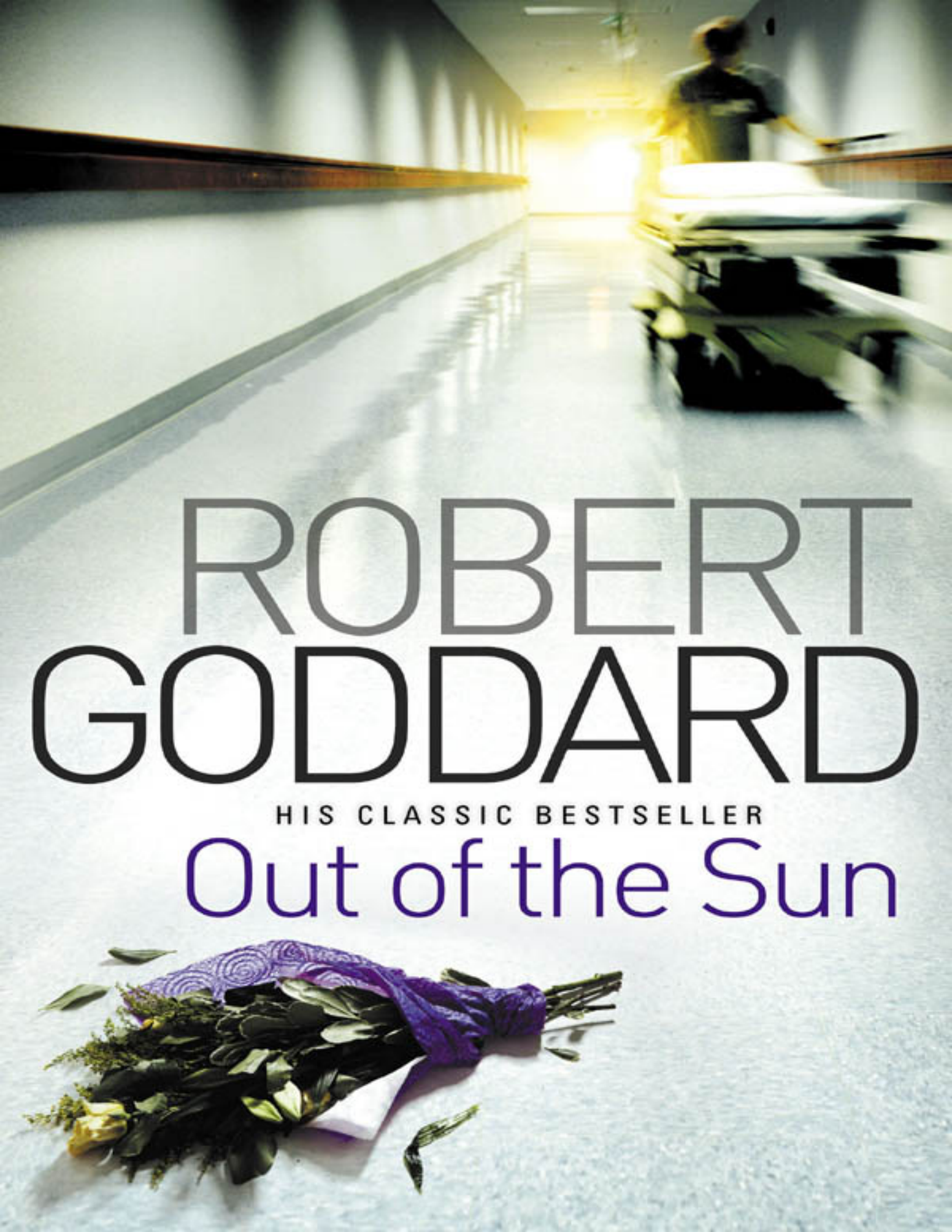




ROBERT GODDARD

HIS CLASSIC BESTSELLER

Out of the Sun



About the Book

Harry Barnett is shocked to learn that he has a son – David Venning, a brilliant mathematician, now languishing in hospital in a diabetic coma. And this is only the first and smallest of the mysteries he is about to encounter.

It is not known whether David's condition is due to an accident or a suicide attempt. But Harry discovers that his mathematical notebooks are missing from the hotel room where he was found. And two other scientists employed by the same American forecasting institute have died in suspicious circumstances.

Driven on by the slim hope of saving the son he never knew he had, Harry goes in search of the truth and finds himself entangled in several different kinds of conspiracy – none of which he ought to stand the slightest chance of defeating.

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About the Author

Also by Robert Goddard

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OUT OF THE SUN

Robert Goddard

For Duncan

1

IF HE LEFT now, of course, or even five minutes from now, it would still be all right. The only problem was that he was not going to leave. He knew that. And so did she.

'Top up?'

'Better not. I won't be able to see to paint straight.'

'Then don't try.'

'What about Claude? He won't be pleased if the job's not finished by the weekend.'

'I'll tell him it rained.'

'Will he believe you?'

'Who cares? Now, what about that drink?'

'You shouldn't tempt me.'

'Who says I'm trying to?' She tipped the bottle and gin fizzed into his glass.

'Trying or not,' he said, raising the glass to his lips and swallowing some of the strengthened mixture with deliberate relish, 'you do.'

'Do I?'

'Oh yes. Very much. And I've never been any good at resisting temptation.'

'Haven't you?'

'No.'

'That's funny.'

'Why?'

'Because neither have I, Harry.'

Thirty-four years, three months and several days later, Harry Barnett's thoughts found nothing to tempt him as he trudged south along Scrubs Lane into a stiff autumnal breeze soured by traffic fumes and an ammoniated cocktail of industrial pollution. A top up was definitely not in order. Glancing from the crest of the railway bridge out across the pale expanse of Kensal Green Cemetery, its sepulchred ranks an even colder shade of grey than the grimy London sky, Harry would have agreed that just about the last thing his life needed at the moment was an extra dose of any one of its dismal ingredients.

Not the least dismal of those ingredients was his part-time job at the Mitre Bridge Service Station, which lay halfway down Scrubs Lane towards the A40 flyover. He was already late for his five-hour stint of cash-counting and card-swiping, but his right ankle was giving him such gyp following a stumble on the way home from the Stonemasons' Arms last night that acceleration was out of the question. Besides, Shafiq was an understanding fellow. For a Muslim, he was really amazingly tolerant of the scrapes a chap could get into after a few too many. He would complain, of course. That was only to be expected. That was, in a sense, how both of them retained their sanity.

Strangely, however, when Harry turned into the forecourt at Mitre Bridge a few minutes later and made his way none too quickly through the petrol-marbled puddles towards the shop, Shafiq looked up from behind the counter with an expression of puzzled sympathy rather than the over-rehearsed scowl Harry had expected. As a result, before he had even pushed open the door, he was worried. Though not, as it was to turn out, half as worried as he should have been.

'Harry, my friend,' said Shafiq, 'it is good to see you.'

'There's no need to be sarcastic. I got here as soon as—'

'I am not being sarcastic, Harry. How could you think such a thing?'

'Easily. But never mind. I'm here now. You can beetle off home.'

'In the circumstances, I would not dream of it.'

Harry stopped in his tracks, anorak half on and half off. 'What are you on about?'

'Mr Crowther would not object if you went straight to the hospital, I feel sure.'

Shrugging his anorak back on, Harry moved to the counter and leant across it, staring into Shafiq's plump and frowning face. 'Have you been sniffing the antifreeze, Shafiq? What the hell are you talking about?'

'I am sorry, Harry. I am not explaining properly. But it was a surprise. A shock, actually. I had no idea you even had a son.'

Now it was Harry's turn to frown. 'Son?'

'Yes. They phoned about twenty minutes ago. Your son is in the National Neurological Hospital. I have the room number.'

Birdsong and the scent of fresh paint drifted through the net-curtained window as Harry's breathing returned to normal. From the corner of his eye, he could see the trail of discarded clothes leading from the door to the bed they lay on. In his mind, every tug and twist of their removal was already a delicious memory. Though not as delicious as what had followed. Nor as headily alluring as the pleasures that might still be his to savour.

She was lying on her side, her back turned to him. Ashamed already, perhaps? Regretting, now the spasm was past, the desire she had succumbed to? He reached out and ran his fingers slowly down her spine, then let his hand fan out to cradle her bottom and slide in between her legs. And from the throaty chuckle she gave in response, he knew

shame and regret were not going to be a problem. Not for her. And certainly not for him.

‘Do it to me again, Harry,’ she murmured, parting her thighs in invitation.

‘Are you sure you want me to?’

‘Didn’t my husband tell you to do whatever I asked?’

‘Yes, Mrs Venning. He did.’

‘Then what are you waiting for?’ Her breath was quickening again as he stroked her. ‘Once is never enough for a proper finish.’

‘How many times would be?’

‘I’ll tell you later,’ she replied, giving way to a moan. ‘Much later.’

‘I don’t have a son, Shafiq. Or a daughter. I don’t have any children at all. I’m the last of the Barnetts. Chingachgook without Uncas. The end of the line. The absolute dead end. OK?’

‘If you say so, Harry.’

‘I do. This bloke who phoned you—’

‘It could have been a woman, you know? One of those strange voices you can’t pin down.’

‘Whoever. Whatever. They’ve got it wrong. It’s some other poor sod’s son in that hospital.’

‘But they had your name. Harry Barnett.’

‘There must be dozens of Harry Barnetts around. Hundreds, probably.’

‘Only one of them works here.’

‘Very amusing. Now shove off, will you? I’m busy.’ He nodded towards the forecourt, where three cars had pulled in more or less simultaneously.

‘All right. If you’re sure.’

‘I’m sure.’

Shafiq fondled his moustache for a moment, then sighed to no particular purpose and sloped away. Harry was glad to see him go, hoping that in his absence he could forget

the strangely disturbing notion that he might somewhere have a son. Given the kind of life he had led, it was difficult to be as certain on the point as he had claimed to be for Shafiq's benefit. Difficult, if not impossible. On the other hand, the last ten or twelve years had been so predominantly celibate, despite encompassing his only experience of matrimony, that any unwitting paternity on his part must lie so far in the past that it would surely have caught up with him long ago – if it was ever going to.

There was, of course, an easy way to put the matter to rest. Phone the National Neurological Hospital and confirm that the occupant of room E318 was nobody whose father he could possibly be. By any stretch of the imagination.

Quite why Harry felt as reluctant as he did to take this simple step he could not have explained, even to himself. But irritation at his inability to put the incident out of his mind finally overcame that reluctance. And, during a lull between customers, he picked up the telephone and tapped in the number.

'National Neurological Hospital.'

'I've been told a close relative of mine is in room E318 at your hospital, but I think there's been a mistake. Could you tell me the name of the patient in that room? Just to be sure.'

'Hold on, please.' There was a pause, then: 'Room E318, you said?'

'Yes.'

'The patient's name is Venning. David John Venning.'

'Once is never enough,' Iris Venning had said. And she was as good as her word. Marriage to Claude must have been even more passionless than Harry would naturally have supposed to nurture in his wife the yearning for physical release that burst open in Harry's hands that afternoon like some exotic bloom whose flesh was as warm and luscious as its perfume.

What heightened their abandon, he afterwards reckoned, was the shared knowledge of its long-term insignificance. Claude had been his section head at Swindon Borough Council for three years, in which time Harry had met Iris no more than once or twice, fleetingly and usually when the worse for drink at some social gathering. But perhaps his appreciative gaze had even then signalled what she was looking for. Perhaps it was she, not Claude, who had suggested asking him to take a week off to paint their house during a spell of fine weather in July, 1960. Claude was by then two months into a new and better job with Manchester City Council, his connections with Swindon confined to a house he was finding it difficult to sell and a wife who could not follow him north until it was sold. A new coat of paint must have seemed like a ploy worth trying. And Harry certainly came cheaper than any professional, which would have appealed to Claude's parsimonious nature. As to what appealed to his wife's nature, both in frequency and variety, that Harry was pleurably astonished to discover. It was a subject he went on to explore several times, even after the house painting was complete. The summer wore on and a sale still did not come and poor old Claude still slept alone six nights out of seven in his economical Mancunian lodgings. While Harry and the lovely Iris ...

But idylls always end, preferably, as in this case, just before they stale. September brought a cash buyer. And by the end of the month Iris had joined her husband in Manchester. It was a relief in some ways, probably for Iris as much as Harry. It was the close of a chapter in their lives that was all the more satisfying for its brevity. It was a parting for good, in both senses of the word. Pleasure, with no strings attached. Memory, without reminders.

Occasionally, when he was feeling sorry for himself or had just been given the brush-off by one of the many girls his chat-up lines failed to impress, Harry would recall his

spectacularly simple conquest of Iris Venning. Then certain sights and sensations would float into his mind: her flushed face, eyes closed and mouth open, glimpsed in the mirror above the fireplace as they celebrated a gymnastic union on the sofa; the tingling hiss of nylon against flesh as he peeled her black stockings down over her soft white thighs; the cool-skinned fullness of her breasts and buttocks; the fluid urgency with which they came together; above all, her eagerness, magnified in his imagination till his own seemed quite eclipsed; her eagerness – and his enjoyment.

Eventually, as the years passed and other experiences came Harry's way, such recollections faded into the remoter recesses of his memory, seldom if ever to be called upon. A hazy image of her body. A blurred impression of her face. A ghostly whisper of her name. There was nothing else. Ultimately, there would not even have been that. And why should there have been? When probability and common sense decreed that they would never meet again.

Until the moment he handed over to Crowther at the end of his shift, Harry was expecting to walk back up Scrubs Lane to Kensal Green just in time to find Terry sliding back the bolts at the Stonemasons'. That was probably what he should do. That was what common sense suggested. But curiosity – and secret reminiscence – had laid their hands on him. So, instead, he headed south to White City tube station. From there, he took the Central line to Holborn and made his way up through Bloomsbury, where the rush hour was in full swing, to the congregation of hospitals round Great Ormond Street and Queen Square. The National Neurological was a grand old Edwardian edifice, all marble pillars, high ceilings and long echoing corridors. A large modern extension was attached to it like some new shell on an ageing snail, where by contrast bright light and clinical starkness prevailed.

It was to the modern part of the hospital that Harry's steps took him, guided by signs and arrows rather than nurses or receptionists, none of whom did he care to consult. The reasons for his visit did not inspire much confidence, after all. Even, perhaps especially, in Harry himself.

But the signs were easy to follow. And nobody seemed even remotely interested in one plodding downcast figure. So, reaching the third floor and passing an unattended nursing station, he arrived, with little difficulty, at the far end of a short passage lit by a tinted window through which a dusk-smeared flank of the British Museum could be made out across the jumbled roofscape. Room E318. With a card lodged in the name-panel at eye-level: *David Venning*. No mistake, then. But a stranger, even so. Of that Harry remained certain. Unless what seemed like certainty was really only a fading hope.

He pushed the door open and entered. The room was small, but comfortably furnished. Pale wood, pastel carpeting and a large floral-curtained window created as light, airy and normal an atmosphere as could be contrived. But normality stopped at the bed. A youngish dark-haired man lay there motionless, his head resting in the very centre of an otherwise undisturbed pillow, his arms bent at identical angles across the counterpane. He made no sound that Harry could hear, but sound there nevertheless was: the steady rhythmic rise and fall of mechanical breathing. A ventilating device fitted with some kind of bellows sat on a low table next to the bed, linked by a ribbed plastic pipe to a valve fixed to the man's throat and attached to the tracheostomy through which his lungs were being filled and emptied. And without which, Harry's minimal medical knowledge told him, he would die. This did not look good. Peaceful, yes. Almost serene. But very far from good.

Sad as the sight was of an apparently fit and healthy young man lying inert and artificially sustained, it was still

no more than that to Harry. It did not involve him. It need not concern him. It was none of his business. Especially since, whoever David John Venning's father was, he could not be Harry. Could he?

'Date of birth,' Harry muttered to himself as he stepped across to the end of the bed and removed a clipboard thick with records from where it was hanging on one of the rails. 'That'll clinch it.' And clinch it, in a sense, it did. Though not in the way Harry would have hoped. *David John Venning. DoB: 10.05.61.* 'Oh, bloody hell.' He had been born the spring after the summer of Harry's long-forgotten fling with Iris Venning.

BY THE TIME he left the hospital, Harry was in no serious doubt that the comatose occupant of room E318 was his own son. Not just on account of the coincidence of dates and names. Nor simply because the proud parents flanking David Venning in a framed graduation photograph on the bedside cabinet were recognizable to Harry as older versions of the Claude he had worked with and the Iris he had been seduced by thirty-four summers ago. It was, after all, possible that the boy had been conceived during one of Claude's weekends home rather than one of his weeks away. Possible, though unlikely, especially given Harry's opinion of Claude's virility relative to his own.

But none of that was really the point. What convinced Harry beyond question was the telephone call, someone knew for a fact that he was David's father and thought he should be aware of his condition. Which was, a staff nurse warily admitted, serious, if not grave. David Venning had been with them nearly a month and had remained in a deep coma throughout that time. As for the prospects of a recovery, she declined to commit herself, suspicious as she clearly was of Harry's claim to be an old friend of the family who had somehow lost touch. If he did not know the next of kin's address and telephone number, she felt unable to supply them, although one correction she did supply. David's mother was Iris Hewitt, not Venning. Remarriage, then, following divorce or widowhood. Well, the graduation photograph was probably taken more than ten years ago. It

was not so surprising. Poor old Claude – one way or the other.

She was scarcely more informative about the cause of David's illness, beyond stating that the coma was diabetic in origin. It seemed a cruelly arbitrary fate to overtake such a good-looking young man. Doubly so, when you considered how fundamentally fit his overweight ne'er-do-well father remained. Harry winced as he glimpsed a reflection of himself in a darkening window. He did not cut a handsome figure. To judge by the photograph, Iris had aged far more gracefully than he had. But that, he supposed, was only to be expected.

A more sympathetic junior nurse told him Mrs Hewitt visited her son every afternoon, usually between two and four. If Harry wanted to see her, that was the time to try. The wisdom of trying was what he debated later over several pints in a nearby pub. Thirty-four years ago, he would have run a mile from fatherhood. In principle, he would do the same now. But that calm still waiting figure in the bed was no principle. It was a person. A body and a soul. A son he had never known. A man he had never met. Till now.

And then there was the telephone call he always came back to. Who could have made it but Iris? She alone would know for certain. It had to be her. If so, the call was a kind of summons. A plea for help, perhaps. An appeal for support. She must have gone to some lengths to track him down. In the circumstances, he could hardly ignore her. But why, if it was her, had she left no name or number? Why the anonymity she must have known he would see through? There was, of course, only one way to find out.

Harry called Shafiq from the pub pay phone and asked if he would be prepared to swap shifts with him tomorrow. Pressed for an explanation, he admitted it had something to do with hospital visiting hours, then claimed he was

running out of money and rang off before Shafiq could do more than agree.

Since the swap committed Harry to a disagreeably early start, he headed straight home, hoping to find Mrs Tandy had already gone to bed. But no such luck. She was up and about, making cocoa for herself and chopping up sardines to tempt Neptune, her cat, down from a neighbouring rooftop. Though cocoa was not what Harry wanted on top of four pints, no dinner and the sudden discovery of a son, it was what he found himself consuming in the tiny kitchen, while Mrs Tandy stood at the open back door, whistling for Neptune and waving the bowl of sardines in the night air to set his whiskers twitching.

‘I don’t know why I bother with this cat,’ she announced. ‘He gets better treatment than most of the children round here.’

Harry choked on his cocoa and wondered amidst his splutters how Mrs Tandy had developed her uncanny knack for making remarks somehow related to whatever he was trying hardest to keep to himself.

‘Of course, Selwyn and I were never blessed with offspring. Perhaps if we had been ... But, then, you can’t be sure, can you?’

‘What about, Mrs T?’

‘How they’d have turned out. What they’d have become. As often a curse as a comfort, I believe.’

‘Well, I wouldn’t know, would I?’

‘No.’ She glanced back at him with a disconcerting beadiness about her eye. ‘I suppose you wouldn’t.’

TUESDAY WAS MRS Tandy's Scrabble day. This was a relief to Harry, since it meant the coast was clear for him to return unobserved from Mitre Bridge for a bath, shave and change of clothes before setting off for the hospital. Such midday sprucing-up would have struck Mrs Tandy as highly suspicious. As would the abstention from alcohol that nibbled at Harry's nerves as he made the journey to Bloomsbury. Not to mention the half dozen circuits of Russell Square he completed while making substantial inroads into a pack of *Karelia Sertika* cigarettes. He made a mental note to call at Theophilus's shop off the Charing Cross Road later and collect a fresh supply of the esoteric Greek brand his years on Rhodes had left him with a liking for. Though whether such a banal errand would lodge in his mind in view of all else it might soon have to cope with he rather doubted.

It was nearly three o'clock when he reached the hospital. The third-floor nursing station was staffed this time, but, happily, not by any of the nurses he had met yesterday.

'Is it OK to visit David Venning?'

'Well ... he already has a visitor, actually.'

'His mother?'

'Yes.'

'Don't worry. We know each other.'

He pressed on down the corridor. The door of room E318 stood half open, a pool of golden sunlight spilling

across the threshold. He stopped just short of it as a voice caught his ear. Iris Venning's. She was reading aloud.

'Cosmologists seem to have taken a Trappist vow in response to such inconvenient data. How can the universe contain stars up to sixteen billion years old when the Hubble telescope measures the age of the entire universe at a mere eight billion? Clearly, there is no easy answer. But scientists are not in business to dodge difficult questions.'

Her voice had not changed. Listening to it, he could almost imagine that if he stepped into the room he would see her as he had last seen her: red-headed, bright-eyed and full-figured, her sensuous lips shaping a come-hither smile or a suggestive giggle. But the photograph had prepared him for what he would actually see. A middle-aged woman with salt-and-pepper hair cut sensibly short, her face grown lined and cautious, her eyes dull and diffident, her smile ... But she was not going to smile, was she? For there was nothing to smile about.

'How they square this circle may determine the future of astrophysics. The Big Bang may come to be seen as the Big Blunder. A role for the much-derided cosmological constant may suddenly emerge. But that will seem to some awfully like a last resort. What is really needed—'

She stopped the instant he appeared in the doorway. They looked at each other across twelve feet and a gulf of years. Recognition wrestled with disbelief in her gaze. Her mouth fell open in surprise. She slowly removed her glasses, put down the magazine she had been reading from and stared at him, unable to convince herself, it seemed, that it really was him. Had he changed so very much? Or had she thought he would ignore her message?

'I'm sorry,' she said, 'who ...' She frowned and rose from her chair, stepping round the end of the bed to see him more clearly. 'Do I know you?'

'It's me,' he replied, wishing to God he had thought of something less inane by way of introduction.

'Harry?' Her eyes narrowed. She took another step closer. 'It can't be.'

He shrugged and shaped an apologetic grin. 'I guess this is what letting yourself go means.'

She said nothing, blinking rapidly as she stared at him. She reached out behind her and clasped the bed-rail, as if for support.

'How are you, Iris?'

'What ... What are you doing here?'

'I got your message.'

'What message?'

'About David. About ... our son.'

Much of the colour drained from her face. A ring on one of her fingers began to tinkle against the hollow metal of the bed-rail. She was trembling, as if fear were slowly replacing shock.

'I called round yesterday. They wouldn't tell me very much.'

'It was *you*?'

'Ah. They mentioned my visit, did they? Surely you must have guessed it was me, then.'

'*Guessed?* Guessed it was you? Of course not. I'd never —'

'Look, why don't we sit down?'

He moved hesitantly into the room. As he did so, Iris suddenly darted to his left and slammed the door shut behind him. Closer to, he could hear the shortness of her breath and sense the turmoil of her thoughts. But he could not fathom it. Her reaction made no sense. 'Let me get this straight,' she said slowly. 'You claim to have got some kind of message ... about David?'

'You phoned the garage yesterday. Where I work. Just before I arrived.'

'And said what?'

'That my ... son ... was here.'

'Your *son*?'

'David.'

'He's no son of yours.' But something in her flickering glance towards the bed was as false as it was evasive.

'Come on, Iris. May sixty-one. I can do the sums.'

'You've done them wrong.'

'What are you saying?'

'I'm saying David isn't your son. I'm saying I made no phone call. And I'm saying I'd like you to leave.'

'What?'

'My son is gravely ill. And I'm extremely worried about him. The last thing I need – the *very* last – is somebody I hardly know popping up from the remote past to claim a relationship that exists only in his imagination.'

'Iris, for God's sake ...' She must have read the bafflement in his eyes. Just as he read the determination in hers. The message had not come from her. The central fact of it was true. David *was* his son. But Iris had no intention of admitting anything. To her, Harry was worse than an enemy and less than a stranger. He was some kind of rival. One she was certain she had the power to defeat.

'Are you going to leave?'

'Not just like—'

She pulled the door open and stepped into the corridor. 'I want to see Staff Nurse Kelly immediately,' she called towards the desk. 'It's urgent.'

'There's surely no need for—'

'You're right,' she said, looking straight at him. 'No need for you to have done this at all. What gave you the idea, Harry? Did you see one of the newspaper articles about David and reckon there might be some money in it for you?'

'*Money*?'

'You look as if you're short. Well, I can't say I'm surprised. But if you think—'

'This has nothing to do with money.'

'I can't imagine what else would bring you out of the woodwork.'

'You *phoned* me.'

'No.'

'Well, somebody did.'

'I don't think so. In fact—' Staff Nurse Kelly strode suddenly into view, a bustling vision of blue-starched efficiency. 'Thank you for coming so quickly, Rachel,' said Iris. 'You met this man yesterday, I think.'

'I did.'

'His name's Harry Barnett.'

'A friend of yours, he said.'

'No kind of friend. And no help to my son at all. I've asked him to leave, but he refuses.'

'I haven't refused,' put in Harry. 'It's just—'

'I want him to go. And I don't want him to come back. Is that clear?'

'It's clear, Mrs Hewitt.' Kelly looked flintily at Harry. 'We do have security staff, Mr Barnett. Am I going to have to call them?'

'No. You're not.'

'This way, then. If you please.'

Harry shaped a final appeal. 'Iris, can't we just ...' But no. They could not. That was obvious. With a resigned shrug, he walked past them and away down the corridor at what he judged to be a dignified pace.

4

BEER WAS A lover who never tired of Harry's attentions, a friend who never turned him away. The slurred damn-it-all indifference he could summon up under its influence was his for the rest of the day, expanding with each pub he visited on his erratic route home, until, at his last port of call, even the barman's reluctance to serve him did not dent his sang-froid.

'Don't you think you've had enough, mate?'

'Oh, of many things. But not of beer. "Look through the bottom of a pewter pot, to see the world as the world's not." Truest thing I ever read.'

'We don't allow poetry in here.'

'No? Well, looking at the décor, I can see what you mean. Still, a pint should improve the view.'

'All right. Just one, mind.'

'Absolutely. Just one. As God's my witness.'

It was an oath he regretted breaking next morning, after waking late and leaden-headed to the discovery that even the curtain-filtered light of Foxglove Road, Kensal Green, could be painfully dazzling to those who have just single-handedly boosted several brewers' prospective dividends to their shareholders.

He stumbled to the kitchenette, coughing over his first cigarette. There he filled the kettle, started it boiling, downed a pint of London tap-water and commenced the

quest for the Holy Grail of a clean coffee-mug. Before he had abandoned it, the telephone rang.

'Hello?' he said in a gravelly phantom of his own voice.

'Harry?'

'Yes. Who—' It was Iris. Disbelievingly, he fell silent. Surely it could not be. But it was.

'Am I ... disturbing you?'

'Er ...' He leant over and turned off the gas. 'No. You're not. Really.'

'The thing is ... well ... I'm sorry about what I said yesterday. How I reacted. It was ...'

'Understandable.' He gave his forehead a vigorous massage with his free hand. It made nothing any clearer. 'Honestly.'

'It was the shock, actually. After all these years. The shock and ...'

'There's no need ... to explain.'

'Oh, but I think there is. I think I owe you that much, now you know about David. Could we meet, perhaps?'

'Well, of course. Why not? I mean ...'

'You mean that's what you wanted to do yesterday and I prevented it. You're quite right. I can only apologize. You're probably wondering what's brought about this change of heart.'

'We've both had the chance to sleep on it, I suppose.' Though whether the stupor Harry was still recovering from could be called sleep he was not at all sure.

'Quite. Anyway, I suggest somewhere other than the hospital. I sometimes take tea at the Hotel Russell after visiting David. Do you know it?'

'Yes.' Of course he did. It was the terracotta pile he had passed on his circuits of Russell Square yesterday afternoon. The thought reminded him that he had, as predicted, failed to stock up with Greek cigarettes.

'I'll meet you in the lounge at four o'clock.'

‘Fine.’ Such a time would necessitate an early departure from Mitre Bridge. Perhaps he would just go sick instead. He felt ill enough to make it almost genuine. Although, strangely, his condition seemed to have improved since picking up the telephone. ‘I’ll be there.’

‘Right. Well—’

‘One thing, Iris.’ His mind was sharpening now, even without the aid of coffee. A suspicion was growing on him that her conciliatory tone might amount to a confession. ‘If you had this number all along, why did you phone me at the garage on Monday?’

‘Because I didn’t phone you, Harry. I called your mother in Swindon this morning. She gave me this number. Oh, don’t worry. I didn’t tell her who I was. But the message you got wasn’t from me. I realized later how stupid what I said about you being on the make must have sounded. Even if you *had* read about David, you wouldn’t have connected him with me, would you? Or with you.’

‘Who did call me, then?’

‘I don’t know. Nobody but David and I know, Harry. That’s the point.’

‘Know that I’m his father, you mean?’

There was a lengthy silence Harry steeled himself not to break. Then Iris said: ‘Exactly.’

HIS NECK CHAFING against the unfamiliar constriction of a tie, his eyes scarcely registering the wood-panelled elegance of his surroundings, Harry took the cup of Assam tea Iris had poured for him and leant back in his chair. He felt as he feared he looked: out of place and ill at ease.

Iris Venning – or Hewitt, as he was struggling to think of her – appeared, by contrast, perfectly in tune with the hushed and alcoved environment. She was wearing a simple but flattering outfit Mrs Tandy would probably have called a tea-dress. It certainly confirmed that Iris had kept her figure. Whereas even a double-breasted blazer could not disguise the paunch Harry had acquired since the summer of 1960, a season his thoughts, and doubtless hers, were bound to return to, however careful they might be to avoid mentioning it directly.

Indirectly, the events of that distant summer were the only reason they had met this wintry afternoon. Without them, David John Venning would never have been born. Nor would he be lying now, comatose and unaware, a few short streets away. Time could devise its revenges from beginnings as well as endings.

‘Are you diabetic, Harry?’ asked Iris, as he declined the offer of sugar.

‘No.’

‘I’d thought you might be, you see. I’d thought David might have inherited the disease from you. It developed in his teens. Oh, he came to terms with it readily enough. The

injections and the diet. He made no fuss about it. It was just a problem to solve. He's always been good at that. Solving problems. But this time ...'

'How did it happen? The coma, I mean.'

'I don't know. I don't understand it. He was alone. In an hotel room out at Heathrow. He was staying there overnight before flying back to America. He's lived and worked in the States for, what, nine years now. He's a mathematician, Harry. Quite brilliant, as a matter of fact. But it's all over my head. What he does. What he thinks about. Yours too, I expect.'

'*A brilliant mathematician?*'

'Yes. Amazing, isn't it? At an age when you were still reading the *Beano*, he was devouring Newton's *Principia*. And making things too. Cardboard dodecahedra. Hypercubes. God knows what. He really was a prodigy. Senior wrangler at Cambridge. Ph.D. at twenty-three. We were so proud of him.'

'You and Claude?'

'Yes. Claude died the year after David went to California to do post-doctoral research at UCLA. That's where he met his wife. In Los Angeles.'

'So he's married. Any—'

'No. No children. David and Hope are divorced now, anyway. Maybe you've heard of her. She's married again since. To the film star, Steve Brancaster.'

'I don't think so.'

'It doesn't matter. David was well rid of her. She'd only have held him back.'

'From what?'

'Academic success. She always wanted him to go into the commercial sector. Got her way in the end with the Globescope job. Globescope's an international economic forecasting corporation based in Washington. David was working for them until the spring of this year. But I don't think his heart was really in it. When he came to see us last

month, he was full of a new project that was pure research.'

'Us meaning you and your new husband?'

'Yes. Ken was a golfing friend of Claude's. He was very good to me after Claude's death. We've been married five years now. He runs an engineering company in Stockport.'

'You still live in Manchester, then?'

'Wilmslow, actually. But I've been staying with my sister in Chorleywood since this happened. Which brings us back to where we started, doesn't it? David had been over here drumming up interest in his new project. He's secured a lot of funding in America already and seemed confident it would get off the ground. A specialist institute to investigate the mathematics of higher dimensions. Don't ask me what *they* are. I've never understood such stuff. But David was full of it. And very excited about the prospects. He could hardly wait to get it up and running. That's what makes the suggestion of attempted suicide so utterly—' She caught his shocked look. 'I'm sorry. Perhaps I should have explained more fully from the start. But it's not easy. Explaining all this to someone I never expected to ... Someone who never ...'

'Who never knew he had a son, Iris. Remember that. I had no idea.'

'Would it have made a difference if you had? Would you have stood by me if I'd come back to Swindon a few months after leaving and announced I was carrying your child? I don't think so, Harry, do you?'

He shook his head slowly in surrender to his own memory of himself as much as the force of her argument. 'No. I expect he was better off with Claude as a father. But you said this morning he knows. About me, I mean.'

'I told him after Claude died. I thought he was entitled to know. But he didn't make much of it. Mathematics had always been more important to him than human frailty.'