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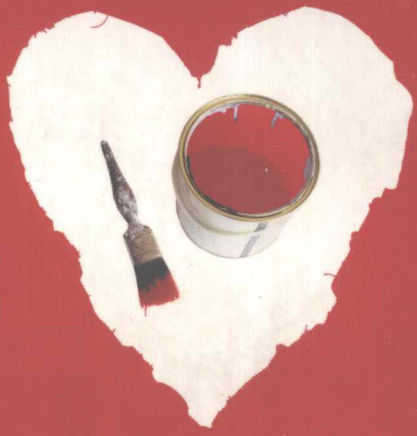

Jeffrey Moore

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Red-Rose Chain

To the memory of
my mother and father

Leading him prisoner in a red-rose chain . . .
— *Venus and Adonis*

PART ONE

One

(Yorkshire, 1970s)

O, I smell false Latin. —*Love's Labour's Lost*

"I've got an idea," Gerard announced twenty-two years ago, and it suddenly seemed I was on the edge of a cliff. "An exquisite idea, something we've never done before—that no one, I dare say, has done before . . . "

I looked up at Gerard's red face and eyes that mesmerised. Whatever he asked I'd do; wherever he went I'd go too.

"I'm going to blindfold you with this," said Gerard as he unknotted his necktie, "and you're going to choose any book in the room, any one at all, at random. But you must touch the spines and covers carefully, and listen to the voices inside you. When you feel something, when you sense you've chosen the right book, let me know immediately. Is that clear?"

I nodded. Gerard was wearing an African mask, which made his voice sound muffled and strange.

"Can you see anything?" he asked as he fastened my blindfold.

"No, it's all black."

"Right then, off you go."

"What does 'at random' mean?"

"It means you can pick any one you like."

"Right." Arms outstretched, I stumbled round the room, breathing in its smell of long-unopened suitcases, tripping over objects, groping for books. Often I hesitated, volume in hand, waiting for a "feeling" of some sort.

"Be patient, lad. Be absolutely certain. You wouldn't want to select the wrong one now, would you?"

I shook my head. And then back on my quest I went, in darkness, the floorboards whining under my tread. I discarded several books from among the hundreds on the floor and walls, afraid of somehow selecting "the wrong one" and disappointing Uncle Gerard. Maybe this one. No, I didn't *feel* anything. What was I supposed to feel?

From a shelf at floor level I picked up a heavy volume and turned it over in my hands. It had a grainy cover and raised bands on the spine. I didn't really feel anything, to be honest, but when I heard church bells chime (a wedding?) I took this as a sign, a good omen.

"Uncle Gerard, I've found it! This is the one, I'm quite sure of it!"

I heard the rattle of loose boards and the squeak-squeak of Gerard's rubber-soled slippers. He took the book from my hands.

"Let's open it up and let the future in, shall we? No, keep your blindfold on, Jeremy, we're not finished yet. What I'm going to do is flip through these pages and you're going to stick your finger in whenever you feel it's the right moment. Do you understand?"

"You mean at random?"

"Precisely."

I could hear the sound of turning pages, smell their mustiness. I waited. Yes, I definitely feel something coming on! I can sense something! I thrust my hand out and felt the book close on my hand like a trap.

"Now take off your blindfold and look at the page you chose—that you were *destined* to choose."

The page was thin, like tissue paper, and the characters were very small. I grew hot, and could feel myself starting to tremble.

"I want you to rip that page out of the book," said Gerard. "Go ahead lad, tear it right out, don't be afraid."

I did so, but not cleanly; the fragile page ripped in a jagged slant. I needed two hands to make amends.

"Now fold it up and put it in your breast pocket. Good. You must never lose that magic leaf, Jeremy, it's your *anting-anting*, your flying carpet—it will take you wherever you want to go. But be patient because it will choose the time, and that time may not be for months, years. Now go. And don't mention this to anyone, ever. You must promise on all you hold sacred that what happened today will remain our secret forever. Do you promise?"

"Yes Uncle, I give you my word as a gentleman. It'll be our secret—and torture won't drag it from me."

I always called him Uncle, though I knew we were just pretending. Gerard was my mother's boyfriend, who came to live with us in York when I was about three. He was much older than my mum and with his wisdom and experience prevented her, I'm told, from having a nervous breakdown when my father left us. I can't say with certainty how nuts Mother was because I was curled up in her abdomen at the time. Abortions were not so common then as now, but even if they had been I think my mum would have kept me—she was of that sort, or maybe just lacked the courage. Gerard helped her along (us along) during the stressful pregnancy and sort of moved in three years later, as I said. But he

wouldn't marry my mum, not Gerard Gascoigne, no matter how many times I asked him to. "Marriage is not a word but a sentence" and "Fast women and slow horses were my downfall" were his two stock answers, neither of which I understood at the time. Either, come to think of it, would make a good epitaph.

When I was around seven, my mother met someone at church who *would* marry her. Ralph Stilton was his name and he was a lopsided beanstalk of a man with thin eyebrows and crooked front teeth and a high voice he would try to push down. He wore colours like oatmeal and brown gravy and sang in the choir with bug-eyes and a mouth opened superhumanly wide. I didn't care for him, in other words, and he didn't care for me—or especially for Gerard. "He is *not* your uncle," Ralph liked to remind me, "and he'll set you no shining example, you can be sure of that. That man has led a life of epic dissipation, he has. A scoundrel of the deepest dye is what he is, one jump ahead of the police. Aye. Lord knows how your mother got mixed up with that bounder, that heathen . . . "

Epic dissipation. Scoundrel of the deepest dye. What grand expressions, so . . . heroic-sounding. For days I muttered them over and over like mystical runes. And then asked Gerard what they meant. I don't remember his answer but I do remember him exploding with laughter—and me laughing along with him, in stitches. Oh, I understood that dissipation and scoundrels were not good, but I didn't care. Gerard was my idol, my ideal. Ralph, who did his best to find me other, higher objects of worship, soon barred me from seeing him again.

For days I screamed, sulked, threatened to kill myself. And then became the docile, dutiful son—"a very decent stamp of boy," I overheard Ralph say. Had I seen the light,

the error of my ways, Gerard's epic dissipation? No, I simply discovered the art of deception. Like rabbits out of hats I produced alibis for Saturday morning visits with Gerard: friends, school outings, football practices, cricket matches at St. Peter's. Gerard was my coach ("What is a lie but truth in masquerade?" said he); he taught me to lie and with practice I became quite good at it.

"You and mum split up," I would say, "but *we* never did, did we, Uncle."

Our last lie was the most farfetched, and in spite or because of this, the most successful. It depended on a certain Mr. Dragonetti, who was once Ralph's brother-in-law (he divorced Ralph's sister), a white and wispy man who was always rushing about in odd clothes and speaking nonsense, which made everyone think he was a scholar. He may have been (he did know Latin). Gerard said only that he was "fond of alcohol but not very good at paying for it, and fond of horse races but not very good at predicting their outcome." He owed Gerard, as a result of these two failings, large sums of money. This, then, was our plan: I would develop a sudden interest in learning Latin and Mr. Dragonetti would offer to teach me, on Saturday mornings, in exchange for help in his back garden.

My leery stepfather, especially at the beginning, would accompany me to Mr. Dragonetti's front door. Once he even asked to see the garden. "All in good time," Dragonetti replied, "all in good time. *Vincit qui patitur.* I shall be delighted to show you my . . . my delphinia and eryngia when everything's properly tended. Your son's been invaluable—he's got a real green thumb, that lad." As Ralph walked back home, Dragonetti crawled back to bed and I flew out the back door.

Through the phantom flowers I ran, across the paved garden, over the fence and along the City Walls, from Fishergate Bar, across Skeldergate Bridge and the chocolate waters of the Ouse, to Micklegate Bar, the monarch's entrance. From there it was a short run—and winds could not outrun me—to the flat of my illegal guardian. I would clap the lion-head knocker three times before letting myself in. The battered oak door, like a dungeon door, creaked on its hinges, I think by Gerardian design. It was lockable but never locked.

With its sloping roof and exposed wooden beams, the flat could have had charm, but didn't. It was too dark, too dirty, too full ("Oceans of room," Gerard would protest, "Oceans!"). Its furniture, some of it dust-sheeted, seemed not to have been chosen so much as left. Books of all shapes and sizes were scattered amidst untenanted cabinets, overburdened suitcases, locked steamer trunks, faded costumes and props, unfinished canvases, and a swarming, higgledy-piggledy mound of flea-market curios and arcana.

In the "kitchen" was a picture of two large birds perched on a branch (with a TV antenna), minding two pints of beer:

> Toucans in their nests agree
> GUINNESS is good for you
> Open some today and see
> What one or Toucan do.

I loved this. Below it, amidst exotic postcards fixed with Sellotape, was a faded yellow card with cursive lettering and red ornamented borders. It was not as funny, even if Gerard seemed to think it was:

What is home without
Plumtree's Potted Meat?
Incomplete.
With it an abode of bliss.

In the bathroom, often in the bathtub, was a slightly limping rocking horse that Gerard promised one day to mend. "Magic Wanda" had brass fittings and swing irons and stirrup covers made of real leather; on her belly was a brass plaque from the British Rocking-Horse Society indicating full pedigree, dam and sire. In "my" corner was a toy chest, whose constantly replenished stock included a gas mask, water pistols, catapults, lead soldiers, a cream-coloured Royal Ascot badge, a bag of Barker and Dobson's Fruit Drops with something else in it (regimental buttons?), Happy Family playing cards, Moon Traveller fireworks, and an African mask that scared me even after the hundredth time Gerard wore it.

A strict routine was in effect on these Saturday mornings, perhaps the only one in my young life I never wanted to see upset. Gerard, when not in gas- or African mask, would greet me with a grin in which one eye closed up more than the other, and a handshake that hurt. Then it was "spying and tales" conducted from the flat's only source of light, a large dormer window. As we stuck our heads out and gazed at the spires of York Minster, Gerard would recount some spellbinding tale or chapter in mediaeval history. I don't know why the view of the Minster inspired him so—he had no use for religion. Often, he would direct his gaze towards more residential architecture, through a telescope, so perhaps it was not the cathedral that inspired him.

I was never really sure what Gerard did for a living. His window stories contained some inconsistencies. After being

"slung out" of Rugby, Gerard once recounted, he sailed to Africa and ran guns in Zululand. In another version he became a jockey after graduating from Eton. Yet another time he was a Shakespearean actor and never went to school at all. I believed all three stories until Ralph pointed out that Gerard went to a state school in York, that jockeys are rarely six feet tall, and that Zululand was incorporated into Natal in the 19th century. What I know for certain is that Gerard travelled a lot ("I've knocked up and down a bit," said he), especially to France, and that he worked in "mathematical" fields. Mother said that he once worked as an actuary for Great Northern Life, and I know that he worked as a tic-tac man at the racecourse in Pontefract, near Leeds, because I twice saw him in action, relaying the changing odds by hand signals. He had two boxes of business cards, one set with "Mathematician" under his name, the other with "Turf Accountant".

After the window stories came the Games, usually involving words or chance. I kept a record of these games in a book filled with musical staves that Gerard gave me on my seventh birthday. On the marbling of the front cover was a patch over someone else's name. It was a big book, quite beautiful, bound in green moiré silk that shimmered when you tilted it. We called it the Book of Saturdays. It was empty, except for these notes on the last page:

Sometimes we would make anagrams in this book—Gerard was constantly making anagrams, a sign of schizophrenia so they say—with random words from a *Manchester Guardian* or *Yorkshire Post*. But Gerard insisted on "pertinent" anagrams—they had to relate to the word in

question. I was not good at this, though once devised "THE EYES: THEY SEE". If my anagrams were not pertinent, my uncle would say "Jeremy, you're being impertinent!" and I would laugh, without knowing why. Gerard was always pertinent. On 11 March 1972, for example, he wrote: "MARRIAGE: A GRIM ERA; MOTHER-IN-LAW: WOMAN HITLER; DESPERATION: A ROPE ENDS IT."

On our last Saturday together we played a new game, a very simple one, which Gerard approached with uncharacteristic gravity. He may have known it was to be our last.

"I've got an idea," said Gerard. "An exquisite idea, something we've never done before . . . "

Please don't imagine, as I did for so long, that the contents of the Page will somehow set in motion the events that follow. Life's not like that. Its course is not printed on a sheet of paper, ripped from a random book; only mystics and children would think otherwise.

Normally I would walk home, ploddingly, but on this last Saturday I ran quickly, zigzagging in and out of camera fields along the Walls, then back across the locks of the Foss. I went straight to my bedroom, got into bed and pulled the covers over my head. I was bathed in sweat, my heart beating its drum.

I held the Page for a few seconds in the dark. *You must never lose that magic leaf. It's your anting-anting, your flying carpet* . . . I took a deep breath, counted to eleven and turned on my bedlamp. The Page was folded unevenly in four; I stared at it, afraid to restore it to one. I took another deep breath and my door swung wide open.

Ralph, standing in the doorway as I frantically slid the Page beneath the sheets, looked from my flushed face to the