

= HER PENICILLIN

CRIMES =

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## HER PENICILLIN CRIMES

Now interest in chemical events...may still be dampened by the feeling that, after all, when we go to the centre of things, to the bioplasm, where these processes are initiated and controlled, we shall find a milieu so complex that the happenings there, although they comprise the most significant links in the chain of [living] events, must be wholly obscure.....

I would like you to consider how far this is necessarily the case...

*Sir Frederick Gowland Hopkins, 1929 co-Nobel laureate for discovery of vitamins, Proceedings of the British Association.*

## THIS IS THE FIRST TALE OF PLANET TECHNOLITA



*Turn off the main Westport to Louisburgh road at the sign to Craggam. Go 1.1 miles. You see wood both sides of the road. The gateway to the lodge is over a cattle grid on the right, two big gateposts.*

Those were Spy's directions in his email.

I was there, at least to the gateposts and the cattle grid. No lodge. This was County Mayo, I should say, central part of the west of Ireland, a mile or two from the Atlantic coast. It was 9.15, Wednesday October 5, 2016.

Spy was Arne or 'Spy' Nielsen, American-born, lived on the move, where the story was, now forty nine, reported from war zones. He had been in Bosnia, Uganda, Columbia, Afghanistan, Iraq for five or six years, Syria. Fiji, Mongolia. He was a loner, never had a long term partner as far as I knew.

A translator for him had been kidnapped when they recorded illegal logging for palm oil in a certain country. Spy had be told to get out or get killed.

From the cattle grid a rough driveway ran across a meadow, a huge oak, cattle grazing. To the right was a river, peaty and flowing over boulders with big still pools, the kind of river that housed salmon before the wild stock was nearly made extinct by over-fishing and pollution.

Was the 'lodge' the substantial white house at the end of this tree lined drive?

Well: I would try. Trees framed the solid house and the outbuildings to its left. In a tree-deprived part of Ireland, there were alders all along the river and young oaks to my left. Did the itinerant Spy who said he only had one spare shirt own all this? Or was he a guest here? Of whom?

I drove the bumpy drive to the house. Oyster catchers flew up from the river.

I did not know Spy that well. I was staying with a friend nearby and he said to come over. I remembered him as dark and wiry. He had lost part of his left ear in Lebanon and was partially deaf, also had lost two fingers on that hand, always wore dark clothes, jeans, T shirt, nondescript jacket. On the phone we'd talked about stress in reporters, environmental conflicts being the new war zones, the grim possibility that his interpreter had been snuffed, the threat of Trump to reporters. Spy was as self-effacing in looks as he was in claiming credit for his reports and photography.

Well, it was there, a sign, *Craggam Lodge, main entrance/ deliveries*. There was an old Ford at the green front door. The house had classically proportioned casement windows. I wondered who he was staying with. I decided I was 'main entrance' and parked.

He'd said 9.30 and I was five minutes early.

I rang the bell. No answer. Rooks cawed in the sky above. A few leaves were falling, was not really autumn yet. Sound of the river.

Two minutes early. I am aware of being punctilious and sometimes shy and that that can be irritating to those who deal with irregularity and the dark zones of the world, men like Spy.

I hesitated. Rang again. Tried the big knocker. I'm not the first person Spy has stood up.

He said he wanted to talk about whether he should seek counseling for war stress, or whether it was hokey to think his condition clinical. I knew of other journalists who suffered post-traumatic stress disorder.

Suddenly yapping: not one but two terriers. A woman's voice, American, behind me. 'Lucy... Fatboy.' I turn. Goodness. She is six foot tall, thin, in her thirties, I wonder - - thirty six - is wearing gum boots, bare legs, brief and wet underpants and a towel over her shoulder and front, carrying a brassiere that looks sodden, as does her silver hair.

She's been swimming in the river -- in October?

And Spy? 'Spy's not here?' I don't ask where he is. This is his house? Yes, this is his house and property. And she is called 'Francine' and I'm called 'Francis'.

She has command. She's used to authority. She has a frown and also a laugh.

'So we must be doing something right,' she said. 'Can you come in?'

Do I recognize her? The delicate facial features. Big eyes? Her way of looking into one, eyes take command, even though I'm a stranger? She's emanating curiosity and courtesy.



It was chilly, early November 1941. The possibility of war hung over city of Washington as the grey clouds of that week. It did not rain and the clouds did not move. Rumors and no war.

Her name is Nathalie Armstrong, the Nathalie spelled the French way with 'th'.

It was still broad daylight, a low mist predicting a cold night. It was a Saturday. She was bicycling along Wisconsin toward Tenleytown where it meets Conn Ave. She

was going to Hechts to buy stockings. She had on the woolen gloves Maman had knitted so meticulously in a small stitch, bands of brown wool sown into the fawn as ribbing might be on leather gloves. She was mostly going to buy stockings for Maman, to send to clothes-rationed Britain.

Under her left glove was her wedding ring and the opal ring he gave her, the husband, THE MAN.

She bicycled alone to try to prove to herself there could be life without fear. At least moments without fear. She was twenty seven and part Swiss and part English and she worked as senior researcher for Brigadier Lindemann who was Churchill's scientific advisor in Washington.

Dangerously, she had a double role. She worked for a man called Wessler in London and she was trying to see the extent to which the American allies were duping the British out of their best war science ideas.

She knows. She knows. She's good enough at espionage to know the effect she creates. And she's bad enough at marriage to be separated at twenty seven and working here, a childless professional woman with a doctorate in biochemistry and a second hand white Columbia bike, nice old Burberry tucked under her arse.

It's good to pedal, get some exercise, have no wind against you, watch the last leaves falling. She works such hours she does not get time to swim at the YWCA pool. She's been celibate for eleven months except for doing it twice with the black bear, Jake Ungar.

What color stockings would Ungar like her in? Assuming it's safe to visit him which she knows it is not. Well its nice to think about, just bicycle along Wisconsin Avenue past what is still farmland. Go to Hechts, look at silk shirts, buy coffee and a sandwich at Carlucci's soda fountain, then back to work in Lindemann's place, put in six hours collating lend-lease figures till eleven pm for the Monday White House meeting. Seagulls in the air. Bicycle light battery should be all right. What to get for Maman besides stockings?

The shorter way to Dupont Circle was down Mass Avenue and I just liked avoiding going past the British Embassy. Why build something that looked florid and imperial in a USA that hated the British empire? That's my subject, UK-US tensions.

Well, it's OK. Alongside this highway there is corn stubble in what is still farmland. Crows feeding on it.

In spite of all the negative news, I could not help feeling, and nor could Jake, that there was someone could knock heads over penicillin.

This was a strange period of limbo.

No one knew, just that war was in the air.

There were other rumors that American destroyers were protecting convoys way out into the Atlantic, the possibility being that this would provoke a German submarine to act against these warships. Draw the US into war without FDR declaring.

A black car drew alongside me. It stayed level and then passed me. It drove slowly just in front of me and close to the curb it stopped so that I had to stop too. I had no time to wheel round it.

Plain clothes agents in pork pie hats got out of each side. One held his badge.

'Mrs. Nathalie Armstrong?' Yes, I was that. They were Bureau.

'Leave the bike there!'

How did I know this was irregular? No warrant? That I was picked up on a deserted stretch of highway. That I must have been followed from the apartment a mile back? That I was going to be sexually assaulted? That it was going to go wrong and one

of the two men who were going to have me in tandem was going to chicken? And the Webley bulldog, the little handbag pistol with wide caliber .404 shells was going to save me?



It is 1932, early October, a Saturday afternoon. The insurance company where Maman works is open Saturday morning. She is back for the three o'clock pick up.

She needs to be at this interview which will take her daughter into adulthood if it goes right.

Otherwise this naughty creature will have to suffice with teaching other girls science. Or she will find a job in a government lab.

And, naughty: the girl has already done it. The mother knows. The mother did it very young too, and the daughter, the lanky Nathalie, her only one, was born before she, the Maman was eighteen. It becomes an addiction, the need for the warmth of the man and for that you forgive all their oddities, the needs to put it in here and then there.

And the creature the mother cannot take her eyes off -- glory of her love for her lost mate -- the creature says with such cheek, 'well moorhens do it young'.

More painful and private, Maman, Isabel Sykes, has been fourteen years without it, a widow, experiencing the sacrifice of life. Will this healthy, athletic girl restrain? Her pale tall looks are so lyrical and lovely, every male in the district turns it onto her.

There is another worry too, that this is all too high, that these rich people who might help the girl always have their price. Maman, Isabel Sykes, saw, back in Vevey in Switzerland, the count's son destroyed her friend. Little Yvette who was so pretty took her own life and that of the growing child when she was still fifteen. Oh wealth! Can privilege ever be other than ugly?

Widowed mother and only daughter, waiting there, were in the middle class, in danger of trending towards the lower part of the middle, always short of funds, still mourning the post-World War I death of the father and husband.

The hallway of the South London Victorian red brick row house was tiled in black and white, showed not a speck of dust, was between being cramped and not cramped.

The daughter, Nathalie, spelled that way with a 'th' to hang on to any Swiss French connection they could now had a chance to enter a world of science which is almost entirely a world of men.

At first the war widowed mother hoped the girl would just survive a period of young delinquency and anger and find a respectable life. And then her daughter's height expressed itself in a delicate and fair beauty that took people's breath away and the height also expressed a command of the intelligence she had not inherited from her mother.

Nathalie found Saturday work in the -- Maman understood -- fabled bacteriological laboratory at St Mary's hospital and that led to a -- dangerous indeed -- offer to be an intern in the Institute Pasteur and that led to a demand she open her legs for the pathologist and surgeon concerned, a man of international reputation and the commanding girl, finding that he was also an avant-garde photographer offered instead to undress for photographs he took of Nathalie some of which are lyrical and some of which are plain indecent and all of which would be prosecuted under British law.

Oh irony! For Maman too, and too young, sixteen was her father's model. She loved the tall and rangy British painter she met in Switzerland and gave birth to Nathalie

before she was eighteen and then Justin Sykes went to war and survived only to die of influenza.

And the daughter met the patron who they are waiting for, whose chauffeur they are waiting for...met Mrs. Bernstein through a dealer in Paris who is buying a nude of Maman and who patronizes girls in science and was shown Nathalie nude by the French dealer, Ameline Montdore, who thought this idea would be 'charmant'.

And Mrs. B wielder of much influence and much money and possessor of double or triple standards when it comes to buying nudes and not considering that real people might have posed, although somehow the girl so good at science is in one category in her mind and the Maman in another.

Mother and daughter wait.

Neither is talking. The tension is palpable. 'Maman, you stripped for Daddy when you were only fifteen and you let him put his lovely thing inside you.'

'His art was respectable, Nathalie, ma cherie.'

The tall seventeen year old girl and her diminutive, dark haired mother stood, impeccably dressed and trying not to show they were nervous. What was happening was impossible and it was not.

A car with a chauffeur was coming. Oh Moorhen! You have made mistakes. Send my two angels.

'I'll send Crosswaite and the Rolls,' Mrs. Bernstein, alias the Swan, had said.

By one theory the just eighteen year old daughter could not afford to make fun of the booming voice, call her potential patron -- or potential accuser -- 'the Swan'.

By the other theory when you had done what you had done, and your nickname was Moorhen and you got deep into the reeds around the pond of adult life and the Swan found out about your being a model although not the dangerous part... the Swan who bought nudes by Matisse and Bonnard and now your own father... she profoundly disapproved of you being undressed, you, Moorhen, had to limit the damage by smiling.

You would have to lie in the interview for which they were ready too early.

They were waiting for what the girl in her intellectual way said that, *on the one hand*, would come to nothing and, *on the other hand*, might put her on the way to becoming a professional following the scientific way Marie Curie had led for women and she hoped, if far behind, to follow.

In the past the Swiss born mother had said to her difficult daughter: 'if you of thinking too much do, your eyes will affect to be so clever.'

The girl smiled. Now Maman changed her tune. A daughter who might go to university with a bursary.

If Maman had thought cleverness in girls not good, too bad. Maman's sadness was that she would not move on -- either accept that women could push for real careers, or find a new mate.

Minutes went slowly. The prim mother, Isabel Sykes, wore a navy blue suit, a high collared silk shirt with a ruffed collar and a diamante brooch of a dragonfly on her lapel, this given to her by her late husband.

She held a plain black leather handbag in both hands in front of her.

In her medium high and wedged heels, she stood only five foot one.

Her shoes were well made and 'sensible', the ones she wore for work each day at the Manchester and Canal Insurance where she sat at the front desk to welcome and register visitors, a task that minimized the need to speak in English which she did incompetently and with reluctance.

The cuckoo clock which the daughter had smashed deliberately on news of her father's death ticked on. They had been ready far too soon.

The tall girl, Nathalie Sykes, wore flat heeled school shoes with a buttoned up strap, this across perfectly aligned white socks that came to just below her childhood-scarred knees. She was a woman who was a schoolgirl and she had the keep the w bit at bay.

Nathalie wore a grey pleated skirt, dark green school blazer and white cotton shirt with a green tie. The skirt had been let down as far as the fabric would allow. The shirt was tight against what she called 'mine royale orbes'. Maman hoped the few millimeters of hem of the skirt would not fray.

Nathalie tried to reassure Maman. The slightly too small uniform was OK. It expressed their financial need and the perfectly ironed and starched shirt expressed their respectability. I am a schoolgirl with high marks and special apprenticeships.

In the photography sessions where she let the young lab assistant come inside her once, this young man, Pierre-Louis held ice to the nipples before the shot. After than they airbrushed out the exceptionally large dark nebulae. So it was in the market for mammary.

Whatever was going to happen at the Swan's house was going to happen. One thing was sure. You did not become a girl scientist by just passing the exams.

They were bound by the third person in the hall, father and husband, artist and decorated infantry officer, Justin Sykes, the Englishman who painted in the light manner of the French, died so tragically two months after World War I of influenza.

Influenza, civilian disease -- and no war pension.

Like much, that was true when true and not true when not true. The stalking Moorhen keeps lies in bundles and wraps them up with truths. So you see the truth which is that she has this chance.

Here is the knock at the door.

It really is a Rolls Royce.



The timeframe switches, although maybe the idiom of male violence against working women does not. It is late September 2016.

My name is Francine Smithson.

I started this by describing how Francis Gladstone became my friend and collaborator. This is before I arrived in Ireland.

To reiterate, I am what my twelve year old daughter, Lilit, calls *Homo Californicus*, a third generation Californian which she then changed to *Femina Californica*. Which her fifteen year old brother Nick said could not be a genus.

Lilit is learning Latin since she discovered that the word *vagina* is the same in both languages. She is in a group after school who are discussing bullying on social media. One of the issues is nudity and another is virginity.

Lilit is actually an Armenian name and my married name and the children's surname is Agopian. To repeat again -- something I repeat every hour or two -- I am a widow. It is less than two months to go before the election I dread. In July 2015 I was responsible for my husband dying. I'll come to that. There is quite a lot I need to come to.

For the moment my nuclear family is close.

It is now September 30, 2016, Friday.

On Monday this week my mother rang from Beverly Hills which is where our home is -- not the posh part, high in a canyon, a modest house that can only be reached by walking up fifty six steps.

'Granny Juliette says something terrible has happened,' my son Nick said. He took the call on our landline. We, myself and the two children, live in Davis which is north of San Francisco.

'Juliette?' I call her that.

'I've had a letter,' Juliette now says to me. 'It's one big lie. She isn't who she said she was and she never bought that mirror at Butterfields.'

'Hold on, Juliette,' I say. 'Who is *she*?'

'Who *was* she? She was supposed to be my mother.'

'Granny Sonia?'

'Yes.' *My* mother, Juliette Smithson, is a hard to upset woman and she is badly upset. 'She was another person. I want you to come.'

'Another person? What do you mean?'

'Can you come tomorrow?'

'The children are in school.'

'I don't care about your children.'

Wait. I have to de-fuse this. 'Just go back, Juliette. Do you mean Granny's big mirror?'

This is a centerpiece in the house. It is oval with a flat base and perhaps thirty inches high. It sits on a slab of stone mantle and is flush to the wall above the fireplace in our home in LA. It has scallop shells around its frame and these are silver leafed. The glass is antiqued. It is either an Italian antique or a copy of one. It goes back all my time.

Indeed, I was brought up by my grandmother Sonia in that house and with the mirror and I used to dress up in vintage dresses she had and look at myself in the mirror.

She was important to me because she acted as my mother until she died when I was ten. The mirror was part of my introduction to the beautiful things she surrounded herself with, to my sense of patina and restraint -- Beverley Hills being about the most unrestrained place on earth.

My image of myself was important to me. I first modeled aged eight and earned money and Granny was so proud. She died suddenly two years later and now she is 'not who she says she is.'

Juliette my mother wants me to visit her. I am sympathetic to this because I do know there are missing parts of my grandmother's life. I'm still on the phone.

'You're not speaking to me!'

'Wait Juliette.'

'I need you to come. Don't argue.'

'I can come with the children on Friday night for the weekend,' I say. I have to be careful with funds. I have lost my husband's income and the insurance is a tangle.

'This is not suitable for children,' she says.

'Juliette!'

'She said that mirror was bought in Butterfields.'

'Juliette!'

'I'll have supper for you and your children,' she says. 'This is very disturbing.'

I put down the phone. *Your* children. My children are *her* grandchildren.

The children look at me. '*Ad portas mortis*', Litlit says.

'Lil!' Nick says. 'Granny is not so bad.'



Lilit stands on her head leaving us to see her underpants which are frillier and more bikini cut than I would like.

I'm getting good enough at Latin to get it. *Mortis* is death. It must be 'to the gates of death.'

'Lil,' I say. 'You've got maths.'

'I know,' she says as with a big yawn and then comes up to me and says: 'you are a very good mummy.'



The Smithsons, the *Feminae Californicae*.

My great grandmother was Dawn Smithson who died with her husband in the worldwide flu epidemic of 1919.

In 1919 my grandmother, Sonia, was four and made an orphan, an only child. She was SONIA Smithson. She was a scientist and her exact jobs after World War II are not known, nor is her World War II life.

I believe that in the late '40s, the '50s and '60s, she worked for McIntyre Aircraft Corporation whose headquarters have always been on Wilshire Boulevard in LA.

Granny had two children, Juliette the older and Andrew who was killed in Vietnam in 1968.

So Granny's only daughter and surviving child is the fiercely independent mother of mine, JULIETTE Smithson. She is a hydraulic engineer, still working at the seventy years her birth certificate says she is.

Put differently I know there are issues about her identity and parenthood.

Both my grandmother and mother use or used their maiden name Smithson as professional women.

I, FRANCINE Smithson, do the same. I am Juliette's only child. I was -- and still at thirty seven sometimes still am -- a fashion model. I am now a fabric and clothes designer for women who want a formal day look from a small label that offers some measure of custom fitting and tailoring.

I am a proponent of sobriety and elegance rather than show in working women. My footnote to the *Me too movement* which is taking place as Francis and I put this together is that women need to look more at how they look to men. That said, I've had some horrible experiences as a model.

My grandmother, Sonia, developed my interest in clothes and look, even though she died when I was only ten. I was, from quite young, able to draw with some facility. My first silk screened fabrics were from floral designs. Sonia also made me interested in plants and I learned the art of flower drawing where you have to create something that is recognizably as a particular species and is not too scientific or cold a rendering. I learned to translate these into blocky colors for breaking down to silk screen. Then I did more abstract designs.

Sonia also taught me to sew and gave me my first sewing machine. Later I inherited hers as well as clothes of hers. My business partner and I have a small retail shop here in Davis and we have boutique section in four department stores across the country. Some of the tougher linen fabric we use for suits is also used to upholster small furniture pieces and make cushions.

It's OK. We do shows from time to time which is dynamic because you meet a lot of people in a short time. Stephanie wants to expand into wholesale and this terrifies me. Fashion brands, except a few, go up and down in a short time and I think I can be consistent if I remain close to serious women customers.

I use my own image a good deal on the labeling. Via social media I am well known to a small audience. Also I write about what constitutes femininity in the dress of the 2016 period.

So here I am, mistress of my straight up look.

When our possibly about-to-be President boasts of touching the pussies of bimbos.

The sub-genus *Femina Smithsonian*, working Smithson women. Two of these working Smithsons have been scientists. All three have been tall. I am like my granny, fair and small boned in spite of being six foot tall.

I am thin. My late husband said 'neurotically thin.' Then he did not want me to be fat.

My mother, Juliette, is more robust than Granny and I, like her father, still tall, dark and freckled.

So two scientists and now superficial me. I call myself Smithson lite because I am so keen on image and clothing. I am trying to grasp how to make sense of how to be green and am aware I fly a lot and that my industry is a polluter.

I am trying to grasp quite a lot. I feel I walk in a bubble that will burst and then I will meet head on the horned devils that will pierce me with guilt about what I did to my beloved husband.

I can feel a sickness I don't yet have. I do have some silver hairs.

Number five Smithson is my daughter Lilit, *our* daughter, the light of my life -- well, Nick junior, the steady one too. Nick jr can't have children. Which is a private matter.

The youngest female of us and quite different in looks, short and dark, is Lilit who has not yet called herself Smithson and who I would not encourage to do so given the tragic circumstances of her father's death fourteen months ago.

Lilit has heard of the American school in Rome and says she is not quite sure when or if she'll have a sex change or be something in between.

Between a sex change and a not sex change. 'Girls should have choice, mummy,' she says. She has been with me to see the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* in the Getty Museum in LA.

I booked the flight, Friday evening peak time. It was expensive -- we'll manage. Nick was cautious and the house is mainly paid off.

It's dark. We are coming down through the clouds. Suddenly out of the grey there is clarity -- a city of a million lights, orange mainly, red, green, neon signs, flashing, searchlights over night-lit sports pitches, the thick pattern of moving lights on the curving sweep of freeways, smaller processions of car lights on other streets, Los Angeles below, although strictly the San Fernando valley with the hills south and east and near black in the few protected places. I love this place.

I love this city so much, although I've been in Davis sixteen years. My husband's family have all been grape growers in the valley and he was a specialist in vine breeding and diseases with a post the University of California there in Davis.

I have the window seat and the children are next to me. Nick who is fifteen is next to me and Lilit is across the aisle. They are exchanging Latin words.

The children are not looking out.

'Nick', I say. And he looks over, holds my arm and leans because his seat belt is tied down. 'Lilit'. She does not look. She waves her hand in a cheerful, dismissive way. They have bought an old fashioned Latin grammar via Abe Books.

'We shouldn't really be flying,' I say.

'Keep on your granny this time,' Nick says.

He's right. And my mother has emailed me quite a lot more.

The airhostess comes by with a transparent sack bulging with plastic, paper napkins, about one actual newspaper. Yuck.

We are six weeks from a possible Trump era.

Stop thinking of that. Lilit's *ad portas mortis*, to the doors of death has become a chant the two children do in base and soprano voices. Lilit does cartwheels and Nick picks her up by the ankles and whirls her around. Nick and I were serious students of books on sibling rivalry -- in the end it was him, really, and luck.

I tend to be uptight and unable to let go of my concern about my image. I draw lines. I will not have facial surgery and I absolutely refused to have my saggy breasts done. They are mine! I fed my children. And I was successful, to a degree, in part by being labeled as 'odd looking'.

I have a long body, which they want, and a long face which they tend not to. My silver Granny was similar. I saw her naked before her right breast was removed. She died in 1980 when I was ten. She shrank as I grew.

If I am cold and austere, it is partly because with a certain look, a lot of people stare. When I was sixteen I had a model friend who said I'd get nine hundred in hundreds and she'd keep the tenth, if I came with her. It was a house in Bel Air and she did it with six men together in the room. She was sixteen and now she is in rehab in Arizona.

I like to think I am a warm person. In spite of the rule book, that world is about sex. You sell sex even with 'restrained' clothes.

I don't know about my mother except that she did not bring me up until Granny Sonia died. She had me by Caesarian which is a bit of Latin I can bring to Lilit and she did not breast feed me and went back to work three days after I was delivered to the world.

As I understand it my parents had a normal wedding and courtship. As I have implied and as I have locked away pretending it does not matter, some pretty nasty things happened to me when I was a young model. If I had told Juliette I would have not been allowed to go on.

I've covered up the bad. Very early on I became angry with a photographer which you should never do. 'Where's your cunt?' he asked me. The answer was covered by a miniskirt that I did not want to imply was to be taken off in public. In public. So I pulled a face. He loved the picture of this and I pulled a worse one. I got a name for being expressive, for smiling which models don't often do and for looking anxious which is different to what they do which is look false angry.

When I was twenty six I got noted in *Rolling Stone* as the anxious face of the twenty first century. I was on an environmental protest about dams on the Columbia river.

Well I am. Not *the*, certainly *an* anxious face. We are in a mess, this little millions of years old planet and this fat young species.

The landing gear is groaning and wailing and coming down. One problem of mine is that I love these sounds. Nick holds my hand. Not because I am frightened of flying, because I am worried about what my mother has to say.

Nick has big broad hands and is dark like his beloved father. I hold his hand as we come to the runway. Like Granny Sonia I have long arms and tiny hands.

I killed their father. That is I was in a terrible smash on a narrow dirt road and I made the wrong move and he was killed and I was not. That was fourteen months ago. The date, July 16, 2015 is etched on my right hand which was badly cut and has visible stitch marks.

The university had a plant nursery and when I could I would take time off and drive him there and go round and bag and label grape vine cuttings. There is a place where the dirt road goes down a bit. It is banked up and there are willows on the right. A truck with huge high wheels came round a corner and I tried going left to escape up the bank because I thought the gap between it and the trees was too narrow and so I cut across it and it hit us. If I had kept to the right side it might have been able to climb the bank. I would have been killed and not him. The seat belt and airbag held and the roof came in and he never got as far as the hospital.

The police said I did the only thing possible. The truck turned over and two men in it were killed. The forensic officer said they were going at 50 mph. They were loaded with amphetamines and vodka and the truck was full of submachine guns with which they had been shooting jackrabbits until there was nothing left.



1932. The Rolls.

'Please maman!' She does not want the collar of her school shirt adjusted for the one hundred and tenth time to hide the fraying. Just ride on this sea of beige and cushioned softness in the back of the elongated limousine. What happens in this interview will happen. I will either get a lift, or I will be condemned in front of you, Maman.

Mother and daughter ride, separated by nervousness from each other and separated by glass from the driver. They ride in the swish, silent car through the decay of depression London, past vegetable stalls and second hand shops, girls old at twenty five, men with scarp iron in prams.

Urban grubbiness gives way to well possessed houses and light. Then on the hill, at the top there is a bus stop and opposite they turn left. The houses are grand, the road is rutted. It is called The Lane and big old chestnuts grow along it. They pass a straight-backed lady riding sidesaddle, a green delivery van from Harrods. They stop.

'No, Maman,' she says. The chauffeur must open the door.

'You to me will frighten so,' Maman says, grimacing.

The chauffeur does open the door. Maman is going to be OK. Pray. And if Mrs. Belinda Bernstein sees that my shirt is darned and my white socks also, so be it. She can't consign me to anywhere worse than a lab girl job in a chemical factory.

They are instructed to ring at the door. A maid who is younger than Nathalie, opens it. When Nathalie gives up her raincoat the maid notices. It has a big patch where she spilled sulfuric acid on it in the winter term.

The maid's expression says: what is this?

Such is a life in science. You can get through this. If you smile. Only don't smile openly. Not this time.

The room they are shown to is upstairs a study with a kneehole desk piled with papers, a mantle thick with embossed invitations. One side of the room is lined with a floor to ceiling bookcase. Nathalie glances at runs of journals, the *Cambridge and Dublin*

*Mathematical Journal*, the *Quarterly Journal of Pure and Applied Mathematics*. Goodness! There is a bound leather volume with one word embossed on its spine, *Newton*.

The Swan, Mrs. Belinda Bernstein, attended Cambridge University between the ages of sixteen and nineteen. In the final examinations she was top of the university in marks. She was mentioned in no roll, given no degree. After this she failed to develop any correspondence with any mathematician.

There were no women mathematicians. Then she married Bernard, head of the London branch of the family Bank, gave birth to two sons and decided to devote herself to promoting girls in science.

Maman and she sit at two upright chairs in front of the desk. Behind the Swan's empty chair is a sketch signed by Toulouse Lautrec of women prostitutes waiting, one sitting with legs apart, the others naked and smoking.

This is how men portray women. And this is how women buy pictures of women because the Lautrec painting of the prostitutes belongs to the Swan.

The prostitute in Paris Nathalie actually knew, who was also a model, said: mock them. Pretend to come and do not. Moan and groan. *Va te faire foutre*.



The Swan comes in, short, rotund, gilded hair the beehive above her face, wearing a cream colored toga, this edged in gold thread. Mother and daughter stand. Nathalie curtsies. Her mother curtsies.

'That is not necessary, Mrs. Sykes. I am glad to meet ya. Sit down, Mrs. Sykes.'

Nathalie remains standing.

'Now girl, you wish to apply for university?'

'Yes, Mrs. Bernstein.'

'Well, you have a good report from Miss Williams. Where would you like to apply?'

'Cambridge, Mrs. Bernstein.'

'Cambridge! Why Cambridge?'

'Because of the biochemistry department, Mrs. Bernstein.'

'That is for graduates, gerl.'

'I know Mrs. Bernstein. I heard undergraduates can sit in on some seminars.'

The Swan looks at her notes. Nods with small satisfaction.

'You studied with Lèfevre? Chemistry of lipids?'

'Yes, Mrs. Bernstein.'.... 'This is a lie. This lie has to be part of a package of damage-limiting lies about her experience at the Institute Pasteur.

'Do you know Blor's classification of lipoids.'

'I think it is 'simple', 'compound' and 'derived', Mrs. Bernstein.'

'Very good. Can you name a vitamin that is a lipid?'

'Vitamin C, Mrs. Bernstein.'

'What did you work on with Lefèvre?'

'Chrysene by dehydrogenation of cholic acid, also cholesterol. He was corresponding with Dr. Bernal at Cambridge, Mrs. Bernstein.'

'Well, well, well, you're forward in more than one way my gerl....'

*Forward in more than one way.* This may not be good.

The Swan continues:....'Does the title *New Atlantis* mean anything to you.'

'Yes, Mrs. Bernstein. I read it.'

'And?'

'It is by Francis Bacon about a land in the south seas that is a utopia. It is set in the early seventeenth century and in the New Atlantis, society is ruled by science, by the rational.'

'Very good, Nathalie. We are still there. In spite of the American my husband has taken up with, Mr. Clayton Rutland. A so-called popularizer. Whose columns I consider too pessimistic. Your daughter will probably set me wrong, Mrs. Sykes. Newton, whose works I possess and try to understand, belonged to the era that was the start of the Royal Society, the beginning of science, the elucidation of data that can be tested by others. Science, progress, development. Mathematics, my subject, underpins all this. We have had a great age of physics and I think we will have a great age of biochemistry where your daughter has ambitions. Where living matter is no longer protoplasm, but a series of discrete molecular interactions. Lefèvre, Nathalie, said you did well. Now I have to talk to you. You may sit down, gerl.'

'Thank you, Mrs. Bernstein.'

'You have stripped naked, Nathalie. This is fine for some. And not for others. Why did you do it?'

'Madame Montdore said that I needed to pay rent. I had no money.'

'Was that your understanding, Mrs. Sykes?'

'That she worked only with the sculptor, Madame. I mean 'Mrs. Bernstein.'

So The Swan did not know about the other photographs.

'I would be naïf to suggest, Nathalie, that there are not some very naughty and fast girls in Cambridge or other British universities. Even in my day of high propriety at the turn of the century. That said, the official atmosphere is austere. The women dons are single women. For it to be known that a candidate had stripped naked would immediately disqualify that young woman. You only did this for the sculptor, Mr. Ledyard. It cannot have got out to any other studio.'

'No, Mrs. Bernstein. Only him.'

'And you are moral, Nathalie? You are striking and you are pretty. You are going to have to face a lot of temptation.'

'Yes, Mrs. Bernstein. I am moral.'

The Swan who knew girls and who was damaged by her own failure with her husband after the birth of the children and knew the husband strayed and lied knew the girl in front of her strayed and had lied.

It was exceptional that a girl from south London could have been taken on by a man like Hare in St Mary's. Of course the girl Nathalie's electric and infectious charm and energy was part of it, that she got to places.

The risk was that the girl's dubious past would come to light in the wrong circles and that this would reflect badly on the Bernstein Fund whose recommendations of girls to study were usually taken without question.

She pondered.

The girl is Jewish through the mother. Even though the mother had become Catholic.

And this girl is a wonder, Bernard thought. One out of a large number who are ordinary. Beautiful women are not that difficult to find. This is different.

Underneath he knew the danger, that 'different' meant 'had profound humanity', and that 'had profound humanity' meant vulnerable to severe hurt.



In the next years the Moorhen went up and she went down and she went up again.

One secret was that The Swan's husband, Bernard, head of the London branch of the Bernstein bank was her protector.

And, she, to some degree his.

Bernard Bernstein was short, athletic, black haired, full of physical energy, rode to hounds, had damaged his back falling, well survived the particular upper class mockery reserved by the short of funds British gentry for Jews in red coats.

He knew. He owned the exquisitely delicious *Album Blanc et Noir* of LL-Anonyme, the professor at the Institute whose price for tuition for this painter's daughter was the right to photograph her and publish for the most select clientele, these images, the peek of a nipple, the peek of a smile, the surreal image of his bicycle tires across her pale and flat belly, les trois mouchoirs attached to her tits and lips Black and white indeed! The fourth mouchoir died black below. Four pointed kite of love.

He found in the girl he persuaded his wife to support in spite of..... He found her compassionate and understanding and when she came to work with them for receptions in the summers from Cambridge he told her of his anguish, marrying a sexy slip of a girl who after childbirth became both a barrel and frigid to all touch.

What he liked so much about Nathalie was her way of looking right into him, at first sight a wide-eyed look that might almost be supplicant for sex and was, in fact, supplicant for understanding.

He could talk to her about his marriage. And she, making the right and the absolutely wrong choice, could talk to him about hers.

Or hint. And ask for help so soon after she was inside her marriage. And she called herself 'The Moorhen' which was charming and self-deprecating and different to the other scientific girls The Swan supported who tended to be drier and less accessible to the jokes that make the world go round. Bernard thought this. He also suspected that The Moorhen was the one who first, on the quiet, called his ocean liner of a wife, The Swan. Apt indeed. Moorhen indeed.



Yes, this alter ego is important, really a key to her success.

And it is September 1938. And Bernard has said to look out for the two men.

She first adopted the nickname 'Moorhen' because she discovered in a bird book that had belonged to her father who died at the end of the war that these dark and squat birds skulked in the reeds looking for clues or food and trying to be unnoticed. So this made sense for a girl who was tall and fair and rather noticeable.

A feminist before the age of seven and before knowing that word -- 'feminist' -- she also picked up that there was no 'moorcock', only Mr. Moorhen and that he took a lot of chores on including sitting on the eggs. The species was named after its female.

There was also the self-deprecating aspect to it which was reflective of Nathalie's aggressive tendency to both lead a gang and then, un-aggressively, put down her own achievements. Moorhens both did pretty well, lived in places others did not want to be, the edges always, of swamps and streams, and did not boast.

And impatience.

Moorhens could fly, swim and run and always seemed to be wanting to do the one when engaged in the other. They swam to the bank in order to run along the grass and ran along the grass in order to go swimming and flew short distances only with a rather vigorous and clumsy movement. Just right for an exceptionally tall girl with fair skin and fair hair, a true ability to concentrate when not bored and athletic to boot. Of course she could not fly, although when she dived from the high board, you might doubt that and she could certainly run like the wind and swim like a fish.

Oh Moorhen! Given that, growing up in the 1920s, she was very much a junior member of *Mankind* and the world full of barriers, some self-created by her early delinquent behavior... to be able to see herself as this two syllable creature... Moor....Hen.... was a way of absorbing insults, ignoring disgusting men who opened their raincoats and wore nothing beneath... coping with her Swiss Maman's fussiness, the 'Oh!' could be long and the 'moooor-hen' had many permutations in how it was pronounced.

By the time she was twenty four, by this time she had been in a number of dreadful situations, not untypical for a woman in the world, by the time also that she had developed a number of adult tastes, some of which could be talked about, the carnal ones, some which could.... oysters, smoking cigars, being able to wear her Vionnet evening dress, scrambling to peaks in Scotland, reading William Faulkner and the antiquarian Lawrence Sterne, some aspects of said pleasure where your self approval came only in the whispered 'Oh Moorhen'. So soft that nobody heard.

The phrase could be a punching bag by which to try to externalize disgust or disappointment or it could be a down filled pillow by which to luxuriate in the nice things of life and a private sense that your brain was better than those of many. Nathalie Armstrong called herself 'The Moorhen' and at the same time communicated with 'The Moorhen' as a way of offsetting the bad and extending the good in life. Being a woman was never easy. Nor, necessarily, a man.

She wanted life to be straightforward so as to have as much time for professional work. She never wanted to hurt anyone close to her as she hurt Maman in her delinquent, in the juvenile's court days. She had a strong sense of Christian morality and of how that man, Jesus, put the last first and put his mother and other women at the center of things. Angels were nice to have around because they gave you courage that you were not alone and if scientists said they did not exist, they were the kind of scientists who do not believe in imagination, even in science. And, like a dog, The Moorhen could talk to the alter Moorhen. It was better to have a Moorhen than a psycho-analyst.

Winding up her self-confidence like a counterweight on an old clock, she thought so. Of course life was not straightforward.

This was the night of Bernard's two men. Even The Moorhen alter ego did not provide a fall back, nor saying she knew some of the biochemistry of adrenaline, the Japanese and Polish who isolated it. This is too much. Bernard's two men.

She is staying in Bernstein house helping and getting her husband into her small servants-room bedroom and doing it just made the tension of expectation worse.



It was September 28, 1938. It was her birthday and when she had wiped herself after he came inside her without taking off their clothes, she said to leave his present for



later. It kept persisting in her mind that she was hoping to betray him and this was so much what she was not that the adrenaline kept pumping.

The red London bus ground its way in low gear up Highgate Hill. It was a wet evening.

Office workers, glad to be nearly home, jumped off the bus before it had stopped. Then came the man of medium height in an old raincoat. As the bus moved off, he put up his umbrella. He was fifty one years old and he had a long flat face with hair parted in a schoolboy way. Brushed across his forehead, the hair was a deep shade of copper.

He crossed the road.

His intention was to go unobtrusively.

He was one of the richer men in the world. Across from the bus stop was The Lane. On the right were the big houses that looked over London. On the left there were mature horse chestnut trees.

The man's name was Sacheverell Wessler. He was born in Persia, now Iran, had a Jewish mother and a Christian father. He had been educated at Cambridge University and Columbia in New York, the first a degree in natural sciences, the second in geology with particular reference to the geology of carbon fuels.

Wessler spotted new oil fields and invested in them, notably in the American south west. And he traded in oil and oil futures. He was unscrupulous.

He was hoping to meet a fellow he admired, Clay Rutland, reporter, author of the *Technopolitana* column and then walk a few hundred yards to a reception at the house of his banker, Bernard Bernstein.

Science linked Wessler and the Bernsteins -- not doing it -- manipulating it. Geology for oil. Now other more ambitious ideas.

P O L I C Y.

British government science policy. They could do it.

Wessler walked and then stopped. He waited. A Daimler limousine, then two black London taxis passed by.

He turned towards the main road. Another red London bus drew up, stopped and moved on. A tall man crossed the road. He wore a beltless raincoat, was craggy and athletic, had on the boat-like brogues Americans wore. He had a face of protruding features, was compared to a hawk for his sharp looks and pointed journalism. He had large, worried blue eyes. His hair had turned part silver, early for his thirty eight years.

He saw Wessler and did not gesture. The two fell into step.

The reporter's name was Clayton Rutland. From the American south, he had escaped the decay of old Macon, Georgia to study medicine in Tennessee, began to write about the destruction of the great forests of the south and became a journalist.

Since 1930 he had written for *NOW!* His interest was in 'progress', the march of invention, also in questioning it. Depression America was devastated by poverty while the richest and most innovative country in the world.

The two men were linked in the idea that new science could make an edge in a surely coming war. And that they might, in ways not clear, manipulate this on the side of the British.

Each man had strong American connections.

Each man felt it would take a lot to bring the US into war and that they must bring their outsider knowledge here to the UK.

The two walked with the silence of anticipation. The Bernstein reception to which they were heading was to raise money for émigré scientists who had fled or were trying to flee fascist dominated parts of Europe.

There was going to be war. And if there was going to be war will this transfer of scientific talent from Germany make a difference -- men from Einstein's level down, maybe a woman or two? Will the West gain from Germany's loss of talent and expertise?

Turn this around to asking how Britain could do best. The two men had agreed as they ate two days ago, not in a London club or the Savoy Grill, in a modest Italian restaurant in Soho. Even there Wessler grumbled about the prices.

The British government was misjudging Hitler. The tyrant could not be appeased long term as Prime Minister, Chamberlain and the myopic-about-Europe British right had hoped.

They could not affect the underlying politics, these two. Science...? What they noted also was that the British government was dominated by the classically-trained and science considered rather odd, 'rather odd, old chap', 'stinks', 'fellow does stinks'.

At best British science was world leading. To make it make a difference in the war it needed pushing and coordinating and publicizing.

Why not start by employing a private spy? Find a fellow who was a graduate, not too specialized? Have him snoop around, maybe clandestinely.

Wessler already employed private spies. You did not get rich in the oil business by being nice. You got rich by having the best information, notably about the other side's plays and plans.

Wessler's contact already in place was right in the establishment old boy network, bluff, high living, gambler, member of White's Club, an electronics engineer, Professor George Elwys. Elwys had his own radar-related research, yet could direct the footwork of the private spy who would have to nose around, make contacts, persuade scientists to give him inside gen.

Most important, Elwys was in an inner circle around the politically exiled Churchill and had a well-placed brother who could probably access passes for the fellow Rutland and Wessler were seeking to employ, the private spy-to-be.

If they had the private spy and the fellow was urbane, 'one of us' as the British establishment said, then getting the fellow vetted by Elwys' brother would not be difficult.

The problem was: who? Unlike the Americans whose college educated all learned some science and engineering -- the country was built on this, damn it.

The British forgot what made their empire, the technologies and engineering ideas and those few who did know any science were taught it was a virtue not to see beyond the end of their own lab bench.

The good news was that their host tonight, Bernard Bernstein had idea. 'I might have someone,' Bernard said, 'Cambridge trained biochemist, wide-ranging mind.'

For Wessler the money to pay the private spy was no issue.

Wessler and Rutland walked the last hundred yards.

Self-effacement was Wessler's game.

Odd, shabby fellow with an American wife. Not even a whole Jew. Other half Coptic of some damn thing.



The house was Georgian, rain-dripping pale yellow roses around the entrance door.

There was a crowd in the hall, chatter, greetings, the gloss of wealth. Mrs. Bernstein was there, short and toga clad, her hair in a golden beehive -- The Swan, for the way her chest glided in front of her. 'Mr. Wessler, Mr. Rutland,' she greeted them in her basso voice. She stood away. No kissing.

'Tell him I've got money for his tie fund,' she chuckled to Rutland of Wessler's shabby appearance. 'I think Bernard has it,' she then whispered to Wessler.

You would not think war was coming from this champagne punch sipping lot, Rutland observed.

Ah! There was 'hunter' Bernstein, the host.

Bernard B greeted the two men warmly, held each of their hands in both of his.

'Come.... I'll show you it, exhibit A.' This was OK, looking at the prospect first. Wessler said you can generally tell all you need to know from looks. It was the root of his financial success -- the contrarian view of how to assess the geology overlying big oil wells, yes, also knowing who to trust and who not in this game of the black viscosity.

The limping host led, took them into the tent which extended the conservatory where the piano recital and presentation would be. 'Over there. Tall. Fair hair.'

They could not see him.

'Youngest in the group.'

Bernard led them further forward. Wessler saw two couples, one he knew, the Smarts, investor clients of his and a dark haired man with a square jaw and good English looks, late forties, he guessed.

'Not the gal?' Wessler asked.

'That's it,' Bernard said. 'Nathalie Armstrong and David. Historian of transport and author of travel books. *Armstrong Tramps*... Know them?'

Yes, Rutland had read one about old Roman roads and their discovery, lucid and self-deprecating in a witty British tradition.

Not the him. The 'it'. *It* was a gal. Rutland chose the adjective: 'willowy'. And fair haired and wore, in contrast to the pastels and sparkle of other women at the reception, a **dark red dress**. The material had a slight sheen to it, so that it was almost gold on the folds. Its form was simple. The dress had small collar was buttoned up like a shirt, loose enough in front so as not to protrude the bust. All around the room was substantial mammary flesh, implied by sequined curves, or displayed like pink balloons.

Around the waist of the red dress was a loose belt of the same material. The skirt fell easily. The sleeves, too, were like a shirt. She had the daring to come as a peasant.

Rutland knew. She was it, the private spy. Her long face spelled sunshine and deep anxiety, all at once. She had captured as a husband this elegant, eloquent and tailored man whose body spoke real athletic strength until Rutland noticed the eyes... something weak or weakened.... portholes to a damaged inner being. *That* brutalized British generation.... and who must be twice her twenty five or so.

She knew, not what was coming, that Bernard might have something for her and that these men would look at her and might talk to her and that, not for the first time in her long or short life, the Moorhen was destined for a set of dark reeds which might or might not offer the satisfaction of using her mind. She was also mature enough to know one other thing.

You think you know where you are going and you do not.

The drinks glasses were collected. It was her role to help the maids supervise that because, in the way the Moorhen dealt with life's paradoxes for her, on the one hand she was a guest here and on the other she was a servant of the Bernsteins.

Glasses collected she went to supervise the moving of the grand piano as the guests took their seats. Ernst Chain, always looking too puffed out, came in, puffed out

in the right way because he had PhDs in biochemistry from both Berlin and Cambridge and had been her supervisor and was a man at whose imagination for molecular structures she gasped, puffed up in the wrong way because it fed the appetites of those British who wallowed in using the words émigré and Jewish as if beneath contempt.

Moorhens went carefully -- whatever other faults they had, nervousness and self-consciousness. Chain had to be careful or he could left out of what he was best at.

He did. He got left out of the British penicillin mission to the USA. People thought he was irritating -- that is how I, who loved him, interpret it.

And, if this is jumping ahead in the Moorhen's narrative, angels cross such barriers of space and time. For the moment I was there, watched by the gorgeous Rutland, my anti-science hero of science writing, the American eagle, watching me as I turned the pages of the Beethoven piano sonata for Chain, being selected for something that might or might not be bigger than the funny old Moorhen normally took on.

Like many men, I noticed as the notes of the Number 8, the *Pathétique*... Like many man I could sense across the divide that Clay Rutland would like to see me without the red dress... Yet what was so implicitly exciting was that he saw within me something different to my sexual potential whatever hot air thing that meant. Oh Moorhen! This is moving, Beethoven, the pinnacle of German culture played here by a biochemist from the pinnacle of German science and Hitler creating mayhem and shit and me, the Moorhen being groomed for a role in this. Ooooooh! Moorhen! Adventure and danger.



Thump! There we are, thump and bounce and down again and swerve and high octane fuel poured into the engines to reverse them and judder of the breaks. And from flying in the air we are taxiing slowly to the jet way.

Ping. There is a text. Of course it is Lilit. *Noli tristis esse mater*. I've tried to keep up with her which is difficult. *Do not be sad, mother*.

'Matrem,' Nick says. 'Not mater. It's the object.'

'No, it's a command,' Lilit says.

'OK,' he says. 'So are you. Lil commands the whole world.'

She tries to bash him as we are now beginning to stand up.

'Thou shall not correct Lilit,' he says.

'Shut up,' she says. 'Go and shave your pubies.'

You have to leave Lilit in her own space. So neither Nick nor I speak.

'OK,' I say when we are free of the hustle to the plane's door. 'We will not be sad,' I say. 'First commandment.' It is OK. They take one hand each. We have put the luggage in a suitcase and checked it.

The children are now quiet. As Nick's wife and intimate I am the one who gets the sympathy.

I really want the opposite. I feel that if I could be punished for my carelessness I could put it behind me. Instead I am caressed, by most people, although my cold mother never said a word about the car crash, nor came to the funeral. All the sympathy came from Nick's Californian Armenian family. I find it difficult because I have to pretend that he was perfect and no one is.

I needed a certain thing he could not give me one time and I was unfaithful to him. He knew and we fought and the knowledge of the imperfection grew both of us

up and then he too was unfaithful. Love is to do with absorbing blows and accepting blemishes. *In sickness and in health.*

I don't want to be the perfect widow. I hold the children's hands.

On the jetway it is warm and that LA warmth is, to me, thrilling. In spite of the smog, there is nowhere on earth with a climate like LA.

Next I get a horrid look from the slick young man at the car rental desk for wanting a compact. He turns away to the key rack, picks up one key and then another, sneers at the keys, offers me an upgrade.

'Quod accudendum,' Lilit says. 'What a jerk.'

Saying I am green, and flying quite a lot, I also collect instances of where people disdain one for not wasting. One is at fault in this world for not driving a more 'prestigious' car, for having water from the tap. Trump can't win the election. It's impossible.

LA....And now the children in the back. I have space, am driving out of the airport, window down. This place never changes, the San Fernando valley, the neon of evening, the ninety eight per cent gone glow of orange light over the Pacific, the steady, going-home mood of the traffic on the Ventura Freeway which I take for a few exits, then Beverly Glen up the canyon, the fronds of palm not yet swept up, the squeak of tires on hot, polished tarmac. I am up on the top of the ridge separating LA from the Valley, on Mulholland Drive and would like to go where I first went to be kissed and kiss, an old pull off with a view south and surrounded by overgrown brambles. I am worried about the need for a cigarette coming on strong. So I take a deep breath, go left and right and down Benedict.

What can my mother want me to do?

I'm day dreaming or evening dreaming. I am tired and there is an impatient driver behind me putting his headlights up and right into my mirror. Well... it's OK. The right turn is here and a small tinge of fear dissipates, tall woman with two children in a rental car followed...

I never stop hating this and being frightened. I dress in a demure and reticent way. In the clothing business I am patted, pinched and have obscene propositions made to me. No, I do not want to meet suppliers in their hotel rooms.

The car behind does not turn after me. It is supercharged, a big Camaro. Having descended I climb again, navigate sharp bends up Boltzmann Canyon. Then I turn left onto Boltzmann Street, twist and twist, turn the window full down, feel the delicacy of the moist air. Water and sandy colored earth run across the street where they have always run across the street. Our house is nearly the highest in the canyon.

I stop the car, grip the steering wheel, not quite ready to face whatever Juliette has to say. This road is a dead end. Again, I want a cigarette and hold back. This mysterious place of ours is very little changed. Granny's vintage Porsche 911 is still here which Juliette must have been driving as it is not under its cover. There is also the white Ford multi-seat transit van which Juliette bought for the Episcopal Cathedral mission for girls.

My mother's life is her work as a hydraulic engineer, for many years working on the cooling systems of nuclear power stations. And she has the church. She is a voluntary official at the Episcopal Cathedral and works with a 'mission' they have in South LA to get teenage girls not to go the drug route or pregnancy route or, worse, because some are already or born addicts, both. My mother is fundamental about Christianity although not a fundamentalist.

'You OK?' Nick asks.

'Listen. As you know Juliette emailed me after the call. '

'She didn't come to our Dad's funeral,' Lilit says.

'Well, look. You know I loved my Granny a lot. My Granny had two children. Andrew was killed in the Vietnam war. And Juliette. Granny brought me up. In the house here. Juliette lived in Anaheim where her company has offices and she came on weekends and we went to the Episcopal Cathedral.

'Now....You know the big mirror in the living room? Over the fireplace, the big oval one with old glass and the silver painted scallop shells as the frame.

'With Granny I would dress up with various clothes and I would look at myself in that. The glass is what is called antiques so it is more misty, not so bright as modern mirrors in rest rooms. Granny was a good photographer and she took my picture, once through the window with rain drops, in a white dress up in the big old black live oak. She got me interested in my own picture and she said she had been photographed long ago. In another world. She and I had small facets for faces, not big prominent jaws and cheekbones. Small bones pictured well, particularly in black and white.

'I saw myself.

'She said I was her in a different generation. Well I wasn't clever like her. She also said I had to care for Juliette who hated her.

'A man from Ireland has sent Juliette a picture of my granny Sonia. She is photographed with a man. They are reflected in the scallop shell mirror. It is 1938.'

'1938,' Lilit says. 'Wait... M...L....CCCC...X...V...III.'

'No, it's M...C...M for nineteen,' Nick says. 'Sorry, Mum. We are the local crazies.'

I turn and hold his hand.

'My Granny said she bought that mirror in San Francisco in 1970 or some time then. Now there is a picture of her as a different person, married, different name, 1938.'

'Weird,' Nick says. 'Is that why our Granny hates her?' he asks.

'Well, for a long time I have known that Juliette is not sure if Granny Sonia lied that she was Juliette's mother. Also about Juliette's father. She does not think that Jake Ungar, the army doctor, came into her life till she was about three. So can he be her father?

'Juliette says that there was a big earthquake up at Olympia in Washington in April 1949 and she vividly remembers watching it on early tv. Her birth certificate says she was born in January 1948.

'You don't remember events on tv when you are fifteen months.

'So was Juliette born a couple of years before her birth certificate. She is very certain she remembers living in a little rented cottage down by Santa Monica Boulevard, south of Hollywood and she was looked after by a girl with a big birthmark on her face. There was just her and Sonia.

'I asked her: can she remember that? She says they moved to Silver Lake when Jake came into her life.

'She says that Granny lied about everything and of course her brother was killed in Vietnam. My Granny and Juliette's father, or supposed father lived apart. This was Jake Ungar. He worked in an army hospital in Reno, Nevada and they met only on weekends.

'Every Friday Granny Sonia drove hundreds of miles up to Bishop where they had a house and horses.

'Now Granny has had this letter from a stranger she does not know. The letter includes the photograph.

'It is strange. You know there is a big Von's supermarket where we came off the freeway. On Ventura Boulevard. A man has written from Ireland and he remembers some woman rebuffing his father outside the supermarket. Years and years ago. His

father showed him a photograph of a woman -- this is the woman in our mirror -- and the man thinks it is the woman who was so rude to his father.'

'Spooky,' Lilit says.

'Say that again, Mum,' Nick says.

'A man called Mr. Spy Nielsen wrote to Granny Juliette. His father was Magnus Nielsen. Who was quite well known for writing books on the environment. Mr. Spy remembers his father being very badly hurt because a certain woman was so rude to him outside Von's. And now he thinks this woman is my granny, Sonia.'

'The strange thing is that he has pictures of Granny Sonia when young. And we have none. And he has proof that she was married to an Englishman. This is very strange. For people who are well known in England they have a list called *Who's Who*. Well in the *Who's Who* there was an entry for the man who married Granny Sonia when she had another identity. His name was David Armstrong and he was a professor of history in England. In Oxford university. He also wrote books on travel and old Roman roads.'

'Roman roads?' Lilit asks.

'Yes, they built them all over the Roman empire.'

'And you can see them?' she asks.

'When I went with Daddy to France near the Vacqueras vineyard there is an old Roman bridge, still there.'

'Can we go?' she asks.

'Shush Lil,' Nick says.

'Are you all right, Mummy?' she asks.

'Well, I don't know. In the *Who's Who* book the person called Nathalie Armstrong died in 1945. She was thirty one then. And that is when Granny came back from Europe at the end of the war. So Granny Sonia may be two people.'

'Or double identity,' Nick says. 'Was she on the run?'

'This man, Mr Spy, says there are a lot of papers about her. Several filing cabinets which his father collected. His father was jilted by her.'

'When Granny Sonia died we all climbed high into the Sierras with her ashes and scattered them. To the west of the Owens Valley. I remember the big man, Magnus Nielsen who was on the Nova science programs.'

'So wait a moment,' Nick says. 'Magnus Nielsen is the one she jilted. And Spy Nielsen is his son? And Spy Nielsen lives in Ireland?'

'You take less time that I do to get this in mind,' I say. 'This Spy Nielsen has a house and property and land and river bank. And he thinks that his father got it from someone. And now he thinks this someone might be Granny Sonia who would not talk to his father.'

'She paid him off for something.'

'And Granny has told you this?'

'She wants to know who she is,' I say.

'Non est cur puellae sunt reptili,' Lilit says.

Nick is much better than this than me. 'Girls don't have beards, Lil.'

'But they have pubies,' Lilit says and 'under their arms. When can we go to Victoria's Secret Mummy?'

'When you have breasts, Lil.'

'But I do,' she says.

'Hair grows on breasts too,' Nick said. 'It's in the weirdos book.'

'Let's go and see Granny,' I say.

Some things last. Sonia's 1976 911 Porche is there. And I have her green Jaeger raincoat.

We get out of the car.

Nick wants to lug the suitcase alone.

This property where I grew up is a sloping acre with big live oaks and palms on it and two houses, one a small adobe house, first probably a love nest for some film or oil tycoon when the street was a horse trail. That is rented and there is the wooden house. My Granny Sonia built it.

There are the sixty plus steps up and Juliette lets dead leaves accumulate on them. This makes them slippery for humans, and an environment where amphibians can be cool and feed on spiders and insects. I can smell a fox and hear an owl hoot. I know we dominate everything here. I still love the idea of this home among nature.

There are lights in the adobe house. Nick lets me take half the heavy case up the last stairs. Lilit has gone on.

Whew. At the top of the steps there are blooms on one of the English rambling roses Granny planted here -- twenty seven years since she died.

I just want to stretch and bend and breathe. We've been having a bad time with some European linen which is not taking the dye as the sample seemed to.

The investment in the fabric is one thing. The other is that we've pre-sold the line and design. Nick does not mind waiting and absorbing the moist air and dark. I'm wearing one of my own suits. It is an ochre fabric which I have decorated with wide bush stokes of a color just darker, decorated the skirt. The coat is plain except that the lapels and collar have a smaller and lighter version of the same brush stoke design. This is sown in on a cotton. I'm very anti-*Victoria's Secret* in my look, that is they sell push up bras by the million and I like jackets to be tailored to show but not exaggerate busts.

All this I learned from Sonia. An extravagance of mine is flat walking shoes from Crockett and Jones in London. My shirt is a vintage look, lighter beige with little irregular circles like tiny bubbles, nice but not frivolous. It's got a small, *Annie Hall* type collar. Granny left me black pearls which I value so much I've had them replicated.

I am wearing the copied string and black ear studs.

I stretch and put my arm on Nick's shoulder. He can wheel the case along the walkway to the wooden house. There is Granny's pool with its Turkish blue and ocre tiles.

Oh Gawd! I can see my severe mother who always wears dark clothes, through the plate glass window. She has her big copy of the Bible. Lilit is standing on one of the sofas, now doing a handstand on its back. It's going to topple and I catch the look of fury in Juliette. *Ad portas mortis*.

It is all right. Lilit who is squat and yet athletic falls forward.

Juliette is not all right.

I want to find out more. For a woman to change her identity, and country, and name aged thirty one is quite drastic. Wars wound. My mother has never recovered from the death of her brother in Vietnam in 1968. Clearly Sonia lied to her about some things, possibly when she was born and who was her father.

Having come all this way, Juliette wants me to drop it.

I manage to reach Spy Nielsen. I think I have heard him on NPR reporting from Iraq and Syria.

I reach him by cellphone out of hearing of Juliette, sitting by Granny's pool. Lilit is splashing in naked which I find a relief -- I am dreading *Victoria's Secret* -- she's got a friend who gets panties there. Nick is a good swimmer.

'I don't think we know anything about a relationship between your father and my grandmother,' I say. 'My mother might do.'



'She doesn't say she does?'

'No.'

'Well we should drop it.'

'But you say you have got these files relating to Nathalie,' I try to be persuasive. I don't know this man and information on him on the internet is sparse, perhaps because he reports from dangerous places.

'Are you *the* Francine Smithson?' he asks.

'I'm Francine Smithson,' I say.

'Yes, and you've been photographed a lot.'

This is a change I had not expected.

'Yes. I've been photographed a lot.'

'You kept me alive,' he said.

I kept Spy Nielsen alive? The man who wrote to Juliette.

He enclosed a picture of Granny in the mirror, taken in 1938. In a mirror she says she bought at Butterfields auction house in 1970.

'Pictures of you have kept me going,' he said. 'On my machine in bad places.'

He kept pictures of me modelling clothes. The effect of this is akin to be propositioned by a man.

Granny Sonia who I now know is Nathalie, or as she was, jilted his father He remembers a meeting at Von's supermarket here?

Nick jr says this is the new Roman Forum. The only places left for people to meet are in shopping centers or supermarket checkouts.



I am in Ireland. It is now mid-October 2016.

Perhaps it was not the best way to arrange this narrative. I started with my Granny, Nathalie now, in bad trouble, having hit the British man Hampson in the face with her pistol and then with her recruitment to be a 'private spy.'

I did not start with how I, who am so lite, came to be the one to see her story for the first time since 1946. Like so much this is a muddle. Spy appeared to want to know whether Nathalie and his father had an affair or relationship known to Juliette.

Then he appeared to be keen on my image.

I'm even more muddled. I want to find out about Juliette's birth although my father who keeps in touch with her says I should leave it. I can only make things worse.

I want to meet Spy Nielsen. I want to have an affair with him which I know is dangerous because he has been taciturn and rude so far.

The children wanted me to come. And I have done it. I am in Ireland and reading on through the narrative of the biochemist who became the private spy.