

A Successful Man

Mike found the photographs down the back of the filing cabinet. The manila folder was old and dirty, but the glossy images within it were pristine. He flicked through them and the memories snagged at his awareness.

'Hello there.' As a courtesy the Principal tapped the office door as he stepped into the room. 'Ready for the move I see.'

Startled, Mike pushed the photos and their folder into the desk drawer. 'Well, yes. Not that I'm presuming anything of course.'

The Principal smiled. 'Don't worry. I can confirm your appointment, officially, this morning. Congratulations, Professor, you can put up the nameplate on your new door.' He reached out his hand, which Mike clasped in both of his own.

'Thank you.' Mike radiated gratitude. 'Excellent. Thank you.'

Finally.

He'd worked hard for this, been working at it for years. He'd written pieces for journals which no-one read, lectured in cold, half empty halls, learned to position himself well and to manage the politics. Oh yes, he'd worked hard. He had no doubt, this was what he deserved. He was truly delighted.

'If you'll excuse me, I must phone Susanna...'

'Yes, yes, of course.' The Principal ambled to the door. 'Give my daughter my regards. She'll be pleased, I know.'

Mike barely had time to tell his wife the good news, before people began to arrive and the disordered room filled as the news spread. Champagne appeared. One or two Senior Fellows dropped by, even Ed Ngoyen, Mike's

main internal rival for the Chair. The tall Vietnamese weaved through the growing number of colleagues and students, to shake Mike's hand.

A decent chap, 'though not what the College needed right now, the Principal had said.

Mike flirted in half-hearted fashion with the secretaries. He almost tingled with anticipation as he contemplated the pleasures of his new position. He could hardly wait to go across to his new rooms, though he wouldn't be late home tonight, Sue would want to celebrate. Deftly, he encouraged the well-wishers to depart. But he had already packed what he needed to take.

As people left Mike drew the manila folder from the drawer. He'd keep the photos, at least until he had a chance to look at them properly. He slipped them into his briefcase. At the door he took one last look at the office which had been his for almost ten years.

It had seemed such an achievement when he had first arrived here, to own part of this little, shared space. Here he had set out to woo and win Susanna, and to obtain her father's blessing. The union branch meetings had convened here when Mike had been such a staunch supporter. Academics from across the globe had visited here and students laboured.

It was time to move on.

His step was jaunty as he strode across the lawns in the late spring sunshine. Through the stone arch and into the oldest, grandest building, and there it was, etched in shining brass on his new door, the evidence of his success.

Professor M. A. Cassio.

Someone must have thought to attach this as soon as the news was out. He'd forbidden it beforehand. Mike reminded himself to find out who had done it. They'd shown initiative.

Through the half-opened door the room glowed golden in the light of the setting sun. The heavy walnut desk and chair, a long-ago gift from his first wife, was positioned centrally on a fine Turkey rug, but otherwise the room was almost empty of furniture. Mike closed the door as he stepped inside.

There was an ante-room off to the right, for his secretary, with its own entrance. So he could come and go without notice or comment.

He switched on the green shaded lamp and sat, leaning back, in the chair. He swivelled, surveying his new domain. It was good.

Mike pulled his briefcase on to the desk and opened it. The manila folder slid out. He took out the photographs. Today, of all days, to come upon these. Still, he could afford to be nostalgic.

How young he looked, a lowly graduate student, how callow and untried. It was the Cyprus trip, a British Council sponsored delegation to a conference. Mike had been there to support his professor and get noticed, but, in fact, it was when his career had really begun.

The monochrome pictures showed a group of people, sitting just inside a restaurant, its doors pushed back and open to the street. There were gleaming metal chairs and tables outside. Car headlights were bright spots of glare with wavy tails, passing on the road. Inside, people and objects had a massiveness, a sculptural quality.

The photographs formed a sequence. The linen napkins were folded knife sharp in the formal place settings, but crumpled with shadow in later shots as

the meal ended. Waiters in white shirts and black waistcoats were half in, half out of frames, setting down spotless plates or removing them, mottled with use. They filled gleaming glasses with black, treacle-like wine and Mike thought of the thin Cypriot red.

The diners were mostly academics, though, at one end sat a short, swarthy-looking girl. One of the conference people, Mike surmised, before he remembered. It was their interpreter, whom he had later accompanied to her room. He felt a twinge of guilt, even thirty years later, for the casual coupling. Then his common sense kicked in, he had been young and single and it had probably meant as little to the girl. He was indulgent to his younger self.

Anyway, none of this gang had exactly been whiter than white, except Mona and, possibly, Emily (although there was no excuse for wilful naivete).

At the centre of the table sat his Professor. Theo's star was then at its zenith and Mike had been anxious to gather some reflected radiance. To Theo's left sat James, hawk face watchful, wide mouth smiling, self-deprecating and charming, everyone's friend and advisor. On his left, his wife, Emily. She smiled as James ignored her, her face a mask of scarcely concealed unease. Later in the sequence, she seemed more relaxed, joking with Mona, long hands a-flutter. More than a few glasses of wine, no doubt.

As he scrutinized the prints, lines of energy and tension around the table formed beneath his gaze.

It was so transparent now. How did he miss the hatred and plotting at the time? Was it youthful self-absorption? Or did the knowledge come with hindsight? Mike examined his memories. He stared at the images as if they would offer up more secrets.

At the other end of the table sat Rod, his face blotchy in shades of grey, 'though Mike remembered it as brick-red and florid. With the grin and dimpled cheeks of a debauched garden gnome, Rod's simulacrum exuded good will, so far removed from the man's habitual sourness. Disappointment, in life and in love, had made him vindictive. In one frame Rod watched Theo and his new wife, his eyes like sharp flints. His hatred was palpable.

Mona's heavy hair is piled high. Her huge eyes, pale lips and skin are exquisite and flawless in monochrome.

Mike tilted his head and smiled. He'd always been a favourite of hers. He suspected that she had enjoyed the company of someone closer to her own age than Theo. Perhaps, had things been different.... but as it was.

Such a shame.

In one photograph Mona cups her chin in her hand, elbow propped amid detritus, as she watches her husband with a look of pride and love. Theo is smiling, holding forth, but the slight stiffness in his pose betrays his knowledge of her gaze. In another image Theo raises his hand to Mona's cheek, to brush away an escaped tendril of hair, with the mazed look of a man astonished at his own good fortune. Mona's simple dress is matt grey, her hand reaching up to meet his, is pale against it. Theo's high forehead reflects the restaurant lights, his white shirt blazes against his black skin.

Mike blinked, his eyes damp.

The intensity of their feeling. It reaches him even here, across time.

Are all lovers so exposed, their emotions unguarded and their focus askew? His own emotional life was hardly so dramatic, more chamber piece

than grand opera, but not without its turmoil and cost (divorces were rarely happy and never cheap). There was always gossip. But nothing, Mike conceded, like the firestorm stirred by Theo and Mona.

Of course, things were different now. There were black cabinet ministers and lots of mixed race couples. Elite educational institutions actively encouraged applications from non-white students and had non-white Fellows. One couldn't be certain that such hatred wouldn't find other outlets, other weaknesses, but it was less likely today. Things had changed.

He looked again at Theo's image. Admiration, even adulation, jostled with envy and, Mike acknowledged, fear. The charisma of the man, his pugnacity and humanity seemed to dominate even from the pictures held in Mike's hand. Mike could hear again that voice, those musical, persuasive bass notes and he felt reduced to a hack-student, a mere opportunist on the look-out for advancement.

Well, it just showed how wrong Theo could be. Mike pressed his lips together and raised his chin. In that as in other things.

The Cyprus conference had been a turning point in Mike's career. The split with Theo would have been inevitable, he understood that now, though things were difficult at the time. He wasn't a man to cross and he'd clearly felt let down when Mike had got caught up in the brawl. Mike had pressed Mona to speak with Theo on his behalf and she'd done so, she'd been a good friend to him. She had pleaded his case.

He couldn't have known what that would lead to.

Tragic, what Theo threw away, what could have possessed him? How could anyone believe ill of such a devoted and beautiful creature as Mona, a girl so obviously in love with him?

Mike would certainly not repeat such folly. He had planned his life to perfection, there would be no uncontrollable rages.

When he'd been let out of hospital the drama was all over. Even the newspapers had lost interest. Mike delivered the conference address on behalf of the, much depleted, British delegation, stepping into the breach rather well, he recalled, under the circumstances.

He'd given the address in a light and airy room, its windows over-looking the harbour, not far from the little restaurant in the photos. It was well received and had started him on his way.

Mike placed the photographs into the desk drawer and turned its key. Fancy finding those today, of all days, when he took his mentor's place. He was the Professor now.

"Ready to go, Mike?"

He smiled as Julia, his graduate student, entered the office from the ante room. The very last of the sunlight caught in her red hair.

"Yes, I think so. When is the rest of the furniture arriving?"

"Next week, while we're in Venice. Everything's arranged. The conference pack is ready, if you want it. I have a copy here."

Standing close at her shoulder, he rifled through the binder. The trip would be another triumph and might afford other enjoyment, for Julia had not yet accompanied him overseas and Venice was a romantic city. He savoured the possibilities.

He had stayed the course.

Theo hadn't.

As he scanned the schedule Mike considered his erstwhile mentor, the father he had never had – his own father being too mean and little to qualify.

The man had had it all, recognition, fame, position, money and dear, beautiful, strangled Mona. No wonder suicide was the only way.

Mike dismissed the ghosts. He would write the history now.

His eye lighted upon the sheaf of photographs lying on the desk. There should be a photographer for the ceremony, he thought as they left the office, his hand resting lightly on Julia's back. His moment of triumph should be captured for posterity, in glorious colour. What a good idea.