

Take your chances

Boston Facial Reconstruction Clinic

'Yes please.'

'Are you sure? This procedure is irreversible. And I must remind you, it is not without risk, especially at your age. The healing process will be slow, and the final outcome cannot be guaranteed. So, Professor Taylor, for the last time, are you sure you want to go ahead?'

'Yes please. I have signed all your forms and paid up-front. The risk is entirely mine. I understand, so please proceed as we discussed.'

'Right then, see you in theatre in fifteen minutes. Over to you, Donald.'

There were two injections, one to calm me and the other to anaesthetise my nose and the various nerves which connect it to the rest of the body.

I was recently retired and would be fifty-one in a few months' time. I had sold my patents to *Astra Zeneca*. From a teenager, I had been shunned by strangers because of my looks, my grossly oversized nose. I was determined to make sure that the rest of my life would be different, free of the stigma of oddity.

To be totally honest, if it had not been for my sister-in-law Abilene, I would probably not be lying here but, as she had insisted repeatedly, it was time to start taking my chances and move forward, to have confidence in myself.

Three hours later

In the immediate post-operative mini-conference, Mr Ahmed Purwani, checked the MRI images.

The radiologist, Sarah Weston, said:

'Well done, Ahmed. Looks like a perfect match with the photoshop images we agreed with Professor Taylor two weeks ago. Of course, we will check again in five days when the post-op swelling abates but I think we should be finished here. What do you say?'

"Yes, it all looks pretty good to me. We must wait and see. I just hope the olfactory recovery is good enough. You know he is a Master of Wine?'

'Yes. And worth sixty million and counting. But why did he bother? His nose wasn't that bad, not compared to some we've sorted.'

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'Yes, I did try to put him off but, as you know, business is business. Right then, I'll have a pre-op chat with that horrible wannabe politician. Now *there's* someone who really does need our help. I hear she is hoping to run for Senator in Texas next term.'

'Texas? I thought it was New Mexico?'

'So long as it's not Boston, eh?'

Three weeks later

'Well, Professor Taylor, let's take off this dressing, shall we?'

The male nurse moved closer and snipped and eased the dressing away to reveal the tiny lines of stitch marks and their slight redness.

Mr Ahmed Purwani handed a vanity mirror to me while the medical photographer took a series of record photographs. She sent them to her iPad, dropped them into a before and after *PowerPoint* which she then displayed on the large plasma screen.

He gave me time to study the images then said:

'Well, Professor Taylor, you are healing very well indeed. What's your opinion?'

'Yes, thanks. Very satisfactory, very acceptable.'

'Give it another month and those stitch marks will fade. Our MRI scans show you are well on the way to recovery.'

'What about my sense of smell and taste? They are very dulled. Look, I know you warned me of this, but will ever I recover them?'

'Let's be entirely positive on this. The olfactory system is amazingly complicated, involving a myriad of nerve endings embedded in the membranes which secrete the mucous which makes the whole system work. In my experience, it can take months, even a year or more to achieve full recovery from the trauma of invasive surgery. As you will surely recall in our pre-op chats, this was one of the main risk areas.'

'What about stem cell implants. I read somewhere that there is a procedure which speeds recovery in such cases?'

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'Ah, yes. Professor Buaernmaker in Geneva. I saw his presentation at a conference in London last fall. As I recall that treatment is still experimental. I advise you be patient and let the natural healing process take its course.'

'Yes, that was the name, Buaernmaker.'

'So, Professor Taylor, are you still planning your grand tour of Europe?'

'Yes, thanks. My sister-in-law is making all the arrangements. She has lined up everything, but we need your sign off to fly before she puts her plan in place.'

'Well, you have it. Get in touch when you return and we will run a final check. Enjoy!'

Geneva, six months later

His mobile phone rang from the table on the far side of his room, left there deliberately, a trick he had learned many years ago when he had been a regular long-distance traveler.

The room was dim, the curtain fully drawn. He threw off the duvet, sat up and watched the device flashing then lurched across to snatch it up, sliding the bar to 'snooze'. His head was thumping from jet lag.

Steadying himself, he teetered into the *en suite* and sat down on the WC. After a long wait and a few dribbles he gave up and walked across to the shower area and set the temperature to hot and then lathered up before plunging into the overhead drencher.

A few minutes later he was feeling better and pressed the plunger to change the flow to the handset and sprayed under his arms before leaning forward to irrigate his anus, feeling the haemorrhoids tingle, watching the runoff for signs of blood. There was none. He then directed the spray to his testicles and penis, hoping the heat would release the pressure in his bladder. No luck. Still rock solid, two days and counting. He shuddered at the thought which had been haunting him for the last year.

Towelled damp dry, he looked at himself in the mirror, checked his nose. The new face was almost handsome and looked completely natural, as planned. He sniffed. Only a slight hint of citrusy vanilla from his shaving foam. His taste was slightly improved but still dulled.

His gut ached and another of the familiar anal stabs hit him. Staring at his eyes in the mirror he whispered:

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'No, Eric, not yet. Keep focussed. Get back your sense of smell and taste first. One step at a time, old son.'

His eyes gazed back, unconvinced.

The phone alarm resumed its urgent chimes. Lethargic, he ignored it at first then shuffled across to turn it off.

Dressed in tan slacks and a pale green short-sleeved shirt, he made his way to the open-air breakfast area on the roof overlooking Lake Geneva. The sun was up and there were a few other Elite guests already eating. His newspapers from London were waiting for him, couriered by air. The young waitress appeared with his tray of food preordered from his phone app the previous evening.

Picking at his croissant and sipping weak green tea, he flipped through his phone for messages and emails until he saw what he was waiting for.

*Professor Taylor,
your appointment with Professor Buaernmaker is confirmed for 8:30 am local time tomorrow. Please refrain from alcohol or non-prescribed medications for the next 24 hours.
Agnetta Crenatti.*

He scrolled and read the second message he was expecting, this one from Abilene.

Eric, thinking of you. Hope it all goes well tomorrow. I'm catching an overnight from Boston to join you but not for a few days yet. I'm up from NY looking after Jaden and Paula while their Mum and Dad are away for an anniversary weekend. See you soon. Chin up. I'm sure this new treatment will work. I have a real good feeling about it.

His phone vibrated on silent, a WhatsApp.

Professor Taylor, I am available to you all day. My Mercedes is parked at the front door. I have a suggested itinerary for our sightseeing tour but I am entirely flexible. Annmarie Stalker.

As he entered the lift, the sudden urgency took hold, without warning, as it always did. Fortunately, he made it to his room and onto the WC just in time.

After he had cleaned the bowl thoroughly to remove all traces, he stripped, rinsed out his underpants, wrapped them in a sanitary bag and disposed of them in the bin provided, to cover his trail. He then re-showered, Dried, he sprayed himself and the bathroom with aftershave lotion.

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Changed into a lightweight grey suit with a pale mauve open-neck shirt he exited the main door and approached the silver car. The woman was mid-forty-ish he judged, as she moved forward and offered her hand.

Eric saw great legs, posh trainers, a smart, semi-formal straight skirt, dark blue, just above the knee, complemented by a cream blouse and a red cravat. Her hair was short, curly, a dark natural blond. Her bright clever eyes were dark brown almost black, reminding him of his sister Helena, sadly now dead these last seven years from stomach cancer, the same disease which had taken his brother Jonno (Jonathan), Abilene's husband, three years ago.

Despite Abilene's nagging, Eric had resisted genetic screening, so far.

'Professor Taylor. Annmarie Stalker. Welcome to Geneva. It is a beautiful day, is it not?'

Her English was perfect, just a slight trace of sing-song German, reminding him of Stefan Gries, his collaborator from the University of Zurich.

"Perhaps she might know him?"

This was a thought he dismissed as fanciful.

'Yes, it is. I've been here before for conferences and business meetings but I've never had time to see the sights. What do you suggest we do?'

'Perhaps a sail on the lake? There are plenty of tourist cruise boats but I have a friend who does tours in his motor launch. That way we see all the best bits without suffering the 'over-the-top' rhetoric and the frequent stops for tatty souvenirs. I did a similar tour last week for an American couple from New Hampshire and they loved it. It takes three hours. Marco and I provide the commentary. We can eat whenever you wish, either on board or I could book us at one of my favourite restaurants, small places but with excellent food and good wine cellars. For the afternoon and evening I have other ideas we can discuss as we go along.'

'Sounds ideal. Just one thing. I'm under orders to stay off alcohol, I have medical tests tomorrow.'

'Ah, yes, you're meeting with Professor Buernmaker. Your wife sent me your known itinerary. I am booked to take you to the clinic tomorrow. In fact, I am booked to drive you for the entire length of your stay in the region, wherever you wish to go. I understand you have a passion for wine. As you may know, we have many wonderful vineyards in Switzerland.'

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'Abilene is not my wife. She is my sister-in-law. I've never been married.'

'Of course. Sorry. Shall we go?'

Late afternoon

The day had gone well. Marco, an older man with good English and a wry sense of humour had kept Eric distracted. Marianne went ashore to a bakery returning with a small selection of filled panini and iced buns and they ate lunch on board. They all drank still water in deference to Eric's alcohol ban. On their return to the hotel, she asked if he would like her to book someplace for dinner but Eric declined, saying he would snack in his room and head to bed early to try to counter his jet lag.

It was agreed Marianne would call for him at 7:30 am. The drive to the clinic was around thirty minutes. By 6:30 pm, Eric was in bed with his phone alarm set.

At midnight he was wide awake and barely made it to the WC where he suffered another explosive evacuation. This time there was blood in the mix which he hoped was from his haemorrhoids. After tidying up and showering he sipped lukewarm Red Bush tea while his innards settled.

The following morning

At 7:30 am he was back in the Mercedes.

'Professor, are you alright, you look very pale?'

'Jet lag and a grumbly tummy. Long flights always set me back.'

'I have some coffee in a Thermos if you think that would help?'

'Still water, Marianne, if you have it, please. Not coffee. Ah, good, thanks. No need for a beaker, by the neck will do just fine. And please call me Eric.'

'"By the neck"? When you say that, you sound almost English.'

'That's because I *am* English, by birth, or should I say, I *was* English. I'm a US citizen now. I moved to the States as a newly fledged PhD from Cambridge University, the one in England. I did a post-doc stint at John Hopkins Medical School. Then on to Boston University to work on the next generation of anti-viral drugs to fight hospital acquired

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superbugs. My father was from Boston, Irish roots, before he moved to London. My mother was Scottish with Dutch roots. A mongrel pedigree if ever there was one, eh? What about you? From Zurich, are you?'

'Nearly, quite close. I'm from Meierskappel, Canton Lucerne which is forty kilometres away, half an hour by fast train. I'm from a large farming family. One sister and six brothers, all scattered like me. We have Italians, French and Germans in our heritage. My brother Heinrich is the one who keeps track of our family tree. It's possible you might meet him. He works at the Clinic. He's a surgeon.'

'Abilene is working on our roots. Or rather, *her* roots. Her family name is Horstmann, from Munich, she says. But there's Spanish in her family somewhere too. The Taylors are only a small branch, like a twig, sort of thing.'

'Eric, what does "sort of thing" mean? You used it a lot yesterday and I been wondering about it.'

'Well, I'm not sure. My mother used it and I suppose I picked it up from her. I guess logically it doesn't mean anything specific. So, I suppose saying "sort of thing" is a fill-in phrase, used to give the brain time to choose the next words to say. Do you have any phrases like that in Swiss German?'

'No, I don't think so. So, Eric, what do you know about Swiss German?'

'Just a very little, like:

"Grüezi" for 'Hello' and

"Wie goots Ihne?" for 'How are you?' and

"Wohar bisch Du?" for 'Where are you from?' and, of course,

"Pröschtli!" for 'Cheers!'

'Very impressive, Eric. Your pronunciation is very good too. How did you learn these phrases?'

'For ten years or so, I spent hours on *Skype* almost every day collaborating with a guy called Stefan Gries. You don't happen to know him, do you? He's from Zurich University.'

'Only a very little. Anita Berger, one of my second cousins, is married to him. Stefan is very famous in Switzerland, as you probably know.'

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'Yes, when I get this nose of mine sorted, I plan to go to stay with him for a few days. We always said we would get together but we never got around to it, sort of thing. Both too busy to meet in person.'

'Well, Eric, here we are. Do you know how long you might be here?'

'His PA said few hours maximum, when I talked on the phone last week to give her my go ahead to have my medical details copied across from the clinic in Boston together with samples of my biopsy materials. This morning they are planning a full body MRI scan, I think. Boston only did a head and shoulders look see.'

'Right, I'll go back to base and catch up on paperwork and aim to be back here by noon, if that's okay? If you are finished sooner, ring my mobile and I'll come for you.'

'Sure, noon it is then.'

Geneva Holistic Wellness Centre

The windowless examination room was dim, the trolley table covered with a soft, yellow cotton sheet. Eric Taylor, naked, was covered by a matching upper yellow sheet. Air conditioning and other equipment purred softly in the background.

The radiology technician wore a yellow uniform. He was a small, smiling dark-skinned man wearing a purple skull cap and Harry Potter spectacles. He eased his patient forward and the end of the trolley tray engaged with the roller mechanism and the patient moved from the trolley onto the MRI scanner plat, still outside the machine. Melodic piano music began to play.

The nurse attendant in a pale blue uniform said:

'Professor Taylor, your whole-body scan will take twenty-two minutes. Please put on these special glasses. I hope you enjoy my Chopin selection. See you on the other side.'

Unlike the machine in Boston, this one was almost silent, just a slight throbbing pulse.

Ninety minutes later

Dressed in a hospital robe, still naked and feeling exposed and vulnerable, Eric Taylor was seated in a side room with two other patients. He was sipping from a insulated beaker of mint tea infusion which seemed tasteless,

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A tall, stern, auburn-haired woman entered carrying a clipboard and crossed to tower above him:

'Professor Taylor, I am Frau Agnetta Crenatti. Professor Buanemaker will see you now, please.'

They took a lift to the top floor and Eric was introduced to Gustav Buanemaker. When they were alone, Gustav checked his notes and viewed his desktop screen before speaking in American accented English.

'Professor Taylor, from what we have seen of your innards on these scans today, you must be aware that you have serious stomach and bowel problems. Why have you not sought treatment?'

'Yes, I suppose I must have. Why did I ignore it? Fear, I suppose. Anger too, just when I thought I might be able to retire to enjoy a pleasant future, it seems my genes have other ideas. Yes, I was hiding from the inevitable, deflecting myself, concentrating on my nose. Stupid really. What do you suggest?'

'May we cut the crap and use first name terms here?'

Eric nodded.

'Right, Eric. Time is of the essence, and you've gotten lucky because my colleague Heinrich Stalker has a cancellation in his schedule tomorrow. Don't ask why, right? So, I've spoken to him and he is willing to take you on. You have an awkward spiral shaped boa constrictor type tumour throttling your colon. We need a biopsy right away. The hope is that it might be benign. There are no signs of other tumours, so far. You may be about to get lucky for a second time.'

'Why do you say, "for a second time"?''

'Your nose job. I can also see from this morning's scans that your mucous membranes and sinuses require flushed and sterilised. Looks to me you've picked up a virus somewhere along the line. Ironic, or what, given your specialism? We'll do swabs this afternoon and suss out what treatment you need. But, as you realise your nose issue is very secondary to sorting out your innards, right?'

'Yes, Gustavo. I understand. I suppose this is what I feared all along, sort of thing.'

'Call me Gusti. Now, Eric, your wife Abilene, she is still in Boston?'

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'Not my wife. She's my brother's widow. He died of stomach cancer, like my sister. Cancer, it's in our genes, it seems. I suppose the only alternative to this surgery is chemo?'

'Listen, Eric. We, I speak for the whole team here, we think that there's a real good chance that your tumour is not malignant. You have to take your chance right away and allow Heinrich to work his particular magic and then, when you are recovered, we will sort out your nasal problem. I see from your notes you are a wine collector. When this is all over you must visit his brother Han's vineyard, near Zurich. He brews up excellent wines, both red and white. Not that I would know, really. I'm more of a beer man.'

'It seems there are Stalkers everywhere in my life now. Heinrich's sister Annmarie is my driver. Abilene made the arrangements. She's such a lovely girl, so sweet and ...'

A gentle knock on the door and then Frau Crenatti entered. Buaernmaker was on his feet.

Had he pressed a hidden button like I used to do to keep to my schedule, Eric wondered.

'Agnetta, please take Professor Taylor off to your office and complete the paperwork. I'll type up an action plan and circulate it but no food or fluids, only water, he's scheduled for surgery with Heinrich first thing tomorrow.'

The men shook hands across the table and Eric was led away.

Six weeks later

Eric and Abilene Taylor were in Gustavo's office at the Geneva clinic alongside Mr Heinrich Stalker and his sister Annmarie Stalker.

Gustavo turned to Heinrich:

'Well, Hank, go for it. Take the stage Maestro, this is your big moment.'

Heinrich, cleared his throat and began speaking in the same sing-song English used by Annmarie:

'Well, Eric, the news is good. The tumour was indeed benign and yesterday's scans shows no signs of recurrence. We'll schedule you back for further scans at three-month intervals for the first year. Your haemorrhoids have been removed and the scarring has healed. Gusti here tells me your sense of smell is fully back to normal. So, you're good to go but at the first sign of a problem, you must ring us and share your concerns.'

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'Thank you, Heinrich. And Gusti. And thank you Annmarie for visiting me during my recovery, keeping me sane and positively focused.'

'Yes, a dream team result, definitely,' said Gustavo Buanemaker. 'Now, to celebrate, and since it is well north of my six o'clock start time, how about a glass of wine from Hans's vineyard?'

Seven months later

It was the American couple's third visit to *Restaurante Grand Italia* at Meloneras, Gran Canaria. Abilene was on a hunt for her Spanish ancestors who had moved first from Gran Canaria to Venezuela and later to New York, according to the 1904 records from Ellis Island. With their roles reversed, Eric Taylor was now in charge, organising their schedule, making bookings, arranging drivers, helping with Abilene's family tree diagrams.

Rejuvenated, with two all-clear scans from Geneva in the bag, Professor Eric Taylor was back to his former cheerful, irritatingly playful self. He was due back in Zurich in a few days to continue the process of applying for Swiss citizenship, partly because of the tax advantages but mainly because of his blossoming romance with Annmarie Stalker. Eric was also involved in early talks with her brother Hans Stalker considering the details of a joint business start-up (working title - 'Swiss Wine Tours for Aficionados') a venture designed to appeal to well-heeled people like himself.

It was seven o'clock and the popular fifty-seater al fresco restaurant was almost full. Many who did not have reservations were waiting in a long queue, hoping for a table.

Marco, the tall forty-eight-year-old gym-fit greeter and seater led the Americans to their pre-booked table. Although this was a crowded tourist restaurant, Eric's *EuroWines Guide* had led him here because the behind-the-scenes owner, a grandee who also owned many of the local hotels, was using this particular restaurant to offer a selection of his best wines as he sought to rebalance his personal cellar. As a result, even the house red and white wine served in open carafes were very acceptable and fairly price.

As soon as Tomas noticed the Americans had closed their wine list and menus he headed for their table. In his current role, Tomas had been detailed to take all the orders for wine and food but he was no ordinary employee. This suave thirty-two-year-old had travelled widely then settled to train as a cordon bleu chef at the *Ritz* in London before moving to *Hugos* in Berlin. He had recently returned to Gran Canaria and was being groomed to take over the running of the entire family chain of businesses from his father

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(the grandee), who was planning to relocate to his family home in Aranda de Duero, the capital of the of the *Ribero del Duero* wine region.

To progress to this next rung on the ladder, Tomas was keen to establish himself under Marco who was the sitting franchisee appointed by Tomas's father.

His phone app and stylus at the ready, Tomas opened the dialogue, smiling broadly:

'Professore Eric, Dottoressa Abilene, what wine have you chosen tonight?'

Eric pointed.

Tomas smiled - the 2017 *Gaja Barbaresco* at 230 euros. Thankfully he still had two bottles in the locked section of the cellar.

'At once, sir, and one bottle of still, as before?'

Eric nodded.

'And for your starters?'

Eric pointed.

'Mussels, an excellent choice. They are fresh today, flown in. Yesterday they were in the sea in Scotland. I had some myself earlier. And to follow?'

Abilene replied:

'We would like to try that traditional dish you recommended last time we were here, if it's still on.'

'Let me check with our kitchen, please.'

'Turning aside, he pressed the button on his mic and spoke in rapid, authoritative local dialect, waited, then turned back to the Americans.

'Yes, but there may be a delay of up to twenty minutes between courses.'

Eric nodded and Abilene gushed:

'Sure, Tomas, no probs this end. But it better live up to your billing, or else.'

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'Madam, I am supremely confident that you will find our traditional speciality dish truly amazing.'

A few minutes later, the tall, slim, dark-haired teenage waitress arrived with the wine bottle, in her train a second waitress carried a huge, bulbous carafe already fitted with a white filter, the assembly to be used to decant the wine. This girl also carried a bottle of still water, an usual label, green swirling writing, a brand not shown on the drinks list.

With a flourish, the first waitress presented the bottle of wine for Eric's inspection. He nodded.

The chubby man at the next table watched, wondering what this wine had cost, remembering that in the wine list there had been red wines on offer up to 530 euros.

Continuing the drama of the occasion, her first time being entrusted to open a bottle of this reputation and high price, the girl removed the foil, then the cork which she sniffed then passed to Eric, who sniffed, smiled and passed it to Abilene who sniffed and gushed:

'Perfetto!'

The waitress poured a small amount into Eric's glass. He rolled the wine around the glass, sniffed, rolled it again, sniffed then sipped, closed his eyes, smiled shyly then whispered:

'Yes, excellent! Thank you, Rosa, and please, no decanter tonight. The table is too small and, in any case, the wine is just right.'

Crestfallen, Rosa thought of protesting but saw that Tomas was frowning and shaking his head.

'As you wish, sir, shall I pour?'

'No thanks, I enjoy pouring for us. Just pour our water, thanks.'

Abilene reached to touch Rosa's arm:

What perfume are you wearing, please. It's very nice.'

'I not sure. My older sister she work in a perfume shop, she lot sprays she let me use. I ask her tonight.'

Eric spoke, with gentle authority:

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'It's Calvin Kline *Eternity*, the *Intense* version.'

'Yes, sir, I remember now.'

Both girls floated away.

Abilene said, 'So, not just wines, but now perfumes too, Eric?'

'*Eternity*, in the original *Classic* version is Annmarie's favourite perfume. The *Intense* is too powerful, I think, aimed at a younger audience.'

Under the next along table the chubby man's wife kicked his shin, hissing:

'John, for goodness' sake stop staring at that couple. It's embarrassing.'

Seeing the smiling waitress returning, the chubby man said:

'Ah, here comes our lasagne. Thank you, Rosa. Ah, smells delicious. And my God, look at that mound of chunky chips, that's enough for five people. This is a great place, is it not, my dear one? And the prices are very reasonable too. No wonder it's always full, eh?'

'John, keep your voice down, please. And yes, it's tasty and lots of meat but too much béchamel sauce for my liking.'

'My dearest wife, no one makes lasagne like you. No one in the whole wide world. But I feel compelled to say this runs yours a good second.'

Tucking in, John refocused his ears on the Professor and Dr Abilene.

'**Of course** she did, Eric! Of course she did! Surely you didn't expect Annmarie to say 'no' to your offer of marriage, did you?'

'Well, she was very open about everything. She was married before, she told me. He died in a climbing accident. They worked together as a team, Alpine Guides. Bruno fell right passed her, screaming, into a rocky crevasse, a thousand metres. It took over a week to recover what remained of his shattered body, after the scavengers. As a result of the trauma, she lost their baby at sixteen weeks. As you can imagine, she was heartbroken. It was Han's and his wife who saved her, brought her back. She warned me she is still fragile, still has black spells. But she keeps going, like we must, eh?'

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'Yes, as we must,' said Abilene.

Then, after a short silence, she added:

'Well, I'm so happy for you both. As I always say, Eric, *we must* all take our chances when they come along. And she is such a lovely person. And so are Hans and Pia. I'm sure you and Annmarie will make a good team with them in your wine tours venture.'

Lifting her glass, she clinked hers very gently with Eric's, saying:

'Here's to a long and happy marriage. You both deserve it. And hey, I'll have a nice place to bring my grandkids for skiing, eh?'

'And we'll have a stunning apartment over Central Park to house swap with you. Annmarie is keen to see the Big Apple and Boston and the Fall Colours in New England. She said that would be her dream honeymoon but we've agreed to hold off on making our wedding plans until I get the final all clear from Geneva.'

'No, Eric! No, you should go ahead right away, grab your chance for happiness while you both can.'

'Yes, Abilene, you're right. I'll try her on Skype later. If she agrees, we can get things moving for a wedding on her birthday. And guess what? It's on First August, Swiss National Day.'

'Look, Eric, here come our Scottish Mussels!'