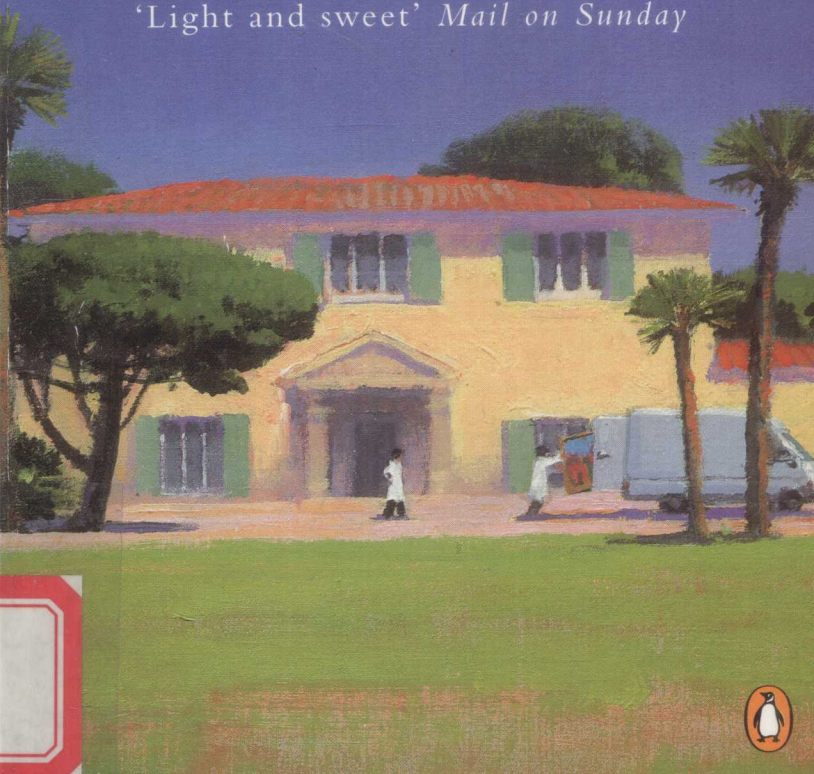


PETER MAYLE

Chasing Cézanne

His wonderful new comic thriller

'Light and sweet' *Mail on Sunday*



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For Ernest

ONE

The receptionist echoed the décor, a human accessory precisely in tune with the restrained, almost severe chic of her surroundings. Glossy and cool in beige and black, she murmured into the phone, ignoring the ruffled young man standing in front of her. A slight frown threatened the smooth mask of her makeup as she glanced at the scarred leather shoulder-bag that the young man had put on her otherwise immaculately bare desk of polished sycamore. She put down the phone, pushing back a wing of blonde hair to replace the gold earring that had been removed to facilitate conversation. Her eyebrows, plucked to perfection, rose in two questioning arcs.

The young man smiled. 'Good morning. I have an appointment with Camilla.'

The eyebrows stayed up. 'You are?'

'Andre Kelly. Are you new here?'

The receptionist declined to answer as she unhitched her earring and took up the phone. Andre wondered why Camilla kept on hiring girls like this. They rarely lasted more than a couple of months before being replaced by another polished clone – decorative, faintly unwelcoming, relentlessly blasé. And where did they go once they had left? The cosmetic department at Barney's? The front office of a smart funeral home? Or were they swept off their feet by one of Camilla's many friends in the lower levels of European aristocracy?

'Her meeting's running late.' A finger flicked towards the far corner of the reception area. 'You can wait over there.'

Andre smiled at her again as he picked up his bag. 'Were you always this unpleasant, or did you have to take classes?'

But it was wasted. The phone was already tucked beneath the burnished wing of hair, the murmuring already resumed. Andre settled into a chair and prepared himself for an extended wait.

Camilla was known – and, by some, admired – for her deliberate unpunctuality, for double-booking appointments, for manufacturing situations that emphasized her editorial charisma and her social importance. It was she who had broken new ground in the world of power lunches by booking two tables at the Royalton on the same day, shuttling from one table to the other – a nibble of rocket and endive here, a sip of Evian there – while she simultaneously entertained an important advertiser and a promising South American architect. It was a tribute to her reputation that neither of them was offended, and the two-table lunch then became an occasional part of Camilla's socio-corporate repertoire.

In the end, of course, she was allowed to get away with such displays because she had achieved success, for which, in New York, all manner of bad behaviour is forgiven. She had rescued an elderly magazine from its lingering death and modernized it, changing its name, retiring its venerable contributors, instituting a zippy but socially concerned 'Letter from the Editor', updating its covers, its typography, its photography and, indeed, its receptionist and reception area. The circulation had tripled, advertising pages were increasing steadily, and the magazine's owners, while still losing money, were bathed in the reflected glow coming from a suddenly hot property. The magazine was being talked about, and Camilla Jameson Porter, for the moment, could do no wrong.

The magazine's rapid rise, while certainly helped by the cosmetic changes in its appearance, was in fact due almost

entirely to something more fundamental: Camilla's editorial philosophy.

This had evolved in a curious way. During her earlier years as an ambitious but unknown journalist working on the R and L (rumours and libel) page of a London tabloid with social pretensions, she had managed to acquire a wealthy upper-class husband – the tall, dark and inconsequential Jeremy Jameson Porter. Camilla had embraced his name (which sounded *so* much smarter than the one she'd been born with, which was Camilla Boot), and also his well-connected friends. Alas, she had embraced one of them too enthusiastically, and had been caught doing it. Divorce had followed, but by then Camilla had mingled with the wealthy long enough to learn the lesson that was to serve her so well in New York.

It was very simple. The rich are acquisitive, and, with a few notable exceptions, they like other people to know about their acquisitions. After all, half the satisfaction of a privileged life is the envy it engenders; and what is the point of having rare and costly possessions unless others know you have them?

This fairly obvious insight kept returning to Camilla's thoughts as she pondered her future as an unattached woman in need of a job. And then one day she found the catalyst that turned her insight into a career.

She was in her dentist's waiting room, and had picked up a copy of a brightly coloured gossip magazine, intrigued by the cover photograph. It showed an aristocratic and internationally known art collector, posing in front of his latest Titian with his latest wife. Why, Camilla wondered, would such a couple agree to appear in such a magazine? Her question was answered by the story inside. It had been written on bended knee, shameless in its flattering descriptions of the collector, his pneumatic young bride, and their art-filled, fifty-seven-room love nest perched on the most select hillside overlooking

Lake Como. Many photographs – artfully lit and equally flattering – accompanied the gush of prose. Every word, every image, attested to the fact that this was an absolutely wonderful couple living a wonderful life in a wonderful home. It was a seven-page massage.

Camilla looked through the rest of the magazine, an illustrated chronicle of the doings of the underemployed section of European society – charity balls, perfume launches, gallery openings, the frothy distractions that provide excuses for the same group of people to keep bumping into each other – *quelle surprise!* – in Paris and London and Geneva and Rome. Page after page of smiling faces, vapid captions, bogus events. Nevertheless, as Camilla left the dentist she took the magazine with her, and spent that evening brooding over the cover story. Gradually, an idea began to take shape.

Success is rarely achieved without a little luck, and in Camilla's case this came in the form of a phone call from a journalist friend in New York. All of media Manhattan, it seemed, was talking about the Garabedian brothers, and their unexpected move into publishing. Having made several fortunes in nursing homes, invoice factoring and waste disposal, they had recently acquired a group of companies that included a minor book publisher, a Long Island newspaper, and several specialist magazines in varying stages of decrepitude or collapse. The assumption was that the Garabedians had taken over the group for its main asset, which was a building on Madison Avenue, but there were rumours that one or two of the magazines might be kept alive and, in the words of Garabedian the younger, 'goosed'. Financial analysts interpreted this as an indication of significant injections of capital. And one of the magazines considered suitable for goosing was *Decorating Quarterly*.

It was the kind of publication you might expect to find, its

pages curled and yellowing, in the salon of a long-deserted Newport mansion. It was staid in tone, dowdy in appearance. The advertisements, few and far between, were mostly devoted to curtain fabrics and faux-baronial lighting fixtures. Articles discussed the joys of ormolu and the proper care of eighteenth-century porcelain. The magazine kept its editorial face firmly turned away from anything remotely contemporary. And yet it had managed to retain a core of readers as it limped along making a marginal, shrinking profit.

Garabedian the elder looked at the numbers and was all for killing the magazine. But his brother was married to a young woman who described herself as a homemaker and who had read thrilling things about Philippe Starck. She persuaded her husband to consider a rescue operation, and the demise of *Decorating Quarterly* was postponed. If the right editorial formula could be found, it might even have a future.

The word went out; the grapevine throbbed. Camilla, briefed by her friend, came over to New York with a detailed proposal that she presented, in her shortest skirt, to Garabedian the younger. The presentation lasted from ten until four, with a two-hour break for a mildly flirtatious lunch. Garabedian, it has to be said, was impressed as much by her ideas as by her legs, and Camilla was hired. As her first editorial act, she announced a change in the magazine's name: henceforth, *Decorating Quarterly* would be known as *DQ*. New York watched and waited.

In the way of new editors making their mark, Camilla promptly invested a considerable amount of Garabedian's money in self-promotion. She was seen – appropriately and expensively dressed, of course – at all the right occasions, beaming at all the right people, the magic moments being photographed by her personal *paparazzo*. Well before her first issue of *DQ* appeared, she had managed to establish a certain

level of celebrity based on nothing more substantial than social stamina.

But those countless evenings of seeing and being seen and cultivating, those dozens of follow-up lunches, were to pay off. Camilla quickly came to know everybody she needed to know – that is, the rich and the bored, the social mountaineers and, perhaps most important, their interior decorators. Camilla paid particularly close attention to the decorators, knowing that their influence over clients often extended far beyond advice about fabrics and furniture; knowing also the fondness that decorators have for publicity.

And so, on those rare occasions when one of the magazine's chosen victims showed any reluctance to have her home invaded by photographers, writers, florists, stylists and numerous black-clad attendants with cellular phones, Camilla called the interior decorator. The decorator twisted his client's arm. The doors were opened.

In this way, Camilla managed to go where no other glossy magazine had gone before. In fact, her very first issue contained a scoop, a double triumph – the Park Avenue triplex (an Impressionist in every bathroom) and the Mustique cottage (three servants per guest) belonging to Richard Clement of the Wall Street Clements. A normally private, almost reclusive bachelor, he had surrendered to a pincer movement mounted by his young Italian companion (a neophyte interior decorator himself) and Camilla. The resulting article, twenty pages of honeyed description and luscious photography, had been widely noticed and much admired. *DQ* was off to a fine start.

Three years had passed, and by keeping rigidly to its credo – 'Never, *ever*, a nasty word about anybody' – the magazine had flourished. Next year, even allowing for Camilla's expenses, it would make a significant amount of money.

Andre picked up the latest issue, and turned to the pages

featuring the photographs he had taken of Buonaguidi's apartment in Milan. He smiled at the memory of the little industrialist and his bodyguard being directed by Camilla to re-hang the Canaletto in a more photogenic spot. As it happened, she'd been right. He enjoyed working with her. She was amusing, she had a good eye, and she was generous with Garabedian's money. Another year of regular assignments from her, and he would have enough to get away and do his book.

He wondered what she had for him today, and hoped it would take him to the sun. The New York winter had been so cold that when the city's sanitation department had gone on one of its strikes, very few people had noticed. The whiff of rotting garbage, usually a potent negotiating tool, had been neutralized by ice. Union men were counting the days until spring, and a pungent thaw.

The sound of high heels on the polished slate floor made Andre look up in time to see Camilla clicking by, her hand tucked under the elbow of a young, bearded man who appeared to be dressed in a black tent. As they stopped in front of the lift, Andre recognized Olivier Tournenc, a fashionable Parisian designer renowned for his minimalist furniture and currently at work transforming a SoHo meat-packing plant into a boutique hotel.

The lift arrived. A flurry of air-kisses – one for each cheek and one for luck – was exchanged. As the lift doors slid shut, Camilla turned to Andre.

'Sweetie! How *are* you? How boring of me to keep you waiting.' She took him firmly by the elbow and started to propel him past the receptionist's desk. 'You've met Dominique, of course.'

The receptionist looked up and offered a token rictus which barely stretched her lipstick.

'Yes,' said Andre. 'I'm afraid so.'

Camilla sighed as she steered Andre down the corridor. 'Staff are *so* difficult. She's a bit po-faced, I know, but she does have a rather useful father.' Camilla looked at Andre over the top of her dark glasses. 'Sotheby's.'

They were followed into Camilla's office by the senior secretary, a willowy middle-aged man armed with a notepad and wearing a deep, out-of-season tan. He smiled at Andre. 'Still taking those heavenly snaps, are we?'

'We're doing our best, Noel. Where have you been?'

'Palm Beach. Don't even *think* of asking who I was staying with.'

'I wouldn't dream of it.'

Noel looked disappointed, and turned to Camilla. 'Mr G. would like a word with you. All the other calls can wait.'

Camilla paced to and fro behind the desk, the phone cradled on her shoulder, her voice a low and intimate purr. Andre recognized it as her Garabedian voice, and he wondered, not for the first time, if their relationship was confined to business. Camilla was a little too overpowering for his taste, too much like a corporate missile, but she was undoubtedly an attractive woman, successfully resisting the passage of time with every available artifice. Slender, just the acceptable side of skinny, her neck still smooth and unwattled, the backs of her arms, her thighs and her buttocks lean and taut as a result of her daily 6 a.m. workouts, there was only one part of Camilla that was remotely thickset: her hair. Camilla's hair, dark brown, helmet-cut, so straight, so clean, so shiny, so fabulously bouncy, was a legend at Bergdorf's, where it was serviced three times a week. Andre watched it fall across her cheek as she leaned forward, cooing goodbye to Garabedian before hanging up.

She looked at Andre and made a face. 'God, the things I have to do. He's giving an Armenian dinner party. Can you imagine?'

'You'll love it. Give you a chance to wear the national costume.'

'What's that?'

'Ask Noel. He'll probably lend you his.'

'Not funny, sweetie. Not funny at all.' Camilla made a note on her pad and looked at the oversized Rolex nugget on her wrist. 'God, I must fly.'

'Camilla? You asked me to come in and see you. Remember?'

'I'm late for lunch. It's Gianni. I daren't keep him waiting. Not again.' She stood up. 'Listen – it's icons, sweetie. Icons on the Riviera, maybe a little Fabergé as well. You'll have to root around. The owner's an old Russian dowager. Noel has all the details.' Camilla scooped her bag off the desk. 'Noel! Is the car down there? Where's my coat? Call Gianni at the Royalton and tell him I'm stuck in traffic. Say I'm on my way back from a deeply upsetting funeral.'

Camilla blew Andre a kiss before clicking off to the lift, her hair performing its fabulous bounce, the junior secretary trotting alongside with her coat and a fistful of messages. Andre shook his head, and went over to perch on the edge of Noel's desk.

'Well,' Andre said, 'it's icons, sweetie. On the Riviera. That's all I know.'

'Aren't you the lucky one.' Noel referred to his notepad. 'Let's see, now. The house is about twenty miles from Nice, just below St Paul-de-Vence. Ospaloff is the old dear's name, and she says she's a princess.' Noel looked up and winked. 'But don't we all these days? Anyway, you're booked in for three nights at the Colombe d'Or. Camilla's coming through to do the interview on her way to Paris. She'll be staying the night, so the two of you will be able to have a cosy little dinner. Just don't do anything I wouldn't do.'

'Don't worry about it, Noel. I'll say I have a headache.'

'You do that. Here' – Noel pushed a folder across the desk – 'tickets, car and hotel confirmations, and Mother Russia's address and phone number. Don't miss the plane. She's expecting you the day after tomorrow.'

Andre slipped the folder into his bag and stood up. 'Anything I can bring back for you? Espadrilles? Cellulite cream?'

Noel raised his eyes to the ceiling and shuddered. 'Since you ask, a little lavender essence would be very nice.' The phone rang. Noel picked it up, wagging his fingers in farewell as Andre turned to leave.

The Riviera. Andre wrapped the thought round himself like a blanket before going out to face the frozen grime of Madison Avenue. A bitter wind, cold enough to split skin, made pedestrians flinch and lower their heads. The nicotine fraternity – those huddled masses yearning to inhale who gather in small, guilty groups outside the entrance doors of Manhattan's office buildings – looked more furtive and uncomfortable than ever, their faces pinched in a vice of frigid air, sucking on their cigarettes and shivering. Andre always thought it was ironic that smokers were denied equal opportunity privileges and banished to the street while their colleagues with a weakness for cocaine could indulge themselves in the warmth and relative comfort of the office rest-rooms.

He stood on the corner of 51st and Fifth hoping for a cab to take him downtown. *The Riviera.* By now the mimosa should be in bloom, and the more hardy inhabitants would be having lunch out of doors. The operators who ran the beaches would be adjusting their prices upward and wondering how little they would manage to pay this summer's batch of *plageistes*. Boats would be having their bottoms scraped, their paintwork touched up, their charter brochures printed. The owners of restaurants, boutiques and night-clubs would be flexing their

wallets at the prospect of the annual payout, the May to September grind that allowed them to spend the rest of the year in prosperous indolence.

Andre had always liked the Riviera, the effortless, usually charming way in which it plucked money from his pocket while somehow making him feel that he had been rendered a favour. He was quite happy to endure the over-populated beaches, the occasional rudeness, the frequently grotesque prices, the infamous summer traffic – all these and worse he could forgive in return for an injection of South of France magic. Ever since Lord Brougham re-invented Cannes in the 1830s, the coastal strip had been attracting aristocrats and artists, writers and billionaires, fortune hunters, merry widows, pretty girls on the make and young men on the take. Decadent it might be, expensive and crowded it certainly was, but never dull. And, thought Andre, as the arrival of a cab saved him from frostbite, it would be warm.

He was still closing the door when the cab took off, cut across the nose of a bus and jumped a red light. Andre recognized that he was in the hands of a sportsman, a cut-and-thruster who saw the streets of Manhattan as a testing-ground for man and machine. He braced his knees against the partition and prepared to assume the foetal position recommended by airlines in the event of a crash as the driver swooped down Fifth Avenue in a series of high-octane lunges and sudden-death swerves, cursing the traffic in a guttural, mysterious tongue.

At last the cab lurched into West Broadway, and the driver tried his hand at a form of English.

‘OK. Where number?’

Andre, feeling his luck couldn’t last forever, decided to travel the last two blocks on foot. ‘This will be fine.’

‘Fine?’

'Here. Right here.'

'You got it.' The brakes were applied with gusto, causing the car behind to lock its wheels and slide, very gently, into the back of the cab. The cab driver jumped out clutching his neck, reverting to his mother tongue to deliver an agonized tirade in which the only two familiar words were 'whiplash' and 'sonofabitch'. Andre paid him and made a hasty escape.

The building he reached after a brisk two-minute walk had started life as a garment factory. Now, like so much SoHo real estate, its humble origins had been thoroughly concealed by several coats of gentrification. The high-ceilinged, light rooms had been sub-divided, partitioned, repainted, rewired, replumbed, rezoned and, needless to say, repriced. The tenants were mostly small businesses in the field of arts and communications, and it was here that Image Plus, the agency representing Andre's work, had its headquarters.

Image Plus had been founded by Stephen Moss, a young man with intelligence, taste and a liking for warm weather. His clients were photographers and illustrators who specialized in non-fashion subjects – Moss, quite rightly, being wary of the temperaments and complications involved in anything to do with clothing and androgynous models. After the early years of struggle, he now had a tight, profitable little business, taking 15 or 20 per cent of his clients' income in return for representation, which covered everything from career counselling to tax advice and fee negotiation. He had extensive contacts, a doting girlfriend, perfect blood pressure and a full head of hair. His only problem was the winter in New York, which he detested.

It was this fear of freezing, as much as a desire to expand his business, that had caused him to take on Lucy Walcott as a junior partner. Nine months later, he had felt sufficiently confident in his choice to leave the office in Lucy's hands

during that first suicidally unpleasant part of the year from January to March. She was pleased to have the responsibility. He was pleased to have the sunshine in Key West. And Andre was pleased to working with a pretty girl. As he came to know Lucy, he found himself looking for chances to extend the relationship, but he travelled too much, and she seemed to attract a new and dauntingly muscular young man every week. So far, they had yet to see each other outside the office.

Andre was buzzed through a steel door which led into an airy, open space. Apart from a couch and a low table in one corner, the only furniture was a large square production desk built for four. Three of the chairs were empty. Lucy, head down over a computer keyboard, was in the fourth.

'Lulu, it's your lucky day.' Andre dropped his bag on the couch and went over to the desk. 'Lunch, Lulu, a real lunch – Chez Felix, Bouley, you name it. I've just picked up a job, and I feel an overpowering urge to celebrate. How about it?'

Lucy grinned as she pushed back her chair and stood up to stretch.

Slim and straight, with a mop of block, curly hair that made her seem taller than her official five foot six, she looked far too healthy for a New Yorker in winter. Her skin colour was halfway between chocolate and honey, a glowing dark caramel that seemed to retain some of the sunlight from her native Barbados. When asked about her background, it sometimes amused her to describe herself as a pure-bred quadroon, and to watch the polite nods of incomprehension that usually followed. She thought that getting to know Andre might be interesting if he ever stayed in town long enough.

'Well?' He was looking at her, half-smiling, hopeful.

She shrugged, waving a hand at the unattended desk. 'Both the girls are out today. Mary's got the flu, Dana's got jury