

Manfred was honest.

He lived in a one-bedroom apartment slotted above a newsagency near the edge of a middle-class beachside suburb on the outskirts of the city. He lived alone, paid his rent once a month – always on time – and travelled, five days a week, to his office in the central business district to pursue, half-heartedly, his vocation of Accounts Clerk with a solid but obscure insurance firm.

For years Manfred's life had been anchored in routine. He had always derived enjoyment from regularity, from a sense of the fixity of things; which partly explained why, despite one overriding talent, he had barely managed, in his thirty-six years on this planet, to carve out more than the most unobtrusive of niches. Manfred's fondness for order and routine had imbued him with a conservative disposition: he simply disliked change. He was content with his lot, and comfortable with his unremarkable existence.

But then, Manfred himself was a less than remarkable individual. Neither tall nor short, stocky nor slim, overly dark nor noticeably fair, he was really quite undistinguished in appearance – except for the eyes: two blue gemstones set in a pallid, almost expressionless face. From close up they lent his features a distinction which, along with his sharp chin, Roman nose and unusual honesty, placed Manfred apart from his distinctly nondescript colleagues, with whom he socialized hardly at all.

To tell the truth, Manfred was something of a loner. Nobody could recall visiting his apartment, nobody knew much about his private life: he preferred such a condition to one in which his precious privacy – including his special pastime – might be constricted in the smallest measure.

This special pastime, Manfred's one overriding talent, was poetry. An ardent reader from his early teens, he had started composing his own poems while still at school, and by his twenties had methodically instructed himself in the poetries of all the great practitioners through the ages. In recent years he had developed the habit of jotting down his thoughts each evening after work, and these he would subsequently shape into lines and stanzas of dexterous,

energetic verse, with a felicity that occasionally surprised even him. Six fat folders now overflowed with the thousands of items penned by his hand – three thousand and twelve, to be precise.

The subjects he ranged among included – well, everything: nature, myth, music and art, history, personality, desire, faith, destiny, death ... a universe of concerns that encompassed the gamut of human experience, but with one crucial exception. Love. Manfred had never been ‘in love’. He had indulged in no more than a handful of liaisons, mostly brief, cumbersome and superficial; he had certainly never met anyone he wanted to marry. Being too honest to write about something that had played no direct part in his life, he shunned the subject, or would allude to it obliquely, in impressionistic poems about dreams, misty aspirations, unfulfilled ideals. Deep down, Manfred was an incorrigible idealist.

Very few people had been granted the privilege of inspecting Manfred’s poetical outpourings. He had once shown some of his work to his parents (who had died, within months of each other, a dozen years ago); and, in his mid-twenties, to a young teacher of literature named

Hugo with whom he had forged a tentative friendship, who had since vanished from his life and was living overseas. That was all. Nobody else knew, because in truth the poet was unaffectedly modest about his ‘scribblings’, regarding them as the mere playthings of his imagination. How could these spontaneous studies in self-indulgence, these arbitrary private diversions (however cherished), be of any interest to others, let alone represent a serious or lasting contribution to literature?

His parents had reacted with predictable admiration, even amazement, at these secret labours of their diffident only child. But Hugo, who was shown a smaller selection, read quietly for a while, stopped, took a deep breath, and proceeded to shower the poems with so many superlatives that Manfred felt compelled to reread some of the pieces over his friend’s shoulder – and was a little distressed to detect tremors of pride, even vanity, asserting themselves almost imperceptibly, as he acknowledged the force of an image, the cleverness of a rhyme, the aptness of a rhythm or trope.

Flattering as such approval might be, Manfred persisted in the belief that his poetry was of no great consequence.

Although he continued to write in his considerable spare time, he had no interest in seeking to publish any of his poems, and never even bothered to make copies. He was content with the private sense of order and structure that the writing lent to his daily life. He knew nothing about poetry-publishing, never saw the literary journals, and wouldn't have had a clue how to go about submitting his work. He was convinced that he was writing only for himself.

Until he caught sight of Hugo's slim volume.

He had spotted it quite by accident, while browsing at the remainder tables of a city bookstore. The arty two-colour jacket that adorned the slender hardback caught his eye, and when Manfred read the identity of the author he let out a gasp. Snatching up the book – it was the last copy on the table – he flicked through its generously thick pages. Was it a coincidence of name or could it really be his old literary friend, whom he hadn't seen for so long? He turned to the inside back flap and – there he was, staring at him out of a small black-and-white portrait, older, thinner, a studied little twinkle in his eye, but without doubt the same Hugo.

According to the biographical note alongside the photo, the author, an expatriate for some years, had died of ‘an incurable disease’. This was his first and only collection of poems, published posthumously.

Manfred purchased the book at once (its price was ridiculously low), and he carried it home like a long-lost treasure. When he sat down to read the poems, however, he discovered himself surprised and disappointed. It was verse of indifferent quality: not *bad*, in a way, just ... flat, unpressured, without true combustion. The language was not perfectly tuned; its rhythms, though well-controlled, lacked range and music; the imagery, if not exactly conventional, was showy and often poorly focused; the whole construction, solid enough, was functional, safe. He remembered how highly Hugo had once praised his, Manfred’s, poems. Now, reading through Hugo’s work, unable to push aside the conviction that his own was stronger, maybe a lot stronger, Manfred was seduced by the idea that he should make at least one attempt to show his poems to a publisher. He might as well satisfy himself once and for all: what did he have to lose? And whilst he still harboured serious misgivings about his writing, and doubted whether, in the larger scheme

of things, it would measure up, he was suddenly curious enough and (to be honest) proud enough of his art to put it to the test – just once, just to see.

Impelled by a certain irony of logic, Manfred opted not to approach the publishers who had issued Hugo's collection. Instead he procured the address of a well-known literary house, one apparently renowned for printing new and established writers, whose headquarters happened to be located near the city, and started to sift through his poems to prepare a portfolio.

This proved a daunting task. Manfred could not decide what to include, or how to choose from among his three thousand pieces, for he was naive about such procedures. In the end he gathered up all six of his bursting folders, bundled them into a large heavy-duty plastic bag and, on a pleasant Friday morning in early autumn, one of his rostered days off, found himself sitting on a double-decker bus, his destination the offices of the company in question. He would allow these expert literary publishers to peruse his work: in all likelihood they would judge the material unsuitable for printing and send Manfred packing – good-naturedly, of course, no doubt suggesting, with reassuring

nods and eyebrows earnestly lifted, that ‘a number of them do show style, very clever, well written; but unfortunately ...’ Then he could return confirmed – indeed, pacified – in the knowledge that his poetry was for his own eyes only, and had nothing to offer the world of letters.

For Manfred was too honest to let himself succumb to vanity. At moments when the urge to succumb was exceptionally strong, he battled not to drop his guard and indulge the luxury of tolerating such weakness. In this vigilance, this relentless monitoring of his subtler impulses, Manfred was nothing short of ruthless. If he was too honest to deceive himself, he was no less astute at recognizing promptly when the danger loomed.

Manfred had been on the bus for about a quarter of an hour, a variety of thoughts traversing his mind, when an incident in itself utterly trivial took place. It was to change, utterly, the course of Manfred’s life.

The compartment was practically empty and Manfred, looking like a jaded traveller lost in a daydream, was gazing out the window at the passers-by, weighing up their clothes, their gait, their expressions, noting wryly how vulnerable, even dismal, seemed so many of these specimens of human-

ity, how self-absorbed, how wrapped up in their preoccupations, and how little they tried to disguise it. To Manfred, their characteristic demeanour was one of helplessness, or emptiness, or a bleakly assertive defiance; the masks floated, helpless, empty, bleak, about the faces of these automatons. He felt a poem whirling up.

His inspired reverie was cut short by the incident just alluded to. Something nearby had distracted Manfred; he glanced toward the aisle. As he did so, his view was eclipsed by the coat of a fellow passenger, a largish woman who had been sitting on the other side of the aisle, just one seat ahead, and had stood up to hurry past – he caught a whiff of the perfumed vapour that trailed her as she disappeared down the stairwell of the double-decker (Manfred always preferred to ride upstairs). This event, the departure of the largish woman, would have had no further repercussions had it not caused Manfred's eyes to linger vacantly over the area where she had been sitting. At once he noticed something curious.

On the newly vacated seat, nuzzled into the dark crease between bench and backrest, was a shiny blue leather purse. Within a hand's reach from Manfred, it bulged and beck-

oned, as if stuffed with mysterious treasures; to verify this notion, the corner of a hefty clutch of banknotes protruded coquettishly from between its steel lips.

But Manfred was honest. He jerked his eyes towards the back of the compartment and nearly called out to the woman, but she had already vanished. The bus lurched forward: she must have got off. He blinked in dismay. The six or seven passengers in the compartment were buried in their newspapers or books; a well-dressed couple sat up front, lost in romance and chatter. A grey-haired gentleman shuffled within his briefcase, smoothed himself down as he stood to depart. Nobody had noticed the purse – Manfred alone was positioned within view of the dark-blue object. The bus continued on its way, sped up, then almost immediately braked, squealing as it approached the next stop.

Manfred winced. He took stock of the situation, as he always tried to do when in doubt. A woman had been sitting in this compartment and now she was gone. She had let drop onto her seat a purse that might well contain her life's savings, had risen to pull the cord, had abandoned the seat, and had climbed clattering down the steps – leaving her precious purse behind! Foolish woman.

Manfred knew that numerous others would have welcomed so unexpected a gift from the gods. They would clench the blue satchel under their jacket as they trundled innocently down the stairwell, to disappear forever. They wouldn't think twice about the plight of a silly old lady (surely she had discovered her oversight by now); they would merely chuckle at their good fortune.

Ah, but Manfred was honest.

He swung out of his seat and dashed down the steps, the purse squeezed between his hand and his chest like some antique salute. Could he find her again? The bus had travelled only one stop further; if he raced towards the previous stop he must surely spot her, standing there with that pathetic look of helplessness, a poor picture of the chilling emotion that rises up in such moments: that startling, awful realization of loss, paralysing the will as it sickens the stomach. Manfred's sharpest memory of such a moment was powerful enough to make him feel for this innocent, unfortunate creature all the more: the memory of the day he was told that his parents had been involved in a traffic accident which had killed his father and left his mother in a coma. He recalled, as he hopped down the footpath claspings the purse, how stunned

and sickened he had felt at the instant of that fatal revelation – how horribly inadequate had been the stock condolence on the face of the constable who had knocked to deliver the news; how he had wished that the cop would strike at him, laugh at him, shoot him – anything but this rehearsed pity, this deadpan supercilious remorse ...

He imagined the same dismay imploding within the woman from the bus. What if the money in her purse *was* her life fortune, which she carried about everywhere? What if she depended upon it for her existence? How would she survive if he didn't find her? The banknotes had seemed, on the most superficial inspection (Manfred was too honest to probe too deeply, even if there had been time), to comprise a considerable sum, perhaps hundreds of dollars. As he tried to reconstruct his all-too-brief glimpse of the victim, he fancied he could remember two details: she was old, and she wore tattered clothing, sprinkled with cheap perfume. Yes, no doubt she had dabbed the perfume valiantly, defiantly, into the folds of her wrinkled visage to thrust a braver face at a world that had come to despise her. At last she had gathered together the savings of a lifetime, money she had put away only by dint of the harshest toil, and –

There she was!

He recognized her at once: the image of the figure on the bus returned with a jolt as he spotted her threading her way slowly in his direction, avoiding pedestrians and sidewalk obstacles, evidently weary but still with a spring to her step. Thank goodness she hadn't crossed the road or vanished into some hidden door or dingy laneway; he would never have found her then. Why was she not weeping, or looking dazed? Obviously she had not yet discovered her loss.

Manfred was almost trembling now with a mixture of solicitousness and, yes, pride, permitting himself to anticipate the pleasure, even the glory, in which he would shortly bask as the deliverer of this hapless old scarecrow ...

But the woman was no scarecrow. As Manfred drew up beside her, he felt an abrupt pang, like a remote jab from somewhere inside his memory. Yet he knew that she was a total stranger. What was bothering him? He suppressed these misgivings as he studied the lady. She was in her late forties or early fifties, well-groomed, with a rather puffed-out, fattish face, from which a rosy proboscis bulged; her cheeks were rouge-daubed, lending an illusion of premature aging; her sleek black mink coat hung in a jaunty vertical

from her shoulders, which were quite broad. She looked for all the world like a Hollywood gossip-columnist from the 1950s. Beneath the mink, she sported a much too noisy paisley blouse which clashed with the olive-green boots, while the blue skirt that managed to peep from behind the half-open coat revealed a torso endowed with both ample-ness and the trinkets of wealth. Dangling from her elbow, nudged by an array of golden bracelets, was a deep-blue leather handbag. She most definitely was not the destitute crone that Manfred's fancy had so briskly, so floridly concocted. How had it happened?

And why was he feeling so ... queasy?

She turned towards him, for it had become apparent that someone was about to address her. Manfred noted with disappointment that she showed no awareness of having discarded her purse; rather, she had that restless, questing expression which suggested she might be looking for a cab. He half-smiled, and the nausea he had tasted a minute earlier washed over him again from somewhere distant. He heard himself speak.

'Is this yours?'

The two painted eyes became wellpools of wonder as

the socialite recognized her possession. Her crimsoned lips flew open and Manfred was sure that she was about to abuse him; perhaps this encounter was the doing of his imagination, and if he blinked the real woman would magically appear, in tatters and on the verge of despair, crumpling to her knees in gratitude. Manfred blinked, but the vision remained the same.

‘Oh, how ...?’

‘You left it on the bus.’ He managed a pleasant smile, without condescension, as he offered the prize to its rightful owner.

‘Is it yours?’ he repeated redundantly.

‘Why yes, thank you so much. I hadn’t even noticed.’ And she rummaged about sheepishly within her handbag, as if to confirm beyond doubt that the purse was indeed missing, was indeed genuinely hers.

‘You’ll need to be more careful in future,’ Manfred remarked, at which he could have swallowed his tongue. He smiled again, more broadly, to soothe the hackneyed reproach, for he had determined not to scold the poor ... but this wasn’t, after all, the wretched beggar-woman he had fabricated. Why had he not deduced, from the style

and polish of the blue leather purse, that such could have been no pauper's money-pouch? And why was he feeling so perturbed?

'Yes, yes, thank you. Surely I can repay you.' She had accepted the purse and was fumbling within it.

But Manfred, with a magnanimous wave of the arm, was already away, running back in the direction from which he had come, because the reason for the nausea had suddenly exploded upon him. He couldn't believe it! He sprinted towards the stop where he had jumped off the bus, craning his neck, straining his eyes down the busy roadway to make out the vehicle before it disappeared. But it *had* disappeared, and Manfred became aware that he was starting to shake. A panic the like of which he had never experienced – certainly not since that tragic constable day long ago – now seized him, and he thought his heart would collapse.

Manfred had left his poetry on the bus.

He arrived, puffed and sweating, at the bus-stop. The sickening panic had become a dull ache in the vicinity of his heart. The bus was gone, he had wasted too much time

searching for that woman to catch up with it now, his poetry could be lost forever. But this realization was instantly joined by another: maybe he had dropped the packet while chasing her, and it was lying where it had fallen, against some gutter beside the footway, ignored by commuters oblivious to the treasures their boots were brushing. Fired by this glimmer, Manfred tried to retrace his steps. He must miss nothing, and he must waste no more time: someone could still pick up the bundle.

Immersed in his quest, looping about on the sidewalk with his head down, a curiosity to the pedestrians avoiding him – this stooped, desperate, distracted man who appeared half-drunk, staring into the footpath, ferreting about in the gutters and drains – Manfred grew aware of the hopelessness of the situation: would anybody pass such a package without gathering it up, running home with it as with a pot of rainbow-gold? Could such a parcel, bulging with unknown possibilities, fail to attract the cunning squint of the first shrewd onlooker circling the city streets on his predatory rounds, or the first of a thousand like him? How long could such a plump packet, lying unattended in the middle of a busy urban thoroughfare, survive unnoticed and un-

touched before the ready claws of some streetwise scavenger closed about it for good? Though crushed by these thoughts, Manfred marshalled the courage to accost random passers-by: had they chanced to notice a large parcel, in a thick plastic bag, lying on the footpath or in the street? Of course all his questions were fruitless, all the responses rushed and negative – puzzlement, annoyance, faked sympathy, a quick shake of the head – or nothing, not even the courtesy of a glance: several of the pedestrians didn't even stop to hear him out.

Somehow it never crossed Manfred's mind to flag down a taxi and pursue the bus – by the time he'd persuaded himself that he must have left the package there, it was too late anyway. Instead, his sense of order reasserted itself, so that, even as he abandoned his search of the street, he was already formulating a three-pronged plan of action. As it took shape, the resolution comforted him a little: the thought of a plan and the steps of its implementation bolstered his spirits, and afforded a renewed hope that methodical effort not random street-scouring held the key. He began to believe that he could recover his poetry after all.

But as he sat on the bus bound for home, staring out

limply at the cars and the people thronging the lunchtime streets, imagining at every corner that this flushed businessman or that pallid office-girl was hastening along with the prize securely stashed away in briefcase or shopping-bag (casting sideways glimpses at the crowds and traffic, guarding a terrible secret) – as he watched the city rewind around him, Manfred sank into melancholy once again. He began to reconstruct in minutest detail the all-too-hazy circumstances of his momentous blunder, turning over and over in his tortured mind a spectrum of possibilities, a catalogue of questions that led him round and round until his brain was reeling and a dull headache gripped and held him as he alighted at his usual stop.

The sun was blazing huge and steadfast within a sky as blue as he had ever seen it, and Manfred was pained by the contrast between his personal tragedy and the great burning indifference of the world. Creation flaunted its constancy in the face of the most frightful catastrophes (worse, far far worse, than his puny little misadventure) and he felt at once consoled and angered by nature's steely nonchalance. Mounting the steps and entering his apartment, he caught himself reflecting bitterly that the last time he had turned

this key to this front door, all had been well and life had been secure; the last time he had rested his eyes on these books, this furniture, these records and these windows, which faced the street and revealed the unaltered, unashamed blue sky, and the last time he had breathed the air of these rooms and touched the contours of these walls, his life had been full of hopes and promises. He now understood just how much he had invested in his poetry, how much faith he had placed in the chance that something might at last flow forth from so many years of his diurnal jottings. Oh, to turn back the clock!

Manfred boiled the kettle and tried to invoke a line or two from among his thousands of poems; nothing came. He never had been a memorizer: it had been a source of admiration and wonder that certain otherwise ordinary mortals should be capable of retaining and then reciting reams and reams of other people's verse, whereas he, with so broad a body of his own work under his belt, as it were, had committed scarcely a single phrase to memory. Once, when working in a department store as a vacation casual, wrapping and dispatching parcels in the basement, Manfred had stood mesmerized while a workmate declaimed almost two whole

acts from *Julius Caesar*. The pentameter had tumbled from his lips, not exactly without feeling but with no true conviction either, nor with a rhythm entirely persuasive. Memory wasn't everything – the poetry, the poetry ...

Manfred felt that such poetry as he had written he could never write again.

It was amidst these broodings that the poet forced himself to remember his plan of action. He downed the remainder of his coffee and reflected. There were three courses open, one of which must surely conduct him to his goal. It was essential to contact the bus depot; it was necessary to write a letter to the department of public transport; and it was vital to place an advertisement in the daily press.

Early in the afternoon Manfred caught a bus to the depot from which that fateful other bus had emanated and to which it must return. His enquiries at the lost-property office were met politely but with little interest: the clerk at the counter seemed bored by so colourless a loss (she much preferred hearing about wallets stuffed with cash, gold watches, compromising photographs), though she did manage to respond

in a civil manner. She suggested that Manfred might return at the end of the week, as the ‘article’ had been lost only that very morning and it could take a few days before staff discovered lost objects or passengers handed them in – if, she added ominously, with a first hint of sympathy, they handed them in at all. But let him try again on, say, Wednesday, five days hence (today was Friday). And as she forced an insincere smile to separate her anaemic lips, Manfred read menace in the knowing mouth and the impassive eye; but he caught himself in time and shook himself and reproached himself. Paranoia would not help him recover his poetry. He must follow up every avenue, and he must certainly return on, say, Wednesday – even if he knew already that this bleak officious counter would never bear witness to his moment of triumphant reprieve: the bulging, intact ‘article’ materializing from under the desk to be presented to him by the beaming public servant, bathed in light, her smile as radiant as Manfred’s swelling heart ...

That night he typed a letter to the department of public transport, stating lucidly and formally the circumstances of his loss and requesting with equal formality that any advice or information should be ‘forwarded to the above address

with the utmost urgency', for which he would be immensely grateful. He stressed the value and importance, albeit purely personal and sentimental, of the papers inside the parcel, and he finished by underlining the efficiency with which he was confident his request would be handled.

First thing on Monday morning, after spending the most miserable weekend of his life, alone and completely abandoned to his imaginings and fears, eating little but chain-drinking black coffee, browsing mindlessly through books of paintings by Munch and Klee, listening joylessly to the Grieg concerto, a favourite, as it turned over and over on his stereo, Manfred rang the city's main daily broadsheet to place his advertisement. It read as follows:

LOST. On bus to city from eastern suburbs, last Friday, about 10 a.m., green heavy-duty plastic bag tied with string, containing several folders of manuscript; great sentimental value, reward ...

and concluded with his address and telephone numbers. Having lodged the ad, Manfred went directly to his workplace, arriving half an hour late. Nobody seemed to notice. Good. The last thing he needed now was to explain what he was going through.