

# THE ACADEMIC WIFE

With hindsight the third request for Box M229 had been a mistake, and now Maudie Grey would finally have to be killed.

This was not a troubling thought; the trail could be allowed to run cold. A last scattering of random searches, the ordering of a couple of books, would throw down a fog and give time for the last traces to be erased.

For long enough Maudie Grey has been among the faithfuls waiting for the reading room to open at 9.30am, every day except Sunday. Coming in with the opening of the front doors, she and other habitués deposit coats and bags in favoured lockers, extracting pencils and notebooks, library cards and spectacles. Maudie eschews the clear carrier bag ('please re-use') with no hiding places, to be checked in and out, library staff on the lookout for theft or torn-out pages for souvenirs and covert sales.

Occupying solitary tables they wait in the café like satellites programmed to avoid, eyes on any point but each other. Maudie Grey carefully lines up notepad, pencil and sharpener. Her notepad is empty. There is the stir of the rope barrier being lifted, and young researchers slipstream around the old as they swipe at phones, greet, and share signals to meet for coffee before retreating behind headphones in their favourite zones. Once inside the reading room, everyone shrinks into their self-contained space.

There is a pattern. Maudie passes over the reserve slips from the night before and collects her saved books, depositing them at the small table in the alcove she has laid claim to by habit, before pushing out of the swing doors and heading for the computer terminals. Choosing from the catalogue is a slow process. The Indian Empire is vast enough to be lost in and broad enough for tangents. The pattern is no pattern. She displays interest in the subject but there is no predictable cypher for her choices. She seeks out books on open shelves, and from the stacks on and off-site, also pamphlets, bills of fare, old newspapers, adverts, PhD theses and academic articles, catalogues, registers of business interests. She

flits between language, history, politics, art, anthropology, religion, literature, travel and commerce. She orders for quick delivery or from the far underground reaches, with occasional complex requests from a series. Sometimes she places an order from Special Collections and travels one floor up in the lift to receive a rare item in the inner sanctum. It is enough activity to make her known but it is routine. She rarely makes a mistake.

She returns to her saved books from yesterday and checks her previous day's work quickly before returning them to the desk. She does not want these on deposit for later. The first of her new orders are through and she gets down to work. Maudie Grey's notepad remains empty. She passes out through the turnstile at lunchtime, her notepad ruffled perfunctorily at the security turnstile and pays a comfort visit before ordering soup, no bread, with tap water, in the library cafe. She keeps her notepad and pencil to hand. She watches, but with a middle-distance gaze which does not invite sharing of her table. Her iron grey hair is cut into a square bob and held in a clasp to one side, she wears a loose cardigan and heavy corduroy trousers which flap some distance above her plain leather shoes. Her hands are clenched in her lap, both from habit but also against Reynaud's disease which forces her to wear gloves in most weathers. She is silent and still, and gives off the air of always waiting; just another wife of a retired academic who never had her own career but carried out research, usually unpublished.

On this day the afternoon is to be passed in Special Collections, always slightly chilly and today more so than usual. A document printed in Calcutta (she refuses to call it Kolkata) contains an engraving of the trip up the Hooghly River by a Governor General of India. She deliberately seeks out orders of slim pamphlets and single rare books which wait discreetly on the shelves behind the issue desk, and over which she can hunch under the eye of staff who prowl checking for illegal pens, unsupported book spines, and other transgressions.

This time there is no lone pamphlet against her library card. Instead she is handed Box M229. It is filled with letters, maps, and other complicated items as well as the pamphlet – it is a bundle of archive which will demand careful management. She settles on a table close to the window and far from the front desk, propping up the clamshell lid against the foam

book supports. Snowflakes swirl outside as Old College dome drifts in and out of focus, and roofs whiten as they begin to settle.

She sifts through bundles of letters, finding loose watercolours and engravings before the pamphlet emerges. Her requests have not yielded paintings before, and she becomes distracted by the images which stray across the written record; a private secretary's amateur sketchings of a journey through West Bengal, the boats and ghats, fishing and temples. She traces over them with her pencil, taking care, exciting no attention from staff and fellow researchers absorbed by the snow globe playing out over the rooftops and Arthur's Seat.

Maudie Grey becomes invisible among the obsessed who return like a dog with a bone to their boxes of rare documents. The staff barely glance at her now. Three times she orders Box M229, frustrated when it is delayed, finally keeping it on reserve so it is there to greet her at the opening of the barrier in the morning. She is lost in its contents, finding stories in the letters and tableaux in the paintings.

Under umbrellas against the sleeting rain, the habitués stand distantly from each other outside the closed doors of the National Library. It is almost 9.40am. The young researchers arrive and set up a stir; why is it closed, when will it open? They google 'national library opening times', they knock. A member of staff opens the door a fraction, a policewoman glimpsed behind her shoulder. She is agitated. The library is closed due to an incident, and will remain so until further notice.

It will take time for the death to become a murder, but Maudie Grey walks past two bus stops, and in the bustle of the Bridges drops her pencil, sharpener and notepad into a bin. The notepad is still empty but the pencil is blunt, dipped and redipped in a clay laced with scrapings of the brown spots from the stems of hemlock gathered on waste ground by railways and abandoned buildings, pressed in the sharpener as an inkwell. Lightly traced and invisible on countless letters, numbers, commas and full stops; on documents, engravings, in book prefaces and pages, marginalia, footnotes and lately watercolours, the ancient poison finds victims who are random but targeted; a Socratic roulette.

For this single death there will have been others who took their palpitations to their GP, complaining of heavy limbs and being out of breath; a virus perhaps. There may be more yet. Whoever touches the residue is an affront to her and deserves their fate; the ranks of retired professors, the aspiring young with their careers before them, the new breed of women bull-dozing their way up through archaic university ranks. However she does not target all the habituals. India is not a likely field for her kind; the academic wives, who have steered – or been steered by husbands - towards the romance of Jacobites or medieval pageantry, or towards belated degrees in History of Art as a quasi-Mothers Union, cod-academia path which they can supposedly share, unequally, in their quiet houses scattered around the Meadows. Staff do not read the books; she has protected them. No trace was ever left on her empty notebook, riffled through daily at the turnstile. She took no risks herself. She wore gloves, and touched no bread at lunch.

But Maudie Grey made the mistake of becoming interested. Briefly, she stepped aside from dilettantism and stalled her flitting across the catalogue to linger over Box M229, and now she will be remembered. She returned often enough to become invisible but known, a familiar outline among the book supports and bundles of archive.

On Sunday the library is closed. At a church on the south side the congregation meets as usual, a small knot of regulars. She is cashmered and elegantly dressed, her hair is expensively brunette, and she protects her hands with fine gloves. The transformation has been much admired but discreetly; they knew it was the price paid by her ex-husband for diverting to one of the new breed of bullish academic women. A stalwart of the congregation, she lingers for coffee after the service and relieves the burden on the minister by visiting the dying. She seems taller than Maudie Grey, who gained an unexpected second life with the loss of no more than a library card. Her second death is negligible. The grey wig and clothes burn easily, and the body suit with sagging breasts and buttocks is cut up, bagged and left out for with the fortnightly bin collection.

Maudie Grey does return to the library as soon as it re-opens, but only to tease and confuse, ordering a scatter of books which are never collected. Meanwhile despite herself, she is

drawn to the library, picking up on fragmented searches and book requests which she has allowed to run throughout her campaign. She frequents the café where she pretends to revise notes while tilting an ear to conversations, or exchanging shocked comments with strangers at tables.

Thus she learns of the death of a 72 year old woman, who became unwell at her usual place in Special Collections, and died later in hospital. The top floor remains closed, and is now a crime scene, as investigators probe the source of what appears to be a poisoning. Efforts are focussed on the contents of the box still spread around her table, notes on the art of the East India Company neatly filling her pad. Soon after, the back catalogue of books, articles and papers ordered by Maudie Grey will be bagged up for forensics, and then destroyed.

The death of an academic wife leaves few ripples and no obituaries in its wake, meanwhile the grieving husband is identified by his achievements and people nod as they vaguely recall who she was. This devastating perversion of the planned target both destroys and steels her as she walks away from the library down George IV Bridge, her perfect crime compromised by the convergence of herself and her victim around the same temptations. She knows this unknown woman, she had been her, just as she had known Maudie Grey and many others in the shadows of their oblivious men.

Revenge is not yet served and more deaths are required. Hers, nominally, will be the first.

-----