

Lucius the Club

by

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Kingsfield

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MY MOTHER showed me the photographs as soon as they arrived. She came upstairs and knocked on my study door, even though it was open. Then she stood there, with that slightly vacant expression on her face which I had come to know meant trouble.

‘I think you ought to see these,’ she said. ‘They were put through the door a few minutes ago.’

She handed me a brown manila envelope – quarto, we used to call it in those days. About ten inches by eight. Someone had scrawled her name on it in capital letters. Ballpoint.

The envelope had already been sliced open, but I gave Mama a quick glance and I could see that she wanted me to look inside, so I did.

‘It seems,’ she said, ‘that someone has been spying on me.’

Inside the envelope were half a dozen photographs. Full-plate, I think was the correct term for that size – anyway, they were about eight inches by six.

I laid them out on the desk.

They were black and white, of course, because this was in December 1960. There were three people in each of the photographs: Mama and two men.

The men were Brazilians. I knew them slightly. They were a double act – The Fabulous Rodrigos – acrobatic

dancers. They did a cabaret act in all the best clubs and hotels.

All three participants in the photographs were naked, and they were engaged in what can only be described as enthusiastic sexual congress. Very enthusiastic, actually. The best shot showed Roberto entering Mama from the rear, while she had her mouth round Rodrigo's cock, looking up at him as if she hoped to please. In every shot you could see her face clearly. Unfortunately.

In their way the photographs were beautiful, because the two men were very handsome. And Mama was a film star – literally. There was plenty of light in the room (no false modesty for these three; they wanted to see what was going on), and it must have been a warm room because you could see the glistening of sweat on their skin.

I sighed a little.

We had been through a lot together, Mama and I, and at nineteen I was just old enough to understand that there would always be something – some problem that had to be dealt with. But I also had the confidence of youth, and I was inclined to believe that, whatever the difficulties, we could always deal with them.

'So,' I said, 'our first blackmailer.'

Mama gave me an apologetic smile. 'I'm afraid so. I'm very sorry.'

'Not your fault,' I said, because she was apologising for the blackmail, not for having sex.

I took a closer look at the pictures. The room was expen-

sively furnished.

‘Where were these taken?’

‘Curly Robinson’s flat.’

‘Was she watching?’

‘No, darling. She wanted to, but I persuaded her to go shopping.’

With money, no doubt.

Curly Robinson was a small-time film actress, married to a rich man. Their flat was said to be the site for Saturday-night orgies, and was rumoured to contain so-called two-way mirrors: some device which would enable an observer to see what was happening without being seen themselves.

‘So,’ I said. ‘Curly wasn’t watching, but someone else was. With a camera.’

‘It would seem so.’

Mama sat down in an easy chair, and I swivelled round from my desk to look at her.

‘Was it a set-up? Did the boys take you there?’

‘No. I suggested going there.’

‘Why there?’

‘It was the nearest place, darling. And the boys only had an hour. I didn’t want to waste it.’

I could have sighed again, but I didn’t. I was thinking.

‘So, you rang Curly and asked for the use of her place. And it took you a few minutes to get there....’

‘Yes.’

‘So she had time to ring somebody.’

‘Either that, or someone was there already.’

‘Do we know who it is yet?’

‘Yes. We do. Billy Marwell.’

‘Why him?’

‘Got to be, darling. He rang me this morning and told me to look out for something in the post. He was rather mysterious about it. Besides, dirty pictures are his line of business. And you know he’s shagging Curly now that her old man can’t get it up any longer.’

I nodded. It all made sense. Of a sort. Mama rang Curly for the use of a bedroom, and Billy was with Curly at the time. Mama and the boys arrived, Curly went out, and Billy was hidden behind the two-way mirror.

‘So, Billy Marwell is putting the squeeze on us. Charming.... How much does he want?’

‘Hasn’t said yet.’

‘Is Curly in on it?’

‘Not on the blackmail, no. I doubt that. But she may have asked him to take some piccies, since I wouldn’t let her watch.’

Or join in, I thought. But I didn’t mention that.

‘When was this?’

‘About a week ago.’

‘Are the boys still in London?’

‘No. They sailed on the *Queen Elizabeth* on Monday. They’ve got a six-month contract on a cruise ship out of Florida.’

I nodded again. I hope I seemed calm, but inwardly my heart was pounding and I was afraid I might have to be

sick. I needed fresh air.

‘Well, leave it with me, Mama,’ I managed to say. ‘I shall have to have a think about what we’re going to do.’

*

I put on a scarf and overcoat, picked up my stick, and went out into the dusk for a walk.

It was the middle of December, 1960, and I had just finished my first term at Oxford. Elvis was number one, with ‘It’s Now or Never’. All was well with the world – except that we were being blackmailed.

I knew a bit about blackmail, because Jack was an expert.

Jack, you see, was my father. Nominally. Mama would never tell me who my biological father was – in fact she would never tell anyone. She said that my real father had never wanted to know me, and that was that. I never pressed her because I wasn’t interested.

Mama got pregnant when she was seventeen. By mistake, I think. And although she could have got rid of me easily enough – she certainly had the contacts – she chose to let me go full term. But she did decide to get married. And since my real father had disappeared, as she put it, she knew just the right stand-in.

Jack Grebanier was an actor. Not too well known before the war, but later he became a film star. In the David Niven and Michael Wilding class. Jack had problems, however,

because he was gay – or queer, as it was called in those days. And recently he'd had an unfortunate experience when he tried to pick up the wrong man in the gents lavatory at Piccadilly underground station. He was very drunk at the time, he told me, otherwise he would never have been so foolish.

Anyway, Jack's target turned out to be a plain-clothes policeman, and it cost Jack fifty quid in used oncers to settle the matter. Fifty pounds was an awful lot of money in 1940, and after that Jack became something of a connoisseur in blackmail.

One afternoon in the Haymarket, he pointed across the street. 'See that man over there, in the spectacularly vulgar brown suit?'

'Yes.'

'He has lived for years by blackmailing...' And he named a well-known Hollywood actor.

Back in 1940 Jack's needs and Mama's needs coincided. Too many people were beginning to mutter about Jack's sexuality, so it would do him no harm to be respectably married, with a family on the way. And Mama was smart enough to know that being a single mother was definitely not a good idea. So, at her suggestion, they got together.

They stayed together until I went to Follington, at the age of thirteen. Then they divorced.

Follington was Jack's old school – he came from a good middle-class family with some money in the background – and although it's not one of the famous public schools it

does a pretty good job. And that connection with Jack's posh family is the reason why I call Mama Mama, you see. It helped to make peace with Jack's parents, who weren't too thrilled with him marrying a Windmill girl. But then, it was wartime, and these things happen. And Mama soon charmed them into accepting her. She charmed everyone.

*

That afternoon – the day we found out that Mama was being blackmailed – I went out into the dusk and walked down to Berwick Street market.

I think I had already realised that I was going to have to kill Billy Marwell, but I wanted to think about it to make sure.

Mama and I have always lived in Soho. It was her father's house, bought cheap in the 1930s, a big Georgian place with high ceilings and some really quite good mantelpieces.

Soho was once the home of Hogarth, Angelica Kauffman, and (briefly) Mozart. But in the post-war period it was the centre of London's vice and sin. These days, estate agents sometimes refer to our street as being in Fitzrovia, or even on the fringes of Mayfair, but it's really just Soho. Naughty, dirty, dangerous Soho. It was the perfect place for us, really, because, as Mama never ceased to point out, we were not a respectable family. We came from a long line of thieves, brothel-keepers and publicans.

So off I went, wrapped up against the cold.

There were no longer any prostitutes lining the street, as there had been until recently. But the Street Offences Act of 1959 had driven them indoors. I rather regretted that. When I was younger I knew them all, and they knew me.

‘Wotcher, Luce,’ they would say. ‘Fancy a free one?’

‘Just had one, darling,’ I would say. ‘Down the road.’ And they would laugh.

Mama and I, you see, knew everyone in Soho. All the residents, that is, and many of those who just came to work. We’d both been born there. Mama’s family probably went back a couple of hundred years or more.

In the Berwick Street market I bought a few things that we didn’t really need, and chatted to those who served me. Off to the east lay Old Compton Street, which contained a number of pornographic bookshops, in one of which worked Billy Marwell – when he wasn’t out taking photographs, to be sold in the private room at the back. I didn’t look down that street.

And then I went back home.

I was calmer now. And a little amused. I wondered how many other Oxford undergraduates, at the end of their first term – or any term for that matter – had been forced to face up to the fact that they were going to have to a kill a man.

*

When I arrived home I told Mama what I had decided.

Perhaps I had thought that she might tell me not to be so silly. But she didn't. Her eyes shone and her expression lit up, and she kissed me rather passionately.

'Oh, Lucius,' she said. 'I'm so proud of you.'

Then she sat me down with a drink and reminded me of a few things I already knew. Plus a few new ones.

'You're making the right decision,' she said, 'and I'll tell you why. I've never really had a protector, Lucius – I've never been anyone's bird. Lots of the girls I grew up with, they found themselves a tough guy to look after them. But I never did. I've always lived on my wits and my looks. And I've done pretty well. For a while of course there was Jack. But Jack wasn't a hard man. He always lived among gentlemen who behave like gentlemen. They may do some insider dealing, but they don't go in for razor slashing and acid in your face. But in any case, Jack was just an interval, to make us look respectable. You and me Lucius, we've always lived among thieves and cheats and liars. Our family were villains from way back. And I was a tart for a while, in the war. There were so many Americans around, with so much money, it seemed a pity not to take it off them. It's in our blood, Lucius. And violence is never far away.'

She took a drink and settled back in her chair.

'While he was alive, my father was my protector – your Grandad. Officially he was a publican, but his real business was robbery. Smash and grab mostly, and banks. Not round here, of course. Usually south London. One of his principles

was, you never hurt a member of the public. But do you know why he never went to prison? Because everyone knew that if you grassed on Jimmy Johnson you ended up dead, that's why.'

She looked at me and grinned. 'He killed two men that tried it. Two that I know of, anyway. One of them was killed right here, in this house, and I helped Dad get rid of the body. I won't tell you where it happened, because it might make you nervous.'

She smiled at me from across the room.

'And now that you've grown up, you've got to be my protector. But that's not the way people think of you. People think of you as Carol's kid. The cripple. The posh kid who goes to Oxford. And that won't do, darling. Not for the future. In the future you've got to be my protector. Otherwise we shall lose everything.'

'Billy Marwell you see, with his naughty pictures, he's just the first. If we let him get away with it, we'll be paying him for ever, and there'll be others. And they'll take everything we have. So we've got to put a stop to it, Lucius. We've got to send out a message, loud and clear. And the message is, Don't fuck around with Carol and Lucius, because they bloody well won't put up with it.'

And there was more in the same vein.

After we'd finished our drinks, she took me upstairs to bed.

*

Mama and I were very close. You've probably gathered that by now. But our relationship was also somewhat unorthodox, in that we had sex together, regularly, from my puberty onwards.

'You're never going to be God's gift to the ladies, Lucius.' That's what she told me. 'You may have a club foot and a funny face, but there's nothing wrong with your willy, and I'm going to teach you how to use it.'

She did too. And although I find it passing strange now, I never complained at the time.

After Mama had broken me in, so to speak, taught me the basics of sex, she found other women for me. By that time she was really quite a famous actress. She was never a Deborah Kerr or Julie Andrews. She wasn't that kind of star. But she got lots of parts in films, playing the ordinary girl next door – glamorous when she needed to be, a bit plain if the part required it. Not huge parts, but regular. She was popular. She was cheerful. She was no threat to anyone.

And so, by the time I was fifteen or so, there were always young actresses who had figured out that Mama might be able to put in a good word for them with people who made important decisions. And Mama probably pointed out to them that she would appreciate it if they would give Lucius a little entertainment. Which, gritting their teeth, they did. But some of them got a pleasant surprise, and said so. Because I'd had a very good mentor.

Mama always took the view that it was contemptible for a man to just shove it in, finish it off, and then go to sleep. I

was taught to do things the proper way. And I must say it is a skill that has made me a few friends, over the years.

*

The next day I started to give some thought as to how I was actually going to do the job. Killing Billy Marwell, that is. But Mama was ahead of me.

‘Come,’ she said, and led me downstairs to the cellar. There, after moving a few old trunks and suitcases, she pulled out a couple of loose bricks in the wall and produced something wrapped in a filthy old towel. It was a sawn-off shotgun.

‘Your Grandad’s,’ she said proudly. ‘Very powerful, Lucius. Stop a charging bull, this would.’

I took it from her, because actually I knew quite a bit about shotguns. Much more than she did.

We had a weekend cottage in the country, a place we called The Farm, though there wasn’t a farm attached – just a small wood. And friends in the country had arranged for me to be taught how to shoot by a gamekeeper, some years earlier.

I checked the gun over. It seemed to be in good order, though I was a little nervous about that short barrel. Saw it off too short and the shot will come back at you and do you a serious mischief. Or so I’d been told – and that was by people who looked as if they knew what they were talking about.

While I examined the gun, Mama chattered.

‘This is stage two, Lucius.’

I looked at her. ‘Stage two of?’

‘Giving you a reputation as a man who knows what he’s doing.’

‘Stage one being?’

‘Stage one was when you sacked the accountant.’

Ah. Yes. The accountant.

When I reached the advanced age of sixteen, Mama decided that I must become head of the household in terms of handling the money. Mama had divorced Jack by then – perfectly amicably, and he kept in touch – but Jack wanted out. He was, in truth, a rather peculiar man, driven by some strange needs; but whatever the matter of that, the divorce meant that he was no longer there to pay the bills and do all the other things that needed care and attention. So Mama put me in charge.

After about six months, I discovered that our accountant, or business manager I think he called himself, was on the take. When I was sure of the facts I asked Mama what we should do.

She seemed almost pleased. ‘Oh,’ she said, ‘we must sack him. Publicly. Make a bit of a fuss. Oh, it will be such fun, Lucius!’

It didn’t seem like fun to me. I checked and double-checked, and on the quiet got another accountant to go over the books with me. It wasn’t difficult – lots of men were happy to do a favour for a woman like Mama. Nor was it

difficult to see what our accountant was doing. He was just charging outrageous fees for simple work. Keeping money in his own account and earning interest from it.

Mama wrote a little script for me. And one day, when our man was having lunch with some key clients, at a rather expensive restaurant, I marched in with Mama behind me.

The restaurant had a stone floor – it must have been fashionable that year – and my stick clicked on it as I crossed the room in my dot-and-carry-one fashion.

We were an odd pair, Mama and I, and everybody stopped talking and watched as we neared the table. Then I tossed a pile of bank accounts in among the wine glasses and vegetables.

‘Barrington,’ I said – I think his name was Barrington, but it’s a long time ago – ‘Barrington, you’ve been stealing money from my mother. The total sum nicked is £1,545.’ Or whatever. ‘You’ve got three days to pay it back, or your professional association will hear about it, and I will do my best to have you disbarred.’

And then Mama and I walked out.

Well, as you can imagine, this caused a bit of a stir, and Soho talked of nothing else for two whole days.

The next morning, Barrington was round with a certified banker’s cheque and a fluent line in babble, but we just took the money and told him to fuck off.

‘That was brains, you see, Lucius,’ Mama told me. ‘That proved you’ve got brains. And that was stage one. This time, we’re going to have to prove you’ve got balls.’

*

Ah yes. Balls. That really was the central point.

It was one thing to decide, in a cold-blooded and logical manner, that you really could not tolerate blackmail. And it was easy to rule out going to the police, or paying the blackmailer – which just left killing the greedy bastard. It was easy to reach that conclusion. But did I have the balls to do it? That was what was worrying me.

Overnight, I didn't sleep at all well, and I didn't fancy breakfast much. I was beginning to feel that tightness in the scrotum, and the sick, vomity feeling in my stomach that signals a nasty attack of the doubts.

I should have known, mind you, that there would always be trouble. Jack had warned me, after the accountant affair.

'You did well there, Lucius,' he told me. We met by chance on Piccadilly and he took me into the Ritz for coffee. 'Handled yourself well. But be warned. That won't be the last problem you have, and it won't be the worst.'

'Oh?' I said. 'Why so?'

'Because your mother mixes with bad company. All her father's old friends. Some of the biggest crooks in London are men she calls Uncle. And when you mix an attractive woman with hard men like that, what you get is trouble.'

So I can't say I wasn't told.

Anyway, I put Grandad's rather frightening weapon back in its oily towel, packed it in an overnight bag, and went down to Sussex on the train.

When I got to The Farm, I went out into the wood at the back and tried the gun out.

Quite frankly I very nearly wet myself the first time I fired it. The gun looked all right. But it was old. God only knew how old, or how long it had sat there in the cellar.

Eventually I managed to summon up enough courage to pull the trigger, and no disaster ensued, so I carried out a series of tests. I tried out cartridges with various sizes of shot, at various distances from the target, and made quite a mess of several old tree trunks. I learnt how to brace myself against the recoil, and how to control the muzzle flip.

These tests decided me that whoever had doctored the weapon knew what they were doing. They had made it short enough to be easily concealed under a mac or an overcoat, but the barrel was still long enough to ensure that the shot did not disperse too widely. And a tight shot pattern is what you want, if you're going to kill someone. The idea is to blow a fatal hole in him. You don't want to hit him with a hundred separate pinpricks, otherwise he's just going to walk home and dab on some Dettol.

By the end of the afternoon I was clear that my weapon of choice would do the job. I knew what kind of cartridge to put in the gun, and how far away from the target I needed to be. I knew that the gun would kill someone.

All I needed now was courage.

*

On the way home in the train I thought about that, and I decided that perhaps I might have what it took after all. I came to that conclusion because of my experiences at school.

Jack must have pulled a few strings to get me into Follington, because they like their boys to be one hundred per cent fit, and I wasn't.

I was born, you see, with a condition known as talipes equinovarium – or a club foot, in common parlance. Same thing that Lord Byron had. And, as if that was not enough, there was probably an injury inflicted during birth, which resulted in damage to the muscles and nerves on the left side of my face. This meant that I tended to dribble a bit – especially when I got tired.

Mama never trusted doctors, and when I was a child she refused to let them operate on me. But later, when I was forty, I had some reconstructive work done on my foot, and a similar operation on my face, which stopped the worst of the dribbling. But when I was of school age both of these were a problem.

The club foot meant that I walked with a distinct limp. And it was Jack who insisted that I should use a stick, although it wasn't actually essential.

'A stick will mark you out, Lucius,' he said. 'Give you a bit of distinction. If you have to be a cripple, be a cripple with style.'

There was no political correctness in those days, you see. No talk of being 'handicapped' or 'disabled'. You were just

crippled. So Jack got me a stick with a silver top. Quite a handy weapon actually, if push comes to shove. I've had a few different sticks, over the years, but they've all had silver tops.

Mama did her bit to overcome my disabilities too. When I was a boy she didn't hide me away, as if she was ashamed of me. Far from it. She took me everywhere – to theatres, film studios, parties, the lot. Wherever she went and whoever we met, she always introduced me.

'This is my son,' she would say. Proudly. 'My son Lucius. Lucius the Club we call him, because he has a club foot.'

That was very clever, you know. In retrospect. It meant that my condition was public knowledge – almost a mark of distinction. And so everyone knew me – including every doorman and head waiter in London.

Physically, I wasn't by any means an obvious shoo-in for any public school. On the other hand, I was really rather bright academically, which did quite a lot to recommend me.

By whatever means, possibly a little blackmail on Jack's part, I was allowed to enter Follington.

It wasn't until I got there that I found out where the name Lucius came from. I was named, it seems, after one of the mythical kings of Britain. I once asked Mama if she chose the name for that reason. 'Oh yes,' she said, 'of course. I made enquiries.'

Follington was quite a sporty school, and the standard game in that first Michaelmas term, five afternoons a week,

was rigger. I couldn't do that, so they sent me to the gym instead. For remedial exercises with the PT instructor – a Sergeant Mansfield.

Mansfield was about five feet nothing; ex-Army man; short tempered. The boys were slightly frightened of him. He got me to walk up and down for him, with and without the stick, bending, turning, and so forth. Eventually he decided that there was nothing wrong with me above the waist, so he got me doing work with weights. Before long I was the strongest boy in my year, and within a couple of years I was the strongest boy in the school.

On three days a week, in the early evening, boys had the option of doing boxing or gymnastics in their spare time. Comparatively few volunteered for either, but Mansfield decided that I would box.

I thought this was a ridiculous idea at first, but his theory was that you didn't need to be able to move particularly fast in the ring. Not, at any rate, at schoolboy level. Well, he was partly right, and it was partly bullshit, but the long and the short of it was, he got me to box. And of the five or six boys in my year who also chose to box in their spare time, I was always the champion. Largely because I was strong.

Mansfield even got me representing the school. The first time I fought a boy from somewhere else, their coach turned a funny colour when he saw me. He came over and had a few pointed words. I couldn't hear all of it, but 'spastic bloody cripple' was one phrase which drifted my way. Anyway, the fight went on, and I won, which made me a

hero.

I didn't always win against other schools, of course. In fact I lost more often than not. But as I took the train home from The Farm, after testing out Grandad's sawn-off shotgun, I thought about getting into the boxing ring as a schoolboy; and fighting boys who were a great deal more mobile than myself. And I decided that, if I had the balls to do that, I probably had the balls to shoot someone who was trying to blackmail my mother.

After all, I reminded myself, I owed my mother my very life. Twice over. First, she didn't have an abortion when she found out that she was inconveniently pregnant. And second, when I was born, she could have got rid of me then.

In 1940 there was, in Soho, a hospital sister whom I will call Sister Smith. In the 1930s, times were very hard, and working-class families couldn't afford any passengers. And so when a child was born with severe deformities, or was obviously a Mongol, or hopelessly premature perhaps – in such a case, a quiet word would be had, and Sister Smith would be sent for. And Sister Smith would see to it that the deformed child would go quietly to sleep and would never wake up again.

When I was seventeen or so, a drunk woman in the French pub told me that, when I was born, the midwife suggested to Mama that it might be a good idea to let Sister Smith have a look at me. Mama gave that wretched woman the most fearful ear-bashing that had been heard for many a long year.

As I sat there, in the train from Sussex, that day in December 1960, I remembered all that. And I decided that I would look after my Mama, and protect her for the rest of her life – no matter what the cost.

And after that I did get a good night's sleep.

*

In my absence, Mama had done the ground work.

She'd heard from Billy Marwell, she said. And he wanted a thousand pounds. She'd told him she couldn't do it until next week.

In the meantime, she had discovered that, every Sunday night, Billy played poker with four friends, in the bar of the Girliebar Club. The club was closed on Sundays.

Once famous for its gorgeous strippers, but now long since forgotten, the Girliebar was on the top floor of a five-storey building. It's now the office of a famous American film company. In 1960, one of the five poker players was a partner in the club, so he acted as host for the regular Sunday-night game.

The five men were all small-time criminals. They were chronic gamblers. And they were all alcoholics. During the period from about seven p.m. to midnight, they sat and drank and played poker. Each man bought a round of drinks. And a round consisted of a bottle of champagne and five double brandies. So by the end of the night, they were very well oiled indeed.

All this information Mama had gathered together in my absence.

‘So we’ll do it Sunday night,’ she told me. ‘In the bar.’

What’s this ‘we’? I thought. Which is interesting, because it shows how the mind picks on irrelevant details.

‘The street door isn’t locked,’ Mama went on, ‘because the bloke who runs the club can’t be bothered going up and down to let them all in and then lock it again. And anyway all the internal doors are locked except the bar on the top floor. So you can get in OK, go up the stairs, and do it in the bar. By ten o’clock they’ll all be three-quarters pissed, Lucius. Billy won’t feel a thing.’

I sat down and thought about what she was proposing. Do it in the bar? With an audience of four other poker players?

‘But there’ll be witnesses,’ I said. Rather foolishly.

Mama sat down beside me and held my hand. ‘Darling, of course there’ll be witnesses. That’s the whole point.’

I must have looked as bemused as I felt.

‘Don’t you see? We’re in the business of sending a message. And the message is, Don’t fuck around with us, because we won’t stand for it. So people have to know that it’s you.’

The logic of this escaped me. ‘But then the police will know.’

Mama gave a great peal of laughter. ‘No they won’t!’ she said. ‘You silly.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because the witnesses are all criminals, that’s why. They’re small-time crooks, Lucius. Fences, thieves, drug dealers, pornshop owners. They’ve all been inside. They know the ropes. And they’re not informers. One they’ve seen you shoot a man, they’ll know what to expect if they tell the police. But they *will* tell everyone else – all their underworld friends. That’s the whole point.’

I really had to think about that for some time. And it wasn’t easy for me to accept.

Mama gave me a hug, and kissed me. ‘Don’t worry,’ she said. ‘It will all work the way I tell you. And besides,’ she added, almost as an afterthought, ‘I shall get you an alibi.’

‘How will you do that?’

‘Never you mind,’ she said. ‘But just leave it to me. It’s already arranged.’

*

Sunday night was two days away, and it’s a good job it wasn’t longer, otherwise I would have probably lost my nerve. But two days was sufficient for me to be occupied.

I went and had a few drinks at the Girliebar Club, where I knew a lot of the staff anyway. And I made a point of chatting to them, so that they would remember that I’d been there. And next Monday morning they would realise *why* I’d been there.

I also got Mama to explain her famous alibi. It was to be provided by a Judge, no less. The Judge, who had leached

after Mama for years, and was a fairly regular visitor to our house, was coming to dinner on Sunday night. At a certain point in the evening, I would discreetly retire, as I always did on those occasions, and leave him and Mama alone. I would go and 'watch television'. But in fact, I would go down the road and kill a man.

*

Sunday night came.

The Judge arrived, and we all chatted over the meal – as if nothing unusual was afoot. It struck me at the time how ridiculously easy that was to do. And I realised that the idea of killing a man had a remarkably calming effect. Chilling, in fact. I wasn't remotely nervous – I had gone well past that, and I was in total control of myself.

Then, at about half-past nine, I went into the living-room, where the television set was, and the Judge and Mama were left alone. In due course, once I was comfortably out of the way, Mama would take the Judge upstairs.

This was an arrangement which had been in force for some time. The Judge was an elderly man, not remotely attractive, but Mama provided him with certain services. As she often remarked, you never know when a High Court Judge is going to come in useful.

By ten o'clock Mama and the Judge had disappeared, so I put on my scarf and coat, picked up the loaded gun, and let myself out of the house.

I was wearing a mackintosh, one of those 1950s versions which had slits beside the diagonal pockets, so that a gentleman could put his hand through and extract a handkerchief, or some money, from his jacket pocket, without troubling to unbutton the coat. The shotgun was held against my right leg. My famous silver stick I left at home.

It was quite dark, of course, and Soho was deadly quiet. Sundays in Soho were quite different then from what they are today. In those days very few places opened on Sunday nights – the law didn't allow it – so the streets were silent and empty.

It wasn't far to the Girliebar Club. Three hundred yards, if that. And I don't remember seeing anyone. No one I knew, certainly.

When I reached the club entrance I paused. But the street was empty. I was wearing gloves, by the way. At that stage. And I tried the door.

I suppose I had kind of half hoped that it might be locked, in spite of what Mama had told me. But it wasn't. So I let myself in and closed it quietly behind me. Then I took off the gloves.

The stairs were dimly lit with bare 60-watt light bulbs on each landing. Stone stairs. So I had to be quiet.

I made my way up slowly, and as I went I began to feel as if I were in some kind of dream. I remember touching the stone wall to reassure myself of its solidity.

On the top floor there was no sign of life whatever. Only the closed door of the club. The famous Girliebar, before

which many a provincial punter, about to see his first live stripper, had paused and trembled with anticipation.

I paused too, but then I told myself to get on with it.

I unbuttoned the coat, took hold of the shotgun properly, and tried the door.

It opened, so I went in.

The bar was an L-shaped room, and after my recent visit I knew where the poker players would be. Round the corner. And now I could hear a murmuring of voices, which meant that I could forget that last faint hope that tonight they had decided not to bother playing after all.

I went around the corner and found them all there. They were having a bit of a laugh, because the last hand had seen somebody do something foolish. But they stopped laughing when I appeared.

One of them saw me. I'm not sure now who it was. But it wasn't Billy. 'Wotcher, Luce,' the man said. 'Wot you doin' 'ere?'

I ignored him. And now they were all looking at me. I raised the shotgun and they all saw it. They went silent and still.

Billy Marwell was not where I'd hoped he would be. I'd hoped he would be straight ahead of me. But he wasn't. He was to the left.

'On your feet, Billy,' I said.

'Wot?' He looked at me as if he couldn't believe his ears. 'Wot you say?'

'Stand up,' I told him. 'Now.'

And he was dumb enough to do so. If he'd cut and run at that point, gone round behind the bar, perhaps, and thrown bottles at me, he might have got away. But I was just Lucius the Club. Even if I was carrying a shotgun. What did he have to fear from me?

He stood up, pushing his chair back and moving to one side.

Which was exactly what I wanted, because now he was separate from the other four men.

So I shot him.

*

At this distance in time I can't pretend to remember every detail. But Billy went down, and the others ducked for cover, scrambling on all fours, I think – some of them – for shelter behind the bar.

I went over and looked at Billy and I could see immediately that he was dead. There was no way he was ever going to recover from a wound like that.

So I turned around and left.

I didn't hurry. I walked slowly out of the bar and down the stairs. No one followed me. I took out the empty cartridge, put it in my pocket, and hid the gun under my coat.

When I reached the street door I opened it a fraction, found that the street was empty, and then walked home.

I went into the living-room and returned to watching television. I hadn't been gone long. Twenty minutes at the

most.

About eleven o'clock, I heard voices on the stairs. I turned down the sound on the television and went out into the hall to say goodbye to the Judge. It was only polite. I shook his hand, and called him Sir. He liked that.

*

The next morning was much like any other Monday morning. I slept well, oddly enough. Then I did some Oxford work, and after lunch Mama suggested that I should go out and test the temperature – as she put it.

So I went out.

The shooting of Billy Marwell had been too late for the morning papers, but I wandered over to the local newsagent and bought the *Evening Standard*. Rather to my surprise there was no report of a shooting on the front page. The headlines were devoted to a possible strike by the Tube drivers. Only on page two was there a paragraph saying 'Man Shot in Soho'. Nobody, it seemed, was interested in reading about Billy Marwell, a small-time crook who had been gunned down, it was thought, as part of a gang war.

I found myself thinking that this was really rather disappointing. So I wandered off into the street market, as I often did. And there I had the first inkling that Mama had been right. She had said that every man present when I shot Billy Marwell would tell everyone he knew what had happened – everyone bar the police, of course – and when I went to buy

some fruit from a man I'd known for years, he actually flinched when he saw me. He stepped back a pace, mouth dropping open.

I was rather proud of that. I winked at him, and he tried to grin, but failed. And there were one or two other reactions too. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a few nudges, so generally speaking I could see that the word was out.

Which both terrified me and fascinated me.

I was astonished by how calm I was able to appear, while at one and the same time I was in dread that a man in a blue uniform would put his hand on my shoulder at any moment.

Of course I realised early on that a good many of those who heard the story simply didn't believe it. Lucius? Lucius shot Billy Marwell? Ridiculous. Those were the people who heard it third or fourth hand. But then, if they knew one of the men who was said to have been there, they would seek him out in a pub, or on the street corner. And he would tell them straight – yes, it was Lucius. Yes, I had had a few, but I know bloody Lucius when I see him – known him since he was a kid.

And so gradually the word spread. At least among the criminal fraternity. Just as Mama had said it would. Lucius had done the job. And Lucius was therefore a man to be reckoned with. A man who had to be treated with respect. He wasn't just some bloody cripple – Carol's kid – the one with the gammy leg. Lucius was not a good man to cross.

*

Before long, the police heard the story too. Despite the comparative lack of interest in the newspapers, the police were always concerned about a shooting in Soho. They discounted, of course, the wilder Fleet Street stories about gang wars. But in the late fifties, and much more so in the sixties, the CID branch of Scotland Yard was pretty well corrupt from top to bottom. Soho *was* run by gangs – and the most powerful one was made of up of CID men.

The plain-clothes officers, particularly the Obscene Publications Squad, they had all the rackets thoroughly organised: the clip-joints, the porno bookshops, the girls, and the gambling. Club owners, porn merchants, and brothel-keepers, they all had to pay for their licence to operate. And the more they paid, the less police attention they got.

The Yard men didn't care about Billy for himself. He was a low-life, a man who'd been in and out of prison for twenty years. But the Yard didn't like people who rocked the boat, and who brought reporters into the area. So they wanted to know who shot Billy, and why.

It wasn't long before the key men in West End Central heard an account of how Billy Marwell had died. It wasn't a first-hand account, of course. They wouldn't expect that. But it was close. Even so, they didn't believe it. At first. But then they heard the same story from different sources – and always the story came from shifty little men, professional informers, who could scarcely believe it themselves. But

everyone who was in the Girliebar Club, that Sunday night, they all told the same tale. It was Lucius wot done it.

I suppose the police must have interviewed the four witnesses. But I never heard. If they did, the four men would have invented some agreed story which didn't include me. Quite apart from any threat that I might pose, they all knew that Mama was well connected. If anyone shopped her beloved Lucius, she knew quite a lot of men who would gladly make a new cripple of the man responsible. If not worse.

Eventually, sighing deeply (because the Yard men all knew me too, and they thought the Marwell thing was the silliest story they'd heard for years), a couple of detective constables from West End Central came round to see me. They said it was part of routine house-to-house enquiries, but I knew it wasn't.

I told them the truth. Well, I had to tell a few lies, of course, but mainly it was the truth. I told them that the Judge – and I gave his name and number – had come round to dinner that Sunday night, about seven; and the three of us, Mama, the Judge, and I, had been at home until he left, at about eleven o'clock. I had watched television while the grown-ups chatted. I was sure, I said, that the Judge would say the same. If they asked him.

The CID men took it all down in their notebooks and went off to see the Judge. And he would have told them, no doubt, that he could vouch for my presence all evening.

After all, he too had something to hide. The truth was that, at a certain point, he and Mama had gone upstairs to

her bedroom, where he told her, in some detail, what a naughty boy he had been seen they last met. And then Mama told him that he was going to have to be punished, very severely, and she had spanked his little botty for him, until he begged for mercy. The Judge could hardly tell the police all that, now could he?

Later on – some weeks later – the Judge told Mama that he'd been astonished when the police came to see him. 'As if Lucius could have had anything to do with it!' he said. 'I told them they were mad.'

I was very relieved to hear it. And that taught me a lesson: never jump to conclusions. To the Judge, you see, it was inconceivable that I could have shot Billy Marwell. Because Billy was a common criminal. And I... well, I was an Oxford man.

*

At Christmas we went down to the Farm, and I buried my Grandad's gun in the woods. It's probably still there.

Only one thing bothered me. What had happened to the original negatives? Suppose the police found them, recognised Mama, and began to work things out. What then?

But Mama was quite convinced that the photographs would never turn up.

'I know Billy,' she said. 'Known him since before you were born. He would have put those photos in a safe-deposit box somewhere, under a false name. Along with a

few others of the same kind, no doubt. And they'll stay there till hell freezes over.'

By the new year, everyone had forgotten about Billy. Even the police. And we all got on with our lives, as if nothing at all had happened.

*

After I left Oxford I could have gone into the City, or the law. Or some other respectable profession. But I wasn't interested in respectability. For one thing I remembered Mama's words about our family traditions; and for another I was fascinated by show business. That was, after all, the world in which I had lived and moved and had my being.

Even in my last year at Oxford I acted as manager to a couple of rock groups. And in the rest of the sixties I did rather well out of a number of bands, some of them household names. Briefly.

Then I grew bored with music, and branched out into the theatre. The theatre, I soon discovered, is a good place to lose a lot of money very quickly. But you only need one really big hit to make a small fortune. And, as it happened, I made two. Then I went into films, and television.

I was always well in the background – I was the money man, the fixer, the producer whose name no one notices on the credits. That suited me just fine. And I made more than enough money to support Mama and myself in the manner to which we had become accustomed in her good years.

I never married. But Mama's training in bed, plus my reputation as a man who could influence casting, saw to it that there was never a shortage of ladies. And I was able to be generous, so none of them ever complained.

Some of those young women became good friends. And a couple would have liked a more permanent relationship. But eventually they realised that I already had a partner in life; and her name was Mama.

As for my other reputation – that of a man whom it was unwise to cross – I did just occasionally imagine that I saw a flicker of something in people's faces.

All Mama's underworld friends, for example – they all knew, of course. Or at any rate they'd heard the story. Whether they believed it or not, they gave me a nod of respect, and spoke to me as an equal.

And sometimes – just now and then – I would see an American, in the film business, look at me rather curiously. Especially if he had mob connections; as a lot of people do in that line. I could see the American's brain working. Could this possibly be, he asked himself, could this possibly be the guy who they said...? It didn't seem very likely, did it? But he would listen to my proposition without being too dismissive. Just in case.

Only one man ever asked me directly about the shooting. It was about five years later, and I was sitting alone in a restaurant, late at night. There was a group of men at the bar, and I sensed, rather than heard, that they were talking about me.

Eventually, one man came over. I knew him slightly. He pulled out a chair and sat down. He got straight to the point.

‘Why’d you do it, Luce?’ he asked.

I didn’t need to ask what ‘it’ was. I could see from the man’s face that he was already nervous. He’d told his drinking buddies, in a fit of bravado, that he would bloody well go over and ask, and now he was regretting it. I decided to be kind.

‘Blackmail,’ I said.

‘Ah.’ Then he nodded, and went back to the bar.

I could see that he told his pals what I’d said, but they affected not to notice. And they certainly didn’t look at me.

*

In this way, forty years went by.

Early in the new century, Mama fell ill.

She had hospital treatment, and after the doctors had done all they could for her, I had her brought home. I arranged a rota of nurses, twenty-four hours a day.

I took to working at home more than I normally did, particularly in the mornings. Then I would go out for a late lunch, about two o’clock. I used to go to Alberto’s restaurant, because they knew me well there, and they had a small upstairs room where I was usually on my own. There I could read the paper while I ate. And think.

One afternoon, as I was drinking my coffee, Bob Hooper

came to see me. Bob has large flat feet, and he's the only person I know who makes more noise going upstairs than I do, so I knew who it was long before he arrived.

Hooper is a big name in photography. Not a public name, like Bailey or Snowdon, but a professional name, well known on the advertising side of the business.

He'd evidently been briefed by Alberto, because he came with his own cup of coffee and sat himself down. We were old friends, and I was pleased to see him.

After preliminaries he said, 'I hear your Mama is unwell.' 'She's dying, Hooper,' I said. 'Dying.' And that was the first time I'd admitted that, even to myself.

'I'm sorry to hear that.' And he meant it.

'I've been having a bit of a clear-out,' he said. 'Think I might retire before long. And I was poking around in the back of the safe the other day when I found some old photographs of your Mama. I could have just destroyed them, but then I thought perhaps I ought to give them back.... Thing is, Luce, they're a bit explicit. I took them a long time ago, made her a set at the time, but she didn't want the negs and she asked me to take good care of them. What do you think?'

'You'd better give them to me,' I said. 'I've seen plenty of nudes of her before. When did you take them?'

'Oh, ages ago.'

He opened his bag and handed me a brown manila envelope. Quarto, we used to call it years ago. And I took out half a dozen photographs. Full-plate, I think the size was

called. And there, once again, were the six photographs of Mama and the two Brazilian boys: Roberto and Rodrigo. All three of the participants looked just as beautiful and just as engrossed in what they were doing as they had done the day the pictures were taken. The light reflecting from the dancers' skin was dazzling in its intensity. It made my head swim.

I sat there and looked at the pictures for a few moments before I said anything. I almost laughed. And then I almost wept.

I lit a cigar to cover my confusion. I don't really like cigars, but I've found it a useful diversion in business. Whenever you need time to think, light a cigar.

Did Hooper know, I wondered, or did he guess that Mama and I were lovers? I never told anyone, but she may have done. She was never shy about such things. And in her prime she would have had sex with Hooper, that was for sure. He was a very handsome young man in his youth, and he's still presentable now.

'I've seen these pictures before,' I said. 'A long time ago. In 1960.'

Hooper shrugged. 'If you say so.'

'You say Mama knew about them?'

He seemed surprised. 'Oh yes. She asked me to take them.'

I thought about that. And then I said: 'They look as if they were taken from behind a two-way mirror. That's why I ask.'

‘Oh yes. Well that was the effect she wanted. She wanted them to look like secret photographs – hidden camera – that sort of thing.’

‘But you weren’t hidden,’ I said. ‘You weren’t behind a two-way mirror.’

‘Oh no. I just moved the bed away from the wall.’

I puffed on my cigar for a while.

‘Does anyone else know about these pictures? Apart from you and me?’

‘No. Well, the Brazilians knew, of course. But they’re long gone. No, I took them myself, Luce. Developed them myself, chose the best half dozen or so, and printed up two sets. One set for her, and one for my files. But they were obviously very sensitive, so the negs and the prints went into the safe. And they’ve been there ever since.’

‘So there’s no chance that anyone might have pinched a set. Either then or later?’

‘No, Lucius. No chance. You can be quite certain of that.’

*

I made my way home slowly.

I wasn’t sure what to do. Should I mention the pictures to Mama? Should I ask her about them? I had, after all, killed a man because of them. But if the photographs had been taken by Hooper, at Mama’s request, then they hadn’t been taken by Billy Marwell. So why had she lied to me? What was going on?

I decided to wait and see how Mama was.

When I arrived home I went straight upstairs. Mama was in bed, of course, she had been for weeks. And she was dozing. She'd had an injection not so long ago, for the pain, and that always made her sleepy at first. I suggested to the nurse that she should go off and have a cup of tea, and I sat myself down.

When Mama woke up from her doze and seemed able to talk, I told her that I'd seen Hooper, and without much ado I showed her the photographs. All six of them.

Well, if I'd expected Mama to be embarrassed or disconcerted, I was right out of luck.

'Ah yes,' she said softly. And she smiled a lovely smile. 'Roberto and Rodrigo. How beautiful those boys were.'

Her words were slightly slurred, as if she was tipsy. That must be the drug, I thought.

I let her look at the photos for a moment or two, and then I said, 'Hooper told me that you asked him to take them.'

'Yes, that's right.' No problem.

'So why did you tell me that Billy Marwell took them? And why did you say that he was blackmailing you?'

Mama put down the pictures and looked at me. 'Well he *was* blackmailing me, in a way. He was always into me for money. He was a gambler, Lucius, and they always lose. And when the bookies threatened to break his legs he would come to me and ask for a loan. I was fed up with it.'

I took a moment to digest all that.

‘Maybe so,’ I said. ‘But we didn’t need to shoot him though, did we? When he came asking for money you could have just said no.... It seems a bit unreasonable to kill a man just because he was a nuisance.’

This mild reproof seemed to exasperate Mama beyond words, and she shook her head from side to side.

‘Look,’ she said at last. ‘Look – don’t you lose any sleep over Billy Marwell, Lucius. He never showed any concern for you. I once loved that little shit. Loved him with all my heart. And when I became pregnant I thought he’d be glad – I really thought he would marry me. But he wasn’t glad at all. Denied the child was his. And that hurt me. Deeply. I wasn’t a saint, but I wasn’t that much of a slag. I’d been faithful to him. In my way. Anyway, he told me to get rid of the kid, whoever’s child it was – have an abortion....’

She paused and gathered her strength.

‘He kicked me, you know.’ She glanced at me again. ‘In the stomach. When I refused to have an abortion, he tried to give me a home-made one. And I bled quite a lot. I don’t know.... Maybe that was what made you the way you are, Lucius.... I never wanted to see him again after that. But when you were born he heard that you weren’t quite right, so he came and had a look for himself. And when I showed him what you were like, he said, That’s no child of mine. And he left. He never mentioned you again. He hardly ever spoke to me, in the next twenty years, except when he wanted money. Which was more and more often as the years went by. Every three months he would sidle up to me

and ask for a loan. Fifty, a hundred, a thousand. And of course it was never repaid. He was always into me for money, Lucius. The more successful I became, the bigger were Billy's debts – and the more often he knocked on my door.'

It was going to take me a long time to come to terms with what Mama had told me, I realised that. I wanted to go away and think about it. But I thought I'd better press on with some questions while I had the chance. The opportunity might never arise again.

'But I still don't understand,' I said. 'All of that seems hardly enough reason to shoot him. He wasn't really blackmailing you at all. So why did you go to all that trouble with the photographs?'

Mama would have sat up straight if she had the strength, but she couldn't, and I didn't help her because to do so might have stopped the flow of thought.

'Ach, Lucius,' she said, 'you just don't get it, do you?'

I remained silent.

'You've long since forgotten what it was like when you were a boy.... You were a poor pathetic little thing. A cripple, and a spastic with it. People were sorry for you. And they pitied me. They saw you as weak, Lucius. Weak. You were a person of no account. It got a bit better when you grew up and started to box and lift weights and things. But people still saw you as a soft touch. You were still a Mama's boy. Someone I had to look after. You were a toff who went to a toff's school. You weren't a real man. And all of that

meant that we were vulnerable.

‘I told you at the time, Lucius, I’m sure I did. We had to send a message. We had to make people realise that you really were a hard man, just like your grandfather. I wanted you to be respected, you see, just like your Grandad was. I wanted to hear people say it: Don’t fuck around with Lucius. It’s not good for your health. And it worked. After you killed Billy Marwell, everything changed. From that day on, you were no longer my crippled little kid. You were someone to be reckoned with.... A hard man. You must be able to see that, Lucius? Surely.’

She looked at me imploringly, as if desperate for me to agree with her. But I was unable to speak.

After a moment Mama became calmer.

‘I made you kill Billy Marwell for the same reason I took you into my bed when you were fourteen. Because I wanted to make you a man, Lucius. In every possible way.’

She lifted up her pale and wasted hand, and stroked the good side of my face.

‘And I did,’ she said. ‘Didn’t I?’

Michael Allen is an award-winning writer whose first work appeared in print over fifty years ago. Since then he has written twelve novels, three non-fiction books, and a collection of short stories; he has also had work successfully produced on the stage, television, and radio. He is currently best known for his blog on books and publishing, the Grumpy Old Bookman:

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www.michaelallen.me.uk.

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Critical Reception

Here are some quotations from reviews of Michael Allen's previous fiction:

'A pleasing narrative style that will make his future efforts keenly sought after by readers' [*The Leavers*] *Daily Mail*.

'The best police procedure novel I have read in years' [*Spence in Petal Park*] *The Spectator*

'A true blue murder master' [*Spence in Petal Park*] *Time*

'Solidly constructed' [*Spence at the Blue Bazaar*] *New York Times Book Review*

'Absolutely first class... in the Top Ten of crime writers' [*Spence at the Blue Bazaar*] *The Bookseller*

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