

Spotted Lily

ANNA TAMBOUR

○
prime

‘HOW MANY angels can dance on the head of a pin?’ I asked.

‘Six, I think. But, really, dear, this is not my field.’

‘And I read somewhere that you turn us into sort of butterflies, and keep us in lacquered boxes with airholes, for transport.’

‘I couldn’t possibly comment on that.’

The Devil and I were sitting in my room, getting to know each other. He’d just been accepted in our sharehouse, ‘Kitty is thirty-five dollars a week, no coffee or coffee substitutes or power drinks included’ for the room next to mine, which was convenient for both of us.

It was Pledge Week, and we had to make the most of our time, but to do that, we had to get to know each other a little better.

I changed the subject.

‘Why do you have Pledge Week?’

He examined the pressed tin ceiling, seeming to be considering whether he should answer. When I had almost forgotten my question, he answered. ‘We have to. We lose too many to heaven these days.’

I knew I had to learn fast, but if he didn’t start to make sense, this was not going to work. ‘Come again?’

He cocked an eyebrow at me, then scratched himself behind somewhere and examined his nails. I tried not to look at his hands. As he wasn’t forthcoming, I tried again. ‘Isn’t forever forever?’

‘Ah . . . Yes, it is, in hell as it is on earth. But you make the rules, not we. And when you change your minds, you do manage to make an ado for us.’

‘Like what? Please don’t speak in riddles.’

‘A regular omnium-gatherum of disorder, don’t you know?’

I obviously didn’t.

‘A tumult, bother, hubbub, farrago of disorder. A regular huggermugger of change that we could well do without.’

I still didn’t understand his words in this context, and with some of them, in any context. *What the hell* sprang to mind, but the words that came out were, ‘Could you give me an example?’

He sighed.

‘And could you please try to speak in more accessible language. We *are* in twenty-first century Australia here. You do keep up, don’t you? You must have *some* Australians there.’

He bowed, a trifle condescendingly. ‘I will try. Eh, you know, don’t you read the papers? Don’t you see what you’re doing to us? It messes our morale something awful, you know.’

Although the ‘Eh’ was New Zealand, and he was trying a leetle too hard, I couldn’t quibble with his delivery. However, I was no closer to understanding. I think he must have thought me frustratingly dense, because his brows beetled, and I felt a prickle of sweat chill my back. He waved his hand, and in it appeared an *International Herald Tribune*. ‘Look at this article,’ he commanded, and threw the paper into my lap. It was singed but readable, and two days old.

I had no idea which article, so began to read down the first page, with rising panic.

‘Oh dear. I do so apologize,’ he said, in either an apologetic or a patronizing tone. It was so hard to read him. He grabbed the paper and opened it up, folded it neatly, and handed it back. ‘Read that,’ he pointed, ‘and *do* try to think. Think about the after-effects.’

I *hate* it when someone talks to me like that. But I read.

ANGLONG VENG, Cambodia In a case of Disneyland meets the killing fields, Cambodia’s Ministry of Tourism is drawing up grandiose plans to upgrade the final stronghold of the Khmer Rouge into a million-dollar theme park.

I looked up, grinning. ‘This is a joke, isn’t it?’

He scowled, something I do not wish to see again. ‘Do I look like a jokester,’ he asked rhetorically. ‘Read on.’

I did, all of it, including the part that said:

“Pol Pot was a kind man and the only people killed during the Khmer Rouge time were Vietnamese spies,” said Kim Syon, director of the Anglong Veng health center and son of a senior Khmer Rouge leader. “In the next 10 years people will begin to see the positive result of what Pol Pot did.”

I wanted to wash. ‘But this is gross.’

‘No, love, it is normal,’ the Devil said sadly. ‘Do you know how many people we will lose, and do you know what our futures markets are saying about the new arrivals whom we had banked on for the next few years?’

Whom now. Was he having me on? Was the ‘on’ itself, the dangling preposition—snide? And . . . and *futures markets*. Wait a bloody minute. I thought of something Dad said whenever he met someone he thought was serving him potato skin and calling it bangers and mash: ‘There’s something crook in Muswellbrook.’ I felt in this conversation with the Devil, like I was standing in Muswellbrook’s main street as the main attraction—the town fool. It was about time I assert myself.

‘You’re shitting me,’ I told him. ‘Why are you trying to take advantage of my gullibility?’

His eyelashes fluttered. ‘Oh dearie me. You asked, and I’m telling you how it is. I never lie.’

I shot him a look that would pierce most people of my acquaintance.

He looked blandly back. However, he *seemed* truthful.

But first, I had to take care of something that was making this getting-to-know all the harder. ‘Would it be possible if you don’t call me “dear” or “love”? In my culture, it *is* kind of a put-down.’

He might have been miffed, for he said, ‘Miss Pendergast—’

We could not go on like this. ‘Excuse me, but “Miss” isn’t something I’ve been called since I was fifteen, by anyone with whom I wish to associate.’

He looked uncomfortable, and his brows began to move.

‘My friends call me Angela,’ I added quickly, and then wondered if that would offend. ‘Would you mind calling me Angela? Or if you prefer, any other name would be fine. Like maybe Imelda. Someone you know.’

‘Imelda?’

She was the only one who came to mind. Perhaps not dead yet.

I was wracking my brains when he coughed. I looked at his face and he smiled. ‘Angela has a certain ring to it. Look, Angela. Think of Jefferson. Do you know Thomas Jefferson?’

‘Yeah. Great American forefather. I don’t imagine you would know him.’

He scratched somewhere I don’t want to know again, this time with a smug grin. ‘You obviously don’t keep up. He’s in our place now. Something to do with his love life.’

'You mean . . .'

'You decide, we abide, my, er . . . Angela. And we must keep abiding, which means that our populations are forever moving back and forth . . . and even disappearing and appearing again.'

'What do you mean?'

'Caligula? You *do* know of him?'

'I saw the movie.'

'Before the movie.'

I don't like to be reminded of what I don't know, but thought it best not to obfuscate. 'No.'

'You don't have to feel defensive. Caligula was a wonderful . . . what would you say . . . resident, for centuries, and then faded away. He's only recently come back to us. And with your attention span these days, it could be that we only have the pleasure of his company for one or two of your years.'

'Unless "Caligula" is re-released,' I mumbled, thinking.

'Come again?'

'Skip it,' I said, still thinking.

Suddenly a sharp tang of stink stung my eyes and jammed its choking fumes down my windpipe.

'I do demand respect,' he said.

'Sorry,' I mouthed. And I was. It was impossible to breathe.

He waved his hand and the worst evaporated.

'Sorry,' I repeated, to clear the air completely. 'I think I'm beginning to understand. 'But don't you gain from heaven, too?'

'Yes. Like I said, we've got Jefferson now, and the markets say we'll have Ghandi soon. You know Ghandi?' he added somewhat condescendingly.

'Yes,' I said, somewhat hurt.

'Well, it *is* hard to tell, you know.'

'The markets?' I had to ask.

I was secretly (though I couldn't let it show) happy that he looked at last, confused. 'Don't you know markets?' he asked. 'Futures trading? I thought you were all obsessed with it nowadays.'

'Not *all* of us,' I had to remind him. And all of a sudden I realized that for all his ultra-cool appearance, he was remarkably ignorant. Very gently and respectfully I asked, 'You don't know much about us, do you?'

'What do you mean?' he answered, and I was happy to smell that he wasn't offended.

‘Well, here we are in a share house, and maybe you need some background on your housemates. Kate, remember—the one who chaired the interview today. She teaches ethnic studies at Sydney Uni, but she also inherited this house which was an investment from her North Shore parents who didn’t think enough of her to leave it to her unmortgaged. So then there’s us tenants who are also her housemates. Jason, who is going to bug you to death on your implants. Did you see his bifurcated tongue? It’s very like yours.’

‘I didn’t notice. I was looking at his tattoos.’

‘They’re only part of his performance. He is a work in progress.’

The Devil yawned.

I tried not to gag. ‘Do you mind if I light a cone?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Incense. I like to burn incense. Little cones of scented natural dried stuff.’

He waved his hand graciously. ‘Be my guest.’

I was crawling over to the little table with its celadon saucer and collection of Celestial Sky, thinking I should possibly change brand names tomorrow, when he grabbed my arm with a grip you might expect the Devil to have.

I thought I was about to die.

‘It’s not garlic, is it?’

‘Never,’ I managed to smile.

‘I do apologize,’ he said after a final little squeeze. I felt like a fruit.

‘Did I hurt you?’ he asked solicitously.

‘Only a bit,’ I lied. ‘But what do you care?’

He shrugged, the same shrug as the bank manager gave me in some little French coastal town when he refused to cash my travellers cheque because my signature on it didn’t exactly match the one on my passport.

‘That reminds me,’ I said (though it hadn’t—I just needed to change the subject) as the scent of, I think it was called ‘Bavaghindra’ filled the room. ‘Why do you have Pledge Week?’

‘You aren’t very perspicacious,’ he observed. ‘Pledge Week,’ he said slowly as if I were a child, ‘is necessary because, outside of our permanent population of futures markets operators, Pledge Week provides the only new source of once acquired, stable and permanent population that we have.’

The fingers of fate frolicked upon my back in a most disconcerting manner. I shrugged, which not only made me feel great and I hope, annoyed

him in the same can't-admit-it way as his shrug did to me, but I think established my position far closer to the peer level necessary to our smooth working relationship.

He must have thought I still did not understand. 'When you come with me—'

'My coming is forever.'

We looked into each other's eyes for so long that I wondered whether it was a blink contest. Eventually I had to blink. 'That is correct,' he said. 'When you come with me, your coming is forever.' And his face changed from its solemnity, to one of Christmas cheer.

The actual elements of his smile, when I could steel myself to really look, were rather heart-flutteringly beautiful, and not at all like Jason's barracuda-shaped mouth of crooked, filed teeth. The smile of the Devil was broad, and his teeth looked good enough to be capped.