

On an afternoon in June 2003, when, for a brief moment, it looked as if the invasion of Iraq had not been such a bad idea after all, Jeffrey Atman set out from his flat to take a walk. He had to get out of the flat because now that the initial relief about the big picture had worn off – relief that Saddam had not turned his non-existent WMD on London, that the whole world had not been plunged into a conflagration – the myriad irritations and frustrations of the little picture were back with a vengeance. The morning’s work had bored the crap out of him. He was supposed to be writing a twelve-hundred-word so-called ‘think piece’ (intended to require zero thought on the part of the reader and scarcely more from the writer but still, somehow, beyond him) that had reached such a pitch of tedium that he’d spent half an hour staring at the one-line email to the editor who’d commissioned it:

‘I just can’t do this shit any more. Yrs J.A.’

The screen offered a stark choice: *Send* or *Delete*. Simple as that. Click *Send* and it was all over with. Click *Delete* and he was back where he started. If taking your own life were this easy, there’d be thousands of suicides every day. Stub your toe on the way to the bathroom. Click. Get marmalade on your cuff while eating toast. Click. It starts raining as soon as you leave the house and your brolly’s upstairs. What to do? Go back up and get it, leave without it and get soaked,

or . . . Click. Even as he stared at the message, as he sat there on the very brink of sending it, he knew that he would not. The thought of sending it was enough to deter him from doing so. So instead of sending the message or getting on with this article about a ‘controversial’ new art installation at the Serpentine he sat there, paralysed, doing neither.

To break the spell he clicked *Delete* and left the house as if fleeing the scene of some dreary, as yet uncommitted crime. Hopefully fresh air (if you could call it that) and movement would revive him, enable him to spend the evening finishing this stupid article and getting ready to fly to Venice the following afternoon. And when he got to Venice? More shit to set up and churn out. He was meant to be covering the opening of the Biennale – that was fine, that was a doddle – but then this interview with Julia Berman had come up (or at least a probable interview with Julia Berman) and now, in addition to writing about the Biennale, he was supposed to persuade her – to beg, plead and generally demean himself – to do an interview that would guarantee even more publicity for her daughter’s forthcoming album and further inflate the bloated reputation of Steven Morison, the dad, the famously overrated artist. On top of that he was supposed to make sure – at the very least – that she agreed to grant *Kulchur* exclusive rights to reproduce a drawing Morison had made of her, a drawing never previously published, and not even seen by anyone at *Kulchur*, but which, due to the fear that a rival publication might get hold of it, had acquired the status of a rare and valuable artefact. The value of any individual part of this arrangement was irrelevant. What mattered was that in marketing and publicity terms (or, from an editorial point of view, circulation and advertising) the planets were all in alignment. He had to interview her, had to come away with the picture and the right to reproduce it. Christ almighty . . .

A woman pushing an all-terrain pram glanced quickly at him and looked away even more quickly. He must have been doing that thing, not talking aloud to himself but forming words with his mouth, unconsciously lip-synching the torrent of grievances that tumbled constantly through his head. He held his mouth firmly shut. He had to stop doing that. Of all the things he had to stop doing or start doing, that was right at the top of the list. But how do you stop doing something when you are completely unaware that you're doing it? Charlotte was the one who pointed it out to him, when they were still together, but he'd probably been doing it for years before that. Towards the end that's how she would refer to this habit of muted karaoke. 'That thing,' she would say. 'You're doing that thing again.' At first it had been a joke between them. Then, like everything else in a marriage, it stopped being a joke and became a bone of contention, an issue, a source of resentment, one of the many things that rendered life on Planet Jeff – as she termed the uninhabitable wasteland of their marriage – intolerable. What she never understood, he claimed, was that life on Planet Jeff was intolerable for him too, more so, in fact, than for anyone else. That, she claimed, was precisely her point.

These days he had no one to alert him to the fact that he was walking down the street mouthing out his thoughts. It was a very bad habit. He had to stop doing it. But it was possible that, as he was walking down the street, he was forming the words, 'This is a very bad habit, I must stop doing it, it's even possible that as I walk down the street I am forming these words . . .' He glued his mouth closed again as a way of closing off this line of thought. The only way to stop this habit of forming the words with his lips was to stop forming the words *in his brain*, to stop having the thoughts that formed the words. How to do that? It was a major

undertaking, the kind of thing you got sorted out at an ashram, not cosmetically at a beautician's. Eventually everything that is going on inside will manifest itself externally. The interior will be exteriorized . . . He made an effort to smile. If he could get into the habit of doing this constantly, so that his face looked cheerful in repose, then the exterior might be interiorized, he might start to beam internally. Except it was so tiring, keeping smiling like that. The moment he stopped concentrating on smiling his face lapsed back into its unbeaming norm. 'Norm' was certainly the operative word. Most of the people passing by looked miserable as a disappointing sin. Many of them, if their faces were anything to go by, looked like their souls were scowling. Maybe Alex Ferguson was right, maybe chewing gum ferociously was the only answer. If so, the solution was at hand in the form of a newsagent's.

Behind the counter was a young Indian girl. How old? Seventeen? Eighteen? Gorgeous, though, and with a bright smile, unusual in her line of work. Maybe she was just starting out, taking time off from her A-levels or whatever they were called these days, filling in for her surly father, who, though he spoke little English, had so thoroughly adjusted to British life that he looked every bit as pissed off as someone whose ancestors had come over with the Normans. Atman was always taken aback by his exchanges with this guy, by the way that, brief though they were, they managed to sap any sense of well-being he'd had on entering the premises. It was difficult to repress the habit of saying 'please' and 'thank you' but, as a reprisal, a protest, at the guy's refusal to abide by the basic courtesies, Jeff always picked up whatever he was buying – the paper, a bar of chocolate – and handed over the money silently. Not at all like that today, though. Jeff gave her a pound coin. She handed him his change, met his eyes with

her own, smiled. Give her a few years and she would scarcely pay any attention to whoever she was serving, would just look up, grab the money and not try to make of the exchange anything other than the low-level financial transaction it was. But for now it was quite magical. It was so easy to make people (i.e. Jeff) feel a bit better about life (i.e. himself), so easy to make the world a slightly better place. The mystery was why so many people – and there were plenty of occasions when he could be counted among their number – opted to make it a worse one. He went away feeling happier than when he'd come in, charmed by her, even sort of aroused. Not aroused exactly, but curious. Curious about what kind of underwear she might have been wearing beneath her T-shirt and low-waisted jeans – exactly the kind of thinking, presumably, that many in the Muslim community – the *so-called* Muslim community – used as justification for the full-face veil. He had read, a few days earlier, that British Muslims were the most embittered, disgruntled and generally fed up of any in Europe. So why was there all this talk about the need for Muslims to integrate into British life? The fact that they were so pissed off was a sign of profound assimilation. What better proof could there be?

Chewing over this important Topic – at the last moment he'd opted for chocolate rather than gum – Jeff walked on to Regent's Park. The fact that he should, at this point, have returned home and got back to work meant that he kept going, walked through the park under the cloud-swollen sky and crossed Marylebone Road.

A creature of deep habit, Atman was programmed, the moment he set foot on Marylebone High Street, to go to Patisserie Valerie's and order a black coffee with a side-order of hot milk and an almond croissant – even though he didn't want either. Normally he came here in the mornings but now,

in the post-lunch doldrums, it was too late for coffee, too early for tea (it was that time of the day, in fact, when no one wanted anything) and far too late to read the paper – which he'd read extra thoroughly, hours earlier, as a way of putting off writing his stupid think-piece. Fortunately he had a book for company, Mary McCarthy's *Venice Observed*. He'd first read it four years ago, after getting back from the 1999 Biennale, and had started re-reading it now – along with the other standard books on Venice – as preparation for the return trip. His almond croissant was the size and complexion of a small roast turkey and in the time it took to chomp through it he was able to read the entire section on Giorgione's *The Tempest*.

McCarthy reckoned there was 'a new melancholy in the chronic leisure' of the renaissance nobility. Could a similar melancholy be detected among the leisured ladies of Marylebone High Street? Apparently not. Like everything else leisure had changed with the times, had sped up. So there was actually a kind of urgency about these wives of investment bankers and hedge fund managers negotiating the brief interval between lunch and picking up their kids from the lycée or the American School. They had learned the lesson of leisure, the importance of contriving things so that there wasn't *time* to be unhappy. Back in the Renaissance time mounted up without passing so that sudden storms are forever on the point of breaking. Hence the melancholy that 'suffuses Giorgione's paintings, a breath of unrest that just fails to stir the foliage of the trees . . . It is the absolute fixity of his scenes that makes this strange impression.'

Atman hadn't seen the painting in 1999 but it was one of the things he was most looking forward to this time around (if he had the time): seeing *The Tempest*, gauging the painting – and the city – against what McCarthy had written about it.

Stuffed with pastry, tense with coffee, he left Valerie's and browsed through the Oxfam bookshop, all part of the normal pattern of a walk along Marylebone High Street. What was completely out of the ordinary was to find himself looking in the window of an expensive-looking hairdresser's. He had never paid more than ten pounds (with tip), had not had his hair cut anywhere but a barber's for thirty years, not since the unisex craze of the mid-seventies, and, most importantly of all, he didn't *need* a haircut. But here he was, opening the door, entering, taking the first steps towards doing something he'd been thinking about for years: getting his hair dyed. For a long time he'd thought of grey hair as a symptom, a synonym of inner dreariness, and had accepted it, accordingly, as inevitable – but all that was about to change. He shut the door behind him. The hair-conditioned interior smelled nicely, of product and potion, and looked conservative – not the kind of place where getting your hair dyed anything other than orange or pillar-box red marked you down as a hopeless square. It had the atmosphere, almost, of a clinic or spa. A man with shapeless brown hair – was it a subtly suggestive ploy that hairdressers so often looked like they needed a haircut? – asked if he had an appointment.

'No, I don't. But I wondered if you had a slot now.'

He looked at the appointment book, heavy and much-amended, a kind of Domesday book of the hair world.

'Cut and wash?'

'Yes. Actually, I was wondering . . .'

He felt as embarrassed as a character in a 1950s novel buying French letters. 'Might it be possible to perhaps get my hair dyed?' The guy, who had seemed only marginally interested, at this point became more focused.

'Yes,' he said. 'Dyeing is an art like everything else. We do it exceptionally well. We do it so it looks real.'

‘That’s Sylvia Plath, right?’

‘Indeed.’ A hairdresser who quoted poetry. Well, this really was an upmarket place. Or perhaps this kind of thing came as standard in this part of London. Jeff would have liked to respond with some kind of counter-allusion but could dredge nothing up. He explained that he didn’t want anything too radical, wanted it to be subtle.

‘Like this?’ the guy smiled.

‘Like what?’

‘Like mine.’

‘Wow! Yes, exactly.’ It was hard to believe his hair was dyed – it looked entirely natural and he still had a little grey at the temples. They moved into more detailed negotiations. It would cost a fortune but the great thing was that in ten minutes – he was lucky, the guy said, they’d just had a cancellation – Jeff was in the chair having his hair slightly cut and dyed . . . ‘Discreetly, very quietly,’ he thought to himself, but it was too late now to make use of this retaliatory bit of Plath: the man who’d welcomed him was evidently some kind of maitre d’; the actual dyeing was done by a young woman with multiple piercings (eyebrow, nose, a saliva-gleam of tongue stud), who preferred to work in silence. Fine by Atman. He was preoccupied, as he sat there, by the implications of coming out as a man who dyed his hair. It was the kind of thing you did if you emigrated to America, went to begin a new life in a place where no one knew your former grey-haired self – but he was reinventing himself on his home turf, in London, on Marylebone High Street. You grow older imperceptibly. Your knees begin to hurt perceptibly. They don’t get better. Occasionally they get worse and then improve but they never get back to what they were before. You begin to accept that you have a bad knee. You adjust your walk to compensate and alleviate but, by doing so, you set the scene



for lower-back pain. These things were complicated and sometimes impossible to fix. And now one of the symptoms of ageing – possibly not the worst, but certainly the most visible – was being dealt with, painlessly and quickly. It was as simple as that. All it took was money and a bit of time. Apart from that, you just sat under one of these Martian dryers, waiting, wondering if you should have opted for a lighter shade – or a darker one. Or just a trim.

The moment arrived, the moment of untruth. The silver foil was taken off. Jeff was tilted back over the basin. His hair was washed with almond-scented shampoo, rinsed. Flipped back into upright mode he was confronted, in the mirror, with his new hair. Wet, it looked *Thunderbirds*-black. Having it dried was like watching a Polaroid in reverse. The black gradually faded to a convincing shade of rejuvenation. It had worked! His hair was dark without looking dyed. He looked ten years younger! He was so pleased by the result that he could have spent ages gazing at himself adoringly in the mirror. It was him but not him: dark-haired him, plausibly youthful him. All in all it was the best eighty quid he'd ever spent in his life. (The only thing that could have made him happier was to have found a way to claim it back on expenses as necessary preparation and research for the Biennale.) And tomorrow he'd be on his way to Venice. Life was sweet, a lot sweeter than it had been three hours previously when he'd left the house as a way of putting off writing a stupid article – which still had to be written. If it hadn't been for that, if he didn't have to get back and write his stupid article, he'd have been tempted to drop in at the newsagent's again, to buy another Topic and see if that young Indian girl was still there.

Back home, back at his desk, the perennial question kept cropping up: how much longer could he keep doing this stuff

for? For about two minutes at a time, it turned out, but eventually these two minute increments – punctuated by emails pinging in and out – mounted up. God, what a miserable way to earn a living. Back in the days when his hair was naturally this colour – or darker – it had been a thrill writing stuff like this, or at least seeing it in print was thrilling. The fact that his dyed hair had sort of rolled back the years brought home how little progress he'd made in the intervening decade and a half. Here he was, doing the same shit he'd been doing fifteen years ago. Not that that made doing it any easier; it just made it more depressing. As always he struggled to get anywhere near the required word length and then, after padding and expanding, ended up with too many words and had to expend still more energy cutting it back to the required length (which always turned out to be more than was actually published). Still, by eleven o'clock he'd finished, cracked it, done it. He celebrated with camomile tea – there were days of heavy drinking ahead – and the remains of *Newsnight*, amazed at how grey Paxman's hair had become.

*Tomorrow he'd be on his way to Venice . . .* More immediately, less sweetly, he was on his way to *Stansted*. With all the potential for cancellations and manifold failure – signals, points, engine – he'd allowed ample time for delays but, on this occasion, there were none; everything went smoothly and he got to the airport with time to spare. In this way the country's injury-prone transport system contrived to waste your time even when nothing went wrong. Ahead of him in the check-in queue was Philip Spender, a director at the Gagosian gallery, wearing his cream suit – his trademark cream suit – and expensive sunglasses perched atop his expensive haircut.

‘Junket Jeff! What a non-surprise, meeting you here.’

‘You too, Phil.’ He was staring at Jeff’s hair. ‘You’re looking good.’

‘You too.’ Spender was still looking at his hair. Jeff could see the question ‘Have you dyed your hair?’ bubbling away in his head unaskably at this pre-drunken hour of the day. But he *would* ask it at some point, probably at whichever time ensured maximum public embarrassment. They’d seen each other a couple of nights earlier, at Grayson Perry’s opening at Victoria Miro, so the contrast between before (grey) and after (discreetly non-grey) must, in Phil’s eyes, have been at its most marked and least discreet. They established where they were staying (quite near each other); parties they were going to (a lot of overlap, but Phil was going to some others as well, including an unscheduled, semi-clandestine Kraftwerk gig that Jeff had not even heard of, had no desire to go to, but which now preyed on his mind). This was it, the start of the Biennale proper: the onset of party-anxiety and invite-envy, the fear that there were better parties you’d not been invited to, a higher tier of pleasure that was forbidden to you. Once you got to Venice, this became still more acute. You could be at a tremendous party, full of fun people, surrounded by beautiful women, booze flowing, totally happy – but part of you would be in a state of torment because there was another party to which you’d not been invited. There was nothing to be done about it. Jeff was not really a player in the art world. He had a certain usefulness in terms of gaining publicity for galleries and artists but had no real value in his own right. He was the kind of person who could be bought relatively cheaply – a few glasses of prosecco, an Asian-inflected canapé – happy to be someone else’s Plus One if that would get him into a party to which he would not otherwise have gained admittance. He was way down the totem pole but plenty of

people were not even *on* the totem pole – and not everyone queuing up to check in was Biennale-bound. There were also families on the brink of riot, backpackers and a group of ruddy-faced Irish who looked like they'd booked tickets solely to get stuck into the duty-free.

'You know,' Phil said, as if reading his mind, 'flying has never been the same since Concorde was grounded.'

'Quite.' Where had that 'quite' come from? He'd never said it before. Must have been from reading a John le Carré novel a couple of weeks earlier. The Circus. Scalphunters. Babysitters. Quite. Perhaps Phil was a spy, working at Gagosian but secretly in the employ of White Cube. Actually, now that the idea of duplicity had entered Jeff's mind, it occurred to him that Gagosian was almost certainly having a party to which he had not been invited. What a shit Spender was, standing here chatting, all the time knowing that his gallery was having a party to which Jeff had been conspicuously uninvited. For the second time in as many minutes, Phil seemed to have read his mind.

'You're coming to our party, I hope?'

'When's that? I don't think I got an invite.'

'On Friday. You should have had one. I put your name on the list myself.' Typical: there he was thinking everyone was a total shit – an enemy agent – and it turns out they're considerate, thoughtful. The only shit was Atman himself, for being so suspicious, so ready to think the worst of everyone.

Phil clicked open his black, espionage-leather briefcase. 'There you go,' he said, handing over an invite. 'Take this one.'

'Thank you.' Jeff studied the invitation, noting the sponsor's logo – Moët, nice – and the time. Shit, it clashed exactly with the Australia party which, in turn, overlapped with a dinner he'd cancelled as soon as the Australia invite turned up. That was also part of the Biennale experience: not getting invited

to things was a source of torment; getting invited to them added to the logistical difficulties of wanting to go to far more things than you had any desire to go to.

Another sign that the Venice experience had started here, at Stansted: he and Spender were both glancing over each other's shoulders, seeing who else was around. Jeff recognized several people in the various check-in queues that were in danger of merging into a single queue. Talking on her phone, rummaging in her handbag, Mary Bishop from Tate Modern spilled cigarette lighter and passport. The man next to her – Nigel Stein – bent down and picked up everything for her. Jeff waved to both of them. In fact, as he looked around, there were lots of people he knew, all looking around and waving at all the other people they knew.

In spite of its size, the queue was fast-moving. Jeff could now see, with some surprise, that the airline logo above the check-in read: 'Air Meteor: We Couldn't Give A Flying Fuck!' It was in exactly the same font, against the same yellow background, as the rest of the airline's graphics but none of the other counters boasted this interesting amendment. Moving closer he saw that this slogan had been stuck over the existing one, but so subtly and cleverly it was difficult to notice. Given how quickly it must have been done – airports, these days, were not the easiest places for guerrilla subversion or art pranks – it was extremely impressive. Maybe it had even been done by Banksy. Or perhaps, in the spirit of artistic collaboration and ironic brand-awareness enhancement, the airline had co-operated, let it go. Whatever the case, it was certainly fair comment. Airlines like Ryanair or EasyJet tried to dress up their no-frills status; Meteor basked in theirs. What you saw was what you got. More accurately, what you *didn't* get. This was budget flying taken to its limit. They had stripped away everything that made flying slightly more

agreeable and what you were left with was the basically disagreeable experience of getting from A to B, even though B turned out not to be in B at all, but in the neighbouring city C, or even country D.

Spender checked in successfully. Turning back from the counter, he said he'd see Jeff on the other side, as if they were about to cross the river Styx. Jeff stepped forward, handed over his passport, answered the questions about security, said he had no bags to check in. The check-in woman asked to see his hand baggage. He held up the smaller of the two bags he was carrying and she went ahead and checked him in. Taking care to keep his other bag hidden from her, he turned away and headed towards passport control and security. With no larger aim in view, his life was made up entirely of little triumphs and successes like this. He had avoided checking in his bags, thereby saving an incalculable amount of time at the other end.

Boarding was a barely polite scramble, but such was the demand for a place near the front of the plane that Jeff succeeded in getting the ultimate prize: an exit-row seat. He stowed his bags, one of which was almost too large to get into the overhead bin, smiled at his neighbour and belted himself in for what promised to be an uncomfortable but festive couple of hours. The plane was filled with people who already knew each other, all on their way to the Biennale. It was like being on a school trip, organized by the art teacher and part-funded by a range of sympathetic breweries.

At the Biennale one entered a realm of magical excess. Champagne flowed like spring water. There were rumours that, at the Ukraine party, there would be a hundred and fifty thousand dollars' worth of caviar. Not like that here on the plane, of course. The cost-cutting was amazing, extravagant, even. No expense had not been spared. Getting rid of free

meals and drinks was just the beginning of it. They'd skimped on the flight attendants' uniforms, on the design and graphics of the check-in counter, on the number of characters on the boarding pass, on the amount of foam and cushion on the seats. It was hard to imagine they had not skimped on safety features as well – why bother with a life raft when everyone knew that if the plane ditched in the sea you were fucked anyway? It seemed they had even budgeted on the looks of the flight attendants. The one doing the safety demonstration appeared to be suffering from an aerial equivalent of the bends. No amount of make-up – and there was a lot of it, caked on like the first stage in the preparation of a death mask – could disguise the toll taken by years of jetlag and cabin pressure.

As far as this particular flight was concerned, though, all went according to plan. The plane accelerated, succeeded in taking off, levelled out at the budget cruising altitude and, unless something catastrophic occurred, would land in Venice (or thereabouts) in less than two hours. Even a frequent flyer, hardened complainer and upgrade-seeker like Atman had to concede that, for a mere two hours, conditions on board were tolerable. He bought a Coke and a small tube of Pringles – ‘Could I have a receipt, please?’ – and began reading the press material biked over yesterday about Julia Berman, Steven Morison and their daughter, Niki.

Pretty standard stuff, really. They'd had an affair, she became pregnant, raised the kid on her own. Morison had pitched in with some money but continued his life as a globally successful artist, painting his pictures and porking whichever model or studio assistant took his fancy, the most recent of whom was only a couple of years older than his daughter, who was twenty-two and had her first record coming out (with cover art by her famous dad). Niki had

already been interviewed by *Vogue* but a 'rare' interview with the 'reclusive' mum and a never-before-seen picture constituted some kind of scoop. All of this had to be arranged in person, by Jeff, because, rather quaintly, Julia Berman didn't do email. (As Max Grayson, his editor at *Kulchur*, had said, 'You're there anyway and it's such a simple assignment even you can't fuck it up.') She was in her mid-fifties now; there were rumours – and had been for years – of a forthcoming, unghosted memoir. Jeff was to find out about that as well, if possible.

In her day Julia had been famously beautiful, a sex symbol, as they used to say. A nostalgic glamour still attached to her even though there's actually nothing more tragic than these old howlers having to trade on looks that have given way years ago. Jeff had interviewed another of these crumbling beauties, on stage, as part of the Brighton Festival. What a fright! Smoking cigarettes, working through her gravel-voiced repertoire of classic anecdotes – the night she was on acid when Hendrix puked in her fireplace!; the time she asked George Best what he did for a living! – while the audience listened politely, united by a single unspoken thought: ugh! She didn't even have a memoir to promote. All she was publicizing was the astonishing fact of her continued existence. Pathetic. So what did that make Atman? Infinitely more pathetic, obviously, since his job was to provide cue lines for her greatest anecdotes, a gig for which he received travelling expenses and four complimentary drinks tickets. However much he despised other people, when he did the math and added things up, Atman always found himself more despicable still. Especially since he'd asked if he could interview another of the guests at the festival, Lorrie Moore, a writer he'd never met but whose work he loved – and was told that, unfortunately, that slot was already taken by someone else. The lesson was that he



was good for tittle-tattle but unsuited for anything serious; more *FHM* than *TLS*. As often happened the act of reading had sent him off on an inner rumble of discontent. He flicked further through the press cuttings and lingered on pictures of Julia taken by – he had to check the caption – none other than David Bailey. No doubt about it, she had been sensationally gorgeous. Slinky as a panther, with outsize purple bangles round her wrists and what used to be called bedroom eyes. No one had bedroom eyes any more (the phrase was almost as obsolete as ‘a well-turned ankle’); they’d been rendered obsolete by the bedroom asses and bedroom thongs of the *Loaded* and internet era. Jeff had no idea what she looked like now. She had not been photographed for years – hence the last and most despicable part of his assignment: he was meant somehow to sneak an intimate picture of her. So, on top of everything else, he was supposed to be a pap without the advantages of a telephoto lens, just his own little digital camera with its 4x optical zoom. The biggest joke of all – the thing that made him more depressed than anything – was that at a certain level he was considered successful. People envied his getting assignments like this. One of the people who envied his getting assignments like these was Jeff. He bitched and griped but he would have bitched and griped even more if he’d heard that some other hack had got this junket instead. The writing – a so-called ‘colour piece’ – was a bore, going to see this old has-been in her rented palazzo was a drag, but Venice for the Biennale – that was fun, that was unmissable.

He crammed the cuttings back into his folder, read more of *Venice Observed*, dozed, and was woken by the captain announcing that they were about to begin their descent into Venice Treviso. Nothing very noteworthy about that; but when he went on to announce the temperature in Venice – thirty-six degrees – a gasp of astonishment swept through the plane.

Thirty-six degrees, that was – what? – ninety-five degrees Fahrenheit? That was *hot!*

Everyone assumed some kind of mistake had been made but as soon as they stepped onto the vibrating ladder down to the tarmac they realized how mistaken they'd been. It was like arriving in Jamaica in the middle of a heatwave. The heat immediately generated a kind of hysteria – a mixture of happiness and dread – among the British passengers. This was not what they had counted on. Some people on the plane must have received texts or calls from friends who'd arrived earlier, saying it was hot but this was . . . Jesus, this was *hot!* The heat bounced off the tarmac. The air was rippling and roasting. It was difficult to imagine anywhere hotter on earth. Cairo couldn't have been as hot as this.

As expected, Venice Treviso was nowhere near Venice – which made Jeff even more pleased to be one of the first people through immigration. He was ahead of the game, had stolen a march, was ready to go. Except getting his bags onto the plane turned out to have been a completely pointless bit of cunning. There was a bus waiting outside but it had been chartered specifically for their flight and would not depart until everyone had picked up their bags, cleared customs and boarded. He ended up spending a sweat-soaked hour pacing an arrivals lounge the size of a converted garden shed and the temperature of a sauna, before the bus, crammed with Biennale-goers, was ready to begin its crawl towards the city the plane had, nominally, flown into. Jeff was sat next to a red-haired woman he recognized but whose name he couldn't quite remember, a curator from the Barbican, who prodded her Blackberry for the entire length of the journey. For reasons that were unclear even to him Jeff did not own a mobile phone, let alone a Blackberry – which meant that he spent increasing chunks of his life in a state of suspended non-existence while

other people took calls, checked messages and sent texts. It was impossible to read on the coach and there was nothing to see from the window. He had been longing for the flight to be over; now he was longing for the bus ride to be over. At what point would the longing for things to be over be over so that he could reside squarely in the present?

Not, it turned out, when the bus journey ended because he then had to struggle through the coach-crowded bus terminal, with his bags, in the baking heat. It was like being in the Italian version of an oily, hugely demoralizing art installation called *This Vehicle is Reversing*. Once he got on a vaporetto at Piazzale Roma, though, he was in Venice proper. What fun it was, going everywhere by boat – even though the boat turned out to be as crowded as a rush-hour Tube in London. The difference was that this Tube was chugging down the Grand Canal, through the miracle of Venice at dusk! Venice in the grip of an insane heatwave! Venice the city that never disappointed and never surprised, the place that was exactly like it was meant to be (just hotter), exactly synonymous with every tourist's first impression of it. There was no real Venice: the real Venice was – and had always been – the Venice of postcards, photographs and films. Hardly a novel observation, that. It was what everyone always said, including Mary McCarthy. Except she'd taken it a stage further and said that the thing about Venice was that it was impossible to say anything about Venice that had not been said before, '*including this statement*'. Still, there was always the shock that such a place did actually exist, not just in books and pictures, but in real life, with all the accoutrements of Venice-ness crammed together: canals, palazzos, gondoliers, vaporetti and everything. A city built on water. What an impractical but wonderful idea. Jeff had read several accounts of how the city came to be built but it still didn't make sense. Better to think that it

just appeared like this, fully formed and hundreds of years old in the instant it was founded.

It was almost dark by the time he squeezed out of the vaporetto at Salute, the stop for his hotel (a five-minute walk, he'd been told) which turned out to be nowhere near the hotel – or at least the hotel, if it was nearby, was completely unfindable from this stop. If it hadn't been for the heat and the weight of the bags and a steadily mounting pressure in his bladder it would have been nice strolling around the neighbourhood, but the heat and the bags stopped it being a nice stroll and turned it into an exhausting yomp in a hundred-degree heat. Losing his bearings in the labyrinth of alleys, narrow waterways, bridges and little squares that all looked so much like each other, the five-minute walk took twenty minutes. The hotel, when he finally stumbled on it, was nowhere near where it was supposed to be and, at the same time, exactly where it was meant to be. Jeff produced his passport while the desk-clerk remarked on the incredible eat – eat that the bell-hop sought to counter by bringing, on a glinting silver tray, a glass of water so cold it made his teeth ache like metal.

What a relief to finally get into his pleasingly over-priced room (booked and paid for by *Kulchur* magazine). It was on the top floor and had a view of sorts – not of the lagoon or the Grand Canal, but of the roofs of buildings like the one he was looking out from. What a relief, too, that it was decorated in minimalist, boutique fashion – white sheets, blonde wood – not decked out in the rococo style of most Venetian rooms. *What a relief!* It was one of those phrases that buzzed around his head constantly, phrases that in music would have constituted the themes or motifs that wove in and out of a symphony, fading, disappearing for long intervals, but always eventually returning.

In the way of boutique hotels – and was there a decent

hotel in the world that did not designate itself boutique? – various books had been arranged in aesthetically-pleasing spots around the room. Naturally, they were all about Venice. The room was nicely air-conditioned, not something that he normally needed or used, but in these circumstances some kind of respite from the killing heat – the eat, as he now thought of it – was essential. Unfortunately, he was late for the dinner he was supposed to go to. It had been organized by *Modern Painters* magazine and though it was usually a good idea to avoid these big sit-down dinners – they ate into one’s evenings – this had seemed a perfect way of easing into the Biennale. Well, nothing to be done about that. If he went now he’d only be in time for dessert and would be unable to make the quick getaway he was counting on in order to go to the Iceland party (a much sought-after invite: Björk was going to be there, might even be DJing) near the Campo Manin. He called the editor on her cellphone, left a message, apologized, blamed the plane, the bus, the time difference. He stripped, showered, put on a fresh shirt, underwear and socks, left the hotel and ate quickly on his own – dreary salad, bread that might once have been fresh, home-made ravioli – at the trattoria a couple of doors away.

The concierge had assured him that if he took a vaporetto one stop, across the Canal to Santa Maria di Giglio, Campo Manin would be only a short walk after that. And, amazingly, he was right. Jeff found the palazzo easily, arrived at the perfect time, just as the party was filling up. There was the thump of decent-sounding music from inside but, with temperatures still in the eighties, everyone was outside in the courtyard. He took a bellini from a waiter – his first of the Biennale, the first, in all probability, of very many – and drained it in a couple of gulps. Always awkward, arriving at these big parties, before you see people you know, so he traded

the empty glass for a full one, the last of its kind on the tray. He'd almost guzzled that as well when he spotted Jessica Marchant, wearing a kind of Bridget Riley Op Art blouse. They clinked glasses. Jeff complimented her on the blouse and congratulated her on the novel she'd published a couple of months previously. Half the people Jeff knew had written books, most of which he'd not even attempted to read. The majority of the ones he *had* started he'd not had the patience to finish but he'd whizzed through Jessica's in a state of constantly increasing admiration. It seemed a good omen, that the first person he'd encountered in Venice was someone on whom he could lavish praise. The problem was that doing so made Jessica look so distinctly uncomfortable – had he been too fawning? – that she immediately turned the tables, asking him about his long-awaited book.

'I was hoping everyone had forgotten about that. Including the publishers. I just never did it.' This was every bit as honest as his admiration for Jessica. Write journalism for long enough and a publisher will eventually suspect that some article that you've written contains the seed of a possible book. A letter forwarded by *Esquire* had led to a phone call, which had led to a lunch, which had led to a contract to write a book on . . . He pushed the thought from his mind. Even back then he'd had no desire to write such a book but had hoped that the contract and advance – minuscule though it was – would impel him to do so. And it had. For about a month. There then followed six months of fretting before he more or less abandoned the book and went back to writing nonsense for magazines. When he heard that his editor was leaving, Jeff congratulated himself on having, effectively, gained a small amount of money for nothing. Except for a brief call from his editor's replacement, no one at the publishers seemed to expect anything from him. And he'd not even had to pay back

the advance. Perfect. The only mistake he'd made, in that first flush of enthusiasm, was to tell people he was doing the book. Hence the current conversation. He explained that he had given up, abandoned it.

'I don't blame you,' Jessica said. 'It's hell writing a book.' So many people ended up, inadvertently or deliberately, making you feel bad about yourself (many people thought Jeff was one of those people) but Jessica always made you feel OK, normal. It was as if she had put her arm round him and said that they were in the same boat.

'It really is, isn't it?' he said. 'I don't know why everyone seems to be doing it. But what about you and here? Are you writing about the Biennale for someone?'

'For *Vogue*,' she said. Well, that was one of the reasons for writing books. You got offered gigs like this. As happened, Jeff's admiration immediately became tinged with jealousy even though, aside from a few details – accommodation, fee, and the nature of the article – they were here for the same purpose, were having the same experience. That was the thing about the Biennale: it was a definitive experience, absolutely fixed, subject only to insignificant individual variation. You came to Venice, you saw a ton of art, you went to parties, you drank up a storm, you talked bollocks for hours on end and went back to London with a cumulative hangover, liver damage, a notebook almost devoid of notes and the first tingle of a cold sore.

They were joined by David Kaiser, a film-maker (i.e. someone who made telly programmes), and Mike Adams, an editor at *Frieze*. Jessica knew them both too. The Kaiser was just back from Saudi Arabia, 'a truly vile country, worth visiting if only to have an experience of unsurpassable vileness'. The experience of going without alcohol for a week had had a profound effect on him.