

Chapter One

It was the luckiest night of Tim Fitzpeterson's life.

He thought this the moment he opened his eyes and saw the girl, in bed beside him, still sleeping. He did not move, for fear of waking her; but he looked at her, almost furtively, in the cold light of the London dawn. She slept flat on her back, with the absolute relaxation of small children. Tim was reminded of his own Adrienne when she was little. He put the unwelcome thought out of his mind.

The girl beside him had red hair, fitting her small head like a cap, showing her tiny ears. All her features were small: nose, chin, cheekbones, dainty teeth. Once, in the night, he had covered her face with his broad, clumsy hands, pressing his fingers gently into the hollows of her eyes and her cheeks, opening her soft lips with his thumbs, as if his skin could feel her beauty like the heat from a fire.

Her left arm lay limply outside the coverlet, which was pushed down to reveal narrow, delicate shoulders and one shallow breast, its nipple soft in slumber.

They lay apart, not quite touching, although he could feel the warmth of her thigh close to his. He looked away from her, up at the ceiling, and for a

Ken Follett

moment he let the sheer joy of remembered fornication wash over him like a physical thrill; then he got up.

He stood beside the bed and looked back at her. She was undisturbed. The candid morning light made her no less lovely, despite tousled hair and the untidy remains of what had been elaborate make-up. Day-break was less kind to Tim Fitzpeterson, he knew. That was why he tried not to wake her: he wanted to look in a mirror before she saw him.

He went naked, padding across the dull green living room carpet to the bathroom. In the space of a few moments he saw the place as if for the first time, and found it hopelessly unexciting. The carpet was matched by an even duller green sofa, with fading flowered cushions. There was a plain wooden desk, of the kind to be found in a million offices; an elderly black-and-white television set; a filing cabinet; and a bookshelf of legal and economic textbooks plus several volumes of *Hansard*. He had once thought it so dashing to have a London pied-à-terre.

The bathroom had a full-length mirror – bought not by Tim, but by his wife, in the days before she had totally retired from town life. He looked in it while he waited for the bath to fill, wondering what there was about this middle-aged body that could drive a beautiful girl of – what, twenty-five? – into a frenzy of lust. He was healthy, but not fit; not in the sense with which that word is used to describe men who do exercises and visit gymnasia. He was short,

Paper Money

and his naturally broad frame was thickened by a little superfluous fat, particularly on the chest, waist, and buttocks. His physique was okay, for a man of forty-one, but it was nothing to excite even the most physical of women.

The mirror became obscured by steam, and Tim got into the bath. He rested his head and closed his eyes. It occurred to him that he had had less than two hours of sleep, yet he felt quite fresh. His upbringing would have him believe that pain and discomfort, if not actual illness, were the consequences of late nights, dancing, adultery, and strong drink. All those sins together ought to bring down the wrath of God.

No: the wages of sin were sheer delight. He began to soap himself languidly. It had started at one of those appalling dinners: grapefruit cocktail, overdone steak and *bombe no surprise* for three hundred members of a useless organization. Tim's speech had been just another exposition of the Government's current strategy, emotionally weighted to appeal to the particular sympathies of the audience. Afterwards he had agreed to go somewhere else for a drink with one of his colleagues – a brilliant young economist – and two faintly interesting people from the audience.

The venue turned out to be a nightclub which would normally have been beyond Tim's means; but someone else had paid the entrance. Once inside, he began to enjoy himself, so much so that he bought a bottle of champagne with his credit card. More people had joined their group: a film company executive

Ken Follett

Tim had vaguely heard of; a playwright he hadn't; a left-wing economist who shook hands with a wry smile and avoided shop talk; and the girls.

The champagne and the floor show inflamed him slightly. In the old days, he would at this point have taken Julia home and made love to her roughly – she liked that, just occasionally. But now she no longer came to town, and he no longer went to nightclubs; not normally.

The girls had not been introduced. Tim started to talk to the nearest, a flat-chested redhead in a long dress of some pale colour. She looked like a model, and said she was an actress. He expected that he would find her boring, and that she would reciprocate. That was when he got the first intimation that tonight would be special: she seemed to find him fascinating.

Their close conversation gradually isolated them from the rest of the party, until someone suggested another club. Tim immediately said he would go home. The redhead caught his arm and asked him not to; and Tim, who was being gallant to a beautiful woman for the first time in twenty years, instantly agreed to go along.

He wondered, as he got out of the bath, what they had talked about for so long. The work of a Junior Minister in the Department of Energy was hardly cocktail-party conversation: when it was not technical, it was highly confidential. Perhaps they had discussed politics. Had he told wry anecdotes about senior politicians, in the deadpan tone which was his

Paper Money

only way of being humorous? He could not remember. All he could recall was the way she had sat, with every part of her body angled devotedly towards him: head, shoulders, knees, feet; a physical attitude that was at once intimate and teasing.

He wiped steam off the shaving mirror and rubbed his chin speculatively, sizing up the task. He had very dark hair, and his beard, if he were to grow it, would be thick. The rest of his face was, to say the least, ordinary. The chin was receding, the nose sharply pointed with twin white marks either side of the bridge where spectacles had rested for thirty-five years, the mouth not small but a little grim, the ears too large, the forehead intellectually high. No character could be read there. It was a face trained to conceal thoughts, instead of displaying emotion.

He switched on the shaver and grimaced to bring all of his left cheek into view. He was not even ugly. Some girls had a thing about ugly men, he had heard – he was in no position to verify such generalizations about women – but Tim Fitzpeterson did not even fit into that dubiously fortunate category.

But perhaps it was time to think again about the categories he fitted into. The second club they had visited had been the kind of place he would never knowingly have entered. He was no music-lover, and if he had liked it his taste would not have included the blaring, insistent row which drowned conversation in The Black Hole. Nevertheless, he had danced to it – the jerky, exhibitionist dancing that seemed to be *de*

Ken Follett

rigueur there. He enjoyed it, and thought he acquitted himself well enough; there were no amused glances from the other patrons, as he feared there might be. Perhaps that was because many of them were his age.

The disc jockey, a bearded young man in a T-shirt improbably printed with the words 'Harvard Business School', capriciously played a slow ballad, sung by an American with a heavy cold. They were on the small dance floor at the time. The girl came close to him and wound her arms around him. Then he knew she meant it; and he had to decide whether he was equally serious. With her hot, lithe body clinging to him as closely as a wet towel, he made up his mind very quickly. He bent his head – she was slightly shorter than he – and murmured into her ear: 'Come and have a drink at my flat.'

He kissed her in the taxi – *there* was something he had not done for many years! The kiss was so luscious, like a kiss in a dream, that he touched her breasts, wonderfully small and hard under the loose gown; and after that they found it difficult to restrain themselves until they reached home.

The token drink was forgotten. We must have got into bed in less than a minute, Tim thought smugly. He finished shaving and looked around for cologne. There was an old bottle in the wall cabinet.

He went back to the bedroom. She was still asleep. He found his dressing gown and cigarettes and sat in the upright chair by the window. I was pretty terrific in bed, he thought. He knew he was kidding himself:

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she had been the activist, the creative one. On her initiative they had done things which Tim could not suggest to Julia after fifteen years in the same bed.

Yes, Julia. He gazed unseeing from the first-floor window, across the narrow street to the red-brick Victorian school, its meagre playground painted with the fading yellow lines of a netball court. He still felt the same about Julia: if he had loved her before, he loved her now. This girl was different. But wasn't that what fools always told themselves before embarking on an affair?

Let's not be hasty, he told himself. For her this might be a one-night stand. He could not assume she would want to see him again. Yet he wanted to decide where his aims lay before asking her what the options were: government had taught him to brief himself before meetings.

He had a formula for the approach to complex issues. First, what have I got to lose?

Julia, again: plump, intelligent, contented; her horizons contracting inexorably with every year of motherhood. There had been a time when he lived for her: he bought the clothes she liked, he read novels because she was interested in novels, and his political successes pleased him all the more because they pleased her. But the centre of gravity of his life had shifted. Now Julia held sway only over trivia. She wanted to live in Hampshire, and it did not matter to him, so they lived there. She wanted him to wear check jackets, but Westminster chic demanded sober

Ken Follett

suits, so he wore dark, faintly patterned greys and navy blues.

When he analysed his feelings, he found there was not a lot to tie him to Julia. A little sentiment, perhaps; a nostalgic picture of her, with her hair in a pony-tail, doing the jive in a tapered skirt. Was that love or something? He doubted it.

The girls? That was something else. Katie, Penny and Adrienne: only Katie was old enough to understand love and marriage. They did not see much of him, but he took the view that a little father-love goes a long way, and is a great deal better than no father at all. There was no room for debate there: his opinion was fixed.

And there was his career. A divorce might not harm a Junior Minister, but it could ruin a man higher up. There had never been a divorced Prime Minister. Tim Fitzpeterson wanted that job.

So there was a lot to lose – in fact, all he held dear. He turned his gaze from the window to the bed. The girl had rolled onto her side, facing away. She was right to have her hair short – it emphasized the slender neck and pretty shoulders. Her back tapered sharply to a small waist, then disappeared beneath a crumpled sheet. Her skin was faintly tanned.

There was so much to gain. 'Joy' was a word Tim had little use for, but it entered his thoughts now. If he had known joy before, he could not remember when. Satisfaction, yes: in the writing of a sound, comprehensive report; in the winning of one of those

Paper Money

countless small battles in committees and in the House of Commons; in a book that was correct or a wine that was right. But the savagely chemical pleasure he had with this girl was new.

There; those were the pros and cons. The formula said, now add them up and see which is greater. But this time the formula would not work. Tim had acquaintances who said it never did. Perhaps they were right. It might be a mistake to think that reasons could be counted like pound notes: he was reminded, curiously, of a phrase from a college philosophy lecture, 'the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language'. Which is longer – an aeroplane or a one-act play? Which do I prefer – satisfaction or joy? His thinking was getting woolly. He made a disgusted noise, then looked quickly at the bed to see whether he had disturbed her. She slept on. Good.

Out in the street, a grey Rolls-Royce pulled up at the kerb a hundred yards away. Nobody got out. Tim looked more closely, and saw the driver open a newspaper. A chauffeur, perhaps, picking someone up at six-thirty? A businessman who had travelled overnight and arrived too early? Tim could not read the number plate. But he could see that the driver was a big man; big enough to make the interior of the car seem as cramped as a Mini.

He turned his mind back to his dilemma. What do we do in politics, he thought, when we face two forceful but conflicting demands? The answer came immediately: we choose a course of action which,

Ken Follett

really or apparently, meets both needs. The parallel was obvious. He would stay married to Julia and have an affair with this girl. It seemed a very political solution, and it pleased him.

He lit another cigarette and thought about the future. It was a pleasant pastime. There would be many more nights here at the flat; the occasional weekend in a small hotel in the country; perhaps even a fortnight in the sun, on some discreet little beach in North Africa or the West Indies. She would be sensational in a bikini.

Other hopes paled beside these. He was tempted by the thought that his early life had been wasted; but he knew the idea to be extravagant. Not wasted, then; but it was as if he had spent his youth working out long-division sums and never discovered differential calculus.

He decided to talk to her about the problem and his solution. She would say it could not be done, and he would tell her that making compromises work was his special talent.

How should he begin? 'Darling, I want to do this again, often.' That seemed all right. What would she say? 'So would I,' or: 'Call me at this number,' or: 'Sorry, Timmy, I'm a one-night girl.'

No, not that; it wasn't possible. Last night had been good for her, too. He was special for her. She had said so.

He stood up and put out his cigarette. I'll go over to the bed, he thought; and I'll pull the blankets off

Paper Money

her gently, and look at her nakedness for a few moments; then I'll lie beside her, and kiss her belly, and her thighs, and her breasts, until she wakes; and then I'll make love to her again.

He looked away from her and out of the window, savouring the anticipation. The Rolls was still there, like a grey slug in the gutter. For some reason it bothered him. He put it out of his mind, and went over to wake the girl.