

**NEITHER REWARD
NOR PUNISHMENT**

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*In nature there are neither rewards nor
punishments – there are consequences.*

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Series.*

1

He knocked on the door. Two dull raps with the flat of his knuckles. He waited. The door was pulled open wide and the head, still holding the handle, waved him in with a sweep of his arm.

Unwin. Come in. Come in. Sit down. Sit down.

The head moved round to the far side of the broad desk and allowed himself to fall into his chair. The sleeves of his gown fell more slowly. The single sheet of paper on the dark polished surface drifted a little in the swirl of air. He swivelled slightly to his right and raised one knee over the other and interlaced his

fingers across the waistcoat of his suit and leaned back as far as the chair would let him.

Well, Unwin. Mathematics of course.

Yes, sir.

As I said to you all, the purpose of these little sessions is to give you some idea of what it will be like to be interviewed for a university place.

Dennis nodded.

Now there's no general pattern. Could be one interviewer or two. They may not ask any questions about your subject. But then they might. They'll be hoping you will talk. The more you talk the less time they will have to ask questions. Keeping his lips together he smiled.

Dennis waited.

But that doesn't mean you should talk for the sake of talking. They will want to find out about you. His forefingers unlinked themselves and made a V, tips forced together. Who you are. The V pointed towards him. What you are. The fingers moved up and down. How you think. The fingers parted. Have you got what it takes. The fingers came together and he brought them up to his face, below his bottom lip. They don't want to take on anyone who needs nursemaiding. Use each question as an opportunity to let them know more about yourself. He hunched his chair forward a few inches and reached for the sheet of paper. He looked at it for a second or two.

Sports? No rugby? No cricket? Anything?

No, sir.

The head nodded. Hobbies?

Not really.

What do you do? In your leisure time.

I read.

What do you read?

Books.

Of course. Of course. Books. But which books?

He shuffled and sat more upright. Anything.

Anything? You've no particular enthusiasms or favourite authors?

Dennis frowned. No. I read books because they have been written. Not because of what they are about or who has written them.

After you have read a book do you always think it was worth reading.

Yes.

All of them?

Yes. If someone thought it was worth writing then it must be worth reading.

Surely there are some books that make you ask why it was written?

Yes. Often.

And is there often an answer?

He looked at his own hands, palms flat together, fingers gripped between his thighs. I try to imagine the person it was written for. I try to understand the relationship between the writer and the reader. I try and understand them as people. I want to understand people.

Are the books you read predominantly novels?

No. I read non-fiction. He raised his head. Mostly non-fiction. Beyond the high shallow window in the wall behind the head, snow was falling. Floating flakes adhered to the glass and softened and slid.

But aren't such books written to inform, to educate, to enlighten? To tell you about an area of human achievement. To explain the coherence of an area of knowledge?

Yes. He flashed a quick glance at the headmaster's face. They do. Snow was accumulating in a corner of the window. But they also tell you about people. The flakes were more numerous.

You mean biography?

No, all books. A mathematics textbook tells you about people.

But you learn more about people from novels? How they behave. React. Think.

The accumulation of snow was extending up the side of the window and along the lower edge of the window. The line bounding the snow curved sharply near the corner and was almost straight at its extremes.

Unwin?

Yes, sir?

So?

It's rather like one arm of a rectangular hyperbola.

What is?

The snow. The snow on the window.

The head stared over his shoulder.

How would you determine the equation of the curve.

The headmaster slowly elevated one hip. Ah. He extracted, at length, a white handkerchief. Mathematics. He lowered the hip and silently wiped his nose, keeping his gaze on Dennis's face.

Yes. Dennis rotated his face as he continued to study the window. But where would you start? He glanced at his teacher. What assumptions? What parameters?

The head picked up the sheet of paper again. He spent a few seconds reading. His eyes did not follow any of the lines of writing. He put down the sheet. What is a number?

Sir?

What is a number?

I'm not sure what.

Come on boy, don't dither. What is a number? You mathematicians deal with them every day.

The ceiling was white. A double fluorescent tube was mounted parallel to the long uniformly pale walls. Well there are different kinds of numbers.

Yes.

A black-and-white photograph of a team of men arranged in rows hung on the wall to his left. The most basic. He stopped. The basic kind of number is a whole number. A counting number. A natural number. He paused. He half closed his eyes.

The headmaster showed his teeth and raised his eyebrows.

Dennis opened his eyes and lifted his face.

The head closed his lips. His left hand cupped his right elbow. His half-closed right hand obscured his mouth. The thumb pushed upwards under his chin.

Dennis straightened his shoulders and breathed. Every set of distinct objects has a natural number associated with it. His speech was paced giving each word its own time. The set with no objects in it – the empty set – is associated with the number zero. He paused again. Adding another object to a set produces a set associated with the next natural number. So starting with zero there is the next number after zero, and then the next number after the next number after zero and so on. Continuing this will in infinite time go through every natural number.

The head lowered his right hand and folded his arms. He remained silent and, after a moment, relaxed.

We have an arbitrary sequence of names. One, two, three, four et cetera which we use to refer to these numbers. This arbitrary sequence of numerals, names of numbers, has an agreed order so that when we hear or see the name then we know which natural number is being referred to. Some primitive tribes used body parts in an agreed sequence. A bit like us counting on our fingers. The first number was the number of a set with a single isolated object. Our one, rather than zero. They probably didn't see the need for zero. Our numerals are systematic and can easily be extended to name the numbers associated with extremely large sets. We also have symbols which provide a compact way of writing numerals instead of using words. There are different systems of numerals such as Roman numerals but they only give different names, different symbols to the same numbers. We can define things to do with numbers. Operations such as adding and multiplying, and their inverses, subtraction and division. These lead us to consider other kinds of numbers like integers, positive and negative, rational numbers. Then we discover that there are some numbers that are not rational, or integers, and we call them irrational like the square root of two,

and transcendental, like pi, and then when you have to deal with the square root of minus one then there's imaginary and complex numbers. He breathed and rested his hands one on each knee.

The headmaster nodded slowly several times.

Dennis moved in his chair. His face muscles slackened.

But I am still not sure what a number is. The head reached forward to grip the edge of his desk and began to rise.

Well once you have the rule that there is a first thing and then a next thing for every thing then anything that fits that rule is a number and from that all of mathematics can be deduced.

The head lowered himself.

I think the Italian mathematician Peano was the first to think of it this way. Peano's postulates.

The head's mouth twisted. He stretched out his left arm so that his wrist watch revealed itself. That's enough, Unwin, though a real interview is likely to be somewhat longer.

I thought you might have heard. She held the plate until some of the foam had slid off and dripped into the bowl.

Heard what?

She put the plate in the draining rack. From one of your universities.

They're not my universities.

I know. Another plate.

He put the cup he had been drying on the worktop beyond the drainer.

I hope you get an interview.

I have.

You have?

Yes.

Why didn't you say?

It came on Saturday. After you'd gone out.

Dennis. It's Wednesday. You could have told me before now.

He lifted a large plate from the rack and began to wipe it with slow circular movements. I didn't feel like talking about it.

Why not?

You'll fuss.

I won't.

You will.

She held the saucepan until he had finished drying the plate and started on the other one.

When is it?

Next Thursday.

You'll need to get a ticket. Which one is it?

Mam. You're fussing. He put down the plate and picked up the long pointed knife she used to slice vegetables.

I'm only.

Only what?

You know.

Trying to tell me what to do. Well don't. I can do this myself. Let me be. If I get there I'll be on my own. You won't be there to make sure I've got clean socks. Will you. He pointed the knife at her.

Careful with that. It's sharp.

Sharp enough to cut out your tongue. He dropped the tea-towel over the back of a chair and put his hand behind her neck and brought the knife to her face.

Dennis!

One quick slice, a mouthful of blood, and then no more words. Bliss.

Dennis! That's horrible. I don't know how you can think like that.

Easy. He waved the knife in the air.

Don't.

He took his hand off her neck and used the tea-towel to wipe the blade slowly and carefully.

Sometimes I wonder.

Train at ten to nine. Thursday morning. Get there about half past ten. Plenty of time to get to the university by eleven thirty.

He bent forward. His hands came together, the right enclosing the knuckles of the left. The sleeves of the new jacket rested on the edge of the lowered glass panel of the door, his arms taking some of his weight. The air held the sharp, heavy smell of coal smoke. She looked up at him. The skin of her face was slack.

A whistle shrilled. He turned to his left. A man in a uniform wearing a stiff flat cap waved a grubby flag.

She touched his fingers. Reluctant thunder rumbled as the engine's power was released and the large metal driving wheels spun and slipped on the wet rails. The carriage shuddered and then began to move. Her hand slipped away.

Good luck, she said.

The slow rhythm of the locomotive increased, hurling steam and smoke into the low sky. The rounded shape of his mother drifted away along the platform. Her left hand lifted and then dropped.

He waved and ducked inside. He pulled up the window and pushed it upwards till it was completely closed then sat down next to his raincoat. He was alone in the compartment. The rain streaked diagonals across the window.

At the level crossing three men stood waiting in soft flat caps. They had scarves tucked inside long brown gaberdine coats and hands in hidden in the side pockets. The collars of the coats were turned up. One of the men looked up at the train. A lorry carrying scrap metal and a small blue Morris van waited in the road that led to the closed gate. A hundred yards away were shops. A cyclist wore a yellow cape that swathed him and his bicycle. Water ran down the cape. The cyclist held himself and his machine upright by holding on to the post of the wooden steps that led up to the signal box. His cloth cap was dark with

rain. His trousers were clipped to his ankles. The white paint on the gate and the steps and the box was cracked and faded. The exposed wood was wet and dark. The carriage clunked leisurely over the gaps in the rails.

The sky was grey above the black rectangles of the sheds and warehouses. Steam streamed from a metal chimney. Artificial light struggled out of blackened panes in factory walls. He put the side of his head against the glass. His head vibrated with the beat of the train. The curve of the train followed the curve of the track. The locomotive expelled its smoke and vapour in a steady percussion. Underneath the wheels clacked to a different beat.

The track-side industry came to an end. Terraces of houses displayed their gables, decorated with faded painted advertisements and newer rectangular hoardings.

Outside the town the fields were without colour and the distance indistinct. He stretched out his legs and leaned back. Above the seats were three equally sized pictures, pale reproductions of rural scenes. On his side there were two more pictures. In the middle, instead of a picture, was a mirror with the same dimensions.

He stared out of the carriage window at the innards of the city. The train passed the backs of houses, their vegetable plots, sheds and greenhouses. Later there were yards rather than gardens, with outhouses and wooden doors in brick walls. The train passed through a marshalling yard, linear collections of trucks, carriages. A small saddle-tank locomotive puffed eagerly. The line curved around a church with a square tower set with a white-faced clock. The buildings squeezed in on the train, slowing it down, as it eased between offices and warehouses at first floor level. It clattered and lurched across a bridge over a street. Alongside, a sloping ramp became a platform. The platform was paralleled by other platforms. Entirely inside the dark station the train stopped. He followed the other passengers

down the length of the platform, and queued to give up half of his ticket.

Outside the station he took out his letter. The wind flapped the paper. He stepped back into the shelter of the station entrance and read the letter.

Around the corner he joined a short queue at a bus stop. Women with shopping bags. Men with walking sticks. A green double decker bus appeared from under the railway. He pulled himself up on to the platform and went into the lower saloon and sat on the left. He had a handful of change in his trouser pocket. The dark-skinned conductor shouted. All supplied. A statement, a question. He held up his right hand. University, please.

Four pence.

He put a threepenny bit and a penny into the small palm. The conductor gave him a small brown square ticket that he had levered out from one of the horizontal slots on the machine that hung at his waist.

Can you tell me when I get there.

Aye love, he said.

Stone office buildings with ornate lintels and wide wooden doors channelled the traffic. The bus crossed a wider road that gave a brief view of a very large colonnaded black building with a clock tower and a cupola. Some small shops, a cinema. More shops, then houses.

The conductor spoke to him as he came down the aisle. You want be off at next.

Metal panels of the bus vibrated, resonating with the engine. The vehicle hesitated as the driver selected a lower gear. The clutch bit and the bus gained a little speed as it met the challenge of the upward slope.

He stood at the corner looking around him. Two buildings in white stone, a clock tower, shops, a long terrace of houses going

down the hill towards the centre of the city. He crossed a road and walked around a grass-bordered empty flower bed towards the broad white steps that climbed gently to four white pillars. The pillars rose towards the tower and the clock. He glanced from side to side and walked up the centre of the steps. A man in a black academic gown over a brown suit came out of the building and quickly down the middle of the steps. The wings of his gown lifted. His tie flapped over his shoulder.

He went up the steps and pushed open one of the tall glazed doors walked into the high entrance. The floor was dark polished parquet. A further parade of glass doors presented themselves. Beyond these the space was higher, rising through two floors.

He turned to his left. The dark flooring extended more than twenty yards along a broad avenue of pillars that reached to the ceiling from which hung a central line of huge art deco lighting pendants. At the far end was a wide staircase. He turned to his right. The court stretched equally in that direction. Footsteps echoed quietly. Voices murmured in the distance. Each sound was diminished by the large uncluttered volume.

The soles of his black leather shoes made sharp sounds with each footfall. Each step faded without echo. He consulted his letter of invitation again.

The stairs at the end of the pillared court divided at the top of the first flight. At the first floor a waist height brass railing guarded an opening that looked out on to the large light pendants and along the length of the court. People moved unhurriedly across and along. Voices failed to rise. He continued up the stairs to the second floor. The letter mentioned a room number. He knocked on the door. He held his ear close to the wooden panel.

Come in.

He opened the door. A woman sat at a desk. She wore a pale-blue soft knitted jumper under an unbuttoned cardigan of exactly the same colour. Her desk faced the right-hand wall. She

swivelled the chair towards him, smiling with her mouth and eyes. Her skirt was straight and navy.

Dennis Unwin, he said. I have an interview. Eleven thirty. He held out the letter.

Take a seat, Mr Unwin. You may hang your coat up. She gestured towards the coat stand. There was a single wooden straight-backed chair.

He folded the letter and inserted into an inside pocket.

Dennis!

He worked his tie around the upturned collar of his white shirt.

Dennis!

He adjusted the lengths of each part and threw one length over the other.

Yes. Mother.

Don't mother me. There's a letter for you.

He descended the stairs pulling the knot of his school tie to his neck. She was standing at the bottom holding out the manila envelope. He turned down his shirt collar.

It's from the university.

Which one?

She thrust it at him. The envelope curved under the pressure of her thumb.

The name of the university was printed in the top left-hand corner and the envelope had been franked with a machine. There was no stamp.

D. S. Unwin Esq.

He sat down at the kitchen table and placed the envelope to his left. The long edge was parallel to the edge of the table. He shook cornflakes from the box into the bowl. He poured milk from bottle and then sprinkled sugar with his desert spoon.

She watched him. He put down his spoon and used a table knife to slit open the long edge of the envelope. The sheet of stiff

paper was sharply folded in three. He used both hands to hold it open. The paper curved against the creases.

What does it say?

He looked up at his mother.

She lifted her eyes from the letter to his face.

He read. His eyes scanned the lines.

Well?

They've offered me a place.

Well done. Well done. Your father would have been pleased. She rubbed her hands on the apron of her pinafore and put an arm around him and pulled him to her. University.

I'll be late. He twisted his shoulders and she removed her arm.

He spooned the soggy cornflakes into his mouth and left the residue of milk in the bowl. He took his jacket from the hook on the kitchen door and picked up two half slices of cold dry toast. With the toast gripped in his mouth he buttoned his jacket, and picked up his ex-army canvas bag and shrugged it on to one shoulder.

Don't you need a coat? It's cold.

He shut the house door behind him.

There was a queue at the bus stop. It was cold.

2

The hard chairs had been arranged around the school hall. The long curtains had been drawn across the floor-to-ceiling windows to keep out the light of the summer evening. He crossed the open space following a short diagonal to where a few boys from the upper sixth were sitting together. Most of the boys were in suits, the others in sports jackets. The girls were in pale coloured short-sleeved dresses holding their small handbags or purses with two hands. Their shoes were pale with high heels.

At the lunch-time dance classes that had been organised as this event approached they had come in their navy blazers, blue gingham dresses, white ankle socks, and flat shoes. They had taken off their blazers to dance.

He sat down. His polished black shoes caught the bright school lights.

Look different don't they. Dressed up.

Older. Frightening.

You think so?

Course not.

Dennis watched.

The chairs began to fill up. A few boys were standing in front of each of the lengthening rows of girls. Talking. The girls dresses were held wide with stiff petticoats. The dresses were long enough to hide their knees when standing. Those sitting down held their small handbags across their knees to keep the hems of their skirts from rising any higher. Knees and ankles were kept together, legs at a slight angle.

The first dance was the Saint Bernard's Waltz. There was much urging from Mr Allsop. Let's get as many of you on the floor as possible.

The few boys who had girlfriends at the sister school stood up with their partners and sauntered towards the middle. Others approached a row of girls and asked each in turn until they were accepted. Some lads paired up and tackled a pair of girls together. Dennis watched the chairs empty.

Unwin. Ask that young lady to your right.

There were a dozen empty chairs between him and the girl. A blue ribbon tied in a bow held her brown hair back in a pony-tail. The ribbon matched the belt of her pale yellow dress. The frames of her upswept glasses were blue.

Dennis went over to her. He did not speak and she did not reply. They joined the circle without touching and stood facing each other. As they took up the ballroom hold she hurriedly put

her small bag into her left hand so that she could rest her right hand on his open left.

The music from the record player gave out a loud chord and all the dancers straightened. As the music began Dennis stepped twice to his left and stamped twice. His partner mirrored his movements and they completed the pattern. As the music continued they repeated the sequence colliding occasionally with a neighbouring couple during the twirl at the end. Some boys stamped their feet more loudly at each execution.

The record came to a final long chord at which all the boys bowed in the direction of their partners and the girls dipped in a brief curtsy.

Stay with your partners!

Everyone came to an uncertain halt.

This time we will make it a progressive. Ladies as you spin move on to the gentleman to your left. He swung his arm to indicate a clockwise movement around the circle of dancers. When you acquire a new partner introduce yourself, gentlemen first, ladies respond. Just your first names. It's not an interview. Introduce yourselves to your present partner.

Dennis, he said.

Sheila, she said.

The music began.

After changing partners, he said Dennis again.

Barbara.

The music continued.

Dennis.

Janet.

Dennis.

Margaret.

Dennis.

Eileen.

When the music came to an end he bowed to Eileen.

Gentlemen! Escort your partners to their seats.

He followed her to the side of the room. The chairs to either side of the one she chose were empty. Sit down, she said. She patted the seat of the chair to her right.

He glanced over to where he had been sitting. The boys he had been with were re-assembling.

I won't bite.

Didn't think you would. He sat down.

Around the hall careful voices conversed.

Her body tilted towards him. Her shoulder touched his arm. You're a good dancer.

Am I? His voice was flat.

They're. Her hand twisted in an open gesture. Clodhoppers. Most of them.

Are they?

She nudged him with her shoulder. Look at me.

Her hair was fair and straight, long enough to rest on her shoulders. Her lipstick was pale pink, very pale pink.

That wasn't difficult. Was it?

Mr Allsop announced the Gay Gordons.

She took his hand. Come on.

In the boys' toilet Alan shouted at him. Still waters run deep.

What?

Dark horse.

He buttoned his fly.

You and her.

Who?

You know. Her. The bint with the long fair hair.

Eileen.

Eileen. Eye lean.

Dennis turned on a tap.

Alan did the same at the next basin. She's stuck to you all evening.

Dennis went over to the roller towel.

How long's this been going on?

Alan slicked a comb through his hair.

Tonight. That's all. He dried his hands. She thinks I'm a good dancer.

Good dancer. She fancies you.

You think so? He walked over to the mirror.

I'm sure so. Alan winked. You're in there man.

Dennis shook his head. Why would she fancy me? He combed his hair forward and parted in on the left and then flicked it away from his forehead.

You never know with women. He pulled opened the door. You're bloody daft. Can't see a fucking good thing when it's right in front of you. Alan went out.

Dennis followed him. The beat of a recent rock 'n' roll hit echoed in the corridor. In the hall it filled the space. Eileen was dancing with Eric. The music was fast and Eileen and Eric executed repeatedly a coordinated short sequence of movements, clasping hands letting go. When Eileen spun round her dress lifted. The record came to an end. Eric held on to her hand and they faced the corner where a different disc was being put on the record player. When the music started they went into their routine again following the slower rhythm of the ballad-like number. Eric who was four or five inches taller than Eileen even though she was wearing high heels bent down and spoke. They halted, listened, and suddenly began dancing at twice the speed of the music. The same routine. Their timing was good, hands meeting and parting as each spun or turned. Eileen's hair floated and spread. Her heels lifted and dropped, her toes parted and came together. She performed for her trainer, responding to the touch of his hands. The dancers near them stopped to watch and the couple were soon encircled. When the record ended there was applause as the pair, breathing hard, acknowledged the applause with a slight bow and a curtsy.

Take your partners for the last waltz.

Those who had been dancing waited. Eileen removed her hand from Eric's and came over to Dennis. She held out a hand and led him on to the floor. She put her left hand on his shoulder and raised her right. He put his right hand on her waist and his left under her outstretched hand. The waltz began and they moved awkwardly to the subdued one-two-three. Other couples had already abandoned the formal ballroom hold. The boys clasped their hands behind the girl. The girls rested their hands on the boy's shoulders. Each pair swayed to the music making small steps, hardly moving. Eileen put her hands at the back of his neck. His arms moved around her and she came close. His feet inched sideways with the music. She lay the side of her head on his chest. His nose was in her hair. The music continued. Someone turned out two-thirds of the lights. Her head tilted and she pressed her lips to his jaw line. Her hand slid up to the back of his skull. He looked down at her and she reached up to kiss him on the lips. The music stopped. A few seconds passed. She relaxed. And made a quarter turn away from him. The lights that had been switched off came on again.

She collected her three-quarter coat and changed from her white heels into her navy blue flat school shoes. You'll walk me home. She held out her white shoes. He took them from her.

Where do you live?

The other side of the park.

Should do it in half an hour.

Not at my speed.

The town was quiet. On the main road a few cars passed them. A drunk sang a fragmented refrain in a guttural baritone that pulled apart words and avoided most of the notes. It was almost midnight when they reached the end of her street. There was a lamp on the corner and another half way down the terrace. Her house stood in the blackness in between. There were no lighted windows.

All in bed.

They're away.

Away?

At my Nan's. She's been in hospital. Mam wouldn't stay on her own so Dad's gone with her. She's never spent a night without him since they were married.

No brothers or sisters?

Older brother. In the forces. Army.

So you're on your own.

Don't get ideas.

I didn't mean.

Yes you did.

I didn't. Honest.

She pushed him gently in the chest. Only kidding. She twisted open the clasp on her bag and felt around inside. Hold this a minute.

He took the bag from her.

She stood on the step and reached up to put the key in the lock, holding the knob at the same time. The door opened. Her hand moved up the inside wall and the light in the hall came on.

He held out her shoes and her bag.

She dropped them beyond a narrow table that stood against the wall. A fan of unopened envelopes lay on the table.

Good night. He stepped back and began to turn.

Don't I get a kiss?

He stopped.

She stretched and put her hands on both his shoulders allowing herself to lean towards him so that he was preventing her from having to step down on to the pavement. Her eyes were a little higher than his.

He shuffled forwards a few inches and she was smiling slightly as she moved to kiss him. She kissed him firmly moving her mouth over his.

He grabbed at her waist. He kissed her back.

They pulled each other close.

She drew away from him then gave him a quick kiss on his nose. Would you like to come in for a while?

He went into the school by the main entrance. Inside he stood for a moment in the foyer: a wide glazed corridor connecting the classroom block to the laboratories and workshops. In the centre of foyer was a free-standing noticeboard. Around it boys clustered, mostly in uniform, peering at the large printed sheets that had been pinned there. The bubble of voices communicated both excitement and apprehension. He headed for the board and leaned between two boys. The results were in alphabetical order of surname. The boy to his right moved away. He stepped sideways until he saw his name. He scanned the columns. He edged back, freeing himself from the press of bodies.

You get what you needed?

He looked at Villiers. Yes. I did.

I'm not sure. They said three sixties and I only got forty-five in chemistry. Do you think they'll still take me?

I don't know.

I think I'll ask.

Ask?

Fletcher. The teacher was sitting at a small desk. A boy was sitting on a chair in front of the desk. They were talking.

Dennis said nothing.

Villiers went over to the teacher.

Dennis stood still, isolated.

Den.

He turned round. Alan.

OK?

Yes.

Me too. He grinned. Off to university.

University. A blurry blank space in my future.

A blank?

What will life will be like after the end of September?

A bit like school but.

But what?

Alan shrugged. Anyway, what you been doing? Not seen you around.

Working. At Marshall's. Loading vans.

I'm helping me Dad. Repairing cars. Bloody mucky job. Takes me ages to get clean.

He pays you?

Cash. No National Insurance, no tax.

You shouldn't have to pay tax in any case. Dennis moved towards the door.

Alan stayed with him. Still seeing that girl. What was her name. Eileen.

Yes. A couple of times.

He waved to a group leaving. I'm coming. We're going for a celebratory drink. You coming?

They've only given me the morning off.

Right then. See you around.

3

The other three were already at the dining table when he entered the room. Simultaneously they all lifted their eyes from their plates. Their landlady came into the room as he was taking his place. She moved round the back of him and swung his plate bearing baked beans on toast around his head and put it down between his bowl and the large packet of cornflakes.

I'm going out this afternoon boys. Make sure you take your keys in case you're back early. Evening meal at the same time, six o'clock. I'll say good morning.

Each of them muttered as soon as their eating allowed them.
She closed the door behind her.

In silence they listened. The scrape of knife and fork. The muted slurp of milk. The pouring of tea. The clink of a spoon stirring sugar.

Geoff finished filling his teacup and set the aluminium teapot clothed in its brown and cream striped knitted cosy back on the circular raffia mat. What time's this bazaar thing start?

Don't know.

Ten, I think.

You going?

Yeah. Dave waited. What else is there to do?

Not much.

It's all about participating. Getting the most out of university life.

You've been listening to too many speeches.

You can say that again. Didn't they go on.

I think I'll join something. Meet people.

Such as?

Girls. Women.

I mean what are you thinking of joining.

Dunno.

Anyone for a drink at lunch-time?

Where?

The pub opposite engineering. Went there yesterday at the end of our little guided tour.

Where's engineering?

Our Grüppenfuehrer took us for a coffee. Coffee.

Past chemistry.

Hardly heard a word she said. Scurried off as soon as she could. So did the other two women.

OK.

Sam?

He was still in the middle of his beans on toast. Sorry?

Malcolm was suggesting that we meet up for a drink at lunch time. After we've been round the Freshers' Bazaar and joined the societies with the prettiest girls.

Don't know.

Well if you make up your mind we're meeting in the pub opposite engineering.

You mean the Pack Horse?

If that's what it's called. The Black Horse at twelve.

The Pack Horse.

All right, the Pack Horse.

One by one the other three finished their breakfasts and left the room. When he had eaten his toast there were seven beans that had rolled on to his plate as he had been cutting the bread. He left them on the plate. He drained his cup of tea. Dave looked in. Coming Sam?

On the top deck of the bus he took a seat next to the window.

Dave sat down beside him and stretched his leg out into the aisle. I'll be pleased when term's started.

Why?

Aren't you a bit fed up with not knowing what to do?

No but.

Bits of paper. Speeches. Too much free time.

The other students.

Yes.

Do you think they feel the same? As you do?

Probably. Dave laughed lightly. They probably do.

Sam squinted through the glass.

Don't you?

What?

Think they'll all feel like we do.

You do?

OK. Like I do.

I don't know. They all seem so. Sure.

And you're not?

Perhaps. Sam lifted himself up slightly.

Our stop?

Yes.

Dave stood up and went to the back of the bus and started down the stairs.

Sam caught him up. When do you register?

Dave was standing on a lower step in front of him. He turned his head. Wednesday morning.

Tomorrow?

If that's Wednesday. Between ten and half past.

The bus stopped.

I'm in the afternoon. Two thirty till three.

Sam shaded his eyes as he followed Dave towards the zebra crossing. The sun was bright and the air warm. Across the road the university buildings were a mixture of Portland stone and redbrick with a few terraces of Victorian or Edwardian family houses that bore painted boards with names of departments or units. Except for the University Court with the broad steps and the clock tower, the buildings generally had only two or three storeys. The clock chimed the half hour as they strode along University Road.

Students were entering and leaving the union building. There was congestion in the entrance. Dave went ahead, up the half dozen steps. Sam kept close. Out of the sunlight the interior of the building was dark. He went along the milling corridor towards the large hall where they had heard speeches the day before. The chairs had been cleared and stacked up along the walls. The space had been filled with tables serving as stalls. Behind each table was a gathering of students. On each table were leaflets. Fastened to the front of tables were handwritten posters or hand-painted banners. Some stalls were more elaborate with a wooden frame like a shop front or a display stand. Appeals from all sides urged the meandering freshers to join, sign up, come along.

Sam. Sam. Dave had his hand in the air above the bodies that had separated them. See you for coffee at eleven.

Where?

Downstairs, the whatsit lounge.

Right.

Dave turned away and made for one of the stalls.

Sam went in the opposite direction. He glanced at each stall he came to. Many stalls had equipment. A canoe, a football, a triangular net on a bent pole crossed with another. Others had symbols. A cross as on a church. There was music from a record player. Two students playing chess. People spoke to him, offered him sheets of duplicated text. Each time he kept his hands behind his back, smiled while staring downwards, shook his head slightly, and moved on. Stalls became surrounded, obscured behind a talkative barrier of bodies. The proportion of women was higher at these stalls. He made his way against the general movement out into the corridor. He passed open doors to smaller rooms where more societies endeavoured to attract new members.

Outside the entrance to the building he walked across to a raised shrubbery and sat on the low sunlit wall that encircled it. He took off his jacket. It was the same black jacket he had worn all year at school with the sewn-on badge removed.

He watched the flow of people crossing the space in front of him. Men in jackets with shirt and tie. Women with coats over their arms, wearing blouses or sweaters, their heels clicking on the asphalt. Some had the longitudinally striped scarves in the university's colours loose around their necks. Bright new scarves.

A girl in a red skirt and white sweater with a high neck walked towards the union. She carried a black patent leather handbag. She went quickly around the groups and up the steps and into the building. He put on his jacket. A sudden glut of people coming out impeded him. Inside, the corridor was almost empty, her red skirt was a few yards in front of him. He halted. After a

few seconds he entered the hall and stood in the less crowded centre and scanned the stalls. Figures moved to the left and to the right, opening spaces or occluding his view. A section thinned. The girl in the red skirt had her back to him, standing at a stall. He walked over and stood at the corner of the same stall.

Hello. The fellow behind the table eyed him.

Hello. He lowered his gaze to the pile of sheets and picked one up.

The girl in the red skirt was writing on a slip of paper.

It's Carol, isn't it?

She put down the ballpoint pen pushed her dark hair away from her face. Yes, she said. Her lips were almost the same colour as her skirt.

Sam, he said. Same freshers group. Yesterday.

Of course, she said. I'm sorry. So many new faces and names. She gave the slip to the student behind the table.

He thanked her. First meeting Saturday. Here's how to get there. He gave her a sheet of paper. Any of the buses that go up the road. He sidestepped and stood across from Sam. You joining?

Not sure. He raised the duplicated leaflet he was holding. It had a cross in the middle above the text.

Bye, she said, and swung off towards the corridor.

I don't go to church.

A seeker?

Seeker?

Someone looking for something that will fill the empty space in their life.

Sam stared at him. No.

Are you sure?

Yes.

You won't know until you open your heart.

What does that mean exactly?

You need to let Jesus in.

Do I?

Look. Take a map. Come along. See what you think.

Bloody registration.

Sam stood up as Dave sat down. Pint? Bitter?

There was no space at the bar. Sam waited. He held up a two shilling piece. The bar staff moved up and down the bar serving each of the waiting men in turn. His turn came and he asked for a pint of bitter. The girl serving him pulled at the handle of the beer engine, filling the glass in three pulls with an extra short pull to bring the head to the top of the glass. She stood the pint on the bar and took his coin. He put the change into his trouser pocket and took the pint to the round table in the corner.

Thanks. Dave lifted the pint and drank a third. He held the glass with the handle away from him. That's better.

Sam sipped at his own pint.

I queued for damn near an hour. God know what some of them were doing at the front. I was through in a couple of minutes. Bloke in front of me had trouble because he hadn't got a form R. What the hell's a form R. You got one or need one?

Sam shook his head.

The bar filled up. The upper air became dim with smoke. By the time they had finished their pints it was so crowded that edge of their small table was supporting a trousered female bottom that lifted and pushed every time someone squeezed by. Smoke trickled from the black cigarette she held between her fingers.

Another?

I'd rather eat.

OK.

Not here?

No.

They stood up and excused themselves repeatedly as the eased sideways between the bodies. It was raining. They ran

across the road and into chemistry, one of the Portland stone buildings that lined the road.

Each of the queues had a tall stand next to the table at the front. He went to the end of the queue that led to the stand S-Z. The others were A-H and I-R.

He turned round as another student joined the line.

The student was not very tall. He wore a brown jacket with cavalry twill trousers. How long do you think this'll take?

Chap in my digs said he waited an hour this morning.

Said I meet someone at three.

You could be OK.

It's not like I expected.

What?

Everything.

What did you expect?

I don't know.

You must have expected something if it's not like what you expected.

I know, I know. But.

Sam looked down at him.

I suppose I expected it to be like school. Not so optional.

Optional?

Well, except for this, it doesn't seem to matter whether you do something or you don't.

Sam moved up as the queue moved.

Is there anything you've chosen not to go to?

No.

Why not?

I felt I ought.

It only seems optional then.

Suppose so. A crooked smile contorted his mouth. I didn't want to miss anything. Anything important. It's not clear what is

going to be important or when you'll be told something important. He inflated his cheeks and puffed noisily. Everyone else seems so grown up. Frankly I don't feel grown up.

Sam shifted a few inches.

And the girls seem much more grown up. Women. Intimidating.

All boys school?

Yeah.

The other fresher gestured with his head and Sam moved up to close the gap in the queue.

What's your subject?

Maths.

Same here, said Sam.

We'll be together then.

Sam said nothing.

I'm Philip. Philip Topping. Phil.

Sam Unwin.

The clock above their heads struck the quarter.

Did you know.

Sam turned back to look at him.

There are four men for every woman. Undergraduates.

Are there?

My brother – he was at Manchester – said that there'll be plenty of local girls at the hops. Want to get hitched to a student. Anyway, evens up the numbers.

Cattle market. Saturday hop. So someone said.

You going to the freshers' hop?

Might. You only get cows at a cattle market.

Phil laughed. You join anything yesterday?

No. You?

Trog Soc.

Trog Soc?

Speleological Society. Caving. Some good caves and potholes not so far away. Caverns as big as cathedrals. Phil looked over Sam's shoulder.

Sam glanced in the same direction.
How's it going?
Dave this is Phil. Phil's another mathematician. Dave's in digs with me.
What you reading? asked Phil.
Sociology.
Sociology? That wasn't a subject at my school.
Nor mine.
Never occurred to me to do anything else but maths. That was what I was good at.
Managed O level. Just.
What if you're no good at it?
Sociology?
Yes.
Dave shrugged. Ask me again in a couple of weeks. He fished a folded sheet of paper out of his side jacket pocket. After I've read all these. He opened it up and held the printed side towards Phil.
Looks like a year's reading to me.
There speaks a mathematician. He refolded the piece of paper and put it back in his pocket. See you later Sam. Nice to meet you, Phil.
Dave strode across the parquet towards the main entrance.
Are you in digs?
I'm in hall. Not far up the road.
They waited.
I'm going to see if they've got the books in the union book exchange. Save some money.
I thought I'd use the library.
It'll only have a couple of copies at most. That's what Steve – my brother – said. And they'll be out on loan. Come with me. After lunch.
Haven't got my money sorted yet. Got the grant cheque. No bank account. Which bank do you use?
Barclays across the road.
The clock struck the half hour.

Sam watched the student at the front gather his papers together and leave. He stepped forward. Dennis Sampson Unwin. He put down his completed registration form.

4

Mrs Harker shouted up the stairs at eight o'clock even though it was Saturday. Boys! Breakfast!

Cornflakes followed by scrambled egg on toast. By nine o'clock he was back in his room. He stretched out on his bed, hands behind his neck.

Malcolm knocked and came in. Too bloody early for a Saturday. I'm bored already. He put his burly bulk on to the polished round seat of one of the two hoop-backed bentwood chairs. What you going to do?

Not sure. Dave's gone somewhere to play lacrosse.

La what?

Cross. Bit like hockey but you play with triangular fishing net.
Being in for all these meals is a bit of a bind.

What's Geoff doing.

Writing an essay. I suppose that's what you do in history. You
been set any work?

Nothing.

Given us a list of books. Suppose I could go to the library and
see what they've got.

Saturday?

Till twelve. Don't think I can afford to buy all of them.
Chemistry books seem big, glossy and expensive. Digs took most
of my grant and Dad hasn't sent anything yet. Said I'll have to
wait until the end of the month.

I'm OK I think. No parental contribution.

Lucky you.

Don't think I'll have to spend more than thirty quid. Chap on
the same course as me tried the book exchange in the union.
Nothing much in the way of maths, but might be better for you.
I've only bought one up to now.

Might give it a try.

What?

Book exchange.

This morning? Will it be open?

Might be. Malcolm stood up. I'll give it a go. See you later.
Malcolm closed the door behind him.

Sam went the window. The street below was paved with setts.
The terrace opposite threw a sharp-edged shadow diagonally
across the rectangular pattern. Above the roof line the sky was a
uniform blue, pale not like summer.

He had not been walking ten minutes when the street he was
following ran into a park. The roadway no longer had
pavements on each side and continued across grass towards

woodland. A woman threw a ball for a dog. The dog tore across the grass after the bouncing ball and leapt and caught it between its jaws. A man and two boys kicked a football. The roadway came to an end at a short row of cottages that backed on to a shallow fast-flowing beck. There was a bridge across the beck and a footpath that ran upstream on the far side through the edge of a wood. He crossed the bridge and took the footpath. The beck rattled over stones. Children's voices reached him from a distance. A gaggle of young women approached him. He stepped off the path on to the exposed roots of a tree and let them pass.

He stood for ten seconds then began to follow them. They were not walking very fast. Their voices made a continuous chatter that hung around them. At the bridge he stopped and looked at the swirling water while the distance between them and him increased. They took a path that crossed back over the beck and then kept by its side. The path angled over another bridge. The girls stopped. Three of them hung over the left parapet and three over the right. Watching the flow of the water. He hung back. A small bird moved in a spindly tree on the opposite bank. It hopped on to a different branch. It had a red patch on its chest. Its head twitched from side to side. The sound of a splash and the robin vanished. A small boy threw another stone into the water.

Gary! Come away from the edge.

The girls had disappeared from the bridge. He hurried along the path and over the bridge. They had taken the path towards the car park. From the car park they took the narrow road that crossed the park and it was not long before they were walking along the path where he had first seen them. The woodland was dark and dense. The trees were taller and the ground was thick with bushes and shrubs. There was bare earth rather than grass. The path narrowed and then twisted up to some damp stone steps coated with moss. Soon he could only hear their voices.

He came to a transverse path that inclined gently upwards to the right. He listened and took the path in the direction of its rise. Within a few yards the path levelled out and he came to the foot of some more stone steps. He went up these between large leaved bushes. Some of the stone slabs from which the steps had been constructed had been pushed out of true by the roots of the trees that rose up to the canopy that let little daylight through to the ground. The air was heavy.

At the top of the steps there was a flat area of grass. An asphalt strip curved around its edge and disappeared into the trees at the far side. He hurried along this footpath. The path became wider, sufficient for a vehicle. Strips of short grass ran along each side with flowerbeds between the grass and the larger vegetation. He was soon at a gate that opened on to a road. Across the road was another gate and a board that gave the name of one of the university's halls of residence.

As he came out of the bathroom Malcolm and Dave came up the stairs. His shirt was unbuttoned and his vest outside his trousers. He had left them watching Mrs Harker's television in her sitting room. Her rule was that the boys could watch it provided Mr Harker didn't want to.

You getting ready to go out?

We've decided we'll give the hop the once over. You going?

No. He opened the door of the room that he and Dave shared and went in. Dave came in after him.

Where you off to then?

Sam arranged his towel over the footboard of his bed.

Not telling are we?

Sam put his toilet bag on the little table next to his bed.

Come on.

Sam sat on the bed. There was this girl.

Girl.

In the same freshers group.

Yes.

Well I bumped into her.

Just like that.

At one of the stalls on bazaar day. She was joining up.

And.

Well. I picked up this leaflet advertising the first meeting.

Not tonight.

Yeah.

Saturday night?

Seemed a bit odd to me.

What kind of a society is it?

Some kind of religious thing.

It's CU isn't it? Christian Union.

How do you know?

I go to church at home. Keep Mum and Dad happy. Our minister had a word with me. He wasn't keen on CU. They're a bit – how did he put it? Simplistic? Bible-bashing? I don't know. But he made them sound like narrow-minded cranks. Not my cup of tea certainly. Not that there was any risk of me getting caught up with them. Or any other churchy types.

She seemed really nice. I think I saw her this morning in the park.

Which park?

If you keep walking along the road at the top you get to it. She was with some others. Not sure if it was her.

I suppose she could be.

What?

Nice.

Yes.

Do I detect a note of doubt.

Might be a waste of time.

What?

Going to the meeting.

Probably.

It was seven o'clock when he found the church. It was a small simple brick building with neither tower nor steeple, quite new. It had a small empty car park. The cross in darker brick on the gable was faintly lit by the light that shone upwards from the wide glass-and-metal porch that ran across the width of the building. He walked back along the street of stone terraced cottages that joined the church to the main road, and stood on the corner in a shop doorway. He waited. It was brighter on the main road. The shop was a bakery. The space behind the glass was fitted with sloping shelves. The shelves were empty except for the white paper linings. There were crumbs on some of them. The bus stop on this side was a little farther up the road outside the door of a pub.

Each green double-decker that came and stopped released a passenger or two. A man with a cap on his grey hair and a scarf tucked into his jacket went straight into the pub. A couple, in long coats, she carrying a bag with knitting needles protruding hung on to the man's arm. The man pulled down the brim of his trilby. They crossed the road at the zebra. A young bloke in a suit with a white shirt and a narrow tie, his hair swept up from his forehead. A lad and a girl came along and waited together for a bus. He was in a light short raincoat. Her coat had a hood. Her hair was fair, tied back in a pony tail. They held hands as they waited. Their conversation was intermittent and with each word spoken her face tilted up to his. When the next bus came in sight he signalled with his free arm and the two of them stepped back as three young women alighted. They were all wearing university scarves.

He drew back into the dim shelter of the doorway.

As they went down the street he kept a few yards behind them. Their heels clattered ahead of him. His shoes made a duller less rapid rhythm.

The car park had two cars in it. The porch had filled up. The three girls walked straight across the car park and in through the glass doors.

He went up to the glass door and pulled to open it. The door had PUSH on the metal frame. He pushed it open. A dozen or so students were standing in the porch in twos and threes. Beyond them the doors to the church were open. The three girls were waiting just inside. He studied the noticeboard on the wall. There was a handwritten letter from a married couple who had moved to another part of the country. The letter was addressed to everyone at the church.

Dear everyone,

It is now almost three months since we moved into our house here. We continue to strive to find people of a like mind. As we have said before, when we speak to people on their doorsteps, and describe what we were part of before we had to move, and list what you have achieved, they express an interest and wish us well, but as yet there are not many signs that God's spirit is moving in the area. We have had moments of despair, but we turn to the Bible and we pray and hope springs anew in us.

Thank you for all your prayers and messages of support.

Yours in Christ

Joan and Peter

The girls had disappeared from view.

The church was wider than it was deep. Metal chairs arranged in slightly curving rows faced a raised platform on which stood a wooden lectern. The light coloured wall at the back of the platform had a thin blue painted cross at its centre.

A man detached himself from a group and went over to the three women who loitering in the space behind the back row. I spy freshers.

They smiled and laughed.

I'm Mike. Tell me your names.

Christine.

Maureen.

Carol.

Now where are you all from?

The girls whispered their replies.

Sam hung back near the door. Students were entering the church in a broken stream, moving sideways along the rows and sitting down.

Mike backed away from the trio, suggesting with an outstretched arm that they should take their seats.

The three girls sat down in the second row towards the middle. Carol was at one end of the group. Sam sat down in the same row leaving empty chairs between him and Carol.

Do you mind moving up.

Sam slid along a couple of seats.

As far as you can. Please.

Sam glanced behind him. Most of the seats were filled.

He moved into the chair next to Carol. Red lipstick. Brown hair. A faint deliberate perfume.

She glanced at him and changed her posture so that she was not quite as close to him

She spoke. It's Sam, isn't it?

He nodded.

So you joined.

I'm. I'm thinking about it.

Someone near the front knocked over a chair.

I think I saw you this morning. In the park. There was a group of you.

She was still facing the front of the church. The chair had been righted and a man was setting papers and books on the lectern.

You might have, she said, without turning her head. A few of us did go for a walk. In the park.

The chattering quietened into silence. The man wore a sleeveless pullover over a shirt and tie. The tie was striped in the university colours. He gripped the edges of the lectern. The front row was still empty.

He was already in bed when Dave came up. He slipped his leather bookmark between the two pages and closed the book and placed it by the bed. What was it like?

The hop? Dave unbuttoned his shirt.

Yes.

Loud and crowded. Too many men. Not enough women. Any woman free for a second instantly had some chap pestering her to join him on the dance floor. The bar was heaving. You had to wait ages to get a drink. Stuck it for about an hour and half and then went to the pub.

Both of you?

And a fellow from Malcolm's fresher group. A lad called Colin. From the North East hardly understood a word he said. Dave picked up his towel from the wooden stand. Mainly freshers. The women. All that new talent oozing pheromones attracting hundreds of the men. Second and third years. They didn't let us timid freshers get a look in. We stood around and watched. Embarrassing.

Pheromones. Chemical signals given out by living creatures.

Colin's phrase. Oozin ferrormoans. Didn't like to show my ignorance.

Sam opened his book and continued reading.

What signals?

He closed his book again.

Alarm. To mark territorial boundaries. Or leave a trail. Or to attract males.

Plenty of the last kind and a few trails I wouldn't have minded following. He left the room and went along to the bathroom.

Dave returned and put on his striped pyjamas. How did you get on?

He took his book away from his face. All right.

Sound as though you don't know.

Don't know would be better. I hardly had chance to speak to her. Hymns and prayers and a sermon.

Sermon?

More like a talk. Full of words like grace and salvation. Exhortations to let Jesus into your life. God knows what that means.

He grinned crookedly, lifting his eyes to the ceiling. He probably does. He sat on the bed and kicked off his slippers. So you didn't walk her home.

She'd come with friends. From her hall, I suppose. I was wondering whether to ask her when this chap came up to me and started asking me questions. Where was I from. What was my subject. Which denomination did I belong to. What had I thought about the talk. By the time I got free she'd gone.

Mrs Harker didn't call them until nine on Sunday morning. Breakfast was bacon and eggs and Sunday dinner was roast pork, roasted and mashed potato, with carrots and peas, followed by apple pie and custard.

Mrs Harker explained that they went to their daughter's house for tea every Sunday afternoon. There's sandwiches and cakes in the dining room. You'll find the tea caddy and teapot and the sugar in the middle cupboard in the kitchen. Milk in the pantry.

They lounged in the heavily curtained sitting room in front of a dark and silent television set. Malcolm sat with his back to the window allowing the light that came through the tall narrow gap to fall on the News of the World. As he read he called for their attention from time to time so that he could read out key

sentences from a selection of stories. Geoff had brought down his chess set and board. It was a while before he suggested a game. Dave put down his book and took up the challenge. He helped set up the board on the low round table that Geoff had pulled into the angle between an armchair and the settee. Dave chose the fist holding a white pawn and when Geoff had carefully rotated the board through one hundred and eighty degrees he advanced his king's pawn in the conventional opening move. Geoff responded with the Sicilian Defence. Geoff captured enough material in the middle game to make the end game short. After exchanging queens he trapped Dave's fleeing king against edge of the board with his rooks.

Geoff began setting up the board again.

Dave lay back in the armchair. You a chess player?

Reasonable.

You give Geoff a game. I suspect he'll only beat me again.

Sam closed his book on the bookmark. He and Dave swapped over and this time Geoff was left with the white pawn. He opened by moving his queen's pawn to the centre of the board.

Dave picked up Sam's book. Pure Mathematics by G H Hardy. This what you were reading last night. In bed?

Sam moved another pawn.

Maths never made any real sense to me. Though I can solve a quadratic equation. Tenth edition. First edition nineteen O eight. That's ten years before my dad was born.

Malcolm lowered his newspaper. Maybe impure mathematics would be more exciting.

The alternation of the opening moves was almost mechanical, as though each were following a prescribed sequence. A sudden exchange of pieces left Sam a pawn down. The intervals between moves became longer. Geoff occasionally moved his hand towards a piece then withdrew. Sam moved his pieces quickly and without hesitation.

Malcolm folded the newspaper and dropped it on the carpet. He walked over to the bay window and parted the net curtains.

I'm going to have to find something bloody better to do on a Sunday afternoon than this.

Dave left the chess game and went to pick up the newspaper. We'll have work to do once we get properly started.

Sunday. Day of rest.

Dave sat down where Malcolm had been sitting. What did you do at home on a Sunday?

Not much. Didn't get up till twelve and after dinner the parents would fall asleep in front of the television. Dad likes to watch a western, but he is usually snoring before the end of the first twenty minutes. He looked at his watch. They'll still be asleep with the curtains drawn to keep the daylight off the screen. What about you?

Church in the morning with Mum and Dad.

Church?

It was expected. In the afternoon I used to go to church again. Sunday School teacher.

Malcolm laughed. Sunday School teacher.

Dave laughed. And then in the evening I'd go to church again, but then so did everyone else from the youth club. Chat up the girls when we went for a walk afterwards.

We could do that. Tonight. Why not? There's that big church across from the bus stop. Bloody sight better chance than at that union hop.

There was a gentle tap from the chess board. It was followed by a swishing oscillation. Geoff's white king was lying on its side rolling in an arc.

Geoff picked up the black notebook that was lying on top of the wooden box in which the chess pieces were stored. He drew a pencil from a short sleeve attached to the cover and opened the book at a blank page. Holding the book open with his left thumb and pencil in his right hand he returned the pieces move by move to a position earlier in the game.

Sam went back to his pure mathematics.

Malcolm's suggesting we go to church and see if we can pick up any birds.

Sam was reading.

Geoff put his pencil down. I said I'd ring my parents tonight.

Excuses. Excuses.

I was only joking.

The phone box on the corner wasn't working yesterday afternoon when I tried it. I had to wander around for a quarter of an hour before I found another one. Fortunately that was OK.

My parents haven't got a phone so I have to ring when they're at my uncle's. First Sunday of each month.

5

Monday was the first teaching day. All thirty-five of the mathematics class – nine women and twenty-six men – were waiting for their first lecture by a minute after nine o'clock. Four rows of separate desks and chairs faced a long blackboard. Most of the men were in the back two rows. In the second row were a couple. They were holding hands under her desk. The rest of the women were on the front row. No one spoke. At five past a bell sounded, dull as though coming from under several blankets. Simultaneously the lecturer walked in.

After briefly introducing himself and the subject, and recommending a text, the lecturer started writing at the left-hand end of the blackboard. He began with the full title and author of the book: An Elementary Treatise on Differential Equations and their Applications by H. T. H. Piaggio. He continued with: Eqns of type

$$\frac{dy}{dx} = f(x, y)$$

in general define a family (or congruence) of curves provided $f(x, y)$ satisfies certain conditions of continuity etc.

He stopped writing. Such as Lipschitz conditions. He then resumed writing.

Everyone was watching. After a minute in which the lecturer did not speak again and during which he had written several lines, two or three of the women on the front row opened pads of notepaper and started writing. Quickly everyone followed suit. Sam searched his pockets and found two leaflets he had picked up on Bazaar Day.

From time to time the lecturer paused and explained some aspect of the notation or elaborated the link between one expression and the next. At the end of the lecture the board had been filled three times. Sam had managed to fit a legible copy of what had been written on to the backs of the two sheets.

Coming to the union, Sam? They followed the rest of the class down the stairs.

What did you think to that?

Straightforward.

Not like school though.

No?

At school it was explained. Understanding was not. Phil paused. Presumed. Today I was told things.

I just copied down everything.

So did I. Didn't have time to think.

Didn't need to. I should have bought a notebook or something.
What did you expect?
I thought someone would tell us. Tell us what we needed.
They turned down the staircase.
What about a briefcase? How much are they?
This cost me eight quid.
That's four or five books.
Last you a lifetime.
They moved to one side to make room for the students coming
up the stairs.
It sort of made sense.
What?
The lecture.
Yeah. It made sense.
But I couldn't quite see where it was going. I'll have to read it
through again.
At the bottom the stairs the class streamed out through a
double door into the open air. The sky was clouded.
What do you think Lipschitz conditions are?
What conditions?
Lipschitz. Not sure how you spell it. He said something about
them when he mentioned continuity.
Don't know. I think I'll go and buy a briefcase.
There's a shop. Five minutes towards town.
Thanks.
See you at twelve.

The second lecture on Monday was in a large raked theatre, far
too big for the small class. The men were sitting in the in the
fourth and fifth rows and the women along the front row. The
couple were in the middle of the second row. The third row was
empty. Phil was was the farthest from the door on the fourth
row.

Sam walked around the front and slid along the bench to Phil.

Sam rested his new leather briefcase across his knees unlocked the catch and lifted the leather flap and pulled open the hinged top. He withdrew a large quarto feint-with-margin pad of paper already punched with two holes so that the leaves could be stored in a ring binder. He folded the cover over the top of the pad and set it down on the sloping wood. He put the case beside his feet. He took a pen from inside his jacket. He unscrewed the top and lodged it on the opposite end. He wrote the date in the margin of the first line of the empty page. And then Statics in the middle of the line then STA-1 in the top right-hand corner.

The lecturer came in and the subdued conversation stopped.

Phil put his head close to Sam's. Some beard.

The lecturer faced the class and for half a minute addressed the floor in front of the first row. When he was neither writing nor speaking his right hand pulled at half his beard. The long black straight beard was shorter at that side.

Sam copied down everything that was written on the blackboard making notes (in parentheses) that were based on the spoken comments.

When he had completely filled the long blackboard the lecturer rubbed out his first section and filled it again. Later he had to erase his second section as he needed the space to get to the end of his notes.

Sam's notes covered two and a half pages. He put the torn-off STA-1, STA-2 and STA-3 into his ring binder. Its cover was embossed with the university's crest in gold

The lecturer cleaned the board completely and left as the subdued electric bells rang to mark five minutes before the hour.

The large union cafeteria was quiet. It was a few minutes after noon. He bought a ham roll, a packet of crisps and a half-pint carton of milk. Phil got a sandwich and a coffee then followed

him to one of the many long empty tables in the large basement room that gained little daylight from the shallow high windows. The smaller tables around the edge were already occupied, two of them by bridge fours.

Wednesday. Nothing this afternoon. No lectures. No labs.

I was thinking of going to the library and working through some of the exercises. Phil pulled his chair in to let a chap get to the end of the next table. It's all a bit vague.

What?

What you've got to do.

Straightforward. Bit harder the A-level. Not much.

No, I mean, whether you've got to do them.

No point handing them out otherwise.

But who's checking?

Lindstrøm said he would collect our solutions.

But what will he do if we don't.

Don't what?

Hand them in.

Mind if we join you?

Three of their classmates – two women, one man – stood at the end of the table.

Not at all, said Phil. He moved up one place.

They put down their paper bags and each pulled out a chair. The two women put their coats on the backs of their chairs. The man sat down then allowed his camel coat to fall back behind him. The material of the lining had a sheen even in the poor lighting of the cafeteria.

I know I should know your names but remind me. I'm Phil and this is Sam.

Anne. She used the heel of her right hand to move a tongue of black hair from her face.

Felicity. Fliss. Her curly fair hair encircled her smile. She had wide almost circular eyes. Pale blue irises.

Matthew. He pushed his glasses up his nose with a forefinger.

We were talking about what we're expected to do with the exercises.

I see them as part of the course. I'm going to try them all and the ones I can't manage I'm going to get help with until I understand what they're about. That's the way it is with maths. If you can't do it you don't understand it. Anne untwisted the corners of her paper bag and took out a sandwich roll. She had to hold it with both hands to stop the salad escaping.

That looks good. Where did you get it?

She slid forward a little to answer Phil. The baker's across the main road. Fliss tried it first. Better than you can get over there. She nodded her head in the direction of the counter. Keeping hold of her roll she pushed her black hair away from her eye with the angle of her wrist.

Is it OK to bring it here?

She had already taken a large bite and could do no more than widen her eyes and lift her eyebrows in reply.

I can't. I'm seeing the bank manager in an hour. I need an overdraft until my cheque arrives.

Your local authority hasn't sent it? Fliss crinkled her forehead.

No. He pressed his lips together and shrugged. I don't get a grant. His glasses had slipped a little. My father will send me a cheque. He pushed at the bridge of his spectacles. Eventually. His business seems to do well but when it comes to cash.

Sorry.

Not your fault. I'll manage.

Come later.

No. He struggled into his coat. I'll see. He stood up and his chair scraped the floor.

See you.

Maybe.

Matthew picked up his crocodile-skin case and hurried towards the double doors. His chair was grabbed by another student who carried it to a table a few feet away.

You're coming aren't you Sam.

Well.

Come on. Better than the library.

I've always.

Always?

Worked by myself. At school.

We collaborated, said Anne. On the difficult stuff. Miss Bellingham – she was in charge of the school library – was always telling us to be quiet. We used to call her Always. Her full name was Alwyn Bellingham, but to us she was Always Tellingham.

The two girls put on their coats and picked up their things.

Phil lifted his briefcase on to his knee. Are you coming?

Sam stared straight ahead.

Come on.

He broke his stare and looked up at Anne. Phil was struggling through the gap between the pillar and the other end of the table. Anne smiled.

All right you're worse than my mother.

They squeezed through the tangle of tables and chairs to the empty space that divided the room. In the farthest corner an older student in a long coat was sitting at the upright piano, improvising. He had a thin cigarette between his lips, his head angled away from the ascending smoke. They headed towards the door. Phil held one leaf open until they were all in the corridor. He let go of the door. It swung a couple of times in a heavily damped oscillation, finally closing silently. The fragmented pattern of notes and the clatter of a hundred voices was suddenly lost.

The hall where Anne had a room was at the far end of University Road. It was a large nineteenth century house that had been converted into a hall of residence. Across the high square hall, the wide staircase climbed in shallow steps between ornate banisters. They followed her up to the first floor.

This is big, said Fliss. The room I share is much smaller.

The boys sat down on the thin carpet and leaned against the wall. Fliss sat on the bed. The cane chair remained unoccupied.

I'll see if I can find a kettle.

While she was out of the room they got out their exercise sheets and their folders of notes.

Where do you want to start? He fanned the sheets in his right hand leafed through them with his left. Geometry? Dynamics? Calculus?

Such enthusiasm. Especially for one who was reluctant to come.

Don't get at him. I'd prefer to start with something fairly easy. Fliss struggled to pull a clipboard with a sheaf of papers from her bag. Calculus? These differential equations.

Anne returned. She plugged the kettle into a socket in the skirting board and put the open carton of milk on her table. She made a space among the clutter and pulled a jar of instant coffee forward, and a packet of sugar, and four coloured mugs. Pink, yellow, pale blue, and green.

What about you Anne? Where would you like to start?

What about geometry? I thought I understood conics, but after last week's lecture I was confused and this morning's just made it worse. Everyone take milk? Sugar?

No sugar for me.

No milk for me.

Somewhere I've got a spoon.

There were two letters addressed to Dennis Unwin on the breakfast table. He sat down and picked them up, turned them over. The white one with the neat handwriting had S.W.A.L.K on the back. He put both of them back on the table to the right of his cup and saucer. He put the blue envelope on the top.

Dennis? Malcolm was sitting across from him.

First name's Dennis.

Dennis Samuel.

No.

Dennis Sampson. Family name. I think.

Sam?

Better than Dennis. You?

What?

Middle name? Other names?

Middle name. Always used Malcolm. Don't think I'll change.

David Henry.

Geoff raised his eyes from his plate. Me? Geoffrey Handelsman
Sylvanus Brownjohn.

God what a mouthful.

I quite like the sound of it.

Sounds German. Handlesman.

Mother's maiden name.

She German?

Somewhere. Long time ago. Sylvanus was my father's choice. He liked walking, the countryside. Roman god of woods and fields and so on. Mother's father was Geoffrey. Can't imagine me using any of the others. Bloody nuisance when filling in forms.

He went to his room after breakfast. The others had left. Dave had a nine o'clock. He straightened his bed and sat with his back against the headboard and opened the letter from his mother pushing one finger into an unsealed corner and ripping the envelope. The letter inside had been written on white lined paper. He read the first side and then turned it over and read the rest of the letter. The writing from the first side showed through.

He held the other letter for a few seconds. The envelope had retained its stiffness during its journey and the corners were still sharp. He went to the chest of drawers they shared and picked up the paper knife belonging to Dave. He slit the white envelope open. The two torn edges were clean with only the smallest of irregularities. He pushed the two ends of the envelope until it opened. He jerked back his head. Holding the envelope at arm's length he fanned the air between him and the

letter. After a few seconds he slid out the folded letter. There were three sheets of stiff white paper each filled on both sides with uniform lines of handwriting. On the last page she had written love Eileen and a few Xs. He refolded the sheets and inserted them into the envelope.

When he returned from the bathroom, Mrs Harker was dusting the room.

From a girl? She pointed at the two letters at the side of his bed. Nice perfume. Bit heavy. Noticed as soon as I walked in.

Yes. He took his jacket from the back of the door and his briefcase from his bentwood chair. I'm going, he said, thrusting the two letters into his side jacket pocket. In the hall he put on his raincoat. In the street the setts shone in the grey light. The rain had stopped. Around the corner there was a litter bin mounted on a lamppost. He took out the perfumed letter and tore the sheets in quarters and dropped them into the bin.

In the afternoon he found a place at the end of one of the long reading desks in the library. He removed his raincoat and hung it around the empty chair. He read through his recent lecture notes making marginal additions alongside what he had hastily copied from the blackboard. When he had finished this task he closed the file and reached for the book he had bought for twenty-one shillings at lunch-time. On the spine the title was reduced to two words. Differential Equations. The surname of the author was impressed below them. He turned to the first chapter.

The approaching click-clack of high heels disturbed his concentration. He raised his head. A blonde girl, hair held on the top of her head in a circular swirl tripped by the end of his desk. His eyes followed her to the rectangular enclosure across the entrance where books were returned and issued. He sat back in the wooden armchair. Each wooden desk had seating on both sides with a raised divider that housed long horizontal reading

lamps, one for each position. The desks were not all the same length. Some could accommodate four readers on each side, others five. The length of the shorter desks was determined by the available space between the central aisle and the columns that rose to the balcony and up to the high ceiling of the reading room. There was a similar balcony on the other long side of the reading room. He watched the same blonde girl progress along the balcony to his left, her stride limited by her straight skirt. She disappeared through a door at the far end. Underneath the balconies were rectangular bays filled with books. Each bay was allocated to a specific subject. The balconies also had reading desks and book shelves. A small number of students moved around the library: coming in or leaving through one of the four glass-and-wood doors across the main entrance, walking around the catalogue, returning books, moving towards the queue to have books date-stamped so that they could be taken out. On the balcony readers walked to and from the staircases at each end. There was a slight murmur of voices as pairs of adjacent students discussed what they were doing. Here and there a student stood alongside a friend engaged in conversation. From time to time a cough echoed.

By the end of the afternoon he had worked his way through the first nine pages completing all the Examples for Solution embedded in the text. The last two pages of the chapter – pages ten and eleven – were filled with Miscellaneous Examples. He did not attempt any of them.

Sam heard a pair of heels. A woman walked through the space on the other side of the desk at which he sat. She turned her back to him and clacked her way down the central aisle. She was wearing a loose white silky blouse with a small collar. Her hair was dark brown. She was wearing the same red skirt. The sound of her steps diminished. She went up the staircase then appeared at the end of the balcony. She passed behind the third pillar and did not appear at the other side.

He opened his file and laid the closed new book across the handwritten sheets. At the top of the stairs he rested his arms on the balcony rail. The desks below were in set out in pairs parallel to the end walls. A space ran the centrally along the length of the room. There was little movement and only a drift of sound. The bookshelves on the balcony were arranged to make bays similar to those below. On the outer ends of each bay was a notice listing the topics under the subject that the bay was given over to. He went to the third notice and studied it. Psychology. He peered around the edge of the bookshelves into the third bay. She was sitting at the far end of the long desk. She was reading a book. A grey coat hung on the back of her chair. She turned a page. He watched her read. She gently placed a picture postcard into the gutter of the book and slowly closed it. She sat still for a few seconds then eased back her chair and stood up. She lifted her grey coat on to her shoulders, slipping her left arm into a sleeve and then her right arm. She picked up her university scarf and fitted it around her neck.

He hurried back down to his place, put on his coat, picked up his book and notes. The clock above the entrance showed four forty-five. At the brass turnstile beyond the exit a porter asked to see his books. The porter examined inside the front of his new book and released the turnstile. He had left his briefcase in his locker in the basement under the court. Back near the entrance to the library he stopped in the centre of the court under the clock tower. He glanced towards the turnstiles then went outside and stood at the top of the steps. The sky was overcast and the light grey. He surveyed the bus queue and then looked up the road and down the road. He turned back.

Inside he put his briefcase down at the base of one of the wide pillars. He waited. He squatted on the corner of the plinth at the base of the column. He stretched out his left arm to expose his watch. The tower clock began to chime. As he rose to his feet she came through the library doors, down the few steps towards the turnstile. She had pulled a knitted hat over her hair. He turned

his back to her. After he had heard her pass he walked slowly towards the main entrance. He made his way down the wide steps veering in the direction of the bus stop.

The queue for the buses extended beyond the shelter. He joined the queue. She was a yard or two in front of him. A bus approached. It was one of the routes that he could use.

The queue moved up. She did not get on. He stayed in the queue. He was nearer her now. Others came round his shoulder to get on the stationary bus. The conductor rang the bell twice. The engine struggled to pull the loaded bus into motion. It picked up a little speed and left them waiting.

She got on the next bus and went up the stairs ahead of him. She slid into an empty double seat and he sat down beside her. His right knee angled out into the narrow aisle. The air was tinted with exhaled cigarette smoke.

She stared out of the window. The lobe of her right ear was visible below the ribbed edge of her hat. As the bus passed the end of a street the sun which had dropped below the clouds flashed its bright disc. She flinched away from the window, avoiding the sudden glare.

Oh, hello, he said.

She raised her eyebrows. Her brown pupils flicked in his direction and then away. Her red lips remained pressed together.

No seats downstairs.

No, there weren't. I hate all this smoke. She continued to look through the window.

He said nothing. The bus groaned as it pulled away from each stop, and juddered as it stopped and started in the heavy evening traffic.

You OK?

I feel a bit – you know.

You're doing psychology.

Am I?

You were in the psychology bay in the library.

Was I?
I noticed.
Did you?
Sorry?

She made as if to respond, then went back to staring out of the gloomy window.

I'm not sure I can take this volume of food. Dave was stretched out full length on his bed.

No.

Daren't leave any. I did think about putting my head around the kitchen door and saying that if that's mine it's more than enough.

Sam unfolded one of the two tables that, along with a bentwood chair, met the requirements laid down by the university so that what was merely a bedroom could be classed as a study-bedroom. He put his chair next to it and sat down. From his briefcase he took the evening paper he had bought and turned its broadsheet pages until he came to the cinema listings. He folded it back and set the folded sheets on the table top. The light from the single shaded bulb was not bright. He moved his finger down the column: ABC, Capitol, Dominion, ...

What you looking for? A job?

Pictures. See what's on? Elite, Empire, Hippodrome, Lyceum,...

Thinking of going?

Yes. No. Not sure.

Tonight?

No. Lyric, Odeon, Palladium, Regent, Ritz, Scala, Tower.

When.

Sam said nothing.

Next week? On your own? Who with?

Same spoke to the space in front of him. This girl.

Which girl?

You know.

The CU lass.

Yes. Her.

Thought she ignored you.

Not exactly.

I see.

Saw her again today.

Accident or design?

I thought I might ask her out. He returned to the newspaper.

Nothing venture.

What?

Malcolm and I are going out for a drink. You coming?

No.

No?

No.

6

It was a little after half past eight when he left the library. There was no one waiting at the bus stop. The wind was cold and dry. In the ten minutes that passed before the first bus arrived a small queue gradually assembled behind him.

The bus followed its route slowly. At one stop it remained stationary for a few minutes before starting off and resuming its unhurried progress.

Walking through the streets towards his digs he looked up at the sky. The stars were bright against the blackness despite the proximity of the street lights.

He unlocked the front door with his latch key and went in. It felt a little warmer inside.

Is that you, Sam? Mrs Harker stood with the sitting room door ajar.

Yes. He hung up his coat on one of the two empty wall pegs. He went up the stairs. There was laughter coming from Geoff and Malcolm's room. The room he shared with Dave was empty. He did not knock before he opened the door of the other bedroom. The three of them were sitting around one of the folding tables playing cards. There were partly empty bottles of beer in three of the corners. On the floor along the skirting was a row of six empty bottles.

Each of them in turn tossed a card into the centre. Dave started with the two of clubs, Malcolm followed with the ten of diamonds and Geoff with the Jack of spades.

Bugger, said Dave. The last bloody trump. I'll probably win this one as well. Dave put down his last card, the four of hearts.

Malcolm dropped the five of diamonds on top of it. Bloody well done Dave. Thank you very much.

Shit! Geoff threw down his five of hearts and scooped up the trick.

Sam sat down on one of the beds.

Malcolm gathered the cards into a pack. Geoff wrote on a piece of paper. That puts you in the lead.

Dave lifted his beer to his mouth and tipped up the bottle. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and belched loudly. Excuse me. He put down the bottle and gestured wildly. Sam's going to take this girl to the pictures.

No. Geoff turned his head to Sam.

Sam closed his eyes.

Malcolm nodded thoughtfully and pushed out his bottom lip. He made a faint sound. Bit of all right. Hey?

On the maths course?

No. In his fresher's group. Been bumping into her ever since. She's one of these religious types.

Won't get far with her then. Bloody certain.

You seen her?

Dave blinked at Geoff. He shook his head quickly little more than a repeated twitch. He raised the bottle a few inches and then lowered it to the table. No. That's not strictly true. I don't know whether I have ever – he repressed another burp – seen her. I could have seen her without knowing it was her because I wouldn't know her if I saw her. He hiccuped. She may be no more than a figment of Sam's mathematical imagination, an hypothesis, an abstract concept, an imaginary number. Bugger, I've got hiccups.

Malcolm's eyes swung in Sam's direction. You all right? He mouth began to smile. You've gone very red. The smile struggled not to become a grin. He drank some of his beer but failed to control a sudden giggle and the beer in his mouth sprayed over Dave.

You messy bastard! Dave reached into his trouser pocket and struggled to pull out his handkerchief. His knees straightened as he tugged and his chair lifted on to its back legs and then as he strove more determinedly the chair slowly toppled. The chair fell and Dave followed it to the floor. Dave held on to his bottle which emptied itself on to his face. Fuck.

There was silence. Malcolm released a strangled noise then gasped.

Aren't I the silly bugger?

Malcolm began to laugh. The laughter was raucous. His heavy shoulders lifted and fell.

Geoff grinned.

I've fucking well stopped hiccuping.

Sam stood up and went out of the room.

Sam was standing facing the window when Dave came into the room.

It's warm in here. How long have you had that thing on? The black upright cylinder of the paraffin heater stood in the corner farthest from the door. It stinks.

Sam moved his head slightly.

Sorry about the other night.

Forget it.

That the letter that came this morning?

Sam raised the envelope to his chest. Yes. It is.

What's the matter? Bad news?

Don't know. He sat down on his chair. His hands held the letter between his knees.

You haven't opened it.

I know who it's from.

Dave took a book out of his case and threw it across the room. It landed on the middle of his bed, denting the soft quilt.

I'm going to send it back.

Unopened?

Yes.

You don't want her to write.

No. I don't want anything to do with her.

Dave pushed off his shoes with his toes and walked over Sam's bed in his stockinged feet and sat down on his own.

I only went out with her for a couple of months. Less. It was her really. When will I see you next. What shall we do on Saturday. I went along.

Do you like her?

I don't know. It was all a bit. Terra incognita.

Here there be dragons.

She was the first. The first girl I'd ever been out with. She latched on to me at the end of term school dance. I didn't know what to do to stop it. I quite liked it. I thought it would end when I came here. But.

But she wrote. That letter you got a week or two ago.

Yes.

What did she say?

It was strange. It didn't seem to be intended for me. When I read it was like reading someone else's letter. It was too. His shoulders sagged and he stood up and walked over to the window. He stared through the dull glass. One hand was behind his back, holding the unopened envelope. Too personal. But I wasn't the person. I felt. I felt suffocated.

Did you write back.

No. I didn't. I didn't want to. Want to respond. I thought. I thought that whatever I wrote she would. I don't know.

You think if you ignore this letter she'll give up.

How do I know.

I think you should write a short note making it clear that it's over.

Should I?

Yes, but you've got to read what is in that first. He pointed a finger at the envelope.

Why?

It might make a difference to what you write.

How?

I don't know.

Neither do I.

It's up to you.

What is?

To put your cards on the table and tell her what's what.

Sam put his back to the window. He held the letter by his side.

You don't know what she might have written.

I don't want to read what she's written.

And it might make a difference to how she interprets. Your response.

But she'll see I haven't opened it.

I know but.

But what?

I can't explain, but I should read it. If I were you. Then decide.

That'll make it worse. Harder. I'd rather send it back.

So why haven't you?

Sam sighed. I want it not to have been sent.

Impossible.

I know.

Dave reached for his letter opener and held it out, handle first

Sam put his head back and closed his eyes.

Go on.

Sam remained silent.

Here. Take it. He waggled the paper knife at Sam.

Sam opened his eyes.

Dave gestured with the knife again.

Sam snatched the proffered implement. The stiff envelope was blank on the back. There was no hint of perfume. In two quick movements he slit the top edge and one side. There was only a single sheet. Sam sat down.

Dave stretched out on his bed.

The lying bitch.

Dave lifted his head.

The hand that held the letter fell slowly until it was resting on his knee. His eyes were unfocused. His face slack. She's pregnant and says it's mine.

Dave swung his legs round and sat up. Is it?

What?

Is it yours?

No. He compressed his lips and blew air through his nostrils. No, it's not. He looked at Dave. It can't be mine. He stood up. No! He held the letter out towards Dave. Says she can't hide it any longer. What is she? Four months. Five months. I don't know. It's the end of October now. That makes it. When?

Say four months. End of June. Could be later.

I didn't start going out with her till late July, end of term.

About three months. What's she going to do?

She doesn't exactly say. He sat down. Why. Why does she want me to say it's mine?

She daren't say whose it really is.

If she knows. Sam threw the sheet of paper on to the chest of drawers below the mirror. The folded sheet stood like a tent on the polished wood.

Dave rolled on to one side and swung his feet to the floor. She knows.

You think so.

I'm certain so.

You don't know her.

Do you?

Sam shrugged. Who knows anybody?

She could get rid of it.

You think so.

Why not?

You mean abortion?

Not necessarily. There are ways. Or adoption. Disappear for a few months and come back and say nothing.

Why tell me? Why not get on with it?

Can't say.

Sam breathed. No. Neither can I.

She could be.

What?

Well. Infatuated. You said. The letter.

With me? Infatuated?

You never know.

It doesn't fit.

Ah. You think she's scheming to.

What?

Get you to marry her.

Daft idea.

It happens. Makes things well. Decent.

Marry her! As if I'd be so stupid.

7

He got down from the train and rested his suitcase on the platform. He pulled his coat together and buttoned it. He let the belt hang loose. The engine at the front of the train whistled and then the coaches shuddered in turn rattling the couplings. He walked across the platform. The train behind him moved and continued its journey northwards. His body curved away from the weight of his suitcase. The soft top of his case bulged a little. He stood it on a bench, two painted planks mounted on cast iron frames, and sat down beside it. He turned up his coat collar then pushed his hands into his pockets. To his right there was a

puddle of rainwater. Drops fell at long intervals from the curved roof high above him. He glanced at the large station clock mounted high on a wall overlooking one of the long through platforms. The black hour hand jerked to the next half minute. The face of the clock was white. It had Roman numerals set between two concentric circles. A woman stood waiting at the same platform. Her arms were folded across her chest and her handbag hung down from one gloved hand. Her coat had a wide collar which she had turned up. She had her back to him and only the top of her head was visible. She was not wearing a hat. She began to walk up and down in her high-heeled shoes.

Cold air blew through the bleak station. A man and a couple were walking about the dismal platform. A diesel railcar appeared in the distance and followed the line into the platform in front of him. The harsh vibration of the engines reverberated in the trench between the platforms. A total of seven people waited as the train came to a halt. A smaller number alighted. The service terminated here. The driver and guard got off the train and hurried away. The lights were still on in the passenger compartments and the motors had been left idling. The others boarded. He followed. The seats were arranged in twos and threes more like a bus than a train. He sat down and pulled his suitcase on to the seat next to him. A seat across the aisle oscillated, resonating with the rattle of the diesel engine, fighting against the bolts that rooted it to the floor.

The train left the station the same way it had come in. Outside it was night. The view through the window was nothing more than a trembling reflection of the light inside the train. There was little to see except street lights and the occasional yellow-paned window. Hot air came from somewhere under his seat. He loosed his coat and stretched his legs. He did nothing but sit as the train tunnelled through the night.

A hundred yards outside the station he waited for a bus. The bus came and emptied. He boarded, put his case in the space under the stairs and sat downstairs and waited for the driver

and conductor to return. He heard someone go up the stairs. When the bus moved off he was the only one in the lower saloon.

He stood outside his house. There was a dim light in the curtained bay window of the living room. He walked up the short path and stood his case on the broad step to the front door. He fumbled in his pocket. He stopped and reached out to the knocker and banged twice with it.

The curtain in the corner of the bay window moved and he could see his mother's face. She disappeared and the curtain fell back leaving a triangle of brighter light.

The door opened. Dennis. Dennis. She stepped back, holding the edge of the door. This is a surprise. Is everything all right? You're not in trouble?

He lifted his case and stepped inside, dropping the case by the hall stand.

Why didn't you tell me you were coming? You look tired.

It was last minute. I didn't think about it till this morning.

Take your coat off. She took the coat from him and hung it on the hall stand. Go in, go in.

There was a chill in living room. A fire was burning in the grate. Voices came from the back of television. He crossed in front of the fireplace and sat down in the far armchair. She followed him. She looked at the screen for a second or two then turned off the television before sitting down on the settee. He watched the picture shrink to a bright spot and continue to stare until it had faded to nothing.

Well this is a nice surprise.

It gives out a lot of heat doesn't it. This smokeless fuel.

It never quite reaches the corners of the room. And you have to use gas to get it lit. I'm getting used to it. She straightened. What have you had to eat? What time did you leave? I've not much in but I can find something.

I had a decent lunch. A sandwich. Cheese or something.

I'll make some tea.

It was a large through terrace house in the middle of one of the streets that had been built at the end of the nineteenth century or the beginning of the twentieth. There were two steps up from the flagged pavement to the brown-painted front door. A high vertical letterbox with a metal flap with the word LETTERS in curlicued capitals was set between the upper panels. Below the letterbox was a knocker, a twisted circlet of wrought iron. He stepped up, lifted it and hit the metal boss beneath it several times. Back down on the pavement he waited. After a minute or so the fluted knob turned and the door was pulled back a few inches. An eye and a slice of face appeared in the murky gap. The eye peered at him, a shallow downward angle. The face withdrew into the darkness as the door was opened fully.

Dennis.

She wore a quilted blue dressing gown. It was tied loosely with a matching belt and hung over her belly. Her face bore no make-up and her fair hair had not been brushed and drooped listlessly.

Dennis.

He did not say anything.

I wasn't expecting anyone. I haven't been up long. She turned her head to look down the dark, narrow hallway.

He stood on the pavement.

I think you'd better come in.

He followed her down the hallway then went back and closed the door. There was a cigarette end in a glass ashtray on the narrow table. She went into a room to the left. He took off his coat. The only furniture in the room was a pale three-piece suite and a small table with a large empty ceramic vase. The vase was decorated with flowers, bold, child-like. Cold ashes occupied the grate and over the cast iron fireplace a bevelled oval mirror hung on a long chain that passed over a picture hook on the dark picture rail. The wallpaper was leafy. He put his coat over the nearer armchair. The room was not warm.

She had her back to him looking out between the curtains of the sash window. I know why you've come.

Silence.

She jerked her head so that she could glare at him over her left shoulder.

Silence.

She faced him. Her feet were bare, bloodless, veined. Her toes gripped the thin patterned carpet.

Say something.

What do you want me to say?

She shook her head and lowered herself on to the settee. Her right hand fidgeted its way into the gap between the two cushions.

He moved slowly to the mirror looked at his reflection then spun round to face her. He opened his palms behind his back as though as though he could detect a vestige of remaining warmth from the ashes in the grate.

I. She looked at his eyes.

He was looking at his shoes.

I wanted.

He rubbed his hands together. He raised his head. You wanted. His voice was dry, the pitch a little higher than normal. He cleared his throat.

She brought her hands together on her lap. The dressing gown hung loosely parted in an inverted V. I just wanted a father for my baby.

It hasn't got one?

No. Yes. Her head dropped. I wanted someone to be a father to my baby.

I have no interest in your baby.

No. She raised her eyes. Her head lifted a little. I thought. I thought. She caught her breath. I thought you would make a good father.

I know nothing about being a father.

Yes. But I thought you liked me.

Liked? I did. For a while. He sat down in the chair where he had dropped his coat. He eased his hands under his thighs trapping them between his trousers and the cushion. There was a spot in the carpet where the weave of the coarse backing showed through.

She made a sound. Tears ran down both of her cheeks. I'm sorry.

I don't want to know. It's nothing to do with me.

You're angry.

I shouldn't be here. He stood and picked up his coat.

Please.

Please what?

Don't go.

You've got yourself into this. This. This mess. You'll have to get yourself out of it.

If it hadn't been him it might have been you. She drew in a deep breath and sobbed noisily.

Adoption. Abortion. Get rid of it somehow.

It's my baby.

I'm going.

My baby. Inside. Here. A person.

He strode to the door and into the hallway. He unlatched the front door.

I thought you would care.

He stood on the step and shouted into the dimness. Care! Why should I care? Leave me out of it. It's your bloody problem. He stepped down into the street and marched off. After four or five strides he halted. He hesitated then faced her. She was hanging on to the door frame. Try to pin this on me and. He shut his mouth for a second. And you'll see. You'll be sorry. Then under his breath. Really sorry.

The house was empty. He worked his key out of the door lock and fastened the door. The knitted sausage that inhibited the

draught that sliced under the door when the wind was at the front lay at an angle. He eased it back into place with the toe of his shoe. He removed his coat and hung it up.

His mother had lit a fire. It glowed without any flames. He sat down. The fire hissed faintly. The clock on the mantelpiece ticked. Over in the bay window there was an intermittent buzzing. A newspaper lay on shelf under the television. He pulled it out and rolled it up. On the painted windowsill a torpid wasp crawled towards the glass. He raised the newspaper above his head and smacked it down towards the wasp. It buzzed up on to the bottom pane. He twisted to attack the insect again. A short sharp flick with his wrist. The wasp fell on to its back, legs flailing, wings oscillating. The next blow killed it. He swept it on to the floor.

Through the window he saw his mother coming up the path. She had a shopping bag in her hand. He went to the door and opened it.

You're back.

I'm back.

She stepped in and wiped her feet on the mat. I've been shopping.

I can see. He closed the door and replaced the draught stopper.

The wind's got up. She hung up her coat. What's the matter?

Nothing.

She followed him into the sitting room. Where'd you go?

He sat down. Nowhere.

You seem.

He looked at the fire.

She lowered herself carefully, one knee at a time, until she was kneeling on the hearth. She twisted the knob at the front of the grate. The upward draught drew a flame from the glowing fuel. She held on to the mantelpiece as she lifted herself to her feet. Is something bothering you?

Nothing. Don't fuss.

Is there something you don't want to tell me?

Mam. Give over.
She sat down on the sofa. It's that girl.
What girl?
The one you were seeing in the holidays.
I was *seeing* no one.
All right. But she came round not long after you –
She what?
Came to see me.
What for?
Your address.
You gave her my address?
Yes.
Bloody hell.
I thought it would be nice if she wrote to you.
He got out of the chair. I'd finished with her. Done with her.
Didn't want anything more to do with her. I gone away. She
stayed here. Why would I want?
She seemed a likeable young woman. We had a cup of tea and
a little chat.
He made a despairing sound. He put his hand on the wall at
the side of the bay. He thumped the wall with the side of his fist.
Persistent bitch.
Don't speak to me like that.
Not you. Her.
Though why you couldn't stay out of it, I don't know.
Why?
Oh, it's. He turned round. You wouldn't.
You've been to see her. Haven't you? This morning?
I said stay out of it.
Is that why you're upset.
I'm bloody angry.
Angry?
It was finished. Done with. Now it's. He banged the wall again.
I don't know.
What did you say to her?

I can't remember.
Do you think she'll?
How the hell would I know?
Neither of them spoke for a minute. She stared at the fire. He
stared at the back of her head.
I'm sorry if I did the wrong thing.
Are you? You'll never understand.
Understand what?
Me.

He threw the case on to his bed and began to take out the clothes that his mother had washed and ironed for him. He put them away in drawers. He hung his shirts in the wardrobe. The spare wire coat-hangers jangled. He closed the empty case and shoved it under the bed using his foot to move it the last few inches until it could not be seen. The afternoon light was dim. He lay down full length on his bed, locked his fingers behind his neck and stared at the ceiling.

The sudden brightness of the sixty-watt bulb under its shallow white cone woke him.

You're back.

I am.

So?

So what?

So what happened?

He sat up and folded his knees and hugged them to his chest.

Did you see her?

Yes. Yes. I saw her. She looked awful. Tangled hair. I think she'd put a fag out. I could smell it. Still in her dressing gown.

Dave got down on his knees to light the wick of the paraffin heater.

She thought I'd make a good father to the bastard. Not sure I'd want to be its father if it was mine.

Difficult. He closed the curved door of the heater.

You know what I mean.

She didn't insist it was yours.

No. He breathed. She knew.

Dave held his hands over the rising warm air from the heater. Did she say anything about?

She started. I told her I didn't want to know. Told her to get rid of it. Said it was nothing to do with me.

What do you think made her think that there was any chance you go along with it?

You tell me. She kept on and on about her baby and then she cried. On the bus home I felt guilty.

I can see you might want to feel sorry for her. Do you think the father is married or something?

Could be. Could be dead. Could be. I don't know. She probably doesn't know. Who knows. Who cares. I don't.

Dave sat down on one of the chairs. You seem angry.

Sam sat on the edge of the bed and stared at the floor. I am angry. Annoyed. It's all so. So. Unnecessary. I shouldn't have gone. No need. Not my responsibility. I only went out with her for a few weeks. Can't say I know her. Makes no sense. Her even thinking I'd go along. Why did I go. If I hadn't seen her. I can see her now. Weeping. He stood up. What time is it?

Dave pushed back his sleeve with one finger. Five past eight.

I could do with a drink.

The pub was less than ten minutes walk from Mrs Harker's. He bought two pints of bitter and took them to the square table in the corner of the tap room where Dave was sitting. The pub was busy but not crowded. A few men stood at the bar. Four were playing dominoes and there was a darts match of some kind in progress. There were no women. There were women in the other room, but all the tables there were occupied.

Dave brought a packet of cigarettes out of his jacket pocket. He pushed back the top and gave the packet a shake and took out a cigarette. You want one?

No.

Dave closed the packet.

No, I will. Not had one since I was fourteen. He took a cigarette and gripped the filter end in his lips.

Dave flipped a silver lighter and held out the small flame.

Sam thrust his head forward and the flame scorched the paper and then lit the tobacco. He drew in the smoke carefully, briefly, and removed the cigarette from his mouth as he filled his lungs. He coughed, sucked in air and coughed again. Been a long time. The nicotine hit his nervous system and he exhaled slowly leaning back. God, that's good.

Dave smoked, putting his cigarette to his mouth at intervals and then after several seconds allowing the smoke to flow up from his mouth and enter his nostrils. He tilted his head to one side so that the drifting smoke avoided his eye. His pint remained untouched, the head slowly settling.

Sam lifted his pint with two fingers and a thumb, holding the cigarette between the other two fingers, and downed more than a quarter of his beer. He made a gentle sound with his mouth wide open then wiped his mouth with the back of his bent wrist. The smoke from his cigarette unwound from the raised end.

There's nothing you can do.

I suppose not. I feel.

You ought.

I ought to do something.

It's a terrible word, a fucking terrible word.

Sam sucked at his cigarette again. The smoke entered his lungs smoothly.

Ought. In one single bloody syllable it commands responsibility without reason.

But.

But what? Dave waited.

I don't know.

Think. Think it through. Don't do anything you won't be able to justify later. Nothing that you can't justify as right for you. And only you.

Sam drank again and smoked again.

Dave was neither drinking nor smoking. His eyes blinked once, gently.

Sam blew smoke to one side. I'm a bit surprised.

Surprised?

At the way. The way you see this.

Logical.

But. What about. What about love your neighbour and all that? All that church stuff?

Love your neighbour as yourself.

Sam nodded.

Don't forget yourself. Anyhow I'm not sure I hold with what's in the bible.

I see.

Love your neighbour? Am I my brother's keeper? Which? I'm not my brother or my sister or anyone else's keeper.

No.

Look after number one.

You said I should write.

I said write. Spell it out. I didn't say go and see the little tart.

Sam winced.

Dave rocked back on his chair. Of course there will be times when it is profitable to put others first – or appear to be doing so.

Seems cynical to me.

I suppose it is, but I'd say I was a realist. See things for what they are not for what others tell you they are or what you might hope or wish that they were. Dave drank slowly and steadily from his glass.

So.

Dave put down his glass.

You think. I should. Put her out of my mind. Pretend she doesn't exist.

She has no hold on you. She does not belong in your life. There's no gain for you in giving her an ounce of consideration. She tried to use you. Refuse to be used. Dave drained the bottom inch of his glass. Another?

The following morning he arrived ten minutes late for his nine o'clock lecture. He sat down quickly in an empty place near end of the second row. Already half the width of the blackboard was filled with two broad columns of equations that involved the differential operator that had been introduced in the previous calculus lecture. He uncapped his fountain pen. He wrote the date in the margin of the half-full sheet of paper and started to copy what was on the blackboard directly underneath where his notes for last time ended. He wrote rapidly. The writing was untidy but legible. He had already devised a number of abbreviations of his own in addition to those used by the lecturer.

Dr Greenhead looked like a schoolboy. The writing on the blackboard was clear and the lecturer drew a vertical chalk line to the right of what he had written before he started again at the top of the blackboard. Sam had copied everything before the first vertical line as Dr Greenhead was filling up a third section of the blackboard. Space remained for a fourth section. Sam was copying the first line of the third section when the lecturer, who had not said a word since Sam had entered the room, returned to the left-hand end of the board and erased the first section with the cloth that he took from the desk under the window. He glanced at the papers on the desk as he replaced the cloth and then began to write further sequences of symbols in the space he had just wiped.

The feeble bell that rattled rather than rang at five to the hour did not stop Greenhead. He added the final two steps to the

proof and then drew a horizontal line across that section of the board. Most of the class finished writing only a few seconds after him. Chairs clattered and conversation rose. Sam had to pull his chair in and squeeze his body against the desk to let those who were leaving pass behind him. He kept writing. A female student was talking to Dr Greenhead who had already retrieved the cloth. Sam was copying down the final few symbols as the woman thanked the lecturer and left. Dr Greenhead worked diligently from left to right removing the evidence of his lecture from board. Sam closed his notepad and put it into his briefcase. He stood up and then bent down to retrieve his coat from the floor under his desk. The board was blank again.

Everything all right?

Sam stopped. Sir?

You were late this morning.

Yes. He hesitated. I'm sorry.

Nothing wrong?

No. Not at all. A bit late setting off. Waited ages for a bus.

Dr Greenhead went out of the room carrying his sheaf of notes. Sam followed him outside into the corridor.

Phil was waiting. You OK?

Yes. I'm fine.

You looked knackered when you came in.

I hate being late. They walked along the corridor.

What happened?

Must have gone off to sleep again. Rushed breakfast. Ran to the bus. Then up all these bloody stairs. You're right. I was knackered.

Fliss and Anne were in the coffee lounge in the basement of the union. They pulled up chairs and joined them.

Aren't you feeling well? Anne put a hand on his knee.

He smiled at her. I'm OK. Went for a drink last night with Dave. I shouldn't have had the cigarettes. I was well – let's not go into it.

Didn't know you smoked.

I don't. Well not since I was in the fourth form. It hasn't been a good weekend.

How?

I'd rather not talk about it.

Phil lowered two cups of coffee to the table. Did you go home like you said.

Yes, I did.

Family all right? Phil sat down.

There's only my mother and she's fine. He unwrapped the pair of sugar lumps and dropped one in his pale coffee and stirred the shallow cup. He rested the spoon in the saucer and pressed the paper around the remaining lump. He placed it next to his saucer. He watched the paper unfold itself, flower-like.

I didn't think you'd come.

Why?

Her door was only partly open.

Didn't Phil say?

Say what?

About. About him and Fliss?

What about him and Fliss?

That they're.

I see. Going out. Together.

You knew?

No. But it adds up.

How?

Little things. Can't really say. A word here, a look there. Didn't realise I'd noticed. Fliss and Phil.

Fliss told me that they wouldn't be coming.

Phil didn't say.

Anne stepped back opening the door a little wider.

Well we.

Are you sure you want to bother?

Don't see why not. Might be more fruitful with just the two of us.

Anne let her chin drop and lifted the toe of her right shoe. It had a low heel and a fabric bow on the patent leather.

Unless.

No. I don't.

It's your room. You say if.

No. She raised her eyes then stepped back again and looked into the centre of her room. It just seems. I don't want people to think.

Never a good idea thinking. Leads to all sorts of trouble. He walked into the room and she closed the door behind him. Look, if you're not comfortable.

Seems wrong.

What?

Not wrong. Im ... im ... proper.

Thought you were going to say immoral.

I nearly did. She smiled then laughed.

He laughed as well.

I had a boyfriend at home for a while. Mum and Dad used to leave us in the sitting room if he came round and they'd sit in the dining room. They might as well have stayed with us. We only talked and listened to records. Mainly.

She sat down on the bed.

Sam sat down in the cane chair.

Now here you are.

With a man in my bedroom.

And not the first time.

But the first time with no one else around.

I'll be good.

You'd better be.

That sounds like an invitation.

It's not, Sam Unwin, so keep your libido under control. This is mathematics and nothing more.

I forgot. There's a letter for you. Mrs Harker put down his plate on which there was a slice of toast bearing an undercooked poached egg. I'll bring it through.

He poked his knife into the centre of the egg. Liquid white oozed and sank into the toast.

Dave looked across at him. The other two said nothing.

Mrs Harker came back with a blue envelope. Sam took it from her. My mother. Didn't think I'd get one this week. He tore open the envelope and unfolded the single sheet of writing paper. A folded strip of newspaper slipped out and he caught it. He looked at the letter and then put it and the envelope on the tablecloth and opened the folded strip. His eyes moved down the column. The others watched. He stopped reading.

This girl I knew. Back home. Thrown herself off a cliff. Killed herself and.

8

The toe of his left shoe caught the edge of the stair tread and he fell forward trapping his briefcase between his chest and the wooden stairs. He gasped. He pushed himself to his feet and went more slowly up the next flight. At the top he rubbed his shin. Along the landing he thumped the door with the side of his fist. He rested his left shoulder against the door and banged again, clumsily with his forearm. The door opened and his body moved with the swing of the door. He grabbed for the door frame with his right hand and gripped the woodwork. His body pivoted about his grip and he stepped forward to provide

support for his weight. The movement of his lower legs was impeded by the briefcase heavy with books. His knees bent and his grip broke. He collapsed over his briefcase twisting as he fell so that his left shoulder hit the floor first. Momentum continued to move his head until the left side of his skull thudded against the polished boards.

Sam!

He pushed at the floor with his hands, straightening his legs, then fell over the briefcase again. He moved his knees and pushed again with his hands. He grasped the door handle and pulled himself off his knees until he was upright.

Anne was holding his briefcase. What have you got in here? She put it next her desk then looked at Sam. You hurt?

Noah I maul right. He released the door handle and took a stride towards the cane chair. His second stride allowed him to steady himself on the chair arm and turn round and sit. His legs straightened out in front of him, his heels together his toes apart. His head hung backwards, his chin pointing to the ceiling and his neck exposed.

Where's? His head fell forward before traversing a long horizontal arc. His eyes following slightly behind scanning the room. Flil and Phiss? Phil and Fliss? His head fell backwards.

You've been drinking.

Own lee hack up pull. He addressed the words to the ceiling.

You're drunk.

Anne yore beauty full.

I'm not.

Beauty is in the high of the be older.

Well it's Tuesday not Wednesday.

So that makes two of us.

Sam. Shush.

I know. Their go in out.

Sam. Listen. Why don't you go home.

Home?

I've got things I must do.

Homes wee tome.

Sam.

I'm go in. He levered himself upright and stepped uncertainly towards Anne who was standing between the bed and the door. His briefcase was on the floor by her shoe. Kiss good by. His mouth moved in the direction of her face. She took a small step backward and Sam's right hand came up as he swayed and he grasped at her. His fingers closed on her breast.

Get off me! She placed her hands on his chest and pushed. Get out! He fell on to the bed. She ran through the half-open door.

Sam closed his eyes and flattened one ear against the bedding and vomited gently. Bet her go, he said. He got to his feet and took hold of his briefcase and walked determinedly out of the room. He went down the staircase one step at a time holding the banister with his free hand, sliding it to its next resting position before taking his next step.

A tall grey-haired woman wearing a knitted beige cardigan and a brown skirt waited on the first landing. Anne stood a little behind her.

Is this the young man?

Yes.

Mr Unwin, I trust you are leaving.

Leave in go in gone.

If I find you in this hall again this term I will have you removed immediately.

Him media telly. He walked across the two women and down the next flight of stairs. He pulled open the wide heavy front door only as far as was necessary for him to slide through and out into the fresh air.

Behind a buttress in a gap between two of the old college buildings he was sick again. He wiped his face with his handkerchief and thrust it back into his trouser pocket. A little of it flapped like a pennant as his jacket caught the wind.

At the bus stop he leaned against the frame of the shelter. When the bus came he boarded it and sat on the first place

inside the lower saloon, on the left-hand long seat over the wheel. He twisted his body towards the back of the bus. His eyes stared through the glass, through the rear window watching the road. Each time the bus braked or accelerated he held his mouth shut and closed his eyes.

The bus stopped, not at a bus stop, and soon there was a queue of vehicles waiting behind the bus. A few yards behind the bus was a zebra crossing. A woman wearing a grey coat and a knitted hat crossed from his side of the road to the other passing between the waiting vehicles.

He took hold of the handrail to his right and swung himself on to the platform. The bus jerked forwards. He staggered towards the edge of the platform. The vertical chrome-plated post that divided the platform hit his forehead and right cheek. His arms flung themselves either side of the post and his fingers released the weight of his briefcase. He moved to the left of the bar, curled his right arm around it and swung out waving his left foot in the air. He thrust himself backwards off the platform. The bus was still moving. His feet hit the road and he made running movements with his legs but his momentum was too great and he fell full length towards the gutter. His left arm doubled under him and he rolled on to the pavement. He stood up using only his right arm and his feet and went back along the road clutching his left elbow.

Are you all right?

He saw someone holding his briefcase.

Hey! That's mine.

The man held it out and Sam took it with his right hand.

Are you hurt?

I'm OK. I'm OK.

Sure?

I'm all. Right.

He skirted the man. Across the road was the woman in the grey coat. A large van came along the road from his right. He stepped back and as soon it had passed he shouted. Carol! And

darted to the middle of the road. He glanced to the left and stopped his feet. He was falling forwards as the offside wing of the car lifted him on to its bonnet. He slid along the bonnet to the windscreen and then rebounded and slumped down the side of the car. The mirror on the door hinge cracked against his skull and threw him away from the wheels. The wing of a vehicle going in the opposite caught then back of his head as he fell to the ground.

9

Dave followed Mrs Harker into the dining room. He stood behind her as she put plates in front of Geoff and Malcolm.

She turned to leave.

Sam didn't come in last night.

She raised both eyebrows as she slipped past him on her way to the kitchen.

Geoff and Malcolm glanced at Dave as he twisted his chair from under the dining table.

Bed's not been slept in.

Dave sat down.

Do you think something's happened? Geoff held his knife and fork upright, flanking his plate like guardsmen.

Happened? Dave poured himself a cup of tea. Something. What something?

I don't know. Geoff sawed through a corner of his toast, fixed it with his fork and then dipped it in the yolk of his poached egg. He could have been arrested.

Arrested? Malcolm made a dismissive noise. What for?

Geoff held up his knife and fork again and raised his eyes as if trying to determine the common point indicated by the directions of their longitudinal axes. I think he's been drinking a lot recently. He waited. Hasn't he? Ever since that letter. He's always late up in the morning. Comes in late at night. Says he's been to the library. He could have been picked up by the police. Drunk and disorderly.

More likely stayed over somewhere.

With a girl? Malcolm widened his eyes. Never. He half shook his head.

Might have.

Sam? Hardly. Malcolm pushed his cereal bowl into the middle of the table and dragged his poached egg towards him. Speculation. Sheer speculation. You'll see. It'll be something quite ordinary. Unexciting. Boring. Sam's like that. Full of what he's going to do. Never does.

That's not fair.

Isn't it? Only my opinion.

There was that girl he kept on about. So you said.

Yeah. That was ages ago. Beginning of term.

And that fiction about a girl at home.

The one who killed herself.

That one.

He wasn't making it all up. He did go out with her and she did kill herself.

He'll walk in right as rain. You'll see.

Mrs Harker came back into the room. He will. He'll have bedded down on somebody's floor. Talking and drinking until it's too late to get back. I've seen it happen before.

At lunch-time Geoff hurried from his lecture to the student union. Downstairs in the cafeteria he stood in the doorway and swept his gaze around the room. It was not long after one and there were only a few spare chairs. The muted clatter of conversation filled the space. After a few seconds the puzzled expression on his face vanished and he set off towards the left-hand side of the room.

Phil? It is Phil isn't it?

Yes.

Geoff. Geoff Brownjohn. I'm in digs with Sam.

Phil's face relaxed. Geoff, of course. I remember. Sam. Is he not well?

A student at the next table vacated his chair and Geoff swung it round and sat down. Ill? To be honest I don't know. I was going to ask you if you'd seen him.

The blonde girl next to Phil was eating a sandwich. She stopped chewing. He's not been in lectures since last week.

You know Sam?

Fliss. Maths like Phil and Sam.

Hello. He reached across the table and she put down her sandwich on the paper bag she had bought it in, rubbed her hands together and then held out a hand towards Geoff's. He took hold of the straight fingers. He didn't come in last night and we wondered. He let go of Fliss's fingers. No, I wondered if you'd seen him today. And you've not?

No, not since Friday.

Friday. Geoff straightened his back, inflated his cheeks and exhaled through pursed lips. How do you think he's been this last week or so?

Fliss and Phil each flicked their eyes in the direction of the other.

He was all right yesterday. Well. Up to a point.

What do you mean?

Fliss put her hand on Phil's arm. Tell him.

Phil leaned forward. Anne told us this morning. She does maths with us. Yesterday afternoon Sam came to her room. She's in hall here on campus. The four of us often meet on a Wednesday afternoon – in her room – to talk through any bits of maths that are puzzling us. Sam went yesterday. Tuesday.

Just tell him, Phil.

You tell him. I was trying to give Geoff the picture so that he doesn't.

He was drunk. He fell over. Tried to grope her. She had to get the warden and have him thrown out. And he was sick on her bed.

Bugger. We knew he was drinking. We could tell when he came in. But sloshed in the afternoon.

None of them spoke for half a minute. The cafeteria had started to clear.

We see him in the morning mainly. He's been late for a couple of nine o'clocks, but then so have other people. I always think that after the clocks change it's harder to get up in a morning.

Phil. That was ages ago.

He looked at her.

He's not been himself for a while. Not since he went home that weekend.

You knew he'd been home?

Yes. But he didn't seem to want to talk.

Fliss you didn't. You'd didn't pry? His pupils rolled upwards. You did. Didn't you? Just like.

A woman. I didn't pry. I took a friendly interest. Everyone feels down once in a while. Homesick. Lonely. I thought he might open up. You men, you've got to be so. So macho.

Macho?

Spanish.

Oh.

Male. Tough. Show no feelings. You know. I thought he might talk to me. Like a sister.

He didn't?

No.

He didn't say anything about a girl. At home?

They shook their heads.

From what he's said. He went out with her over the summer holidays. She wrote to him, a long letter. Then three, four weeks ago he had another letter. Short. Said she was pregnant and it was his.

Goodness, said Fliss.

He claimed it couldn't be. His. Anyway he decided he'd have to see her. Get things clear. So he went home.

That weekend.

Ye-es. That weekend. She admitted it wasn't his. So Sam said. But for some reason wanted him to be its father. I think Sam. I think Sam got angry.

Don't blame him.

Fliss had put her arm through Phil's. She squeezed up to him and rested her head against his shoulder. So he didn't go along with her. Her proposal.

No. He didn't. Geoff pushed at the edge of the table and straightened his arms a little. At least that's what he's told us. It's hard to know.

I know what you mean. Most of the time you have to drag things out of him. At others he rattles on.

The next week. Not the week following the Sunday he came back, the one after that. He had a letter from his mother. A note with a newspaper clipping. This girl. Geoff breathed. This girl. Eileen. She'd taken herself off to the local seaside resort and jumped off a cliff.

Killed herself?

Yes.

And her baby. Fliss released Phil's arm. How awful.

The table was set for their evening meal. The three of them waited. Sam's place was vacant.

He's not here then. Mrs Harker stood framed by the entrance to the room. Not seen him?

I bumped into a couple of his friends from maths. They've not seen him since Friday.

Something has happened. She left.

They told me that he'd been seen very drunk yesterday afternoon. He'd called on a girl and made a bit of a fool of himself and was thrown out of the hall by the warden.

This girl he's been on about?

No, someone on his course.

If he doesn't come in tonight. D'you think we should do something.?

Such as?

Tell the police. Missing person.

Mrs Harker came in with their plates.

If you ask me it's not really our business, said Dave, moving his hands away so that Mrs Harker could put his plate of liver and onions, carrots and mashed potatoes between his knife and fork.

Do you have to report him? Tell someone he's gone AWOL.

Me? Mrs Harker stood back having set plates in front of each of them.

I mean does the university require you to act in loco parentis as it were?

He means as we're not twenty-one yet then do you have to be a stand-in for our parents.

I think there's something in the little booklet they give us. Not looked at it for ages. I'll get Arnold to see if it says anything. Don't want to lose me approval. I'll plate his up in case he comes in later.

Malcolm stared at his plate. Bloody liver. I hate liver. I'm going to ask her if we could have something different on a Wednesday.

I dare you.

Bet he daren't even leave it. Anyway it's good for you. Iron. Vitamin A.

Malcolm glared at Geoff. Iron. I'll be rusting soon.

The door opened. He's in the hospital.

Sam?

She nodded.

They watched as she held up the evening newspaper. An outer sheet unfolded and flapped as she prodded a page with her finger. Student in coma after road accident. She folded over the newspaper. A loose sheet floated to the floor.

Eighteen year old university student Dennis Unwin remains in a coma after he was hit by a car yesterday afternoon. According to another student, Carol Primley also eighteen, who witnessed the accident and indicated that she knew Mr Unwin slightly and has since visited him in hospital, said that Mr Unwin was crossing the road having alighted from a bus and that a small grey saloon car coming in the opposite direction hit Mr Unwin. It is thought that a vehicle going in the other direction may also have hit him. The conductor of the bus that Mr Unwin had been travelling on said that he thought Mr Unwin might have been drinking. Mr Unwin was seen to get out of his seat at the back of the bus and stumble on to the platform. The bus was moving slowly in a queue of traffic as Mr Unwin jumped off and he fell over in the street. He managed to get to his feet without assistance and crossed the road round the back of a large removal van. It was then that the Mr Unwin was knocked down. The driver of the car, Mr Stanley Allsop, was shocked but unhurt and claimed that Mr Unwin had run straight out out in front of him. Infirmary staff said that Mr Unwin had sustained severe injuries to his head, and fractures to his left arm and leg.

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What's the point? He is in a coma.

He might have come round by now. Come on Dave.

I've got this essay to finish. I'll go tomorrow. Find out if there's visiting in the afternoon.

OK. He went out on to the landing. Malcolm you ready?

Coming.

The thin fog that had appeared in the late afternoon had thickened reducing visibility to less than a hundred yards.

It was almost quarter past seven when they entered the hospital. The woman at the enquiries desk was talking on the telephone as they approached. They waited until she had finished her conversation.

Yes, she said, spinning round on her chair

We've come to visit a friend of ours but we don't know which ward he's in.

Name?

Unwin. Dennis Sampson Unwin.

She pulled a box of cards towards her.

Unwin. Tyler. Underwood. Upton. Doesn't seem to be here. She swung to the other side of the desk and lifted some sheets out of a wire basket. Not here either. What's he in for?

Accident.

Knocked down by a car.

When was he admitted?

Yesterday afternoon.

He's probably in twenty-four or twenty-five. She lifted the handset of the black telephone and waited. Ward twenty-four, please. She waited again. Have you got a patient called Unwin? She put her hand over the mouthpiece. First name?

Dennis.

Dennis. Dennis Unwin. You have. Thanks. Bye. She put the phone down. As I thought. Twenty-four. Go along here, turn right at the end and then go to the stairs and up one floor. There'll be a sign. Twenty-four.

Beyond the tall double door was a long Nightingale ward. A row of beds had their heads up against the left-hand wall with windows above them and a similar number were arranged along the right-hand wall. The ward had been mostly painted cream. From the floor to a few inches below the windows the colour was darker: coffee with too little milk. The gloss paint reluctantly reflected the brightness of the light that reached it.

There were one or two visitors seated at most of the beds. They were bent forward listening or talking. More audible noises came from a group gathered around one bed. Younger people, sitting, standing, laughing. The patients were all men.

In the centre of the ward halfway down the avenue of beds was a desk set in a space between the beds on the right. Two nurses were sitting at the desk. One was writing, the other was watching the noisy group. She stood up as Geoff and Malcolm walked up the ward.

We're looking for our friend Sam, sorry, Dennis Unwin.

Far end. The bed with the curtains drawn.

Nurse! Nurse!

Excuse me.

An elderly man in an overcoat and a loosely hanging scarf stood up and back from the patient he was visiting. The nurse quickly pulled the curtains around the bed. The elderly man came out and waited holding his trilby in both hands.

Is it all right if we?

Yes. He still unconscious though.

They walked up the ward.

Rather pretty. Quite fancy a nurse fussing over me.

Don't you believe it. I've a cousin. Not quite as hard as nails, but she doesn't exude sympathy, particularly when it comes to men. Geoff parted the curtains.

There was no one around the bed. Sam lay on his back along the centre of the bed. A sloping rack attached to the bed frame supported his head and shoulders. His head rested on a single pillow. A thin tube descended from a container hung on a metal stand. The tube went up one nostril where it was held in position with a strip of sticking plaster. His mouth and eyes were closed. His face was swollen as if inflated. The left side of his face from his nose to his ear was dark with bruising. He was covered to his shoulders with a sheet and a thin cream blanket. His left arm rested on top of the blanket, spoiling the straight line followed by the rest of the bedding. The forearm and part of

the hand were encased in plaster. The thumb was hooked through a loop in the plaster.

To the left of the bed was a wooden cabinet with an open shelf at the level of the pillow. In front of it was a tubular framed chair. The back and seat were each a slightly curved piece of varnished plywood. The metal had been painted cream, a little paler than the upper walls. A similar chair waited on the opposite side of the bed.

Geoff took the chair to the left. Malcolm went to the right.

He's breathing, said Geoff.

Course he is. Otherwise he'd be dead.

I mean. On his own. Could be asleep.

He is.

I know. Not natural though.

But then, being knocked over by a car isn't natural.

Suppose not.

Malcolm bent towards Sam.

What you looking for?

Signs of life.

Life?

Consciousness.

He's in a coma.

Awareness. He eyed Geoff across the bed. If he doesn't know we're here, why the hell have we come?

You can know without being aware.

I was joking. I know he doesn't know we're here. Dead to the bloody world.

Are you sure? His ears are still receiving sounds. His skin is still detecting the movement of air, the change in temperature. Behind his eyelids his eyes are reacting to changes in the levels of light. How can we know what his brain is making of all this.

They've been inside his fucking head.

Inside? Surgery.

His head's been shaved at the back. You can just see some kind of dressing.

Skull fracture.
Brain damage.
Could be.

Malcolm put his head back and surveyed the ceiling then stretched his arms in front of him his palms open and almost vertical. How long should we stay?

Visiting ends at eight. You go if you want. I'll stay.

No. Might as well stay. We could walk up to the union and have drink. Shan't get anything useful done tonight.

The curtain was drawn back in a single quick movement by the nurse who had spoken to them earlier. She swayed through the gap and then whipped the curtain back closing the gap. She went round to Geoff's side of the bed. He stood up and moved out of her way. She had to stretch lifting herself on to the toes of her flat shoes to take a mercury thermometer from a small glass container rather like a test tube that was fastened to the wall above the head of the bed. She shook the thermometer with a sharp flick of her wrist. She checked the reading before easing it into Sam's slack mouth and under his tongue. She turned back the sheet and blanket and extracted Sam's right arm and closed the fingers of her left hand around his wrist. She raised the inverted watch hanging over her left breast with her other hand and waited.

Geoff caught Malcolm's eye. Malcolm was nodding his face in the direction of her backside. Geoff moved a little farther away from the proximity of her body.

She put Sam's arm away and removed the thermometer, read it and dropped it bulb end down into the tube on the wall. She sidled along the bed and unhooked the clipboard from the metal frame at the foot. After she had written on the sheet clipped to the board she put it back and swerved her hips through the split in the curtains, turned, smiled and closed the gap with both hands.

What eyes.

She'll hear.

I don't care.

A distant bell rang.

Malcolm's chair caught the metal stand as he stood up. He felt his way to the break in the curtains.

Geoff rose and touched Sam on the shoulder. Be seeing you. Geoff drew the curtains behind him.

Malcolm was at the central desk talking quietly to the same nurse. Geoff passed him. Malcolm caught him up as he was leaving the ward.

The hospital corridors were oddly busy with visitors leaving, all heading in the same direction. Only a trolley with a seated patient still in everyday clothes came on against the flow.

She said they've no idea when - or even if - he'll regain consciousness.

They clattered down the stairs.

Days, weeks or months?

Could wake up tomorrow. There'll be no prior indications.

The fog was much thicker. The street lights were fuzzy spheres of brightness disconnected from any support. The traffic was slow and intermittent, swirling the fog.

Geoff coughed. Took out his handkerchief and held it over his mouth.

What about over there? Malcolm pointed at a pub across the street.

Better than walking up to the union.

The pub was warm and quiet. Malcolm was quickly served and brought two pints of bitter over to the polished table. A dark wooden partition topped with shallow stained glass panels made a corner with the wall of the room. Geoff was sitting on the L-shaped upholstered bench that ran around the corner. He pushed two beer mats into place and Malcolm put the pints down. He sat down on the bench at right-angles to Geoff.

Just look at this. Geoff held out his white handkerchief. I put it over my mouth while we crossed the road. Look at it. The handkerchief had a a mouth-shaped sooty stain.

Best have a drink to swill away the grime. Malcolm raised his glass. Cheers.

Geoff raised his and then drank from it.

Malcolm took a longer swig.

Odd one isn't he.

Malcolm raised his eyebrows.

Sam.

How do you mean?

He doesn't quite – I don't know – hang together. He's bright, perhaps very bright. But he doesn't quite connect. With people.

Only connect.

Geoff furrowed his forehead.

E M Forster. Howard's End, I think.

Never read anything of his. Hers?

His.

You know what I mean? About Sam?

I know what you mean. He's distant. He joins in with us. Dave and us. Because he lives in the same house. But I couldn't see him going out of his way to be friendly.

He is friendly though. You can have a conversation.

Yeah. But you wouldn't call him a mate.

It's. It's as if he knows what to do but he doesn't feel it.

So he comes across a bit.

Distant.

Yeah, distant.

The slightest of delays.

Before he responds. Geoff sipped at his pint.

As though he had to work it out.

I almost felt closer to him sitting watching him in the hospital than I have done before.

Strange him changing his name.

Mm. You mean why would he want to?

Well that. But having the idea. In the first place.
You had a nickname at school?
Yeah.
You don't use it now.
Malcolm shook his head.
So you've changed your name.
Not really. I was always Malcolm at home and I don't really like Malc.
But why not keep your nickname.
Childish. Juvenile at best.
And you're no longer juvenile.
Mr Steadman, Mr Malcolm Steadman. Sounds adult to me.
Maybe Sam wanted to cast something off. Maybe he associated Dennis with something that he wanted rid of.
Could be. Could be. Malcolm lifted his glass and drank until it was empty.
Another?
Yeah. Go on.
The pub was busier and noisier than it had been when they came in. Geoff disappeared through the crowd that hovered in the bar area. A number of the women wore navy gaberdine raincoats. Those that had unfastened their coats revealed nurses' uniforms.
Geoff came back with a pint and a half. I think I saw the nurse from Sam's ward.
Did you see where the bog was?
Round the other side of the bar, I think. He poured the half into his unfinished pint.
Malcolm returned after a few minutes.
Must be farther than I thought.
What do you mean?
How long does it take for a slash?
You're assuming –
I was. Sorry. I was.
Stopped to have a chat with the Nurse Gwyneth.

Forward bastard.

Nothing venture, nothing gain. I might be coming here again.

Carry on.

What do you mean?

With the verse. Nothing venture, nothing gain. I might be coming here again.

I'm a poet and I don't know it.

Sam was interested in a girl. The one Dave told us about. Not the other one.

Don't think there was anything to it.

Dave said he was keen, or appeared to be keen.

He went to some God Soc, didn't he?

He did. Part of a plan.

Plan?

Campaign. Scheme. To get noticed. See her. I don't know.

I'll ask Dave.

What?

If Sam said anything more about her.

Dave followed the signs to ward twenty-four and strode quickly towards the curtains that screened Sam's bed. There were already visitors at a number of the beds he passed. The nurses in the centre gave him a brief glance as he veered round their desk.

He parted the curtains with one arm and swung round to re-close them. He caught the foot of the bed with his hip. The bed clanged. He spoke over his shoulder. Sorry, Sam. If you can hear me. If you're awake.

He might be able to hear you even if he's not awake.

Oh.

She was sitting at the left of the bed. Her grey coat hung around the back of the chair. She was wearing a dark blue pinafore dress over a ribbed white sweater with a high neck.

Her dark curls had been pushed behind her ears. She smiled, gently, barely showing her teeth.

Hello, he said

You a friend of Sam's?

Yes. Dave. I'm in digs with him. He put his camel duffel coat on the back of the empty chair on the other side of the bed

Carol.

Oh. Carol. He sat down. You saw.

I saw it happen.

It was in the paper. Your name. He looked at Sam. He's still unconscious.

Yes. Strangely peaceful. No creases in his face. Not as puffy as it was.

You can see him breathing. Too still to be asleep. To be just asleep that is. And that tube.

You've come on your own.

The others – from the digs – came last night. A soon as we'd seen the paper. We were er concerned when he hadn't come in the night before.

She turned her face to Sam.

You knew Sam before this?

A little. I was in the same freshers group as him. Then he came to one of our meetings at CU.

Christian Union. He mentioned it. He mentioned you. I hadn't realised you were that Carol. Did you see much of him.

No. He once came and sat next to me on the bus. I had the uncomfortable feeling that he had contrived it deliberately. You know. A small dark line appeared between her brown eyebrows.

You mean?

I had a picture of him waiting. Watching from the shadows or following me. She made herself shudder. Not that he was creepy. More ill at ease. Awkward. He was.

Dave allowed his body to slump, reducing his height. He folded his arms. His chin almost resting on his chest. He pushed a snatch of his ginger hair away from his face. I think he fancied

you. I know he fancied you. We share a room and he talked quite a lot in the first couple of weeks. He hasn't said much lately.

The chap in the ambulance said something about being drunk.

He was. One of the girl's he does maths with had seen him about half an hour earlier. He could hardly stand. So she said.

He shouted my name a second before the car hit him.

He did.

I hadn't seen him for maybe three weeks. Not to speak to anyway. I'd seen him in the distance. Always managed to avoid him.

Not been to CU any more.

Just the once. Can't understand why he came after me. Must have seen me from the bus. I'd crossed at the zebra. And then got off. Doesn't make sense.

I don't think much was making sense for him.

What do you mean? Because he was drunk?

Well that. But there was something else.

Tell me. I feel some of the blame belongs to me – for this. She rested her hand on Sam's shoulder. If I hadn't been there. She smiled at Sam as a mother might smile at a sleeping child.

Dave unfolded his arms, gripped the edges of his seat and sat straighter. I only know what he told me.

Outside the hospital it was it was hard to see the other side of the road. An ambulance with headlamps on full beam appeared out of the fog, obscuring the darkness a white wedge that blotted out detail and significance. It left behind a vortex of brightness and shadow below the hazy street lights.

She stood with her bag between her feet and eased on her knitted hat pushing her curls inside with her fingers. I'm walking up to the university. She pulled on her leather gloves spreading the fingers of each hand as she did so.

I'll walk with you if that's OK.

She shrugged slightly and smiled. As her red lips parted and closed, her teeth gleamed briefly. Then her head dipped and her brown eyes lifted. She flung a length of her scarf over her shoulder and lifted it up to cover her mouth.

Let me carry your bag. All my stuff is in my locker.

It's heavy. Her voice was muffled inside her scarf. Somehow I always seem to add books and never make a point of taking out those I won't need.

He grasped the handles of the large leather bag she was carrying. She released her grip and her hand brushed his. What have you got in here? A gold brick?

Statistics.

Another mathematician?

Psychology.

Sociology.

Any statistics in your course?

Not that I know of.

At the junction the traffic lights hung their colours in the air. They crossed the road warily towards the vaguely discernible opposite side. They turned up a street lined with terrace houses that rose steadily towards the campus.

I hate this fog. It tastes. And my eyes sting.

It's the sulphur trioxide. It dissolves in your tears to make sulphuric acid.

Nasty.

Not very strong.

A friend was at concert in the town hall last night. It was even foggy in there.

Each of the dim houses they passed had a small low-walled rectangle in front usually concreted. It seemed the place to keep the dustbin, and any larger items that were no longer used but retained some value. A rusting pushchair, a tea chest, a cardboard box warped with the weather. Under their feet the stone pavement flags were large. Many were cracked. Above

their heads the eaves and the roofs atop them were invisible. The walls of the houses faded into damp colourlessness.

I'd never seen so many cobbled streets as there are here.

Strictly speaking they're not cobbles. They're setts.

Setts?

So Sam said. Cut stones. Cobbles are pebbles set on edge. He heaved her bag across his body and carried it with the other hand.

Will you go to see Sam again?

Probably. And you?

Yes. I think I will. I don't like to think of him lying there ignored.

Today. He he drew in breath harshly and coughed. Today, I thought I would pop in for a couple of minutes. Say hello. And leave. That's if he hadn't come round. He breathed again. This hill is steeper than it looks. I'll have to give up the fags.

Can't understand smokers.

Nor me. He laughed. Though this dratted fog is probably doing me more harm by the second. He moved her bag to the other hand. I wouldn't call myself a smoker. Not like some. Smoked on the quiet at home. Because my parents would not have approved. Smoke here because there's no one to stop me.

They crossed a side street and turned up a street with larger terrace houses on one side and barely discernible more recently erected university buildings on the other.

I'm glad you turned up today. I would have forced myself to sit by his bedside for the whole of visiting time and it would have seemed ages.

You could have passed the time reading.

But that would have been the same as ignoring him. A bit rude.

We didn't give him much attention.

We talked. We had a conversation. He was part of it. A non-speaking part of it.

Geoff – he's in digs with me – was suggesting at breakfast that people in comas can actually hear. Said he'd read it somewhere.

All the senses are working, and may even be linked to the brain, but there's no output. Only input.

There were now university buildings on both sides of the street. The fog was less dense.

I'm going through to the library. Need to look something up and dinner's not till seven.

Mrs Harker feeds us a six. By the time I've got my things out of my locker it'll be time to get a bus.

Thanks for carrying my bag.

See you around.

Bye. She walked away.

Bye.

Her head turned towards him. She lifted her free hand slightly as if to wave discreetly or to signal something that she could not or did not want to put into words.

He watched her figure as it became dimmer in the fog. Bye, he said, but the word was little more than the faint sound of his gentle exhalation.

He had to wait for a bus and the driver took it slowly up the road. The fog had thickened again. Visibility was down to twenty yards. In the centre of one of the cross roads a lighted gas cylinder stood vertically its flaring flame dispersing the murk.

He dropped his briefcase in the hall and hung up his coat. It was a few minutes after six. In the dining room Malcolm and Geoff were already at the table.

Mrs Harker followed him in with the first two plates. Police were here this morning. Wanted to speak to Sam. Told them where he was and they went away. You'd have thought they would have known where he was.

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She was out of breath when she found the hospital. She'd walked from the station following the directions given by a policeman.

At the top of the stairs, she held on to the bannister and took deep breaths. Her free arm hung loosely and her handbag hung loosely at the end of her free arm.

You all right, love?

She nodded and took a deep breath. Walked up from. Her chest heaved. The station.

It's all up 'ill but it don't look it.

I'll be all right. These stairs. She sucked in air. Nearly killed me. She lifted herself up the last step. The man, older than her, set off along the corridor. She looked at the sign and followed him more slowly breathing more regularly.

Twenty-four.

Inside the ward she walked steadily to the nurse's desk.

I'm looking. For my son.

Sit down for a minute, you look all in.

I'm all right. She sat down in the chair that the nurse had vacated.

Your son?

Dennis Unwin.

We've moved him in here.

The nurse took her elbow and her hand as she pushed herself up from the chair. The nurse guided her to an area behind the nurse's desk where there was a bed partially concealed from the rest of the ward. We can keep a closer eye on him here.

Is he still? She sat heavily on the hard chair.

I'm afraid he is? She straightened the bedclothes which covered everything but his head. He looks better today. The bruising will take time, but the swelling has gone.

How long will he be? She put her handbag on the floor and it toppled over. She took a long breath and began to unbutton her coat. She breathed out. I'm hot.

It is warm. We get used to it. I'd take your coat off if I was you.

I will in a minute. When I get my breath.

Talk to him. It's something to do. And you never know he might be able to hear you.

Do you think so?

I don't know. Nobody does. Not really.

Hold his hand. The nurse turned the covers back and lifted Sam's right arm out and lowered it on to the bedclothes.

She reached out and laid her hand on his. Dennis, she said. Silently her eyes filled and tears overflowed on to her purple cheeks. She squeezed his hand. I don't know what to say. She

sniffed. A tear trickled past the downward crease at the corner of her mouth. It ran to the line of her chin and dropped on to the palm of her curled right hand that lay in her lap. She wiped her palm on her skirt. They told me what happened. Sent me a telegram and a telephone number to ring. I had to go through the operator. It cost me nearly three shillings. She picked her handbag from the floor and stood it on her lap. She twisted open the fastener and felt inside for a handkerchief. She shook open the ironed square. White cotton oversewn in lilac thread with a tiny embroidered flower in one corner. She wiped her eyes and rubbed her cheeks. I bet I look a mess. The clasp snapped shut under the grip of her fingers and she lowered her handbag to the floor, resting it carefully on its flat base. It stayed upright. She leaned forward until her weight was over her knees and gripping the back of the chair steadied herself and stood up. She took off her coat, folded it over her arm and then carried it round the bed and folded it again before setting it on the other chair. As she walked back round the foot of the bed she tucked the handkerchief into the left sleeve of her cardigan. She lifted her chair nearer to the bed. She sat down and took his limp hand in both of hers.

He's through there, on the left. His mother's with him.

We won't intrude. We'll come another time.

No. Go in. She's on her own. She'll appreciate a bit of company.

I'm not sure. What do you think, Fliss.

Fliss went ahead. Come on. We can leave if it gets a bit. You know.

Phil followed.

She was sitting with her knees touching the bed, bent forward, the curve of her spine under her cream blouse making a smooth almost circular arc. She was facing away from them. Her hair where it showed around the edge of the brown hat was the colour of steel wool.

Fliss stopped at the foot of the bed. Mrs Unwin. Her voice was low. Mrs Unwin.

The head tilted upwards. The body straightened. Her strained face struggled with the need to be polite. Hello.

I'm Fliss and this is Phil. We on the maths course with Sam.

Pardon. Her face was stern. I think. She lifted her nose. This my son Dennis. You must have made.

Mrs Unwin?

Yes.

He told us his name was Sam.

I remember now. Phil moved closer. Dennis is his first name. He asked us to call him Sam. I'd forgotten.

Sam? Why Sam? I always call him Dennis. After his father. He said it was the name of a fire engine. He liked that.

We won't stay if you'd rather be on your own.

No. Sit down. Give me the coat. It'd be nice to have some company. She waved in the direction of the nurses. She said to talk to him, but I feel really daft. I'll talk to you and if he's listening then he'll know we're here.

I'll go and find another chair.

We only heard yesterday. Didn't know whether we should come to see him. She held the coat. His mother took it and laid it across her knees.

I wanted to come, but now I'm here. She tugged her handkerchief out of her sleeve and pressed it to each eye in turn.

Did you come by yourself?

She nodded. The handkerchief was screwed up inside her fist. There isn't anyone else. Never been this far on a train before.

Is his father?

I don't know. Dennis thinks he is. I didn't know what else to tell him.

Phil came back with a chair. Fliss moved round and stood near his mother and gestured to Phil to put the chair down so she could sit on it. Phil went around the foot of the bed and sat on the other chair.

I've been going to explain for years, but somehow. Somehow. Somehow it never seemed. Opportune. If that's the word. And

he's not as easy to talk to as he was when he was little. Just the two of us. We talked all the time. The words flowed out of him. I didn't always understand what he was talking about. And I don't think he listened to me. Not much. Not a conversation. He seemed to start in the middle. By the time I had worked out what he was on about he was talking about something different. I think that's why he didn't make friends. Nobody quite knew what he was on about.

But he's not like that now. Is he Phil?

Except when he's talking mathematics. He loses me all the time.

Very clever. That's what they said at school. He was always reading. Always going to the library. Borrowing books. Her eyes brightened. He once went to the library in the morning. Came back with as many books as he could. Three or four. I think you could have four at a time. Read them by dinner time. Took them back in the afternoon and came home cross because he wasn't allowed to change them until the next day.

Phil caught Fliss's eye and tapped his sleeve.

Fliss softened her eyes and shook her head. Her tiny gold wrist watch was visible below the edge of her sweater. Half past, she mouthed.

Phil raised his eyebrows and slowly closed his eyes.

Fliss sighed silently.

I keep thinking he'll wake up.

Phil nodded his head towards the ward. Have they said?

They don't know. On the telephone. They said. They said he could wake at any time but it could be weeks. Months.

You can only hope. Fliss laid her arm around her shoulders.

The woman folded her arm up so that she could touch the girl's fingers. Hope. I hope he wakes when I'm here.

Are you staying?

Staying?

Here? Tonight?

No. I'll get the train back. They let me have the day off. I only asked for the one day. I don't like to let them down.

You work?

School secretary.

Fliss leaned a little closer.

When will you be able to come again.

Saturday. I'll come every Saturday. Unless there's a change. Just for the day. I can get here it time for the start of visiting and stay all afternoon and be home by eight.

Phil bent forward. I'm going to look for a lavatory.

Mrs Unwin watched as he walked into the main part of the ward. He'd rather be somewhere else, wouldn't he?

When he agreed to come he made me promise. Promise we wouldn't stay long. But I didn't know you would be here.

You don't have to stay for me.

But it's a long time on your own.

I'm his mother.

But.

There's no buts when it's your little boy, your baby. She squeezed Fliss's hand. You'll see. When you're mother.

That'll be the day.

You say that now.

Not for a few years.

He's seems nice.

Phil?

Yes.

Yes. In his way.

Did you come together?

No. We've only become really friendly these last few weeks.

Nice. Nice to have someone to do things with. It's always been just me and Dennis.

Always?

Always.

Fliss said nothing.

I met his Dad during the war. He was from somewhere near Birmingham. For some reason he was spending his leave in our village. Staying with another soldier's family. It was only a week. He was at the cricket match on the Saturday. All the fellers in the team were old. The young chaps were away. I was helping with the tea. He kept talking to me. While I was serving. Asked me if want to go to the pictures. I said yes. He was older than me. A good lump. Though he never said. On the Sunday we went for a walk. It was lovely fine weather that week. Blue skies like glass. Sunshine from dawn till dusk. I was working of course. I was comptometer operator in the wages office of a factory on the edge of the town. He was waiting for me each day at the end of work. He used to walk from the village, but we went back on the bus. After tea we would meet and either go for a walk and maybe have a drink in the village pub. Anyway I think I fell in love with him. It seemed like love. I was a bit – what's the word?

Naïve?

Yes, that's what I was. For twenty-five. Anyway, one thing led to another, as they say. He went back. Said he would write. I never got a letter. Dennis was born the following year.

Couldn't you get in touch through this other soldier's family.

He was killed. We knew that. I don't think they knew much about Dennis. And Robinson's a common surname. She stopped. You see, I'm not properly Mrs Unwin. I'm Miss Unwin. After I left the village and Dennis started school people called me Mrs and when anybody asked I said his dad didn't come back from the war. Which is true.

I'll have to disturb you. Phil was standing behind the nurse.

Fliss stood up.

It's time to turn him.

Phil stepped aside for another nurse.

Mrs Unwin used the back of her chair again as she pushed herself upright.

We just need to get to the side of the bed. You don't have to go.

I think we'll go now.

One nurse was holding the container and the feeding tube.

You don't have to. It was nice talking to you.

We best be off, said Phil.

The other nurse wheeled the stand around to the other side of the bed.

Yes. Fliss put her hand on Sam's mother's arm. It was nice to meet you. We'll probably see you again.

The feeding tube and container was passed across the bed and hung on the stand once more.

Yes.

Goodbye.

Bye.

Fliss and Phil backed away.

Cheerio.

The nurses turned Dennis on to his right side and put pillows at his back and chest to stop him rolling. His broken arm rested on one of the pillows.

If we don't move him now and again he'll get bed sores.

Oh. Thank you.

You can sit down now.

Thank you.

12

The bus pulled away. As they waited to cross the road he fastened the toggles of his duffel coat. She turned up the collar of her coat and tugged at her woollen hat until it covered her ears. He had no gloves. The road cleared and she put her both her arms round his left arm and hugged it. With his hands in his pockets they crossed the road together. Did you like it?

Yes. Yes I did.

A strange people.

The Jews?

A culture. A religion. A nation. With no country.

Not then.

They turned through the gateway into the drive that led up to the hall of residence. There were large shrubs on either side with trees at the back of them. One lamp on a standard on the outside of the curve about halfway from the road to the hall provided an oasis of illumination.

I suppose. His tone was uncertain. I suppose there are Jews all over the world with different nationalities.

The Diaspora.

What's that?

The scattering of the Jews. After their exile in Babylon. It's in the Old Testament.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

I was glad they got together in the end.

In the fiery furnace.

No, in the film. Idiot. She hugged his arm more tightly. Kitty and Ari. She was not tall enough to rest her head on his shoulder. It's one of the signs of the end.

What do you mean?

In the Bible – the Book of Revelation – I'm not sure. The return of the Jews to Israel. Then Armageddon. The last battle.

Nuclear war.

I try not to think about it.

Inevitable. It's going to happen one day.

You believe that?

They talk about deterrence. Somebody will think. Somebody will think that if they get in quick enough then they can prevent the massive retaliation. Deterrence relies on that threat.

Does it worry you?

Sometimes. Most times I console myself with the hope that when it happens I won't know about it. I don't want to be left dying slowly. Rather be a charcoal shadow on a wall somewhere.

The thought of that sudden not knowing makes me go cold.

But you won't know so why worry.

It's there though isn't it? At the back of your mind, deep down.
Three minutes. Three minutes warning. What good's that.

None. None at all. He forced a laugh. At school it was a question. A challenge.

She listened.

What would you do in the last three minutes.

They reached the main entrance of the old house. We're a pessimistic pair.

He put his arm over her shoulder.

It's cold standing here. She let go of his arm and walked backwards tugging one of the toggles on his coat until they were sheltered in the lee of the porch. She put her arms round his waist and he pulled her close.

Can't we go inside.

Not after half past ten. Not after seven during the week. She looked up at him. Thanks for this evening.

I'd have asked you sooner. I kept thinking I'd see you around the university but I didn't.

What time is it?

He put his hand on top of her head and peered at his watch.
After eleven.

She locks up at half past.

Who?

The warden.

He held her a little more tightly.

You'd better go.

Landlady locks up at ten, but we all have keys.

We can only have a key twice a term.

Does that mean you can come in when you like?

She nodded against his chest. I'm cold. My face's cold.

She lifted her face.

He touched her nose with his. Your nose is cold.

He bent his head.

She went up on to her toes.

She pressed her lips to his. For a couple of seconds. Good night.

She twisted out of his hold then took his hand and held it as she moved round towards the door. He followed. She released his hand and went up the three steps.

Good night, he said. Meet you for lunch next week.

Yes.

Monday?

Tuesday.

OK. Outside the library.

Yes. I've a lecture till one.

She turned and slipped into the porch. She looked back for a moment.

Good night, Carol.

The door closed. He walked all the way back to his digs.

Dropped in to see Sam today.

Geoff put down his pen.

No change. Not that I could see. Gwyneth was saying.

Ah. That's who you really went to see. He put the chair he had been sitting on in the corner of the bedroom.

Gwyneth was saying that it's unusual for a coma like this to last more than a month. So someone told her. I don't think they really know any more than you or me.

Over a fortnight. He put his papers and books into his briefcase.

Tuesday, wasn't it.

Tuesday. Yeah. Tuesday. Geoff folded the table and lifted over the chair, sliding it down between the chair and the wall.

They're feeding him directly into his stomach. He moved between the beds and sat down. Tubes in, tubes out.

Geoff sat down again on the chair, legs straight out in front.

They seem to have avoided bedsores up to now, though he's had a urinary infection. Apparently that's a risk with a catheter.

Geoff squirmed. Makes me want to cross my legs. The thought of it.

He twitched while I was there. Gwyneth said that movement was a good sign.

You had a long chat did you? To Gwyneth. Sam's not much of a conversationalist at the best of times.

Gwyneth says.

Bloody Gwyneth.

That you should include him in the conversation. Like you were saying.

Was I? Did I? I said he might hear what we said. I didn't say he was listening.

The nurses talk to him when they're doing things.

I hadn't noticed.

They're supposed to. Keeps the patient calm.

He's too damned calm.

It's weird.

Unnerving. Alive, but not alive.

These new shoes are killing me.

I told you should have bought leather. Plastic. What do you expect?

Cheap. He pushed each shoe off with the toe of the other foot.

So you said. Leather lasts and it gets more comfortable. There'll be no give in those plastic things.

Leather. Old fashioned and bloody expensive.

Better value. In the long run.

I don't intend to run in these. Walking's bad enough.

Ha. Ha.

I've only a tenner left in the bank.

Should last.

If I don't get a job on the post at Christmas I won't be buying much in the way of presents.

Time to eat.

Wednesday. Liver and onions. Malcolm groaned theatrically.

Better than a stomach tube.

The clock struck eleven as they reached the top of the stairs. Anne was already in the lecture theatre and Fliss, followed by Phil, slid along the same bench to sit next to her.

Anne eased a sheet of carbon paper out of a foolscap-sized packet and slipped it under the next blank sheet of her pad of ruled file paper.

What's that for.

I making a copy of all my notes.

Fliss gave her a quizzical look.

For Sam.

Oh, for Sam. She twisted to face the other way. She's making a copy for Sam.

Phil stopped searching in his briefcase. A copy of what?

Her notes? For Sam.

I heard.

Anne dropped the packet into her bag under the bench. So that he can catch up when he's well enough.

You been doing it since?

No. Since the Monday before last.

I hadn't noticed.

It only occurred to me after about a week and I started copying out what I had already got by hand, but it was taking ages. Then I thought. Carbon paper. It's a bit of a faff but it's less effort.

We could take turns.

Who?

All of us Phil.

I think it'll be better if it's all in the same handwriting.

The lecturer came in and the chattering abated.

Fliss whispered. Phil.

Yes.

You could do the physics.

Suppose I could.

You should.

Two exams on the last day of term. Malcolm was lying on his bed staring up at the ceiling. Do you think a spider is self-aware?

I suppose they've got to.

Got to what?

Put them on the last day of term. He closed his book, spun it on to his bed, and folded the table.

Why?

Otherwise we'd all go home early for Christmas. He sat down on the chair again.

How many have you got?

Half a dozen. Only one on the Friday.

I've five in chemistry and one in maths. No practical, thank God. I hate practicals.

Anything over the vac?

No.

One three thousand word essay. The industrial revolution and the expansion of the middle class.

You'll have a couple of weeks in the New Year.

There was a light knock. The door opened and Dave came in. He stood neither in the room nor outside. Did you ask her?

Malcolm moved his attention from the spider to Dave.

About tonight?

Yep.

And?

She's on duty till eight.

So?

So I'll meet her outside the nurse's home and get to the union about nine.

Carol's not changed her mind?

No.

She wasn't that keen was she?

She'll have to miss the last meeting of term.

No bad thing, if you ask my opinion.

Quid pro quo.

What?

Quid pro quo Geoff. I went to her meeting last week. She comes to my meeting this week.

I dropped Latin at the end of the lower fourth.

It almost English.

Latin?

No. Quid pro quo. Like versus. And quod erat demonstrandum.

Dave sat down on Geoff's bed. You doing anything?

Tonight?

Yes.

Yes.

What?

I'm going for a meal at a Chinese restaurant with a few of my fellow historians.

A Chinese restaurant.

Yes. A Chinese restaurant. Where you can eat Chinese food.

I've never been to one.

Nor have I. This girl from London suggested it. Apparently there's at least one in town. Behind the town hall.

I've heard of them. Don't the Chinese eat snakes and the brains of live monkeys? Malcolm swung off his bed and stood and stretched.

Where did you read that?

Somewhere.

The Beano or the Dandy?

The Beano of course. Who reads the Dandy.

Isn't chop suey a Chinese dish?

You'll have to eat with chopsticks. One grain of rice at a time.

Is it? Geoff ignored Malcolm.

Marlowe. That's it. Marlowe eats chop suey. That'd be in the forties. In America.

Who?

Dave flung himself backwards on Geoff's bed. Marlowe eats chop suey. You know Raymond Chandler. He's a detective. He pulled Geoff's book from under his back and dropped it at the side of the bed.

Raymond Chandler?

No he's the author. Marlowe. Philip Marlowe.

I know. I know. Malcolm sat down. You like crime fiction?

Some. Dad has a lot. Rows of those green Penguins.

Green penguins? More bloody Chinese food.

13

She allowed her eyes to close. Her body slumped awkwardly on the straight chair. She kept hold of his hand.

Mrs Unwin.

She opened her eyes. Yes. Sorry. Hello.

The man brought the chair around the bed and put it next to her.

She pushed herself up until her back was almost straight and smoothed her skirt and pulled down the bottom of her jumper.

I talked to you two or three weeks ago about Dennis.

She nodded.

He sat down. I'm sorry that I haven't seen you since.

I can normally only get at a weekend. The nurses keep me up to date. Not that there's much to tell.

No. That's true. Although he's my patient, it's the nurses that do all the work. He took hold of the chair with two hands and without changing his posture twisted it two make the angle between them smaller. We've been thinking about what's best for Dennis. And for you.

Don't mind me.

As I say, all we can really do for Dennis is ensure that he gets the correct nursing. But it's important that you see him and you can only manage once a week.

Over the holidays I'll be able to come more.

But it's a long way and it costs money.

I can manage.

Sorry. I didn't mean. He smiled slightly, reassuringly. Let me be straight. He put his palms together at right angles to each other and then gripped each hand with the fingers of the other. We think it would be better all round if Dennis was transferred to a hospital near you.

Yes. Well.

You seem doubtful.

Will it upset him? One of the nurses said he shouldn't be upset. Noises. Him being moved sudden.

Well that's something to consider. The journey may disturb him a little. But I don't think there's anything to worry about.

I see.

So you agree?

What about his friends? They come to visit him.

In the long run, I think – I don't know – I think that it would be optimistic to expect them to continue to visit. They may.

He rose slowly from his chair. You don't have to give me an answer today.

Thank you. She started to lift herself.

Don't get up.

She dropped back on to the chair. I'll think it over.

Let sister know. One way or the other. He carried the chair back to the other side of the bed. Good afternoon.

She acknowledged his farewell with movement of her head. He walked off with the tails of his white coat rising and falling in his slipstream. His leather soled shoes slapped the floor.

Come and sit here. I told you. Bobby. Bobby. She tossed the magazine on to the low table and walked over to where the little boy was determinedly pushing a spare chair along the corridor. The end of one of the metal legs of the chair caught in a gap left by a plastic floor tile that had been removed. He continued to push, but the chair did not move. The toddler made a prolonged complaining noise. Neither cry nor whine. More like the keening of the bereaved. Be quiet. These people don't want to listen to your moaning. She put her hands on his waist and lifted him towards her shoulder. For a moment the chair lifted with him and then his small hands uncurled and the chair clattered to the floor. She put him on her shoulder and he dribbled down the back of her coat. With her free hand she replaced the chair against the wall. He suddenly threw himself back curving his body and stretching both arms and legs. The woman grabbed his body with the hand that had been carrying the chair. She thrust a foot forward to stabilise herself as the weight of her child threatened her balance. Bobby, she shouted. You silly boy. Look here's daddy. You take him. He's driving me mad.

The man had a girl – maybe six years old – with him. Its only a sprain. They've strapped it up. Should be all right in a few days. She won't have to come back. He took the boy from her.

Let's get out of here before I kill the little sod.

Two older women who were waiting and had carefully observed the interaction between the child and the woman raised their eyebrows simultaneously. One tutted. The man

sitting next to her holding the Daily Mirror gave her quick glance and then continued reading.

I'd give him a good clip if he was mine, said the woman who hadn't tutted.

Do him good. She shook her head. Don't know what the world's coming to.

You wonder don't you. You do.

I'm always saying to my husband. She turned to him. Aren't I?

What?

Always saying to you.

Yes.

I'm always saying to him. They're don't know they're born these days. I blame the television. Don't I Jack?

Yes.

We only watch the BBC. Don't we?

Jack said nothing.

The other woman stood up. What did they say? She took the arm of the man who had come along the corridor.

I'll tell you later. They went down the corridor. Don't you worry.

A porter brought a trolley and manoeuvred it until it was up against the corridor wall at the end of the row of chairs. An old woman was propped in a sitting position, her legs out in front of her covered with a cotton blanket. She wore her own clothes. The grey cardigan was unbuttoned and underneath she wore a thin dress, cream with green flowers. Her eyes were unfocused and she held her head at an angle. Her pale grey hair hung asymmetrically at either side of her bony face. Her skinny arms hugged a large cracked leatherette bag. The porter put on the brake and left.

Mrs Unwin. A young nurse was scanning the women.

Here. She lifted her hand.

Will you come with me.

She gathered her handbag, gloves and scarf.

They had to wait for the lift to come to their floor.

He's in a room by himself.

Is that better?

Quieter. We'll be keeping a close eye on him.

The lift doors staggered open and they stood back while a trolley with an unconscious patient was wheeled out.

On the third floor the nurse started walking quickly but she soon slowed.

Sorry. I'm slow. Too much. Weight, I know.

The nurse adjusted her pace and they walked together.

There were two doctors and another nurse in the room. The older doctor looked over his glasses and held out his hand. Mrs Unwin. I'm Mr MacIntyre and this is my colleague Dr Vickers.

She took Mr MacIntyre's hand and he gripped it firmly.

The young doctor lowered his head then smiled.

Mr MacIntyre released her hand and waved to a chair.

She sat down. Thank you.

Mr MacIntyre sat in the other chair set at something more than ninety degrees to hers. The nurse and the young doctor remained standing.

He bent forward slightly, his large hands on his knees. We've checked him over and he's fine. We will be doing some more tests but they're routine. Not much more than we would do with any new patient. However we will be keeping a wee bit closer eye on him than we had anticipated. He relaxed his face for a moment. On the way here. In the ambulance. Your son became agitated. This was unexpected. We – that is the nurses who travelled with him – tried to calm him down but what had been only a few uncoordinated movements developed into something that might be described as a fit, a seizure, a series of convulsions. In the confined space of the ambulance there was a strong risk of him injuring himself – or one of the nurses – so he was given quite a strong sedative. This should be wearing off in the next hour. Until it does so we can't be sure that there hasn't been any ill effects.

Oh. Oh dear.

It wouldn't be proper for me to say that you shouldn't worry. But I would advise you to be prepared for a change. What that change might be. Well. He spread his hands.

Was it wrong to move him?

No. I don't think so. Anything could have triggered this. At any time. Now there's no need to fret. Nurse Blakeborough will take you through. She'll be here all the time. And she'll call me if there's – if she thinks I'm needed. In any case Dr Vickers and I will return. He fingered his watch. Around five o'clock.

How long can I stay?

You can stay as long as you like.

Thank you.

Phil and Fliss were sitting in adjacent seats in their usual bay. The seat next to Fliss was empty. Anne sat down.

How was he?

Not there.

Discharged?

Transferred.

Another ward?

Another hospital. Up where he's from.

Did they tell you anything?

Yes. Outside?

The three of them filed along to the front of the library causing some heads to be raised briefly and out into the court. Phil led them to an empty bench. Fliss placed herself in the middle. Anne and Phil sat either side.

One of the nurses was surprised we didn't know. She said she told Malcolm.

Who's Malcolm?

Anne bent forward to answer Phil. He lives where Sam did.

Never met him.

Well he seems to be very friendly with this nurse. So I explained that we hadn't seen this Malcolm, but we were friends of Sam. She was keen to talk.

What did she say?

Well. Anne swivelled so that she could talk across Fliss. Nothing had changed over Christmas, but they'd persuaded his mother that he should be transferred. So she could see more of him.

Seems sense, said Phil.

When?

Last week. But. She drew a short breath. Somebody rang to say he'd had a fit or something in the ambulance.

A fit?

I think so. Anyway the next day. The day after he got there. He woke up.

Regained consciousness.

Yes.

Is he all right?

I don't know Fliss. She - the nurse - didn't seem to know. I suppose it's not their concern now.

No, I suppose it isn't.

Maybe he'll come back.

Can't see him getting over it all very soon. Can you?

Don't know.

No. We don't. I'd like to think.

He'd be back to normal.

Well, normal for him. Phil pressed his hands on his knees .

Normal for him. Anne pushed herself back and stared across the court. None of us are normal. Are we?

Neither of the others responded.

Phil stood up. It's an improvement. But it's the long-term that matters.

Fliss punched him on the thigh. Pessimist.

I didn't say that he wouldn't recover.

How do you feel this morning? She drew back the curtains. The panes were still dark. The sun had not yet risen. The light in the room was yellow.

He opened his eyes. He pushed himself into a sitting position. Remind me. Who are you?

Oh Dennis. I'm your mother.

That's right. You are Dennis's mother. My name is Sam.

Let's get you up. It's half past seven. I need to be gone by eight. We've talked about this several times. You're a lot better and we said that as soon as I could then I'd go back to work. I'm going back today.

Yes. That's right. You go back to work. I'll go back to university.

No. Not yet. Let's see how you get on without me at home. She stood at the door. Get up. Get washed. Get dressed. Your clothes are on the chair. Come down and have your breakfast. What would you like?

Scrambled egg. On toast.

Don't you fancy a change. You could have beans.

They fall off.

What?

The beans. Off the toast.

She went leaving the door ajar.

Her footsteps went down the stairs slowly.

She beat two eggs in a jug with a table fork. She added some milk and whisked the mixture a little more. She melted some butter in a small pan. She finished her coffee while the butter was melting. She arranged two slices of bread on the grill pan and slid it under the flaring grill. She poured the beaten egg and milk on to the melted butter. She stirred the congealing mass with a narrow wooden spoon. The end of the spoon was darker than the handle. She stirred and scraped until all the liquid had disappeared. She turned the bread over. She lowered the gas under the pan as far as it was possible. As soon as the toast was brown she laid the pieces side by side on a white dinner plate with a green edge. She spread the slices with butter. She divided

the egg equally between the two slices of toast and positioned the plate between the knife and fork on the kitchen table. At the bottom of the stairs she called. It's ready. Back in the kitchen she relit the gas under the kettle and put a spoonful of tea in the little brown teapot. The kettle began to whistle.

Good morning.

She poured the boiling water on to the tea.

He sat down at the table and drank most of the glass of orange squash she had put out for him. I've made some sandwiches for your lunch. Ham. As usual. No mustard. In the Tupperware in the pantry. The keys are on the hall stand. If you go out then lock up. Back door. The front is locked. Leave it locked. She slopped a little milk into a cup and filled it with tea. It's cold today so you'll need scarf and gloves as well as your coat. I'll be home before five o'clock. What would you like to eat?

Pork chop. Mashed potatoes. Peas. Gravy. I have no money. There is no money in my wallet. There is no money in my purse.

What do you want money for?

The bus.

Where to?

Into town.

What for?

He cut another piece of toast and scrambled egg and fastened it to his fork. It was large. He twisted the fork and stretched his mouth until the whole piece was hidden and then began to chew with large movements of his jaw.

What for?

He continued to chew.

She took her handbag off the top of the washing machine. She popped the press studs on her purse and fanned the compartments while squeezing the bag under one elbow. She tipped some coins on to the tablecloth. She picked up a few and left the rest. There's almost two shillings. One and eleven. That's more than enough. You can use the threepenny bit in these

newfangled phone boxes to ring me at school if you need to. You remember how to use the telephone?

Yes.

You remember the number.

Nineteen times thirty-seven times seventy-three. Fifty one thousand three hundred and nineteen. Five one three one nine.

Outside the frost sparkled in the pale light.

You're back.

Hello George.

The caretaker leaned against the jamb of the door. His hands were in the square pockets of his dark grey overall. All the buttons were fastened and his red tie showed in the V between the lapels.

How's that boy of yours.

I ought to say he's a lot better.

But you're not sure.

I've had him home nearly three weeks now and he's able to look after himself. He looks well. He eats well. But he's different. The way he talks. The way he thinks. At least the way I think he thinks.

George looked out into the corridor.

They won't be finished yet. She always has a lot to say on a Monday.

If I don't ask him what he wants to eat and I don't get him exactly what he wants he won't eat it. I try to talk to him. To have a conversation. And he answers questions but only just. He never. He hardly ever starts anything.

He's been through a lot.

I know. They said they can't be sure what the effects will be but that he should improve in time. The brain is very adaptable. Whatever that means.

Is this the first day you've left him.

I've been out to the shops and the like. But I haven't left him all day. To be honest I'm glad to be back here. He's no company. And.

George glanced down the corridor again.
He doesn't seem to need me.
How?
I can't explain. She tidied some papers into a neat pile. It's almost as if he knows I want to help him and he lets me do it.
Strange.
It is. It feels strange. He say his name is Sam.
Sam?
It's what his friends at university call him. I suppose it's short for Sampson. His middle name. Calls me Dennis's mother.
Do you?
What?
Call him Sam.
No. I try not to call him anything. But occasionally.
You call him Dennis.
And he corrects me. Like a teacher.
How does he fill his time?
As he always has. Reading. I took him to the library a couple of times and he's been on his own several times since he came out of hospital. Always four non-fiction. He picked them very quickly when I was with him. He's read them in a couple of days. He sits there in the armchair in the window turning the pages. Very fast. Too fast. If you know what I mean. Sometimes he stares into space or out of the window. If I disturb him. Speak to him or walk into the room. He watches me till I've gone.
They're coming out. I'll see you later.
The children coming from the assembly hall class by class passed her open door in single file.

There was a light knock on the door.
Yes?
David.
Yes.
Can I come in?

He went around the end of Sam's bed and pulled back the door.

I have had a letter from the university. They want me to take somebody instead of Sam.

Dave fixed an indifferent expression on his face.

If I don't. Well, it's less money.

I see.

Would you mind?

It'll seem a bit odd.

I know. She folded her arms.

It's like we're deciding that he won't come back.

Maybe he won't. Maybe he shouldn't.

But he might. He's better than he was.

Malcolm told me, but that was a couple of weeks ago. We don't know what he's.

Dave pulled his mouth to one side. No. We don't.

She dropped her arms. What do you think I should do?

He lifted a shoulder. It's not for me.

I know. I'd just like someone.

What does your husband say?

He's says we should take someone else. Because of the money.

He's probably right.

You think so.

Dave spread his hands.

And you won't mind?

I'll get used to it.

All right. She half turned. That's settled?

Yes.

She went out on to the landing.

Dave moved towards the door. What about his things?

I suppose we'll have to hang on to them.

For a while anyway.

Someone knocked.

Come in.
She came in.
He finished folding the shirt and added it to the stack of shirts on his bed.
What are you doing?
Nothing. Nothing at the moment.
All these things. Shirts. Underpants. Vests. Trousers. Shoes. Socks. Ties. Pullovers. Shaving brush. Hairbrush. Comb. They're all over the place.
They're arranged. I'm making a mental inventory of all my possessions.
Your possessions.
They are all mine.
Yes. They're all yours.
Why do you speak so loudly.
Dennis. Why?
Sam.
Sam. Whoever you are.
So that I can see everything.
See. Everything.
Then I will know.
She closed her eyes. Inhaled through her nose. Then she opened her eyes. The she exhaled.
I have a suitcase.
What d'you want that for?
Where is it?
It's in the spare bedroom.
Is my briefcase in the spare bedroom?
No.
Where is it?
I don't know. Her voice betrayed her exasperation.
Where are my books and my lecture notes?
I haven't seen them. Or your briefcase. I didn't know you had a briefcase.
If you haven't seen them then you won't know where they are.

What's the matter with you?

Nothing.

You seem. She hesitated. Strained.

He took his jacket out of the narrow wardrobe and took everything from the pockets and placed them on the table. His wallet. A cheque book. A white handkerchief. A bunch of keys. A fountain pen. A leather purse. A bus ticket. He hung the jacket on the back of his chair. He picked up the handkerchief and folded it in four and positioned it with the folds aligned with the edges of the table. He arranged the other items so that they formed rows and columns. He took off his watch and laid it out on its back with the two parts of the strap flat. He emptied the wallet, pocket by pocket. He put the two one-pound notes in a neat pile. One ten-shilling note alongside. The envelopes in another pile. A photograph. He held it up so that she could see it. You and Dennis. This is not mine. I think it is yours. He held it near to her hand. She took hold of it, but did not look at it. He opened the purse and shook the coins into the semicircular section that had enclosed the purse. He made a line of coins. Each value stacked separately. Halfpennies. Pennies. One threepenny bit. A sixpence. Two separate shillings. And a half-crown. He left an empty space between the shillings and the half-crown. He put down the purse. Two pounds, fifteen shillings and tuppence ha'penny.

What are you trying to do?

I am not trying to do anything. I am determining exactly what I have. Is the furniture mine?

Yes.

I won't be able to take it with me.

You're not going anywhere. You're ill. You're not thinking properly.

I'll leave the furniture here. Is that allowed?

Yes. Yes. Yes. But you must stay here. With me. You need looking after. You need me.

You need me.

No. You need me. You need me. There was a blanket box at the end of the bed. There was nothing on it. She sat down on it.

Not there. The books. That's for the books.

Your books aren't here. You haven't any books. Only library books and they're not yours. Tears ran down her cheeks, but she made no noise.

Please leave. You are in my way.

She got up and half-heartedly reached out with her hand. Don't go. Wait till you are better.

I'm not going. I am here.

The hand lowered itself. You'll be much better in a few weeks.

I will go.

In a few weeks. Please. You'll feel more yourself in a few weeks. There's no need to rush it. You'll only make things worse.

He froze in mid-movement. He adjusted the orientation of the purse. His head turned towards her. The rest of his body remained rigid. He looked at her.

Her lips parted, her mouth opened. She said nothing. Her mouth closed. She went out of the room.

George. He's gone.

Dennis? The caretaker came into her office and sat down on the visitor's chair.

She wiped her face with a paper handkerchief from a box on her knee. Peggy – my next door neighbour – has been keeping a bit of an eye on him. Since I've been back at work. She rang here. Ten minutes ago. Said she seen him walking along the road carrying a suitcase. I knew this would happen. Yesterday he was organising all his clothes and things. She sniffed. I'm sorry. I shouldn't cry. But he's ill. He needs looking after. How's he going to manage. On his own. She blew her nose. He's not ready. Not ready to go back. Sometimes I think he'll never be ready.

You think he's gone back to university?

That's what he said. I tried to get him to wait a few weeks. He didn't listen. He doesn't listen. There's a one-way screen

between him and me. I can hear him, but my words don't get through. I don't know what to do.

What about the police?

What can they do?

They can find him. Bring him back, maybe. He's not twenty-one.

He'd just go again. I can't keep him locked in the house. She raised her eyes. The skin around her eyes was red. The lines under her eyes were dark, her cheeks puffed and purpled. Can I? Her chest suddenly heaved. She drew in air and released it a flutter of breaths. He's not like my Dennis. Not any more.

Why don't you go home? I'm sure it'll be all right with her highness.

What for?

I don't know. Get things - well - straight.

Straight?

So you're thinking straight.

I am thinking straight. My son's left home and I don't think he'll come back. Because he doesn't bloody think I'm his mother.

Take it easy, Kath. He walked around her desk. He raised a hand. His hand hovered over her shoulder.

She reached up and touched his hand and then let her hand return to her lap. I'll be all right. I'll have to be. I've always known that one day I'd be on my own. I thought about it when he first went. Kept telling myself he'd be back at Christmas. And Easter. And in the summer. And the three years would soon be gone. But now he's gone. For ever.

You don't know that.

I'd be better thinking it.

You never know.

You don't. She took a deep breath, pushed her chair back, and put the box of paper tissues on her desk. I'd best make myself presentable before the kids come in. I've plenty to do.

He steadied her elbow as she got up from her chair. Are you sure you wouldn't be better having the afternoon off.

No, I'll be fine. I'll have to be.

14

He rang the bell. He stood his suitcase along the single step.
The door opened.

Sam.

He lifted his case and put his right foot on the step.

Sam. Mrs Harker held the door half open. Her other hand held the frame.

He took his foot off the step.

I've got another student. Instead of you. I didn't know when you were coming back. If you were coming back. The university

asked me. They asked me to take this other student. I said yes. You'll have to talk to them. In the accommodation office.

Sam stared at her. He rested the corner of his case on the step.

How are you? How do you feel? When did you get out of hospital?

I left some of my things.

We put them all in your trunk. It's in the cellar. It's too heavy for me to get up the steps. It'll be too heavy for you to carry.

My briefcase?

Your briefcase. She pulled at one ear. I can't say. I don't think. I don't think I've seen it.

Where is it?

I don't know where it is. I'm sorry. It's not here. I'm sure.

He stared at her for a second.

She moved back and took hold of the edge of the door.

I will come back for my trunk. He lifted his case.

I'll get Arnold or the boys to bring it upstairs. It can stay in the hallway till you come back for it.

He set off down the short path. Small flakes of snow drifted down out of a light grey sky on to the shoulders of his raincoat.

Goodbye, she said

Sam closed the wooden gate.

She closed the door.

The woman in the accommodation office explained that it was hard to get places in lodgings in the middle of term, but she was sure she could find him a room in one of the halls. It'll be more expensive.

His eyes moved quickly, surveying the room.

A little over eight pounds per term. On top of what you were paying.

His eyes locked on to hers.

Is that all right?

He stared.

Is that all right?

Yes.

I could have had this all sorted out for you if you'd let us know you were returning.

His eyes were moving again.

Why don't you sit down while I ring round.

There were three chairs against a blank wall alongside the door. The green plastic that covered the seats and backs of the chairs was cracked at the corners. He sat on the far chair in the corner. He stood his case against the adjacent wall below a dark-edged notice board with a neat array of typewritten notices.

The woman held the black handset of the telephone to her left ear and dialled with her right hand. She spoke gently, nodding and shaking her head when she was not speaking. At intervals she put her hand on the receiver rest and then dialled again. On her desk stood a jam jar with a variety of pencils and pens. Yellow pencils. Clear plastic ballpoint pens. A pair of scissors. In front of her was a shorthand pad bound with a coil of wire. Next to the pad was a small tray with an eraser, a few paper clips, a bulldog clip, a small white bottle. She picked up a paper clip and began to twirl it between her fingers. Beyond the telephone was a telephone directory. On top of the telephone directory was a thick green book bound in stiff green covers. Behind her was another desk with a typewriter. There was a sheet of paper in the typewriter. The sheet was partly filled with typescript. Next to the typewriter was a white cup and saucer. In the saucer was a teaspoon.

Mr Unwin.

She produced a university map from her drawer and unfolded it and pointed out to him the location of the hall where there was an empty room. I've spoken to the sub-warden and he's expecting you. If you get a move on you should have time to unpack and settle in before it's time for dinner.

He went over to his case.

Take the map.

I don't need it. He picked up his case.

Take it anyway.

He pulled back the door, stopped, and glanced back. Thank you. He stepped out into the corridor. The door closed and clicked.

She refolded the map and returned it to her desk drawer.

He followed the sub-warden up the stone staircase. The man left dark footprints as the snow his shoes had picked up in the quadrangle melted. The man wore a thick grey sweater with a deep turtle neck. A bunch of keys jangled in his hand.

At the top of the sixth flight he unlocked one of the rooms and held out a single key. There you are then Sam. It's only small but it's warm. The heat seems to collect up here. You've got your rules and you've got your key. Now is there anything else.

I have a small trunk at the house where I was in lodgings before. It has many of my things in it.

Before your. Your accident.

Yes. I must get it here?

Where from?

The house where I lodged.

Address?

Sam recited his old address.

Not sure I know where that is?

Halfway between here and the university.

Too far to carry. Too heavy as well. Taxi'll cost you a few shillings. The sub-warden turned to leave then stopped. Look. I'll have a word with the porter and see if one of the university's vans can't pick it up when they come up here with internal mail. Leave it to me. I'll see what I can do. He pulled a ball pen from his pocket and took a tattered leaflet that was pinned to the board on the wall near the door. Here, write the address on the back of this.

Sam went to the desk and wrote down the address. Thank you.

The sub-warden took the paper from him. See you at dinner. Seven o'clock. Warden likes punctuality. Best be at table by five to.

Fliss and Phil entered the lecture room together. They edged sideways along the second row until they were at its middle. They sat down and assembled paper and pens ready for the lecture. Anne was sitting in the front row a couple of places to Fliss's left.

Anne screwed herself round and stretched across the empty desks. Sam's back.

Sam? Where?

Far end, back row. She angled her head towards the corner of the room farthest from the door.

Fliss twisted round. It is. It is him.

Phil nudged Fliss. You're staring.

He seems a bit. I don't know. Awkward. No. Uncomfortable. Unaware.

He was here when I got here. Has he got anything in front of him yet?

No. Desk's empty. He's just looking. A bit blank. At the front. Waiting. Almost as if he didn't know what was going to happen.

The subdued grumble of conversation faded into silence. The lecturer mumbled a greeting and turned to the blackboard and began writing. Anne began copying what was written on to her pad. The edge of the carbon paper protruded slightly and she shuffled it into alignment with the edge of the top sheet. Fliss paused in her writing to observe Sam. He was still looking at the blackboard. He was not writing. He had no paper and no pen. His open hands rested on the desk in front of him palms down. He stared. He sat straight. She returned her attention to the board and hurriedly scribbled. Each time she glanced his posture and attitude were unchanged.

As the lecturer was cleaning the board and the class were putting their pens away and closing folders, Fliss reached and patted Anne on the shoulder. He did nothing but sit and look at the board.

I noticed.

What do you think?

I don't know what to think.

Everyone was moving along the rows and towards the door. A student who had been sitting on the back row near Sam sat on a desk and swung his legs into the row in front and stood up. He repeated this until he was at the front of the room. He then rushed out. Sam followed the others along the back row. Outside Fliss and Anne and Phil were waiting.

Good to see you Sam.

How are you?

When did you get back?

Hello Phil. Hello Fliss. Hello Anne.

Fliss widened her mouth. More than a smile, not quite a grin. Anne's made a copy of all her maths notes since. Since your accident.

Anne lowered one knee to the floor and opened her bag. Here's the latest ones. I'll bring the rest tomorrow.

Sam took the blue envelope file from her.

They're all dated and marked with the subject and the pages are numbered.

Phil's made copies of the physics.

I'll bring them tomorrow.

Thank you. Do you know where my briefcase is?

Sorry, no, said Phil. At your digs?

Not there.

Sam put the blue folder on the floor while he buttoned up his raincoat and drew the belt tight. He picked up the folder. Goodbye. He strode off along the centre of the corridor. The blue folder was trapped under his right elbow.

Bye, said Fliss

Look after. Anne hesitated. Yourself.
Didn't say much, did he? Phil watched Sam vanish round the corner of the corridor.
The girls began walking in the other direction.
Awful.
What do you mean?
Not the same Sam. Not like Sam.
I was thinking that. A familiar stranger.
Phil caught up. Bit odd that.
We were saying. Saying that he was different.
He's been away almost as long as he was here. Perhaps we all seem like strangers to him.
I don't know.
Anne sighed. Maybe he'll be better when he's been back a while.
I hope so.
Sure he will. He'll have to settle in all over again.
Can I help you?
I was in hospital here.
Yes. The woman at the reception window, put down her pen.
For weeks. Unconscious. They took me to another hospital.
Yes. The woman waved her hand.
Who are you waving at?
Sorry, you were saying.
They took me to another hospital. When I was in a coma. I'm all right now. Can I have my briefcase?
Your briefcase?
My briefcase.
All your belongings would be transferred with you.
She hasn't seen it.
Who?
Dennis's mother.
Who's Dennis?
Sam's eyes rolled to the ceiling.

Can I have your name. She beckoned again, more urgently. The porter stopped chatting to the young woman with an armful of manila files and came over to the reception desk.

Everything all right?

I want my briefcase.

He was a patient here. In a coma. Seems to think we have his briefcase.

Student are you, lad?

Yes.

We wouldn't keep your briefcase. It would stay with you or be handed over to a relative.

It wasn't.

How do you know?

I know.

You're sure it was here?

I don't know. Sam flung out an arm in the direction of the woman. I was asking her.

Hey, steady on, lad. The porter moved Sam's arm away from his face.

Don't touch me.

OK. Calm down.

Get away. Sam put his flat hand on the top button of the porter's jacket.

The porter eased the arm away with his forearm. Now, lad.

Sam took a step towards the porter, brought up both hands, opened them.

There's no need to get.

He put his palms against the porter's chest and pushed. The porter staggered back, one heel slipping on the plastic floor tiles. He grabbed for the sill of the reception window. His hand was wrenched away from the sill as his body rotated and fell. His backside hit the floor and his head snapped back against the painted wall.

You little bugger. The porter hauled himself to his feet, massaging the back of his head.

Sam slowly turned round. There were half a dozen people watching.

The young woman with the files came over to the porter. You all right Pete.

Yes. Yes. He took hold of Sam's left arm, above the elbow and wrist locking the arm straight and forcing Sam to walk towards the exit.

I want my briefcase.

You can shout all you like. It's not here and you're leaving.

Two people held back the swing doors and the porter forced Sam out on to the pavement. As he let go the porter put a hand in the middle of Sam's back and gave him a push. Sam stumbled, but kept his feet. Looking back at the hospital he took a couple of steps backwards. He glared at the entrance then spun round and strode straight into a woman carrying a small child.

Watch where you're going.

Why?

In the library he went to the mathematics shelves and searched along the ranks of books. He took down one book, opened it at the first chapter and turned over the pages quickly. He closed it and put it under his left arm. Farther along the shelves he pulled out another. Again he turned over a few pages and held it between his arm and his chest with the first book. When he had added a third book he left the mathematics shelves and went up the stairs and found a vacant chair in the psychology bay. He put the three books in a neat pile on the desk. He swung his raincoat around the chair and sat down. He unbuttoned his jacket. He took the top book from the pile and opened it out on the desk at the beginning of the first chapter. He scanned the first page then turned the page. He scanned the next two pages and turned the page. He continued scanning the pages taking about five seconds for each double page. Whenever he heard footsteps he glanced at the person coming or going or passing. He worked through

the first chapter then the second. The third and then the fourth and then the fifth. When he was about a third of the way through the book his pace began to slow. Certain pages took as much as ten seconds. After ten minutes he was half way through the book. He rested one of the other books on the open book and edged out of the chair. He walked to the stairs and went down them and out of the library. He sat on a bench in the court with his eyes closed. After a few minutes he made his way back to his seat in the psychology bay. As he sat down the student occupying the adjacent seat spoke.

Excuse me.

Sam looked at him.

Were you actually reading that book?

Yes.

Amazing. Eidetic memory.

Eidetic?

Photographic. But you're really quick.

Sam lifted the closed book off the open one. He held the pages open with his other hand.

Can you see all the pages you've looked at? In your head?

No.

Oh. People with eidetic memory retain detailed images. You don't?

No.

So what are you doing then?

Making sense of the mathematics.

Mathematics.

Yes.

Amazing.

Sam returned his gaze to the pages.

I'll let you get on.

When he had finished the first book he took another break. When he came back she was sitting on the other side of the desk from where he had left his books. She had an arm around a pad of paper on which she was writing. He stood for a few seconds.

Her hair was much shorter and the curls tighter. She was wearing a faint perfume. Around her neck was a loosely tied red silk scarf. Her sweater was cream and her grey coat hung on her chair. Its hem rested on the floor. He went and stood behind her left shoulder. He watched the flow of her writing as it progressed from left to right and line by line. The ink was bright blue. The script was upright and the hand round. The ascenders had no loops and the descenders were not linked to the following letters. After each full stop she left a long gap. She stopped writing and looked away from her writing. Her eyes were unseeing. Sam moved his feet and flexed one knee. Her head flinched. Her eyes saw him. She sat up and twisted round.

Sam. She put her pen down on the desk at the top of the pad. Sam. I heard you were back. David told me.

David?

Dave. You were in digs with him. He said he hadn't seen you. His landlady told him you were back. We shouldn't talk here. Let's go outside.

Her chair slid and stopped against his right toe as she rose.

He stepped back.

She slipped out of her place and lifted the chair closer to the desk. She was wearing black trousers. She eased past him and he followed her. Her shoes were flat and soft-soled. In the court she led him to an unoccupied bench. She sat down in the middle and he sat down in the space to her left.

Well, how are you?

I'm all right.

I'm sorry.

Sorry?

I feel it was my fault somehow.

What?

Your accident.

Why?

You were running across the road to me.

You.

Yes. You shouted.

Shouted. His eyes watched her mouth.

Yes. And then there was this awful noise. A dull sound. I saw you falling. It was awful. She covered her mouth with her fingertips for a moment. The ambulance came. I thought you were going to die. The hospital let me see you the following morning. You simply lay there. Getting ready to die. She closed her eyes and then opened them. Do you remember anything?

No. His eyes locked with hers and then he blinked and looked down at her hand resting on the bench between them. He moved his hand towards hers. She withdrew her hand. He edged away from her.

A car ran over your briefcase.

Where is it?

I picked it up.

Where is it now?

It's in my room. I thought someone should look after it.

Can I have it?

Of course.

When?

Whenever.

When?

This weekend.

When?

Saturday.

When?

Afternoon. She stood up. Around two.

She put her coat on. She bent her arm through the strap of her bag and manoeuvred it so that she could support its weight on her shoulder. As soon as she was out of the psychology bay Sam picked up the three books and put them on a re-shelving trolley. He gathered his raincoat and hurried along to the stairs. As he came out of the library he saw her leaving the building. He

strode after her. Outside it was dusk. The sky was clear with a hint of night in it. The orange street lamps coloured the scene. She had stopped halfway down the steps to pull on her woollen hat. When it was stretched over her ears her hair was completely hidden. She turned up the collar of her coat and hitched the strap of her bag farther on to her shoulder with a gloved hand. She had changed her flat shoes for ankle boots with a fur trim. She continued down the steps and joined a queue waiting for a bus.

The first bus that came was not going her way. The second already had a number of people standing. The conductor allowed five or six on to the platform then took hold of the bars at the rear and side of the platform to block any more from boarding. Before this bus left another on the same route arrived. The queue broke up and hurried to the second bus. She hurried to the second bus her toes pointing inwards and her heels flicking outwards. He skipped down the steps. His feet only touching the edge of each. He attached himself to the end of the new line that had formed alongside the bus. He was last to get on. He could see her grey coat standing downstairs. He climbed the stairs and squeezed on to the edge of a double seat disproportionately occupied by a fat man.

The rush hour traffic crawled slowly up the gentle incline that led northwards from the university. The traffic was queued and the bus stopped and groaned repeatedly. The air on the upper deck was warm and sharp with tobacco smoke. The reflections of the lights inside the bus interfered with the view from the windows. Every so often he screwed his body round to peer out of the rear window.

The bus stopped at a bus-stop. Three or four passengers had made their way to the back of the bus. He joined them at the top of the stairs. They moved down the stairs. He waited. After a few seconds he clattered down the stairs and got off the bus after everyone else.

A knot of women students crossed the road. He stood on the pavement. The traffic was moving faster than it had been nearer town. He went to the kerb. He waited, watching the vehicles go by. A dark gap appeared. He stepped out into the road. He stepped back on to the kerb. A car with dim lights rattled in front of him. He waited again. A long gap presented itself and he ran to the middle of the road. There was little traffic heading for town and he only hesitated a second before striding to the far kerb. The students had disappeared up the drive. He walked determinedly into the darkness that gave way to the pale glow of a lamp on the curve of the drive. Carol was about ten yards ahead of him, walking on her own.

He sprinted to catch her up. He came up behind her on her left and took hold of her upper arm. She squealed. The girls ahead of her stopped and looked back.

Sam. You frightened me. You shouldn't do that.

The girls continued walking.

I've come for it now.

Now?

My briefcase.

All right. Your hurting me.

Keep going. He forced her to walk more quickly.

Let go of me.

No.

I'll shout.

What for?

Help.

Help? What for?

She struggled against his grip.

They reached the steps up to the entrance.

Sam be reasonable.

Why?

You stay here and I'll go and get your briefcase.

I'm coming.

You'll have to let go.

Why?

People will look.

So.

They'll see that you're hurting me. Stay here. I'll only be a minute or two. Please. She smiled at him. Please, Sam.

He relaxed his grip and she tore herself free. As she went up the steps she called out: I'll be back in a couple of minutes.

He waited.

Another group of students came up the drive. He turned his back to them.

He fastened his raincoat and buckled the belt.

Sam!

He spun round.

She set the briefcase down on the top step and went back inside. The door swung shut.

He picked up his briefcase. A tyre mark ran diagonally across one side. His watch showed half past six. He set off with a quick long pace. He was late for dinner and had to walk up to the top table and bow to the warden.

15

There was a folded note pinned to his door. Trunk in porter's lodge. Please collect.

The trunk was small. Not much more than a very large suitcase. Grey rounded along its long edges with pale strips of wood strengthening it. Short brass strips protected the wood where it curved round the trunk. It was heavy. He lifted it by its single handle and lugged it across the quadrangle stopping halfway to step round it and lift it with his other hand. He paused again at the bottom of the staircase in his block. On the first landing he let it drop and took a number of deep breaths.

Footsteps rattled up the stone steps. You OK?

He nodded.

You the new chap at the top.

He nodded.

I'm Trevor. Got the room next to you. You like a hand?

He nodded.

There were no handles on the end panels. Trevor tipped it over on to its broad base. He lifted up one end. Sam took the other.

They climbed the flights of stairs at a steady pace one step at a time, Trevor hesitantly walking backwards. Twice he staggered as he caught his heel.

Sam unlocked his door. Trevor dragged the trunk the last few feet and stood it upright in the middle of the room. He flopped into the easy chair gripping the ends of its wooden arms.

Sam sat down on the chair at the desk.

Got back from a field trip this afternoon and saw the note so I knew someone had moved in. Been empty for three weeks. Chinese chap. From Hong Kong I think. Kept himself to himself. Seems he failed all his first term exams. Economics. Went down to the railway line. At the back of the tennis courts. He pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. Climbed through a hole in the wire fence and put his head on the track and waited for a bloody train. Bloody mess. His clenched both fists and rapped the wooden arms alternately. So?

So what?

Name. Subject.

Sam Unwin. First year mathematics.

Trevor Upton. Second year geography. Why've you moved here in the middle of the second term?

Hospital. For several weeks. When I came back the landlady had got someone else. Accommodation office sent me here. Monday.

You all right now?

Yes.

Why were you in hospital? Nothing catching I hope.
An accident. I was knocked down.
Oh. You're him. Read about you. There was a bit in Union News. Weren't you in a coma?
Yes. Something happened in the ambulance. They were taking me to another hospital. I came round.
What do you remember?
Remember?
About what happened. The accident.
Nothing.
They said you were drunk.
I don't know.
You'll have missed a lot of lectures.
I'm catching up. He indicated the pile of notes open on his desk. Another student made me copies.
Thoughtful. He got out of the chair. What are you tearing up?
Trevor nodded at the waste paper bin.
The pages I've finished with.
Trevor screwed up his face in comic incomprehension.
Once I've read them.
Won't you need them later? Want to read them again? Revise?
No.
No?
No need.
You mean. Trevor sat down again on the edge of the cushion.
You mean once you've read them you won't need to read them again.
Sam put a hand on the top end of the trunk.
You'll be able to remember what you've read.
Sam closed his eyes. Not remember. He opened them.
Understand.
For ever?
Sam shrugged. Who knows?
Jesus. Trevor relaxed into the chair again.

Sam pulled the trunk over on to the floor. He knelt in front of the trunk and pushed at its knurled brass buttons. It wasn't locked. He flipped up the catches and threw back the lid.

A coffee?

Coffee?

I've a kettle in my room.

All right.

Won't be a mo.

He lifted each item out singly and placed it on the bed. He piled items or grouped items. Books, shirts, vests, underpants, handkerchiefs, socks, ring binders, shoes, galoshes. A pair of trousers with braces. A tie. Towels. Toilet bag. Hairbrush. An alarm clock. Scarf. When the trunk was empty he put his empty suitcase inside it and closed it. He closed the catches till they clicked and stood the trunk on one end at the foot of his bed where the suitcase had been. He put the books on the single bookshelf next to the two from his briefcase.

There was a knock at his door. The door opened before he could move. Trevor came in with a small plastic tray in one hand on which were two red mugs and a half empty one-pound bag of sugar. He took a short pace into the room and then shut the door with a backward kick.

Sorry. No milk. He slid the tray on to the desk.

Sam quickly closed the file and put it into the top drawer of the desk.

Sugar?

Sam nodded.

One or two?

One.

Trevor opened the crumpled top of the the bag and using the spoon that had been lodged inside stirred a heaped teaspoon of sugar into each mug.

Very neat.

Sam took the proffered mug. I need to see what's there. Get everything organised.

Trevor sat on the desk chair. Sam lowered himself into the armchair.

I need to see everything. Arranged.

Visual memory. You must have a visual memory.

Everyone remembers what they see.

More a visual bias. Easier to remember things seen rather than heard or smelt or touched.

I see.

Ha ha. Clever.

What?

You said, I see. See. Visual memory. See.

Sam drank some black coffee.

You can't leave everything in view though can you?

No.

So how do you? Can you remember where things are when they're out of sight?

I look hard as I put things away. Concentrate.

Don't let me stop you.

Stop me?

Getting on with your putting away.

Sam opened the wardrobe. He stared at the bed, then at the wardrobe and then at the contents of each of the drawers in the desk and in the narrow chest. He moved each item from the bed and hung it in the wardrobe or put it in one of the drawers. When the bed was clear he looked carefully at the final contents of each drawer. He stood back from the wardrobe then closed it.

Where are the handkerchiefs?

Sam frowned.

Don't you know? Forgotten already? Trevor laughed.

No. But why do you want to know?

Just testing. A joke.

Top drawer of the chest, right-hand side. With the tie, hairbrush, comb, pair of nail scissors and the bag with soap, razor, shaving cream, toothpaste and toothbrush.

Sam put his empty mug on the desk next to the other one. He sat down and lifted the top sheet from the pile of notes on his desk.

Trevor stood up. I'd best be going. He put the mugs and sugar on the tray and picked it up.

Sam watched.

Give you a knock for dinner?

Sam shrugged lopsidedly.

Trevor held the tray with one arm while he pulled open the door keeping it open with the side of his foot. Outside he managed to hold the tray with both hands and get a purchase on the the handle with two fingers and slowly close the door.

He found an unoccupied chair at the near end of the desk in a first floor bay – economics – across the library from the psychology bay. He draped his coat around the chair, and took a cloth-bound book off the nearest shelf. Modern Banking. Sayers. He sat down and opened the book somewhere in the middle then put it face down on the desk. He reached into an inside jacket pocket and brought out a small notebook. A thick elastic band encircled most of the leaves and the back cover. He set a fountain pen from the same pocket alongside the notebook on the desk. Without getting up he pushed the chair round so that he had the psychology bay in his field of view. He picked up the book and held it in a reading position. Occasionally he turned over to the next page.

A flash of red snatched his attention away from the book. She was carrying her coat over her arm. She was wearing the skirt he had first seen her in. Her bag was in her other hand. She took a place well inside the bay. He kept an eye on her until she had sat down. He put down the book, looked at his watch and opened the notebook at the page marked by the elastic band. He wrote in the notebook and put it in his jacket pocket.

He left the book on the desk and his coat and went along the to the stairs. She had settled down to her work. He hurried down the stairs and into the mathematics bay. He found a copy of Copson's Functions of a Complex Variable and pulled it from the shelf. He crossed the library and went up the stairs on her side two steps at a time. Walking along the balcony he slowed as he approached psychology. She was there. He continued to the other end and returned to where he had been sitting in economics. Before he sat down he glanced across the space. She was there. He opened Copson and began turning the pages.

He lowered the book. He strained to see across the library. His chin lifted. His neck stretched. Holding the arms of the chair he raised his body an inch or two. He relaxed back into the chair. She was there.

Every few seconds his right hand curled back the right-hand page. His fingers slid under the paper, lifted it and pressed it flat against the the previous left-hand page.

Students walked past. From time to time one came into the bay, searched for a book, studied it for a few minutes and left either with or without the book. One or two who came in spoke to a friend or an acquaintance. A member of the library staff came by with a narrow trolley with large silently rolling wheels. There were books on the shelves of the trolley. Her shoes were thin-soled and quiet. Occasionally the clack-clack of high heels attracted his attention and he watched the wearer pass. Blouse or sweater and a skirt that restricted the length of each step. Whatever it was that took his attention from the book he never returned his attention to the pages until he had looked across to the other side. She was still there.

He raised his head. She was walking along the balcony towards the entrance to the library. Her coat hung open. She carried a small purse. She did not have her bag. He checked his watch and wrote in his notebook. He grasped the collar of his coat and tugged it off the chair. He picked up his notebook. When he reached the bottom of the stairs he went out through

the glass doors and through the turnstile which the porter released without a word. He stopped in the openness of the court and carried out a three hundred and sixty degree survey. Students walked away from him. Students walked towards him. Students sat talking or smoking on the benches. He strode back into the library. He went up the staircase and along to psychology. He turned around and came down to the entrance. He left the library again and stood again in the space under the clock tower. He studied every direction. She was at the far side of the turnstile, coming towards him. He hurried to the other side of one of the tall pillars and watched the central space. She walked straight across to the main entrance. He went after her. Outside the day was as bright as summer, but cold. From the top of the steps he saw her start to cross the road. She waited for a second in the middle as a bus passed on its way to the town centre. She joined the queue at the bakery that sold sandwiches. The queue extended out of the small shop on to the pavement. He waited. People were joining the queue intermittently. It was the quiet time between twelve forty-five and one o'clock when most of those who had finished at twelve had bought their lunches but the one o'clock rush that would follow the end of twelve o'clock lectures had yet to start. When four or five people had joined the queue after her, he went over the road and joined it. He was inside the shop by the time she was served and he averted his head as she paid and left. The service was quick. Two young women and an older woman all in maroon dresses with cream pinafores continually solicited requests, fulfilled them, sliding sandwiches, cakes, pastries into separate white paper bags which accumulated on the top of the glass case that separated customers from staff. He asked for a ham salad and a half pint of milk. The milk came in a carton that was almost a perfect cube. He handed over his half-crown, collected his change and left the shop carrying the paper bag and the carton of milk in one hand. He dodged through the traffic and galloped up the steps. Inside he turned left and saw her going towards a

bench under one of the tall windows. He halted. She sat down. She had several paper bags. She rested the paper bags on her lap. She did not open them. He went to a bench on the other side from which he could see her along a diagonal line that slanted past one of the columns. He stood the milk carton on the polished slats of the bench. He opened his paper bag and drew the bread roll partly out so that he could grip the sandwich through the paper and eat the exposed half.

From his position he could not see the other half of her bench. As he watched and ate he saw her look up and then pass one of the paper bags to someone else. Her gaze dropped and she turned slightly. She was talking to someone who was sitting on the same bench. He finished his sandwich and screwed up the paper bag and put it next to his milk. He took the milk carton in both hands, parted the seal with his thumbs until the carton split halfway. He pushed back the wings and pulled out a folded-in piece to make a spout-like rhombic opening. He lifted the opening to his mouth and drank. When the carton was empty he closed the opening and stood the carton alongside the crumpled bag. He took out his pen and notebook and wrote in it. There was a square black waste paper bin at the other side of the pillar. He picked up the paper bag and the carton and went to the bin. He dropped them in the bin. He looked across the court to the bench where she was sitting. There was a man with her. They were sitting close. The male student was gazing in his direction. Suddenly he lifted his arm, turned to her and said something. A finger pointed towards Sam. Sam spun around and dashed behind the column. At a fast walk he hurried to the end of the court keeping the line of columns between him and Carol. He rounded the final column and nipped down the staircase to the basement.

16

He retrieved the quarto pad that he had used for taking notes in lectures. He switched on the room light and sat down at his desk.

He began to write.

Dear Dave,

Today I saw you with Carol. I don't know her other name but that doesn't matter.

He read what he had written, tore off the sheet and crumpled it and dropped it into the waste paper bin.
He picked up his pen.

*Dear David,
I saw*

He stopped peeled off the sheet, screwed it up and threw it in the bin.

*To David Henry Ladywood
You were with her today. I saw you and you were being friendly very friendly. I think you are going out with her. You have taken advantage of my absence to become intimate with her when I was working out how to let her know how I feel about her. I have had these feelings for her since I first set eyes on her during freshers week and since then I have tried to become more friendly with her. It was difficult but I would have succeeded if it had not been for the unfortunate incident which led to me*

He crossed out the word *me*, and continued.

*my being in hospital
for a long time when for most of the time I
was unconscious and unable to continue
what I was doing or planning to do. Since
recovering I have had to spent much time
and effort getting my life back together and
just at the time I was thinking that I could*

He tore the page in half and put in the bin. He wrote the date at the top of the page.

*To David H. Ladywood,
Since I returned to the university to continue
my studies after my accident and time in
hospital I have become aware that you are
spending a lot of time in the company of a
young woman called Carol. I do not know
her surname but you it will be obvious to
you who I mean. I have a personal interest in
this person. I have been taking an interest in
her since I first met her during freshers
week. Unfortunately, despite my endeavours,
no opportunity had arisen that allowed me
to further my interest before the incident
which led to my being in hospital for several
weeks unconscious for much of the time.
Now that I am recovered I was planning to
take up where I left off in my relationship
with her, but your continual presence
whenever I see her in a situation in which I
might sensibly approach her you are there.
You have taken advantage of my misfortune*

*to become friendly with her. In fact, I think
you friendship borders on intimacy. This is
not what I want. I wan*

He had used up all the ink in his fountain pen. The bottle of Quink blue-black was in the second drawer of his desk. He unscrewed the barrel of the pen and submerged the nib into the ink. He squeezed the metal strip on the reservoir squashing it a few times. Bubbles gurgled inside the bottle. When there was no further sound he released the strip and withdrew the nib. He wiped the excess ink from the nib with a piece of blotting paper and reassembled the pen. He put the cap on the pen and read through the letter.

He underlined *I have a personal interest in this person*. He crossed out *your continual presence*. He re-read it. He crossed out *was planning* and wrote *intend*. He crossed out *apparent* and wrote *obvious*. He added at the point where the ink had run out

t
*her. And I saw her first. I think you should
leave her alone so that I can*

He stopped writing. He banged the pen on to the pad and ink splattered across the page. He rose sharply and the chair toppled over behind him. He kicked at the chair. The force of the kick caused it to rock and return to where it had first fallen. He sat on the edge of his bed and then lay on his side, hugging his knees. He relaxed and his arms released his knees, his legs straightened and he rolled over on to his back. He stared at the ceiling. He remained motionless for several minutes. His eyes closed. His breathing shallow. The sound of feet on the stone

steps disturbed him. He got up, put on his jacket and went down to dinner.

You don't play bridge do you?

Sam stopped on the staircase and Trevor caught him up.

I said do you play bridge.

No.

Pity. Stuart's decided he must write up his lab work so we're one short. I'll go and knock on a few doors see if I can find anyone. If you want to join us you can. You could watch and I'll explain.

Maybe.

We'll be in Brian's room. Number 3, staircase E.

Trevor went back down the stairs. Sam continued up to his room. He put on the light and drew the curtains together. He hung his jacket on the peg on the back of the door. The quarto pad and his uncapped pen were on the desk. He bumped the desk as he avoided the fallen chair and the pen rolled off the pad and rested in the grain of the wood. The splashes of ink were still bright. He put the cap on his pen and lined the pen up with the far edge of the desk. He eased the ruined page from the adhesive that held the sheets together and carefully laid it on the desk. He raised the top edge and folded the sheet in half. He smoothed the fold and then smoothed the two halves together spreading the liquid ink. After folding it in half again he held it over the bin and released it. He removed the top blank sheet from the pad and pushed the pad to one side. He stood the chair on its legs and sat down at the desk. He took a clean sheet from the pad. He tore the sheet in half across its width. He found a pencil in the top desk drawer. He transferred the pencil to his left hand and wrote in awkward capital letters in the middle of the piece of paper.

LEAVE HER ALONE

I SAW HER FIRST

He folded the paper in half and slid it into one of the small envelopes that his mother had provided him with when he had left home at the end of September. He licked the flap of envelope and sealed it. On the outside of the envelope he wrote DAVE. He put the pencil away and crossed the room. He pushed the envelope into a side pocket of his jacket. He smoothed down the flap of the pocket and shook the jacket. He opened the door and set off to find Brian's room.

His alarm clock woke him at half past six. It was still dark when he walked out through the gates of the hall. He passed a parked car with a patina of pale frost that glistened faintly under the weak street light. He hurried. A lighted bus passed across the end of the street as he neared the main road. When he reached the corner a dark figure was boarding the bus. The street lamps on the main road were higher and brighter. The morning traffic was intermittent. A cyclist in a raincoat, loose trousers clipped around the ankles, sailed down the gentle incline. A dim red light was attached to the rear forks. He maintained a long stride. Twenty minutes later he reached the pub where he and Dave had downed pints and smoked cigarettes. He crossed the side street diagonally stepping up the kerb on to the narrower pavement. He increased his pace. His toe caught the edge of one of the large stone slabs and he stumbled forwards whirling his arms to recover his balance. He slowed. Ahead of him the sky was beginning turn grey. On the street where Mrs Harker's house stood he waited on the opposite side in a dark patch between the street lights. The windows at either side of the front door were unlit. He crossed the setts. The slightly curved surface of each sett was damp and gleamed. The house had a small front garden split by a path. The wrought iron gate hung open. He reached the front door in a few careful paces. He pushed open the horizontal letterbox holding it with his thumb against the spring. With his other hand he drew the envelope

from his jacket pocket and slipped it silently through the opening. He eased the pressure on the flap of the letterbox until it had closed silently. He glanced at each of the curtained windows before turning his back on the house. Across the street he halted and turned around. The house was unchanged. The clouds were edged with pale early light. He set off again.

He passed no one between the hall gates and his room and after he had removed his coat he lay on his bed until it was time to go down to breakfast.

The knocking was loud enough to rouse him from the doze he had fallen into after dinner. He swung off his bed. The window was dark, the curtains back. The knock was repeated. He turned the handle and opened the door slowly. The figure outside was shadowed by the bulb that hung at the top of the stairs. He opened the door a little more, letting the light from the room fall on the bulk of the caller.

Malcolm.

Malcolm came towards him lifting his arm to shoulder the door wider.

Sam retreated into the centre of the room.

The door flew wide and bounced off the rubber doorstep screwed into the floorboards in a position that prevented a collision with the chest of drawers. The rebounding door was held for a moment by Malcolm who took another pace and swung the door behind him. It did not quite catch and he stepped backwards and pressed the weight of his body against the door until it clicked. He strode across the room towards the desk giving Sam a gentle push in the chest that caused him to lose his balance and stagger against the bed. He sat down on the bed. Malcolm took the chair from the desk and stood it in the middle of the room facing him. Malcolm took off his overcoat, dropped it in a heap on the floor and sat down.

He looked Sam in the eyes.

Sam let his head drop.

Let's agree on a few facts. One. You bullied Carol until she returned your briefcase. Two. You've been following her around the university. Three. You sent Dave what is in effect a threatening note.

Sam raised his head and straightened his back. His eyes were wide, locked on to some distant point.

I needed my briefcase.

There was no need to be so bloody rough. I saw the bruises.

She wanted to keep it.

Only till the weekend. A couple of days.

It is mine.

I know it's yours. But if she hadn't looked after it you wouldn't have it at all. You should have been grateful.

I wanted it.

You got it.

He waited.

OK?

Sam stared past him.

OK. So why are you following her all the time. You're watching her in the library. You get on the same bus. You follow her to see where she has lunch.

She's nice. I like her. He was still fixed on a far point. Ever since I saw her.

Well she doesn't like it.

I don't like him. He's always with her. In the way.

They're going out together.

No.

Listen. She likes him. He likes her.

I like her. Not him.

Following her. And him. It's not going to change anything. Might as well admit it and put up with it.

No.

We'll see about that. And that note. Bloody childish. Dave though it was some kind of joke. But it fits. You've got some

idiotic fixation with her. He said it's the bang on the head. Fucking nonsense. You had this bloody fixation before. All that business at the beginning of last term. That's why you were getting off the bus. Wasn't it? You'd pestered her before. Hadn't you. Look at me you bastard.

Sam turned his head slightly so that the distant stare focused on Malcolm.

You can stop all this stupidity. Keep away from her. No more daft notes to anyone. Or I'll find some other way of making you see sense. You get it?

No, you get it. Sam lunged forward. He grabbed Malcolm's throat and the chair tilted.

Malcolm snatched at Sam's forearms and gained a grip. He planted his feet firmly and thrust upwards. The chair fell away and he threw his greater weight upwards and forwards. Once he had his balance he yanked Sam's hands from his neck and forced him back to the bed. He let go. Sam tottered and sat down heavily on the bed. Malcolm picked up the chair and stood it upright. Sam started to stand. Malcolm slapped him across the side of his head. Sit down. The words hissed. Don't move. He reached down for his coat and took it in one hand. You've had the only warning you're going to get. He went out of the room. He held the handle so that when he closed the door there was no sound.

The psychology department was in a run of old terraced houses on a street that had become part of the university. Large Victorian dwellings with eight or nine steps up to the front. One of these had a wooden painted sign giving the name of the department on the brickwork. The door at the top of the steps was wide with a fanlight and two vertical frosted glass panels. It was set back into a porch. Decorative stonework framed the opening. The door opened easily and he entered the dark hall. A staircase with a large carved newel post rose up to his left.

Below the dado rail the wall was panelled. The wood matched that of the staircase. Along the long wall to his right above a dado rail was a long rectangle of softboard to which were pinned a carefully arranged array of notices.

He worked quickly along the stretch of information scanning up and down as he moved. He stopped at the list of first term examination results. The names were grouped in classes, surname first in capitals, one forename in lower case and any further initials. There was only one Carol Primley.

Quadrilaterals of afternoon sunlight angled across the wall of posters and notices that lined the glass-roofed corridor. There were notices giving sports fixtures, posters advertising events – recital, concert, ball – others for meetings both occasional and regular. Notices were handwritten and typed, many posters were printed on coloured paper, but some had been individually produced using coloured paint or ink.

Can I help?

The dumpy woman student had pale glasses and a single long plait. She wore a cardigan, a heavy skirt that reached her calves and flat brown shoes with laces.

Which room is Carol Primley in?

Just a minute. She went part way through the door at the near end of the notices. Carol Primley? She came back to him.

Top corridor, far end.

He set off towards the stairs.

Up the stairs at the end. Up as far as you can go.

He kept going.

He walked along the top corridor. Each door had one or two names on it. He had passed half a dozen or more on each side when he came to one with her name on it. At the far end of the corridor was a window. He went up to the window and looked down into the grounds of the hall. As he came back along the corridor he paused at her door, took an envelope from his

pocket and slid it halfway under the door. He curled his forefinger against his thumb and flicked the envelope out of sight.

Out in the sunlight he went round the building until he could see the high window at the end of her corridor, then examined the row of windows belonging to the rooms on her side of the corridor.

After dinner he joined Trevor and Stuart in Brian's room. He had agreed to make up bridge four and Trevor had said he would partner him.

A penny a hundred as usual.

The others nodded. They sat at a card table similar to the one Sam had had in his room at Mrs Harker's. Brian said he had found it in against the wall in the billiards room and had, as he said, appropriated it for his own use.

He and Trevor bid three hearts in the first hand and Trevor played it sufficiently well to make one over.

You should have bid four.

Sorry. The king and the deuce didn't look much.

When they were one-all Brian called for a break and produced a bottle of port which he had been given by an uncle who had called in during the week on his way to a business meeting. Brian had four fairly large wine glasses. Sorry they don't match. Mother won't use them so I brought them back after Christmas. He peeled the seal from the bottle and twisted out the stopper. He then filled each of the glasses about two-thirds full.

This is rather nice, said Stuart.

My mother's tippie was port and lemon. Used to give me a taste when Dad wasn't looking. Not had any for years.

They lost the rubber.

I'm going. Sam drained the small amount of port in his glass.

Not working on a Saturday?

He doesn't need to work. He just soaks it up.

Good night.

There was no light on at her window. He sidled through the shrubs and stood under the larger trees. He shifted nearer the drive and watched as an increasing number of women students returned as the half past eleven deadline approached. There were male and female couples, foursomes, all-female groups. Occasionally a lone man would leave the hall.

A distant clock struck the quarter hour. He returned to the spot where he could see her window. The window lit up. He worked his way to the path that encircled the building and went quietly round to the front. There was no one nearby. He let the second hand on his watch make a full circle before he strode down the drive. He reached the gateway without passing anyone. He took the direction towards town, lengthening his stride. A bus passed him heading in the same direction. It was almost empty. He slowed his pace to match that of the person in the duffel coat who was now no more than twenty yards ahead of him.

He followed the duffel coat when it turned down by the pub. It was darker in this narrower street. He walked a little more quickly. The street was about a hundred yards long with three lamps. He caught up his quarry as they were approaching the black patch between the first and second lamps. He rushed past, turned through a hundred and eighty degrees and stopped. Dave almost walked into him.

Hey. Watch it.

Sam didn't budge.

Dave made as if to pass. Sam sidestepped into his path.

Look. I'm a student. I've no money.

It's not money I'm after.

Dave peered down at him in the darkness.

Sam?

Sam lifted his heels off the ground.

Sam. Don't be silly.

You leave her alone.

Sam. She's not interested in you. Forget her.

No.

This is stupid. Go home.

You sent him.

Malcolm? It was his idea. Not mine.

I'm warning you.

It's late. I'd like to go home.

You wait. You'll see.

This is no longer funny.

I'm not trying to be funny.

No? What are you trying to do?

Give you a chance.

A chance?

Yes.

A chance to do what?

Sam said nothing.

You haven't a clue. Not a clue. He eased Sam away from the kerb, stepped into the gutter and walked away.

Sam shouted after him. You wait.

Dave passed beyond the next lamppost and disappeared into the darkness beyond.

17

Anyway what I came in to say is the Dougie McKeown has managed to borrow a film projector from one of the union societies and is going to show a blue film he's got that he's been telling us about for a the last month or so. No idea what it's like, probably a load of old rubbish. You game? It'll be a bit of a laugh if nothing else.

Not sure.

Come on. We'll get in a few beers.

Well.

Why not? Half past ten in Dougie's room. I think we'll go down to the off-licence some time after dinner. I'll knock when we're going.

Dougie's room was much bigger than Sam's. When he and Trevor arrived there were four other students making themselves comfortable on the bed and on the floor. Dougie had acquired a screen that hung on an ungainly tripod in front of the drawn curtain. The projector was standing on Dougie's desk which had been dragged into the middle of the room. Trevor sat down under on the floor against the wardrobe and Sam lowered himself into the adjacent space. He stood his two bottles of beer against the skirting board. Two more students arrived.

Where's Dougie?

Nipped to the bog.

Another student came in. Everyone here?

Get on with it.

He locked the door. The upper spindle of the sixteen millimetre projector had a small reel of film.

Before we start. This is Sam. Trevor pointed to each of the others in turn. Dougie. Chris. Mike. Paul. And Ian. You know Brian and Alan.

Dougie opened the side of the projector and flicked a switch. He adjusted the lens until there was a well-focused rectangle on the screen.

That as big as you can make it?

We could shift the desk a bit.

Two of them lifted the desk until it was only a few inches from the door.

Won't be able to get out in a hurry.

If there's a fire.

Or I need a slash.

Dougie re-focused the projector and began to thread the film through the machine.

Come on, Dougie, Stop fumbling.

It's the anticipation.

Dougie fed the film to the empty reel on the rear spindle. He flicked a switch and the projector whirred, the celluloid clacking jerked through the gate. Someone switched off the room light.

A handwritten title appeared: Performing Bare. The scene was an ordinary room in an ordinary house. The film was black and white. The lighting was dim and the corners of the room were shadowed. From behind a sofa appeared a person on hands and knees dressed as an animal.

Funny looking bear, that.

From stage right came a man in a jacket and white trousers, black boots and a top hat. He held a whip. The man cracked the whip silently.

Sound. Dougie. Sound.

Dougie fiddled with the projector and the speaker on the projector crackled.

The whip was cracked again.

That's better.

The bear exited stage left.

Here.

Sam took the bottle-opener from Trevor and prised the crown cap of one of his bottles.

Sam.

Sam. Brian beckoned.

Sam reached across with the bottle-opener.

The bear was dancing on its hind legs as the ringmaster cracked the whip. There was distorted music. The Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy. As the bear twirled one arm of the costume was thrown free revealing a bare arm. The long, painted fingernails were dark, almost black, and filed to a rounded point. The other arm was thrown away. The bear put her hands on the carpet and kicked backwards at the ringmaster. He no longer had his whip. He grabbed the bear and the foot and leg of the costume came away like a stocking. The ringmaster staggered back and threw the stocking over his shoulder. The foot was wearing a shiny black shoe with a high heel. The bare leg

dropped and took her weight as the other leg went up and the ringmaster revealed the other leg. The bear resumed dancing on its hind legs, wagging her furry bottom complete with a short furry tail at the camera. The ringmaster had found his whip again. He cracked the whip and she turned to the camera. The bodice of the costume had become unfastened. Her hands held the edges together. He cracked the whip again and the bodice opened and shut again in an instant. Underneath the costume she was naked.

Sam took a swig from his beer.

Gerremoff.

Laughter.

The bear was back on all fours. The costume hung open. The bear nuzzled its head against the ringmaster's knees. She raised her head until her muzzle was pressing into his groin. One hand reached up and undid the buttons of his jacket. Her head moved up to his navel. As she stretched and lifted his jacket over his shoulder he took hold of one ear of the bear's head and tugged it free. Her blonde hair fell past her shoulders. She rose on to her hind legs and eased the other half of his jacket over the other shoulder. It fell to the carpet. The ringmaster's chest was very hairy. She twirled away and as she spun she threw away the last piece of her costume and then crossed her arms across her breasts. Her crotch was hidden behind dark triangle of silky fabric. Her mouth was dark like her nails.

A sudden cut. The music stopped. The right hand half of the screen showed the left hip pocket of the ring master's trousers. The the woman could be seen approaching her arms still across her breasts. Her hips swung as he placed one shoe exactly in front of the other. As she neared she went down on all fours and her breasts dropped.

Nice tits

Bloody nice tits.

She came closer. Her eyes were pale. She winked slowly as her face filled the other half of the screen. Nothing happened for a

few seconds then the trousers slid down revealing a fleshy buttock.

A different camera angle. The man, back to the camera and naked except for his top hat, had taken up his whip again. The woman was down on all fours scampering at each crack of the whip. The man commanded her to beg and cracked the whip. She knelt and held her arms like the forepaws of a dog, her tongue extended. The man went closer and out of what could be seen of her head moved as though she was licking.

Someone made an indistinct sound of appreciation.

Any time dear, any time.

The others laughed.

The whip cracked and she scampered, her breasts swaying underneath her. Another crack and another command. Play dead. She rolled over with all four limbs in the air. Another crack and she was on all fours. A cut to the man – without whip and top hat – on his knees behind her. He reached forward and held each breast up with one hand. He began a rhythmic motion.

D'you think he's really doing it?

What?

You know.

Course he is. Why wouldn't he?

Like a couple of stray dogs.

Dog and a bitch.

Bitch. Yeah bitch.

Probably his wife.

How prosaic.

Prosaic? What is he on about?.

The action continued. Eventually she began to moan and wail and the man took her by the shoulders and became more forceful until with choreographed simultaneity their faces exhibited the ecstasy of orgasm and a handwritten The End appeared and within seconds the tail of the film was flapping round the spool.

That it?

Dougie switched on the light. Yep. That's it. I can run it through again.

Sam finished his first bottle of beer and opened the second.

Have you seen what's painted on the gable end just across the road from the university.

What?

All women are bitches.

Bit harsh.

But you know what's somebody's added.

No.

Well it's a dog's life.

They all laughed.

Dougie released the take-up spool and swapped it with the empty spool. He fed the film into the empty spool and rewound the film. After swapping the reels again and threading the projector he switched out the light and started the film again.

Can you speed it up? To the juicy bits?

Her juicy bits.

This time the laughter was louder and longer.

You look really fed up.

He lowered his sandwich. I was thinking.

Must have been an awful thought. Move up.

There was someone at the other end of the bench. He slid a little towards the middle and she squeezed into the gap he'd left.

You seem a bit down. She pushed a swerve of hair from her cheek.

I am. I suppose.

You've been through a lot. She slid her sandwich out of the off-white paper bag. Do you have to go back? She took a bite out of her roll.

Back?

She struggled to speak. Hospital. She chewed hurriedly. Check up. Make sure things are all right.

Yeah. Been once. What can they say. Everything looks all right from the outside. Can't tell what's going on up here. He tapped the side of his head with a forefinger.

You seem OK to me.

And me. But then.

What?

I'm not sure. He finished his sandwich.

Not sure? Not sure about what?

He didn't speak for almost half a minute.

Anne continued to eat. I'm sorry I got you thrown out. When you were drunk. If I hadn't you wouldn't have. You wouldn't have had your accident.

Why do we do things? What is it in our heads that leads to actions. Is it really me making the decisions or am I just an observer watching the consequences of an electro-chemical process.

That is depressing. You really do need cheering up. Come on I'll buy you a coffee and after that you can come with me to town and help me spend the money Dad sent me for my birthday.

No.

Why not?

I don't know.

Forget the damned chemicals. Make up your own mind. You come to lectures. You sit there, apparently taking it all in – you are taking it all in, aren't you?

He nodded.

You disappear. Library? Back to hall? How many times have you sat with any of us for a coffee since. What? Three times? Come on. What do you do with your time?

I don't know.

You don't know?

I remember doing things.

Are you all right?

He nodded.

You looked as though you'd seen a ghost.

I'm not always sure. That I did them.

What?

Things.

Are you sure you're OK? She threw her paper bag in the bin.

What do you mean?

Sorry. Sorry. Just trying to understand. She hoisted her bag over her left shoulder and took hold of his wrist and hauled him to his feet as she rose. Forget maths. Forget what's happened. Stop asking why. Come on.

She held on to his wrist until she had dragged him into the little coffee bar across the road from the university. She rummaged in her bag for her purse and then handed the bag to him. She pointed to a vacant alcove. Sit over there.

Yes. Mother.

She laughed. That's better.

I'm just going in here to pay in Dad's cheque and get some cash. Won't be a tick.

Sam sauntered up the street. The first shop sold lampshades and decorative light fittings, pottery figures and vases, plates to hang on the wall, and prints of country scenes and landscapes mounted in ornate frames. He moved on to the next shop. The window display was shallow, only a couple of feet to vertical panels of pegboard on which were hung tools for cutting. Scissors and shears, knives for the kitchen, for fishing, with short sharp blades for handicrafts. Everything was neatly arranged by type and in order of size. The larger items, garden shears and bolt cutters, were laid out on horizontal surface between the pegboard and the window. Prices were given on small handwritten labels pasted alongside. A printed sign offered to sharpen, knives, scissors, lawnmowers.

I wondered where you'd gone. Anne folded several pound notes into her purse and then pushed it into the bottom of her bag.

What you going to buy?

Don't know. Clothes. Shoes. I'll see what I see. Something nice. Something I'll enjoy wearing.

He leaned against the bus stop. Each time a bus approached he studied the destination blind and then stepped back allowing others who wanted the bus to get on, or those alighting to do so unimpeded, or, when he was the only one standing at stop, to let the bus drive past.

Across the road was the entrance to the hall.

At intervals, when there was no one else waiting, he walked quickly up the road for about twenty yards, swinging his arms, and back down the road for a similar distance in the opposite direction. Then back to the bus stop.

Bit chilly standing here.

He nodded at the man waiting with him.

It was quite warm this morning. For the beginning of March. But there's a chill in the air. A lazy wind.

Sam looked at him. A breeze.

Aye a breeze. A lazy breeze. Can't be bothered to go round you. Cuts straight through you.

Sam sniffed, the vestige of a laugh.

This might be mine. The man thrust his chin out and shaded his eyes against a patch of brightness as he tried to read the front of the approaching bus. Thirty-three. The man extended an arm and Sam stepped out of the way.

As the bus pulled away, Sam saw Dave walk between the two gate posts. He watched him out of sight. He crossed the road and went up the drive. He did not hurry. The sun came out as he approached the hall. The light was strong enough to throw shadows. Dave went up the steps and inside. The shadows faded as the clouds closed the opening in the sky. At the top of the steps the door was pulled back before he touched it. A woman student was leaving. He held the door back and stood to one side, stretching. She ducked under his straightened arm.

Thank you.

He allowed the door to close and walked along the corridor. He skirted round a couple reading one of the notices. He climbed the four flights of stairs one unhurried step at a time. At the top of the final flight he stopped and keeping close to the wall he peered round the corner and looked along the corridor. The corridor was empty.

From a pocket inside his jacket he brought out a kitchen knife. The blade was pointed, about five inches long, the handle polished wood. Holding the the knife in his right hand with the blade pointing upwards, he concealed it under the flap of his jacket. With his left hand he pulled the jacket over the knife. He strode up the middle of the grey strip of carpet that ran along the centre of the corridor. He came to a standstill outside her room. He released his jacket and reached forward and gently turned the knob. Holding the knob against the return spring he brought his shoulder up against the door and leaned against it. The door remained closed. He leaned more heavily.

Excuse me.

He took his weight off the door and turned his head towards the voice, keeping the knife hidden. There was a tall, thin student halfway between him and the staircase. She had straight, short, light brown hair.

What are you doing?

Trying to get in, but it's locked, I think.

Shouldn't you knock?

I don't think she's in. He moved away and as he slackened his grip the knob slipped and the tongue of the catch clicked dully.

Knock anyway. She came a slow yard towards him. Then you'll find out.

He had his left hand raised to rap the wood with his knuckles when a lock scraped and the knob turned sharply. The door swung back.

Dave wasn't wearing a jacket. His shirt neck was open. The striped shirt was rumpled. You.

Sam reversed across the corridor. A pace and a half. He grasped the left side of his jacket and held it tight across the knife. He could see her buttoning her blouse. She was wearing her red skirt. I warned you.

Warned me? Look, Sam. His tone softened. It's not going to make any difference how many times you warn me. Or threaten me with vague. He waved a hand in the air.

I know what you're doing.

I'm sure you do, but its no business of yours.

You're going to.

What, Sam?

Sam retreated another short step.

What am I going to do?

He stood in the middle of the corridor. You're going to. His mouth closed. His eyes moved from Dave to the student who had challenged him. She was standing with her hands gripping each other in front of her chest. He turned back to Dave. Your going to make her behave like an animal, a dog, a bitch. I've seen it. I know.

What the hell are you on about?

I know. You can't fool me. Disgusting.

Sam. Dave sighed and let his arms fall loosely by his sides. Sam. His hands opened, palms visible. I don't know what you're talking about and I'm not sure you do. After all that's happened. He spoke to the student. He had an accident. Car hit him. Head injuries.

I'm fine. It's you.

Dave took a small step towards him. Carol stood behind him.

Sam went up on to his toes to speak to her, peering over Dave's shoulder. Don't let him. Don't let him make you.

Sam. Calm down. Dave put his right hand on Sam's left shoulder. Sam shrugged off the hand with a wild movement of his arm that was partially reciprocated by his right arm. The hand holding the knife came out of his jacket.

Dave! Her hands fluttered. Her mouth closed and opened.

Dave jerked backwards as if avoiding the sweep of the blade that had not come.

The woman student who was only a few feet away backed discreetly down the corridor. I'll get the warden.

Dave twisted his neck to speak over his shoulder. Get back. His voice was thin and penetrating, almost a hiss.

Carol walked slowly backwards.

Dave inched into the room, watching Sam, watching the knife. Put the knife away. Another small movement. Put the knife away. Go home. We'll say nothing. Think about what you're doing. You wouldn't want to do anything that you might wish you hadn't. He was over the threshold.

I know what you're going to do in there.

A quick step back gave Dave space enough to shut the door. He reached for the edge of the door, still watching Sam.

Sam took a single stride. The knife in his fist pointed upwards. He dropped his arm and then brought it up sharply so that the blade arced towards the gap between the closing door and its frame. He threw his weight over his front foot, reaching for the disappearing figure. His body followed the knife and he lost his balance. He began to fall, twisting. His arms bent to lessen the impact. The handle of the knife, still firmly gripped, hit the polished boards first. It skidded on the glossy floor and caught in the gap between adjacent boards. His left arm doubled under him and his head flinched away from upright blade. The point of the blade stabbed his jawbone. He kept falling and knife sliced down the line of his jaw. He opened his mouth. The knife slipped from the bone. The momentum of his fall forced him forwards and the keen length of the blade slit open the flesh on the right side of his neck parting muscles and tendons and severing the carotid artery immediately below where it divided into the internal and external branches.

18

The crematorium was set in the middle of a large flat cemetery. There were low hills in the distance. Colourless under a colourless sky. Matthew parked the Mercedes in the exposed car park next to the low church-like building. It was built of brick, the bricks still pale and clean. The car was his father's. He had been home the previous weekend and brought it back so that the four of them could come to the funeral. It had taken an hour and half to get to Sam's home town and half that time again to find the crematorium, despite well-meaning directions from a number of pedestrians they had stopped to

ask. Even so they were early. Matthew opened the boot and took out a large bouquet of flowers.

The cremation was scheduled for eleven thirty and it was a few minutes after eleven. The men stood in their suits. Phil had his hands in his pockets. The two women put on their coats in turn each holding the other's hat as they did so.

Do you think there's a ladies anywhere?

Must be. I'll have a wander around. Phil set off towards the front of the building. The other three followed at an idle pace. Phil came back as they were taking the short paved path across the lawn from the car park to the entrance.

Over there. He pointed. Gents is that side.

The two girls click-clacked across the asphalted area in front of the building. They disappeared round a corner. Matthew and Phil went into the covered areas that flanked the plain wooden entrance doors. There were benches against the walls. Matthew put the flowers down on a bench. There was a faint sound of music.

That must be the eleven o'clock.

They watched another car turn into the car park. No one got out.

The girls returned wearing their hats.

Matthew gazed at the distant hills.

I'm going to sit down, said Anne.

Good idea. Fliss followed her and she sat on the bench next to the one that was nearest the entrance. Matthew picked up the flowers and put them next to Fliss.

Phil and Matthew stood in front of them, their backs to the open air.

Never been to a cremation.

I've never been to a funeral of any kind.

Went to my grandfather's funeral three or four years ago. That was in church. I didn't go to the actual burial.

Why not?

Don't know. I don't think I was given the option. Matthew studied one shoe then wiped its toe on the back of his trouser leg. Hear the words often enough in films. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes in sure and certain whatever.

So you've never been to a cremation either.

We're all first-timers.

Can you see the flames?

Fliss. Of course you can't. It's not a Viking funeral. The coffin quietly disappears. Behind a screen or curtains. Or something. Dad went to a colleague's last summer. I asked him.

They turned at the noise of a car arriving and stopping. A taxi. It idled in front of them and they watched Geoff pull himself out.

It's Geoff, said Phil. In the same digs Sam was. Last term.

They watched as Carol slid along the seat. She was nursing some flowers. Geoff took the flowers and then reached out to her. She took his hand and rose to her feet, smoothing her black dress. Dave could be seen inside offering money to the driver.

That must be Carol.

You mean the girl who.

Yes. Her. And that's Dave. I don't know his surname. I met him briefly at the beginning of the year, but I've not spoken to him since. He was there when. With Carol.

Of course.

Dave pushed himself across the back seat and got out on the same side. He swung the door shut and the taxi moved off.

I've seen them both around the university.

Are they?

A pair. Think so. Phil went over to them. I'm Phil, Phil Topping. Did maths with Sam.

Phil, said Geoff, this is Carol.

She narrowed her shoulders and tightened her lips. It wasn't a smile.

And Dave. Dave and I were in digs with Sam. First term.

I'll introduce you to the others. They followed Phil, who, when they were standing in a circle, introduced everyone to everyone.

Do we go in first or wait till they've brought?

The coffin?

Don't know.

Here's the hearse. They all turned to watch. The girls stood up.

The hearse swished into the empty area and drew to a gentle stop. Behind it hung a large black car. A trolley was unloaded and unfolded. The coffin was eased out of the hearse and settled on the trolley. A single spray of lilies was placed on the coffin. A woman on her own was assisted out of the car. Standing next to the car she looked around, but did not move. She wore a short brown coat and a round brimless beige hat with a contrasting bow at the side.

A man about the same age as Sam appeared from behind the car. He was a little overweight and his face was red. His coat hung open. He was joined a few seconds later by a tall thin man, older. They spoke to each other. Two women were standing a few yards away, one middle-aged the other younger. The younger woman wore a dark suit and was talking. They were joined by a man much older than both of them. His suit jacket was unbuttoned.

In the car park a door slammed.

Two of the undertaker's men held back the entrance doors. Another asked everyone to go in. The creases of their black trousers had not been sharp for some time and their shoes had lost their shine.

Inside there were pews like a church. Phil led them to the third row from the front. As they sat down some other people sat in the row behind them. No one turned round.

The trolley was wheeled to the open doorway and Sam's mother guided from where she was standing to her place behind the coffin. At eleven-thirty the undertaker began his slow walk down the aisle, followed by the coffin. Sam's mother followed the man pushing the trolley. The other two men allowed the doors to close silently and then stood one at each side.

Mrs Unwin sat alone in the front pew.

After the ceremony they were ushered out pew by pew through the side exit to another covered area. The lilies lay on a slatted table. Fliss put the flowers they had brought along side them. Carol did the same. They clustered on the edge of the area. A man came over and spoke to Anne.

She introduced him to the group. Professor Lawler. Head of mathematics. They each shook hands with him.

The tall man, the overweight younger one, and another about the same age stood together. Sam's mother went over to them and they separated so that she could speak to them. She shook hands with each of them. While she was with them the younger of the two women came and stood next to her. They exchanged a few words and then the young woman left with the older one and the man. After talking for a minute or so longer Sam's mother walked across to the larger group.

Thank you for coming. Are you all from the university?

They nodded.

Professor Lawler spoke. John Lawler, department of mathematics. Felicity, Philip and Anne were all in the same mathematics class as Dennis. Geoffrey and David lived in the same house for a while and Carol was a friend. She saw what happened when Dennis was knocked down.

Thank you for coming. I was never sure whether he had friends. He didn't tell me everything. And after.

Matthew took a clean folded white handkerchief from a side pocket in his jacket and gave it to her.

Thank you. She dabbed at her cheeks and then carefully wiped each eye. After he came out of hospital – her voice was torn between squeaking and silence – he was different. She raised her eyes, drew breath, and spoke again. I'm sorry. Her eyes filled. Excuse me. She moved away from the circle.

Matthew went with her.

I think I'll go. I'll only get more upset. I'll be better at home.

One of the undertaker's men came alongside. Is there anything, Mrs Unwin?

Take me home please. Take me home. She tried to return the handkerchief to Matthew.

Matthew shook his head. It doesn't matter. You take it.

She walked across to the black car resting some of her weight on the black arm of the undertaker's man and wobbling a little on the narrow heels of her shoes.

Anne went over to the table with the flowers, located the bunch they had brought and hurried over to Mrs Unwin with it. You take these.

She mouthed a thank you and took them.

Once she was inside the car, the man who had accompanied her got in the front and the driver put it into gear. It glided away through the headstones towards the gateway.

Anne waved and then went back to the others. Professor Lawler had gone.

What now? asked Geoff.

I'm for a drink, said Dave. There's a pub just down the road.

Walking distance?

Fair way.

Can't we all get in the car?

Anne sat in the middle of the back seat with Dave on one side and Phil on the other. Fliss sat on Phil's knee. Carol sat on Dave's knee. Geoff took the front passenger seat.

Right at the gate, said Dave.

Matthew parked in the space to the left of the mock Tudor building. The upper storey appeared to be half-timbered, the lower one straightforward brick. Inside and to the right was the bar and to the left the lounge. Dave led them into the lounge where they added a couple of chairs to a large round table in the bay window. The window seat accommodated the girls and the men sat on the wooden armchairs. There was no one else in the room.

Shall we have a kitty? Dave took his wallet from his inside pocket.

How much?

Ten bob. That should do. Dave dropped a ten-shilling note in the middle of the table. The others added their contributions to the pot. Dave looked at the girls. What would you like?

Anne asked for a lager and lime. Carol wanted vodka and orange. Fliss screwed her face up for a few seconds and then decided on a glass of cider. Matthew said he would have a cider as well.

Pints? asked Dave. Bitter? He picked up a pound note and went across to the bar in the corner. He waited for someone to come through from the bar. After a while he leaned forward to look through the opening. The barmaid was standing chatting to a customer that he could not quite see.

There's a bell.

Where?

There. Geoff pointed to the right hand end of the bar.

Thanks. Dave brought his palm down on the top of the brass bell pressing the plunger. The bell sang.

The barmaid came through. Sorry dear. Didn't realise you were here.

His mum. She seemed so lost.

Yes, she did, said Carol. Is she widowed?

Well. Anne glanced at Fliss.

You might as well tell her. Won't hurt anyone.

You tell her.

Fliss put down her glass. We met her once at the hospital. She said something about coming on her own and there being no one else. So we asked about Sam's father. Was he dead. She explained that she met him during the war, but he had gone back after leave and she had never seen him again.

And she was pregnant?

Yep. Phil lifted his glass to his mouth and drank.

Fliss continued. She left the village and when people asked she just said that his Dad went to war and never came back.

Which was true.

No brothers or sisters?

Sam?

No, her.

Don't know. You'd have thought they might have been here today if she had.

She must have friends.

Must she? Geoff shrugged. She works. Sam said she always worked. Doesn't leave much time for friends. Working and bringing up a kid.

There was that man with the two women.

Colleagues?

Could be.

Well now there's just her.

It have been like that in any case. Sam would never have gone back.

What makes you say that Geoff?

Geoff twisted in his seat and spoke directly to Anne. He never wrote home. He went home one weekend and that was to see that girl that started it all. He never talked much about home. He'd answer direct questions but you never got much out of him.

What girl? asked Phil. He never mentioned a girl to us.

You remember. Geoff told us. In caf. Before we knew what had happened.

The one that.

Yes.

It did seem an odd business.

Yeah, very odd. Dave drained his glass. Same again all round?

Nobody disagreed.

Why?

Well he didn't seem to be the girlfriend type.

I know what you mean.

A woman would have to take him on. You couldn't imagine him taking the initiative. At least, not the right kind of initiative. He had this - well, obsession is too strong a word. Fixation. Maybe that's more accurate. With Carol.

With me?

Yes. Didn't you realise?

Afterwards. Yes. But you mean before his accident? Don't you?

Right from the time he met you in freshers' week.

She shook her head. I suppose I should have. I just thought he was trying to be friendly. I did think there might have been more to it. But I tried not to do things that might encourage him. Thought he would get the message.

This other girl? Phil leaned back as Dave put down a round metal tray of drinks and dealt them out. The one he went to see. The one that.

Dave put the empty glasses on the tray. She wrote to him. He carried the tray back to the bar.

The first letter was longish. He described it as romantic and sloppy. Whether it was or not I can't say. Mrs Harker mentioned that it stank of perfume. She had written swalk on the flap.

What?

S. W. A. L. K. Sealed with a loving kiss.

God almighty.

Carol frowned at Phil.

He didn't write back. As far as I know.

Cheers. Dave raised his glass. The next letter was short. But not sweet. Said she was pregnant and the baby was his.

Anne put down her glass. Do you think it was?

He denied it. Said they'd never done anything. Well he was actually a bit vague. He tried to calculate when she might have got pregnant assuming that she could no longer hide it. He reckoned it was before he had met her.

He didn't want to do anything, did he, Dave.

I don't think he had a clue about what he could do or couldn't do. He wanted it not to have happened. Not to be. I thought he should write to her making it clear that he was not going to accept the baby as his. He didn't want to. He didn't want to do anything. Though I don't know what good it would have done. I

felt he should do something. Maybe it would have been better if he'd done nothing.

What did he do?

He went home. For the weekend and went round to her house to see her. He wasn't impressed. Didn't actually call her a slut. Dave stood up. He said something like: she wanted me to be a father to her bastard. He paused. I'm going to the bog.

He was all right till the note came from his mother with a clipping from the local rag. She – what was her name? – Eileen. Eileen had been found dead at the bottom of a cliff at the local seaside resort. Sam concluded she'd jumped. He blamed himself. Thought he ought to have done something. That's when he started drinking. You know the rest.

How awful. Carol screwed her face in simulated pain. You didn't tell me she committed suicide.

Didn't I?

Why? Why would she do a thing like that?

Who knows?

While the balance of her mind was disturbed.

Is it illegal?

Suicide?

Don't know?

Doesn't matter if you do it properly.

Matthew took a sip from his second cider and lowered his glass to the table. There'd have to be an inquest. What was the verdict?

No idea.

I'd have thought the police might have wanted to talk to him. She being pregnant and him the latest boyfriend.

Didn't seem to.

Strange. You'd think.

Maybe.

Hang on. The police did come.

Dave dropped into his chair.

When did the police come?

You remember. Mrs Harker mentioned it.

He'd been in hospital a day or two. Or thereabouts. We thought it was about the accident. Seemed funny that they didn't know where he was. I suppose it could have been about her. Eileen.

19

Malcolm knocked then put his head into the room. Dave was lying full length on his bed. His suit jacket was folded over his chair and the long black tie hung over the jacket. You're back.

No.

Where's Geoff?

He got off the bus at the university.

How did it go?

All right. Bit cold.

Been warm here.

Not the weather. The atmosphere. The ambience.

Ambience. He emphasised the pronunciation.

It was like a factory operation and we were like visitors from the USSR following a protocol that required us to watch and appreciate.

Never been to a cremation. Never seen Soviets going round a factory either. Malcolm sat down on what had once been Sam's chair.

My first. They have one door for going in and another door for going out so that one lot don't get mixed up with the previous one. They were closing the exit doors as we were let into the entrance.

Production line.

De-struction line.

Many there?

Us. Three from maths. And the head of department.

Mm.

And Mrs Unwin.

No relatives. No friends.

There were a couple of lads and another fellow. And a old chap with two women. Don't know who any of them were. It wasn't exactly a social occasion. There was a vicar who led the service. He shook hands with each of us as we went out, murmuring in the appropriate tone of voice. We sang The Lord's my Shepherd. Went through some prayers. A bible reading. He talked about Sam. He called him Dennis. There wasn't too much to say. Promising life cut short and that kind of thing. Can't say I really listened. Then the committal to some appropriate music coming from somewhere. Tape recorder I guess. And the coffin moved on its rollers and curtains were automatically drawn round.

Very mechanical.

Yes. Mechanical.

Anyway. What I came to ask is. When's Andy back from wherever he's gone?

Sunday. Why?

I just thought. Only a thought. That if you were staying over at Carol's while he's away. He tightened his mouth and pulled his lips inwards.

You and Gwyneth could have this room to yourselves.

Her roommate is always there. Well nearly always.

Not sure.

It was only a thought. You will let me know.

No mess. Please.

We'll use Sam's bed. Andy's bed.

She'll know it's been used.

Gwyneth'll make it look as good as new. She's a nurse, remember. Hospital corners and all that.

Geoff!

He swung round.

She was a couple of yards behind him. Her face was pink. She stopped and spread her hand on her chest and inhaled fiercely. She let the air out of her lungs. I've been looking. Out for you. For days.

Sorry.

Not your fault. She breathed gently for a full second. I'd expected to bump into you sooner. But I didn't. Saw you as I came out by the Great Hall. Thought I'd catch you before you got inside the union.

Well now you've found me?

Do you know Sam's home address? His mother's?

I'm sure it's in my address book. I remember asking him. In those early days when we were all polite.

Could you let me have it.

Sure.

Leave it in the union pigeon-holes. Anne Darlington.

OK.

I'll check in a day or two.

I'm going for a coffee. Would you like to join me?

The coffee lounge was quiet and Anne went over to a table underneath a window. Geoff brought two cups of coffee with

milk. There were wrapped sugar lumps in the saucers with the spoons.

Why do you want Sam's address? If it's not an impertinent question.

I thought I'd write to his mum. She seemed so. So on her own. I thought she might appreciate a note.

She might. He dropped a sugar lump into his cup. Do you want this?

She shook her head. Don't take sugar. You think I shouldn't?

Don't know, really. I wouldn't know what to write.

I'll think of something. I shan't write much. She hasn't had much of a life has she. Bringing up Sam on her own and then this.

She's not that old.

What do you mean?

You sounded as though she was on her last legs. She can only be early forties.

Fliss said that she was twenty-five when she had Sam. And Sam was eighteen?

Think so. Don't know when his birthday is. He never mentioned one.

So she can only be forty-three or four. She seemed older. The grey hair.

And a bit overweight. He picked up his cup.

Not much to look forward to. No son. No prospect of grandchildren. Just work. Anne gave a wave to someone she knew.

Geoff turned to look for moment.

Then a lonely old age

She might start to make friends. Now that Sam has gone. He put down his cup.

Why?

I think her life was all Sam and work. I think he was her assignment. I think she did everything for him. And. And

because he was – well – not exactly outgoing. I think he was shielded.

An awful lot of speculation there.

I was trying to get a picture. She stared blankly.

Geoff drank some more of his coffee. Anne's face was smooth and calm. He smiled faintly.

I think he knew he could be free of her. She continued to fix on a point somewhere between them. Now he was away from home. Suddenly she was focused on her coffee. But he didn't know. He didn't know.

That was Sam.

He didn't know how to exploit his freedom.

Yeah. His coffee finished he relaxed.

Now she's got the free time. His mum. Freedom.

I suppose she has.

And she won't know how to use it. Anne shook her head and the lock of hair drifted across her face.

She must have started to get used to it. She had a whole term without him.

But he was going to come back. It was only temporary. A phase.

So she thought.

Yes. So she thought.

I hate this room.

Why?

Why do you think?

You've got to put it out of your mind. It's over. In the past. Fixed.

Every time I go out or come in I notice where they scrubbed the carpet.

I thought they were going to replace it.

Then it'll be the stretch of new carpet.

You'll get used to it.

Will I? I'm convinced there's dried blood between the boards.

Don't be silly.

You have a look. Go on you look.

You can't avoid everywhere where something awful's happened. I bet there's hardly a square yard on earth where someone hasn't died. In this room. In this bed.

Now you're really helping.

He laughed.

I don't know how you can laugh. I never walk past the spot. The spot where. And if I'm on the bus I close my eyes till I'm sure we've passed it. The pictures are still vivid.

I'm sorry.

He got off the bed where he had been sitting, and took her hands in his. He made her stand. She closed her eyes as she rose. He released her hands and put his arms round her shoulders. She rested the side of her head on his chest.

I can still seem him lying in the road. Crumpled. Bleeding. Not moving. Still. And here. Face down with dark blood seeping into the carpet and moving across the floor, like red oil.

There wasn't that much.

I can see it. She moved her head to look at his face. I'll always be able to see it.

They stood in silence. He raised his eyes and studied the room. She closed her eyes.

You know, he said. Blood's transparent until it meets oxygen. That's when it turns red.

You are callous.

Objective. I'm sorry about Sam. There might have been things I should have done differently. But I can't go back. Life goes on. Our life goes on.

I know. She put her arms around his waist and pulled him closer. But it seems harsh. Unfeeling.

After a minute or so she relaxed, and slipped out of his arms and sat on the bed.

He sat beside her. I was thinking about the verdict. I thought it might have been Accidental Death. Especially as the girl.

Andrea.

Especially as Andrea had seen it all and could verify that no one else had been involved. An Open Verdict feels like there is someone to blame but no one is sure who.

It did look a bit like suicide.

Brutus falling on his sword. It was Brutus wasn't it?

Don't know Julius Caesar very well. We did the Merchant of Venice. She sighed. It was an accident. Accidental. He was trying to stab you.

But he didn't.

Not in his right mind.

Who knows what a right mind is.

Let's go out.

If you want to. I was thinking.

I know what you were thinking but I'm not in the mood. This room has really got me down today. I should have stayed longer in the library. But he was always in the library. He must have been watching. It didn't bother me then, but it bothers me now. I wonder whether he is still watching.

Ghost?

No. Just watching.

He picked up his duffel coat and put it on. She took her grey coat from the back of the door and swung it across her shoulders easing her arms into the sleeves. I feel it was my fault.

Your fault?

Why was he obsessed with me? Was it obsession?

Kind of.

She locked her room. What did I do to make him like that? Did I do anything?

No. I'm sure you didn't. Not intentionally anyway.

I'm not sure. Does lack of intention excuse me?

Yes. Of course.

If I'd been less friendly or more friendly but made it clear that.

You weren't interested.

Perhaps. She stopped at the top of the stairs.

Perhaps not. Anyway, as I said, he was deranged.

At the end. But not before.

He followed her down the staircase, leaving space for another student coming up. I think he was always a bit odd.

She looked over her shoulder. No more than many.

His oddness was unsettling. Rather than interesting.

You never said.

We didn't discuss it. Geoff and Malcolm and me.

They walked passed the noticeboards.

I think that being brought up entirely by his mother had given him a distorted understanding of women.

Carol came to halt. You've been reading Freud.

He passed her to get to the door first. No. He held open the front door and then followed her out into the dark. The sky was sprinkled with a few faint stars. There was no moon. It stands to reason. It's not natural for a boy – particularly a boy – to be influenced entirely by a woman. Bound to grow up different.

You're not making much sense. She hugged his left arm. Come on let's step it out. Have a couple of drinks at the New Inn and we can get back while you're still allowed in. And then.

And then?

We'll see.

And what might we see?

She did not not answer.

He did not ask her again.

20

Anne found the note from Geoff under the letter D in the array of pigeon-holes on the lower corridor of the union building. She returned to the library where she had left her files and books. When she resumed her seat she pushed them to the back of the desk and took a notepad from her bag. She opened it at a clean page and after staring up at the balcony for almost a minute began to write.

Dear Mrs Unwin,

It seems strange that Sam, your Dennis, is no longer in any of our lectures. I keep expecting him to arrive late which he often did. He used to write very quickly and always managed to get everything down off the blackboard before the end of the lecture. When he came back after being in hospital he didn't bother to write anything down. He said he could remember it all. Looking back I think that was just another sign that all was not well in his mind. Even so I expect you miss him even though you must be used to him not being at home with you. It must be hard not to imagine that he is here with us and that one day he will come walking through your door. I often think of you. You seemed to be so on your own at the funeral. I hope you do not mind me writing like this but I thought it might help if you knew that we hadn't forgotten all about you.

With best wishes

She put down her pen and stretched back in her chair thrusting her arms above her head until they were straight. She clasped her hands as she looked up at the chandeliers that hung down the centre of the ceiling. She brought her hands down to her face and in a smooth symmetrical movement forced her hair away from her face until she was holding it bunched between her hands at the back of her head. It was almost long enough for a pony tail. She held the pose for a while, her eyes closed.

When she opened her eyes Fliss was standing next to her.

Didn't want to startle you.

I was thinking.
Sam?
And his mother.
I couldn't help but notice.
The letter? It is only a first go. I want to write, but I am not sure what to write or even if I should write.
I'm taking an early lunch.
Where's Phil?
He's gone home. Went for a train at twelve.
I'd forgotten he said he was going early. His mother's birthday or something.
Yes. Wanted to surprise her. I'm a bit lost without him.
Come on then let's eat.
Do you want another coffee?
Go on. Why not. There's nothing that I have to do this afternoon.
Fliss came back with two coffees.
Did you read the letter?
To Sam's mum?
Anne nodded.
I glanced at it. Can't say I read it.
Would you mind reading it?
Fliss shrugged.
Please.
OK.
Anne took the notepad out of her bag and folded it back at the page where she had written the letter. She turned it towards Fliss who took it from her.
Anne watched her face as she read.
Seems fine to me.
Are you sure?
I can't see anything wrong with it. If you're not happy with it, don't send it.
I want to send something. If I write a different letter I'll probably still feel uneasy about it.

Why this, this compulsion to write?

I think. I think it's because – if I'm honest – I feel that I am – in part at least – responsible. For what happened to Sam. If I'd.

If you'd what?

Been more hospitable that day.

He was drunk. Falling down drunk. You said so.

I know. I know. Her eyebrows rose, her eyes widened. But I could have.

Anne. Her tone was that of one who knew better addressing another who should know better.

You don't have to say it. I did have options. I did make a choice.

What choice did you have? Really. What choice?

I could have let him sleep it off.

He was aggressive. You said so. You were frightened.

I was a bit. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know what he was going to do. I simply wanted him to go away.

And what happened afterwards is not your fault.

Yes, but.

Fliss sighed. I'm sorry. You can't help the way you feel and if it will make you feel better than send the letter. She probably won't reply so you'll never know what she thought or whether it helped her or not.

Anne closed the notepad and dropped it into her bag.

You going tomorrow or Saturday.

I'd like to get off tomorrow. It'll be nice to be home. To have to do nothing and be waited on hand and foot.

All right for you. My parents. My parents will up in London and I'll be stuck at home miles from anywhere with only Doris for company.

Doris?

Cook. Housekeeper. Looks after the house. Oh and there'll be William. The gardener. But he's ninety and never says anything. Except yes ma'am no ma'am. Daddy never speaks to him.

What do they do? Your parents.

Daddy's a barrister. Mummy writes.

What?

Articles. I think she might be working on a novel. She's always talking to her agent. Can't remember the last time I really talked with them. What about yours?

Dad's a bank manager and Mum, well, housewife and mother. John'll be a pest once the school holidays start but one can't have everything.

No, one bloody can't.

You seem fed up.

I am. I miss Phil and I don't want to go home.

Anne lay in bed until she heard her father leave for work and her brother set off for school. The room was light with the morning sun illuminating the pale curtains. She'd read until after one o'clock the night before. The open book lay face down on the bedside cabinet. Lord of the Flies by William Golding. She had read almost half since picking it out of the class-fronted bookcase in the dining room. She rolled on to her side and reached for the book. She held it with her thumb parting the pages. After reading for a few seconds she turned back a couple of pages and read what again what she had read just before she but it down to sleep.

The door squeaked as it was opened.

Reading? You should be up on a day like today. It's nearly ten. Her mother crossed to the window and in two blatant moves drew back the curtains. Right arm, left arm. The new brightness was harsh.

Any plans?

Plans?

For today.

No. Nothing. I thought I'd have a lazy day.

I'll be making lunch for twelve and then I'm going to Mrs Elsworth's. I usually pop in on a Monday afternoon. So you best

get up soon as there won't be time for your breakfast before it's lunch-time.

When her mother had left she cleared the table and washed up the plates, cups and saucers and the two knives. She stood them in the drainer, a wire construction covered in pale blue PVC that hadn't been there at Christmas. She went upstairs to her room and took the letter from her suitcase that had been pushed under her bed. Back downstairs she found an apple on the circular mahogany fruit stand on the table in the hall and went into the front room where she dropped into the armchair by the bay window and re-read the letter while eating the apple.

After three or four bites she stood the part-eaten apple on its end by the lamp on the small dark polished table next to the chair and went over to the mantelpiece similarly dark and similarly polished. There was a pencil concealed behind the wooden-cased clock.

She crossed out the the two words *Even so* at the beginning of a sentence half way through, and the following comma. She put down the pencil and picked up the apple. Another bite and then she exchanged it for the pencil once more. She replaced the words *here with us* with *at university*. She finished the apple without making any more changes to the letter.

After she had washed her hands she took a writing pad from the sideboard drawer in the dining room. The sheets of paper in the pad were white, unlined and larger than the usual size of pad. Her fountain pen was in her bag which was sitting by the fruit stand in the hall. She sat down at the dining table. In the pad there was a loose sheet with heavy lines which she slipped under the first sheet. She wrote her home address at the top right, the date and then copied out the letter she had drafted earlier. Her ink was black. She finished off with *Best wishes* and signed it Anne Darlington. When the ink had dried she eased the sheet away from the adhesive binding and folded it in three so that it would slide easily into the matching envelope. She licked the length of the flap and pressed the it down. The slip of paper

with the address on was in her purse. She addressed the envelope in neat capital letters. She left it on the dining room table.

She looked through the Times and managed to fill in about a third of the crossword before she put on a heavy woollen cardigan to walk down the lane and along to the post office. She bought a threepenny stamp, wet it with her tongue and pressed it on to the envelope. Outside she dropped it through the mouth of the pillar box.

The reply came eight days later. It had been posted the day before. The envelope was pale blue and the writing paper matched. The letter had been written with a ballpoint pen using sufficient pressure to give the paper a slight curl that had persisted despite it being folded and put in an envelope.

Dear Anne,

Thank you very much for your letter and for thinking about me. I have realised how little I really know about what Dennis did at university. I find it very hard to picture. I hope you don't mind me asking if you would like to visit me. The address on your letter is not that far from where I live. Would you like to come over for an hour or two and just talk to me about what it's like at university. I will understand if you say No.

Yours truly

Kathleen Unwin

There was an old yellow AA handbook on the bookshelves in the room that her mother liked to call the study. The room was only big enough for a couple of deep armchairs. Two walls were lined with books. Her father would often leave the sitting room if the television was switched on and spend the evening reading there. She sat down in one of the chairs and opened the map section of the book. The pages that covered the local area were well worn. The town where Sam's mother lived was on a less frequently consulted page. Anne had never been there. It was something over thirty miles away in a direction away from the places where they might go by car for a day out.

The rain and wind were hard on the panes when she drew back the curtains. Low dark grey clouds moved steadily under the sky. Below her she could hear the intermittent whine of a vacuum cleaner as the air flow through the machine hesitated and then resumed. She selected a file of notes, some folded papers, a text book and a pad of file paper from the pile she had stacked on her chest of drawers when she had unpacked. Downstairs she put the papers and the book on the dining room table. In the kitchen she boiled some milk for her coffee and made some toast.

Her mother was in the sitting room. The vacuum cleaner was silenced. A couple of minutes later, it resumed above her head.

When she had eaten her toast she carried her coffee through to the dining room where she stood it on a round table mat that she took from the second sideboard drawer. The table mat was decorated with a picture of deep red roses. She finished the coffee and carefully selected one of the folded sheets from the pile. It was a first year examination paper from two years ago. She read it through. She opened the sheet at the first question and flattened it and opened her pad, looked at her watch, and began writing. The first part of the question was

straightforward. She puzzled over the second part, repeatedly pushing her hair away from her face.

What're you doing?

Mum. I'm working through an old exam paper. I'm trying to see how long it takes and how much I can remember.

I thought this was a holiday.

It's a vacation. And we're expected to study. Some of the time at least.

You mean you want me to leave you alone.

Please.

After lunch the sky remained low and gloomy, though the wind had eased. The rain fell vertically with enough volume to keep hard surfaces in the garden shiny. It was set in for the day. She worked through the afternoon.

Her mother brought her a cup of tea about quarter past four. After this, Anne tidied up the mathematics and piled everything on the sideboard.

Her mother returned and picked up the tea cup and saucer. Anne, I wish you'd put things away properly.

She shuffled the pile together and carried it upstairs to her bedroom, switching on the ceiling light to disperse the greyness that had seeped in through the window. The artificial light was yellow. She lay down on the bed which her mother had straightened, tucking the bedclothes in more tightly than she had done. The ceiling had a faint crack that ran from the struggling brightness in the centre to the middle of the shadowed junction with one wall.

They ate as soon as her father came in and finished a little after six. Her mother abandoned the table as soon as it was polite explaining as she went that she would clear up when Tonight had finished. Her brother John followed his mother.

You go and watch if you want.

She shook her head.

Your mother has to watch certain programmes. A religious commitment. She seems to like that fellow Michelmore. Always has a bit of a smirk on his face. Pleased with himself.

Nobody talks. No conversation. It's the same in hall.

Television?

There's a TV room. You have to be quiet. They just watch. Mesmerised.

Who chooses?

I've no idea. Two of us went in once. Early last term. And were shushed because we were talking as we opened the door. Left after ten minutes and have never been back.

She got up from the table and carried some things from the table to the kitchen. I'm going to wash up.

I'll help.

In the union they have two TV rooms. One for BBC and one for ITV.

No arguing over which to watch.

Once everything was by the side of the kitchen sink she filled the washing up bowl with hot water and squeezed in some detergent. The tap was still running and the suds built up quickly. She started with the glasses. Her father took a clean tea towel from a drawer and stood patiently as the glasses drained before picking one up to dry it.

Well how are things?

All right.

Just all right?

No, better than that. But I'm not sure what's normal. The whole business with Sam has distorted things. I suppose it will be different again when we get back. Now that he's.

How well did you really know him?

Better than most of those doing maths. She stood a plate in the draining rack. Not that he was easy to know.

Why?

I didn't see it at the time. When everyone was new to each other. I suppose none of us was really relaxed. Not ourselves.

But Sam tried too hard. It was performance. Not a good performance.

Lacking in confidence?

Perhaps. But he was damned clever. She lifted a couple of table knives out of the water and wiped each with the dishcloth and then stood them in the square container to drain. Sam wasn't his proper name. He'd always been Dennis at home, but he always called himself Sam at university. A shortened form of his middle name Sampson.

Samson? As in Samson and Delilah?

No. With a P.

Trying to be somebody different.

She nodded and pushed a hank of hair from her face with her right wrist, leaving a smear of bubbles on her forehead.

Or break with the past.

Could be. He'd been brought up by his mother. No father.

Apron strings?

No. I don't think so. She seems to have found him a bit difficult herself. What's the word psychologists use?

Introverted?

Yes.

Psychiatrists.

What?

Introverted is a psychiatric term.

Oh, right. She tipped the bowl of flat dirty water and filled it again from the hot tap. I think he'd worked it out that the change of situation was an opportunity to throw off the introverted Dennis and become the outgoing Sam. It didn't quite work.

Lack of practice.

I don't think he knew how. He managed reasonably well with the lads. But women.

How?

Either obsessed or nothing.

How was he with you?

Nothing. Nothing at all.

What about?

She put the last pan on to the drainer and wiped the worktop.

What?

That time. He lifted the pan by its handle and began to dry the inside. Your mother mentioned it to me.

It was nothing. He'd had too much to drink. I don't know why I told her. She emptied the bowl. At Christmas she was asking about the accident. I'd written to her, but she'd read more into it. I had to give her the full story.

She wrote a short note to Sam's mother.

Dear Mrs Unwin,

I'm sorry but it is not possible for me to fit in a visit to see you while I'm at home. Thank you for asking me. I'll write again and perhaps I can come and see you when I have more time in the summer vacation.

Best wishes

Anne.

As soon she had finished writing she folded the letter into an envelope addressed it and took it to the post.

21

She was wearing a long-sleeved blouse tucked into the waist of a pair of black slacks. She put her arm through his. It's about half a mile to the High Street.

The station only had two platforms with twin tracks between them. There was a timber footbridge linking the two platforms and when they reached the middle of bridge she pulled him to a stop and pointed towards the town. The ruins of a Norman keep stood on a shallow hill beyond the cluster of buildings, a rectangle that had crumbled at one corner leaving a rough

trapezium with two rectangular openings. The sky behind it was an even blue with a handful of white clouds.

You see the castle.

Yes.

Look to the left. She swung her arm through thirty degrees or so. See the church tower.

Yes.

Our house is just a bit to the right. She let go of his arm and headed for the steps down to the other platform. He went after her.

As they went through the exit he handed half of his ticket to the man in uniform. Last train back today leaves at seven-ten.

Thank you Mr Standing. I'll see he doesn't miss it.

He grinned broadly inclining the upper half of his body, the hint of a bow. A pleasure Miss Primley.

After a few yards, Dave said, Miss Primley?

It's a joke. He goes to our church. I've known him since before I could talk and once I started travelling on the train by myself he stopped calling me Carol and addressed me as Miss Primley. Only when he is in uniform.

Outside the station yard they turned left and walked towards the town holding hands. On one side of the road were pairs of semi-detached houses, with arched porches and doors set back inside. The bay windows on the ground floor had side panes angled at forty-five degrees to the front panes. There were fields opposite with wheat and barley. The houses were followed by a brick terrace of cottages. On the other side a single large house set back from the road. The road turned to the left and was joined by another coming from the right. At the junction was an old coaching inn. They took the left-hand road into the High Street. There were shops on both sides.

You're quiet.

I'm looking. Taking it all in. He took his jacket off, held it by the collar until it folded itself then draped it over his arm. A gust of air lifted his tie.

The street squeezed between two tall stone houses before it opened out into a market square that had shops along two adjacent sides. In the centre stood a building that was no more than a roof supported on stone pillars.

What's that?

The Butter Cross. Where they used to sell butter.

Why cross?

I think in some places it was a cross. I suppose our cross was superseded by this.

She skirted the Butter Cross and took a narrow stone-paved path that left the market square at the diagonally opposite point from the corner where they had entered the square. The path meandered between close stone cottages and houses until they came to a lychgate across the path. Beyond the gate was the churchyard and the church whose tower he had been shown from the station footbridge. The old gravestones, some standing at weary angles were separated by grass that was beginning to be long and untidy. She led him up to the south door and then round the tower and along a path of single stone slabs to a gate in the churchyard wall. There was one word on the gate: Rectory.

Your father's a vicar.

Yes.

Oh.

He's out. Visiting parishioners. And then he's off to some meeting in another parish. He won't be back until mid-afternoon. If the weather stays the way it is we'll go for a walk and I'll introduce you at tea. And then you could get the next train back.

You making him seem like someone I should avoid as much as possible.

I am his only daughter.

Her mother had prepared a salad of lettuce, tomato, cucumber, spring onions to accompany a home-made bacon-and-egg pie. The sun had come out more strongly so they sat on wooden chairs arranged around a wooden table in a corner the walled garden sheltered from the slight breeze that did little more than disturb the leaves on the large oak in the far corner. Along one wall was a wide border with shrubs, some already in flower, and in front of them the remains of what must have been a swathe of daffodils.

They ate off small plates discreetly decorated with small blue flowers. The plates would have been square except for the double curves at each corner. They drank pale tea from cups that matched the plates.

Mrs Primley was almost as tall as Dave with heavy glasses and long nose. She asked Dave questions. About his family. His course.

What exactly is sociology?

Dave floundered as he tried to explain something that he was only now beginning to understand.

Don't worry, she said, touching his forearm for a moment. Carol talks much the same way when she's asked about psychology.

The conversation moved on to easier topics. Where he was from. Did he have brothers or sisters. Church was mentioned.

Would you like some more tea?

Not for us. We'll go for a walk.

They walked back through the churchyard.

She can't get through more than a couple of hours without a cup of tea.

They went up to the castle and sat on a line of stones that marked the location of wall that had been plundered to build some of the nearby cottages. The grass dropped steeply away to the river which made a smooth arc around the northern side of

the town that had developed on the more gentle southern slopes of the hill on which the castle stood.

I love this view.

He put his arm around her shoulders.

It's so peaceful. It's quiet here even when there are visitors at the weekend. Children running and squealing but somehow the sounds are softened, lost in the calm air.

We're a world away.

From what?

You know.

I was hoping.

We could forget it.

Not forget it. Put it aside. Over. Finished.

I know.

I asked Miss Coggles.

The warden?

Yes. If I could change my room.

What did she say?

She'll see what she can do.

Someone will have to leave or move out.

She could get someone to swap. There are girls who don't like being on the ground floor. Did you see that?

What?

A rabbit. Down by the river. Another. Lots.

He shaded his eyes.

To right of that clump of trees.

I see. Must be a dozen. He took a packet of cigarettes from his shirt pocket.

David, you said you'd stop.

I am stopping. At this end of this packet.

So you said. Seems to be lasting a long time.

He put the cigarettes back in his shirt pocket.

Ideally I'd move out altogether. Move into a flat. There's a girl who would share with me, but Dad would never write a letter giving permission.

I thought you had to be twenty-one. He lit his cigarette with a match he had twisted out of small book.

Not if you get permission from your parents.

Since when?

Since next year.

Why wouldn't he agree?

He thinks someone is looking after me if I'm in a hall of residence.

And in a flat?

Who knows?

I'll look after you.

That's his worry.

Carol's parents were sitting in armchairs either side of the fireplace. A folded newspaper lay on the long low table between them. The grate was hidden by a wooden fire-screen decorated with a tapestry of the church. The wood of the high mantelpiece and surround was dark like the doors and the picture rail that skirted the high walls about two feet from the ceiling. Two pictures in ornate gold frames hung from the picture rail. A large one opposite the door, a smaller one in the recess to the left of the chimney breast. Both depicted gloomy nineteenth century rural scenes with animals and people standing self-consciously.

Her father stood up as they entered the room. He had removed the jacket of his grey suit, but retained his clerical vest and collar. He was a portly man with a bald crown, and a little shorter than his wife.

Carol's mother remained seated, but turned towards them.

You must be David. He held out his hand. Dave took it and her father gripped his hand firmly placing his other hand over the handshake for a few seconds before releasing Dave's.

Sit down, sit down. He waved at the long sofa which had space for three people. Carol sat down. Dave did the same. The middle cushion separated them.

As Carol's father sat down, her mother got up. Would you like a cup of tea?

The other three looked at Dave. That would be nice.

Mrs Primley went out of the room.

Now what are you reading?

Sociology.

Ah, a relatively new discipline, I believe.

Not all that new.

The Reverend Primley cocked his head slightly.

It's been taught in America since 1890.

Ah, the United States, a nation of innovation and invention that it bewitches the rest of the world into copying.

And at the LSE – London School of Economics – since 1904.

As long as that, but still relatively new.

Carol smiled.

You go to church, I understand.

Dave nodded.

Church of England?

No, Methodist.

Good singers that eschew alcohol. We have no alcohol in this house. Not even for medicinal purposes. Do we Carol?

No, Daddy.

However, I'm afraid we Anglicans can only sing when we're organised into a choir. He moved on to the edge of his chair and curled one palm on each knee. These are lax times. Christian principles and the morals we derive from them are being undermined. The cinema. Television. The seamy side of life is thrust at us as though it was something to relish. He paused and listened. A straight question, young man. Do you think it right for a man and a woman to have sexual intercourse before they are married in the eyes of God?

No, I don't.

Carol stared at her shoes. One of the laces was loose and she reached down to tie it.

I am glad we are agreed on this. The Bible is quite clear about it. Read Deuteronomy, Chapter 22. What about Sunday?

Dave's face made his puzzlement obvious.

Are there things you would not do on a Sunday?

I'm not sure. I'd have to think about that.

Mark my words. If we are not vigilant it will not be many years before Sunday will just be like the other days of the week.

I can't see that. Most people now only work a five-day week. Sunday used to be the only day off. Isn't it more likely that we'll have more days of rest? Technology, more labour-saving devices.

Carol's mother came in with a large tray. Her father removed the newspaper and dropped it between his chair and the hearth. She knelt down resting the tray on a corner of the tray on the table. She put out four china cups and saucers, different from those they had at lunch. The cups were fluted, almost flower-like in shape with a gold edge. The saucers were shaped to match. There was a plate of buttered scones and a Victoria sponge with jam and cream in the middle already cut into wedges. She left again.

Pull the sofa nearer.

Dave and Carol got up and rolled the sofa forward on its castors. Carol sat down and Dave waited until Mrs Primley had passed through the gap with her tray, laden once more. She unloaded the stainless steel teapot, sugar basin and milk jug and concealed the empty tray at the far side of her chair before sitting down. She set the saucers out, then the cups on the saucers, then a little milk in each cup, Finally she poured the tea into the cups.

Bit of puritan, your Dad?

Conscious of his position. Couldn't cope with being accused of hypocrisy.

Errs on the side of caution.

I wouldn't say he errs. It's more positive. He preaches a certain morality which he can justify and he is both constrained and freed by that morality.

I hear an echo of the pulpit.

I suppose so.

What about you?

Me?

What morality are you constrained and freed by?

I think I'm still working on it.

There was a whistle in the distance. The locomotive pulling the train he was waiting for chuffed under the road bridge about a half mile down the track. He turned and put both arms around her. Less than a fortnight and we'll be back there swotting.

She lifted her face and caught his eyes. He bent down and kissed her. She kissed him briefly and stepped back out of his arms as the engine slid into the station with its steam turned off. It eased to a stop and a few doors were opened. Commuters returning from work. She stood with her hands behind her back and a bright smile. He grinned and opened the door of the compartment that was near him. She stepped back again. He pulled himself up into the carriage and heaved the door shut. He pressed the window down.

The guard blew his whistle and waved his green flag and as the train blasted smoke and steam out of its stack and began to move he disappeared into the guard's section of the last carriage.

Dave waved.

Carol blew a kiss.

She waved and walked towards the exit. He watched her disappear and then closed the window.

22

He turned over another page of his notes. There was the remainder of a sentence at the top of the page. He turned back to re-examine the bottom line of the previous page. He held the previous page while he read it again.

Coming for a drink before we go back.

Dave allowed the page to fall. Not sure.

Come on. Malcolm took hold of the ring binder and tried to shut it.

Dave pulled it away and gripped the unread sheets of paper between thumb and forefinger and held them up, slightly lifting

the ring binder in which they were fastened. I promised myself I would finish this today, tonight.

What time?

I don't know. It's taking longer than I planned. If it wasn't written in my handwriting I could easily believe I'd never seen any of this before.

I'll come for you about nine thirty.

OK. He shook his head at Malcolm's back.

Malcolm walked down the length of the library and then went out into the court. The clock over the doors showed half past eight. Dave resumed reading his lecture notes. He worked slowly down each page, underlining a phrase here and there. Where a word had been badly written in the rush to get down what the lecturer had written he wrote over the top of it so that it was quite clear. From time to time he had to pause and puzzle over a particular scrawl until he was able to replace it with a legible version of what he had intended to write. Once in a while he leaned back, stared at the ceiling for a few seconds and then closed his eyes. His lips moved. He was frozen in this attitude when Malcolm put a hand on his shoulder.

Prayer, however fervent, will not substitute for knowledge and understanding.

I've still got a few pages.

Come on. It'll wait. I need to talk.

What's wrong?

Let's get to the bar and then I'll tell you.

There were about a dozen or so students in the bar. All men.

You sit down. I'll get them.

Dave sat down in a corner. The table was marked with a multiplicity of interlocking rings.

Malcolm brought two pints of bitter and took the chair opposite.

Cheers.

Cheers.

The both took long pulls from their glasses. When they had both stood their glasses on the table, Dave said, What is it?

Malcolm shook his head. He put his hand between his legs and pulled his chair forward. He interlaced his fingers and rested both arms on the table. He studied his fingers and then without raising his head his eyes looked up at Dave. It's Gwyneth. He straightened up. She's bloody pregnant.

Dave leaned back.

There's no need to look at me like that. I thought. Air hissed into his nose and out of his nose. We were careful. Damned careful. He unlocked his fingers.

Calm down. Being angry isn't going to help.

But I am fucking angry.

One or two heads jerked in their direction.

Why?

Why not? He clenched his fists.

It's not her fault.

I'm not angry with her. I'm just angry.

Angry at the situation?

Yes. His clenched right hand dropped on to the table. The table rocked.

Dave lifted his gaze slightly. No one seemed to be paying Malcolm any attention. How long?

Two months. She thinks.

She doesn't know?

Said she'd missed before and it had been nothing but she's missed again. Twice.

She's sure.

Says so.

But not been to the doctor.

No.

When did she tell you?

Weekend. I went to see her tonight. I'd just seen her when I saw you earlier.

How is she?

Not sure. At the weekend, well, she was upset. She cried. It was. It was bloody awful. Didn't know what to say. Sorry didn't seem right. We were in her room. Sunday afternoon. Maggie was out. We lay on her bed together while she cried on my shirt. Then she fell asleep. I left her about seven. Before Maggie came back.

That's where you'd been.

She'd calmed down. By the time I'd left. I promised to see her on Monday. He shrugged. I did. See her. She didn't cry. She seemed fragile. Vulnerable. Wistful. I felt she'd transferred all the responsibility to me.

Dave sighed heavily.

I'd no idea what to do. Malcolm sat back in his chair. New territory. But today.

You mean you have now? Some idea?

Not me. Her.

Her?

Yes. Her. Well her and her mates.

What do you mean?

She's clearly told one or two of her friends.

And?

Well, look, they're nurses.

Dave drank a little more of his beer.

And being nurses they know what the options are.

Abortion is illegal.

Technically.

Technically?

Well it happens.

Back street abortions. Not a good idea. Stupid. Dangerous.

Apparently not all of them are back street. If you've got money then there are people – with medical qualifications – who will do a better job.

How much better?

Depends on how much you are able to pay.

Sounds a bit cloak-and-dagger.

Not the phrase I would have used. But as you said. It is illegal.
How much?
Not sure. Something like a term's grant. Maybe more. I don't really know.
Could you find that kind of money? Between you?
I've got a few hundred that my Gran left me.
Well then?
If Dad found out.
Will he?
He knows I've got that money and if it ever came out that it's no longer there. What would I say?
I see.
Still.
You wouldn't need all of it. Would you?
No. I don't think so.
What about her?
Thirty quid in a post office account.
At least you've got a choice.
Aye. Malcolm drank slowly from his beer. He put his glass down carefully. Three times. No four times. In what? Four months. What are the chances?
Higher than you thought.
Worse than Russian roulette.
But somewhat less disastrous.
With Russian roulette you don't have to be concerned about the consequences.

Fliss was sitting on the front row. There was an unoccupied place beside her. Anne went along the front and sat on the spare desk. She dropped her bag on to the chair behind it. She was wearing navy ski-pants. She bent her knees until her feet were higher than the desk top, spun on her bottom and lowered her feet to the floor the other side and sat down next to Fliss. Where's Phil?

Fliss pointed over her shoulder. Back row.

You two had a tiff?

Fliss shook her head. No.

You sound disappointed.

The lecturer had started writing. Anne opened her file and began to copy down the words and symbols.

You haven't broken up?

Fliss nodded.

At five to ten the lecturer finished off and strode out of the room. Anne stood up to follow the others that had been sitting on the front row. Phil was one of the first to leave. Out in the corridor she waited for Fliss to catch up. Together they walked along the corridor and down the stairs to their next lecture.

What happened?

We wrote to each other during the Easter vac. His letters were just about what he'd done, who he'd seen. Nothing about us or me. Nothing interesting, conversational. More like a newspaper report. I had to arrange when to meet when we got back.

What was he like when you saw him?

Well. It was all right. Felt a bit strange but then I convinced myself I read too much into his letters. After the first week he started saying he was getting down to some solid revision. I hardly saw him. Other than in lectures and maybe lunch together he was always going to the library or back to hall.

You sat with him. Most days.

I did. But if I was there first.

When did he finish with you?

He didn't?

You did?

I asked him what he fancied doing over the weekend. I thought we might get a bus somewhere on the Saturday if it was fine. He said he'd planned his revision and he was going to spend most of Saturday revising. What about Sunday, I said. He said he didn't think he'd feel much like going out. So I said, well if you

don't feel much like going out with me then perhaps that was it. He said, yes maybe it was.

They hurried into the lecture theatre and sat down on the front bench.

I just sat there. Then he got up, sort of moved his head as if that was the way of the world and said, see you around.

It looks smaller.

It is a bit. I think it's the shape.

Dave sat down on the bed.

It's a bit noisier. Being opposite the stairs. You don't feel quite so private. And there's noise from outside. She nodded at the window.

He went over to the window. It was glazed with diamond-shaped leaded lights. The top floor windows were plain. He unhooked the fastening at the bottom of the window frame and pulled at the handle halfway up. He pushed. The window creaked open. It's not far from the path. I reckon I could use this as an escape route.

It's further up than you think and the ground slopes at the bottom.

Nah. Only six or seven feet. Easy.

What are you doing?

I'm going to give it a go.

Don't be stupid.

Dave crouched on the window sill. It was only wide enough for his toes. His knees were bent almost to the angle where he was sitting on his raised heels. His back was curled forward with his head just below the lintel. He had one hand on the fixed half of the window and the other on the wall above.

You'll hurt yourself.

He tucked his arms into his side, thrust his head out of the window twisting his shoulders through the narrow opening. He straightened his legs. She watched him leap into the evening. There was a soft thud, a sharp cry and the sound of vegetation being crushed. She went to the window and peered out. The low

yellow sun caught her eyes. She shielded them with her hand. Below in the comparative darkness she watched him struggle to his feet at the side of the path. He stood straight for a couple of heartbeats and then retracted his right leg and swayed until gingerly resting his right toe on the ground he held his balance.

She shouted, You've hurt yourself. And then quietly, You idiot.

She left the room, walking quickly. When she reached him he was standing on his left foot holding on to the trunk of a small tree at the side of the path away from the building.

She stopped a few feet from him. Men.

I think it might only be a sprain.

She ducked under his arm. She took the hand that was supporting him and placed it on her shoulder and then put her arm around his waist. She staggered. Can't you put any weight on it?

I'll try.

They started off along the path. Dave moved his injured foot forward and taking a little of his weight on his bent right toe and resting much of it on Carol, he hopped his left foot forward. They progressed slowly. At the steps he hopped up each step with Carol providing only sufficient support to prevent him falling over. Along the corridor using the wall to steady himself he got more confident with his hopping. Once back in her room he hopped to the bed and dropped his weight on to it. He lifted his right leg and then his left leg on to the bed and lay full length. Bugger.

We won't be going far tonight then.

You mean I can stay.

No. What I meant is that we shan't be going out shall we?

He pressed his lips together turning down the corners of his mouth and widened his eyes.

You might well give me that little boy look. That's all you are.

I'm sorry.

So you should be.

He pushed himself into a sitting position. Come here. He eased himself towards the wall.

She sat sideways on the edge of the bed twisting so that her upper body faced him. He took hold of her shoulders and pulled her towards him. She resisted.

I'll make some coffee. She went out of the room carrying two mugs and a jar of instant coffee. She put the jar of coffee on the floor outside while she closed the door.

He lay down again and examined the ceiling.

She came in with two mugs of coffee in one hand. A teaspoon stood in one mug. He sat up. She put the mugs down on her desk and went back into the corridor to pick up the jar of coffee.

I've put the milk and sugar in.

Thanks.

She stirred the mug and offered it to him. She sat on her chair.

They drank their coffee in silence. Sipping at first then drinking more quickly as it cooled.

When his mug was empty she came over and took it from him. As she turned away he put his hands on her waist and made her sit next to him. He manoeuvred himself so that he could rest his head on her shoulder. I need a bit of comfort. His hand slipped behind her and under her thin sweater.

She grasped his wrist and removed his hand from her bare flesh.

What's the matter?

I was thinking of Gwyneth.

Why?

I wouldn't want to be in her shoes.

No.

That could be me.

We can be more careful next time.

No.

No?

There won't be a next time.

He pulled away from her.

Can you imagine my father's reaction. What he would think. What he would say.

All right. He reached up and held her head while he stretched to kiss her on the cheek.

That's how it starts. A kiss, a cuddle. Then you try more and I like it and then suddenly it all seems so natural, so inevitable.

I said we can be more careful.

But we wouldn't be, would we?

Are you saying that this is it? We're finished?

I don't know.

What the hell are you saying?

Don't get cross with me.

Women.

Please.

He shuffled to the edge of the bed and stood up with care. I think it would be best if I go.

She watched him as he took one step and then another.

He reached the door and tugged it open. I'll manage. I'll get a bus. He went slowly out into the corridor.

After half a minute, she closed the door quietly.

23

There were half a dozen waiting outside the examination room when Phil arrived. They were all men. It was nine-fifteen. There was no conversation. There were four typewritten sheets pinned up on the board alongside the door. Phil found his name on the one headed Mathematics Pure 2a Paper II. He crossed the corridor and leaned against the wall.

A succession of students arrived, checked the noticeboard and found somewhere to wait.

How are they going?

Geoff. You in this room?

Yep.

All right so far. Nine down, five to go. And you.

Not so bad. History's OK. I'm doing economics as a subsid and that first paper was a real bastard.

Matthew arrived. It's taken me ages to find this room. Do you think I've time to go to the bog.

You all right? asked Geoff.

Nerves. I'll be all right once I'm in there. It's the waiting.

He's always like this.

You've plenty of time. Anyway you can go in any time up to half past.

I know, but if I go in late and I'm short of time at the end I feel.

Get your seat number and go. Now.

Matthew went over to the board and then hurried down the corridor in the direction of the toilets.

By twenty-five past nine the corridor was crowded. Some of the examinees were sitting on the floor backs against the wall.

You hear about Gwyneth.

Gwyneth?

The nurse at the hospital.

Didn't, Phil hesitated, didn't your roommate – Malcolm – go out with her for a while.

More than a while. And more than going out.

How do you mean?

Matthew returned just as the double doors were swung back and fastened into place. Those sitting got to their feet. The loose crowd pressed forward. Phil was behind Matthew.

Geoff caught up as they went through the double doors. Pregnant.

Pregnant?

Absolutely.

I can't see Anne or Fliss.

They'll be here somewhere.

Inside they put down their briefcases and bags in the corner of the room with all the others and then fanned out to find their seat numbers. The desks were in long files separated from each other by three feet. There were a dozen or more desks in each file and eight files. Phil's seat was the farthest in the second file. Matthew was three rows in front of him. Matthew made a half humorous grimace as he sat down.

Each desk had a printed examination booklet. The outside cover had the title of the paper and a warning not to open it until instructed. Underneath the printed booklet was an answer booklet. Phil took his pencil case out of his inner jacket pocket, opened it and took out his fountain pen. From his side jacket pocket he brought a small bottle of ink. He arranged the case, the pen and the bottle along the top edge of the desk.

It was half past. A trickle of students were still entering the room. At least a quarter of the seats were still vacant.

Phil uncapped his pen and wrote his name, degree course and examination number in the boxed area on the front of the answer booklet.

The various noises in the room, chairs moving, clattering footsteps, desks scraping the floor, diminished into near silence.

There were two invigilators. One consulted his watch and glanced up at the clock on the wall behind him. You may open your papers and begin. On a free standing blackboard he wrote: Start 9.33 and then underneath: Finish 12.33.

The silence was ruffled by the flap of pages.

The invigilator who had spoken crossed to the doorway and unlatched one of the doors and held it as he allowed it to close without a sound. As he did so, Anne and Fliss came in through the open half and quietly walked to their seats. Phil raised his head and Anne saw him and smiled. She sat down two-thirds the way down the next file of desks.

By half past eleven he had filled the answer book with his complete answer to Question 6, the answer to most of question

2 and the opening parts of Questions 1, 3 and 7. He raised his left arm as he was still writing on the last line of the back page.

One of the invigilators brought him a second answer book. A few other arms were raised. He took the fresh answer book and completed the panel on the front. He rested his pen in the narrow trough across the front of the desk and stretched both arms in the air and then folded them across his chest. The invigilator was slowly going up and down the aisles carrying a small pile of answer books in the crook of his arm.

Phil picked up the paper and read through the questions. He opened his first answer book and stared at his incomplete answer to Question 2. He turned to Question 5 and read it through again. Yes, he said under his breath. He picked up his pen and began writing in his second answer book.

It is now three minutes after twelve. No candidate may leave the room until the end of the examination and all answer books have been collected.

By quarter past a large proportion of the examinees were sitting waiting. Their answer books were closed, pens and pencils had been put away. Others were writing hurriedly, raising their eyes to the clock every minute or so. Phil closed his answer book. Matthew put up his hand. An invigilator brought him an empty answer book. Phil sat back. Anne was bent over her desk writing. Her hair hung down touching the elbow of the arm that enclosed her answer book.

Five minutes. Make sure you have completed the front of each answer book.

The minute hand of the clock ticked every half minute. The minute hand ticked again and bisected the six. Many continued to write.

One minute.

Tick.

The other invigilator stood up.

Tick.

Stop writing. Close your answer books.

Anne and Fliss came out together.

Phil was waiting across the corridor. What did you think of it?

I've told you I don't discuss exams. I've done what I can and that's it. Talking about it won't change anything and it might make me feel worse.

What about you?

Anne put one finger to her lips and inclined her head towards Fliss who was pulling a tissue out of a box in her bag.

OK I suppose. Fliss wiped both eyes and blew her nose then she and Anne set off along the corridor. Phil followed.

Geoff caught him up. How'd it go?

Fine. I think did more than enough to ensure a pass.

I suppose you can have a pretty good idea in maths. About how well you've done.

Yeah. If your working comes to a tidy end and you haven't got equations that sprawl over two lines then you're probably on the right track. Of course, you've only got to get a sign wrong and what should have been a neat and elegant solution becomes a mess. To persist and hope that it suddenly simplifies or to go back over what you've done to see if you can spot an error – that is the question.

Or the answer.

Or a waste of time.

You never know in an essay.

What?

Whether you're on the right track. Or even if there is a track.

Subjective?

Partly. It's the actual questions that are the real problem. The wording. The imperatives are always woolly. Discuss. Consider. Compare and Contrast. Followed by topics that are quite broad. You ain't got a clue what they're looking for and if what you write is not what is expected then. Who knows.

Matthew was waiting with the two girls in the bright sunshine. The light struck down from a clear sky and rebounded and

reverberated from the Portland stone of the building behind them.

Hello, said Anne.

How are you? asked Geoff.

As well as can be expected. I'll be glad when we've finished.

Me too.

We're going to buy a sandwich and go up to the park. Sit on the grass. Lie in the sun.

What a very good idea.

I'll give it a miss.

Matthew. Anne frowned at him. Why?

He lifted his shoulders. Got things to do.

Fliss when over to him but her arm through his. No you haven't. She turned to the others. Let's go. I don't want to have to change his mind again.

Have you changed your mind?

Seems so.

They crossed the road as a group, and joined the queue at the bakery.

In the park, small groups and couples were sitting or lying in the sun. Geoff meandered his way between those already settled until he stopped in a space. They followed.

Should be all right here. He surveyed the nearby groups and took a couple of steps and then looked again in all directions. Yes. Here. He sat down.

Is the grass damp?

He placed the flat of his hand on the ground. Bone dry.

They sat down and opened their paper bags.

What were you saying about this nurse of Malcolm's - Gwyneth?

Who's Gwyneth? Anne shuffled nearer to the centre of the group.

A nurse on Sam's ward. You're remember. Pretty. Short fair hair. Slim.

Thin, I'd have said.

Well she's not so slim now.

You mean?

Yup. Peggys.

Malcolm?

Who else?

I don't know.

Oh dear. Fliss forced a plastic straw into the perforated hole in the top of her carton of orange juice. What's she going to do?

Geoff slowly emptied his mouth. I think. No. Malcolm thinks she's trying to have an abortion.

I think she'll find that abortions are illegal in this country.

Yes, Matthew. But illegal doesn't mean impossible.

You mean she's going to have an illegal abortion.

Is there another kind?

I think there are certain medical reasons.

Convenience isn't a medical reason.

They all turned to Anne.

Convenience? Fliss said.

A bit pejorative, said Phil.

Pejorative? said Geoff.

Hinting that you think it's wrong without actually saying so out right. Disapproving.

I do disapprove. Anne looked at each of them.

There was a silence in which the warm air carried the chatter of other voices into their space.

Fliss spoke first. What are her choices? Other than?

Adoption?

I don't think I could give away my baby.

It happens. A child for couples who can't have children.

She could keep it. Anne's voice was firm. Her or him.

She'd have to give up nursing.

And how would she live?

Social security.

The state? Council house. No father.

Nothing wrong with council houses. It was all right for me.

Sorry, Geoff. That was me being pejorative. But a child should be in a family.

You're saying that being dead is better than not being in a family?

No, Anne. But.

But what?

The problems multiply.

I think he has some responsibility. Fliss put her hand on Anne's. I don't like the idea of abortion. Why can't they get married. Find a flat. Be a family.

What'd they do for money?

Malcolm could get work.

Give up university? That's two careers blighted.

So you'd murder a child.

It's not a child. Not yet. She's only three or four months.

At four months it might only be this long. She held her thumb and forefinger as far apart as she could. But it looks like a child.

But is it a person?

Is there a dividing line between person and not-person?

It's not a person at conception and it is a person at birth and the development is continuous so somewhere there is a change.

Seems like a variant of the mean value theorem.

Anne stood up quickly. It's not a joke. You're talking about a human life. She snatched up her bag and walked off.

Phil looked dismayed. Looks like I said the wrong thing.

Thought I might find you here. He sat down on the bench.

She sighed.

Sorry. Don't you want company?

I don't know.

He put his sandwich back in the paper bag.

No. Don't go.

You all right?

Yes, she said, drawing out the vowel. I haven't got anything today. Can't get my mind to focus.

I know how you feel. I've only got two more. Both next Monday. Sick of staring at the same pages. I'm not sure there's anything more I can do. But then.

You can't do nothing.

That's about it. He started eating.

A cloud moved across the sun. A breeze rattled the leaves in the tree behind them. No one was sitting on the grass. Half a dozen men students were kicking a football.

How did you know I'd be here?

Saw you walking up the road.

You were lucky. I nearly kept on walking.

I'm sorry about Tuesday.

Tuesday?

All that talk about abortion.

You've nothing to be sorry about.

Perhaps. But.

It's Phil. Ever since he and Fliss broke up. She rested her hands on her lap, gripping her sandwich. He's become. She turned her face to him. Less sympathetic. Fliss as well. It's as if. Almost as if. As if they'd both been playing parts and now they don't have to.

I don't really know them.

Not sure I do. You know how it is. Circumstances brought us together. Same course. The four of us used to meet and struggle with our homework. Homework. She laughed gently. Then all the business with Sam seemed to keep us together. And now.

Yes. I feel a bit like that about Dave and Malcolm. We all felt we had to try. The lad that replaced Sam is still a stranger. We see him at mealtimes. He shares a room with Dave. But that's it. He's got his friends. Malcolm and Dave get on. But I don't count any of them among my friends. Not really.

Have you made any friends? Out of choice?

Not sure. There's a few I'm friendly with in Chess Soc and on the course. But I wouldn't take my troubles to them.

Didn't know men did that.

We do. Might not always admit it. But we do. What about you?

Same. There's a few in the Gilbert and Sullivan Society.
You sing?
Badly. I'm only in the chorus. They're a good crowd and you
feel you belong.
I'm not sure I belong.
How sad.
Don't mock.
You ought to come along. Next year. We're doing the Mikado.
Don't think it's for me.
You'd enjoy it.
The slow moving cloud revealed the sun.
That feels better.
Quite warm. The sun. When it gets a chance.
What you doing this afternoon.
Back to the library.
Do you think it will really make a difference?
Probably not.
Well then. How about getting a bus out somewhere. Take a
walk in the fresh air.
She bent over and examined her shoes. I'd have to change my
shoes.
Oh.
But that'll only take a few minutes.
Well then?
OK. Let's go.

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Dave ran up the stairs and swung round the newel post on the top landing and flung back the door of Malcolm and Geoff's room which had been standing ajar. Finished! Fuckin' finished.

Malcolm was lying on his back on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

What's wrong? You had your last today.

Malcolm rolled on to his side, brought his knees up and pushed himself into a sitting position on the edge of the bed. She went through with it.

Gwyneth?

He raised his eyebrows then nodded.

How do you know?

Note in the union pigeon-holes. From another of the nurses.

When?

The note was dated Monday.

Two days ago.

I only look at them once a week, if that. Last Friday.

Didn't you know?

I knew she'd decided. I'd given her fifty quid. Said she could have more, but she didn't ask. She said she'd got it all arranged and she'd be in touch when it was all over. I put it out of my mind. Exams and all. There didn't seem to be anything more I could do.

No. Dave folded his arms and tightened them against his chest, pulling his shoulders in. No.

Malcolm rested his elbows on his knees and lowered his head into his palms.

Did the note say how things had gone?

No.

Where will she be now?

She's taken a week's holiday. Said something about going for a few days to a married cousin. Bristol, I think. Same thing had happened to her. Bit older than Gwyneth.

No address? No telephone number?

Said the less I knew the better.

What now then?

The note said there would be more news.

You don't know who this nurse is.

It just said Linda. Gwyneth mentioned her once. Never met her.

Malcolm found the second note on Monday morning. He opened the envelope and unfolded the small sheet of paper. He read it through while Dave watched him. The corridor was quiet. A few students wandered through.

What's it say?
Malcolm finished reading. She's in hospital.
Hospital? Why? What for?
Malcolm held the out the note. You read it.

*Dear Malcolm,
I'm sorry to have to tell you that Gwyneth
was rushed into casualty on Friday night
with blood poisoning (septicaemia) as a
result of her recent operation. She is very ill
but with good prospects of a full recovery. If
you want the latest on her situation then
you can ring the Bristol Royal Infirmary.
You may have to pretend you're a relative.
Linda*

Dave looked up from the note and held it out for Malcolm.
What're you going to do?
Go down there.
When?
Now.
Today?
Why not? There's nothing to do here. What time is it?
Just after ten.

They got the bus back to their digs. Malcolm but a clean shirt and some clean underwear in his briefcase. Briefcase, he said, as he did so.

Dave worked his way through the relevant pages of Geoff's copy of the full British Railways timetable to find a suitable train to Bristol.

Malcolm clicked his briefcase shut and put his jacket back on.

There's one leaves a little before twelve. You've plenty of time to get that. Change at Birmingham. It arrives in Bristol late afternoon. So you'll be able to go for evening visiting.

Right then. I'm off.

I'll come to the station with you.

Thanks.

They left the refectory. The sound of the group thrashing their electric guitars followed them at a distance. Geoff steered her by the elbow towards the stairs. I need a coffee. They had been dancing almost non-stop for more than half an hour.

Downstairs in the coffee lounge Anne made for an unoccupied sofa while he ordered two coffees. She sat down. The imitation leather squeaked as she shuffled back smoothing her long dress over her knees. He crossed the room carrying a saucer and cup in each hand. He bent his knees to set the coffees on the low table and flopped down beside her. He unbuttoned his dinner jacket and ran a finger round the inside of the collar of his dress shirt.

She leaned forward to lift her cup. A lock of hair escaped and swung forward resting on her bare arm as she sipped from the cup. I can still feel the pressure in my ears. Like the after-image of a bright light. Blurred but noticeable.

They're good though, aren't they?

She moved the hanging tress away from her face and smoothed it against the side of her head.

What time is it?

She squinted at the tiny gold watch on her left wrist. Half past eleven.

Is that all? Over two hours to go.

You're not flagging?

No. He sat up, straightened his jacket and adjusted his black tie. I'm ready for anything.

I would like some fresh air. When you've finished your coffee.

The French windows at the back of the union building were open and they walked out on to the paved terrace hand in hand. The light from the room behind did not reach more than a yard or so from the building and by the time they reached the balustrade the empty sky was clearly visible. He searched the heavens. She released his hand to pull her thin shawl tightly round her shoulders folding her arms, clutching her small silver bag.

You can see quite a lot of stars. Look, there straight ahead and up you can see the W of Cassiopeia.

Queen and mother of Andromeda who – whom? – she had chained to a rock as a sacrifice to the sea monster Cetus all to appease Poseidon *whom* she had upset by bragging about how beautiful she and her daughter were.

And there's Ursa Major – the Great Bear.

I know Ursa Major is the Great Bear and those two stars are the pointers that show the line to the North Star.

Polaris.

Polaris. At the tail of the little Bear. Ursa Minor.

He laughed and put his arm around her shoulders and she pressed herself against him. She tilted her head and he dropped his chin and then turned his head to kiss her. She pivoted slightly. Her arms unfolded moved under his jacket and around his waist. He held her firmly as their mouths moved one against the other.

Hello, hello, hello. What have we here?

Anne and Geoff drew apart and turned in opposite directions to face the voice.

Dave stood awkwardly, Fliss bearing down on his left arm, her little shiny bag dangling from her fingers. His tie had gone. She was carrying her shoes in her free hand.

Didn't expect to see you two. Together.

A marriage of convenience. Rag Ball. Can't be missed.

Is Malcolm here?

He didn't tell you.

What?
Not sure I should say.
Come on.
He told me, but if he hasn't told you then I'm not sure I should tell you as it would break an implied confidentiality.
Fliss giggled. Bet you couldn't say that again.
You're saying he's not here.
Yes.
I thought he might have brought Gwyneth despite her being pregnant.
That's the point.
They've broken up? asked Anne.
No.
She's had an abortion. Hasn't she. He's an accomplice to murder.
Don't start.
Anne pulled away from Geoff. I'm not starting. I'm only saying what I think.
OK. OK. I'm sorry.
It's not you.
If you must know.
Anne and Geoff turned to Dave.
She's ill. Blood poisoning. Septa-whatever.
Septicaemia.
After the abortion.
Yes. She was staying with a cousin in Bristol. Now she's in Bristol Infirmary.
How bad?
Pretty bad.

He checked the message he'd picked up in the union. He dialled the digits carefully. At the end there was there was a short silence. A voice at the other end started speaking and was interrupted by a rapid beeping. Dave pushed a threepenny bit

into the slot. The coin clattered inside the box and the beeping stopped.

Can I speak to Malcolm. Malcolm Steadman.

Just a moment.

He pushed a sixpence and a shilling into the appropriate slots and put another shilling on top of the box.

Hello.

It's Dave. How are things?

Better. Much better. I saw her this afternoon and she's much brighter. Sitting up rather than just lying there. I don't think she realises how ill she's been.

How much longer will she – ?

Nurse said that if she continues to improve then they may discharge her in a couple of days.

What then?

Home, I suppose.

She'll need more time before she comes back here.

Certainly.

What about you?

I'll come straight back. Results'll be out next week.

You won't go with her?

To her parents? Not bloody likely. God only knows what they'll have to say to her. At best I'd only be an uncomfortable spectator. They might see it as all my fault.

The beeping started again. And stopped.

I'll go then. I won't ring again. Expect you when I see you.

Thanks for ringing.

He put the phone down, picked up his spare shilling and pushed open the door of the kiosk. Outside the air was soft and heavy after the day's sun, and still warm. The sky had a low haze.

Geoff raised himself from the garden wall where he had been sitting.

Big improvement. Seems to be on the mend.

Geoff nodded. I'm glad.

Dave walked alongside Geoff. Where're you going?
Anne's.
You walking?
Yes. They won't be out of dinner till eight. Nice evening.
OK if I walk down with you?
Sure.
Nothing better to do.
Thanks. Thanks very much.
Sorry. Should have said I'm at a bit of a loose end. I'd go home for a few days if it wasn't for Malcolm coming back.
Is he?
Gwyneth'll go to her parents when she's discharged.
They stopped and waited for a car to pass before they crossed the road.
Expects that'll be in a couple of days.
Bit of a hiatus this, isn't it?
Dave didn't respond.
Between Rag Week and results. Nothing that has to be done.
I've got an essay to do over the summer.
Me too. Don't feel like starting it until I know how I've done this year.
No.
Resits would really put the cat among the pigeons.
You don't think.
No. Not really. But then.
I know. Even one would be a bind.
Look. I think I'll leave you here.
Geoff stopped.
Dave rushed into the middle of the road. I think I'll drop in on Fliss.
I thought.
That was the deal. Dave stepped on to the far kerb and shouted back. You never know.

He walked the half mile through the streets to the house where Fliss was in digs. Another girl answered the door when he knocked.

Is Fliss in?

Who shall I say?

Dave.

Fliss was wearing a pale blue nylon housecoat. She had curlers in her hair. Her face leaked annoyance.

Looking for company for an hour or two. But I can see it's not convenient.

No. Sorry.

I'll see you then.

Good night.

Bye.

It took him twenty-five minutes to get back to Mrs Harker's.

Dave stepped into the strong sunlight. He lifted his left hand to shade his eyes. Malcolm, naked above his brown corduroy trousers, was stretched out on the grass of the small rectangular lawn exposing his back to the sun. Dave stepped down on to the paved path that separated the lawn from the vegetable garden where there were rows of peas, carrots, cabbage and lettuce. In the far corner of the lawn there was a small wooden bench under a lilac tree. He sat down. You'll burn, he said.

Malcolm turned over and brought his arm over his face. Don't think I can stand another year here.

Here?

The food. The having to be here. The early mornings. Never a lie in.

What then?

A flat.

Carol said you don't have to be twenty-one any more.

If you have a letter of approval from a parent or guardian.

That's what she said.

A bee swerved among the roses along the low fence, humming irregularly as it changed its course.

You fancy sharing?

The bee flew upwards and away.

With you?

Yes. Me.

I'd need to think.

Trouble is we'd need to get things sorted out before the end of term.

What's to be done.

Get a letter from home and then see what's on offer at the accommodation office.

Rent?

Malcolm sat up and crossed his trousered legs. His tennis shoes had not been white for a long time.

Less than digs. Plus gas or electricity. Coin-in-the-slot meter. And of course food.

Probably works out much the same.

But the independence.

The freedom.

Real freedom.

Dave sauntered over to the vegetable plot. He closed one eye and stared up into the brightness then half turned. OK. Let's do it. I'll get a letter in the post to Dad. Should get a reply in a couple of days.

I've already done that. We could go down to accommodation today. Get things moving.

What's Geoff doing?

Said he was thinking about hall.

Malcolm got up and brushed some dead grass and dry leaf fragments from his trousers.

Dave went back to the bench. What does the term flat actually mean? He did not sit down.

Varies. A couple of rooms in a house. Access to a bathroom and toilet. Some cooking equipment. That sort of thing.

Furniture?

Of course.

Right. He followed Malcolm through the house. I think I'll write that letter now. We can post it on the way.

Malcolm brought a shirt from his room and after he had put it on he lay on Dave's bed. Dave wrote the letter. He folded into the envelope, licked the flap and pressed it down. He wrote the address. He found a stamp in his wallet. He slipped the wallet back into his jacket hanging on the peg behind the door. He licked the stamp and fastened it neatly in the corner of the envelope.

In the hall at the bottom of the stairs, Malcolm listened and then called to Mrs Harker. We're going out.

Both of you?

Yes.

Is Geoff in?

Don't think so. Said he was going out.

The pillar box was at the first corner. Dave rested the letter in the slot and then flicked it in. Done.

They walked on, the sun warm, the sky a hazy blue.

Heard anything from Gwyneth?

There was a letter this morning. She got a friend to post it. Says I can ring her on Friday evening when her parents are out. If it isn't her who answers I'm to say that it's a wrong number

Wonder what she's told them.

Can't see how she could've avoided telling the truth. Why was she down there. It'd just get more complicated.

She dialled the operator.

I'd like to make a reversed charges call.

She gave the number and sat down on the high stool in the alcove where the telephone was installed.

Carol?

Yes, Daddy.

How is my angel?

I'm fine. How are you?

Oh, you know.

And Mummy?

In the garden.

I've had my results. I passed everything. Nothing spectacular. Mainly seconds. One third.

Well done. The end of a successful year. You'll be able to relax over the summer and return with renewed vigour.

Yes.

You sound uncertain. Is everything all right?

That's it. It doesn't feel all right for next year. I don't really like it here. I'm so looking forward to being at home.

It will be lovely to have you here.

Yes and it'll be lovely to be at home. But I don't think I will want to come back. Not here.

Why? What's the matter?

I'm not sure.

You don't want to give up?

University? No.

You could have a break from it.

I suppose I could take a year out. But.

But what?

I'd rather live at home.

You mean transfer to somewhere nearer?

Yes. I don't think I'd have to start again. I should be able to go into the second year.

I could have a word with a couple of people I know? See what the options are.

You will? I've already spoken to my tutor and I'm going to see someone in the registry tomorrow. I'll ring you again tomorrow.

I'll see what I can find out.

Thanks.

Bye my angel.

Love to you all.

She put the phone down. The bell in the base tinkled once. She slipped off the stool .

You look pleased with yourself.

Carol was slow in responding. Yes, she said. I am.

And might I ask why? The other girl had stopped and grinned. I like good news.

I'm not coming back next year.

To hall?

No. To university.

Failed your exams?

No. I want to be at home. I'll go somewhere nearer. Travel in each day.

You'll miss a lot of the fun.

But it will be simpler.

Simpler?

It's all been too complicated this year.

Andy was in the room with Dave when Malcolm knocked and then put his head into the room. He didn't come in but left the door half open. Dave went on to the landing and then into Malcolm and Geoff's room. Malcolm was standing by the window, looking out.

Did you speak to her?

Yeah.

Not good news?

Not sure.

Dave sat down on the bed.

She went to see her doctor this morning. She been given a letter from the hospital to take to him. Malcolm spoke to the glass.

What did he say?

Not sure whether it was what he thought or what was actually in the letter. Anyway, he explained to her possible problems she might have in the future.

Because of the.
That and the septicaemia.
Such as?
Infertility.
She won't be able to have kids.
Not certain, but it's a strong possibility.
Why?
The septicaemia. Can damage the what-do-you-call-em tubes.
Fallopian.
Yeah.
Eggs can't get through or something. She was upset. I didn't quite catch all that she said.
That's a bugger. Dave studied his shoes.
I know.
Will you go and see her?
Don't know. I feel. I feel cornered.
Cornered?
You know. I feel responsible.
Dave raised his head. It's not entirely your fault.
No. It isn't. But.
She chose to have the abortion.
That's not it. I can't see a way out.
From where?
From this. This. This relationship.
I see.
Do you? Malcolm glared over his shoulder.
Let me try. You feel that you have to take on this problem of hers because in part – at least – what you did led to the problem.
Something like that.
And it means you simply can't break it off.
It's a kind of loyalty.
But you don't like having to be loyal.
I'm not sure it would be good for either of us.
What?

Keeping going. Malcolm continued to stare out of the window.
Yet.
Yet?
I can't just say sorry and disappear out of her life.
I suppose that might seem a little callous.
Selfish at best.
You'll need to talk to her. See how she feels.
Malcolm, turning from the window, stretched his mouth and sucked through his teeth. Yes. He pressed his lips together. You're probably right. He resumed looking out of the window.
Did you get the rest of your results today?
Yeah.
OK?
Fine.
Come on let's go for a drink.
Always a good idea.

The coach was over ten minutes late when it swung into the small bus station. The sun was at her back as she stood up from the bench and the light reflected off the coach windows. She moved around to the front of the stationary coach. There were a few people alighting. An old man carrying a leather suitcase lowered himself to the ground first one foot then the next. He was wearing a trilby hat and a long coat that was too heavy and too warm for the day. When he had two feet on the ground he put down the case and turned himself moving each foot twice to face the coach. He held up a hand to support a much thinner woman of a similar age in a round hat with a narrow brim. She reached out to him and eased herself down gripping the vertical rail at the side of the door with bony fingers and thumb until she was established on the pavement. Geoff was next to alight. He waited while the old couple edged slowly away from the coach in a laboured sequence of small steps. When he was clear of the coach she went over to him. He put his hold-all down and held

his arms ready to hug her. She stepped close and he put his arms around her. She lifted her face and they kissed.

I've missed you.

And I've missed you. She grabbed his hand as he picked up his bag and dragged him across the bus station. We'll catch the three o'clock if we're quick.

It was a double-decker and Geoff put his bag under the stairs and then followed her up. She had gone right to the front. He sat down next to her and she clasped his hand again.

Anne turned the left-hand knob on the television set until it clicked. The picture shrank to a fuzzy bright dot in the middle of the screen. The dot faded as she came back to the sofa and sat down next to him. Her parents had gone up to their bedroom a few minutes before, ushering her brother in front of them. She leaned against him and he dropped his right arm from the back of the sofa and pulled her close. She rested her head against his chest.

How did you get on with Sam's mother?

It was a bit strained. Neither of us knew what to talk about. She found an old photo album and showed me some pictures of Sam when he was little. There was a few school photographs. There was one of those really wide ones with the whole school on.

Panoramic.

She challenged me to find Sam. It had been rolled up. She sat beside me and we held it open between us while I searched. It took me ages. He was twelve or thirteen. She didn't mention anything about when he was a university. So all I could do was listen. Maybe that's what she wanted.

Geoff rested his cheek on her hair. It all a bit vague now. Compressed.

She talked about Eileen. As though I would know her.

How could we?

I know. Just a name to us.
Did she know her?
I'm not sure. She talked as if she did.
What was she like?
Eileen?
Yes.
Hard to tell. His mother suggested that it was all her fault.
Easy to blame the dead.
She needs someone else to blame.
Someone else?
Other than her. Deep down I think she blames herself.
Not that easy.
She cuddled up to him. It never really made sense to me.
What?
Her wanting Sam to say he was the father.
Yeah. A bit odd. Maybe she was a bit odd. Sam certainly was.
He was all right was Sam. A bit odd, yes. But all right.
There was all that business with Carol.
He read more into that than he should.
How do you mean?
She was being friendly. That's all.
And he thought?
No. He didn't think. Men don't. She reached up and kissed his ear.
He quivered.
I think.
Women think too much.
Now then. She dug her fingers into his ribs. I think that this relationship – if that's what you could call it – with Eileen had given him confidence. Confidence that he could have a relationship with a girl. Any girl.
Any girl?
If he tried. If he made the effort.
And he picked Carol.

Say what you like, that's what I think. She sat up and swivelled on the cushion so that she was facing him. On my way back.

From Sam's mother's?

Yes. In the bus station there was a newspaper placard. Mum-to-be's suicide – in quotation marks – man quizzed. I thought, can't be many pregnant women who commit suicide.

You thought it was about her.

Yes. So I bought a copy. Didn't get chance to read it before I had to get on the bus. And even then it took me ages to find the article.

Not on the front page?

Never is. I kept it. Get up.

He looked at her.

Stand up.

He stood up.

She lifted the cushion and pulled out a sheet of newspaper. Read it yourself.

Geoff sat down and read it, holding it up so that light from the lamp beside the television illuminated the paper. Do you think he was the father?

Seems likely.

Has he been charged?

No idea.

He pushed her off the cliff.

Doesn't actually say so.

But.

And.