



THE TWO SECRETS

1

I have decided, for therapeutic reasons, to write an account of my life over the last couple of months. I intend this account to remain private, but it is possible, of course, that these words will be read by somebody else one day. To try to preserve the anonymity of those concerned, therefore, I have changed the names of most of the non-famous people mentioned, including myself.

I have also decided on three rules:

1. To write about myself as a character in a novel, occasionally addressing the reader. I won't go so far as writing in the third person – 'Robert gasped with shock' – but I have always wanted to write a novel and this will hopefully give me a clearer perspective on my actions.
2. To write everything in chronological order and not get ahead of myself. It would be easy to write with a sense of hindsight, knowing what happens to one of the characters.
3. To stick to the truth at all times.

So picture me, if you will, walking back to my office having lunched at the Metro Café in Finsbury Park. (I can still remember what I had to eat that day – ratatouille crêpes.) I am 42 years old. Louise, the receptionist in my office, says that I bear a resemblance to Hugh Laurie. Very flattering, I'm sure. Ah! And now that I have mentioned her, here is Louise. She is half my age and has an engaging manner. Who should I compare her to? Lily Allen, if you can picture the pop singer? I have entered the foyer of the architectural firm I own with Peter to find Louise sitting behind her desk, blushing and flapping at me to come over...

'Where have you been?'

'I was at lunch.'

'Oh, my God! I could have died! She's been waiting in your office for the last ten minutes.'

'Who's been waiting in my office?'



Louise gazed one way and then the other.

‘Tamara Collins. The actual Tamara Collins. In person. She arrived in a pink Mini Cooper and strolled in here all on her own.’

I had noticed the Mini Cooper on coming in, and wondered if its driver might be a potential client. As for Tamara Collins – in person – waiting in my office, that could only be a joke. Tamara Collins, or the only person of that name I could think of, was the British actress beloved of the tabloids, famed for baring all in the BBC drama *The Medicis*, before going onto worldwide acclaim in the film *Lachrymosa*.

‘Did you make her a coffee?’

‘Tea with two sugars,’ Louise breathed fervently.

‘OK. Let me know when Keira Knightley and Catherine Zeta-Jones arrive.’

I opened the door to my office located beyond Louise’s desk. Somebody, at any rate, was waiting for me. Upon hearing me enter, my visitor turned around in her chair, prompting me to utter a phrase favoured by my late father, but which I don’t believe I have come out with before or since.

‘Good gracious me!’

For facing me was indeed Tamara Collins. The actual Tamara Collins. In person. I am not by nature star-struck. A *Hello!* article I had browsed at the dentist’s depicting the ‘Tumultuous Tamara’ and her husband lounging in their Lake Como chalet, I recalled largely for the design of the beams in their living-room ceiling. Nevertheless, it is always a shock, I imagine, for those who don’t move in such illustrious circles to encounter a genuine A-list celebrity.

She smiled at my exclamation.

‘Mr Hillier?’ She stood up and we shook hands. ‘Do you mind if I call you by your first name?’

I shook my head.

‘OK. Robert, it is. Or, as the Italians say, Roberto. I’ve just been looking at some of your designs. That one’ – she pointed to a section drawing of a barn conversion in Woodford on the wall – ‘is amazing.’

I moved behind my desk, conscious of my fogeyish jacket and my untidy office with its drawing-boards and protractors. The house depicted was one of my proudest achievements. The



centrepiece was a two-storey living room with a wrap-around library balcony for which I had picked up a RIBA award. It just goes to show what you can do (although I probably shouldn't say this) when the client has a practically limitless amount of money and allows you a free rein.

'Could you do something like that in my place?'

Her place, she added, was a Georgian townhouse. She wasn't, she pointed out, as much into books as my Woodford client, but she did like the idea of a living room that was twice its normal height.

'Perhaps you could have Roman columns,' I hazarded, 'and use the extra space for paintings and tapestries.'

This suggestion was not as intuitive as it sounded. The Georgian style of housing is linked with the classical period and I recalled that she was Italian or half-Italian. In addition, her (Jimmy Choo?) shoes, with their thin leather strips, somewhat evoked the ancient era.

She gazed at me in astonishment.

'That's amazing. I already have Roman columns in my living room.'

She sat down and we contemplated my genius for a second. I found it distinctly strange that she should come to Hillier and Scotchley for her architectural needs. We are a relatively small outfit and, although we have numerous reference sites and people to recommend us, I couldn't think of a single client who might move in such celebrity circles.

'So what can I help you with?'

She crossed her legs, swallowed and, to my surprise, took a moment to compose herself. I have to say that she looked stunning. Although her green and black patterned skirt, orange T-shirt and pink cardigan could hardly be termed glamorous, she had a certain glow. It is an odd feeling talking to somebody famous. Do these people have more charisma than other people? Or is it simply because you know that they are famous that you feel their presence more acutely?

'You're James's father, aren't you? Has James spoken to you about last night?'

The world was becoming an ever more surreal place. Had my nineteen-year-old son somehow bumped into Tamara Collins and, rather improbably, recommended me for a job? James, in fact, had not spoken to me for a fortnight. When he had gone off to university, even though he had



moved only three miles away, he had cut his ties with me significantly. I love my son dearly but, since the suicide of his mum – my late wife, Jill – I confess that our relationship has been strained.

Tamara Collins placed her hands together in prayer and leaned forward. I was reminded of the scene in *Lachrymosa* where she, the peasant girl, petitioned the priest for forgiveness employing those same cobalt-blue eyes. A strand of her blonde hair had hooked over one eyebrow and looked as messy as it had in the film.

‘A misunderstanding occurred. I’m really, really sorry. James and I were rehearsing a play I’m in in the West End. Unfortunately Lewis, my husband, interrupted us in the middle of a seduction scene.’

‘Is James OK?’

‘He’s fine. He and Lewis just had a sort of scuffle.’

I frowned.

‘Didn’t your husband realize you were rehearsing?’

She stared reflectively at the ceiling.

‘I guess that there was more to it than that. I think the hostility between them dates back to when we were in Italy.’

I was struggling to keep up. Presumably she was referring to James’s month-long trip around Europe, even if he had neglected to mention (a small oversight) bumping into Tamara Collins.

While she spoke about how James had dropped in on her and stayed for a week – a week! – I recalled our family’s connection with the Collinses. In her last job, my wife had worked for an old acquaintance who happened to be the husband of Tamara’s sister, Yvonne. A close link, I suppose, but Jill and I had never socialized with Yvonne or, so far as I was aware, even met her.

‘James and I have a lot in common,’ she said surprisingly. ‘I remember feeling the same way at his age – feeling this need to express myself, to do everything and to go everywhere. In Italy’ – she glanced at the framed photo of Jill and James on my desk – ‘we talked a lot about his mum and how I felt about losing my dad. I think maybe Lewis was jealous of the time we spent together. You’d think by now he’d be used to the way we actors interact.’

One of her legs rested on top of the other, showing off the shape of her calves extending up



from her high-heeled shoes. Tamara Collins as a friend of my son! It was hard to imagine somebody so worldly associating with somebody who, although good-looking (or so I've been told), is a gangling youth not renowned for his social skills.

'So what happened last night?'

In the *Hello!* article Tamara's husband had been a big man with a suspicion of a beard. Some sort of film producer or director?

She was about to respond when her phone beeped.

'*Mannaggia spannaggia.*' She checked her messages. 'My publicist wants me to do a magazine interview. My contract stipulates I have to do a certain number of them to promote this play that I'm in. Anyway' – she returned her phone to her pocket – 'about the scuffle. I told Lewis that we were only acting and, now that he understands, he's profoundly embarrassed. When he came into the room, James and I were hugging each other – just as it says we should do in the script. Unfortunately, Lewis got the wrong end of the stick and threw a few punches at James. The whole thing was stupid.'

Maybe it was stupid, but I was already dialling James's number. There was no response and so I left a message for him to call me back. Then I tried the number of his bedsit. I noticed as I was doing this that Tamara Collins was again looking at the photo of Jill and James.

'I'm sure James isn't badly hurt,' she said. 'I was shouting at Lewis to stop and I think I managed to slow him down. My husband has a bit of a temper. That's why I've come here to explain what happened so that you don't get the wrong impression.'

No answer from the bedsit. Surely she could see that something was odd about all this. Why hadn't James called me himself? Why wasn't her husband doing the apologizing, not to me but to James? What was this woman, a worldwide icon, doing talking to me?

'Have you or your husband spoken to James since the scuffle?'

She shook her head.

'Do you have any idea where he is?'

'*Mi dispiace*, Roberto.'

'I'm afraid my Italian...'

'Forgive me. *Mi dispiace* means "sorry".'



Apparently, she had told James, on his way out, that she would have a word with Lewis and explain the misunderstanding. Since then, however, she had not managed to see or speak to James, which was partly why she had come to see me.

‘Don’t worry, Roberto. If you like, we can visit James’s favourite haunts and try and find him.’

Being told again not to worry was ironically having the opposite effect. (And addressing me as ‘Roberto’ did not improve matters.) What was I to make of her offer to go looking for James? Was she worried about the story leaking out to the media? It was strange that what had happened wasn’t supposed to be serious and yet here she was in my office, wringing her hands and staring at me plaintively. Another question going through my mind was over the extent of her knowledge about my relationship with James. I didn’t want to admit that he had told me nothing about their friendship or of his desire to be an actor. James was in the second year of a mechanical engineering degree at UCL which, in my innocence, I had thought would keep him occupied.

‘Thank you for coming here,’ I said, wondering how she had got my work address. ‘I don’t think, though, we need to go searching for James together. I’ll tell him when I see him that you were very kind in paying me a visit.’

We noted down each other’s details and then I escorted her to the front door.

‘It’s lovely to meet you, Roberto,’ she said, squeezing my shoulder. ‘Don’t ask me why, but I feel that you and I will be great friends. Isn’t that strange?’

Yes. Very strange. Nonetheless, I returned her smile as she waved goodbye.

As she strode out of the building, I turned to see Louise, our office manager-cum-receptionist-cum-eavesdropper, suddenly sitting up from a pose of quiet concentration.

‘Look, look!’ she said, glancing out of the window. ‘I told you that she came here on her own with no minder or entourage.’

She dashed over to the window and eyeballed the road until the Mini had disappeared.

‘Wow!’ she gushed.

She returned to her desk, collapsed into her chair, but then immediately sat up.

“Can I speak to Robert Hillier?” she said, imitating Tamara Collins. And I said, “No, Mr Hillier’s out.” (I called you “Mr Hillier”.) But, I added, “he should be back soon.” And she said, “Is it all right if I



wait for him in his office?" And I said, "Yes, that's all right, no problem, it's over there." *That's all right, no problem, I said.* My very words! Oh, my God, oh, my God, oh, my God! Tamara Collins! In our office! Talking to me! A thought struck her and she stood up. 'Hey! Did you see if she drank the tea that I made her?'

Instead of waiting for my reply, she scooted around her desk and ran into my office.

'I was tempted to knock on your door and ask if you wanted another one.'

'I didn't get one in the first place,' I said inconsequentially.

"Roberto," she called you. Oh, my God, I could have died! Yes, yes! Look! She drank most of the tea. There's a little bit in the bottom, but that's OK, she obviously liked it. So come on. Spill the beans, "Roberto". What was she doing here? Something about James? And she's embarrassed about something? Oh, my God, didn't you think she looked beautiful? My ex is nuts about her. His tongue was practically hanging out when she was doing that scene in *Julianna* – you know, the one where she takes about five minutes to remove her suspenders. And could you believe how she was acting towards you, pushing her breasts out here, there and everywhere?'

Louise did a quick, and much exaggerated, impression of our visitor.

'Don't ask me why,' she said, squeezing my shoulder, 'but I feel that you and I will be great friends.' She giggled coquettishly. 'Isn't that strange?'

Realizing that I would get no peace otherwise, I divulged the gist of my recent conversation.

'And she came all the way to Finsbury Park to tell you about a scuffle?'

Unfortunately for Louise, at that moment, the phone in reception rang. She seemed reluctant to do anything about it, but I adjusted my expression in what I hoped was a 'You'd better answer the phone' sort of way.

'God,' she spluttered, 'you're such a tyrant.'

By the time she had replaced the receiver – 'Yes, I'll just put you through...' – I was heading outside.

'Don't go,' she pleaded. 'Did you get her autograph? Sorry. Stupid question.' She began again. 'I remember reading about her husband, the film director, Lewis Lawson. Didn't he attack a photographer? Oops, sorry again. But Tamara Collins looked amazing, didn't she? Especially



considering...'

She allowed the words to tail off.

'Considering what?' I asked inevitably.

According to Louise, who seemed to know an inordinate amount about the subject, Tamara Collins had thrown herself into her job after her father had died. This had led to serious burnout. She had become fed up with movie shoots starting at five in the morning, fed up with making one film after the other, and fed up with LA. Around three or four months ago, she had announced that she would take a break from work to see what took her fancy in Europe (not, I hoped, my son). Naturally – although I was unaware of any such speculation – this move out of the limelight had only increased media interest in her life.

I told Louise that I would be away looking for James for an hour or two.

'That's all right, you go.'

'Thank you,' I said pointedly.

The mind is a funny thing. Over lunch I had been thinking about my to-do list – checking designs for an office complex in King's Cross, submitting a planning application for a school refurbishment programme in Holloway, visiting a residential property in Tottenham. Now, though, I was focused on James. And also, because I could imagine how worried she would have been in the circumstances, his mother.

Jill and I had met at a Christmas party at the University of Southampton. We had been introduced by a mutual friend and, unusually for me, I had chatted her up. At the time, I had looked young for my age and I remember my shock when Jill, who seemed very sophisticated, agreed to go on a date with me. As soon as I got back to my hall of residence, I had called my mother and told her that I thought I was in love.

'What is she like, this Jill?'

I said that she was slim with big eyes. I think that my mother was expecting a little more information.

'Well, I hope that she's a nice sort of girl. You will be careful, Robert, won't you?'

I presumed that she was talking about me not getting my heart broken. In those days, the



biggest worry that could befall a student was failing to get an essay in on time. Jill and I managed, however, to give ourselves another worry. Jill, for perfectly logical reasons, fell pregnant. I remember visiting her in her digs, the two of us sitting on her bed, and her handing me a white tube.

'It's a pregnancy test kit,' she explained.

I looked at the so-called pregnancy test kit.

'Does this mean...?'

'Yes, Robert, it does.'

I stared, mesmerized, at the two red lines in the little window. When I looked up again, Jill was smiling and looking more beautiful than ever. The possibility of Jill becoming pregnant had naturally occurred to me but, somehow, the news still came as a shock, as if it was something that only happened to other people. Jill and I had known each other for three weeks. However, after a moment's thought, I decided that this was the most wonderful news ever. I got down on my knees – or, to be precise, on one knee – as the tears sprang into my eyes...

The choice we left ourselves was either to give the baby up for adoption, favoured by both Jill's parents and mine, or for one of us to give up university and look after Theo (he became James around Jill's third month of pregnancy). As lawyers generally earn more money than architects (Jill's argument), I gave up my degree and became a full-time house-husband. This was a slightly unusual thing to do in the 1990s and, in all honesty, I can't vouch for how well I fared. I certainly gained an insight into the lives of most women as regards to changing nappies, night-time feeds and toilet-training. This last activity seemed especially challenging for James, who liked to experiment and did not see why the bathroom should be the preserve for such affairs. On one occasion I remember him standing on top of his toy box and weeing with surprising accuracy over each one of his toys. I also recall, in the evenings, carrying him for hours, patting him on the back to soothe him from the terrible colic he suffered from. One night, exhausted, I lay down on the floor and lifted him up above my head, only for him to throw up over my face.

'He didn't stain the carpet, did he?' Jill asked, solicitously.

How did I differ as a man bringing up a baby? I suppose I was one of the fastest, if not the fastest, pushchair-pushers around. I didn't go to the extreme of another househusband I knew who,



after dropping his child off at nursery, folded up his pushchair and slung it over his shoulder as if it were a hod of bricks. Nonetheless, I was pleased that, unlike a few of the mums, I did not succumb to tears when I first left James at nursery. Admittedly, I was close to it a month later when he toddled off to the other children without a backward glance...

After James had started primary school, I completed my architecture degree with the Open University and then started working from home. A stage of our lives was over. Meanwhile, Jill was experiencing difficulties at work. For women, encountering a glass ceiling in their job is as hard psychologically, I think, as it is for men who choose to become home-makers. Jill felt that her ambitions were being thwarted and her move to another firm, Dixon and Regis, didn't improve matters. As it happened, around that time, Peter Scotchley, a university friend and the best man at my wedding (who returned the favour by making me the best man at his wedding to Sue), suggested that he and I form a company. James was then 13, and Jill, who wasn't getting on with her boss, went part-time and was then made redundant. With hindsight, this affected our relationship quite crucially. Although Jill said she wanted me to go out to work, I think she resented my success. Another aspect highlighted by our change in roles was the difference in our parenting methods. Jill was more solution-orientated and less easy-going in dealing with James than I was. Arguably, she had harder problems to deal with as he went through his teenage years. At any rate, this period signalled the start of the problems in our marriage. Jill found herself in a rut and so, when James was 16, applied for a job, contacting Carl Tartaglia with whom she had shared a bedsit at university...

No answer to my knock at James's two-storey Victorian pad in Kentish Town. It was two in the afternoon and the curtains were closed – not, believe me, an unheard-of circumstance. James and his two housemates, even if they were out of bed, tended to find opening the curtains rather a chore.

What should I do?

It occurred to me to ring Clare, James's girlfriend, when a neighbour, a late-middle-aged woman with long grey hair and skin matching the colour of the pavement, emerged from the house next door.

'Excuse me,' I said. 'Do you happen to know my son? He lives in the house here and drives



the black Vauxhall Corsa over there.' I pointed to the vehicle across the road. 'He's tall, has dark curly hair, wears National Health specs—'

'Hold on, lovey,' she cut in. 'Are you talking about the ambulance?'

'What ambulance?'

'A man with dark curly hair got into the back of it this morning. He was accompanied by a woman.'

'Was he hurt?'

'I couldn't tell. He was holding his jaw like this.' She demonstrated the pose. 'Did nobody answer the door?'

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