

Obituary

by L. Lee Lowe

Patrick Savage, who has died aged 29, was a poker player fast on his way to becoming a cult figure in the music scene.

'I've got nine lives,' Patrick says after I pull him from the river. 'There goes number two.'

We're flopped on the bank and he's laughing as I pant for breath—thick, laboured sounds—and I want to pummel him till my knuckles split. Bite him till our lips do. This is before he makes any money for the good life he's always talking about, like the handmade shoes or the meals in three-star restaurants or the Ferrari that will kill him ten years later. I won't be sharing any of those meals with him, something I already know but don't let myself think about.

'Get dressed,' I say. 'I'll be late for work.'

'So what? It's your father-in-law's place.'

'That's what.'

He sits up, stretches languorously, flips back his dripping hair. Everything's a performance with him, even drowning. I've never been in his room, but I'm willing to bet there's a big, ornate mirror above the bed.

I reach for my jeans. Penny leaves them alone now, after I made her unpick the patch over the arse. Dad thinks they're inappropriate, she'd protested. He means sloppy. He means vulgar. He means, get your arse in gear and find a real job, a job where you have to wear the uniforms of the expensively educated. No one sees my arse when I drive a forklift, I tell her.

'Love your arse,' Patrick says. Classy schooling teaches you how to lie with the highest in the land, and I spin a convincing tale of a hitchhiker in desperate need of a meal, sobering been-there-done-that advice, and a bus ticket to her grandparents', when I report late for my shift. Penny's dad is a great one for advice, he'll never crap it that no teenager listens to advice from senior citizens, even those barely into their twenties.

Mostly, we use the delivery van. Whenever I've got a route, I head for a McDrive—alternating between the two nearest the factory—and ring Patrick while waiting for my coffee. If it's before noon, he usually doesn't pick up. Afternoons he often doesn't. Working on my game, he says. I know all the quiet spots where a man will go to shoot his dog, but sometimes we don't make it out of the van. Penny's got a lovely body, it's not that, maybe it's the way his skin tastes, like something from the sea, or maybe the sort of spice nobody here can put a name to. I spend a lot of time trying to work it out.

Savage was killed early Friday morning when his Ferrari swerved into oncoming traffic and struck a delivery van. He died instantly.

3 AM. It's the what-if thinking that takes hold like a tentacled sea monster and drags you down into the shapeless, sleepless dark. Black cold, enough to numb you, enough to stop your breath, but the stings of possibility never stop. What if you'd gone straight back to the flat instead of stopping in the market square to marvel at a living statue—Michelangelo's David—and catching Patrick's quizzical gaze? What if you'd gone with him to Las Vegas? What if he'd got up ten minutes later, or ten minutes earlier, or stopped for a latte, that Friday morning?

You'll hit the alarm and stretch, then reach for his shoulder. Now that he plays less poker, it'll be this club or that one till five, later sometimes, free shows, no record label deals, no self-issues, not even a website yet, 'learning his New York shit', he calls it. Laughs it off. When did it become bad form to reveal a decent technique? But they know about him—listen to him, too. Record him on their cells, it's the easiest thing in the world. Laughs that off too.

But this Friday he'll have a dental appointment, about as banal as it gets, and he'll have asked you to wake him. He'll be giving you a lift to the campus, then meeting you for lunch. You'll shower and make him a double espresso, which he'll drink while towelling off.

Later, he'll say, when you mention his stubble. How old's that dentist of yours anyway? you'll ask.

It'll be a sunny morning, the whetted edge of autumn a reminder to see to some firewood. Since Penny's dad died, she'll be happy for you to come round and clear off whatever the storms and acid rain will have damaged. Her new bloke won't go near a chainsaw, smart enough when you think how much whiskey he puts away. Penny's still got her figure, but there's a pallor to her face which her makeup doesn't quite disguise, a slackening under her eyes, slight as yet, as though her skin is already embarrassed to stick around. She won't mention the last miscarriage.

The autumn woodcutting, the Christmas tree ritual—you and Penny's dad did OK with those things. He'd pick the day, but otherwise it was two men toiling as equals, a pact as old as song. Friendship didn't come into it. Maybe, in another time, another country, you could have hunted together. Then again, maybe he'd have shot you in the back. Accidents happen.

Both the driver of the van and Savage's passenger, jazz pianist and longtime companion Jon Solomon, were badly injured in the accident.

Patrick wrenches open the door to the van. 'Oi,' he says, flinging the diphthong before him like a banner. 'Adrian, you're not going to believe this.'

'Get in,' I say and tap the accelerator. Any other time, Patrick would tell me to cool it, Penny's dad isn't hiding behind the nearest bus shelter. Or laugh and slide over and lay his hand on my thigh. Instead he dangles a key in my face.

'Head out towards the old mill. I've got a surprise planned.'

The wipers need replacing. I pull out into traffic, hear the angry bleat of a horn behind us, take a deep breath and focus on the road. Light from oncoming headlamps shatters in the tracks left by the wiper blades, a bedazzlement like sunlight on ice. After a moment I risk a sidelong glance. Patrick has settled back and closed his eyes,

as though waiting for a thaw. Droplets on his hair, his face—the miracle of rain. I look back to the road. He doesn't speak till we reach the river.

'Turn right after the bridge,' he says.

'Where are we going?'

'Las Vegas.'

I cross the bridge, then pull off onto the verge. The wipers drag reluctantly across the glass.

'Why are you stopping?' he says. 'The lane's just beyond the bend.'

'You've made it? You've really done it?'

'Champagne's already chilling, Sven promised.'

It's an old farmhouse, the sort Penny dreams about; me, I think of dry rot and weeds and the inevitable dog hairs, new wiring and blocked drains. 'There'll be ghosts,' I tell her. As Patrick unlocks the front door, I hunch against the rain, deliberating about a puncture, then ring Penny's dad. 'You could've told me beforehand,' he says. 'But since it's for Penny.' In the hall there's a mirror with just the right gilt frame, not brassy and overbearing, its glass convincingly tarnished, and I glimpse in its depths a kinder version of myself, a version I wouldn't mind hanging on our wall, but the truth is that its absence would be tricky to account for, and I settle on a more breakable find. Sven—or his partner—must like eBay (and *Country Living*).

The champagne is a bit too sweet to linger over. I drink one glass off dutifully. 'Sven asked me to water the plants,' Patrick says, his hand inside my jeans, and pours the rest of the stuff into a cactus with spines like something from an Inquisitor's kit.

'You'll kill it,' I say.

'Exactly,' he says.

The sex is good, it's always good despite his penchant for sandalwood, but at least he doesn't smell like a damned rose garden and I don't have to ask myself if he's faking. And there's none of the stubble, unseemly, almost repulsive, which Penny wears proudly like a hair shirt when switching to her 'natural woman' mode. Why can't

she make up her mind which it'll be? That's maybe her worst trait—indecisiveness.

Patrick forgets to eat for long stretches, then all at once is ravenous. I help myself to a sourdough baguette from the deep freeze, fry up some bacon, scramble half a dozen eggs. We sit cross-legged on the bed, facing each other like kids on an indoor picnic, gleefully using our fingers. There are crumbs everywhere, and I retrieve a few buttery curds from his crotch. 'We'll have to change the sheets,' I say.

'Penny's got you well trained.' He laughs and deposits everything on the floor, except the last rasher of bacon, which he wraps round his glorious cock. A shrink would say sex is all about intimacy. The thing is, Patrick strips away the need for subterfuge. If Penny has any erotic fantasies, she'll never admit to them. What is she so damned afraid of? That I'll run to Daddy?

Penny is listening when Patrick tells me about Las Vegas. I can just about picture it—the famously glitzy lights, the luxury suite, the desert heat banished to the pool deck, the sex. My understanding of poker is sketchy, and I've never seen Patrick play, online or off, but I don't have to. He doesn't eat because he feeds off intensity.

'So I'm to be your mascot?' I ask.

He sets his espresso cup down on the worktop.

'I'm going to win, you know,' he says. 'This year the grand prize is close to \$11 million. Eleven fucking million. You'll be able to quit that crap job of yours and set up on your own, make that indie film you're always talking about. Or even go back to university and get yourself a string of degrees that'll have Hollywood kicking in your door.'

'It doesn't work that way.' I empty my cup, tasting the sugary dregs, then drink some water.

'You ought to know.' He gives me the perfect poker-table look. 'There's one thing *I* know. Pride doesn't buy a single tube of makeup, not to mention anything like a decent camera or studio time. Stop being so stubborn.'

Again I regret having told him about my mother and her producer husband. Larry T., with his—pardon me, *their*—friends, their parties, their property. How many homes do they have now, anyway? Malibu, New York, Cannes, the wine estate in the Cape—I've lost count. There must be a ski chalet in there somewhere. The last time I saw my mother, eleven years ago, when she was still doing some screenwriting, I spent most of my half-term visit helping Ramona polish the silver. The Spanish she taught me was the only souvenir I brought back, aside from the Easter egg her grown-up son spent days painting (I still read any articles on *el autismo* I come across). All my new gear I'd secretly given away to the staff for their kids, stuffing my cases with crumpled newspaper. At school no one believed I'd really been in California: 'Where's your tan then?'

They sent a fine gift for our wedding, my mother and Larry did. A silver tea service, just what a young couple needs for their first home. Penny keeps it on the bookshelf in the front room. She'll take it down for an elaborate polish once a month—PMT, more accurate than the calendar, maybe the Pope should send all newlyweds a piece of silver. Engraved with his coat of arms.

'What about Penny?' I ask.

'What about her?'

'Just where does she fit into your plans?'

Solomon is in intensive care and unable to respond to questions at this time.

After his big win, Patrick gives interviews away like Yanks, their lurid Halloween candy. Unwrap them with caution. I'm not lured by public revelations, I tell myself, but end up googling his name whenever I'm online, it's like prodding a chipped tooth with your tongue. One of his answers exposes the pulp: 'No more satellites, no more tournaments. In this game, you've got to know when to quit. When to walk away.'

Maybe they'll discover a gambling gene. Or how about a neurochemical imbalance? No sane person pits his wallet against a

random number generator. I think of my mother, who used to buy lottery tickets every week when I was a little kid. She'd have me pick the numbers: 'You're my lucky, plucky boy.' We made a game of it, taking turns to outdo each other with fantastical plans—'We'll buy a house just for the two of us, a house made of silvery fish scales', 'a house made of Lego', 'a house made of rainbows', 'no, Mum, a house made of chocolate fudge', 'a house made of solid gold ingots'.

A house made of cards.

Patrick doesn't quit, of course, not entirely. I reckon he can't, the way he's going through his money. Even when he had almost none, he was beyond generous. Some people may think he's buying friendship, buying loyalty, but that isn't it. Sudden wealth doesn't change your nature, only rescales it. Interpolation, it's called in computer graphics, and there's always some loss. 'You know,' he once told me, 'it's a good thing I'm not going to have any kids. I'd spoil them rotten.' Penny is finally pregnant again. If only I'd been less of a fool—face it, less of a *coward*—he'd have made a wonderful godfather.

Friends report that Savage and Solomon were in the process of adopting a child, eagerly awaiting a match after a favourable assessment.

'What am I supposed to tell Penny?'

'The truth?'

Penny is watching me when I walk from room to room, looking for the airing cupboard. It's not under the stairs, where the shelving displays bin upon bin of buttons, sorted by colour. There's something about buttons. On rainy afternoons I was allowed my mother's button tin: now the buttons would become Borrowers, a whole rather bloodthirsty village; now an elaborate mosaic on our table (kitchen, dining, sewing, writing); now counters in a game I played with Kevin, a plump, wheezy neighbourhood boy who was so grateful for a friend, I understood even then, that he acquiesced to my every demand and mid-game rule change. When I plunge my

hand into a bin of nearly colourless buttons, letting them run through my fingers, his pale eyes reproach me with a hint of tears.

It's not in the main bathroom, where I eye the oversized claw-foot tub, its exterior painted exactly the right shade of aquamarine to suggest a whole new range of waterplay. The oak linen press holds plenty of white towels—only white—but no bedding. On the landing there's a built-in cupboard crammed with winter jerseys, cushions, mohair rugs, all manner of lovely things. Just to be sure, I slide each stack forward and check for concealed items, turning up, however, nothing more than a couple of cedar blocks. In one bedroom the armoire is empty, the chest of drawers too, except for a life-sized and remarkably—disturbingly—detailed thumb cast in bronze, and a whole salami (French, walnut). In another bedroom, I discover a wardrobe full of vintage ballgowns. When I finger a fold of lustrous green satin, Penny's favourite colour, she moans with lust. The tiaras on the shelf can't be real, can they? I slam the wardrobe door shut and march out of the room, feeling like I'm back in school, once again forced to read some stupid poem. Individually, the words make sense—mostly—but just try to figure out what's going on. One exam, it got so bad that I ended up in the lavatory, hanging over a basin. Panic attack, they later called it. At least there's not much to panic about when you're shifting boxes in a warehouse.

Sven, I think, how about some help here, I can't spend the whole fucking afternoon searching for a sheet. The shrinks I know would get a hard on after ten minutes in this place.

Which thought does a lot for my mood, but nothing at all when it comes to finding the airing cupboard.

In the study there are enough museum catalogues and art books on the shelves, sketches on the walls, plus a free-standing large-format printer which I first mistake for an electric mangle, to make me think, artist, but where's the studio? In the back garden? And what's with the entire shelf of medical texts? Whoa, I think, as something fires in my head. I grab a pen and paper from the desk, sit down and scribble a couple of notes, flip the brass-mounted hourglass, stare at the trickling sand, scribble some more. With the

buzz fading, I get up and slowly circle the room. I'm on my knees in front of the fireplace, peering up the chimney, when Patrick asks, 'What the hell are you doing?'

'Searching for clean sheets,' I answer without thinking.

He begins to laugh and after a sheepish moment I do too. I get to my feet, dust off my hands, and blurt out my idea for a script, but want to wring his neck when he mentions my stepfather. And tell him so.

'Shall we try it?' he asks. 'It's about as amazing an orgasm as you can get.'

Savage is renowned for his remarkable victory in the World Series of Poker ten years ago when, aged nineteen, he catapulted from online poker room to the main event floor in Las Vegas after winning a US\$57 satellite tournament. Flamboyant in live play, he became an overnight idol for all wannabe poker stars by going on to take the US\$11.3 million first prize.

The light is nearly gone. Adrian has fallen asleep, and I watch him for a moment, his long lashes, the faint scar on his temple—a plate meant for his dad—the boyish flush, lids which tremble slightly. Asleep, he's the child he won't allow himself to be. I could happily strangle that mother of his. Though you can't tell when they're shut, his eyes are not quite the same size, and it's always the vulnerable one, the shy watchful eye that I kiss first. Its droop will become more pronounced in middle age, he'll be helpless to prevent it, yet fewer and fewer people will notice. I watch him for a moment longer, then bend down and whisper in his ear. He stirs, and I whisper again: 'I won't leave you.'

Unlike other top prize winners, Savage confounded his fans and supporters by largely withdrawing from poker and reinventing himself as a musician. For months he played free shows in small clubs, writing his own songs and slowly gathering a devoted—some would say a fanatic—following.

Still warm from the drier, the cotton sheet crackles with static electricity as I snap it over the mattress. It refuses to cooperate, clinging to itself as though afraid to settle, to embrace a flattened posture. I wonder whether there's someplace I've overlooked, someplace which ought to be obvious, or whether Sven has actually hidden his spare sheets from us, perhaps covetous of heavy linen or regal satin, of the thin, tenuous miracle of silk. But Patrick is right: there's no good reason to keep looking.

From the other side of the bed he takes hold of the sheet and swiftly draws it taut, then moves round, tucking and folding and tucking again till I eye the expanse of white like a child, the icing on a birthday cake or a patch of unbroken snow.

'Don't you dare,' he says.

I pounce, he groans, the matter is settled. Some things are irresistible.

On the way home I rehearse what I'm going to tell Penny: only a week, all expenses paid, can't let a mate down. The last will work with her dad too. He's big on loyalty. When I pull up out front, I curse under my breath, then drive on till I find a place to park the van. Penny's dad has taken my usual space.

Before getting out, I turn on my mobile to check my missed calls: TD, TD, and again TD. He's going to be plenty pissed—*his* time, some of it anyway, and *his* petrol and *his* van—but I sprint through the rain, and the puddles, as though outfitted with a serviceable excuse. At the last crossing I nearly collide with a cyclist whose glasses are speckled with rain and lose my footing, while she swerves, flings a curse over her shoulder, and rides on. Winded and wet, I'm fitting my key in the lock when the door to the flat is snatched open.

'Where the fuck have you been?'

I gape at my father-in-law, who once told me that he'd forsworn all coarse language after his wife's death. Admittedly, he'd needed to be vigilant till the habit was established; excuses are for the weak.

'You slip once, Adrian, you'll slip again.' With my mother, it had been junk food. Other kids would brush their teeth and gargle after a fag, while even now, I haven't got a single filling. Single parents are so fond of rules that they have about twice as many.

Penny is spotting but became frantic at the suggestion of an ambulance. Nor would she let TD drive her without me. Since her mum died, she's been terrified of hospitals. They keep her overnight after the D&C, and she's weepy for several days. 'I always wanted twins,' she sobs. 'What are the chances we'll have twins again?' TD gives me time off from work and doesn't remember to harass me about my irresponsible behaviour while my wife is miscarrying till a good week later. I make all the right promises to get him off my back. I cook lots of her favourite soups and casseroles, dishes like zucchini gratin with bacon and walnuts, but end up eating most of them myself. I fetch heaps of DVDs, first vetting them for pregnant women, for babies. I'm patient and tender and make no demands. I wank off in the shower. I spend a lot of time at the computer, learning to play poker. I calculate odds—like the odds that I'll run into Patrick in the video shop. The odds that TD will have a second coronary.

Though Savage rarely covered someone else's songs, his debut album pays homage to the man he repeatedly called his own idol—the legendary Belgian singer-songwriter Jacques Brel. Savage recorded Brel's 'Ne me quitte pas' in French for the first track and in his own hauntingly lyrical English version for the last.

Three days before he's to fly to Las Vegas, Patrick rings and we meet for a pint after work. I don't trust myself with the van.

'It's not too late to change your mind,' he says. 'Penny must be OK by now.'

'I've been learning how to play poker.'

'Is that a *yes*?'

There's dirt under my fingernails, TD's decided on white tulips for the borders, his wife was a passionate gardener and Penny won't

admit, least of all to herself, that she resents tending, season for season, her father's expectations. Maybe that's why she's so desperate for a child. Since her miscarriage we spend chill grey Sunday afternoons kneeling on spongy ground without even a decent hymn to break up the monotony.

'Will it be hot enough to swim?' I ask.

'I think most of the hotels have heated pools, jacuzzis. Maybe even waterbeds.'

'Waterbeds are so babyboomer.'

'OK, no waterbed. But think of the 24-hour room service.'

Room service. I begin to laugh.

'What?' he asks.

'The sly bugger. So that's how he does it.'

He gives me an exaggerated share-the-joke look.

'Penny's dad. He goes off every couple of months on business trips. Five-star hotels, heated pools, great room service. Yeah, that's what he says: nothing can beat great room service.'

'And?'

'And isn't it obvious? He's got to be getting it somewhere. He's good, though. Has everyone fooled by his show of undying love.'

His look becomes complicated, something wounded about it.

'Stop that. This is real life, not some Hollywood blockbuster.' I think of all the films that have been shot in Las Vegas, in its casinos and bars and hotel rooms.

'So you're not coming?' he asks.

'I haven't said that.'

He takes out a pack of cards and shuffles, his fingers fluent in the language of foreplay. I'm not crackpot enough to think that rectangles of pasteboard carry an erotic charge, so it must be his edginess, or mine, which gives them the energy to speak. They blur as I stare at them, fuse and blur into a hypnotic, compelling, inevitable *yes*.

'Go on, cut.' He places the pack in front of me. 'We'll let the cards decide.'

At rest, the cards are stiff and silent. A game with him would be no game at all. I shake my head, and he laughs as if he's already anticipated my reaction.

'Then we'll each pick a card. If mine is higher, you'll come with me.'

He's going to win in Las Vegas, I know it now. His sort of confidence is for winners. When he goes to pay the bill, I square the pack, slip it into its cunning little leather case, conspicuously new, and pocket the cards we've drawn.

Within minutes of the accident, reports were circulating online, and messages pouring into Savage's Facebook page. Most of his fans cite his fabled generosity as well as his stunning voice, fearless spirit, and virtuoso musicianship, often mourning his loss in terms of the Brel song he has reinterpreted for a new generation. They plead, 'Don't leave me, Patrick.'

I've been out of the country too long. There's been another bloody muck-up, this time with the translator, and we're so wiped anyway that I call it a day and send everyone off for some sleep, though a lot of the crew plan to get in their sightseeing or shopping or fucking the pretty boys you see everywhere; whatever. I head back to the hotel, stopping at a food stall to film a noodle maker whose infallible hands were made to shape fortunes, not dough. The street is crowded, my elbow is often jostled, but I watch for much longer than I film, an uneasy spectator waiting for—willing—the godlike to fumble. Several times I need to wipe sweat from my upper lip, and there's a tightness in my chest which the noonday heat doesn't quite account for. My new camera is a beautiful piece of equipment, so compact that I'm easily mistaken for a discount tourist. After one particularly nimble tell, the vendor catches my eye and solemnly inclines his head a fraction, and then I'm certain, absolutely certain, of a momentary glint of mischief before I lift my camera and his fingers blur in an even more intricate pattern, fuse and blur till I'm staring at a double exposure.

Back in my room I have a tepid shower and stretch out on the bed, first picking up my paperback, then my latest notes, then my mobile, but I'm too keyed up to work my way through something like seventy-five emails and the air is stale, the smell of long-discarded butts a reminder of former inhabitants. I'd insisted on a family hotel, and while clean and comfortable, it's also a bit too intrusive—*too* friendly. A lot of the crew smoke, though it's not tobacco I worry about. Despite my strict warnings about local laws, and a clause in all the contracts, there are always risk-takers. I seem destined to end up with more than my fair share of risk-takers.

The window won't budge. The oldest son, who speaks good English, is still in school, so I poke my head into the kitchen and attempt to explain to his mother about the window and the curtain whose hem I've managed to rip. She insists on feeding me several dumplings, perhaps as a reward for my enchanting performance. I'll speak to her son in the evening.

In the park there's shade, if not exactly quiet—the congestion on the streets is too close by, the heavy machinery at a building site too outspoken, the pedestrians too numerous, and in any case pop music follows you everywhere in this city like a chronic migraine—but as soon as I stop to watch the river traffic, it's the lads splashing off a wooden pier who deaden all else to silence. Tourists are warned not to swim in the fast-flowing river, its waterfull of flotsam a continual hazard. We larked as recklessly, as boisterously, as joyously, Patrick and me, for a few brief weeks that summer, and when I shut my eyes I hear us larking still.

'Mister.'

I turn round, instinctively tightening my grip on my camera bag. The boy, his dark eyes too old for his skinny frame, gives a small, sad shrug.

'No stealing, Mister. I serve, you pay.'

We stare at each other till I think to ask, 'Are you hungry?'

Again a shrug.

A flicker at the corner of my eye alerts me to someone's approach. The boy takes off, darting round those in his path with silverfish

grace, vanishing so swiftly that I glance riverwards in anticipation of telltale ripples. In a land of lakes and rivers, there are surely waterspirit legends.

'These boys are unsafe.' The policeman is slightly built, and young enough to look as though he's got some growing to do to fill his uniform. 'Dirty.'

'He wasn't soliciting me. I asked him to pose for a photo.'

'I know better places for that.' His visor shades his eyes, and he keeps one hand cocked on a hipbone so that I can't help noticing his wristwatch.

'No thank you.'

Clad in all the starched menace of his uniform, he asks for my passport, then inspects my arms for track marks and turns out my backpack. I'm worried that he'll confiscate my camera, but it's my wallet he appraises like an antique dealer. 'Very nice, very good quality.' He returns it to me. 'Most foreigners appreciate how safe we keep our streets.' I extract some notes and murmur a few polite phrases, exit lines which aren't really humiliating, not under the circumstances, not in this part of the world. Don't scurry, I tell myself, don't saunter, and whatever you do, don't look back, there won't be a chance to edit the take. Last time I saw Penny, she picked a fight about my so-called detachment. You can't help it, though. You see things differently once you live with a camera. It's got nothing to do with arrogance.

Neither does my blogging, Penny dearest. Since I hate to cart my laptop around in public (only an idiot falls for their 'no crime' propaganda), and a mobile isn't great for posting more than a couple of lines, it's either trot back to my stuffy room or settle for an internet café. I remember that just beyond the flower market is a busy street where there's bound to be a couple of places, they're everywhere, and I'm already working out what to say about the dignity of street kids as I make my way towards the south gate. Patrick blogs too, but I've never detected any indication he reads mine. He's got hundreds of followers.

They buried him yesterday.
They buried him.
buried

—Adrian, he whispers. His voice, his musky scent, his breath warm on my neck.

With a cry I jolt round, and there, *there* he is . . . Patrick, whom I haven't seen in so many long years. Thankgod, it was a mistake, or hoax, a cruel joke. Maybe a publicity stunt.

'Mister.'

The smell of sandalwood vanishes, driven off by the sour imperative of sweat. I lean away and rub my temples. I must be more tired than I realise.

The boy's eyes go to the monitor. 'He's pretty.'

I notice now that the boy's hair is wet. 'Move back, you're dripping on the keyboard.'

'The policeman, he give you trouble?'

'No trouble. Why are you following me?'

The boy looks back to the monitor, to Patrick's photo, and his lips move as he tries to work out the English text. I reach over and close the window. All I have to do is say the word, they'll chase him off. He looks even skinnier with his ragged hair plastered to his skull, his skimpy T-shirt damp at the neckline. How can he run in those flipflops? I take out my wallet. He shakes his head.

'Why not? Get yourself something to eat.'

He delves into a pocket of his jeans and hands me two playing cards—*my* playing cards. 'Sorry, Mister. I give them back.' An accomplished pickpocket, then. And yet all he jacked were the cards. Again his eyes go to the monitor. 'Maybe I steal your good luck.'

I stare at the cards, remembering what Patrick said about the odds of drawing two aces. He was always calculating odds, and always defying them. He must have known that I'd kept the cards. Why hadn't he understood what I was telling him?

The kid looks so damned serious. Anyone who works overseas learns to respect local customs, so I keep my mouth shut. Still, I shouldn't have kept the cards. It's got nothing to do with superstition. I shouldn't have done a lot of things. And should have done lots more, but hadn't. Jesus, is that how we end up? Adding year by year to an obituary of regrets?

'What's your name?' I ask.

'Patrick,' he says. 'A good name, no?'

Now I know what it feels like to drown.

They plead, 'Don't leave me, Patrick.'

At the touch of his hand, I raise my head. The pools of his eyes are dark and deep. I haul myself up towards the sunlight that is all Patrick.

'You keep them,' I say, returning the cards. Though my hour isn't over, I get up to leave. 'Come on, I'm hungry. We'll stop for a bowl of noodles, then you can show me the best place to swim.'

