

Ripley Under Glass

1.

Thadeus made a wide waving gesture and asked in a bored voice, "So what's special about this one?"

"Well, *Galerie Royals Saint Hubert* is not the largest or most splendid nineteenth-century arcade, but it was the first in which its architects realised the potential of a grand structure."

My companion did not appear to be listening; he was distracted by people-watching. I usually used his dropping by to take a break from writing. Since giving up smoking it's something I forget to do. This break had extended into a bottle of beer and the end of the working day. The sun was sinking, and we leaned over the window rail to survey the passers by.

"Look at this bunch of reprobates", Thadeus sneered. From the vantage of my rooms on the first floor looking directly into the covered arcade we have the luxury of observing tourism at work. The gallery produces a profound effect on its visitors; their pace slows to a crawl as they take in the consumables in the boutique windows, they are dazed. One can observe genetics at work too, the waddle of the mother unconsciously emulated by the daughter, the clothes of the father imitated by the son. The young homosexual promenading with his mother with identical pug noses; straight out of a Flemish painting.

"Are you going to Knockke this weekend?" I asked.

"No seaside for me. I have to stay home and wait for a delivery from Berlin; a portfolio from my father. He's doing a deal with Posada here, and since the new plan is that I'm to be involved with his business I have to oversee it. As if I could care less about this decrepit old crap. The most use I ever got out of those books and prints was with Agneiska when we were teenagers. We would get drunk and put armfuls of antiquariat on the bonfire in the garden to keep the fire going."

I don't have an opinion about Thadeus's desultory existence, and I don't have any sympathy for his problems, such as ostensibly having to participate in the family business instead of just being given money. He's like the majority of people I end up with - friendship born of circumstance rather than desire. This Hooray Henry was just a reliable drinking companion. The son of a Polish intellectual and a German book dealer, he had grown up, so I understand, in a home that continually entertained and

that many passed through, and I imagined this was the reason his life centred around diversion.

"Is that Heloise down there? It is!" The lamps in the arcade had been lit, and I noticed for the first time that while we had talked the *Theatre du Vaudeville* to our right had spewed out its well-to-do audience. Thadeus's body language changed. He ducked, straightening his tie and hair - as if anyone would notice us up here. People were surprised that anyone lived here in the upper levels of the proto shopping centre. He darted looks out, then openly stared at a flaxen-haired young woman below. She wore an orange shantung dress and was tanned and healthy. She stood with a man and woman.

"Who's she?"

"Her name's Heloise Ripley. French, but she and her English husband moved here a year ago. That's him beside her in the navy suit. He's bad news. You hear a lot of shit about him. But she's nice, I like her."

The young woman who was Heloise and the man who was her husband certainly looked like they belonged together, both good-looking and dressed in the conservative manner I had come to associate with Brussels. Their unity was consolidated by the incongruity of the woman they stood with. She was the opposite - someone who appeared to have no money rather than plenty. But it was clear the two women were good friends. They were talking rapidly and looking at the programme notes of the performance they had just been to.

"The other girl?" I asked.

"Ha-ha! 'The Person'!"

"Huh?"

"She's Thea Pearson, a deadbeat from Berlin just like me. Actually she's not a deadbeat in the slightest, she's just scruffy. I knew her in my squat period in Berlin."

"Thea and Thadeus, sounds nice."

"No, nothing like that." He knew what I was thinking. "Now she works for Mr. Posada in the bookshop."

"She looks like a totally different creature. Why is she with this couple then, and what's so bad about Mr Heloise?"

"Firstly, Thea knows everybody. Secondly, Tom Ripley may look like a pansy but don't be fooled. It's just rumours, but I've heard he's involved in organised crime."

I know it's normal to dabble in white collar double-dealing, especially here. Everyone does. But apparently people he has known both privately and in business have disappeared."

"So presumably she can't be as lovely as she looks if she's married to someone like that?"

"Who knows? It's pure conjecture, but I don't like him anyway. We've met several times at parties. He's quiet and smug; the type that lets you talk and talk till you've backed yourself into a corner. But she's *very* fun. Likes dancing."

Feeling that the bottle of beer Thadeus had brought had signalled the start of the weekend, I wanted more. "I'm going to the shop and then we can go out. Would you like to?" He blew a panpipe on the bottle neck in approval, still riveted to Heloise, and I went downstairs.

Seeing Tom Ripley at ground level gave a fresh impression. From above he seemed intimidatingly handsome and polished, but face to face he was normal - average in size and shape. It was a trick of perspective. I promptly forgot him as I fished into my jeans for some change, heading to the night shop round the corner.

2.

My subjects are architecture and public sculpture. I'm working presently on an overview of the nascent period of that imperative capitalist structure, the shopping arcade. My research engenders a strange kind of tourism; I've lived for extended periods in Naples looking at Galeria Umberto, in Milan living inside Galeria Vittorio, Berlin and of course Paris. I made brief trips to smaller towns such as Norwich, Den Haag and Nantes studying their arcade architecture and its history in the last few years. Now I am in Brussels.

At first I tried to keep in touch with friends back in England, but the volume of primary and secondary material to uncover, check and process means I have very little spare time and have become rather isolated.

My work is divided between my apartment, the national library and modern architecture archive in Ixelles. In the evenings, to pass the time, I rent films, or get drunk with Thadeus. We met – and bonded – in a night dive called *Le Rose*, agreeing it had the perfect balance of cheap prices, sentimental music and older clientele with no interest in us to make it ideal.

On an overcast mid-week night after a tiring day of dusty archives I was waiting for my friend in *Le Rose*. He was late, so my attention turned to a group of rowdy men, the smell of dry sweat and overused cologne emanating from them and permeating my own clothes, purely by proximity. They were in the middle of an animated conversation in thick Flemish. I translated as best I could.

"But I palmed him off onto *Le Soir* for you!" spluttered a small ruddy faced guy, the youngest at the table.

"What do you mean, for me? I *needed* that job!"

"Look we all know the politics of *Le Soir*. They're just about to appoint Xavier Bofourt as head of current affairs, leaving Dieter to go down with it. It'll ruin his career. Meanwhile you'll stay with us at *de Standaard*, you're safe. I'll get in another round." The young man got up stiffly and came over to where I was, nearly knocking over my drink as he shoved his way to the bar. He ignored the glass, as well as me, scratching his balls and yelling back to ask what everyone wanted.

Thadeus arrived, his lurching frame silhouetted against the older couples waltzing under the glitter ball and fairy lights. "Sorry I'm late; had to have dinner with old Posada to conclude our deal. Bloody nice German guy there too. Posada just met him at an auction, where they'd been outbidding each other for some antique

printing paper." He ordered a drink, and then confided "I've started having an illicit affair with someone."

"For it to be illicit she must be married. Is she?" I asked.

"Yup!" Thadee struck what he thought was a heroic pose. We sipped our gin and tonics.

"I got involved with something similar once. We would meet when her husband was gone, and she would sob and sob about how awful he was to her, how much she loved me. Really convinced, and convincing; but after several years it was clear she had no intention of changing her circumstances and I bailed."

"Well that's where we differ, I don't want her to leave him, we're just having fun, and it's all very light, like a holiday romance."

"That makes sense, if it's who I think it is. That woman we saw outside the theatre the Friday before last?"

Thadeus seemed surprised that I could deduce so much. "How did you know?"

"Because of the way you've been dressing recently. It's October and you're all kitted out for summer cocktails on the deck of a yacht. And that's precisely *her* look!"

He laughed, conceding, looking down at his knotted sweater and deck shoes.

"I am a bit cold."

We watched the dancers; he checked his mobile phone several times as messages came in.

"Look, remember that friend of hers, The Person? Would you like to come out with the three of us some time?"

"Of course, three a crowd is it?"

"Very good" He tapped into his phone and I got a feeling of imminence. Meanwhile the journalists' club had broken into tuneless singing, some doggerel Brabant student song. The little pink-cheeked one who had disturbed my drink stood up on the sofa and pretended he was riding a surfboard. The rest chanted:

"Tintin! Tintin! Tintin!"

He drank down a large bottle of dark beer in one go. One of his companions noticed my disgusted expression. I realised I was wincing and wiped my face blank, but he came and sat next to us.

"Ignore the wee man's Himmlering", he guffawed. "He just thinks he is the most famous guy in Brussels."

Half an hour later we were joined by the pair of self-conscious women. Heloise in bright colours, Thea in grey, and we were introduced. Heloise was shy but friendly, claiming she had heard all about me from Thadeus. They started kissing immediately. I shook hands with Thea; she was cool, hardly making eye contact, but sat beside me on the sofa.

3.

Thea and I smoked some delicious cigarettes at an open window in the early hours of the morning. Delivery boys run around with loaded trolleys to the densely packed shops and restaurants which fan off from the Grand Place, a spot which seems second only to the Rialto Bridge in Venice for tourists per square metre.

"Does anyone live over there?" Thea asked, nodding straight ahead and twirling her finger round a lock of my hair.

"Not in the flat directly opposite, not since I've been here anyway." We looked at the empty apartment in front of us, and we could see right through it to the window on the other side.

"How did you find this place? It's so disconcerting; the lack of weather under the glass. I think it's like living on a spaceship."

"The society that runs the arcade gave me a short term lease, to help me write my book."

There were muffled footfalls above; my neighbour goes to work early while her other half rattles round all day in the flat like a dried pea in a coke can. He is a son of one of the families who run the place. Like Thadeus, a brat.

"There're people above, I can hear them." There are a series of loud bumps as someone stomps across a room and slams a door.

"Lunatics. Married, with the tacit agreement they can beat each other. But this is Belgium, what goes on behind closed doors is private. Anyway, they did get up in front of god 'n all and signed up for it." Thea's kohl lined eyes in the dark looked at my steadily.

"Is that meant as a criticism of Heloise? I notice the way you treat her and Thadeus, you don't take them seriously at all. Her being married, having an affair, are you making a comparison? Do you think she 'signed up' for something?"

This type of question I had come to understand as normal from her, direct and slightly tactless. "No." I replied.

"Things are strange between her and Tom, so don't begrudge her Thadeus. I know them both well remember; they have the same expectations. Tom is very private and Heloise has always had to have an interior existence. In the end they like their set-up, and get freedom in it," she smiled. , "And remember; they are deeply bourgeois."

I snuck my arm to angle it around her waist. We had slowly warmed to each other in the bar earlier that night. Being trapped together as a convenient front for our

friends' affair is not ideal, but I had pulled her proverbial pigtails and she had responded with equal black humour; desire had taken over. I pushed her hair away from her face.

"You seem different from them, and Thadee. They all suffer from 'affluenza'. Do you enjoy being with them?"

"I don't see *you* running in the opposite direction! I'm tolerant, that's all, don't judge anyone's aspirations just because they are different from mine."

"Sagacious Thea." Holding her and enjoying the cigarettes I'm struck by something. "You were in Berlin quite a long time Thad said."

"I moved there from Hull in 1992, and then in 2003 I came here."

"Do you know the *Friedrichstrassepassage*?"

"Is it a bar?"

"No, but you may know it as *Tacheles*"

"Yes of course, the squatted art centre all destroyed from World War Two. We ran a night there for a while. It's on Oranienburgerstrasse - a former synagogue or something."

"Well scrumptious, you're wrong. It used to be one of the most beautiful and grand arcades ever built. But it wasn't destroyed in the Second World War; the Communists knocked most of it down. Do you know where the graffiti and broken cars are?"

"Next to the department store on Friedrichstrasse?"

"It extended between the two boulevards, with a cupola in the middle. What you know as Tacheles is just the entrance façade on Oranienburgerstrasse. It was beautiful."

"Well the place is legitimate now; it's a tourist attraction just like this place. But now I prefer glove shops, sausage dogs and Heloise, so I am in the right spot!"

"Hoi, Attention!" We looked down. The security guard was shining his torch on the little piles of ash that had accumulated below us.

"C'est interdite!"

"D'accord." We went back to bed.

4.

The next afternoon I woke alone to strange noises. I shrugged on my dressing gown against the cold and entered the main room of the apartment to a surprising sight; an old man in a cap looking directly in my window. I realised it was Michel, the concierge of the arcade, fastening to all the window ledges a series of flags. The city were always getting them out in honour of one thing or another.

Probably galvanised by the unexpected nudity of the previous evening, and the desire for a healthy constitution in preparation for the impending winter, I dug out my shorts and went for a run in *La Cambre*. I jogged around the disused hippodrome, which feels like staring in ones own sport fantasy dream, but the point when one awakens to find the stalls empty of cheerers and running track overgrown with weeds. Maybe your own flesh rotted and hanging in curtains around your atrophied muscles too. Picking up my pace I headed into the density of the forest. Beginning in the south of the city it starts as classical Victorian city planning, with artificial lakes and rollerbladers, then slowly the tracks tail off and one is left in the middle of the dense and ancient *Forêt de Soignes* with no end in sight.

Before even my muscles got a chance to ache I was out of breath, feeling tightness in my lungs from lack of use. I have never been a gifted sportsman, but I navigated the fallen leaves and faint paths, mostly made by horses', and threw myself with a certain lack of intelligence into the pursuit. *I must have ran at least five miles, I'm beat*, I thought, and looked at my watch. I had got off the tram and entered the park at 2.30, meaning I'd only been doing this for fifteen minutes. I smarted at my delusion. Now since I had given up any pretence at exercise I had the chance to have a cigarette from the pack that Thea had left in the kitchen. I lit up, wiped away some sweat and wandered towards a large clearing.

To my surprise there were two figures quite close to me in the undergrowth that I had not seen at first. A gaunt figure in a camel coat leaned against a tree with his arms folded across burgundy lapels, listening with concentration to a shorter man who was walking around, whacking undergrowth with a stick and talking intently. It was Tom Ripley. What was he doing here? I hid myself from view, but with a sightline. His companion had an alarming scar along one cheek, which seemed to contrast with his rather mournful face, struck by the sunbeams of the autumn afternoon

through the forest canopy. They did not look like they were here for the natural beauty. They were oblivious to anything other than their conversation, which I sensed was both collusive and confrontational.

Ripley produced an envelope from inside his coat, followed by something darker that I realized was a revolver. The tall man pocketed it as casually as if he had been asked to look after a map or guidebook and they continued talking. I was skeptical as to what I was witnessing - two seemingly innocuous (apart from the scar), well-heeled young men (polished dress shoes in the middle of a forest?) in what must be a clandestine meeting, exchanging information and weapons. Who was the scarred man?

A group of scouts, herded by several teenagers looking comical in the same shorts and scarves as the children they accompanied, came up from behind, walking in the direction of the grove. The men stiffened, proving they probably did not see me observe their exchange. I took the chance to move; my body temperature had dropped but I knew I could run now as far and fast as needed with the adrenaline in my system. I stubbed out the cigarette and got lost in the swarm of singing children as they passed through. As I got closer to the men I saw that the look on Ripley's face was bland and detached. The scarred man smiled - with his mouth but not his eyes - at the scout leaders, who nodded politely, but seemed just as mistrustful as I felt towards these disconcerting men.

I didn't have bad dreams that night because I didn't sleep. Every time I came close to it the thought of what I had seen that day snapped me awake. Clearly Thadeus's ideas about the criminality of his lovers' husband were not as far fetched as they sounded. I decided I had come a little too far out of my hole here recently and it was time to withdraw, to avoid Thadeus for a while. As for Thea, I didn't know if we would meet again. It had not been discussed.

Eventually, worn out by exhaustion, I swallowed a sleeping pill. Awaking bleary the following afternoon there was a telephone message from Thadeus.

"Hello it me, where are you? Look, I have to go back to Berlin for a month or so. I'd have liked to have seen you before I leave ... how's it going with The Person? Oh well, it'll have to wait. You've got my number if you need me."

I was relieved.

5.

"I can't believe what just happened." Thea was full of undirected energy as she paced around my studio, not ready to admit she was angry about something, yet unable to listen to or think of anything else.

We had not been in touch for two weeks even though she worked on a street close by. I had had meetings with the architects who recently renovated the glass roof of the arcade. They owned a substantial archive documenting the engineering of the canopy – which was made of hundreds of small glass slats - as well as models and samples. It was a pleasant surprise to hear her on the intercom and see the round face looking up. I buzzed her in and she chained her bicycle to the stair rail.

"What's wrong?" I had to ask. I would rather have not got drawn into whatever she was worried about, but felt obliged to enquire.

"Tom, I got into a mess with Tom. It was my fault I was stupid."

I brought her a chair and an ashtray and prepared to hear about what had happened.

"I think I'm too sensitive about not having a formal education. But at least I'm honest about it, I don't pretend. Tom's just as much of a bandit, but needs to appear knowledgeable at all times. Have you ever been to their house? It's stuffed to the roof with his *library*. They had to have the floor reinforced."

"Did you have a fight?"

"No not really. I can't explain; it was just uncomfortable."

"Was it at a party? Was Heloise there too?"

"It was a dinner party and no, Heloise wasn't there and he said she had a stomach bug. I was a bit drunk, but fuck, you had to be. Tom was telling a long tale about helping restore murals at Pompeii."

"Does he paint?"

"Yes he's good, but come on! I'd heard this particular story before, now with extra details. But I held my tongue. Because I'm a bluffer myself, I can see it in other people right away. I think Tom Ripley is insecure and that's why he spins tales about teaching drawing in Rome, studying pottery in Nymphenburg. Can't he see no-one cares or believes him?"

"But what happened?" I was lost.

"At the climax of the tale he told an anecdote about meeting the designer Karl Lagerfeld in Pompeii. He claimed he was there scouting a location for a fashion shoot and they had hit it off. He said Lagerfeld had been very charming, fanning him a little in the heat."

"So?"

"So, he claimed this was last summer. I don't care much for fashion but I do know that Lagerfeld does not carry a fan anymore."

"Why not?"

"Because he became very skinny and apparently doesn't feel the need to hide anymore. I told the room this, and Tom went quiet. I know he suspected that I think he's an intellectual fraud and now he knows. I wanted to undermine him in front of everyone, it's true."

"What happened then?"

"He shrank; went from being the centre of attention to completely silent for the rest of the night, and he left without saying goodbye which is unusual because he has such formal manners. Shit, I'm not proud of myself, who gives me the right?"

"Thea, don't be hard on yourself, everything will be fine. I'd have loved to have seen that though! You're his wife's friend, it doesn't matter. It sounds like a normal party. Come on, I'll cook you something, it'll take your mind off it."

It did. We ate toast and pâté and I showed her my plans and models. She talked more and eventually cheered up. Lying in bed, she put her head on my chest.

"Thank you for listening, it's very understanding. Let's not leave it so long before meeting up again."

"Yes." I replied. Then in the darkness I felt her breathing get faster.

"Christ; what have I done?"

I didn't understand what was going on. Why was she shaken by such a mild confrontation? "This incident, was that all there was? You seem so upset."

She was silent, then after a time levered herself onto the pillows and said. "No it's not, I'll explain. There was something last week at their house. Heloise had taken me for a swim, and invited me back. I always look through their books, they're incredible; rarities, bound volumes of magazines. She was taking a bath so I had some time to read, and I found a beautiful edition of *A Season in Hell* by Arthur Rimbaud. I'd heard it was good and it was. Because I liked it so much Heloise said *I could keep it, Tom had another copy that she would read on my recommendation!*"

"I'm afraid I don't know the writer," I said, feeling embarrassed at my lack of knowledge outside my own field. She ignored me.

"I took it into work and was reading in my lunch break when Posada's wife picked it out of my hands and examined it. She called Posada to have a look and he went crazy, I'd never seen him like that before. He was almost shaking, told me that it was a *first edition!*"

"Is that special?"

"Well a copy sold at auction in Paris a year ago for €500,000! They regularly change hands for €40,000 Posada told me."

"That's incredible! But why?"

"Rimbaud wrote it in Belgium, and had it printed here. He sent a few copies to people in the literary world, but he'd made so many enemies by that time that he was rejected. In anger he burned all the copies stored at his mum's and left the country. Years later a box was found at the printers, but that's all that's left and that's why they're so rare. *So how come Tom Ripley has copies to spare?*"

"Couldn't he have just bought them?"

"You think? He's not that rich. Would a collector buy more than one? He's not a dealer, and it was just sitting in the shelf with the rest. I told Posada it belonged to a friend and took it home. Then a few days ago Heloise told me that Tom wanted it back, I couldn't have it. But I've kept it because I think something is going on. I want to go to Posada and tell him I think it's stolen, or more likely a forgery because they are so rare. I'll see what he says."

"You think Ripley knows this?"

"No, but tonight will have confirmed that I'm not his friend." She was agitated, I also felt disturbed, but nothing was going to stop me falling asleep soon.

"Let's talk tomorrow, I have things to tell you about Tom too, but it's so late now."

"I can't sleep, and if you're going to be snoring beside me I should just go." She was upset that I was distracted; she got up and dressed. I promised to visit her in the bookshop tomorrow. I heard the door slam, but my mood was too good; I postponed thinking about all the implications, instead curling up on the spot she had vacated to steal the warmth, ready to fall asleep instantaneously.

But I didn't, because a few moments later a muffled scream came from the arcade outside. It came again, and I knew that the noise was made by a woman being strangled.

6.

I sprang out of bed wide awake, ran to the window and stopped, trying to take in what I was witnessing. You know shocks are supposed to fly by in a split second? Well this didn't, I just stood and calmly watched as someone below squeezed the life out of Thea. I was rooted to the spot, my nose against the glass. At some point my brain quietly registered that I could intervene if I wanted to and not just passively look on I wrenched open the window and let out a bellow, and then ran down the steep stairs to meet the macabre scene head on.

I had seen from the window that a dozen or so metres down the arcade had been a writhing heap; Thea kicking her legs in the air while a huddled man pumped her throat and bounced her head with such a viciousness that she skidded across the polished floor away from him. He had to stand on her overcoat and long skirt to hold her in place.

As I tore the front door open and raced to the spot the light of the lamps revealed the fruits of the brutality. The attacker had vanished. I was dimly aware of activity at each end of the passage, but I could not tear my eyes from Thea's head, which was now a dun coloured mask framed by what looked like matted muddy seaweed in an enlarging liquid pool. She had been beaten and beaten and the blood ran between my bare toes.

The barking and shouting that had come from one end of the arcade now reared up behind me. Turning I caught my reflection in the window of a chocolate shop; a semi-clad, bone-white, scrawny man, hovering uselessly. I also saw in the reflection the approaching security guard. I know him by name, Luc, with his Alsatian; he was descending on me with a club.

I roared at him to stop, but before I could move a blow struck the side of my head and everything started to fade. As my consciousness was wiped I had a flash memory of a conversation I had had with Thea on the evening in *Le Rose*. Thadeus was teasing Heloise, holding her wrists as she pretended to attack him. I had said as we watched them,

"I know it's obvious, but men are actually a lot stronger than women aren't they?"

"Yes they are." Thea replied.

"I say it because you can forget, in normal company. But the fact is, Thaddeus is theoretically capable of killing her with his bare hands right now if he feels like it."

"I don't forget in normal company. I know all the time."

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Shit. Did something ever happen to you?"

She answered calmly, "No, but I've never been attacked because I don't put myself in danger. I don't argue with angry people or go home with complete strangers. Someone taught me a lesson you see. When I was ten my sister and I went out without telling our parents where we were going. We were just cycling around, having fun. When we got back it was getting dark and my parents were distraught, my mother was crying. We got a row, especially me as the eldest, but they calmed down; I apologised and promised never to do it again. Then later, as I was getting ready for bed in the bathroom, my dad suddenly burst in with a knife and knocked me over, held it to my throat and screamed in my face '*Do you understand now? ! Do you see how easy it is?!*' Can you imagine that, your dear old dad pretending to be a rapist to shock you into facing your own mortality?"

The thought was interrupted, owing to the fact that I was now out for the count.

7.

Her bike is still chained to the railing a week later; I can't face what I would have to do to get it off.

I had come round with a smarting skull in a police cell and was interviewed at length in broken English the following day. They told me Luc had been taking a tea break in his cubby hole in the Galerie du Roi when he had heard strange noises and my shout from the Galerie de le Reine. He had seen at a distance a dark figure running from the body, then me appear and join the situation. He's now apologetic about the whack and looks embarrassed to see me when I pass.

It seemed I was not above suspicion of involvement, but Luc's evidence cleared me of the murder directly. I was told by the interviewing policewoman, "Your identity papers entitle you to three months here without registration. I suggest you don't try to register, and on leaving don't return."

"I won't."

"Have you an idea who could have done this or think of any motive?"

"It seems trivial, but Thea had had an argument with a man called Tom Ripley yesterday evening, that's all I can think of." I sat humiliated in my underpants with dried blood in streaks on my body.

"We will look into this, thank you." She spoke into a walkie-talkie in rapid French.

"Do you know where the attacker went? I saw him from my window, but when I reached street level he had disappeared." I enquired.

"No, it's a problem for us. There were some taxi drivers on the Place Agora at the end of the arcade and they would have seen a running man, but they told us no-one went in or out. The security guard was at the other end and we've asked around all the tenants who were home this morning. There's no other way to escape. It's a mystery."

I was pumped for more information about our relationship for an hour, when an officer arrived and told us that a Thomas Ripley had been found at his home in the suburb of Woluwe St-Pierre, and his wife corroborated that he had been present all night from 10.00 pm. He had been reading to her in bed. They eventually released me in a badly fitting overall and I returned to the arcade. Police were still dealing

with the hysterical shop owners and residents. I pushed through the crowds, got home, and wept.

She had died instantaneously from one of the head wounds. Thea's family flew her body back to England yesterday. I met them briefly in a café as they had wanted to see the last person with her. The father was tiny and frail; I could not equate him with the brute I had imagined, with a knife to her infant throat. They told me that on the night she was killed her apartment had also been ransacked; they had cleared it up and packed what little she had to come back to England. They would be back soon to demand an enquiry. I felt unable to offer them the condolence or the emotional support they needed. It was an uncomfortable half an hour.

I slowly returned to my research because it helped to have a routine. I was in the middle of compiling a short biography of the architect Cluysenaar when the buzzer sounded.

"Salut. C'est Heloise." The little voice made my stomach clench. I wanted to shut myself off from this whole situation, but I straighten my clothes and opened the door. Tom Ripley stood a little behind his wife. They both appeared completely normal, though her eyes were sensitive.

"May we come in?" she asked. "Not for long, Tom wanted to come shopping in the passage ... since you are here ... I hope I am not disturbing you." She edged into my studio.

"Please come in." I was stiff and formal but starting to sweat. "Nice to meet you Tom" I said as I welcomed him with a limp handshake.

"You too. Nice place you have here," he said flatly. He actually looked bored, but eyed the apartment like an estate agent and wandered around the room. "Beautiful mouldings; are they original?"

"I can't tell you, sorry."

Heloise leaned in to me, bursting to talk. "It's all *incredible*, isn't it?" Her eyes were wide. Thankfully, my discomfort around Tom registered with her and she herded him towards the door. "Chou, maybe I just meet you downstairs in the café when you've found what you're looking for?"

"Sure." He turned to shake hands again. "Look, it's awful about Miss Pearson, I didn't know her well but she seemed like a lovely girl." And he turned on his heels and left. Heloise gripped my arms.

"Oh it's so dreadful! I heard they took her to England. There is not even a funeral! Hey, and you know they came to our house asking about Tom!"

I bated away her clutches.

"Heloise, tell me honestly, do you think Thadeus is safe at the moment?"

"What are you talking about?" Her face darkens. "He's in Berlin isn't he? Why would he be in danger? Listen Tom knows *nothing*, don't say *anything!*"

"And am *I* safe Heloise?" Anger had started to rise, I was sick of her.

"What are you saying? Why would you say that?"

"Heloise, stay away from me."

"My friend is dead! How dare you!" She looked incredulous and tried to read my expression. We turned our backs to each other and she marched out of the studio. The sadness and frustration of the last week broke over me and I followed her out of the flat.

"Get away from me." I said after her.

"Fuck *off!*" She cried and stumbled, bumping into a man coming up the stairs. I was crying too. The man called to me.

"Hold up pal, I wanna talk to you." He was somehow familiar.

"Who are you? What do you want?" I asked resigned and exhausted.

"You're the guy who knew the murdered girl aren't you. Look, I'm a reporter, looking into the story." The ascent had winded him, and he let out a wet cough. I shook my head and shut the door on him, but his foot stuck the door jamb.

"Listen I'm not the police and I've nothing to do with them. I just want to talk to you. My name is Tintin. I'm an investigative reporter."

8.

I realised who he was when I smelled him. The same stale mackintosh and aftershave that had infected me at *Le Rose* confirmed he was the boozing journalist. In the light of day he was not as young as I had presumed back then; his small stature and childish features could not counteract the scaly skin, swollen hands and unkempt nostril hair of the long term alcoholic.

"Shit, pal you look miserable. Can I buy you a drink?"

The fact that he was a stranger, with no connection to this weird configuration of people I had got tangled in, took a weight off my shoulders. I knew I needed to talk.

"Yes, please, I'm a mess, I'd love a drink."

"Come on, we need somewhere quiet. We won't be disturbed in the Greenwich"

It is a chess bar, often frequented by writers and readers because of its silence, with an intimate back room. Large sums of money are often won and lost over games there and everything is the same shade of nicotine. Tintin ordered us double cognacs and a fresh pack of twenty cigarettes.

"Thea Pearson, was she your girlfriend?"

"A bit, I'd only known her a short time. She probably would have become." Tears well up inside me, though I manage to suppress them.

"What do you do?"

"Write. I'm publishing something soon on nineteenth-century glass roofed arcades, and that's why I'm living in the Galerie de la Reine in the St Hubert arcade."

"Yes I saw the snazzy scale model in your place, it's incredible. How did you meet Thea?"

"Through a friend of a friend" I filled him in on the back story and he occasionally scribbled in a notebook.

"Who do you think killed her?"

"I don't know. It involves a man called Tom Ripley, though he has an alibi. The woman you saw on the stairs is his wife."

Tintin looked lucid. "His wife you say? Then I know exactly who you mean. I saw that same woman holding hands with a man in the arcade this afternoon, before I came to jiver you out. I was drinking coffee; I watched him buy a pair of tortoise-shell glasses."

"Tim Ripley does not wear glass." I said flatly.

"Well he owns a pair. He tried them on."

"He also owns a revolver. I saw him giving it to a man in the park."

"Why does someone like that need a gun?"

"My friend thinks he's killed people, and Thea suspected him of the theft or forgery of rare books."

"That's common here. People say that if your furniture is stolen you should come to the antiques market in Brussels to buy it back. This part of the world has been a crossroads in all kinds of trade since before it was even a country, and that's including contraband. In the nineteenth-century, compared to its neighbours, Belgium had relaxed laws concerning freedom of the press, so avant-garde writers and pornographers came here to get published. It's always been like this, right up to the present with children being bought and sold under our noses!"

"Well Thea thought that a book called *A Season in Hell* she had borrowed from him was a fake."

His eyes glazed over, focusing a long way off.

"You know what, that sounds familiar. I'm going to look into this" He drank down his cognac, and put his arm round me. "It's going to be me and you pal, face to face, against the world, getting to the bottom of this!"

I did not like the sound of this, but he was all I had. He was not a half-wit, I was convinced of his abilities, but his manner was very erratic. Maybe he was on prescription drugs?

"You get any problems, here's my number, come to me." He angled his thumbs at his puffy face under its frazzle of orange hair. "I'm the best."

"Don't you remember me?"

"What?"

"The Rose bar, you were with some friends, singing and shouting. You nearly knocked over my drink?"

"No recollection whatsoever." And with that he left.

9.

I walked home, wondering what would come of this new association; I felt anxious. As soon as I entered the arcade it got stronger, but I put it down to recent events. I hung up my coat, kicked off my shoes and flicked through a book lying open on the table.

I could not concentrate on what I was reading because I was locating what it was exactly that was making me nervous. Then I realised what it was. I had the distinct impression of being watched. The rooms across from mine were unoccupied so I had never bothered to buy and install curtains. Now I was aware of the brightness of my living room lights, I would be framed perfectly by the window for any observer watching from the other side of the arcade. But this was just a hunch; I carried on reading, though now putting on a studious expression for the benefit of any imaginary viewer.

Eventually I yawned. The clock said 2.00 am. Stretching, I took off my shirt and slowly approached the window. Nothing seemed amiss. I opened it and leaned out, taking in the length of the arcade from end to end.

Would I become an urban myth like those stories of architects who jump off the roof of their creation because they put the entrance on squint or forgot the men's toilets? Would I be the writer whose girlfriend was murdered in the building he was researching?

There seemed to be nothing happening outside, but the newly erected flags obscured my view. I leaned out to brush one out of the way when I felt something suddenly *whoosh* past my hand and a lump of plaster fall to the ground. I dived to the floor, scrambled along until I could hit the light switch and plunge the room into darkness. Someone was trying to shoot me. But there had been no sound other than the air sucking past. Was that what happened with a silencer?

Still as close to the floor as possible, I fished in my coat for Tintin's number, and for the telephone on the table

"Mr Tintin? I think someone shot at me! Here in my flat."

"What! Did you see them? Are you wounded?"

"No nothing, they missed. But I couldn't see anyone in the arcade!"

"I think you should get out of there. I'm still in the centre of town so I can pick you up and take you out to where I live for a few days. It's about an hours drive. I'm coming over so get some things together."

He arrived and I let him into the dark apartment. He went immediately over to the window frame to examine it.

"Can we please just *go*?" I had to get out. He came back from the window, restraining his eagerness but he spotted my scale model and pointed to it.

"Can we take this? It could help!" I nodded agreement and pushed him towards the door as he scooped it into his arms. We ran to the car, a 2CV Citroen parked around the corner.

I had never been out of the city before by car, and as we passed the town limits and settled into the boring motorway journey I noticed [the central road lamps snaking off into the distance behind and before us.

"They keep them on in the middle of the night, in the middle of nowhere." Tintin laughed. After what seemed like a short time we turned off the motorway and into a small town, then into a car park in front of large house.

"This is Waregem. I'm living in a hotel at the moment, sharing the room with a friend, but he's away right now. He's a sailor." It was a large, turreted gothic building which had once been grand, but now looked divided up and rented to the long-term unemployed. I didn't see much because it was so dark, but he let me into a room, put on a bedside lamp and patted the bed.

"Get some sleep. I'm going to go back so gimme your house keys." I passed them to him and he raised an eyebrow at my Snoopy key-ring. Then was off again.

Next day when I awoke I got my first full view of his room. The sun strained through a dirty window. That and the forest of dead pot plants in front produced a beautifully diffused, autumnal light. There was a collection of empty rum bottles on the table and everything was in disarray, with piles of newspapers, cuttings and notebooks strewn on every available surface. Only the typewriter proved the owner of this room was not just a schizophrenic. A picture must have been recently removed, because a patch of bright sixties style wallpaper showed the extent of the dirt around it. I lay and looked at the strange streaky light pick up particles of dust in the air.

Later I investigated the shared bathroom and discovered the house was deserted. I wandered outside to discover exactly where I was. As he said, the place was called Waregem and seemed to be a quaint, typically Flemish town. I went to what must have been the centre clustered around a church, and ate in a tearoom in a concrete shopping centre. I felt like I'd been given a remission from my problems.

When I got back I cleared some space on the table, and placed the scale model on it. Tintin returned that afternoon.

"Great, the model, just what we need." He went straight to work. "Explain to me how you were standing when you were shot at."

I assumed a pose with one hand on an imaginary lintel, the other extended as if brushing aside the flag outside. "Like this; leaning out the window."

"I went to your flat and examined what I could where you were standing. I found not only two bullet holes in a flag, but also a chip, a kind of ricochet mark in the statue just beside it. She's made of plaster but has a steel armature and it bounced right off."

"Flora. It's a statue of Flora, she's the goddess of springtime."

"Very nice. Let's look at the model and try to determine where the bullet came from." Tintin's ruddy face appeared gargantuan through the windows on the other side of the model..

"I was right here." I stuck my finger through to show him.

"Ok, I'm almost certain that the gunshot came from the apartment across from yours."

"It's supposed to be empty. Oh, my god, there was someone there! I felt it!" I said.

"It solves the mystery of where Thea's killer disappeared to does it not? Look here, if we trace back the angle of the bounce off Flora's hip, it correlates, especially presuming that you're holding the flag. Bunched to the side we get the double penetration of the bullet." Tintin concentrated and paced the room. He reached into a draw and pulled out a half empty rum bottle and took a swig. "If this is the case then there must be concrete evidence, because at that angle it would have bounced directly upwards! Through the roof!"

"That canopy is made of glass slats. They create the curvature of the roof as well as keep the flow of air into the arcade. You can see them here in miniature."

"Damn, I should have looked! I'll go back and see. Stay here and don't go anywhere! How can I get up to the glass roof?"

"At the top of the stairs in all the hallways there are exits onto a shallow walkway by the dome, it's used by the window cleaners, but mine is always locked."

"No bother. We're getting to the bottom of this!" He hugged me and seemed extremely psyched. He took off in his car and I went over his findings on the model. Now I was certain of it. I *had* been watched!

10.

I waited in Waregem for three days. There were no telephone calls, and no answers on Tintin's phone. When a car pulled up to the front of the hotel I ran to check in the hallway, which had cleaner windows, but every time it was just another contingent of Asian and Russian illegal workers returning from the endive packing plant. They seemed to make up the rest of the tenants here.

Leaving the model because it was too large to carry I travelled by train back to Brussels Central Station and put my bag in a locker there. I did not intend to stay in my apartment again and this way I could avoid it. The arcade was usually full of tourists and shoppers, but today the heavy rain outside had swelled the numbers even more. I cut through them intently, oblivious to their presence.

My neighbour upstairs was leaving as I approached the front door and I caught it before it shut. She looked at me sheepishly, sporting a black eye, but I pushed past her. It was only when I reached my front door that I realised Tintin still had my keys.

There was nothing left to do but try to figure out what had happened to Tintin.

I made my way up the stairs to the top floor, where the door that was usually padlocked swung on its hinge, apparently forced very recently. On hitting fresh air and rain I was surprised at the strength of the wind, but I was four stories up. I gathered my jacket close. What was I looking for? There was nothing up here other than an uncomfortably tight well between the glass curve of the central dome and the continuous length of red slated roof, chimneys, and occasional light-wells for the homes on each side. I strained to see anything unusual but there was nothing so I squeezed a bit further along. Up close, the engineering of the dome was impressive.

Then as I scanned it I noticed that one glass slat stood out from the others, not with a bullet hole, but by the fact that it had clearly been recently replaced – it was fresh in contrast to the weather stained ones surrounding it. I angled myself above the glass and was staring directly down Flora's plaster cleavage. Then I noticed something on the other side of the glass. It was my Snoopy key-ring. There was no way I could get over the glass dome without putting myself in danger and

attracting the attention of the people below, but there was a platform at the end, which meant I could pass along one side and return along the other.. I decided to give it a try.

The wind was picking up, but I held on to the slippery sides as best I could. There was a surprising amount of rubbish gathered in the groove between the two surfaces; I kicked it out the way. In no time I was on the other side of the same spot and had retrieved my keys. I leaned against the roof and examined them. What now? I knew the only way to find out what had happened to Tintin was by imagining what he would have done. I must try to gain access to that empty apartment. I could avoid going all the way back around to return to the ground floor by using the doorway on this side. I looked around. To my left was a light well and just beyond that the door. One try of the handle proved it was firmly locked.

The wells run the height of the building to comply with regulations about light and ventilation, though the one in my place just emitted mosquitoes, air conditioner stink and noise from the surrounding restaurants. This one corresponded with the apartment opposite, and I peered down. There was a window open. I counted the floors, yes; it was that flat, which meant I could get access by climbing down. I had come so far; this method seemed easier than trying to sweet talk the security guard into giving me entrance by the front door. It would not be difficult; I could lower myself over the edge and support myself on the network of ledges, beams and pipes going all the way down to the dark bottom. It was good to not look down, and avoid directly crossing any windows, though I was sure that all the apartments on this side were unoccupied.

I made my way down as best I could in the beating rain, almost losing my balance several times. Finally, out of breath, I was on the outside edge of the apartment's window. I waited and listened. Nothing. I lingered a little more before taking a peak. There was no-one in the bare room, though it had definitely been used recently. From here I could see an armchair, several piles of boxes, a suitcase, some food wrappers, and a camel coat draped over a chair. It was the camel coat of the tall man in the forest; it had the same burgundy lapels.

Taking a chance I decided it was safe to enter. As I swivelled round to go through backwards I saw in the black of the bottom of the well, a sight that took my

breath away. It was Tintin's blue jumper and raincoat. His little body laid in a puddle, broken and splayed, the black marks of strangulation on his throat. The image of this and what it meant was brilliant, toxic inspiration, pushing me back into the room. I staggered and caught myself on a table to stay upright. Then I grabbed, riffled and scanned notes stuffed in pockets. I only remember this after the event because at the time I was blind with horror. What was written on a little card eventually propelled me out, away and back toward the train station. I needed to warn Thadeus. I may not have liked him much, but I did not want him to die.

The febrile sales rep in the ticket office thought I needed cheering up on encountering my bedraggled cheeks and dry voice croaking,

"Berlin"

"Berlin! Oh, Berlin, why is everyone going to Berlin all of a sudden?"

"I don't know."

"It must be because it's so beautiful! I'd love to go. Your train leaves in half an hour. *Bon voyage.*"

11.

I knew Thadeus stayed at his parents' home in Wilmersdorf when he was in Berlin. My overnight train arrived at the city's new gleaming Hauptbahnhof at 7.00 am. I bought a map and studied it as I travelled on the S-bahn; the most reliable time to catch him would be the morning, when he was still in bed. The address he had logged in my notebook with a flourish of his fountain pen directed me to a large townhouse on Fasanstrasse surrounded by trees, small museums and designer boutiques.

My knock was answered by a woman. She was his twin; the same long wavy hair, deep-set eyes and slight hunch common to gangly people.

"Are you Agneizka?" I asked

"Yes?" She looked at me with surprise and misapprehension.

"I'm a friend of Thadeus, from Brussels."

Recognition softened her features.

"The writer? Oh come in! What are you doing here? Thadee will be very surprised." She led me to a little sitting room on the first floor and courteously motioned for me to sit on the sofa. "I'll get him out of bed." Thadeus appeared shortly after wearing a dressing gown and a puzzled expression. "What are *you* doing here? You look terrible!"

It poured out of me. I told him that the day he left for Germany I had seen Tom and a stranger in the park with a gun. Then Thea had angered him by pointing out a fabrication in a story. I explained how she had come to mine and had been strangled to death when she left. Thadeus sat stunned. He put his head in his hands, but I steamrolled on, explaining I had been questioned by the police in their investigation and had pointed them to Tom but there was nothing on him.

"Have you see Heloise?" he asked

"I'm avoiding her. She came to mine with Tom to get the juicy details of the murder and I let her have it. I suppose you aren't seeing her any more if you don't know any of this."

"You're right. She broke things off. Sent me a text message. Can you believe that?"

"I think she's involved, she *must* be!" I said. He raised his eyebrows.

"The only criminality she's capable of is criminal indifference. Keep talking, this is awful."

I told him a reporter had latched onto me, was interested in following the story, solving the case. He seemed to agree with a theory of Thea's that Ripley was involved with forgery. Then I was shot at in my flat so he hid me in his house. I waited till yesterday but could not get in touch with him, so came back and tried to retrace his footsteps.

"Thadee - he'd been strangled too! He's lying in a puddle of stinking water at the back of some unoccupied flats. I think they were both murdered by the same person, an accomplice of Ripley!"

"Why did you come here instead of going to the police?"

"Because there's no time! I found stuff in a flat they've been using; I think you are in danger!"

"Why?"

"Because in that flat I found your dad's business card."

"Oh my god."

"Have you been dealing recently with anyone that seems suspicious?"

"No, not really. The only new person is the German I met though Posada, buying the antique papers. His name's Reeves Minot."

"Reeves Minot?" I stared at him incredulously. "*Reeves Minot?* I found an airline ticket from Hamburg to Brussels in that flat in the *same name!*" I grabbed his shoulders and shook him "You've been with the man who murdered Thea!"

His eyes widened. "Oh shit. That means he's here in Berlin! He telephoned a few days ago to arrange to show me some of his stuff. I'm supposed to be meeting him this evening on Savignyplatz. He's got some rare first editions he wants to sell to us, French stuff. What on earth is going on? Oh God, do you think Ripley knows about me and Heloise?"

"I have no idea. She said no but who knows. I have to think about what we should do because the way things look they are spiralling towards us."

12.

We talked all afternoon, and decided with some confidence that it was possible that Tom's and Reeves' interest in Thadeus might be purely business. Would Ripley even care if his wife had a lover?

"You must meet him tonight. If you get some samples of the forged books, we can go to the police with some evidence." I said. I was running on pure anxiety and we were both worked up into a frenzy. I grabbed him.

"Be calm, you have to be convincing when you meet him, it's our chance to be rid off this! Otherwise we could be killed!"

As arranged Thadeus was at the café on Savignyplatz at 6.00 pm, I waited on a corner nearby to see if his appointment really was with the blond man with the scar that I suspected was Reeves Minot. Right on time a tall figure with a large leather bag turned into the café. It was him. I felt jubilant and terrified; we could have them legitimately arrested, then from there I would tell the police about the body, they would check the apartment, no more hiding and running.

The plan was that I would not stay in case he saw me, so I headed back to Fasanenstrasse, only stopping into an imbis snack bar on the way for some cigarettes. The man grumbled at my large denomination note, but gave me what I wanted and I left. I continued down the street and fished out a cigarette. It was as I took the first long draw that I saw Tom Ripley staring at me from a doorway across the street. He smirked from behind a pair of old-fashioned tortoise-shell glasses.

I take off, heading down Kantstrasse under the cover of the train lines and hit the bustling Zoologischer Garten. I keep running, enter the station and catch the first S-bahn that arrives heading east. He's here, and he knows our game. I watch the city slide by. Again the Hauptbahnhof. Off at Friedrichstrasse, and walk. I'm so fried, so sick of the tense nausea that has taken over my existence! I go into the first bar I see and order a double vodka and a beer. I'm drinking and drinking, and checking over my shoulder and now it is totally dark. I can go outside again.

I'm drunk and things feel better. As I stagger along there is a young man in thick spectacles walking beside me; he's skinny and sporting a karate suit with a black belt. I burst out laughing.

"Don't worry; I know not to mess with you! Hiiii-ya! Hahahahaha!"

He tuts under his breath and takes off at a jog. Through my mirth and intoxication I realise I have wandered somewhere familiar. I'm standing square outside the entrance to Tacheles. I move backwards across the road, between the traffic to get a better look at the graffittied façade. It's all here, the structure I had research three years ago, the *Freidrichstrassenpassage*. I had never visited this nightclub then. I feel a firm hand grip my arm.

"Where are you going?"

It was Ripley, still smiling. I shake him off, run straight across the road, car horns beeping, and dive into the building. It's full of people, dancing to a band. I worm a path through them, away from him, desperately trying to gain distance. I get to a side exit and force open the door at the end of a corridor. There is winter air; I take it in running out onto the welcome waste ground. It's dotted with abandoned cars and I can see the S-bahn in the distance.

I turn to see if he has followed. He is behind me, framed by the remnants of the arcade. I stumble on a pile of bricks, fall and feel the weigh of his frame cover me, his hands like a garrotte around my throat and a concentrated furrow in his brow. I imagine Thadeus dutifully admiring Reeves's selection of fine antiquariat, as my life disappears. Vomit and Ripley's grip plug up my throat.

I die on the waste ground behind a burned out van; my body is found the following afternoon.