



## CHAPTER ONE

## A Short Story

I am sitting on a bench in a run-down park on the side of a hill overlooking the port of Ocho Rios in Jamaica. Far below, a giant cruise ship moves from the harbour out to sea. It is like a block of flats. Clockwork people wave from its decks in pretty colours. The blast of its horn bounces off the hills as it accelerates as fast as a car into the blue. In a matter of minutes this tub crammed with life – four thousand loved ones, shitting and pissing and complaining – is on the edge of the horizon. Soon it is a dot. Then nothing, engulfed in the flaming edge of dusk. It is quite romantic and slightly depressing – the perfect combination.

The noise of the town is a distant hum. Turtle-doves moan and flap in the trees and the shadows grow long over a derelict hotel, boarded up, pink and white, on the hill above me. Its terraces have been reclaimed by nature. In the old colonial days this used to be its garden. A waterfall cascades down a cliff into a series of pools filled with gigantic bleached goldfish that stare at you with vacant mulatto eyes from just beneath the surface, presided over by a vast banyan tree. Under its branches, butterflies flit in and out of the dim beams



of the sinking sun. The occasional splosh is their death knell. A few gardeners move through the park, dressed in blue dungarees. They don't seem to be doing much, but Jamaica is a lazy place locked in slow motion.

Two women appear at the top of the hill and walk carefully down the path towards the pools and the tree. They are an odd couple. One is a sturdy brunette squeezed into a black mini dress. It barely covers her arse. She has a large nose and drooping eyes and speaks English with a Jamaican lilt. She could be black. She could be white. Actually she could be Jordanian. Her friend is like a baby sparrow that has fallen from its nest, slightly disorientated as she hops from step to step down the hazardous path in Uggs and a track-suit.

They are white, ageless and slightly chavvy. They look as if they might have been sleeping rough. Or perhaps they are from the cruise ships and have simply missed the boat and are now living in the bushes. Either way, they sit down and both light up cigarettes, which they suck at thoughtfully while contemplating the view and the next move.

'I got Demerol,' says the larger one finally.

'Doesn't work for me,' replies the little sparrow curtly. She has a gravelly Viennese accent with a Thames Estuary undertow. She is mildly bad tempered. 'What are we gonna do?'

'Drive to Montego Bay, I suppose. What else can we do?'

'All the way to Montego Bay for a fucking prescription? You gotta be kidding.'

'Barbiturates she said! You need a special form. A papal fucking dispensation.'

They have arrived at some kind of impasse, returning their attention to the view with two co-ordinated huffs, followed by another cigarette. One has the pack. The other has the lighter. It's a Busby Berkeley routine of hands and mouths, of leaning in and lighting up and leaning back, and they are suddenly – comically – engulfed in smoke.

'Steve has Percocet,' says the brunette drearily, a sudden thought, barely energised as the fog lifts.



‘Percocet! Vicodin! Demerol! I told you. Morphine doesn’t agree with me. I need codeine.’ The little bird would be furious now if she had the energy. She is a strange creature, beautiful and graceful despite her moon boots. Her eyes are fierce and black for a moment but then she cocks her head to one side and chuckles. ‘I haven’t heard that word for years.’

‘What word?’

‘Barbiturates. It’s quite *Valley of the Dolls*, isn’t it?’ She speaks like a child, trustingly, with no filter, and she reminds me of someone, but I can’t think who.

I get up and walk towards them.

‘I couldn’t help overhearing what you were saying,’ I say politely.

‘My God,’ snorts the nose, deeply put out. She hurls a protective sausage of an arm around the little bird’s bony shoulder.

‘But I happen to have some Tramadol near by, if you would like some.’

They stare at me aghast for a moment, and then the bird breaks into a dazzling smile. ‘I’m afraid Tramadol doesn’t suit me. As you probably heard, I am allergic to morphine.’

‘It was just a thought.’

‘Are you from one of the ships?’ asks the little bird.

‘Good lord, no.’ It is my turn to be shocked.

‘You staying at the inn?’ accuses the nose.

‘Yes, I am.’

‘Did you get lost? No one from the inn comes up here.’

‘I was searching for a house.’

They both look bewildered, and so I explain. It’s a long pointless story and their attention dims with the day.

‘It’s called Honeycomb. I thought it was on this street.’

‘Honeycomb?’ sneers the nose. ‘Who lives there?’

‘No one. A friend’s godparents lived there after the war. When I said I was coming, he showed me a postcard of it. It looked rather sweet. I thought it might be fun to see if it was still there.’

I have a crotchety friend in London called Bob. Over the years he



has occasionally talked about his rather ghastly godparents called John and Joyce. They moved to Jamaica in the fifties and came home every summer on a boat, regaling Bob's mother with tales of Caribbean horror – how the local shopkeeper called Joyce an evil white bitch (she was, actually), how Noël Coward once came for drinks and then was overheard saying that if he ever saw them again he was moving to St Lucia. How Bob always thought that with enough sucking up they might leave the house to him. (No such luck.) John died, and Joyce sold up and moved to the South Coast of England. Death in Bournemouth. In our friendship they became a byword for everything that was stuck-up and conventional. 'It was a bit John and Joyce, dear,' Bob once said after a rather dreary performance of mine in a Jacobean tragedy, and the phrase stuck.

A few weeks ago, at lunch, I tell Bob that I am going to Ocho Rios, and he digs out letters and a picture of their pretty colonial bungalow called Honeycomb. We have a laugh and think no more about it. But arriving in Jamaica, desperately searching for a reasonable excuse not to start work on the book I am writing, I suddenly remember. Honeycomb! What a marvellous idea. Bob will love it if I manage to track it down. I ring him up and ask for directions. He is not particularly amused.

'God, you must be bored, dear.'

'Not bored. Desperate.'

So I have spent two fruitless days scouring the hills, high on ganja. Now I have arrived at the end of the road – literally – and the gates of this run-down park.

'This place is a tip since the cruise ships came,' says the little bird at the end of my tale.

'So it's probably been knocked down.'

'Unless it's that strip joint with the dwarf,' suggests the nose.

'God. Where's that?'

'You want to go?' asks the bird, brightening.

'Not really.'

'It doesn't really get started until after midnight.'



‘Oh. I’m in bed by then.’

‘Me too.’

Silence. The nose’s cellphone rings and she begins a long conversation in patois.

‘Do you want to have a walk around the garden?’ suggests the bird.

‘I’d love to.’

We potter slowly around the park, through its collapsed arbours and overgrown pathways. I feel as if I have known this woman in a past life. We chat pleasantly, tipsy with anonymity, revealing too much. She must be at least sixty but she acts like a little girl. Her face is deeply lined, but her eyes sparkle and her smile is radiant. She knows the names of all the trees, and picks their leaves, crushing them in her fingers.

‘Smell this.’

‘Delicious.’

‘I can’t think where that pimento tree went. It was here yesterday.’ She is stooping – looking at the ground for clues.

‘Over here!’ shouts her friend from another part of the garden, laughing. ‘She can’t remember anything!’

‘Oh yes. That’s where it’s gone.’ The little bird hops over.

It is dusk and we are back at the edge of the park.

‘I’m Anita, by the way,’ says the bird.

‘Rupert.’

‘See you at the inn maybe. We swim there sometimes.’

And I get into my car and drive back to the hotel.

Later, I am sitting in the empty bar of the hotel nursing a second rum punch, staring vacantly at the view. The moon and the first stars are sliding up the dimming sky. The cocktail chatter, a tinkling piano and the distant slap of the waves against the beach are more cheap wine to my doused senses and something clicks in my head.

‘Anita Pallenberg,’ I say out loud. Someone is walking on my grave.

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