

Believing the Lie

Also by Elizabeth George

Fiction

A Great Deliverance
Payment in Blood
Well-Schooled in Murder
A Suitable Vengeance
For the Sake of Elena
Missing Joseph
Playing for the Ashes
In the Presence of the Enemy
Deception on His Mind
In Pursuit of the Proper Sinner
A Traitor to Memory
A Place of Hiding
With No One as Witness
What Came Before He Shot Her
Careless in Red
This Body of Death

Short Stories

The Evidence Exposed
I, Richard

Anthology

Crime From the Mind of a Woman (Ed.)
Two of the Deadliest (Ed.)

Non-Fiction

Write Away: One Novelist's Approach to Fiction and the Writing Life

ELIZABETH GEORGE

Believing the Lie


HODDER &
STOUGHTON

First published in Great Britain in 2012 by Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

I

Copyright © Susan Elizabeth George 2012

The right of Elizabeth George to be identified as the Author of the Work has
been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Map illustration © David Cain

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in
a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the
prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any
form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and
without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real
persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 444 7 0597 3
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 444 7 0598 0

Typeset in Plantin Light by
Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Hodder & Stoughton policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and
recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The
logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the
environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.hodder.co.uk

In loving memory of
Anthony Mott
brilliant raconteur
adored companion
always Antonio to me

This life's five windows of the soul
Distorts the Heavens from pole to pole,
And leads you to believe a lie
When you see with, not thro', the eye.

William Blake

10 OCTOBER

Fleet Street
The City of London

Zed Benjamin had never been called into the Editor's office before, and he found the experience simultaneously disconcerting and thrilling. The disconcerting half of it resulted in massive sweating of the armpits. The thrilling half of it produced a heartbeat he could actually feel, for some reason, in the pads of his thumbs. But since from the first he'd believed it essential to see Rodney Aronson as just another bloke at *The Source*, he attributed both the sweating of armpits and the pulsing of thumbs to the fact that he'd switched from his one summer suit to his one winter suit rather too early in the season. He made a mental note to change back to the summer suit in the morning and he only hoped his mother hadn't taken it to be cleaned once she saw he'd made the switch. That would be, Zed thought, exactly like her. His mum was helpful and earnest. She was too much of both.

He sought a distraction, easy enough to find in Rodney Aronson's office. While the Editor of the newspaper continued to read Zed's story, Zed began to read the headlines on the old issues of the tabloid that were framed and hung along the walls. He found them distasteful and idiotic, their stories pandering to the worst inclinations in the human psyche. **Rent Boy Breaks Silence** featured a piece on a kerb-crawling encounter between a sixteen-year-old boy and a member of parliament in the vicinity of King's Cross Station, an unseemly romantic interlude interrupted by the advent of vice officers from the local nick. **MP in Sex Triangle with Teenager** preceded the rent boy breaking his silence and **MP Wife in Suicide Drama** followed hard on its heels. *The Source* had been on top of all these stories, first on the scene, first with the scoop, first with the money to pay informants for salacious details to juice up a report that in any legitimate paper would either be written with discretion or buried deep inside or both. This was particularly the case for such hot topics as **Prince**

in Bedroom Brouhaha, Kiss and Tell Equerry Shocks Palace, and Another Royal Divorce? all of which, Zed knew very well from gossip in the canteen, had topped *The Source's* previous circulation figures by over one hundred thousand copies each. This was the sort of reportage for which the red-top was known. Everyone in the news-room understood that if you didn't want to get your hands dirty sifting through other people's nasty bits of laundry, then you didn't want to work as an investigative reporter at *The Source*.

Which was, admittedly, the case for Zedekiah Benjamin. He definitely didn't want to work as an investigative reporter at *The Source*. He saw himself as a columnist-for-the-*Financial-Times* kind of bloke, someone with a career providing enough respectability and name recognition to support his real passion, which was writing fine poetry. But jobs as respectable columnists were as scarce as knickers under kilts, and one had to do *something* to put food on the table since writing excellent verse wasn't about to do it. Thus Zed knew it behoved him to act at all times like a man who found the pursuit of the social gaffes of celebrities and the peccadilloes of members of the Royal Family journalistically and professionally fulfilling. Still, he liked to believe that even a paper like *The Source* could benefit from a slight elevation from its usual position in the gutter from where, it had to be said, no one was gazing at the stars.

The piece that Rodney Aronson was reading demonstrated this. In Zed's mind, a tabloid story did not have to swim in lubricious facts in order to capture the reader's interest. Stories could be uplifting and redemptive like this one and still sell newspapers. True, such stories weren't likely to make the front page, but the Sunday magazine would do, although a two page spread at the centre of the daily edition wouldn't have gone down badly either, just as long as photographs accompanied it and the story made a jump to the following page. Zed had spent ages on this piece and it deserved a gallon of newsprint, he thought. It had exactly what readers of *The Source* liked, but with refinement. Sins of the fathers and their sons were featured, ruined relationships were explored, alcohol and drug usage was involved, and redemption was achieved. Here was a feature about a wastrel, caught in the deadly embrace of methamphetamine addiction, who at the eleventh hour – more or less – managed to turn himself round and live anew, birthing himself through an unexpected devotion to society's lowest of the low. Here was a story with villains and heroes, with worthy adversaries and enduring love. Here were exotic locations, family values, parental love. And above all—

'It's a snore.' Rodney Aronson tossed Zed's story to one side of his desk and fingered his beard. He dislodged a flake of chocolate therein and popped it into his mouth. He'd finished a Cadbury's Dairy Milk while he was reading and his restless eyes took in his desktop as if seeking another indulgence, which he didn't need, considering a girth barely hidden by the overlarge safari jacket he favoured for workday attire.

'What?' Zed thought he'd misheard and he rooted round in his mind for anything that rhymed with *snore* as a means of reassuring himself that his editor hadn't just condemned his piece to the bottom corner of page twenty or worse.

'Snore,' Rodney said. 'Snore as in sleep as in put me to sleep. You promised me a hot investigative piece if I sent you up there. You guaranteed me a hot investigative piece, as I recall. If I went to the expense of putting you up in a hotel for God knows how many days—'

'Five,' Zed said. 'Because it was a complicated piece and there were people who needed to be interviewed so that the objectivity one wants to maintain—'

'All right. Five. And I'm going to want a word about your choice of hotel, by the way, because I've seen the bill and I'm wondering if the bloody room came with dancing girls. When someone is sent the hell up to Cumbria for five days at the expense of the paper, promising that a whiz-bang story will be the outcome . . .' Rodney picked up the piece and used it to gesture with. 'What the hell exactly have you investigated here? And what in God's name's this title all about? "The Ninth Life." What is this, something from one of your highbrow *lit-ra-cher* classes? Maybe creative writing, eh? Fancy yourself a novelist, do you?'

Zed knew the Editor hadn't been to university. That was part of the canteen gossip as well. *Sotto voce* had come the advice soon after Zed's joining the staff of the *The Source* : For God's sake and for your own good, don't cross Rod with anything that reminds him you have a first or a second or a *whatever* in something even vaguely associated with higher education, mate. *Cannot* cope and thinks you're taking the piss, so keep it shut when it comes to that kind of thing.

Thus Zed trod carefully with his reply to Rodney's question about the title of his piece. 'I was thinking of cats, actually.'

'You were thinking of cats.'

'Uh . . . having nine lives?'

'Got it in a basket. But we're not writing about cats, are we.'

‘No. Of course not. But . . .’ Zed wasn’t sure what the editor wanted, so he altered direction and plunged on with his explanation. ‘What I meant was that the bloke’s been eight times in rehab, see, in three different countries and nothing worked for him, and I mean *nothing*. Oh maybe he’s been clean for six or eight months or once for a year but after a bit it’s back to the meth and he’s wasted again. He ends up in Utah where he meets a very special woman and suddenly he’s a new man and he never looks back.’

‘Presto, change-o, that’s about it? Saved by the power of love, eh?’ Rodney’s voice sounded affable. Zed took heart from this.

‘That’s exactly it, Rodney. That’s what’s so incredible. He’s completely cured. He comes home, not to the fatted calf but—’

‘The fatted what?’

Zed backpedalled swiftly. Biblical allusion. Obviously a very bad way to go. ‘Nothing. So he comes home and he starts a programme to help the unhelphable.’ Was that a word? Zed wondered. ‘And not who you’d expect him to help: young blokes and girls with their lives ahead of them. But rejects. Old blokes living rough, society’s detritus—’

Rodney glanced his way.

Zed hurried on with, ‘Social rubbish getting its next meal from the inside of wheelie bins while they spit out their rotting teeth. He saves them. He thinks they’re *worth* saving. And they respond. They’re cured as well. A lifetime of booze and drugs and living rough and they’re cured of it.’ Zed took a breath. He waited for Rodney’s reply.

It came evenly enough but the tone was suggestive of a lack of enthusiasm for Zed’s defence of his reportage. ‘They’re rebuilding a bloody tower, Zed. Nobody’s cured of anything and when the tower’s finished the lot of them will go back to the street.’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it’s a pele tower. And that’s what gives the story its power. It’s a metaphor.’ Zed knew the very idea of metaphor put him onto dangerous ground with the Editor, so he madly rushed on. ‘Consider the use of the towers and you’ll see how it works. They were built for protection against border reivers – those nasty blokes who invaded from Scotland, eh? – and, for our purposes, the border reivers represent drugs, okay? Meth. Coke. Hash. Smack. Blow. Whatever. The pele tower itself represents redemption and recovery, and each floor of the tower, which in the past contained something different and by this I mean the ground floor was for animals and the first floor was for cooking and household

activities and the second floor was for living and sleeping and then the roof was for fighting off the reivers by showering them with arrows and oh I don't know hot oil or something and when you look at all this and take it to mean what it *ought* to mean and *could* mean in the life of a person who's been on the street for what . . . ten or fifteen years? . . . then—'

Rodney's head dropped onto his desk. He waved Zed off.

Zed wasn't sure what to make of this. It looked like dismissal but he wasn't about to slink off with his tail between . . . God, another metaphor, he thought. He crashed on, saying, 'It's what makes this story a cut above. It's what makes this story a Sunday piece. I see it in the magazine, four full pages with photos: the tower, the blokes rebuilding it, the before and the afters, that sort of thing.'

'It's a snore,' Rodney said again. 'Which, by the way, is another metaphor. And so is sex, which this story has none of.'

'Sex,' Zed repeated. 'Well, the wife *is* glamorous, I suppose, but she didn't want the story to be about her or about their relationship. She said he's the one who—'

Rodney raised his head. 'I don't mean sex as in sex, stupid. I mean sex as in *sex*.' He snapped his fingers. 'The sizzle, the tension, the make-the-reader-want-something, the restlessness, the urge, the rising excitement, the make-her-wet-and-make-him-hard only they don't know why they even feel that way. Am I being clear? Your story doesn't have it.'

'But it's not meant to have it. It's meant to be uplifting, to give people hope.'

'We're not in the bloody uplifting business and we sure as hell aren't in the business of hope. We're in the business of selling papers. And believe me, this pile of bushwa won't do it. We engage in a certain *type* of investigative reporting here. You told me you knew that when I interviewed you. Isn't that why you went to Cumbria? So *be* an investigative reporter. Investi-bloody-gate.'

'I did.'

'Bollocks. This is a love fest. Someone up there seduced your pants off—'

'Absolutely no way.'

'—and you soft-pedalled.'

'Did not happen.'

'So this—' Again he gestured with the story. '—Represents the hard stuff, eh? This is how you go for the story's big vein?'

‘Well, I can see that . . . Not exactly, I suppose. But I mean, once one got to know the bloke—’

‘One lost one’s nerve. One investigated zippo.’

This seemed a rather unfair conclusion, Zed thought. ‘So what you’re saying is that an exposé of drug abuse, of a wasted life, of tormented parents who’ve tried everything to save their kid only to have him save himself . . . this bloke who was about to choke on the silver spoon, Rodney . . . that’s not investigative? That’s not sexy? The way you want it to be sexy?’

‘The son of some Hooray Henry wastes himself on drugs.’ Rodney yawned dramatically. ‘This is something new? You want me to tick off the names of ten other useless bags of dog droppings doing the same thing? It won’t take long.’

Zed felt the fight drain out of him. All the time wasted, all the effort spent, all the interviews conducted, all – he had to admit it – the subtle plans to alter the direction of *The Source* and make it into a paper at least marginally worthwhile and thereby put his name in lights since, let’s face it, the *Financial Times* wasn’t hiring at the moment. All for nothing. It wasn’t right. Zed considered his options and finally said, ‘Okay. I take your point. But what if I give it another go? What if I go up there and do some more digging?’

‘About what, for God’s sake?’

That was surely the question. Zed thought about all the individuals he’d spoken to: the reformed addict, his wife, his mother, his sisters, his father, the poor sots he was saving. Was there someone somewhere doing something he’d missed? Well, there had to be, for the simple reason that there always was. ‘I’m not sure,’ Zed settled on saying. ‘But if I nose around . . . Everyone’s got secrets. Everyone lies about something. And considering how much we’ve already spent on the story, it won’t be such a waste if I give it another try.’

Rodney pushed his chair back from his desk and seemed to roll Zed’s offer round in his head. He jabbed a finger onto a button on his phone and barked to his secretary, ‘Wallace. You there?’ and when she responded, ‘Get me more chocolate. Hazelnut this time.’ And then to Zed, ‘Your time, your dime. And that’s the only way I’m going for it.’

Zed blinked. That put things in an entirely different light. He was on the bottom rung of the ladder at *The Source* and so were his wages. He tried to do the maths on a train ticket, a hire car, a hotel – perhaps a down at heel B & B or some old lady letting out rooms on a back street in . . . where? Not by one of the lakes. That would cost too much,

even at this time of year so it would have to be . . . And would he be paid for the time he spent in Cumbria? He doubted it. He said, ‘C’n I have a think about it? I mean, you won’t spike the story straightaway, right? I have to look at my funds, if you know what I mean.’

‘Look all you want.’ Rodney smiled, a strange and unnatural stretching of his lips that spoke of how seldom he used them in this manner. ‘Like I said, your time, your dime.’

‘Thanks, Rodney.’ Zed wasn’t quite sure what he was thanking the other man for, so he nodded, got to his feet, and headed for the door. As he reached for the knob, Rodney added in a friendly tone, ‘If you decide to make the trip, I suggest you lose the beanie.’

Zed hesitated but before he could speak, Rodney continued. ‘It’s not a religion thing, kid. I could give a bloody crap about your religion or anyone else’s. This is a recommendation coming from a bloke who’s been in the business since you were in nappies. You can do it or not, but the way I see it, you don’t want anything to distract people or give them a reason to think you’re anything but their confessor, best friend, shoulder to cry on, psychowhosis, or whatever. So when you show up in anything takes their attention away from the story they want to tell – or better yet and for our purposes *don’t* want to tell – you’ve got a problem. And I mean any of it: turbans, rosary beads swinging from your neck, beanies, full length beards dyed in henna, daggers at the waist. Are you with me? My point is that an investigative reporter should blend in and with the beanie . . . Look, there’s nothing you can do about the height and the hair – unless you colour the hair and I’m not asking you to do that – but the beanie takes it over the top.’

As if in reflex Zed touched his yarmulke. ‘I wear it because—’

‘Don’t care why you wear it. Don’t care *if* you wear it. It’s a word from the wise, is all. Your choice.’

Zed knew the Editor was saying this last bit to avoid a lawsuit. Indeed, he knew the Editor had phrased everything he’d said about the yarmulke for the very same reason. *The Source* was not exactly a bastion of political correctness, but that was not the point. Rodney Aronson knew which side of his professional bread bore the butter.

‘Just take it on board,’ Rodney told him as the office door opened and his secretary entered, bearing a family-size chocolate bar.

‘Will do,’ Zed said. ‘Absolutely.’

*St John's Wood
London*

Time was of the essence, so he left at once. He planned to take the Tube and switch to the bus at Baker Street. A taxi all the way to St John's Wood would have been better – with the added benefit of giving him legroom – but he could ill afford it. So he hoofed it down to Blackfriars station, waited interminably for a Circle Line train, and when it arrived crammed to the gills, he was forced to ride next to the carriage doors where the only way to fit inside was to hunch his shoulders and rest his chin on his chest in the manner of a penitent.

With a crick in his neck, he stopped at a cashpoint before catching the bus for the final leg of his journey. His purpose was to check his bank account in the vain hope that he'd somehow miscalculated the last time he'd balanced his chequebook. He had no savings other than what was contained in that single account. He saw the amount and felt his spirits sink. A trip to Cumbria would clean him out, and he had to think was it worth it. It was, after all, only a story. Give it up and he'd merely be assigned another. But there were stories and there were stories and this one . . . He knew it was something special.

Undecided still, he arrived home ninety minutes earlier than usual, and because of this he rang the bell at the building's entrance to announce himself so his mother didn't panic when she heard a key in the lock at a time of day when no one was due at the flat. He said, 'It's me, Mum,' and she said, 'Zedekiah! Wonderful!' which rather puzzled him until he got inside and saw the source of his mother's delight.

Susanna Benjamin was in the midst of finishing a modest afternoon tea, but she wasn't alone. A young woman sat in the most comfortable chair in the lounge – the chair Zed's mother always reserved for guests – and she blushed prettily and dropped her head for a moment as Zed's mother made the introductions. She was called Yaffa Shaw and, according to Susanna Benjamin, she belonged to the same book discussion group as Zed's mother, who proclaimed this a marvellous coincidence for some reason. Zed waited for more and soon was given it in the form of, 'I was telling Yaffa only just now that my Zedekiah *always* has his nose in a book. And not only one but four or five at once. Tell Yaffa what you're reading now, Zed. Yaffa is reading the new Graham Swift. Well, we're *all* reading the new Graham Swift. For the book group, Zed. Sit, sit, darling. Have a cup of tea. Oh my goodness, it's cold. I'll get some fresh, shall I?'

Before Zed could manage an answer to this, his mother was gone. He heard her in the kitchen banging about. She turned on the radio for good measure. He knew it would take her a deliberate quarter of an hour to produce the tea because he and his mother had been through this before. The last time it had been the girl working on the till at Tesco. The time before that, and a far better bet, the oldest niece of their rabbi, in London to attend a summer course offered by an American university whose name Zed could not remember. After Yaffa, who was watching him doubtless in hope of conversation, there would be another. This would not cease till he'd married one of them and then the prodding for grandchildren would begin. Not for the first time Zed cursed his older sister, her professional life, and her decision not only not to reproduce but also not to marry. She had the career in science that had been intended for him. Not that he'd wanted a career in science but if she'd only cooperated and given their mother a son-in-law and grandchildren, he wouldn't be coming home time and again to yet another potential mate lured onto the premises through one pretext or another.

He said to Yaffa, 'You and Mum . . . the same book group, is it?'

She blushed more deeply. 'Not exactly,' she admitted. 'I work in the bookshop. I make recommendations to the group. Your mum and I . . . we were talking . . . I mean, the way people do, you know.'

Oh how he knew. And above all the things he knew was the fact that he knew exactly how Susanna Benjamin operated. He could picture the conversation: the sly questions and the trusting replies. He wondered how old the poor girl was and whether his mother had managed to work her fertility into the equation.

He said, 'I bet you didn't expect to find she even had a son.'

'She didn't say. Only now things're bit difficult because—'

'Zed, darling,' his mother sang out from the kitchen. 'Darjeeling's fine? Tea cake as well? What about a scone, dear? Yaffa, you'll have more tea, yes? You young people will want to chat, I know.'

That was exactly what Zed didn't want. What he wanted was time to think and to weigh the pros and cons of going into debt to take himself up to Cumbria for the time needed to sex up his story. And when in Cumbria, if he actually went there, he was going to have to determine exactly what constituted the sex: the zing, the snap, the whatever it was supposed to be to excite the readers of *The Source* who, it was highly probable, had the collective intelligence of gravestones. How to excite a gravestone? Give it a corpse. Zed chuckled inwardly

at the extended metaphor. He was only glad he hadn't used it in conversation with Rodney Aronson.

'Here we are, my dears!' Susanna Benjamin rejoined them, bearing a tray of fresh tea, scones, butter, and jam. 'My Zedekiah's a big boy, isn't he, Yaffa? I don't know where he got his height. What is it, exactly, dear heart?' This last to Zed. He was six feet eight inches tall and his mother knew that as well as she knew where the height came from, which was his paternal grandfather who'd been only three inches shorter. When he didn't reply, she went blithely on with, 'And what feet he has. Look at those feet, Yaffa. And hands the size of rugby balls. And you know what they say . . .' She winked. 'Milk and sugar, Zedekiah? You want both, yes?' And to Yaffa, 'Two years on the kibbutz, he was, this son of mine. Then two years in the Army.'

'Mum,' Zed said.

'Oh don't be so bashful.' She poured more tea into Yaffa's cup. 'The *Israeli* army, Yaffa. What do you think of that? He likes to hide everything. Such a modest boy. He's always been that way. Yaffa's like that, too, Zedekiah. Every bit of information must be dragged out of the girl. Born in Tel Aviv, father a surgeon, two brothers working in cancer research, mother a clothing designer, my boy. Clothing designer! Isn't that wonderful? Of course, I couldn't afford a single thing she designs because her clothes are sold in . . . What did you call them, Yaffa dear?'

'Boutiques,' Yaffa said although she'd gone so red in the face that Zed feared a stroke or seizure was in the offing.

'Knightsbridge, Zed,' his mother intoned. 'Just think of it. She designs all the way in Israel, and the clothing comes *here*.'

Zed sought a way to interrupt the flow, so he said to Yaffa, 'What brought you to London?'

'Studies!' Susanna Benjamin replied. 'She's going to university here. Science, Zedekiah. Biology.'

'Chemistry,' Yaffa said.

'Chemistry, biology, geology . . . it's all the same because think of the brain in this sweet head of hers, Zed. And isn't she pretty? Have you ever seen a prettier little thing than our Yaffa sitting here?'

'Not recently,' Zed said with a meaningful look at his mother. He added, 'It's been at least six weeks,' in the hope that the sheer embarrassment of having her intentions brought out into the open would force her to wind down.

That was not to be. Susanna added, 'He likes to make fun of his mother, Yaffa. He's a tease, my Zedekiah. You'll get used to that.'

Used to that? Zed cast a look at Yaffa, who was shifting uneasily in her chair. This told him there was more to be revealed and his mother revealed it forthwith.

‘Yaffa’s taking your sister’s old bedroom,’ Susanna said to her son. ‘She’s come to look at it and she’s said it’s just what she needs now she’s having to move from her other lodgings. Won’t it be lovely to have another young face in the flat? She’ll be joining us tomorrow. And you must tell me what you like for breakfast, Yaffa. Starting the day out with a proper meal is going to help you with your studies. It did for Zedekiah, didn’t it, Zed? First class degree in literature, my son. Did I tell you he writes poetry, Yaffa? Something tells me he’s likely to write a poem about you.’

Zed stood up abruptly. He’d forgotten he had his teacup in hand, and the Darjeeling sloshed out. Thankfully, most of it went onto his shoes, saving his mother’s carpet. But he would have liked to dump it onto her neatly coiffed grey head.

His final decision was as instantaneous as it was necessary. He said, ‘I’m off to Cumbria, Mum.’

She blinked. ‘Cumbria? But didn’t you just—’

‘More to the story and I’ve got to go after it. Very time sensitive as things turn out.’

‘But when are you leaving?’

‘Soon as I pack my bag.’

Which, he decided, ought to take him five minutes or less.

En route to Cumbria

The fact that he wanted and needed to leave post haste before his mother built the *chuppah* right in the lounge forced Zed to catch a train that would get him to Cumbria by a most circuitous route. That couldn’t be helped. Once he packed his bag and tucked his laptop into its case, he was gone, effecting a very clean getaway. The bus, the Tube, Euston Station, slapping down a credit card to pay for his ticket, four sandwiches, a copy of the *Economist*, *The Times*, and the *Guardian*, wandering round the platform till it was time to board, wondering how long it was going to take him to find something – anything – to sex up his story, wondering even more how long it was going to take him to break his mother’s habit

of bringing women in off the street like a procurer . . . By the time he was able to board the train, he was ready for the distraction of work. He opened up his laptop and as the train left the station, he began to search through his notes, which he'd meticulously recorded during every interview, which he'd meticulously typed into the laptop every night. He also had with him a set of handwritten notes. He would check those as well. For there had to be something, and he *would* find it.

He reviewed the subject of his story first: Nicholas Fairclough, thirty-two years old, the formerly dissolute son of Bernard Fairclough, first Baron of Ireleth in the County of Cumbria. Born into wealth and privilege – there was that silver spoon – he'd squandered throughout his youth the good fortune that he'd been handed by Fate. He was a man graced with the face of an angel but in possession of the inclinations of Lot's next door neighbour. A series of rehabilitation programmes had seen him as an unwilling participant from his fourteenth year onward. They read like a travelogue as progressively more exotic – and remote – locations were chosen by his parents in an attempt to entice him into healthy living. When he wasn't taking the cure somewhere, he was using his father's money to travel in a life-owes-me-a-living style that led him time and again directly back into addiction. Everyone threw in the towel on the bloke, after wiping their washed hands upon it. Father, mother, sisters, even a cousin cum brother had—

Now *that* was something he hadn't thought about, Zed realised. The cousin cum brother angle. It had seemed a non-story, and Nicholas himself had certainly emphasised that during interviews, but there was a chance that Zed might have missed something he could now use . . . He flipped through his notebook first and found the name: Ian Cresswell, employed by Fairclough Industries in a position of serious responsibility, first cousin to Nicholas, eight years older, born in Kenya but come to England in late childhood to be a resident in the Fairclough home . . . Now that was something, wasn't it, something that could be moulded somehow?

Zed looked up thoughtfully. He glanced at the window. It was pitch dark outside, so all he saw was his own reflection: a red-headed giant with worry lines becoming incised on his forehead because his mother was attempting to marry him off to the first willing woman she was able to find and his boss was ready to deposit his well-written prose into the rubbish. And so, what did he have in these notes? he asked himself. What? *What?*

Zed fished out one of his four sandwiches and began to devour it as he checked his paperwork. He was looking for a clue, for the way to spin his story, or at least for a hint that further digging in one area or another might produce the sizzle that Rodney Aronson said was required. The cousins-as-brothers angle *was* possible. Reading, however, Zed found that his thoughts were dominated by Old Testament tales, which took him into the land of literary allusion and metaphor, where he could ill afford to wander. But if the truth were told, it *was* difficult to read what he'd uncovered in his interviews with all the principal characters without thinking of Cain and Abel, my brother's keeper, burnt offerings of the fruits of one's labour, and being pleasing or not so pleasing to whoever was standing in place of God in the story, which would probably be Lord Fairclough. And if one *truly* wanted to be Biblical about things, the peer could be Isaac, faced with Esau and Jacob and their battling birthrights to contend with although how anyone on earth could have mistaken the skin of a dead lamb – or whatever it had been – for hairy arms had always been way, *way* beyond Zed's willingness to believe. The whole idea of birthrights, however, drove Zed deeper into his notes to see if he had any information about who actually stood to inherit what, should something untoward happen to Lord Fairclough in addition to who stood to run Fairclough Industries should the baron meet an untimely end.

Now *that* would be a story, wouldn't it? Bernard Fairclough mysteriously . . . what? Dies or disappears, let's say. He falls down the stairs, becomes incapacitated, has a stroke, or whatever. A little digging turns over the fact that days before his untimely end or whatever it was, he'd met his solicitor and . . . what? A new will is drawn up, his intentions as to the family business are made crystal clear, lifetime settlements are made, language is inserted into his will his trust his papers as to – what would it be? – an indication of an inheritance a declaration of someone's disinheritance a revelation of . . . what? The son is not his actual son. The nephew is not his actual nephew. There's a second family in the Hebrides, there's a mad and deformed elder sibling long hidden in the attic the cellar the boathouse. There's something explosive. Something *kapow*. Something sexy.

Of course, the problem was that, if Zed wanted to admit the *entire* truth of the matter, the only remotely sexy thing about his story of Nicholas Fairclough's ninth life was the man's wife and she was sexy in spades. He hadn't wanted to make too much of that fact in his meeting with Rodney Aronson because he'd been fairly certain of Rodney's

reaction, which would have come from the photograph-her-tits school of thought. Zed had kept fairly mum on the topic of the wife because she'd wished to remain in the background but now he wondered if there was something about her that he might explore. He went to that set of notes and saw that words like *caramba* and *yikes* had indicated his initial reaction upon laying eyes upon her. He'd even nonsensically written *South American Siren* by way of describing her, every inch of her a w-o-m-a-n demanding notice from an m-a-n. If Eve had looked remotely like Alatea Fairclough, Zedekiah had concluded at the end of their only interview, it was no wonder Adam took the apple. The only question was why he hadn't eaten the whole damn crop and the tree as well. So . . . Was *she* the story? The sex? The sizzle? She was stunning in all the right ways, but how did one turn stunning into story? 'She's the reason I'm alive today,' says the husband, but so what? Run a picture of her and any bloke whose parts are in working order is going to know why Nicholas Fairclough took the cure. Besides, she had nothing to say beyond 'What Nick's done, he's done himself. I'm his wife but I'm not important in his real story.'

Had that been a hint? Zed wondered. His *real* story. Was there more to uncover? He thought he'd dug, but perhaps he'd been too smitten with the subject of his piece. And perhaps he been too smitten with his subject because he wanted to believe such things were possible: redemption, salvation, turning one's life around, finding true love . . .

Perhaps that was the line to follow: true love. Had Nicholas Fairclough really found it? And if he had, did someone envy it? One of his sisters, perhaps, because one of them was unmarried and the other divorced? And how did they feel anyway, now that the prodigal had returned?

Further rustling through his notes. Further reading. Another sandwich. A wander through the train to see if there was a buffet car because he was dying for a coffee. Then it was back to his seat where he finally gave up the ghost altogether and then popped back up with the idea of ghosts because the family home was what had got him started in the first place on this piece and what if the family home was haunted and the haunting had led to the drug addiction which had led to the search for a cure which had led to . . . He was back to the bloody wife again, the South American Siren, and the only reason he was back to her was *caramba* and *yikes*, and he'd be better off crawling back home and forgetting this whole damn thing except home meant his mother and Yaffa Shaw and whoever was going to follow Yaffa Shaw in a never ending procession of women he was meant to marry and produce children with.

No. There was a story here somewhere, the kind of story that his Editor wanted. If he had to dig further to find something juicy, he'd get out his shovel and aim for China. Anything else was unacceptable. Failure was not an option.