

In the air

Adam de la Halle

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On a recent trip to London, I bumped into an old university friend I hadn't seen for years and had completely lost touch with. She nearly flattened me actually, leaping out of a taxi, designer briefcase in one hand and mobile phone pressed to other ear.

We both gasped a startled „sorry!“ then recognition kicked in.

„Fiona!“ I shrieked. „Oh no!“ shrieked she, spoke a businesslike „call you back, okay?“ into the phone and threw her arms round me. The briefcase slammed into my spine.

We held each other at arm's length, smiling and studying. „How are you?“ we chorused, „God, it's been so long!“

She released me and glanced at her watch. „Time for a quick coffee?“ She took my arm and shepherded me into a brushed steel and chrome café. I was posted at one of the stand-up tables while she strode up to the bar, ordered espressos and came back with two cups containing an inch of black liquid.

„Fancy us meeting like this! You over on holiday? Where is it you live ...

Liechtenstein, or somewhere?“ She swigged at her coffee, pulled a face, then smiled again. I took in the sleek dark suit and short shiny hair; and the lines round the mouth and the tired eyes.

„Luxembourg. Working for Europe. But what are you doing now?“

„Oh City. Boring financial stuff, you know. Well paid though. God, when did we last see each other? You haven't changed. Bit greyer ...“ She gave a little laugh. „D'you remember our grey tutor? Grey hair, grey clothes, grey ideas! That time in the restaurant we were talking about her ...“

„... and she'd been sitting there all along. Heard everything.“

„God, that was awful. And that essay of yours on the Jeu de la Feuillée, when she suddenly went all quiet and then the passage came up in Finals.“

We laughed then went quiet ourselves. I took a bitter sip of coffee.

„It seems so long ago ...“

„Yes.“ She frowned. „I sometimes ... well, d'you ever wonder what it was all for?“

I looked at her. „What d'you mean for?“

„Well, I really liked mediaeval French literature; but for the life of me I can't see what it's got to do with investment banking ... I mean none of my colleagues has even heard of Adam de la Halle. They're interested in property and cars and ... and football, stuff like that. I've got used to it, of course, but ...“



Adam de la Halle, known as Adam le Bossu Miniature of a XIVth century ms

She broke off and looked down. „It gets a bit lonely sometimes, having no one to talk to about things you find important.“

„Same for me at work. A whole part of you remains completely unknown. But I married someone who knows literature.“

She looked up at me. „Did you? Good for you. Mine doesn't.“ She fell silent. Her gaze went vague, then after a moment snapped back into focus. She breathed in sharply. „Still, it was all a very long time ago, wasn't it. We've got to move with the times!“

She glanced at the watch again.

„Look, I ought to be going. Important meeting.“ She drained her coffee. The bright smile was back in place. „But it's been really good to see you again! We must keep in touch. Here.“

She dived her hand into her briefcase, scabbled around briefly then frowned.

„Damn it. Haven't got a card with me. Never mind. I'll write it down.“

She delved again and came out with a notebook and pen.

„This is my home phone. If you're phoning from abroad, don't do the zero.“ She wrote.

„Best time to get me is late evening. But there's always the ansaphone. Fax is the same except for the last four digits.“ She wrote.

„This is my mobile.“ She wrote.

„Oh, and Simon's, just in case.“ She wrote then looked up. „Sorry, Simon's my husband. City like me. Quite successful.“

I murmured something.

„At weekends, we're mostly at this number. We've got a little place in the country. Really great club few miles away; golf for us, riding for Berenice, you know.“ She wrote.

„I'd better give you our new town address. We're moving next week.“ She wrote.

„Place still chaos, but it's handy for the City and there's a decent local school. And some really great restaurants.“ She wrote.

„Here's my direct line at work.“ She

wrote. „My secretary can always tell you where you can reach me.“ She turned over the page and wrote.

„And the switchboard, if no one answers.“ She wrote.

„This is my personal fax. And the company's.“ She wrote.

„And my company mobile.“ She wrote.

„I'll give you the firm's address, to be on the safe side. Not far from Mansion House tube. Really great Italian couple of doors away. Seared tuna and fennel with pancetta. Vaut le détour, as they say.“ She wrote. She stopped writing, skimmed back over the two pages and looked up.

„Think that about does it. Now where can I reach you?“

I gave her my address and phone number. She looked at them then smiled at me. „Right. Nice place, Luxembourg. I'm sometimes over on business. We really must do drinks or dinner. Have a chat about old times. Or maybe ... How long are you in London?“

„We're off tomorrow morning ...“

„Oh well, can't be helped! I'll be in touch when I'm next over! I'm so pleased we bumped into one another.“

She threw her arms round me again and I braced myself as the briefcase struck home. We went outside and hugged each other again.

„Bye for now.“

„Do keep in touch ...“

She smiled again quickly then paused. „You know, I really do miss people who know about Adam de la Halle ...“

And suddenly she was gone, half walking, half running down the street. She turned and waved before her present finally closed in round her.

I followed, more slowly, in her footsteps, glancing up at the smart post-modern office block that had swallowed her up.

Thinking back to being young and sitting up all night writing an essay on *Le Jeu de la Feuillée* then reading it out to my friend Fiona and our grey tutor, on a bright March morning, at the dawn of time.