

Chapter Ten

Hugh smiled at the gathered hoards of MABO musicians, and clapped his hands together. 'Right,' he said. 'Yesterday you guys did some great preparatory work for our communal composition. I've had your haikus typed up and as you can see, I've done some print-outs so you all have a copy. Marvellous thoughts, and thank you to all of you.'

Posy looked down curiously at her copy of the printed sheet. Her own poem seemed to stand out a mile, and she blushing reviewed it.

The lily pond is still
Your stick plops into cool green water
And a heron shrieks.

Whose stick? Why had she felt so compelled to write *your* stick, not just *a* stick, or *my* stick? Surely it was obvious that the haiku was a thinly-disguised sexual fantasy, Posy imagining herself lolling by a pond with a certain man, the stick representing a certain part of his body, the cool green water obviously her own body, and as for the shrieking of the heron...ugh! She found herself looking around the room, expecting to see sniggering faces, fingers pointing at her. But the others seemed fairly uninterested in the sheet of poetry, and were just looking up at Hugh, their faces full of innocent expectation. Posy felt the dull nip of scorn in her solar plexus. Since coming on the course, she'd noticed something child-like and helpless about the MABO players; the way they sat there passively, going 'educate me', as if their openness to being filled with inspiration was all that was required. There was no initiative, and their deference to their leaders seemed more like passivity, laziness: 'You're so clever, and I know nothing; help me.' They were not actually making any effort to learn; they were just going through the motions, wanting to be entertained. And then, returning her eyes to the sheet of poetry, Posy felt ashamed. The other haiku were much better than her own, much more imaginative. People had sought out really hidden, unexpected areas of the grounds of Camargue Castle, nothing as obvious as the lily pond. George had found a sun dial, hidden in a walled garden. Roy Carlton, the baker, had visited the old kitchens of the Jacobean house and had used poetry to express his disgust at the treatment of servants by the nobility in the 17th century. Lloyd had focussed on his powerful emotions on encountering a mouldering compost heap at the corner of a lawn:

O man, the flies.
Like deadly currants carrying germs.
Old grass cuttings stain my trainers and I weep.

Amina's haiku had a touch of quirky observation:

Cherub statue
Spewing green water into the babbling pond
Your little penis has crumbled away.

'You'll all be wanting to know what the next step is,' Hugh continued. 'Well, we have our lyrics, but no sounds. Sound is the next step! But I don't want you all to disappear into your practice rooms and come up with ... symphonies and sonatas. I want you to get out there again, out into the grounds, and listen. Find the sound that most inspires you. And then we'll translate that into music, music for our instruments or music for our voices.'

'Like the sound of the heron shrieking,' Rhoda suddenly butted in, 'in Posy's haiku. I love that image! So passionate!'

Posy cringed in shame.

'And how do we collect these sounds?' said Phil. 'Do we have to record them?'

'Not at all,' answered Hugh, 'unless you've a portable recorder with you.'

Lloyd and Kevin nodded to each other and gave a discreet thumbs-up.

'You can draw them, jot them down, in your notebooks. For instance, if I was going to notate the shriek of a heron, I could draw something like this.'

Hugh turned to the white board with a thick green marker pen, then stopped, frowning.

'Actually, Posy, how did the shriek of the heron go?'

There was a ripple of laughter, and Posy was horrified. Surely Hugh didn't expect her to do an impression of a heron?

'It was a bit like a peacock,' she said.

'So, sort of *eeek, eeek, eeek?*' Hugh responded, totally unafraid of committing himself to trying out the raucous cry.

'Yes, exactly,' said Posy, melting with relief that she had not been forced to make passionate bird-cries, rich with hidden meaning, in public.

Hugh made a strong, rhythmic zig-zag gesture on the board with the green marker pen.

‘That would do,’ he explained. ‘It’s just an aide-memoire. I’d probably jot down a few verbal notes too, with any extra bits of information. Such as...and I’m making this up now:

echoing, atmospheric...shrill; rising at the end of the phrase. Posy, could you add anything to that?’

‘Erm...yes...I suppose, it was a noise that almost expressed pain, or maybe shock, as if the bird had been disturbed and was crying out a warning.’

‘Wonderful!’ encouraged Hugh. Posy stole a sideways glance at Alexander, desperately hoping that he wasn’t reading anything embarrassingly erotic into her description of the heron’s cry. He was watching her.

‘I heard that sound, too,’ he said. ‘I think I know exactly what you mean.’

To Posy’s amazement, he held his violin up to his chin and raised the bow. ‘It was like this.’

He lowered his eyelids in concentration, and produced three rich, searing chords, rising slightly at the end of each one. There was a murmur of appreciation amidst the orchestra.

‘Thank you!’ smiled Hugh, ‘that illustrates exactly what I had in mind. But don’t worry if you can’t see a way of translating your chosen sound into music - we’re going to work on this together. So, don’t waste the weather - it’s a glorious afternoon. Get out there, MABO composers, and search for beauty!’

The grass tickled Posy’s knees as she returned to the lily pond, hoping to catch a glimpse of the heron again and perhaps hear its call. The pond itself was reached through a small coppice full of ancient trees and curly fronds of bracken. Posy had scratched her shins on brambles hidden amongst the ferns, and now and then found that a tiny green caterpillar had abseiled down from a tree on its invisible thread, and attached itself to her hair. The wood was quiet except for birdsong; the rhythmic cooing of wood pigeons punctuated by the abrupt squawk of a green woodpecker, its rude cry like air being released from the stretched neck of a balloon. The coppice led to a lush, grassy path which offered a circular tour of the pond. Parts of the path were shaded by overhanging trees; the combination of black mud and buttercups suggested that they were slightly boggy, and Posy was not tempted to venture beyond a rough bench, formed from a hollowed-out tree trunk. She checked the seat for ants and sat down with her notebook. The peace was astonishing. It seemed like a crime to try to capture this primeval sound-world and steal meaning from it, rather than to simply be there, in the moment. Posy felt an urge to become one with nature, and at the same time, a frustrating awareness of her intrusion, as a meddling, judgemental human being who was far

from her own urban territory. She lay the notebook down beside her and tried to imagine herself merging with the idyll, imagining herself as a creature of the forest who might sleep in a tree house and live off nuts and berries. A few minutes later, her eyelids were drooping and she was feeling very sleepy. The sun was a flat, blinding disc of white gold, though with her large straw sun hat and baggy linen sundress, Posy felt perfectly comfortable. For a few moments she struggled with her drowsiness and tried to turn her thoughts to her notebook and pencil; it was no use.

Posy was woken by the sound of a huge fart. Her arms jerked, sending her pencil skittering onto the ground, and she looked around her, confused. She had only just nodded off. Where had the noise come from? Was it the heron she heard? Posy turned round to look into the clump of trees behind the bench, and squinting her sun-blinded eyes, could make out the shadowy figure of a man sitting on a picnic rug beneath a large spreading conifer. She could now hear the rustling of a newspaper, quite distinctly; how strange that she hadn't noticed it before. And then she heard it again: yes, it was definitely a fart, followed this time by a cough and the sound of a match being struck. The cough gave the game away: it was George Farrington, the truculent second violinist. Posy stayed very still, being aware that her presence might seem intrusive to George. He was obviously totally oblivious to her; in fact, she could hear him mumbling to himself: 'Ah, that's better. A fag.' A thunderclap of wind emerged once more from between his buttocks, and this time, Posy started to laugh. She pressed her hand to her mouth and listened in fascination. The newspaper rustled again. George was apparently making himself at home. 'Fuckin' politicians,' he commented, before inhaling deeply. 'Ahh, lovely sweet cigarette. Now then. Which bit's Page 3?' Posy's eyes were watering with suppressed laughter, but her mirth was about to give way to alarm. She heard the sound of a zip, and another sigh. Her eyes widened, as she realised that George was fumbling inside his trousers. She couldn't watch - this could turn nasty; but if she stood up to run away, he would spot her, and know that she had seen him. George's private monologue continued. 'Ah, Beverley from Dundee. Not bad. Let's have a look at you. Ahhhh...'

Crouching low and focussing her eyes on the ground, Posy crept away from the bench and as swiftly and silently as she could manage, made her way back down the path in the direction of the coppice. Bent double, in the hope that George would not be alerted by the instantly recognisable sun hat and sandy-red hair peeping out beneath, Posy stumbled along, quite unable to see where she was going. And then, her head made contact with something. She sprang up to her full height, and realised with horror that she had head-butted the groin of Alexander Hamilton.

‘Shhh!’ he hissed. ‘I saw it too. I was in those trees trying to track down a woodpecker. He’s exposing himself over an old copy of the Sun!’

Posy’s hand shot up to her mouth. ‘You don’t think he was exposing himself to *me*, do you?’

‘No way! Don’t even think about it! He thinks he’s alone. He is half deaf, he’ll not have heard you.’

‘But he might have seen me sit down on the bench.’

‘You were facing the other way. I’m sure he’s just entertaining himself. He’d be mortified if he thought he’d been seen. Come on - let’s just move away!’

Posy now let her laughter and tension flood out.

‘Oh my God, this has to be the strangest incident I’ve ever witnessed on a MABO course.’

Alexander seemed less shocked. ‘It’s human nature, I suppose. There’s always a few folk who just come on these courses for a bit of a break in nice surroundings. He wants to relax, not learn Beethoven One.’

‘I wish he’d gone back to his room to do it,’ Posy complained, ‘I mean, ughh, I nearly saw it!’

‘Saw what?’

‘Saw *it*. You know what I mean, Alexander.’

‘Don’t tell me you’ve never seen one before.’

‘That’s not the point. Of course I’ve seen one before - but not out in the wilds, like this.’

They both laughed, then embarrassment suddenly returned.

‘I’m really sorry I head-butted you,’ said Posy.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ Alexander responded agreeably. Posy was vaguely anxious that he might make a comment about the intimate nature of the collision; if he did, what would she say in return? She was overwhelmed with awkwardness and simply could not think of anything to say, and yet she wanted to avoid silence at all costs - it might suggest something too significant.

They left the path and were swallowed up by the cool, green canopy of the coppice. Posy followed Alexander into the shade, finally confident that they were out of sight, and earshot of George.

‘Phew!’

‘Phew.’

Alexander suddenly turned round so that Posy almost walked into him. Their bodies were four inches apart, and staring compulsively at the front of his white shirt, Posy felt a rush of happiness and pleasure. She knew that she was about to kiss him; this was quite a different

feeling from before, when there had been uncertainty and intense fear of messing up, shocking him, spoiling things. Maybe he was now communicating a clear desire to kiss her back - maybe it was just telepathy - or maybe she no longer cared what he thought; she knew her own mind, and that was good. She lifted her arms to his neck and simply went towards his mouth. It was hard to tell who had made the kiss happen. But Posy knew, the barrier between them had been broken; by means of some magical chemistry, each knew what the other wanted and had communicated consent.

As they finally pulled away from each other, an image of Barnaby rose up in Posy's mind. Was it an illusion, a trick of time, that made her first kiss with Barnaby seem so good? The kiss she had just shared with Alexander was lovely, there was nothing repulsive about it, nothing wrong, but her body was not tingling in the way it should. There was a sort of satisfaction and relief; satisfaction that a nice man liked her and relief that she had not misjudged his feelings. And now, it was lovely to have his arm around her shoulder, supporting her, being there for her; his torso a luxurious pillar to lean on. 'What's wrong with you?' a querulous voice piped up in her head. 'He's yours for the taking. Be happy, you ungrateful cow.' But the question of Barnaby hung around. The mess of separating their lives so she could start afresh with Alexander seemed like an overwhelming prospect. It would be like trying to separate the red and blue pigments in a tin of purple paint. What a mess.

'Are you all right?' he asked.

'You are the most sensitive man I've ever met,' said Posy.

'But are you all right?' he persisted.

Posy felt her arm drop away from the warmth of his waist, and dangle coldly in the shady air of the wood.

'I don't know,' she said. 'I'm just thinking about my boyfriend. Barnaby.'

'You did tell me about Barnaby.'

'But I didn't tell you we'd been together for ten years.'

'Ah. Well, no, you didn't. I suppose this must feel a bit strange for you.'

He was being painfully kind. Posy hated her own arms, dangling at her sides; hated them for rejecting him. What a turn up for the books! She, Posy Gibson, faded ex-redhead with a wardrobe full of frumpy beige clothes, was rejecting a kind and handsome single man. It was like finding a diamond and throwing it into the bin because you preferred your familiar old cubic zirconia. It was mad.

'I belong on Rhoda's couch, not you,' she said.

‘I’m not going to Rhoda any more. Since I came back to music, I haven’t needed her. I need music to create meaning in my life. Rhoda helped me to see that. It was Rhoda who encouraged me to ring you that day.’

‘Really?’

Posy frowned. She wondered if Rhoda had planned all of this. How embarrassing. But she wasn’t sure which was worse - the idea of Rhoda pitying her and trying to fix her up with a new man, or the idea of letting Rhoda down by failing to bond with the new man.

‘I don’t want to rush you or pressurise you,’ said Alexander, putting his arms around Posy once more. ‘I just think you deserve better than Barnaby. And I’m better! Aren’t I?’

He looked into her eyes, and Posy saw confidence and humour there. She almost felt as if she loved him; but still, there was no tingling.

Posy opened her mouth to assure Alexander that he was indeed better, when the distant sound of a huge fart reached their ears.

‘That’s going to be my sound,’ said Alexander, nuzzling Posy’s hair, ‘for our communal composition.’

Some of the tension drained away as she laughed out loud.

‘Well, Hugh is a great believer in humour in music.’

‘But how would we recreate the sound in concert?’

‘Just feed George with lots of baked beans, then point his bum in the right direction.’

There was a moment of silence while they contemplated the image. Then they laughed again, and continued through the coppice. Alexander replaced his arm around Posy’s shoulders. She noticed his gentle persistence and felt a rush of conflict. An awkward inertia was building inside her chest; it was as if the moment needed flowing emotions in order to move forward, but nothing was driving her; there was no petrol in the tank, certainly no sexual fuel. She felt an unaccustomed relief when her mobile phone, which she’d charged up the previous night, began to vibrate in her trouser pocket. She rolled her eyes and muttered an apology, unfolding it quickly and clumsily.

‘Hello? Carrie! Hi! How are you?’

Alexander watched patiently as Posy’s face flopped unselfconsciously into an expression of horror.

‘Don’t do anything! Do you hear me? Carrie! Carrie! Are you listening?’

Posy slumped down onto the brambly woodland grass, ignoring the thorns that penetrated her thin linen trousers.

‘Carrie, I care about you. Your life *is* worthwhile! Listen – where’s Dante? Is he all right?’

She looked at Alexander for support, and he reached out his hand to grasp hers, a look of concern on his face.

Posy listened as Carrie wept into the phone, babbling deliriously. She tried to make her voice as calm as possible.

‘He is safe in his cot. Don’t worry about him. If he’s in his cot, he’s OK. Two hours isn’t that long to leave a baby! Just go home now, Carrie. We will sort this out. Don’t get on the train to Inverness! Get straight back on the tube and go home! No, he won’t be dead, he’ll probably be asleep. Yes, yes. I’ll come. I’ll come tonight. I promise. No, it’s no trouble! You need help! I will come!’

She clicked the phone shut and looked into Alexander’s eyes.

‘Oh, God,’ said Posy softly.

‘You must go!’ said Alexander firmly. ‘I’ll take over here.’

‘But the concert! The promoters!’

‘The Beethoven,’ chimed Alexander.

‘The funding!’

Alexander paused.

‘How is your friend?’

‘She was about to abandon her baby. She’d left him at home and was catching a train to Inverness. She’d actually bought a ticket and was standing on the platform.’

‘Does she come from Scotland?’

‘No! She knows nobody up there! She was just running away!’

‘Thank God she phoned you.’

‘Thank God my phone was switched on,’ muttered Posy. ‘From now on, my phone stays on, even in concerts.’

‘You’ll become a pariah.’

‘I don’t care!’

‘Why don’t you ask your friend to come to you?’

‘What, with a baby?’

Alexander said nothing. He settled himself on the grass next to Posy and put his arm round her shoulders.

‘We’ve coped with more difficult situations.’

‘I can just see Leif le Carré’s face. *‘Hon hon! Un bébé!’*’

‘You could give her your room and move in with me.’

Posy was not quick enough to hide the shock.

‘I’m sorry, that was very premature,’ said Alexander.

Posy backed away from the whole subject.

‘You’re right, I can’t go. It would be best if Carrie could come here where at least I could look after her. Rhoda and Amina would help, too.’

‘When they’re not practising,’ added Alexander wryly.

