

It's That Man Again

Ashley Stokes

Ashley Stokes
76, Caernarvon Road
Norwich
Norfolk
NR2 3HX
01603 449749
hazelphase@hotmail.com

At sixteen years old she stood in court and heard her own suicide note read aloud: 'Dear Mother, please don't be angry but I can't stand it any longer. The world is against me. I am going to end it all. I am going to Hell where I belong . . . I never tell the truth. I am so very wicked.'

All the Devils are Here - David Seabrook.

Tonight the tennis courts were unlit as she passed them. Out on the surrounding lawns the conifers sparkled in the moonlight and at the end of the driveway Marmara House hardened from a loose, black mound to something oblong and angular. Her suitcase began to tug at her shoulder as she advanced beyond the hedge animals and the memorial rockery that lined up with a grotto in the woods. He'd once said that there was supposed to be a second grotto but the Softies hadn't died in the expected order. Her feet hurt but she quickened her pace. The only light in the house was at the window of the master bedroom. There was a smudge, a smear standing there. It grew in length as she approached. Her coattails billowed behind her and she began to almost like the feel of the grit trapped in her sandals. Nearly there now, she was nearly at the front door. She had a little hope left when finally the portico and the pillars and the gables of Marmara reared up, and its chimneys and fortifications tottered and whitened above her.

In the window his outline shunted sideways. Then, a second later, the light up there went out. This wasn't a coincidence, like the strange happenstance involving the cold cream and Dumb April's birthday supper. It wasn't like the clock in the library mysteriously telling the wrong time when more time was needed. Chance had served no ace here, as it did the night the floodlights at the tennis courts failed just as someone called out her name. This, now, was the worst thing he'd ever said, and he'd not even used any words.

Even now she half-expected the light in the hallway to illuminate the little semi-circular window above the front door before the front door opened wide. She realized that she was waiting, tentatively, as if she had knocked; or it was last week again and she had knocked already and couldn't hold on to herself, anticipating the slow and assured way he used to slip her coat from her shoulders. In the vestibule he would take off the coat to admire the dress she was wearing for him even now. He had bought her the dress somewhere abroad, in Paris or maybe

Rome, in the shop of the lady who invented the divided tennis skirt. The dress clung to Rose's waist and her bust and coated her legs, lapped at her feet. It was the fashionable new colour: shocking pink. Shocking pink for Shocking Rose. It must be kept out of sight at home, this colour. It was, however, very much permissible and even encouraged at Marmara, and on one occasion had even witnessed an outing to the pictures and a lovely stroll on the beach. Now it felt like it needed a clean, grubby from so many evenings when the clocks mistold the time and lights went off and on and off and on. The light was not coming on again, at least on this side of the house, or this side of the cliff. The note would not now keep safely in her pocket.

So he couldn't miss it, she abandoned her suitcase at the front door. She had no need of it now, and as she walked around the house she thought that maybe he'd like something to remember her by. When she reached the top of The Steps she could already hear the slow slosh of the waves. Beyond the headland, a web of stars held the moon in place. A glimmering pathway of white light shone on the surface of the sea. It seemed to flow across the beach from where it trickled down The Hengist Steps and began as a glint in the footprint embedded in the first concrete stair. Rose knew that many other people, many other girls had come this way before. Tonight, she had a premonition that many would follow her.

In the Shanghai Lantern she'd written the note and the note was in an envelope that she took from her pocket and tucked into the front of the shocking pink dress. She no longer needed the coat to hide the dress, now that it had been found and she could no longer shout at the stories about her and had taken the bus and walked from the Lantern in the middle of town and then along the private roads to Marmara. It was a relief to stoop and unbuckle the clasps of her sandals and then wrap them up in the coat and toss the whole bundle over the rail and wait for

the sound. She and April used to drop the fattest pinecones over the side and count until the beer bottles down there clanked.

No smash or rattle. Her bundle must have snagged. The wind rushed in the long grasses and the trees along the cliff. The trail across the sea glittered. It led to France and France, she knew, was red. She flinched as she placed her bare foot in the footprint. Once it had been ten-times her size, when Mum had taken her up to see Dad, and Dad was painting or papering a room inside Marmara, when the house was still empty, after Lord Soft Sword, as Jeremy called him, passed away. When the Osbourne-Parks appeared and their little girl April was just the same age and Rose was allowed to come up to Marmara to keep April company, and then, when they were older, play tennis on the floodlit court, a rubber shoe bought for her by Mister Osbourne-Parks filled up half the footprint at the top of The Steps. The Osbourne-Parks moved away and took Dumb April and the tennis coach with them. She didn't even write from Cairo. Dumb April, that is, not Miss Havers, the tennis coach whose letter said, *You really are very promising. I am willing to have a chat with your father.* But there were things that could not be explained to Miss Havers, and while Marmara had slumbered ownerless Rose crept up here at night and for hours patted a ball against the ground for want of a game. One night she thumped the ball too hard and it bounced so high that she feared it might never come down again. And then the floodlights clicked off. He appeared, strolling over from the generator shed, and called out her name. When he reached her and she stared into the qualities in his face the ball smacked on the surface behind them. Now, at the top of The Steps, she tried to draw her coat in tight and pick up her case. They were gone. She reminded herself, and started to make her way down.

Viking Beach was no more deserted than usual. It belonged to Marmara and Marmara belonged to Jeremy now. The breeze snatched her hair and the hem of the dress, pulling it in the

direction of the lighthouse at the periphery of the bay. Momentum took her swiftly across the narrow strip of sand before the ridges of shingle, but she slowed to a sort of stagger as she made her way to the sea's edge. When the foam nipped her feet and shuddered her to a standstill she grabbed hold of the dress and screwed it to her hip. She was shivering and decided, suddenly, not to take it off. Her chin bobbed up and down all of its own as she turned to look back at The Steps and the cliff and Marmara. No window lights. Jeremy would be strong after all. He loved to talk of strength and she'd loved to listen, hadn't she.

It was funny, though, that all the whispers and daft talk about Jeremy Trask in the town had not concerned itself with his strength. They said that he didn't have the decency to admit that he ran that new office by the War Memorial. That he had written what was in those pamphlets there. That someone had done their business in his hero's head and forgotten to flush. And Johnny Rooper couldn't afford his own ale and needed the clean shirts. That's why he marched around with another dozen or so undesirables every Saturday. Rose had thought that none of this had anything to do with Jeremy, who wasn't born in Tangiers or Russia or Romania. He hadn't sucked the blood from his mother's breast. What a rotten thing to say. It was lies. He sold gymnasium apparatus all around the world. He called her Rose and said she could play tennis whenever she liked.

She had come back for the court, but soon was following him into Marmara, bounding along the corridors and landings and the carpets of scarlet and gold patterns. She had sat at the grand walnut dining table by the cocktail bar as he played records on the radiogram or operetta tunes on the pianola, his gaze aloof from the keys as she sipped too quickly the gin and the tonic and the bubbles that rushed up to cling to the ice cubes. Soon there was a dress in a wide white box. When she emerged in costume, the clock in the library told the wrong time.

And of course, it couldn't be true love unless it was proper, whatever he might say, and to make it proper she made him take her to the pictures. They had missed Wimbledon and even she couldn't make him wait a year. He didn't hold her hand in the queue for the tickets but she was by his side and wearing the shocking pink dress. The Hopgoods noticed her in the foyer. So did Philip Drew, Joan Prior who taught physical education and Johnny Rooper's cousin Bert who owned The Norseman's Head on Coronation Row, and Dicky Foster with his runny nose, who knew her family and probably blabbed first, and Nigel Neville and Hector and Miss Privet and the one-armed Barnes who owned the Hengist and Horsa Tea Rooms along the cliff. Rose could see it in their eyes. They marvelled at the dress, what she could do to herself out of school, now that her schooldays were coming to an end.

He insisted the usherette lead them to the front row and a middle seat. When they were settled he placed his hand on Rose's thigh and a warm feeling lifted up her spine. On the newsreel before the film, Hitler was giving a speech in front of a sunburst with a swastika at its heart. He was having a bit of a shout and waving his arms and holding his fists to his chin and when he paused he stared out with black glass eyes at some strange far-off place. And then soldiers jerked their legs across the screen like little clockwork things, and everyone around, the Hopgoods and Philip Drew and Miss Prior laughed like Dad always laughed. Rose laughed. The whole cinema was laughing. She took a sideways glance at Jeremy. Swabs of light from the screen flickered across his face. At first she thought he was sneering, then smirking, but she realized there was no expression there.

The film was called *The Spy in Black* and was set during Dad's war. It started with handsome German submarine sailors, who didn't look like enemies, and a captain dispatched on a secret mission. Meanwhile, a pretty schoolmistress, Anne Burnett, was kidnapped on the way

to a Scottish island. Good Anne was replaced by bad Fräulein Tiel, who looked like Miss Havers and said things like ‘silk stockings is my cue to go to bed’ and ‘you and me are only parts of a machine of destruction’. Together on the island, the Submarine Captain and Fräulein Tiel plot to sink fifteen capital ships in league with a traitor called Ashington who had a cut-glass voice, like Jeremy. A reverend looked like Mr Osbourne-Parks and a special constable looked like Dad and a vicar’s plain and cheery wife a bit like Mum and the peasant maid like Dumb April and all the sea dogs and sailors were like the Roopers and Dicky, Nigel Neville, Hector and the one-armed Barnes. The Submarine Captain falls in love with Fräulein Tiel, but she’s in love with Ashington. And Ashington is not Ashington and Fräulein is not the Fräulein, and it was all double-crosses and betrayals until everyone was sunk by his own side and lost at sea.

On the drive home to Marmara, in the rear of his car – it was the first time she realized that Johnny Rooper was merely his chauffeur – she asked Jeremy if he’d enjoyed the film. He said, softly, holding her hand but peering at the moon that seemed to speed along the tops of the hedgerows, that it was a terrible tragedy, that war. It must never happen again. There were bigger enemies, the empire of disease, monsters that crawled from a pyramid of skulls.

No one would be allowed to keep their money outside of the country, he said as they picked their way down The Hengist Steps. The first blast of the trumpet against interest slavery and cosmopolitan usury. On Viking Beach he said that he was thinking of changing the name of the house. Marmara was one of Soft Sword’s foibles and sounded like a Turkish bathes. It should be called Hengist House. He’d been doing some reading about old Hengist. What a chap! Our local hero. At Stonehenge his men had drawn their knives and dealt calmly with their Celtic foes. England was born. England must be strong again, he said, back at Marmara, after he’d lifted her

onto the cocktail bar. He cradled her shoe in his hand and his little moustache twitched as he spoke.

‘We only want England to be strong, Rose. Imagine how strong we’d have to be if we’d been humiliated like that in nineteen.’ He slipped off her shoe and then found the other, removed it too and arranged the pair neatly on the bar. ‘If we’d been forced to admit it was all our doing.’ He held her feet and with his fingertips pulled at the heels of her stockings. ‘And the king slung out and replaced by the Bolshevik rabble. Our coalfields and factories looted.’ When the stockings had come away he took her by the hand and eased her off the counter. ‘And our colonies parcelled out, and Scotland and Wales and Ireland and Cornwall made a new ring of enemies to keep us weak.’ She raised her arms and made herself giggle as the shocking pink dress slid over her head. ‘And no army, or navy, or air force,’ said Jeremy, ‘and no union allowed with our friends abroad.’ She was uncovered. His hands pinned her arms to her sides. ‘And made to pay in cash and kind forever.’ The soft press of his kiss was not like the scratch of his fingernails as they clawed into her waist and her behind. ‘And meanwhile the bacillus spreads and spreads until nothing remains but a ball of dirt.’ He undressed and arranged her flat on the carpet. His chest hair now pressed down on her skin. ‘What do you think, Rose?’

‘I’m not Rose,’ she whispered in his ear.

She shut her eyes and waited and held on to him and it was hot and wet and hurt but she was now his Rose.

‘Who is this Rose?’ he’d declared a month ago as he emerged from the generator shed, and she had muttered and blushed and confessed her name as if she’d done something worse than trespassing. ‘I prefer Rose,’ he said. ‘You are a perfect Rose. Rose Thou Art.’ When the tennis

ball plopped onto the court behind them, he stared up at the sky. 'Look, Rose Thou Art, it's made of velvet up there.'

That was a month ago. It was August now. The night sky looked like black tin. She did take off the dress and found herself standing in her underthings. Back up at Marmara, no Jeremy appeared in the window in a lightning flash. She didn't want to be Rose any more. She wanted to be Mavis. The name her mum and dad had given her. Mavis. Plays a bit of tennis. Makes sure the clock is wound. Never loses track of time. Mavis Hardcastle. It was a nice name, reliable and decent, whatever Jeremy said.

A smooth, bright stone shone in the foam at the sea's edge. She scooped it up and used it to weigh down the envelope that she'd already wrapped in the dress and left on the beach. She turned back to the moon and started to wade into the sea. A pressure on her legs sent a spike of tingles into her stomach. The smell of brine and wind and rot. The tin sky and the sea. Out there, she imagined France as glowing red. Jeremy said that France was teeming with reds. When the water reached her thighs she could no longer open her mouth to yelp with each swell. When it covered her middle, she heard voices behind her. Men on the beach. 'Missy.' 'Miss.' Their voices harsher, more urgent. A dog barked and splashed. But Mavis was striding, strong now, the water up to her elbows and lifting her up and engulfing her neck and her shoulders, striding away from the voices, towards the reds on the horizon, the dashing crimsons, the delightful scarlets and the wonderful rubies.