

Justice Drive



'The soothing green embrace of the park'

Polly was not exactly inexperienced, but the facts of the case were enough to make anyone blush. She was trying to be objective, and at the same time follow what the prosecution was saying. It was hard, because the small Chinese barrister spoke haltingly, in imperfect English. He might have been giving a dictation to a class at school, for he spoke so slowly and paused for so long between sentences that she would have had time to write his words down in longhand. And she almost wished she had done so, for at times she lost his flow altogether. Yet the vague manner somehow dignified the sordid events he was describing. Perhaps it was deliberate. Polly hugged her cardigan against the air-conditioning and leant forward, trying to catch his words.

The judge was listening carefully too, fingering his jowls as he took occasional notes. She recalled the way he had marked off the names of jurors as he was accepting them for the case. He read out their names one by one. Alex, the smart grey-haired man now sitting beside her on the bench, had asked to be excused: he had a business to run. The judge had

warned him - a juror could decline a case, but that would put him in line for the next one. Then the solemn figure softened. If it were him... He leant forward confidentially so that the flaps of his wig hung down on either side of his face like an elephant's ears. If it were him, he would take this case. It promised to be short, and the next one might be worse. Then the flaps resumed their normal position as the judge sat upright. Alex gave up and nodded his assent.

Then it had been Polly's turn. She stood up, hesitant before this gweilo. What with his strange hairpiece and the embarrassing nature of the case, she had almost made up her mind to withdraw. But the eye that fell on her from the raised bench was kindly, and the tone of the question was soft. Polly began to waver. The judge adjusted his wig so as to scratch his head, and she felt confident that after all it would be all right: this fatherly middle-aged man reminded her of Mr Knowles. She whispered her answer. The judge leant forward again, unable to hear, and so she repeated it in normal tones: "Yes, I accept."

Afterwards, she and her fellow jurors had sat together in one corner of the courtroom for review by the counsel for the defence. This gentleman, an angular gweilo in glasses and the by-now familiar head cover, looked hard at Polly. His Adam's apple moved and she thought he was going to dismiss her. She cast her eyes down; perhaps he would think her too sympathetic to the plaintiff. But the barrister merely coughed, and when the judge asked if there were any objections from the defence, he answered in a gravelly voice that there were none. The two gweilo seemed to know each other, Polly thought. Perhaps it was the extraordinary hairpiece they both wore.

Meanwhile, the prosecution continued his halting exposition. He was as short and round as the defence was tall and bony. When he came to the part about the knife, Polly glanced at the young Indian man who sat flanked by two green-uniformed officers in the accused's stand. In his smooth round face she could detect no sign of passion. He was even less animated than the Indians she had seen standing in the doorways of their restaurants in Central. She had never been inside those establishments: you could never be sure the food was clean. One of the men had followed her once for a few steps down the street, calling to her in a singsong voice. It had given her a fright; she remembered it still. Perhaps they were all like the accused, she thought. A momentary image came to her mind of an entire subcontinent sunk in depravity, carpeted by dark bodies entwined in unspeakable acts. But in the cold air of the courtroom the idea of passion seemed very remote. Polly frowned, and tried again to focus on what the prosecution was saying.

The halting style, the painful pauses, could not obscure the drama of the case. The prosecution told how the attacker had compelled his victim to go into the lift and up to the empty floor of the car park. His words slowed, so that the account was hardly faster than the events it described. The courtroom seemed to hold its breath as the dreadful sequence

reached its climax. Even the old man sitting at the back had put his newspaper down and was gawping open-mouthed. But eventually the circumlocutions came to an end and the barrister bowed. There was an audible sigh from Alex and a shuffling sound, unnaturally loud in the silence, as people stretched and uncrossed their legs.

The judge then spoke directly to the jury. He reminded them that they had to pay attention at all times: if they missed anything, the case might have to be heard all over again. Polly nodded seriously. She had understood it, although it had been an effort: she was clear what had happened. The pack of dried beef in her handbag came to her mind then, but she knew she could not open it here.

Instead, she looked round the courtroom. It had been empty, the bare walls and bleak lines of the benches making no concession to the drama they witnessed. But as the morning went on, odd members of the public had been filing in, and the seats were now filled with a jumbled assortment of figures. The old man was reading his paper again. Behind him was an Indian family, serious-faced at the back; Polly supposed that they were friends of the accused. At the front were reporters, young girls with their knapsacks. And beside her in a row on the bench sat her fellow jurors. They were a mixture too, she thought.

Before the proceedings began she had had a few words with Alex. He seemed unruffled by the case, worrying only about his business. What about her? he asked; was it all right for her to take time off? Mr Knowles had said it would be good experience for her, Polly replied. Alex laughed: Mr Knowles must be an understanding boss, a better one than he was. This made Polly laugh too. In such a good suit Alex could not be a bad boss. Beyond him there were two Chinese women - this was good: it would not be so embarrassing with them there. Further down the row were a couple of younger men, and lastly a gweilo in his thirties with fair hair and self-satisfied smile. Polly had said hallo to him and turned away quickly. She was not quite comfortable under his eye.

Now it was the turn of the defence. The counsel rose, and majestically gathered in his gown. His voice grating as if with a cold, he expounded his case. Polly had no difficulty following him. But the story he told clashed strangely with that of the prosecution.

The harsh tones that now filled the courtroom painted a stark picture of the events on that hot May evening six months previously. His client, the rasping voice explained, was an inexperienced youth, a good boy, but lacking knowledge of the ways of womankind. He had met the plaintiff in a bar in Wanchai. She had targeted him, and by flattery induced him to take her off in his van. They stopped in a car park in Sheung Wan, and then she led him to the room where the act had taken place. But it was a consensual act, the voice insisted - an act in which both had participated and which both had enjoyed. It was an act which should have remained in the privacy in which it was engendered and never brought before the cold scrutiny of this court.

The barrister took off his glasses and polished them briefly. Then the Adam's apple bobbed again as he resumed. The plaintiff had led his client on, had whipped up his passion, had tantalised him - the grating voice rose to a crescendo - and then she had ruthlessly taken advantage of him. The voice sank to a whisper. She was the aggressor, not him. And for the favours she had pressed upon him she had even demanded payment. Payment! The word had almost physical presence in the speaker's mouth, a foreign body requiring to be spat out. The gown swirled, and the silence that followed was broken by the owner's hoarse cough.

Polly shivered, and looked at her fellow jurors. Alex was absorbed by his shoes, seemingly unconcerned. But of course he was a man of the world, used to things like this. She wished she were better able to deal with it.

Now the judge stirred himself: "Is that all?"

"That is all, m'lud," the barrister replied heavily, and sat down as if exhausted by his own efforts. He coughed again. After a little while, Polly looked up at the Indian boy whose passions, whether indulged in by himself or inflamed by another, were on parade before them all. But the young man looked sternly ahead at the blank courtroom wall.

The first day's hearing ended early. The judge decided that there was not enough time to call the first witness, so the case was adjourned until the following day. The jurors filed up some stairs to a separate room to discuss the case. They had been instructed to elect one of their number as foreman, so when the door closed they looked at each other awkwardly. Polly passed round her packet of dried beef. Faces lit up: it was such a relief to have something to chew.

"Well, who wants the job?" asked the gweilo cheerfully. The others demurred, and fidgeted. Polly turned to him. Why shouldn't he do it? Because of him they all had to speak in English anyway. Alex nodded. The gweilo shrugged his acceptance; in fact he was rather pleased. His name was Martin, he said, and he was in sales. By a gesture he indicated that Polly should introduce herself. She did so, and the others followed. Then Martin tried to make them voice their opinions on the case, but all were reluctant to speak. He turned to Polly: what about her? Polly thought for a moment, her round face serious. "I am not sure yet," she said; "want to hear more of the case, especially the plaintiff."

"That's right," said Alex, "We should not decide too early."

One of the young men, who had not yet spoken, broke in. "That's the point, isn't it? We are supposed to wait until we've heard everything before deciding." Martin blustered, but his fellow jurors were united and the meeting came to an end.

They parted, and Polly went out by herself into the courtyard. This bleak concrete expanse huddled between two high buildings, ignored by both, although from one of them as an afterthought jutted the mean little entrance from which she had just come. The focal

point of the plaza was a broad circular pool that reflected the grey sky. To her left was a turning area for cars, bounded by a barrier before the drop into Admiralty. A covered walkway ran along the barrier, its roof sparsely ornamented with grasses like hairs on a balding head. Polly walked over to the pool, and stood beside a forlorn dwarf fir, trying to make sense of what she had heard that day. She was alone in that bare place, and the great grey edifice of the court building loomed above her. Now a group of people filed out of the little entrance and began walking towards the hillside. On impulse, Polly turned and followed them out of the courtyard, across Justice Drive and into the soothing green embrace of the park.

The court proceedings did not begin until ten-thirty the following morning, and so Polly had time to go briefly into the office. She was tending the small fern on her desk when Mr Knowles walked in. He asked her cheerfully how the case had been. Polly knew that he did not expect a reply. He was fat and wise like the judge, but not so pompous. She had great respect for Mr Knowles; he always seemed to know a great deal, and not just about work things. There was something fatherly about his paunch, and the grey cardigan buttoned tightly over it was in happy congruity with the grey curls that framed his face. She was tempted to ask him about the case: he would surely understand the boy's feelings. Of course, Mr Knowles was old, but he had been young once - perhaps he could understand it better now that he was older. She hesitated, looking into his twinkling brown eyes.

"Ah, puzzling it out, are you?" said Mr Knowles. He recalled then how he had once done jury service in a theft case in England, many years ago. He told the story for Polly's benefit. Although the facts of the case had been clear enough and pointed to the guilt of the defendant, he had expected his fellow jurors to be sympathetic to the miserable young woman. But they surprised him. They gave an unhesitating verdict of guilty, watching with satisfaction as the woman was committed to prison. So justice had been done: the woman had to pay her debt to society. He had been impressed at the time, he said, thrusting his thumbs through the buttonholes of the cardigan.

For a moment the cardigan reminded Polly of the judge's wig. She wanted to tell Mr Knowles about her case. But it was all tangled up in her mind; she did not know where to start. And weren't they supposed to keep the case confidential? Polly thanked her boss and sat down to concentrate on her typing. Mr Knowles hovered for a moment over her desk and then went back to his room.

Once the comforting woolly presence had gone, Polly felt disappointed with herself. It would surely be clear to a man like him, if only she could get it out. Oh, why did they ask her to be a juror? Polly thought to herself in frustration. They ought to have asked Mr Knowles instead. But then, she thought further, he could not do everything. If he had been selected, nothing in the company would get managed. The company could not do without

Mr Knowles. So perhaps it was best for her to go after all. Yes, perhaps it was. Mollified by this train of thought, Polly typed up Mr Knowles* letters - his handwriting was so very neat - and took the pile in for him to sign. Then with a start she realised she must hurry to the courtroom.

She caught a taxi, even though the distance up from the office in Wanchai was short. The vehicle roared up the incline of Justice Drive and then, just when the gradient was about to become impossibly steep, it swerved round a little roundabout, careened along past the consulate and the hotels and the strip of park, and reached the end of the road. Since the plaza was blocked with workmen's vehicles the taxi dropped her there, and Polly scampered over the concrete plaza herself. When she got to the courtroom she was relieved to find that the proceedings had not yet started, and squeezed past the others to her place on the juror's bench. She should not have put on that red skirt this morning, it made her so big. Fortunately, the jurors were talking to each other and did not seem to notice. Everyone in the courtroom was more relaxed - this being the second day, all were accustomed to the proceedings. Polly took out her dried beef and started to chew.

She nearly choked on the little spicy wad when the clerk of the court banged his gavel and told all present to rise for the judge. A door opened at the side of the courtroom, and the august personage swept in. The long gown trailed the floor as the personage strode up to the raised seat in front of them; then being rather heavy, he sat down with a bump. He gave a signal, and from another door the Indian boy appeared. The young man marched up to the stand ahead of his escort, and sat down, looking around the room. He caught Polly's eye, almost challenging her to look at him, to entertain herself with his plight. She held his gaze for a moment, finding herself able to contemplate his unnatural acts with composure. His face, it struck her now, was almost black. She could feel pity for him, trapped as he was in such inauspicious skin. But then of course the plaintiff was a Thai: she would be dark too. There was a balance in it somewhere. As Polly mused over this insight she surreptitiously chewed the remainder of the beef, finally swallowing it.

The prosecution asked for permission to bring on the first witness, and the judge nodded. Another side door opened: all eyes turned. But then there was an audible release of breath, for through the door limped a dismal figure. A plump girl, so short that Polly almost took her for a child, hobbled to the stand and stood there. Only the head was visible over the wooden rim looking, with its hair permed in an extraordinary wave, like a melon with a plantain leaf on top. The courtroom stirred and shuffled; Polly saw Alex and Martin exchange a wry glance.

She turned back to the head again. The plaintiff did not seem pretty to her; she wondered how that round figure could inspire such passion in the boy. Of course he was plump too: perhaps that was it. But then it came to the reflective secretary that a certain quite slim boy had once, after a demonstration of enthusiasm, described herself as "an

armful". Perhaps there was more to this kind of thing than she had thought. With a smile on her own full lips Polly mused on the diverse manifestations of male passion. And it was in a more sympathetic mood that she leant forward again to listen to the proceedings.

The prosecution, with an air of being kindly, took the unprepossessing witness through the events of the case. His presentation was more confident now; the halting voice of the witness seemed to prompt him to new strength. Through his questions he elicited the main events of that fateful evening - the meeting in Wanchai, the drive, the car park, getting into the lift, the production of the knife.

The counsel dwelt on this last item. Did the accused produce the knife when he invited her into the van? No, came the whispering voice. Then why did she get in? The Indian boy spoke so softly to her, she trusted him. Then did the knife come out in the car park? Yes, it was then. What about in the lift? Yes. So he took it out again? the counsel pressed gently. The girl paused. Yes, came the lisp, barely audible in the courtroom: it was in the lift. He made her get out at another floor. Which floor? The sixth, where there was a room. What kind of room was it? Just an empty one, for storing things. And that was where the act took place? There was another pause. The girl sighed. Yes. Still holding the knife? The girl thought for a moment. He put it down. Could you run away then? No, the girl said, it was too late. It was only afterwards that she had managed to escape. Why didn't he stop her then? She did not know. Was it because he had had his way with her and was satisfied? Yes, that was it. And then she had fallen and hurt her foot? Yes, it was then.

The counsel finished, and the courtroom filled with rustle and murmur as those who had been listening intently now relaxed and stretched themselves. Polly was able to picture it, the horror the girl must have felt as her new companion, whom she had trusted, turned violent. The experience must have marked her, caused her to lose her looks. Sympathy welled up in the tender secretary. That poor girl was hardly able to remember her story; she was so upset! Fortunately, the prosecution was understanding. It was like Mr Knowles had said: justice was being done.

The judge banged his gavel for silence. Then he called on the counsel for the defence. That gaunt individual rose, looking as he spread his gown like a great bat, and cleared his throat. His first question was about the plaintiff's marriage. The prosecution appealed to the judge, but the judge waived the objection aside.

"It was a marriage of convenience," the barrister repeated. He paused for emphasis. "Wasn't it?"

"It was a business transaction," he continued. "You passed your husband part of your earnings. Didn't you?"

"And he turned a blind eye to your activities. Didn't he?" There was no reply from the witness box.

“And you went to that bar frequently, didn’t you?” Another pause.

“It is a bar where sailors go to pick up dates,” - again the word was a physical impediment, spat out – “Isn’t it? There was no reply. The round head behind the witness stand showed no emotion.

Gradually, the defence built up his case, fencing off a section of the plaintiff’s story with each question before impaling it on a cold shaft of logic. At length, the grim figure drew his shoulders in for a final blow. “You’re a prostitute, aren’t you?”

There was a muffled protest from the witness stand. The prosecution leapt up, and this time the judge acknowledged him, calling the defence to order.

The defence then took the witness through the sequence of events, challenging every part. The liaison with the boy was a business transaction to her. She had been paid for it, and would have parted amicably as she did from her other clients had she not taken a short cut over the car park wall to avoid being seen by the guard. There she had fallen and hurt her foot. It was to avoid her husband’s anger that she had invented the story of the assault. The barrister sat down. Silence hung heavily over the courtroom and its stunned audience.

The judge’s coughed, shaking his jowls, and with a wave of his hand invited the prosecution to call the next witness. It was the Indian boy himself. He answered the prosecution’s questions calmly, but when it came to the knife, his denials showed increasing irritation. Was this a critical point? Polly wondered. Was it here that he was not telling the truth? But the judge called for order.

Then came the turn of the defence. The barrister’s dry questions established the facts of a seduction. When they met in the bar, the girl had said that he was tall, that he was a good dancer. Had she danced close to him? Yes, she had. Had he led her to his van? No, she had asked to be taken for a ride. How had they walked: had he been in front? No, the girl had clung to his arm. Had he been excited about that? Yes he had.

Later, the barrister came to the act itself. “Did you ask her for sex?” came the gravelly voice.

“Yes.” The boy was unashamed.

“Did she agree?”

“Yes.”

“What happened then?” The boy gave an account, in brief sentences. Did it seem unusual to him? Yes it did. But he accepted it? Yes. And did it last for a long time? No, not very long. And then the plaintiff asked for money? Yes. How much? One thousand dollars. Did he pay? Yes. The counsel for the defence turned to the judge. That was all he wanted to ask. He sat down.

The final witness for the day was the sergeant from the police station to which the girl had reported on the night of the assault. Uniformed, he made a stolid figure in the witness box, responding impassively to the questions of the prosecution and the defence alike. But

he had little to add to the twisted allegations and counter-allegations with which the two barristers had filled the minds in that courtroom. He had not observed anything unusual about the girl when she reported that evening. She was hurt, but that was all. It was the doctor from the hospital who had examined her. No, he had not seen the medical report.

As they gathered in the jurors' room after this tumultuous day, Polly felt quite exhausted. Even Martin was subdued. Who were they to believe? he asked them. The thin man detached himself from the wall and insisted on the sergeant. They had to believe him. The two women nodded. But this advice, wise though it might have been, did not help Polly for she did not recall anything he had said that pointed in one direction or the other. She was going to raise this, but her fellow jurors were already discussing other aspects of the case. One woman had not been able to understand the Indian's accent, and Martin repeated to her what had been said. The conversation petered out at last. Martin spoke for all of them when he said that they would hear the evidence out before deciding.

As Polly walked out of the court building, she rehearsed the day's impressions in her mind. She could not make sense of it, two such irreconcilable views of the same act. And as she focused on that act, trying to conjure it up in all its sordidness, even her revulsion faded. It was months ago, the passion had died away, what did it now matter? She had crossed Justice Road and was in among the trees. The air was still and misty. As she passed between the columns that marked the park entrance, leaves floated down, and she had to pick one from her hair. She glanced at the curled wisp on her firm flesh of her fingers. The luxurious heat of summer was over, the greenery was thinning out; and when the sun came again its heat would be dry, drawing off the moisture of the leaves. She came out of the little strip of park, and walked along the winding road past the hotels, then down the sharp incline to the busy streets of Wanchai.

Mr Knowles was out when Polly entered the office, but he had written her a list of tasks to complete. As she looked at the orderly handwriting, the neat pile of annotated papers for her to correct, she felt lost. The conflict in the courtroom that day had left her unprepared for this structured world. For a moment, she felt like expressing a passion of her own - tearing the papers, say, and scattering them on the carpeted floor. But it was only for a moment. She had spent the day with voyagers who had dared the rapids of life and foundered in turbulent waters, but her own course was steady down the placid current of the mainstream and the small eddies there would deflect her only marginally from her way. Mr Knowles' trust in his secretary was not misplaced.

Polly pursed her lips and pulled her seat in to the desk. She swept some dead leaves from the fern into the bin. Then she started typing, taking especial care. Where she was uncertain, she would ask herself how Mr Knowles would have put it; and at times she almost felt the grey cardigan as a beneficent presence at her shoulder, its owner correcting her errors in his kindly way, thumbs in buttonholes. The little hand of the clock had begun to make an

acute angle with the vertical by the time she finished. Opening her boss's office with the spare key she kept in the tape dispenser, the dutiful secretary deposited the papers on his desk. They were still warm from the printer, and she laid her hand on them for a moment as if patting the head of an obedient dog. Then she closed the door and walked out of the empty office.

On the third day, the trial reached its final stage. There was just one more witness to call: another young Indian who was an acquaintance of the accused. He was tall and as thin as the accused was fat, and he spoke so rapidly that the judge repeatedly had to ask him to slow down and stick to the question. He had nothing to add to the facts of the case, having been working as a security guard the night the alleged deed took place. So the defence questioned him about his relations with the accused.

The excitable young man explained that they shared a room. In fact, the two of them almost shared jobs, in that the accused did the guard's day shift, and the other had taken over the night shift when his plump companion left on that ill-fated excursion. It appeared that they were close friends, cooking meals for each other, the free one helping out with errands while the other was working. Polly was quite touched. From time to time the tall man glanced over to his friend encouragingly. The sharp questions of the prosecution did not unsettle him. Was the accused a violent person? No, he had never seen him do anything rough. He was a good chap who did his work well. The young man sighed. There was so much to do; he himself also had a job as a driver in his spare time.

The gangling witness was dismissed, and the prosecution and the defence summed up. It seemed that they were well-suited to their respective roles for their appearances contrasted as sharply as the presentations they made. When the turn came of the defence, this austere figure acknowledged that much in the case remained unexplained. It was, by any standards, an unusual affair. And who could know the motivation for the act itself? Why had it been done that way? The counsel shrugged his shoulders. Perhaps it was just their own inexperience, as onlookers at these events. Who could say what form of contraception a Wanchai prostitute might use? The silent courtroom gave him no answer, and he sat down for the last time.

The judge rounded up proceedings, and summarised the key points for the benefit of the jury. He reminded them that they should be careful before accepting uncorroborated evidence in a case of sexual assault. If they were in doubt, they should return a verdict of not guilty. The jury might feel that they did not believe anyone; if so, then they should dismiss the case. The judge's cheeks shook emphatically. Then his gavel banged, and the court was adjourned.

The jurors gathered in their room. This time they were more at ease with each other, and Martin invited them to raise opinions freely. His smile seemed kindlier now. The

jurors debated the conflicting versions of events without much direction. Martin and Alex fell deep into a conversation of their own; she saw Alex touch the foreman's sleeve and whisper to him. Then as Polly turned over her small stock of sexual knowledge, trying to apply it to the case, something surfaced.

"Do you think he's gay?" she burst out. Then her round face reddening with confusion she added, "I mean, he's living with that other young man, and they seem close, cooking and... you know..."

Some of the others began to nod. But Martin straightened up. He asked Polly gently if she lived with her parents. She did. "But he cannot," Martin went on. "And he can't get public housing in Hong Kong either: he isn't Chinese. It is too expensive for him to have accommodation of his own. So he has to share." Polly could see it now that he explained it to her. Martin had lived in rooms with a male friend in London when he was younger; of course not quite like these two, but a bit the same. Polly nodded slowly. Then Martin turned and winked at Alex. The two of them seemed to share some male joke and Polly, her point refuted, languished for a while at the edges of the discussion.

But Mr Knowles' secretary had a strict sense of duty. Unappealing though the facts of the case were, it was her task to confront them, and as she did so a further doubt surfaced in her logical mind. The others were in the middle of a debate on the knife when she broke in again.

"Why did he accept it then?" she asked. They turned to her - a row of mainly masculine faces, less patient than before. "I mean, why didn't he just stop when he didn't get it the way he wanted?" There was a silence in the little group. "Why not?" She looked at them triumphantly. She had this matter of male passion pinned down at last.

But Martin was blowing out his cheeks, looking down at the floor. He seemed to be trying not to laugh. He turned to Alex, who was also brimming with mirth, and the two of them cast about for words. This time it was Alex who spoke first. "I think he couldn't wait."

"Yes," said Martin, "he was too far gone." And both of them laughed out loud. Polly's cheeks flamed again. These two men, the Indian boys, the judge, the barrister for the defence - all these men seemed to have their own understanding, had built up their citadel of male intimacy from which they looked down at her in disdain. She could not breach their walls, and circled feebly round the outside of their debate. What was the point of her being on the jury? She sat in silence for the rest of the discussion.

But there was not much more to discuss. Martin wound up, summarised the main questions they had raised, including - he looked at Polly - the accused's impatience. Then he came to the point. Did anyone feel beyond doubt that the accused had committed the alleged assault? No one raised their hand. "Then we are unanimous?" he asked. No one spoke.

As they entered the courtroom and filed along their familiar bench, they felt all eyes upon them. It was now their turn to play a role in this drama. Polly was nervous, grateful now that Martin was there to lead them - strong and clear-minded Martin, who understood the passions they were called upon to judge and was the equal of anyone in the courtroom. Martin stood up, tall and straight, and waited for the judge.

“Have you reached a verdict?” The judge was solemn now, his avuncular manner gone.

“Yes,” said Martin.

“Is it unanimous?” the judge asked.

“Yes.”

“What is your verdict?”

“Not guilty,” said Martin looking straight before him.

The judge thanked him, and Martin sat down. Polly reached over and touched his sleeve, but still deep in his role as foreman he nodded without turning to her. She looked at the Indian boy. He was sitting behind the bars of his stand with a quiet smile on his face.

Then the judge wound up the proceedings. He cautioned the boy to take greater care in future. Behaving foolishly, he had exposed himself and suffered as a result, but the judge hoped he would put it behind him and make a fresh start in life. Then it was the turn of the plaintiff. The grey flaps of the wig swung with the vigour of the admonition its owner delivered. He hoped that the girl would reflect on the distress she had caused all parties, that she would lead a more sober life in future. The girl hung her head until her face was completely hidden by the exaggerated wave of hair. Then even this homily came to an end. The judge banged his gavel, surprising Polly with his vigour. “Case dismissed!”

As the courtroom emptied, the jurors shook hands with one another, the triumph of the moment uniting them. Polly clasped Martin’s hand warmly, and as he looked down at her in some surprise, she felt the urge to give him a kiss. But it was too public in the courtroom, and the moment passed. Her last glimpse was of Alex and Martin walking off together, as if bound for some male ritual, she supposed perhaps a celebratory drink. Polly felt that they could have invited her; but the thought was only for a moment, and was displaced by the recollection of the work that awaited her. The conscientious secretary filed out of the courtroom with the last members of the public to make her way back to the office.

She walked out into Justice Drive alone, and turned again to her now customary route through the park. As she walked in among the trees the euphoria she had felt at their verdict faded, and she turned the courtroom revelations over in her mind with increasing bafflement. Had the plump Thai girl been lying? It was such a terrible thing, to send someone to jail: how could she do that? How could Martin know the boy was not gay? And why had the boy paid money if he thought it was for romance? Doubts about these events thrust up in her mind like rocks breaking the smooth flow of a stream. But the events were remote,

already receding into the distance; and as she walked on over the dead leaves the gentle current of her life reclaimed her, carrying her past the now familiar hotels and down to the foot of Justice Drive. There the busy streets immersed her in their clamour. And by the time she entered her office again she had lost the threads of the argument altogether.

Polly came early to work the following morning. Mr Knowles was already there, and on seeing her he came out of his room brandishing a newspaper. An aroma of coffee clung to the cardigan. He laid the paper on the desk and pointed with a stubby finger. There on the inner page was a picture of the Indian boy after his release, smiling. Mr Knowles asked if that was her case. She nodded. "So you let him off, did you?" her boss went on, "Hm."

He looked again at the report beside the photograph, and said something under his breath that she did not catch. Finally he looked up at her.

"Hope you were right," he said. His jaw was clenched, and for a moment an unaccustomed strain showed in his face. Then the outburst: "They're all like that over there, you know. A bunch of buggers, if you'll excuse my French."

Polly looked straight before her. But her manager was already recovering his composure. "I know, you're not supposed to talk about it," he said to his secretary in a more kindly way. "Sorry you've had to go through all this." And then gruffly, "Perhaps I can take you for lunch today; you look as though you need cheering up."

Polly said nothing; Mr Knowles had never made such an offer before. For a moment there was silence, as each contemplated the intimacy that it implied. Then Mr Knowles folded the paper and put it down on the desk, patting it as if it were a dog that had retrieved something and was now no longer required. The buttonholes of the cardigan were put into service, and with a hoarse, "We missed you, you know; indeed we did," their owner solemnly launched into a letter. His voice gathered strength as he progressed. And as his dutiful secretary settled down to her shorthand it would have been hard to say whether she or her boss were the happier now that her brief voyage through the wild waters of the world was over and she had returned from it untouched.

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