

BONDS

I suffer from falling in love syndrome, I can't help it, I wish I could. It gets me into all sorts of trouble. My friends tell me this is no way to live my life and all the so-called *experts* counsel the importance of a long term, mature relationship. Trouble is, I become disinterested once a relationship evolves into familiarity and the humdrum, the point when ennui replaces excitement, whereas as soon as a new one starts, all my passions emerge from the hibernation they began when the previous one went stale. I am addicted to the freshness of a new love affair; that time when you're both still on your best behaviour and trying to impress the other, when you hold your farts in and select your clothes when you get dressed with only one person in mind; that stage when you're still getting to know each other and you want to know everything but everything about them and what has ever happened to them; that time when you're still getting to find out about each other's bodies and what each of you likes; that time when no sooner have you been together than you're back on the phone to each other, when, as Cole Porter explains, every parting seems like an act of defiance against those divine forces that brought you together and every reunion leaves you awkwardly muttering and stuttering with delight; that stage when the future together is to be a fairytale happy ever after, rather than entrapment in a dull and mediocre relationship.

Most of my contemporaries are in unsatisfactory relationships which are slowly gnawing away at their souls, but they tell me I'm in the wrong for gallivanting around like 'a latter day Don Juan' or 'an ageing rock star'. That's how they describe me, all the time extolling the virtues of a loving and sustaining relationship, although when I ask them to expand on these benefits, highly articulate men become incoherent. I gather it has something to do with duty and responsibility and suppressing your emotions and desires for the greater good of??? (they can't really say).

For example, I recently went out to a new restaurant on Kingsway with Dave, my elder brother. We both studied law at UCL and annoyingly we both look alike and have similar voices. When we're together people instantly know we're brothers. I even see him moving his arms to emphasise a point he's making in exactly the way I do and I've noticed that everything that's happened to his face will later on appear on mine, be it unwanted wrinkles, hairs in the wrong places or a slow receding of the hair line. So to have him in front of me is to be looking at a mirror about eight years from now (he's seven years and nine months my elder). But we have very different temperaments

and views and although we both went into law, we've gone in very different directions: I work as a solicitor specialising in human rights while Dave is a district judge and very right wing. Kinship is almost as great a mystery as love, because we still meet up from time to time and enjoy each other's company, even though we now have so little in common and he constantly gives me a hard time and not only for my love life: he never misses an opportunity to poke fun at my political views.

Although he loves to tease me about my high ideals, I don't think he's as cynical as he pretends to be; this is all part of our dynamic: I'm the incurable romantic who won't grow up and forever chasing after women and causes, whereas he adopts the role of an elderly buffoon, who no longer harbours any illusions about human goodness. I sometimes have the impression that this isn't a front and rather fear he means some of the almost unforgivable things he says to provoke me, be it about my work for Amnesty International or my latest love affair.

'What you call love,' he told me once 'is simply an acculturation of lust.' Naturally, he claimed that what he experienced with Caroline was something far more substantial in some way. I never dared come out with it to his face, but I used to feel he was let out on licence by her and, although he had claimed to have achieved some higher state of marital bliss, I wasn't surprised when they separated. But he didn't find anyone else and became very morose and bitter, before moving back in with Caroline again, which seemed to make him even more miserable. Being in a dead relationship slowly took the spark out of him, I'm sure of it.

Dave used to say things about women that just weren't funny, although I have to admit he could be equally scathing about men. However, there were times when he was amusing, turning events at court into entertaining anecdotes and making outrageous, right-wing pronouncements that I laughed at despite myself, although if I ever tried to repeat what he said, it would only sound offensive. For example:

'I'm not in favour of the death penalty for murder,' he exclaimed, 'because it is no deterrent. It's a fact.' He paused for effect, with the skill of somebody who has spent his career speaking in public. 'But I am in favour of bringing it back for crimes where it would deter,' he continued, 'such as avoiding paying your fare on the railways, or for football hooligans. Automatic gallows for any of them found guilty.'

'I suppose you'd like to sentence thieves to have their hands cut off,' I said, playing the role he expected me to.

'No, not thieves, but so-called graffiti artists. Both hands removed. Then they'd never spray again.' He filled up our glasses, called the waiter and asked for another bottle of the very vivid Australian Chardonnay. This is our usual banter, but when I proceed to share the problems I might be having with my love life, he does give me a hearing.

However, on this occasion I needed to talk about work, because the latest case was constantly on my mind and troubling me. A few days before I had become engrossed in a complicated business, representing Idris Balam, an asylum seeker, who had been discovered at Felixstowe amongst a lorry load of live pigs. This had attracted some press attention and there was an assumption that here was one more 'economic migrant' who should be deported forthwith, especially since he claimed he had paid a king's ransom, in his terms, for the clandestine journey to these shores. There is an erroneous assumption made by the media, politicians and authorities that to be a bone fide asylum seeker you wouldn't have paid to be smuggled here, whereas I always think people will be more likely to pay to save their skins.

'You would say that,' interjected Dave, 'because you don't want to admit that nearly all of these types are bogus.' He took a pinch of snuff and breathed it into his nostril, the thick hairs of which were stained by his habit. When he'd been a student, his use of stuff had made him appear bohemian and unconventional, whereas now, I thought, it simply made him seem reactionary and unpleasant.

'Dave,' I replied wearily, 'you know it isn't that simple.' Nor was this case. Luckily my client had told the authorities very little but when I visited him at the Beehive I could tell he was genuinely scared. After many years you really can suss out those who are frightened for their lives from the rest, even if you don't know whether their fear is justified by facts and I was certain I was talking to a very worried man as he muttered softly through a dark moustache, his eyes darting all round the room and he told me he feared for his skin but refused to elaborate. It had taken endless patience and talking around the topic and explaining that I was somebody he could trust, I was representing him and could only do this if I knew the facts before he disclosed that he had worked for a gang involved in smuggling migrants to countries of the European Union.

At this point in telling the story Dave chipped in.

'One of those Mafia types. Point proven. You're wasting your time representing this kind of scum. Why do you become so attached to people like that?'

'I don't,' I protested, 'I support human rights, not human wrongs. I don't like the chap at all. Immediately he confessed, I told him what I thought of him and that I understood very well why he hadn't wanted to tell me, but then I quickly composed myself and asked Hakam, who was translating, kindly not to tell him what I'd just said. No. My immediate instinct was to abandon the man to his fate, turn him in, because I have nothing but contempt for those gangsters who trade in human misery. I've had to deal with the consequences all too often, listening to the stories told by naive, exploited, frightened people having their dreams and desires so brutally exploited by these types.'

Dave appeared rather taken aback by this and listened attentively as I continued to the story. I explained to him how after I had returned to work mode and continued to do my professional duty and put my lack of empathy for him to one side, I had been intrigued by what he'd told me. It seemed he'd gone round villages acting as a kind of salesman, finding people who wanted to make the journey, helped to dispatch them and then returned to collect the money from their families, which was often paid by instalments. It appeared he had quite a lavish lifestyle from this and I must say I found myself hating the man even more. I imagined him going to desperately poor families, promising them paradise in the West, all smiles and smarm and then returning for payment, all snarls and threats.

But then something had gone wrong, because a group of thirty-seven had left from one village and were all discovered at the Austrian border and within weeks sent back home. Trouble was, he had trusted them to pay him, he explained through Hakam, he had believed their families would pay and arranged the shipment without even receiving a down payment, but with all of them returned back home they refused and when he entered the village, he'd immediately been threatened and had to make a very hasty retreat. Meanwhile the gang he worked with kept demanding the money from him. Even if he'd sold everything he had he could never have raised such a sum and he found himself in the middle, being threatened by both sides: the villagers upset about the horrendous, futile journey, his associates demanding payment.

All the time he spoke, his head had been bowed. He told how he tried to raise money by slipping two extra bodies on the next shipment. This subterfuge had been discovered and he had been visited by his cousin, who had stuck a gun in his mouth and told him to get the money, or else. He was convinced his life was in danger and I had felt a complete idiot as soon as I

asked him why he didn't go to the police in his country. The answer was obvious. On the other hand, the more details he gave me of his activities and associates, of his dealings with individuals in various European countries, the more I realised Idris had information that the UK authorities would be able to make use of. I explained to him that it was legitimate to apply for asylum if his life was in danger from a criminal gang, but the ruling might go against him if they decided he was a criminal himself, whereupon he began to cry.

'Sshhh,' I had tried to quieten him, because this news had caused him to place his hands over his face and sob like a baby. 'It's all right, you'll be all right, do you understand?' He had looked up at Hakam and then me through his fingers. 'You have information that would be very useful to the authorities. So useful, that I am sure they'll do a deal, allow you in and protect you, if you're prepared to tell them everything they need to know, all you've told me and a lot more. You can take my word for it. You'll be all right.' This did the trick, his face brightened; he shook my hand and smiled. His fingers were wet: from his tears, I presumed. I wiped my hands on my trousers and smiled back.

I was sure what I told him was right, after all here was someone who could blow the whistle on what appeared to be a major gang, but my confidential chat with Geoffrey Edwards of the UK Border Agency was a complete disaster. He had started by telling in detail about how he had recently returned to work after fracturing his wrist and he kept moving his fingers around, which the physiotherapist had told him he had to keep doing, but it began to get on my nerves, this non-stop clenching his fist and opening his fingers. Moreover, we just didn't seem to be understanding each other as I'd anticipated. He was delighted that I had informed him my client was a criminal, who could therefore be dispatched forthwith. In vain did I plea the potential usefulness of his information. We had an argument about what is genuine and what is bogus and he betrayed his bias by making the outrageous claim that asylum seekers never commit to this country, they merely take from it all they can.

'Quite right too,' said Dave.

'Yes, I know what you think, but luckily you don't work for the Border Agency. The meeting ended very badly, I lost my temper rather and slammed the door, which I immediately regretted, but I profoundly disagreed with him and I'd given my word to Idris and now it wasn't working out as I had anticipated.'

'That man Edwards is a fool,' said Dave, 'it is surely incumbent on him to explore the truth or otherwise of what your gangster claims.'

'Thank God you agree, I was beginning to doubt myself,' I explained, 'I've been really desperate. I phoned all sorts of contacts and acquaintances I know explaining the story. Some of them listened attentively, but nobody has offered any constructive suggestions.'

'Why didn't you ask me?' asked Dave.

'You? It's not your area. What could you do? Do you think you can help?' He smiled.

'I can't, but I know someone who can.'

'Who's that?'

'Gordon Bennett.' He laughed as he said it, but I found it irritating.

'Oh, fuck off,' I said, 'I thought you were being serious.'

'I am, I am, that's his name. An old pal. He works at the Home Office. He'll know what to do. I'll have a word and get him to contact you.'

I thanked him and after that the conversation reverted to my love life, which was also complicated, as it involved three women, rather than the usual one. As always, Dave viewed this revelation from only one point of view.

'How do you manage to bed so many women?' he enquired. He's always asking me that question and I always reply in the same way, which is that I'm not trying to. He never understands, but it's true nonetheless, because I'm looking to fall in love and one consequence is that I make love. In my experience men go out in pursuit of sex, sex, sex and often get nothing unless they are willing to hire a sex worker, which I find grotesque, whereas I go out looking for love and end up with the sex as a part of the package. Dave, who once again claimed to have one of these higher level, long term, intimate marriages as opposed to my allegedly immature, superficial dalliances, proposed after the meal that we go to some sort of lurid sex club he knew called Good Vibrations. I declined and we went our separate ways.

Not that I minded leaving; in fact I was happy to, as I had to get up early next morning to go to Heathrow to meet Mónica, whom I'd met at the IRWA Human Rights Conference in Cairo last year where we'd fallen madly, absurdly in love. I'm rather ashamed to admit I skipped most of the conference as we behaved like a couple on a honeymoon, visiting the tourist sites and so besotted we couldn't keep our hands off each other for any length of time. In fact time was always there in the background, ticking away, bringing our inevitable departure closer. Sometimes time can be very healing,

sometimes corrosive and sometimes so cruel, especially in the way it accelerates just when you need it to slow down, but the hours we had together were passing and we barely slept. That amazing rush of adrenaline falling in love gives you keeping us awake, so that in the middle of the night there we were climbing the outside of one of the deserted pyramids, which is actually a giant staircase, Mónica's hand in mine, Cairo set out below us while in the other direction just the blackness of the Sahara. I was thinking then that the latter represented my future without Mónica.

'Perry,' she said over and over to me, 'we belong together' or another refrain: 'I've spent all my life waiting to meet you.' Yes, I'm aware that these aren't original, but when you're madly in love you speak in clichés, you think in clichés and what to those in a normal state might sound like sentimental nonsense right then pulled at my soul. There are no original ways to write about love: you start and realise it's a path worn down so much you cannot deviate from it. But whereas the style might be banal the message can seem monumentally meaningful. When you're in love living makes sense as it did for us atop the pyramid with the thousands of years of history beneath our feet, or the billions of years of light from twinkling stars above and with us in the middle and everything, but everything then as it should be. As we embraced, I had the impression we merged with some sort of continuum, perhaps even time wasn't ticking. However the cold intervened and we climbed down. At the bottom a policeman appeared from nowhere and tried to arrest us for illegally going up a pyramid, but Mónica appeased him with her charm and some bank notes, which more than did the trick as he even drove us (at incredible speed) back to the hotel where we slept for a while, before making love again.

When the conference ended I postponed our parting by flying with her till Madrid and we spent a few fraught hours there, before her flight for Rio de Janeiro left. At that moment I was both sad and filled with excitement. I loved every pore of her skin, every cell of her body. It felt as if all our cells had connected and now we were tearing them apart.

On the plane to London I was reflecting that love is exactly like a drug, which means in a day, a week we need more and more. However seeing Maggie amongst all the bustle and taxi drivers and chauffeurs at the arrivals point at Heathrow didn't give me the fix I craved, even though I'd been quite in love with her when I'd left. Of course what had just taken place with Mónica had a lot to do with it, but a greater factor might have been the ridiculous golden hat Maggie was wearing and as soon as I saw it I knew that my love for

her was finishing. If I'd loved her I'd have found her choice of singularly unsuitable and unbecoming headgear endearing, a part of me would have wanted to reach out and protect someone so unworldly as to put such a thing on their head and go out in public. But no. I was filled with disgust, contempt and even self-loathing because there I was kissing such a person on the mouth, putting my arms around her and giving her an embrace. Even so she sensed my reaction, without knowing its cause and the tension mounted between us, like unseen changes in the air that tell us the weather is changing: nothing that would be recorded on the airport's security cameras, which would show us holding hands as normal, nothing that would be revealed through a content analysis of a transcript of our conversation, but behind these actions I think we both knew something had changed between us.

Not that she seemed to suspect a thing about Mónica. Before we had landed, I'd wiped myself as thoroughly as possible with the perfumed moist, disposable cloth that came with the meal in order to try to hide Mónica's scent, this done with great reluctance and as we headed towards the car park I'd begun to elaborate on my story about the flight being overbooked and having to return via Madrid: to me it sounded quite preposterous but Maggie didn't register any scepticism or suspicion. I've had lovers who were suspicious every time I popped out to buy a carton of milk thinking I was also having a secret rendezvous with another lover and others who were always trusting and never appeared to have considered for a second that I might be attracted to anyone but them and Maggie was definitely the latter sort, thank God.

I reckon Dave's wife Caroline is like that. After they married she used to gate crash our occasional dinners; it was awkward having her there, especially for Dave, I always thought. He behaved quite differently, with Caroline sitting there treating her husband as if he were a pedigree dog entered into competition and the conversation at table all about such stimulating topics as school fees and suburban gardens.

The timing of Mónica's visit wasn't good, even though I was pleased to see her. In the intervening months we'd been exchanging e-mails and having long telephone conversations and often discussed meeting up together. But it so happened that I'd recently fallen madly in love with a woman called Mirgül, oh my God, I was absolutely besotted; it was distracting me from my work, which has never happened to me before. As a rule, I put work and love in different boxes and don't believe one's private life should impinge on one's

professional activities and vice versa and although I'm very passionate about my work, I tend to keep a level head most of the time, whereas in my private life my head permits my passions to be boss. However, I was beginning not to live up to my own ideals, partly because of the exceptional circumstances of both facets of my life.

In the case of my love life, I'd been unable to break with Maggie, even though I considered the affair was long beyond its sell-by date. I kept puzzling why this was and what it was that was holding me back. In part, I instinctively knew that she would take it very badly and the longer I continued to see her, the worse I felt my ending it would be, so I didn't; on the contrary, I indulged her in her illusion that we were a loving couple, until I had gone beyond the point of no return. It was strange, but the more I tried to slide out of the relationship, the deeper I seemed to be sliding into it. She interpreted my preferring to read a book, rather than continue talking with her, as a sign of how comfortable we were together. That's what she told me, that she felt we were comfortable together and no longer had to conceal any facet of ourselves from the other. Little did she know all the thoughts that passed through my head. Little did she suspect that every time I thought about it rationally, I thought it ought to end. She had house-plants all over her flat and a large fish tank in her drawing room and not only do I dislike both, I knew that they presaged her aspiration to a future suburban garden with a pretentious pond, perhaps with some ghastly fountain dribbling interminably.

Yet, I have to admit that we clicked in some ways I didn't understand. Not quite to the extent she seemed to imagine, for she told me over and over that she knew she'd found her Mr. Right, how, unlike other men in her life, I listened to her, how I knew how to make her feel loved and how much she enjoyed returning the love to me. But that wasn't the only reason. There was, let's admit it, something appealing and rather humbling about the unconditional love she gave me merely for being in her presence. Well not even in her presence, just somewhere in her flat, reading my book, while she would be in her bedroom practising yoga. I had long ago ceased being besotted with her and making love had become so routine I virtually did it on auto-pilot, but there was still something else I couldn't pin down, something elusive, yet alluring, that was causing me to return to her. Was I perhaps, for the first time in my life, passing through that mysterious door from passion to the kind of sustaining, long-term relationship other had talked about?

Well not any longer, because in recent days I had been spending most of my spare time with Mirgül instead, or I had been till Mónica arrived.

Mirgül. My oh my, I'd never known anyone like her. Mirgül in brightly coloured, slinky dresses, balancing on absurdly high heels, Mirgül, who said matter-of-factly: 'I know how to give you pleasure,' and gave me so much, I had to keep going back for more and more.

But my professional duties were also demanding my time. I hadn't known Mirgül for more than a week or so when Dave's friend, Gordon Bennett, had got in touch and things on that front really got moving. All of a sudden I was meeting all sorts of anonymous men (almost always men) in and out of various uniforms. I was encountering a segment of the British administration for the first time, the part that deals in secrets and has been so often fictionalised. It's strange to encounter the real thing, rather like entering a film set.

I attended their first interview with Idris, which dissipated any initial scepticism on their part. I was phoned afterwards and told that the first tranche of Idris's information was accurate. They were particularly impressed because he was supplying details about links with criminals in London and how transportation was organised. All of a sudden he was very important and taken to a secure, secret location for his own protection and I was kept busy, as I still represented him and attended all the sessions, as did Hakam, who had been engaged to do the translation for 'them' (I never knew precisely who 'they' were). Experience led me to keep a record of each session. But I felt strangely detached from the process, I think because I never really liked Idris.

Time, it is alleged, was invented by God to prevent everything happening at once, but all of a sudden I found it wasn't doing its job. I was still having a relationship with Maggie, even though I knew any lingering passion was in its final stages as demonstrated by the way she would walk round her flat in a horrendous, moth-eaten dressing gown, had stopped wearing make-up when at home and even ceased to close the door when having a pee; all these tell-tale signs that love is being replaced by routine. She was even talking about moving in together, which was the last thing I thought I wanted, although, I do admit that just once or twice when she proposed it, I didn't dismiss the suggestion out of hand: something to do with her ability to create a cosy nest and an instinct she had for popping the question at the right moment for her, wrong moment for me.

When I had a free evening I sometimes came round and she'd cook a meal. I've always been an eating out person, whereas she was definitely an eating at home type and this alone should have rung the alarm bells for me,

because I knew very well that the eating at home types are also the settling down types. However, the alarm bells weren't ringing when they should and I lacked the resolve to stop seeing her.

But these moments of weakness didn't happen often since I was spending so much time with Mirgül. I'd never have considered her my type either, she wore outrageous, vulgar clothes that made her look more like a call girl and she was the kind of woman I wouldn't normally have looked twice at, even though she was extremely beautiful, with jet black hair and a round, Mediterranean face of almost indecent perfection. In fact, unlike other males, I had barely paid any attention to this woman who was sitting opposite me at the plastic table of the crowded hell-hole of an eating place, although she told me later that for her it was love at first sight.

It was at one of those dreadful motorway service stations: crammed full of plastic tat and things that nobody could ever want to buy (but do, I presume), filled with intrusive, inane, pop music and overwhelmed by the smell of tired fat cooking the worst sort of British fare. I'd stopped there for a coffee while driving back after the first meeting with Idris and had almost turned heel and done without a coffee, but in the event discovered something they called 'Diamond Cake', which was doubtless pure junk and full of things you shouldn't eat, but I enjoyed it in a furtive sort of way and ever since, after visiting Idris, I'd stopped for this snack. And so it was that in this unlikely setting fate brought me and Mirgül together and even by my standards this passion erupted abruptly. After only three nights together it seemed I'd known her forever. Despite superficial differences, such as having read very different books and seen different kinds of films, we got along perfectly. We were always tuned into each other's needs and moods, while our lovemaking was miraculous. As she said, our bodies were matched to perfection.

Then back into my life came Mónica, who'd travelled specially to see me and how could I now tell her I had recently fallen in love with somebody else, especially since as soon as I saw her at Heathrow I was under her spell and reliving our time in Cairo? That's love for you: once it has begun it takes on its own momentum and we, who live it out are merely its servants. (Where did I steal that from? Can't remember. It's true though.)

And then Hakam was murdered. Shot in the street, clearly a professional job, a melancholy detective told me. Unlike the other officials I'd been encountering for this business, this officer was dressed in torn jeans and a dirty t-shirt. Of course the connection with Idris was only one line of enquiry, he explained, but it couldn't be discounted. Security was to be

stepped up, only as a precaution, I was to understand. Anonymous men in polyester suits told me not to let Idris know what had happened. I insisted it was his right to be told and we had a bit of an argument, but I acquiesced. In any case they were now seeking another translator and I had no way of talking directly to him. That was on the Wednesday. Although they told me there was a slight possibility my life could be at risk and I should take precautions, such as travelling only by taxi and so on, I was more concerned with the danger that Mirgül might discover I was seeing Mónica, or vice versa.

This had so nearly happened the day before, when I'd told Mirgül I'd needed to catch up on my work and wouldn't be able to see her that evening and was lying on my bed with Mónica, kissing, cuddling and half watching the television when the doorbell rang. I was going to ignore it but Mónica said: 'Why don't you go answer it,' and I went down to discover Mirgül there, in a bright, crimson, slinky dress and matching shoes, earrings and rather oversized designer handbag. She looked ravishing. My stomach lurched and at that moment I thought to myself what an idiot I was, jeopardising my love for her by seeing Mónica, but then it would have been extremely uncourteous not to have seen Mónica, who had come all this way to be with me, although right then I was wishing she hadn't, as I was certain I was about to be caught out. Mirgül gave me a long, slow kiss and told me she had come because she just had to see me, she'd been thinking and thinking about me all day, but she wouldn't stay, she understood that I was busy and so there we were kissing in my study, which luckily still had a light on and was sufficiently untidy to look as if I might have been using it, while one floor above Mónica, whom I'd just been kissing, was in the bedroom. I kept expecting Mónica to appear, or Mirgül to ask me why the television was on upstairs, but she didn't seem to notice.

Then the phone had rung. It was Maggie wanting to see me and saying how much she missed me and how badly I was treating her these days and how she couldn't get on with her life, she was worried, I seemed to be so distant, but she couldn't live without me, all sorts of twaddle like that, she even said that I claimed to be a champion of human rights but never respected hers. I wanted to argue with her and defend myself but since Mirgül was in the next room and within earshot I had to make my replies in my most formal, professional voice, which only made it all worse, especially when she began crying almost hysterically into the phone. In the end I simply had to hang up on her and then turned it off, in case she called again. My head was swimming after that, but as luck would have it Mirgül said she couldn't stay. I sank into

my favourite chair with relief once I'd let Mirgül out and felt my accelerated heart beat thump away.

Yet next day, there I was living dangerously again, in my house with Mónica, only this time I had taken the precaution of unplugging the land line from the wall, turning off my mobile and even disconnecting the doorbell, but even so I was too nervous to make love as I normally do; I'd never before been in a position of loving more than one person at a time and I was finding it difficult. In fact, I was realising that it was Mirgül's body I desired, not Mónica's. She sensed it.

'Your mind is somewhere else tonight, what's wrong darling?' she'd said to me and I'd replied about having work on my mind, which should have been true but wasn't, in fact I hadn't done any work that day, but instead tried to contact Mirgül, without success and on a whim gone to visit Maggie at her office. That visit hadn't gone well. Instead of being glad to see me she'd kept berating me for having ignored her and not giving her the love she thought she deserved. We'd had a very cool lunch together and I knew I should tell her I no longer loved her but how do you do this to somebody who seems to have become so dependant on you? This dilemma I'd been having for weeks: should I end it, shouldn't I end it, but once again I didn't, although from the way she left in tears you'd have thought I'd given her the push.

Then later in the afternoon I'd picked up Mónica and offered to show her round London but she'd wanted to spend another cosy evening at my house, which soon culminated in our not very successful lovemaking. Although it was early, I'd fallen asleep, for how long I don't know, but then, there, out of my dream, from beyond my unconscious state, all disorientation then and my mind trying to respond to being abruptly woken by very loud banging from downstairs, bang, crash, this noise, it was awful and put us both into a terrible panic. As I was emerging from deep sleep, I immediately sensed great danger, then I wondered if Mirgül was there, the banging carried on and grew louder and suddenly there was a loud crash and to my terror I realised the front door had been forced and I was no longer thinking about Mirgül, but of Hakam and that his murderer was coming to get me. Under normal circumstances I might have been paying greater heed to the potential risks of that Idris business but all these complications in my love life had caused me to neglect it.

I could hear the footsteps downstairs, doors opening and closing, the drawing room, my study, the kitchen, the cupboard under the stairs. Crash, crash, definitely not just one person either. Soon they'd be up here. The story

Idris had told me about a gun in his mouth came to me. I thought of its hard, cold metal rasping over my tongue, scraping against my tooth enamel.

I was scared. Really, really scared. You never know how you'll react to danger until it confronts you. I suppose I'd liked to imagine I'd treat it in the suave, nonchalant way that one sees in trashy films, but I found that I wasn't able to be like that at all. The hairs on the back of my neck tingled and I couldn't find a smidgen of courage within me.

Mónica asked me what was happening. I said I didn't know. I was thinking about where I could hide and couldn't think of anywhere. Then we both began to wail. Mine was more of a continuous screech, hers short, sharp screams, followed by sobs and an awesome inhaling of breath. She pressed her finger nails into my leg, although I hardly noticed. I was more aware of the footsteps which were on the stairs. They were coming to get me and I was thinking how petrified I was and also what a complete mess I'd made of my life, which was going to end up like this and no time to do anything, nowhere to go, the footsteps were already on the stairs, the bathroom door was opened and now dark figures were entering my bedroom, the overhead light was switched on, I cowered into the mattress waiting to be shot, certain my life was about to end. Only it wasn't assassins but more of the anonymous secrets men, together with two uniformed policemen all suddenly standing over the bed, like senior consultants in a hospital with their entourage of a trainees.

I had been sick with fear but my professional self kicked right in and I demanded to know what right they had to enter my house and where the warrant was and what they suspected me of. Mónica had let go of my leg. One of the agents, a tall, very thin, bald variety, explained that they had to talk to me urgently, they had rung the bell and knocked on the door many times but there had been no reply and I had been unreachable by phone and they had become very concerned for my safety. 'And,' he added, looking down at me, 'we have to ask you questions about the women you've been having romantic connections with. This one,' he pointed, 'is Mónica Coreira, is that right?'

I agreed. 'Well, Miss Coreira, we need to talk to you.' Then, he added to me: 'We need to eliminate her from our enquiries. But it's another one we most need to ask you about.'

'Other one?' I asked, 'what do you mean? Which other one?'

'I think you know her as Mirgül Malik.' I was curious to find out what this was about, but above all I was thinking that the game was up.

‘You’ve been spying on me,’ I protested, feeling vulnerable and slightly absurd and trying to remember where I stood legally. My brain wasn’t functioning well.

They left us to get dressed. Mónica got out of bed and pointedly turned her back to me.

‘Mónica, I’m so sorry. I can explain everything’ I said.

‘Shut up,’ she said in a soft, firm voice, as she buttoned up her blouse, ‘I have nothing to say to you. Nothing.’

She went to the bathroom and I went downstairs. I felt totally disorientated, having all these strangers prowling in my house and having had them in my bedroom. They had violated any sense of security I’d imagined I had. My house appeared foreign, everything that was happening seemed alien, as if I was there, but not there: I was watching this happening to me. I was watching a uniformed policeman trying to knock on the front door which was hanging limply like a carcass in a slaughter house and of course not realising this cop was unconnected with the others: how was I to know? There was lots of confusion before it transpired that he was wanting to talk to me urgently, as were two of the polyester suits who’d bludgeoned their way in. I was thinking then that my neighbours must be wondering what was happening, but most of all I was thinking about Mónica and Mirgül and what a pickle I seemed to be in.

I had thought it was the middle of the night but when I checked the time discovered it was only eleven fifteen. Before I would agree to talk to any of them, I insisted on phoning Dave. I really didn’t know what I should do and thought he might be able to advise me, or pull a string or two and smooth things over. Instead of Dave I got Caroline, who sounded about as stressed as I was and told me he was out and she had no idea when he’d be back and added mysteriously that I might read about it in the morning. I tried to get her to elaborate, wondering if he was all right, to which she replied that she didn’t know. It was clear no assistance would be coming from that quarter tonight. After that conversation the last cop to arrive asked to speak to me alone. We entered the drawing room. He had his helmet under his arm and looked so young and I was trying to remember who had first said that you know you’re getting old when the policeman look young.

‘Do you know a woman called Margaret Lochreigh, sir?’ he asked. I hesitated. It was almost farcical. All these police and sundry agents coming in the middle of the night to interrogate me about the women in my life.

‘Maggie, yes she’s a friend.’

‘Well, sir, I have bad news. She took her life.’

‘She’s dead?’ I asked.

‘I’m sorry sir. She left a message addressed to you. I’m sorry sir.’ He handed me an envelope addressed to Perry Sayers. She had written: ‘Perry dear, please forgive me for being so weak and don’t blame yourself. I know we could be perfect for each other but I’ve had to accept that you don’t share my dream and I’m not strong enough to carry on having my love trodden on. You don’t even remember my birthday. You take from me all the time and give nothing back. You think only of yourself...’ The note went on for three long pages in the same vein, each sentence adding to my guilt. I had a momentary image of her bringing my favourite food to table, sitting opposite me and contentedly gazing at me as I ate it.

The PC watched me for a while. He looked embarrassed. I was trying to convince myself it wasn’t my fault, that she must have been unbalanced, but a part of me was acknowledging that I couldn’t totally creep away from responsibility for what she’d done. My head was spinning. I tried to pull myself together and think clearly. The cop began quizzing me about my relationship with her, which I found intrusive and unnecessary until I caught on he was under instruction to find out about where her body was to be taken and who would be responsible for hiring an undertaker and whatever else you have to do when somebody dies. I remembered a brother who lived in Manchester and how she’d once suggested taking me to visit her mother, who lived...I couldn’t recall where, my brain was seizing up.

I stayed in that numb, dumb state as I was taken into a shabby room in Paddington Green police station and interrogated. As a consequence, it took me a long time to piece the bits together. It turned out that when they had gone to make arrests on the basis of Idris’s information, both here in London and in other countries, everyone had disappeared. It was clear they’d all been tipped off. Mirgül was mixed up in this and had left her rented flat in great haste but they had found my notebooks there and these contained my record of their interviews with Idris. They wanted to know how she had come to have them, since this vital information had foiled their plot. I guessed she would have taken them while I was on the phone to Maggie, the night before, however that detail didn’t interest me greatly. What I kept wanting to understand was how Mirgül could have done this, whether all her protestations of love were bogus and I knew the answer was that I had been deceived and made a complete fool of. From three women I was down to one and she would never speak to me again.

Well I was wrong about that. We were driven back to my house together, sitting side by side in the same car. Dawn was making itself felt though greyness and rain and when inside she let rip her anger at me:

‘How could you do this to me? How, how? I thought you were a man who deserved my love but you’re not, you’re just another baby, a baby,’ with her accent she broadened the ‘a’ of ‘baby’, which added to the scorn, ‘I thought you were different, but all the time you’ve been deceiving me. I understand you now, you pretend all the time, you say all the nice things, you know how to flatter a lady, to make me feel special, but you’re just like all the other men, you’re a lying son of a bitch, that’s all you are, a dirty, disgusting son of a bitch, who takes, takes, takes all the time, well I’ve got something to tell you, not all women are like me, no, some women are sons of bitches as well and I hope one day you find a son of a bitch who makes you suffer.’ There was such anger and pain in her voice, I felt each word like a blow. ‘Why did you keep calling me after I went back to Brazil, why keep pretending you were in love with me? It could have ended at Madrid and that would have been a happy memory for both of us, but you had to have more, you made me believe there was more, because I believed you, believed in our future, I feel such an idiot, an idiot. I am an idiot. I split with Nelson because I thought we were going to have a future. You use women but you don’t understand nothing about love.’

After she’d left I sat in the kitchen for a long time, tired but wide awake, before picking up the phone and arranging to have the front door temporarily fixed, which wasn’t easy and I lacked the energy to sound insistent, but once it was clear I was prepared to pay way over the odds Alex, the man I usually use for odd jobs agreed to come right away. Next I tried to phone Dave again and again got Caroline. This time she told me what had happened: he’d been arrested in Spitalfields with a prostitute in his car, she began to cry and so did I and then we both apologised for doing so and cried more and after that call I sat in contemplation. Then I got in my car and went to see Idris, since a meeting had been arranged for eleven and although I expected it would be cancelled, it gave me something to do. But he wasn’t there. He’d left yesterday. No they didn’t know where. After several phone calls I was told to go to the Home Office. Having been kept waiting for two hours, a civil servant in another cheap, ill-fitting, polyester suit took me into a very large office with two fluorescent lights brutally inserted into the decorative plasterwork of the ceiling.

I was introduced to someone wearing a well-tailored, woollen suit. It was none other than Gordon Bennett. He told me that they deported Idris the day before.

‘You had no right to do that, I have a document proving that he has permission to stay in the UK,’ I protested.

‘Well he wasn’t exactly deported, he wanted to go.’

‘Of course he wouldn’t have: why didn’t you call me?’ I asked, finding a bit of anger.

‘We tried, but nobody could get hold of you yesterday.’

‘Why did you send him back?’

‘He asked to go.’

‘You’re lying to me. Prove it. I’ll get you for this. You know that to send him back is to guarantee he’ll be killed.’

‘And so?’ said GB complacently, ‘we’d rather have him killed there than have a murder added to our crime statistics. You can’t do anything about it, we’ve got his request to leave with his signature and two independent witnesses.’

‘I gave him my word he’d be safe.’

‘And so? What do you think that’s worth?’

‘I’ll get you,’ I said, ‘I’ll go to the press and let them know how you sent him to certain death.’

‘You mightn’t have noticed, but the press aren’t very keen on asylum seekers, in fact they’re not very keen on foreigners at all certainly not on gangsters. But in any case, it’s never a good idea to contact the press, you never know what they might print next.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘I mean your brother David, got into a spot of bother with a prostitute last night. Well, so far, so good, it’s not in the public domain and as long as it isn’t his career will be unaffected. What will happen is the CPS will wait a month or two to see if the press gets hold of the story. If not, it’ll be quietly forgotten. Trouble is, the police are not reliable like they used to be, so you never know. Sometimes it misses the dailies and comes out in one of the Sundays. But it’s looking good. You see, it’s not wise to talk to the press. Somebody else might as well.’

I protested that he was blackmailing me, but as I said it I realised that I’d been trumped. Wearily I left his office and walked down a wide, opulent staircase. There was no fight left in me. In a state of numbness I made my way home. In the taxi I reflected that falling in love syndrome is like drug

addiction: providing temporary gratification while exacting a high price in human misery and it began to dawn on me that genuine love must be something more substantial and less harmful than the superficial dreams I had spent my life pursuing.

I'm at a restaurant with Dave. He's recently been appointed to the High Court and this is a kind of celebration. I can tell he's displeased that I've brought Mónica and even more so that she'd brought Ricardo, our son, but she insisted on bringing him, as she does to all my social events. The idea of leaving her baby with a sitter is anathema to her. I've been totally loyal to Mónica. A few weeks ago I did meet somebody I know I could fall in love with and we exchanged telephone numbers but I've not rung her.

Written in London, 2002