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A Short Break

Donald Humbie, a considerably successful advocate in his mid-fifties practising at the Scottish bar, was having a hell of a time driving along this narrow, downhill, winding, gloomy country road hemmed in by thickly planted pine trees. His neck was stiff, he felt short of breath and his steering was all to hell. There seemed to be something wrong with his car, too – a smart but unpretentious little 1998 Daewoo – though it had served him so well hitherto. The engine was roaring and screaming and protesting and the vehicle was jerking and veering wildly from side to side. His terror of those who were pursuing him was now matched by his horror at his own reckless driving and mounting fear of his seemingly uncontrollable car.

Then it flashed into his head that all this could be explained by the circumstance that he was in fact reversing, at great speed, looking over his left shoulder. When

he had backed precipitately out of the forest track in the certain knowledge that they were close behind him, it had struck him that he would be wasting precious time by stopping to change into forward gear, so he had just shot off backwards down this desperately narrow, steeply declining, treacherous country road, without further thought.

What a thing to do! – even in those circumstances. This autumn holiday was not going so well.

He had left Edinburgh only a couple of days before. It wasn't his usual time for a break, the courts were sitting, but – well, really it was on doctor's orders. He wasn't exactly ill; but he certainly wasn't well either. Madeleine said it was the male menopause. She knew he needed to be off on his own for a bit, and the truth was that really she would be glad enough to see the back of him. Allowing each other their own space, that's what it was called nowadays. Things had not been so good lately, between Madeleine and himself. But then they had not been so good within himself either. He acknowledged that. And when things are not right within yourself, it follows that they can't be right with other people.

One evening recently he had been sitting in his study, putting off the work that badly needed to be done, and staring at his oldest and most faithful friends, the multifarious books on his crammed shelves, consciously willing them to explain what was wrong. The answer must be there, surely, somewhere among all those words.

'How extraordinary,' he thought, 'that I have read all the books on those shelves, bristling with ideas and life, and they have all passed through me and become part of me, yet here I sit without an idea in my head or an

emotion in my heart, dead as a doornail! Something will have to be done.'

The only thing he could come up with, though, was the thought that he must 'get away for a bit', which was not really very imaginative. And that was part of the trouble: he wasn't in a very imaginative frame of mind. But he decided that's what he would do anyway; he'd go away for a few days. Then, on the morning of his departure, he didn't feel so well. He was in the bathroom when he was suddenly overcome by a deathly faintness and nausea, the sweat broke out on his brow and the world was running away from him. He sat down on the toilet seat and put his head between his knees, but for a little while he was not aware of what was going on and perhaps he even briefly lost consciousness. Then there was a curiously unnerving sense, for a moment, that he was travelling between two modes of existence and could experience both simultaneously. But it passed and he felt better, if rather strange and in an odd way detached from himself. A little shaken, he continued with his preparations for departure.

Then something else rather strange happened. He had already packed the car and was ready to set off and was saying goodbye to Madeleine when he quite unexpectedly felt very emotional and even thought that he was going to cry. He had his hands over his wife's hips.

She said in a far-away voice, 'I dreamt last night of the guillotine. They were going to execute me. It made an awful mess of me here.' She raised both her hands and rested her fingers on the back of the neck. '*You* should have done it,' she whispered. 'You would have made a cleaner job of it.'

He was going to ask, 'They – who were they?' but before he could do so she kissed him passionately. Neither of them said anything more; Donald hesitated a moment, then he turned and left.

He thought he would head for the north-west. Something was niggling away at the back of his mind. Partly it was those strange words of Madeleine's; but there was something else too. Had he failed to pack something vital? He racked his brains but couldn't pinpoint anything. Yet the further he drove the more strongly did the troubling sense assert itself – a sense which he now realized had always been there but which up till now he had successfully repressed – that he was missing something. Not something in his luggage but something in his life. It wasn't some large elusive generality like success, or fulfilment, or love, or God. Actually, he believed that he had some of those things, to some degree. No, what he was missing was something absolutely concrete and specific – something he had once had. He ought to be able to see it; he could almost touch it. Yet always it evaded him; it was just beyond reach.

That first night he had spent in a little hotel in Benderloch. The drive had been pleasant, the early autumn weather clear and fresh, he was enjoying being by himself, and but for that odd niggle at the back of his mind everything seemed to be all right. But as he dressed for dinner in his single room with the double bed he began to feel lonely and to wish that Madeleine were with him after all. The feeling was naturally accentuated as he dined by himself, the only lone diner in the restaurant. He drank a bottle of wine with his meal, which he felt was rather too much

for one.

Perhaps as a result of this over-indulgence, on an impulse he decided to phone Madeleine after dinner, and ask her to join him at their old haunt of Fliuchary within the next day or two. He went up to his bedroom to get this done before his coffee arrived in the lounge. There was the familiar pause and faint click indicating an answering machine, then a male voice speaking in a guttural Eastern European accent intoned:

‘You have reached the residence of Attila the Hun. I am sorry that I am unable to take your call at present, but if you care to leave your name and address, I will arrange to have you torn apart by wild horses as soon as possible. Please speak slowly after the tone.’

Dammit! – wrong number. He tried again. The same thing happened; but this time, after the voice had delivered its instructions, it laughed, quite briefly. The laugh was not a kindly one.

Well, that was not encouraging.

Donald decided to have a brandy with his coffee. What was he to do now? He really did want Madeleine to join him as soon as possible; he was almost sure of that. But how was he to get in touch with her when there was this problem with the phone? Then he remembered that he had his notebook computer with him. E-mail – that was the answer. Technology was a wonderful thing.

‘Darling, I’m missing you. I’m in Benderloch tonight but going on to Fliuchary tomorrow. I’ll stay there for at least a couple of days – why don’t you come up and join me? I need you. I’ll be at Tigh-na-Coille as usual. There seems to be a problem with the phone (ours, I mean). Love, *H.*’

H. stood for Madeleine's pet name for Donald, which it really wouldn't be fair to either of them to reveal. He posted the message and everything seemed to be fine. Technology was a great comfort.

When he checked the next morning there was as yet no reply from Madeleine. Probably she had not yet checked herself; she wouldn't have been expecting to hear from him that way. He was confident there would be a response from her by evening. Or she might just decide to give him a surprise by arriving unannounced – that would be like her. He could see now the expression of childlike pleasure – a mute 'Look, here I am!' – she would assume as she waited for his mouth to open in joyful surprise. She still had that innocent freshness.

All the same, Donald felt rather depressed as he set off on the longish haul up to Fliuchary; or not so much depressed as disorientated. 'It's one of those days when everything's different,' he said to himself. It was a feeling with which he had been familiar since childhood, though he didn't experience it very often nowadays. A sense of unfamiliarity within the familiar; everything was really the same, yet it contained within it an alienation that was imperceptible to the senses, as if the substance of the world had been infiltrated by something subversive and nothing was any longer truly as it appeared. It was usually brought on by some dislocating event, a kind of *Verfremdungseffekt*. No doubt on this occasion it was that bizarre message on the answering machine which had sparked this sense of strangeness. Who the devil could have been playing around with their phone?

He wondered whether Ken had been round to see Madeleine after he'd left. Ken was Madeleine's much younger

half-brother, and a great practical joker. A complete buffoon, in Donald's opinion. Yes, that was doubtless the explanation.

All the same the feeling had not entirely dispersed when, around half-past five, he arrived at Fliuchary at the end of his long drive and pulled up at the familiar guest-house. Tigh-na-Coille – almost home from home. Donald and Madeleine had been coming here now for about fifteen years and the welcome was always the same. Here, at least, nothing would have changed. The whitewashed house, the two little lawns of coarse grass on either side of the pebbly path, the neat flower beds under the front windows, the sea-shells arranged around the porch, and the big stone roller for the lawn in its little niche. His feet crunched on the pebbles. He pulled the old-fashioned bell.

A man in his mid-forties who looked a bit like Clark Gable, dressed in a canary waistcoat under a loudly checked tweed suit, opened the door almost at once, as if he had been waiting for Donald, and stared at him impassively without speaking, a slight smirk on his features.

'Is Mrs Macrae about?' asked Donald, with an attempt at brightness.

'Mrs Macrae's dead,' said the man. 'I'm Mr Motion.'

'Dead? Mrs Macrae's dead? When? What happened?'

'A little over a year ago, I believe. I don't know the details. We took over in May. I think you'll find that everything's much as it was. Are you coming in?'

This man didn't seem to think that it should matter to Donald that Mrs Macrae was dead! Clutching his bag, he staggered rather than walked over the threshold, not

knowing what else to do, close to fainting with shock but already trying to steady his spirit to withstand the onflow of grief which must soon cascade over it. He followed the man up the stairs and into the familiar bedroom.

Yes, everything was much the same – in fact, absolutely the same. So much the same that it was positively obscene. Not only the décor and furnishings, even down to the bedspread, but all Mrs Macrae's things, her little personal touches, yes, actually the family photographs too! Donald wondered whether the man was playing some kind of nasty practical joke on him, whether Mrs Macrae had just popped down to the post office and this unpleasant guest had taken it upon himself to show the new arrival to his room. But then he noticed one unfamiliar object: on the dressing-table stood a large, tasteless colour photograph of a rather vulgar-looking, heavily made-up woman with a cold smile, gazing at the camera through blue, narrowed lids.

'Mrs Motion,' said the man, observing that Donald was looking at it. 'You'll have the pleasure of getting acquainted with her later.' There was something naggingly familiar about his voice.

Donald grunted non-committally. *Some pleasure!* he thought. What a piece of effrontery, to imagine that his paying guests would want to have Mrs Motion gazing upon their intimate lives throughout their stay! As soon as the man had gone he removed the photograph from the dressing-table and placed it face-down on the floor beside the waste-paper basket. He sat down on the bed, not wanting to stay, wanting in fact very much to leave. But Madeleine might well come. He got out the Toshiba; still no reply to his message. Well then, he would have to

wait, and there was no saying how long. He knew that if Madeleine did come, she wouldn't want to stay here now. How shocked she would be! – not only at Mrs Macrae's totally unexpected death (she was a fit and healthy little woman, not yet 70), but at this disgusting usurpation of her home, almost of her life. How on earth could it have happened? She had a family – a daughter in Glasgow and a son somewhere in England. How could they have allowed this creature to take over their family home, wholesale, down to the last button? It wasn't canny.

But what was he to do? He could try phoning again, he supposed, but . . . somehow he didn't want to. To tell the truth, he was scared. He didn't want to hear again the voice of Attila the Hun. The voice . . . Oh, God, the voice, the voice! *That* was why Motion's voice seemed familiar! The room began to swim before his eyes: he had to lie down on the bed, and perhaps even momentarily lost consciousness once again.

When he had recovered a little he stood up and a convulsion of rage coursed through his spirit. He wanted to confront Motion at once and shout '*Impostor!*' at him at the top of his voice. For that was all he was – a wretched, vulgar impostor!

Donald ran down the stairs and found the man in the private sitting room, reading a newspaper. He stood in the doorway for a moment, uncertain whether the other even knew he was there; then, instead of what he intended, he merely said:

'I'll be eating out this evening.'

'That's a sensible decision,' replied Mr Motion, without even looking up from his newspaper. 'We don't serve evening meals.'

THE JOURNEY

Utterly wrong-footed, Donald stood there awkwardly for another moment then left the house and walked quickly down the road. He felt as if he knew he had been infected with some deadly disease but was still in the incubation period, waiting with unutterable dread for the first symptoms to appear. In the meantime he had to carry on living because there was simply nothing else to be done, but it had all become meaningless. He walked on in the steadily encroaching twilight. The little details of life had taken on a feverish intensity. Ahead of him an old gentleman was irritatedly flicking litter off the pavement with inept, jerky movements of his walking-stick.

'That's me in twenty years' time,' he thought fleetingly. As Donald overtook him the old man turned sharply and looked at him and he was – just that. Himself in twenty years. To see one's double – wasn't that supposed to portend approaching death?