



Under the green scoops and chalk pits of England's South Downs, the little town of Lewes folds into the softness of an ancient Sussex landscape. A living pocket of mysteries surrounded by local vineyards, the flint terraces and cosy pubs are not as they seem. On November 5th, some weeks from now, Bonfire Night will blow this place apart. The townsfolk will take to the streets in a nighttime parade of masked costumes, burning crosses and giant effigies detonated beneath fireworks loud enough to make the Greenwich Meridian tremble towards London. Each bonfire society's darkest secret is the hidden location of their cache of explosives and huge statues tucked behind barn doors and farm gates across the local hills. Lewesians take great pride in who knows what. And some know a great deal more than others.

From an open window above the Victorian stained-glass door of the Bottle Bank wine shop, the jovial sound of humming is cascading into Priory Street below. Rooks are squabbling over the roof and on the doorstep, a bottle of white wine with no label is glimmering in a dewy late summer sunbeam. The sound of a handclap sends the rooks on the roof scattering as Barclay Flint stares delightedly at himself in his shaving mirror. 'The Library of Libations,' he murmurs, rolling the words around his palate as a connoisseur would revel in a glass of rare champagne. The last creamy ridge of soap from the morning shave is resting on his neck

like ermine round a kingly robe. Barclay is proud of his smooth, radiant and stout demeanour. Although in his mid-fifties, he likes to think of his appearance as ‘youthful poet’ and tells himself that a purple paisley silk dressing gown is very similar to a glass of wine – all about the detail. Wiping the last foam from his neck, he briskly pom-poms his way to the door of his bijou flat, his robe billowing in his wake. ‘Minty!’ he sings out, before realising that Minty is already halfway down the hall stairs wrapped in her large vibrant-green cardigan. Minty slowly turns and addresses him.

‘Nineteen fifty-two it was when I left Antigua; did I know where I was coming?’

‘It would be rude of me to presume.’

‘This riddle of a place. The thing I learnt quick? When someone such as Barclay Flint starts singing before breakfast time, trouble’s coming.’

‘Do you know, Minty, I could swear you look five years younger this morning.’

‘Hold your smooth talking; spit it out, man.’

‘New name for the shop: the Library of Libations.’

Minty takes a breath and tightens her grip on a bag of bird seed.

‘The pigeons need feeding, you’ve had a sherry for breakfast and the shop’s already got a perfectly decent name.’

Stomping down the stairs, Barclay calls after her: ‘I only had one glass. Manzanilla. And it was as cool and crisp as a salty snowball!’

Downstairs, Minty opens the Bottle Bank’s elegant Victorian stained-glass front door and retrieves the unlabelled bottle of white wine from the doorstep. Carefully placing it inside on the counter strewn with empty wine bottles and a nearly finished jigsaw of Eric Ravilious’ *Wilmington Giant*, she shakes her head at the mess. Wrapping her scarf around

her neck, Minty Jarvis steps out in search of advice to give and feathered friends to nourish.

As lights flicker on in the shop with a glimmering twinkle, Barclay's breaking wave of hair frames his head like a halo of possibilities. Perfectly unkempt, this buoyant soul always strives to give the air of someone about to bob up through the very sky of the best mood possible. As he proudly surveys the regiments of bottles on the shelves, Barclay delights in the reflection of his own merry ways; enchanted by puzzles, unmoved by trends and a prodigious scribbler of notes meticulously tied around the neck of each bottle. He takes deep pride in these enticing descriptions, and this morning he's over in the South African section casually reading aloud from his own handwriting, "A peach rolling down a sunbeam" . . . Ah, wine! You are truly my muse.'

Spotting the blank bottle of white wine on the counter, Barclay's brow momentarily flutters with quizzical consideration. *Hello stranger*, he thinks before munching on a pre-breakfast biscuit and turning his gaze to the unfinished jigsaw. His right hand connecting with the record player next to the till, he barely looks at the needle as music's answer to slow-motion giggling crackles across the shop; Bert Kaempfert's 'Bye Bye Blues' is one of Barclay's favourite tunes to solve puzzles to.

Pinot, a keen-eyed Border collie with a heart set permanently on where the next snack is coming from, bounds through the door.

'Morning salutations my dearest friend,' croons Barclay as he tosses the last nibble of his biscuit over to Pinot, who snaffles it faster than even she could comprehend. 'Aah, she does love me, we understand one another, don't we, Pinot?'

'She understands that you always feed her,' corrects Pearl Finch, clocking into her managerial shift.

In her mid-twenties, Pearl's been working with Barclay for several years and in Barclay's eyes is a Hollywood starlet bathed in the glow of resigned idealism. Pearl, on the other hand, sees Barclay as a fantasist pretending to be real. Though she admits a cool respect for Barclay's knowledge, Pearl rarely acknowledges even to herself that she deeply admires his determination to match the perfect bottle of wine with every person who enters the Bottle Bank.

'I only feed her my very best thoughts,' insists Barclay.

'Whatever,' snorts Pearl, straightening her broadly striped yellow and black woolly jumper, which resembles a recalcitrant bee that's been stretched through a Hoover. 'Made a new sign for the counter,' she says, holding up a tiny protest placard that says USE LESS PAPER. 'And I'm adding the weight of every bottle to the tasting notes today; don't be buying heavy bottles, Barclay. You know what it means for the carbon footprint.'

'With you all the way, Pearl.' Barclay attempts a good-natured salute, but it peters out as a stroke of an eyebrow while he recoils under Pearl's unmoved stare. Getting to work at once, Pearl starts stacking the bottles from the counter into the recycling bin and writing bottle weights on the labels of Barclay's specially curated Hot Bottle section on the shelf behind the counter.

'"Inky as a hippo dipped in Shakespeare"? What does that even mean?' asks Pearl, exasperatedly reading from one of Barclay's handwritten labels.

'Oh, you know, thick-skinned, powerful, complex . . . it's decent, that Cabernet, and from Moldova – how boundless is wine, Pearl, Moldova!' says Barclay putting the last piece of his jigsaw in place. '*Ta-daaa*. Right, on to matters of great importance, this mystery sample. Who's it from?'

'Not seen it, this one?' Pearl points to the unlabelled bottle of white wine from the shop's front step.

'That's the badger, no note, no label and perhaps . . .'

‘...Laced with poison?’ jokes Pearl.

‘Nonsense, perhaps this season’s first fruit though, looks paler than a moonbeam through a gooseberry,’ remarks Barclay as he uncorks and pours two tidy glasses. ‘Hmm, lime-gold flecks swirling like liquid jewellery around the glass ...’ Inhaling deeply, his eyes widen sharply. ‘Lychees on a pogo stick!’ he exclaims before taking a large swig from his glass.

Pearl rolls her eyes as Barclay considers the mouthful. A wave of silence moves through the shop as though his entire being is the portal through which wine becomes alive while the man himself disappears.

Barclay stares at Pearl. She sighs. ‘So come on, Barclay, what does the self-proclaimed GOAT of wine tasting make of this mystery bottle?’

Barclay looks up at her with a half-smile, taking a shallow breath before clutching his heart, staggering three paces to his left, falling to his knees, his eyes pleading as his body slumps to the floor with the jigsaw pieces tumbling after him and Pinot giving his cheek a concerned lick.

Pearl lets the silence soak a while. ‘Ha ha, yes, very funny, Barclay. You clown, up you get,’ she says, sniffing her glass before glancing at it mistrustfully and placing it back on the counter. Standing over Barclay, she peers at his twitching feet, concern mounting, before crouching over him, panic rising.

At that moment county moth recorder and delivery driver for the Bottle Bank, thirty-year-old Teddy Olsen, trips over the doorstep of the wine shop, nearly sending his laptop and book bundle flying before regaining his lanky balance and announcing, ‘Ten points to me, for not falling over, further ten points for arriving exactly on time for a Barclay breakfast.’

He notices Barclay prone on the floor as the record plays the final phrase of ‘Bye Bye Blues’. ‘Alright, Pearl, you killed the boss?’



Dandelion Hill is England's most secluded vineyard. A couple of miles from Lewes, hidden from view in a valley ringed by the burly shoulders of three high ridges in the South Downs, its principal visitors are the wildlife drawn to the cover crops of clover, extensive tree planting throughout the vineyard and lack of all chemical sprays.

People rarely visit, unless by strict appointment with Victor Crawshaw, a human volcano under whose long stewardship it became regenerative several years ago. Approaching his eighties, Victor has lived in deep Downland countryside his entire life and is one of the last survivors whose speech is still dotted with old Sussex words. He misses the days when the ancient sayings were more commonplace – when *doddlish* meant 'infirm', *boffle* was a mistake or cock-up, and *mizmaze* was used instead of 'confusion'. In addition, Victor's mental tombola of hot-headed opinions has always made life tricky for his grown-up children, Tabitha and Harold, who live in a state of semi-cordial armistice on opposite sides of the farm – Tabitha in the main house with her father, Harold in a drab 1950s bungalow.

As Tabitha likes to remind her dad, '. . . feuds with local landowners, rows with restaurateurs, too many business partners called uncle something . . .'

'I veto people,' Victor would retort.

In the eyes of Tabitha and Harold, all Victor delights in these days is watching his runner ducks on patrol for slugs

and spending his evenings hoping for the first residents to appear in his bat boxes. Where once his skill at creating wine had brought him tantalising pleasure, as the years hunted him down so he'd grown resentful of one too many harvests blighted by frost, battered by hail or smothered with grey rot.

But this year Victor's last hope remains a faint glimmer; to create a wine so sublime that with one sip it could convert the mood of a morgue into the glorious abandon of a Roman bacchanalia. Alchemy for the mind, as he thought of it. Or maybe a last hurrah.

Tabitha and Harold have been alarmed by the slow-down in wine production since the farm became more of a rewilding hobby for their imposing father; in fact, the one thing Tabitha and Harold can agree on is their mutual concern for the diminishing state of the family finances. If they are unable to repay the bank's latest loan by next March, the farm will be repossessed. Victor's insouciance regarding this predicament is gnawing at them both.

Relentlessly pitching their own visions for how the farm should best survive, each one is utterly convinced that the other is wrong. With stalemate rubbing everyone up the wrong way, wildfires have been smouldering through the Crawshaw family mood. And while no one really knows how to quell these latent blazes, one of the few things that distracts the awkward clan from their mutual disdain is the old barn steadily filling with paraphernalia for Priory Bonfire Society's parade on November 5th – the clandestine amassing of explosives the one last thread holding them together.

Shuffling out of a dark crack between the imposing winery doors and leaning on his stick, Victor Crawshaw squints up

accusingly at the sky. Tabitha strides towards him across the dusty yard; Victor feels his momentary surge of hope smothered.

What have I done to deserve these children? he asks himself. They are always chattering about finances, entirely missing the point of life beyond people, filling the steady silence of nature with prattle; Victor feels exhausted by the very thought. *Ducks*, he thinks. *Why can't people be more like ducks?*

Tabitha hasn't uttered a word yet, but she knows her father is in no mood for a genial chat.

'Looks like the rain might hold off, Dad,' suggests Tabitha in as neutral a tone as she can muster.

'It's a monkey's birthday, pissing down by noon,' barks Victor as he tries to build up speed on his stick and stride past. At his age, however, acceleration has faded with a sense of inevitable surrender, so he turns and faces Tabitha, barely disguising his sigh of glowering disdain.

'I want to talk to you about my idea for the wedding venue, Dad – I'm totally convinced it can save the farm. I've run the numbers and—' Before Tabitha can finish, Victor raises his hand and gestures over her shoulder.

'Old Snuffy's at it again.'

High on the Downs behind the farm, on the boundary where Dandelion Hill gives way to neighbouring property, Maurice Le Brocq stands with the casual aggression of a veteran general considering whether to invade. Robed in a dark waxed cotton cape, his lean frame of seventy-odd years is powerful and somehow taunting in its cocky alertness.

A sly grin moves over his face as he peers through his binoculars down at Victor seething outside the winery. Murmuring to himself, Maurice turns away and continues

his walk up the hill. ‘Only a matter of time, dear Victor, before you pop like one of your wet corks, and then . . .’

Down the hill, Victor growls, ‘Gummut only does it to boil my bladder. Look at him, trespassing right over my furlong.’

Tabitha rolls her eyes at her father’s use of the old Sussex word for lout and prepares herself for yet another rant about the transgressions of Maurice Le Brocq. Meanwhile, inside the winery at Dandelion Hill, the fermenting vats of freshly harvested Pinot Noir are just starting to bubble. The skins of the grapes rise to the surface in a magenta lattice of foaming tissue. Fermentation does not care about family feuds, about border disputes or long-held grudges. It moves forward with its own inevitability.

Outside the winery, Harold in a worn Barbour jacket is stalking over to his father and sister, like an uptight giraffe after years of square-bashing in the army.

Tabitha can barely contain her frustration as Harold’s lips purse and he starts ejecting sentences from his face like strips of rag.

‘Father, we know that there’s a market in people carking it, happens every day, the country’s running out of graveyard sites, and that exposed slope up the hill towards Le Brocq’s place is about as much use for vines as a ball of chalk, but utterly ripe for a natural burial ground, think how regenerative it would be, the trees, pollinators—’

‘Mourners,’ interrupts Tabitha.

‘Oh Foxtrot Oscar, would you . . .’ Harold scowls at her.

Victor discerns the first surge of real pleasure he’s felt all day. Somehow when his children fight, it distracts them from pitching him their relentless ideas for making money and he can slip away undetected to poke around one of the ponds

for signs of life. He reflects for a moment, with gratitude, that a certain Barclay Flint persuaded him to lead Dandelion Hill into rewilding and regeneration. Victor muses that Barclay is one of the few people he can still tolerate in small doses, tentatively united by their mutual love of wine. He must give Barclay a call.

From the top of the hill, Maurice Le Brocq peers down one last time at the squabbling family below before he smirks and strides back towards his own grounds, satisfied by the knowledge that Dandelion Hill is falling further into ruin.

Soon, he believes, it will all be his.