RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Destiny

Tim Parks

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About the Book

Three months after returning to England, Christopher Burton, receives a phone-call at the reception desk of the Rembrandt Hotel, Knightsbridge that informs him of his son's suicide. But why on receiving this terrible news, does Burton immediately decide that he must leave his Italian wife of thirty years standing? Why does he find it so difficult to focus on his grief for his son?

Intensely dramatic, dark and, against all odds, hilariously funny, *Destiny* is a satisfying story and a profound meditation on marriage and identity. Parks gives us a frightening experience of what it means to tread the narrow line between sanity and psychosis.

About the Author

Tim Parks's novels include *Tongues of Flame*, which won the Somerset Maugham and Betty Trask Awards, *Loving Roger*, which won the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, *Cara Massimina* and *Mimi's Ghost*. His non-fiction work includes the bestselling *Italian Neighbours*, *An Italian Education* and *Adultery & Other Diversions*. His ninth novel *Europa* was shortlisted for the 1997 Booker Prize. Tim Parks lives in Italy.

ALSO BY TIM PARKS

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‘What marks Tim Parks out as more than the sum of his narrators is his exceptional finesse at relating their bouts of self-doubt and attempts at reconciliation to a wider philosophical view’

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‘This might well be the novel that Tim Parks’ previous books have been working towards, for here he cleverly combines the darkly-crafted inventiveness of his fiction with the wry, self-reflective tones of his intellectualised travel writing. The result is an intensely philosophical, curiously compelling journey along the fissures of his favoured themes: identity, nationality, language and the family’

Guardian

‘This clotted, clever, niggling book is most effective as a portrait of a man walled in by thought’

Observer

‘Readers of *Europa* will recognise how well he writes in the first person: here he has brilliantly contrived a narrator who gradually disintegrates into the very tale he tells’

Financial Times

‘Another Booker contender’
Anita Brookner, *Spectator*

‘As in *Europa*, Parks balances a skilful rendering of the inner thoughts of a clever, neurotic, menopausal male *in extremis* with a series of antiseptic, sense-dulling locations – departure lounges, waiting rooms, hospital. The result is a powerful feeling of emotions recollected . . . moments of clarity shine through, as calm as the moon’

TLS

‘Searingly honest and lucid, he unravels the deceptions that have driven him away from his wife, and rediscovers the

love that will, perhaps, keep them together: a sobering, cautiously optimistic, unforgettable novel’

Harpers & Queen

Destiny

Tim Parks

I

SOME THREE MONTHS after returning to England, and having at last completed – with the galling exception of the Andreotti interview – that collection of material that, once assembled in a book, must serve to transform a respectable career into a monument – something so comprehensive and final, this was my plan, as to be utterly irrefutable – I received, while standing as chance would have it at the reception desk of the Rembrandt Hotel, Knightsbridge, a place emblematic, if you will, both of my success in one field and my failure in another, the phone-call that informed me of my son's suicide. 'I am sorry,' the Italian voice said. 'I am very sorry.' Then replacing the receiver and before anything like grief or remorse could cloud the rapid working of my mind, I realised, with the most disturbing clarity, that this was the end for my wife and myself. The end of our life together, I mean. There is no reason, I told myself, shocked by the rapidity and clarity with which I had arrived at this realisation, entirely bypassing those emotions one might expect on first impact with bereavement, no reason at all for you and your wife to go on living together now that your son is dead. And particularly not now that your son has committed suicide. So that gazing blankly across the deep carpet and polished wood of that unnecessarily sumptuous lobby, as again now, tickets in hand, I am blankly gazing across a strike-bound Heathrow departures lounge, it was, it is, as if this were the only real news that phone-call had brought me: not my son's death at all, for he died long ago, but the peremptory announcement of my imminent

separation from my wife. Suddenly I could think of nothing else.

Not only was air-traffic-control working to rule – over France, over Italy – but the underground was out too. My wife was completely numbed. I hurried her to South Ken tube, knowing it was quicker than the taxi. I felt deeply sorry for my wife, yet was already aware of a growing fear of her eventual reaction. Which would surely be punitive. People were milling around the barriers and every two or three minutes the p.a. system repeated that a handicapped woman had chained herself to a train at St James's Park. We must get a cab, I said. Unusually, my wife allowed herself to be led like a child. Needless to say all the cabs were taken.

Yes, it was a stroke of luck, I reflect now, gazing across the departures lounge, one of those queer strokes of luck in the midst of catastrophe, though hardly a silver lining, that I should have been down in the lobby and actually speaking to the receptionist when that call came through. Otherwise it would have been directed to our room and my wife would have heard the news with the same brutality I did. Your son stabbed himself to death with a screwdriver, Mr Burton. How? she asked. It had taken me some fifteen minutes to get up to our room. An accident. The line was bad. He didn't explain. You could call again, she said. There was hardly much point. We should get moving. For a moment I was ready to hear her answer back: You always say there's not much point when I suggest something. But she was quite numbed. This news has broken the compulsive back-and-forth of our recriminations, I thought. And as she allowed herself to be led by the hand up the steps out of the tube station, the way once one led one's tiny children by the hand, savouring their trust and innocence, I again thought: It is quite over between us now, between my wife and myself. This news has blown the whistle on a stalemate that should have ended years ago. I felt excited. And

remembered there was an airport bus that ran along the Brompton Road.

I had gone down to the lobby, I recall, still staring at the departures board where the word ‘delayed’ figures prominently, in order to renew our booking at the Rembrandt Hotel for the forthcoming week. There is a copy of the artist’s self-portrait by the lifts. I paid a compliment to the receptionist, who must be a German girl I think, and decided to take the opportunity of enjoying the hotel’s extravagant breakfast without reproach. Your wife objects, I thought, to the expense of the house you wish to buy, as likewise to the expense of these extravagant breakfasts, but she says nothing of the expense of living for months in a well-appointed hotel, nothing of the cost of maintaining a well-appointed house we do not live in. Scooping up fried eggs fried bread fried tomatoes sausages and bacon, I thought: Your wife objects to these extravagant breakfasts because they push up your weight and thus are bad for your health. This is true. But other things that are equally bad for your health – as for example the uncertainty generated by your wife’s constant changes of mind, her inexplicable rancour, her obsessive attachment to your unhappy son Marco, things that undeniably lie at the root of your various nervous disorders – do not concern her in the least. Your health, your heart, do not concern your wife in the least, I told myself, deciding it would be too much to add a kipper, except insofar as they offer an alibi for her objecting to what she anyway wishes to object to for her own private and perverse reasons. Though I love kippers. Which one never finds in Italy. The chief of these being her growing and entirely unreasonable concern with money. Why is my wife so concerned with money? I wondered. Why won’t she sell the house? Except that then this thought, deciding yet again that I must not have a kipper, this perception, that is, though hardly new, of the way my wife’s objections to whatever I did were always falsely attributed to the best of

motivations, and above all my health, my heart, or even more crucially Marco's health, if one could rightly speak of such a thing, reminded me of a note I had scribbled down the previous day on the flyleaf of my potted version of Montesquieu's *Esprit des Lois:* To the extent, I had scribbled, to which government is not for the public good, it is legitimate for me to disobey it, though it is rarely *for that reason* that I disobey it. One's tax evasion, for example. And perceiving a connection between these two lines of thought, this search, I mean, which seems at once innate and obsessive, for the comfortable camouflage of legitimate motivation, I had immediately felt happy, in form. I had laughed. Your mind is extremely agile this merry morning, I told myself, smiling at the generous spread of the Rembrandt Hotel breakfast buffet. I suddenly felt immensely well-disposed to the whole world, my wife included. One small kipper can do no harm, I decided.

And how wise the management had been to put down such a deep carpet in the breakfast room! I spread out my newspaper – one of my three newspapers – propping it up carefully on ashtray and cruet, and read about Tony Blair's decision to banish calculators from primary schools. Nothing is more pleasurable, or more tricky to set up, than reading and eating at the same time, satisfying both body and mind at the same time. And nothing could better distinguish the English mentality from the Italian, I had thought, only minutes away – but how could I know this? – from hearing about my son's suicide, than this extraordinary enthusiasm, indeed euphoria, over a new prime minister. Picking up a piece of fried bread to dunk in the tomatoes, I remembered Rousseau and how he would steal wine from his employer's kitchen and search out cakes from remote bakeries so that he could then eat and drink while he read. On his bed. As tricky as 69 sometimes, I reflected, when the pepper pot toppled. *Troppa carne sul fuoco.* I signalled for more coffee. No, nothing could be more indicative of the health, the

ingenuousness, and a certain coarseness too, in the Anglo-Saxon mentality, I reflected, blissfully unaware that my life was only minutes away from the most radical of changes, than this wild excitement over the replacement of a government they had after all voted for themselves on three previous occasions with another government they would no doubt make haste to replace as soon as they had had enough. Number-crunchers, no thanks, was one sub-heading. The carpet made a wonderfully muffled hush of things. I broke a fresh bread-roll to clean my plate. Unthinkable in Italy. This belief not so much in change, but in the right kind of change. In progress, no less. But how could I work this into the book? How does one turn such a vast amount of disparate material into a monument? I was very excited by the prospect of writing a book, something I had never done before, and above all a monumental book, one that would say once and for all and quite irrefutably how things stand. It would require system. On the other hand, how could I even start if my wife refused to settle on any of the houses we looked at? Refused to make up her mind. How can one write a monumental book in the cramped and temporary circumstances of even the best hotel room?

There was a very large photograph of a smiling Tony Blair with his young children. The English, I thought, and I had decided I would treat myself to a cigarette if I could get hold of one, have this extraordinary ability to start from scratch, to believe they are starting from scratch. For years and years, I thought, spooning marmalade onto a second roll, the English vote Conservative, they breathe and believe conservative, they teach the world the meaning of the word conservative, they espouse the doctrinaire notions of monetarism and privatisation and invent marvellous expressions like ‘rolling back the boundaries of the state’, until all at once they realise they’ve had enough, all at once there they are wriggling on the edge of their seats, fidgeting

and frantic for the two or three years they must wait before they get the chance to vote Labour. Then, oh the excitement when the first thing their new prime minister does is to banish calculators from primary schools! Tony does his sums! says the caption beneath smiling faces. Andreotti also had a large family, I reflect, but was rarely photographed with wife and children. It is admirable, I thought in the admirably carpeted hush of the Rembrandt Hotel breakfast room where even the scraping of knives on fine china is reduced to a distant tinkle, this ability of the English to rise from the ashes, to believe one can rise from the ashes. And how can it not go hand in hand with their extraordinarily high divorce rate? For the point of my book was to show the oneness of private and public life, to establish once and for all the dynamic of the relationship between a people and its government, its destiny. I did the right thing, I suddenly thought, returning to England. After all, I am English myself. Even after all these years away, these decades, I am still English. If you had remained in England you would surely have divorced your wife ages ago, I told myself complacently in the Hotel Rembrandt breakfast room. If you had remained in England you would surely have made major and salutary changes. Salutary for my wife as much as myself. And above all for Marco. On the other hand, when you ask an Italian waiter for a cigarette, he will give you one and this saves you from buying a pack and smoking them all at once and feeling ill. That is service. A single cigarette. A circumscribed transgression. Whereas the stiff, white-jacketed fellow at the Rembrandt seemed not so much offended as bewildered. Clearly he imagined I was American. In Italy they take me for a German, I thought, in England for an American. And you are set to write a book about national character.

I laughed. My wife is weeping into her handkerchief as she sits beside me on one of a row of ten plastic seats bolted together for convenience sake in the departures lounge of

Terminal One. It is important that people sit in rows in a large public concourse, otherwise can you imagine the confusion? She is crying quietly into her hands and handkerchief, but in a way, I'm aware, that rejects rather than invites consolation. While only two hours ago, I reflect, or perhaps less, you were laughing heartily in the breakfast hush of the Rembrandt Hotel. To yourself of course. One laughs mostly to oneself. And what you were laughing about was not so much the destiny that has had you everywhere mistaken for something you are not, German here, American there, and then the irony of such a person's embarking on a monumental book, a book whose ambition is to pin down, once and for all, precisely what people are, or rather what *peoples* are, no, but the exhilaration at your perception of that irony. Quick as lightning this morning, I had thought, there in the breakfast room. Why does my mind cling to thoughts now entirely inappropriate, I wonder, here in the departures lounge? Why won't my wife accept my consolation? A breakfast hush seems to encourage thought, I thought in the breakfast room, imagining the day when Tony Blair would be photographed on resigning office and some other prime minister would startle and enchant the British public perhaps by reintroducing school milk or banning the use of roller-blades in public parks. I would gladly console her if she would let me. Tony leads from the front, another caption said. Yes, you're in form, I had thought. And this pleasure, I can't help, however inappropriately, remembering now, as my wife rocks slowly back and forth in her grief, her exclusive grief, this wonder – the kipper, as I knew it would, beginning to repeat on me – at your own mental processes, was, is, part of a general feeling that has been developing for some time, from my fiftieth birthday on perhaps, yes, or my long convalescence after the bypass operation, the feeling that I am approaching the height of my powers, that I am, in some sense, coming into myself, my true and most profound

inheritance, fruit of decades of experience and self-nurturing. Why else would I have resigned my various posts and embarked on such an ambitious project? Personality is the greatest happiness, said Goethe. The liveliness of the mind. The active mind. I cannot think of Marco. I must strike while the iron is hot, I told myself in the breakfast room of the Rembrandt Hotel. I drained my coffee. I must start now. I must force my wife to see reason, settle on a house, sell the house in Rome. And shifting back my chair on the deep carpet of the breakfast room, I could see a spacious study perched over suburban gardens and all the books I had been collecting ranged in sober colours around the walls, and all the laboriously-written notes I had compiled organised in numbered box-files, and on the desktop a white sheet of paper and a simple fountain pen already blocking out the first simple sentence: National character does exist.

One week as of tomorrow night? the receptionist enquired. She picked up the phone to take a call, tucking the receiver between neck and chin. And although this division of attention is something I loathe, I was smiling at the German receptionist, doing my best to show her that while I had no intention of playing the fool I found her extremely attractive. It is not the rudeness I loathe, I thought, watching the receptionist tuck the phone into creamy skin, but the distraction, the lack of focus that plagues so much of our lives. My wife, for example, I was thinking, has always been willing to break off the most crucial conversations, or even love-making, to answer a phone-call, or speak to a neighbour at the door, or a priest or a doctor or a tradesman. Nobody, I suddenly thought, watching how the tucking gesture was forming the most endearing of double chins, could be more willing to break off love-making or wrangling than my wife. To turn away from me at crucial moments. Even for a Jehovah’s Witness on one occasion. But that was in Rome. A *testimonio di Geova.* And immediately her voice is full of a politeness or a warmth or

an unction that is absolutely false. Absolutely false, I thought, observing how the tone of the German girl’s voice had altered on picking up the phone. We put on voices like hats, I thought, enjoying the chance to smile vaguely at that double chin. The call is for you, Mr Burton, she said. Would you like to take it here at the desk? Then, still smiling across at the German girl, enjoying her generous Teutonic fleshiness, in much the same innocent way as I had enjoyed the generously fleshy kipper which is now so predictably repeating on me, I heard a voice speaking Italian say: Your son has killed himself. I put the phone down in the sumptuous lobby of the Rembrandt Hotel where a copy of the artist’s self-portrait hangs between the lifts. And with the awful clarity that always accompanies our perception of the worst, I realised that this was the end for my wife and myself. Our impossible alliance is over.

II

IT WAS GALLING that I had not yet been able to collect the Andreotti interview, since the place it must occupy in my book was that of a final demonstration, a proof even, of all that had gone before: the predictability, given a proper understanding of race character sex and circumstance, of all human behaviour. Yes, the Andreotti interview, I have often told myself, quite apart from forming the explanatory link between a not insignificant career in journalism and now this monumental account of national destiny – the latter at once a maturing and a repudiation of the former – must clinch the whole question of necessity, obvious and inevitable correlate of predictability: Andreotti would say *exactly* what was expected of him. Exactly what I had said he would say. Exactly how I had said he would say it. As would Blair, come to that, had I chosen to end on an interview with Blair. Or indeed my wife – most of all my wife – if only one could put one's wife in a monumental book. People are who they are, I thought. I have always thought. Most particularly your wife. So every study in character, and above all in national character – this is the thesis I have been working on for so long – is a study in prediction, in political calculation, and all failure to predict is a failure to understand character. Andreotti, of all people, I was certain, would not let me down in this respect. Who is at once more himself and more exquisitely, as the Italians put it, Italian, than Andreotti? Had Andreotti ever, I asked myself, in all the years I reported on these matters, which were many, too many, been anything less than his irretrievably ambiguous self? Entirely predictable. Character is necessity's

momentum, it occurs to me. That would be one way of putting it. Knowing means knowing the future. Still, I was loath to start the book and predict its end – what Andreotti would say and how he would say it, down to the very last detail and inflexion – without having actually done the interview. Without cheating, to be honest. For some reason – and more than once these words have formed quite clearly in my mind – I feared the sin of hubris. Of presuming too much, presuming, that is, not just to have understood things after the event, as Oedipus, but before, as the oracle. Though isn't it to this in the end that all human knowledge aspires? Predicting elections, predicting earthquakes. I never doubted I was right, merely felt it might be wise to do the interview first. At a quarter to eleven, seated beside my wife in a concourse ever more crowded and chaotic, the trill of my mobile reminds me of this now trivial anxiety: the Andreotti interview. It must be my fixer.

On arrival at the airport I had gone to purchase the tickets, my wife being unable even at the best of times to speak any but the most rudimentary English. Your wife, I thought, and I was still completely unable, in the queue at the Heathrow ticket desk, to summon up anything resembling a proper sense of bereavement, my mind still running – I know this is unacceptable – on all its normal tracks, your wife made an extraordinary concession when she agreed, in her mid-fifties, to come to live in a country whose language she is not only unable to speak but has always, I am convinced, at some subliminal level, categorically refused to learn. An extraordinary concession for a woman as gregarious and sociable as your wife, a woman for whom conversation, in the three languages she does speak, means so much. No, for a woman, I thought – wondering if a bereavement I was still absolutely unable to feel entitled me to push to the front of a long queue at the British Airways ticket desk – who has always been the heart and soul of every party, every one of her many parties, not

to mention an incorrigible flirt, to come to a country where she cannot engage in any but the most rudimentary conversation, the most banal of pleasantries, is an extraordinary concession. An extraordinary sacrifice, as she would say. A concession is always a sacrifice, for an Italian. Albeit wrung from her not just, or not even, by myself, but by the doctor, Dottor Vanoli, who so often insisted that our absence could only have a positive effect on Marco. What Marco needs, Dottor Vanoli would say, and despite all her flirting my wife could never get him to change his mind on this one, is not your assistance, but your absence. And not for the first time I was bound to reflect that far more than her concession in coming to England, to a place where she cannot speak and cannot flirt, or not easily, it was her concession in leaving Marco behind in Italy that mattered. Though only made *for* Marco of course. Predictably enough. I played no part in the decision. A sacrifice for her son. And only to try out the one solution that had not been tried out, the solution, what's more, she believed in least of all. Perhaps only to prove Dottor Vanoli wrong. But in any event, I thought, suddenly and unexpectedly finding myself face to face with a British Airways clerk whose name-tag ironically identified her as Italian, in any event and cavilling aside – but how did I get to the front of the queue? – my wife has made some very considerable and creditable concessions. Did I push past the others? Last night at Courteney's, for example, she sat through a whole dinner party without engaging in any but the most rudimentary of exchanges, her customary flirtations limited absolutely to glances and smiles and generous gesturing. Did I lapse into a kind of trance? Though these are hardly areas where she is deficient. Nobody seems upset, I thought, glancing quickly over my shoulder. And even when a certain name came up, I told myself, but at the same time vaguely reminded now, as the girl's elegant fingers enquired something of her computer, of those mysteriously lost minutes earlier on in

the morning, between the phone-call and the return to my room – even when a certain name came up, last night at Geoff Courteney's party, my talkative wife was limited to inquisitive glances and mild uncomprehending nods. That was a considerable sacrifice. And I wondered, what did I do or think in those fifteen minutes? Down in the Rembrandt lobby. Here in the ticket queue. Or even twenty. I hadn't looked at my watch. The girl clicked at the keyboard. And despite – to return to the matter of my wife's concessions – her repeated and obtuse blocking both of a house purchase in London and a house sale in Rome, the kind of significant shift of resources that would have consolidated, perhaps irreversibly, our intention to stay in England, there had even been some wistful talk these last few weeks, on her part and indeed on mine, of our somehow getting back together. Of our becoming real partners again. Even lovers. Perhaps we can get back together again, my wife had said wistfully last night. In Italian. After the argument in the cab. The London cab. And the word *heal* was used at some point, I remember – *heal our relationship*, she said. Was this what I was thinking about, in those lacunae? Sitting in the armchair beneath the portrait perhaps? I can hardly, she had laughed – we were climbing out of the cab on our return from Courteney's – annoy you by talking to an *English* Jehovah's Witness. Can I? It had been a bitter argument. We laughed together. *Flirting* with a Jehovah's Witness, I corrected. She was hugely amused. Yes, your wife has made huge and generous concessions, I suddenly thought. All at once, at the British Airways ticket desk, my eyes were streaming with tears. And now it is over between us.

Ms Iacone looked up. The flight to Turin is full, sir.

Then to stem this flood of emotion rising from an entirely unexpected direction and nothing to do with Marco at all, I switched to Italian. *Allora a Milano, il primo volo a Milano, per favore*, I said, wondering at my suddenly being entirely and unexpectedly overcome by emotions that had nothing

at all to do with Marco. And at once I could see the girl take my switch in language as criticism of her competence and she sold me, tight-lipped, two first-class seats to Milan-Linate before telling me that all flights were delayed because air-traffic-control was working strictly to rule. Over France and over Italy. Serious delays, she said with evident satisfaction. Your wife's reaction will surely be punitive, I thought. Perhaps I *had* pushed to the front of the queue. She will not remember that it was Dottor Vanoli and not I who insisted on this experiment of our absence. Prolonged absence, he insisted. Not I. I had only been scrupulous in following the doctor's advice. Was this why I had told her it was an accident rather than suicide? Did that decision have something to do with those missing minutes? But it was like casting about for a forgotten dream.

Returning from the ticket desk, I found my wife on a row of seats in the concourse, bent forward in her grief, as on the bus she had simply sat bent forward in her suffering without ever a word the whole length of the journey from South Ken to Heathrow. Given that she consented to this experiment only with the keenest of misgivings, I thought, considering her bent and bowed body as I approached, how could her reaction be anything but punitive? What form will it take? Air-traffic is working to rule, I said. There are delays. She had brought out a photograph of Marco she keeps in her handbag and was weeping over it, quite silently. Perhaps silence, I thought. No one is capable of such punitive silences as your talkative wife. We'll have to fly to Milan, I said. She was rocking slowly back and forth on her seat. Of such extended periods of miserable and uncooperative mutism. Elective mutism, is the technical term. In between weeks of chatter. I tried to put an arm around her, but a small shrugging of the shoulders told me my consolation was not welcome. Yourwife, I repeated an old reflection, while at the same time earnestly wishing I could focus my mind elsewhere, and above all on Marco, my son Marco, has

always displayed her grief, whatever its cause, in such a way as to make it clear that there is absolutely nothing you can do to console her. And this has always been a source of immense uneasiness for you. Not only can you not feel grief the way she does, cannot even focus on the object of grief, your mind like the strangled chicken still clucking about in its usual dirt, but you are not permitted to console her in the extravagant grief that she feels. You are considered too vile to offer consolation. Or in any event unworthy. And it occurs to me, as the phone now begins to trill in my pocket – it must be my fixer – and the kipper to repeat, so predictably, in my oesophagus, that there is a terrible simultaneity about marriage. Our marriage. However long ago something happened, it occurs to me, hearing the phone trill in my pocket, in my mind, it is always the same thing. Isn't it? In marriage. Always the same dynamic. The shouting match in a London cab, or stubborn silence in a bar in Trastevere. No wonder you have so many nervous disorders. It will be the fixer, I tell myself, starting nervously at the sound of the phone in my pocket. The nocturnal urination and scratchy oesophagus. Of course it's partly to do with heavy drinking and heavy eating, with generous breakfasts in thickly carpeted hotels and nights soaking spirits while waiting for interminably delayed press conferences. But only partly. Only a very small part. And even as the telephone trills in my pocket, I see myself sitting beside my wife in another airport many years ago – twenty-five? thirty? – quite unable, then as now, to comfort her after another doctor had said she would never be able to have a child. You will never be able to have a child, Signora Burton, this doctor said, kindly, solemnly. I forget his name, but not his kind, solemn manner. Many years ago. Our story is long and complicated, it occurs to me, very long and very complicated, should anyone ever wish to tell it, yet seen another way everything is simultaneous, fixed as the revolving planets. How can that be? And pulling the mobile from my pocket, I announce

to my wife: Perhaps it’s Paola, and switch the thing off. I am feeling queasy is the truth and, frankly, in need of a lavatory. It must be Paola, I repeat to my wife, then am immediately aware that any decision now to get up and go off to the lavatory can only be interpreted as an attempt to go and phone Paola on my own. As if I had only switched the thing off to deceive. Perhaps I should have answered, I insist, eager to understand if my wife intends to punish me with silence. She may have more news. Or she may not even know. Definitely provoking now, I remark: After all Paola deserves to know. Doesn’t she? Suddenly necessity obliges me to head off to the lavatory.

The fixer said Andreotti would not see me personally, but had finally agreed to answer my questions in writing by return of fax. That was no good, I said, automatically businesslike. The fixer laughed. There was a way round it, he said. Or half a way. Since Andreotti thought the interview was for a major national newspaper, indeed would never have consented to it otherwise, he, the fixer, had told him they would need a photo session. As a special concession he will let you sit in on it. You can talk to him then. I can’t pay for a photographer as well, I protested, and despite this setback was somehow finding the mental space to reflect that the fixer, in Rome, couldn’t imagine how I was now sitting with shivering flanks spread over a parlous lavatory bowl in the Heathrow Terminal One departures lounge. Odd, I thought, the contrast in such circumstances between the extreme vulnerability of your trouserless trunk and the peremptory confidence of your voice, your manner, speaking now in a foreign language. Though this visit was proving a false alarm. I shivered. There are all sorts of hospital tests I feel I should do. Just bring a friend with a camera, the fixer was saying. Anybody. Even a girlfriend. The man laughed. How’s he to know? Just make sure it’s an expensive looking camera. We’ve arranged it for Wednesday. You’re to fax him the questions today or