INTERNATIONAL BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

ROBIN BAKER

CABALLITO

Max, a young anthropologist, discovers two handwritten pages written by a Victorian adventuress who lived with an unknown tribe in the Amazon. Determined to discover more, Max is dragged into a world of mysterious suicides, pagan sects, child prostitution and police harassment. Set in the English countryside and Amazon rainforest, CABALLITO portrays an alternative society in which fatherhood has no meaning and communities share everything, including each other. Once, this was how all people lived.

Caballito

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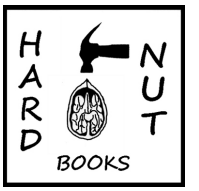
Robin Baker



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Except for the historical figures and events listed in the Acknowledgements, the characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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Dedication

To all the staff, students, villagers, poachers, beer-drinkers, dart-players, cricketers, ‘ghosts’, free-spirits and lovers who together created the magic that was Woodchester Park, Gloucestershire
1972-1992

ALSO BY ROBIN BAKER:

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Primal
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NON-FICTION

Sperm Wars
Baby Wars
Sex in the Future
Fragile science

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Chapter 1

‘There’s a madwoman in the Ladies.’

‘Wino? Bag-lady?’

‘No, she’s young. Nearly as young as us. Really pretty, too. Brownish skin. Long black hair. But she’s just standing there, stark naked, staring into the mirror with this sad look on her face.’

‘Her clothes are in the toilet. There’s water all over the floor.’

‘Oh my God! Don’t look. She’s coming out.’

‘What are you four staring at?’

‘Nothing,’ we said in unison, looking away, Leo and I wide-eyed, Gemma and Aisha trying to stifle giggles. But as soon as the woman turned her shapely back on us and struggled onto one of the tall stools near the bar, we stared again.

The flushed and overweight landlord appeared, brushing himself off as from a visit to the cellar. On seeing the woman, he froze, his face slowly turning crimson. Then he started shouting and swearing at her, but when all she did was laugh and demand a coffee he picked up the bar phone.

The police arrived – a man and a woman. The man seemed angry, speaking to the naked woman as if he knew her, as if she had done this before. But she refused to be covered or to leave quietly, so he dragged her kicking and shouting from the room.

‘Imagine doing that,’ said Aisha.

Gemma blushed. ‘Well, actually. After last summer’s exams…’

‘Right across the Downs and back,’ chuckled Leo. ‘How’s that for a streak?’

Gemma looked at me and Aisha. ‘Not ever?’

‘Those two? Of course “not ever.” All that “naked-in-the-jungle” rubbish. It’s just not in them.’

I bristled. ‘Yes it is. And one day I’ll prove it to you. But it’s time and place, Leo. Doing what the locals do. And in case you haven’t noticed, around here the locals wear clothes.’

‘And a great shame it is too. Don’t you think, Max? Eh? A few more like madwoman, that’s what we need. I wonder what the police are doing with her?’

Chapter 2

An earth-trembling thunderstorm drove me to shelter in a second-hand bookshop just a few hundred metres from my home. Browsing to fill the time, I was tempted by a copy of *Coming of Age in Samoa* by Margaret Mead, the once-famous American Anthropologist. 'Why the cellophane wrapping?' I asked the shop owner.

He winked at me. 'Because of the photographs.'

'So which edition is it?'

'First, I think.' His eyes were wide, his face sincere.

I laughed. '1928! It can't be.'

He took the book from me, then made a show of examining it through the cellophane. 'Sorry. My mistake. 1961, this one.'

'Can I take off the wrapping?'

'Best not.'

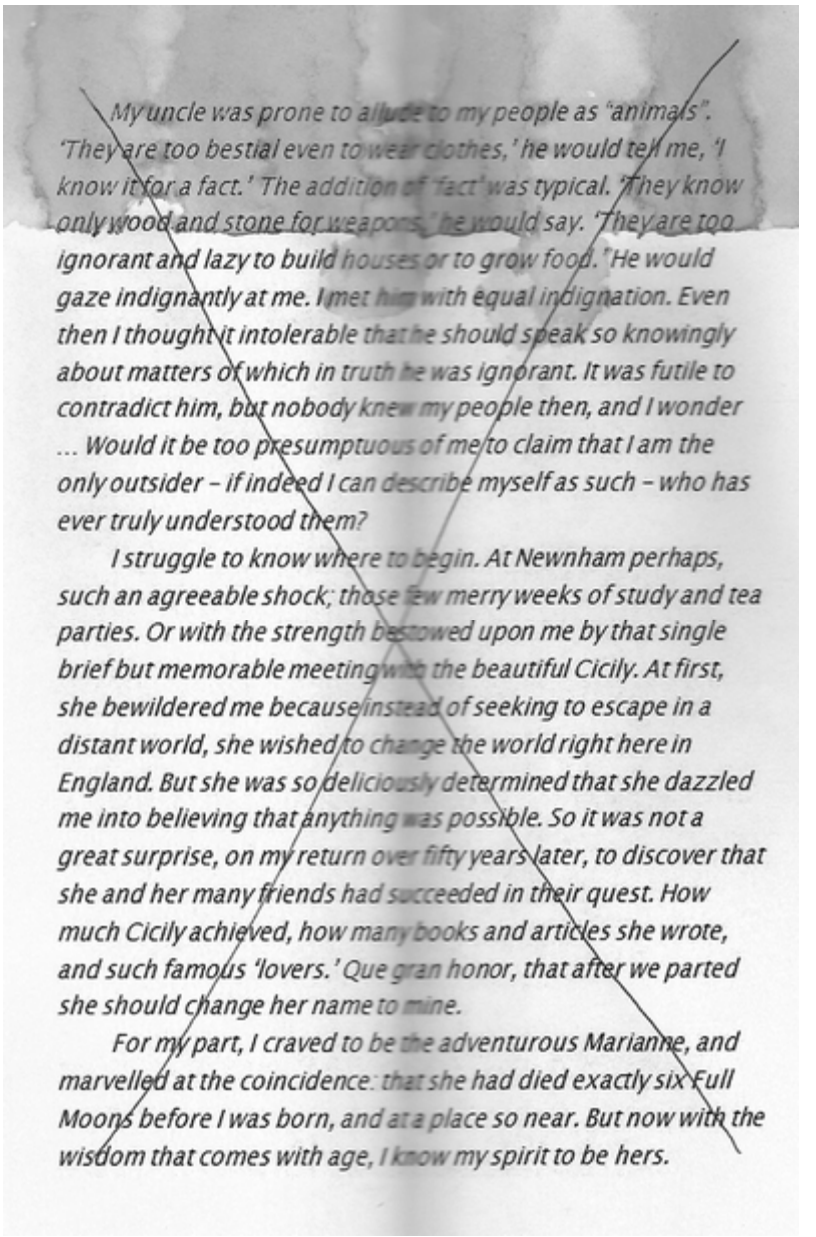
'How much?'

'A pound.'

'How about fifty pence?'

Back in my apartment, the contents of the 'book' spilled onto the floor. But when I tried to put the pages back in order, I found that many were missing. There were no photographs either. As a book it was worthless, but it soon didn't matter. The bookmark was value enough.

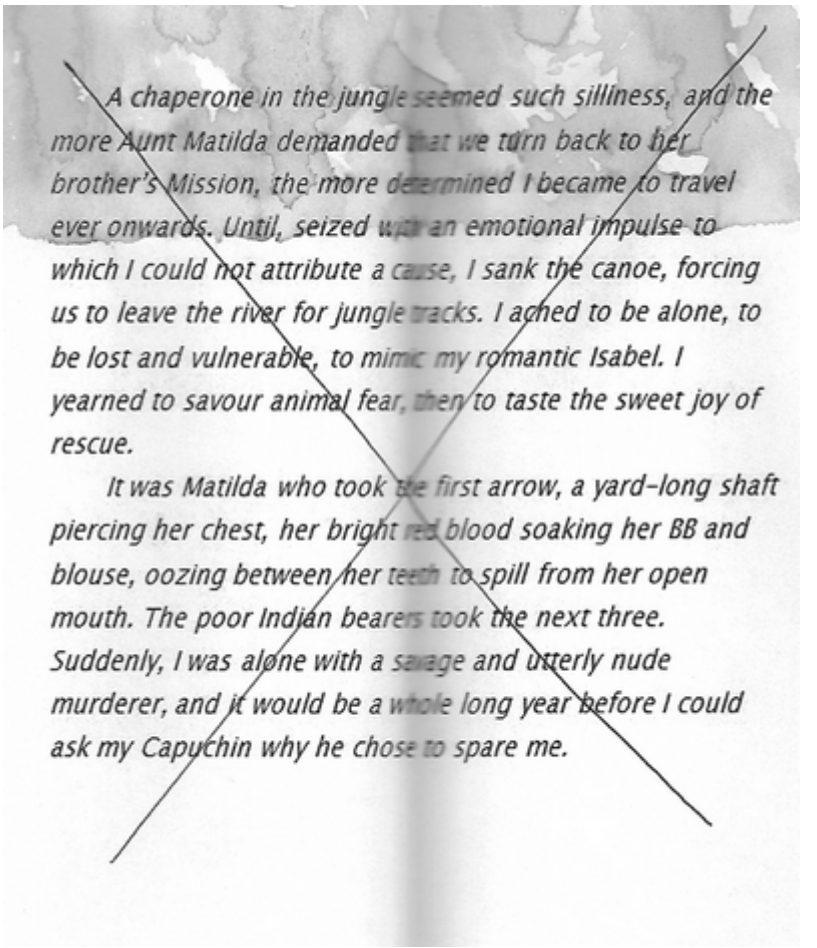
It wasn't a real bookmark, more two sheets of writing paper folded together to serve as such. When unfolded, one side of each sheet bore handwritten prose scribed in the most beautiful italic lettering. Yet somebody obviously hadn't approved because on each sheet two lines had been drawn from corner to diagonal corner to form a single large censorious 'X':



My uncle was prone to allude to my people as "animals". 'They are too bestial even to wear clothes,' he would tell me, 'I know it for a fact.' The addition of 'fact' was typical. 'They know only wood and stone for weapons,' he would say. 'They are too ignorant and lazy to build houses or to grow food.' He would gaze indignantly at me. I met him with equal indignation. Even then I thought it intolerable that he should speak so knowingly about matters of which in truth he was ignorant. It was futile to contradict him, but nobody knew my people then, and I wonder ... Would it be too presumptuous of me to claim that I am the only outsider – if indeed I can describe myself as such – who has ever truly understood them?

I struggle to know where to begin. At Newnham perhaps, such an agreeable shock; those few merry weeks of study and tea parties. Or with the strength bestowed upon me by that single brief but memorable meeting with the beautiful Cicily. At first, she bewildered me because instead of seeking to escape in a distant world, she wished to change the world right here in England. But she was so deliciously determined that she dazzled me into believing that anything was possible. So it was not a great surprise, on my return over fifty years later, to discover that she and her many friends had succeeded in their quest. How much Cicily achieved, how many books and articles she wrote, and such famous 'lovers.' Que gran honor, that after we parted she should change her name to mine.

For my part, I craved to be the adventurous Marianne, and marvelled at the coincidence: that she had died exactly six Full Moons before I was born, and at a place so near. But now with the wisdom that comes with age, I know my spirit to be hers.



A chaperone in the jungle seemed such silliness, and the more Aunt Matilda demanded that we turn back to her brother's Mission, the more determined I became to travel ever onwards. Until, seized with an emotional impulse to which I could not attribute a cause, I sank the canoe, forcing us to leave the river for jungle tracks. I ached to be alone, to be lost and vulnerable, to mimic my romantic Isabel. I yearned to savour animal fear, then to taste the sweet joy of rescue.

It was Matilda who took the first arrow, a yard-long shaft piercing her chest, her bright red blood soaking her BB and blouse, oozing between her teeth to spill from her open mouth. The poor Indian bearers took the next three. Suddenly, I was alone with a savage and utterly nude murderer, and it would be a whole long year before I could ask my Capuchin why he chose to spare me.

I let the book fall apart again, this time deliberately, all over the floor. Then I shuffled the printed pages with my bare feet, looking for further sheets of handwriting, but there weren't any.

***

While finishing a coffee at my apartment window, I looked out across the Bristol Downs to the Suspension Bridge. The morning rush-hour was in full flow, and it was raining. I sat in front of my word processor. *Chapter 15: Future Work* the screen said; nothing more.

'Last chapter? Always the most difficult,' my PhD supervisor had once told me, trying to console me, to spur me on.

Rain began lashing the window pane, enticing me back across the room to stare out at the people scurrying on the pavements beneath, struggling with their umbrellas; at the cars and buses too, with their headlights on full and their windscreen wipers working at top speed. I smiled to myself. According to the weatherwoman, it was raining even harder in Liverpool.

'But there aren't any undiscovered stone-age tribes,' Leo had once scoffed. 'And even if there were, you'd never find them. And even if you did, they'd kill you as soon as look at you. Why the hell would they let somebody like you live with them?'

'No, you're wrong,' I growled back at him. 'There are still uncontacted tribes. About a hundred, it's reckoned. Mainly in the rainforests of Brazil, Peru and Indonesia. Governments even know roughly where they are but they're protecting them. It's just a question of slipping through the defences, that's all.'

'And you think you're the person to do it?'

'Sure! Why not?'

'What I don't understand,' said Gemma, 'is why you think it's such a big deal. Surely loads of people have lived with rainforest tribes and written about them. That's what Anthropologists do, isn't it?'

‘But that’s the point. They always go to study, not to live. They wear modern clothes, take medicines, introduce technology, bring tools and provisions to barter for information, ooze approval and disapproval. It all has an influence. You have to become one of the people. Embrace everything: their technology; their nakedness if need be; and their morals.’

‘Morals! Now I get it,’ laughed Leo. ‘You want to screw native girls. Why didn’t you just say so? I’ll come with you.’

Only Aisha had taken me seriously, lying in my arms, cocooned beneath my duvet, reluctant to crawl out into the dank chill of my bedroom to start another day. We would discover a tribe together, we told each other. Live a stone-age life together; write about it together. But now three years on she is a headmaster’s wife somewhere, and I have a thesis to finish.

Suddenly inspired, I strode from my window back to the word processor and typed a whole paragraph. Then I read it through, deleted every word, and wandered round my flat again. The rain outside was easing. A large lorry drove by beneath my window, a badly-loaded lorry, probably from the M4 Motorway. I picked up the phone and dialled a familiar number in Liverpool. ‘Hi Gemma. Did I get you up? How are your ankles?’

‘Oh, Hi Max. No, it’s OK. My ankles? Panic’s over. Swelling’s nearly gone. Just one more week of taking it easy, the doctor says – unless I can persuade him to make it two.’

I chuckled. ‘How’s Leo coping?’

‘Leo cope? Don’t be silly, Max. Anyway, how about you? Found anybody to share that massive bed of yours yet? That new tenant of yours on the ground floor you got so excited about?’

‘Total disaster. Turns out she hates hairy chests. She wanted to take a razor to me.’

‘Unlucky! But maybe it’s for the best, eh? How’s “Future Work” coming along?’

‘It’s not. I daren’t write anything in case I’m actually expected to do it. But that’s not what I want, Gem. It really isn’t.’

‘Then tell him.’

‘Oh, sure. And have him give the fellowship to somebody else.’

In my final undergraduate year, an eminent Professor had urged me not to “waste” my upcoming postgraduate years living in some remote jungle, but to write computer models about tribal evolution instead. ‘All life, all history, all explanations can be digitised,’ he enthused. ‘You’ll be a pioneer in the anthropological world, my boy. This work will make your name. Our names.’ He had been waiting, he said, for a first-rate student to appear who also had a talent for mathematics and computing. And now, with my PhD nearly complete, he was so “enthralled” by my work that he desperately wanted me to continue. The fellowship was mine, if I wanted it.

‘Look, Gem… The reason I’m phoning… You know that course-module on Suffragette Literature you did at uni. You didn’t come across a woman called Cicily who changed her name, wrote loads of stuff and had famous lovers, did you?’

Chapter 3

'Hi, stranger,' said Gemma from the open door as I walked up the path, her appearance a shock though not a surprise.

'Hi, Gem.' I threw my holdall into the hallway and gave her a long hug. 'You look great.'

'Liar!' She closed the door behind me.

I had to tell her. 'Do you know how many badly-loaded lorries I saw on that journey? Ten! Bristol to Liverpool, just a hundred and fifty miles – ten!'

She gave a gentle smile and placed her hand on my arm. 'It's been two years, Max. Let them go. Move on.'

We went into the kitchen. 'So what's so important about this accountants' conference that Leo has to leave you on your own this week of all weeks?'

'It's in the Caribbean, it's free, there'll be lots of women, and everything here is totally freaking him out. And I wanted him to go. Until it's over, I really am better without him. Besides, I'm not alone, am I? You're here. He trusts you. We both do.'

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Gemma sat on her lounge floor peering down at my bookmark, her long fair hair tumbling around her pale angular face. I was so used to seeing her slim and sexy that her globular mother-earth body seemed an anomaly, as if borrowed from a different person.

'So somebody starts to write a story, doesn't like it and gives up.' She looked up at me on the settee. 'Why are you so interested?'

'So you think it's a story?'

‘Don’t you?’

‘I’m not sure. If – as you say – there really was a Cicily who changed her name and bedded both Charlie Chaplin and H.G. Wells…’

‘Oh, yes. Let me show you.’ She made to struggle to her feet.

‘No, stay there. Just tell me where.’

She slumped back down again. ‘There. Third shelf down. The thick red one. Pass it here.’ She found the page. ‘Here it is. “Rebecca West. 1892-1983. Born Cicily Fairfield in London. Father left the family in 1901 and her mother moved with the children to Edinburgh. Cicily returned to London in 1910.”’

‘Does it say when she changed her name?’

‘Not exactly. It says that in 1911 Cicily joined the staff of the feminist paper *Freewoman* and started to use the name Rebecca West.’

‘So our bookmark woman could be a Rebecca. And we’re talking about a meeting with Cicily in 1910, 1911-ish. Yes? Before Cicily changed her name. Sounds promising. Fits with chaperones and tea parties, anyway. Maybe the article mentions our woman as the inspiration for the change of name. Does it?’

Gemma scanned the encyclopaedia entry. ‘It says here that Rebecca West named herself after the “passionate, self-willed heroine in Henrik Ibsen's play *Rosmersholm*.” Nothing about a Rebecca from Newnham.’ She handed me the book so that I could see for myself. ‘So you think your bookmark woman might be a real person?’

‘Doesn’t she feel real to you?’

‘Not really. More like a character dreamed up for a novel, I would say.’

'What about these other women? "Adventurous Marianne"? "Romantic Isabel"? Can you place either of them? Or do you think they're fictional too?'

She shook her head. 'No idea. But even if they were real, all it means is that the author did some research to get the setting right for his or her main character.' Gemma struggled onto her knees, then shuffled to kneel in front of where I was sitting. 'Come on. What's on your mind, Max?'

'Oh… Nothing, not really. Just crazy thoughts, not worth talking about. Besides, right now…' I smiled at her. '… I don't know about you, but I'm hungry, and in great need of alcohol.'

She smiled back. 'OK. I get the message. To the kitchen woman, and stop asking questions. So what do you feel like?'

'No! I'm chef and shopper this week. You're going to take it easy. Just keep my wine-glass full and I'll do the rest.'

'Really?' Gemma laughed; a delightful musical laugh that I had missed since she and Leo moved north. 'Then that's definitely a deal. Do you know – in all our six years together, the nearest Leo has ever come to cooking me a meal is heating up a takeaway.'

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The following morning, Gemma thrust a scribbled note into my hand. 'I don't really want to distract you from your thesis – but Leo phoned last night. I told him about your bookmark and he has this idea who your "romantic Isabel" might be.'

I glanced at the name on the paper. '"Isabel Godin"! How the hell does Leo come up with a name like that?'

'Oh, you know Leo. Ask him what colour my eyes are and he won't have a clue. But show him some obscure crossword…'

I smiled. ‘Look, can I borrow Leo’s library card?’ It was an old deceit that Leo and I had used often when students. Although his face is thinner than mine, his long hair curlier, and his beard slightly longer, any difference in appearance was always too subtle for stressed librarians to notice. And so it proved again, allowing me to take out on loan just the book I needed: *Perils and Captivity* was in three parts, the last entitled, *Voyage of Madame Godin Along the River of the Amazons in the year 1770.*

‘I’ve found her Gem,’ I said as I returned. ‘Deep in the library archives. 1827! They don’t write books like this anymore. I’ll start reading about her after dinner.’

But I never had chance. Gemma started reading first, then couldn’t stop. ‘This is so romantic. Shall I read it for you? Make some notes?’

I knew her offer was to allow me to work on my thesis, but the next morning with a shout of ‘Just going to the library again. Back for lunch,’ I instead went to re-immerse myself in a previously unknown world that I had discovered the day before. And after phoning Gemma to check that she wasn’t about to give birth on the kitchen floor, my morning in the library turned into a whole day.

If I had possessed any preconception of middle- to upper-class Victorian women it was along the lines that they stayed at home, dedicating their life to their family and domestic responsibilities. They were socially responsible, wore stiff corsets and long dresses, went to church frequently, and spent their time worrying about servants and children. And I daresay many were just like that, but as my second day in the library unfolded I learned just how many exceptions there were. Stories of crossing the Atlas Mountains to the Sahara, of cycling fourteen thousand miles through the towns and jungles of the Indian Plain, or of being in sole charge of a

caravan of two hundred slaves and porters in nineteenth century Africa, astounded me. So did the tale of an "adventurous Marianne" that I found. She was Marianne North who, it seemed, travelled the world, often alone, painting the flowers and plants of far-flung countries. Her paintings were still hanging in a gallery named after her at Kew Gardens in London – and she died at Alderley in Gloucestershire on 30 August 1890.

I checked in the library's almanac. There was a Full Moon that night.

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After dinner, Gemma told me the story of Isabel Godin. 'She was born high up in the Andes, in Peru – except it's Ecuador now. A place called Riobamba, a Spanish colony. When she was fourteen, she married a Frenchman called Jean Godin…'

'Fourteen! How the hell does a 14-year old Spanish Peruvian girl meet a Frenchman to marry? And when was this exactly?'

Gemma checked her notes. 'The marriage was 1741. And he was on an expedition. The world's first "geodesy" expedition to the equator. What's "geodesy"?'

'No idea! But go on.'

'Eventually, Jean Godin decides he wants to take Isabel and their children to France. One child's already been born, the other's on its way. But what does the idiot do? A test run without his family right across South America to the Atlantic coast, the whole length of the Amazon, west to east, just to make sure it's safe. Can you believe it? It took months.'

'He was being cautious.'

'Crazy, more like – and it totally backfired. Because when he arrived, the Portuguese and Spanish authorities

wouldn't let him go back up the Amazon to collect his wife and family. So for years and years they were on opposite sides of South America, totally unable to communicate with each other. She couldn't even tell him their two children had died of smallpox. All he could do was keep writing to Europe asking for help.'

'You mean he could write to Europe but not to her? Or her to him?'

'Seems that way. Anyway, eventually the King of Portugal sent a "galiot", whatever that is.'

'Does it matter?'

'Not really, except it came with thirty oarsmen to do whatever was necessary. Which in the end meant that it went as far up the Amazon as it could and just sat and waited for Isabel to make her way down from the Andes to meet it. By then, it was twenty years… Twenty years!… since Jean had left her, yet they'd stayed faithful to each other all that time…'

I chuckled.

'They had,' she insisted. 'It was really romantic. And when the news about the boat reached her, she didn't hesitate. She just set off across the mountains and down the tributaries to find the boat.'

'Alone? She can't have gone alone.'

'Not at first, and this is where it gets really awful. To begin with there were… wait a minute…' She looked through her notes. '… forty-two people, though thirty-one of them were Indian bearers. They all crossed the Andes by foot and on mule. But when they arrived down in the Amazon Basin, the mission station they'd been relying on to give them more provisions had been abandoned. Everybody had died from a smallpox outbreak. It scared the bearers shitless. They all deserted.'

‘Can’t say I blame them. So that left… How many? Eleven?’

She nodded. ‘Isabel and six others set up an emergency camp, and four went on ahead in a small canoe they found. Those four were supposed to send back transport big enough for them all, but it never came – and one-by one those in the camp died from disease and infection.’

‘So now Isabel’s alone?’

‘And nearly dead, too. For days, she just lies on the forest floor, delirious, surrounded by stinking corpses. But she recovers, then wanders totally lost through the jungle for nine days, living on fruit, nuts, partridge eggs, and what she calls “palm-cabbage.” Then, virtually naked because her clothes had been shredded and torn from her body by branches, she stumbles across four Indians.’

‘Did they attack her?’

‘No! They were nice to her. Took her to the nearest mission.’

‘And did she and Jean ever make it to France?’

‘They did! Three years later. And nineteen years on, that’s where they both died. Within six months of each other. And I don’t care what you say, I think it’s a really romantic story.’ Gemma’s blue eyes were glistening, holding back tears.

‘I was only kidding. I think it’s romantic too. And that’s brilliant. Thanks. That’s got to be her, don’t you think? So that’s the lot. All the women in the bookmark seem to be real, and Isabel’s story plus the Capuchin reference pins the story to South America. We’re talking Amazonians, Gem. It couldn’t be better.’

‘So now are you going to tell me where all this is going?’

I hesitated. ‘OK. Look… Something a bit like this bookmark story happened once before. Back in 1935, a young white Christian girl called Helena Valero, about 12 years old, was captured by Amazonian Indians and forced to live with them for twenty odd years. Everything you can think of happened to her, including having four children. When she eventually escaped, she was interviewed by an Italian Anthropologist who then wrote her biography. It was a fantastic book. Everybody raved about it. Completely unique.’

‘So…’

‘The point is, the tribe in that book were Yanomamö. They were horticulturalists. Shamanists. Male-dominated. Warmongers. Quite advanced on the Amazonian scale and fairly specialised. But this tribe in the bookmark: stone tools, naked hunters and foragers, nomads… That’s just about as simple as human society gets, yet even in the early 1900s there really were tribes still living like that. So suppose Rebecca really existed. Suppose she really did spend over fifty years with such people. Her story would be amazing.’

Gemma was shaking her head. ‘But you can’t interview her, can you? Even if she lived, she’s got to be dead by now.’

‘I know. But… Suppose the bookmark was the start of an autobiography. Obviously it was never published otherwise the whole anthropological world would know about it, including me. But suppose it’s just lying around in a draw or an attic somewhere. That’s anthropological gold dust, Gem. Nobody really knows what the lives of the forest nomads were like in the early 1900s. But the manuscript could tell us. I could write papers on it, a book even. I’d be given money to re-visit the tribe, see if it still exists, how it’s changed. It’s totally mind-blowing. The chance of a lifetime.’

Gemma was chuckling. ‘Max, calm down. I can see why you’re excited, but – come on – this is pure fantasy. The bookmark is no more than scribbles for a novel. It’s fiction. Forget it.’

‘I can’t forget it. It’s there in my head, all the time. I tell you Gem. If I didn’t need the money, just a sniff that Rebecca was real… I think I’d chuck the fellowship and throw everything into researching her life and tracking down her tribe.’

She peered at me. ‘Do you need the money?’

I laughed. ‘Sadly, yes. My inheritance was good, but it won’t run to gallivanting off to South America for years on end.’

‘Well that’s a relief. You won’t be tempted into doing anything silly then. Because, whether you like it or not, you’re brilliant at what you do. Look at all those papers you’ve written. Not to mention the lectures you’ve given – and you’re even at Cambridge next month, aren’t you? You’ve got a fantastic career ahead of you, Max. You’d be crazy to jack it all in just because of some stupid bookmark. Which is a work of fiction, I promise you. Cicily, Marianne and Isabel might all be real, but Rebecca isn’t. She can’t be.’

‘Of course she can. Give me one good reason why not.’

‘OK. Just ask yourself this. Would any real person in her right mind deliberately try to repeat an adventure as appalling as Isabel Godin’s?’

Chapter 4

'Remember me?'

'Can't say that I do.'

'Nearly two months ago you sold me a 1961 copy of *Coming of Age in Samoa*.'

'Did you enjoy it?'

'It was unreadable, but I'll make you a deal. I won't tell anybody what state it was in, and I'll let you keep my pound…'

'Fifty pence.'

'…if you'll tell me where the book came from. You do keep records, don't you?' Then I told him about the bookmark.

With a disinterested air he disappeared into the back of the shop. 'It was part of a job-lot,' he said when he returned. 'A favour for a friend of mine, about five years ago. He used to do house clearances. But he was giving up. Closing down. The big C. Six months, they told him – but he only managed three.'

I voiced my condolences but all he did was shrug.

'So where was his shop? Somewhere in Bristol?'

'No, Nailsworth. Tiny place. Over in Gloucestershire.'

Back at home, I checked on a map. As the spirit flies, Nailsworth was just a few miles to the north-east of Alderley, where Marianne North had died.

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I phoned Liverpool. 'Hey, you're home. Congratulations. How's the baby?'

'You mean the little pink one, or the big hairy one?'

'I mean the little pink one. But did Leo really faint in the delivery room? Or was he just stringing me along?'

'No, he fainted. Did you think he wouldn't? And the pink one is gorgeous, but very noisy, very hungry, and doesn't understand sleep. Leo's just taken her out to buy some breast pads. For me, not her. I'm leaking all over the place. We've decided to call her 'Solymar' by the way, and before you say anything, it's my idea and I like it.'

'Then so do I. No, I mean it. 'Sun and Sea'. That's great. Very you – and Leo.'

'Mmm. So how's life in the academic rut? Finished your thesis yet?'

'Just about.' Then I told her about my visit to the bookshop.

'Still doesn't prove anything. You'll have to do a lot better than geography to convince me Rebecca is real.'

***

Budding academics don't often get invited to lecture at Cambridge University before they can put 'Dr' before their name. Admittedly, my hosts were only a student society, interested more in computer modelling than in anthropology itself, but there were a lot of famous people at the university who might just be tempted to come and listen to me.

'Where did you put the posters advertising my talk?' I asked the gushing undergraduate who met me late-afternoon and introduced himself as chairperson of the society. 'Which departments?'

'Loads.'

'Anthropology?'

'Of course.' He looked unusually nervous. 'The only problem…' But before he could finish, other committee members appeared and as they led me to the lecture theatre

for my five o'clock start we became enmeshed in a round of introductions and polite small-talk. At the lecture hall, the projectionist asked for my slides, and I took up position at the lectern to wait for the auditorium to fill.

Five o'clock arrived, but not my audience. 'They're always late,' said the chairperson with a weak smile as he drummed his fingers on the bench before him. 'Five more minutes? Give them chance to get here?' I shrugged and poured myself some water from the bottle provided. Then to make it look as though I cared I began fingering my lecture notes – but something very different was on my mind.

Days before, by phone, I had negotiated with the Newnham archivist to be allowed access to some of the College records, and for this I had arrived in Cambridge before lunch. The woman had listened to my bookmark story with fascination, then suggested that to err on the safe side I should examine the details of all students who registered between 1905 and 1915. While trying not to become despondent as the possibilities shrank, I scanned through seemingly endless Marys, Margarets and Winifreds, telling myself that there had to be at least one Rebecca, even if she wasn't my Rebecca – but there wasn't.

'OK, shall we start?' the chairperson said at last. 'I'm sure that what we lack in numbers, we make up for in enthusiasm.' He forced a smile then in a ludicrous sop to protocol stood to introduce me, his delivery only lightened by three further people sidling into the back row. My audience had reached double-figures.

'First slide please,' I shouted, and a fumble or two by the projectionist later, the title of my talk was on the screen and the theatre lights were dimming. But once I started speaking… Once the theatre was dark, apart from the

projector light and screen… The three latecomers on the back row sidled out again.

'Next slide please.'

'Sorry, the projector's jammed. Just give me a moment.'

I took a sip of water.

At the back of the theatre, through a door that doesn't open, a young woman appears and fills my mind. Beautiful, of course, and tall and elegant, she has an hour-glass figure with hand-span waist all doubtlessly tortured into shape by corsetry. Dark though the room I see her clearly, her outfit Gainsborough blue from head to toe. Her bell-shaped skirt drags on the floor as she glides down the steps towards me, and her taffeta petticoats rustle with every hidden stride.

'Sorry, I'll have to turn the lights up for a moment.'

There is no sun, but Rebecca's parasol with its frilly frothy rim of muslin is raised above her head. Her high-necked blouse drips with lace, and her wide hat has a windmill bow and a lavish brim sweeping around her face. The hat seems suspended on her head by magic, but in reality must be resting on her long dark hair, pulled together into a flat coil and drawn up onto her crown.

'There, that's done it.' The theatre lights dimmed again and my next slide appeared on the screen.

Smiling at me, Rebecca comes to rest in front of the lectern, enveloping me with the scent of her lavender perfume. I am privileged: the only person to know that beneath her fashionable innocent subservient exterior there beats a fierce heart aching for adventure, yearning to "savour animal fear", to emulate her "romantic Isabel." I look straight through her at the people sitting on the front row – and shout at them.

'No! For pity's sake turn the lights back up again. This is a total farce. A complete and utter waste of time. Mine – and yours. I really appreciate the invitation,' I said to the chairperson. 'And I thank you others for coming, but I know perfectly well that, like everybody else in Cambridge, you'd much prefer to be at Richard Dawkins' defence of *The Blind Watchmaker.* And so would I if I didn't feel so pissed off and stupid for actually starting to lecture to the seven of you. Look, if we stop now, you can still get to Dawkins' lecture in time. I won't even hold you to taking me out for a drink and a meal afterwards. Just pay me my expenses and I'll entertain myself.'

The students at the front exchanged sheepish glances. 'How did you know?' said the chairman.

'Big posters everywhere? How could I not know?'

He stood and moved out towards me. 'I'm really sorry. It's my fault. But I honestly didn't know when I invited you.'

'It's OK. Don't feel bad about it. These things happen. Go! Go! All of you.'

And nearly all did, and quickly too, though the chairperson did pause long enough to shake my hand and thank me, and the projectionist did collect and return my slides. But one person stayed, her pretty face, dark hair and shapely body unnervingly reminiscent of my imagined Rebecca. 'I'm the treasurer,' she said with a smile. 'And in case you missed it the first time, my name's Anya.'

'No, I didn't miss it. And thanks for hanging back, but it's OK. There's really no need to pay me now. I'll send you an invoice. Just go. You'll be late.'

She shrugged. 'I've heard Richard before. Several times.' Her smile grew coy. 'Look, I was wondering… I mean, if you prefer to be on your own, fine. After this cock-

up, I wouldn't blame you. But, if you'd like company for a while, I'm all yours. And I do have the society's cheque book.'

I smiled at her. 'Do you drink?'

'I'm famous for it.'

'And do you like Indian food?'

***

With a couple of hours in a pub behind us, and poppadams and a first shared bottle of wine finished, Anya and I began a second bottle and waited for the main dishes. 'Obviously she'd have been stripped,' she said, her blue eyes wide. 'The women would have been desperate for those gorgeous clothes.'

'Mmm. Maybe.'

'And raped. Who was to stop them?'

I had told Anya everything, including how I nearly missed finding Rebecca in the Newnham archives that afternoon. "Mary R. Downing" the record card said, so I passed it over during my first search while looking only at students' names. But during my second much slower and more-painstaking search, I checked birth places and dates as well. "Nailsworth," the card said; and "23 February 1891" – exactly six Full Moons after Marianne North's death. If that wasn't link enough, Mary R. Downing had attended Newnham to study Botany in 1910, and had stayed for only three weeks.

'It has to be her,' I said to the archivist, hardly able to contain myself. 'Is there any way you can check whether that "R" stands for Rebecca?' And after a full half-hour in the far-reaches of her domain, the wonderful meticulous woman returned with a piece of paper and a beaming smile to confirm that it did.

Meal over, the waiter cleared our table and Anya asked for the bill. ‘As Rebecca survived,’ she mused, bubbling with interest, ‘somebody must have protected her, mustn’t they? The chief’s son? He fell in love with her at first sight and stopped the other men from hurting her? Married her? She had his babies. Probably lots of them. She became a baby machine. Oh, I’d love to know.’

‘And so would I. I can hardly think of anything else. But, what you’ve just said… So much depends on what sort of tribe it was. Some – the hunter-gatherers – didn’t really have chiefs as far as we know. Everybody was equal. As for marriage… Now that’s something I’d really like to know. There certainly won’t have been any ceremony. Even the Yanomamö didn’t have weddings. For them, marriage was… Oh, sorry.’

‘Sorry? Why?’

‘I’m lecturing again. Bad habit. Just tell me to stop.’

Anya reached across and gave my hand a timid and very brief squeeze. ‘No. It’s OK. I want to know. Go on, please. What was marriage to the Yanomamö?’

‘Well, it was political. Possessive. Polygamous. Girls were traded. Promised to somebody when really young. Even before the girl was born sometimes. And all the men beat their ‘wives’. Even killed them sometimes if they were unfaithful.’

‘So the women were too afraid to cheat?’

‘You’d think so, wouldn’t you? But it seems not. If a woman really fancied a man, she always found some way of having sex with him.’

‘Really?’ Anya laughed as the waiter collected the cheque. ‘So nothing’s changed very much then?’

‘I guess not.’ Then, standing, I asked if she knew where my hotel was.

‘Sure. I walk past it every night on the way to my flat. It’s about ten minutes from here.’ She checked her watch. ‘Shit! We’ve missed last orders.’ Briefly, she looked disappointed. ‘Off-licence?’ Then her face lit up. ‘What about your mini-bar? In your room? How about it? Let’s get really pissed at the society’s expense – and you can tell me everything you know about sex in the Amazon.’ Then, on seeing my expression, she said, ‘Oh, don’t worry. My first lecture tomorrow isn’t until two.’

***

On a real high when I returned home the next day, I phoned Gemma and told her my news.

‘That’s brilliant, Max. Especially about Rebecca. You were right and I was wrong. Congratulations. And what about the girl? Did she make her two o’clock lecture?’

‘Just about. We shared a taxi. I dropped her off on the way to the station.’

‘And are you going to see her again?’

‘Probably not. It was fun, but we both knew it was only a one-off.’

‘Oh! OK. So what’s next with Rebecca?’

***

At the end of a two-day visit to Nailsworth, I sat alone in an ostentatiously quaint café. Between pouring tiny and ever-stronger cups of tea from an elegant if slightly stained silver pot, I ate scones topped with cream and strawberry jam.

I had arrived in the picturesque Cotswold town full of hope that I would discover something about Rebecca and the Downing family. I visited graveyards, churches, pubs, and the offices of the nearest local newspaper in Stroud. I found the site of the old bookshop, now a sweetshop, where my copy of

Coming of Age had first surfaced. I even stopped old people in the street and asked questions. But over the whole two days I learned nothing. '"Nailsworth" could mean any of the villages around here,' and 'Maybe the family left before World War I,' were the nearest things to helpful answers I received. I may have proved Rebecca to be real, but I still had no idea how to find her.

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