

Just Desserts - Chapter One

In the history books Sir Francis Drake 'sing'd the King of Spain's beard'. That was in 1587. It wouldn't be history but Martin Packman, the Louse, veritably torched mine, four hundred and thirteen years later. The episode in which this egregious individual earned his sobriquet Louse will remain with me through Alzheimer's disease, beyond brain death and into the cosmos. The shafting of Michael Tremayne. On top of that, the Louse is intent on shafting my wife.

Ugh, Packman! He should be in an opera: Puccini's *Tosser*. Packman has a raffish reputation, well deserved. In Edwardian society he'd be regarded as a bounder. He is expensively dressed, inconsiderate, unreliable. Today he drives a BMW limo with leather upholstery and a personalised number plate that pigeonholes him, MXP 69. *Why the sixty nine, Martin?* the ladies ask him, *simper simper. Oh it lends a little je ne sais quois, don't you think?* Ugh, we know perfectly well *quois. What's the X for, Martin? Ah that's a secret eXtra something I only tell women, leer leer, in bed.* He actually said that, to Leila Mason, my friend Jack's wife. Leila told him that it was one fact then of which she was certain she would remain ignorant. A withering then.

I should explain. I am a surgeon, *Mister* Tremayne, forty two years old, married, three kids. The Louse is another doc, a radiologist, around forty but he looks younger. And to the misfortune of the woman concerned, he is married. He is with issue, two kids, further misfortune there. *My* misfortune is that I am obliged to work with the man. My surgical bread and butter is so-called vascular, to do with blocked blood vessels. The Louse diagnoses my patients for me.

My surgical activities consume a lot of time. My wife Nancy, the object of the Louse's priapic ambitions, thinks it consumes too much time. Nancy doesn't understand, or chooses these days not to understand, that you can't just turn surgery on and off. Although I only operate for three routine sessions a week, there are the joyous outpatient clinics, the ward rounds, emergency operations in the middle of the night, administration and a fifth activity, which has loomed large lately, sticking up for my rights.

I haven't been sticking up hard enough. Packman, ugh. He has comprehensively outmanoeuvred me with the hospital management. Now the other matter seems to be going the wrong way too.

Looking back, it's hard to see how, the Louse and I used to be friends. We met as junior doctors at a hospital in Kent, and kept in touch after that. I was appointed a consultant at Marsham District General Hospital eighteen months before him, and I was delighted when I heard he was under consideration for a newly created radiology post. I always knew he was ambitious. He made no secret of this when he arrived. Jim Desilletts, my fellow vascular surgeon and I welcomed the fact. During his first eighteen months the Louse transformed our hospital's vascular radiology service. Significantly, he was skilful in treating blocked blood vessels himself. He was progressive; he introduced new techniques. All good. He was a fine administrator; he cut down waiting times. All good. It was only after a couple of years that the problems surfaced. At work, his lust for power. At play, his lust for my wife.

I'm still filled with wonder that Nancy married me. I can distinctly remember when I spotted her for the first time, the precise instant. It was at a summer ball in London, my last year as a medical student. I was looking down the huge shallow staircase from a gallery in the Weavers' Hall, taking in the atmosphere, minding my own business. There were various revellers on the stairs, mainly boisterous couples, but Nancy stood out as she came tentatively up, apparently looking for someone.

She was wearing a tight crimson off-the-shoulder dress and carrying a tiny matching handbag. Oblique lighting from a chandelier emphasised the curves of her body, her cheekbones, her hips, her bust. *Why is it called a bust, Dad? Because the good ones are trying to bust out, son. But don't tell your mother I said that.* Her waist seemed impossibly tiny. Her hips pushed from side to side with each step, slowly, voluptuously. Her hair was up in a complicated arrangement, with artful wisps down the side of her face. Her neck was exposed, naked apart from a string of pearls. Her eyes were serious, scanning the milling figures around me. Did they alight on me for a moment? Surely not. Her nose was straight, her lips parted, a slight frown creating an anxious expression. I wanted to rush down to her side. Don't worry, Miss Damsel, I'll sort things out, cling on to my arm. No, tighter than that; everything will be all right. Instead I just stood transfixed. Was there ever a more beautiful face? A more beautiful woman? Not to my eyes, impossible. Who on earth,

I wondered, or indeed, who in heaven was she? Neither she nor the smooth blue-chinned escort I saw her with a little later were medics. That was probably why I hadn't come across them before. He looked at least thirty so I could probably do it twice as often as him without flagging, surely a decisive advantage. The people I asked didn't know them. Some hadn't noticed her, for goodness' sake, prime candidates for ophthalmological research.

As the evening progressed I became worried. I had to find out who the damsel was. I must have been distracted company for my partner. Finally it became clear that Nancy and her escort had disappeared. I wouldn't be able to blunder into them and contrive an introduction, *Hi, I'm Adonis, honey, disguised this evening as a nerd*. Worry turned to desperation. Would this be a fairy story without a happy ending? With hardly anything in the way of a beginning? Had some time warp returned Aphrodite to London EC1 and then whisked her away again? Come to think of it, didn't Aphrodite marry Hephaestus, who was both ugly and lame. I wasn't lame, but I was prepared to shoot myself in the foot or have it mutilated by a chain saw to complete the conditions of the myth, if it would bring me an introduction to the damsel.

Some time after midnight I bumped into an Australian friend, Max Maraun. Max was at our hospital for three years doing an MD. This is a big research project culminating in an academic thesis, passport to a plumb consultant appointment in his hemisphere or ours. Max the political beast masqueraded as a social animal when it suited him. He had quickly come to know most of the people in our inbred medical circle, and he knew all the gossip. We went to the bar while our ladies powdered their noses. I enquired for the umpteenth time about the girl in the vivid red dress.

Max laughed in astonishment. "Who is that? Come off it, Michael. That's Nancy Ambrose. The fucking Dean's daughter no less. The late Dean, excuse me. She might even be married now, I'm not sure. Don't even dream about it. You've got as much chance there, mate, as a team of pygmies in the NBA."

I clung to Max's every word. I was thrilled to hear someone talk about the damsel, but depressed at the thrust of his news.

Max took a swig of beer, not his first of the evening, and continued, "You know Michelle, the Dean's secretary? An Aussie sheila of course. Good for a bit of low down. She helped with the guest list for tonight. She was telling me, listen to this, the bloke Mademoiselle Ambrose is with, or it might be Madame someone else but don't let's worry about the detail, this bloke Serge Dutronc, is none other than the French ambassador's son. You know the type, garlic breath, Gallic bullshit, or should that be the other way round, and rocks transplanted from a Charolais stud bull. And she's a bit down market tonight. Let's give you an idea. Her regular boyfriend, or maybe she's married as I said, I'm not sure, it could even be her husband here but he doesn't look old enough, her regular beau is some geezer in the City, twice her age and twice as wealthy as her father. Twice as ugly as you, too, but don't take any comfort from that, Michael, m'boy. She's out of your league, mate, way out of your league. I've even ruled her out for meself! You concentrate on the fair Philippa. She seems a bit of all right."

The fair Philippa was all right, true, but that evening I had gone off blondes for ever. It was life that wasn't fair. Life was a sardonic brunette, dark of skin and dark of purpose.

From that moment life for me was Nancy Ambrose. The daughter of the late Dean, wow! Regrettably I had crossed swords once or twice with Sir Brian Ambrose, before he was killed in a freak accident. For some reason he had taken a dim view of my tasting a 'faecal specimen' in front of a bacteriology class. The lady microbiology lecturer had fainted and cut her head open when she fell, unaware that the specimen was actually chocolate peanut butter, substituted by me the previous day. The words, I had brashly pointed out to Sir Brian, were spelt s-e-n-s-e o-f h-u-m-o-u-r. And he had accused me of cheating no less. A good result in a multiple-choice exam paper had belied my perceived absence of dedication during the preceding academic year. That really hurt, as I had worked hard the night before the exam, and if regular alcohol had improved my intellectual abilities then that's the way it was. I couldn't understand how such an ethereal creature as Nancy had sprung from the loins of that crusty old bugger. It was impossible to foresee that, however unwillingly from his premature grave, he was eventually to become my posthumous father-in-law.

The story of Sir Brian and Lady Felicity Ambrose was well known. Sir Brian had been independently wealthy, much involved in *pukka* London life. The young Brian Ambrose, brilliant

doctor, researcher, government advisor, had met the even younger Felicity in the 1970s, when she had been a model. Dashing wealthy-bachelor Brian became the dashing, cheque-cashing husband. He continued to provide his coruscating wife with a designer wardrobe from the moment he whisked her out of the disappointed world of couturiers into London society.

It had clearly been Lady Felicity who gave Nancy her looks. Remembering Sir Brian, I always wondered whether some handsome dressmaker hadn't slipped his wife out of more than just the dress she was trying on during a private fitting, and had provided the genes for Nancy's eyes and her hair and her relative lack of height. Certainly Nancy was her mother's daughter, but was she biologically her father's? She bore scant resemblance to her brother in photographs, I later noticed.

I should point out that crises concerning the opposite sex were a regular part of my existence in those days. I would be smitten by another unattainable woman or paragon or angel, they varied, and would mope around, making do with Philippas and Janes and Dianes, nurses, physiotherapists, other students, the odd doctor, even Michelle, the Dean's secretary, unbeknownst to Max Maraun. All the while I would be forlornly scheming to meet up with, and as quickly as possible mate up with, the current Miss Wish Object.

Not much separated high level fantasy, the stuff of sonnets, from low level lust, the stuff of stuffing. *My angel, my darling, my precious, you are the most wonderful creature on God's earth. Your beauty captivates me, your wit entrances me...* Never mind that, Jasmine, I crave your loins. Jeans off NOW and we'll do it on the carpet.

Nancy was different. Her memory didn't fade like the others. Certainly there was a procession of unattainables after her, each being replaced by another, transiently more desirable than the last. Certainly I had a succession of relationships, presumably girls who couldn't do any better than a three quarters broke junior doctor. Not a bad lot as I look fondly back. But the image of Nancy in that crimson dress, and numerous mental pictures of her out of it, would always return and fill me with a wistful longing. I almost failed one of my exams once thinking about her. *Yes I'd love to go for a picnic with you, Michael. Don't forget the wine and I'll bring a rug so we can lie down...* Cripes! I've got two questions to finish in fifteen minutes, where's the time gone?

I didn't see Nancy after the ball, and never realistically expected to. I half-heartedly tried to find out what she did, but that only confirmed she was married. Oh the pangs, but in the end, ah well, back to the Philippas and the Janes and the Dianes.

Aubrey Waddy