

CASSIOPEIA'S HAIR

The third Tuesday of the month: the book group meeting. Why do I go, Jack? Why do I go? I ask the question but — as with so many questions — I know I should not expect an answer. Jack was a practical man who had no time for fiction.

Two bottles of Chardonnay have been drunk. Coffee has been poured for those who drink it; camomile tea for those who don't. Now we have come to that point in the evening when, it might be said, our fate is decided. It is Alison's turn to choose next month's book.

—*Cassiopeia's Hair*, she says.

She holds it up. A frayed, faded, mulberry cover. A dull volume like many others that sit forgotten on the back shelf of a second-hand bookshop. But, as Alison is plainly keen to tell us, the book has a story of its own.

—Why I've chosen *Cassiopeia's Hair* is because ...

—What is it? asks Barbara. A thriller? A romance? A whodunit?

—I don't know, says Alison.

—Don't know?

—No.

Barbara shakes her head in disbelief.

—Doesn't it say somewhere? asks Cherry.

—No, says Alison.

—Oh.

Cherry allows her eyes to close.

—Who's the author? asks Denise.

—'W', says Alison.

—Who on earth is 'W'?

—That's all it says on the title page. 'W'.

Denise sighs.

There is a pause which I decide I should fill.

—Why have you chosen *Cassiopeia's Hair*, Alison? I ask.

—Well, Elspeth, she says. You remember my Uncle Ivo ...

Denise looks at her watch; Cherry leans back on the sofa; *sotto voce* Barbara groans. We've heard the tale before — more than once in fact — but Alison is a dogged storyteller and won't be dissuaded from telling us again. How her Uncle Ivo was found hanging, limp as a soiled overcoat, in a wardrobe in a bedroom in the hotel where he was staying in *Le Petit Socco*. How odd it was because Alison has no idea what he was doing in Tangier, having always assumed he seldom strayed far from his lodgings in Broadstairs. How Alison's husband, Gabriel — about whom there will be more later — has a theory. (Alison has always been happy to share Gabriel's theories with anyone who can be persuaded to listen.) Gabriel, it seems, contends that the explanation for Uncle Ivo's death is to be found in the murky world of drug-dealing, money-laundering and espionage. Where Broadstairs fits into this sinister picture I cannot guess, but this seems not to trouble Gabriel.

—So strange, says Alison, placidly. Such a puzzle. Such a mystery ...

Is it? I have no first-hand knowledge of the practice but my reading has ranged widely and — despite my advancing years — I retain most of what I've read. Alison and Gabriel, it seems probable, are unfamiliar with self-induced hypoxia or, as it is often termed, erotic asphyxiation. It is not my intention to enlighten them.

—It was on his bedside table, says Alison.

—I'm sorry ... ?

My attention must have wavered.

—The book. You remember the British Consul arranged for everything they found in Uncle Ivo's hotel room to be shipped back to us. Although Gabriel's quite certain that a number of items haven't been returned and I'm pretty sure that some of the things that were sent back can't possibly have belonged to Uncle Ivo. Anyhow, the book on the bedside table was *Cassiopeia's Hair* and I thought it would be amusing if we read it. It's

out of print, of course, but I've done some research on the internet and there are one or two second-hand copies available online.

Barbara, Cherry and Denise have adopted the resigned expression that usually marks this stage of the evening. I should explain that the members of our group have different reading tastes and a book that is chosen by one seldom finds any favour with the rest. The usual practice, however, is to accept what's been proposed as a *fait accompli* and to say nothing further. Which is why Freya's intervention comes as a surprise.

—First, I should tell you that I will be leaving next week and won't be attending any more meetings, she says. Secondly, if you take my advice, you will choose a different book.

—Oh, says Alison.

—Why? says Barbara.

—Have you read *Cassiopeia's Hair*? says Cherry.

—No, says Freya, I haven't read it. But, based on my experience with many other book groups and implausible as it may sound, choosing to read *Cassiopeia's Hair* invariably brings bad luck.

—Bad luck? says Alison.

—Yes, says Freya. Extraordinary misfortune.

There is another pause which this time I decide I will not fill.

—What s- s- superstitious nonsense! says Alison.

She is a stubborn woman who stutters when she's crossed.

—The book I've chosen is *Cassiopeia's Hair*, she says, and that's the book I'd like us all to read.

Freya smiles and says nothing. As she often does, she unfastens the elastic band and writes a word or two in her notebook.

—What do you think, Elspeth? says Denise.

—Me? I say. Oh, I'm happy with whatever you all decide.

My policy is to acquiesce. This is what's expected of a woman of my age.

I joined the book group after Jack died hoping for some intellectual stimulation. A forlorn hope as it happens. By no stretch of the imagination can our discussions be described as 'literary'. The choice of titles is 'eclectic' and see-saws wildly from month to month.

Freya makes another note. What has she seen? What has she heard? What oddity? What idiosyncrasy? A turn of phrase; a sudden colouring; a particular tilt of the head: fragments she will store away for later use. This is her way. The witchcraft of her calling. Freya takes from us what she wants.

My eyes rest on each one of them in turn.

Alison, when she was younger, must have been pretty. Today she has a fondness for lush romances and historical fiction.

Barbara, dark, intense, divorced, is a potter with a studio in an abandoned bakery. She has no sense of humour and favours steam punk and gothic horror.

When the choice of book is Cherry's, she turns to me. Bored, sleepily seductive, she is married to a diver who returns from the oil fields to devote himself to home improvement.

Denise, a science teacher in an all-girls school, claims to have no time for men. In life they have disappointed her but in fiction she is thrilled by the gritty heroes of violent westerns.

And me? As you will guess from my name, I am from a different generation. My choice would always be a novel by the incomparable Mr Charles Dickens — his colourful characters, his well-worked plots — but, whenever I have made the suggestion, there has been a chorus of dissent. (I am considered too old to take offence.) 'Oh, no, Elspeth.' 'Too long.' 'Too boring.' 'Too difficult to follow.' I defer and suggest Jane Austen. Together we have read: *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*. We have thus exhausted Miss Austen.

For a time I endeavoured to be more experimental. We tried poetry but it wasn't liked. The stage directions in the play I chose caused confusion. My excursion into erotic fiction was ill-judged. *The English Mistress* turned out to be both poorly written and

anatomically improbable. A little mischievously, I then proposed *Mobius the Stripper* by Gabriel Josipovici. I knew, of course, that post-modernism would not be to the group's taste but I knew, also, that the name of its author would be an irresistible attraction.

Is now the time to say more about Alison's husband, Gabriel? 'My Angel Gabriel,' as she likes to call him. No, I think not. Gabriel is at the same time at the centre of this story and at its periphery. But to me he matters very little which is why, when I introduce him, I won't have much to say.

Eventually I conceded defeat. I read my Dickens alone and share my joy in him with no one else. When the choice of book is mine, or when Cherry shrugs and looks in my direction, I settle for a detective novel. Nothing 'noir', you understand. At this stage of my life I have no need of 'noir'. The country house, the castle, the isolated vicarage, the lonely hotel. These are my preferred settings. And, of course, the eccentric detective who, at the close, correctly identifies the least likely suspect as the villain of the piece. Such books are, I believe, what keeps our group together. We share the pleasure of a conclusion, a resolution with no loose ends. To me it seems not unreasonable to expect to read a final sentence and find that everything has been explained. When all is said and done, life is puzzling enough; I see no need for fiction to add to the confusion.

—Is this simplistic of me? I once asked Freya, as we sat, drinking coffee, in 'The Bottomless Cup'.

—No, I don't think so, she said. A writer may pose as many questions as she likes but there should be answers.

—And if the reader fails to find them?

—There are always readers who can contrive to lose themselves in their own back gardens.

The clue was obvious: the notebook fastened with a rubber band. That and the way she watched us, the way she listened.

—Forgive me, I said, touching her arm. I would like to ask you a question.

The meeting — the first Freya attended — had come to a close and we were standing in the street.

—You may ask, she said, but I may choose not to answer.

—Am I right in thinking that you are a novelist?

I saw the lie she considered telling me floating between us like a bubble. And then it burst.

—Yes. Although I'd be grateful if you said nothing to anyone else.

—Of course. I'm noted for my discretion.

—It can provoke such tiresome questions.

—I understand, I said.

—Yes, she said. I think you do.

And trust was established between us.

The next Thursday we met for coffee and for many Thursdays after that. I learn that Freya — writing under a name I won't divulge — publishes a novel every other year and has done all her writing life. Her practice, while she is working on her first and second drafts, is to live away from home, isolated from all distractions. Does she have a husband? Or children? Friends who miss her? Celebrations she can't attend? She shared none of this with me.

—Writing is lonely business, she told me one afternoon. But it's what I do.

—Is that why you joined the book club? I said. For company?

—Partly. And also for the remarkable characters I come across.

—Indeed?

I ponder this. Alison? Brenda? Cherry? Denise? (Should I explain what must surely be obvious? The alphabetical names I have ascribed to my fellow members are entirely fictional. I am, as I say, noted for my discretion.) It must be, I suppose, a part of the novelist's craft to discover what others miss, or otherwise to find what isn't there at all. Should she also be expected to uncover the narrative that lies behind the characters? No, that must be the preserve of the clairvoyant. At the time there was no story. Only the circumstances that would lead to one.

Jack and I shared an interest in brainteasers; *casse-têtes* my husband used to call them. He regarded such exercises as mental gymnastics and thus as acceptable as calisthenics.

Are you acquainted with the puzzle of the black and white hats? There are, of course, different versions but this is mine.

Three women line up on a staircase. Standing one behind the other, they face in the same direction. The women are wearing hats which they have taken from a closet in an unlit room. None of them knows the colour of the hat she is wearing but they have been told that there were in the closet three black hats and two white hats.

The woman on the top stair can see the colour of the hats worn by the women on the middle and bottom stairs. The woman on the middle stair can see the hat worn by the woman below her on the bottom stair but not the hat worn by the woman behind her on the top stair. The woman on the bottom stair cannot see the colour of the hats worn by the women behind her. The woman on the top stair is asked the question:

—Do you know what colour your hat is?

She thinks for a moment.

—No, she says. I don't.

The woman on the middle stair is asked the same question:

—Do you know what colour your hat is?

She, too, thinks for a moment

—No, she says. I don't.

The woman on the bottom stair is then asked the question ...

—Well, she says, if neither the woman on the top stair nor the woman on the middle stair knows what colour her hat is, then, yes, by deduction, I know the colour of *my* hat. It is ...

I will not pretend this is an analogy or a metaphor or anything such as that. I am not a novelist. Such devices aren't my stock in trade. All I will say is that whenever I bring to mind Alison, Brenda, Cherry and Denise — and, of course, Gabriel — I am reminded of the puzzle of the black and white hats.

The last afternoon I will spend with Freya. I am going to miss her presence at the book group. To employ a weary cliché — permissible only because, before her arrival, I felt so suffocated — she has been ‘a breath of fresh air’. When invited to contribute to the discussion, she has led us away from the trivial, anecdotal and banal. However dreary the subject under discussion, her comments have been concise, illuminating, well-considered. I find myself — a sign of frailty — on the point of asking her if she cannot stay a little longer. A foolish impulse. Everything must come to an end. Few people know this better than I.

—Tell me, I say. I’m intrigued. Were you serious when you said we shouldn’t read *Cassiopeia’s Hair*?

Freya looks at me.

—Oh, yes, she says. Entirely serious. Over the years, I’ve attended several book groups that have chosen it. Terrible disasters always follow. Please don’t ask me for an explanation. I can’t provide one.

—How very strange.

—Extraordinary, isn’t it?

And now we are standing on the pavement outside ‘The Bottomless Cup’.

—Goodbye, I say. I’ll miss our Thursday coffees.

—Yes, she says. So will I. Goodbye.

—I don’t suppose we’ll meet again, will we?

—No, I don’t suppose we will.

—May I give you my address, I say. In case you should ever wish to get in touch.

—Thank you, she says, and accepts the card I give her.

It’s time to speak of Gabriel. Jack would have called him ‘one of those pretty boys’. I would describe him as ‘charming’. In my experience, ‘charm’ is not a serious attribute and most of those who are ‘blessed’ with charm use it recklessly. I feel the need to say nothing more about Gabriel.

I won't dress up the facts. I will lay them out as clinically as I can. Like a frog on a dissecting table; at the same time pitiable and repellent. But it was nothing as simple as a love triangle.

Alison likes to show me her wedding photographs. Alison and Gabriel: the glowing bride in white; the bridegroom's boyish grin. But later — very soon — Brenda appears in the shadows. A burning passion, Brenda tells me. Uncontrollable. Her affair with Gabriel is a poorly-kept secret although Alison herself suspects nothing. At different times Cherry and Denise share with me their surprise that anyone could be so blind. But Brenda, too, is blind. While her husband is in the oil fields, Cherry finds herself lonely. Gabriel, she says, is such lovely company. Denise, brooding darkly, dismisses them all. They cannot reach into his soul, she tells me. They cannot bring him happiness. Some day. When the time is right. She pours herself another glass of wine and stares ahead into a future which she will share with Gabriel once she has sprung him free.

How do I know this? I have found myself their regular confessor. Discretion and indifference are readily confused.

The boil swells. And then it bursts.

The details are the trivial currency of domestic drama. A husband who does not return from a sales conference. An unexplained voicemail message. An undeleted text. An old restaurant bill in a jacket pocket. A hotel key hidden in a drawer. So tedious. So banal. One thing which leads to another and another and another. Deceits unravelling. Denials and confessions. Fury and tears. Alison confronts Brenda. Together they rage at Cherry. Denise unleashes her pent-up scorn on them all. Such treachery. Such vitriol. Nothing can ever be forgiven.

Gabriel remains absent for several days but in due course he will be found and everything will be explained.

No. I don't miss the book group. If Freya hadn't joined it when she did, I would have left the four of them to snipe and bicker without me. And, no, I've not read *Cassiopeia's Hair* and I think it unlikely that I will.

Henrietta — we learn later — is a young woman in the Accounts Department: an ordinary-looking girl, who has never before been the object of office gossip. A puzzle. But sexual chemistry is often a mystery. For the present, she and Gabriel live contentedly in a terraced house. On clear nights they take a telescope into the back garden and stand there together watching the stars.

Sometimes — often unexpectedly — Jack answers me. There are things, he says, we can easily explain. There are things we can explain less easily. There are also things that it may sometimes seem we cannot explain at all. But this is not to say they cannot be explained. Only that we cannot explain them.

The envelope is addressed to me. Bold handwriting that I do not recognise. Inside is a postcard and a short, typewritten note:

My dear E.

I feel the need to confess. As you will know, a novelist's task and aspiration is to persuade the reader that her narrative is true. Trust me, she says. I won't deceive you. But fiction is, of course, a lie. A lie that we — the reader and the writer — conspire together to believe. However, in the present case, the lie was more in the nature of a deceit. To put it plainly: I have had no previous experience of book groups. Joining one was an experiment, a piece of research. I knew and know nothing about the book that was found on Uncle Ivo's bedside table in his hotel. Reading Cassiopeia's Hair — indeed merely

mentioning its name — may bring bad luck but it doesn't seem very likely, does it? My story was an invention. It is what I do. Lying is my métier. Forgive me.

F.