

Martin Clover stopped on the way to the airport to collect his smart jacket.

‘Job interview?’ the dry-cleaning lady asked him.

Martin’s hands were shaking slightly, and he dropped his money on the floor.

‘No,’ Martin laughed. ‘I’m collecting my daughter from the airport.’

And Martin could see that the dry-cleaning lady didn’t like to be wrong, because she said, ‘Well, you’re a bag of nerves,’ and flounced to the next customer.

Martin was already sat in the airport waiting room when he remembered the photo of Angel. He had left the photo in his jacket pocket, but when he looked, there was only a card for the drycleaners – *Here to help you*. Martin walked to the bin, exposed in the middle of the waiting room, and casually tossed the card in. His shoes tapped on the tiled floor.

At two o’clock, the first swell of people flooded in; pecking and smothering loved ones like a flock of birds feeding on suited and hatted insects. Martin stood up, even though Angel’s flight wasn’t due for another half an hour. He saw a flash of Angel’s cottony hair, the yellow that softly surrounded her head, but the girl went to the other side of the room and met with a tiny woman dressed all in patent leather, even with a shining black rain cap. When the girl turned around, she had a very sharp face, a pointed nose, and Martin saw that she looked nothing like Angel.

Martin settled back into his seat, it was cold and hard, but Martin made a small pleasure sound like he was very comfortable. He watched the yellow-haired girl and the small, leathered woman walking up the long white corridor, the small woman scuttling and carrying all the bags, as though she had many arms.

Angel didn’t have a sharp nose; her nose was small and button-like. Martin smiled, the lounge had started playing soft, simmering music, but a feeling was creeping, at the edge of his mind. *Was Angel’s nose really button-like?* He tried to grasp a picture of the nose but found that he could not. A blonde woman sat down next to him and clacked sweets against her teeth, breathing through her nose while she sucked. *Angel’s eyes*, Martin thought, *she has beautiful brown eyes – but what shape were they?* Martin felt afraid. He realised that he couldn’t picture Angel’s face; he didn’t know what his daughter looked like.

Martin went to the bin, in the middle of the room – the card was there; he could almost read the words – ‘*Here to help you.*’ Martin reached into the bin and grabbed it, and nobody looked up or saw. The card wasn’t even dirty. He shuffled over to the public telephone. Martin swallowed three times. *What was he doing?*

The ringing was faint, like it was coming from a different universe, and the dry-cleaning lady was only half on the line, talking to a customer while Martin tried to explain.

‘A photo?’ the lady said. ‘Yeah, I did see a photo, actually.’

He heard her moving around where she was, shuffling things about.

‘Mr Clover,’ she said. ‘I’ll save your photo for you here. Nice and safe.’ She placated him like he was a child. Martin was undoing his tie; it was too tight.

‘Wait,’ Martin said, louder, ‘Wait!’ Nobody in the room seemed to care that he was shouting. ‘Can you describe it to me?’

He could hear the press hissing at the dry-cleaners.

‘Describe it to you?’ the lady said. ‘Ain’t this your photo?’

‘Please!’ Martin choked. He could hear a faint tapping, shuffling sound – the planes were letting people off, and they were swarming towards the waiting room.

‘Blonde-haired girl,’ the woman said, ‘brown eyes. A pink cardigan, from what I can see.’

‘Yes, yes,’ Martin was saying, ‘but what are the eyes *like?*’

The shuffling was coming closer, swelling down the windowless white corridor that led to the waiting room. The people in the waiting room dropped their newspapers and stood up expectantly, pasting smiles on to their faces.

‘What kind of eyes?’ the lady said.

People were starting to filter into the room, and sounds of delight echoed around.

‘Okay,’ said the dry-cleaning lady. ‘Sorta round, piggyish.’

Martin was silent; there was a sound right behind him.

‘Daddy?’

Martin dropped the phone.

He could hear the lady saying, ‘Listen, you asked me...’ and then the receiver was too far away to hear.

Angel was there – blonde, cottony hair and brown eyes - round, a bit piggy - just like the dry-cleaning lady had said – that was his daughter, standing right there.

‘It’s so good to see you, Daddy,’ Angel said. She handed him her bags, and he took them obediently. ‘I’m so tired,’ she said. Angel came close and rested her fluffy head on his shoulder. Martin wanted to hug his daughter, but his arms were covered in her heavy bags and stuck out right in front of him.

‘I’m sure you are,’ he said. ‘Let’s get you home, to our house.’

Angel took Martin’s hand, and they walked down the windowless white corridor together. Angel was very cold; her long nails dug slightly into his wrist. The corridor seemed to stretch on forever, and for a moment, Martin couldn’t remember how he had come to the airport.

‘We’ll go home in the car,’ he said uncertainly, and Angel just looked at him blankly, her eyes very still in their sockets. The white corridor was so long, stretching as far as he could see. Angel made them walk faster now. Martin’s legs felt very short and feeble next to his daughter’s long gait.

‘Slow down, Angel,’ he said. ‘Your old dad can’t...’ And as they travelled along the white corridor very fast, Martin saw a girl with cottony yellow hair. ‘Wait a second, Angel,’ he said - then there was another blonde girl, and another, brown eyes shaped in all different ways. There were bouncing dots of yellow, coming towards him and Angel, pink cardigans and brown eyes glinting from the end of the white corridor.