

# *ABBA ABBA*

*I would reject a petrarchal coronation – on account of my dying day,  
and because women have cancers.*

JOHN KEATS

*To LIANA*

**ONE**

## One

‘Isaac,’ he said. ‘Marmaduke. Which of the two do you more seem to yourself to be?’ He mused smiling among the ilex trees. The dome of San Pietro down there in the city was grape-hued in the citron twilight.

‘I have never much cared for either name,’ said Lieutenant Elton of the Royal Engineers. ‘At school they called me Ikey Marmalade.’

‘We’re both edibles then. Junkets, me.’

‘Junkets? Oh yes. Jun Kets.’

‘To be eaten by Fairy Mab.’

Elton did not catch the reference. He took out his handkerchief, coughed harshly into it, then examined the sputum in the lemon dusk. Satisfied with what he saw, he wrapped it and stowed it in his pocket. He said:

‘It’s the mildness here that is good. The winter will be very mild, you will see. Extremes are bad. On St Helena a raging summer is ready to begin. Not good for the lungs, that climate. Not good for the liver. Not good for anything.’

‘You spoke with Bony at all?’

‘He waved his arms and said something about earthquakes or it may have been earthworks. Or earthworms, for that matter. I could not understand his French very well. I saw him digging a lot. *Il faut cultiver notre jardin*, he shouted at me. That’s from the atheist Voltaire.’

‘You don’t admire Voltaire?’

‘A damned atheist.’

‘Here comes his sister.’

‘Voltaire’s?’

‘No, no, no. God in heaven, here truly comes his sister. To us.’ Pauline Bonaparte glided in the dimming light, a couple of servants behind her, taking her evening walk on the Pincio. Elegant, lovely, with a fine style of countenance of the lengthened sort, finestrilled, fine-eyed, she peered with fine eyes at the taller and more handsome of the two young men, gliding closer to peer better. Elton stood stiffly as though on adjutant’s parade, suffering the inspection. She smiled and nodded and glided on. His friend laughed, though nervously.

‘Fairy Mab will have you.’

‘Ah no. Ah no she’ll not. I’m no whoremaster.’

‘Faithful to the one at home?’

‘Yes, you could say faithful.’

John brooded. ‘I too. The animal ecstasy of the flesh denied to us. We’re not winds to play on that Aeolian Harp.’

‘What Aeolian Harp?’

‘Her as Venus Reclining. Canova’s work, apt for the hallway of a warehouse. To be played on by any wind that blows, gale, zephyr, postcena eructation.’ He paused to take in shallow breaths while Elton looked puzzled. ‘Can they be disjointed, disjuncted, disjunketed?’

‘What?’ They turned, in Pauline’s far wake, towards the Spanish Steps.

‘Love and the animal ecstasy.’

‘It is ennobled,’ said Lieutenant Elton RE, ‘by love. It ceases to be animal and becomes divine.’

‘In what bad poet did you read that?’

‘I read no poetry. I read only engineering manuals and the Holy Bible.’

‘And Marmaduke said unto Isaac: Get thee gone and build thee an earthworm, earthwork I would say. And lo it was done and earth did quake with the work thereof.’

‘I think you laugh at me much of the time.’

‘Kindly, though. You will admit kindly.’ They started going

down the Steps. ‘And talking of kindly, would it not be a kindly act to accost the Divine Pauline and speak of her brother, saying he is well and digging hard?’

‘He is not well. They say he will be dead this time next year.’ And then: ‘Accost. I will keep out of the way of her accosting.’

‘You will be no accostermonger.’

‘You laugh at me much of the time.’

They had come all the way down the Steps, quieter now than in the daytime, and John led Elton to the Barcaccia, whose water music could, with the evening stilling of the piazza, be clearly heard. ‘This,’ John said, ‘tries to sing me to sleep.’

‘You really are a poetical sort of fellow. And you have really brought out a book?’

‘Alas.’

Elton chuckled uneasily. ‘Will we meet tomorrow?’

‘Under the ilexes. I’ve been searching for a rhyme for ilex. We have a terrible language for rhymes, Isaac Marmaduke. It makes poetical engineering most difficult. Here the people shout in rhyme without reason. Put on your armour, duke, be calmer, duke, cried Marmaduke. We’re always being betrayed into comedy. You see how difficult it all is. From the sublime to the ridiculous is but a step.’

‘That’s what Bony said. After the retreat out of Russia.’

‘He may go down in history as a great theoretician of the arts. Well, Mr Elton sir, under the ilexes let it be.’ Elton, though in civilian dress, sketched a salute and loped off across the piazza towards the Caffé Greco. John stood a while by Bernini’s broken marble boat, listening to the water music. He tried to identify himself with the water, to be the water, to feel the small sick parcel of flesh that was himself liquefy joyfully, joyfully relish its own wetness and singing clarity. He sprang back with a start into nerve and bone to find a hand on his arm. James Clark, his doctor, with a smiling stranger. Clark said:

‘Ye should be hame the noo, Master Keats. The nicht air –’

‘Is nae halesome. Aye, I ken.’ The stranger looked puzzled with the very puzzlement of Lieutenant Elton. ‘I mean no mockery,’ John

said. 'Doctor Clark knows that his deliberate use of Scotch inspires confidence. Scotch engineers, Scotch doctors –'

'Scotch reviewers,' said the stranger.

'Somehow I knew you understood English.'

'This is Mr Keats,' Clark said. 'This is Signor Giovanni Gulielmi, man of letters and citizen of Rome.'

'I know your work,' said Gulielmi. 'I know your *Endymion* well –'

'Ah, no, not that botched mawkery.'

'Also your volume of this year. Would you call that too a botched mockery?'

'Mawkery,' John corrected. 'A neologism. The critics were always on to me for making up words. A real writer, they seemed to imply, would get all his words from Johnson's Dictionary. Sorry, I seem to start with a mockery and continue with a rebuke. You speak English excellent well, before God, with a right slight accent of the North. I would I had but a hundredth of that skill in the Tuscan.'

'In, in,' urged Clark, impelling John by the elbow. 'Is Mr Severn already at home?'

'I let my keeper loose for the evening. He has gone to see the sculptures of a certain Mr Ewing.'

'William Ewing,' Gulielmi said. 'He has a certain small talent. His figures are recognisably figures, one may say so much.'

'I envy,' John panted, climbing the marble stairway to the second floor of Number 26, 'any man who can carve marble. To climb it,' seeing old Mr Gibson come from the top floor, candle-lighted by his French valet, 'is for me, in my present state,' having just visited Mr O'Hara up there, 'work enough. Your servant, sir.'

'Evening, evening,' old Mr Gibson growled, passing, candle proceeding.

'Easy, man, easy,' said Clark, trying to pull John to a standstill by his coattail. 'There's all the time in the world.' Then he emended: 'I the worrrruul.'

John led his visitors into the parlour. Light was fading. He looked panting for candles. Panting less, he sat with Clark and Gulielmi, their shadow selves sitting huge upon the walls. 'Wine,' he said.

‘Tell me where the wine is,’ said Gulielmi, getting up. ‘Ah, I see it, I think.’

‘Your English is astonishingly good, signore.’

‘Not astonishingly. My maternal grandfather came from Manchester and was a staunch Stuart man. Disgusted and, indeed, disgraced by the failure of the rebellion of 1745, he exiled himself to Italy. He died recently, very old, in an apartment of the Castello on the lake of Bracciano. He was still brooding on the lost Stuart cause, execrating the puddingy Hanoverians, as he called them. My mother, his daughter, keeps my English alive, as does my work as a translator. Our friend Dr Clark has, I fear, little sympathy for the Pretenders. I, though an Anglo-Italian, am a better Scot than he.’ He smiled though, pouring the cheap golden Roman table wine, all that John and Severn could afford.

‘A question of faith,’ Clark said. ‘My family is allied to the Knoxes, meaning the great Knox who preached against Mary our Jezebel mistress. As for the Hanoverians, I’ll serve them. As for puddingy, your bonny prince was puddingy enough.’

‘You then, sir I will say and no longer signore, are of the Romish faith?’ And then at once: ‘Oh, it seems I must spend all this evening in apology, for both stupidity and boorishness. Of course you are of the faith, and Romish is a stupid word. For my part, I belong to nothing. I recognise,’ looking at Clark, ‘that it might still my soul in face of we know what if I belonged to something. But it is too late, I think. Severn, if I may speak so without disloyalty, does not in his work *in his work* bear the best witness for the Christian creed. It does not help his art, shall I say. Too gentle-Jesus feathery where the iron groin should show through.’

‘Art,’ said Clark, ‘is no, not everything.’

‘Religious,’ Gulielmi said, wine up for sipping. ‘To be religious is to respond to the numinous. It does not have to be your Mr Severn’s gentle Jesus. I have read your poems. You treat Apollo, may I say, as a living numen.’

John turned big eyes on him that flashed in the candles. ‘He is not mocked,’ he said. ‘That god is not mocked. That god can punish.’

‘Punish may be, but no save,’ Clark said.



‘Save, yes, that too,’ John said fiercely. ‘I will say that only he can save. This you should know, as he is also the god of healing. It was to that side of him I was first led. I was,’ he told Gulielmi, ‘once a small sawbones.’

‘I had heard that.’

‘I knew that I was to serve one god, but I had mistaken which of his aspects it was to be. Save, yes, save. What does it profit a man to become a saint in heaven? What does it profit them he leaves behind?’

‘He can intercede,’ Gulielmi said, with mock primness, ‘at the Throne of the Most High.’

‘Saints do not create goodness, they but exemplify it. As for those called by Apollo, they *make* truth, they *make* beauty. They create, and in creating create also themselves. Let us not talk of the Christian God’s part in the everlasting making and remaking of the world.’

‘Ye’re unco excited, man,’ in deliberate Scotch. ‘It will dae your stomach nae sort o’ guid to be in that state.’

‘My stomach will do well enough,’ John said stiffly. ‘It is not my stomach I have to worry about.’

‘The trouble with the lungs is past. It is in the stomach, it is the stomach that must be watched.’

‘Dr Clark,’ John said firmly, ‘I took this to be a social visit. In the presence of Signor or Mr Gulielmi this talk of stomachs is to say the least unseemly.’

I take to him, thought Gulielmi. He is a little man and no more than a boy, but he comports himself with Apollonian dignity. I take to the large eyes and the quivering nose and the big overlip, the strong chin, the hair that is both fire and cornfield. Can he live to be a poet? He cannot breathe well, but he looks well supplied of energy. He said: ‘I will be happy to hear of stomachs in a capacity not clinical. Are you eating well here in Rome?’

‘Now well,’ John said. ‘Filthily before. But I threw our imported dinner out of that window two afternoons ago. Scrawny raw chicken and filthy macaroni and filthier rice pudding out on to the steps for the dogs to pounce on. So the point was well taken and the trattoria now sends up food we can eat. The action was better than any speech. It was done with a smile and the fellow with the basket smiled too.’

‘And your Italian, how is your Italian?’

‘I read Dante with the help of Cary’s translation. Reading is, however, not speaking.’

‘You must learn our Roman speech, it may amuse you.’

‘There’s hardly time.’ It was said without self-pity. They heard boots on marble approaching. ‘Severn,’ said John. ‘Sabrina fair.’ The young man who entered, mouth open smilingly as to drink in cheerfully whatever the evening sent by way of company, was indeed fair though somewhat washed out, his good looks girlish enough. He was introduced to Gulielmi. He said, with an atrocious accent:

*‘Parla bene il signore la nostra lingua.’*

John said: ‘It’s his mother’s – ItaloJacobite exilic, Charlie is my darling. How were the Ewing marbles?’

‘I think,’ said Severn reverently, ‘he has an exquisite talent. There is a quality of true sentiment, the stone eyes have a look positively languishing in one of his demure maidens. He has done a pair of spaniels that belie their marble. His marble comes from Pietrasanta, where Michelangelo got his. That alone makes him take fire. Oh yes, exquisite work.’

‘Alas alas,’ Gulielmi said, ‘it was not the marble that Michelangelo would have chosen if he had had any say in the matter. His and everyone’s preferred blocks come from Carrara. But he was at work on Medici commissions and the Medici family owned the Pietrasanta quarries and imposed their stuff upon him. Soft and dirty he called it.’ The poet’s eyes smiled. I take to him, thought Gulielmi.

‘Ewing in Italy,’ John said, ‘hewing so prettily.’

‘Oh, very prettily, John,’ Severn said. ‘You must come, you will be impressed.’

‘I must be impressed to come, press-ganged. I have had my fill of marble and only half-digested it. The Elgins, I chew their cud still. Give us some music, Severn. Something not too melting.’

All this time, nursing his rebuke, Clark had said nothing. Now he said: ‘Haydn.’

John smiled and said: ‘We are grateful, Dr Clark, you must know that. For the loan of your music. For much else.’ Clark reluctantly smiled back.

Severn pulled at his fingers, cracking them, then sat at the ill-tuned pianoforte they had rented. He played the first movement of a Haydn sonata, one in D major. John leaned on the instrument, surveying Severn's dancing or walking fingers in wonder. 'He's like a child,' he said in glee at the end. 'You never know what he will do next.'

Severn looked faintly offended. 'I can assure you, John, I followed the notes as written.'

'I meant Haydn, not you. And yet we *do* know what he will do next. I dedicate this evening to the bubbling out of stupidities. Play that movement again and I will know what he is going to do next. If I could read those hieroglyphics I would see it all planned, not at all childlike.' In comic gloom, 'It justifies or vindicates or something Dr Clark's John Calvin. All planned from start to end and I am fool enough to talk of childish unpredictability.' He chuckled. 'Still, it is a good impersonation of childlikeness. Not like old Willy Wordsworth.'

Severn did not attack the second movement. He folded his hands and looked up in reproach. 'These days you laugh at everything.'

'Not at everything, Sabrina. I do not laugh at our comic writers.'

'I think,' Gulielmi said, 'you must plunge into our Roman dialect at once. It is not like the Tuscan. Its very make and sound is different. And it has never had the terrible dantesco vision imposed on it. It does not have that sense of high responsibility that for half a millennium the tongue of Florence has had to bear. The Roman tongue is coarse and rough and full of the Rabelaisian. There are, for instance, hundreds of words to describe, to describe, well, the—'

'Ah,' John said, 'I see we are on the verge of bawdry. Can you *stomach* some of that commodity, Dr Clark? Severn can drown his ears in Haydn.'

'I have a friend,' Gulielmi said, 'a poet, scholar, actor, a fine-looking man, a fine man altogether, who did an admirable thing and then, in a sort of pudic remorse, destroyed it. His copy, that is. I had and have my own. A sonnet based on the Roman cant terms for the ah male pudendum. A long sonnet.'

'I do not think, with respect,' John said, 'you may speak of a long sonnet.'

‘Come, you will have met sonnets with codas. Petrarch wrote them. Your, our, Milton wrote one too.’

‘I’m stupid again. Of course. A sonnet on the penis with a tail. Just, very just. Who is your friend?’

‘A man tugged many ways – towards respectability, even holiness, towards the dirty suffering life of the holy and unholy city the papal rule has made, on its surface, somewhat dull and conforming. You see, sir, we may love our popes spiritually but, in the secular sphere, be unhappy about them. However. If you want laughter here, you will find it in the obscenity of desperation.’

‘That,’ John said, his face glowing in the pianoforte candles, ‘is a fine phrase, obscenity of desperation is a.’

‘I will give you a fine word,’ Gulielmi said, ‘that you will not find in Dante. It is for the male organ and it is *dumpennente*. Is not that a fine word?’

‘I think,’ Dr Clark said, in unscotch, ‘Mr Keats has had enough excitement for the evening. I would say it is time for him to go to his bed.’

‘Taking with him his lonely *dumpennente*,’ John said. He kissed the delicious word. ‘*Duuuuuum* – A pendent pen, dumb and in the dumps.’

‘Yes, you see the way Roman language operates. An n and a d following become a double n. *Dumpendente*. The origin of course is the Latin *dum pendebat*. You catch the reference? No?’

*Stabat mater dolorosa*  
*Apud lignum lachrymosa*  
*Dum pendebat filius.’*

‘An unholy reference, if I may say so,’ Severn said, unwontedly assertive, the Haydn slow movement evidently not now to be attacked.

‘Come, Mr Severn, I take you to be of the Reformed Faith. It is our *Stabat Mater*, not yours, and we may do blasphemies with it if we will.’

‘Blasphemy is blasphemy.’

‘One and indivisible,’ said John with joy. ‘Severn gets his *Stabat Mater* from Haydn or Mozart or somebody. But how wonderful – *dum pendebat* – while he was hanging. From the cross, from the crotch. But this is exquisite, and in no feathery way. This is the good groiny iron. You’ve given me a fine present, Mr Gulielmi.’

‘There are more in store, if you will have them.’

‘We will go,’ Dr Clark said sternly. He returned to Scotch, language of health and holiness, for his patient. ‘Ye’re unco excitable, ye ken that? Bye and bye I maun consider what tae dae wi’ yon stomach.’

John facetiously took the yon for a true yonder and peered for the stomach in the corner shadows. ‘Aye,’ he then smiled. ‘Bye and bye is easily said. I do not mock. Remember I am still, on engrossed and wax-sigillaed parchment, of your confraternity. I do not think it is the stomach.’

‘We will see.’

‘Alas, yes. *You* will see.’

When the visitors had left, Severn and John looked at each other. Severn brought the pianoforte lid gently down and looked again. John’s eyes were now dulled, stilled, the lids brought gently down. He was sitting with left foot on right knee, shoe off, fondling his instep. He said:

‘You were shocked. You will be shocked more before we are done.’

‘It is not to my taste, no more than that. It will seem namby pamby to you that I spoke so, but it is the way I was brought up. You are unused to Christians, I know. I think sometimes now of Providence. My being here, I mean.’

‘Cant and humbug, by your leave. Anyway, I talk of bigger shocks. The obscenity not of desperation but of dying. It will not be pretty, like some marble spaniel of Mr Ewing. Are you sure you wish to stay?’

‘If I did not love you I would still speak of my Christian duty. Besides, I do not believe it. You are already better.’

‘In terms of my posthumous life, yes. I am not spewing blood. I fear our friend Clark may be right. I have pains in my stomach. I

may add I have pain in my dumpendebat. Oh no, don't look newly shocked, nothing to do with the clap, big or little. Shall I say that I have loved like a gentleman, meaning to end unfulfilled, not to have cupped those breasts naked or even kissed deeply, and as for the other, the right true end – And I am wrong too to say *gentleman*, because we have been confined by our class which is neither gentlemanly nor ruffianly but plain pure middle, and poets of the middle zone are not permitted, by reason of their small sales, to be married. So I end unsatisfied, Severn my dear boy, and I would curse loudly now if I were not so, ah, spent. Spent without spending.'

'But you have – You told me. I mean, the experience, though not with.'

'I've drabbed, briefly and cheaply. That I try to forget.'

'You really mean,' Severn said, with the eye of fascination all against his better instincts, 'you think she should have – given herself to you?'

'Like you, like Lieutenant Isaac Marmaduke Elton, she accepts the cant of the feathers and the iron meeting holily when the holy words have been burbled. Poets do not marry, though. Not on a sale of fifty copies.'

Severn, still standing by the pianoforte, lifted the limp wings of his arms to waist height then let them limply fall. 'Lord Byron can live on his verse. But who would wish to be Lord Byron?' A candle flickered at that question, and a wind brought the chuckle of the fountain a fraction nearer. 'It is love that is the thing, remember, the warmth of two hearts conjoined. She returns your love.'

'*Dum pendebat* on the *crux* she returned his *amore*. And yet her name, now I say it to myself in this room, Rome I would say where names are tunes –' He was weary. 'The name of any leering fishwife. A seller of headcheese. Give me some of my laudanum, Severn. I need sleep.'

'I gave it to Dr Clark, you know that. I want no repetition of what of what.'

'Happened on the ship to Naples. Good. The suicidal poet must be protected from himself. Good good. Meanwhile I may not sleep.'

'The fountain will send you off. You say it does.'

‘By the waters of babble on there we shat down and flung our arses on the pillows.’

‘That is not funny.’

‘No, merely blasphemous. I blaspheme against love and against both testicles I would say testaments. But a testimony is to do with swearing on one’s balls. An old Roman custom. And there are *two* testaments. Interesting.’

‘If blaspheming makes you more cheerful, then I suppose you must blaspheme,’ Severn said stoically. ‘But I wish there were some other way of making you cheerful.’

Soon John lay in the Roman dark listening to the fountain he thought of as his. It was not a question of being cheerful, rather of shedding the shameful rotting stuff that was himself by making that inner nub which cried I, I, I into the centre of something free of the agony of thought. He tried to turn himself into the music of Haydn that Severn had played, but the image of Severn’s all too human fingers intruded like a meddling elf. As for the water of the fountain, it remained obdurately other, singing mindlessly and unoppressed by time.