

# **THE FAVOUR**

# THE FAVOUR

LAURA  
VAUGHAN



Published in hardback in Great Britain in 2021 by Corvus,  
an imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd.

Copyright © Laura Vaughan, 2021

The moral right of Laura Vaughan to be identified as the author of  
this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright,  
Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any  
means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,  
without the prior permission of both the copyright owner and the  
above publisher of this book.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and  
incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any  
resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities, is  
entirely coincidental.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British  
Library.

Hardback ISBN: 978 1 83895 201 3  
Trade paperback ISBN: 978 1 83895 202 0  
E-book ISBN: 978 1 83895 203 7

Printed in Great Britain

Corvus  
An imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd  
Ormond House  
26–27 Boswell Street  
London  
WC1N 3JZ

[www.corvus-books.co.uk](http://www.corvus-books.co.uk)

*To my parents, who have given me  
a life filled with treasures.*

*'One sees as one wants to see; this is false;  
and this falsity constitutes art.'*  
*– Edgar Degas*

On my return, I found the city bleached of all colour, shimmering dully in an August heatwave. The water was almost as full of glare as the sky. Once again, I had miscalculated. Once more, I was unprepared. Ancient treasure gleamed within dark doorways, shopfronts winked with made-in-China trash, and their competing glister seemed one and the same. My armpits were swampy, my mouth sour. My hands shook. So when I realised it was him, my first thought, absurdly, was *I don't want him to see me like this*. After all those years, he still had that effect on me.

Cheer up, Ada, he said. You look like you're going to a funeral. His mouth crooked. And then, of course, we laughed.

PART ONE

---

*Trompe l'Oeil*

## CHAPTER ONE

---

Inevitably, I blame my mother.

I am aware that this is unreasonable of me. Perhaps entirely so. But when all's said and done, things would have turned out differently if she hadn't sold the house.

Garreg Las was what people generally think of as a 'country house'. While very far from being a stately home, it was still large and dignified enough to be the seat of landed gentry, which is what my father's family had always been. Our particular branch – the Howells – hailed from an overlooked corner of Carmarthenshire. It was there, in 1807, that my great-great-great-grandfather Edwin built the house. His design was almost aggressively plain. The roughcast façade didn't boast so much as a pair of pillars, let alone a portico. Yet the entrance hall, with its sweeping staircase and arcaded gallery, was pared-down classical perfection. The cornicing was delicately moulded, the windows tall, the rooms brimming with pale light.

'It's rather awful to admit,' I heard my mother saying on the phone to one of her friends, 'but I never liked the house. With Anthony gone, it's even more of a millstone.'

I was thirteen years old at the time and my father had only been dead three weeks. But even before his diagnosis, and the



cancer's ferociously swift assault, the house had always seemed an extension of his best self. Although my father was gone, the spirit of the place did not leave with him. It lived and breathed within our walls.

If one was going to be unkind, one could say that both the house and my father had seen better days. Once a well-regarded novelist, Daddy's career had petered away into self-published volumes of unintelligible poetry. Garreg Las, too, was not what it was. A lot of the rooms didn't have quite enough furniture, their walls sporting sad bleached squares where paintings had once hung. The roofs were a catalogue of leaking valleys and blocked drains. There was a perpetual chill, even in summer, and the bathwater was never more than lukewarm.

Those memories are distant. I have others which carry with them the sheen of a fairy tale. I remember the mossy smell of apples softening on the larder's shelves. The faded gold of the drawing room walls, the same colour as the roses that foamed by the rotting entrance gates. And the narrow valley in which the house lay, its hills as rain-sodden as the sky and the heavy yet tender colour of a bruise.

I accept that my mother may have seen things differently.

My mother had been a self-avowed city girl the moment she escaped her provincial Midlands town for university in London, and then a job as a publisher's PA. That's how she met my father. Our move to the country was meant to be a temporary break, intended to cure Daddy of a bout of writer's block. But although the block came and went, the three of us stayed put – in a valley that seemed to spend three-quarters of the year under cloud. My

parents' circle was chiefly composed of the old county set Daddy had grown up with and a handful of raddled hippies.

Meanwhile, I went to the village primary along with the local farmers' kids, who, though they quaintly referred to Garreg Las as 'the Big House', rather pitied me for the lack of hay bales and quad bikes in my life. Other gatherings involved the children of my father's own childhood friends. They too grew up in large draughty houses with shabby portraits on the walls and damp stains on the ceilings – yet by the age of eleven, vast sums of money were mysteriously found to send them away to public school. By contrast, I was sent to the only independent college in the area, a cheerful but rackety establishment under constant threat of closure. I was dimly aware that this, together with my lack of trust fund or wealthy older relation, was a source of parental concern. But then Daddy fell ill, and everything changed.

'Garreg Las's always been too big for us, darling,' was how my mother broke the news. 'And it *eats* money. If we try and stay the house will literally fall apart around us. That's why we need to pass it on to people who can give it the care it needs.'

The estate agent sucked his teeth as he was shown around and looked doubtful. 'Big old houses like these ... there's not much call for them round here. Nowadays, people want the mod cons. Shame you aren't any closer to the motorway. And just the garden, you say? No real land?'

Hearing this, a rush of hope scalded my heart. Perhaps the house would never sell. However, against the odds, Garreg Las was snapped up by a Manchester businessman with Welsh roots, whose younger wife 'fell in love with the place'. There was an

illustrated feature about them in the local paper once they'd finished their renovations. One of our old neighbours sent it to us, perhaps to commiserate, or else out of some private spite:

The substantial 6,000 square foot country home now oozes period elegance, combined with modern additions all done to the highest of standards.

'Oh, it was a real wreck when we bought it,' laughs Tania Price, the glamorous new lady of the manor. 'The fittings were hopelessly dated, and nothing worked. All our friends thought we were crazy! But I saw the potential straight away.'

The old stables now contained a hot-tub and gym. There were gold taps in the bathrooms and feature walls papered in whimsical designs of palm trees and pagodas. The final photo showed one of the Prices' lumpish teenage daughters posing on the stairs in a fish-tail sequinned ball-gown. When I saw this, I cried so hard I was sick.

Should it have made a difference that Daddy was not my biological parent? I suspect my mother thought so. There were times when I sensed the words coiling in her mouth: *He was not your real father. And it was his family home, not ours.* She never said them out loud, though. I'll give her that.

I was conceived during one of my mother's rare visits home, when she ran into an old schoolmate in her parents' local. Two

weeks later he was killed in a car accident. I was a year old when my parents met; Daddy always said he didn't know which of the two of us he fell in love with first. He was close to fifty at the time and had assumed he would be childless.

I can't remember a time when I was not vaguely aware of the facts of my birth, so my mother must have followed the conventional wisdom to be open about such matters from the start. The couple of photos she provided showed a blandly cheerful twenty-something with sandy hair and broad shoulders. Tim Franks, I was told, had been sporty at school. Good at maths. He became the manager of a regional sales office. His parents and younger sister had emigrated to Australia; he enjoyed Korean food and Formula One. But my mother's efforts were tepid at best; I could tell that the man was essentially forgettable. That made it easy for me, too, to shrug off the idea of him.

I only remember one conversation with Daddy about this. It was some weeks before his diagnosis; though he was already ill, we didn't yet know how badly. I was helping him to clean the frame of one of the portraits. It was of great-great-great-aunt Laetitia, young and roguish in pink satin. She had always been a favourite of mine, partly because the painting was overlaid by an ironic melancholy: poor, beautiful Laetitia had died of TB two weeks after her wedding day. 'Do you think I look like her?' I had asked.

'I think you do,' Daddy replied gravely. 'It's in the eyes. You have the Howell eyes.'

'But how can I? If I'm ... if I'm not really a Howell?'

Everyone in Wales, and therefore everyone we knew, assumed I was Daddy's biological child. Nobody ever said anything to

correct this. I think this was the first time I openly acknowledged it myself.

Daddy looked surprised. 'Of course you're a Howell. The last of a long line of 'em.'

I nodded. I knew the stories: our branch of the Howells could be traced back to the ninth century and a Welsh prince named Rhydian.

My father must have guessed something more needed to be said. 'You think there haven't been love-children or foundlings before? Every family has its share, if you look hard enough. That's because a so-called family line is actually a series of links. Think of a long chain of different metals, forged together. It's the variation that makes it beautiful. Strong.' He cleared his throat. 'I might not have made you, Ada, but I chose you. You're my legacy, *cariad*.'

The Welsh endearment sounded odd in his public school tones. I think Daddy must have guessed he was dying. Perhaps he was convincing himself as much as me. Perhaps he sensed that his books and his poems were not enough, that any kind of heir was better than none. But he loved me. Of that I was sure. He gave me his name. He left us his house.

The house was proof of everything.

The sale of my father's ancestral home and the auction of most of its contents bought us a three-bedroom Edwardian terrace house in Brockley, London. It had an Ikea kitchen, waxed pine floors and a small garden bright with geraniums. At least the portraits came with us. Aunt Laetitia, of course. Uncle Jacob, the

East India Company colonel. Grandfather Edwin, who had built the house. But I could tell my mother was embarrassed by her dead husband's entourage of ancestors. All those cracked faces and dusty smiles.

Although Daddy's family might not have changed history (no great rebels or reformers or potentates), his ancestors were still a visible part of it. You could pin their individual stories next to the timeline of the national one, and the symbiosis was plain to see. They were people who had always had a tangible stake in the world. Without Daddy, and far from everything he loved, how was I to find mine?

The few bits of furniture we'd kept looked as cramped by the new house as I felt. I stood in the boxy living room, listening to the traffic grind up and down the high street at the end of our road, and assured myself that this exile was temporary. I did not belong here. This was not my life.

For good or ill, our lost house was no longer just the stand-in for what I loved and remembered about my father. It had become the talisman for everything I wanted to be. Austere, yet romantic. Picturesque. Patrician.

Mine is a familiar story, I suppose. The lonely outsider who craves the status and glamour of a privileged elite. But, so I told myself, *my* trajectory was different. I wasn't trying to break in, you see. I was trying to get back.

I really believed that.

## CHAPTER TWO

---

‘I’m having trouble with the meaning of three words: lie, deceive, mislead. They seem to mean something similar, but not exactly the same. Can you help me to sort them out from each other?’

To study English Literature at Oxford, at the same college as my father, had gradually supplanted my impossible ambition to reclaim Garreg Las. Various teachers had remarked on my facility with words; I had begun to hope I might even share Daddy’s gift for storytelling.

And like hundreds, thousands, of misty-eyed hopefuls before me, I was convinced that Oxford’s hallowed ground would provide both rescue and reinvention.

Until I faced the three little words that struck my dream dead.

Lie. Deceive. Mislead.

I was moderately happy with my performance in the first interview and my analysis of a poem that I guessed, correctly, to be a Seamus Heaney. In fact, when I took my seat before the second panel, I thought I was on my game. I knew the point of these so-called ‘trick questions’ was to show that you were capable of thinking creatively, and on your feet. Enjoy it, I’d been told. There is no one right answer.

In this particular case, my best strategy would have been to contrast the words in pairs or, like a good dictionary, give examples of sentences in which they could be used. Instead, I plunged into lengthy definitions of each word, which proved impossible to do without pulling the other treacherous simulacrum into the fray. I blundered about in search of similes, lurched after delineations, piled clarifications on top of qualifiers in such a headlong rush that the whole tottering heap of verbiage threatened to crash around my head. A hot pulsing blush began to spread from my damp armpits up my neck and over my face. It was a mercy for all involved when I finally ground to a stop.

Even then, all might not have been lost. I could have recovered. I was dimly aware that my interviewers were trying to be encouraging. And yet – unaccountably, disastrously – I retreated into a wounded *froideur*. My expression grew haughty, my words clipped. In the final moments I think I even attempted a smirk.

Somehow, the rejection letter still came as a surprise. I'd managed to tell myself that the second interview couldn't possibly have gone as badly as I imagined. That's what my mother and teachers kept saying. I was apt to catastrophise, wasn't I?

I don't remember much about the day Daddy died or when we left Garreg Las. I'd blacked them out. The end of Oxford was not of the same magnitude, but the physicality of my loss was still extreme. Long blank hours would pass, heavy with nothingness. And then, out of nowhere, I'd be hit by a jolt of cold sick energy that left me shaking. I was rancid with shame.

For of course, everyone I knew assumed that I was Oxford bound, especially at school, where I was the designated posh swot.



On first moving to London, I'd been a natural target for derision. My clothes were practical, bought to withstand bad weather and a draughty house. My voice was plummy, with an occasional and inconsistent Welsh lilt. My parents did not own a television. I had only encountered department stores and public transport once or twice a year, on our rare excursions to Swansea. I worked hard to compensate for these deficiencies. But while I was not actively unpopular, I was only ever tolerated, never liked.

Thanks to its catchment area as much as its OFSTED rating, my comprehensive was entirely respectable. It was also hopelessly middle-of-the-road. And so, I was beginning to fear, was I. *What if*, whispered my secret, only part-acknowledged dread, *I took after my real father, after all?*

It was my godmother who came to my rescue. Delilah Grant, an old family friend of Daddy's, was the affluent bohemian type, who painted a little and travelled a lot. The sale of Garreg Las was something she bitterly lamented – 'The place was dear Anthony's muse, after all.'

My mother bit back a laugh. 'Better a house than a mistress, I suppose. And only marginally more expensive.'

My parents had always been an unlikely couple, age-gap notwithstanding. Daddy had had a melancholy stoop and a quizzical manner. My mother was plumpish, prettyish and as direct as my father was (charmingly) elusive. And while I felt that everything about our move to London had devalued me, my mother had come into her own.

Quite quickly, she found a job as office manager at a small architectural firm. She cut her hair short and started wearing make-up. On the weekends, she attended a supper club and repainted the house in seaside shades: whites, blues, sandy beige. When I embarked on my A levels, she started dating a divorced surveyor called Brian, who was as kindly as he was dull. I didn't want my mother to be lonely. But why did everything about her new life have to be so relentlessly conventional? Whenever I tried to talk about our past she looked at me with a kind of polite incomprehension.

Delilah found this as baffling as I did. Whether she had volunteered or Daddy had appointed her to the job, she was an attentive godparent and had been a frequent visitor at Garreg Las. There, she would turn up at very short notice, bringing champagne, impractical shoes and implausible but always entertaining anecdotes. She professed herself to be 'scraping by' but lived in a large flat overlooking Hampstead Heath, and she favoured embroidered kaftans from vintage boutiques. We saw less of her in London than we had in Wales, presumably because Brockley was provincial in a way the wilds of Carmarthenshire were not.

However, Delilah's indignation at the Oxford debacle was too excessive to be of much comfort. 'Didn't they know who you are?' she demanded, when she came over for a post-mortem tea. 'Your father's *name* should have been enough.'

I felt embarrassed for both of us. Anthony Howell's moment of literary acclaim seemed all the more fleeting in light of his later disappointments. Delilah, however, had kept the faith right to

the end. We suspected she was responsible for most of the sales of his privately published poetry.

‘Now listen,’ she said, ‘I have just the thing to cheer you up. University’s all well and good but honestly, darling, there are so many other exciting ways to expand one’s horizon.’

‘Ada is still going to university,’ said my mother. ‘She got offers from everywhere else she applied. In fact, UCL is probably a better fit–’

‘Ah, but *this* is something special.’ Delilah thrust a couple of thick brochures into our hands. ‘A friend’s grandson went on one of these courses last year and is still *raving* about it. He’d been one of those hulking, monosyllabic types, you know. But after two months in Italy, he was positively Byronic! Not that there’s anything unprepossessing about *you*, Ada darling. *You’ve* always been adorable. But Italy is transformative. You’ve read *A Room with a View*, haven’t you?’

The brochure’s colour scheme was turquoise and plum, with the name of the company – Dilettanti Discoveries – printed in dull gold. Its strap-line was ‘The Grand Tour Reimagined for the Modern Age’. I read on breathlessly.

Three hundred years ago, wealthy young Englishmen celebrated coming of age by touring Europe in search of art, culture and the roots of Western civilisation. They commissioned art, collected antiquities and mingled with the elite of continental society.

Here at Dilettanti Discoveries, we believe that this is a tradition worth reinventing. Our gap-year courses follow in

the footsteps of the Grand Tourists, travelling the length of Italy in search of its greatest treasures, inspiring a passion for art and intellectual discovery in new generations of young people.

‘The company does various tours around Europe but the Italian gap-year course is what they’re really known for,’ Delilah explained. ‘It’s been running for fifteen years but they don’t tend to advertise much; it’s mostly word of mouth. And their connections mean they have all sorts of privileged access. That’s what you pay for.’

‘I’ll say.’ My mother was looking at the small print. ‘Eight weeks in Italy is twelve grand. Not including flights! Or –’ disbelieving snort ‘– food. Lordy.’

I barely heard her. I was looking at a photograph of a handsome, floppy-haired youth gazing intently at a Raphael Madonna. For so long – and exhaustively – my dreams had been filled with quadrangles and spires and wood-panelled studies. Here was a different set of clichés, no less seductive. In the next picture, a trio of laughing girls drank prosecco on the steps of an amphitheatre. The light, the wine, their glowing faces seemed equally sun-doused.

### *Who are our students?*

Our courses seem tailor-made for those interested in pursuing a career in the arts, but in fact our students come from a range of disciplines. To enjoy the Dilettanti experience, all you need is an open mind, a love of beauty

and curiosity about the world. And it's not just about learning, of course – we're known for inspiring life-long friendships, as well as a passion for art.

*Who are our tutors?*

Whether they're artists, academics or curators, all our 'Cicerones' are experts in their fields. Young and friendly, they're also keen enthusiasts of *la bella vita*! Our teaching style is lively and informal, with debate encouraged. There are no notes to take or final exams, so students are free to learn at their own pace.

*Who were the Dilettanti?*

The Society of Dilettanti was a club founded in 1734 by a group of British aristocrats who had shared the transformative experience of having made the Grand Tour of Italy. But as the name Dilettanti (from the Latin word *dilettare*, to 'take delight') suggests, its members took the enjoyment of life as seriously as they did their fascination with the ancient world.

These original Dilettanti were proud to be amateur enthusiasts, not dusty scholars. We hope their exuberant spirit lives on in our tours.

'It's not cheap, I'll grant you,' said Delilah, 'but that's where I come in. Not the whole amount,' she added hastily, 'but I'd like to make a significant contribution.' She gave a self-conscious laugh. 'I was planning to leave Ada a little something once I shuffle off

this mortal coil, but then I thought, why wait? At least this way I'll be around to see you enjoy the spoils.'

'Goodness, Delilah. This is – extraordinary of you. Extraordinarily generous, I mean.' My mother sat up even straighter. 'I'm not sure we can in all conscience accept.' She cleared her throat. 'No. Thank you for your great kindness, but it's altogether too much. Ada's expectations have a way of getting out of hand; it would be better to keep to the existing plan—'

I flung down the brochure and burst into tears.

'Nonsense! *Nonsense*. I absolutely *insist*.' Delilah's eyes, too, were watering as she pulled me into an embrace. 'It's what dear Anthony would have wanted.'

I assumed Delilah was right and that my father would have been delighted with her gift, but it was not something I could be certain of. It troubled me that my memories of Daddy were becoming much less vivid than those of Garreg Las. Like a benign ghost, he seemed to have been absorbed into its remembered shadows. If I closed my eyes, I could see one of his hands resting on the lid of the piano, tracing the storm clouds of its polished wood. If I dreamed of the lime trees in the avenue, then I would glimpse his smile in their shivering, silver-green light. I had his books, of course, but they were paradoxical and wilfully abstruse. They might as well have been written by a stranger. I fretted that my own attempts at fiction felt like a stranger's too. How did a writer find their voice? And what if they were too fragmented or adrift to recognise it?

And, yes, I blamed my mother. As time wore on, and my restlessness only increased, my mother's lack of interest in her marriage, and my childhood, began to feel a deliberate betrayal. There was a certain ruthlessness in how easily she'd shrugged off our former lives. Our old neighbours didn't get so much as a Christmas card. The one time I tentatively suggested we go back to visit, she looked at me in surprise. 'What would be the point of that? You'd only wallow.'

Generally overlooked at school, I wondered how different my experience could have been if the people there had understood where I came from. I wasn't stupid; I knew that bragging about past Howell glories would have been met with incomprehension or ridicule. But if there was a boy I liked, or a girl I wanted to befriend, I'd have these embarrassing fantasies of taking them back home, to my *real* home, where I would teach them the geography of a house with wings (*gun room, bell room, butler's pantry*) and the language of its furniture (*credenza, settle, armoire*). I wouldn't be pompous or snobby. Yet they would be impressed and beguiled nonetheless: first by the house and then by me.

This was not going to happen in Brockley.

Then there was the day I came back from school to find the portraits and the few bits of furniture we'd brought with us from Wales had been packed up and sent to storage. Even Daddy's books had been cleared from the shelves. The only photographs of Garreg Las that remained were the ones in my bedroom. 'Let's not be *morbid*,' my mother said briskly, when I questioned the purge.

It was as if everything my father represented had been stripped away and sanded down, then painted over. Shades of beige.

I didn't want to turn into my mother. I didn't want to end up like Delilah, either. With her greying mane of hair, her kaftans and kohl-smudged eyes, she was costumed for a part in a play she hadn't been cast in. Delilah was nobody's muse. She was picturesque, but also pitiable.

No, I thought, resting my palm on the gilt-edged brochure, I am going to be one of these kinds of people. A Dilettante.



## CHAPTER THREE

---

I was able to defer my place at UCL without undue trouble; the real challenge of my last-minute gap year was funding my share of the Dilettanti costs. Generous as Delilah's contribution was, I still had several thousand pounds to raise.

The Dilettanti course ran for two months, from mid-March until mid-May. In the meantime, I found a part-time job at a local bar and took an online secretarial course. Brian, my mother's paramour (as Delilah insisted on calling him), had a friend who worked for a company that ran English language schools and helped get me temp work at their head office in Holborn. Most of my time was spent doing data-entry in the basement, but I decided to look upon this drudgery as just another aspect of the émigré experience. It gave me a measure of satisfaction to think my co-workers would never guess the mantra that got me through our desultory chats by the water-cooler: *This is not my place, these are not my people. This is not my real life.*

We may lose faith in many things over the course of our lives, but belief in one's own exceptionalism is generally the last to go.

My mother's lack of enthusiasm for the trip was a continued thorn in my side. 'I'm very grateful to Delilah, of course, but I can't help thinking that a contribution to your tuition fees would

have been a more appropriate gift. Goodness – if you want a holiday, you could always go for a week or two to Italy with a couple of friends.’ How, I wondered, had my mother failed to notice I didn’t *have* any friends? ‘I mean, you’ve never shown any particular interest in art before.’ Then the final stab: ‘You know you’ve a tendency to build things up, or else blow them out of proportion. I just don’t want you to be disappointed.’

To prove her wrong, I spent as much time as I could in museums and galleries. Here I was free to strike the attitude of an insouciantly sexy bluestocking. (My expression was pensive, my skirts were short.) And I accessorised my commute with pickings from the Dilettanti Discoveries suggested reading list: *A Room with a View*, *The Wings of the Dove*, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Dante’s *Divine Comedy* ... ‘*Do not be afraid*,’ I recited to myself, while taking orders for the tea run or trudging back from the copy-shop with a stack full of binders, ‘*our fate cannot be taken from us; it is a gift*.’

The most compelling piece of Dilettanti paperwork was the list of my fellow students. Rocco Carrington, Petra Deane, Annabelle Gilani, Melissa Harrison, Kitty Henshaw, Lorcan Holt, Jonathon Jolf-Stratton, Mallory Kaplan, Willa Murray, Oliver Seaton-Bryce. Saying these names aloud, I should have been uplifted by their cut-glass chime; instead, my mother’s words rang in my ears, and I felt the first intimation of unease.

Melissa (‘Missy’) took charge of communications, converting an introductory email into an instant messaging group. The ensuing banter revealed that Missy and Kitty were already besties, and that Lorcan and Willa were school friends who’d likely enjoyed past benefits. Annabelle and Lorcan were step-siblings (or half-

siblings; it wasn't clear). They and Kitty shared an acquaintance with Oliver. It was beginning to feel as if the in-crowd had already been formed.

I kept my own introduction brief and breezy. Better to hold back until we met in Italy, I reasoned. In a foreign country, far from home, prior alliances were bound to fall away.

To this end, I blew off the introductory drinks Missy organised for those living in or near London. Only a couple of people could make it in any case; most were busy with alternate adventures. If they had a job, it was working the ski season as a chalet girl or volunteering on a Kenyan game reserve or doing an internship at Christie's or *Tatler*. For them, Dilettanti Discoveries was just one of several stops along a luxuriant gap-year path.

I think it was this realisation that shook my confidence most of all. How would these people know I was supposed to be one of them?

Although I wasn't alone in having a marginal online presence, I was still able to scroll through a seemingly endless montage of shiny, pretty people partying on ski slopes and beaches and the aforementioned game reserves. Minor-league celebrity and aristocracy were both represented: Oliver was the younger son of a baron; Petra Deane had been a child actor. I recognised her winsome pout from a BBC costume drama of five years before. Meanwhile, the lone American, Mallory, clogged her social media feeds with quotes about Unleashing the Inner Goddess and Loving the Power of You. Rocco had an upended fedora with vomit in it as a profile picture.

I widened my online investigations to include our so-called

‘Cicerones’. Assorted specialists would come and go during the course of the trip, but three tutors were set to accompany us from start to finish. Dr Nathaniel Harper was on research leave from the Classics department of a red-brick university, Ben Ainsworth was an art history teacher at one of the big public schools, and Yolanda Franks was a professional artist, as well as Learning Consultant at the V&A. These were serious people, I reassured myself; they would run a serious course.

The final flurry of packing and repacking, research and rehearsal, passed in a blur. I felt simultaneously over- and under-prepared. And all of a sudden it was a chilly March night, and I was disembarking from a bus onto Piazzale Roma, Venice.

This utilitarian square, with its parking garages and bus bays, was not the introduction to La Serenissima that I had imagined. Indeed, the guidebook I’d bought had waxed lyrical on the joys of arriving at Venice by boat over the lagoon, and thus ‘seeing the city as it was meant to be seen: a jewel rising from the waves’. The water-taxi approach was what the rest of my course-mates had opted for. But since it was up to individual students to arrange their travel, my mother and I had gone for the cheapest offering of a budget airline. I had, therefore, landed at Treviso, a town sixteen miles outside of Venice, three hours after the rest of the group, instead of the lagoon-side airport of Marco Polo. Flight delays had held me up by a further hour.

Ben Ainsworth, the lead tutor, had supplied instructions on how to find the party. I tried to take heart from the fact I wasn’t

the last to arrive; Lorcan Holt was staying the first night with friends in the city and would not be joining us until the morning. But this was the first time I'd really travelled on my own; by the end of my somewhat flustered transit through airports and bus stations, I felt both dingy and diminished.

My first full view of the Grand Canal restored the magic. Or so I told myself – like all the best conjuring tricks, Venice's beauty depends in part on one's willingness to accept the illusion. The Disney strip of palazzos, with their faded pastels and spun-sugar trimmings, was lit up like a stage-set. The water's surface was satiny, with ruffles of black and gold. Once I had boarded the vaporetto, I leaned over the side of the boat, straining to catch, beneath the exhaust fumes, the city's fabled mermaid whiff. My stop, San Stae, was dominated by a towering baroque slab of pillars and pedestals and writhing saints.

But then the city performed another sleight of hand. Leaving the Grand Canal was to turn away from the Disney palaces and their tinsel glitter; almost immediately, I was in a maze of dank alleys and dead campos shuttered up against the night. At only half-past ten, the city seemed deserted. The trundle of my suitcase was embarrassingly loud. Street lamps pooled sour light on peeling stucco and powdery bricks hollowed by age.

After only one wrong turn, I came to a narrow canal with the trattoria on the left. The windows' spill of buttery light should have been inviting; instead, I held back. *Just don't fall over your suitcase*, I told myself, before squaring my shoulders and attempting to saunter confidently through the door. Seconds later, the maître d' tripped over my bags instead.

Amidst the resultant apologies and confusion, somebody was calling my name. There was no need to shout: the place was mostly empty except for the large table at the back, which, of course, had fallen silent the moment I'd made my chaotic entrance. 'Here you are, here you are!' exclaimed the man who had now taken my hand in both of his and was pumping it up and down vigorously. '*Benvenuto in Venezia!*' He had round childish cheeks, tufts of gingery hair and a polka-dot cravat knotted jauntily around his throat. Ben Ainsworth, I presumed. I recognised the cravat from his photograph on the Dilettanti Discoveries website.

'What a time you've had, poor duck. Come on, sit down, let's get you settled. Have you eaten?' Garlic gusted from his breath. 'Of course you haven't. Plane food is pap. Let's get some pasta in you. And wine. Lots of it! *Dell'altro vino, per l'amore di Dio,*' he shouted cheerfully at the waiter, before launching into an animated chat in what appeared to be fluent but excruciatingly accented Italian.

'Hello there,' said another man, rising to shake my hand. He was tall and fair, with a long bony face that shouldn't have been attractive but kept you looking. 'I'm Nate,' he said, with a slightly stiff courtliness. 'It's lovely to have you with us.'

Indistinct sounds of agreement and welcome came from the rest of the party. Coffee had just been served; they had the flushed, hazy look of people who had been drinking and talking just a little too long to hold their focus. The table was littered with the remnants of the meal – bloody stipples of wine, the ticker tape of breadstick wrappers, whiskery bones of fish lying in a nimbus of green oil.

‘Scootch up, sistas,’ said an American voice. The girl – Mallory – was shifting her bottom about and gesturing to the bit of bench next to her. Her wide snub face was redder and shinier than anyone else’s; the eagerness of her smile suggested she was a bit too relieved to see me. Had she, in her own seconds-swift appraisal, decided that we were in some sense on the same level? Was this because of the clumsiness of my entrance or had she picked up on some other, deeper insecurity? And was it apparent to the others too?

But since nobody else was making space for me, I was obliged to sit next to her. This was the cue for other people to lean forward and introduce themselves.

Jonathon (‘JJ’) was the first to say hello, a big sloppy boy with an acne-roughened complexion and comically overgrown thatch of hair. Rocco sported grimy silver rings and even grimier-looking tattoos. By contrast, Oliver, the baron’s son, was slight and elfin.

Of the girls, Annabelle was slim and dark with a cool smile. Willa was a blonde with the coarse, sensual features of a saloon-bar madam. Petra put me in mind of a younger version of Delilah: self-consciously bohemian, determinedly artless, with a tangle of improbably red curls. Two Sloane-y girls with identikit giggles, one button-nosed and blonde (Missy), the other a diminutive brunette (Kitty), completed the group.

A plate of cured meats was put in front of me, followed by a glistening coil of spaghetti and clams. I tasted oil and salt and gristle. Sweat and brine. The trattoria’s scuffed white walls and heavy wood furnishings were softened by candlelight. Through the fog of the wine and my own tiredness, I felt as if I was looking

at a memory, as if hindsight had already gilded the scene with bittersweet significance. *The night my life began.*

‘I like your pearls,’ said the dark girl, Annabelle, out of nowhere. From her surname, Gilani, I’d assumed she was part Italian, and her colouring suggested the same, though I later discovered her mother was in fact Iranian. Annabelle had been one of those with no accessible online presence and I thought she might be shy, for she was sitting in a corner and had been quieter than most. Now I saw that she was beautiful, and that this reticence was self-possession.

‘Thanks. They were my grandmother’s.’

Previously kept for special occasions, the pearls would now be my signature accessory, I had decided. After long and anxious thought, I had attempted to reinvent my personal style as country-house nostalgic. I pictured dreamy floral tea-dresses and homespun knitwear, prim blouses with a sexy edge. Sourcing this vision proved tricky: in the event, the dresses’ prints were too brash for vintage charm, the knitwear was scratchy and the blouses were made of a polyester blend that made me sweat. But the necklace, at least, was authentic.

‘Gorgeous,’ Petra conceded. ‘Lucky you.’

I touched the rounded warmth of the pearls and felt a surge of well-being.

Afterwards, as we wound our raucous way back to the hotel, the night-time streets revealed themselves in different ways. The dark waterways and empty campos swirling with sepia shadows and dead leaves now seemed mysterious rather than sinister. For this time, they were graced with glimpses of loveliness – a wellhead



garlanded with pockmarked cherubs, a loop of embedded arches, an iron grille as fine as filigree.

Or maybe this memory is a composite one, gleaned from the course of many such nights. Maybe I have only imagined the hints of what was to come and invented the portents we brushed past so blithely. Here, an angel's wing. There, a fanged lion.