

The Prologue

Good evening, dear friend. I'm extremely pleased to see you, but I'm sure you'll understand why I can't give you my full attention. Joe Fortune is just about to kill his father-in-law, and I've no intention of missing this long awaited event. I won't ask you to go away, but please stand back in the shadows with me and keep a low profile.

With careful and artistic precision he arranges the tools of his trade (or what you may prefer to term the murder kit) on a solid silver bonbon dish borrowed from the grand piano. One syringe, one needle, one dose of the lethal elixir and a pair of disposable rubber gloves. He has no nerves, or panic or negative thoughts. In fact he feels a strange sense of ceremony; something akin to a religious ritual that involves a great deal of bobbing about and mumbling, but in truth it must be a glorious surge of adrenaline. His victim lies prostrate, breathing deeply in an induced sleep, his baggy face looking no different to that of any other cosseted octogenarian. Joe has things to say of course, but he won't be justifying or explaining his actions. He really couldn't care less what either of us think. He's had to live with the reality and we haven't, so please resist the urge to make moral judgements. He's just about to draw up the fatal shot so if you're squeamish look away now. If not, enjoy the moment with me.

Moonlight as bright as the sun illuminates the room, allowing him to see clearly. The injection site must be carefully selected, as it could easily be spotted by an astute mortician. The anus is always the safest, but although he's seen ten thousand anuses (or is it anusii?) in the course of his career, the sight of Gordon's would have him gagging for a bucket. He's thus decided to re-use the venous puncture site created this morning

by the district nurse. He slides up the sleeve of the pyjama jacket to reveal the soft underside of the left elbow and locates the small, red point of entry. With a steady hand he inserts the needle and swiftly plunges with his thumb; an action as familiar to him as clearing his throat. Briefly the victim begins to murmur and moan, but within seconds he's clinically dead.

Joe's lost count of how many deaths he's witnessed in his long career. Some silent and unconscious, some choking with terror, some indicating peace and relief. Each one a lottery of fate, and professionally administered by his exemplary code of conduct. This expedited one's his first (and certainly his last) but the final breath sounds exactly the same; a low exhalation as the life force slips away. But tonight it's a thrilling departure. He smiles with relief and self-congratulations. Goodbye and good riddance to Gordon Morton Moore. A fitting end to a bastard of the first order, and there'll be no last rites.

Having completed his mission Joe places his used equipment in a thick plastic bag and observes the body in the bed. (The body! Oh joy. The *corpus mortalis*!) 'The next time I see you Gordon,' he muses, 'I'll be wearing my swanky Savile Row pinstripe, with a bold red waistcoat, and Patte's gold half-hunter hanging on my teddy bear tummy. With all the verve and confidence of a theatre luvvy I'll sail into the front pew, flashing my haughty, handsome, Jewish profile to comfort my beloved Anna, the daughter you never deserved.'

Joe leaves the room, quietly close the door, and pads back along the corridor to find his bed. After dropping the bag of evidence into his black medical case, he slips his ethnic thobe over his head and carefully gets into bed beside a deeply sedated Anna. He

hunkers down to reflect on his sin, and yes, dear friend, he's fully aware that he's sinned. Whether he cares or not is another matter.

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Everyone knows what Philip Larkin said. 'They fuck you up, your Mum and Dad.' Josiah Fortune's mum and dad certainly fucked him up, but what choice did they have? They were completely fucked-up themselves. A 1945 wedding snap shows them as Rose and Harvey, two shy, shivering teenagers, arm in arm on the patch of bare earth that was called the garden at Caple Street. The groom wears his demob suit and the flat disc of his Cuple, the bride a traditional long white dress that had already graced twenty weddings in Peckham. They were two people Joe had never known, nor could imagine them ever being. They're trying to look happy, despite the tragedy of their slaughtered millions casting its giant shadow. (There were no real figures, nor ever were. Just a disbelieving silence and the binding of an invisible, unifying cord.)

'It will never happen again,' said Patte. 'We are the victors and a strong, just nation. We will guide the world into a future without prejudice and we will never have to look over our shoulders again. We are so lucky. We have each other, a good pitch on Rye Lane market, and we will buy a sign-written van on the never-never with Harvey and Harry's demob pay.'

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The puking, mewling scrap of Josiah Jacob Dov Fortune was born to Rose after five years of bloody miscarriages. A weak, premature baby, his welfare was immediately assumed by Mitte and Patte, his grandparents. They were older and wiser. They knew what was what. Joe was a miracle baby, a Jewish Prince, and deemed to be a genius. The doctor said that Rose's nerves had been shattered by the trauma and he was glad she had the close support of her family. He also said that more babies might kill her, so he explained to Harvey about restraint and the use of French letters.

Josiah Fortune was thus raised as an only, lonely child by a quartet, but he could never understand where he fitted in. There were four corners of the earth, four sides to a square, and four points on the compass. The quartet seemed to exist for themselves, around themselves, and in servitude to themselves. He felt as if he was just a dancing doll, programmed to entertain them; his strings pulled and manoeuvred to suit the needs of a permanent grinning audience who applauded their little prince whenever he walked, talked, spat out his food or filled his nappy. He was cocooned and protected with an intense, overpowering anxiety, but it was just the Jewish way. The 'one love.' The one God. The respect, love and care of the whole family. History in their bones and in their hearts. Prince Josiah. Heir to bugger all.

Yom Kippur 1955: Joe was five. The synagogue had been hot, and airless, and full of emotion as the final prayers of the *Ne'ilah* rounded off the commitment to the Atonement. With the blast of the *shofar* ringing in his tired little ears Joe now stood with Patte and his father while they consulted Rabbi Greenberg.

“Now you are five, Josiah, you will go to Cheder classes,” said Patte. “You will learn to read the Torah in our glorious and ancient Hebrew. Our language is the most beautiful in the world, my son. It runs like a river, and swirls like the wind. Now, let’s have a memory of this wonderful day. Come and sit on the Rabbi’s knee and have your picture taken.” Joe hid his face on his arm and started to cry.

“He’s a bit shy, Rabbi,” apologised Harvey. “Now come along, our Joe. That’s no way to behave. What will the Rabbi think of you?” Protestingly the reluctant child was lifted up and plonked onto the Rabbi’s corpulent lap. “There’s a good lad. Smile for the birdy. Say Cheder.” Joe refused. The Rabbi was old. He had a wet beard encrusted with stale food. He stank of time gone by, and tobacco, and pee-pee pants, and it was the last straw of endurance the tired child could muster. As the deadly fumes of the Rabbi filled his nostrils he passed out and slithered with high drama from the royal lap. Two blood-curdling screams came from the gallery where a mother and a grandmother had witnessed the dramatic scene.

A few minutes later Joe groggily came round to find he was surrounded, not only by the anxious, tear-filled faces of the quartet, but by the whole congregation. As he opened his eyes there was a loud wailing of joy and a burst of applause. He was clasped with fierce, bone-breaking gratitude and suffocated with slobbery kisses. But then voices of judgement began to murmur until there was a nodding and mumbling consensus of

criticism. One voice eventually spoke aloud. “Surely the boy hasn’t been fasted. At five years old? Whoever heard of such a thing? You should be ashamed of yourself, Rachel Moisemann.”

Mitte squared up, faced the muttering crowd with full affrontery, and delivered a loud matriarchal proclamation. “I can assure you, Dora Gold, our precious boy has *not* been fasted. He ate a hearty breakfast, and a proper dinner, and he had a sardine sandwich for his tea.” With perfect timing, Joe rolled his eyes and confirmed that Mitte was indeed telling the truth.

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The photographs in the Morton Moore albums make everything look quite normal, but looking in is never quite the same as looking out. Look closer. The eyes always tell the truth. They see through a distortion, like the shaky reflection on the surface of still water, the stretching and shimmering of old glass viewed from an angle, or the refraction of light through a prism.

The life that little Anna lived behind the eyes is shown in endless snaps, taken against the backdrop of The Old Vicarage. Edwardian ruby-hued bricks softened by meandering creepers and gnarled Wisteria. Long sweeping lawns, edged with shrubs, and long-shadowed by ancient, hard woods. A fish pool that flashed with the red and golden lights of koi carp. A ha-ha wall with bridges to a meadow, backed by a wide vista of the green-swarded Chilterns.

Her parents stand, with seeming unity, before the heavy oak front door. Gordon, a mature and imposing merchant banker, and Eugenie, his full-smocked French beauty. New marriage and new lives within the bursting belly. Then proudly presenting the swaddled bundles of Hugo and Anastasia. ‘Such lucky children,’ the Monks Bottom village folk all said . . . ‘*Oh, your daddy's rich and your ma's good looking . . .*’ The babies thriving to become two toothless cherubs at either end of a grand, full sprung pram, and fluffy-headed toddlers clinging to adult legs. Endless pages followed of the twins with Mummy and Papa as they traversed the years and the seasons. They are here, they are there; together and apart; muffled up for winter, or bare-limbed for the sun. But smiling. Always smiling. Were they as happy? Anna’s eyes may tell you.

Christmas Day 1965: Anna was five. She was sitting at long walnut table that seated fourteen. A white damask tablecloth, silver salvers, tureens with big, fluted lids and crackers from Fortnum’s. Three sets of cutlery, too heavy for her little hands to hold, and far too big for her mouth. A party of foreign visitors were spending Christmas Day with them; some very important people who had some exciting business with Papa’s bank. A tiny Japanese man called Mr Ito, a German couple called The Krugers, and an American called Mr Cicero. Papa was wearing a paper hat and posed with a kukri to carve the turkey while the assembled company held in static mode for the camera. But Anna had started to cry.

Papa sighed. “What on earth’s the matter, Anna?”

“I don’t feel well,” she said. Her mouth wobbled and tears spilled down her cheeks.

“She iz very pale, Gordon,” said Mummy. “I am sure she iz not vell.”

“Nonsense, Eugenie. I think that half-eaten packet of Turkish Delight might be more to blame. Now behave yourself, Anna and smile for the camera. You too, Hugo. Stop looking so sullen. Now, let’s have a happy English Christmas photograph. Come along everyone. Let’s raise our glasses with a champagne toast to the prosperity of C.I.K. Technology. Cheers”

A flash photograph was taken by Mr Feather. Mr Feather was the nice man who tended their garden on Sundays. It was his one day off from the furniture factory in High Wycombe, sacrificed to sweep and mow and dig and prune for the sake of the odd little luxury, like a motorbike to get to work on. Blurred in the background, the rounded, aproned figure of his wife, commandeered to wait at table and wash up afterwards. Their own festivities with their large family delayed in favour of the pittance they’d earn for a few hours at double time. “Let’s have one more snap, Feather?” said Papa. “Then you can stack up some logs in the drawing room. Come along children. Jolly smiling faces, please.” The Morton Moore family, and their prestigious guests, dutifully stared again at the camera and mimed, ‘Cheese’.

Anna was beginning to feel very hot and sweaty and she put up her hand. “Papa, I feel sick.”

“Anna, I want no more of your nonsense. Now eat up your turkey like a good girl, otherwise our guests will think you’re a big baby.”

The taste of the turkey was making her throat go woomp, woomp, woomp. It tasted like her fingers did when she’d been playing with pennies. She stuffed it all in her mouth and ran from the table mumbling, but when she returned to the table she found

some more turkey had been put on her plate. “Perhaps you can eat that, Anna,” said Papa, “seeing as the last piece has just disappeared down the lavatory. Your ingratitude incenses me,” but Anna continued to cry and turned a begging face to her Mummy.

“Pliz, Gordon,” said Mummy. “She really iz not vell.” Papa’s eyes returned a fierce look that forbade further protest.

Anna slowly swallowed each tiny morsel, but her tummy was dancing up and down. She knew she had to be a good girl, and be smiling and pretty for the important guests, but a big tidal wave was rising up inside her. She swallowed and gagged but she could do nothing to stop it coming up, so she picked up the hem of her pink satin party dress and decanted into her lap.

All conversation at the table stopped, and no-one moved a muscle. Papa’s face froze and Mummy’s eyes moved from side to side, staring at him for permission to move. It was Mrs Feather who took full charge of the situation. “S’ all right, Mr Morton Moore,” she said, skilfully concealing the offence and lifting the crying child into her sturdy arms. “No bones broke. I’ll see to ’er.”

“Thank you, Mrs Feather,” said Papa. “You’ll excuse my wife of course. Mrs Kruger has no English and Eugenie’s the only one who can speak any German.” He then turned back to his guests. “Now everyone, I’m sure my daughter will be better after a little lie down. Let me fill your glasses.” As if a radio had been switched back on the table re-commenced its happy seasonal banter.

An hour later, Anna collapsed unconscious into Mrs Feather’s arms. She was rushed to hospital where a kidney infection was diagnosed.

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So, dear friend, I now bid you farewell. They're all yours. Make of them what you will.