

## Broken Skin

The girls hurtle along the main street, a shrieking typhoon of pink net and tinsel. A half-inflated giant penis is borne aloft, a broken barque on the crest of their wave. The lean, bronzed early breakfasters at the Library Café glance up, frowning over their cappuccinos and croissants. They came here to hike, to swim, to hunt for Bruce Chatwin's elusive shrine. They did not come here for hen parties.

Helen, at her usual table to the rear of the terrace, lets the ghost of a smile pass across her face. Helen has never married and never expected to, yet here she is, in this café in the Mani, because of a man. George. If time had worked differently, that could have been her (though with less pink net and perhaps not the flaccid penis).

Helen will turn fifty-one next February. All things being equal, she'd have expected another ten years in the job, the job she loved, the job that was her (let's face it) for nigh on thirty years. Helen was going to be a detective ever since she read her first Nancy Drew when she was nine. No husband, no children, not even a cat, were going to deflect her from her ambition.

'Hello home,' she'd say, when she closed the door behind her at the end of the day (or sometimes night, or a tense string of days and nights that hummed in her ears like telephone wires in a wind), in the tone of voice she imagined most people would reserve for a significant other. Her only significant other was her DS, Jerry Coad, known inevitably as Morse, though jokes about single malts and crosswords were lost on him; Jerry Coad was Morse for the Netflix generation.

'What are you doing, boss? Harvesting the hops?' It was Helen's forty-ninth birthday and a crowd of them had gone to The Wheatsheaf for drinks. Standing at the bar, waiting to be served, she'd found herself drawn in some way to the man waiting beside her. Was he a criminal she'd put away? After a career as long and successful as hers you were bound to come across them. She realised she was staring at him and looked away, but not quite quickly enough.

'Do I know you?' he asked. A voice that carried without being loud, hint of the local accent.

'I don't know. Do you?' She'd turned to face him then, given him the chance to recognise her and spare them both the embarrassment, though she was certain she

didn't recognise him. She would have remembered; she was no sucker for good looks or easy charm but there was something about this man, definitely something.

"Do I dare to eat a peach?" he'd asked her and, not quite knowing what she was doing, she'd glanced down (Timberland boots, well worn), shaken her head and replied,

'I don't think so. The bottoms of your trousers aren't rolled.'

She sips her Greek coffee (*ligi zachari*), looks out at the sea, milky in the morning haze, and thinks of George and a heart like a pair of ragged claws, or perhaps two hearts, a ragged claw each, scuttling. It sounds like the beginning of an intellectual joke. A detective chief inspector, a social worker and J. Alfred Prufrock walk into a bar...

The girls are out of sight and earshot now. Helen turns a page of her book. She has always been an eclectic reader (though not, obviously, of crime fiction): the influence of the English teacher who tried to persuade her she should go to university rather than enslave herself to the Fascist state. *Prufrock* had made her laugh; this, her teacher assured her, was evidence of an intuitive understanding of Eliot, remarkable in a girl of seventeen. But Helen wasn't interested in understanding poetry, what she wanted was to understand people. She will have another coffee, she decides, not ready, yet, for the solitude of her house with its square tower, its fig tree and the path to the sea where you have to look out for adders basking in the hot sand. She waves into the café, a narrow, windowless space lined on either side with shelves of battered and blotted and sun-softened books. There are prettier cafés, but not better ones.

George hadn't had the education she'd had. He had gone to work for the council at sixteen and trained for social work on the job. He had met J. Alfred at a poetry appreciation evening class. When George and Helen met, he was six months into early retirement, but in the pub with people he called friends from work. Looking back, she sees they were on the same road but going in opposite directions; she had workmates but she wouldn't have called them friends. Where they met, where they stepped on to the verge and let the traffic overtake them,

'There's this place I know in Greece...' George said, his arm around her, her head tucked into the hollow below his shoulder, their skin aglow in the heat of the fire and the medicinal single malt.

This place, this strip of scrub between the mountains and the sea, the glitter of olive leaves punctuated by groves of poplars black as exclamation points, this impossible habitation where nevertheless she has come to live. What plans they had made together had never developed beyond the theoretical. They had looked at property websites, Tripadvisor, Stephen Fry's *Mythos*, recipes for moussaka and galatoubourekos. In the car they played the Duolingo Greek course. It seems obvious, looking back, that George was indulging a pipe-dream.

A good job she found him, with her background. A good job she could let herself in, four o'clock on a Sunday afternoon, with a batch of home-made scones and a jar of raspberry conserve from the farm shop. She didn't call out; he would hear her bustling about in the kitchen and come through. Slip his arms around her waist as she was filling the kettle, kiss the nape of her neck, her skin chilly, his lips warm. She filled the kettle, put the scones in the oven, went into the sitting room where she expected to find he had nodded off over a book. But the room was empty, the hearth cold.

At the bottom of the stairs she called out, even though she knew, somewhere deep and stripped of artifice, that no-one would answer. As she climbed the stairs her knees knocked. She hadn't known that was even possible, had always considered it no more than a figure of speech. His – their – bedroom was empty, the bed made, his jacket with the elbow patches hanging on the wardrobe door. She scooped up a stray sock from underneath the bed.

An envelope on the dressing table, propped against the lacquer box which contained his twenty-first birthday cufflinks and a detritus of her scrunchies. She picked it up and examined it, almost chiding herself for not putting on latex gloves. It was addressed to her in his angular hand, the ink having bled a little into the weave of the paper, the uprights of the H deeply scored. She put it down.

She found him in the claw-footed bath with its view over sheep-speckled moors, his face composed as a stone saint's, the water butcher's pink and still body-warm. His father's bone-handled safety razor lying neatly closed on the lip of the tub. Oddly, she forgot most of what the note said as soon as she had slipped it into an evidence bag and handed it to Morse with what she hoped was a professional and reassuring smile. But there is a line which comes back to her, and comes back to her now as she walks home along the cycle path. The sun has cleared the mountains

and burned off the morning haze. The sea to her right sparkles, the olive trees to her left cast rheumatic indigo shadows on the sandy earth.

*My work, he had written, the things I had to deal with, made me see the world as if through dirty glass. I thought, once I retired, that barrier would disappear, but the more I tried to clean the glass, the more I smeared it. I'm tired of peering through the filth. I can't do it any more.*

Police work, she thinks, as she whistles up her dog, is all about cleaning the glass, looking at life's vagaries through a sheen of Windolene. It's evidence bags and forensics and filing reports. It's this high-definition light.

'Come on, George,' she says, 'time for a swim.' The dog had been living in the wood store when she bought the house, one of those generic, whippy strays with scarred flanks and hopeful yellow eyes. She had bought dog food and called him George for the pleasure of still being able to feel the shape of the name in her mouth. He is prepared to follow her to the beach, and watch her enter the sea with quizzical caution.

She calls it the beach but it's really no more than a nail paring of sand backed by scrub. No-one comes here; there is no space for sun loungers or cafés. Its thin arms embrace a rocky outcrop on whose highest point balances a white marble egg. The rock is apparently the birthplace of Helen of Troy, and even though the Princess of Sparta has enough mythical birthplaces in the Peloponnese to have spawned sufficient contentious beauties to start a world war rather than a local bust-up in Turkey, her namesake likes think this is really where Leda pushed out her bloody egg and perhaps fell asleep under the pulse of the sun. Helen swims around the island most days, though she has never climbed out on to it; the rock is jagged and razor-edged.

Today something is there, caught among the ridges and pinnacles.

Pale flesh, dark rock, the gleaming marble egg.

Helen treads water until her heartbeat steadies and there is breath back in her lungs. She swims a couple of strokes towards the rock then stops again. No heroics; a good police doesn't indulge in heroics; that's just for television. She returns to shore where she calls out the coastguard, gathers up her belongings and walks home, George zigzagging across the path in search of whatever dogs go in search of. She isn't police, not any more; the story of that broken skin isn't hers.

Some hours later, nevertheless, a police officer knocks on her door. Tourist police, of course; she might live here twenty years and still be a tourist. He steps inside, removes his hat and fixes her with a smile which reminds her of how her superintendent had looked when she told him she wanted to join CID.

'Thank you,' he began, 'for your attentive call to the coastguard. With good fortune there is no case. It was a...' he hesitates, stares at his shoes like a bashful suitor, tries again, 'an inflatable...' holds out his hands, one above the other, as if measuring a vertical.

'Ah,' says Helen, remembering the screaming girls, "I see what you mean. Punctured. By Helen of Troy.'

No, she is not police any more, she is myth, and needs to get her eyes tested.