

RAMONA

The Novel

by

Johnny John Heinz

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Published by Twenty First Century Publishers Ltd. in conjunction with UPSO.

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Published in Great Britain, July 2002.

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ISBN: 1-904433-01-4

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PROLOGUE

AN ORANGE GROVE IN SEVILLE

Ramona

Ramona did not know where she came from: she knew neither her parents nor her precise age. It was early spring in the square beside the Cathedral of Seville, the air heavy with the soft scent of orange blossom. The little girl sat among the orange trees as if daydreaming in the afternoon sun, when the uniformed police officer approached her. He had seen her earlier, too young to be alone, waiting for her parents in the Cathedral? No, too long a time by now.

She told him her name was Ramona. He guessed she was five or six years old, but she could not say where her parents were, or who was with her. He asked if she was with her older sister, her aunt, her nursemaid, only to elicit the same blank response. When he asked where she came from, she simply said it was a long way away, but she spoke with the timbre of the local Spanish. Fernando was taken with the pretty child. He held her hand as he walked with her around the square, hoping to find the desperate parents. No one. They entered the Cathedral. No one. They walked around the square again. No one. She remained quiet and dreamy, unresponsive to his questions.

Back at the police station with his new charge, this was the report that Fernando was filing, when he learnt that there had been a tragic accident earlier in the afternoon near the Cathedral. A young man and woman had been run down, fatally. They had no identification on them. Was there a connection to the young girl? While photographs were arranged to show to Ramona, Fernando took it upon himself to take her to his home to offer her the comfort of his wife and family, with this dreadful prospect looming before her.

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Ramona remained withdrawn, dreamy not sullen. If she knew the man and the woman in the photographs she would not tell, but the police decided they were not the parents. Nor was there any clue to the identity of these two unfortunates. What to do now? Fernando's sister Clara was staying with him for a few days. Sister Clara was the principal of a village school in the Sierra Morena to the north of Seville. She suggested to the officials that she take Ramona up there with her, while the search for Ramona's identity went on. She asked little Ramona, if she would like to come with her into the mountains, and for the first time the little girl smiled as she shook her dark curls and asked if there would be snow.

And the paperwork? Fernando had asked, but they knew the state's bureaucracy would be benign to them, even today: their elder brother had been one of the many personal physicians who attended General Franco. The family joke was that with the scale of resources of the Spanish health service devoted to this one client, he should remain as healthy as any president of the United States. By the time Ronald Reagan tested this proposition some years later, absorbing lead bullets into his personal body space, Franco had long since a(de)scended to wherever it is that late dictators go.

Andalusia and Seville were beautiful but poor in those days, long before the World Exposition brought its glitz to the city. Sister Clara's little green Seat left the suburbs of Seville, passing vast mounds of the city's waste in open fields. Their journey took them north across the plains of the Guadalquivir River, before they ascended towards the west. Passing the town of Nerva, the green Seat chugged behind great trucks of ore through the bleak terrain of the open cast mines surrounding Rio Tinto, where metals, first zinc and later copper, have been extracted for thousands of years. From there they turned north again, into the western tip of the Sierra Morena near the border with Portugal. The road was narrow and potholed, twisting left and right as it climbed into the hills. They passed through villages, deserted for the Siesta, and eventually reached Sister Clara's village. Stone built houses lined the street, their fronts decorated with bright ceramic tiles. Sparsely wooded hills rose around the village, and the afternoon sun filtered through the trees with the welcoming glow of home for Sister Clara, her home and her school.

Clara's upbringing in a convent had equipped her for the life of a

Ramona

schoolteacher, but it had not trained her for marriage, and that meant, in rural Spain, sacrificing the opportunity of motherhood. Though she did not know it as they drove into the village, the little girl beside her in the car would take on the role of daughter. The days of search for Ramona's identity became weeks and then months. Finally, with the help of Franco's personal physician, little Ramona was officially assigned to the care of Sister Clara, who by this time wished for nothing more than that, the fulfilment of a dream that had grown these past months. As for Ramona, she now had an identity and a home.

The schoolhouse was a white stone building with arched windows that gave onto a courtyard, planted with three orange trees. For the village children this was their playground after school and where they would meet to play at weekends. In the corner of the courtyard Sister Clara had a desk where she would mark work and prepare for the next day, as she supervised the children at play. Often she would gaze wistfully at Ramona. How could it be that this beautiful little girl could be abandoned or lost in the middle of Seville? Who could lose this jewel? How could they lose it? Who could bear to lose it? Try as they may, her brother Fernando told her that there was still no trace, no sign, nothing. And the girl? She was less dreamy now, but it was as if time before the square beside the Cathedral was lost to her. Was it amnesia? She was very good at her schoolwork and showed no signs of trauma. Was the memory blocked off to guard against some dreadful secret? That seemed impossible to Sister Clara as she watched the little girl gaily play with her friends. With her long dark tresses, her brown eyes and dark complexion, she certainly looked local, and spoke in the local manner, although in a rather adult way. In medieval times, we would have called it a miracle, Clara said to herself, a miracle for me.

However hard she tried, Sister Clara could not stop the thought from surfacing, again and again, that she had stolen something that did not belong to her. But I have not, she would tell herself, to no avail. Twice a year it was her custom to go to Seville, in the cool of early spring and in September once the heat of the summer had passed. The first trip, September, since Ramona had arrived came due, and Ramona would come with her. Clara would extend her trip

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by two days and she would do her duty: she would enquire about the search for Ramona's real identity.

Sister Clara felt that they must go back to the "beginning", to the square beside the Cathedral, but she was worried lest some hidden trauma be released? Should she take this risk? How else could she jog a hidden memory? She asked Fernando to meet them by the Cathedral, as she was afraid to do this alone: she wanted his stability for the girl, and perhaps for herself too. Clara need not have worried. As they got out of the car, Ramona saw Fernando across the square, twenty metres distant. With a scream of delight, she launched herself towards him. Clara followed behind, unable to contain her tears, joy and relief mingling with the immense sadness that this little girl's affection, so keen for Fernando, was lost to her real family.

As Clara walked next to Fernando, Ramona skipped and danced in front of them, delighted by the memory of the place, perhaps? But no sign of stirrings of earlier memory. They visited the Alcazar, the great Moorish palace of Seville, pillars supporting delicate vaults, a splendour of colour, and passed through into the gardens behind. The paradise these gardens symbolised all those hundreds of years ago is still a paradise of verdant green in the parched landscape of Andalusia. Like a newly born foal, Ramona danced through the gardens, chatting to the visitors smiling at the tourists, and disappeared ahead of them. As Clara and Fernando turned onto a new path, they stopped dead in disbelief: Ramona was chatting to two young tourists, but what was unimaginable to them was that she was speaking fluent English. To Fernando it was a foreign language, but Clara's English was passable: she could recognise the clear accent, the sound of a native. This dark haired, dark skinned Spanish girl? English? After six months, how could she, Clara, not know of her English? But then why would she know, except by chance? Was this the solution to the mystery?

Such was the report Clara later gave at the police station, but it became clear that this was not the solution to the mystery, rather it served to deepen it. What could they in Seville practically do? As a practical matter the brother who was the physician had seen to it that Ramona now belonged to Clara. Did Clara not want her? She did. Then what should they, the police, do? The case was closed. Was it not better so? It was better so. Was it not best for the girl who had

Ramona

been abandoned? It was best. Should we open old wounds? We should not. Is she not happy? She is. The solution: Clara would learn to live with her "guilt". Surely that was best for them all. The concession to her conscience? From then on Clara read to Ramona for one hour every evening in English.

CHAPTER ONE

SIERRA MORENA

Ramona

The little green Seat wound its way up the road into the Sierra Morena, the last time it would make this journey before being consigned, several years overdue, to the great graveyard of little green Seats. For the whole journey Ramona's enthusiasm for the events of the last school term in Seville drew Clara into a world so different from her life at the village school, and held at bay the June heat and the dust of the road. For two years Ramona had been schooled in Seville, staying with her uncle Fernando during term time. Life would change yet again: at the age of seventeen she was planning for her future. She had finished school and it was the summer vacation.

The familiarity of home beckoned Ramona as they drew up beside the schoolhouse. The heat up here in the hills was less than down below on the plains, but it was still the time of siesta. First, they would rest and then she would meet her friends, the few of her age who remained in the village. Mostly work in the big city had by now beckoned, or for some of the boys, the copper mines. Clara had her new youngsters in the school, but the numbers had dwindled each year in line with the reduced opportunities for adults of working age.

Restless, Ramona walked out into the hills, knowing that this place was soon to be in the past for her, but what should she do? Where should she go? She had looked at university courses but remained undecided. Her singing teacher wanted her to follow her talents into music. Her other choice was foreign literature. In Spain or abroad, she wondered, as she ran through the list of scholarships she could apply for. What would Clara think? She would find out.

Ramona

Clara's practice of reading to Ramona had survived into adolescence: the idea of a television in the household would have been anathema to Clara. That evening Ramona brought out a new book that had just been published to great acclaim. It is the work of an English professor in Cambridge, Ramona told Clara. Clara reached across to take the book and read the title page: *A Melody of Sadness by Alistair Jamolla*. Clara flicked open the book, looked back up at Ramona, and then started to read.

A Melody of Sadness - Chapter One

I curse the wealth of my family: the cause of my misfortune. What does wealth bring us but convenience: what can it take away? Everything, believe me, everything. That is my story. The story starts right here in Cambridge, where I have completed my first year as a research fellow, aged twenty-two. It starts on a Sunday morning, and to be more precise it starts in the Anchor pub in Silver Street, just a few hundred yards from my college, where I have rooms in addition to my house just outside town, and just a few hundred yards from the Graduate Centre, what we call the Grad Pad, where I have parked my car.

It is one of those Cambridge days we will always remember. The sun shines in a clear blue sky, the few students who remain will also be gone for the summer in a couple of days, and the first of the language students, many female, are arriving for their summer language courses. The adverse ratio in this university town of several men to each woman is about to reverse for the summer months, or at least to achieve a happy equilibrium as the language students pour in. Serious types like me, graduates, remain behind, for our work of course, research.

I would not embarrass myself by saying that I was humming to myself as I stepped out of the porters' lodge onto Trumpington Street, but the fact is that I was. I crossed the road and turned down Silver Street, as another one bit the dust. I walked the couple of hundred yards to the Anchor. Ahead of me was the bridge over the river Cam. Below were punts available for hire. Upstream to the left would take you out to the village of Grantchester through the meadows. Downstream took you past the backs of the colleges, under the bridges out to Magdalene Bridge. Later maybe: for now the Greene King beckoned, if not Tolly Cobbold, or both - the favoured breweries. I turned left and entered the Anchor.

Even in those days you could find Australians behind the bar. This one brought me the requested pint of bitter and I relaxed against the bar.

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No one I knew was there, but it was still early and the pub was about two thirds full. Later it would spill out through the doors on a fine day like this.

A magnifying glass concentrates sunlight to a point of focus, a bright spot of heat and light. Maybe this is just how I see it in retrospect, but as she came through the entrance of the bar, it was as if the whole place fell silent and focused on her. In a hand of three cards, I drew three aces from serendipity that day. Ace number one: I was alone at the bar. Ace number two: I was in her direct line of entry. Ace number three: this was her first day in Cambridge, so no one else had got to her yet. I guessed I had between three and five seconds to play my three aces, as she flashed a smile to the room at large. How is it that deep brown eyes can simultaneously spark with fire? Or combine indifference with invitation? Her complexion was southern, maybe Spanish; her wavy tresses of hair bounced on white clad shoulders as she moved towards me, white silk blouse, slim blue jeans, silver belt.

My natural, relaxed courtesy must have rescued me within the window of those few seconds, because she was accepting my offer of a drink. She asked for white wine, so I ordered her a Pimms. She made a heavily accented formal introduction of herself, Carmen followed by a succession of names that meant nothing to me then. The initial stiffness was a relief: no need to pretend to be cool.

Sharp as she may have looked, Carmen was young and naïve, a combination we may deride in the lecture theatre, but that we consider attractive in the situation of the bar of the Anchor on a fine June day: so young and naïve that I knew her life story by the time I was on my second pint of bitter. Like me, she had been orphaned at a young age and had no family to speak of. Unlike me, she had no inherited money but lived in institutions until she set out into the big wide world at the age of fifteen. She was now seventeen and had earned money in bars and restaurants (I later found out as a singer) to finance her language studies here in Cambridge. She had arrived yesterday evening and taken digs out on the Hills Road.

Pimms is conducive to acceptance of punting invitations. We walked out of the Anchor and strolled upriver to the wooden hut where they hire out punts by the hour, determining we should go downstream through the colleges. We walked down the steps and boarded one of the punts moored to the wooden landing jetty. I grasped the pole and expertly manoeuvred the punt out into midstream, under the bridge, and we were on our way. It was still early enough for punt traffic to be light. The river gleamed green as we slipped past Queen's College and

Ramona

could shortly make out the familiar sculpted features of King's College Chapel. Carmen sat back in the seat facing aft, with me in her field of view, as with a flick of the wrist I propelled the pole to the riverbed, thrust down and caught the pole on the rebound, driving the punt smoothly forward through the still waters, gently rippling behind us.

New passengers see how easy it is, before requesting their turn to punt; to power and direct the boat by means of the pole, dropped to the river bed to push the boat forward, and steer. As they assume their position on the wooden platform at the stern, the world seems to change, as in a dream where control of events slips away and the simplest actions lead to strange consequences. The chance of their staying dry approximates to zero, and the chance of their staying in the boat, and not the river, is not that much higher. Carmen battled the odds, as the punt circled, rammed and ostentatiously ignored her instructions transmitted to it via the pole. She stayed out of the river: not bad for a first time Spanish seventeen-year-old after a couple of glasses of Pimms.

I took over, and we moved on beneath the overhanging willows, beneath the Bridge of Sighs, past St John's College and on to Magdalene Bridge. We turned and lazily retraced our course, drifting slowly past the colleges beneath bridges lined with tourists, deftly avoiding the growing fleet of first time punters.

I said I had three aces. Well, it was the fourth ace, the last in the pack that clinched it. After dropping the punt, we wandered the short distance back to my college. My college has the advantage of being situated near the cake shop, so I picked up a creamy walnut cake and suggested we take tea in my rooms. The fourth ace simply popped out of the colour supplement of the Sunday paper lying on my table: they were selling tickets to a special rendition of Bizet's Carmen in the Ears Court Exhibition Hall in London. I did not consult Carmen. I simply excused myself while I made a phone call. Tickets were available for Thursday and I took two.

Ramona

Ramona interrupted Clara's reading.

"Clara, I don't see the melody of sadness in this, the title."

"Patience, Ramona. Perhaps this is setting the scene of what will be lost. Maybe those first words of the book are a clue, the curse on his wealth."

"But I'm enjoying it anyway, Clara. Carry on."

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A Melody of Sadness

After tea we strolled down to the Grad Pad and picked up the car. It was as I dropped Carmen off at her digs that I asked her to come with me to London on Thursday. I did not know, but I thought she was thrilled, and I hoped so.

I had seen the Royal Tournament, staged by the military at Earls Court. It is a stadium rather than an opera house or theatre, but it had been specially set up for the production of Carmen. As I entered the building with my Carmen, I imagined her as fitting the bill for the central role, and the many heads turning towards us, and looking rapidly away again, confirmed me in this belief.

We took our places, the lights dimmed and the orchestra struck the first tones. We were transported to Spain, to a flamenco world, and I could not help but wonder at its effect on the girl by my side. Each time I turned to look at my Carmen during the performance, I saw a reflection of the Carmen on the stage. I saw the fire in her eyes as the stage Carmen sparked with fury. I saw tears glisten on her long dark lashes as the stage Carmen was consumed by grief. The whole opera was alive beside me. It was as we left that she told me she could sing all Carmen's roles in that opera. I laughed in half belief. But there was something more. As we drove back to Cambridge that evening I could not help but believe that our lives were about to change, and I could not help but believe that she felt the same.

Ramona

Again Ramona interrupted. "That bit's too short, Clara, if this is a romance. Also, he's too smug. He tells us how clever he is, but what about Carmen?" Clara continued to read.

A Melody of Sadness

I reflected with detachment the next day. What was I doing with a seventeen-year-old Spanish language student? How could she fit into my social life, the Cambridge dons, the academics? And this is my life. This is what I wish to do. She, a young girl with no formal training, how could she become part of this life I lead at Cambridge? All these years later, I wish I had asked her then about her own aspirations. I would have learned of her voice training from an early age, of her precocious musical talents, that she could have aspired to sing professionally in opera. Would it have helped? Would anything have changed? Probably not, but today I grasp at straws. Maybe if the best thing in our life had

Ramona

been delayed it would have been better, but I digress: what is done is done; she sang later and I still have all her recordings.

Suffice it to say, that my standing in both the college and the university rose rapidly. I know and I admit that having Carmen on my arm contributed more to my advancement than did my intellectual prowess in those days. We all have to make our way in life as we best can, and the truth is that Carmen, as I soon became aware, drew attention to me within the community. On Carmen's eighteenth birthday we were married, and before she was nineteen (I twenty-three) our daughter was born. A teenage mother? As far from it as you can imagine. Carmen loved our daughter, as I know she loved me. We took a maid to help, and this is when Carmen decided to take up where she had left off with her singing, her vocation, not at the expense of our daughter but to complement her. I always wanted her to sing the themes from Carmen to me, but she said they must be reserved for special occasions. I adored her Wagner and suffered her Verdi, in private. Her linguistic skill in song was never echoed in her spoken English that remained coloured by her mother tongue. We had it all.

Ramona

Clara stopped reading at the end of the first chapter.

"I think that's beautiful," she said.

"You're just a sentimental old lady who never had any kids," Ramona replied.

"No, Ramona. I mean the ability to sing as she does, and somehow I feel that is how she lives."

"That's what you feel when you sing, Clara."

"No, you do. I don't. That's the difference." Clara gave Ramona her wistful look.

Clara continued reading, starting on chapter two of *A Melody of Sadness*. Outside the light began to dim and the sounds of the night whispered to them through the open window. Clara's voice undulated with the text, and Ramona sat dreamily at her feet, letting the words of the book wash through her, living the story set so far away in the city of Cambridge.

"I'm sleepy," Clara said, as she closed the book at the end of the second chapter. "It's the long, hot drive back from Seville. Let's walk in the fresh night air."

The lady and the young girl stepped out into the cool of the late

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evening. The white arches of the schoolhouse gleamed in the moonlight. They crossed through the moonshade of the orange trees and out onto the village street. The ceramic faces of the houses glinted in the foreground, while darker shapes were set back among the shadows. The darkness of the hills loomed above them, but above that the blue-black sky was speckled with stars.

“I loved that chapter,” Ramona said, “the story of the little girl. The life she had. I don’t know it’s...” - she stopped and tears formed in her eyes - “...what I didn’t have.”

Clara put her arm around Ramona, in the knowledge of the part of her life that she, Ramona, had lost, the life before the orange grove beside the Cathedral in Seville.

“It’s what I sometimes feel, when I sing,” Ramona whispered. “As if it’s really there.”

“Shall we stop the book, Ramona,” Clara asked.

“No, please. Not that. I loved it. I love it now. The little girl.” She brightened and laughed. “Just think, Clara, if we had never met.” This thought no longer had a place in the conception of Clara’s world.

CHAPTER TWO

CAMBRIDGE

Ramona

The next day was, of course, school as usual for Sister Clara. Ramona slept late, but in the middle of the morning she joined Clara to give the children a music lesson. Ramona played the piano and the children sang. Then Ramona sang to the children as she played the piano, and they clapped and banged their desks, laughing when she had finished. After that Clara continued with her lessons.

All afternoon Ramona went through prospectuses she had collected, scholarship application forms and books of advice, but still she drew a blank. What was right for her? She could combine the things she liked, but she knew it was better to choose, to focus, to concentrate. She remembered the advice of the German philosopher Hegel: that the young man does not wish to choose because of all the other things that the choice excludes. But you have to choose. I know that, she told herself. The luxury of choice is the misery of choice, she thought. If I could be like my friends who are good at just one thing. For them it's easy. Then she thought of the girl Carmen in the story, of how she had financed her way to her course in Cambridge, when even younger than Ramona now was. Incredible, but just a story. I suppose it does happen. Be practical, Ramona, be practical.

They ate late that evening, and relaxed, still weary from the travels of the previous day.

"Just one chapter tonight," Ramona said, and snuggled on the floor at Clara's feet. Clara began to read the third chapter.

Johnny John Heinz

A Melody of Sadness

It truly was a thunderbolt from the blue, unbelievable and indescribable. I have mentioned my family's wealth. It had all devolved to me, the last of the line, the only heir. I did not need it. I had my work in Cambridge. I had my aspirations. The wealth was simply locked away in trusts, in investments and in controlling stakes in the family businesses, long since professionally managed. This was not part of my life. It probably never would be. But it changed my life irreversibly. It destroyed my life through the mere fact of its existence.

It was a day you do not forget, a day you do not ever forget. Carmen called me from the house. She spoke clearly, she spoke rationally and to the point, but there was a depth of emotion in her voice, which I have never heard before or since in the voice of any man or woman. The maid had been bludgeoned into unconsciousness and our daughter was gone.

Three days later we received a ransom note with no amount specified and no instructions, just an indication of what was to come. That was the last we heard, never another whisper. We never saw our daughter again. The last birthday we celebrated was her fifth birthday, just a few months before, at our house with her little friends from kindergarten. I would have given everything we had to get her back, all that wealth of mine that was of no value to me. It was of value to someone, but that someone never came for the exchange. They never returned to us what was most valuable in the world.

For me the first chord of a melody had been struck which would run through me in the years to follow, the first jarring chord of the melody of which I write.

Ramona

Clara stopped and looked down at Ramona, on the ground by her feet. Ramona was expressionless. Then she said, "Has he given up already?"

"I don't think so," Clara replied. "Maybe it was not like that for him then. Maybe it just seems like it afterwards from what followed."

"How can it get worse?" Ramona asked.

"Not worse. Just how the emotions reverberate through him. What else is affected?"

"He has not lost everything," Ramona said.

"No, he has not lost everything," Clara agreed. She continued to read.

Ramona

A Melody of Sadness

I will not dwell on *me*. I continued to work in college, my successes grew. I will not dwell on *Carmen*. She was tougher than me, and as to her singing, a young woman in her mid twenties, she was on the verge of fame. The first few months were agony, but agony can be borne: hope breathes life into you at the worst of times. It was what had changed in each of us that could not be borne. I now realise this, but I did not know then. I write this now to help with the understanding of what follows.

Carmen had always been spirited, lively, the fire of her soul reflected in her eyes. That is why she could sing the pieces of Bizet's *Carmen*: it was her own. In the depths of our loss, I could not tolerate her spirit, which to me was almost a betrayal, and as for Carmen, she could not live with my deep sadness, with my wounded spirit; she could not watch my blood spill out onto the floor everyday of our life. My grief devastated her as much as the loss of our daughter. She, our daughter, would not have wished this on you, Carmen would tell me. But what could I do?

Ramona

Clara stopped. "Grief affects them each differently," she said. "Carmen wants him to live to fight another day."

"He has everything he needs, except what he wants, Clara. She has had a life of having nothing, but what she made for herself. He had education, wealth. It fell into his lap."

"You're right," Clara agreed. "She suffers deeply, but must do something. She cannot sit and grieve, not for herself, not for him and not for the daughter, she would say."

Clara continued to read and the story unfolded as the seeds of dissent germinated between the author and Carmen. A deep sadness descended on the room as Clara's voice read on, and chapter three became chapter four as she read late into the night.

Ramona would normally miss breakfast, the sleep of the seventeen-year-old taking priority. This morning she was in the kitchen before Clara. She could not wait. She spoke as Clara entered the room.

"I cannot accept it," Ramona said.

"What?" Clara asked.

"That Carmen left him I can accept. It all seemed to lead to that. But without trace?"

Johnny John Heinz

“Was she being kind?” Clara asked.

“How?” This was not clear to Ramona.

“There was no remedy for the rift. If she killed all hope, would he recover?” Clara answered.

“I suppose that’s true, Clara. Maybe he wouldn’t recover, but certainly he would never recover as long as he had her, or I suppose even access to her, knew where she was.”

“I think she felt the grief of each was feeding the grief of the other. So much time had elapsed, that she had given up hope of ever seeing the daughter. She went for the clean break.”

“It’s cruel to be kind,” Ramona breathed. “She’s a powerful woman.”

“I think that’s it.”

“These last two chapters have rocked me. I’ve never read a book like it.” Ramona looked at Clara, who nodded her assent. “Such a simple story, but the tension between them, the emotion dragged out of each of them in these last two chapters is killing me.”

“Do you want me to stop reading?”

“I couldn’t ask that. You must read. You must, tonight.”

This was the last day of term for Clara’s children. They finished at lunchtime. In the afternoon Clara planned to drive down to Rio Tinto, where she dispensed charity on behalf of the convent to support children in the mining communities that surrounded the copper mines. Ramona came with her. They would also take a fond farewell of the little green Seat and pick up the smart new car, which should not overheat and break down, and, the *coup de grace*, which had air conditioning. The last ride in their mobile oven would be down the hill, more breeze.

Clara’s charity work had its inception years before Ramona appeared on the scene. Spain’s wealth had grown, even during the last eleven years since Ramona had been involved. Many of the old public health issues had disappeared. The dire needs of children in miners’ families racked by loss of breadwinners, through accident, prison or simply escape to a new life, was no longer a concern they handled. Particularly since Ramona came on the scene, Clara had sought to develop the talents of gifted children, to help raise them from their lot, for their own good, the good of their families, and for the benefit of the community. Clara had seen in Ramona’s own spectacular

Ramona

talents, how these could so easily have been lost. What would have happened to Ramona, she thought, if it had not been Fernando to report events in the square beside the Cathedral?

In her early teens Ramona had taken to this work, because she loved to spend time with their charges. For her it was a world apart from the limited scope of their little village in the Sierra Morena and the games of the schoolyard. She was a child then, and she had her favourites, and she still had them now.

Maria's grandmother was eighty-three years old, and Maria was fourteen. She relied on her grandmother for everything, no other family remaining. For four years Ramona had brought music to Maria, and Maria sang from those sheets. As she entered the single room where they lived, Ramona could not help but think of Carmen in the story, *A Melody of Sadness*. Did little Carmen have a grandmother to look after her when she was fourteen? Did she have a child like Ramona to bring her music? Ramona thought not. Today she had brought sweets as well as music. It was hard to know who was more thrilled by the sweets, the child or the grandmother. This is hardship, Ramona thought, but so much less than it used to be, and again she thought of the fictitious Carmen, of how she would have lived. Clara came into the room, greeted and hugged the grandmother and the child, and then, taking Ramona with her, moved on, to work their way through the town. Clara distributed books these days in the hope that they would be read and passed on. The sight of one of her books in another person's house would give her great satisfaction. She was also glad that her job here was no longer the grave necessity it used to be, that she was now ever more a luxury item as the community's welfare grew.

In their smart new air-conditioned car, driving back up into the hills, Ramona talked about Maria.

"You know," she said to Clara, "when I look at Maria, I think of how much harder it was for Carmen."

"For who?" Clara asked.

"For Carmen in *A Melody of Sadness*."

"But she's a story, Ramona."

"It doesn't matter. Think of Carmen. As Maria, how could she have lived with him, with Alistair. The wrong person wrote the book, Clara: it should have been written by Carmen."

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“By the character rather than the author,” Clara laughed.

“He thought he could give everything to get his daughter back, but in the same breath he claimed his wealth was worth nothing, so what was he giving? She knew worth, Clara. She came from nothing and knew worth. Did he know the worth of his daughter? The worth of Carmen?”

“I think we have to read further, Ramona. We must read further.”

But chapter five was the story of a vain search for Carmen, interviews, appeals, newspaper advertisements, money was no object, money was there: Carmen was not. They languished over chapter six and began to build their own fantasies about how chapter seven should continue. By then it was the end of the week, and Ramona returned to Seville and the summer job she had arranged. Clara planned to take her September visit to Seville a couple of months early. She knew that the days she would be spending with Ramona would grow less from now on. She was prepared for this but wanted to abstract herself gradually. In some ways she thought it would be harder for her to lose her niece or younger sister, as she thought of Ramona, than to lose a daughter-she thought of the book, *A Melody of Sadness* - but not an infant.

Whether it was *A Melody of Sadness* that influenced Ramona, or the natural choice of her research, she decided that she would like to consider reading literature at Cambridge. Her background and academic record did not match the standard requirements, but she was given a personal recommendation that compensated for that. She was invited to visit Cambridge in September and discuss the mechanics of competing for a place with her background, for entry in the following year. When Clara realised that the book had influenced Ramona was when she saw that Ramona would meet Alistair Jamolla. With her on the journey, Ramona took *A Melody of Sadness* that Clara had read to her, up to chapter six.

Ramona had never travelled abroad. When she arrived at London Gatwick, she amused herself wondering which countries Carmen had seen before she had arrived in Cambridge at the very same age as Ramona, in the book. She could not imagine herself arriving to meet the man she would marry. She could not imagine herself having sung in restaurants and bars to finance a course in the city of Cambridge. To be honest, she was worried about how she was going to find her

Ramona

way there. She had never been anywhere unfamiliar on her own. These were her worries before she even disembarked from the plane.

In the corridors leading to immigration, milling with strange people, panic set in, and she found herself leaning against a pillar sobbing her heart out, wishing she had stayed at home. An elderly German lady helped her through passport control and to find her luggage, after which her confidence grew. The instructions she had with her came into focus. She was able to find the train to London Victoria, to find her way to the underground station, to make the interminable journey across to the other side of London to Liverpool Street Station, to find the Cambridge train with one change at Audley End, and finally to join a taxi of four people from Cambridge station to the Blue Boar Hotel, where she had a reservation.

Ramona had planned to read on from chapter six of *A Melody of Sadness* on the plane, and then on the train, and then in the evening at the hotel. Now it was breakfast of the next day. Tomorrow she was due at the college. She was bright, alert and excited. Today, I will retrace the steps of Carmen on my first day in Cambridge, she said. It was a Sunday. It was September not June, but both months were outside term time. White blouse, blue jeans and silver belt, she said, remembering Carmen in the book. Shoes? I don't know.

From her street plan she saw she should turn left from the hotel and walk down Trumpington Street. Reaching Silver Street, to her left she saw the cake shop. It is early, she thought, I will look into the college first, before I go to the Anchor. She walked through the entrance by the porters' lodge. Just as all those years ago when she had stepped into the paradise of the Alcazar gardens in Seville, she felt she had crossed a doorway into another world, the buildings, the gardens, the creepers, the rich green lawns that she had never seen in Seville. The book came alive to her as she stepped into a world that had been graced by the Carmen of the novel. She imagined herself as Carmen on the arm of her new husband, and suddenly, she could see how it might have happened, how the story could come true. One enchanted garden seemed to lead to the next, as she moved through archways and gates. She was oblivious to whether she was just walking in circles or travelled miles, as she lost herself in the experience.

Ramona found herself back at the porters' lodge, eleven thirty, scene one. She walked along Trumpington Street, crossed and went

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down Silver Street. I do not know which route Carmen took, but this will do, she said to herself, as she followed Silver Street. On the left was the Anchor and she experienced the magic of reliving a fairy tale. Ahead was the bridge; below was the river, all as she knew it to be.

She pushed open the door of the Anchor, no bar but stairs up and stairs down, where should she go? She went to the upper bar where she found a group of rowdy young men to the left and ahead some Japanese tourists. She flashed a smile to the assembled crowd and moved to the bar. She felt ignored and moved through the pub. She took a place further along the bar and ordered a mineral water, looking around nervously, surprised that the young man behind the bar asked for money straight away. She paid and sipped her water. Relax, she said, and forced a smile for herself, moving across to a table in the sun by the window. Outside she could see boats on the river, a group of kayaks racing up from under the bridge to land just upstream from the Anchor. She decided to stay for at least as long as it takes to drink a glass of mineral water.

As soon as she left the pub, strangely dressed men in stripy blazers with flat straw hats, boaters, on their heads surrounded her offering boat rides. She chose one of the young men and descended to a punt, the right direction, downstream, the backs. She closed her ears to the guided tour in a New Zealand accent, and eventually told him to shut up. It was all so familiar to her from the book, and yet so foreign. It was so much less real than in the book: the characters were not there. It was just Ramona and a pole operator from New Zealand.

She did not go back to the college for tea and was not invited to a performance of Carmen at Earls Court. In fact, she had spoken to no one in a social capacity and wondered about the famous three to five seconds and the need for four trumps, but it had been fun, drinking in the atmosphere, as she wandered through the colleges. Back at the hotel, she was motivated to spend the evening reading the first six chapters of *A Melody of Sadness* that Clara had read to her, and was as moved by the story as the first time.

Everyone is nervous when their heart is set on something they want and their own performance is what counts for them to get it. Ramona was no exception as she took the familiar route down Trumpington Street the next morning. Running through her head were the literary

Ramona

topics she had chosen to discuss, should she have the opportunity, or create the opportunity. Her literature teachers in Seville had given her no guidance, but her music teacher had explained how to twist the conversation and had conducted role-plays with her. Ramona was dressed in a knee length black skirt and a white blouse, adequate for the warm weather, and in her case setting off well her dark wavy hair, hanging almost to her waist, while maintaining a serious, formal, Spanish air.

Not a student was in sight: tourism ruled on Trumpington Street today. She was still early, so she looked into the courtyard and onto the green lawns of a college called Corpus Christi. She wondered if this was a special religious sect. On the right was the magnificent chapel, which she recognised and had seen from the punt the day before, of Kings College.

"I am me. I will be early," she said, marching to the porters' lodge, and added a few Spanish swear words to herself to boost her confidence. She was surprised by the deference and cordiality with which she was greeted, she a mere supplicant. Unusually Mr Jamolla will not be able to come down to receive you, she was told, by reason of a knee injury. She was led through the grounds she had visited the day before, through an entrance and up a staircase. The porter knocked on the door and she was invited to enter. She thanked him profusely, and wondered whether she should give him a tip, before deciding not.

Alistair Jamolla was expecting the Spanish girl, an excellent prospect judging by her file before him. He looked forward to meeting her, out of the ordinary, clearly exceptionally talented. We should get photographs of the female candidates, he thought, displaying a politically incorrect attitude unusual for him, but then they did not get many Spanish girls for English Literature. He heard the knock on the door and mechanically invited entry.

He started involuntarily as she thanked the porter, the sound of her voice. Then the door swung open. She was framed in the doorway. He froze as he saw Carmen the first time she visited these rooms. Ramona stopped similarly frozen. A sensation welled up from deep within her, and she spoke one word.

"Papa."

The feeling was mutual, momentous, and instantaneous... and

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then it was gone. *He* was stiff. *She* was formal. *She* did not know why she had spoken that word. *He* knew it was not Carmen. *Neither* knew what to say. *They* had to say something. *Each* was unaware of the other's confusion. *He* started the interview. It went nowhere. *She* raised the subjects she had rehearsed. *He* had not asked for them. *He* looked bland. *She* stuttered. *She* aborted. He tried to say something but could say nothing.

Ramona pulled his book from her bag and placed it on the table, a gesture that just seemed right. Again he looked at the face of Carmen, the figure of Carmen, the voice of Carmen and the movements of Carmen. This must be a trick. The age. The age was right, but it would be for a trick. What should he say, something non-committal?

"Has your mother told you about me?" he asked.

"My mother?" she was confused. "I have never known my mother." Should she say this?

"Everyone knows their mother." It came out unasked, and Carmen's child would know her mother - the child was five at the time.

"Sir, this is a literature interview."

"You produced my book. It is about a mother, a father, a child."

Her enthusiasm took over from what she had read, the second time, the previous night. "The early years of the child...so beautiful...missing for me."

"Missing?"

"Sir, I cannot say this in an interview..."

"Let's halt the interview, talk about the book, *A Melody of Sadness*."

"My...my aunt read it to me. The first six chapters."

"The first six chapters!" Exasperation.

"I read them again last night. The book rocked me then, and it does now."

"Then?" Accusatory

"Six months ago. It was more real than punting on the River Cam was yesterday."

"More real?"

"The characters were there in the book. Not yesterday. Only me, and some creep from New Zealand."

Ramona

“Who is Carmen?”

“I did not know.” She reached deep inside herself to what she knew was there, but did not know where. She found feeling but no fact. “Sir, I am the first interview candidate to ask this, probably in the history of the university.”

“Ask.”

“May we do a DNA test?”

The interview did not end with this request. After he complied, Ramona chose to sing a piece from Carmen that she rendered without music.

He had not listened to Bizet’s Carmen, since his Carmen had left; he could not, but he still owned all her recordings. He played them on low volume to achieve the instrumental accompaniment, as she sang several pieces faultlessly from memory. Below the window a group of tourists and college staff gathered as the afternoon progressed. Without knowing it, Ramona was giving a concert to a group of fifty by three o’clock and more than twice that by four o’clock. They stood in silence, hearing just the voice, not the music. Only as the final refrain died away did the applause draw their attention to the open window. As he looked out at the courtyard below, he knew that the DNA test was irrelevant. But he would do it anyway, for the trust fund.

CHAPTER THREE

THE READING GROUP

The Reading Group

The reader closed the book and looked around at the group of ladies in the reading group. There was silence for a moment, as they released themselves from the world of make-believe, as the reader's voice trailed to a close and the real world resumed. Still no one spoke. They were lulled into the state the bedtime story intends to achieve, almost.

Vera spoke first, to comment on the reader's book. "Moving. Style. Sorry, I'm lost for words."

Gloria: "I loved it. But the plot!"

"The plot?" the reader asked.

"Yeah. Not credible for me. Change it. You know, coincidence. We don't like it."

"But it's me," the reader countered.

"Yeah, I know it's you, your style." Still Gloria speaking. "You wrote it, so I'm giving you editorial advice on *Romana*. It's what these groups are for."

The reader smiled. "Gloria, Ramona, "Ra", not Romana, "Ro". I'm Ramona. The book is *Ramona*. It's me, Gloria. Don't criticise the plot. It's me, Ramona."

The implication was obvious. The circle gasped, and Gloria felt for a moment very stupid, and then very privileged. She leant across and hugged Ramona, as liquid emotion expressed itself in her eyes.

This could have been the last session of the reading group for reasons that became apparent two days later. Did Ramona know? I think the answer is no. Why did it have to be so soon?

Gloria was dozing in bed when the telephone rang. She was

Ramona

always sleepy in the morning. She tried to cut down on the white wine after dinner, but there was always a reason. Who the hell was this? It was Vera.

"Have you seen?"

Gloria raised herself onto her pillow. "Seen what, Vera? Sorry, been out with the dog this morning. Just got back." Gloria sank down again, duty done for the moment.

"Shall I read it?" A buoyant, chuffed, sort of voice.

"Go ahead."

"Bla, bla, bla, I quote, Gloria, and the prize for literature goes to, Gloria, you know the prize, there is only one, goes to ... are you listening, Gloria... Ramona Evans. Ramona's best-known work is *A Melody of Sadness* published under the *nom de plume* of Alistair Jamolla. The first part of her next work, *Ramona*, a trilogy, was released yesterday, and has been previewed to high acclaim. Ramona has been nominated as ... Gloria?"

"Vera, I am stunned, but I believe one hundred percent of what you say."

"Our Ramona, Gloria. Can you believe it? Our Ramona, who's reading us the first part of her new book, *Ramona*!"

"I just think about the other day, Vera. Is it true?"

Ramona

It was some hours later in Buenos Aires, given the time difference, before the news came though, and some time more before it was disseminated.

She was eager and enthused for the forthcoming performance as she sat in the dressing room, just a few minutes to go. A knock on the door and an envelope placed before her. She opened it deliberately, as it was her manner to do everything. A press cutting. She put it down. She called the make-up girl over for a final check up. She looked at the cutting. Literature prize. Boring. She looked again. *Nom de plume*. She saw the confusion of names and glanced again, astonished. *She* wrote the book? *My daughter* wrote the book. So it wasn't him after all. A smart little vixen. The Prize for Literature! Maybe I will make contact after all. Time to go. She picked up her trademark rose. It was in her contract, part of her show: before she went out to play

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the principal part of Carmen, she would parade on stage with a rose in her teeth.

The Reading Group

"Gloria, Gloria, Gloria," she said, and the ladies in the circle blinked, "this is not the end of our circle, just because I win a prize, sorry, *the* prize. You have not read *Ramona*. This is not the end. I was seventeen in Cambridge. How old am I now?" Ramona was not seventeen by a long way.

Vera: "So what do you want to say?"

"Yes, I did write *A Melody of Sadness*, but I wrote it for my father, and so I pretended he wrote it. And he would have written it. Do you understand? All those years he lived his own melody, the sadness of the years of loss, first me, and then Carmen. That's why I gave the book the name. But there's also the story of Ramona, the story you don't know, yet, the story I am still writing. I have never seen my mother, well, not after the initial phase."

Gloria: "Thank you, Ramona. We will all read your book. Just let me say," she looked around for agreement, "we are a literary society, not a self-help psychiatric group. I think I speak for us all."

Ramona was not intimidated. "I'm sure you do, since none of the rest of them speak. The next meeting's at my place on Wednesday the sixteenth. Come who will. But I'd like to see all of you." Ramona stood up and left.

Celebrity has an attraction, sufficient attraction that Ramona was forgiven her withering comment on the reading group's powers of self-expression. Even the self-appointed spokesman, Gloria, turned up to the next week's meeting. There was embarrassment and tension, covered by enthused discussion of *Ramona*, and then they sat down for the next stage of Ramona's reading of the new book, or as they now knew, that part which had been written to date.

"Before I start," Ramona opened, "let me just ask. You do understand why, in the book, *Ramona*, Ramona could only have read up to chapter six of *A Melody of Sadness*, by the time she met her father?"

Vera: "Thank you, Ramona. In the absence of time travel, it

Ramona

is abundantly clear. If you, sorry she, wrote *A Melody of Sadness*, then all those chapters we love so well, about the father and daughter, had not yet happened."

Ramona laughed. "I'm sure you have as much a problem with that as I do. It cannot be. But remember, you have to have read both books to spot the logical flaw. So what? This is Art, ladies, Art. The fact is that the book is why Ramona went to Cambridge (even if she did write it afterwards), she did meet Jamolla, she did re-enact Carmen's first day in Cambridge and Clara did read the book to her. OK, the historical sequence may be wrong, but that's the way it seems in those few months looking back, and guess what? It's closer to the truth than the simple sequence of events. As I said, Art."

"How did you get into Cambridge?" The first question ever from the elegant, silk clad lady on the right.

"We'll come back to that." Ramona did not know how to answer that one at this stage, and continued to read them the book, *Ramona*.

Ramona

Few candidates have secured a place at Cambridge as rapidly as Ramona, deserving as the others may have been. The "interview" was in mid September, and she started there just three weeks later together with the year's intake of freshers for the Michaelmas term. It may have been hard for Clara, or maybe not; Ramona did not know, wrapped up in her new life as a Cambridge undergraduate. It was a strange life for a young girl from a village in the Sierra Morena, briefly baptised in Seville to city life. As to family life, well, how can you call it family life? A father she had never known, a mother she still did not know, a mother who had disappeared without trace, just as the daughter had, all those years ago. She called him "Alistair", just as she had called Clara "Clara". Familiar terms of address were limited in her life to just one, "uncle" as in Uncle Fernando.

Ramona took therapy in the early weeks of Cambridge life from a skilled psychiatrist. Gradually, he believed he was able to release the memories of the abduction, of life before that square where she had sat under the fragrant orange trees in Seville. The little girl, Ramona, had liked her kidnapers, who in the few days they held her treated her as their little princess. On that fateful day, the three of them had

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just arrived in Seville. Before seeking accommodation, they went to the centre of the city, to the Cathedral, as Ramona remembered. She recalled running away and believed that this had caused the accident. Whether she was to blame or not did not concern the therapist. What was clear to him was that the little girl's feelings of guilt had caused her to block off her earlier memories. Perhaps she had pretended not to remember what had happened at first. Be that as it may, the fact was that her earlier memories had been pushed down below the surface of consciousness. In his opinion, these memories could now progressively be released. Ramona's early life in Cambridge to the age of five would come back into focus, to the extent early memories are retained in any child. With the help of photographs of her life up to the age of five the effects of the therapy were dramatic, and this helped Ramona settle into the situation with Alistair.

On Sundays Ramona would visit Alistair at his house outside Cambridge. He would spend the morning recounting tales from her early life, but mostly he would relive the sadness of the lost years, and she bathed in his sorrow, at first. During the week they were around college and it was different. Some of the academics seemed to her like furniture, the traditional kind, not the sort you buy in Ikea: there forever, seldom thrown out, until, rickety beyond repair, they collapse. Many had known Carmen from when she was Ramona's age, and here she was, back, or so it seemed with the physical resemblance. Just as in the old days, they would see her walk through college, occasionally beside Alistair. They *knew* her but she did not know them.

The mystery of who Carmen had been began to grow in Ramona. This young girl, as young as she was, seventeen years old, had come to Cambridge on her own. Within months Carmen was married to Alistair: a life so different so foreign to Ramona, who could not imagine herself in that situation. She thought of the little girl, her friend Maria to whom she gave music, in Rio Tinto, with her beautiful voice. Was this a young Carmen? What was it about Carmen? They all say I look like her, but I've been in Cambridge for weeks and nothing has happened to me like to Carmen in the Anchor: no one has played those four aces for me.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE GOSPEL

Ramona

Ramona spent Christmas back at home with Clara in the village in the Sierra Morena. Clara met her at Seville airport. On the journey up to the village, just as Ramona had recounted her school terms in Seville, she recounted her first term in Cambridge. It is the singing more than anything that I love, she told Clara. We have a group, seven of us, who sing in the different college chapels. Next term we will sing in the famous chapel of King's College, and I hope to do a solo. It will be recorded. And the literature is fun, but we do not work as hard as we did at school. The familiar route seemed very different in the new air-conditioned car. No longer were they stuck behind big lorries, the fumes streaming in at their windows. Now they sped past lorries, cars, buses, to reach the village in what seemed like no time. As they entered the village, Ramona saw that everything had shrunk in size: even the schoolhouse, so imposing, was smaller than Alistair's house. Clara laughed and told her that she now finally believed Ramona had grown into a woman.

That evening Clara suggested they read and Ramona chose the book.

"We reached chapter six," Ramona said, "where he was searching in vain for Carmen, spending the money, that meant nothing to him, on the search, but to no avail. Read on Clara."

Clara opened the book, *A Melody of Sadness*, and turned the pages until she reached the seventh chapter. She read in a low voice in the darkness of the winter evening, just a table light beside her to light the pages, crouched in the dim light at her feet the form of Ramona, head

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raised, eyes intent on Clara as she read. She reached the end of the chapter and closed the book.

“Just that one word *Papa*. I suppose that’s all she needed to say to him, but how did she know?” Clara asked.

“An ancient memory, buried deep, a face not seen for twelve years, maybe.” Ramona smiled up at Clara. “It’s a moving reunion.”

“It is, but what happens now? What can there be between them: for him just memories of sadness, and for her incomprehension of that sadness. Perhaps we should stop here, Ramona.”

“Read on, Clara, read on.” Once again Clara read late into the night, with the girl at her feet.

Ramona did not come to breakfast the next morning. She did not surface until lunchtime. She looked tired, but Clara looked worse, her face drawn, darkness beneath her eyes.

“Was it so bad, Ramona?”

“What he went through with my mother, that is what he wanted to relive with me, those years of sadness, those years when I was gone. Why would I do that? I looked to the future, to what we could do, now I was there. He lived his own melody, the sadness of the years behind him. That’s why I gave the book the name. I could not live this. Forget it! is what I screamed at him in my nightmares, but I was more important to him vanished, than I was to him as the inadvertently prodigal daughter. I felt for my mother. I felt for her for that time she was with him, after I disappeared. If it was like this, I know why she disappeared.”

“Are you going back?”

“The book is not finished. I am going back.”

“It’s a beautiful book, Ramona. It’s just so hard for me. Hard for me because I know you. Any other reader would love those chapters.”

“That’s it. Those chapters are for him. They are not for me.” Ramona fixed her gaze on Clara and continued. “I don’t know whether he will ever read beyond chapter six, whether I shall let him. That depends on him.”

Unlike Clara, Alistair did not collect Ramona at the airport, that was not his style. She arrived back in Cambridge by train. From the

Ramona

station she took a taxi, driving out over the flat landscape to Alistair's house. The east wind held a chill in the air: no high ground between here and the Urals, they say. The sky was a clear Cambridge blue. Her thin Spanish blood left her shivering in the taxi, soon to be warmed by Alistair's traditional blazing hearth. He greeted her in his deferential style. Just as it was hard for her to imagine Carmen in Cambridge at her age, seventeen, it was hard to imagine him in that scene at the Anchor pub, the scene when he met Carmen. They sat before the fire sipping a traditional Cambridge sherry. Maybe it is this place that has changed him, she thought, doused the fire of youth.

"Have you read my Christmas present?" she asked.

"Incredible. How did you know?"

"You told me," she replied.

"I told you all that?"

"All that and more, these last few months."

"Incredible," he repeated. "It comes alive just as it was."

"It's a warning."

"A warning?"

"Alistair, exorcise the past. You relived it in me. I have written it down. The gospel according to Ramona, Saint Ramona."

"It's literature."

"Life cannot be literature, Alistair. We have to change it."

"Does it continue?" Alistair stood and replenished the sherry. He did not want to look at her as he awaited her answer, feared the answer.

"The book is incomplete. That depends...it depends on you."

"That's as far as you've written, then?"

"I did not say that."

"Can I see?"

"No, Alistair. Maybe. Not yet. Maybe never."

"It's about you?"

"No. It's about me and you. That's different." As she said this, Alistair let out a sigh and returned to his seat.

"So for the moment how it ends is with that word, *Papa*." He said in a low tone.

"The word of encounter in this case, Alistair. You have to admit that's how it was. How will it be?"

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The Reading Group

The reading session had stretched well beyond its allotted time. It seemed a good place to stop, and Ramona closed the book. She sat there with the book on her knees, and there was silence in the circle. No one spoke. Eventually Vera broke the silence.

"Next week seems so far away. Can we take some with us?"

"That's not how we do it. It's a reading session and discussion, not critique," Gloria objected.

"Then let's take a vote," Ramona suggested. "But if you read it, then the next session has to be for discussion only - I don't read." Heads in the circle nodded assent. Gloria wanted a secret ballot, for some reason, maybe to avoid tension in the group. Each of them marked, folded and deposited her ballot paper. The result was unanimous. Gloria?

"I'll copy the next section and send a copy to each of you. Or email. Who's got email?" They all had email. As soon as they left, Ramona sent out the emails. The next session can be at my place, Ramona thought, but after that I am not so sure that will be safe, safe for me. Vera did not get to bed that night until 3 a.m., all consumed, left with a desire for more. She felt very adolescent as she cried herself to sleep that night, thinking of Ramona and what might have been. Another week.

But it was not another week, for Vera polled the group, who agreed, and they extracted even more from Ramona before the next session.

The elegant lady, Pam, until now so silent, started the debate.

"I went to Cambridge, Newnham. I often used to think, you know, the strange people, the twisted minds with powerful intellects, the banks of windows in the colleges, all those little rooms. Where was I?" She was losing her confidence, unused to being at the focus. "Oh yes. I used to wonder what goes on behind those windows, the stories, the scandals, the passions, I suppose."

"So what struck you about the chapters?" Gloria asked.

"Exactly that, Gloria. The unbelievable. There we had the reunion, the world put to rights, but something completely different pops out." Pam was struggling to put her thoughts into words.

"*Something completely different* as in Monty Python?"

Ramona

Gloria asked to laughter.

"But that is it," Vera interjected. "The knight. The one who keeps on fighting as his limbs are lopped off. Finally, just a head is dancing around shouting its anger, Alistair and his sorrow."

"I don't think so," Gloria objected. "I liked Alistair. A victim. Ramona should have simply told him. Why didn't you, Ramona?"

"I think we'd better stick to what's in the chapters, Gloria," Ramona admonished her. "I think you might find the story develops differently from what you think."

"I take Gloria's point," Vera said. "I just wanted to step in and take control, all the time, change things. I could see what was happening, but I couldn't stop it. I wanted to throw the book down, tear it up, burn it, but I couldn't. I had to read it. I have to read on. And then I'll start again from the beginning, and just hope that this time it will be different. I know it won't."

Pam stepped back into action. "I think what I was trying to say is that there is something that's happening at the human level, something so different from what we expect, so unconventional, and all that in the conventional setting of Cambridge University life."

"It's so desperately sad, so sad when Ramona walks out on him," Vera said. "So sad, but so true. What else could she do? But that's why the book's so good. What else would you expect from a book with that title, *A Melody of Sadness*? Why else would you buy it? That's what it is."

"We're talking about *Ramona* here," Gloria corrected her. Vera looked flustered and felt very silly. God help these women, Ramona thought to herself, when they get on to the real story. And god help me. They'll tar-and-feather me if *this* already gives them offence. I had better say something.

"Vera, I feel your point is valid," Ramona said, and relieved Vera's defences from the impending assault lined up against her by Gloria, ready for combat. "There is an egocentricity to Alistair, as in us all. He is wallowing in his sadness. That made for a beautiful book in *A Melody of Sadness*, which I, if you like, wrote for him, through his eyes. In *Ramona* I'm telling the truth. That's why parts of *A Melody of Sadness* appear verbatim in *Ramona*. I'm not selling one book for the price of two, the same book twice. It's not a literary scam. I'm showing

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his world and then juxtaposing it against another perspective. Let's call it *real life*. You'll see yet another perspective later. Sorry, I shouldn't influence you. I'm only expanding on what Vera wanted to say." Vera thanked Ramona inwardly, and just wished that Ramona's words had been what she had wanted to say and had been able to say it. But then maybe *she* would have won the prize for literature.

Gloria was not to be outdone, and changed her tack.

"I accept that she had to leave him." Gloria glared at the assembly. "She welcomed him, she accepted him, she loved him, and all the time he just looked to the past. Sadness was his self-fulfilling prophecy, in modern jargon, a loser."

"But it was a huge sacrifice to herself." Pam was back on stage. "She gave up the chance of a Cambridge degree - unthinkable to Pam, a graduate - and became... well, I'm not sure. A writer? Well, let's read a bit further."

Now the serious literary criticism started, as they pulled out their notes and took it in turns to comment on the text, mostly on the first two of the five chapters, after which they had mostly given up note making, engrossed as they were in the story. Ramona sat listening, thinking never again, from now on I read at these sessions, or someone else reads her work. Gloria was right about the agenda for our reading group. Why did she join the others in voting for *this*? Gloria smiled to herself. It was clear to her what Ramona was thinking. She's manipulating us, she thought, and now she's suffering boredom, torture for her no doubt. Where does it go from here? Is our little group entering the danger zone? Her mind wandered: my ex-husband was a real bastard.

CHAPTER FIVE

CARMEN'S STORY

Ramona

I love Paris. I can walk to work from my hotel in the Marais, and then when all the tourists come into our tour office I tell them about what they can do, where they can go, and I change their money for them, and then at nine o'clock in the evening we are free, and we go down to the Latin Quarter and meet the students.

This is my only sad day, Sunday. I sit here on the tip of the Ile de la Cité and watch the waters of the Seine swirl past. In a moment I will walk over to Notre Dame, stand in front, observe the portals at its entrance, the gargoyles above, before I go into its dark insides where the candles burn. Then I will come back out into the bright light. I will walk to the Luxembourg gardens, see the statues, feel the gravel under my feet and the warmth of the sun above. I will walk back to the Louvre, where I like it inside because I can walk for miles, and then out into the gardens of the Tuileries, past the Orangerie on my right and on to the Place de la Concorde. I will look at my watch for the first time today, not yet lunchtime. What do I do before the evening? Roll on Monday.

I wander, I hate wandering, up the Champs-Élysées to the Etoile and branch right - I cannot believe I walk all these miles in one day - to take me right back down to the Place de la République, and just a few paces by my newly acquired Paris standards, back down to the Hotel de Ville and to my hotel. I can change, relax, i.e. get bored to death, and then make my way down to Saint Germain, where I will start this evening, where I will sing.

At home everyone knew who I was, they knew me as a child, they

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knew my mother, they knew my father, they knew the rest of my family. They would always say, hello Carmen, and they would laugh at my little jokes, smile, get angry, smile again, laugh. They were the sounding board of my guitar, of me, and would always react to whichever note I played, and always in the same way. Here in Paris, no one says, hello Carmen. When I say things I say at home in Spain, no one reacts as I expect. They do not react, or if they do, I do not understand them. Yes, I ask for a lemonade and the bartender gives it to me, but he does not see behind my smile, what I mean when I ask.

In three months I have learnt more than ever in my life before. I have practised being “not Carmen”: I have practised being “someone else”. It works. I have always loved my full long dark hair. My mother used to warn me that I looked like a prostitute and that is why men would follow me in the street. I knew she was not right, and here I am a goddess, but not if I behave like me, only if I behave like the new Carmen I have been practising. Caroline has helped me. She sits in a café and gauges reactions as I come in, and I do the same for her.

We have worked our way up the scale, as we have honed our movements, our pauses, our looks of vulnerability, our flashes of anger - we’ve tried them all, and it has been great fun, though in more successful moments escape has been difficult. In the end, I have a simple secret, and have left Caroline far behind: I enter with the background melody playing in my head, the melodies I sing to earn my living, and I move in tune to the feelings that arise from the melody. I let the melody flow over into my first reactions when I meet people. I would love to let it flow over into my life - no more drab Sundays on the banks of the Seine.

Another drab Sunday, but I sit outside in a café with Caroline on the Champs-Élysées, the most expensive one - we have long forgotten the economy of the price of drink, in favour of other economic advantage. The bright morning sun is diffused through the café blind above us. The crowd moves in both directions along the broad pavement beneath the canopy of trees, while traffic moves in spurts as the traffic lights change from red to green and back to red. Caroline has a friend who learnt English at a language school in Cambridge, a ratio of seven men to one woman, she tells me, men who come from the best families, men who are either rich or will be rich, but more important to us, the sort of men for us. We are mature women,

Ramona

Caroline says to me, both of us knowing that at sixteen she still has a couple of months to catch me up. She tells me we need money, but I have enough money from my singing. It is April. We leave in early June.

Is this the England of Empire, as I read in books? The train to Cambridge is decrepit, the same as I know from anywhere, from Andalusia, from Morocco. Caroline laughs at me and tells me that streets paved with gold are really sewers: the gold comes to those who seek it and know how to find it, not to those who look at the pavement. In later life I remember Caroline as a philosopher, and I learnt all her lessons, although I am sure she never knew she was giving any - she would have charged me, if she had known. She has long since risen to heights of social rank far beyond me, and I know from her philosophy lessons that I should never try to reach her, nor ever could, but I still hope we may meet one day (a vain hope of lost youth).

Cambridge, a small town in the English countryside, cold even in the summer, June, but I am here with Caroline. She knows where to find what they call "digs" and we are established in our new venture. I already miss Paris, which we left this morning, but Caroline is happy, so I am happy.

This is our first day, she tells me, so we must split up, or we will not meet people. Should we not register at the language school, I ask her, but she looks at me in a strange way, and tells me, only if we have to, as if I have not understood her. I have no idea of where to go, but I do know what to do when I get there. The Anchor.

It was still early and I was hungry, so I had breakfast at a hotel in the centre of town called the Blue Boar. It is expensive for me but that does not matter as I start my new life in this strange place. I step out of the hotel and turn left down the street. I notice many beautiful buildings on my route, one looks like a huge church with lawns before it. I walk further, and then stare into the window of a cake shop, and think I will come back later; breakfast protects me against such desires for the moment. I turn through an archway into what we in Andalusia might call paradise. I wander through this place that, unbeknown to me now, I will come to know so well. My thoughts

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turn to Caroline; like her I must do something. I leave paradise and move on.

The river is so beautiful, with the boats lined up ready to go. I want to take a boat, but I do not know how. They have big poles, but there is no one there by the boats, so I think I will wait for the boatmen to return, and look behind me at a building that might be a restaurant or hotel. The Anchor.

I step inside and flash my smile, the smile that I have learnt will even breathe warmth into hell - the place comes alive before me, and the melody rings in my head. It is a song from Andalusia, and the bar is blue but for one glowing red spot at the bar, glowing with the charm of Andalusian warmth, convention and courtesy, an older man, I think, but I move, gently, towards him. I meet Alistair, mature, twenty-two years old.

Caroline's philosophy deserted me that afternoon, as did my Parisian *education* - I just thought I was back at home, but better. I have no memory of that time on the river, six hours, one hour, ten hours, but of him. What did I see? Where did we go? The next thing I do remember that I can recollect is the cake shop - I saw it earlier and wanted cake - because it was like living a dream. It was Caroline's dream, but it was real and it was mine. I was just here for adventure and I had captured Caroline's dream, which I would never tell Caroline, and never did.

In the dim lights of the Paris clubs, I would swing my hips while I sang, throw back my head and let my hair flow over my shoulders, as the melody flowed from me to the audience. I would stiffen my hips and strike flamenco poses, charging the room with emotion, and I was their magnetic pole. I knew what I felt as I sang, but I could only guess at what they felt. Today I felt the electricity flow through me from him. When he dropped me at my digs, I felt the whole world of hope collapse around me, and then came the Carmen proposal: Carmen, me, and more than that, the Carmen I loved and sang.

I will not speak of the Carmen Opera in London. No, perhaps I should talk of the Carmen opera in London. My thoughts swirl through my head as they did then. My thoughts? Is that what it is? At home it was me, the Carmen they knew, the Carmen who lived, well, the life of Carmen. What is it when I magnetize a concert hall as that

Ramona

Carmen did on that day in London with Alistair at Earls Court? Is it Bizet, reincarnated from the dead? No, he wrote ink marks on pieces of paper, which I read. What is it when I sing his melody and captivate my audience, his audience? Caroline could tell me. As for me? I will never know. I may never know what it is, but I know what it is for me: it is living my life.

Alistair loved me and I loved Alistair. The logical consequence in those days? We married. You know why I came to Cambridge, so don't ask: he despised his wealth, but I loved it. He loved his academic life, worthier than a meal in the stomach: he did not come from Andalusia. The first problem was that he failed to instruct his lawyers correctly when we married. What belonged to Alistair belonged to Alistair, which was plenty. What belonged to me belonged to me, which was nothing. The second problem was that he was an academic in Cambridge and not a singer in Paris, so he had no idea of what I needed to spend. I earned nothing and had nothing to spend. Question: what do I spend my time doing in Cambridge?

The answer was the little girl and I loved that little girl. I loved that little girl in Cambridge more, I think, than I would ever have loved her in Andalusia, because - don't despise me - she was my choice and not my obligation, but I still would have loved her even then. I gave her everything, or she stole everything from me, whichever way you prefer to look at it. I only went back to my other love (apart from her and Alistair), singing, for the money, of which Alistair gave me none because it was unimportant, to him. I did not earn money from singing then in Cambridge: rather I trained, because I was the best and I knew it. One day I would use my talent for myself and my daughter. I knew that one day I would have to escape the prison of poverty (known to me from my childhood in Andalusia) imposed upon me in Cambridge by my rich husband through not ignorance but principle, belief, misguided belief, stupidity.

Carmen's autobiography: who wants to hear this? No matter. I will continue, because I want to, just as I sing because I want to sing, and if you don't like my melody, leave my bar (when I am poor), or my concert hall (when I am rich). I am Carmen. Shall we move on?

Alistair was impressed by my singing, or should I say astonished? I loved to sing to him and I know he loved it. At that level we were one. He would talk to me about the Opera, simply for aesthetic value,

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of course. What he failed, or rather refused, to recognise was the economic value of my singing, my release from a poverty he could never understand, because he had always had it all and still did. No, it was more than that: he saw wealth as a burden to be not discarded but thrust aside, and so he rejected what I could earn, because we (that is he) did not need it, nor want it.

CHAPTER SIX

ABDUCTION?

Ramona

What is fantasy? What is a dream? What would you do? Forget the last question: no one would do what I did, and yet it is so easy to do in these days of modern travel. You are in a small town in England, Cambridge, with your daughter, and you could both be in Andalusia, to meet her family she has never seen. Easy. You catch a plane.

If you ask me today why I never told Alistair about my family, I will tell you that he never asked, and that is true. Alistair was an orphan, a rich orphan, so when I told him that I had financed my own way to the Cambridge language school, he assumed I was an orphan. Why did I never contact my family? I did contact them, but I never told them what was really going on, and strange though it may seem, they never asked, but why would they? They had given me up anyway, at least until I saw sense and returned home from my strange foreign travels.

When I left Ramona with my brother Fernando in Seville, it was to me like going on holiday without your child, and then he told me that it was difficult for him and Clara was looking after her, so I did not worry about her. I never intended anything permanent, and then Alistair had never even noticed we were gone, engrossed as he was with some absurd literary project in his rooms in College. It was only after the accident with the maid, when he totally misinterpreted what I said to him on the telephone and called in the police, even before I knew, that everything spiralled out of control.

I am not telling the truth. Even now, as I tell the story, I cannot tell the truth, but I must. Yes, Alistair was right: there was

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kidnapping. So you want the truth? Perhaps I did embellish the story just now, but surely you can understand why I would do that. It is true that I came to Cambridge, as Caroline instructed me, as a gold digger, but I did love Alistair. The truth: I did love his position and money, and maybe him - let's say I did love him, and still do, if you like. But he wronged me: he had everything and gave me nothing. You must understand that I could have chosen anyone else, but he chose me. He chose me and gave me nothing. So what is a kidnapping? How can you kidnap your own daughter? Absurd. I was simply trying to prise from him what was my right, and the right of my daughter.

It took me little time to learn that however good a singer I may be, I was a hopeless kidnapper and extortionist. What to do? I hung on with Alistair, but I did not want to be with him, especially not since his descent into what I would describe as serial melancholia. I could not bring Ramona back without admitting what I had done, and quite frankly, I did not want her in this prison of Alistair's Cambridge life anyway. Clara loved Ramona and I missed Ramona, but I needed my new life. Why did you not go and start your new life, you may ask? Caroline could answer that for you better than I could, I think, but you want the answer from me, yet I do not wish to give you the answer. I do not wish to tell myself the answer, so I will not admit it, but I will say what the answer might be, or maybe again not. Suffice it to say, the trust funds and investments of Alistair, which he despised, were very, very large.

The Reading Group

It was Gloria who interrupted the flow of Ramona's words.

"I can't believe this. This cuts away the foundations of *A Melody of Sadness*. Alistair was her dupe. If you knew this, how could you have written the book?"

"I told you there would be another perspective," Ramona responded.

Pam: "That's life, Gloria."

Vera: "It's different, Gloria. They are different. Two cultures: poverty in Andalusia and the riches of the developed world. Ignorant of each other, poles apart."

"So you're not judging the gold digger, Vera?" Gloria asked.

"Aren't we all gold diggers? What should Carmen have

Ramona

done? She said she lived her life and I think that's what she did, and in the end she protected the child, as any mother would."

"I think," Pam said, demonstrating her familiarity with Cambridge, "that it's like Alistair's replete after a good meal, and he pushes the walnut cake from Fitzbillies to one side contemptuously, while his wife and daughter, restricted to a diet of bread and water, eye it with avarice from the other side of the table."

Ramona laughed. "Pam, I assure you that I won't steal your simile from you and use it in my next award winning novel, but yes, I would say you've got the point. Alistair's fixation on what-he-has-but-does-not-want blocks out his perception of what the others need."

"It's Stalinesque," Gloria added. She too had got the point and Ramona resumed.

Ramona

That was all in my youth. It's different now. Would I behave differently today? Probably, but then today I have earned what I need in life, a successful performer, well off. I am still married to Alistair after all these years, I know, I have checked. It is not in his character to instruct his lawyers with regard to that wealth he despises, so I will still be his beneficiary, which means that one-day I may be very rich. People like me outlive them all.

My first thought, when I saw the news of the prize, was that she was a little vixen, just as I may have been described all those years ago, and she was after his money. Yes, I had read the book, but I had assumed that he had written it: after all, it was published under his name as author. I suppose I enjoyed the book: it expressed the sorrow, as was intended, but I missed the vibrancy - I would have described the Carmen performance at Earls Court, its life, its poignancy, but then I suppose that's me. The prize, you are asking, what prize? Well, *the prize*, the prize for literature of course.

The Reading Group

"Ramona," Vera exclaimed. "You cannot have known!"

"Ramona laughed again, brightly. "I didn't!"

"You mean..." Pam was lost for words, as always.

"You know I'm still writing the book. Think about it. Well,

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sorry, there's a section I have written, that I did not know where to insert, but I'm going to put it in earlier, in what we've already read." Ramona reached into her bag and took out a sheet of A4. "I'm putting this in:"

"It was some hours later in Buenos Aires, given the time difference, before the news came though, and some time more before it was disseminated. She was eager and enthused for the forthcoming performance as she sat in the dressing room, just a few minutes to go. A knock on the door and an envelope placed before her. She opened it deliberately, as it was her manner to do everything. A press cutting. She put it down. She called the make-up girl over for a final check up. She looked at the cutting. Literature prize. Boring. She looked again. Nom de plume. She saw the confusion of names and glanced again, astonished. She wrote the book? My daughter wrote the book. So it wasn't him after all. A smart little vixen. The Prize! Maybe I will make contact after all. Time to go. She picked up her trademark rose. It was in her contract, part of her show; before she went out to play the principal part of Carmen, she would parade on stage with a rose in her teeth."

"But I don't understand," Gloria said. "You've made contact with her, but you must have known where Carmen was all the time, if Clara was her sister."

"Gloria, let me remind you again that we should stick to the story in the book," Ramona replied. "I think I should read on."

Ramona

It was only after hearing of the prize that the book, *A Melody of Sadness*, began to take on a new significance for me with my knowledge of its real author. I began to wonder why she had contacted him and not me. I admit I had not contacted her all these years - I thought it was better that way, no emotional struggle once the initial loss was borne, Clara loved her, replaced me - but she could have reached me anytime. Why did she go to him? Did she reveal where I was? No, Alistair would not have let that pass. Alistair would have been on the first plane to Buenos Aires. I was, I am, his life. Alistair, poor blinkered Alistair, I have not needed you for years.

Ramona

Originally it had been hard to obtain a copy of the book in Buenos Aires, but today it was everywhere, only in Spanish, so I bought a Spanish version. I had no idea where my old copy had gone. Why did this girl, my daughter, live, suffer and write down his sorrow? I could think of two answers: one was that the book had made her rich, especially now that she had won the prize; the other, my first thought, was that she wanted his money. Well, I doubted she would have any greater success than I had. The idea that she might have loved her lost-and-found father did not for a moment occur to me. Why should she? She had Clara, Fernando and the rest of them. What would she want with Alistair? Well, other than his money?

I have never been known for long deliberation and soul searching. After my performance the next day, I stayed late at the club, and then as I guessed with the time difference that dawn was breaking in southern Spain, I called Clara and we spoke for hours. She loved the book, but she also told me how bad it had been for Ramona with Alistair, in the end, and that Ramona had broken with him years before. You ask too much of me to make me admit this, but yes, I admit it, I was relieved, and the weight of the last thirty-six hours lifted from my shoulders, relief. As soon as I finished with Clara, who gave me the number, I was on the line to Ramona, speaking to her for the first time in twenty years, my dark haired, brown eyed, glittering, fiery jewel.

The Reading Group

Vera cut in. "After all those years, Ramona. What was it like?"

Ramona smiled at Vera, looked at Gloria and said, "Let's see what Carmen says."

Ramona

Some of you sentimental souls will have read *A Melody of Sadness* and have expectations of this telephone reunion from Buenos Aires to London after all those years; others of you, more inclined to current affairs and modern history, may expect us to discuss the Malvinas, the Falkland Islands. I jest, but it is to help you with the context, and remember I am Carmen, remember who I am. What struck me as, well almost hysterical, was that this famous authoress spoke her Spanish with a funny Andalusian intonation that came from me back

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in those Cambridge days, but that I had so long ago ditched on my route to stardom.

Perhaps I flatter myself, but I think she was pleased to hear from me. How do you assess someone over the phone? I thought she combined the equanimity of Alistair with the softness of Clara, and to tell the truth, I was beginning to find the platitudes a touch mind numbing. She must be a better writer than conversationalist, I thought to myself, as she rambled on. Then I asked if she could sing. Well, I told her, it's my call, my cost, so sing to me, sing whatever you want. And then she sang a beautiful rendition of Carmen, which is when my tears came, so I told her I would call tomorrow for another song, and I hung up.

In London Ramona put the phone down in astonishment. Without further thought she called Clara.

"Can you guess who I just spoke to, Clara?"

"I don't need to guess. I gave her your number." Clara smiled to herself in her quiet way.

"Why did she call? She left you and the family years ago. Why call me?" Bewilderment.

"Didn't she tell you?" Clara was sure she would not have, but asked anyway.

"She didn't listen to what I was saying, at least that's what I thought, and then she asked me to sing, so I sang."

"I half wondered whether it was a hoax, by someone who had read the book," Clara said. "Now I know it wasn't. That's Carmen. Sing to her like I read to you all those years, Ramona. She'll love it."

The Reading Group

Again it was Gloria who cut in. "Are we supposed to think Carmen's some kind of musical prodigy who lives on UHF while we live on MW?"

"I think you're a bit out of date, Gloria," Pam said. "We're going digital."

"You know what I mean. Is this some kind of subplot, Ramona?" Gloria asked.

"I've thought long and hard about this, Gloria. If all Ramona did was sing to Carmen, how would she have managed to get Carmen's side of the story? You have just heard Carmen's side of the story, right? So there must be more to it." With her

Ramona

answer, Ramona smiled at the group.

Vera: "We await the next session with bated breath, Ramona."

"Don't hold your breath though," Ramona suggested.

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean is that I think our literary group here should take an extended break from Ramona, after all it is a trilogy. Let's look at something else. Gloria? Pam? Anyone?"

Gloria: "I vote we continue with Ramona for now." Nodding heads.

Ramona: "Not possible."

Vera: "Why ever not?"

Ramona: "I've read to you everything I have written so far." Deep gloom descended on the room, and the group decided to break for the summer. In fact, Ramona had read to them less than half of what she had written. She just did not know if she had the courage to go through with it, with them.

CHAPTER SEVEN

NOM DE PLUME

The Reading Group

The restaurant was conservatory style, built into the courtyard at the back of the hotel, Scandinavian tables, space and light. Gloria was sipping a white onion soup, while Vera daintily carved her pâté wishing she had ordered the soup; Pam had abstained for the first course and was greedily eyeing both, but still proud of her decision.

Gloria had thought out her game plan, which was to launch the subject after once again chatting about their favourite book for the moment, *A Melody of Sadness*. They each had their different opinions, but shared the view that the book struck deep to the core. It was time to strike.

"I've been thinking," Gloria said, "and bear with me. This is going to take a bit of explaining."

"Shoot," instructed Pam.

"Just a couple of weeks ago we thought that *Melody* was written by the father, right?" The other two nodded confirmation. "Then we learn that it was written by the daughter, our very own Ramona. In fact, she points it out to us, when I tell her the plot of *Ramona* is unrealistic."

"Very moving," Vera chipped in.

"Moving, yes, but does it change our perception of the book, I mean it's all about the father telling his sad story? Now we learn he didn't write it." Gloria waited for their response.

"Not for me really," Pam replied. "The book's the book."

"OK, hold off on that for the moment, but the next thing is, and she points it out to us, that in *Ramona* there's a logical impossibility, a circularity let's say: Clara reads *Melody* to Ramona, which leads Ramona to Cambridge to the

Ramona

unexpected reunion with the writer who turns out to be her father, but then it's Ramona who writes *Melody* so it can't have happened. It's like the Escher picture where the water flows down four stories in the mill and ends up where it started." Gloria raised her hand to stop interruption, sipping another spoon of soup. "Let me continue. She says, I mean what Ramona tells us, is that you wouldn't know, unless you read both books, but that's not true. You would know if you had *written* both books." Gloria looked around triumphantly, only to see blank return stares.

"OK, you don't get it, so let me tell you the next thing. The next thing is we discover that the little girl was never really kidnapped to start with. I admit the father didn't know this, but consider the following: one, it was her uncle who picked her up in Seville; two, she was brought up by her aunt; and three, there was never a problem for her to find her father. How does that compare to the opening scene in Seville when Ramona sits under the orange trees, that beautiful, moving scene of the poor little girl? Now let me spell it out. In books and in the real world, things happen in the past and in the present and these things that have happened or are happening determine the course of the future. Do you see what Ramona's doing? She's turning this on its head. As we go forward into the future in the book *Ramona*, the past changes to conform to the future when the future happens. It's all the wrong way round."

Vera laughed, and choked on her pâté. "Gloria I think I *have* got it now. You're amazing." Pam still looked blank, so Vera continued, "It's like me, when I'm twenty-five years old, introducing my mother to my father, because they've never met before and I think they'd make a good match, but then how come I was born? *That* can only happen *after* I've prompted the coupling of father and mother."

"Exactly," Gloria affirmed. "Like I spend all afternoon burning the autumn leaves I've raked up in my garden, and then I notice that I don't have any trees, so I can't have had any leaves, so I might as well have not bothered, and that's what I'm beginning to think about *A Melody of Sadness*."

"Gloria! A book's a book," Pam repeated. "Don't get so uptight."

"I'm not uptight, and it's not that simple. Why's she reading this book to us?"

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"Because she's a member of the group," Pam responded.

"No, Pam. It's more than that. I think she's manipulating us, but I'm not quite sure how. It's sinister. Is she playing at being god or something?"

"Why would she do that? Gloria, come on." Vera did not like this tone, and Gloria, realising this, backtracked.

"Sorry, that's not quite the word. Somehow I feel experimented on, the laboratory mouse, you know, the way she picked her moment to let us know she was Ramona and all that. And she got the prize, so *someone* knew she wrote *Melody*, but she hadn't let on to us. Anyway, enough for today. But think about it. Let's see what happens."

The main course, a mackerel delicacy, chose just the right moment to arrive at the table, and for the time being literary discussion was relegated to a subservient position. As the mackerel retreated from the foreground, it was replaced by the subject of ex-husbands, Gloria's favourite, as it allowed her to employ language not normally appropriate in polite circles. After they paid the bill, Gloria played her trump card.

"You know what we're going to do one day. We're going to ask her to sing to us." She laughed. "And that's before we reach the point in the story where her father turns out to be the world's greatest opera singer and he was doing the singing all along and not Carmen after all."

"Well, we'll have to wait for that," Vera said, to defuse Gloria's attempted pyrotechnics. "She told me she was withdrawing to concentrate on *Ramona* for as long as it takes."

Ramona

"Hello, Alistair." She had chosen her position in the college, so that she was silhouetted in the archway against the evening light behind. He could see a shape before him, lost in his thoughts, leaving his rooms for the week, to spend the next two days at his house just outside Cambridge. For a moment he did not react, and then he recognised her. Long gone were the days of the Anchor, the days of sadness recorded in his daughter's book.

"Hello, Carmen," he said, after more than fifteen years. "How's Ramona?"

Ramona

“Alistair?”

“You wouldn’t be here, if you had not seen Ramona. Come on, Carmen.”

Carmen laughed and started to sing. It echoed over the college lawns and then she stopped.

“If only you had *known* me then, Alistair, and I had *known* you.”

“Then we would have had nothing, Carmen. I have no regrets. We had everything. In the book it says, *we had it all*. You’re not going to tell me you don’t believe the book, Carmen.”

“The book never interested me, Alistair. Yes, I read it in English, and then again in Spanish, after the prize. It was boring, for me.”

“The truth, the beauty, the sorrow, boring?” Alistair looked at her in mock horror.

“That’s the book, but you just had to pick up the phone, Alistair. You were too proud.”

“And my daughter?” He asked.

“Yes, too proud for that. I thought you would fall down at my feet this evening, Alistair.”

“An ageing superstar, opera singer, yes, many would.”

“Do old people still go to the pub, Alistair?”

“To live nostalgia?” He asked.

“To have a drink and talk. The Anchor?” Her invitation.

She moved to his side and took his arm, hoping he would acquiesce and he did. As they reached the Anchor, Carmen said she would prefer to walk along the river to Grantchester. They walked down Laundress Lane, crossed the river and set out on the opposite bank to the Garden House Hotel.

“Whose idea was it to publish under your name,” she asked, to break the silence. “It fooled me.”

“It’s a long story, Carmen, so I won’t tell it. What I will say is that my actions were more in your character than in mine. She wouldn’t show me the book, well, not beyond chapter six, so I stole it, published it (not difficult for a professor of English literature), and thought, sue me if you dare, Ramona.”

Carmen laughed her deep laugh. “And she did? I mean, sue you.”

“We reached an accommodation. My name became her *nom de plume*. And I signed an agreement to keep this secret. It was only

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when they came to award the prize, that I insisted the truth be known.”

“Your career could not afford fraud on that scale?” She asked, even though she knew the answer. He knew and did not answer. She asked him to put an arm around her and he acquiesced for the second time that evening.

“I can say it in one sentence, Alistair. I should not admit this, not to you, but you are the only person I’ll admit it to, the last to hear this, but the only one. Do you want to hear?”

“Fire away, Carmen, fire away,” Alistair said in a false, resigned tone with a sigh, by now desperate to hear what she had to say.

“It is true that I was in love, Alistair, and it’s true that I loved the child, but I was a teenager, a singer who needed her life, and I left to find that life, knowing Clara would be a better mother - pregnant pause - and that is all behind me.”

“Is that all?” He asked, his tone signifying his full understanding of the proposition.

Carmen stopped, turning to face him, and very gently said, “That is everything. I hope you listened to me. I am still a young woman, little more than forty.”

Alistair had easily maintained his distance, emotionally detached, up until that point. Now she pierced his calloused shell, hardened by those years of whatever he may have felt, whether as recorded in the book or otherwise.

I have always known that my natural parents were still married and over all those years of separation had never divorced. I had not minded: my family was Clara, Uncle Fernando and all the rest of my cousins, as defined in the widest sense. I suppose it was the Carmen in me that made me contact my father, a rich man, I knew, and also influential - I wanted to do the best for myself. It worked, in that he arranged for me to come to Cambridge, but I was incensed when he stole my book and published it before it was even finished. That crippled an already stunted relationship between father and daughter. I felt cheated, duped, a laughing stock, and rushed - I now think foolishly - home, turning my back on both him and Cambridge; I

Ramona

was simply too young to deal with this. Today I question if, without him, the book would have ever been published.

I did not know what to do, and it was Clara (who else?) who arranged everything, with the result that I had a steady stream of income from the highly successful sales of the book under my *nom de plume*. I have written volumes of short stories, which I may publish one day, but it was only later that I undertook to write this book, *Ramona*. It has been so much more difficult to write than *A Melody of Sadness*, quite simply because the facts are *wrong* and I have to sculpt them into shape as the work progresses. Each time I seek to edit the earlier chapters, I find that I cannot unwrite what I have written, because I cannot destroy the aesthetic truth of those words.

The stupid singing programme with my mother in Buenos Aires over the phone lasted about three weeks, because she wasn't my type. I could see why she left home: she did not fit in with us. The truth is that people in Andalusia are not all flamenco dancing Carmens: they are people like me, Clara, Fernando and, of course, little Maria, who is now big Maria and my best friend. After I returned from Cambridge, her grandmother died and she moved in with me and Clara, and then with me when I moved to Seville and later London.

Maria could not understand my rage. She had never seen me like this and it frightened her when I flew out of the flat in Knightsbridge and ran screaming into Hyde Park. When she caught me up later, and I calmed down, I could not understand it either, but it was there, and I think it will be there forever, somewhere, this rage. They had not told me, they had not bothered to tell me, they had not cared to tell me: my mother and my father were living together again in Cambridge. They had moved together weeks before. Why should I worry? I never felt rejected before, but now I did, as if they had stolen something from me that belonged to me. How can they? How can these two people be family without me, without asking me, without telling me, without considering me, without...well, without? My rage resumed. I ranted and raved that I would never ever have anything to do with them again, that I would never see them again, that they would suffer for this insult. I was brought back to the park, the trees, the military horses riding round the perimeter by Maria's laughter, not hysterical, but the laughter that follows a good joke. But Ramona,

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she told me, you don't have anything to do with them anyway, so what's the difference? Cold logic can be a salve to emotional hysterics and in this case it was, to be taken once every four hours for as long I live I wondered, incredulous at my own rage.

Why have I introduced this subject, so private, so personal, so embarrassing? I can only guess that the flow of this text has a power of its own to draw this from me, and because of what comes later. Clara, please help me.

Contrary to Maria's statement that I had nothing to do with them, they did contact me just four weeks later. I was calm now, most of the time. My reaction to their news was also calm - well let us just say my first reaction - I simply told Maria their news, and then I added that my only hope was that they would not call her Ramona.

The Reading Group

They had hardly started, but somehow the session came to a halt, the first meeting Ramona had joined after so many months. Vera looked across at Gloria and Gloria felt acutely embarrassed. She remained silent. It was practical Pam who moved in.

"I can understand why it has been so many months, Romana," and immediately Pam felt like an imbecile, with the possible interpretation of what she had said. Vera came to the rescue, deliberately, perhaps over-deliberately, staying with the text.

"I can see that Ramona may have experienced exclusion from her natural family situation... she did live with them for five years, early experience, you know, that kind of stuff"

"And she was an only child," Pam added, "in both situations, I mean, at home and then with Clara."

Ramona smiled at them. "No one needs exoneration. This is a story of relationships that derive from and are influenced by their own special circumstances. Let us remain humble before the power, the truth, of humankind. Shall I continue?"

Ramona

Maria looked at me with the intensity of a sinner standing before the Devil himself, a sinner claiming it could all be explained, there was some mistake somewhere, it must have been someone else, a mix-up.

Ramona

Now I thought she would explode, but she dissolved in sadness. She told me to remember those days when I had visited her in Rio Tinto and many other things. Suddenly, this little girl Maria, the singer, whom I had pulled out of her misery, with my music sheets and sweets, was my mentor. This will be your sister, she told me, and in that instant I realised that this thought had not even occurred to me, my sister. I had never had a sister before. Now I would have a sister. My rage burnt white hot.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MARIA'S STORY

Ramona

I grew up with my grandmother and for all of my childhood that I can remember just the two of us lived in that little house on the edge of Rio Tinto. She was eighty-five when she died, but I now know that she had been an old woman for many years before that, all the years that I knew her. Why she had moved close to the mines of Rio Tinto is a forgotten mystery, for she had lost interest in her life after the age of twenty-five by her later years, by the time I was mothered by her, when she would relate tales to me, Maria, of those early days, constantly.

I suppose she brought me up as her mother had brought her up, which was the way she, in turn, had been brought up, maybe by her grandmother. This explains a lot about me, a living anachronism, I sometimes think I was. Many are inspired by the old gipsy way of life, flamenco in the woods, fierce women fighting with knives to win a man, castanets; but for them it is a charming fairy tale, while for me it is laced into the tapestry of my childhood, mixed in with the life of the peasantry, life on the land, again incongruous with my childhood reality among the urban (mining town) poor. Perhaps all these strands were plaited together in me, and if so, they all had one thing in common, nothing to do with the modern world in which we live.

Everyone else had family but we did not, and our isolation was probably made worse by my grandmother's interminable, repetitious stories, which grew worse with her disease. The greatest excitement in her life was when Sister Clara would bring sweets for me and we would share them. I think Sister Clara realised this and would leave

Ramona

me double rations. At that time the very idea that I should ever live with Clara was beyond my wildest imagination, but then I suppose that would never have happened if Ramona had not returned from Cambridge. Then, at that time, Ramona and I were so far apart in years - I was fifteen - now we are so close in years, less than three years apart. But much more than the years separated us then: Clara and Ramona descended to us from Mount Olympus. And it was Mount Olympus, compared to the life I had and the little I knew, but I had, of course, no conception of their little village in the Sierra Morena, of Seville, of London.

I have no doubt that Clara was motivated by charity and her natural kindness, but I also have no doubt that Clara brought me to live with them to solve the problem of Ramona, the post-Cambridge Ramona, who needed something more in her life than the village school, teaching, had to offer. The development of me and my talents, which I neither knew I had then nor now, was that something. It was like a role reversal from those very first days. I would relate to Ramona the tales from my grandmother, which I knew by heart, and Ramona would write them down as short stories to be read by Clara to Ramona and me in the evenings. Charming, for a couple of months, but then we were rescued by the move to Seville, where I for the first time learned the meaning of the word education, and that is why we moved to London, Ramona and I, when she accompanied me "to look after me" as I commenced at London University, where I graduated two years ago. How much of life can be squeezed into a paragraph, a paragraph in which I too ascended to Mount Olympus, by now a fully paid up member of the demigods, looking for promotion.

I cannot say it was ever family life to me, but then I suppose that is something neither I nor Ramona has ever really had, in the conventional sense. Anyway, from the age of fourteen it was my interests which led me on, and I suppose, with time, it is true to say that Ramona and I have become the best of friends. She encourages me in what I do, and I still give her the plots for all her stories. Knowing her as I do, I have never seen her as an artist, but more of a technician: she constructs the stories from the pieces I give her. She knows my point of view and accepts it because she knows it is true. She has taken down, virtually verbatim, whole texts I have spoken on the

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subject, and I have the suspicion that she may even include part of this in her new book, *Ramona*, simply to cock a snook at the world, now that she has won the prize.

So what is the problem you may wonder, when everything is hunky dory (note how I attempt, often unsuccessfully, to clad my anachronistic being with a modern veneer) and we live in clover? I think you may have guessed the problem: Ramona. Why can she not escape this past that has nothing to do with her past life, her present life, or her future? Forget it, Ramona, forget it, and leave them be, as they you, I tell her. What has it got to do with you, with me, with Clara, with anyone? They live in a different soap opera, not in ours, not even in a parallel universe, more distant than that not even tangential, forget! Forget!!! The concept of “forget it”, of course, does not necessarily include the inheritance, which I would certainly not advise anyone to forget, if they had the remotest chance of getting their hands on it.

Ramona is not an emotional type by any stretch of the imagination. She is, in my view, and I think her own, a bit of a plodder, even if a talented one, although this is disguised by her engaging social manner and exceptional looks. So it was an extraordinary outburst, for her, when she learnt about her natural parents moving back together: Ramona rushing out into the park screaming! You must be joking, but she did; I am the athlete in our household but I could not catch her until she was halfway to Kensington Gardens. Bystanders must have assumed we were training for the Fun Run, but I am not sure what they thought about the hysterical shrieking.

And then within a month the real news: they are to have a child. This has had a powerful effect on Ramona that I do not really understand, and I am worried for her. What do I do?

If the scene at the Anchor had led you to believe that both Carmen and Alistair lived in a world dedicated to first impressions, you would not be wrong. Maybe that is why she was a performer, who made her living by creating illusion on stage, in her appearances during a performance, those minutes when she would be on stage, and why

Ramona

she and Caroline used to practise their entries into the cafés of Paris. Maybe that was why Alistair was a professor of literature, for reasons that a professor of literature may be better qualified to answer.

Whether it was really a first impression, or came alive later, Carmen saw Maria step through the garden gate of their Cambridgeshire home as a figure from Maria's grandmother's tales, stepping into the clearing from the dark forest to shout her defiance at the soldiers guarding her imprisoned lover. In fact, Maria had come to see Alistair and Carmen with the principal intention of having them invite Ramona to be a godmother when the time came. Maria thought that "inclusion" was the solution for Ramona, but then she had not met Carmen before today.

Ramona was never intended to be a book about singers, and certainly not opera singers, but both the real world and fate (if the two are compatible) conspire against the best of intentions. As he drove into the driveway Alistair could hear a familiar female duet echoing across the lawns, but it was unfamiliar in that it contained the familiar voice of Carmen who had no partner for duets.

Alistair walked across the lawn from his redbrick garage, shorter than taking the serpentine stone path. The privacy of the house would be afforded in due course by a beech hedge he had planted, but now he could see his neighbours who had stopped their game of croquet to stroll up to the border and listen to the impromptu concert. Alistair walked across to them, a painter and his flamboyant wife, a daughter and son-in-law, both Cambridge academics. Jules, the painter was laughing as he spoke to Alistair.

"I wouldn't like to be in your shoes, old boy," he said. "Whoever she is, from what we've heard this afternoon, she's at least as good as Carmen."

"Are you suggesting my wife's a bitch?" Alistair grinned. The two of them had an understanding about how to keep their respective wives under control.

"Just a woman, Alistair."

"Well to the extent that any woman could be a bitch, Carmen would not wish to be considered less able than any other, but no, one thing I will say for her is that she just loves the music and will do anything to improve it. There's no spirit of competition in that

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department. I believe she would give up a role if she thought there were a better singer. So, no, I think, if this girl's so good, I'm a lucky man, for a change." The painter's wife was surprised by his tone.

"I have to give it to you, Alistair," she said, "you do rank at the top of the smarmy bastard league table."

"If both of us weren't married, I'd take that as an invitation to dance," Alistair said, "but come in anyway and join us for a drink."

They parted the beech hedge, stepped through and the five of them strolled across the lawn to the house.

Alistair had built onto the west side of the house a conservatory the height of two storeys, and attached to the house at the upper level within the conservatory was a gallery. Carmen had chosen this as her stage for tonight, so the audience settled into rattan sofas of floral design, among the plants below, all very Alcazar in its way. They sipped chilled white Valdepenas wine to enhance the authenticity of the performance, but not a word was spoken among them, capable of being spoken among them, as the two women swayed and flowed above them with the music and their voices combined and then complemented in successive roles, breaking in waves across the conservatory.

Carmen staged three curtain calls for Maria to the applause from below and ushered her down the curving staircase to join the audience. As they stepped off the bottom step, the world of opera above retreated to wherever it is that it lives while the real world takes over. Carmen was in her gardening clothes and Maria was turned out for the occasion she had planned, not for an operatic dress rehearsal.

"Alistair," Carmen enthused, "Ramona's friend Maria has come to see us." Neither of them had the vaguest idea that Ramona had a friend called Maria. Alistair proceeded to introduce Maria to the painter and his wife, while the daughter and son-in-law took an overdue leave to meet their planned evening engagements.

The painter took pains to be honest in his opinions, and the opportunity to test Alistair's probity.

"Carmen, I have admired you more than any other singer and am honoured to be your neighbour, if I could just paint with your art, but today you have been surpassed by Maria."

Carmen beamed at him.

"I could never have told Maria that. She wouldn't have believed

Ramona

me. I have never sung with anyone like Maria. Not because she's technically perfect, she isn't, how could she be without years of training? But the quality! Believe me, Maria, this man *does* know how to paint. You have just, deservedly, received the highest praise you could earn."

Maria accepted her demigod status with grace, but was for the moment more concerned about her mission, thought she had probably made a step in the right direction. If only the painter would go, she could get on with it. But the painter did not go before the second bottle of Valdepenas was finished, and Maria had to start worrying about train schedules. To hell with it, she said to herself, I am here for this, and if need be I'll walk the streets tonight until the first train tomorrow. Her concerns were set aside by Alistair.

"Stay here tonight, Maria. It's unpleasant to travel back to London so late, the tube at the other end and all that. I should have been home much earlier; it's my turn to cook. I'm going to start now, so one extra is easy. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

"Then chat with Carmen while I disappear in the kitchen. It's not often we entertain Ramona's friends," i.e. never.

After a joint operatic performance small talk does not come naturally, and the impromptu performance had not generated a professional post mortem, so Maria came straight to the point.

"Ramona does not know I'm here," - Carmen did not appear surprised - "If she did, my ears would be burning, white hot."

"I think I understand," Carmen responded cautiously.

"I had one intention when I came here tonight, now I have two." Maria was clear about what she wanted.

"Tell me the first," Carmen proposed, uncorking a sorely needed Valdepenas.

"Make her a goddaughter."

"Absolutely, but why do *you* tell me?" Carmen looked at Maria with interest.

"Because she's burning up, Carmen, about the sister six months hence. It's absurd, but that's how it is. Include her." Maria had stated her demand. Carmen was impassive.

"And the second?"

"Again in the interests of inclusion, not exclusion, Alistair should

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make a financial settlement on Ramona. I only thought of this while we were singing up there, you know, for age twenty-five or whatever.”

Carmen let out the deep belly laugh of the trained opera singer.

“Maria, none of this would ever have happened if it were not for Alistair’s miserly possession of his hated wealth. I agree to demand number one, but you ask him about demand two over dinner, I want to be there - I can’t miss this, not this.” A repeat of the operatic belly laugh.

Alistair produced fried blood sausage, boiled turnips, chopped raw cabbage in olive oil, hot green chillies and boiled white rice. Maria enjoyed it, wondering nonetheless whether he might be making a point about the cooking, but then she did not know what it was that Carmen produced when she was on the rota. Alistair was enamoured of the godmother idea, especially once Maria had explained her rationale.

“So that’s settled,” Alistair declaimed, voluble and clearly pleased.

“I had another thought,” Maria added. “You know, some sort of financial settlement to reflect her age.”

Alistair turned serious.

“Maria,” he said, looking very stern, “I went through so much. Ramona went through so much. It could never be paid for.”

“That’s not what I’m suggesting,” Maria chipped in merrily.

“You don’t understand. I could never do a pay-off like that. This was my daughter, my life, my daughter’s life.”

“That’s not what I’m saying. I’m just saying, include her in the family, spread the wealth a bit, show she’s part of the game-plan.”

“Maria, I have never, never ever attached value to wealth, material wealth. I would not for one moment demean my daughter by assuming her opinion was any different. That is final.”

Carmen smiled at Maria and asked, “Shall we talk about opera now?”

But Maria turned back to Alistair.

“You are absolutely wrong, Alistair. The money has no value, apart from convenience, other than the extreme value you give it, the extreme *no-value* value. Think about it Alistair, but let’s not discuss it tonight. Let me just ask if the bartender in the Anchor, on that famous day when you met Carmen, would have accepted no payment

Ramona

for your three pints of bitter and two Pimms, in lieu of white wine, on the basis that material wealth had no value. Get real.”

She would have stood up and left, except that Carmen was smiling and Alistair clearly had not the least idea of what she was talking about. She was beginning to understand what it was that Carmen had intimated to her earlier, and why Carmen wished to witness the discussion. Then she turned to Carmen with her sweetest of smiles.

“You know, this was the most wonderful evening, earlier. You were the most wonderful hosts, earlier. I was so glad to be here, earlier. But, you know what? It stinks, and I think I understand why. Maybe I can help Ramona after all.”

“I hope you can. Alistair, are we having digestifs? Come on let’s go back to the conservatory.”

At this moment Maria realised she could not fault Carmen. Carmen had returned to Alistair and knew how to handle it, and she also realised that Carmen respected her, Maria, for more than her singing.