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LA SUPERBA

EXCERPT

First intermezzo [p. 128-149]

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FIRST INTERMEZZO

We all live in a yellow submarine

1.

It was Don's birthday and we sure knew it. He had turned seventy-three. That morning I saw him sitting with the Wild Boar. That's Elio's nickname, the manager of the Schooner restaurant on Salita Pollaiuoli, past the Bar of Mirrors, a little further towards the Via San Bernardo and San Donato. The Wild Boar has a simple strategy. No one can smoke in his restaurant, unless it happens to be empty. That's why the restaurant is closed pretty much all day long. The Wild Boar stands there in his dirty vest, puffing away behind the counter under the NO SMOKING sign. Sometimes the door is open to let in some fresh air. Unsuspecting, high-spirited tourists, wandering in for a bite to eat in the world famous Schooner restaurant get bundled off by the Wild Boar. Chiuso. Closed. Shut. No, no restaurant today. Because otherwise he'd have to get changed, clear the ashtrays from the tables, look for the menus, work. He'd rather close the door again and turn up the music. Ella Fitzgerald. Listen to this. Sarah Vaughan. And then something with a sousaphone solo. His vest turns as yellow as his fingers, steeped in nicotine. Wine. Beer. Gin and tonic. Don. And anyone else there has to be a friend of the Wild Boar's or of Don's to be allowed in. Even at eleven in the morning.

Italian humour mainly consists of laughing very loudly after you've told a joke and then raising your voice and telling the same joke three times over. Sarah Vaughan sung the song 'You are my honey bee.' The Wild Boar who, unlike the rest of them, understood a bit of English, translated the line into Italian. 'She sings "You are my honeybee". That means he comes along and pricks her, know what I mean?' He made the accompanying vulgar gesture. While there was laughter around the bar, he raised his voice, clearly as pleased as punch with his little success, and continued, 'You are my honey bee. Get it? He's got a sting... He pricks her with his, you know. And then she sings that he's her honey bee. Get it? Get it? You are my honey bee. Unbelievable. That's what she's singing. And he's pricking her...' Again and again, he made the same obscene gesture, And if anyone else tried to chip in, he defended his own personal success by repeating the same thing even more loudly. An Italian party consists of telling as many jokes as possible, as often as possible and drowning out any others trying to do the same.

And in amongst it all, Don flourished, floated, sang and prevailed liked a jamming station. He danced along on a giant woolly cloud of gin and tonic. My god, it was his birthday. He had been in Genoa for more than twenty years by now and he still hardly spoke any Italian. But he knew the obscene gestures as well as the next person. And as soon as yet another girl came tripping in to wish him a happy birthday, he spread his arms and sang, 'You are my honey bee', to the Wild Boar's great hilarity and that of all the other Italians at the bar. Don knew how to make friends in Genoa, or anywhere else in the world, he didn't care, as long as they served gin and tonic with as little tonic as possible and as long as he was given special personal dispensation to smoke with the barman in a bar where you couldn't smoke. He smacked women's bottoms, squeezed their breasts and laid his head on their laps. Clearly, a seventy-three year-old alcoholic with an English accent could get away with a lot.

'We're just as big a scoundrels as all those Italians,' he said to me in English. 'We're anthropologists,' I proposed.

'Here's to anthropologists! Let's drink to that! Cheers big ears!' And then he began to dish up a long, priceless anecdote about an anthropologist he'd met in Burma or Malaysia. I'd heard this anecdote ten times before, but each time I'd been denied the punch line because of the arrival of yet another woman needing to be snogged, hugged or groped.

At the time, Don was my dearest friend in the labyrinth. He was the only one whom, by getting profusely lost every day, never got lost. His world had shrunk to a handful of bars near his hotel on Salita Pollaiuoli, and although he regularly couldn't find his way back to his hotel from the Piazza delle Erbe, which his room looked out on; in his unbroken delirium, he was the most constant, stable, reliable and most realistic of all the people I knew. And I don't mean that as a funny way of saying that he was predictable and easily locatable at any given moment of the day. He was the only one who understood. He didn't live in a fantasy world, because in all its modesty, he had made a beautiful fantasy come true: to drink himself to death, laughing and dancing amongst cheerful superficialities, smiling Italians and some bottoms to slap and tits to squeeze. He no longer had any illusions. Instead he had decided that every day was a party. Every day was Don's birthday for Don. *Grande Don*.

2.

His real name was Donald Perrygrove Sinclair, but because he was the godfather of the square and on a busy night hundreds came along to kiss his hand, he was called Don. He was the English Professor. The little Italian he spoke, he pronounced with such a heavy Oxbridge accent that he turned himself into more than one English Professor: the way he said it, it sounded like Il Professori Inglesi. And everyone copied him, because it seemed to fit. He was too magnificent to have to make do with the banal singular.

And he was several people too. He was the rumped, soiled old age pensioner in the morning with a gin and tonic in his shaking hand. He was Oscar Wilde in the afternoon, a ravishing conversationalist whom, while enjoying a gin and tonic, sailed along on the currents of art and literature, sublimely acting out what pleased and rankled him, quoting Shakespeare and his own verse and dishing up priceless anecdotes. He was the Don the Italians loved after sunset, the pissed clown who sang and danced with a glass of gin and tonic in his hand, without a care for decorum or even a memory of what the word meant. There was no way he could remember the names or faces of the dozens of friends, male and female, who filed past his table after sunset and whom he'd undoubtedly met before at some point, but also after sunset. This was why he hugged and kissed everybody. He resolved painful misunderstandings, which were inevitable, by bursting into song. He had a large repertoire but his favourite was 'We all live in a yellow submarine.' He was the Don who tripped and injured himself after closing time. This was because he suffered from dizzy spells, according to his own diagnosis. He actually went to the doctor once to ask what was causing the dizziness. 'And what did the doctor say?' I asked when he returned. 'He's an old friend of mine. I can't lie to him. He asked me how much I drink and when was the last time I'd eaten. I'm a very intelligent man but not that clever.'

He was seventy-two when I met him for the first time. He told me that he'd come to Genoa more than twenty years previously to teach English. He had a one-year contract. He never left, not even once he retired. He had lived in the hotel on Salita Pollaiuoli for more than twenty years, close to the Bar of Mirrors. He had four girlfriends who were poisonously jealous of each other. He had more than four girlfriends. He kissed, felt up, embraced and pawed everything with a pair of tits on it and then he'd say, 'I love you.' And all that about a hundred times a night. 'To be shot by a jealous husband when I'm ninety-five. That's my ambition. What a way to go.'

His greatest mistress was undoubtedly his glass of gin and tonic. He often said it himself, 'I've left nine women but never a glass of gin and tonic.' Cappuccino senza schiuma, he called it lovingly. He never emptied his glass, but cherished it, adored it and nurtured it, the whole day long. Every time he was halfway, he'd ask for extra ice and a lacrima, a tear, a shot of extra gin. 'Drunk on tears. That would be a wonderful name for a pop group.' Early in the afternoon, it had already become pure gin with a dash of the memory of tonic. 'Enough gin to keep the Titanic afloat and enough ice to sink her.' He was a professional alcoholic who didn't spend a single second of the day with an empty glass. And at night, at closing time, there wasn't a barman who knew how much gin and tonic to put on the bill. All things considered, he'd only drunk the one.

'I had my first gin and tonic when I was eleven, with my Uncle George. It was all his fault. He was a great character. The man never uttered a word of sense in his life, until he suddenly came out with: "They say you live longer if you don't smoke or drink. But that's not true. It just seems longer."'

He didn't like moving, that much was clear. He loved Genoa. 'My hotel room looks out onto seven bars. Eight if you count the internet café. Please stay. Please stay in Genoa, Ilja. It's heaven. Everything you need is here.'

3.

Apart from gin and tonic, Don only needed one other thing to survive and that was attention. He was the king of the Piazza delle Erbe, where all the tables were crooked. He would install himself by preference on the high side of one of the higher tables, because sooner or later a bottle of tonic would topple over and in accordance with the rules of gravity, it would land not in his lap but in the lap of whoever was sitting opposite him on the lower side of the table. He was a professional. He thought of everything. When it came to drink, he didn't leave anything to chance.

He usually sat alone on the high side of his high table and held sway. The crowds greeting him, went on by. The two most common words in Genoa were 'Ciao, Don.' He sat there like a retired cabaret artist waiting for an audience. Like a sleeping monkey in an old-fashioned machine, the kind you had to put a coin into to wake it up and then it would do a little song and dance. Don was like that, prepared at any moment of the evening to do his act as soon as a grateful audience presented itself. In the meantime, he'd doze off behind his sunglasses with a half-litre of gin and tonic in front of him on his high table.

And like every cabaret artist, he constantly needed new spectators. His repertoire was large, but sooner or later he'd fall into repetition. The gin and tonic didn't help either. He was capable of dishing up the same priceless anecdote three nights in a row because he'd forgotten for two evenings in a row that he'd told it the night before. Though this wasn't a real problem, because the combination of his antiquarian Oxbridge accent and the gin and tonic made him as good as incomprehensible, so that you had to hear the same anecdote at least three times to understand it.

His favourite audience members were the boaties. Ah, the boaties. How should I describe them? Genoa is a port city, right? The cruise ships moor to the west of the Centro Storico; even more to the west you've got the ferries for Sicilia, Sardinia and Africa, and even more to the west of that, kilometres and kilometres of container ship facilities. But all the same, we are talking about the Mediterranean. So there's also a large harbour for yachts. And that's in Porto Antico, right under the Centro Storico, at walking distance from the Piazza delle Erbe. That's where you find the luxury motor yachts, the forty metre plussers. If the owner isn't there. If he is, they go to Sardinia, Portofino, Saint Tropez, Saint Tropez and Saint Tropez. But the owner is only there for two or three weeks a year. Aside from that, they also have a few charters, but for the rest of the year the boat stays here. And to maintain a luxury motor yacht of more than forty metres, moored in the haven, you need a crew of ten or eleven. There's a German or a Russian captain, whom everyone hates; half are Filipinos, who do the hard work and cook for each other, and the other half come from the commonwealth. They're the boaties. Australians, Kiwis and Canadians with much too much money and far too many gadgets, off on an adventure in the Mediterranean, only it's not a real adventure because they hang out together all the time, in overpaid luxury. They come along to the piazza from time to time with their iPhones to noisily throw away hundreds of euros on cocktails and leave a stupidly large tip for all the glasses they've broken and all the nuisance they've caused.

They were Don's most appreciative audience. Also because then he didn't have to speak Italian, which he couldn't anyway. Spoiled young men from the colonies found his archaic Oxbridge accent hilarious. Sometimes it seemed as though they expressly sought him out. As though he had been explicitly marked out as a tourist attraction in their travel guides.

With three stars. And up he'd spring. As though someone had put a coin in the machine. He'd do all his anecdotes and all his jokes. He satisfied every expectation. And they would buy his next gin and tonic just like you'd throw a new coin into the monkey automat. And at the end of the evening, when he could no longer talk, he'd begin to sing. They already knew the song. 'We all live in a yellow submarine.'

4.

I was a new audience to him too. He told me stories about his own life. He was a brilliant storyteller. At least, after his third gin and tonic and before his thirteenth, which on average left a window of opportunity of between three and six hours. He told me how he had been expelled from school almost a century ago. Of course with a surname like Perrygrove Sinclair

and a father who'd ascended to great heights in Her Majesty's Royal Army, he'd been sent to one of the most prestigious public schools in the United Kingdom.

'In my second to last year we got a maths teacher from India. A brilliant man, I've no doubt about that. But he had a terrible stutter. And I wrote a limerick about it in my exercise book. But he saw it and confiscated my book. He read the limerick. And then there was trouble.

The next morning I had to go to the headmaster's office. Along with my father. The headmaster had my exercise book lying on his desk. He adopted a stern expression, opened the book and read out the limerick. I sniggered. "There's nothing funny about it, Perrygrove Sinclair. Did you write this?" My father sat motionlessly in his chair, resting his weight on his walking stick. He had adopted a stern expression too. "Although it might not be perfect in terms of metre," I said, "I'm not ashamed to admit that I'm the proud author of this poem." The headmaster slammed his hand onto the desk. "There's isn't a single reason to be proud of this filth." Then my father stood up. "I agree with you completely, headmaster. My son has sullied the good name of the many generations of Perrygrove Sinclairs who have been educated here." His decision was to take me out of school. He sent me into the army.'

Don took a sip of his gin and tonic and asked the passing waitress for some extra ice and a lacrima.

'And now, of course, you'll ask whether I can still remember the limerick.

There was a maths teacher from Calcutta, Who had an incredible stutter.

But his girl smiled with glee,

For she found out that he

Took more time than others to fu... fu... fu...

And then that the last line still rhymed. But you'd got that already. When I read it out to my mother that evening, she laughed. She kissed my forehead. The next morning I got the bus to the barracks.

A year later I was in Malaysia. For the so-called Emergency. You weren't allowed to call it a war, but it was one. It began in 1948 and didn't end until 1960 or 1961. I was in the parachute regiment. One day a grenade exploded a little too close by. My whole stomach was blown open. I'll show you the scars. Look. See that? I almost died. Because of a limerick. I almost died because of a fucking poem.'

5.

Quite frequently he'd emerge from his hotel in the afternoon with visible wounds from the night before. Scabs on his head or elbows or bloodstains on his shirt. When I asked him what had happened, he spread his arms and replied triumphantly, 'I can't remember any more.' And when I carried on asking, he said, 'Normal people fall down the stairs, I fall up the stairs.' And when I carried on asking some more, he said, 'There's a security camera next to the entrance to my hotel. I'd love to see a compilation of all my spectacular homecomings.'

Slowly something else began to dawn on me, something he kept carefully hidden behind his suits and ties, his impeccable appearance, a few bloodstains notwithstanding, his Oxbridge accent, his lacrima gin and his residency in a hotel room from whose window he'd hung a Union Jack. He was totally broke.

It became clear to me one evening when he asked me to come up to his hotel room to fix his television. Repairing it wasn't the problem. That was a simple matter of putting the plug in the socket. But the socket! A kind of pre-war construction made up of several cracked Bakelite components. There were bare wires. 'Is this yours?' I asked. 'No, it's all the hotel's.' And then I took a closer look. There were patches of damp everywhere. The wallpaper was peeling from the walls. His bed was a yellowed mattress on top of an old door. I went to the bathroom, but I'd have been better off not going. There were empty gin bottles and the remains of kebabs all over the place.

'How much do you pay for this room, Don?'

'I've been here so long. The owner's an old friend of mine. I've known him since—'

'How much do you pay for this room, Don?'

'Two hundred.'

'And how often do they clean it?'

'Sometimes.'

'How often?'

'The problem is that I have to clean it up myself first before the cleaner will dare come in.'

We carried on our conversation out on the square. He took a sip of gin and tonic.

'Just before my father died,' he said, 'he summoned me to his study. It was the first time we'd spoken to each other since he took me out of school. Well, to say 'we spoke to each other' is an exaggeration. He gave me a dossier. It contained all the paperwork for his pension, his life insurance, my mother's, and my pension, all perfectly documented and ordered and all of them with one of the most traditional and reliable banks in England.'

A waitress went past so he ordered ice and a lacrima.

'Barings Bank.'

He paused for a moment.

'I don't know if it made the news in your country at the time. In England it was a drama. Ten thousand respectable, honest, hard-working people lost all their savings in one fell blow.'

His eyes filled with tears.

'Nick Leeson. I'll never forget his name. It was 1995. He was a trader for Barings Bank in Hong Kong. He had gambled away millions of their capital on the stock market and then billions more in an attempt to make good his loss, then he fled to Thailand in his Ferrari. They got him in the end, tried him and sent him to prison. He did his time. Then he wrote a book that became a bestseller and made him a multi-millionaire again. But Barings Bank was

bankrupt. And do you know what it means when a bank goes bankrupt? I know you know what it means.

If I add it all up, what with my time in the army, my work as a Cambridge professor, everything I did in Italy after that, not to mention the work I carried on doing for certain British contacts, but I can't tell you anything about that unfortunately – and then my father's money and a little from my mother on top – if you'd added it all up, I'd have received a pension of more than eight thousand pounds a month. How much is that in euros? But I lost all of it. I'm one of the Barings bankruptcy victims. I'm one of Nick Leeson's victims. And now I live on a small state pension of a few hundred euros. Just enough to pay for that shithole I live in. And the rest goes on drink and cigarettes. And every month I have to choose whether to take my shirts to the drycleaners or get my shoes resoled. That's how tight things are.'

He took a large sip of gin and tonic.

'That's how tight things are. But you can also look at it another way – imagine if I'd had eight thousand euros a month to drink, I'd have been dead long ago. Cheers. Here's to Nick Leeson.'

6.

We began to worry about Don. The crowds that filed past his table every evening to embrace him and kiss his ring couldn't see it. They saw the clown they hoped to see, and he delivered on cue. We were a handful of foreigners – a Scot, a Paddy, a couple of Brits, a Pole who'd married in, a Czech – who saw him most days on the square. It was a group of good friends, from whom I often distanced myself because the language of communication was English. And that wasn't even the real problem. It was the kind of small, ex-pat community where they talked about the test match results, the Queen Mum and the best place in Genoa to buy Marmite. The after-shocks of British colonialism. Speaking their language allowed you into the club, but let's see if you really are civilized and know the cricket scores. And in the meantime, have a laugh about the Italians who happen to have the privilege of temporarily welcoming you, with your superior culture and your superior irony, to their corrupt and endlessly inefficient country, which you shake your head pityingly at, because there is still scaffolding up which was there six months ago and your doorstep hasn't been repaired yet. I didn't come south to listen to superior northerners in shorts making jokes in their superior language about the south, with all kinds of puns on the names of English cricket players and the little else that was of importance that day in the Commonwealth. But they were friends of Don's. And they were nice people. So I couldn't and didn't want to keep ignoring them.

We had a crisis meeting in a place Don would never find us: the Mandragola. Rebecca, the owner of Caffè Letterario was there too, because as manageress of his favourite haunt, she was the best qualified to pass judgement on Don's situation. The meeting was opened by our Scottish friend, who thanked us all for attending and emphasized that this meeting should never come to Don's attention. We all nodded obediently. Then he explained in a nutshell what our problems came down to by describing Don's skin colour. He said it was 'olive green'. At this, a lively discussion sprung up. The lobby for 'moss green'

seemed to gain the majority stake at first, but after a veto from the East Bloc countries, a compromise was reached: 'puke green'. The next item on the agenda was his physical health. A small minority described him as 'skinny'. But they were overruled by a majority who considered him 'emaciated'. The debate finally moved on to his many injuries and their failure to heal properly and the cause of his strangely swollen stomach. Our Scottish chairman suggested a compromise: that Don, despite the differing interpretations the various parties might have, was looking unhealthier by the day. This motion was unanimously approved.

At that moment, Rebecca took the floor. 'I love Don,' she said. 'He's a living legend. I don't mind if he drinks himself to death on my terrace. He's an adult. It's his choice. And in a certain way, I feel honoured, although perhaps that's the wrong choice of words. I mean—'

We nodded understandingly. We knew exactly what she meant.

'What I mean is this. On an average evening, he easily drinks a whole bottle. Gin. A litre. That's forty euros retail price. And he can't even pay the cost price. Sorry to be so prosaic. Don is a poem. But I still have to cash up at the end of the night.'

There was a silence. And suddenly all of Don's friends had places they needed to be. I stayed behind with Rebecca. 'The most important thing,' I said, 'is that Don never finds out that we met up to try and help him. He has his pride. It's the only thing he has left. He would never forgive us.'

Rebecca didn't say anything.

7.

'After Malaysia, I was posted to Japan and Korea. Japan was a doddle. That was drinking G&Ts with the Japanese. I'll give you two guesses who won. And in Korea I had a kind of admin job. For a month. And after that I was at a secret British navy base in Saudi Arabia for a while. It was so secret that even in the British Army management there weren't many people who knew of its existence. But the Israelis knew about it. And they demonstrated it by flying over on a weekly basis and bombarding the runways. Symbolically. With flowers. As a warning. To make it clear that they were keeping an eye on us and that if they did decide to really bomb us, because we weren't keeping our heads down, nothing would stop them. Sometimes they'd come a day earlier or later. And once the Saudi pilots had just gone out to train when they came along. All the pilots were princes. Terribly spoiled. And terrified of the Israelis. And two of them were so terrified they used their ejector seats and let their expensive fighter planes crash in the desert. We laughed a lot about that.

But Malaysia was tough. That was real. We were given a jungle survival training course in Kuala Lumpur. What was edible and not. How to make drinking water from your own piss. There were these plants with huge leaves. Really. This big. We called them elephant's ears. They're poisonous. If you eat them raw, you die. But if you soak them for a night in your own excrement, they become extremely nutritious. And in case of emergency, I always carried a bottle of gin in my rucksack.

We were hunting CTs. Communist terrorists. These days I'd call them freedom fighters. Pitched our tents behind their lines. The stress. The stress was the worst thing. Four

men keeping guard and after four hours being relieved by the other four. Taking turns to sleep in four-hour shifts. And never shooting. If only that was true. That would have made it a little more bearable. I have my doubts those CTs existed. I never saw one.

There were Frenchmen though. On our rugby pitch. They came from Vietnam. Their base was surrounded and they were evacuated by helicopter. To our rugby pitch in Malaysia. They'd had a lot thrown at them, you could see that. Wounded. Torn uniforms. Lice, leeches, shot wounds and no gin and tonic for weeks. So, us Brits, we started by giving those Frenchmen a good wash. A great heap of tattered uniforms on the rugby field, petrol and a lighter. And there they were, stark naked in a row in front of the showers. The officers too. Their beer bellies gave them away.'

He ordered ice and a lacrima.

'We called them the FBBs. Fat beer bellies.

8.

'All in all, I spent eight years in the army. Eight fucking years of my life. It was a total waste of time, all things considered. I learned nothing but skills I hoped I would never ever need, like shooting freedom fighters, cooking elephant's ears in my own excrement and catching shrapnel in my stomach. It was finally time to do something useful with my life. Useful mainly in the sense of easier to combine with my thirst. I wanted to sit in cafes like a civilized human being, instead of in submerged manholes in the jungle. I could put my talents to better use. And my illustrious career proved me right.

I decided to study. English literature at Cambridge. But there was one problem. I'd never finished school. I didn't have any A levels. And you need A levels to get in, don't you? I mean, that wasn't enough, you had to submit essays too, take entrance exams, that kind of thing, but without A levels, you didn't even get the chance to try. So I had to come up with a plan.

I had a mate in the army, a simple lad from Birmingham. He couldn't write his own name but he was brilliant at drawing. He made clever cartoons of our officers on the back of bread packets or whatever he could lay his hands on. It was a wonder it never got him into trouble. They were so mean, so accurate, so good. I thought: that's the man I need.

I can't remember his name. Peter. Something like that. Or Brian. But that doesn't matter. He was brilliant at drawing. Or did I already say that? And he owed me a favour. Haha! It still makes me laugh to think of it. That was in Japan. No! Korea! It was in Korea. I remember it well. He had a lady visitor, that was our euphemism at the time. A whore. They popped up quite often on Her Majesty's Royal Army base. But of course it was strictly prohibited, you'll understand. To pluck the fruits. To consume, for a modest fee, the ripe fruits that had fallen onto the ground in front of your very feet. We were British, weren't we? Haha! And this Richard or Mark or whatever his name was had found one who screamed like a suckling pig on a spit. I still remember it well. I was standing in the corridor keeping a look out. And then one of those five star generals came along "to inspect the troops", as it were. Can you imagine? No, listen. That Korean whore lying there screaming like all the Karaoke

bars in Taipei put together and the general coming down the corridor. Do you know what I did? I faked a coughing fit. I coughed her out. I coughed a hysterical little Korean whore all the way home. The general was worried. "Asthma, General. I suffer from terrible asthma. And being in the tropics doesn't make it any better. The medical examiner didn't want to pass me when I signed up. I got down on my knees and begged him to show some mercy. My greatest desire was to fight for England, the queen and the free western democracy." The general gave me a pat on the shoulder and walked on.

'So that John or Edwin or whatever he was called owed me a favour. He was a simple lad. But what you need to know is that he was bloody good at drawing. Or did I say that already? So I gave him a copy of my brother's exam certificate. Don't ask me how I managed that. It's a long story. And Michael or Steve or whatever he was called copied it. He faked my exam certificate. I could apply for university. My essays on James Joyce and the English metaphysical poets went down brilliantly. That's how I ended up in Cambridge.'

Don took a big sip of his gin and tonic. 'Cheers, big ears.' He got a coughing fit. When he'd finished coughing, he said, 'I can still do it. I'm one of the great coughers of my generation. Didn't Oscar Wilde have a clever quip about that? Anyway, it was a close call.'

A group of teenagers walked by. They found it important to greet Don, one by one. To ask his opinion about Sampdoria which had been on a losing streak for weeks. He stood up and hugged them all, while getting all their names wrong, which he made up for by singing the Sampdoria club song. That was the way it always went.

'What was a close call?'

'Almost getting kicked out in my first year.'

'Tell me.'

'No, Ilja. I'll tell you tomorrow. Otherwise you'll put it all in the same chapter.'

'Since when have you worried about my novel's structure? You're a character, try to remember that!'

'And what a character! Haha! Let's drink to that. But I do want a bit of space for my story. I can't write it all down myself anymore. So I'm using you for that. And make sure you don't make stuff up. I'm much better at that than you. Haha! We all live in a yellow submarine.'

9.

When I bumped into Don the next day on the Piazza delle Erbe he looked radiant. He was glowing. I was almost worried. 'Don, what happened?' He removed a newspaper from his inside pocket with a triumphant gesture. It was the Sampdoria club paper. 'Page eight,' he said. There he was. A full-page photograph. With the caption, 'Don, one of Sampdoria's biggest supporters.' I congratulated him on this corroboration of his fame. He dismissed the compliment, beaming. 'Oh, well, Ilja. I've been in this city for so long. I know them all. Vialli and the rest. I've given them all English lessons. Gullit too. But to be honest I thought he was an arrogant bastard. I don't go to the stadium these days. I'm too old. And I suffer from dizzy

spells. But I used to go to every home match. The last time was on my birthday. Four or five years ago, or maybe even six. And they knew. At a certain point the entire stadium was singing, "Happy Birthday to Don." It was moving. The referee held a two-minute silence. All the players came to the gradinata sud where I always sat, and applauded me. It was the nicest birthday present I ever received.

All my friends are *Doriani*. You know, there are three sounds I cannot bear: breaking glass, the sound of shutters going down in the bars at closing time and "Forza Genoa". You are a Genoano, I know. Even though you seem like an intelligent man. But there are other things about you I don't understand either. For example, why you carry on drinking those disgusting cocktails instead of becoming a member of the Gordon's Club, whose chairman, secretary and treasurer you have before you.

I was there at Wembley too, when Sampdoria played in the Champions League final against Barcelona. Simon arranged it, a friend of mine who was working at the aquarium as a dolphin trainer at the time. He called me a few days before the match. "I've got good news and I've got bad news. The good news is that I've found cheap flights. The bad news is that we're flying via Amsterdam with a four hour transfer." Yippee! We went to a coffee shop and got as high as a kite. After the match, they gently broke the news to me that Sampdoria had lost. The entire match had passed me by.

And on the return journey too – the same coffee shop. Or another, I wouldn't be able to say. They all look terribly similar, don't you think? When it was time to go to Schiphol to catch our flight back to Genova, we still had a big chunk of hashish left. "Don't take it with you, Simon. Think about it. Give it to those two boys at that table." "You're right, Don, that would be a better idea. But I've just flushed it down the loo."

At Genoa airport, the sniffer dogs lunged at us. They jumped all over Simon. "Fuck, Simon," I said, "you didn't...?" But they couldn't find anything. "It's on our clothes," we said. "We spent the whole afternoon in a coffeeshop in Amsterdam. The smoke's on our clothes. That's what the dogs can smell." And they let us go because they couldn't find anything.

In the taxi from the airport to Piazza dell Erbe, Simon said, "Do you fancy a joint, Don?" He had shoved the hash up his arse. In a condom. He'd gone to the loo in the coffee shop in Amsterdam to get a condom out of the machine and put the hash up his arse. Can you imagine? And that's without even mentioning whether I still felt like smoking it once I knew where it had been for the entire flight.

And this brings me on to something completely different. Do you remember accusing me of meddling with the structure of your novel last night? You might have forgotten it, you drunkard, but I haven't. Because what do I still have to tell you? Well? Exactly. Why I almost got sent down from Cambridge in my first year. And that didn't have anything to do with hashish. But everything to do with a condom.

Back in those days we still had servants in college. Kind of butlers for the students who made their beds in the mornings. We called them "bedders". One of the bedders found a used condom in my bed, something which didn't surprise me at all, by the way. I was summoned by the dean. He pulled a face and got it out of an envelope with the tip of a pencil. He dangled it in front of my nose. "Is this yours, Perrygrove Sinclair?" I put on my glasses to get a better look. I studied the condom carefully. And do you know what I said?

The dean laughed so much he had to let me off. You should be able to guess. I just said it. If I'm interfering with the structure of your novel, I'm doing a good job.'

He took a formidable sip of gin and tonic and gave me a triumphant look. 'They all look terribly similar, don't you think?'

10.

Don could be irresistible at times. He had a talent for making himself lovable and used this to gain personal favours, which he then considered his right and a legal basis for further favours. Catering staff were his main victims. He used his charm to take advantage of them. What began as an extra ice cube, would imperceptibly morph over the space of a few weeks into an own glass of maximal volume, a personal chair, permission to stay on after closing time and litres of free gin. And whenever a bar owner was brave enough to move Don's process of appropriating the bar back a step, he'd explode. When a self-created privilege was taken away from him, he could be unusually unpleasant. Like a spoiled child not getting its own way.

And he lost control completely when his drink supply was stopped, for example, when the barman concluded, after he'd fallen over three times, that he'd had enough. Even if he didn't have any money left to pay for his next gin and tonic, he'd consider it a universal human right to be allowed to drink one more, and anyone disagreeing was a fascist or much worse.

A lack of attention was also catastrophic. He could have an angry outburst when a group had collected at his table and didn't consider him the lynchpin of the company – for example when no English was spoken or when English was being spoken, but he was being ignored because he was too drunk to say anything sensible. During an angry moment, he'd wake up out of his stupor and call them every name under the sun.

But worst of all was when he felt his pride had been injured. He disgraced himself on a daily basis, but when he got the impression that someone else was trying to do that, the piazza was too small for the both of them. He cracked the jokes, including the jokes about himself, and anyone getting it into his head to make him the butt became an arch enemy, at least, for as long as he remembered, and that was never very long and in any case never longer than until the next morning.

But outbursts like this were relatively uncommon. I began to worry about something else. There was also a quiet, dejected, melancholic Don and I began to see him more and more often. The ex-pat friends we had in common noticed it too. When we asked after the cause, he'd just say he was thinking. And if we carried on asking, he'd say even less. But we could guess what he was thinking about. A lack of money put a recurrent dampener on the party mood. His depressions almost always overcame him during the last week of the month. As soon as he'd been to the bank to collect his pension, he'd drown himself in happiness again. But it went deeper than that. Sometimes he'd get a card or a letter from his sister in Birmingham. He would carry it with him in his inside pocket for days and tell us night after night that he'd got a card or a letter from his sister in Birmingham. He seemed just as

surprised as we were that he had a sister and it made him melancholic, like someone taken unawares by a realisation of lost time.

Don's family was a concept no one could get their head round. He was one of those rare characters who, like Athena, must have sprouted fully armed out of someone's head. Don was born with a gin and tonic in his hand, it was the only possibility, because without a gin and tonic in his hand, Don wouldn't be Don. It was inconceivable that he'd ever been a normal toddler with anything as banal as a sister. Even more unimaginable, if that was possible, was the thought that he'd had ever had children himself. He was much too happy with his own cocky independence and his role as a maverick singleton at the heart of the crowd, and much too faithful to his glass, his only mistress. And yet he had them. He had a daughter, who lived in Greece, and a son whose stage name was 'Dicko' and had made a fortune in Australia playing a malevolent judge on TV talent contests. We found this out by chance. Don never talked about them. All contact had been cut off. And there must have been a wife involved, or in any case a mother to his children, but we never found anything out about her, not even by chance. He was in denial about his hidden past and trying to forget it, but its ghosts haunted his mind more and more often when he didn't have enough money for the gin he needed to deny or forget.

He was getting old, that was it. He began to grow older than he'd ever imagined possible. He no longer had the strength for his forward flight every evening. He was being sucked back into his own past, which he wouldn't share with anyone whatever bottle you plied him with. He resembled a wounded animal, hiding away under the roots of a tree to die out of sight of the cameras which he continued to play for as long as he could see them.

11.

'I really can't talk about it, but I know I can trust you. I'll tell you on condition that you don't write it down. It was just before I graduated from Cambridge. My thesis on the metaphysical poets had been passed. Better still, I'd been given the highest possible grade. I'd been celebrating that in my own way for a few days. And one evening I came home and found an official letter from the dean on my desk. One of the bedders must have put it there. This was highly irregular. The college post was always delivered to the pigeon holes in the main hall, just next to the entrance. The next morning, when I'd sobered up, I opened the letter. The dean had invited me for tea at his home. This was highly, highly irregular.

I was received in the drawing room. The dean's wife served tea with a wide assortment of sandwiches, cakes and petits fours. The dean joined us in the drawing room and began a very amicable conversation about a series of amusing trivialities. He told me stories about his time as a student and the short period during which he had been politically active. He seemed exaggeratedly interested in my thesis's conclusions and my other views on English literature. He nodded and smiled friendly at everything I said. His wife kept on topping up the teacups and proffering new delicacies. Meanwhile I felt more uncomfortable by the minute. Something was fishy about this. It was highly, highly, highly irregular. What was going on? What did he want from me?

"I know you have a great fondness for orchids," he said, "Come. I want to show you something." Where on earth had he got that from? I didn't like orchids at all. But I went with him. We went outside through the back door, and right at the back of his large garden there was a greenhouse in which he cultivated orchids. He gave me a tour and at a certain point, while he was clipping away a couple of superfluous leaves with a small pair of shears, he casually asked, "By the way, have you ever considered joining the Service?"

I didn't have the foggiest what he meant. He carried on coolly trimming his orchids. It was a very finicky task. He leaned in close to scrutinise his work and said, "We have selected you as a potential candidate. You aspire to an academic career, don't you?" I nodded. "That can be arranged. It won't get in the way of your work for the Service in any way. On the contrary, it would be an advantage because an academic career is a most suitable cover. You'd have to attend a lot of conferences abroad, but you wouldn't have to worry yourself about that. We'd organise that for you." I still didn't understand where this was heading. He said, "What I mean is this: if you cooperate, the Service would guarantee the preconditions, like a lectureship and in time, a chair. That goes without saying."

I couldn't believe my ears. "Why me?" I asked. "Because you are one of the few here with a military background. Besides, there are certain facets of your personality that make you a very suitable candidate – you seem to value a varied social life and you are very credible in places where a lot of alcohol is drunk and people tend to be rather more loose-lipped than usual. That's a characteristic which might come in useful. What's more, you don't clam up under pressure. I noticed that when I put you to the test with that condom that ostensibly had been found in your bed. And if you are still not convinced, I'll give you one final argument."

He walked to the back wall of the greenhouse where there was a tool cabinet. He took out a rolled-up piece of paper. "Do you recognize this document?" I was my A level certificate. "It's a forgery," he said. "Not a bad forgery, I'll admit, but we're no fools. Listen, let me put it this way, as an employee of the Service such a demonstration of improvisational ability works in your favour, whereas under different circumstances it might be considered a punishable offence. Do you get my meaning?" I nodded. "To prevent any misunderstanding, I'll make myself more explicit. If you accept, we'll put this document back in our archives and you'll get your first class honours next week and we'll underwrite your future academic career. If you refuse, I'll unfortunately find myself compelled to take steps. To start with I'd have to cancel your graduation and following that, legal proceedings would be put into motion." I swallowed. "So I don't have a choice?" Smiling, he laid an arm around my shoulders. "No."

That's how it happened. That's how I got recruited into the Service. But once again: you have to swear that you won't mention this to anyone else.' He took a generous sip of his gin and tonic.

' But what kind of service was it?'

'Ilja! Don't you understand anything?' He looked around to make sure no one was listening. He leaned towards me and whispered in my ear, 'MI6. Her Majesty's Secret Service.'

12.

'In the early years, I was a kind of delivery boy. As a PhD student and later a professor, I was regularly invited to international conferences on the English metaphysical poets. It amazed me that there was so much interest in them worldwide. And the curious thing was that they were mainly held in places in countries which, to put it subtly, were "at odds" with the United Kingdom. Peking. Bucharest. Havana. I gave lectures in all those places. And there was a lot of interest in metaphysical poets in Moscow. I went there at least ten times for conferences. And while my international colleagues debated my hasty conclusions, I was supposed to deliver a parcel. A parcel is a bit of an exaggeration. It was usually a newspaper. Or a magazine. It probably had a microfilm hidden in it. They never told me what I was carrying. It wasn't my business. And I wasn't supposed to ask questions, I was the delivery boy.

I remember one time in Greece. That was during the military junta of 67-74. I was in the train. All of a sudden five Greek policemen entered my carriage. I was shitting myself. In a manner of speaking. I didn't know what I was carrying but I knew I was carrying something. But the other five passengers in my carriage turned out to be Turks. They stripped them from head to toe and left me alone. It didn't sink in until later that we'd planted those Turks there. But Ilja, you can't imagine how petrified I was.'

He asked for some ice and a lacrima. 'My darling,' he said. 'My darling,' the waitress said back.

'I love young people, Ilja. I love young people. They say they keep you young. I believe in that with all my heart. That's why I was always so popular when I was teaching at the university. I always behaved like one of them instead of their professor, but that's how I felt too. I remember it well. It was in 1968 or 69. One day, my students came up to me after a lecture and asked, "Professor, do you fancy coming to a concert with us tomorrow? It's a bit of a drive. But if you want, we'll come and pick you up tomorrow morning in the car."

The next morning I stood there waiting in a dinner jacket and bowtie. Ready to go to a concert. They said, "Professor, you might be a little overdressed. We're not going to the opera. It's a different kind of concert." "That doesn't matter," I said. "I like to dress up for the performers. Out of respect."

It was indeed quite a drive. We were hours away from the city. We drove along country lanes. They said we were close. It seemed an improbable place for a concert. "I think we're lost," I said. I could see a farmer on his tractor in the distance. "I'll ask him the way. What's the name of the place we're looking for? Stockwood?"

He still found it hilarious.

'Had you stopped working for the Service by then?'

'No, I'd only just begun. As a delivery boy. Later I was deployed for more serious missions. Well, I don't know whether they were more serious. You never know with MI6. But I had to gather information. I was brought into contact with rulers and dissidents. I had to drink G&Ts with them. That's what it came down to. And I'd be debriefed in London. Of course I wasn't allowed to write anything down – that would have been much too risky. I had to remember everything. That's how I got my excellent memory. I was never allowed to tell the

same story or joke to the same person twice. And in London I was expected to relate everything they'd said. I wasn't to judge what was important and what wasn't, that was their business. My job was to relate everything exactly as they'd said it.

And to be honest, that's how I... But wait. You really have to promise me that you won't mention this to anybody.'

I promised.

'But I'm serious.' He disappeared into his thoughts.

'Cheers big ears.' He remained silent. 'And to be honest, that's how I witnessed a few important developments. Not to say caused them.' I ordered him another gin and tonic.

'You understand.'

'Well?'

He stirred the gin and lime in his family-size glass. 'In 1989, I was in the DDR.'

'For a conference on metaphysical poets?'

'Yes. And what's his name again? Kraut. Egon Kraut. I have an excellent memory. No! Krenz. Egon Krenz. I said to him—'

Some Italians came to kiss his ring. 'We all live in a yellow submarine,' I said. Don gave me a withering look. 'That's my line,' he said.

'Sorry. But tell me more about Egon Krenz.'

'No.'

13.

I hadn't seen Don for a couple of days. People on the piazza began to worry. It was almost the end of the month. Maybe his money had run out. On the other hand, this had never prevented him from clamouring for his right to an advance on next month's tab before, given his special status. The shutters on his hotel window remained closed. He didn't answer his phone, but that happened quite a lot because he didn't know how it worked. And just when we really began to worry and seriously consider calling someone, like the police or the hotel owner, he came coolly sauntering onto the square in characteristic fashion, like a gentleman who has assumed a slow and dignified gait to camouflage the face that he is struggling to keep his balance.

'Where were you, Don?'

He didn't say anything. He stuck out his arms and crossed his wrists. The gesture meant that he'd been handcuffed. I had to laugh. He didn't.

'What happened, Don?'

He sat down, ordered a cappuccino senza schiuma and didn't say anything. He didn't begin to talk until after his third lacrima. What he said was: 'Cheers. To Nick Leeson.'

A man came by selling roses and Don tried to wangle a free rose for his button hole. Although, after a while, the rose-seller became rather receptive to the idea that Don shouldn't

pay for the rose because he was a pensioner, the deal ultimately fell through because Don didn't like the colour. He was wearing a pale blue shirt with a white tie that day and couldn't compromise on a yellow, pink or red rose. The rose-seller apologized profusely and promised to return the next day with white roses.

'But hey! White means white! Understood?'

'Sure, Don. Sorry, Don.'

The rose-seller moved on. Don drank. I waited. Don sighed. 'I've told you how tight things are sometimes,' he said. 'Everything goes on rent, drink and cigarettes. And it gets less every month because the pound keeps going down against the euro. Last month, the hotel owner raised the rent for that shithole. Not much, but every tenner counts. I protested but he said that I was the only person in the hotel who'd been paying the same rent for years. What can I say? He's an old friend of mine. And I'd pay at least double that everywhere else. At least.

I don't usually make it to the end of the month anymore. That's not a real problem for the alcohol – I've got tabs all over the city. But my shoes need to be resoled. And I have to go to the dry cleaner's. I've run out of clean shirts. And you know how important I find it to look tip top. My dignity is the only thing I have left. If I lose that, I've lost everything. Do you understand?'

I understood. And because I understood about his dignity, I decided to change my mind and not offer to lend him any cash.

'So.' He stirred his glass pensively with his straw. 'Do you know Bruno? From Le Cinque Vele in Porto Antico. It used to have a different name: La Sirena. He's got three or four bars around there. I'm sure you know him. He was one of the biggest drugs dealers in Genoa. Years ago. Everyone knew. In the end he got arrested, but he did a deal with the police. He gave up his supplier in exchange for being acquitted or at least avoiding a long prison sentence and then stopped. But what not many people know—'

'Is that he didn't stop?'

Don nodded. 'He mainly delivers to the luxury yachts. To the boaties. I know them all, and I know nearly all the captains. They trust me, and Bruno needs a delivery boy from time to time. Which happens to be my former occupation, shall we say. He doesn't pay much – a few tenners. But I can use the money.'

I give him a shocked look. 'But Don, what the fuck are you saying? I mean – drug-runner? At your age?'

'I know, Ilja. I'm a very intelligent man, but not that clever. And I was incredibly lucky too. When they picked me up, I didn't have much left on me. A few grams perhaps. Less. I'd already delivered the rest. But still. I had to go to the station. They kept me for a couple of days. They wanted to know who I worked for and who I delivered to. They knew damned well that I was a runner, they're not stupid. But I didn't give Bruno away, or the boaties either. I maintained it was for personal use and that I'd bought it from some Moroccan guy on a street corner in the Maddalena quarter. And of course I wouldn't be able to recognize that Moroccan again. "They all look terribly similar, don't you think?" They didn't find that very funny. And they didn't believe me. But they didn't have any proof.

But the biggest piece of luck was that the police chief is an old friend of mine. He only showed up after a couple of days. To be honest, I think he works for a different department as a rule. I'm not sure exactly how it works. But as soon as he saw me, he was all, "Ciao Don. Cappuccino senza schiuma. We all live in a yellow submarine.' He asked me what had happened. I told him that it was all a misunderstanding and that he should ring the British Consulate at once. I had already said that to the other carabinieri who had questioned me, but they had refused. He knew I still had special protection because of my work for the Service and he was happy to help me. It was all sorted out with a single phone call. I could go.

That was an hour ago. So you'll understand, Ilja – I could use a G&T.'

14.

A few days later I was drinking coffee and reading the papers in the little Sicilian bar on Piazza Matteotti early in the morning, when Don popped up from the wrong direction. His hotel was on the Salita Pollaiuoli but he came from the Piazzini de Ferrari. It was highly irregular to come across him at such an early hour, but he'd clearly been somewhere else even earlier. He sat down next to me. His face was troubled. He ordered a coffee. That was even more irregular, if possible.

'How are you doing, Don? Where've you just been?'

He pointed his thumb back over his shoulder in the direction he'd just come from. 'From the British Consulate.'

'Because of that little incident? When you got arrested?'

Don shook his head. 'Well, indirectly. They called me two days ago to make an appointment. Which was this morning. They were very friendly. They asked about my health and in particular my financial situation. I told them the truth. I told them how difficult it is sometimes. They knew everything already and told me they might be able to help. "There are two gentlemen here you probably know. They'd like to have a little chat with you." The door opened and they came in. And indeed, I did know them well. I knew them all too well.'

He stared dejectedly into his coffee. 'Maybe I need something stronger.'

'And who were they then?'

'Unfortunately I can't tell you, Ilja.' He downed his gin and tonic in one. He looked a lot better for it. And when he'd finished his second, he said, 'They wanted me back. They wanted me to work for them again. For the Service. But I'm too old, Ilja. I'm too old.'

The two men were my former boss and his right hand. They'd come to Genoa especially to talk to me. Undoubtedly the consulate had informed them about my lack of money and my recent act of desperation. We went for a coffee in the bar on the corner. I already knew what they were going to ask me, but I pretended not to. We talked about this and that and the good old times for half an hour and then the truth came out.'

'What did they want you to do?'

'They never tell you beforehand, they only explain when they're one hundred percent sure you're going to do the job. And just the bare minimum. You only get told the things that are absolutely essential to completing the mission. And then a lot of the time it's probably about something other than what they've told you.

But they let it drop that they were thinking of several missions. Abroad. The word Cairo was mentioned a couple of times. They told me about a good friend of mine from Cambridge. Another literary type. Turns out he's a professor there, at the University of Cairo. They told me he was planning to organize a big international conference shortly.'

'On the metaphysical poets?'

'I didn't know he worked for the Service too. I should have suspected, of course. And they did offer me a generous fee. About twice as much as I used to earn from them. And they knew all too well that I'd be receptive to their offer.'

'So you agreed?'

'I can't do it anymore. All that travelling. I'm too old for it. I'm too old, Ilja.'

15.

A week later he was dead.

It was a lovely summer's evening. The terraces were buzzing. It was the high-pitched note of a warm day which hadn't yet tired itself out, but was satiated enough not to demand anything more of itself than this gentle and effortless slipping by in warm, slow gestures. Here and there, the metallic tinkle of a toast. Street musicians went past. They played slightly slower and their sound was slightly purer than usual. Beggars smiled. The swallows flew high above the pastel-coloured palazzi. Pigeons pecked around the square without having to worry about the seagulls who'd flown far offshore over a calm sea. The fire brigade's red helicopter flew high overhead to put out forest fires in the mountains. Tomorrow was going to be another wonderful day.

I didn't speak to Don that evening. I sat a few tables away from him with three Italian girls. He'd been attended to at his high table by a group of boaties. Don had been at his most Donnish. I had seen him gesturing enthusiastically and heard his loud laughter. Shoulders were slapped heartily, again and again. He had been able to run through a large part of his repertoire. His stories had met with warm approval. They had sung along to his songs and he'd been generously rewarded with many brimming glasses. He had been the focal point of the evening. He had gloried.

When they left, he'd drifted off behind his sunglasses. There was a full glass of gin and tonic in front of him. He had a smile on his face.

The crowds filed past his table. 'Ciao Don.' He didn't reply. Just smiled. 'Forza Sampdoria.' They slapped him amicably on the shoulder and carried on. 'Grande Don.'

Closing time drew near. Various waitresses had told Don in passing to finish his drink because they were about to shut. He'd listened with an affable smile.

When the bar's shutters had been rolled down halfway, Rebecca, the owner, came out to shake him awake. His glass was just as full as before. 'Don, we have to close.' His sunglasses fell from his head. And still he didn't move. He was cold to the touch.

The ambulance arrived immediately. But there was nothing they could do. He was dead.

'How long's he been dead?'

'It's hard to say. But at least four hours or so. Didn't you notice anything?'

'We thought he was happy.'

16.

The news spread through the city like wildfire. The next day, people from the suburbs were already arriving in Piazza delle Erbe to ask whether it was true. It was true. In the absence of anyone to offer their condolences to, they offered them to themselves. Rebecca had placed an improvised book of condolences on the bar in her café: an empty scrapbook with kittens on the cover which she'd had lying about somewhere, a photo of Don, which Nello from the internet café had printed out and framed, and Don's last gin and tonic which they hadn't had the heart to empty down the sink the previous evening. The rose-seller had laid a white rose next to it. Rebecca had tried to pay him for it but he'd refused. Halfway through the evening the scrapbook was already full. Nello dug up a large exercise book in the Sampdoria club colours from somewhere. That was soon full too. And everyone asked when the funeral would be.

That was a good question. Not least because it wasn't exactly clear who would arrange it. Or rather, it was all too clear. Don knew hundreds of people in this city who called themselves his friends, but he had no friends, apart from our small group of expats who had always worried about him instead of cheerfully slapping his fragile shoulders in passing, which by the way, he had always preferred to anyone worrying about him. If we didn't organize it, no one would.

We had to notify his family, but that was easier said than done. We knew of the existence of a son in Australia, a daughter in Greece and a sister in Birmingham. We tracked down the son quite quickly. He really had become famous as 'Dicko' the bad guy on TV talent show juries. We tried to contact him through his management. There was no response. There wasn't a single trace of the daughter. No doubt she had a different surname by now. The same went for his sister, but we did finally manage to trace her with a lot of effort and a bit of luck, thanks to friends of friends of our friend from Liverpool. She reacted calmly to the news of her brother's death. 'I'm glad it happened like that,' she said over the phone. 'That's the best death he could have wished for, the drunken bastard.'

We had a lot of contact with her over the days that followed. No, the body didn't need to be shipped back to England. It was better to bury him in Genoa. 'Let him take his nuisance where he spent his money. All those so-called friends of his are there. No one knows him here anymore.' And no, she wouldn't come for the funeral. Her brother had always

considered himself better off without her. He'd never wanted to listen to her when he was alive and she thought the chance very small that things would be any different now.

And his children? 'Don't bother.' Why not? 'Let it drop. I don't want to say anything bad about him.' But we need to keep them informed at least? 'He never found that important when he was alive. He's been dead to them for more than thirty years. From the moment he started drinking again. If he ever stopped. But for a while he acted as though he had, when the children were still young. And when he couldn't keep it up anymore he just disappeared, from one day to the next. He didn't even leave a letter on the kitchen table and he never got back in touch. We only heard by chance on the grapevine, years later, that he was in Italy.'

We asked about his professorship post. Perhaps the University of Cambridge would be interested in publishing an obituary, or might be inclined to donate something as a sign of their gratefulness and respect? She burst out laughing. 'Is that what he told you? Typical Don.' Wasn't it true then? 'But when then? Think about it. He went to university when he got out of the army. He was a mature student, as we call it. When he started his studies he was about twenty-six. He was over thirty when he graduated. His children had already been born. He started a Master's thesis but never finished it, he ran off to Italy before that.'

But nevertheless, over the years he was a welcome guest at international academic conferences, wasn't he? In particular ones on the metaphysical poets? 'Don't make me laugh. He never left Italy. It wouldn't have been possible. His passport ran out more than twenty years ago. I still remember the letter. His ex-wife gave it to me. I think I've still got it somewhere.'

And that astronomic pension then? 'Which pension?' The one he had at Barings Bank and lost because of Nick Leeson's activities? 'All the private investors were reimbursed before the bankruptcy. The truth is that Don never worked in his life, apart from perhaps a few private English lessons and a little translation job now and again. He didn't have time to. He was a full-time alcoholic. His entire life long. He was already an old drunkard long before you knew him as an old drunkard. It's a miracle he kept it up for so long. I'm happy he had such a pleasant death, because I do love him. Bury him there amongst his so-called friends and keep us out of it. And cherish the stories he had you believe. Let things be as he wanted them. I don't want to hear anything else about it. I'll transfer a contribution to the costs. That's all. Thank you.'

17.

In Via Canneto Il Curto, in the stretch between Via San Lorenzo and Piazza Banchi, there's a dusty little shop where you can buy old coins and medals. I'd never seen a customer go in and although I'd never noticed a shopkeeper either, he did turn out to exist. He heard the shop bell ring and came shuffling out of a back room in his dressing gown. He was even more dusty than his shop. He asked me how he could be of assistance. I told him I needed one or two old decorations. He stared into space, deep in thought. Medals, I clarified, pointing at the shop window where medals of all shapes and sizes were displayed. Something gradually began to dawn on him. He nodded circumspectly and asked me what

kind of medals I was thinking of. 'English medals,' I said. 'Decorations for bravery in battle or other exceptional services to the patriarchy.' 'English?' 'Yes, English.' He shook his head and began to shuffle to his back room. I stopped him and said I'd take any other medals that were good. I chose four: the biggest with the most stars, crowns and aureoles and the most fake gold and the most colourful ribbons.

The funeral took place in the historic Staglieno cemetery. Our Scottish friend had been able to arrange a modest but pleasant spot through his contacts there for a friendly price. He didn't want to say much about it, but I suspect he'd got a bulk discount by signing a contract for us all to take options on plots there at the prevailing rate at the moment of first use. To keep the costs even lower, a slot was chosen on a Tuesday morning at eight o'clock. We announced the time and place in an advertisement in *Il Secolo XIX* and a letter on the door of the Caffè Letteraria on Piazza delle Erbe.

Despite the early hour, it was unbelievably busy. When the ceremony started with an a cappella performance of Don's favourite aria '*O mio babbino caro*' by his good friend Irene Cenboncini, the soprano from the Carlo Felice, there were hundreds of people around the grave, including pretty much every barman from Genoa and around. Our Scottish friend gave an impassioned speech in Italian, in which he dwelt at length on a number of Don's merits – ones he'd always been too modest to share with his Italian friends, such as his heroic role in various battles in Korea and Malaysia and the crucial role he played in a number of key moments in the history of the twentieth century as an agent for the British Secret Services. The medals shone on his coffin.

And then the coffin began to drop and, in a silence which resounded with respect, the grave stone was slowly revealed. It was a simple block of granite in the classical form with a curve at the top. And the only thing carved into it were the two words which had been the two most spoken words in Genoa all those years and which now rang out in silence for the very last time:

CIAO DON

18.

There was a long procession from Staglieno, along the banks of the River Bisagno back to the centre. We passed the Luigi Ferraris stadium in Marassi. There was a large banner hanging above the main entrance, changing the name of the stadium to 'Stadio di Don'.

On Piazza della Erbe, all seven cafes were running at fully fighting strength. The terraces had been set up outside at their maximum capacities and all the temporary staff had been called in. This turned out to be necessary. On that Tuesday morning, when all of Don's friends flooded the square to raise a final toast to him, it was busier than a busy Friday or Saturday night. And even though nothing had been agreed beforehand, everyone drank gin and tonic, which everyone ordered as cappuccino *sense schiuma*. This led to some debauched scenes already quite early in the afternoon.

The game soon became who could remember the most jokes from Don's immense but worn-down repertoire. Anyone telling a joke laughed more loudly than everyone else and

then told it again a few more times in a loud voice to prevent others from cutting short their victory by telling a joke of their own. This Italian habit, which usually annoyed me, had something almost likeable at the time, because ultimately these were Don's victories that were being celebrated with so much determination and noisy envy.

The next game was to do an impression of Don. Elio, the Wild Boar, imitated how Don sang Sarah Vaughan's 'You are My Honey Bee' to every girl who came in. 'You are my honey bee, he sang, and he pricked her...' He made the accompanying obscene gesture. 'Get it? Pricked her... And then squeeze some tits. I'll demonstrate. Look. Like this.' The Wild Boar squeezed a random friend of Don's in the tits. But there was a degree of self-interest in it, I thought, it wasn't just part of the imitation. From time to time, someone would fall off his chair, blind drunk. But in those cases too, it wasn't clear whether this was part of the game or whether it was due to the gin and tonic. But at the end of the day it came down to the same thing.

Don's funeral gradually turned into Don's birthday. And because at his own birthdays, Don generally featured more as a shadowy presence than actually being present as a concrete person, he was barely missed. He was there that day on the Piazza delle Erbe, there was hardly anyone who doubted that. And no one doubted it at all when suddenly, spontaneously, without agreement or sign, across the square hundreds of voices joined together in his favourite song. 'We all live in a yellow submarine.'

In the evening there was a passionate debate about how we could get the council, the province or the region to replace a small, battered statue of a putto on the Piazza delle Erbe with a statue of Don holding a glass of gin and tonic. And when hours later, after the legal closing time, the shutters rattled downwards and everyone stumbled home blind drunk, we heard Don's piercing peals of laughter echoing through the city's silent alleys.

He was a living legend and it will be difficult for the city to get used to the fact that he is now a dead one. Smiling behind his sunglasses, he drank himself to death and laughingly invented a life story to go with it. The bum. The drunken bastard. He enticed all of us into the labyrinth of his fantasies. And he succeeded – he was the most popular immigrant, the most successful foreigner in the whole of Genoa because he never integrated, never fitted in and always stayed himself. In fact he had refined himself into a caricature of himself. And on the day of his funeral, hundreds and hundreds of friends had drunk cappuccino senza schiuma while having serious conversations about a statue. Hundreds and hundreds of drunken voices had joined together to sing his favourite song. We all live in a yellow submarine. He had always known that it would end like this. *Grande Don.*