

The Catastrophe

Ian Wedde

Chapter 1

The taxi, clean and white with a bright blue light on top, did a careful U-turn and stopped on the far side of the rain-slick street. A passenger stepped out into spilled light behind the taxi on the footpath side. The woman was wearing a black, trousered suit. She opened a small red umbrella and stood there as if thinking what to do next. Then she strode forward. It seemed strange that the taxi had parked on the other side of the street from the woman's destination. Her determined strides made the direction of her intentions clear, but she seemed to be avoiding eye contact with the first-floor window of the restaurant where he sat with his glass of wine and, pushed to one side of his plate, the remains of a Provençal braised rabbit and some bits of unsatisfactory salt pork. Sure enough, under the partial cover of the umbrella, her head flicked quickly up at his window.

But not 'his' window, after all, since she didn't know he was sitting next to it – since, in fact, she didn't know him. Nor did he know her. But she'd deliberately made the taxi stop over there, after it had first parked in front of the restaurant. Her hesitation was also, somehow, determined. The woman seemed to be thinking her way through the approach she would make. Or perhaps she was thinking ahead about the direction in which she would prefer to leave, since the white taxi waited while she paused again on the footpath below the restaurant, closing the red umbrella.

She was in her 50s, he guessed – a tall, gangling woman whose bony frame he extrapolated from her striding gait and the long, oddly pale fingers with which she gripped the strap of a shoulder bag. Black and shiny, the bag was slung against her hip. Its purpose wasn't clear – it could have been business-like or an expensive accessory. The details of her appearance, even her movements, weren't easy to see clearly through the rain-streaked window. Obvious features, like her hands, were exaggerated. They seemed pale and prominent – maybe she was wearing

gloves of some kind? The rest was vague. Yet the direction of her intentions seemed clear.

She wasn't all that interesting. But what else was there to look at? He was bored. He'd been bored ever since Miss Pepper. His 'food is love' mantra going iffy around him, like left-overs forgotten in the back of a fridge.

He arranged the bits of fatty pork in a triangle shape.

Bored *and* alone. The only solo diner in the wretched place. Though hardly lively, it was at least half full of neighbourhood regulars taking the easy *plat du jour* option on a miserable night – with the possible exception of a dodgy older-man-young-woman unit in a discreet booth. He'd even begun to look forward to the lanky woman entering the restaurant when she'd first stepped off the far curb and crossed the road the way she did, so determined. The taxi remained where it was. Perhaps she was making a delivery? She had silvery hair that swung a hand's-width below her ears. He saw it when she jerked her umbrella aside to help her balance on the slick street. She took another quick look up at the restaurant windows. She was wearing elegant, wedge-heeled boots. Her straight hair was grey, though it could have been very blonde, given the darkness outside and the irregular shafts and patches of light that entered the street from the bars, their street-front windows and entranceways, coloured neons, the yellowish street-lamps. Then she paused, furling her umbrella, and disappeared under the restaurant awning below his window. He waited hopefully for her to appear over by the maître d's desk.

Meanwhile he refilled his own glass and dabbed up a little of the rabbit's winey gravy with a piece of bread. The pastimes of the lonely traveller. No, not lonely. Alone. The alone traveller's time-passing observations. While he allowed his critical faculties slowly to assemble detailed thoughts about his meal – beyond the fact that it was rubbish.

Because he'd lowered his face over the plate to get the moist bread to his mouth he missed the woman's arrival. What he saw first as he lifted his face to follow the bread with a sip of wine was the very big man in the booth at the opposite end of the room from the maître d's desk. He'd

stood up with his pale linen jacket hoisted above his broad hips and was pushing the table away from himself against the other side of his booth, pushing it against the young dark woman in a black, sequined top who was also struggling to stand up. The man's huge face seemed to be stretched around the entire front of his bald head by a feral grin of fear.

The gunshot came from the direction of the reception desk. The big man flinched as if stung. The tall woman from the taxi had dropped her luxurious bag on the floor next to the desk and now she began to cross the room with long strides, the revolver held out in front of her in both hands – which he saw did have pale gloves on them. When she fired again it was the young woman who flew sideways and crashed out of sight behind the table, dragging the tablecloth and everything that was on it with her. Then, at the third shot, the big man seemed to jump in the air before sitting down almost comfortably on the banquette behind him. He was clutching his thick neck. It looked as though he might have spilled the *Tomates aux crevettes* down his chin and chest. That was that.

The lanky woman swung the revolver in an arc and the maître d' put his hands above his head. Other diners had started to scream and shout but the woman, whose hair was indeed grey, said nothing. She left her expensive-looking bag where it was and stepped sideways to the door of the restaurant. She seemed to be making decisions according to a scrupulous, cautious logic. Her pauses were thoughtful, her subsequent movements decisive. Slow, slow, then fast – like a dance step. She moved decisively through the door leaving her strategic hesitation behind her in the arrested poses of the diners, the waiters, the maître d' with his hands above his head and the sleeves of his dark jacket pulled back towards his elbows. A ridiculous amount of black hair sprouted from the cuffs of his white shirt.

The *plat du jour* diners were frozen in their seats, so he was able to get to the exit quickly. He saw the maître d' make an imploring gesture at him, but he couldn't hear what the man was saying over the sound of the yelling in the room. The shape of the man's imploring words was 'No! No!', but could as well have been 'Go! Go!' No one blocked his way out the door, not even he himself, though one of his own voices was

shouting ‘No!’ in his head while the other insisted, ‘Go!’ The ‘No!’ voice was expecting to get shot on the other side of the door, but the ‘Go!’ one was certain the grey-haired woman would have gone down the restaurant stairs at full speed towards the taxi parked across the road. He had the taste of winey sauce, bay, thyme, juniper and rabbit in his mouth, together with the cleansing sip of nice plain Rousillon Coulet Rouge. Like a greedy gulp, he flew heedlessly down the stairs.

Ever since Mary Pepper he’d hoped – believed, even – that the small signs of his ageing were funny if nothing else. The little fart that broke from him in a hotel elevator as he bent to pick up his suitcase; his refusal to ‘act his age’. But lately it had become clear that his preference for young company and his refusal to accept his physical limitations were embarrassing to most people. Not least his ex-wife. His Miss Pepper. His ‘Thé Glacé’ – his TG. He was getting more and more fussy and pedantic, she’d said with affectionate resignation, before things got nastier. That was when her Mary-Pepper-wealthy-Chelsea voice started putting phrases like ‘get real’ in quotation marks. As if she was quoting herself. Which she was. Who’d have thought it? Not long ago, ‘gusto’ was his middle name.

And yet his professional reputation had increased for the very reasons his youthfulness had lost credibility. Now he wasn’t a maverick any more. The professional insincerity of restaurant staff told him this. He was wise in judgment and foolish in self-knowledge. This was why he dined alone these days, like a widower, having lost the companion known in his syndicated columns by the soubriquet Thé Glacé; why he travelled like the bon vivant roué he wasn’t, really.

The street-side door of the white taxi was unlocked and he opened it and fell across the woman in the back seat as the cab accelerated away from the curb. The unlikely word ‘providence’ had flashed on in his mind like the ‘Taxi’ sign on the taxi’s roof. Why was that? Nana Gobbo had often muttered the word during his childhood. Or the Italian – *provvidenza*. Then, he didn’t know what it meant – and it still filled him with dread and excitement.

‘Really stupid,’ said the woman. She hadn’t even screamed. He couldn’t place her accent. It was French but something harsher as well. It made the ‘t’ spitty and turned the ‘u’ into an angry grunt. Her gun pressed into his ribs where huge breaths were stopping his speech. What would he say, when he could? The woman was clearly cursing as she adjusted her clothing efficiently with one gloved hand while the other kept the barrel of the revolver pressed into the side of his chest. The driver wasn’t a cab-driver, that was clear. Sweat was running down the back of his thick, furry neck. He too was cursing in a foreign language that forcefully conveyed rage. The windscreen wipers seemed to be conducting his rant as they swept squalls of rain aside. The white taxi sped out of the narrow street of bar-fronts and neons and entered a broad boulevard lined with palms. The constriction in his chest opened as well – his breath began to flow steadily, like the orderly lanes of traffic.

‘You forgot your bag,’ he panted. A little, rabbity burp came up with the words. He held the shiny thing with both hands against his heaving chest.

‘And the umbrella, I suppose?’ The woman’s laugh was metallic – a clashing sound high in her bony chest. ‘God almighty,’ she said with a guttural rasp of emphasis on ‘mighty’, and dug the gun into his ribs. ‘Are you a madman?’

The driver yelled something in the language that sounded furious whatever he was saying. He smashed one open hand against the dashboard of the car and yelled again.

‘Cross turds with turds, you’ll get shit,’ translated the woman. ‘That’s what he thinks. What do you think?’ She prodded him. ‘Sit up better, please – further over there.’ Her English was confident but odd. She arranged herself firmly in her seat, getting her clothes straight and covering the revolver with a turquoise silk scarf.

What did he think? He was amazed. He was in the car. He was here, now. He’d run out of the restaurant and across the road, he’d jumped into the car. He felt as though he’d left himself behind – as though he’d jumped out of time. He didn’t even know how he’d done it. Now he was in the taxi with this angry driver and the woman who’d just shot two

people in the restaurant he was meant to be reviewing. A tremendous fluttering began to interfere with the breathing he'd only just recovered.

'What,' demanded the woman, 'so now you're going to be sick?'

'I don't know what I think,' he gasped, his pride a little wounded. 'What I was thinking,' he corrected. 'Why I did this.' The fluttering began to go away. 'But I knew I was going to, the moment I saw you cross the road to the restaurant.' This was barely true and only after the fact, and the woman scoffed as if she saw this.

'What do you do? Not a police – a journalist, perhaps? You think this is an opportunity?' She paused, and then laughed her chesty, metallic bark of a laugh again. 'A *scoop*, as you say?' She made a derisive scooping gesture with her free hand.

'I'm a food writer,' he said. 'I write about restaurants and food. I travel around and do this. It can get very boring.'

Now the woman's attention sharpened with obvious scorn. She turned her scoop into an incredulous summary of the car's interior. 'And what do you think this is – *un amusement*?' She spoke the French word crisply but then relayed something to the driver in the other language, what sounded like a joke or an insult; the language also sounded angry when she spoke it. The driver smacked his dashboard again and yelled something.

'He has for you a suggestion about food,' the woman said. Suddenly she looked tired. Her heavy beige eyelids drooped. 'You wouldn't like to hear it.' The gloves she was still wearing were like those synthetic ones some line cooks wore these days, and they transformed her derisive gestures into a kind of mime. The artificial looking, nail-less hand not covered by the scarf was very pale; it accentuated her olive complexion.

She picked up the large shiny bag that he'd rushed down the stairs with. Now, in the intermittent light of street lamps that also gave the woman's face a filmic appearance, he could see that it was one of the ubiquitous fake luxury brand items that North African men sold on the beaches of the Ligurian coast where he'd written memorably about *Cappon Magro*, the Genoese Christmas Eve speciality. She held the fake

Gucci bag out to him with her free hand, the other holding on to the pistol under her scarf on the seat between them.

‘Please to put this bag over your head, Monsieur Gastronomique.’ She pushed the bag against his chest. ‘Over your head. This bag that you ...’ Then she was impatient – she slapped the bag hard against his face. ‘Over your head, now!’

‘You want me to ...?’ But he knew what she wanted. He put his head inside the bag and slumped against the cheap vinyl cladding of the seat. The inside of the bag smelled of ... it smelled of the bales of such bags that black peddlers hauled off and on the trains along that coast of bug-eyed, spiny fish. It was brand new. Maybe it had only ever held the gun. A glossy, coloured, travel magazine-type illustration of the oily *Cappon*’s pyramidal shape came to his mind, with skewers of prawns, anchovies and mushrooms splendidly adorning its crown. He’d written about it with ‘gusto’. A ‘food is love’ moment. The image was briefly vivid inside the bag.

‘He said, you should try eating your own shit.’ The vinyl seat cover on her side squealed as she shifted across to yank the bag further down over his head. Then her bony hand found the cell-phone in his breast pocket. When chilly air blew into the back of the car he guessed she’d chucked it out the window. The secret of *Cappon Magro* was in the quality of the air-dried fish and keeping the artichokes separate from the other cooking vegetables. The woman’s voice was slightly muffled and he could smell his own gamey breath inside the bag.

‘My friend has a limited vocabulary, mostly about shit,’ said the woman. ‘But on the other hand, you. A *food writer*.’ That metallic bark. Then a word in the angry language. The fluttering in his chest had stopped. How strange it was to feel almost peaceful under the circumstances. He sat with his head inside the soothing darkness of the bag, which smelled new and luxurious, not fake. An image of the excessive pile of Genovese fish and vegetables, with its odd adornment of prawns, anchovies and mushrooms on skewers and its moat of greenish *salsa verde*, flicked on and off in the darkness which was also a kind of darkness in his mind. Thé Glacé, skinny wee Mary Pepper, had

always liked these rich, *proletarian* dishes, and others such as the Bedouin *mansaf*, though how she'd fitted them in was a miracle. Their rationale seemed to be to include as many ingredients as possible at the same time, a kind of gluttonous economy – though TG balked at the *mansaf*'s crowning glory of a boiled sheep's head. Nonetheless, despite the head, gusto was what they'd had in common, at the beginning.

Out there in the white taxi, the bony, olive-skinned woman with long hands clad in pale synthetic gloves, and the driver whose thick neck had been running with sweat, continued to argue in the language that was angry even without their apparent rage. They seemed to be providing a furious commentary on the gleaming *Cappon Magro* in his mind which, now, had begun to alternate with the *mansaf* and its glutinous skull.

The impatient shriek of a zip announced the woman's desire to get out of the car. Her door opened and slammed, propelling a gust of cool air into the back seat. A stink of diesel and culvert sludge came into his bag. Where were they? Nowhere salubrious. Then the driver, he guessed by the curses, opened the door on his side and yanked him out by the arm. The building they were in smelled like an oily, exhaust-fumey garage at first. Then they went through another door into somewhere domestic – there was a homely smell of burned or badly cooked food – and he was pushed up some narrow, creaking stairs. He counted two flights. Then he was thrust down into an armchair. He tried to be compliant, even helpful, but when he reached up, panting, to take the bag off his head, someone smacked his hand away. He felt chilly air on his stomach where his shirt was untucked. He could hear the sound of dense, fast-moving traffic in the distance. Then someone closed some shutters and fastened a window and the traffic noise receded. A door closed. Did that mean there was no one in the room, or that someone was waiting silently in it? He needed to pee. He was very thirsty. It was stifling inside the bag.

'So,' said the woman's voice. 'You just sit there? With the bag? It's okay? You are comfortable? You don't want to take it off? So obedient, it's very good.'

'I need water. I want to use a toilet,' he said. It felt as though he was complaining to himself.

‘What, in the bag?’ The woman’s chesty laugh moved closer. She slowly lifted the bag from his head. ‘*Voilà tout!*’ she exclaimed. ‘Now I am a magician.’

He took deep breaths. It was as though he’d woken up – everything was vividly present. Certainly, it was scorched chickpeas and garlic that the room smelled of. And cigarettes. Its bare plastered walls were brightly lit. There were two dirty green armchairs in a cluster with his own, a low glass-topped table in the centre, an ashtray filled with filter-tipped cigarette butts, an empty Coca Cola bottle, two used espresso cups. He was facing a closed window with greenish wooden jalousie shutters outside the glass. A brown water stain ran from the sill to the wooden floor. So this was an old building – not concrete, at any rate. The woman was standing behind him. He didn’t turn his head. He didn’t dare to. He guessed she could see his thighs trembling, but he couldn’t stop them. Maybe he was going to throw up after all.

‘Please,’ she said. ‘May I have your personal document? You have it?’

‘The toilet,’ he said. ‘I need the toilet. The lavatory.’

When the bag came back down over his head he cried out and his body, for the first time admitting that he was afraid, betrayed him by emitting a little jet of pee. Then the woman’s hand in his armpit urged him to stand and hurried him forward. The bad cooking smell was stronger outside the room, and he could hear the harsh, argumentative voices of two men downstairs. Then the woman pushed him into the stink of a dirty toilet and a door slammed behind him. He yanked the bag off his head. There was a squat hole in the tiled floor, a hose with a rusty shower-rose hanging on the wall, a silvered mirror, a small grubby hand-basin, a dirty towel.

His hands were shaking. He peed towards the lavatory hole as best he could, then suddenly bellowed loudly and vomited a geyser of rabbit and wine across the floor. That made him feel braver as well as better – even defiant. He washed his hands and face under the tap and stood there dripping. No way would he touch that towel. He wouldn’t put the bag

back on his own head, and not just because it had been on the filthy floor. Then he opened the door.

The woman was waiting across the landing under a yellowish light, a look of haughty disgust on her face. Her hand was dismissing a man coming rapidly up the stairs – a thick-set older man, not the angry driver, with a full grey moustache and a balding head. The man shrugged indifferently and turned back down the stairs. The woman was holding open the door of the room with the armchairs in it. He walked past her and sat down.

‘So you can see,’ said the woman, leaning against the wall by the window, ‘that we have now a problem. That you have made for us a problem. What is your name?’ She was ignoring the fact that he’d been sick, or else she didn’t care. He didn’t care, either. He felt as though he’d been moved forward by another decision, one he didn’t even know he’d made until he was in the situation it had created. Until he’d become one of the decision’s consequences. He was someone else. He’d jumped out of his past. Or he’d sicked it up.

‘You don’t need to know my name,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry. I was stupid. I was bored. You can just let me go. I won’t tell anyone.’

The woman lifted an eyebrow. Then she suddenly smacked the flat of her hand against the wall behind her, making him jump. ‘But you have seen everything. You think I am stupid also?’

‘I saw what everybody saw.’

‘But then you get in the taxi. And maybe everybody see that.’

‘It was a mistake.’

‘A mistake for you, a problem for me.’ The woman took a long stride and sat on the arm of the chair opposite him. She held out her hand.

‘Your document. You have it perhaps in your jacket.’

Close up, in the hard light of the room, he could see that her face was hatched with fine lines which, however, made her skin look papery thin and delicate. There were dark bags under her big, protuberant eyes, and her cheeks were pocked with large pores or the remnants of some disease. Yet she was as striking close-up as she’d been when he’d first seen her across the road from the restaurant, glimpsed in tricky patches

of light, moving quickly from shadow to shadow. Could that be why he'd run down the stairs and jumped into the taxi – his 'mistake'? Was this his 'problem'?

'You think this is funny?' She snapped her fingers. 'Your document, please. Passport, something like that.' Her mouth smiled but her eyes didn't – the fragile skin at their corners remained uncrinkled. Yes, as usual, his snigger had been inappropriate. 'You are famous perhaps. Mr Free Lunch.' To him her joke was both surprising and offensive, but she enjoyed it. Her eyes crinkled a little at last and she barked her curt, chesty laugh.

What difference did it make? The price of his foolishness could already have been a bullet. He could have had his head pushed into the foul lavatory. They could have thrown him out of the car once his head was in the bag.

'My name is Christopher Hare. Hare I am. A terrific name for a food critic you might think.' She didn't get either joke – she pinched at one of the bags under her eyes as if to relieve some pressure there, and kept her other hand extended. Anyway, they'd always been lame jokes. He didn't need TG to tell him that, though of course she had. He took his wallet out of his jacket pocket and extracted the passport from it. 'I sometimes use a pen-name, do you know what that is? A pen-name? *Nom de plume*?' The woman flapped her extended hand impatiently. 'A false name. So most people don't know who I am. Including me.' He tried another joke: 'Or where.' Still she didn't smile – her eyes, attentive but moody, watched him steadily. 'The people at the restaurant – they don't know who I am.' He handed her the passport. 'Or they don't care.' She opened the passport and glanced up at him from its photograph; she made a droll 'Tut' sound at the comparison. 'If their terrible hare's anything to go by.' *Shut up*, he told himself. Then he took a deep breath. That fluttering again. 'So why did you do it?'

Why did you do it? He pressed one hand against his panting chest – of course he was asking himself the question as well. He half expected her to answer it for him.

She was turning the pages of his passport with decisive flicks of her fingers, tilting it on its side to look at visas. She lifted her head and stared at him. Again, she seemed tired, or even bored.

‘That man, he had also a false name. He had many false names. He was false, as you say. But we found him.’ The smile that wasn’t a smile. ‘As you saw for yourself.’ She handed the passport back to him. ‘And why? Because it was necessary. But also to show that hiding is not possible.’

She stood up and he tried to do so also, but she stopped him with an abrupt gesture, one arm thrust out, her palm held up, big fingers splayed.

‘You are maybe quite famous, Mr Hare, or whatever you prefer. Your false name as you say. A famous food writer. You have a wife? A good cook? Maybe she wonders if you run away with a beautiful woman like me.’ She coughed, or laughed. ‘What we have to do I think is make this problem into a useful thing. That is always what I like to do. Your mistake, yes? Your stupidity. We cook it.’

She crossed the room with that decisive speed, as if she’d rehearsed the move. By the time he got to the door it was locked. He was about to raise his fist and bang on it, and shout – kick it. But then he remembered the moment when he’d stood up in the restaurant and run out after the woman who’d just shot two people. How he’d flown down the stairs. How could he possibly have done that? How? This was something he had done. No one had done it to him. He had done it. He, Christopher Hare. *Christopher Where*, as TG had begun to say a while back. *Where are you Christopher? Christopher Where?* What was the point of making a fuss? He must have wanted this to happen. This was the moment he’d wanted to be in. No, impossible. But yes.

He opened the window and then the wooden jalousie. The chilly air was smelly but felt fresh, like an old fashioned sorbet between courses. He sucked it in through the bilious taste in his mouth. The window faced old apartment buildings across a dark, nondescript street. Between the buildings across the street he recognised the profile of hills behind the city, pricked with lights. So he was facing inland, perhaps from somewhere down towards the docks. There was a smell of drains, maybe

the harbour. He'd run down the restaurant stairs – could he climb out the window?

He pulled the shutters back together and fastened the glass behind them, shutting himself in. He felt himself moved forward by another decision, another one he hadn't really made by himself. He was reflected there in the window, a dim phantom, thickset, his dark shirt hanging out under his jacket, his hair a mess, his full-moonish face tinged with pallid light reflected from the green jalousie slats. He seemed to be pouting. That was what everyone always said he did.

'*Malade de jalousie*,' he said, exaggerating his out-of-focus pout, watching himself do it, remembering the French phrase. 'Christopher Where.' When he said his joke name aloud he knew exactly where he was – he was Hare, now! – and at the same time he knew he was completely lost.