

Character Reference:

**ANGELO VARGAS** - Reticent recluse with nomadic past. A-religious and no admirer of mankind. A streak of violence runs deep although usually under control. Erudite, with a sharp intellect and a penchant for black humour. Advanced ability to listen and make people talk. Of private disposition and can appear morose. Not fond of compromises and too forthright for most. Men uncomfortable with his demeanour but women find him intriguing and considerate. Dreams of finding his shrine but assumes it is out of reach. Profession added to experiences from childhood onwards together with a complex and restless mind make him accept being a social outcast.

**JENNIFER MORAN** - Of Catholic faith but not dogmatic. Oddly unaware of her magnetic femininity. Has an instinctive understanding of human nature. More fond of sardonic humour than she likes to admit. Drawn towards the unknown and fascinated by a world alien to her own background and experiences. Knows the difference between feelings and emotions. Ardent opponent of violence but realizes there are circumstances when unavoidable or even justified - has the ability to put reason before condemnation. A strong character with little sympathy for cheap compromises. Unreservedly loyal and capable of deep and sustained affection when giving herself.

**IGOR PARKHURST** - Jennifer Moran's godfather - once a distinguished writer now fallen on hard times, destitute and deserted by those who flocked around him in his heyday. A gentle and intelligent man prone to feeling hurt. Believes in human values but being in the grip of the Secret Service has made him depressed and confused. Can no longer see a way out of the morass.

**TADASHI ISHIHARA** - Suave, dapper and loquacious. Non-conformist in the extreme and ditto unscrupulous. Expert at gathering intelligence. An inscrutable character with an acerbic wit. Competent mind-reader. Ambitious. Have seen more of the world than most. Adores his wife Yasmin. Limited respect for people with exception of long-time collaborator Angelo Vargas.

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The late spring of 1958 had been promising, but the summer, like so many English summers, saw August fade into an early autumn.

A light mist touched the Hampshire hills like a gentle stroke from an artist's brush. From a distance came the faint whistle of a train. A kestrel hovered over the dirt-yellow field across the paddock and the row of chestnut trees stood as if carved in black against the leaden sky, heavy with rain. Then the wind ripped the clouds apart and the sun gilded the edge of the woods and the meadows.

Igor Parkhurst shuddered. He bit off the broken nail on his right thumb and wished that he'd bothered to put on a jacket. The smell of rotting leaves filled his nostrils as he sauntered through the remnants of his garden.

Parkhurst's mind moved in circles; he thought about life, life as it was, and life as it could have been.

He did not look up when he heard the rasping voices of the jackdaws approaching the big sycamore tree, its majestic trunk brown and moss green and glistening in the wet. Life had become a bad joke. His existence had been reduced to a vacuum between birth and death. He could not understand that he hadn't deserved better. Events had got on top of him, and, to crown it, he was no longer in the best of health.

Age, he thought, this merciless destroyer of good looks, hope and confidence; he was rapidly nearing three-quarters of a century and of late was convinced that his body would soon follow his reputation into decomposition, followed by terminal obscurity. It was as if, whatever he tried to do, the result was the equivalent of hoping for an orchid to grow by peeing on a weed.

His hands had begun to shake, on and off. He was arthritic. He carried two-hundred-and-twenty-four pounds on a five-foot-nine frame. His blood pressure could have blown apart a Sherman tank. It did not help that his daily consumption of cognac had increased from two fingers in a tumbler to a good half bottle, but the sense of succour was great and the feeling of loneliness became less unbearable as night closed in.

Parkhurst kicked a pine cone out of the way. He stopped in front of the greenhouse. Shards of broken glass ran like busted swastikas down the wall. He imitated a smile and recalled the scene of departure when Miriam, his third and final wife, had walked out two years earlier. Her words of farewell had not been nice. He shivered and rubbed the back of his neck with both hands.

*“You are not even worth the paper you don’t write on,”* she had sneered. *“You can’t afford to keep me and now you claim that you can’t even afford to divorce me. What I wanted was a decent standard of living, but that was evidently too much. I tell you, Igor, when this divorce is over there won’t be much left of you.”*

Parkhurst’s grimace ended with a lopsided grin; he was clearly the kind of husband that only a widow with a failing memory could love. But Miriam had been right, in a way; he could no longer produce anything worthwhile, and he was nearly destitute. His creative mind, together with the rest of him, had long been hibernating.

How lucky women were, he mused; they never made mistakes, they had no faults and they were never wrong. Three attempts—and not once had he achieved the perfect balance; his imperfections and their virtues neatly synchronized in the conspiracy women effortlessly defined as love. It had been like doing a fandango with an eel.

The wind carried the smell of fertilizers across from the nearby fields. He plodded down the lawn towards the paddock. The ground was adorned with honey-coloured leaves from the beech trees.

He scratched the beard he’d grown to avoid looking at himself in the mirror every morning. His skin had gone the colour of sun-dried bones. His physique looked as if a eunuch had sired him. The hair on his head had the dull hue of pewter and the expression in his eyes was as lacklustre as melted lead.

*The Web of the British Scorpion*, he thought. He liked graphic analogies unconnected with realities.

He squeezed his left thumb with his right hand and saw the sun once more break through the clouds before it left the day. The pastures in the west became olive green and the pink softness of dusk turned mauve.

But the scorpion existed, all right, personified by Gregory Pritchard-White, Esquire, and he had been dangling in Pritchard-White's web for the past five years. Since the very first day, again and again, Parkhurst had asked himself: of what use could he possibly be to the Secret Service? Each time he came up with the same answer; hardly any, or probably none at all.

It had begun by sheer coincidence. With incredible naivety, or, rather, stupidity, he had conveyed to a then Member of Parliament a remark snapped up whilst visiting Washington in November 1953. In those days Parkhurst was a big name in literature; everybody flocked around him, including high-ranking politicians whose idea of a library was a storage room for discarded cheque books. He'd been invited to the White House, and there, on that occasion, he had forgotten to keep his nose clean. President Eisenhower had greeted him warmly, albeit, true to the best of American traditions, he'd been unable to get his name right. The President then turned around to continue his conversation with a silver-haired senator named Harold Wetherspoon. Baffled by the President's abrupt behaviour, Parkhurst stood where he was for a while, clinging to his glass, and just long enough to overhear the senator's description of the British as *totally unreliable homosexuals, too soft on the Russians and altogether unable to comprehend the peril of communism*. He is telling a joke, he'd reflected, but then he thought about God's generosity when it came to Americans and humour and decided to eavesdrop a bit more. *Apart from being a bunch of lily-livered eggheads hallucinating about an empire long lost, the senator had continued, no way were the British bright enough to understand Moscow's stealthy ways and neither were those isolated islanders sufficiently alert to the machinations of the KGB. In addition—and at this point the senator had resolutely emptied his glass—which had produced more spies, traitors and useless politicians per capita than the goddamn Brits? None. Which country had given birth to Neville Chamberlain and Oswald Mosley?* The senator shook his silvery locks vigorously before he strongly advised the President to *keep the Brits in the dark, which was where they belonged anyway, and not utter one single word about the latest Kremlin/White House overture.*

By then the grinning President had made himself busy by paying attention to a female admirer with a passion for golf. The senator's voice drifted, and from then on and forever after Igor Parkhurst had no idea what that particular overture was all about.

But the senator had been an important and influential man; he had once been to Europe for an entire week, and with this experience to his credit he quickly rose through the hierarchy and became the natural choice as USA's foremost specialist on all matters foreign and international.

Parkhurst thought about what he had overheard and did not give it too much weight. Obviously things were going on backstage, but that was politics. The subject had never been close to his heart.

What bugged him was the senator's remark about the British. Instead of writing it off as just another American inanity, he found himself increasingly annoyed, and, as he now saw it, a basically irrational sentiment became the catalyst leading to infinite misery.

Returning from Washington, he had called Wilbur Fletcher, an old acquaintance from Oxford and now a Member of Parliament; they had met for lunch in The House and Parkhurst had related what he'd overheard. "*Oh, never mind the Americans,*" Fletcher had said with an indifferent shrug. "*They're just a bunch of conceited, ignorant, shallow, arrogant, dishonest and humourless second-hand immigrants. Our inferior cousins across the pond cannot come to terms with the fact that we've got history, culture, traditions and class. It is nothing but envy, feeding from an enormous inferiority complex.*" Fletcher had asked for another bottle of wine before he'd continued, "*What you heard was a piece of bungled politicking between two dilettantes, dear chap; annoying, yes, but of no significance. Suffice to say that we know substantially more about what is going on in this world than they do. Look at the way they deal with things they don't understand,*" he had added with a snicker. "*The Americans are so incredibly inept that one must almost admire their line of consistent mishaps from Wounded Knee to Panmunjon. I've met Senator Wetherspoon a few times in his capacity as Chairman of the Foreign Relation Committee, and, believe me, he's one of the biggest jerks they've ever produced. He's adopted this melancholy grin of an alligator pretending to be a friendly manic depressive, but nobody here takes him and his foolish mannerisms seriously.*"

During the rest of the meal they talked about their days at Oxford, and that was it—or so he had thought at the time. What he did not know was that Fletcher had a high-ranking friend at the SIS, and that the friend had a young protégé who was as innovative as he was ambitious.

A week later Parkhurst received a telephone call. The man did not present himself other than as an acquaintance of Fletcher, but the caller would be grateful if he and Parkhurst could meet over a drink and discuss a matter of vital importance. Parkhurst had been both flattered and appreciative. His appreciation stemmed from the fact that a writer could never be in possession of too much raw material.

They met in a pub in Pimlico Road at opening hour. The place was quiet and they found a corner table. Pritchard-White said who he was and whom he worked for, stressed the confidentiality of the meeting, referred to Fletcher's version of the White House incident and praised Parkhurst for his unquestionable patriotism. People like Parkhurst were indeed rare, in Pritchard-White's estimate; a man who had the gift, or, possibly more precise, the transcendent ability to pick up pieces of intelligence from conversations and convey such priceless information to the country's designated collectors of the same. Such a person was no less than a national treasure.

Parkhurst grew a couple of inches as he listened. His stare was fastened on Pritchard-White's long and narrow face where a pair of brown-and-yellow-spotted eyes glistened with holy patriotism. Nothing wrong with that, he had thought; the man obviously believed in what he was doing, and, true enough, the world was a complex place. Everybody suspected everybody else of harbouring ulterior motives, acrimony was rife, there were mountains of nuclear weapons around, and—bottom line—*my country right or wrong*. Stalin's death earlier in the year had not made the Soviet Union less formidable, nor had the absurd Korean armistice made the world a safer place. The events in Iran, when Premier Mossadegh was ousted, demonstrated clearly that communism was a plague that could show up anywhere.

That about summed it up, and Parkhurst had smiled with controlled enthusiasm. Yes, if he could be of any help... a discrete nod and a conspiratorial line over his left eyebrow completed his new-found sense of flag-waving loyalty.

Pritchard-White had been delighted, in his self-effacing fashion. They'd agreed that Parkhurst would use his discretion and report whenever he picked up something that could be interpreted as being in the interest of the nation, however far-fetched it may sound at the time. And—by the way—nothing in writing, not a single note. Parkhurst had kept on nodding, but he did emphasize that incidents like the one in the White House were indeed few and far between; usually, he attended cocktail parties and other social events a bit further down the ladder. True, there were glittering get-togethers now and then where also politicians and ambassadors congregated—was it something like that Pritchard-White had in mind? Precisely. Big names from all walks of life, broadly speaking, preferably in the company of influential allies like women and alcohol—Pritchard-White had winked twice—that was when vanity took over and created the condition where an eagle like Parkhurst could pick up slices of raw meat involuntarily dropped.

They'd left an hour later; a partnership well and truly established and with the clear understanding that nobody was ever to know about this, and that Parkhurst did not liaise with anybody and that meant *anybody* but Pritchard-White.

He memorized the two code names and a couple of telephone numbers and went home, slightly bemused but all in all reasonably pleased with himself.

For the next two years not much happened. He reported back whenever he thought that something could be deciphered as being of national interest, and he remained in the dark as to the significance of his observations. During those years he'd been exceptionally prolific; his books and plays were well received and translated into a dozen languages. Money came in almost as fast as his succession of wives could get rid of it, and, thanks to his gift as a raconteur backed by his literary success, he'd become the darling of the intellectual masses from London to Paris and from San Francisco to Tokyo. His boundless energy and stamina allowed him to write for seven months of the year and to travel for four months. He gave himself one month during the summer to recharge his batteries, and for a long time he believed that this arrangement made everybody happy, family included.

Then one day Pritchard-White asked him to go to Israel; things were brewing in the Middle East. It was the first time a direct request had been made, and it didn't suit Parkhurst. He had other plans; one

of his plays was to open in Berlin and he had promised to be at the premiere.

His objection had been met with stony silence. Pritchard-White sucked on his pipe for a long time, occasionally re-lighting it and permanently staring at a spot above Parkhurst's head. Half an eternity later their glances had crossed; Pritchard-White put his pipe in the ashtray, wiped the saliva from the corners of his mouth with the back of his hand and said, *"Really."*

Then he slowly shook his head as if he could not believe what he had heard, his molars grinding and the muscles in front of his earlobes moving like slugs under a strip of speckled canvas. *"Mr. Parkhurst,"* he said in a voice barely audible, *"presumably there is no need to remind you that we are talking about matters of national security. We—and I now speak on behalf of the British Government—we have reason to believe that the Americans are making a deal with the Israelis whilst telling us something entirely different. Furthermore, the Americans are also preparing some underhand scenario with Iraq and Turkey, trying to sneak in on the Baghdad Pact, consulting neither us nor the Israelis. That is utterly devious and totally unacceptable, my dear chap. We need to know what is going on. We can't ask the Arabs without their half-baked and perpetually paranoid political leaders immediately feeling betrayed by the Americans—most likely the final outcome, but anyway—and there we are. The Israelis not only distrust everybody out of sheer habit; for some arcane reason they also keep clinging to the misconception that we, the British, are primarily anti-Semitic and always have been. God knows where they got it from, but, regardless, how does one cure a permanent mental disturbance of such magnitude? Can't be done, old boy. It's pathological and beyond present means of treatment."* He again fired up his pipe, and for a while he sucked like a man offered his last smoke. He went on, *"You are popular in Israel, and Mossad can be quite leaky, when it suits them, particularly now with that old fox Ben-Gurion back in the saddle. Get down there and see what you can find out."*

Parkhurst repeated his desire to be in Berlin. He tried to reason, but Pritchard-White had cut him short. *"Just do it,"* he said in a tone of voice that Parkhurst found menacing, *"or you can read all about your father's interesting life in next week's newspapers. The sins of the fathers, and so on, my dear Mr. Parkhurst. It's amazing how colourful and nasty such a story can be made to appear—not to mention its repercussions. Think about it. If I hear nothing by tonight I shall presume that you are on your way."*

Parkhurst went home and locked the door to his study. He did not doubt that the threat was real, and it scared him. For the first time it dawned upon him that he was but a small pawn entirely at the mercy of a powerful and ruthless organisation and that his activities as a collector of intelligence, however insignificant, could one day seriously backfire and damage if not destroy him.

His father, Henry Parkhurst, had been an impresario, an eccentric character, vibrant and opinionated. He had been a friend of Bertrand Russell and shared his pacifism, although not to the extent of risking jail. As opposed to Russell, Henry Parkhurst could not accept that the Soviet Union wasn't likely to become the workers' paradise as outlined by Lenin and Trotsky. Henry could not be persuaded to read Lenin's *The State and Revolution*, characterised by Russell as a magnificent but perverse masterpiece of intellectual fraud—a description Henry Parkhurst found more amusing than instructive—and he flatly refused to rid himself of a residual sentimentality towards an -ism he'd never bothered to analyze. Even Russell's vivid description of his meeting with Lenin in the summer of 1920 could not make a dent in Henry Parkhurst's belief, and he continued to praise the revolution and the Soviet philosophy to anybody who cared to listen. He categorically discarded the theory that history repeated itself; in Henry Parkhurst's opinion it so happened that a vast number of events during the centuries had a tendency to reflect familiarity, and that was all there was to it. An explanation as to a possible distinction between the theory and the opinion was never produced—he just changed his facial expression from pitiful to resigned dismay.

Lenin's death and the arrival of Stalin made no difference. Russell's observation that Bolshevism was no better than Tsarism was wearily rejected, and it was only in 1933, following the Metro-Vickers case, that he began to question if there was indeed something rotten in the hitherto greatest of democracies. The assassination of Kirov a year later was not glossed over by Henry, but he was still reluctant to admit that he could have been so incredibly mistaken for almost twenty years.

Then came the Moscow show trials where Vyshinsky performed to Stalin's perfection; the blood purge swept away old-timers like Zinoviev, Kamenev and Bukharin among many others, and in 1938 only the ruins were left of Henry Parkhurst's illusions.

The relationship between father and son had been a harmonious one, mainly because young Igor from childhood displayed a will to understand and a desire to forgive. He knew that his father's rapport with reality was seldom intimate; on the contrary, most of the time it thrived on the far side of distant. Being a fantasist and a dreamer did not necessarily make a bad person, in Igor's view, and both as a child and in later years he found it impossible to judge his father as anything but a charming cross between Don Quixote and Walter Mitty; a quaint, capricious and ultimately kind and generous man who meant no harm. Yes, he did drive both Igor and his prim and proper mother Beryl up the wall more often than not, but always with such vivacity, exuberance and charm that it never seriously rocked the family boat.

Igor Parkhurst smiled as he recalled a story his mother had told time and again. It had been her wish that her one and only child should have a respectable English name, either Charles or, preferably, William, but her beloved husband had opted for Leon, after Trotsky. Mrs. Parkhurst refused to budge; no son of hers should walk through life with a distinctly un-British name like that, and to her astonishment Henry had just shrugged and seemingly accepted.

Three days before the Christening ceremony Beryl had by coincidence run into the local vicar who congratulated the Parkhursts with their choice of names for their little boy. No doubt he would use only one of them as he grew up. Beryl, baffled but composed, had said, "*Plural?*" and asked the vicar if he would be good enough to elaborate. The vicar had been quick to identify a Gordian Knot and knew that he had cornered himself. "*Your husband's list, Mrs. Parkhurst,*" he'd said, shifting his feet uneasily, "*Vladimir, Charles, Ilich, William, Leon. Am I to understand ...?*" and he had stared towards heaven for further assistance. "*See you later,*" Beryl had said and hurried home. They had compromised the very same evening, landing on *Igor* and celebrating over a bottle of champagne. Henry had been extremely pleased with himself, and Beryl not seriously despondent.

Then, in 1939, Henry died. He did so before he had found the time or perhaps the nerve to denounce officially his past passion for communism. Having been a popular and successful impresario and a larger-than-life character, his essentially trivial political tenets were soon forgotten. Igor Parkhurst could not remember one single instance during his entire adult life when his father's once-held Soviet sympathies had

been mentioned until Pritchard-White brought it up. Parkhurst knew that he was left with no choice. He believed that Henry's peripheral and innocent political past wouldn't make much of a splash in England, but America was a different matter. He feared that his immense popularity could evaporate overnight; the cold war was a fact and with Senator Joseph McCarthy permanently in the headlines, Parkhurst had no illusions about the Americans' horror of communism. This was more than a mere academic perception; during numerous visits the old ghost had been the topic of many a conversation, and his discernment, supported by solid experience, convinced him that Pritchard-White's threat, if carried out, would result in diminishing interest and ultimately the cancellation of lucrative contracts.

Parkhurst went to Israel and came back without the faintest idea about the value of his intelligence, as usual, but Pritchard-White had been pleased.

Since then he had made several trips to various places around the world; what had once been polite requests had been replaced by firm orders. He concealed neither his reluctance nor his displeasure, and their former amicable relationship soon became dominated by resentment and hostility.

In particular it annoyed him that Pritchard-White always managed to keep his cool. His attitude was contemptuous and patronizing, and he selected his words with the precision of a malicious schoolmaster. Career-wise he had done well for himself; he had rapidly risen through the hierarchy and operated a notch below top level. His contacts in Whitehall were many and influential.

Their relationship finally came to a point where Parkhurst decided that he'd had enough. He could no longer produce as he used to; his sources of income became fewer and the amounts smaller, and his family life was in a shambles. He spent a week in solitude evaluating his predicament, and he emerged with the conclusion that he'd rather lose America than his mind. The articles would surface—nobody squeezed Pritchard-White's nose without paying for it—but then Parkhurst himself would write a couple of articles, putting things in perspective. After a few weeks the whole shabby affair would blow over, and, who could tell, perhaps even the Americans would pay less attention than he'd originally feared. The year before, McCarthy's

reign had finally come to an end when the Senate condemned him for “*conduct contrary to Senatorial traditions*” and perhaps common sense would continue its come-back now that phobia no longer was mistaken for patriotism.

The day of reckoning came in May 1956. They met in one of the pubs selected by Pritchard-White as appropriate for matters of national interest. Parkhurst showed up sporting a pair of baggy brown trousers and an old tweed jacket that he normally used when walking the lanes in rural Hampshire. Pritchard-White, tall and slim, was the epitome of elegance. His dark grey suit was tailor-made, with small lapels and four buttons. The tie was blue and narrow and with a small design embroidered in the centre.

Without overdoing formal politeness, he instructed Parkhurst to go to Moscow. The order was accompanied by the traditional comment about his mammoth popularity. Pritchard-White went on with details about pre-arrangements, events and the names of a good handful of interesting people with whom he should converse. That was it, really. Plain sailing, in other words. Nothing unfamiliar.

“Write your articles,” Parkhurst said.

“Excuse me?”

“Write your articles about my father. I have had enough. My life has become a nightmare and I’d rather face the consequences than continue like this. I just can’t go on. I think the time has come for you to accept that.”

“What a shame.”

“Is it? I am only a tiny little fish, merely a sardine, swimming aimlessly around in the seven seas of your world. I cannot see that I have been or ever will be of any real use whatsoever. The whole thing is just a farce. I am too ignorant about the world in which you operate, too naïve, too innocent and too amateurish.”

“You are underestimating yourself. Grossly, I’d add.”

“I don’t think so. I am an incompetent and nonplussed dabbler, just as my father was an innocuous saloon philosopher of a left-wing quasi-intellectual kind. I ask you in earnest. Please let me go whilst there is still something left of my life.”

“We never let go.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I am terribly sorry, old chap, but we don’t operate that way. You are one of us. Apart from sympathizing with the frailness of your character there is nothing I can do about it.”

“You know nothing about my character.”

“Yes, I do. As you know, we exist to investigate, to counter, to advise and to assist. We are guided by our commitment to integrity, legality and objectivity. To serve our country is an honour and a duty. Once involved always involved. Betraying our mission is not acceptable. We’ve had enough of the likes of Burgess and Maclean.”

“Are you comparing me with...?”

“Please, let’s not get personal. However, the fact that those two gentlemen decided to emigrate five years ago does not eradicate another fact—namely that there are plenty of their ilk around. Funny, isn’t it, how Cambridge was and is so fertile when it comes to treacherous perverts? Never mind. You’re Oxford, I seem to recall, always a few steps behind, in all respects.”

Parkhurst rose to leave. “Write your articles.”

“Ah—the tip of the iceberg.”

He sat down. “Am I supposed to follow?”

“Of course you are. Here—” he pulled a brown A-5 size envelope from his pocket and took out a photograph “—remember this gentleman?”

Parkhurst stared at the picture of two men passing in a park, one giving what looked like a small parcel to the other.

“I take it you recognize yourself. The other one, as you know, is your old friend Viktor Seleznyev from the Soviet Embassy. He’s gone home to Moscow now, but I’m sure you’ve got no problems recalling name, place and, of course, data contained in your little parcel.” He smiled. His visage made Parkhurst think of Count Dracula waiting for the twelve chimes of midnight.

“This is a fabrication,” he said. “I have never seen that man in my life before.”

“Is that so?” Pritchard-White pushed his glasses up from his nose and made them balance on top of his head. “What about this, then?” He took a piece of paper from the envelope and unfolded it on the table. “Look at this statement, one of many, as we both know. Haven’t you amassed a small fortune in Switzerland, my dear fellow? I am impressed, to say the least.” His eyes were glossy and with an expression usually associated with chemical assistance.

Parkhurst looked away. The smells of his own fear hit him like the stench in a public toilet. Then everything became blurred and Igor Parkhurst knew that he had lost. He could have fought his father's corner, but there was no way he could fight the evil machinery now facing him. For a brief moment he felt like a man whose mind was a satellite lost in space. He stared at the grin on Pritchard-White's face and thought that his teeth could have done with a monthly brush.

Pritchard-White's hands moved as if he was kneading dough.

Igor Parkhurst conceded defeat and knew that his life had become existence in decline.



He felt the rain on the wind and leaned against the solid trunk of the big chestnut tree. In the corner of the paddock his neighbour's horses stood as if chiselled in black marble.

He turned and began drifting back towards the house. Out of habit he tried to look slimmer by hunching his shoulders and keeping his arms straight with his knuckles pointing forward. His shoes made sucking noises on the damp and flattened grass. A peculiar ache penetrated his heart and spread across his chest. Laboriously he opened the French doors to his drawing room, reached for his last bottle of cognac and filled a tumbler. His hands were trembling. He let out a deep sigh and dumped himself heavily in the nearest chair.

His safety valves did not function any more. He missed them. Fits of rage, tears or any other appropriate emotional outburst had served him well in the past, but he had no tears left and anger and repugnance and the soothing sensation of feeling unscrupulously exploited were all of the past. He was burnt out, empty and seconds away from an all-consuming and irreversible indifference.

He looked out the window and up towards the sky where the clouds lingered like translucent greyhounds frozen in time. He quaffed his cognac and opened and closed his right hand as if squeezing water from a sponge. Life, he thought, what the hell was life but a graveyard with a forecourt. An echo of despair reverberated between his ears and he focused inward and reminisced.

Once, writing had been his life; purgatory extricated by catharsis. He'd seen it as both a duty and an intellectual challenge to emphasize

the complexity of man without offering explanations or trying to influence the reader with unsustainable sentiments. He had agreed wholeheartedly with the Shakespearean technique of *presenting conflicts without giving answers*, and it had been fun. He smiled wryly. He had been good at it. Now he was dead from mental and emotional hypothermia, and whatever was left of his physical existence was as significant as an amoeba in orbit.

Two hours later his glass was empty and so was most of the bottle. He inhaled the stale smell of loneliness and got to his feet. He did not sway and he felt remarkably sober. I'll give it one more shot, he thought. I shall close the circle and if that does not work... he rubbed his cheeks with his knuckles as he walked across the floor, into the hallway and up the stairs to his bedroom.

Tucked under the sheets of his regal four-poster bed, Igor Parkhurst turned his pillow. It was brown from body grease and he heard his unshaven face rasp against the cover. He thought about his youth, so long ago, when his mind and his body were strong and virile and the notion of death was but a hypothesis, vague and elusive like the haze over a far-away mountain pass.

He listened for a while to the dialogue of the barn owls before he switched off the light. An hour later he was still awake.

Igor Parkhurst wished that he were the mortgage-free owner of a small cottage and not the occupant of a vast Victorian mansion belonging to a bank.

# **Those Who Leave**

A Novel

Ivar Rivenaes

A further taster follows to whet your appetite from  
pages 111-120

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Kathleen, Jennifer and Conor were enjoying their morning coffee.

“Top of the morning,” Conor said. “I must declare, you look amazingly fit, almost supercharged.”

“Like a gargantuan cherub,” Kathleen said. “All rosy cheeks and pink eyes. You had a good night’s sleep?”

Parkhurst pulled out a chair. “Better than, oh—I don’t know—an eternity. What an evening. Where did the time go?”

“It’s the company,” Kathleen smiled. “Kindred spirits and, if I remember correctly, all kinds of spirits.”

Parkhurst fumbled with the belt of his gown. “I love the three of you.”

Jennifer came with a mug of coffee.

“Thank you, my dear,” Parkhurst said and patted her hand. “I presume you picked that one accidentally on purpose.” He looked at the picture of a polar bear with a bewildered look on his face. The text read: *LUCK FOOLS—TALENT RULES*.

“Pure coincidence,” she said. “What a suspicious mind you have got, Uncle Igor.” She stroked his hair and turned her attention to the driveway in front of the house. “Are you expecting somebody?”

They all got up and watched a black Mercedes come to a halt.

Parkhurst said, “No, but I think I know who it is.”

“Who might the unexpected guest be?” Conor queried with a slight anticipation to his voice.

“Have a guess,” Parkhurst said uneasily as both front doors of the car opened.

Conor smiled. “Your favourite Japanese and his friend.”

When Conor had told Kathleen about Parkhurst’s state of affairs, he had included the approach from the Japanese. Jennifer had yet to be informed.

“Who are they?” she asked. “Do you know them?”

“Kind of,” Parkhurst said. “I’ll explain later. Let me try to postpone the non-existent appointment.”

He left the kitchen and went to the main entrance.

“Ah,” they heard a voice, “Mr. Parkhurst. A very good morning to you. I do hope that we find you in the most ebullient of mind. May I have the pleasure to introduce my friend and associate Mr. Vargas? Please excuse this apparent intrusion, but may we come in for the briefest of moments?”

Parkhurst was taken aback, but he was too polite to consider an objection, or, as he suspected, temporarily too spineless to put up any resistance. Or was it the thought of a hundred grand multiplied by two that made him nod? "Please," he said and stepped aside.

Ishihara headed straight for the kitchen, followed by Vargas. Parkhurst closed the door, adjusted his gown and wondered if the two strangers' presence would turn out to be a calamity or a bounty.

"My oh my!" Ishihara exclaimed. "You have guests, Mr. Parkhurst. Why didn't you tell us? Now we feel like invaders. A most uncomfortable sensation." He smiled broadly and displayed his front gold tooth all around. "However, dare I presume that this is the esteemed Moran family? What a remarkable coincidence, not to forget the added bonus."

Parkhurst grounded his molars before he did the full round of presentations. The Japanese bowed formally, took a quick step forward and shook hands with each in turn. "A delight beyond words. It makes me indescribably happy that Mr. Parkhurst has some true friends to rely on, his pickle being what it is."

Vargas did not bow. Neither did he move as rapidly as the Japanese did. The movement of a cat, Conor thought, a beast of prey slowly approaching something of dubious interest. The handshake was firm but brief. Vargas' blue eyes showed neither friendliness nor hostility.

Parkhurst asked, "May I offer you something to drink?"

"That is frightfully thoughtful of you," Ishihara said. "Coffee, please. Milk and sugar for my good self. Mr. Vargas takes it black."

Jennifer turned to hide a smile. She had not been to the Far East, but she had encountered the odd Japanese during the years. This one was exceptional.

Ishihara was dressed in light grey trousers, shiny maroon shoes, mustard-coloured blazer, white shirt and a scarlet and indigo striped tie. He wore a gold Rolex and an expensive looking ring on his left pinkie finger. It struck Jennifer that there was no mismatch between his attire and his vocabulary. The gold tooth fascinated her, as did his entire demeanour and almost black and coruscating eyes.

Her gaze wandered from Ishihara to his less talkative companion who, in comparison, looked as elegant as a vagabond on the run. He was some three inches taller than the Japanese; black shoes with rubber soles, black denims, coal grey shirt with no tie and a black leather jacket. No jewellery, not even a watch. He was tanned, and, she surmised, had

once been blond. His shortcut hair was greyish and looked bleached by the sun.

She tried to estimate the age group of the two guests; anything, she thought, between thirty and forty.

“Shall we move to the drawing room?” Parkhurst suggested. “It is a bit crowded here.”

Jennifer found a tray and six coasters. They all put their cups down with the exception of Vargas, who decided to carry his. She looked at him, questioningly, but got no reaction. She smiled. Vargas remained impassive. Please yourself, she thought; a pity you haven’t picked up some manners from your Oriental friend.

Comfortably seated, Ishihara raised his right hand. “Once again our most sincere apologies for this unannounced visit. The point is, however—” he stared at Parkhurst “—you and I have to reach a decision rather imminently. In fact, we must make our move not later than by ten o’clock Tuesday morning. These opportunities are comparatively few and far between, as you can appreciate.” He smiled. “May I have your kind permission to smoke?”

“Of course,” Parkhurst said, thankful for the respite.

Ishihara took a gold case from his inner pocket and opened it to reveal a dozen slender cigars. “Would anyone like to join me?”

Parkhurst and Conor accepted. Kathleen and Jennifer declined.

Ishihara lit the cigars with his gold lighter. “Ah,” he sighed, “the unsurpassed pleasure of pure nicotine. Mr. Vargas smokes cigarettes, I’m afraid. Not quite the same, in my considered opinion. But then—” he shrugged “—we are all different.” He looked fleetingly at Vargas who took no notice. His eyes rested on a painting.

“So,” Ishihara went on and watched the smoke seeping from his nostrils, “shall we return to the all-important subject of Mr. Parkhurst’s future since, I confidently presume, none of us here would like to see him disappear down the drain and into the big abyss from which there is no return. Let me be so bold as to presuppose that a second opinion does not exist.” He fixed his stare on Conor. “Such a nice and talented man as Mr. Parkhurst should be allowed to blossom and find happiness in the autumn of his life.”

Conor said, “On that point we certainly agree.”

“Where might we disagree, Mr. Moran, if at all? I take it that you are fully familiar with the contents of my two previous meetings with

Mr. Parkhurst,” he added and tapped his gold tooth with his forefinger. “Do not let my remarkable perception throw you off balance.”

“It doesn’t,” Conor said. “My problem is that we do not know who you are and why you are doing what you are doing.”

“That is indeed understandable. I do respect your being as cautious as a hooker counting an archbishop’s money. Most commendable. I appreciate that you are a man whose experience with life’s many facets and nuances is as wide as it is deep.” He bowed, smiled benevolently and put his cigar in the ashtray.

There is not a trace of irony in his voice, Conor thought, and neither a hint of contempt in his eyes. This man is a very skilful player, and, I believe, equally dangerous. As for his sidekick—Conor looked at Vargas who had crossed his legs and did not seem to pay any attention to what was being said. Is it indifference, boredom or a mask? Conor thought; I can’t place him, he’s too laid-back. I can safely assume that he is here for a reason other than the lure of the countryside; the Japanese does the talking, but it could be parlous to write off this chap as merely a sleeping partner.

“Allow me to touch the subject of our background, an ungarnished outline, so to speak,” Ishihara said, steadily watching Conor, “and I am sure that you will acknowledge that our motives for introducing ourselves to Mr. Parkhurst are as plausible as they are justifiable. You may heretofore have drawn the conclusion that we are both foreigners; I am Japanese, as you presumably have guessed already, and my brother Mr. Vargas is half Irish and half Apache. I take it for granted that you do not for a moment imagine that we are here seeking material gains. If that was the case—” he gave a quick smile “—Mr. Parkhurst would not head the queue. Nothing personal, Mr. Parkhurst, I am simply stating the obvious.”

“Convincing, so far,” Conor said.

“Indeed. You, Mr. Moran, know from personal experience what it is like to be a foreigner. This is purely an observation and not a judgement. Even the most resourceful and obstinate of people do find this an uphill struggle. Now, Mr. Vargas and I have been on the go for a good many years, and we have decided to honour this country with our permanent presence. The natives are less intolerant than most and it would not be far off the bulls-eye to say that England remains one of the few liberal countries on this planet. The reason for such attitude can of

course be debated—personally, I am inclined to believe that the population here is mentally too lazy to bother about much at all—but, whatever, it is not a bad place to settle. We have been here for a few years, now, but commitments up to date have prevented us from exercising the delicate act of assimilation and integration. Withdrawing from past activities have given our existence another dimension, and we would now dearly like to become part of this most endearing and charming of stealthy xenophobic societies. However, realism ruling, not for one split microsecond do we envisage that we can achieve this target without the kind and most qualified assistance of an insider. Hence, Mr. Parkhurst. Would it be too immodest to assume that I make sense, so far?”

“It wouldn’t,” Conor said.

“Thank you kindly. Does it not also make sense that if you are prepared to take, you should be prepared to give? Not the most widespread of philosophies, I’m afraid, but one nevertheless distinctly expressed by a great soulmate of mine, and to which I rigorously adhere.”

“Would that soulmate be Mr. Vargas?” Jennifer asked.

Ishihara did not blink. Then, suddenly, he turned and gave her a warm smile. “Not this time,” he said and she noticed the humour in his eyes. “It was a Chinese gentleman by the name of Confucius, now deceased, sadly. Mr. Vargas’ philosophies can be clearly expressed by himself, should he so desire.”

Jennifer smiled back. She refrained from further comments. Vargas was sitting opposite her, less than three yards away. She wondered why his presence, his silence and everything else about him made her feel uncomfortable.

Ishihara continued, “Anyway. What we are offering Mr. Parkhurst is not a gift. What we all know, or should know, is that the act of giving is usually rewarded by the receiver with an unsavoury cocktail of emotions of which most are subconsciously negative simply because dignified gratitude is beyond ordinary mortals. Following this frivolous but excusable aside, what we are extending to Mr. Parkhurst is a helping hand, a short-term loan, in strict financial terms, enabling him to find his way out of his unfortunate wilderness.”

Vargas moved. Jennifer saw a cigarette in his right hand and wondered where it came from. Ishihara lit another of his cigars and tossed the lighter to Vargas who caught it mid-air.

Ishihara added, "I have tried to be as explicit as the situation requires, but please do not hesitate to ask questions."

Parkhurst and Conor looked at each other.

"Let me see if I have got this right," Conor said. "You lend Mr. Parkhurst a certain amount to buy shares. The share goes up, Mr. Parkhurst makes a killing and you get your money back. In other words, you don't risk much."

"Only if it goes wrong," Ishihara said and placed his lighter edgewise on the table.

"My apology. For some reason I did not include that possibility."

"It is a calculated risk, Mr. Moran. Let me underline, for the sake of good order, that I am a businessman and not a charity."

"I would like to think about it," Parkhurst said, "digest it, so to speak. Can I call you tonight?"

"But of course," Ishihara said. His face beamed goodwill iced with attention. "I must emphasize, though, that we have to meet tomorrow if you decide to act. Let me also say that I sympathize with your most natural circumspection, but it is a fact of life, Mr. Parkhurst, that money usually dissolves any degree of apprehension. Never discount the human element, as Mr. Vargas is fond of saying."

"I believe I understand."

"Here," Ishihara said, "my card. You may recall that the one I gave you previously does not contain my telephone number."

Jennifer, who had enjoyed the Japanese's performance with a mixture of humour, awe and bewilderment, suddenly sensed that she was being watched. She moved her eyes from Ishihara and looked directly at Vargas. She told herself that there was no reason why she should feel ill at ease. Jennifer was not conceited; she did not allow herself to revel in the admiration most males so willingly displayed. She knew that men found her attractive; for years she had been aware of the signals of desire when men instinctively turned predators in the presence of a beautiful woman, and she tackled it by a display of formal courtesy fused with a touch of indifference.

Here, something didn't add up. Vargas continued to look at her; it was as if little electric sparks playfully criss-crossed his irises before disappearing behind a screen of reserved curiosity. Then the blue of his eyes turned deeper and made her think of a glacier reflecting in the cobalt of the Arctic Sea. The sudden coldness surprised her.

I'm not an object to this man, she thought, I am a *challenge*. He looks at me as if I am an unexpected archaeological discovery, either that, or those eyes of his are making a roundtrip inside my head. It is amazing how anybody can be so rude without saying a word or move a finger. He must be one of those lucky few whose facial muscles are never unduly exercised. Lots of practice, I suppose.

She settled for one of her deep-frozen stares. It didn't work. Vargas neither blinked nor looked away. She sensed that the palms of her hands were getting moist when she saw his lower lip half curl against his teeth. He's amused, she thought. The bastard is actually enjoying himself.

She heard Ishihara's laughter. It hit her like nails being shaken in a metal container. No, she thought, I am neither relieved nor disappointed if the Japanese breaks up now and take his mute crossbreed with him.

"We must be on our way. Thank you again for your kind hospitality and for giving us this opportunity to explain. I wish you a pleasant afternoon."

He got up, bowed and shook hands.

Vargas nodded to each in turn, Jennifer last. The expression on his face remained stoical, but for one transient moment Jennifer thought she saw the tiniest of smiles in his eyes.

Vargas went straight to the car, but Ishihara stopped on top of the staircase. "I do hope I shall hear from you tonight," he said.

"You will," Parkhurst promised. "By the way, is your friend always this talkative?"

Ishihara laughed. "I am afraid Mr. Vargas is rather reticent. Always has been. But don't worry, he will let you know should there be something he wants to get across." He turned and waved amicably. "See you tomorrow."

Parkhurst returned to the drawing room and found the other three deep in talk. None of them looked at him. He found his chair and eyed each in turn as if looking for guidance. The tiredness was coming back, and he felt a headache spreading from the top of his neck. He said, "I'd say our Japanese friend displayed the same unfathomable sincerity as a lawyer explaining his interim charges. You just do not know what to believe, and you've got no way of checking the facts."

"Seen isolated, I would say that Mr. Ishihara's rationale is fully plausible," Conor said to no one in particular. "It could even be entirely true."

He focused on Parkhurst and continued, "Why do I have this feeling that there is another truth, something we have yet to learn or discover? It is pure instinct, of course. What I am saying is that I am not entirely comfortable with this duo."

"Yes, it is quite a pair," Parkhurst said. "One is charming, eloquent, suave and logical, and the other is broody, sinister looking and less vocal than an oyster."

Kathleen laughed. "Maybe that's where the pearl is."

Conor beat Parkhurst to the question, "Meaning?"

Kathleen shrugged. "I don't know. I really have to dig into my well of intuition before I can answer that one." A thin line crossed her forehead. "Maybe he is just Mr. Ishihara's bodyguard, although..."

"—although?" Conor tapped her knee.

"Somehow, I don't think so. I am guessing. We are all guessing."

Parkhurst pressed his hands against his temples. "I do not think that Mr. Ishihara needs a bodyguard," he said. "From what little I have seen, he is fully capable of taking care of himself. Did I tell you that they have been together for a long time? They met in Japan."

Kathleen said, "They told you about themselves? That's nice, showing confidence, I mean."

Parkhurst stared past her. "Unfortunately not," he said and told them about Nakamoto's letter. "That's how I know."

There was a moment's silence. He poured himself a generous measure of cognac.

"Anyone else?" he asked.

They all declined.

"I've got a headache," he explained.

"You'll have another one tomorrow," Kathleen said.

Parkhurst sipped, closed his eyes and swallowed. "What the hell do I do?"

Nobody answered. He looked at Jennifer. "Tell me what you think. What would you have done? Sorry," he added quickly, "that was an unfair question."

"I think that Mum is right," Jennifer said. "Mr. Ishihara is telling the truth as far as his desire to assimilate is concerned. I do not doubt that. As for the other one," her voice became monotone, "it is impossible to tell. He gave me the impression of being indifferent and as sociable as a wounded buffalo."

“Something like that,” Parkhurst said with a wry smile. He added, “Whatever else they could be up to, we have no way of knowing.”

“I also think it’s a waste of time sitting here surmising,” Jennifer said. “They told us what they were prepared to tell us. We have to take it from there.”

Parkhurst looked fondly at her. “You are certainly not one to misunderstand.”

Jennifer leaned forward and stroked his cheek. “Thank you, Uncle Igor. Remember, though, this is only my personal opinion. Don’t forget that nothing is easier than to advise somebody else. On top of that,” she glanced at her parents; “I could be in minority.”

“You are not,” Conor said. He tried to hide the pride he felt for his daughter by adjusting the strap of his watch.

“Sanctioned,” Kathleen said. “Another thing,” she went on, “it is probably not important, but am I the only one here who think that Mr. Ishihara had one heck of a time regaling Mr. Ishihara? The more he talked, the more I got the impression that he sees himself as superior to us. His choice of words, his mannerisms, his entire *demeanour* radiated a certain lordliness, as if we were a bunch of bumpkins he’d degraded himself to take under his wings.”

Parkhurst said, “That is the Japanese way. Anybody else is inferior. The distinction between this chap and any other Japanese I know about is that Mr. Ishihara has adopted those parts of our Western culture and attitudes that suits him, and this self-styled blend makes him unique. One thing is that he’s picked up our language almost to perfection and uses it in a manner which is both superbly disdainful and loftily humorous, more interesting is it that he displays no trace of inhibitions whatsoever. Now, *that* is uncommon.”

“Yes,” Jennifer said, “that, too.”

“The British have always believed that a true sense of humour cannot and does not exist anywhere else,” Conor said. “Obviously a misconception, if I read you correctly.”

“It is, Conor. I mean, how on earth can we tell? How can we possibly appreciate the humour of *any* nation without being familiar with their culture and in perfect command of their language? How do we grasp irony, self-deprecation, satire and subtleties without vernacular excellence? We can’t. Instead, we dismiss the whole concept, which is the British way of coping with ignorance.”

Conor laughed. "Harsh words, but dispute I shall not."

There was a hushed vibration in Parkhurst's voice when he said, "*Of all vulgar modes of escaping from the consideration of the effect of social and moral influence on the human mind, the most vulgar is that of attributing the diversities of conduct and character to inherent natural differences.*"

"That's profound," Kathleen said. "When did you write that?"

Parkhurst smiled. "I wish I had. John Stuart Mill wrote it."

"Lesson learned," Jennifer said. "Let us not make the same mistake as Mr. Ishihara and his identical twin."

At nine o'clock in the evening Parkhurst called Ishihara. They agreed to meet at The Connaught Hotel at noon the following day.

Jennifer did not say much during their drive back to London. She kept seeing the contours of a man behind snowflakes whirling through the night.