

And Then They Came ...

Oliver Youngblood steps off the bus that has brought the group of foreign writers and scholars to the edge of the Cathedral Square in Pisa. Yet another visa check. He waves his blue passport at the man in uniform, who looks more like a soldier than an immigration official, and continues his conversation with his travelling companion, Walter Hextube, about the role of the supernatural in early Chaucer.

The man in uniform snatches his passport and flips its pages back and forth until he finds the visa. Then he scrutinises Oliver to see whether he is indeed as described – white, male and of working age – before shoving the passport back into Oliver’s hand and gesturing for Walter to submit his.

The disembarked group is flanked by a corridor of stony-faced officials as it proceeds toward the Tower, hired for the annual international meeting of the Royal Ivory Tower Association of Scriveners (motto *Fabula longa, vita brevis*), reputedly at great expense, by Lady Hunnipotte. Only a few know how much she paid for the privilege, and for the visas for the dodgy intellectuals coming from far and wide, but no-one doubts that she paid an enormous sum to use the Tower on the evening before its demolition.

Oliver glances up at the gently revolving dome, made of eco-sustainable plastic and recycled glass, that has been built on the top of the Tower to house a five-star Slow Food restaurant and to host meetings, though usually for movers and shakers rather than thinkers. For a while, Oliver is puzzled, then he decides that courtiers must have kept pictures of it away from the sight of his king, otherwise he himself would never have got an exit visa, never mind one to enter Italy. At the entrance, bags are searched. Any books found are added to a pile that stretches around behind the Tower. Oliver’s magazines are allowed to pass.

Charmaine was not on the chartered military plane or the bus, otherwise Oliver would not be wasting his time talking to Walter, or anyone other than her. Indeed, now that he contemplates the first of the three hundred or so steps that lead to the top, he starts to take them two at a time, leaving his older companion to find another RITAS member to talk to.

Oliver is soon forced to slow his pace. He greets his fellow RITAS as he passes them, but his gaze is always ahead, searching for what he hopes is still the trim figure of the woman he has not seen since they were trapped together at Brighton’s i360 while scoping out venues for an ordinary RITAS meeting, as though anything were ordinary these days.

He pauses to look down to where the Cathedral and the Baptistry still stand, and wonders how convincing their replacements will look. It will be one of Italy’s biggest job-creation schemes, on a par with draining the

marshes in the 1930s. Still, neither visual aesthetics nor labour economics are his concern. He continues up.

Oliver reaches the top and pushes his way into the crowded dome. He sees her! Charmaine Muggeridge stands below below the dais, across the room from Oliver. Her blonde hair gleams under the strip lights; pearls sparkle on her neck that is whiter than uncut cocaine. She is one of the few women in the room.

Oliver gasps, then breathes in slowly and deeply. Charmaine's figure is trim, but it is evident to Oliver that the rumours of her pregnancy are true. He hopes desperately that the child is his. He catches her eye. She smiles and waves at him to join her. As Oliver pushes his way toward her, his excuses fall on ears deafened by the voice of Roy Orbison singing "Pretty Woman", for the theme of the evening is happy endings. He reaches her and takes her in his arms. She nestles against him. As Lady Hunnipotte calls the meeting to order, Oliver places his hand on Charmaine's belly and looks an enquiry at her. She turns her face up to him and nods, smiling. Oliver feels he is the happiest man in the world.

"Thank you all for coming," Lady Hunnipotte says. "I know many of you have had difficult journeys, but to all of us who have made it I can promise a scintillating evening with a focus on "Jane Eyre" and "Pride and Prejudice", together with the aesthetic and philosophical implications of felicitous fictional finishes."

Oliver, however, is transfixed by the real life he feels beside him, in Charmaine's body. He senses a faint autumnal aroma of burning leaves waft into the room and starts gently to propel Charmaine towards the entrance in case she needs some fresh air. Lady Hunnipotte introduces the first distinguished speaker, who, of course, needs no introduction. Oliver and Charmaine reach the entrance. He leads her through it, to the top of the centuries-old stair well, from where they can still see and hear the proceedings inside the dome, as well as take in some evening air. Oliver's attention is caught by the sight of the condemned Cathedral and Baptistry, spread like children's toys below them.

Professor Romanov's words are covered by the sound of heavy machinery. From his vantage point, Oliver looks out and sees two dark-painted helicopters approaching the tower; on the ground, wreckers are moving in its direction. The Professor stops speaking and glances around in irritation for the source of the noise. He realises it is outside, locates it and stands transfixed, staring through the glass at the hovering helicopter. There is gunfire: bullets and shattered windows fly, and the Professor's head explodes. People fall; screams of agony and fear rend the air. Oliver has grabbed Charmaine's hand and is pulling her as fast as they both can

manage down the steps that will spiral them away from the hell above. They are not the fastest. Others, some bleeding and terrified, some just terrified – screaming, sobbing or silent – shove them out of the way to overtake them in the hope of reaching the bottom, and imagined safety, before it is too late. At every landing they pass, the smell of burning gets stronger.

The claw of a “godzilla” high-reach excavator smashes through stonework just above Oliver and Charmaine. It catches the woman behind them in its grip, crushes her to pulp and pulls out her remains through the new hole in the Tower wall, as though the driver wants to examine his trophy.

Oliver stops thinking. Still grasping Charmaine’s hand tight, he plunges down the steps toward the smoke that rises to meet them. It now smells of burning flesh. He is choking and gasping for breath when he realises they are at the base of the Tower. Fire surrounds them. Charmaine collapses to the ground. Oliver gathers her up in his arms and rushes through the ring of flames and dense smoke until the body of what was once a fellow writer trips him. He loses his grip on Charmaine and crashes to the ground, but he has brought them both through the fire. He staggers to his feet and looks for his beloved. She is just a few feet from him, deathly white but breathing, until a round from an automatic weapon rips through her body and tears her in two at the waist. Oliver’s scream of agony and disbelief dies on his lips as bullets blast into his brain and end his short life.