer.

‘Turning over! Action!’

Anny and Troy climbed out of their respective doors, joined hands and ran towards the camera. When they separated – each of them going a different side of the camera – they stopped. Anny knew that the next scene, shot from behind, would feature their stunt doubles who, hand in hand, would leap over the cliff and fall six feet into a net rigged below the turf’s edge. It would be the penultimate scene of the film.

As for the final scene of the film, Anny had no idea how they would do it. According to the script, instead of falling to their deaths Anny’s and Troy’s characters would fly miraculously

upward into the heavens, disappearing from sight – like those rockets they launched from Cape Kennedy, Anny thought, lost to view forever.

Rodrigo Tipton stepped round from behind the camera and wandered over.

‘Fab,’ he said. ‘Can we do it just once more without the shades, please, Anny?’

‘I don’t want to do it without sunglasses,’ she said without really thinking.

‘We probably won’t use it but it might be an interesting option. Just to have it in the can, you know.’ Rodrigo smiled.

Anny thought about refusing – normally she would have refused – but for some reason having Troy beside her made her think again.

‘OK.’

After she had done the run to the cliff edge twice more without sunglasses Rodrigo said everything was great and now they would do the scene with the stunt doubles. Their day was over. Anny quietly told Troy that he should go and she would stay on a while. It would look better if they didn’t leave together. Troy agreed.

‘Yeah, but I’ll come to your room tonight,’ Troy said. ‘Midnight.’

‘No.’

‘Yes. No one’ll see me.’

‘I might not be there at midnight.’

‘You’ll be there, babe.’

He wandered off to his car and driver. Anny asked her assistant, Shirley, to get her a cup of tea as she stood behind the camera with Rodrigo watching the alternative Anny Viklund and Troy Blaze fling themselves off Beachy Head. What a way to go, she thought, remembering her macabre early-morning question to herself. Maybe, in a funny sort of way, it had in fact happened. She had indeed ‘died’ today. The idea was strangely liberating

and she began to think about Troy and his visit tonight. He was very sure of himself, but in a nice way, one that—

‘How’s everything going, Anny?’

She turned to see who was speaking and saw a tall, bald man ambling over towards her. It was the producer, she realised. Tony? Terence? She had only met him once or twice so she decided not to risk a guess and said simply that everything was great, really good, thanks, everyone was being so nice.

‘Good, excellent, very pleased,’ Tony or Terence said. He had one of those classic clipped, dry English accents, she thought. How do they speak like that, hardly moving their lips? No one can really know what they’re thinking or feeling, everything sounds the same. He might as well have said, ‘Bad, terrible, I’m shocked.’

He stepped a little closer to her and lowered his voice.

‘We had a strange phone call in the office this morning. It was the police. They asked if a man called Cornell Weekes had tried to contact you.’

Anny felt sweat form instantly in her armpits and on the palms of her hands. Just hearing his name had that effect on her. Cornell: her demon-lover, her one-time guru, her nemesis.

‘No.’

‘Cornell Weekes is your husband, isn’t he?’

‘Cornell Weekes is my ex-husband.’

‘Ah. Right.’

‘He’s in prison,’ she said.

‘Not any more, apparently.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I don’t know the details . . .’ He pronounced the word ‘deetays’, she thought, seeing him glance around to make sure no one could overhear. ‘But it seems that he absconded during a routine parole hearing. They think he made his way to Canada. To Montreal.’

Anny began to calm down.

‘Why would they think he was in England?’ she said. ‘He was in prison in California.’

The tall, bald man smiled in a kindly way.

‘Apparently they found a map of London in the hotel room he was staying in. In Montreal.’ He shrugged. ‘A logical assumption. Why *was* your ex-husband in prison, if I may ask?’

‘He tried to blow up a federal building.’

‘Right.’ He scratched his nose. ‘I’m sure it was a routine enquiry, you know.’

‘Cornell is a weird kind of fucked-up guy, but there’s no way he’d come to England. He’s never been to England.’

‘Reassuring.’ The man gestured at the film crew. ‘It’s all going so well.’ He turned back and looked at her shrewdly. He must be sixty or seventy, she thought, like my grandpa. He was still quite a handsome man, she saw, lean and upright, despite being old and bald.

‘My name is Talbot, by the way. Talbot Kydd.’

At the end of the day Talbot sat in the office with Joe.

‘What’s up tomorrow?’

‘We’ve got Sylvia Slaye and Ferdie Meares in for their costume fittings.’

‘Jesus Christ. Both on the same day? Is that wise?’

‘Yes, boss. Short and sweet. Two birds with one stone is the idea. They’ve already sent in a list of their “requests”.’

Talbot squared his shoulders reflexively as if expecting a blow, thinking. Old troupers. Former big stars. Now fading stars. Difficult people. The worst. He lit a cigarette.

‘Joe, tell me. Do we have any idea how the last scene is going to be filmed?’

‘Ah. Well. There’s been talk of . . . Of animation. Some animation. Somewhere. In some shape or form.’ Joe almost squirmed in his seat as he said the words.

He was a decent young chap, Talbot thought. Should keep him on, somehow.

‘We can’t afford animation,’ Talbot said, calmly. ‘And animation would be so wrong, anyway. All wrong at the end of this film in particular.’

‘You’ll have to talk to Reggie – sorry, Rodrigo – guv’nor. He seems to have some sort of animated fantasy sequence in mind.’

‘But it’s not in the script. It’s not budgeted for.’

‘The script’s being rewritten.’

‘*What?* No, it fucking isn’t!’

‘Sorry. It was just that I heard Rodrigo was bringing in Janet Headstone. So I sort of assumed . . .’

‘News to me.’

‘Apparently Yorgos gave him the thumbs-up.’

Talbot felt his anger build. Yorgos was his producing partner. What were these people playing at? He exhaled. One day at a time. Stay calm, he told himself, there is always a simpler explanation to be found, somewhere.

He went to the cupboard, took out his bottle of whisky and poured himself an inch into a glass – all in the interests of reaching this new mental state of calm indifference, of Zen-like remove from the irritating, scratchy details of the life of a film producer.

How wise the Japanese were, he thought to himself, remembering that there were two words in Japanese to describe the self. Or so he thought: who had told him this? Apparently there was a word for the self that existed in the private realm and another, completely different, word for the self that existed in the world. Why didn’t the English language have this sensible division? He abandoned his public self and, sipping at his whisky, retrieved his private self, happy to be absorbed in the plans he had made for the weekend. The travails of *Ladder to the Moon* would be erased from his mind – his private self would hold sway for a day or two.