

ADAM BETHLEHEM

MR EINSTEIN AND ME

The mind sits in its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.

John Milton, Paradise Lost



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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE SUN'S BRIGHT REFLECTING OFF PAGES OF MY BOOK. Luckily I've got sunglasses. The holiday season is underway and the beach is filling up, a curve of white sand, little shells and a perfect emerald sea. There are trees at the edge but you have to arrive early to get the shade, for the rest of us it's an umbrella or plain exposure. The collective smell of coconut wafts along, imported from somewhere else and bottled up in factor 8. The serious sun seekers use only oil, basting themselves at regular intervals and turning during the day, in search of a flawless tan.

I'm settled against one of the big rocks, propped up perfectly for reading. Raskolnikov is going through the motions and I'm following him closely. Every so often I take a break, look around, see what people are up to. Umbrellas, beds for hire, not many families here, the younger children congregated at the other end of the beach near the caravan

selling watermelon and ice-cream.

People are animals, take away their clothes and get rid of their jobs and they revert to primitive instincts, nest-making, protecting their territory and preening. A lot of that here, which is nice, watching the bodies is part of the holiday. Nobody minds, least of all Raskolnikov who's grateful for a rest from his terrible tale.

Beach holidays are about sex, Freudian or not, I don't care. The footballers arrive, Batistuta is like a god with a mane of hair and perfect manners. The younger players look fantastic, unbelievable. Muscles and perfect proportions. It can't be effortless but the strange thing is that nobody seems to be interested. Women compete with other women, even the most beautiful isn't ashamed to be seen with some fat banker who spends his day buried in the pages of a crossword puzzle book as a diversion from the financial pages. But men notice the women, that's for sure. I do, and I know it's true for others because we're all watching the arrival of some bambola gonfiabile, inflated beyond reason. She's so thin it doesn't seem possible she can keep her equilibrium with such improbably large breasts and, for extra effect, she's wearing white high-heeled shoes.

The sand makes walking inconvenient but you must admire the effort. She suffers for her art and progress is monitored by a series of faces, male and female, as she reaches

her destination. Footballer heaven, it's the same in England and on the beaches of Italy, connectedness across the globe.

The younger boys are uninhibited. I guess she's famous in her own right because the autograph hunters arrive and she consents to a photograph with a couple of lads, preceded, of course, by a discreet reshaping of the bikini, whether to reveal or conceal is not obvious. It's so small it can't possibly make a difference.

Her precedence is duly established and the beach returns to a semblance of normality. Nobody moves a towel closer but tomorrow the site of her repose will be swamped in case she returns to the same place. Which she will. It's important to keep your public happy.

I'm back to Crime and Punishment but my heart's not in it today. The sea is truly beautiful, with a sprinkling of yachts, though nothing grand enough to sustain attention.

There's a regular fashion parade at the water's edge where the Pakistani man selling pashminas and freshwater pearls is doing a roaring trade, or at least there's a lot of trying on and modelling, maybe somebody will buy. The swimming costume sales are even more entertaining. There's some place women go when they're trying on clothes, introspective but objective, each curve examined in the portable mirror, unaware of the possibility, probability, of following eyes. Anyway, why should

they worry? That's the point, posturing and on display.

The book is not as engaging, to be finished later, in the evening, or when the show moves farther along the sand.

'Hi,' she says, as she makes her way past me.

How did she know I spoke English? Not so difficult, I suppose, baggy shorts, sheltering from the sun under a rock ... reading a book translated into English.

She's from England too, just arrived and doesn't speak a word of Italian. I know a good word, bella, but I'm sure she knows it too. She's alone on the beach for the moment, arranging her towel and umbrella. I look around for the companion but there's no-one to be seen. He'll come later, a girl like this can't possibly be alone.

I take up my book again. For once it's serving a useful purpose, a blind while I concentrate on more entertaining thoughts. I've lost my place but it doesn't matter. Sand pours from the pages and I'm back in the grim little room somewhere in eastern Europe, about as far from the Costa Smeralda as it's possible to be. My new friend, the object of my thoughts, lies in front of me. I couldn't have chosen a better position myself. If she's from the UK, she'd better take care, the sun is terribly strong. I watch as she stretches out.

'Hello ...' she says, cocking her sunglasses at me, not unfriendly, but I realise that I've been staring. The disguise of the book has fooled no-one.

'... What are you thinking about?' she asks. It's hard to tell whether her tone is sassy, or I suppose she could be upset, warning me off before the hulk arrives to defend her honour.

'You,' I say, so confident.

'What in particular? If you don't mind my asking.'

Two alternatives present themselves.

'You'll need protection, I mean from the sun. It's hot around midday.'

Or

'I was thinking about kissing you.'

She looks at me over the sunglasses again, I've said it now and the ball's in her court. She makes no comment so it's back to the book for me. I prop it up to make it obvious that I'm reading but my eyes, hidden by my sunglasses, flit backwards and forwards to make sure I don't miss anything of importance.

By degrees the book retreats and I'm drifting, thinking of what might have been. She can't know I'm still watching, bikini, nice legs and a beautiful face. I've got too deep in my reverie and she sits up, looking at me, questioning.

'Do you have some sunscreen? You were right, it's hotter than I thought.'

'Of course.' I stand up and walk over. The few steps on the sand are painfully hot and I have to hurry back to the rock, as dignified as I can be with burning feet, scuttling like a crab.

I settle into position. I should swim or something, cool off. But not yet, I might get to talk to her properly. She's covered herself in spray. Are sunscreens unisex, perfumed the same for men and women?

'Thanks,' she says as she completes the operation.

I wonder what would have happened if I had said ... the other thing. Kissing her, on the beach, on the lips. It's not something you can say.

'Thanks,' she's brought the bottle back to me. Of course she's not suffering from the hot sand. Sandals, pretty colours, flowers of leather and no heels.

'Okay,' I say, wishing it could be more.

'Where are you from?' she asks from her seat.

'I live in London.'

'Really? Me too.'

I've put down my book, but we're too far away to speak so I pick up my towel.

'Do you mind? ...' I indicate next to her.

'Of course.'

So it's arranged, sitting together like a couple, gazing into the sunshine and watching the strutting and posturing of the Italian mating rituals, as if ours are any different.

'My name's Ben,' I introduce myself.

It's easier to talk like this, side by side. She's on holiday with her friends.

Girls? I want to ask. What I mean is, does she have a boyfriend? Maybe I'll find out later but in the meantime it's nice to have company. It's lonely being on holiday and even if I can order in a restaurant or pass the time of day, my Italian isn't good enough for a real chat.

It's a pleasure to be talking and she seems completely at ease, relaxed enough to reach behind her back in that movement that only girls can manage and unhitch her bikini top. Nothing unusual for a beach, but it's strange in the middle of a conversation, especially when I've been thinking about just this thing. She's got beautiful breasts. It would be embarrassing to stare but I can't help noticing how perfect she is.

'Why don't you meet us for dinner tonight?'

Us? Oh, of course, her friends.

'Sure, I'd love to.'

'Beautiful, isn't it?'

I nod.

'I love the sun. Could I use some of the lotion again?'

Anything, but if she asks me to put some on her back, I'll die.