

Book One: The Thieving Magpie

June and July 1984

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Tuesday's Wind-up Bird



Six Fingers and Four Breasts

When the phone rang I was in the kitchen, boiling a potful of spaghetti and whistling along to an FM broadcast of the overture to Rossini's *The Thieving Magpie*, which has to be the perfect music for cooking pasta.

I wanted to ignore the phone, not only because the spaghetti was nearly done but because Claudio Abbado was bringing the London Symphony to its musical climax. Finally, though, I had to give in. It could have been someone with news of a job. I turned down the gas, went to the living room, and picked up the receiver.

"Ten minutes, please," said a woman on the other end.

I'm good at recognizing people's voices, but this was not one I knew.

"Excuse me? To whom did you wish to speak?"

"To *you*, of course. Ten minutes, please. That's all we need to understand each other." Her voice was low and soft but otherwise nondescript.

"Understand each other?"

"Each other's feelings."

I leaned over and peeked through the kitchen door. The spaghetti pot was steaming nicely, and Claudio Abbado was still conducting *The Thieving Magpie*.

"Sorry, but you caught me in the middle of cooking spaghetti. Could you call back later?"

"Spaghettii? What are you doing cooking spaghetti at 10.30 in the morning?"

"That's none of your business," I said. "I decide what I eat and when I eat it."

"Fair enough. I'll call back," she said, her voice now flat and expressionless. A slight change in mood can do amazing things to the tone of a person's voice.

"Hold on a minute," I said before she could hang up. "If this is some new sales gimmick, you can forget it. I'm out of work. I'm not in the market for anything."

"Don't worry. I know."

"You know? You know what?"

"That you're out of work. I know about that. So, go and cook your precious spaghetti."

"Who the hell —"

She rang off.

Deprived of outlet for my feelings, I stared at the phone in my hand until I remembered the spaghetti. Back in the kitchen, I turned off the gas and poured the contents of the pot into a colander. Thanks to the phone call, the spaghetti was a little softer than *al dente*, but it had not been dealt a mortal blow. I started eating – and thinking.

Understand each other? Understand each other's feelings in ten minutes? What was she talking about? Maybe it was just a hoax call. Or some new sales pitch. In any case, it had nothing to do with me.

After lunch, I went back to my library book on the living room sofa, glancing every now and then at the telephone. What were we supposed to understand about each other in ten minutes? What *can* two people understand about each other in ten minutes? Come to think of it, she seemed awfully sure about those ten minutes: it was the first thing she came out with. As if nine minutes would be too short or eleven minutes too long. Like cooking spaghetti *al dente*.

I couldn't read any more. I decided to iron shirts instead. Which is what I always do when I'm upset. It's an old habit. I divide the job into twelve distinct stages, beginning with the collar (outer surface) and ending with the left-hand cuff. The order is invariable, and I count off each stage to myself. Otherwise, it won't come out right.

I ironed three shirts, checking them for wrinkles and putting them on hangers. Once I had switched off the iron and put it away with the ironing board in the hall cupboard, my mind felt a good deal clearer.

I was on my way to the kitchen for a glass of water when the phone

rang again. I hesitated for a second, but decided to answer it. If it was the same woman, I'd tell her I was ironing and hang up.

This time it was Kumiko. The wall clock said 11.30. "How are you?" she asked.

"Fine," I said, relieved to hear my wife's voice.

"What are you doing?"

"Just finished ironing."

"What's wrong?" There was a note of tension in her voice. She knew what it meant for me to be ironing.

"Nothing. I was just ironing some shirts." I sat down and shifted the receiver from my left hand to my right. "What's up?"

"Can you write poetry?" she asked.

"Poetry!?" Poetry? Did she mean . . . poetry?

"I know the publisher of a story magazine for girls. They're looking for somebody to pick and revise poems submitted by readers. And they want the person to write a short poem every month for an opener. Pay's not bad for an easy job. It's part-time of course. But they might add some editorial work if the person –"

"Easy work?" I broke in. "Hang on a minute. I'm looking for something in law, not poetry."

"I thought you did some writing in high school."

"Oh yes, sure, for the school newspaper: which team won the football championship or how the physics teacher fell down the stairs and ended up in the hospital – that kind of stuff. Not poetry. I can't write poetry."

"Sure, but I'm not talking about great poetry, just something for school girls. It doesn't have to earn a place in literary history. You could do it with your eyes shut. Don't you see?"

"Look, I just can't write poetry – eyes open or closed. I've never done it, and I'm not going to start now."

"All right," said Kumiko, a little sadly. "But it's hard to find legal work."

"I know. That's why I've got so many feelers out. I should be hearing something this week. If it's no go, I'll think about doing something else."

"Well, I suppose that's that. By the way, what's today? What day of the week?"

I thought a moment and said, "Tuesday."

"Then will you go to the bank and pay the gas and telephone bills?"

"Sure. I was just about to go shopping for dinner anyway."

"What are you planning?"

"I don't know yet. I'll decide when I'm shopping."