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THE DREAM

I DREAMT THAT I woke up. It's the oldest dream of all, and I've just had it. I dreamt that I woke up.

I was in my own bed. That seemed a bit of a surprise, but after a moment's thought it made sense. Who else's bed should I wake up in? I looked around and I said to myself, Well, well, well. Not much of a thought, I admit. Still, do we ever find the right words for the big occasions?

There was a knock on the door and a woman came in, sideways and backwards at the same time. It should have looked awkward but it didn't; no, it was all smooth and stylish. She was carrying a tray, which was why she'd come in like that. As she turned, I saw she was wearing a uniform of sorts. A nurse? No, she looked more like a stewardess on some airline you've never heard of. 'Room service,' she said with a bit of a smile, as if she wasn't used to providing it, or I wasn't used to expecting it; or both.

'Room service?' I repeated. Where I come from something like that only happens in films. I sat up in bed, and found I didn't have any clothes on. Where'd my pyjamas gone? That was a change. It was also a change that when I sat up in bed and realized she could see me bollock-naked to the waist, if you understand me, I didn't feel at all embarrassed. That was good.

'Your clothes are in the cupboard,' she said. 'Take your time. You've got all day. And,' she added with more of a smile, 'all tomorrow as well.'

I looked down at my tray. Let me tell you about that breakfast. It was the breakfast of my life and no mistake. The grapefruit, for a start. Now, you know what a grapefruit's like: the way it spurts juice down your shirt and keeps slipping out of your hand unless you hold it down with a fork or something, the way the flesh always sticks to those opaque membranes and then suddenly comes loose with half the pith attached, the way it always tastes sour yet makes you feel bad about piling sugar on the top of it. That's what a grapefruit's like, right? Now let me tell you about *this* grapefruit. Its flesh was pink for a start, not yellow, and each segment had already been carefully freed from its clinging membrane. The fruit itself was anchored to the dish by some prong or fork through its bottom, so that I didn't need to hold it down or even touch it. I looked around for the sugar, but that was just out of habit. The taste seemed to come in two parts – a sort of awakening sharpness followed quickly by a wash of sweetness; and each of those little globules (which were about the size of tadpoles) seemed to burst separately in my mouth. That was the grapefruit of my dreams, I don't mind telling you.

Like an emperor, I pushed aside the gutted hull and lifted a silver dome from a crested plate. Of course I knew what would be underneath. Three slices of grilled streaky bacon with the gristle and rind removed, the crispy fat all glowing like a bonfire. Two eggs, fried, the yolk looking milky because the fat had been properly spooned over it in the cooking, and the outer edges of the white trailing off into filigree gold braid. A grilled tomato I can only describe in terms of what it wasn't. It wasn't a collapsing cup of stalk, pips, fibre and red water, it was something compact, sliceable, cooked equally all the way through and tasting – yes, this is the thing I remember – tasting of tomato. The sausage: again, not a tube of lukewarm horsemeat stuffed into a French letter, but dark umber and succulent ... a ... a sausage, that's the only word for it. All the others, the ones I'd thought I'd enjoyed in my previous life, were merely practising to be like this; they'd been auditioning – and they wouldn't get the part, either. There was a little crescent-shaped side-plate with a crescent-shaped silver lid. I raised it: yes, there were my bacon rinds, separately grilled, waiting to be nibbled.

The toast, the marmalade – well, you can imagine those, you can dream what they were like for yourselves. But I must tell you about the teapot. The tea, of course, was the real thing, tasting as if it had been picked by some rajah's personal entourage. As for the teapot ... Once, years ago, I went to Paris on a package holiday. I wandered off from the others and walked around where the smart people live. Where they shop and eat, anyway. On a corner I passed a café. It didn't look particularly grand, and just for a minute I thought of sitting down there. But I didn't, because at one of the tables I saw a man having tea. As he poured himself a fresh cup, I spotted a little gadget which seemed to me almost a definition of luxury: attached to the teapot's spout, and dangling by three delicate silver chains, was a strainer. As the man raised the pot to its pouring angle, this strainer swung outwards to catch the leaves. I couldn't believe that serious thought had once gone into the matter of how to relieve this tea-drinking gentleman of the incredible burden of picking up a normal strainer with his free hand. I walked away from that café feeling a bit self-righteous. Now, on my tray, I had a teapot bearing the insignia of some chic Parisian café. A strainer was

attached to its spout by three silver chains. Suddenly, I could see the point of it.

After breakfast, I put the tray down on my bedside table, and went to the cupboard. Here they all were, my favourite clothes. That sports jacket I still liked even after people started saying, how unusual, did you buy it secondhand, another twenty years and it'll be back in fashion. That pair of corduroy trousers my wife threw out because the seat was beyond repair; but someone had managed to repair it, and the trousers looked almost new, though not so new you weren't fond of them. My shirts held out their arms to me, and why not, as they'd never been pampered like this in their lives before – all in ranks on velvet-covered hangers. There were shoes whose deaths I'd regretted; socks now deholed again; ties I'd seen in shop windows. It wasn't a collection of clothes you'd envy, but that wasn't the point. I was reassured. I would be myself again. I would be more than myself.

By the side of the bed was a tasselled bell-pull I hadn't previously noticed. I tugged it, then felt a bit embarrassed, and climbed under the sheets again. When the nurse-stewardess came in, I slapped my stomach and said, 'You know, I could eat that all over again.'

'I'm not surprised,' she replied. 'I was half expecting you to say so.'

I didn't get up all day. I had breakfast for breakfast, breakfast for lunch, and breakfast for dinner. It seemed like a good system. I would worry about lunch tomorrow. Or rather, I wouldn't worry about lunch tomorrow. I wouldn't worry about anything tomorrow. Between my breakfast-lunch and my breakfast-dinner (I was really beginning to appreciate that strainer system – you can carry on eating a croissant with your free hand while you pour) I had a long sleep. Then I took a shower. I could have had a bath, but I seem to have spent decades in the bath, so instead I took a shower. I found a quilted dressing-gown with my initials in gilt cord on the breast pocket. It fitted well, but I thought those initials were farting higher than my arse-hole. I hadn't come here to swank around like a film star. As I was staring at these golden squiggles, they disappeared from before my eyes. I blinked and they were gone. The dressing-gown felt more comfortable with just a normal pocket.

The next day I woke up – and had another breakfast. It was as good as the previous three. Clearly the problem of breakfast had now been solved.

When Brigitta came to clear the tray, she murmured, 'Shopping?'

Of course.' It was exactly what had been on my mind.

'Do you want to go shopping or stay shopping?'

'Go shopping,' I said, not really understanding the difference.

'Sure.'

My wife's brother once came back from ten days in Florida and said, 'When I die, I don't want to go to Heaven, I want to go shopping in America.' That second morning I began to understand what he meant.

When we got to the supermarket Brigitta asked me if I wanted to walk or drive. I said let's drive, that sounds fun – a reply which she seemed to expect. On reflection, some parts of her job must be quite boring – I mean, we probably all react in much the same way, don't we? Anyway, we drove. The shopping-carts are motorized wire-mesh trolleys that whizz around like dodgems, except that they never crash into one another because of some electric-eye device. Just when you think you're going to have a prang, you find yourself swerving round the oncoming cart. It's fun, that, trying to crash.

The system's easily mastered. You have a plastic card which you push into a slot next to the goods you want to buy, then punch in the quantity you want. After a second or two, your card is returned. Then the stuff is automatically delivered and credited.

I had a good time in my wire cart. I remember when I used to go shopping in the old days, the previous days, I'd sometimes see small kids sitting inside a trolley as if it were a cage and being pushed round by their parents; and I'd be envious. I wasn't any more. And boy, did I buy some stuff that morning! I practically cleaned them out of those pink grapefruit. That's what it felt like, anyway. I bought breakfast, I bought lunch, I bought dinner, I bought mid-morning snacks, afternoon teas, apéritif munchies, midnight feasts. I bought fruit I couldn't name, vegetables I'd never seen before, strange new cuts of meat from familiar animals, and familiar-looking cuts from animals I'd never eaten before. In the Australian section I found crocodile tail-steak, fillet of water-buffalo, *terraine de kangarou*. I bought them all. I plundered the gourmet cabinet. Freeze-dried lobster soufflé with cherry-chip topping: how could I resist something like that?

As for the drinks counter ... I had no idea so many different means of intoxication had been devised. I'm mainly a beer-and-spirits man myself, but I didn't want to seem prejudiced so I

bought quite a few crates of wine and cocktails as well. The labels on the bottles were very helpful: they gave detailed instructions about how drunk the contents would make you, taking into consideration factors like sex, weight and body-fat.

There was one brand of transparent alcohol with a very scruffy label. It was called Stinko-Paralytiko (made in Yugoslavia) and said on it: 'This bottle will make you drunker than you've ever been before.' Well, I had to take a case of that home, didn't I?

It was a good morning's work. It might have been the best morning's work there ever was. And don't look down your nose at me, by the way. You'd have done much the same yourself. I mean, say you didn't go shopping, what would you have done instead? Met some famous people, had sex, played golf? There aren't an infinite number of possibilities – that's one of the points to remember about it all, about this place and that place. And if I went shopping first, well, that's what people like me would do. I'm not looking down my nose if you'd have met famous people first, or had sex, or played golf. Anyway, I got round to all that in due course. As I say, we're not so very different.

When we got home I was ... not exactly tired – you don't get tired – just kind of sated. Those shopping carts were fun; I didn't think I'd ever bother to walk – in fact, come to think of it, I didn't see anyone walking at the supermarket. Then it was lunchtime, and Brigitta arrived with breakfast. Afterwards, I took a nap. I expected to dream, because I always dream if I go to sleep in the afternoon. I didn't. I wondered why not.

Brigitta woke me with tea and the biscuits I'd chosen. They were currant biscuits especially designed for people like me. Now I don't know where you stand on this one, but all my life it's been a matter of complaint that they don't put enough currants in the currant biscuits. Obviously you don't want *too many* currants in a biscuit, otherwise you'd have just a wodge of currants rather than a biscuit, but I've always believed that the proportion of ingredients could be adjusted. Upwards, in favour of the currants, naturally – say, to about fifty-fifty. And that's what these biscuits were called, come to think of it: Fifty-Fifties. I bought three thousand packets of them.

I opened the newspaper which Brigitta had thoughtfully placed on the tray and almost spilt my tea. No, I did spill my tea – only you don't worry about things like that any more. It was front-page news. Well, it would have been, wouldn't it? Leicester City had won the FA Cup. No kidding, Leicester City had bloody well won the FA Cup! You wouldn't have believed it, would you? Well, maybe *you* would, if you didn't know anything about football. But I know a thing or two about football, and I've supported Leicester City all my life, and I wouldn't have believed it, that's the point. Don't get me wrong, I'm not running my team down. They're a good team, a very good team sometimes, yet they never seem to win the big ones. Second Division champions, as many times as you like to count, oh yes, but they've never won the First Division. Runners-up, once, sure, no problem. And as for the Cup ... it's a fact, an undeniable fact that in all the time I've supported Leicester City (and for all the time before that, too), they've never won the FA Cup. They've had a very good post-war record in reaching the Final – and just as good a one at not capturing the trophy. 1949, 1961, 1963, 1969, those are the black years, and one or two of those defeats were in my opinion particularly unlucky, indeed I'd single out ... OK, I can see you're not that interested in football. It doesn't matter, as long as you grasp the central fact that Leicester City had never won anything but peanuts before and now they had secured the FA Cup for the first time in the club's history. The match was a real thriller, too, according to the newspaper: City won 5-4 in extra time after coming from behind on no fewer than four occasions. What a performance! What a blend of skill and sheer character! I was proud of the lads. Brigitta would get me the video tomorrow, I was sure she could. In the meantime, I took a little champagne with the breakfast I had for dinner.

The newspapers were great. In a way, it's the newspapers I remember best. Leicester City won the FA Cup, as I may have mentioned. They found a cure for cancer. My party won the General Election every single time until everyone saw its ideas were right and most of the opposition came over and joined us. Little old ladies got rich on the pools every week. Sex offenders repented and were released back into society and led blameless lives. Airline pilots learned how to save planes from mid-air collisions. Everyone got rid of nuclear weapons. The England manager chose the whole Leicester City team *en bloc* to represent England in the World Cup and they came back with the Jules Rimet trophy (memorably beating Brazil 4-1 in the Final). When you read the paper, the newsprint didn't come off on your hands, and the stories didn't come off on your mind. Children were innocent creatures once more; men and women were nice to one another; nobody's teeth had to be filled; and women's tights never laddered.

What else did I do that first week? As I said, I played golf and had sex and met famous people and didn't feel bad once. Let me start with the golf. Now, I've never been much good at the game, but I used to enjoy hacking round a municipal course where the grass is like coconut matting and no-one bothers to replace their divots because there are so many holes in the fairway you can't work out where your divot has come from anyway. Still, I'd seen most of the famous courses on television and I was curious to play – well, the golf of my dreams. And as soon as I felt the contact my driver made on that first tee and watched the ball howling off a couple of hundred yards, I knew I was in seventh heaven. My clubs seemed perfectly weighted to the touch; the fairways had a lush springiness and held the ball up for you like a waiter with a drinks tray; and my caddy (I'd never had a caddy before, but he treated me like Arnold Palmer) was full of useful advice, never pushy. The course seemed to have everything – streams and lakes and antique bridges, bits of seaside links like in Scotland, patches of flowering dogwood and azalea from Augusta, beechwood, pine, bracken and gorse. It was a difficult course, but one that gave you chances. I went round that sunny morning in 67, which was five under par, and twenty shots better than I'd ever done on the municipal course.

I was so pleased with my round that when I got back I asked Brigitta if she'd have sex with me. She said of course she'd love to, and found me very attractive, and though she'd only seen the top half she was pretty sure the rest would be in good working order too; there were a few slight problems like she was deeply in love with someone else, and her conditions of work stated that employees were fired for having sexual relations with new arrivals, and she had a slight heart condition which meant that any extra strain could be dangerous, but if I'd give her a couple of minutes she'd slip off and get into some sexy underwear right away. Well, I debated with myself for a while about the rights and wrongs of what I'd been proposing, and when she came back, all perfume and cleavage, I told her that on balance I thought we probably shouldn't go ahead. She was pretty disappointed and sat down opposite me and crossed her legs which was a pretty sight I can tell you, but I was adamant. It was only later – the next morning, in fact – that I realized *she* had been turning *me* down. I'd never been turned down in such a nice way before. They even make the bad things good here.

I had a magnum of champagne with my sturgeon and chips that night (you don't get hangovers here, either), and was slipping off to sleep with the memory of that crafty back-spin I'd achieved with my wedge at the sixteenth to hold the ball on the upper level of that two-tier green, when I felt the covers of the bed being lifted. At first I thought it was Brigitta and felt a bit bad what with her heart condition and losing her job and being in love with someone else, but when I put my arm around her and whispered 'Brigitta?' a voice whispered back, 'No, is not Brigitta' and the accent was different, all husky and foreign, and then other things made me realize it was not Brigitta, attractive lady in many ways though Brigitta was. What happened next – and by 'next' I do not imply a brief period of time – is, well, hard to describe. The best I can do is say that in the morning I had gone round in 67, which was five under par and twenty shots ahead of my previous best, and what followed that night was a comparable achievement. I am you understand reluctant to criticize my dear wife in this department; it's just that after some years, you know, and the kids, and being tired, well, you can't help dragging one another down. It's still nice, but you sort of do what's necessary, don't you? What I hadn't realized was that if a couple can drag one another down, another couple can drag one another up. Wow! I didn't know I could! I didn't know anyone could! Each of us seemed to know instinctively what the other one wanted. I'd never really come across that before. Not, you understand, that I wish to sound as if I'm criticizing my dear wife.

I expected to wake up feeling tired, but again it was more that sense of being pleasantly full, like after the shopping. Had I dreamt what had happened? No: there were two long red hairs on my pillow to confirm the reality. Their colour also proved that my visitor had definitely not been Brigitta.

'Did you sleep well?' she asked with a bit of a cheeky smile as she brought my breakfast.

'It was altogether a good day,' I replied, perhaps a bit pompously, because I sort of guessed she knew. 'Except,' I added quickly, 'for hearing about your heart condition. I'm really sorry about that.'

'Oh, I'll muddle through,' she said. 'The engine's good for another few thousand years.'

We went shopping (I wasn't yet so lazy I wanted to stay shopping), I read the newspaper, had lunch, played golf, tried to catch up on some reading with one of those Dickens videos, had sturgeon and chips, turned out the light and not long afterwards had sex. It was a good way to spend the day, almost perfect, it seemed to me, and I'd gone round in 67 again. If only I hadn't

driven into the dogwoods on the eighteenth – I think I was just too pumped up – I could have marked a 66, or even a 65, on my card.

And so life continued, as the saying goes. For months, certainly – maybe longer; after a while you stop looking at the date on the newspaper. I realized it had been the right decision not to have sex with Brigitta. We became good friends.

‘What happens,’ I asked her one day, ‘when my wife arrives?’ My dear wife, I should explain, was not with me at the time.

‘I thought you might be worrying about that.’

‘Oh, I’m not worrying about *that*,’ I said, referring to my nightly visitor, because the whole thing was a bit like being a businessman on a foreign trip, I suppose, wasn’t it? ‘I meant, sort of generally.’

‘There isn’t any generally. It’s up to you. And her.’

‘Will she mind?’ I asked, this time referring more definitely to my visitor.

‘Will she know?’

‘I think there are going to be problems,’ I said, once again talking more generally.

‘This is where problems are solved,’ she replied.

‘If you say so.’ I was beginning to be convinced that it might all turn out as I hoped.

For instance, I’d always had this dream. Well, I don’t mean dream exactly, I mean something I wanted a lot. A dream of being judged. No, that doesn’t sound right, it sounds like I wanted to have my head chopped off by a guillotine or be whipped or something. Not like that. No, I wanted to be *judged*, do you see? It’s what we all want, isn’t it? I wanted, oh, some kind of summing-up, I wanted my life looked at. We don’t get that, not unless we appear in court or are given the once-over by a psychiatrist, neither of which had come my way and I wasn’t exactly disappointed, seeing as I wasn’t a criminal or a nutter. No, I’m a normal person, and I just wanted what a lot of normal people want. I wanted my life looked at. Do you see?

I began to explain this one day to my friend Brigitta, not being sure I could put it any better than the above, but she immediately understood. She said it was a very popular request, it wouldn’t be hard to fix. So a couple of days later I went along. I asked her to come with me for moral support, and she agreed.

It was just what I’d expected at first. There was a fancy old building with columns and lots of words in Latin or Greek or something carved along the top, and flunkies in uniform, which made me glad I’d insisted on a new suit for the occasion. Inside, there was a huge staircase, one of those that divides in two and does a big circle in opposite directions and then meets itself again at the top. There was marble everywhere and freshly polished brass and great stretches of mahogany that you knew would never get woodworm.

It wasn’t a huge room, but that didn’t matter. More to the point, it had the right sort of feel, formal but not too off-putting. It was almost cosy, with bits of old velvet looking rather tatty, except that serious things happened here. And he was a nice old gent, the one who did me. A bit like my dad – no, more like an uncle, I’d say. Sort of friendly eyes, looked you straight in the face; and you could tell he stood no nonsense. He’d read all my papers, he said. And there they were, at his elbow, the history of my life, everything I’d done and thought and said and felt, the whole bloody caboodle, the good bits and the bad. It made quite a pile, as you’d imagine. I wasn’t sure I was allowed to address him but anyway I did. I said you’re a quick reader and no mistake. He said he’d had a lot of training and we had a bit of a laugh at that. Then he took a squint at his watch – no, he did it quite politely – and asked me if I wanted my verdict. I found myself squaring my shoulders and putting my hands into fists at my side with the thumbs down the trouser seams. Then I nodded and said ‘Yes, sir,’ and felt a bit nervous I don’t mind telling you.

He said I was OK. No, I’m not kidding, that’s exactly what he said: ‘You’re OK.’ I sort of waited for him to go on but he dropped his eyes and I could see his hand moving to the top document on another file. Then he looked up, gave a little smile and said, ‘No, really, you’re OK.’ I nodded again, and this time he really was going back to his work so I turned and left. When we got out I confessed to Brigitta I’d been a bit disappointed, and she said most people were but I wasn’t to take it as any reflection on me, so I didn’t.

It was about this time that I took to meeting famous people. At first I was a bit shy and only asked for film stars and sportsmen I admired. I met Steve McQueen, for instance, and Judy Garland; John Wayne, Maureen O’Sullivan, Humphrey Bogart, Gene Tierney (I always had this thing about Gene Tierney) and Bing Crosby. I met Duncan Edwards and the rest of the Man Utd players from the Munich air-crash. I met quite a few Leicester City lads from the early days, most

of whose names would probably be unfamiliar to you.

After a while I realized I could meet anyone I liked. I met John F. Kennedy and Charlie Chaplin, Marilyn Monroe, President Eisenhower, Pope John XXIII, Winston Churchill, Rommel, Stalin, Mao Tse-tung, Roosevelt, General de Gaulle, Lindbergh, Shakespeare, Buddy Holly, Patsy Cline, Karl Marx, John Lennon and Queen Victoria. Most of them were very nice, on the whole, sort of natural, not at all grand or condescending. They were just like real people. I asked to meet Jesus Christ but they said they weren't sure about that so I didn't push it. I met Noah, but not surprisingly there was a bit of a language problem. Some people I just wanted to look at. Hitler, for instance, now there's a man I wouldn't shake the hand of, but they arranged that I could hide behind some bushes while he just walked past, in his nasty uniform, large as life.

Guess what happened next? I started worrying. I worried about the most ridiculous things. Like my health, for instance. Isn't that crazy? Maybe it was something to do with Brigitta telling me about her heart condition, but I suddenly began to imagine things going wrong with me. Who'd have credited it? I came over all faddy and diet-conscious; I got a rowing machine and an exercise bicycle, I worked out with weights; I kept off salt and sugar, animal fats and cream cakes; I even cut down my intake of Fifty-Fifties to half a packet a day. I also had spells of worrying about my hairline, my supermarket driving (were the trolleys that safe?), my sexual performance and my bank balance. Why was I worrying about my bank balance when I didn't even have a bank? I imagined my card not working at the supermarket, I felt guilty at the amount of credit I seemed to be given. What had I done to deserve it?

Most of the time, of course, I was fine, what with the shopping, the golf, the sex and the meeting famous people. But every so often I'd think, what if I can't make it round the 18 holes? What if I can't really afford my Fifty-Fifties? Finally, I confessed these thoughts to Brigitta. She thought it time I was passed on to other hands. Brigitta's work was done, she indicated. I felt sad, and asked what I could buy her to show my gratitude. She said she had everything she needed. I tried writing a poem, because Brigitta rhymes with sweeter, but after that I could only find neater and eat her, so I sort of gave up, and in any case I thought she'd probably been given poems like that before.

Margaret was to look after me next. She looked more serious than Brigitta, all smart suits and not a hair out of place – the sort of person who's a finalist in those Businesswomen of the Year competitions. I was a bit scared of her – I certainly couldn't imagine myself suggesting sex like I did to Brigitta – and I half expected her to disapprove of the way of life I'd been leading. But she didn't, of course. No, she just said that she assumed I was pretty familiar by now with the amenities, and that she would be there if I needed more than mere practical assistance.

'Tell me something,' I asked her on our first meeting. 'It's silly to be worrying about my health, isn't it?'

'Quite unnecessary.'

'And it's silly to worry about money?'

'Quite unnecessary,' she replied.

Something in her tone implied that if I cared to look, I could probably find things that were worth worrying about; I didn't pursue this. I had plenty of time ahead of me. Time was something I would never be short of.

Now, I'm probably not the quickest thinker in the world, and in my previous life I tended to just get on with the things I had to do, or wanted to do, and not brood too much about them. That's normal, isn't it? But give anyone enough time and they'll get somewhere with their thoughts and start asking a few of the bigger questions. For instance, who actually ran this place, and why had I seen so little of them? I'd assumed there might be a sort of entrance examination, or perhaps continual assessment; yet apart from that frankly rather disappointing bit of judging by the old codger who said I was OK, I hadn't been bothered. They let me bunk off every day and improve my golf. Was I allowed to take everything for granted? Did they expect something from me?

Then there was that Hitler business. You waited behind a bush and he strolled past, a stocky figure in a nasty uniform with a false smile on his face. Fair enough, I'd seen him now, and my curiosity was satisfied, but, well, I had to ask myself, what was he doing here in the first place? Did he order breakfast like everybody else? I'd already observed that he was allowed to wear his own clothes. Did this mean he could also play golf and have sex if he wanted to? How did this thing operate?

Then there was me worrying about my health and money and the supermarket driving. I wasn't worrying about them in themselves any more, I was worrying about the fact that I'd been

worrying. What was all that about? Was it more than a routine adjustment problem as Brigitta had suggested?

I think it was the golf that finally made me turn to Margaret for some explanations. There was no doubt about it, over the months and years I played that lovely, lush course with its little tricks and temptations (how many times I put the ball in the water at the short eleventh!), my game improved no end. I said as much one day to Severiano, my regular caddy: 'My game has improved no end.' He agreed, and it was not until later, between dinner and sex, that I began to reflect on what I'd said. I had opened up on the course with a 67, and gradually my score was coming down. A while ago I was shooting a regular 59, and now, under cloudless skies, I was inching down to the low 50s. I could drive 350 yards without trouble, my pitching was transformed, my putts rattled into the hole as if drawn by a magnet. I could see my target score coming down through the 40s, then – a key psychological moment this – breaking the barrier of 36, that's to say two strokes a hole average, then coming down through the 20s. *My game has improved no end*, I thought, and repeated the words *no end* to myself. But that's, of course, exactly what it couldn't do: there had to be an end to my improvement. One day I would play a round of golf in 18 shots, I'd buy Severiano a couple of drinks, celebrate later with sturgeon and chips and sex – and then what? Had anyone, even here, ever played a golf course in 17 shots?

Margaret didn't answer a tasselled bell-pull like the blonde Brigitta; in fact, you had to apply by videophone for an interview.

'I'm worried about the golf,' I began.

'That's not really my speciality.'

'No. You see, when I first arrived I shot a 67. Now I'm down to the low 50s.'

'That doesn't sound like a problem.'

'And I'm going to go on getting better.'

'Congratulations.'

'And then one day I'll finally do the course in 18 shots.'

'Your ambition is admirable.' She sounded as if she was making fun of me.

'But then what do I do?'

She paused. 'Try going round every time in 18 shots?'

'It doesn't work like that.'

'Why not?'

'It just doesn't.'

'I'm sure there are many other courses ...'

'Same problem,' I said, interrupting her, a bit rudely I suppose.

'Well, you could switch to another sport, couldn't you? Then come back to golf when you're tired of the other one?'

'But the problem's the same. I'd have done the course in 18 shots. Golf would be used up.'

'There are lots of other sports.'

'They'd get used up too.'

'What do you have for breakfast every morning?' I'm sure she knew the answer already from the way she nodded when I told her. 'You see. You have the same every morning. You don't get tired of breakfast.'

'No.'

'Well, think about golf as you do about breakfast. Perhaps you'll never get tired of going round in 18 shots.'

'Perhaps,' I said dubiously. 'It sounds to me as if you haven't ever played golf. And anyway, that's another thing.'

'What is?'

'The getting tired. You don't get tired here.'

'Is that a complaint?'

'I don't know.'

'Tiredness can be arranged.'

'Sure,' I replied. 'But I bet it'd be a sort of pleasant tiredness. Not one of those knackered tirednesses which just make you want to die.'

'Don't you think you're being perverse?' She was crisp, almost impatient. 'What did you want? What did you hope for?'

I nodded to myself, and we called it a day. My life continued. That was another phrase that made me grin a bit. My life continued, and my golf improved no end. I did all sorts of other

things:

- I went on several cruises;
- I learned canoeing, mountaineering, ballooning;
- I got into all sorts of danger and escaped;
- I explored the jungle;
- I watched a court case (didn't agree with the verdict);
- I tried being a painter (not as bad as I thought!) and a surgeon;
- I fell in love, of course, lots of times;
- I pretended I was the last person on earth (and the first).

None of this meant that I stopped doing what I'd always done since I got here. I had sex with an increasing number of women, sometimes simultaneously; I ate rarer and stranger foods; I met famous people all the way to the edges of my memory. For instance, I met every footballer there ever was. I started with the famous ones, then the ones I admired but weren't particularly famous, then the average ones, then the ones whose names I remembered without remembering what they looked like or played like; finally I asked for the only ones I hadn't met, the nasty, boring, violent players that I didn't admire at all. I didn't enjoy meeting them – they were just as nasty, boring and violent off the pitch as on – but I didn't want to run out of footballers. Then I ran out of footballers. I asked to see Margaret again.

'I've met all the footballers,' I said.

'I'm afraid I don't know much about football, either.'

'And I don't have any dreams,' I added, in a tone of complaint.

'What would they be for,' she replied. 'What *would* they be for?'

I sensed that in a way she was testing me, seeing how serious I was. Did it all add up to more than a mere adjustment problem?

'I think I'm owed an explanation,' I announced – a little pompously, I have to admit.

'Ask anything you like.' She settled back in her office chair.

'Look, I want to get things straight.'

'An admirable ambition.' She talked a bit posh, like that.

I thought I'd better start at the beginning. 'Look, this is Heaven, isn't it?'

'Oh yes.'

'Well, what about Sundays?'

'I don't follow you.'

On Sundays,' I said, 'as far as I can work out, because I don't follow the days too closely any more, I play golf, go shopping, eat dinner, have sex and don't feel bad.'

'Isn't that ... perfect?'

'I don't want to sound ungrateful,' I said cautiously, 'but where's God?'

'God. Do you want God? Is that what you want?'

'Is it a question of what I want?'

'That's exactly what it's a question of. Do you want God?'

'I suppose I thought it wasn't that way round. I suppose I thought either there would be one or there wouldn't be one. I'd find out what the case was. I didn't think it depended on me in any way.'

'Of course it does.'

'Oh.'

'Heaven is democratic these days,' she said. Then added, 'Or at least, it is if you want it to be.'

'What do you mean, democratic?'

'We don't impose Heaven on people any more,' she said. 'We listen to their needs. If they want it, they can have it; if not, not. And then of course they get the sort of Heaven they want.'

'And what sort do they want on the whole?'

'Well, they want a continuation of life, that's what we find. But ... better, needless to say.'

'Sex, golf, shopping, dinner, meeting famous people and not feeling bad?' I asked, a bit defensively.

'It varies. But if I were being honest, I'd say that it doesn't vary all that much.'

'Not like the old days.'

'Ah, the old days.' She smiled. 'That was before my time, of course, but yes, dreams of Heaven used to be a lot more ambitious.'

'And Hell?' I asked.

'What about it?'

'Is there Hell?'

'Oh no,' she replied. 'That was just necessary propaganda.'

'I was wondering, you see. Because I met Hitler.'

'Lots of people do. He's a sort of ... tourist site, really. What did you make of him?'

'Oh, I didn't *meet* him,' I said firmly. 'He's a man I wouldn't shake the hand of. I watched him go by from behind the bushes.'

'Ah, yes. Quite a lot of people prefer to do it that way.'

'So I thought, if he's here, there can't be Hell.'

'A reasonable deduction.'

'Just out of interest,' I said, 'what does *he* do all day?' I imagined him going to the 1936 Berlin Olympics every afternoon, watching the Germans win everything while Jesse Owens fell over, then back for some sauerkraut, Wagner and a romp with a busty blonde of pure Aryan blood.

'I'm afraid we do respect people's confidentiality.'

'Naturally.' That was right. I wouldn't want everyone knowing what I got up to, come to think of it.

'So there isn't any Hell?'

'Well, there's something we *call* Hell. But it's more like a theme park. You know, skeletons popping out and frightening you, branches in your face, stink bombs, that sort of thing. Just to give you a good scare.'

'A good scare,' I remarked, 'as opposed to a bad scare?'

'Exactly. We find that's all people want nowadays.'

'Do you know about Heaven in the old days?'

'What, Old Heaven? Yes, we know about Old Heaven. It's in the records.'

'What happened to it?'

'Oh, it sort of closed down. People didn't want it any more. People didn't need it any more.'

'But I knew a few people who went to church, had their babies christened, didn't use rude words. What about them?'

'Oh, we get those,' she said. 'They're catered for. They pray and give thanks rather as you play golf and have sex. They seem to enjoy themselves, to have got what they wanted. We've built them some very nice churches.'

'Does God exist for them?' I asked.

'Oh, surely.'

'But not for me?'

'It doesn't seem so. Unless you want to change your requirements of Heaven. I can't deal with that myself. I could refer you.'

'I've probably got enough to think about for the moment.'

'Fine. Well, until the next time.'

I slept badly that night. My mind wasn't on the sex, even though they all did their very best. Was it indigestion? Had I bolted my sturgeon? There I was, worrying about my health again.

The next morning I shot a 67 on the golf course. My caddy Severiano reacted as if it was the best round he'd seen me play, as if he didn't know I could do 20 shots better. Afterwards, I asked for certain directions, and drove towards the only visible patch of bad weather. As I'd expected, Hell was a great disappointment: the thunderstorm in the car-park was probably the best bit. There were out-of-work actors prodding other out-of-work actors with long forks, pushing them into vats labelled 'Boiling Oil'. Phoney animals with strap-on plastic beaks pecked at foam-rubber corpses. I saw Hitler riding on the Ghost Train with his arm round a Mädchen with pigtails. There were bats and creaking coffin lids and a smell of rotting floorboards. Is that what people wanted?

Tell me about Old Heaven,' I said to Margaret the following week.

'It was much like your accounts of it. I mean, that's the principle of Heaven, that you get what you want, what you expect. I know some people imagine it's different, that you get what you deserve, but that's never been the case. We have to disabuse them.'

'Are they annoyed?'

'Mostly not. People prefer to get what they want rather than what they deserve. Though some of them did get a little irritated that others weren't sufficiently maltreated. Part of their expectation of Heaven seemed to be that other people would go to Hell. Not very Christian.'

'And were they ... disembodied? Was it all spirit life and so on?'

‘Yes indeed. That’s what they wanted. Or at any rate, in certain epochs. There has been a lot of fluctuation over the centuries about decorporealization. At the moment, for instance, there’s quite an emphasis on retaining your own body and your own personality. This may just prove a phase, like any other.’

‘What are you smiling for?’ I asked. I was rather surprised. I thought Margaret was there just to give information, like Brigitta. Yet she obviously had her own opinions, and didn’t mind telling you them.

‘Only because it sometimes seems odd how tenaciously people want to stick with their own bodies. Of course, they occasionally ask for minor surgery. But it’s as if, say, a different nose or a tuck in the cheek or a handful of silicone is all that stands between them and their perfect idea of themselves.’

‘What happened to Old Heaven?’

‘Oh, it survived for a while, after the new Heavens were built. But there was increasingly little call for it. People seemed keener on the new Heavens. It wasn’t all that surprising. We take the long view here.’

‘What happened to the Old Heavens?’

Margaret shrugged, rather complacently, like some corporate planner whose predictions had been borne out to the tiniest decimal point. ‘They died off.’

‘Just like that? You mean, you closed down their Heaven and so they died off?’

‘No, not at all, on the contrary. That’s not how it works. Constitutionally, there would have been an Old Heaven for as long as the Old Heavens wanted it.’

‘Are there any Old Heavens around?’

‘I think there are a few left.’

‘Can I meet one?’

‘They don’t take visits, I’m afraid. They used to. But the New Heavens tended to behave as if they were at a freak-show, kept pointing and asking silly questions. So the Old Heavens declined to meet them any more. They gave up speaking to anyone but other Old Heavens. Then they began to die off. Now there aren’t many left. We have them tagged, of course.’

‘Are they disembodied?’

‘Some of them are, some of them aren’t. It depends on the sect. Of course the ones that are disembodied don’t have much trouble avoiding the New Heavens.’

Well, that made sense. In fact, it all made sense except for the main thing. ‘And what do you mean, the others died off?’

‘Everyone has the option to die off if they want to.’

‘I never knew that.’

‘No. There are bound to be a few surprises. Did you really want to be able to predict it all?’

‘And how do they die? Do they kill themselves? Do you kill them?’

Margaret looked a bit shocked at the crassness of my idea. ‘Goodness, no. As I said, it’s democratic nowadays. If you want to die off, you do. You just have to want to for long enough and that’s it, it happens. Death isn’t a matter of hazard or gloomy inevitability, the way it is the first time round. We’ve got free will sorted out here, as you may have noticed.’

I wasn’t sure I was taking all this in. I’d have to go away and think about it. ‘Tell me,’ I said, ‘these problems I’ve been having with the golf and the worrying. Do other people react like that?’

‘Oh yes. We often get people asking for bad weather, for instance, or for something to go wrong. They miss things going wrong. Some of them ask for pain.’

‘For pain?’

‘Certainly. Well, you were complaining the other day about not feeling so tired that – as I think you put it – you just want to die. I thought that was an interesting phrase. People ask for pain, it’s not so extraordinary. We’ve had them requesting operations, as well. I mean, not just cosmetic ones, real ones.’

‘Do they get them?’

‘Only if they really insist. We try to suggest that wanting an operation is really a sign of something else. Normally they agree with us.’

‘And what percentage of people take up the option to die off?’

She looked at me levelly, her glance telling me to be calm. ‘Oh, a hundred per cent, of course. Over many thousands of years, calculated by old time, of course. But yes, everyone takes the option, sooner or later.’

‘So it’s just like the first time round? You always die in the end?’

'Yes, except don't forget the quality of life here is much better. People die when they decide they've had enough, not before. The second time round it's altogether more satisfying because it's willed.' She paused, then added, 'As I say, we cater for what people want.'

I hadn't been blaming her. I'm not that sort. I just wanted to find out how the system worked. 'So ... even people, religious people, who come here to worship God throughout eternity ... they end up throwing in the towel after a few years, hundred years, thousand years?'

'Certainly. As I said, there are still a few Old Heaveners around, but their numbers are diminishing all the time.'

'And who asks for death soonest?'

'I think *ask* is the wrong word. It's something you want. There aren't any mistakes here. If you want it enough, you die, that's always been the ruling principle.'

'So?'

'So. Well, I'm afraid – to answer your question – that the people who ask for death earliest are a bit like you. People who want an eternity of sex, beer, drugs, fast cars – that sort of thing. They can't believe their good luck at first, and then, a few hundred years later, they can't believe their bad luck. That's the sort of people they are, they realize. They're stuck with being themselves. Millennium after millennium of being themselves. They tend to die off soonest.'

'I never take drugs,' I said firmly. I was rather miffed. 'And I've only got seven cars. That's not very many around here. And I don't even drive them fast.'

'No, of course not. I was just thinking in general categories of gratification, you understand.'

'And who lasts longest?'

'Well, some of those Old Heaveners were fairly tenacious customers. Worship kept them going for ages and ages. Nowadays ... lawyers last quite well. They love going over their old cases, and then going over everybody else's. That can take for ever. Metaphorically speaking,' she added quickly. 'And scholarly people, they tend to last as long as anyone. They like sitting around reading all the books there are. And then they love arguing about them. Some of those arguments' – she cast an eye to the heavens – 'go on for millennium after millennium. It just seems to keep them young, for some reason, arguing about books.'

'What about the people who write the books?'

'Oh, they don't last half as long as the people who argue about them. It's the same with painters and composers. They somehow know when they've done their best work, and then they sort of fade away.'

I thought I should be feeling depressed, but I wasn't. 'Shouldn't I be feeling depressed?'

'Of course not. You're here to enjoy yourself. You've got what you wanted.'

'Yes, I suppose so. Maybe I can't get used to the idea that at some point I'll want to die.'

'Give it time,' she said, brisk but friendly. 'Give it time.'

'By the way, one last question.' I could see her fiddling with her pencils, straightening them into a row. 'Who exactly are you?'

'Us? Oh, we're remarkably like you. We could be you, in fact. Perhaps we are you.'

'I'll come back again if I may,' I said.

For the next few centuries – it may have been longer, I stopped counting in old time – I worked seriously on my golf. After a while I was going round in 18 shots every time and my caddy's astonishment became routine. I gave up golf and took up tennis. Pretty soon I'd beaten all the greats from the Hall of Fame on shale, clay, grass, wood, concrete, carpet – any surface they chose. I gave up tennis. I played for Leicester City in the Cup Final and came away with a winner's medal (my third goal, a power header from twelve yards out, clinched the match). I flattened Rocky Marciano in the fourth round at Madison Square Garden (and I carried him a bit the last round or two), got the marathon record down to 28 minutes, won the world darts; my innings of 750 runs in the one-day international against Australia at Lords won't be surpassed for some time. After a while, Olympic gold medals began to feel like small change. I gave up sport.

I went shopping seriously. I ate more creatures than had ever sailed on Noah's Ark. I drank every beer in the world and then some, became a wine connoisseur and despatched the finest vintages ever harvested; they ran out too soon. I met loads of famous people. I had sex with an increasing variety of partners in an increasing variety of ways, but there are only so many partners and so many ways. Don't get me wrong, incidentally: I'm not complaining. I enjoyed every bloody minute of it. All I'm saying is, I knew what I was doing while I was doing it. I was looking for a way out.

I tried combining pleasures and started having sex with famous people (no, I won't tell you who

– they asked me to respect their privacy). I even took up reading. I remembered what Margaret said and tried – oh, for a few centuries or so – arguing about books with other people who’d read the same books. But it seemed a pretty arid life, at least compared to life itself, and not one worth prolonging. I even tried joining the people who sang and prayed in church, but that wasn’t really my thing. I only did it because I wanted to cover all the angles before I had what I knew would be my final talk with Margaret. She looked much as she had done several millennia earlier when we’d first met; but then, so did I.

‘I’ve had an idea,’ I said. Well, you’re bound to come up with something after all that time, aren’t you? ‘Listen, if you get what you want in Heaven, then what about wanting to be someone who never gets tired of eternity?’ I sat back, feeling a touch smug. To my surprise she nodded, almost encouragingly.

‘You’re welcome to have a go,’ she said. ‘I could get you the transfer.’

‘But ...?’ I asked, knowing that there would be a *but*.

‘I’ll get you the transfer,’ she repeated. ‘It’s just a formality.’

‘Tell me the *but* first.’ I didn’t want to sound rude. On the other hand I didn’t want to spend several millennia pissing about if I could be saved the time.

‘People have tried it already,’ Margaret said, in a clearly sympathetic tone, as if she really didn’t want to hurt me.

‘And what’s the problem? What’s the *but*?’

‘Well, there seems to be a logical difficulty. You can’t become someone else without stopping being who you are. Nobody can bear that. It’s what we find, anyway,’ she added, half implying that I might be the first person to crack this problem. ‘Someone – someone who must have been keen on sports, like you, said that it was changing from being a runner to being a perpetual motion machine. After a while you simply want to run again. Does that make sense?’

I nodded. ‘And everyone who’s tried it has asked for a transfer back?’

‘Yes.’

‘And afterwards they all took the option to die off?’

‘They did. And sooner rather than later. There might still be a few of them around. I could call them in if you want to ask them about it.’

‘I’ll take your word for it. I thought there must be a snag in my idea.’

‘Sorry.’

‘No, please don’t apologize.’ I certainly couldn’t complain about the way I’d been treated. Everyone had been level with me from the start. I took a deep breath. ‘It seems to me,’ I went on, ‘that Heaven’s a very good idea, it’s a perfect idea you could say, but not for us. Not given the way we are.’

‘We don’t like to influence conclusions,’ she said. ‘However, I can certainly see your point of view.’

‘So what’s it all for? Why do we have Heaven? Why do we have these dreams of Heaven?’ She didn’t seem willing to answer, perhaps she was being professional; but I pressed her. ‘Go on, give me some ideas.’

‘Perhaps because you need them,’ she suggested. ‘Because you can’t get by without the dream. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. It seems quite normal to me. Though I suppose if you knew about Heaven beforehand, you might not ask for it.’

‘Oh, I don’t know about that.’ It had all been very pleasant: the shopping, the golf, the sex, the meeting famous people, the not feeling bad, the not being dead.

‘After a while, getting what you want all the time is very close to not getting what you want all the time.’

The next day, for old times’ sake, I played another round of golf. I wasn’t at all rusty: eighteen holes, eighteen strokes. I hadn’t lost my touch. Then I had breakfast for lunch and breakfast for dinner. I watched my video of Leicester City’s 5-4 victory in the Cup Final, though it wasn’t the same, knowing what happened. I had a cup of hot chocolate with Brigitta, who kindly looked in to see me; later I had sex, though only with one woman. Afterwards, I sighed and rolled over, knowing that the next morning I would begin to make my decision.

I dreamt that I woke up. It’s the oldest dream of all, and I’ve just had it.