

George's Grand Tour

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*To Christiane and André,
in memory of Ninette and Marcel, my grandparents.*

Tuesday 21 October

London

Adèle was jolted from extreme boredom by the gentle buzzing of her phone. Mobile phones were to be kept switched off at all times, she had been told often enough. But she had been careful to put it on vibrate and anyway, today was her twenty-third birthday and she was waiting to see how many of her friends were going to remember. The numbers had been disappointing so far. Every now and again she would check to see if anyone was watching before quickly glancing at the screen, which was just poking out of the top of her jeans. She would have to wait for the right moment to read this new message and that moment was not now, seeing as the inspector in the room next door was calling it murder.

She was perched awkwardly on a crate in the long dark corridor that led to the bedroom. The only sounds were from the street below – a scooter, a lorry, a dog, the distant wail of a siren. She

glanced into the bedroom where dust swirled under a spotlight. There was a beautifully carved, dark wooden four-poster bed, a quilt falling in mounds of pink satin, and the deceased, who was wearing a pair of forties-style pyjamas. His face was grey, and he had the tragic air of a murder victim about him. For this was a case of murder, the inspector was sure of it, so sure in fact that he had repeated it three times over. The man's daily injection of insulin had been swapped for eye drops; the little bottles were there to prove it. The eighty-three-year-old victim had left his family a colossal fortune, along with the London mansion they all called home. Every time the inspector said the word 'crime', the granddaughter would break down in tears and her fiancé would try to console her. But it was no use. The young woman was kneeling by the bed with her face buried in the quilt, clasping the hands of the corpse and muttering words that could barely be made out through her almost absurdly loud sobs. She poured out her grief, childhood memories and most of all regrets, of which there appeared to be many; no wonder, since she was now listing them for the fourth time. A very dignified elderly lady was standing upright next to the bed, nodding her head in time to the regrets that the young girl was counting off like rosary beads. This woman was the great-aunt, the sister-in-law of the deceased. There were others waiting behind the door who remained silent. The inspector said it again: the killer was one of the family members. It was no time to be checking one's text messages.

This was not Adèle's first murder scene. They bored her immensely, and she had fallen into a daydream as she waited for this one to finish. Just before her phone had vibrated, it had

occurred to her that she and the young woman crying in the bedroom looked alike. Same age, same long, thick brown hair, same slim figure. But, without necessarily being prettier, the girl in the bedroom was better dressed, more polished; her hands were soft and she was obviously used to drawing gazes. Adèle, by contrast, was more of a tomboy, in spite of her delicate features. What was more, she was not rich, and nobody ever paid any attention to her. Even on her birthday. On the other hand, she thought that the dead man wasn't half as stylish as Irving Ferns. Irving Ferns. She felt a pang in her chest at the thought of him.

The suspense was unbearable – who had sent her the text? The young lawyer she had met at a party a month ago? But how could he have known it was her birthday today? She looked around her. The corridor was crowded, there were about thirty people crammed into the narrow space, all standing still, trying hard not to make the floor creak. Some were scratching their noses, some biting their nails. People mimed at each other because even whispering was frowned upon. But no one seemed to take any notice of Adèle. She checked one last time that the silence police weren't in the corridor – no, they were busy with the corpse – got out her mobile and opened the text message she had just received.

She had to peer closely at the screen to be sure that she had read it right, and couldn't stop herself from letting out a muffled cry of surprise, dropping the phone as she did. It crashed onto the parquet floor of the old house with a deafening clatter. Everyone jumped and turned to look at Adèle. A second later, an angry voice shouted from the bedroom.

‘CUT! CUT! What’s going on out there, for God’s sake?’
And the first assistant director burst into the corridor.

Adèle mumbled, ‘I’m so sorry, John, I ...’

The entire crew was now staring at Adèle, actors included. Then, in a matter of seconds, their attention turned to something else. This kind of thing happened a lot, and it gave everyone the chance of a breather.

John shouted to the group, ‘Come on, let’s concentrate. We’re almost done. There’s champagne waiting for us, guys! So come on, one last push, chaps.’ The director took the opportunity to give the actors some more instructions, the dead man was able to rub his eyes and share a joke with the elderly aunt, the director of photography adjusted the lighting and the fifth take was ready to begin.

This was the last day of shooting. They were filming an adaptation of Agatha Christie’s *Crooked House* for British television. The first chapter, in which the corpse was discovered, had already been filmed on the first day of shooting a month earlier, but they had had to reshoot it. It was the last scene to film and, everyone hoped, the last take. Afterwards there would be a big party to celebrate.

‘Silence, silence please ... Camera. Action.’

Adèle had not moved from her crate. Her mobile phone was still clenched in her hand. For once, she was grateful for the silence. On top of the commotion caused by her dropping her phone, she was still in shock from the text itself. Finally, she worked up the courage to loosen her fingers and look down at the screen.

Hpy Bday Adl, luv frm ur granpa.

(Happy Birthday Adèle, love from your grandpa.)

She managed to keep herself from crying, but couldn't hold back the smile that suddenly lit up her face and spread a warm glow through her chest. Because this silly, slightly awkward text that was trying to sound young was something truly special. Poetic even, and so touching. As well as totally impossible, of course.

There are things in life that are meant to be kept private. And others that are to be shared with all and sundry. This text belonged to the latter category. This was a story that had to be told, and Adèle felt restless and full of emotion.

It was decided that the scene would be shot a sixth time. But Adèle was no longer paying attention to the filming. She was thinking about her story. It was not a particularly long story but it had to be told in full in order to convey what was so extraordinary about this text message. Yes, she had to start from the beginning, one month earlier, 18 September. A month was not a long time, yet in that time hearts had opened, suitcases had shut, and tears had fallen where they were no longer expected. And as a drama played out for the sixth time in the other room, Adèle used these last moments of silence as a chance to remember.

In the dimly lit corridor, she replayed the events of the last month in her head, events that had changed her life in a small way, but which had changed the lives of others beyond measure.