RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Portobello

Ruth Rendell

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About the Book

‘Found in Chepstow Villas, a sum of money between eighty and a hundred and sixty pounds. Anyone who has lost such a sum of money should apply to the phone number below.’

The chance discovery by Eugene Wren of an envelope filled with banknotes would link the lives of a number of very different people – each with their own obsessions, problems, dreams and despairs. It would also set in motion a chain of events that lead to arson and murder.

About the Author

Ruth Rendell was an exceptional crime writer, and will be remembered as a legend in her own lifetime. Her ground-breaking debut novel, *From Doon With Death*, was first published in 1964 and introduced readers to her enduring and popular detective, Inspector Reginald Wexford.

With worldwide sales of approximately 20 million copies, Rendell was a regular *Sunday Times* bestseller. Her sixty bestselling novels include police procedurals, some of which have been successfully adapted for TV, stand-alone psychological mysteries, and a third strand of crime novels under the pseudonym Barbara Vine.

Rendell won numerous awards, including the *Sunday Times* Literary Award in 1990. In 2013 she was awarded the Crime Writers' Association Cartier Diamond Dagger for sustained excellence in crime writing. In 1996 she was awarded the CBE, and in 1997 became a Life Peer.

Ruth Rendell died in May 2015.

Also by Ruth Rendell

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THE WATER’S LOVELY

ruth

rendell

PORTOBELLO

arrow books

For Doreen and Les Massey with love

Chapter 1

IT IS CALLED the Portobello Road because a very long time ago a sea captain called Robert Jenkins stood in front of a committee of the House of Commons and held up his amputated ear. Spanish coastguards, he said, had boarded his ship in the Caribbean, cut off his ear, pillaged the vessel and then set it adrift. Public opinion had already been aroused by other Spanish outrages and the Jenkins episode was the last straw to those elements in Parliament which opposed Walpole's government. They demanded British vengeance and so began the War of Jenkins's Ear.

In the following year, 1739, Admiral Vernon captured the city of Puerto Bello in the Caribbean. It was one of those successes that are very popular with patriotic Englishmen, though many hardly knew what the point of it was. In the words of a poet writing about another battle and another war: 'That I cannot tell, said he, but 'twas a famous victory.' Vernon's triumph put Puerto Bello on the map and gave rise to a number of commemorative names. Notting Hill and Kensal were open country then where sheep and cattle grazed, and one landowner called his fields Portobello Farm. In time the lane that led to it became the Portobello Road. But for Jenkins's ear it would have been called something else.

Street markets abounded in the area, in Kenley Street, Sirdar Road, Norland Road, Crescent Street and Golborne Road. The one to survive was the Portobello and from 1927 onwards a daily market was held there from eight in the morning to eight in the evening and 8 a.m. till 9 p.m. on

Saturdays. It still is, and in a much reduced state, on Sundays too. The street is very long, like a centipede snaking up from Pembridge Road in the south to Kensal Town in the north, its legs splaying out all the way and almost reaching the Great Western main line and the Grand Union Canal. Shops line it and spill into the legs, which are its side streets. Stalls fill most of the centre, for though traffic crosses it and some cars crawl patiently along it among the people, few use it as a thoroughfare. The Portobello has a rich personality, vibrant, brilliant in colour, noisy, with graffiti that approach art, bizarre and splendid. An indefinable edge to it adds a spice of danger. There is nothing safe about the Portobello, nothing suburban. It is as far from an average shopping street as can be imagined. Those who love and those who barely know it have called it the world's finest street market.

You can buy anything there. Everything on earth is on sale: furniture, antiques, clothes, bedding, hardware, music, food and food and more food. Vegetables and fruit, meat and fish, and cheese and chocolate. The stalls sell jewellery, hats, masks, prints, postcards old and new, shawls and scarves, shoes and boots, pots and pans, flowers real and artificial, furs and fake furs, lamps and musical instruments. You can buy a harp there or a birdcage, a stuffed bear or a wedding dress, or the latest best-seller. If you want to eat your lunch in the street you can buy paella or pancakes, piping hot from a stall. But no live animals or birds are for sale.

Cheap books in excellent condition are on sale in the Oxfam shop. A little way up the road is the Spanish deli which sells, mysteriously, along with all its groceries, fine earthenware pots and bowls and dishes. There is a mini-market in most of the centipede's legs and at Portobello Green a covered market under a peaked tent like a poor man's Sydney Opera House. In Tavistock Road the house fronts are painted red and green and yellow and grey.

The moment you turn out of Pembridge Road or Westbourne Grove or Chepstow Villas and set foot in the market you feel a touch of excitement, an indrawing of breath, a pinch in the heart. And once you have been you have to go again. Thousands of visitors wander up and down it on Saturdays. It has caught them in the way a beauty spot can catch you and it pulls you back. Its thread attaches itself to you and a twitch on it summons you to return.

Quite a long way up the Portobello Road, a glossy arcade now leads visitors into the hinterland. There is a children's clothes shop, for the children of the wealthy who go to select private schools, a shop that sells handmade soaps, pink and green and brown and very highly scented, another where you can buy jerseys and T-shirts but exclusively cashmere, and a place that calls itself a studio, which offers for sale small watercolours and even smaller marble obelisks. It was here, long before the arcade came into being, that Arnold Wren had his gallery. He never called it that but preferred the humbler designation of 'shop'.

Stalls filled the pavement outside. Mostly fruit and vegetables up here. When Arnold's son Eugene was a little boy the vegetables and fruit were of a kind that had been sold in English markets for generations. His grandmother could remember when the first tomato appeared and he, now a man of fifty, saw the first avocado appear on old Mr Gibson's stall. The boy's mother didn't like the taste, she said she might as well be eating green soap.

Arnold sold paintings and prints, and small pieces of sculpture. In rooms at the back of the shop stacks of paintings occupied most of the available space. He made enough money to keep himself, his wife and his only son in comfort in their unprepossessing but quite comfortable house in Chesterton Road. Then, one day when the boy was in his teens, his father took his family on holiday to Vienna.

There, in an exhibition, he saw paintings by the Swiss Symbolist Arnold Böcklin on loan from various European galleries. The Christian name struck him because it was the same as his own. Arnold Wren never forgot them; they haunted his dreams and later on he could have described some of Böcklin's works in the greatest detail entirely from memory, *The Isle of the Dead*, the frightening self-portrait with the skeleton's hand on Böcklin's shoulder, the *Centaurs Fighting*.

He had forgotten where most of the paintings in the rooms behind the shop came from. Some had been inherited from *his* father. Others were sold to him for shillings rather than pounds by people clearing out their attics. There were thousands of attics in old Notting Hill. But looking through them one day, wondering if this one or that one were worth keeping at all, he came upon a picture that reminded him of Vienna. It wasn't at all like *The Isle of the Dead* or *The Centaur at the Forge* but it had the scent of Böcklin about it, which made him catch his breath.

It was a painting of a mermaid swimming inside a glass vase with a narrow neck, trying perhaps – from the expression on her face of fear and desperation – to climb out of the water and the vase. All was glaucous green but for her rosy flesh and her long golden hair. Arnold Wren called the picture *Undine in a Goldfish Bowl* and showed it to an expert without telling him what he suspected. The expert said, 'Well, Mr Wren, I am ninety-nine per cent certain this is by Arnold Böcklin.'

Arnold was an honest man and he said to the potential purchaser of the painting, 'I'm ninety-nine per cent sure this is a Böcklin,' but Morris Stemmer, rich and arrogant, fancied himself an expert and was a hundred per cent sure. He paid Arnold the sort of sum usually said to be 'beyond one's wildest dreams'. This enabled Arnold to buy a house in Chepstow Villas, a Jaguar and to go further afield than Vienna on his holidays. His was a Portobello Road success

story while old Mr Gibson's was a failure. Or so it appeared on the surface.

When his father died Eugene Wren moved the business to premises in upmarket Kensington Church Street and referred to it as 'the gallery'. The name in gilded letters on a dark-green background was 'Eugene Wren, Fine Art', and partly through luck and partly due to Eugene's flair for spotting new young artists and what from times past was about to become fashionable, made him a great deal of money.

Without being a thief himself, Albert Gibson the stallholder married into a family of thieves. *His* only son Gilbert had been in and out of prison more times than his wife Ivy cared to count. That, she told her relatives, was why they had no children. Gib was never home for long enough. She was living in Blagrove Road when they built the Westway, which cut the street in two and turned 2 Blagrove Villas into a detached house. The Aclam Road mini-market separated it from the overhead road and the train line, and the Portobello Road was a stone's throw away if you were a marksman with a strong arm and a steady eye.

Chapter 2

JOEL ROSEMAN NEVER walked with a purpose, a destination. He wasn't going anywhere but mostly round in a sort of circle from his flat in a mansion block at the eastern end of Notting Hill Gate and back again. Once, when he first tried it, he had attempted going out in the late afternoon but it was March and still broad daylight. Next time he went out after dark and that was better. Sometimes he walked clockwise into Bayswater, down to the Bayswater Road and home again, sometimes widdershins, in a loop up to Campden Hill and back to the High Street. Mostly he wandered aimlessly.

For a long time now he had found life better in darkness. That was why he dreaded the summer when it wouldn't start getting dark till ten. But now it was April and exceptionally warm, light too in the evenings but dusk coming at seven. He wore sunglasses, a special pair in which the lenses were darker than usual. At home he had several pairs of sunglasses but none with lenses as black and smoky as these.

The allowance Pa had paid into his account regularly on the tenth of the month had just come in on the previous day. Joel brooded on Pa as he walked along, wondering in despair what made him tick, why he was so cruel and how it was possible that a man whose child had drowned could have *that* picture hanging up in his house. He stopped thinking about it when he found a cash dispenser in a bank wall at the bottom of Pembridge Road. The sunglasses had to come off briefly while he drew out a hundred and forty

pounds. It came in twenty- and ten- and five-pound notes. Carefully looking over his shoulder (as the bank said you should) he put twenty-five pounds into the pocket of his jeans and the rest into an envelope. This went into an inside breast pocket of his rainproof jacket. There was no sign of rain but Joel possessed few clothes and this jacket had happened to be hanging up, in the dark, just inside his front door.

He was taking these precautions with his money because he intended walking up the Portobello Road. It would be his first visit. He put his sunglasses on again and the world went dark and rather foggy. When she was young his mother had lived in Notting Hill and she had told him – she went on speaking to him when Pa did not – that if your house was burgled and your silver stolen the police would advise you to go and look for it on the stalls in the Portobello Road where you were likely to find it up for sale. This had made Joel think that the market was a dangerous place, somewhere to be careful, but by 7.30, he had decided, the stallholders would be packing up. He was surprised to see that this was not so. The place was blazing with light and colour, packed with jostling people, voices and music, a flourishing trade still going on. When the natural light was dying they had to make up for it artificially. They never thought what it was like for people of his sort. He blinked behind his glasses. According to his mother, Pa called him a mole and sometimes an earthworm.

No one took any notice of him. He walked up the western side, past knitwear shops and blanket shops and print and china shops. It was a surprise to him to see any shops at all because he had expected only stalls. These were there in abundance, shops on the left, stalls on the right, and people, hundreds of people, walking, dawdling, strolling between them and up the roadway itself. All the people looked busy and they looked happy. Joel could always spot happiness, he was an expert at noticing it,

perhaps because in everyone he personally knew it was absent. On the other side of the road crowds were going home, heading southwards for the tube and the buses. They looked happy too and, the ones carrying bags and packages, satisfied or excited. He went on, not stopping, not considering buying anything. There was nothing he ever needed except food and not much of that. He shopped for nothing else. The special sunglasses were his last buy and he had had them for two years.

By the time he had been walking fairly steadily for twenty minutes he came to the pub Ma had mentioned called the Earl of Lonsdale. He crossed the road and turned down Westbourne Grove. No one had looked menacingly at him while he was in the market and he was beginning to think reports of the place had been exaggerated. But it was still a relief to find himself among the genteel boutiques and soon the gracious houses of this corner of Notting Hill. He had begun to feel a little tired. Well, they told him he had a heart problem. Young as he was, he had a bad heart.

It was very quiet. The poor live among strident voices, clatter, crashes, deafening music, barking dogs, shrieking children, but places inhabited by the rich are always silent. Tall trees, burgeoning into spring leaf, line their streets and their gardens bloom with appropriate flowers all the year round. Joel was reminded by the silence, if by nothing else, of Hampstead Garden Suburb where Pa and Ma had a big low-roofed house squatting in landscaped grounds. Around here wasn’t much like that but the peace and quiet were the same, yet somehow uneasy, almost uncanny.

No one was about but for two men, not much more than boys, loitering on an opposite corner. They wore jackets or coats with hoods pulled down over their eyes and Joel had learnt from newspapers he occasionally saw that hoods meant their wearers were up to no good. They looked at him and he looked at them, and he told himself that they would do nothing to him because they could see he was

young and tall and they didn’t know that his pockets were full of money. He looked poor in his old clothes, his ragged jeans and that jacket with one sleeve torn and the other stained.

Once he had read somewhere about the assassination of the Empress Elisabeth of Austria, how she had been walking on to a boat, which was to take her across Lake Geneva, when she had felt someone jostle her and she received a mild enough blow in the chest. It was only when she was in her stateroom, some minutes later, that it was realised she had been stabbed and was about to die. This was how Joel thought afterwards of what happened to him on the corner of Pembridge Crescent and Chepstow Road. He had been struck, not in the chest but on the left shoulder and from the back. He felt the pain grip him with iron claws down his left upper arm.

Perhaps he cried out. He never knew. He fell or sank or plunged to the ground. But he must have leant backwards at some point for his head struck against the bellpush in a plastered brick pillar, which was one of the gateposts of the house on the corner. Had someone assaulted him, as someone had assaulted the Empress Elisabeth? He forgot that he had a bad heart, he forgot everything as he lost consciousness.

The two boys in the hoods crossed the street and stared fearfully at this shabby long-haired man who lay spreadeagled on the pavement. They thought he was dead. The front door of the house behind those pillars opened. They ran.

If Joel had fallen forwards, his mother told him, no one and nothing would have pressed that bell. He would have died. What she didn’t tell him, until a lot later and she was in a temper, was that his father had said it was a pity he hadn’t. As it was, the occupants of the house had come out to see why their chimes were ringing and ringing. They

found him slumped against the pillar and called an ambulance.

Chapter 3

JUST FIFTY YEARS old, single still but not unattached, Eugene Wren was a tall handsome man who would have looked young for his age but for his white hair. It was thick hair, a glossy thatch, but there was no doubt that it aged him. This was something he minded but he was very careful not to let it show that he minded, just as, though he chose his clothes with care and wore them with appropriateness, he gave the impression of being indifferent to his appearance. Only his girlfriend knew that his sight wasn't perfect but that he wore contact lenses.

He was secretive. Why? Who can tell why we are the way we are? Psychiatrists can. Innumerable books have been written tracing our faults and foibles, fantasies, criminal tendencies, sexual tastes, inhibitions and other peculiarities back to events in our childhoods. Eugene had read a good many of them without being any the wiser. He could have understood his secretiveness if when owning up to something as a child he had been punished, but his parents had been unvaryingly loving, easygoing and kind. In fact, he was encouraged to be open. It made no difference. He kept hold of his secrets. Like his mind, his house in Chepstow Villas held many secret drawers and locked boxes.

One of his secrets was his addictive personality. He had been a heavy drinker and had never given up drink but, by an almost superhuman effort, cut down to a reasonable couple of glasses of wine a day. That was before he met Ella, so he was able to keep his one-time alcoholism a

secret from her. The break-up with his previous girlfriend, a long-term partner of several years, had happened because she found the bottle of vodka he kept in the bottom of a wardrobe he thought he had locked. His smoking was impossible to hide. But as he had with his drinking habit, he eventually conquered it. Several attempts were made at giving up, the last and successful one helped by nicotine patches and hypnotism. It had been horrible for Eugene to reveal his weakness to Ella, not least of it the disclosing that he had a weakness. But when it was over he was quite proud of himself and Ella was very proud.

'You can't really continue to smoke when you are going about with a doctor of medicine,' he said to her with a light laugh.

For a while he was without an addiction, but not for long.

He hoped he wouldn't put on weight, though he didn't say this to Ella, and when he did put it on he did his best to keep it secret. The difficulty was that he tended to eat between meals. Once he would have had a cigarette. Eugene called his habit snacking and Ella called it grazing. To combat it he tried eating Polo mints but he didn't really like the taste of mint and, besides, Polos had sugar in them. Considering how he fulminated against gum-chewing, especially against those who spat out their gum on to the pavement, he couldn't take it up himself. Well, he *could* but it would have to be done in secret and that would be just one more secret. He was anxious not to succumb to deception with Ella. No doubt he would soon propose to Ella and they would live happily ever after, something he sincerely wished and thought likely. Then he had what he called the fat bridegroom dream. He was standing at the altar in a morning suit, marrying Ella, and when he looked down to take the ring out of his pocket all he saw was his huge paunch. Needless to say, he said nothing of this to Ella but pretended to be indifferent to weight or girth.

It was a Saturday morning and he was on his way to the shops. It would be a long walk, some of it perhaps not a walk but a taxi ride. What he sought wasn't readily obtainable even in the sort of shops whose business (he thought) was to sell it. On occasion it was a weary quest he undertook. Although it had been going on for no more than six weeks, sometimes he found it hard to remember what he had done with his time before that day he went into the pharmacy at the top of the Portobello Road.

But spring had come, the day was fine and his scales had just informed him he had lost two pounds. Think of the positive things, he told himself, think what a harmless indulgence this is, and then, glancing down at the pavement, he saw the sprawl of litter. A tumble of fish and chips remains, part but not all of a bright blue polystyrene container, a can that had once held Red Bull and some fragments of a meat pie. Eugene recoiled from this rubbish but braced himself to remove it. The plastic carrier he always took with him on a shopping expedition (in the interest of saving the planet) he took out of his pocket and, covering his fingers with a tissue, picked up and deposited inside it the remains of some lowlife's supper. Underneath it – or, rather, behind it, up against a garden wall, pillar and hedge – was an unsealed and bulging envelope. When he picked it up he could see that inside were five or six twenty-pound notes, a ten and a five.

Without counting the notes, he put the envelope into his pocket before dropping the plastic bag into the next waste bin he passed. Ahead of him he could see in the distance the swarms of people, mostly young, heading for the Portobello Road market. It was always the same on Saturdays. They poured off the buses and out of Notting Hill tube station and charged along, talking and laughing at the tops of their voices, in their weekly quest for bargains and the companionship of their fellow shoppers.

As soon as he had the chance, Eugene turned left to avoid them. Not that he disliked the Portobello Road, but he preferred it on Sundays when it was half empty and you could see its buildings and feel its charm. On weekdays he only went there now for one purpose and he had been up to the pharmacy in Golborne Road on the previous Tuesday. Today one of the other selected shops he patronised must be visited. So now to the serious business of the morning.

What would they think he was in need of and was off to buy, those shoppers heading for the market whose indifferent gaze rested briefly on him before passing on? If they thought about it at all they would assume that a man seeking an addictive substance would look for alcohol, tobacco, cocaine, heroin, amphetamines, ecstasy, crack or, at the very least, marijuana. Eugene allowed himself to feel vaguely glad that it was none of these he sought.

It had begun when he decided he must find some way to curb his appetite. Some kind of slimming pills, he had thought vaguely. But when first he turned out of the Portobello Road in the direction of the illuminated green cross outside the Golborne Pharmacy, it wasn't with slimming or appetite suppression in mind but in search of a plug-in mosquito repellent for the summer ahead. Though it was early March, on the previous night his sleep had been disturbed by the whine of a mosquito in his bedroom and he had spent a frustrating quarter of an hour flapping about with a towel before squashing the thing. Paying for the device, he noticed a row of packets of sugar-free sweets absurdly named Lemfresh, Strawpink and Chocorange on the counter by the till. Probably they tasted disgusting. But he picked up a Chocorange and read the label on it: *Sugar-free, healthy, tooth-friendly*, it said, *only 4 calories per pastille*. Suppose they didn't taste too bad. He could eat one halfway between breakfast and lunch, and one between lunch and dinner or maybe two. At any rate, he could give it a try. They had no sugar in them and very few calories.

He took two packets, one Chocorange and one Strawpink. It was four o’clock and hunger was beginning to bite. Like every container these days, the Chocorange pack was hard to open but he got there. It held perhaps a dozen dark-brown lozenges. Tentatively, Eugene put one in his mouth and was pleasantly surprised by the taste. A rich chocolate flavour with a hint of sharp citrus. Delicious, really. And no bitter aftertaste, which used to be the case with sugar substitutes. He took another to confirm his judgement, trying a Strawpink this time. Nice enough, with an authentic flavour of strawberries but a bit insipid, not a patch on Chocorange.

Why not keep some of these by him so that he could help himself to one or two instead of snacking? Money didn’t worry him but if it had, these were cheap enough for anyone to afford: seventy-five pence a packet. And he knew where to find them. Golborne Road was ten minutes’ walk away from his house. It looked as if he had found the solution. No voice inside his head said, ‘Don’t go there.’ No small cautionary thought came to him, telling him to remember the cigarettes, climbing from five to forty a day, or the drinking, which started with two glasses of wine and mounted to a bottle of vodka plus wine, and now was only shakily reduced to two glasses once more. Don’t go there was unspoken or went unheard.

Should he tell Ella? Sucking a Chocorange, he had asked himself that on the way home from the pharmacy. Of course. He must. She would be pleased that he had found such a simple solution. On the other hand, perhaps he wouldn’t tell her. She, after all, was a doctor and one who often said how much she disapproved of additives, E numbers and the various inadequately tested chemicals that found their way into food today. The Chocorange packet carried a daunting list of the chemicals in it. She might try to stop him. She might tell him it was healthier to have an expanding waistline than fill up his body with junk.

‘We’re not talking about obesity,’ she had said the other day apropos of something else. ‘Being a little overweight won’t do you any harm.’ After all, she was a little overweight herself, though he loved her the way she was.

But it should remain his secret. After all, he was a secretive man and there was no use in pretending otherwise. Not to himself. He might pretend to others but was that not the essence of secretiveness?

* * *

Six weeks had passed since that day, which had also been fine and sunny, much like this one, only today was hotter than had been expected for April, but that, of course, was global warming. It was hard not to be glad of its side effects, warmth and perpetual sunshine. The trees were in the sort of full leaf usual three weeks later, the cherry blossom was past and the lilac out. The gardens of this part of west London had the exaggerated look of a seedsman’s catalogue illustrations, banks of pink and white blossom above cushions of purple and rose, all overhung by frondy branches of lemony green and a rich dark emerald. Six weeks. In those weeks he had consumed a large number of packets of Chocorange and now he was on his way to replenish his stocks. In them too he had lost weight.

Visiting pharmacists was what this now regular Saturday morning quest of his was all about. One of these was in sight, in a parade of shops on the other side of Notting Hill Gate; he couldn’t bring himself to call in there. He had visited it last Saturday and the pharmacist would remember such a recent purchase and, worse, make some comment such as, ‘You’re really fond of these things, aren’t you?’ or, most horrible and shame-making because almost true, ‘You must have your fix, mustn’t you?’

He began to walk down Kensington Church Street where there were no pharmacists but only antique dealers,

picture galleries and purveyors of eighteenth-century furniture. About to pass Eugene Wren, Fine Art, in accordance with his nature, rather in the way he wished for no comments on his behaviour from pharmacists, he kept his eyes averted as if fascinated by the sight on the opposite side of the street of a young man emerging from the florists under an enormous bouquet of flowers. It wasn't that he doubted all was well inside the shop but, rather, that he wanted to go about his Saturday business unobserved. Dorinda Clements, in charge in his absence, was entirely reliable. He sometimes made jokes with valued customers, for instance, that she was 'management incarnate' and that he trusted her more than he trusted himself. But he didn't want her knowing his private business.

The only regular stockists of what he sought were the pharmacy and cosmetics chain Elixir. They had become his default store and, like Dorinda, unfailingly reliable, but again their assistants were human, had eyes and memories, and were also capable of remarking on his frequent visits. How satisfactory it would be when you could do all your shopping without benefit of other human beings and, as you already could in some supermarkets, put your credit card into a machine, key in various numbers and hey presto! You had paid for your goods. You had kept your own secrets. Better not go to Elixir today, then, though he could see the branch he most often used ahead of him in Kensington High Street. That was the one where, a few weeks back, he had bought his second packet of Chocorange, replacement for the one from Golborne Road. And, as he had intended it should, Chocorange had admirably fulfilled its purpose. As a between-meals snack it worked, deadening his hunger and staving off grazing; the result had been that he had lost those two pounds he had gained and then one more. If it had a drawback, this was, paradoxically, that it tasted too delicious. Eugene had never

got over how something synthetic and harmless could taste so good. The result was that instead of one or two eaten in the morning he tended to take three or four and, in the late afternoon, once he had started he found it hard to stop. Sometimes, between three and reaching home at six, he ate half a packet. Still, it worked and that was the main thing. The unfortunate thing was that not all pharmacists stocked them and those that did tended to run out.

He would try a place further along towards Knightsbridge. This was a small shop called Bolus, run by a stout Asian man with a chilly manner. That suited Eugene. He went in and picked up two packets of tissues and a tube of toothpaste before raising his eyes to the section on the counter where Mr Prasad presided. The brown-and-orange design on the small packets always leapt to Eugene's eyes before any other colours – you might have said that in this situation there *were* no other colours – but their absence was as immediately noticeable. The red and pink of strawberry flavour were present, the green of mint but not a single pack of Chocorange. Mr Prasad had sold out. Eugene might have admitted to himself, but did not, that this was largely due to his own excessive buying. After all, the inhabitants of this part of west London, though no strangers to addiction in various forms, weren't prone to spend their leisure time seeking sugar-free sweets.

Eugene was paying for his tissues and his toothpaste when Mr Prasad said in what sounded like sarcastic tones, 'Your favourites will be in by the end of the week.'

The unexpectedness of this assault as well as its content brought the blood rushing into Eugene's cheeks. He muttered, 'Er, yes, thanks.'

'Would you like me to put in a double order next time?'

'Oh, no, thank you. Really, that won't be necessary.'

He wanted to flee but he made himself saunter out of the shop. He would never go in there again. That went without saying. This subtraction reduced the possible

Chocorange outlets to ten. And yet, why couldn't he have looked the man in the eye, laughed lightly and said, yes, he'd like some ordered specially for him? He was more or less hooked on the things, as Mr Prasad doubtless knew, ha-ha. They were so tasty. Why couldn't he say all that? He doubted if he could actually utter the word 'tasty', just as he couldn't say 'toilet' or 'kinky'.

He began to recognise he would have to go further afield, perhaps to the outer suburbs. Of course, as always happened in these circumstances, he began to experience a craving for a Chocorange, the smooth oval shape of it, the rich creamy flavour of milk chocolate and the sharp sweetness of citrus. There was nothing for it now but Elixir. They always had Chocorange in stock; indeed, in stock in reassuringly large quantities. His most recent visit to one of their branches had been to the store in Marylebone High Street and before that to New Oxford Street. It must be at least a fortnight since he had used the branch in Paddington Station. Enough walking had been done for one day and Eugene hailed a taxi.

He didn't ask the taxi driver to take him to Paddington Station; not, that is, through the glazed-in approach area in front of the entrance where Isambard Kingdom Brunel, architect of the Great Western Railway, sits on his plinth. That would have led to the driver asking him what time his train was, whether he wanted him to take this route or that and what was his destination. Better ask the man to set him down in one of the streets that run from Sussex Gardens to Praed Street and leave him to make his own way to the station. He had tried to remember street names but only came up with Spring Street. That would do.

The first thing he noticed – the first thing he always noticed – was the illuminated sign with the green cross on it that hangs above pharmacies. There it was, halfway up little Spring Street, a small shop like Mr Prasad's between a bank and an estate agent. Eugene felt that catch of

breath and lifting of the heart most people would associate with the sight of the person one is in love with. He used to feel it at first sight of Ella; now it was for a purveyor of sugar-free sweets. Don't think of it like that, he told himself, don't be silly. The pharmacist this time was a woman, also Asian, wearing a sari, beautiful, calm, with downcast eyes. But he didn't look at her. The moment he entered her shop a plethora of Chocorange, radiant in their orange-and-brown wrappings, seemed to leap up and meet his eyes, to jostle for his attention. This was a treasure to add to his list, a number eleven to oust Prasad's Bolus for ever. Without bothering to stock up on more tissues and toothpaste, he went up to the counter, picked out three packets of Chocorange and laid them in front of the deferential shopkeeper. She smiled at him, but courteously, without a hint of cunning or amusement, and rang up the sum of two pounds twenty-five.

Now free to make his other purchases, Eugene took a bus back to Notting Hill, where he bought the ingredients for the dinner he intended to cook for Ella that evening and dropped into one of the bags the envelope he had picked up earlier. Walking home with his two fairly heavy bags and sucking his second Chocorange of the morning, he wondered if tonight would be a good time to ask Ella to marry him, whether it might not be better to put it off for a further week or two. After all, their present arrangement worked very pleasantly. There were none of the problems of living under the same roof but plenty of lovely sex two or three times a week. He checked these thoughts, while telling himself that all men thought along these lines. He loved Ella. If she wasn't quite the only woman he had ever loved, he loved her best. He could hardly imagine being parted from her.

But he was a secretive person. Should someone who treasured his privacy so much marry at all? Still, he had