

A HOME OF OUR OWN

After many disappointing and tiring months of searching for a house, we had nearly abandoned hope. Every Estate Agent in the locality had our names on his books. Every postal delivery brought a varied selection of seemingly desirable properties and we spent most of our spare time in visiting even the most unlikely ones. Yet, in every property we considered, there always seemed to be some major drawback. It would be too far from my work, the rooms would be too small, the garden, too large. And, nine times out of ten, it would be I who found fault and raised all the objections; I who explained to a sceptical Agent that we were desperate but it was not quite what we wanted. Ann would insert that it was not quite what I wanted, and would then just let the matter lie. I would maintain that it was no use buying the wrong house and being stuck with it but, looking back now, I realise that I went out of my way to find faults where others would have found none.

The property specifications began to decrease in numbers. Some Estate Agents quickly came to the conclusion that there was no pleasing me and that I was not serious about buying. They were of course wrong because then, from the very depths of the property barrel, came the details of the cottage. Instantly as I scanned the sheet I knew that we would have to look no further. This was the One!

Ann had her doubts and expressed them. Her doubts blossomed into fears when we visited the cottage but, for me, it remained the One. We went out with the apologetic Estate Agent and, whilst we walked around, he described the cottage's history. It had stood empty since just before the second World War and had been owned by a woman of great antiquity from Yorkshire. She had intended it to be a wedding present for her niece but the unfortunate young lady had died a few weeks before the date of the wedding. That had happened some years ago but the woman could not bring herself to sell the cottage which had stood neglected, unmaintained, gradually overgrown. Fences had fallen, bushes exploded, roses ran riot. Here, in splendid isolation, Nature had stepped in and claimed her own.

The woman was now dead and the cottage was, in accordance with the terms of her Will, to be sold. It was the occasion for me, once in my life, to encounter an Agent who was not convinced that the place he was selling was the best on anyone's books, a bargain that could not be passed over. Instead he crept around, tentatively, as if he was ashamed of having to handle the place, and I found my patience waning with every word. All these points he was raising, all these defects he showed us, they were trivial!

Ann became suspicious. I could see the suspicion turn to disappointment and resentment in her normally placid face. Her anger was directed at me, not because of the condition of the property we were examining, but because, in her view, we had seen and I had turned down, so many which were superior. It did not affect me or my judgement. I was convinced even before we reached the place. There could be no question. This was the One!

Despite my rose-tinted view, I had to acknowledge the state of disrepair and semi-dereliction. I had to accept that it might require weeks of work before we could move in, but we had been waiting this long, why not wait a little more? As we looked around, Ann found, in this one structure, the whole catalogue of faults, major and minor, that I had formerly found and used to reject all those others in the past. It was dirty, but it could be cleaned. It was damp, but a good fire and lighting the range would dry it out. Ann said that it would be better to burn it to the ground and that it was not fit for human habitation, while I heard myself tell the Agent, in a distant and detached voice, that it was just the place we were looking for. He was surprised, not to put too fine a point on it, and Ann was shocked and argued, but I was deaf to their reactions. A strange force had possessed me and, seduced by the hidden charm of the cottage, I was already

repairing this, painting that, building a cupboard there, placing the television here, planning the future and, I am afraid, slipping into the past.

I worked hard to placate Ann and persuade her that we were doing the right thing. We could have gone on for ever, looking for the ideal place, never finding it. Now we were buying this cottage for a fraction of its potential and we could spend all the money that we would save turning it into a dream home. Out of character, Ann continued to argue, passionately, but I remained adamant. I think it must have been my unshakeable confidence and enthusiasm that won her over in the end. It might also have been my love, but I doubt even that, now. In any event, we bought the cottage.

We moved in around the end of August, after the Bank Holiday, in time to harvest the benefit of the brambles that had overrun the front garden. Ann faced the disruption and the uphill autumnal task with bravery while I was seized with a frenzied excitement which dominated everything else in my life. It acted like a tonic and I rushed around tackling the most formidable tasks without the slightest compunction. Into that cottage, redressing the years of neglect, I poured all my time, energy, our savings and, I now realise, our love.

Everything went smoothly for six or seven weeks until, one afternoon, I started clearing the front garden which had been low on the list of priorities. The front gate was missing from the dry stone wall but it came near the bottom of my list of "jobs to be done". Now, under the brambles near a vast laurel bush, I found it, lying face down, some distance from its original location. Ann was there, by my side, as I lifted it, then dropped it, face uppermost, on the path. A strange silence ensued as we studied the decaying wood, trying to make out the name that had once been inscribed there. Letters were missing and it was difficult to interpolate the words. It was Ann who spoke. "Woden Place," she said in a whisper.

A tingle of excitement gripped me as I turned to look at Ann, feeling almost triumphant, though God knows why. Her face was drained of blood, marble white, her lips moving but wordless as if she could not, or dared not, speak further. Seconds flashed by as we stood there, rooted, as tension mounted, until she suddenly turned and ran back into the cottage. Later, when I went in, I could see that she had been crying. She said nothing and we never again mentioned the strange atmosphere that had arisen out there, in the garden.

I burnt the gate on a large bonfire. It comprised rubbish and debris from the cottage and garden. As I watched the crimson and yellow flames I was stirred by a primitive thrill and caressed the impression that I was offering a sacrifice. And so I was. I was not at all surprised when Fausta appeared two days later.

Her materialisation possessed me and filled me with a new energy as I set about the redecoration. She did not speak. We both remained silent. She would appear in a dream or I would suddenly become aware of her sat beside me as I watched "Gunsmoke" whilst Ann was at her mother's, something she did every Friday, sometimes staying away overnight. Fausta was careful and never visited me when Ann was present, only when I was alone or asleep. I dared not talk to her for fear that I would scare her away and the precious image would be destroyed; that image that I once tried so hard, but in vain, to conjure up. However, I knew that matters could not continue this way for ever. Decorating progressed and we were happy, all three of us, it seemed. At least I found myself happier, perhaps, than at any other time in my life, although I knew it could not last. It did not.

I had never mentioned Fausta to Ann. It never seemed appropriate. If anything good had ever happened to me, it was Fausta, or so I thought. Our meeting appeared to be predestined. We were drawn together by a multitude of accidents and occurrences, meetings which seemed, at the time, chance coincidences but which were, I now see, ordained by Fate. Slowly our lives came together and interwove as if they were meant to be one. We found each other, travelled the same way, at the same time, in the same mode, to the same destiny. "This is love," I told myself as I bathed in the rich sunlight of Fausta's being. "This will surpass even Death," Fausta had said,

radiant, confident. She was all things to me and I believed her. I could not believe in Death; I could not comprehend that anything could destroy my love or my life, and Fausta was both. We would live for ever.

It is written that what the Lord gives, so shall he take away. It was to be. Fausta's source of life giving energy, the hidden reserve that fed her will and radiance, shrivelled. Unbeknown to either of us, her life was eaten away from within and a few weeks before the wedding, as I sat and held her hand, I could not stop her from passing from this world. She knew she was dying and implored me not to worry. This would be for us a mere, brief, interlude, a trivial separation. Her love would transcend the grave. She would be waiting for me in the beyond, faithful, loving, pure. Kneeling there, at her bedside, I promised solemnly that I would remain faithful to her until we could be reunited. With these words she died happy and peacefully, her tranquil beauty moving all who saw her. I was left behind, in this World, heartbroken.

The world is a desperate and lonely place, and life here is cruelly long for one who has only dying to live for. I knew that suicide would not achieve our reunification. No, that would have guaranteed eternal damnation and inevitable separation. Days passed slowly, collecting themselves into weeks, months and years. The sorrow continued to bleed and the unhealing wound opened up deep wells of depression which reached down and penetrated my soul.

Ann was innocent of all this. She never asked about my past but, in her shrewd assessment, knew that therein lay misery and a stone that should not be turned once cast. In her was, she mothered me, perhaps pitied me, then fell in love with me. I have to admit that recollections of Fausta dimmed whilst Ann remained alive, attentive, and loving. Occasionally, I would fall into moods of guilt and despair, but Ann never flinched and, imperceptibly, I grew to respect and, in a way, love her. Marriage was never mentioned, but it grew as a foretellable result of our relationship. I buried the past and started to live for the future, a future built around Ann.

But you cannot ignore the past. Buried it might be in a heap of memories, but it remains there as real now as it was a year or more ago. If you leave a city, it is still there even if you are one year and a thousand miles away. So it was with Fausta. Ann knew that there was something there, troubling me, but she did not ask. She patiently waited for me to tell her.

Winter came early that year. With Ann on one hand happy but now cautious, and a silent, moody, spectral Fausta on the other, my conscience started to bother me. My dreams became more disturbed and the nightmares started. Slowly and persistently, the old depression began to seep back into my mind, threatening to eclipse my feelings for my living wife. The loss of sleep, of course, made me irritable and tired. It would do that to anyone. Ann remained strangely calm and this irritated me all the more. My energy and enthusiasm waned. The decorating slowed. I blamed the dark nights, the short days, the bad weather, the damp, my insomnia, and lumbago. I sat about every evening, aimlessly watching the banality of the television whilst one last room remained untouched.

It was a small bedroom, large enough to take a single bed and a chest of drawers, but little else. We left it until the last and used it as a store for the odd items of furniture displaced by the work elsewhere and the paint and wallpaper. Now it was there, the last remaining obstacle in the path, and I was seeking that last grain of energy and will power to overcome it.

“What's the matter?” murmured Ann, softly snuggling up to me one evening before an angry fire. I watched the flames quiver and then leap out into the room as if a gale had surged down the chimney. Ann was startled, but I knew it was Fausta and, sure enough, after the flame's warmth her icy hand touched my neck. I moved away sharply - from Ann, not from Fausta. Ann was puzzled, but she was patient. She always was patient. Perhaps had she been a little more volatile, a little more impatient, matters might have taken another course, but she was unable to relieve the pressures of passion that were damming up inside her and I was too preoccupied to notice.

The winter was severe. The snow fell thick and persistent, lingering throughout January and renewing itself in February. It was at its peak, and I was getting ready for work, when Ann asked, "Who's Fausta?" I was quite unprepared. I had not heard the sound of her mane on human lips for so long and now it echoed down the dark caverns of the past, reverberating in the very air we breathed, gradually contaminating it. "Fausta?" she repeated, her face flushed with emotion to the roots of her blonde hair, her delicate hands clenched in an attitude of both defence and despair. "I have the name right, have I? It was Fausta?"

"I am late!" I snapped and left the breakfast rejected and uneaten on the table. It was symbolic of my treatment of her and her love. Ann later threw it in the dustbin. I had never set out for work so early. I hardly knew what to do. Fausta was there, sat beside me in the car as it slid and plunged over the icy roads. I realised she was speaking. No more was it a voice inside my head that I alone could hear, but now, within the car, her words were loud and audible.

"Why?" she repeated. Terror possessed me and the car careered from the road into a ditch. Fausta was unconcerned. She remained as unruffled and serene as she had been in life, but now she was pregnant with an unfathomable melancholy for which I knew I was to blame. "Why?" she said again, with a note of bitterness. "Why didn't you wait? Why didn't you have faith in me? Why did your love die at my graveside whilst I must wait an eternity without you, loving you?" I did not answer. Nor did I have the courage to turn and look at her, but sat still, watching the snow gradually build up on the windscreen.

"I died bound in love to you," she continued. "What made you think that my death released you from that bondage?" The word puzzled me and I turned to look at her. Her face was white and expressionless and her dark eyes looked beyond me, piercing my soul, reading my thoughts. "Yes," she continued, "I suppose you are weak. I suppose that you always were. I hoped that my love would fortify you and give you strength. I staked my life on the perpetuity of your love and now it is lost and I am doomed."

Feeling wretched, I turned away, my thoughts in turmoil. What could I say or do? I sat there for hours, watching the countryside, virgin white upon brown, absolute purity obscuring the dirt, knowing which would triumph in the end. With the thaw it would all vanish, melt and rage down to the expectant fathoms of the oceans, rivuletting in turbulent streams, though flooded plains and swollen, fatal, rivers. Like our love, this peaceful and serenely beautiful scene harboured the seeds of violence, destruction, and death.

Fausta had long left me when a kindly farmer towed me out with his Land Rover. The car was not damaged, but I arrived very late at work. Ann had telephoned, but when I tried to call her back to reassure her, there was no reply and I sensed trouble. I did not know what to expect as I raced home. My imagination ran through a pageant of lurid scenes and my anxiety rose. Ann was there, waiting for me, when I arrived. I sensed that something had changed. She was distant and aloof and, in a controlled outpouring, she accused me of having an affair. I now resolved to tell her about Fausta, her manifestations, the car crash, and

I vaguely remember the room growing dark and spinning. I have still the mental picture of catching sight of Ann's face before the throbbing pain took possession of my body, overpowering my senses. As my limbs failed to respond, the sweat broke throughout my body and I spiralled downwards, like a leaf on the wind, into oblivion. The fever lasted three days and in my delirium I was visited with grotesque nightmares. When reality broke through, Ann was there, soothing and patient, still loving, still caring, but it was always Fausta's name on my lips. She now dominated me with a menacing presence.

One particular dream occurred again and again. In it, Ann was learning to play the piano, something she detested having to be forced to do as a child. The piano was old, as was her teacher whom I should have recognised because he happened to be Fausta's favourite composer. Ann was making little progress and after early coaxing the teacher would suddenly lose his temper. And every time, no matter how much I tried to escape or arrest the progress of the dream,

events would follow the same course. Fausta would appear, ceremoniously bearing a rolled manuscript which she would hand to the teacher. Then, with the air of a sacrificial priest from antiquity, he would raise the roll of paper above the terrified student who appeared to be bound to the keyboard and unable to move, and strike. Time after time I watched, helpless with disbelief, as the manuscript shattered her skull as if it had been a sword. Time after time, Fausta would turn to me and say with an uncharacteristic smile, "Your wishes have been fulfilled my lord. The sacrifice has been made."

Four weeks passed before I was on the road to recovery from that severe attack of influenza. March began fiercely, with storms of rain and sleet, but our home was warm and cosy and, cosseted inside, I recovered my full strength. The nightmares ceased, but the memory of them remained and as my strength returned so did my sanity and my love for Ann. The horror of those dreams worked like a catalyst, building and reinforcing the bond with my living wife and, as this process synthesised, Fausta's visits became increasingly infrequent, weaker, yet more desperate.

We talked enthusiastically of completing the decoration of the last room. Ann suggested it should be a nursery but I instinctively rejected her idea. We agreed that it should become a study and a workroom. One Friday, in early April, I decided to start. Ann drove over to see her mother, electing to stay the night and return the next day as my work was likely to run on, into the small hours of the morning. I worked solidly for the five hours up to midnight, stripping the walls and paint work. Progress was good and, quite satisfied, I went to the kitchen to make a cup of coffee. When I returned to the room, ten minutes later, everything had changed and its appearance was quite different.

"Come in," said a soft, familiar voice. Fausta was there, in a provocative negligee, seductively supine on a coverletted bed. I was shocked. I had never seen her dressed in that way before and I advanced cautiously into the room. A small, neat, feminine dressing table and a bookcase had appeared as well as the bed. A lilac shaded bedside lamp provided the only, soft, illumination. On one wall, running around to finish over the door, was a high shelf crammed with sheet music, books, manuscripts with busts of famous composers acting as bookends. I moved to the bottom of the bed and stood by the bookcase. Fausta was smiling and in her smile I detected a trace of cruelty, even evil. "This was my bedroom," she said. "You didn't know that, did you?" Confused, I failed to grasp the significance of the words at the time. "I spent many hours here, brooding, lonely, planning, praying. This is my room. It is part of me. Don't look so surprised. I am determined to have you. I am not pleading any more. I will do anything it takes to keep you! Absolutely anything!"

I was frightened and speechless and, in my agitation, I did not hear the front door. The first thing I knew of Ann's presence was when the bedroom door burst open and she was upon us. "I thought so!" Ann cried. "I thought you were up to something!" She looked from me to Fausta. "Who's this, then? Need I ask?"

Fausta was unperturbed and smiled. "I knew that you'd come back," she murmured with venomous sweetness. Ann flew at her and in that instance, oblivious to the impossibility of the situation, I thrust myself between the two of them, colliding heavily with my wife. As I fell backwards to the floor, I saw Ann stumble against the half open door and collapse onto her knees. And I saw, with unforgettable horror, one of the book ends roll from the shelf above her and fall, with a dull thud, on her head. In the ghastly instance that followed, her skull split neatly in two, disgorging its contents forward onto the carpet. With Fausta's laughter ringing in my ears, I pitched forward into absolute oblivion.

The sound of someone hammering on the front door awoke me. I was in the kitchen, slumped forward across the table and as I gathered my senses I realised it was still dark outside. The kitchen clock stood at twenty minutes to two. The knocking persisted and feebly I made my way out into the passage. The door to the bedroom was slightly ajar and I pulled in shut without

looking in. Consternation followed confusion. A uniformed policeman stood grimly on the doorstep and requested entry into the cottage. Reluctantly, fearful of what lay in the bedroom, I admitted him.

“Can we go into your lounge, sir?” he said in his matter-of-fact voice. I knew that something was dreadfully wrong, but what? How could they possibly know of the terrible thing that had happened there only an hour or so earlier. How was I to keep the policeman from looking into that room? I confirmed, again, my name, that Ann was my wife, and the registration of our car. I was going to add that my wife had gone to see her mother, was staying the night, and would not be home until morning when he stopped me.

“I'm afraid that there has been a very bad accident, sir. We think that the car may have skidded on the ice. Your wife was driving and, I am afraid, she was killed instantaneously. We would like you to come and formally identify her body, but I must warn you, sir, she had a very nasty injury to her head. The pathologist is still trying to establish what actually caused the injury.”

“When did this happen,” I said weakly.

“Just after midnight, sir,” said the policeman. He must have thought I had been driven mad with grief as I dashed out of the kitchen and threw open the door to Fausta's room. It was just as I had left it earlier, bare walls, paint stripped, illuminated by a single, naked, bulb suspended from the ceiling. Fausta was beside me.

“There,” she said, “you see I have won. I have got you now. We can share the cottage. It will be a home of our own.”

I followed the policeman out into the night. I would never return, but there would be no escape, ever.

THE END