

“I’ve read the Memoirs of Benvenuto Cellini, as sure as you’re looking at me now, and in Italian, what’s more! That chap, a pretty bright spark, taught me to imitate Providence, which kills us all at random, and to love beauty wherever it may be found.”

—Spoken by Vautrin, in Honore De Balzac’s novel *Pere Goriot*

### Cellini’s Revenge

Sudden Events 1956

On the south coast of England, four miles east of Brighton, stands an old village, long settled into the earth over hundreds of years: the smuggler’s village of Rottingdean. Tunnels under the streets are evidence of secret sailing hauls from times long past.

On a November afternoon in 1956 in this coastal village, it seemed like a perfectly ordinary day. Intermittent white clouds lingered southwest before a blue sky, and distant seagulls swarmed over the languishing sea.

Catherine stood in the village greengrocer’s queue and glanced up at her house on the hill, the last one at the top of Neale Street. She didn’t see David’s car coming back down the road to pick her up, but the walk back would do her good.

While she waited for her turn, Catherine looked through the pages of *The Daily Mail*, skipping the bold headlines about the news in Hungary and the Suez Canal, and instead, turning the pages of her newspaper and glancing at her horoscope. November 3, 1956: “Sudden events will change the course of your life.”

Catherine smiled to herself. Life was so tranquil at the English seaside; nothing unexpected or sudden ever happened there. She didn’t believe in horoscopes anyway. She folded the paper and stuffed it into her woven shopping bag. She ordered two large onions, a little flower of broccoli, and a bunch of carrots, complete with the green, wispy stocks, and held her cloth bag open for the greengrocer, who put them in carefully next to the newspaper. She laid two shillings into the palm of his stubby hand.

After the bustle of London, Catherine felt relieved to live in their lovely house by the sea. For her it was a perch where she could observe the slanted rain, the rolling, thunderous clouds, and sometimes, on a walk, the thrashing waves against Brighton’s pier; where she could tuck herself into her favorite armchair while witnessing the daily drama of pastel colors churning across the lively sky. She felt calm and serene just now, remembering how David had finally said the night before that he was ready to have a child.

The endless waves in the distance gave a rhythm to Catherine’s life. A black cloud lurked at the edge of the horizon. Two seagulls above Catherine banked against the wind and squealed their harsh notes. The

cloud crawled across the sky with a blast of wind from nowhere, transforming the whole village from the sparkle of sunshine against the windows into the heaviness of a plunge into darkness. Villagers scurried for shelter as the rain splattered onto their red noses.

Catherine pulled the hood of her duffle coat over her head while cradling one bag of groceries under each arm. She nodded at their local policeman, their “bobby,” as he hunkered down with his slight smile and splashed by on his bicycle. She hoisted the bulging shopping bags higher as she began to trudge back up the hill, her American leather loafers shielding her from the gravel and mud. A young boy rattled down past her at top speed on his shiny black broad-wheeled bicycle. A blind man with only one leg hobbled across her path on crutches, saying “Sorry” as he crossed in front of her; but she felt she should have been sorry. Surely he was the one who had fought in the war. A jumble of seagulls ahead of her on the ground scuttled away from the breadcrumbs the blind man had just finished tossing to them.

The war was really over, even if the holes around the bombed buildings in the East End and Fleet Street were still there. Buildings all around the newspaper offices and local pubs had been burned and collapsed, leaving huge, gaping stories of death and misery. Catherine shuddered when airplanes flew over. Sometimes, even though she had not lived in England until after the war, it was all she could do not to run and duck under a wall, a tree, a house.

It was not an easy stretch from the shops up the hill to their house. But she couldn’t wait for David. Strange, with this sudden downpour, that he wasn’t there yet.

Catherine climbed up past the few quiet, neighboring red brick houses with pointed roofs. The wind hummed roughly past her ears, almost like it was lurking behind the hills, ready to whisk itself and the leaning, long grass into a swirl of frenzy. Their neighbors had pulled their shades, seemed to be gone for the day.

Catherine turned onto the dirt pathway leading across the yard to their front door and was surprised to find that it was ajar. They never locked it, but she felt sure she had closed it firmly. David’s old car was parked there in the yard. She nudged the door further open with her elbow, her arms still full, and kicked it closed with her foot. It banged hollowly and she stiffened as she noticed a musty, unfamiliar smell in the hallway.

“Hello, dear,” she called. He would be home from the usual Saturday London-to-Brighton train, had likely dozed off by the gas fire in the kitchen. She rested the groceries on the long hallway table and unbuttoned her coat. An eerie silence, heavy and dark, greeted her. She stood immobile and cocked her head.

“Hello, dear!” she tried again, a little more forcefully. The grandfather clock ticked, and the ocean hissed like a snake, far in the distance. Their cat, Alexander, brushed her leg, purring. She hung her duffle coat on the coat rack, slung her scarf over it, and picked up the groceries from the table.

“Darling, I’m home.”

Catherine walked through the long hallway toward the little kitchen at the back of their house. The kitchen door was also slightly ajar. She knew she'd closed it, to keep the precious heat inside. Maybe David had just gone in and left it open for a moment. She stood awhile, hesitating. She listened. The cat's purring continued. She pushed the door open a little more with her foot.

More heat was escaping into the rest of the house. Catherine pushed the door further and edged in. Just as she was about to set her groceries on the table she saw a fleshy hand, lifeless on the floor.

Catherine's body was pulled down, like gravity gone mad. Her vision was suddenly blurred, her hearing muted, as though she were drowning. Her chest exploded and caved in, a burning, breathless anguish taking over her entire body. David was lying there on his side in a pool of blood.

"David!" The groceries dropped onto the floor from her arms, oranges and tomatoes rolling away like guilty balls of energy. She fell onto her knees and turned him over.

"David!" she cried, brushing the back of her hand across his short, fair hair, which draped along his marble-white forehead and above his frozen eyes. As she drew the back of her hand across the sandpaper stubble on his cheek, she saw the dark red blood that had soaked through his gray tweed jacket. The bloody fingers of his left hand were clenched like iron jaws around the knife protruding from his blood red button-down shirt. Instinctively, she reached over and peeled his fingers from the knife, pulling it from his body and letting it clatter across the floor amongst the scattered groceries.

"David?" she said hoarsely, her tears blurring the reality of the wet, red floor, and the stiffening, cold body before her. Her mouth hung wide as she realized that he would never hear her say his name again.

Catherine's throat was too paralyzed to make another sound. She quietly reached over and touched David's cheek once again, realizing that this rough growth of unshaven beard would be her last physical contact with him. The agony of that moment: the cold, lifeless corpse lying there that was once love, the silence that bounced back from her tears, the baby that would never be conceived, the life that died in her heart as she witnessed the end of every dream she had...all of it crashed in slow motion around her ears, like fog diminishing her brain.

Who could have done this to her husband? Who could hate him so? Who? Her watery eyes surveyed the kitchen for clues, but all was quiet. There were no signs of another human being; just the Cellini manuscript an inch from his other hand on the floor.

Drops of blood splattered her dress, and she looked at her hand, slightly smudged with his blood now. With her other hand she reached for his handkerchief, pulled it out of his jacket pocket and up to her mouth with a long, bitter howl, then pushed it up her cardigan sleeve. She stood up, inched backward, and ran back down the hallway.

Was the corner shop open? The public call box was broken again. The shopkeeper would let her use the phone. She yanked her scarf and duffle coat from the coat rack, which crashed onto the floor, and ran out the door and down the steep old cobblestone road, her shoes clattering on the wet surface. The clouds ferociously emptied their raindrops on her face, where they mixed with her tears. Not feeling the

sudden cold, but hardly able to breathe, Catherine rushed to telephone the police. She finally arrived at the shop, her mouth dry, her throat tight, and panting loudly, banged on the door. No one answered. She pounded and yelled, "Hello? Hello? Help me! Please, I need to use your phone!" But the shop was quiet and no one answered her.

Dark clouds blew across the sky, like all the smoke in London's chimneys had gathered to spew their grit and anger right there on Rottingdean. Catherine covered her head with the hood of her duffle coat and leaned breathlessly against the mossy old stone wall. The swift change back into the usual damp November cold penetrated through her coat and into her arms as she stood there paralyzed, like she was supporting the wall.

The handkerchief with David's initials engraved in blue fell from her cardigan sleeve onto the bumpy cobbled stones. She saw the handkerchief in a haze. It seemed so far away. The distant ocean rumbled. The wind pushed against her hood. The handkerchief limped toward her in the wind like a drunken man, lifting and collapsing, dragging and inching sideways, but toward her. She ran to it, reached out and put her hand on it like a cat's pouncing paw.

She turned and felt the weight of her shoes, one in front of the other, carrying her away from the shop. She lifted her green wool scarf over her nose and, sticking out her bottom lip, blew her hot breath up to warm her cold nostrils.

The little hut at the bottom of their hill where the local policeman stayed was shut up. The few people out were hurrying home, heads down, hats and hoods up, eyes on the ground. Catherine trembled, not knowing what to do. She shivered with fear and shock, the wet handkerchief still in her hand. She placed it in her coat pocket.

Growing darkness turned the streetlights into shadows of moving monsters. The pub wasn't open yet. The shops had all shut. The bobby, hunched down against the ocean wind, cycled in the distance, thankfully in her direction. Catherine darted toward him, waving, shouting, "Help! Help me!" Tearing her hood from her bun, her long, red hair fell around her wet face.

"Help me! Please help me! My husband's been murdered!"

And as she looked at the bobby's concerned expression, for the second time her whole life caved in, for she and David had never officially married. But of course, the truth would come out and the little gossipy village would now know their secret, which they thought they had left behind in London.