



1 The Flies



Sophie & Stella



It's like long ago – little crowds harangued by orators.

'Blood. The imperative of revolutionary violence.' The guy's determined. Could be from Québec. The French, revolutionaries, still in America? We listen impassively.

'You don't agree?' he shouts at me, in a come-on way. Why am I here, wandering round the city? – cities are like this, always a bunch of guys, impassioned, shaking you from your drift.

'It's true,' I say. 'That's what occurs. Blood – and sometimes revolution.'

'No, no, my friend,' he says, and knows he's won. 'Permanent. Per-man-ent. Revolution! It's not a room that you unlock, and there, it's full of roasted peahens, hot and waiting for you. Chairs as well. Create, cast down! Overthrow – then overthrow again.'

I say again, sidling away, 'It's true. It's just I don't want down that road.'

'It's true,' he mocks expansively. 'And yet this guy, he'd rather go another way. What's truth, then?'

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‘Here’s novelty! I’ve found a little cycle that fruits cash. Economics! You gotta pedal! I’m doing rather well’ – my old friend Pedro. Sitting back.

I’m not doing well. I say, ‘The girl I’m with, she brings the food.’

Pedro laughs, ‘I bet she squawks, when she must sub you! You straight guys, and your sex!’

He used to box, now he’s slumped and rubbery, slippery like a Turkish wrestler all oiled up.

‘I call it the anarchy of commodities,’ he says. ‘You’ll have seen the logic of the Strip. Architects and planners – they love the Strip, it justifies their chaos. Banal boxes, shacks, kids selling air at intersections; mules and Mercurys. But it functions. Not liberal, not progressive. No hope, no plan – just turnover. No charity. Selling what I’m asked. As long as they ask me. Washing iguanas, organising heists, spying on lovers. It all comes in, people all desperate – a buzz, a rush.’

I say, ‘So it’s not economics. It’s chance. As long as they ask.’

‘Always, that’s how it is,’ he says. ‘If they ask – is the key. To most everything.’

I tell Pedro about my brush with truth, the militant guy. ‘Yes, yes,’ he says, ‘of course it’s true. Not that you need to bother with it. It’s like I say – the women feed the warriors. You’re just a parasite – they feed you just the same.’ He laughs.

‘The blood,’ I say. ‘Where it falls, what happens then? What springs up? Flowers? Nothing? Warriors?’

‘These people,’ Pedro says. ‘Trots. They’re like my friends – they went to law school, then got jobs with unions. First, the union fought for justice: then my lawyer friends discovered – they must defend the union against its members. Grievances, the guys complain – “you go so

slow”, “you’re office bums” – you know. Chaos. Then some guy discovers some kind of pattern in it all. But still it’s chaos.’ He gets up, lets a fly out of the room. There’s still more left.

‘You see,’ he says. ‘Your trouble is, for you, it’s all first person. You think it’s all for you. But chaos comes first. And last. It doesn’t care about you, your eyes, your vision, or your making sense. There’s logic in it all, for sure, like – the women bring the food to feed the warriors. I’m not misogynist. Whoever brings the food is women; who gets fed – is warrior. Me – I don’t go down that road.’

That’s why we’re friends, I guess, not going down the roads.

‘Here’s Adnan,’ says Pedro. ‘He lives here. He’s a refugee. So, he does the risky stuff that might involve running. Tell my friend what you are,’ he says to Adnan, ‘why they’re after you.’

‘Which lot?’ asks Adnan, anxious to please. ‘Some guys love to fry their brothers, others to spy at them in cells. I can’t explain. It’s odd.’

‘Indeed it is,’ says Pedro expanding, ‘but at the same time, it’s not, so we don’t waste time over it.’

‘Purity is what you need,’ says Adnan, ‘the core, the diamond, the pressure. You might say there’s a void, but you have to grasp – the space. Nothing in the universe is empty – between great clods of matter, distance, energies, there’s what is left, what it’s all about. A space, the still place where everything has ended and begun ... Space infinitely small or vast – it’s both, it’s all the same.’

He doesn’t say it’s God, the start and end, the nothing giving birth and burying. Maybe that’s not what he means.

Pedro’s impatient, and he says, ‘Yes, yes. But people don’t believe in that! They want the flying donkeys, miraculous dinners, throwing the stones, raising the dead. Now, that is something! That, I warm to – so does everybody

else. Who'd love a diamond you can't see? All the things you'd hope are round the corner ... well, they are: over and over ... Someone tells about them, tall stories, till you hear, up there, the wings and hooves.'

'These flies ...' I say.

'Of course,' says Pedro, indifferent. 'We don't want cash. We want indebtedness. Eggs for life. Onions for ever. Kind! People pay cash they can't afford, and pass along. What use is that?'

'That's how we lived,' says Adnan, 'payment in kind. It's called a family. Avoid it. They send you out to fight.'

'Not me,' and Pedro laughs. 'Haven't you seen the horns and tail? The flies? I'm quite unfit for service.'

'It's that stuff,' says Adnan. 'The rutabagas – they attract.' There's a pile of white and green and yellow, more knobbly vegetables than you would want to eat.

Pedro goes into another room, there's parleying, some woman just come in. And clucking. He says, 'No, I don't want them live. Nor dead – just don't you dare. Life! Surely you can leave me some of that? Or coca leaves. There's lots that like to chew. I don't. They're for the mountains. We're not high up here, but it will come.'

Adnan says to me, 'You know – he drove around my country. I'm not a proper refugee. He picked me up, and brought me here. He studies me.'

I say, 'He doesn't seem the type.'

'It's all about the project – talking about himself. No constituted authorities, just doing things that's singular. And so, you reach the universal.'

'It sounds magnificent,' I say, not much convinced.

'Well, that's the project,' Adnan says. 'What is the human being? Probably not magnificent. He says "What we love today,

tomorrow we may not love at all. That's the paradox – it proves my other case – that everything's dispersed, disordered. Repressed, coerced.” That's what he saved me from – the power of others. That makes me a refugee. It makes us all.’

‘He does all this by talking, talking about himself?’ I ask.

‘Leave nothing out, and always tell the truth. People will think it's lies, and you – a poor fool. Trudging to a natural death, alone, alone, still talking.’

‘Is that all?’ I ask. ‘The rescue?’

‘You mean sex? I don't imagine so. No one travels for that now.’

‘You guys,’ I say. ‘Back there. You might have had democracy – just wait and suffer, there it comes.’

‘No, no,’ says Adnan. ‘What comes after that. Not democracy. What Pedro says is freedom.’

‘To me, it just seems capitalism,’ I say.

‘To you, maybe,’ says Adnan, put out, ‘You have to follow arguments, not cut them short. With spite.’

Pedro comes back. ‘Goddam fowl,’ he says. ‘Can't keep them here, alive or dead. And that's a flaw. Live things – my system starts to smell of rot. Poor beasts. A nuisance to us all.’

It seems we are a fruiterers. Pedro's uneasy, says, ‘Of course, I had a group, when we all had one. Those record covers! Much better than the sounds, and now – that's gone. Of course, I couldn't play – but I could shake.’

We contemplate, and then he says, ‘Crowds and power. All that. And then – forced to be free. I saw him, Adnan, sitting on a rock. Seated calm and contemplating – I drove my Lotus up, and thought, “What a coincidence. I'll save one guy from being swept up, lost like a bubble in champagne, forfeiting for ever, something irrevocable...”’

We look at him, expecting that he'll tell us what that lost thing is, but no, of course, that is the point – you put a name on it when it's forever lost and gone. If you had it to hand – it would just be you.

Adnan says, 'Lotus is good – but it wasn't, and not a rock.'

Something's tattooed on the inside of Pedro's wrist: 'poker'? 'popeye'? He could have been a star, a very great one. But he loves himself, just as he is, and didn't want to be bizarre, I guess. He puts his hand on Adnan's shoulder, showing him off: 'My brother, my comrade,' he says, and Adnan says, like a chorus, 'My brother, my comrade. No tie, no project. My brother...'

I go back to Sophie's place: she says, 'Off at your hen party again?'

'No,' I say. 'Whenever I leave this place, I go looking for a job.' I open a window, shout 'Kitty, kitty!' 'You see, when I'm here, I guard the property.' We have no cat.

'Don't let those fucking flies in,' Sophie shouts. 'The window!'

I say, 'I auditioned today as a salamander. Opera House. The costume was too hot.'

She's not listening. She shouts, 'Get your papers! Then a job. There's scaffolders – those high buildings. A hard hat might suit.'

'Not high,' I say. 'There's the impulse to cast down.'

'Maybe it's destiny,' she says. 'Up high, they chew those coca leaves. And, until you get your papers, no more sex.'

No price at all.

'I don't know where they'd send me back to,' I say: 'Besides, that's about guys they don't want, not countries that'll have them. Us refugees.'

'You provoked them, someone,' she says. 'Or maybe it's all lies. Paranoia.'

'Maybe,' I say.

I think, I fell off the mad donkey: tired of obeying, going where it told me. There I was, back there in the dragon's cave. The dragon says it's a good place, homely: 'Look at all the virgins, lining up outside,' he says. 'You're the proof I'm good. I won't eat you. You're too stringy.' You start thinking how to save yourself.

I tell Sophie, 'The police picked me out.'

'Nonsense,' she says. 'No one cares about guys like you. The dragon's dead, where you came from. The line of virgins – that still waits. There's lots of combat going on, of course.'

'I told them I'd no record,' I go on. 'They said that everyone has one. "We know all about you," this guy said. He told me, "Call me Toopip. Lieutenant. You're the presence of an absence, a space, and under pressure. A gap. You stand out. Of course, you have a record: you're unknown. Even playing noisy music, you've not been reported ... You're not natural."

"No," I said. "I can't stand music. I prefer my own, my silent thoughts." Then they enrolled me, Sophie. I work for them, and they ignore me – it's a deal. They said, "Aren't you curious about your friends, Pedro, Adnan? Their activity?"

"No, not at all,' I said. 'Toopip said to travel, go to their homes, where they came from: enquire and quiz.'

'It's quite unsafe,' says Sophie. 'And the language?'

'I didn't think about the language. And it's safe. I'd be in the police.'

I tell Pedro, 'I've a task – to investigate your origins.'

'This Toopip,' he asks, 'what's he? A Thai? A Turk? The thing is this – food and water. You need those. We eat the swedes. The rest just lies, stagnates. Maybe use it as a fuel ... Those Chinese guys – the Great Helmsmen – they all had plots. Up at dawn from lonely beds to care for lettuces, cucumbers too. There is an end to that as well. Then you go, you plough up

Africa, water from the poles. You bend the future, but ... And you,' he waves a hand at me, 'you're to go to where we came from, Adnan and me. Those places are quite hard, you know. A guy could lose his breath.'

'For my purposes,' I say, drawing up some height, 'the boundaries must shift. Strife, armed and not – that cannot interpose. If I must, I'll empty countries, elasticise the frontiers, twist the laws. Decontextualise, that's the word. I'll do my work, whatever costs arise.'

'Hmmm,' says Pedro. 'That Sophie. A good person – all she touches turns to grit. Not diamond dust, between you two – it's ground-up rock. You want to live – she wants to give you tasks and reasons.'

'You don't know her,' I say.

'I don't need to, if I'm right,' he says. 'Grit. It's not intuition, this gift I have. When you master something down and down, you empty it. Whether it's Zen or Nietzsche – or you and Sophie – my certain knowing leads to the disaster. In the end, all that's outside and strange, it goes inside, subjectified. No more the world, about itself – it's just become my knowledge, personal – I've sucked them in, the masters and the trivial – I've emptied them. They're shells of dragonflies ...'

'Yes, yes,' I interrupt. 'But if you tell me all your sins, or what you've done – I'll spare myself a journey, please Toopip as well. And what a favour I have done for you, and Adnan too – to say you're being spied on and suspected ...'

He's not pleased. Indeed, he's angry. He says, 'I'm sure I've seen the title – maybe by Euripides or such – *The Flies*. The name is good. People get tired of living always in the shadow of the dark bird – wings, always wings, they make the breeze unceasing, wheesh of air on feather – "Away, the shadow! Show us the whole damn bird," they cry. You see, they want to see their sins – but sins are not the eagle,

they're the flies. They multiply, they cast no shadow. In and out the house, the hut, the palace – always round, some circling, others crapping in your food ... Were I a Frenchman living in America – I'd call for revolution too! But revolution isn't half of it – however difficult it seems, that is the easy road. From darkness into light. But there's no light. There's flies,' and he waves towards the dead and dying vegetables, stacked where guys have dumped them: 'The more they come, the more they bring the flies. The less you want to eat them.'

Where does this leave me?

I say, 'Rescuing people. That should count as a good.' I'm uncertain. Their destinies, changed utterly.

'My country,' says Pedro, 'is clay. But not the kind you make men from – it's cooked. Cooked earth. If you break it, it doesn't mend. Little ovens, full of bones. Some of them yours.'

'I think you can repair that stuff ...' I say.

'No. None of your bricolage!' he shouts. 'Broke is broke. Even the flutes is broke.'

'Here's your bag packed,' says Sophie.

'No, no,' I say. 'No need. Everyone has stuff everywhere.'

'Your passport, then?' she laughs, 'or do you have a gun, shoot your way in?'

'Pedro said he'd seen my bones – those little ovens everywhere, like tiny bomb shelters in the scrub,' I say.

'I'll miss you so,' she says. 'What luck, iguana sandwiches and mescal. Day of the dead. All that.'

I say, 'What can Pedro have done, I wonder? I'll go and get his blessing,' and I do.

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