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THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR

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PETER PAN AND THE ONLY CHILDREN

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A VOID

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A CLOSED BOOK

GILBERT ADAIR

ff

faber and faber

The blind is flapping at the window again. I don't care what anyone says, there really has to be a draught somewhere. I suppose I might get up and try to fix it. But, no, that's absurd, what on earth could I do? Besides, Ryder will be ringing the doorbell any minute now, or so I hope. He's late already. Slightly as yet, but late all the same. I can't abide unpunctuality. What was it someone said? That the trouble with punctuality is that there's never anyone there to appreciate it. Well, I would have been here to appreciate it! Though, to be fair, if he has motored down from London, it's possible – 'Aha, there he is now' – the weekend traffic has been heavy.

So, Mr Ryder. There you are and here I am. We shall see what we shall see.

'Who is it?'

'It's John Ryder? You were expecting me at three?'

'Yes, I was. Hold on. Let me just undo this damned chain.'

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'No problem.'

'Come on, you! There! Yes, come in, will you.'

'Ah. Oh, well, thank you. I'm – I'm afraid I'm a few minutes late for our appointment, but I –'

'What? Not at all. Virtually on the dot. Which is a real achievement, in view of how isolated the house is. Did you have any problem locating it?'

'Not really. I followed to the letter the directions you gave me and I –'

'Good. Now. Please leave your coat, your things, whatever, on one of the chairs over by that wall. It's simpler than hanging them up.'

'Oh. Righto.'

'Good.'

'Do take the leather armchair. It's far the most comfortable.'

'Thanks.'

'I'll sit here, shall I? But maybe you'd care for a drink? I'm afraid whisky is all I have, but connoisseurs assure me it's good stuff.'

'I won't, thanks anyway. It's a little early for me.'

'Sorry I can't offer you any coffee. My housekeeper isn't around today, and without her it becomes a devilishly complicated business.'

'No, nothing at all, thanks. I'm absolutely fine. I had lunch of a sort on the motorway.'

'Of a sort? Yes, I do sympathize. Not at a Little Chef, I trust?'

'Hah! No, I managed to do better than that. Even so, it was muck.'

'Barbaric, quite barbaric. Ah me, it was – well, you know, Ryder, I was about to say it was ever thus, but the melancholy truth, as perhaps you're too young to realize, is that it wasn't ever thus. You quite comfortable there?'

'Very much so.'

'Good, good. Please feel free to smoke if you'd like to. Here, why not have one of mine? There ought to be an ashtray somewhere.'

'Uh, no thanks. I won't all the same.'

'Oh, I'm sorry. Maybe I put you off by so nonchalantly pulling a cigarette from my dressing-gown pocket?'

'No, not at all.'

'Forgive me. It's an old habit of mine. And I can never quite make up my mind if it's the height of elegance or the height of vulgarity.'

'It wasn't that at all. I've given up.'

'Wise man. Then perhaps we might start?'

'Certainly.'

'Well now, let's see. Given that our telephone conversation was rather laconic, I'm curious to know why you agreed to drive down for the interview.'

'Well?'

'Well, I suppose I—'

'Did it have something to do with the name?'

'The name? I'm afraid I don't follow?'

'My name. You must have noticed how similar to your own it is?'

'Yes, I did. Though I can't honestly claim that that influenced me.'

'Was it who I was, then? Had you heard of me?'

'Well, naturally I had. I'm a great admirer of yours.'

'Look, Ryder, perhaps you'd better tell me something about yourself. How old are you?'

'I'm thirty-three.'

'Thirty-three. And what about your recent past? Your line of work? On the telephone you said something about stocks and shares. Do you work in the City?'

'No, I play the market from home. I've made a packet too.'

'Have you now?'

'It's child's play as long as you're willing to devote all your time and energies to it.'

'So why would you want to exchange such child's play for a leap into the unknown?'

'Frankly, I'm bored.'

'Bored?'

'I'm beginning to feel like one of those loony old crones in Monte Carlo, you know, who stay at the roulette tables till they win exactly what they set out to win then immediately down tools and go home. I sit at the computer, I never see anyone, I never go out. Or if I do go out, I feel guilty and I wonder if something sensational's come up in my absence.'

'And has it?'

'Never. Which is why I feel I've got to do something, something challenging, something stimulating, with my life. Before it's too late.'

'Obviously you've no idea what this job of mine entails?'

'None at all.'

'And that doesn't worry you?'

'Look. All I've committed myself to so far is answering an advertisement in a newspaper and driving down the M40. If what you offer me – assuming you do have something to offer me – if it turns out to be, well, not of interest, then I'll just get back into the car and drive home the way I came.'

'Hmm. I'm pleased you're so candid. I like that. I also like the fact that you're opening up a little. I can imagine how intimidating this situation must be for you.'

'It is a bit.'

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'Anyway, now is the time for me to catch that candour on the wing and ask the first really important – I mean the first really *relevant* – question of this interview.'

'Fire away.'

'How good are your powers of observation?'

'Sorry, my what?'

'How good are you at observing things? And describing what you've observed?'

'I'm afraid I don't understand.'

'Come, come. What you don't understand isn't the question but why I'm putting it to you, am I right? I have my reasons, I assure you, but never mind those for now. Just try to answer it. And no false modesty, please.'

'Well, like just about everyone, I suppose, I've got a pretty high opinion of my powers of observation. But who knows? I don't remember ever having them put to the test.'

'Then let's put them to the test right now, shall we? Why don't you describe this room for me and what's in it?'

'If you like. It's a large room, very dark, square – *squarish* – with an ornate black marble fireplace – and on either side of the fireplace there are two leather chairs – they're also black – I'm sitting in one of them, you're sitting in the other. There are three smaller

chairs lined up against the wall opposite us. They're red and, I'd say, eighteenth-century-looking. On the right of the fireplace there's a bust of what looks like a young mulatto woman. Would it be terracotta?'

'It's by Carpeaux. And, yes, it's terracotta. Go on.'

'On the mantelpiece there are six blue-and-white vases. Or maybe they're pots? Some of them have lids but, let me see, two, yes, two of them don't. They're all different shapes and sizes. The walls are interesting – very, very dark burnt ochre, the colour of dry, dusty old frescoes. They really look as though they – well, as though they could do with a good wash. Though that's probably the intended effect. In fact, I'm sure it's the intended effect. But if you don't mind me saying so, and you did ask me to be honest –'

'I did indeed.'

'Well, everything in the room is really dusty and discoloured.'

'Ah. Go on.'

'Behind you there's a floor-to-ceiling set of bookshelves. There's a card table and a gold music stand next to a large bay window and in the corner there's – what do you call it? – an *escritoire*? – with what look like handwritten documents and funny old scrolls poking out of the drawers. And a pear? Yes, it is a pear. Made of something like marble? – or jade? – I don't know. I should say it's been used as a paperweight.

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Actually, it's all a bit like the den of some mediaeval scholar or saint.'

'Good, very very good. Go on.'

'Between the two of us there's a low wooden table. I'd call it a coffee table except that that wouldn't really convey the feel of it. It's like something from an old pub, an old cider pub, it's pretty chipped and scarred. There's a big pile of books on it. Actually, now I see them, they *are* coffee-table books. But the only one I can make out is the one on top and, at the angle I'm looking at it, it's upside down. It's called – it's called – *The Romantic Agony* and it's by – by Mario – Mario Praz.'

'The name is pronounced "Praz" and there were too many "theres" – "*there's* a card table", "*there's* a pile of books" – but otherwise that was excellent. It was so precise I felt almost as though I were there, ha ha! I shall need that precision.'

'Well, thank you.'

'Now let's try something a little trickier. Can you describe your face to me?'

'My face?'

'Yes, yes, your face. Describe to me exactly what you look like. What *it* looks like. Would you call yourself good-looking, for example?'

'Yes. Yes, if I'm honest, I'd have to say I *am* good-looking.'

'And?'

'Well, I'm what people tend to call, uh, willowy? Anyway, that's the word that's been used. You see, I'm slim, and thin-faced, with high cheek bones, prominent cheek bones, I suppose you'd call them. You know, this is all a bit embarrassing.'

'Just go on.'

'My nose is bony – but perfectly straight – and I've got, oh well, sort of liquid eyes. Sky-blue. I'm losing my hair. Though gradually, you know, I'm not there yet, just a receding hairline. It's dark, curly hair, what you'd call fluffy. Oh, and I've got a tiny mole at the corner of my left nostril.'

'Clean-shaven? Bespectacled?'

'Yes. And no. Look, would you mind telling me what –'

'Bear with me, man, I've nearly done. I want you now to describe *my* face.'

'Come now, don't tell me there's nothing to be said about it. I know better than that.'

'Let me tell you at once, John Ryder, you're of absolutely no use to me unless you describe my face.'

'If you wish. Your face has been – I would guess – badly damaged in an accident. The entire left side looks as though someone has been trying to pull it off.'

Everything seems to slant downward, your mouth in particular. Which means that when you speak your lips seem to be chewing the words. And your skin – I’m still talking about the left side – your skin, I have to say, is a weird colour – kind of greeny-grey – is verdigris the word? – and there are scars, criss-crossing scars, and strange bulges on your temples. Like bubbles, almost. The right side seems pretty much untouched. It’s hard to tell, but I’d say you were in your early sixties. You’ve got grey hair, lots of it, some would say too much. It’s badly cut, it’s too long at the neck. As for your eyes, well, I can’t describe them, because you’re wearing dark glasses.’

‘Of course I am. How thoughtless of me. I’ll take them off.’

‘Well, John Ryder? Cat got your tongue?’

‘You have no eyes.’

‘That’s quite right. I have no eyes. I’m not only blind, I’m not only sightless, I’m eyeless. And I don’t wear glass eyes because I think having *two* glass eyes would be over-egging the rather soggy, lumpy pudding of my face, don’t you agree?’

‘Oh well. Congratulations anyway. To be frank, you might have been a trifle less zestful in your description, but I rather goaded you, didn’t I?’

‘I’m sorry if I –’

‘No, no, no. You acquitted yourself admirably. You did just what I asked you to do.’

‘Well, thank you. I must say, for a man with – for a man with no eyes, you certainly seem to know your way about.’

‘This room, you mean? Oh, I’ve memorized this room. I’ve learned it off by heart, like a poem by Walter de la Mare. Still, there can be no hiding the fact that I’m blind. There’s something, you see, about a blind man’s movements. Have you ever heard of Herbert Marshall?’

‘Herbert Marshall? No, I’m afraid not.’

‘No, he would have been long, long before your time. A film star.’

‘A blind film star?’

‘Heavens no, he wasn’t blind. But he *did* have an artificial leg. I fancy he lost the real one in the war. That would be the First World War. In any event, Herbert Marshall was one-legged, yet he never played a one-legged character on the screen. Not once. But what he *did* play, quite often, was blind men. Interesting, wouldn’t you say? Yet it makes a sort of sense after all, because if you watch a blind man you’ll see that he moves exactly as though he had a gammy leg.’

‘Well, that’s all by the by. However, just so as you