

ASHOK FERREY

Vitamin V

“I’M GOING TO a large old house in Somerset for the weekend. I’ll wear my oldest clothes, I’ll go riding in the afternoons and I’ll positively refuse to shave.”

They do not believe me of course. They are perfect in every way where I work, but their perfection does not encompass old clothes or smelly horses. For you see, I work in Hell. I understand there are many branches all over the world, but mine runs beneath one of London’s most exclusive streets. They keep telling me how lucky I am to have this job: contrary to popular opinion it is very difficult to get into Hell, and if the customers are exclusive, the staff are, well, perfect. Except for me, of course.

Confidentially, between you and me, I know the only reason I got this job was that they needed someone of my race. They like to think they stock everything down there, and they get a bit embarrassed when members ask for something they don’t have.



We set off in the dying afternoon, my friends and I, for Somerset, and true to my word I have left my razor far behind in London. The sky is a deep orange and the thought of an empty country house somewhere out there in the warm dusk fills me with a deep sense of contentment: it is as if it has always been expecting me, quiet and resigned, like a father awaiting his prodigal son. It is good to be back up here, where life is chipped and cracked, and flawed and real. For perfection is only an illusion, though they like to think otherwise in Hell: perhaps only I know better, because I have to clean it up every morning before the customers arrive. I look at my friends: she has silver-blond hair and a complexion like fresh milk; he is dark and French. They are not be perfect but to me their smiles are worth more than all the beauty you find in Hell.

It is dark and chilly down in Somerset, but he is a good cook, my friend, and after some hot soup and steak my stomach is full, the fire is warm, and I begin to nod. And when I go to bed that night, for once I am not panicked. They are in the next room. All I have to do is shout.



“Turn around,” Alan says. I suppose I should call him Satan because he owns Hell, but that doesn’t sound very friendly. “You’re a bit on the thin side, aren’t you?” I should like to tell him I haven’t had a square meal the past two days but I don’t, because I figure that might ruin my chances. Anyway I get the job, lucky old me.

“Report to Sam at seven tomorrow morning,” Alan says. Sam is thirty-five but does not look a day over nineteen. There isn’t a wrinkle on his face and even his voice sounds young. They may not have the secret of eternal youth down here in Hell, but they make damn sure they give their customers that impression. The work is hard and the hours long, but I don’t complain because I’ve learnt the hard way that work in any form is good. I sing old-fashioned songs from the *Merry Widow* while I scrub the floors and, though he won’t admit it, Sam likes to listen when I sing.

Keep your mind intact while you’re shovelling all this shit, I’ve told myself, and you’ll be all right. I suppose I am honestly a little frightened that I’ll end up like the retired fishmonger who can never quite get the smell off his hands however much soap and water he uses, but as long as there is a little part of you they can’t quite reach, you are safe. I believe that in this line of work it is quite easy to protect your soul, though very few will agree with me. Just as very few will agree when I say that people do not come to Hell to be taken care of: they have their families back home for that. Instead they want to be pried apart and ripped open, their innermost existence laid bare. They want to be shaken up and wrung out like a wet cloth, and hung out in the sun to dry. And when you have done this to them they are eternally grateful to you, because in some funny way you have made it easier for them to bear their innermost sins by exposing them. Of course they will never give a second thought to doing the same to you, so busy are they in their orgy of self-revelation. And therein lies your safety.

I think I am quite good at my job—the customers like me, and my colleagues are a bit in awe: “Where do you get all your energy from?” Sam has asked me on more than one occasion. I think he would rather I slowed down to the pace of my fellow workers, lest I burn myself out before I come to terms with my existence, but that is the last thing I want. When you are

shovelling shit you don't want to come to terms with it: you want to get the hell out before it gets to you.

But it is tiring work all the same. And when I come back up to the real world I want what nobody in Hell can give me: I want to be taken care of. How pleasant it is to close your eyes and lie back in a warm current of water, to be swayed this way and that, gently but firmly, like waves lapping at a boat in some deserted cove. And though they will never know it, my friends do exactly that for me. Their strength lies in their goodness and innocence, and though it may not be possible, I should like them to stay that way forever.



When I open my eyes the room is flooded with sunshine. I must have forgotten to draw the curtains last night. I poke my head out and the air is fresh and slightly damp and there is a blue haze over the Mendip hills. Far away a dog is barking. I don't know the time because I have left my watch behind too, but it must be early. My friends are still sleeping so I pad downstairs and out into the conservatory. I sit in a garden chair in my pyjamas, breathing in great gulps of geranium-scented air. If this is not happiness I don't know what is. But there is no time to waste. My friends have woken up and we are going riding. The last time I rode was at school, a stubborn brute who threw me off frequently, adding injury to insult finally by turning round and biting me in the leg.

My horse is called Maggie and she leans to the right. It's hot up there in the hills, but there are many woods where the sun only penetrates in shafts of light, stabbing and dazzling the squirrels who scuttle from tree to tree in the smoky interior. When we reach the green plateau at the top it is time to gallop. When Maggie wants to go you can't stop her and off we go. I can hear my friends urging their horses on close behind and Maggie, who can't bear coming second, flies like the wind. I hang on for dear life, one hand on the saddle, the other desperately shuffling the reins to make them shorter.

We reach the top and collapse in laughter. After the horses have cooled off it is time to go down. But my friends have not finished for the day yet. After returning the horses to the stables they decide to climb Cheddar Gorge.



In Hell the lighting is subdued as is proper for a place of self-worship, and there is a constant tinkling of music, usually Abba. To this day I can't hear Abba without my stomach heaving. As you can imagine it is quite hot, so for work we wear shorts and trainers. Even so, my colleagues manage to look smart, while I only manage to look silly, because my shorts are tatty and my trainers have great holes in them. They call it the "small island look" and it is the source of much mirth.

Whenever I get a spare moment I sneak into the kitchen and stuff myself with toasted ham-and-cheese sandwiches, which is about all the kitchen is capable of producing.

"You're always eating." Latifah wrinkles her nose at me.

"That's where he gets his energy from, isn't that right, Jonathan?" Siddiq winks and nudges me in the ribs. Latifah is not her real name of course. Neither is Siddiq his, nor Jonathan mine. In Hell we each have a first name, a convenient tag.

"I'm singing in church on Sunday. Will you come?" Latifah asks. I shake my head. "I told you. I'm off to Somerset." Latifah is nearly six feet tall and has long elegant limbs, the most supple I have ever seen. She is much in demand in the nightclubs where she dances, and also here in Hell, but on Sundays she leads the choir in her local church.

"But I'll be there," Siddiq reminds her. "Blimey, number forty-eight was a difficult one," he continues. "She kept asking me all sorts of questions and all I could do was smile. I think she wanted to save me from myself." Siddiq is perhaps the coolest specimen of them all. But he opens his mouth and the illusion is shattered. He comes from Bangladesh via the East End. Sam has told him to keep his mouth firmly shut when he is working.

"Jonathan, throw that sandwich away. You're late for number twelve."

Sam comes in and breaks up the party.

"Me? But I've just done one."

"Never mind, she specially asked for you." He grins wickedly. "All ten stone of you." As I go out he pats me on the head. "Give her a rough time," he says, "she likes it that way." I know that already from experience, and that's what's worrying me.



As usual my friends chose the most difficult way up Cheddar Gorge, a steep, almost vertical, path cut into the rock. There are trees growing out of the rock face and you have to hold on to what you can to pull yourself up. My friends race ahead and I bring up the rear rather reluctantly, in my

trainers with the great holes in them. Every time I look over my shoulder the view is more magnificent.

Gasping for breath we reach the top in time to see the sun set over a metallic white sea. Up here there is still light, but down below the road stretches like a dirty brown ribbon into the darkness.

“Come on,” she says, “time to go home.” But which way? We have wandered so far across the top it is impossible to find the way we came up. Almost every way leads down so we plunge recklessly through the copper-coloured bracken. At least my friends plunge, laughing and giggling. I slide as cautiously as I can on my backside. Funny sort of way to be taken care of, really, but after being a sadist all week it’s fun being a masochist for a change. The undergrowth is turning purple in the twilight as we skate down the final stretch of gravel at the bottom.

Back home she bakes scones for us and we eat them hot with mountains of whipped cream and homemade raspberry jam.

“We’re staying Sunday, aren’t we?” they ask each other, and my heart sinks, for early Monday morning I’m due back in Hell.

“I think we should go back,” I say weakly.

“Monday’s a bank holiday,” they remind me. But Hell works on bank holidays. It works seven days a week, twenty four hours a day. No rest for the wicked.

All the same I finish my bath long before they do and nip downstairs. I pick up the hall phone praying they won’t hear the click on the extension upstairs.

“Hello, can I speak to Sam, please?”

“Sam’s off duty. Jean-Luc here. Can I help you?”

“I hope so. My name’s Jonathan. I work there. I’ve come down to Somerset for the weekend and the car has broken down. We’re going to try and get it fixed, but you know what it’s like in the country. I may be a bit late Monday morning. I hope that’s OK?”

I can hear the chuckle at the other end of the phone. “I’ll leave Sam the message.” He doesn’t believe me, but I don’t have a chance to improve on my excuse because I can hear the bath water running out.

By the time they come down I’ve cooked dinner—fish in cream and cardamom—a North Indian dish. She is wearing a black dress with a touch of gold at the throat and I don’t think she has ever looked lovelier. And when I go to sleep that night I feel tired, more tired than I ever felt after a day in Hell: it’s good to work, of course; even better to enjoy the company of your friends.

The marble entrance to Hell is somewhat larger and more plush than the eye of a needle, and all the rich and famous of London gather there. Frankly, I never saw an uglier lot. There is something honest about the ugliness of real people. But when the wrinkles are stretched and the sagging bits taped up, they begin to lose all humanity, taking on a sub-terranean sort of look.

As for the beauty you find down there, it is refined and manicured to a too-perfect standard. My colleagues move with a grace too feline to be human, too calculated to be animal. To watch them congregate in that kitchen is to watch a room full of prima ballerinas, each the dying swan. An embarrassment of riches.

But I'm afraid to say there is one thing common to all of us, a common missing element so to speak in our makeup; a debilitating weakness that binds us to each other and keeps us united, like victims of some esoteric and unfashionable disease: charming children of the Third World, we're hopelessly deficient in the one vitamin so essential to a fulfilled and nourishing life above ground. *Vitamin V*, I call it. *V for visa*. But we don't talk about it. We see the signs of affliction in each other's eyes, we are afraid.

I have tried hard to dislike my fellow workers but each day it gets more difficult. They have adopted me as their mascot and each tells me minor, inconsequential secrets he would be shy of telling the others. Who, after all, is afraid of revealing himself to his pet dog? With Latifah it's her religion; with Siddiq his insecurity about his accent, and Sam, even Sam has his love of schmaltzy music. The only one who remains aloof is Marek. There are pictures of him plastered all over this town smiling as if he hasn't a care in the world, but in the flesh his features are as hard as granite, never relaxing for a moment. He lives quite close to me and the other day we shared a bus home. Just before he got off at his stop he pointed to a window high up with two faces at it, both sandy haired, both freckled.

"My old woman and my kid," he said. Six words that have since made it a little bit easier to like him.

Their trust in me makes me want to reciprocate, and each day I pray: Oh God, if only I could. But to love somebody is to give of yourself to them. What you give you can never take back: what they possess of you will always give them a hold over you. This phase of my life has to be lived in layers, each a separate skin, and when the time comes as it must to slough off this particular layer, I don't want to feel as if I am chopping a limb off because there are people out there who possess a piece of me.

It is Sunday morning and the church bells are ringing. I am in the conservatory as usual with a small tray of water-colours and a jam jar of water. I can feel the fingers of sunshine massaging my back and the layers of liquid green flow down the paper and merge with the layers of yellow and blue. If only life could always be like this. One day, I vow, one day.

There is a Saxon church in the village and although it belongs to a religion none of us follow we decide to go. The church is cool and dark inside, and deserted, for we have missed the midday service, thank God. And when we come out, I put my arms around them and say, "We'll travel back Monday, it's settled." They look at each other secretly and smile. To them there was never any question.

After lunch we pack a fishing rod and two jam jars—one full of water, one full of worms—and set off for the river. There is a solitary cow in the next field who seems to want to join us. In fact she is getting quite chatty over the fence. The fact that we have caught nothing the whole afternoon is of no consequence. It has been a good excuse to lie in the long tall summer grass making daisy chains.

And when we get back in the evening, surprise, surprise, they are showing the *Merry Widow* on the box, and I think of all those floors I shall not be scrubbing tomorrow, and wonder with despair who am I trying to kid by saying I can manage to keep the layers separate. It is always like this with my friends: the very comfort and happiness I draw from them during these rare weekends away serve also to rot the strength of mind I need to possess if I am to survive in Hell. It is my fault, not theirs.

Perhaps I am doomed to live the rest of my life oscillating between contented indolence and disciplined fanaticism, never entirely happy in either state because of the memory of the other.

That night I have bad dreams, and when we set off next morning it is in silence. As we drive up the motorway I long to reach out from the back seat and touch my two friends, like a pilgrim who touches the holy shrine for the last time, knowing full well that the memory of that touch is all that he has to take back with him. But I can't: I feel paralysed, and though it is sunny outside there is a chill creeping up my legs.