

ALTERNATIVE NAVIGATIONS

Adrian's godfather, Benoît, lives by himself in an apartment in the *sixième*, not far from the *Jardin du Luxembourg*.

—You know, Adrian, he says. One should always marry a foreigner.

Adrian smiles. He has heard this from Benoît before.

—Find a woman whose first language is not English. In my case, naturally, her first language must not be French. This is the way to avoid misunderstandings.

Benoît speaks from experience. He has married, successively, a Greek, a Guatemalan and a Hungarian. Until recently he lived with a Texan. Their months together constituted an interlude of bliss, he says, and he and Mary-Beth barely understood one word the other said.

Fulham. Last night. Late.

Caroline stands by the bedroom door, holding her mug of hot chocolate. She normally wears Adrian's blue towelling bathrobe; tonight she is wearing the pink padded dressing-gown which she knows he dislikes but it reminds her of childhood.

—You're sure you won't come? asks Adrian.

—Yes, she says. Quite sure.

Caroline watches him zip up the canvas bag.

—It's for the best, says Caroline. You know it is.

For the best? Is it? Adrian wonders if he does know this.

Caroline stares at the chocolate in her mug.

—We were going nowhere, she says.

Where did Caroline want to go? Did she say? If she did, was he listening? It's now too late to ask. It may have always been too late.

Adrian has an early morning Eurostar to catch. He lifts the bag off the bed and onto the floor.

Fulham. This morning. Early.

Caroline is standing by the kitchen door, holding her mug of tea.

—I'll be back on Sunday, Adrian says. Late.

—I won't be here, Adrian, says Caroline. I'll be gone. To Battersea.

Adrian knows he should say something but he doesn't know what. It must be something he hasn't said before.

He picks up his bag.

—Well. Goodbye.

—Yes. Goodbye.

He might put down his bag.

She might put down her mug.

Neither of them does.

—I'll call you from Paris.

Most of Caroline's impatience has drained away.

—I won't be here, Adrian, she says. I'll be in Battersea.

At St Pancras International.

—Hi. I'm Al.

He holds out his hand and takes the seat beside Adrian. Al is a man in his forties with an open smile, a trim brown beard and bright blue eyes.

—Before you ask, he says, I'm a Kiwi not an Aussie. I'm travelling to a conference in Seville. Ethnomathematics. Do you know Seville? My colleagues are flying out tomorrow. I prefer trains.

As it happens, Adrian has been to Seville and can suggest what Al should see. The *Giralda*, the *Alcázar*, the *Torre del Oro*. Although the highlight of his own visit, Adrian remembers very clearly, was a walk late at night along an avenue which took him past a succession of elegant pavilions built for the 1929 Iberoamericano Exhibition. Magical. But he has forgotten the name of the avenue. This is why he doesn't mention it to Al.

—Ethnomathematics?

—Yes, Ethnomathematics, says Al. Part anthropology, part mathematics. My own field of study is South Pacific navigation.

The master navigators of the South Pacific, Adrian learns, could cross thousands of miles of ocean without any kind of navigational equipment. Modern navigators require instruments and charts. They must know where they are, to know where they are going. But the navigators of the South Pacific have no need to plot their position. Relying on the skills learnt during a twelve-year apprenticeship, they are guided by the motion of the stars, the formation of the clouds, the swell of the ocean and the colour of the water. They are, as it were, able to reach their destination without ever knowing precisely where they have been along the way.

—That's the critical difference, says Al. He allows a pause. There are those who follow a map, and those who follow a course.

Adrian feels he has been told something significant. Something practical. Something somehow mystical. He would like to take time to absorb it, but Al has moved on.

He is talking about logs and charts, Greek *periploi* and Roman *itineraria*, narrative maps and mythological maps, grids and projections, errors and omissions ... And while Al talks, Adrian wonders. A map or a course? Is he following one or being led by the other? Or neither one nor the other? Or both together? He would like to ask Al one or two questions. To clarify things. To check he has them straight. But the train is approaching the *Gare du Nord*.

—Do you know how I get to *Gare Montparnasse*? says Al.

Adrian consults his *Métro* plan.

—Take line 4 to *Montparnasse Bienvenue*, he says. *Direction Porte d'Orléans*.

They step off the train together, shake hands and then go separate ways.

At a bistro in the *Rue du Cherche-Midi*, Adrian is trying to explain — and Benoît is failing to grasp — the difference between following a map and following a course.

—A course? A map? says Benoît. How are they different? To me they seem the same.

I don't have the right words to explain it, thinks Adrian. Either that or I haven't understood enough myself.

Benoît is amused by his godson's excursion into the abstract. It is not, he thinks, the usual Anglo-Saxon way. But he is sorry that Adrian has come without Caroline. He enjoyed her company last summer when, returning from Avignon, she and Adrian stayed two nights in his apartment. A charming girl. Her French was good. She dressed well and showed an intelligent interest in architecture.

—We were going nowhere, Adrian tells him. That's what Caroline says.

—Where did she want to go?

—I'm not sure.

—Ah, says Benoît. A pity!

And he asks for the bill.

Adrian telephones Caroline. There's no answer. He pictures the empty flat. Caroline's suitcase no longer on top of the cupboard. Her dressing-gown gone from the hook on the bedroom door. He remembers her here in Benoît's apartment. Caroline wearing the straw hat she bought in Avignon. Standing in the sunshine. Singing softly so that only he can hear her.

Sur le pont d'Avignon

L'on y danse, l'on y danse

—But it's not a proper bridge, is it? she says.

—What?

—It stops in the middle of the river.

—It was a bridge once but it was washed away.

—And no one rebuilt it, says Caroline

—No, says Adrian. No one did.

He notices her brush her eyes with the back of her hand. Why tears? She had seemed so happy.

L'on y danse tout en rond ...