



The Devil in the Detail

I don't look in mirrors as a rule and I didn't look at the photograph either. Not at first anyway.

First it was the compliments and I didn't connect the two. I thought the girls at work were having a laugh. Not that they'd dare. Not usually. But it was the nice one, Bernice, that set me thinking. She's not the sort to laugh at someone. She's young and sweet and has long, long dark hair that she lets fall all the way down her back. She's altogether too nice for this office. She made a special effort to follow me to the coffee machine and tell me.

'Paul,' she said, 'Paul. What have you changed? I can't work it out. Did you go to a stylist or something?'

I told her. I don't know what's got into everyone today. Like they've got nothing better to do than kid me, Bernice.

'No,' she said. 'Honest. It's not like that. You look ... lovely today.'

Well, I blushed. Me. Blushed.

She got her compact out and made me look in the mirror and well, talk about frogs and princes. I couldn't put my finger on what had changed. That's when I took the picture out - for contrast. And we both couldn't help but smile when we saw it.

'Geez. That's me?'

She took it out of my hands. Turned it round and held it up.

'Wow. You look fantastic, Paul. Who took this?'

'This bloke. In a shop. In Tetbury. Will you go out with me tonight, Bernice?'

Catch her on the wave, I thought. Never let an opportunity go begging in business or pleasure.

She smiled.

'OK. Will you take me to the shop? Take me to get my picture taken? Will it be open?'

It was a tiny little place off the High Street. I picked it out of the Yellow Pages because it was nothing fancy.

'Gerald Foxcradle, photographer.

Portraits a speciality. Passport photographs to specification.'

He looked on the edge of retirement, as if he did this for a hobby. White hair, white moustache, glasses and a brown tweed suit covered a rather portly frame. He didn't try to sell anything, he was friendly but matter of fact. He did fuss over the details though.

'The devil is in the detail, Mr Croker. The very devil.'

He did two pictures and gave the best one to the customer, he said. That's all. If you don't like it you don't pay, he said. I'd barely given it a glance at the time. So long as it met the specifications, I'd be happy.

It was six o'clock when we turned up at the door and I could see he was about to close up. He ushered us through into the dark interior. There was no clutter. There were old cameras on shelves around the room; museum pieces it looked like. The only light was through the front window which was mostly covered with more shelving. Everything looked as old as Mr Foxcradle himself. I tried to remember what the windows looked like from the front. Pictures, black and white pictures, or even older - sepia they called it, didn't they?. Tetbury through the ages.

'Well if it isn't Mr Croker. Have you come for your money back, Mr Croker?'

Bernice laughed.

'His money back? If that's what you can do with a passport photograph ... Well we wondered if you would do me? A portrait.'

Foxcradle looked at her. I hadn't noticed before the way he looked at you. As if there was something behind his eyes, weighing you up, judging you. Artists, I thought.

'And me. I'd like a portrait too, please.'

He turned away and took out a green hardback writing book. A ledger I suppose you'd call it. He looked at it for quite some time until I thought he'd forgotten all about us. Then he turned back.

'I have time for the lady, Mr Croker. I'm afraid I can't ask you to sit again.'

'I understand that we are late, Mr Foxcradle. Perhaps if we came back another time?'

His eyes met mine.

'Mr Croker, I would ask you not to press the matter. Young lady, this way please.'

His gaze pinned me down. A coldness seeped into my bones and I felt suddenly afraid. I wanted to say 'No. No, let's go, Bernice.' but I couldn't move a muscle. And then a warm hand touched my arm and a voice broke my reverie.

'Thank you for waiting, Mr Croker. Miss Feaghan is finished now.'

At my side Bernice held a photograph up for me to see.

'Isn't it beautiful, Paul? Isn't Mr Foxcradle just an absolute genius?'

It was the very essence of her. Her soft brown eyes, her full lips, everything in absolute balance. Perfection. More perfect than Bernice herself, I thought, until I looked at her. She was, right then, the most beautiful creature to ever walk the earth.

'Bernice. You are finished, Bernice?'

'Isn't it lovely, Paul?'

'Did you take two, Mr Foxcradle?'

He nodded, with, I felt, a trace of reluctance.

'You know my terms. Miss Feaghan has chosen to keep the portrait, Mr Croker.'

'The other, Mr Foxcradle? I wondered if I could buy it off you?'

'It is not for sale, Mr Croker. Good bye, Mr Croker. Miss Feaghan.'

We were outside on the pavement before I could protest.

Bernice was overjoyed with the photograph. And I was overjoyed with Bernice. So we left. I took Bernice to a little Indian restaurant across the road and we laughed and we were happy and I wondered why I hadn't been able to have this happiness before.

Only one incident marred the rest of the evening for me. Through the window of the restaurant I saw Mr Foxcradle leave his shop. If I have given the impression that Mr Foxcradle was the sort of man to carry a shiny black briefcase then I described him very poorly indeed. In his brown tweed suit he carefully locked the door and then shambled down the street, executive briefcase in hand, smiling and nodding as he went.

‘And why shouldn’t he?’ said Bernice. ‘When he makes other people so happy.’

That night I dreamed. In my dream I climbed a hill. I walked fast and there were others falling behind me, but whether I could not slow down or they would not speed up I do not know. Each time that I turned they called my name and I waved happily. They were trying to tell something but I had to climb. As I crested the hill I saw Mr Foxcradle. He wore a blue and white striped apron over his brown tweed and he was cutting meat on an old wooden table.

‘Well, Mr Croker? You came for your money back?’

His gaze was steady upon me but he did not stop slicing the meat, a flesh I did not recognise. His precise movements as he stripped the bone fascinated me. I wanted to tell him that I was a good man, that I wanted only what he had taken from me, but no words came.

As we stood the people behind me began to arrive. Men and women of all ages. Some I recognised and tried to stop, tried to ask them what they were doing. They stared at me. Some shook their heads at me. Each one passed and some went back down the hill on the sunny side. Others turned away and went the steep way down into the dark. Mr Foxcradle watched them - all the time slicing, slicing.

'Which way do I choose, Mr Foxcradle?'

'You have no choices, Mr Croker.'

I woke up in a sweat, heart hammering, determined to go back to the shop.

It was hard to keep that feeling alive when I looked in the mirror, when Bernice greeted me with her own sunny smile, when she made an effort to come into my office, closed the door and kissed me.

'You look fantastic, Bernie. You always look fantastic.'

'You, too. I feel amazing, Paul. I don't know what your little man did to us but I feel like loving the whole world today. I can't believe the photograph he took. And I've had more comments and looks today.'

I pulled her to me.

'I'm not sure I like that, Bernie. I want you all to myself.'

She laughed.

I never mentioned my fears about Foxcradle. She seemed so happy and I didn't want to alarm her.

She had arranged to visit her mother that evening. We were both disappointed not to be spending the time together but we felt like we had the rest of our lives. We were meant to be together. It gave me the chance to go back to the shop. Third time lucky.

I drove fast, too fast, but I felt an urgency. The dream kept coming back to me. It was a quarter to when I pushed open the door. He stood behind the old oak counter like a Victorian impression of a shopkeeper.

'Mr Foxcradle.'

'Mr Croker.' He did not smile. 'Mr Croker I have asked you to drop this matter. We had a contract.'

He slid a drawer from his side of the counter and took out a form. The form I had signed to take receipt of the photograph.

‘A contract, Mr Croker.’

I had no idea why I was there.

‘Please, Mr Foxcradle. Let me see the other photograph.’

His eyes held mine and I saw them soften.

‘That would be unwise, Mr Croker.’

‘I feel empty, Mr Foxcradle. Empty and full at the same time. Like you took something essential out of me.’ I was feeling around the edges of an understanding. ‘You left something really good, but you ... you took something didn’t you, Mr Foxcradle?’

He moved out from around the counter.

‘Please, Mr Croker.’

His eyes pleaded with me. But I couldn’t stop. I saw the dream Foxcradle in front of me slicing flesh. My head felt too light, as if it was full of gas twisting and whirling. I stepped forward to steady myself against Foxcradle. His hand grabbed at my arm and I saw the knife, flashing in his hand. I pushed him hard. Flung myself on top of him. His head struck the side of the counter as we fell. It sounded so solid. Noise that shouldn’t come from the meeting of flesh and oak. His head twisted sharply as he fell.

I lay over him. My stomach writhed like a basket of worms. I was certain without checking that he was dead. But – he’d tried to kill me! The knife? Where was the knife?

I searched him frantically, his arm outstretched, his hand empty. I knelt beside him and rolled him over. A thick syrup of blood had pooled beneath his

head. Nothing. The sweat had turned cold on my face. The delirium that had taken hold of me since I left work had left. I began to methodically think things through. Could it have spun out of his hand? Behind the counter, perhaps? But it didn't take me long to search the place. No knife.

I went and knelt beside his body. I expected something more. I half expected him to be gone. Was he some sort of magician? A demon? But he just lay there. It was me that was a demon. Or sick? I felt ill and stood slowly holding myself up against the counter. Looking down at him, his neck twisted improbably, I felt the bile rise in my throat. Unsteadily I made my way along the counter and reached for a white paper bag with the words 'G. Foxcradle, Photographer' emblazoned across one side. I vomited into it, the sharp acid taste filling my mouth.

Feeling stronger I cast around again for the knife and, not finding it, my eyes settled on the door to his studio. Not knowing what I was looking for I walked in. I remembered it from my first visit; studio was a kind way of putting it. In another shop it would have been a store-room. No windows, small and narrow. Long enough for him to set up at one end and the client to sit, or stand, at the other. I flicked on the lights. There were several, all on dimmer switches and providing ambient light rather than a strong direct beam. Apart from various cameras beside the door and seating and screens at the other end of the room it was bare and I felt disappointed.

These buildings were long and narrow I was sure of it. This couldn't be it. In a temper I dashed the screens aside and found a locked door behind. In contrast to the rest of the shop it looked modern. It had a combination lock and I was suddenly gleeful. I felt vindicated. He must have something to hide.

Four numbers on the lock. It was set at 0-0-0-0 and an optimistic push confirmed that Foxcradle was not a stupid man. Even if I stayed all night I couldn't try them all. Surely he'd written it down. I'd read somewhere that most people do. I turned to go back into the shop and my heart dropped with a thud as I saw him there, half kneeling, half standing, blood smeared down one cheek.

Something snapped inside of me, my wildest imaginings confirmed. His head was slumped to one side as if his neck was broken and yet he crawled towards me.

I strode over and grabbed his collar, hauling him behind me. There was a low growl of pain but I would have none of it. I thrust him head first at the locked door.

'Open it! Go on, let's see what you have to hide.'

He slumped to the door where I dropped him. Slyly I crouched beside him.

'Come on, Gerald. Tell me the number. I'll just take Bernice's photograph and I'll be gone. I'll call you an ambulance, Gerald.'

His eyes looked glassy.

I felt my arm raise and with no thought I hit him savagely across the face with the back of my hand.

A whine forced itself from his lips and I bent closer.

'That's it, Gerald. Talk to me.'

'Mr Croker! Please!'

The words were breathy, barely recognisable.

I forced his hand to the lock and crushed it against the door, then I felt the fingers move. He was opening it.

'On your head be it.'

I flung him to one side ignoring his moans of pain.

There was a stack of white envelopes, each with a name neatly handwritten upon it.

Miss Bernice Feaghan

Mr Paul Croker

I opened the first. The photograph inside was, at first glance, the same as the one she had taken away with her, but as I looked I started to see differences. The brown eyes looked hard, the lips were thinner, tighter. Her hair had no sheen. I looked at him. He lay his eyes half closed but watching me carefully. Looking back at the picture I was suddenly revulsed. She was emaciated, ugly, how could I have loved this woman?

I grabbed my own envelope and tore the picture from it. It could not be me. My lips were twisted in an angry snarl. The smiling confidence in the picture I had bought was replaced by sneering arrogance. My hair was grey, thinner and my eyes looked dead. One cheek slumped as if I could not even control my facial muscles. I felt at my face, my hair.

‘What trickery is this, Foxcradle?’

But he was unconscious, or dead. I knelt over him. Patted his face. Talked to him, wheedling and cajoling.

‘Change us back, Foxcradle. Gerald?’

I was still weeping over his body when the police came.

