

# THE LEAST OF THESE

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*Senex Domum*

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## Author's Note

I completed this novel in November 1990. It was submitted to one publisher who rejected it with a polite note indicating that it had been read. The manuscript was then stored away until it was discovered in 2012. A search among my computer archives discovered an electronic copy that had been written using an Amstrad PCW8256 and the *LocoScript* word processing software. A little programming enabled me to extract almost the entire text from the component files. Where the conversion process failed the original text was restored with the aid of the printed manuscript.

This 2012 version differs very little from that of 1990. Errors – mainly typographical – have been corrected and a small number of words and short phrases have been changed. Although it now has a different title, in essence, this is the same novel.

*KT December 2012*

Since the 2012 edition, further typographical errors have been removed and several changes to phrasing and punctuation. In the light of some criticism an element of the ending has been removed.

*KT August 2013*



# 1

The smooth tedium of waiting had become a coarse rough blanket, irritating.

He blew out a strong stream of air, and turned off the car's radio.

Action, however futile, had become necessary. Movement would rid his mind of its insistent wandering and his body of its causeless discomfort. Alasdair clicked open the car door and got out.

The air was damp, cold with an early November mizzle that had settled on the deep red of the car dulling its hard gloss. He closed the door and, although he was not going to move more than ten yards from the car, he pointed the electronic key at it and it blinked its lights in reply. For a moment he visualised the car, new in its warm showroom, and the low bright redness of the image seemed to press against his lips, cool, powerful.

A double-decker bus with its inner lights streaked by dirty windows passed by, swirling the dark yellow-lit dankness.

Turning his back on the car he walked towards the shop. The front of the shop was in darkness. A white card hung behind the glass door on a twisted triangle of string. The card bore the word CLOSED in black letters and was carelessly angled, as if whoever had reversed it could not care whether the shop was open or closed.

A sector of light spread out across the wall and ceiling from behind a partition at the back of the shop, picking out the chromium rails and hinting at the shapes of dresses and blouses.

With his hand blocking the reflections and his face close to the glass he stared inside. His warm breath fogged his view. He pushed at the door, but it was locked. 'Come on, Rachel,' he said in quiet voice intended only for his own ears.

The moisture in the atmosphere had settled on his hair and face, the sleeves of his sweater felt wet. He went back to the car. Inside, where it was warmer, he sat in silence, listening to the occasional slick swish of a passing vehicle. It was Saturday. It was half-past six. Donald closed the shop at quarter to. Alasdair and Rachel were expected at her parent's house at seven.

Alasdair did not like his wife working in a dress shop, but he had not argued against it when she had asked him what he had thought. Her previous job in a solicitor's office had seemed more in keeping with his own view of their future. But she had heard, through a friend, that this Donald was looking for someone to help manage his shop so that he could consider expanding the business. Rachel thought there was an opportunity. Alasdair had not tried to dissuade his wife, after all, at the time, they had been married less than two months. Six weeks later, Alasdair had heard enough about Donald and his plans, his way with his older customers, and the lack of understanding that existed between him and his wife. Alasdair gave more thought to the understanding that existed between Donald and Rachel. Donald picked her up each morning in his large Japanese car and normally brought her home each evening. Alasdair was always home before they drew up outside the house. Often he watched from the bedroom window and noticed that when Donald said 'Goodbye', he always kissed Rachel on the cheek before she swung her legs out of the car. He had not mentioned it to Rachel. She would only dismiss it with a disdainful 'Alasdair' and accuse him of being possessive. She was his wife, and the kiss, whatever its significance, trespassed on his territory.

It was almost two years since he had first seen Rachel. The New Year's Eve party had been organised by a colleague at the bank. She had

seemed to know everyone there. Her thin fair hair was cut straight from nape to chin and curled slightly making a simple curve. It swung easily as she nodded and shook her head in apparently attentive response to the gossip and teasing offered to her. She had moved from group to group settling like a summer butterfly until her bright red-lipped smile broke open each small circle, interrupted the conversation, and captured the eyes of each man. Alasdair had continually noticed her throughout the evening. After midnight and the formality of first kisses, there had been a little close economical dancing, and Rachel had always had a partner. Unlike the others, she had talked while dancing, holding herself away from her partner and laughing unnecessarily at the ceiling. He put her into the class of woman that likes to be chased and caught so that she can employ the same force that had attracted her pursuer as an irresistible lever to prise herself out of his clutches leaving him to excuse himself politely for fear of offending her and consequently forever placing her out of his reach. Alasdair discovered he had been only partly correct when he casually enquired about her. He learnt that she had had, as in her dancing, a succession of partners in what were generally assumed to be short-lived sexual relationships. It was she who decided the beginning, middle and end of such encounters. And the man she had come with that New Year's Eve had left before the first stroke of twelve.

Alasdair had accepted the challenge and stalked and caught the butterfly. At subsequent parties they arrived together, were rarely seen together during the party, but always left together. They had an understanding. His friends had cautioned him that it could not last: Rachel Marchland had a reputation to maintain. But it had been she who had first hinted at marriage, and he who had been unable to find any reason for not establishing his right of possession, of settling down with a prize that he knew other men envied. They had both given up their separate flats and bought a small house, exchanged two beds which they often shared for one which they always shared, and, in Alasdair's opinion, moved into a new phase of life with fresh commitments and new freedoms. But the freedoms seemed to be Rachel's and the commitments exclusively his. In the past he had said No to her, secure in the macho confidence that she had found, in him,

the man she had been searching for. Now he always said Yes to her because he feared that she might find someone else and he might become a deserted husband. In a little over three months he had learnt to be jealous, jealous of men like Donald who being in a dry marriage had nothing to lose by cuckolding another man.

What were they doing in there?

There was a telephone box on the other side of the road. Alasdair opened his Filofax at his list of telephone numbers and reminded himself of the number of the shop. He looked quickly out of the rear window then thrust open the door. There was small bang and a screech. Seeing nothing, Alasdair opened the door fully and got out, a cyclist with a luminous stripe diagonally across his back was leaning over his bicycle at the kerb.

The cyclist looked back towards the car. 'Bloody arrogant motorist!' The cyclist threw his leg over the saddle and rode off, his white protective helmet bobbing above the yellow sash and belt.

Alasdair examined the door. There was a double scratch from the edge halfway across the panel. 'Sod it!' He slammed the door shut and strode across to the telephone. He thrust a ten-pence coin into the box and dialled the number of the shop. He counted the rings. The ninth was cut short and Alasdair heard Donald's careful voice.

'It's Alasdair. I'd like to speak to Rachel.'

'Who?'

'Alasdair Quirke. Rachel's husband.' He made it sound as if he thought the man was a fool.

There was silence until he heard Rachel's voice. 'Alasdair? Where are you?'

'I'm outside this bloody shop waiting for you. What the hell are you doing in there with that -'

'Look, there's no need -'



‘For God’s sake, hurry up.’ He put down the phone, went back to the car and waited tensely.

Rachel was purposefully silent as she slid into the car. Alasdair looked at her, but she did not look at him. She dragged a large blue plastic bag in front of her knees and closed the car door before fastening the seat belt. Her white hands pulled her black waterproof coat over her lap. The long red nails matched her unsmiling red lips.

‘What’s in the bag?’ asked Alasdair as if he had not spoken angrily to her a minute or so ago. He turned the key and the engine started. After he had eased out into the road, he looked at her again. Her pale profile intermittently caught the lights of approaching cars.

Her refusal to answer his question nagged at him and after two or three minutes when he had completed an awkward right turn he said, softly, without turning his head, ‘Sorry.’

‘And so you should be.’ Her voice was not loud. ‘Fancy ringing me up from across the road. I’d have only been a few minutes. I’d been trying to get away, but –’ She did not finish.

‘I wasn’t cross at *you*. I couldn’t imagine what was taking you so long, and then this cyclist scraped the damn car as I was opening the door. I suppose it was my fault, but I wouldn’t have been opening the bloody door if you had been on time. In fact the car wouldn’t have even *been* there if –’ He did not want to overstate his case.

He flicked a stalk switch and the wipers swept once across the screen and back.

‘What is in the bag?’

‘A couple of dresses. Donald said I could borrow them for next week.’

‘Next week?’

‘He wants me to go to London.’

‘When?’

‘Tuesday. Come back Wednesday.’

‘Tuesday. What for?’

‘He’s getting in new stock for Christmas and wants me say what I think will go well.’

‘Does he trust you? You’re not exactly experienced in the business, are you?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean what will he say if you come back having selected a lot of stuff that doesn’t sell?’

‘I’m not going on my own. I’m going with him. To learn.’

‘Two days. In London. Can’t be bad.’

But she could be bad.

‘You don’t mind, do you?’

‘No,’ he said.

He did mind. And he didn’t like explaining to himself why he did. And he could not explain to Rachel. Not because she wouldn’t understand. She would understand. But because she would pretend not to understand. And she would know that her pretending would make him want to be more forthright which he dare not be. In case he was wrong. Which he wasn’t. Nor did he like being forced into not telling the truth. He should have been able to say he did mind and she should be able to accept the fact that he did mind. But she would argue that his minding was because he did not trust her and that hurt her, knowing that he could not trust her.

Maybe they should have stayed unmarried.

Rachel watched her husband as he drove systematically, handling the gear lever and steering wheel as if they were warm living flesh.

Why had she married him?

Partly, at least, because of the way he handled things, had handled her. He knew how to touch, how to manoeuvre. He was also systematic and liked things in order. That was why he did not like waiting. Waiting, he had told her, is the outcome of inadequate forethought. It seemed fitting that he worked in a bank. His love of arrangement and planning were not always obvious to other people because he was capable of deliberately introducing variety and unpredictability into his life and the lives of those around him. It was contrived, but it demonstrated his thoughtfulness. It had not taken her long to feel that she knew him, and in knowing him see him as a mainstay around which she could build her life. Whatever happened, he would be there. Fundamentally he was boring. Food can be boring, but the well-prepared meal, with the right colour and unusual seasoning, can present a fresh experience and illuminate the ordinary. Alasdair could do that. And before they were married he had done it a lot. Since the wedding he had surprised her less. It was time for a diversion. Donald might be diverting. Not for long. Most people have mannerisms of word or gesture that when noticed begin to annoy and later become magnified until they, like a caricature, sum up the whole person. Men were like that in bed. How many times had she lain there in the unlit bedroom of her small flat awaiting the touch of a hand at ear, hair, breast or buttock, knowing exactly which would be first and the progression that would follow. Alasdair had only recently begun to disappoint her. Two days with another man, whatever happened would put a little distance between her and Alasdair. Let him think. Let him plan. She would return to him and find his pattern less predictable than before, and, she thought, he might be moved to introduce some variations. And he would be forgiving, if he ever knew that there was anything to forgive.

She had seen Donald as a possibility as soon as she had met him. But, as a married woman, she had had to exercise some control over her natural inclinations. In the past, the advent of a new man had merely required the dismissal of the old. With all of them there had been the same sequence of episodes. The competition between old and new, the retirement of the old, with a little encouragement from her, and eventually the new would accompany her back to her flat and stay the

night. She had never actually invited any of her men, but she carefully avoided not giving any indication that they should not come, allowing them to assume and presume. If they felt that they had the initiative and if their schemes did not come to fruition then they would only blame themselves, and try to identify the wrong move they had made. If she never implied Yes then they could never carp at her saying No however unexpected it was. It made it simpler when she wanted to change her mind, to get rid of someone who had suddenly become undesirable, she merely, denied their assumptions. It was something of a game, but an important game, a game she needed. Without her flat and with a husband at home the game had new rules, and without having to make any gambits she was into the early middle game of this particular match.

With Alasdair she had broken a rule. She had, in a round-about sort of way, proposed to him. She liked his lack of assumptions. She had the feeling that, although he pretended not to care, he really did. She had said to him, as he had said to her, that she loved him. But she did not know what that meant, or, rather, she knew what it meant, but did not think that it meant the same to her as it was supposed to mean to other people. Nor did she know what it meant to Alasdair.

One of the reasons for not discouraging Donald was that she wanted to test Alasdair, disturb his complacency. And she had expected more reaction from him. She had anticipated some hint of his latent possessiveness. A small indication that he felt vulnerable, and that allowing his wife to go to London with another man entailed some risk. Surely he wasn't fool enough to trust her completely. That would be a real let down. She needed to test him.

Alasdair slowed down as they reached the circle at the top of the cul-de-sac where her parents lived. He drove directly across the circle and up the sloping driving coming to an unnecessarily sudden stop a few inches from her father's BMW.

She opened her door slightly to put on the interior light so that she could see his face.

‘You don’t mind, do you?’ she asked again.

His soft almost pudgy nose, which seemed like a right-angled triangle of putty pressed to his face along its hypotenuse, wrinkled, moving the hairs of his dark moustache.

Yes, she thought, you do, but she rephrased her diagnostic question.

‘About me going to London with Donald?’

‘My going,’ he corrected, and the hairs on his moustache twitched sensitively like a hamster examining potential freedom. The wrinkling nose and the consequent movement of his moustache always correlated, she had decided, with a suppressed uncertainty. Most people find some reason to touch their noses when they feel that they are losing their grip on a situation. Alasdair resisted that, but his nose wrinkled as though inviting his hand to disperse an itch.

‘Do you want me to mind?’

Yes, she thought, I do. She was pleased at the effect she was having. And I think you do mind.

## 2

‘Mam!’ Joey shouted, almost before he had opened the door from the narrow hall.

‘I’m in here.’ His mother’s voice, coming from the partly open kitchen door, though raised, was barely intelligible across the rowdy television. Joey closed the door behind him. The small living room was cluttered and crowded. It was crowded with a brown three-piece suite with wooden arms, a drop-leaf table, four dining chairs, and a round coffee table. It was cluttered with a trailing plant, a newspaper, some comics, a crumpled light-grey anorak, a computer keyboard, vases, seaside souvenirs, and photographs, in brown-and-gold card frames, of children at various ages. These stood or curled on the shelf over the radiant gas-fire. The large television stood in one corner. The programme was a game show of some kind and the picture was too bright and too red.

‘You’ve been fiddling with it again, haven’t you,’ said Joey, stepping over the stretched out legs of the twelve-year old boy lying on the floor looking up at the screen. The boy spoke without moving his head or taking his hand from where it supported his chin. ‘Wasn’t me.’

‘Was,’ said his younger sister, who sat cross-legged, elbows on knees. Her eyes did not veer from the gawdy flick and flash of different faces.

‘I did never,’ said Robin, pushing Charlie so that she rolled over on the stained beige carpet.

Joey adjusted the colour balance and then lowered the volume.

“Urry up, we’re watchin’.”

Joey stepped back so that his bother and sister could see the screen. He stood, his attention mesmerised. He saw the contestants thinking, laughing, giggling out obvious answers to trivial questions. He saw the patronisingly obsequious male host awaiting the next eager word from a woman with tight fists. The screen cut to a close-up of her face as she spoke separating each sudden phrase from the following one with the ums and ers of frustrated recall. He saw the host encouraging her and almost mouthing the correct answer as though the words when strung together would reveal some shared truth that he could repeat to the audience and completely astound them.

Belatedly, Joey smacked top of Robin’s head and told him to leave Charlie and the television alone.

Joey was nearly five years older than Robin and usurped something of the parental role that was filled almost entirely by his mother. The authority of his father was not negligible but it was exercised with little effect through unreasonable threats, irrational dictates and unpredictable violence. Joey pushed back the door to the cramped kitchen and waving his hand through the steam streaming from under the lids of the two pans on the cooker said:

‘Mam, can y’let us have a couple quid?’

His mother had her hands in a baking bowl and stopped what she was doing to push a hank of bleached blonde hair from her forehead and then rub an eye with the heel of her floury hand.

‘Can y’wait, love. I’ve got to get this crumble in. Y’Dad’ll be here in a bit.’

‘OK, but hurry up. I don’t want *him* to know.’ Joey rested his behind on the high stool. He slouched but even so he could look down on the top of his mother’s head and see the dark roots of her hair. He was almost a foot taller than his mother.

‘Where’s your money gone this week?’

Joey said nothing.

His mother bent over the open oven door and slid in a flowered Pyrex dish, closed the door, and stood up wiping her hands on her apron. A few of the lines on her face had disappeared.

‘That’s it. It’ll all be ready when *he* comes in,’ she said, as though she had achieved something which although mundane was in some arcane way triumphal.

She pushed up against her son and he slid sideways off the stool, standing up as he did so. She lifted herself on to the stool and rested her feet on the rail that circled the legs about a third of the way up. Joey moved across the kitchen and leaned against the worktop opposite her, his back to the steamed window.

‘Them two’s had hamburgers and beans at five,’ she said, ‘what time are you going out?’

Joey always went out on a Saturday.

He was the eldest still living at home. Debbie was married and Dean lived with his latest girlfriend. Joey reached out and drew a ring on the condensation with his finger. He put two dots in the circle, added a triangle and put a curve under them. The curve had its concave side downwards. Joey looked at the little sad face. Beyond the open door the television unloaded a burst of engineered laughter.

He turned back to his mother. She was back at the cooker. ‘Can you?’ he said.

‘What, love?’

She turned down the gas under a bubbling pan.

‘Let me have a couple of quid.’

She turned her head and looked at him out of the top of her eyes. ‘What’s happened to your money?’ she asked, raising her face until her eyes looked straight at him.

The darkness around her eyes made them seem circular. He knew he would have to tell her. ‘I didn’t get any?’



‘Why not?’ It was a sympathetic enquiry. She turned the gas up a little under the same pan.

‘I haven’t been goin’ for two weeks.’ Joey had left school in the summer and after a few weeks doing nothing had been allocated a YTS place at a paper factory. He stared at his Doc’s and using his heels as pivots clapped the sides of his boots together. It made him feel like a performing seal.

He did not need to see his mother’s face, and he felt the pressure of her silence as she waited for him to speak.

‘I’m sorry, Mam, but it was so bloody boring, soul destroying. Do this, do that, take this, leave that, wait here, come with me. The only bloody thing I’ve learned is how to stack boxes against a wall. Fucking youth, fucking training.’

‘Joseph.’ Ordinary swearing she tolerated, but obscenities as she called them were not for her ears.

She reached up to a cupboard for a flat round tin that had once held boiled sweets. There had been a picture of the square sweets on the lid before years of fingers had rubbed through to the metal. It was still generally pale blue where it had not been worn but it had, in Joey’s memory, never contained any sweets.

The tin had always been there. The tin was where his mother kept any money that she could save from her housekeeping. She eased off the lid, and Joey could see that the tin had a number of coins in it, no notes. She handed him three pound coins, and replaced the lid.

Joey slipped the coins into the pocket of his jeans, and unzipped his leather jacket.

‘Thanks, Mam.’ He turned to go and was stopped by the short solid figure of his father standing in the doorway blocking the sound of the television.

‘Thanks for what?’ asked his father. The words were pushed out through almost clenched teeth. It was a threat. His eyes, which were set far apart, too near the vertical outer edges of his heavy-skinned face,

tried to narrow, giving him a frog-like appearance. He had noticed that his wife's hand still held the tin. 'Have you been givin' 'im money, Sandra? I thought *he* was supposed to give *you* money now 'e's workin'.'

Joey said, 'Dad – ', but stopped when he noticed the closing of his father's hard fist. The fist was held steady in front of the ornate brass belt buckle. The belt restrained a taut curved wall of heavy flesh, and the fist was large and dark with the darkness of hands that do hard vigorous labour. It was a portent that was well-known to Joey. Say one word that might be taken as disagreement, make even the slightest movement that could be interpreted as being aggressive and the elbow would go back and the fist would strike out. When he had been younger – smaller – the fist had opened out into a thick flat hand which tried to knock his head off. Since he had outgrown his father the fist remained tight and would sometimes jab viciously into his ribs. His father was tough and he wasn't slow to point it out to anyone. And tough meant taking pain as well as causing pain. He could take it and if he gave it then whoever it was inflicted upon should, in his view, be able to take it equally well. Otherwise you were not tough, and beyond consideration. Physical violence was a form of communication, simple messages, efficiently delivered, and semantically unambiguous. If you could keep him talking then he was less likely to use the more effective means of making his thoughts known.

'Well, Sandra.' He uttered the words as though they formed a precise command that would be obeyed. Women were not tough.

'I was just payin' him back what I'd borrowed last week.' She lied with frightened confidence. Joey had learnt a long time ago that lying to his father might avoid pain and never made consequences any worse. His mother, no doubt, had learnt the same lesson long before he had.

'And why would you be borrowin'? Don' I give you enough, now? Well, don' I?'

His voice was more slurred than when he had first spoken. Joey guessed that his father had had two hours in the pub since the end of the match. If they won he drank to celebrate, if they lost he drank

because they had lost. Eric Almond drank because he was a man and men like him – tough men – drank.

His father swayed round towards Joey with unnerving smoothness. Well-oiled, thought Joey, with pained amusement.

‘She’s lying,’ said his father. ‘And you’ll bloody well lie along with her, won’t you. Y’re a right pair of buggers, the both of you.’

Joey lifted his face from the clenched fist. ‘It’s up to her, if she wants to give me summat then why can’t she.’

‘Your mother does what I’ – and Eric Almond, truck driver, pressed a short finger against his own breastbone – ‘tell her to do. An’ you, y’ little bastard, can tell me the soddin’ truth.’

Joey was a little scared. Not with the fear of sudden pain or even injury, but with the fear born of uncertainty. The odds were in favour of violence, but his father was not reliably predictable, and if anyone was going to be hit, Joey would rather it was not his mother. He needed to draw the fire. He looked down at his feet again.

‘Trouble with you is that y’think you’re God in this house.’ Joey uttered the words at the level of a stage whisper, but with deliberate disrespect. Up in the air somewhere he imagined he was allowing his father to hear what he thought while still giving him the option of pretending that he had heard nothing. He knew he was deceiving himself. Joey was still looking at his feet when his father slapped his face. He had expected a stab in the ribs. Joey reacted and the fist at the end of his sweeping forearm caught his father across the bridge of the nose.

‘You bloody – ’ His father lunged towards him and Joey darted for the back door. His father grabbed at his shoulder and pulled him back. Joey’s leather jacket slipped part way down his arm, dragging him back. As he tried to hutch his jacket back on to his shoulder he saw his father swing wide and low. The hard lumped fist hit Joey in the pit of his stomach. The air in his lungs solidified in an instant: he could neither inhale nor exhale. His mouth gaped as though he was screaming, but his pain was inaudible. Automatically his knees began to

bend and his shoulders hunch as he crossed his arms over his abdomen and thrust out his chin. The backhanded blow which followed caught his projecting jaw and twisted his head sideways and up. With no strength of will left to hold his body he crumpled. From a lopsided angle he saw his mother's back and then watched her flung aside and the large hand of his father come leering down. The hand took hold of him and tried to yank him up. His body was heavy. His lungs began to squeeze the hard air and expand slightly. An arm that belonged to him stretched to grip the top of the unit against which he had fallen. He shut his eyes and hauled. Despite the lack of strength in his arm he was suddenly upright, unsteady. He opened his eyes. His father's face was close, the pores of his skin like polka dots. His beer breath fouled Joey's nose.

'Y'little git y'.'

Joey spat. His mouth was dry and the gesture empty.

'Bastard,' said his father, letting go of one lapel of Joey's jacket and unnecessarily wiping his face with the back of his hand. 'You bastard.'

Joey yelled as the hand became a fist and struck him in the ribs. And again. And again. With each blow, Joey tried to yell, achieving nothing more than a dull grunt.

'Eric! Stop it!'

'Keep out of it unless you want more of the same.'

There was a last punch, a cry from his father, and Joey was released. He fell back, managing to stay balanced over his unsteady legs. His father was holding one hand with the other and his mother was gripping a fork in her closed fist. As her husband moved towards her, like an animal with the smell of its prey in its nostrils, she turned the fork so that its tines pointed upwards. His hands separated, there were four were four small bloody marks on the back of his left hand. Joey's mother waved the fork.

'I'll go f' y'r eyes, I will. Go on, try me. Bully. Kids and women. Y'can manage them can y'? Come on, let's see you try.'

Joey caught her eyes as they flicked from holding his father to signalling to him. She seemed to be saying, Go on. Scarper. He couldn't run. He couldn't run and leave her. Near his hand was a rolling pin, with patches of pastry still sticking to it. He grabbed it and driving it horizontally as though making a forehand with a tennis racquet he hit his father on the side of the head above his ear. His mother screamed. His father moaned and fell forward and down. For a second Joey stood. Then he and his mother looked at each other, exchanging and confirming a wordless treaty. Joey opened the kitchen door and went out, stumbling down the concrete step. Finding his feet, he ran to the corner of the house and down the side path and out on to the street. Ten yards further he had to stop. His ribs stabbed pain into his chest and side and tears had begun to go cold on his cheeks. His breathing was uneven as he struggled to avoid the pain and at the same time fill his lungs. He walked slowly, breathing cautiously and shallowly. He made himself stop crying and wiped his face with his handkerchief. At each touch his bruised cheek snapped at him. Slowly the pain took hold of his whole face and his short reluctant inhalations were like the spasms of worn out weeping.

### 3

The outside light bracketed high on the vertical corner of the detached house was on. Rachel's mother put it on whenever she was expecting visitors as a sort of welcome sign. The artificial light deprived the scene of depth and colour. It was too bright and too directed, illuminating only the front of the adjoining garage and the part of the drive where the BMW had been left. The white-painted door of the garage was harsh. Down the side the contrasting blackness where a high privet hedge separated the house from its neighbour might have been a narrow gateway to another world. Alasdair was given a momentary image of a film set with a director and cameramen at his back and various technicians behind the painted backdrop.

Alasdair followed Rachel to the front door. The door was not locked and Rachel opened it and stepped inside. Alasdair wiped his feet on the coarse mat in the open porch before joining her in the large square hall. He shut the door carefully. When he turned, Susie was coming from the dining room. The house and its occupants were real. Susie smiled, looking pleased to see them. Susie had had her dark hair cut while she had been away, an older style, short at the back revealing the nape of her neck. Rachel said nothing and Alasdair could not see what expression she had on her face.

'Hi, Susie,' he said, pretending to ignore the familiar antipathy between the two sisters. 'How is university life, then?'

Susie, though four years younger than Rachel, was, when compared with the seemingly fleshless frame of her sister, altogether

bigger and rounder, and, in a warm way, attractive. When Alasdair saw them together he realised how carefully Rachel had to be treated, like fine china, and how heedless he could be in his attitude to Susie. Susie was still young. Susie always laughed, Rachel merely evinced pleasure, and only when she was genuinely pleased or fulfilled. There was a free-and-easy style to Susie. Her clothes were comfortable and her hair, even in its new style, would require but the speedy use of a brush and comb to keep it the way it was. She seemed to wear little make-up on her round face and yet she looked as though she took pains with her appearance. Her large brown eyes were the key to her baby-like appearance. Yet she was no longer child-like, no longer the white-bloused schoolgirl. She moved naturally without any of the circumspection that furnished Rachel with a fragile aura. Rachel's simple green dress, almost straight and cut a little low for someone as thin as she, contrasted markedly with machine-knitted navy-blue jumper pulled neatly into the belted top of Susie's plain grey woollen skirt. Her bosom though potentially maternal was high and firm.

'I'm really enjoying it,' answered Susie, leading the way into the lounge which was empty. Her dark-stockinged legs were not heavy and her feet were small in her low-heeled shoes. 'It seems so quiet here. The house is sort of empty and uncluttered. In hall there's always people. And my room. Well, it requires major planning to work out how to clear enough space to put down a cup of coffee.'

'Mother's flapping in the kitchen I suppose. Where's Dad?' asked Rachel.

'Said he was going to get changed.' Susie sat down at one end of the settee and Alasdair took the single armchair at the far side of the fire – a realistic imitation of an open coal fire, but burning gas – and listened while she recounted much of what had happened to her in the six weeks since she had started her course. It was not necessary, but occasionally he offered an anecdote from his own experience as a student to add to or counterpoint what she was telling him.

Rachel interrupted once to ask what they would like to drink and then ignored them while she extracted glasses from the sideboard and poured a sherry and a gin-and-tonic, and then spoke again, telling them

that she was just going through to the kitchen for a beer and some ice. After she had handed them their drinks – Alasdair had the beer and Susie the sherry – Rachel sat down at the other end of the settee leafing through a magazine on the floor in front of her. Listening to Susie, Alasdair watched Rachel. She was bent over and her fair hair hung down and away from her head shadowing the side of her face. Alasdair could feel the lightness of her hair on his hand and the warmth of her cheekbone as his fingers reached for her small ear. Each time she turned a page with her red-nailed white hand her wedding and engagement rings flashed. She was his wife. Suddenly it registered that he had not heard what Susie had said and he began to listen to her again, nodding to indicate that he was fully comprehending what she was telling him, which he was not. Fortunately when she began to laugh because the story was funny, he had understood enough to be able to laugh convincingly with her.

‘You came home yesterday? Last night?’ he asked solicitously.

‘Yes, the damned coach was nearly half an hour late and then I had to wait nearly twenty minutes for a bus.’

‘I thought your Dad – ’

‘I didn’t ask him. It’s a long drive. Almost four hours round trip. Bit much after a day at work. And I didn’t want to ask in case he refused. So I took the initiative rang up and said I was coming on the coach and not to worry.’

‘I’d have come and picked you up. It’d have been a pleasure.’

‘Why should you?’

Yes, thought Alasdair, why should he? He smiled and shrugged, as if to communicate the idea that in making the retrospective offer he was doing no more than show himself to be a decent fellow. But he was excited by the idea of travelling through the dark, meeting her with her relaxed smile and large brown eyes, and then being with her in the car all the way back. It was a simple adolescent fantasy, yet it had power.

‘No, seriously,’ he said, ‘if you want me to pick you or even give you a lift back then let me know. I’ll enjoy the drive.’



A sense of incipient deceit, of anticipated wrongdoing made him glance at Rachel. A small bunch of wrinkles had appeared between her darkened eyebrows, but her eyes were fixed on the curved page of the magazine that now rested on her knee. She had tucked her hair behind one ear.

The sound of the door being opened attracted his glance. Rachel's father came in. Tall and slim with thick almost white hair, yet he must be less than fifty. Rachel put down her magazine and looked up at him. He put his hand on the back of the settee and leaned down, balancing himself with a leg outstretched in the air behind him, and kissed her on her raised cheek.

'Alasdair,' he said in greeting as he straightened up before sitting down in the remaining armchair. The knees of his folded long legs seemed to rise up almost to the level of his face as he sank into the cushions.

Alasdair said, 'Hello' quietly. He would have liked to have added, Denis, but he had not yet worked out how to address his in-laws.

No one spoke.

Rachel has long legs, thought Alasdair.

'Your mother's managing, is she, Susie?' asked her father.

'Just about. But she's best left alone. I tried to help earlier, but it seems harder for her to tell me what to do than to get on with it herself. Don't worry, she'll emerge from the kitchen triumphant, but a quarter of an hour late as usual.'

'She seemed to be making hard work of it when I was in the kitchen. But then she always does,' said Rachel, still looking at the magazine.

'I don't how you can judge. When did you ever prepare a three-course dinner for five people?'

'I can cook, can't I, Alasdair?'

'I'm not talking about mere cooking. It's the planning, the organising, the scheduling, making sure that everything is ready at the same time and knowing what to do if the potatoes are already breaking up after ten minutes when you expected them to take twenty.'

'Girls, girls,' said their father. 'Who's for another drink, while we're waiting?'

At the end of the meal (in which the only serious fault was that the broccoli was overcooked), Joanne Marchland dismissed Denis and Alasdair and asked Rachel and Susie to help clear the table while she emptied and refilled the dishwasher.

Joanne was pleased to have a family again. The weeks since Denis had taken Susie up to university had passed slowly. Very slowly at first. Not because she was not used to having a house that was empty during the day, but because she recognised that only she and Denis now lived there and that even Susie would soon become an irregular visitor. Unlike Rachel, Susie's relocation had been sudden; one day she had been at home and the next was the first day of a long absence. Even after Rachel had decided to have a flat of her own (when she was nineteen) she often called in, came home for some meals and occasionally slept in her old bedroom. Over the last two years, Rachel had gradually changed from a daughter living at home to a young woman living by herself and to a wife living with Alasdair. She still called in two or three times a week. Susie was either here all the time, like now, or only a voice on the telephone. Only Denis came and went each day.

Joanne had completed a phase in her life. The phase of motherhood. And with its completion she had been reduced to the rank of wife. As a mother she had had hopes and aspirations, as a wife she had duties and responsibilities. And the duties and responsibilities were routine and dull. Marriage, even in those early months and years before Rachel was born had soon become predictable. Spending a large proportion of each day's hours with Denis had turned out to be far less exciting than those precious hours she had looked forward to each week

when they were first going out, and later – as they became more attached – each day. Becoming a mother had taken her into an unknown country with new geography and surprise views. She had a child. A child who grew and developed, who changed and challenged, who was both with you and against you. Nearly four years later Susie had been born and instead of it all being a repeat performance having two children opened up fresh territory. She put the intrusive thought of little Martin out of her mind. The two girls had developed their own conflicting personalities. Now they were gone. They had been going for years and it was their absence from the daily routine that had forced her to acknowledge the fact that they had left.

During the time it had taken the girls to progress from wobbly single steps to sometimes overconfident, almost defiant strides, Denis had just become older. And days with Denis were all the same. He had changed, but he had changed into someone whose motivating interests were centred elsewhere. The business had stolen long hours from her, and when success had lessened the need to strive, the hours had been returned empty and uninspiring.

The girls went back and forth between the dining room and the kitchen adding the dessert plates and the glasses to the piles of dirty crockery. She systematically emptied the dishwasher and soon they were both standing watching her. She was holding the basket of clean cutlery and sorting it into that which belonged in the kitchen and that which should go back to the drawer in the sideboard. Susie started filling the dishwasher again. Rachel sat on one of the high stools.

‘Did you tell Rachel about...?’ asked Joanne.

‘No, I haven’t,’ said Susie. The answer was toneless, neither encouraging nor discouraging.

‘Well,’ began Joanne, ‘Susie was – ’

‘Oh, Mum, I’ll tell her.’ Susie spoke with hushed but sharp insistence as though secretly communicating with her mother.

It hurt Joanne in a way she would never admit to anyone that Rachel and Susie did not get on together. They were different, she knew that, but families ought to be able to get on.

Susie soon finished her story. It had taken longer to tell when Joanne had heard it earlier. Rachel had listened without comment, her face looking at Susie and her eyes empty of interest. Joanne wanted them to talk. To exchange experiences, share a little of each other's lives, like sisters should. She tried once more.

'Rachel's getting on ever so well at the shop, aren't you Rachel?'

Joanne looked at Rachel when she heard nothing.

'Yes,' conceded Rachel.

'Don't just say yes. You've been all over the place, haven't you? And Donald – it's his shop – is opening another one and wants Rachel to run it for him.'

'Mum, I told you not to say anything to anyone about that, didn't I?'

'Susie's your sister.'

'Donald only mentioned it. There's nothing definite.'

'Surely, I can tell – '

'Sorry, Mum,' said Rachel without apologising. 'But if I tell you something and say don't tell anyone, I mean don't tell anyone. It doesn't mean tell some people.'

'I don't see why I can't tell my own daughter.'

'Mother, you don't see, do you?'

'I think I do, my girl.'

'I'm not your girl. Not any more.'

'No, I don't think you are,' said Joanne, trying hard to keep the regret out of her voice.

Joanne turned sharply and bumped Susie who was putting some plates in the dishwasher.

‘Sorry, Susie. You go. Filling a dishwasher’s a job for one person. Two only get in each other’s way. You two go through and join Alasdair and your father. It won’t take me very long.’

The girls went out of the door like they had gone out of her life.

## 4

By the time Joey arrived outside the *Wellington* he was determined not to go back home. To go back would be to regret what he had done, and his father would only see his return as an inability to survive in a tough world. He had not injured his father, not seriously, and if he was not there then his father could not rant and rave about him. If he went back then the ranting and raving would be quickly become punitive violence and not only would Joey get hurt, but so would his mother. She was better without him. He would leave and be independent. It was a decision which freed him from restrictions he could not name and made him feel that some longed-for time had actually arrived. He had grown up.

The pub was nearer the city centre than where Joey lived, but not in the city centre. It stood at the end of a long row of high Victorian terraced houses that had once been the homes of the more affluent residents of the city, but which were now subdivided in bed-sits and small flats with shared amenities. The only person Joey knew in the bar was Terry. Terry, who pronounced his name almost as though it was spelt with a U, already had a pint of lager in front of him, and Joey ordered the same for himself, calculating that his three pounds and twenty-seven pence would buy him two pints and leave enough for fish and chips later. Terry had very short hair, an even quarter of an inch long over the whole of his scalp. There was a V-shaped scar where no hair grew near the front of his head. His face was pale, marked with the past effects of severe acne, and he looked as though he could do with a few days in the sun. His hands were white and his finger nails

surprisingly clean. He wore a leather jacket similar to Joey's and three earrings in one ear. Terry was a couple of years older than Joey and seemed to know his way around. He had been coming into the bar for the last two or three months. Joey often talked to him, listened to him. Tonight, Joey wondered whether to tell him that he had left home and he was looking for somewhere to spend the night. He decided not to.

After the second pint, Terry and Joey, despite the fact that the pub had filled up, had not been joined by anybody else. During the week there was usually a good crowd most of whom Joey knew, but on Saturdays, they tended to pair off and do something different. Terry usually had a girlfriend with him.

'Where's Cathy?' asked Joey.

'Bitch,' said Terry, and Joey wished he had not said anything. 'She's gone for a meal' – he said the word as if only specially endowed people ate meals – 'with that Danny that was 'anging around the other night. Just 'cause 'e 'as a car. Well 'e can keep 'er. 'Tain't much of a car anyway.' He lifted his empty glass. 'Al'ays wantin' she is. Oo, I like that. Wouldn't that be nice. Can we go to the pictures?'

Joey wished that his glass wasn't empty so that he could have taken a drink from it rather than sit in silence.

'I'm 'avin' another,' said Terry, as though buying a further drink was like sticking an extra pin in a voodoo doll, a voodoo doll of Cathy. He stood up, and looked at Joey.

Joey read the question. 'No, I'll not bother.'

'Strapped for cash, eh?'

'Well –'

'My treat.'

When Terry came back from the bar, Joey, as a way of showing his gratitude, explained to him what had happened at home and how he'd half-planned not to go back.

‘Not for me to try an’ persuade you, but if you’re lookin’ for a roof jus’ say. No problem.’

Joey said, ‘Thanks, I’ll see,’ and then directed Terry’s attention to a couple women in short skirts and low-cut blouses that had come in and were sitting on high stools at the bar. Joey was fascinated by their unsubtle make-up, startling eyes, bold lips. One of them noticed him staring and winked. Terry who had his back to them had briefly looked over his shoulder and then returned his attention to his drink.

‘One of them winked,’ said Joey.

‘Amateurs,’ said Terry. ‘No, I’m wrong,’ he said carefully assuming the voice of an expert, ‘part-time professionals. Seen ’em in ’ere before on a Sat’d day. If y’ain’t got money for a drink then you ain’t got money for what they’re selling and you might even get more than you pay for.’

‘What d’y mean?’

Terry eyed Joey as if he was looped. ‘They’re weekend prostitutes. Work in one of the local factories durin’ week and then make a bit of extra tax-free at weekends. They’re the worst. Careless. The true professionals are different. Well it’s their livelihood, isn’t it? They’re careful. Especially these days with AIDS, you know.’

Joey thought he got the picture, but judged that any further questions would only highlight his ignorance rather than illuminate his understanding.

Terry bought himself and Joey another pint each and when their glasses were empty he announced that he could do with good curry. Joey said he hadn’t enough money so he’d have fish and chips. They left the pub and walked up the road.

‘What y’ goin’ to do, then?’

‘D’know.’

‘Let me give you some advice. What you need is time and space. Let’s get a couple o’ curries and go back to the hostel – I’ve a couple of



cans under the bed – and when we've eaten and drunk you can stretch out on my floor and see how you feel in the morning.'

Joey looked dubious.

'If you go home he'll belt you and your mother. If you don't go then at worst he'll clobber your mam. Logically you shouldn't go home.'

'OK, here's what I've got left, bit over one-fifty.'

The curry house was in the next street and the hostel a five minute walk beyond it on a road that was not familiar to Joey, a road which was wide and curved downhill, towards the city centre, he thought, but which seemed forgotten. The old large detached houses on each side were too big to be homes and had been converted. As he walked alongside the shorter, but quicker stepping Terry, he noticed offices, a nursing home, a private school, a small conference centre, before they arrived at the hostel where Terry had a room.

'Isn't there someone in charge, like,' he asked, as Terry opened the front door with a key.

'Naw,' said Terry. 'We 'ave a worker who's 'ere in the day, but she only pops in now and then in the evenin'. We're supposed to be learnin' to look after ourselves.'

Inside there was the noise of a television set coming from a closed door at the far end of the empty hall which was long and narrow like a corridor. The floor was covered with plain plastic tiles. The walls were bare.

'We 'ave a lounge with a telly, an' a kitchen,' said Terry 'There's ten of us – nine of us to be honest – Donna 'ad a visit from t'police and so she's not exactly in residence at the moment.'

Terry started off up the wide staircase and Joey hesitated. It was wrong just to walk upstairs in a strange house.

'C'mon, my room's up 'ere. What y'looking like that f'?

‘Well,’ said Joey, feeling awkwardly uncomfortable.

‘Look,’ said Terry rubbing his bristly skull with the palm of his hand, ‘this is my ’ome. I pay the rent, at least the social does, and I can ask who I like in, so come on.’

Joey went up the wide carpeted stairs more slowly than Terry, endeavouring to be quiet so as to neither disturb anyone nor give any sign of his presence. The doors were painted bright yellow with the surrounding frames brown. The place looked recently decorated though the biscuit-coloured wall at the side of the stairs was grubby with the friction of passing clothes. There were black marks near the skirting boards where the edges of careless shoes had scuffed the plaster. The old polished wooden banister retained the unclean touch of a thousand hands.

Terry had a big square room, bigger than any room in Joey’s house, with a large bay window. There was single bed that was ‘made’ only in the sense that the bedspread covered a tangle of rumpled bedding, a chair, a table with a mirror over it, a small narrow pine chest of drawers, and a large wardrobe, constructed from white-coated chip-board. There was nothing that Joey could see that belonged to Terry.

Terry took off his jacket and threw it on the bed. He reached under the bed and lifted out two cans of lager still held together with plastic. His fingers were hooked through spectacle-like rings where there had been two other cans. Terry’s thin pale bare arms were starkly marked with small tattoos on each forearm. He went out to get a couple of plates and forks. Joey sat in the chair.

While they were eating Terry did not speak. The forkfuls of rice and curry kept his mouth full most of the time. And whenever it was almost empty, Terry lifted his can of lager to his lips and threw back his head to drink. Joey, with the manners of a guest, matched his host’s silence.

When he had finished, Terry, who was sitting on the edge of the bed, lowered his plate to the floor and lifted his legs on to the bed and lay back. ‘That’s better,’ he said, and released a deep rattling belch.

Joey put his plate down on the floor, copying Terry, and sat holding the can of lager on his knee.

“S all right here, really. Better than some of the bedsits I’ve been in. It’s dry, it’s warm.”

‘You ever slept rough?’ asked Joey, still the uncertain guest.

‘Plenty. You name it. Park benches, shop doorways, under bridges, once under a hedge. Not bad if you’ve got summat to sleep in.’ He got off the bed and opened the wardrobe. ‘I have this.’ He threw the sleeping bag down on the floor. ‘Yours for the night, no charge.’ The outside of the bag was evenly filthy.

‘What’s it like livin’ ’ere?’

Terry stretched out on the bed again and pushed off his trainers. His white socks had badly stained soles. ‘All bloody questions aren’t y’?’

‘Sorry,’ said Joey. ‘Int’rested, that’s all.’

‘It’s not bad,’ said Terry, as if he didn’t want to admit it was good, but couldn’t put his finger on exactly what it was he didn’t like. ‘The current crowd are OK really, sometimes you get some right drongos. Y’got to watch every word y’say with ’em else they’ll fist y’ before y’know what’s ’it y’. ’An there’s the sniffers, solvent abuse. It’s against the rules, but we’ve ’ad a couple who did it on the quiet.’

‘Rules?’

‘Well, y’ got t’ ’ave some, ’aven’t y’? I mean, people livin’ together can’t just do as they like, can they?’

Terry explained that the hostel was for homeless young people – no one over twenty-five – and about the way the residents, as they were called, met together as a group once a week, with the worker, to sort out any problems. Joey kept asking questions and Terry, despite his earlier rebuke, seemed pleased to be able to inform Joey about a sphere of life that was new to him. All but one of them – there were four girls, including Donna, and six men – had been convicted of at least one crime, and the majority had served some kind of custodial sentence. Their offences were mainly petty, like shoplifting, others had been

convicted of assault and one had a grievous bodily harm on his record. Donna's boyfriend had been charged with a mugging, and Donna had been pulled in because she had been there with him when he and his mates had done it.

'What about you?'

'Me, I'm clever, me.'

'You been inside?'

'Six months, out in four.'

Joey almost pointed out that getting caught wasn't too clever.

'My own fault,' said Terry, as though countering Joey's unarticulated comment. He continued. 'Well, you see, I do 'ouses. You know, in an' out quick. Try a door or a window an' if you can get in then a quick look around grab anything that seems worth 'avin' and then out before anyone's the wiser.'

'How d'y' get caught?'

'Picked up this necklace, like. Was just lyin' on the sideboard. Very sparkly, didn't look real, but, well, I thought, it'll fetch a quid or two. Bloody real diamonds, weren't they. Didn't take 'em long to find me, did it? Still I asked for another hundred to be taken into account, pretend you've cleared the slate. Anyway it helps them to close some of their cases. I stick to cash now, much safer. You'd be amazed how much cash there is lying around in some people's houses. A tenner tucked under a vase, a fiver behind the clock, pound coins in kids' money boxes, old envelopes with forty quid or more saved up for the next telly licence, tins full of loose change, you soon get to know where to look. On a good day you might make fifty quid, on an ordinary one say twenty or thirty. I don't do it every day.'

Joey admired the off-hand confidence.

Terry yawned. 'Bed time.' He began to undress. 'Make y'self comfortable, and I'll put out the light.'

Joey took off his boots, socks and his jeans, and pulled his sweatshirt over his head, leaving him wearing only a tee-shirt and boxer shorts. Each bend and stretch pulled at a sore muscles, and it was with tentative care that he eased his abused body into the sleeping bag.

'Sweet dreams,' said Terry after he had clicked the switch by the door.

'G'night,' said Joey.

The room was not dark. The curtains were not properly closed and light from the street lamps marked the wall with irregular yellow strips. Joey lay looking up at the ceiling, looking at the long shadow of the central lampshade hanging by a plastic flex. The lampshade was a ridged paper globe. He listened. Occasionally a car went by. Dimly he could hear the lower tones of the distant television. Somewhere else in the building a door was closed firmly. A toilet flushed. There were footsteps on the stairs. He heard a creak above him. Terry was breathing rhythmically, like an aspirating machine. Joey was wide awake. He did not want to stay. He was, like *Oliver Twist*, surrounded by thieves and thugs. Although he had not met anyone else that lived there he sensed he was on the fringe of group to which he did not belong, a group of unpredictable individuals who lived by rules that were not made clear to strangers or intruders like himself, but which, nevertheless, he was expected to know and to obey. He knew Terry, a little, but he did not know the others who lived in the same hostel. Loud music burst out from down below, diminished suddenly as someone turned a control and then burst out loud again as the volume was turned up defiantly. A voice shouted. Another answered. The music lessened a little, but was still loud. A door banged and two voices could be heard shouting at each other on the ground floor. Other voices protested. Terry breathed out of rhythm, turned in his bed, and began to snore. The music stopped. Another door banged, or maybe the same one again. A female voice yelled a string of syllables which were incomprehensible, but were recognisably invective, and petulant.

Then, quite quickly it seemed, the more distant parts of the hostel became quiet. Terry kept snoring. Joey considered getting up and leaving. He could go back home. He had left home before – or said he

was leaving home – but always gone back. Once when he was eight, he had packed teddy and his Action Man and all his clothes into four plastic bags and got stuck trying to go through the front door, but he had been determined. He was two streets away when his mother, who had followed him at a distance for a while, had caught him up and put a gentle hand on his untidy hair. Without a word he had gone back with her. Because she wanted him to. On the later occasions he had left the house just to get away and had gone back as soon as his anger or fear had subsided. This would be the first time he had stayed away for a night. But he needed that space and time that Terry had talked about. Going back now would only make it harder to leave later. He had to persevere this time and be resolute. It was a different world with different standards and different expectations, but it was the world where he could do what he wanted when he wanted. And he had made the first step into that world. The thought of this being first step on a long journey made him a little euphoric. The stark strangeness of the room presaged the unknown strangeness of tomorrow, of not having a home to go. Home had been a focus, a fixed point from which everything else gained its position and status. Now he had disconnected himself from it. The only reference was himself.

He might have to sleep rough. Terry had done it. Others had done it. He had seen them on the television, in London, sitting on the steps of Eros talking with a bravado that vaunted their deprivation, and their indulgence in marijuana and cocaine. They used the same tone of voice he had heard used by kids at school for whom the truth was what the teacher you were talking to wanted to hear. The reporter only heard what she expected to hear, an immature, maverick and almost mutinous stand against the norms, expectations and strictures of a materialistic, self-interested society. Their lack of self-esteem, counting themselves nothing, was used as if it were an invincible weapon against money as the measure of everything. But despite their success at telling a newsworthy story and claiming a certain contentment with their lot, the truth was, Joey concluded, that they were often hungry, often wet, sometimes cold and slept uncomfortably and badly on the streets,

under bridges, in winter and in summer. And would rather have a proper bed.

For Joey, the prospect of enduring some self-imposed hardship was invigorating. It was a test he was about to set himself. Living without a home, a house, a flat or a room to go to would prove himself – he thought of the old sense of the word as he had had expounded by a teacher in junior school, the sense that should be read when we say: the proof of the pudding is in the eating; or it is the exception that proves the rule. Yes this was a test, a testing time.

Terry was probably right. About not going back home. Maybe his mother didn't want him to go back. Of late he had sensed she was encouraging him to be independent, silently telling him that she had done all she could and now he had to fend for himself. It would have been easier if he was still on the YTS; at least he would have had some money. Fuck the YTS. He would make out. He knew she wanted him to. She was sending him away from where he did not fit in, where he did not belong. He felt her near. He was her son. They would always be close, with a closeness that transcended distance and excluded others.

That was what his father did not like.

*He* always construed anything between Joey and his mother as being directed against himself. He saw conspiracy and deceit in every word they exchanged and had more than once accused them of trying to make a bloody fool of him. Joey's father was not very bright. His mother was different. She had opinions. But she rarely expressed them. Distinctly left-wing, she was. Hated racism, thought the poll tax was – what was the word she used – iniquitous and couldn't see the logic of privatising water. For her, watching the television news was a key event in the day, and on those days when Joey had been at home during the school holidays, she almost always listened to Radio Four. His father adopted statements and opinions read in the *Daily Star* or heard in the *Mace and Mitre* and quoted them as facts and universal truths. Joey felt very different from his father. His mother had on a number of occasions said that Joey was like her in temperament and character. She never said he was like his father. In fact she never referred to him as his father. She always called him Eric. Joey had sometimes been

surreptitiously conscious of her studying him as if he reminded her of someone.

Joey stepped off a kerb in his half-sleep and his whole body jarred at the lack of solid ground. He hissed between his teeth as the sudden movement was grabbed by the pain in his ribs.

Wide awake again, a possible truth about himself formed in his mind. Was his father not his real father? Perhaps somewhere there was a tall educated man who had had a romantic affair with his mother in the days when, though no longer a girl, she had still been attractive and he, Joey, had been the outcome of that affair.

His thinking drifted into dreaming and his dreaming into sleep and sleep into forgetfulness.



## 5

‘Goodnight,’ said Susie, standing up.

Denis responded, and Joanne stirred in her armchair. A few minutes ago, fatigue had drawn down her eyelids and a little later sleep had tightly sealed her eyes.

As soon as the door had closed, Joanne, whom Denis saw as an older lumpier version of Susie, wearily levered herself out of her chair and went round the room collecting the coffee mugs on to the tray and took them out to the kitchen.

The three of them had said nothing since Rachel and Alasdair had left.

Denis was sitting in the chair he had occupied since dinner. The quietness following the awkward conversation of the evening had released him from a tenseness of body and mind that he had not noticed until it began to seep away. It left a hollow dejection in his chest, a cold philosophical sorrow for things that might have been, that he had expected to be. All evening the girls had bickered. As long as he could remember they had bickered. Disagreements over who was entitled to play with a particular toy, objections to the other choosing clothes that were ‘just the same as mine’ or which ‘no one wears any more’. Tonight each had, in turn, essayed to belittle the other in tones of polite surprise or with faint ridicule disguised as a reasoned presentation of an opposing or merely different point of view. Alasdair, on Rachel’s behalf, and Joanne on Susie’s had tried to offer bridging

compromises or suggest more moderate statements. In one sense they had succeeded in that they had avoided the escalation into a bloody row of the tit-for-tat competition, which had, as its unattainable aim, the public recognition of one sibling's inherent superiority by the other. But Joanne and Alasdair had failed to dissolve the crystalline atmosphere that had held them all in their committed roles for the whole evening.

Denis, in the main, had been an observer. But he could not admit to impartiality. Rachel was his daughter, Susie was Joanne's. Not that he always agreed with Rachel or always took her side. It was more that he saw Rachel as a driver along life's road, and Susie as a passenger, like her mother. He had always endeavoured to be a taker of initiative and a grabber of opportunities, and in certain ways he had succeeded. Rachel seemed determined to succeed on a wider front. And he admired her for it, though she sometimes lacked consideration and exhibited a sort of pragmatic tactlessness. She had rules, and she applied the rules with objectivity, and if someone was hurt then it could not be helped. The rules were paramount. She had once said that in her opinion offence was never given, always taken, and claimed that because her intention was not to give offence then she could not be blamed if people took it. In business and commerce where there were objective criteria for success and for being right, her approach would be praised. Denis did not know whether such an attitude was viable in all spheres. Joanne was different. Joanne spent so much time considering other people that she had never got round to achieving anything herself. She lived vicariously. And because she could not accept Rachel's standards, she lived through Susie, Susie who was just like her mother. Except, except, and he only admitted it to himself, Susie was brighter and manipulated people in a much more subtle way. That was why she and Rachel bickered because each, having different standards of success, thought they were winning, and so each expected the other to concede and because they never did so the bickering went on. It had become part of their being sisters, a sort of family tie through which they acknowledged their sisterhood. Denis no longer expected the family ties to be any more than biological. He and Joanne had chosen to share their lives, the girls had been forced to do so. Now they, his children, had grown from dependence to independence; they were

officially adult and entitled to think and decide for themselves. Bringing up children was not a matter of careful force, they were not clay on the potter's wheel. Nor, if they had been, could it be said that the stronger the hand the more the pot approached the ideal in the potter's mind. Denis had had ideal models for his children, but they had faded as both Rachel and Susie had developed characters and personalities that marked them as separate people, distinct from Joanne and himself. Children were, inevitably, influenced by their parents because they lived with them, but any influence they exerted was unlikely to be manifest openly in the presence of father or mother. Children strove to be distinct from their parents, to deny their parent's values, even to ridicule and deprecate. It was as misguided for a father or mother to change and try to be the ideal parent, as might be envisaged by one's child, as it was to expect a child truly to conform to a parental ideal. There was pretence on both sides. He knew that the tight closeness of father, mother and children had to be pulled apart. All one could expect was that, as they followed their paths in life, one's children would continue to feel that you were interested and tell you about what they did and thought and planned. He had known this for a long time. Joanne had yet to realise it. Maybe it is different for women, for mothers. Maybe the natal ties are never broken. Joanne resisted the inevitable drifting apart of the family she had made, and tried to mend the signs of its impending fragmentation. In contrast, when Susie and Rachel were at odds, rather than try to bring them together, Denis merely watched. He tried to understand the adversarial mechanics much as a commentator analyses the strengths and weaknesses of two soccer teams. Rachel was all striker, always testing her opponents, pressing forward, and occasionally devious. She would pull back from a sharp thrust toward goal and tempt the defence to switch to attack only to outflank and run in to score. Susie played a tight game. Susie was like a team of all-rounders capable of attack or defence, but only mediocre and moderate. What strength she had came from solidarity, her views and opinions cohered and were mutually supportive, she was a principled and careful thinker. Rachel might think she was winning, but her forwards would eventually be caught in the offside-trap and the infrangibility of her opponent's strategy would find her defence unprepared. Joanne, ever concerned about people's sensitivities, played

the referee and when she was effective then the game never became interesting. At the slightest indication of gamesmanship, of playing to the letter of the rules and ignoring its spirit, play was halted with what was intended to be a discreet warning but which grew blatant in the subsequent hiatus, and which united the two girls against their mother, as arguing players will together turn against the referee. These days an emotional appeal to stop it, would, particularly if other people were present, bring a frustrated silence with subsequent play encouraged to follow a different, preferably anodyne, topic of conversation.

Now that this evening's match was over, Denis was both disappointed and relieved. And he quite slowly recognised that not only was the short encounter of that evening finished, but also the longer one, the one in which he had started out as joint manager of both teams and ended as a spectator. The season of fatherhood was effectively over. There was no longer the tension between family responsibilities and the expectations of business, of having to fit in his work and pleasure around the timetables of school and the calendar of school holidays. Now was the time that he, he and Joanne, had freedom. They could enjoy the affluence he had striven for all these years. More holidays. Meals out. The theatre. The opera. He'd like to try the opera. Weekend breaks. Yet, the colour of this carefree future was somewhat muted. For a long time it had been something to hold in front of him when the hours had been extended and the deals difficult, but now it was here he wasn't sure. Much of what he wanted he could have had in considerable measure during the years since Susie had emerged from adolescence. Arrangements could have been made. Ways found. But it was Joanne, herself, that had inhibited any widening of their – his and Joanne's – horizons. She had never argued against anything, but whatever Denis had offered she had always carefully put on one side like a thoughtful but unwanted birthday present – decorative, but useless. Their life was ornamented with thousands of suggestions, each reduced to inutility by the ethos of motherhood. It was impossible to criticise Joanne. Her rightness was totally internally consistent, unassailable from without. Now that Susie was established at university there was, once again, the possibility of change. But would Joanne want it, and if she still did not want it, was it worth anything without someone to share it.

‘Denis. Wake up.’

Joanne had come back from the kitchen.

‘I had only closed my eyes.’ Despite her increasing tendency to doze, it had long been Joanne’s tenet that the only place to sleep was in bed. And, thought Denis, it was now the only thing to do in bed.

A suppressed sigh, guerrilla-like, infiltrated his face.

‘What are you looking like that for?’ The admonition in her voice seemed right coming from a woman with straight evenly cut greying hair standing in a loose, purple dress tied at the waist and patterned with unidentifiable deep-red leaf clusters; it draped her in the manner of a cloth over a piece of new sculpture – a Henry Moore? – before its unveiling. The dress might have been designed to give no clue as to the shape beneath. When he had first met her she had twisted up her refractory hair in plastic curlers, but as a mother the plain nearly severe look had prevailed. Close to, her brown eyes remained as soft as ever. He wished she smiled more often.

‘Just thinking.’

‘About what?’ She spaced out the knick-knacks on the mantelpiece.

‘I can’t remember. You asking has made it go.’

‘No need to be cross.’

‘I am not cross,’ he said with involuntary emphasis.

She sat down and picked a crumb off the carpet, and while still probing the pile with her fingers, she said, ‘Rachel’s just like you.’

Denis let his silence invite elaboration.

‘Whenever anyone shows an interest in you, you take it as criticism. I don’t ask you what you are thinking because I want to pry, I ask you because something about your expression or manner makes me concerned. You should be glad I’m concerned, rather than snapping at me.’ She sat up. ‘I can’t make you tell me what you don’t want to.’

Denis waited for half a minute so that what he said next would be disconnected from what had been said.

‘I was thinking – ’

‘So you said.’

‘I was going to tell you what I had been thinking about.’ That was not the absolute truth, but what he had planned to say was the outcome of his earlier thinking.

She looked at him with the expectation of a Sunday morning congregation after a preacher has announced that he is going to deliver a few thoughts on the problem of evil.

‘I was thinking,’ he said, immediately regretting the repeated phatic statement, and hurried on, ‘that we might have a weekend in London before Christmas, nice hotel, a look round the shops, go to a show or a concert...’ His voice ended with a faint question, a question that had the tone of one which expected no as an answer. He damned his own weakness. If he had been talking to a potential client or a recalcitrant business partner he would have been decidedly more positive, friendly-aggressive.

‘I’ll think about it?’

‘Don’t you want to go?’

‘Oh, I’d like to go, but there aren’t that many weekends left before Christmas, are there? And there’s little point once we’re into December, is there?’

He nearly asked why, but allowed the lack of response to be interpreted as comprehension.

She stood up and yawned, a double yawn with the second phase deeper and longer. ‘I’m tired. I’m going.’

‘I shan’t be long,’ he said.

‘Night.’

She closed the door carefully as she went out, leaning slightly backward, pulling with a straightened arm until it clicked.

## 6

Alasdair always washed the car on Sunday mornings. He had washed it on each of the seven previous Sundays, every Sunday since they had bought it. And he had waxed it. And polished it. And vacuum-cleaned the inside. It was usually ten o'clock when he carried out his first bucketful of warm water to which he had added a sachet of shampoo. Other people used washing-up liquid. He was thorough and this morning there was enough warmth and brightness in the sun to make the task easier and the result a delight. Polished gleaming red. Except for the double graze along the driver's door. Damned cyclist. He walked round the other side and looked at the car. Why was there such pleasure in the sight of a clean and sparkling car? He almost expected the car to show its gratitude and growl like a tamed dangerous animal.

'Alasdair!'

He turned towards the front door and gave Rachel a quizzical look.

'Come and answer the phone!'

He draped his polishing cloth over the edge of the cardboard box that held his collection of car-cleaning equipment and walked up towards the front door of the house. He could hear the phone ringing.

'Can't you answer it,' he called rubbing his hands on his faded jeans.

'I want *you* to,' she said as he stopped on the threshold.



‘Why?’ he asked, stepping past her.

‘It’s the third or fourth time it’s rung and each time there’s no one there.’ She sounded strained, and a little high-pitched. Alasdair called it her pseudo-hysterical voice. She used it when she wanted to appear helpless or feminine.

‘All right,’ he wagged his head to signify his bemusement. ‘All right,’ he repeated.

The telephone was on a low table just inside the front door.

‘Hello,’ he said, ‘Alasdair Quirke.’

The voice at the other end said, ‘Hello, Alasdair. It’s Susie. I’m glad you answered at last. I didn’t want to ask Rachel if I could speak to you. She would only have wanted to know what I wanted you for and then she might not have passed on the message.’

Looking away from the phone Alasdair pulled his face into an expression that was intended to indicate to Rachel that it was a perfectly normal call, but it wasn’t for her. She moved away, and Alasdair twisted back towards the telephone.

‘What message?’

‘Well,’ she said, ‘last night, when we were talking, you said you wouldn’t mind a drive to pick me up, well I wondered, seeing there’s a few things I’d like to take back with me, whether you’d fancy a trip back this afternoon – or this evening.’ The alternative was appended quickly as though she wanted not to appear presumptuous.

Alasdair hesitated.

Susie hastily filled the silence. ‘It doesn’t matter if you can’t or would rather not. I can do without them until after Christmas. Dad’s bound to give me a lift then.’

‘Oh, I’d like to – ’

‘But what?’

Alasdair looked down the narrow hallway in the direction of the kitchen to where he assumed Rachel had returned.

‘I’ll have to see how Rachel reacts.’ Involuntarily he heard his voice adopt a cautious edge. ‘She has... well... she... Look, I’ll call you back. Give me half an hour.’ Before she could put the phone down, he added in a rush, ‘What time do you have to get the bus?’

‘Three-fifty so there’s plenty of time.’

‘OK.’

‘Bye.’

‘Bye.’

Alasdair put down the phone slowly. He wanted to take her back, to drive with her in his new red car. He had rubbed at the two lines to try and minimise the blemish on what had been his immaculate new red car. It would have to be re-painted. Susie wouldn’t notice. He would know, but she wouldn’t notice. He would take her back and his pulse quickened at the prospect.

He *liked* Susie. Yes, liked. He had liked her since he had first met her. But as Rachel’s schoolgirl sister, six – nearly seven – years younger than him she was someone to be nice to and nice to talk to. Inevitably he had seen her quite often and it had seemed that on many occasions there had been time to fill and he had found himself conversing with her, paying thoughtful heed to everything she had to say. Usually she asked him about university and being a student, but she had views on various matters, political and social, which she did not hesitate to expound to him and then wait patiently for his response giving him the kind of attention that was fresh with innocent esteem. He had thought it was because he was so much older than her. In his experience, between sixteen and eighteen, girls were attracted to older, inaccessible men. And he had thought that he fell into that category. Nevertheless, judging her to be of the naive left, he had enjoyed putting awkward questions to her, making her see the consequences of the policies she advocated. Now he was not sure of her attitude, her attitude to him. She was no longer merely his wife’s little sister, and her ideas

and opinions had matured rapidly. Since last night he had realised that he had missed the unarranged opportunities to see her and the notion that she had missed them too added a conspiratorial nuance to the proposed plan for the day. Alasdair almost felt that he already had an *understanding* with her. If he took up her suggestion, which he wanted to, then there might ensue consequences which he might not be able to handle. And yet – he thought of Rachel and Donald – and yet, there *are* tides. No, he was being fanciful, adolescent. It is a straightforward matter, he told himself and strode down the hall into the kitchen.

Rachel was putting water into a saucepan.

‘It was Susie.’

She added salt to the water, placed the pan on the cooker and switched on the electric ring under it. ‘What did *she* want?’

Alasdair had difficulty in categorising the complex of emotions that seemed to motivate his wife whenever her sister was mentioned or present. There was resentment, jealousy, envy, deprecation, disdain, but none in overwhelming measure. It was though Rachel failed to understand what pleasure Susie gained from her life and despised her for being so apparently contented. As if Susie’s very way of living was a continuous criticism of her – Rachel’s – life. That by not having the same values and ambitions that she had, Susie was castigating her. Alasdair had known for a long time that there was this tension between the sisters, but the absence and return of Susie had intensified it, at least in Rachel. Susie, for her part, he believed, found the antagonism unnecessary and futile.

‘There’s no need to use that tone.’

‘It was the way you looked as though you expected my disapproval.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You rather fancy her don’t you?’

Alasdair hesitated, searching for words.

‘I don’t see – ’ His voice was weak, and she gave him no time.

‘See? You can’t see beyond her sweet smile and virginal – ’ She failed to find a noun, but no noun was necessary.

‘Look, she’s a – ’

‘ – nice girl. You’ve said it before. And what does that make me?’

‘I’m not implying that you’re not – ’

‘ – nice nor a girl. God, you’re so predictable. I suppose you want me to try to be sociable and listen to what people have to say and tell them interesting things so that they’ll listen to me. So they’ll know what makes me tick. What I live for. Life’s short enough as it is without having to be nice to people. I’m out for what I can get. So are you. You didn’t marry me for my conversation. You married me because you thought that I was – ’

‘Rachel!’ He stepped towards her, his hand rising. The pan lid began to lift under the pressure of the steam.

‘Go on,’ she mocked, lifting her hand in a parody of defence.

‘Rachel.’ His voice was softer. ‘Who are you trying to hurt?’

‘Hurt? Who said I was trying to hurt anyone?’

The pan continued to boil. Rachel lowered the heat under it.

Alasdair breathed and said, ‘She asked me to drive her back this afternoon.’

‘Why can’t she go on the coach.’

‘Apparently she has some extra things to take back.’

‘Apparently.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘You said *apparently*.’

‘So I said *apparently*. Does it matter?’

‘People say apparently when they suspect subterfuge.’

‘And what subterfuge might Susie be perpetrating?’

Rachel pressed her lips so that her underlip protruded slightly and raised her neat eyebrows. It was her now-how-would-I-know face.

‘Is it all right with you if I take her?’

‘Why should I mind?’

After a pause, Alasdair said, ‘You could come if you want.’

‘No, it’s all right. You take her. I’ll stay here. And I’ll ring the police if there are any more of those funny phone calls.’

‘There won’t be.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I don’t, but I think that it’s more likely somebody who keeps dialling the wrong number.’

‘Why didn’t they say anything?’

‘I don’t know. Could even be someone in another country. Mis-dialling.’

‘Well it makes me nervous.’

‘You? Nervous?’

‘Women get raped in their own homes these days.’

‘You’d love it.’ He knew he’d gone too far. She threw the paring knife she had been holding at him. It caught his left ear. She ran out of the kitchen and banged her way up the stairs, stamping one foot on every tread. He switched off the ring under the pan and went up after her, two at a time.

She was lying face down on their bed and kicking it with her feet.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, keeping his distance. ‘Bad joke.’

She turned on to her side. ‘Awful fucking joke,’ she said. ‘Literally.’

Alasdair saw no tears on her face, and no promise of tears in her eyes. Nor did she seem angry. He sat on the edge of the bed.

'I'm sorry,' he said again.

The bed moved as she changed position.

'I am sorry,' he emphasised.

'I know,' she said.

He continued sitting with his back to her. Her hand touched the back of his neck.

'Look at me,' she said.

He looked at her.

She pulled his head towards her face and made him kiss her. As he pulled back a drop of blood landed on her cheek.

'I'm bleeding.'

She tugged a tissue out of a box at the bedside, wiped her face and held it on his ear as she kissed him again. He knew where she was leading and he knew he would follow.

It was ten minutes over the half hour when he called Susie.

## 7

‘Wait ’ere.’

Terry disappeared around the side of the house, and Joey, as Terry had said he should, watched the opening in the high hedge where the short drive met the pavement. He wasn't sure what he should do if someone appeared. Terry hadn't really explained. But it was obviously sensible to have someone keeping a look out. He could shout.

Joey was restive. He had been looking forward to this moment since Terry had first suggested it earlier that morning. Now he was on edge and the excitement he had anticipated had drained away.

Joey had woken in the unfamiliar room.

He whispered Terry's name. There was no answer. Joey held his breath, straining to create a silence in which he could listen. There was no sound of breathing. Terry was not there. Joey lay there hoping that Terry would soon come back. Gradually the light behind the curtains brightened, but the window faced a direction other than east because no straight sunlight shone through the untidy curtains. When the hardness of the floor beneath the sleeping bag became unendurable he twisted his body intending to get out. He gasped. His chest and back had stiffened and even the gentle shift in his position caused reluctant muscles to pull against each other. Gingerly, transferring his weight carefully from hand to hand and then to his feet, he managed to slough

off the sleeping bag. Putting on his clothes was accompanied by restrained sibilants. He involuntarily drew air through closed teeth whenever a normally unconscious action caused an unexpected twinge or a shot of sharper pain. Carrying his leather jacket and his boots he went to the door. It seemed essential that, until he knew what was going on and what was expected, he be as quiet as he could. He pressed down the handle of the door slowly so that it would not click loudly and then eased it open. At first he could hear nothing, and then he discerned the faint chatter of two voices. Joey crept down the stairs. At the bottom he could tell that the voices were coming from a partly open door at the far end of the corridor-like hall, opposite the door of the room where he had judged the television to be. He stopped outside the door and listened for a while. A female voice, and a male voice. He thought the male voice was Terry's. He could smell toast.

Joey went back to the bottom of the stairs, and pulled on his boots and laced them up. He walked carefully towards the voices, putting each boot gently on the plastic floor. Tentatively he pushed gently at the door, which he gathered must open into the kitchen. It did.

Terry lifted his head when Joey made a small coughing noise in his throat.

'Hey, it's Joey.'

The girl who – as she sitting at the opposite side of the yellow-topped table from Terry – had her back to the door, looked briefly over her shoulder. She had very short hair, tapered up from her neck to a fairly sharp horizontal line above her ears. On the top of her head it stuck out in various directions like an over long untended lawn. Patches of the hair were bleached. Joey was not sure whether they were the leftovers from a time when all her head had been blonde or a deliberate effect. Her flat ears, at least the one he could more readily see, had a line of rings and studs from the lobe to the top curve.

'Yvette,' said Terry, 'this is Joey.'

"Lo," said Yvette. She lifted her mug and drank the remains of whatever was in it and stood up. She was little. Joey stepped back as she skittered under his arm and into the hall.



‘Coffee?’ asked Terry.

Joey nodded.

Waiting for something to happen, Joey began to be nervous. What if someone did come up the drive?

Breakfast had been three slices of toast made from sliced bread with margarine and apricot jam. Terry had nothing else, and he had to ‘borrow’ the jam from Yvette. Joey couldn’t complain. Without any money he was grateful for anything.

It was later, when the nearest pub had opened and Terry had said he’d buy Joey a pie and a pint, or something, that Terry had suggested that they do a few houses that afternoon.

‘You come and help,’ he had said ‘and you can have part of whatever I get.’ It seemed only right, in view of what Terry had done for him, that Joey try to return the favour. Terry said that Joey would not get as much as half because he was only like the apprentice and it was Terry that had all the expertise. That had been all right by Joey.

Now, as the time he had been standing there began to seem like minutes, Joey was tempted to go and see what Terry was doing.

The click of the door behind him being unlatched startled him. He spun round.

‘OK.’

It was Terry.

‘Let’s be off.’

Terry closed the door behind him and led the way down the drive and along the road until they came to the main road. A further twenty yards up the main road, Terry sat down on bench and Joey sat alongside him. Terry pulled some screwed up notes out of his jeans pocket. He pulled out a fiver partially smoothing it out as he drew it

from his right hand with the fingers of his left. He held the nearly straight note in front of Joey.

‘Yours,’ he said.

‘Thanks.’ Joey folded it and forced put it into his jacket pocket and pulled the zip shut.

‘Not a bad rate for an apprentice,’ said Terry, standing up, ‘about a pound a minute.’

They walked for about a quarter of an hour. Terry seemed to know the area. The houses were large, not as large as the hostel, but quite big, detached and with decent-sized gardens at the front at least. Joey didn’t know quite where he was. It had taken nearly twenty minutes on the bus from the end of the road where the hostel was to where they had got off. They had walked for five minutes before Terry had picked out the house.

‘Let’s try along here.’ They went up a street with mature trees growing at intervals from the narrow grass verges on either side. After walking past three or four houses, Terry walked towards the front door of the next. Joey was a couple of paces behind. Terry looked into the front bay window and then rang the door bell as he had at the other house. They waited. When the door opened Joey involuntarily made a short noise with his mouth. A woman stood there. She could have been anything from fifty to seventy, Joey was no judge of age, not of old women.

Before the woman said anything, Terry said, in a careful voice, ‘I’m sorry, we seem to have the wrong house. I was looking for someone called Arnold Shufflewaite.’

The woman shook her head, and closed the door without speaking.

Terry went back down the street to the end where they had come in, and then turned so as to continue the way they had been heading. He explained that if he had really wanted to see someone at that house then that’s what he would have done. He wouldn’t go further along the street to another house. ‘It looks more natural,’ he said, ‘and so anyone

peeping from behind their curtains doesn't get suspicious. If you go into the next house, or even another one on the same street then some curtain-twitcher might think about giving the coppers a bell. Better to play safe.'

'Who's Arnold Shufflewaite?'

'No one, I made 'im up.'

They walked in silence.

After a while Joey said, 'What am I supposed to do if I see someone coming?'

'You come straight round to where I've got in and shout KV.'

'What's KV stand for?'

'It's Latin or Greek or somethin'. They use it in them public schools. I heard it on telly. It means watch it someone's comin' or somethin'.'

'Why?'

'I don't know why?'

'I mean why shout that.'

'If you didn't shout that you might shout me name an' that would be a bit divvy, eh? An' another thing. If we 'ave to run then don't follow me an' I won't follow you. Different ways. Slows 'em down if they have to decide who to chase.'

At the next house that Terry selected, he followed the same routine but when he had looked into the front window he moved back sharply and held his finger to his lips. He walked round the end of the house.

'There's a fella and 'is missus asleep in fron' of the telly. I bet the back door's open. They won' 'ear a thing.'

Joey wanted to say, You're not going in when they're there. But Terry was already on his way round to the back. Joey watched Terry from the corner of the house. The kitchen door was in the side of the

house and when Terry turned the handle it opened. Terry waved for him to join him. The two of them crept into the house and Terry pointed in the direction of the hall and mouthed, *stand near the stairs*. Joey moved to a point between the stairs and the door of the room through which he could hear the television set.

His heart must be beating fast, he thought, because he was bloody scared.

From his position in the hall, Joey could see into the kitchen. Terry was opening cupboards and looking in drawers. He watched him open a tin that was standing on a worktop. Joey listened hard, but the television was too loud for him to hear anything but the voices and music of a film.

Terry came into the hall, shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. He looked around and noticed the door to another room other than the front room where the television and the dozing couple were. He took the knob in his right hand and turned it slowly leaning against the door to control the speed at which he opened it. There was no click. When it was sufficiently open, Terry got down on his hands and knees and put his head around the edge of the door so that he could see into the room. After a few seconds he stood up and walked into the room. Almost immediately he came back grinning and waving what looked like five or six tenners. Joey grinned in return and felt the warmth of a goal achieved.

They both raised their faces as they both heard the sound of a toilet flushing upstairs. There was someone else in the house. Terry dashed back towards the kitchen, and Joey, remembering what Terry had said went for the front door. Unlike the kitchen door it wouldn't open. There was bolt which moved after Joey had waggled it a bit, and a Yale lock which moved easily. Joey pulled at the door. It opened and then jarred to a stop as the door chain, which Joey had not noticed, became suddenly taut stopping the door less than six inches ajar. Joey staggered a little, let go of the Yale latch and the door handle and began to fiddle with the door chain. He had no real idea of how it worked. There were rapid footfalls on the stairs followed by a yell.

‘What the hell – !’

The man coming down the stairs looked young and broad chested. Joey ran towards the kitchen. A hand reached over the banister rail as Joey passed and grabbed at his hair. Joey felt the touch of the man’s fingers.

Out of the kitchen, along the side of the house, into the road.

‘Come here, you!’ The voice was out in the open, behind him. Not far behind him.

Joey hesitated at the gate. Which way had Terry gone? He saw him about a hundred yards away. Joey ran in the opposite direction. He stopped on the corner and looked back to see if he was being followed. The man from the house was sprinting towards him. Joey set off up the main road and dashed into the next avenue. Running ripped at his aching ribs. Breathing hard hurt him inside and out. Get two turns ahead of him. There was a road off to the right. He ran down that one. If he could get two turns ahead his pursuer would not know which way he had gone. Another right turn then one to the left. He made harsh noises with his mouth at each expansion and compression of his chest and ribs. Across the other side of the road he noticed a narrow ginnel going between two houses. He dashed across. He turned his head to see if his pursuer was in sight and caught his foot on on the kerb at the edge of the opposite pavement. He fell full length on to the dark grey macadam. He scrambled to his feet and made for the little opening. When he put down his left foot with the weight of his body following it, pain shot from his ankle to his brain and filled his vision. He fell down, rolling on to his left side. His head hit the post at the side of the ginnel’s opening.

‘Hey, you!’

Joey pulled himself up by the fence he was lying against, and saw the man still running.

‘Sod it.’

He shambled along the ginnel, knowing that he was going to be caught. The ginnel was fenced on both sides, six feet high fencing of varying kinds. At intervals in the fencing were tall gates, more like

doors, which he guessed must lead into the rear gardens of houses. As he passed each one he thrust at it. The third one opened and Joey fell through and managed to kick it shut with his right foot. He lay still feeling the pain from his foot spread up to meet the rawness round his upper body. He endeavoured to slow his breathing, to make it careful and shallow and quiet. Long running footsteps came pounding along the ginnel.

They went past.

‘When he gets to the other end of the ginnel,’ whispered Joey, ‘and I’m not there, he’ll come back.’

Behind Joey was a shed. He dragged open the badly fitting door with his fingertips and crawled inside. Inside he sat up and managed to close the door by gripping a diagonal cross member and pulling. His breathing gradually eased; the hurt in his side and the pain in his ankle grew duller. He thought he heard someone open the gate in the fence. He waited for the shed door to open. It did not. He heard nothing more. Gradually he relaxed and eventually he stopped listening.

## 8

Joanne had finished filling the dishwasher with the cutlery, plates and dishes of Sunday lunch when the front door bell rang. She hurried to the hall and was beaten by Susie who rattled down the stairs and half strode, half skipped from the last step to the door. She opened the door and invited Alasdair in. Joanne wiped her hands on her apron and pulled it off, dropping it out of sight in the dark corner near the cupboard under the stairs.

Susie, who had reverted to the long-sleeved black sweater and her denim jeans, indicated to Alasdair what needed to be taken: her case and three cardboard boxes. The boxes were all about the same size, one had 24 × 450gms printed on the side. Jars of jam, thought Joanne, from the supermarket. Alasdair took one box to the car and Susie followed with another.

Joanne opened the door of the front room. 'She's going, Denis.' Denis closed the *Sunday Times* and hung it over the arm of his chair.

Joanne went back into the hall and stepped out into the porch after Alasdair had picked up the third box and the case and returned to the car. Susie ran up the path and slipped past Joanne into the house. She came out carrying her coat.

Joanne gave Susie a kiss on the cheek.

'Bye, Mum.'

She waved to her father who was standing in the window.

Joanne watched as Alasdair got into the car and then Susie. Susie waved again, a little wave with a little smile.

The car moved forward and Joanne waved at the small smiling face. Her daughter was going. The sun was low in the sky and what had been a bright, and seemingly warm day, had turned chilly. Joanne held a straight palm to her forehead, thumb at the side of her head, keeping the sun out of her eyes. When the car had turned the corner at the end of the cul-de-sac and could no longer be seen, Joanne went in, closed the door, and joined her husband in the front room. He had already resumed reading the paper.

She sat down.

‘It doesn’t matter to you, does it?’ she said.

The paper cracked as he folded it.

‘What?’ he said, pretending he was puzzled.

‘You don’t care about the girls any more.’ It was a fact, not an accusation, nor a question. She didn’t need him to admit it.

‘What makes you say that?’ At least he wasn’t denying it.

‘Rachel’s married, Susie’s at university, the house is half empty, and yet you carry on as if everything was still the same.’

‘That’s what happens with kids. You bring them up and they leave you.’ He smoothed the paper so that he could begin reading again.

‘See, you don’t care.’

‘No, I’m realistic.’

‘You never did really care.’ She spoke the words aloud but they seemed only to be in her head. ‘Even when they were little. You used to like them to run to meet you when you came home, but you didn’t care that they cried when you didn’t come home before they went to bed. And you didn’t notice when they stopped running to meet you. I suppose you thought then, that’s what happens with kids. When they were babies it was always me who got up in the night. I walked miles with Susie up and down that bedroom carpet.’



She had paused between each sentence picturing herself with the two small girls, comforting, explaining.

‘I think you’re being unfair,’ he said, his eyes directed at the upper part of the page, as though he were indifferent. ‘There were some tough times at work, and if I hadn’t come through them you wouldn’t have all this, now would you?’ He moved his arm in long arc. The paper drooped.

She looked at it all. More expensive but not better. Bought because it used up money that had cost more than hours at the office. The large screen television, the new video-recorder, the stereo with compact disc, the bulky three piece suite, the wool carpet, heavy lined curtains, numerous vases, ill-assorted pictures. The fancy clock. The fire with its marble and pine reproduction antique surround. A nest of tables. Trophies to demonstrate his success in the competitive modern world. He had no taste. If the price tag was high he wanted it. She had managed to influence his choice over some matters, but the pictures he bought on impulse.

‘It’s no substitute,’ she said, deliberately vague.

The house had been his choice. He had arranged its purchase without telling her. She called it ‘ours’, but he owned it. Susie had been about three. Rachel had hated changing schools, and then having to change again when she was eleven. Joanne had hated putting all that she had in a big van and taking it half way across the city to an area where everybody went out in cars and few gossiped on the streets. It was a way of telling the world that the hard times were over and the small firm where he worked had moved from uncertainty through viability into a secure future.

‘For what?’ he said.

‘For whatever might have been.’

He shook the paper. ‘I don’t understand. We have...’ He looked at her. ‘What more...? Oh, I don’t... Joanne.’ There was the merest ripple of pull-yourself-together in the way he said her name.

‘Joanne, what?’

‘I can’t explain. I’ve always done what I thought best. I can’t undo it. I can only...’

He could not commit himself to what he would do. He never could. He could surprise her, but he could not make promises. Fulfilling promises might turn out to be inconvenient. The unexpected treat was a guaranteed success, so he thought. To spurn it would be mean and ungracious. And so its success was ensured. He had often tried to compensate for his shortcomings with a bunch of flowers, a box of chocolates, a weekend in London, dinner at a ridiculously expensive restaurant. In the last few years she had used excuses, so that she did not have to go away, to go out, and the offers had been become less, and the flowers had stopped, and the chocolates only came on Valentine’s Day. A silly tradition. And the job still demanded some long days, and nights away in various parts of the country.

And now the girls had both gone.

A unconsidered motive made her go up to Susie’s room. It did not seem like Susie’s room. It was tidy. Every flat surface was clear of clutter. And the posters had gone from the walls. There were still a few clothes in the wardrobe. A daughter’s clothes.

Joanne sat down on the bed.

Her mind was full and yet empty. No, her mind was full and her heart empty. There was nothing for her to do in this room. Susie had removed the cover from the duvet and taken off the the undersheet. The room was no one’s room. Joanne still called it Susie’s room, but she had little need to come into it and when she did there was little to indicate that it was Susie’s room. A small frog made of varnished sea shells with apoplectic eyes stood next to the bedside lamp. Susie had bought that in Tenby, hadn’t she? Joanne wasn’t sure. It might have been the year that they went to North Wales. It was along time ago when Susie was small and she had wanted to spend her holiday money on holiday things. The shell frog had been her first choice. Joanne had made her wait until near the end of the fortnight to make sure that she really wanted to spend such a large fraction of her savings on what had seemed, at the time, to be a worthless souvenir.

Joanne picked it up. This was one of the few links left with that little girl. Susan. They had always called her Susan in those days. How had she become Susie? Joanne thought that it had been Denis that called her Susie. The tininess of the new-born Susan had been so frightening, more frightening than when Rachel or Martin – Martin, she sighed – had been only hours old. Rachel had become so big and Susan was so small in comparison with Rachel's bigness. Susan needed things: care, attention, protection. Joanne had discovered she was pregnant when Rachel had been at school a term or so. 'You're only having a baby 'cause I've gone to school.' Rachel could manage on her own. And Rachel had. Not Susan. Susan had always needed her mother. And now she didn't. Susan had needed her to read a story at bedtime. Rachel could read for herself. Susan had needed her shoe laces tied. Rachel was a big girl and could tie her own. Susan had often not felt well. Rachel had been hardier and less prone to those childish illnesses. She recovered quickly. With Susie they hung on for weeks. Rachel it seemed would leave home as soon as she could afford it. Joanne had been surprised at Susie going. Of course there had been a lot of talk about university, but she could have stayed at home and gone to university. She had applied to four and had offers from all of them. She had always needed her home. Not like Rachel. Susie had always been glad to be home. She had been to France with the school when she was twelve and although she had insisted on going and had bravely told everyone that she had had a wonderful time, Joanne had seen through the bravado. Her little girl had missed her Mummy. She must miss her at university as well. She rang home every week. She needed someone who would listen to her sympathetically, hold her if necessary. She still put on that brave face. She had talked to Alasdair about all the exciting things that had happened. She could not tell him that she missed her home. Joanne had given her every opportunity to say something when no one else would overhear. But she had not. She had always been a girl who stuck by her own decisions even when she regretted them. She would claim it was all right, even when any mother could see that it was not. It was possible that her reluctance to talk to Rachel had been because there were things she would rather not mention. Alasdair had made university sound so marvellous that she had to pretend to him that she was having the time of her life.

It would have been nice to have kept her at home.

Or at least nearby, like Rachel.

The end of Sunday afternoon was marked by Joanne bringing in a tray. On the tray were some sandwiches, some small cakes and a pot of tea. She had brought the tray in earlier than usual which was a sign that winter was not that far off. For most of the Sundays of the year Joanne liked to be in the garden, but she had finished the autumn tidying and now she would have nothing to do until the spring. It was the first tug of Joanne drawing the curtains to shut out yellow-grey light that had roused Denis from his doze. He watched her pull the left-hand curtain smoothly to the centre of the curved window, and then step round the low nest of tables, on which she had placed the tray, to reach up to the other one. Again the quick tug to get it moving and then the slower pull to the centre. She patted the join until it hung correctly, without any of the wrong side showing.

Denis sat up straight, and made himself presentable. His sweater had ridden up above the waistband of his trousers. He stretched it down. His slippers were no longer on his feet. He worked his feet into them again. The newspaper had collapsed in a skewed pyramid by the side of the chair. He picked it up and folded it as best he could. The centre folds of sheets did not fit back together satisfactorily, they never did. Joanne raised the largest of the nest of tables and carried it and the tray to the rug in front of the fire, between the two armchairs.

While they ate he mentioned items that had caught his interest in the Sunday paper. She listened but only made small sounds as though her interest was only a little above apathy.

‘What’s up? Is something bothering you?’

She shook her head, and rested back in the chair.

‘Susie?’ he said, remembering what she had said earlier and trying to seem sympathetic.

She turned down her mouth and sniffed, a short marked sound, which was her equivalent of shrugging shoulders. It was a familiar gesture. He heard himself breathe deeply. When Joanne sniffed like that then however hard he tried to make her see reason she would not shake off her mood.

‘It is quiet without her,’ he said, hoping to concur with what was in her mind. ‘Not that Susie was noisy when she was at home. You’re right the house does feel a bit empty. When she’s at home there always seems to be something happening. Her coming or going or talking on the telephone.’

Joanne was looking at a point somewhere above the fire in the middle of the chimney breast. Her eyes were wide and shining, but not seeing what she was looking at. And not hearing what he was saying.

‘She has settled well,’ he went on pretending he had her full attention, ‘don’t you think? I think she’s managing.’ He stopped, hoping that Joanne would say something.

Joanne, he said to himself, buck up.

He wished he could have said something positive, something bright and uplifting, that looked forward instead of backward. He couldn’t. His mind went back to the times when being with her had been to share with her an unblemished future, full of hints of not quite discernible good things. The good things had turned out to be quite ordinary, and the future was now full of the wreckage of a marriage that had missed the deep-water channel and run aground before the sparkling open sea had been glimpsed. He had made decisions, hoping for the best, but Joanne had long ago gone below decks. There had been a time when he had looked forward to there being only the two of them once again, a time when they might lower a dinghy and row side by side around the headland. Now he did not want to. She knew he did not want to. And neither of them would admit it.

‘I suppose *she* is.’

Joanne’s brows were furrowed and her mouth tense. The lines of her face were sharp and focused like a pen-and-ink drawing, sharp

threads cutting into puffy flesh. Her eyes were held partly closed, rigid. Her words did not follow from what he had been thinking about.

‘What, love?’

‘Oh,’ she sighed a shivering sigh.

‘Tell me,’ he said, forcing himself to take an interest, like a professional counsellor.

He waited.

‘I – ’

He waited again.

‘I’m not – ’

‘You’re not what?’ And the ugliness of what he had said distracted him for a second.

‘I’m not managing. These last few weeks there seems to have been nothing to do each day. Each day – ’

‘I thought you were keeping yourself busy quite nicely.’

‘But that’s it. I am. On my own. Day in day out. You’ve gone by quarter past eight and you’re never in before six, often later. That’s ten hours, more than half my waking hours.’

‘Susie was out at school most days.’

‘But she was back by half past three. And we used to talk. And sometimes I’d meet her in town. I don’t know, maybe I am being silly, but the days are long and empty.’

‘You see people, don’t you?’

‘I do. I go out. But it’s the coming back. The house is always the same. When Susie was at home I used to come back at four o’clock or even five, and when I came in her shoes would be in the porch, her school bag in the hall, doors that I had closed would be open, and the television would be on and she would be sitting there eating bread and cheese watching *Blue Peter* or something, just like she used to when she

was little. Now nothing changes. If there are letters in the second post and I put them on the hall table then, when I come in, they are exactly as I left them. No one has moved them to see if there is anything for them. No one has opened the newspaper, or taken an apple out of the bowl, opened the cupboards in the kitchen, or – ’

‘Joanne, this is ridiculous. You’ll be telling me next that some days you just sit down and cry.’

‘I do! God damn it! Some days I don’t know what else to do. You are so damned busy you can’t imagine what it’s like to listen to your life ticking away purposelessly, wasting away. I’m forty-six what is there left? Breast cancer, mastectomy, hysterectomy, menopause, osteoporosis, hormone replacement therapy? Great. Wonderful. It’s all right for you to go on about retiring in a few more years. I’m not sure I can stand another month of this.’

Joanne stood up and went towards the window. She adjusted the drawn curtains unnecessarily.

‘It can’t be that bad.’

‘Men.’

She picked up a photograph of the girls that they had had taken at a studio when they were about thirteen and seven. A Christmas present for their grandparents.

‘I am trying to understand, to be sympathetic.’

‘Trying, but you never *are*. You have another life. Out there. At the office. This is all I have.’

‘It wasn’t me that stopped you going out to work.’

‘I didn’t want to go out to work because I liked being a mother, a housewife.’ Her voice dropped, ‘Maid, cook, cleaner and bedmate.’

‘You can’t have it both ways.’

‘Why not? Why can’t I be a wife and mother and not be expected to be at everyone’s beck and call?’

‘You said you enjoyed it.’

‘I did, but it was hard work. And it hurts when you’re taken for granted.’

‘By me, I suppose.’

‘We’re not going to have that I’m-sorry-I-didn’t-realise routine, are we?’ Before he could explain, she went on, almost introspectively, still holding the photograph. ‘Children do take what parents do for them for granted. It’s natural. They didn’t ask to be born. They didn’t choose us as parents. They’re setting out. They’ve got a right to be selfish. I’m not complaining about them doing it. I’m just saying it’s hard and sometimes it hurts.’

She carefully stood the photograph in its place, using both hands to open out the piece at the back of the frame that kept it upright.

He sighed, because he wanted to say something, but had no words that would say what he wanted to say without also saying something that he didn’t. But even the sigh could be misinterpreted.

Joanne picked up the tray and went towards the door. She waited until he got up and opened it for her. He wanted to follow her, but he knew she would not welcome his presence. But if he left her alone while she put things away and tidied up he was reinforcing in her mind the view she had about the way he saw her.

He couldn’t win.



## 9

Susie had a single room in one of the on-campus halls of residence. A narrow rectangular room with a square window in one short wall and a door out on to the corridor in the other. Susie had gone looking for milk. After they had carried the boxes up the two flights of stairs and before he could say that he'd better be going, Susie had insisted that he have a cup of coffee before he did. The kettle had boiled, the instant coffee granules were in the mugs and Alasdair was sitting on the bed. The room was small, the wall opposite with posters fastened to it seem too near, like the other side of a corridor. He had forgotten how small student rooms were, and felt. There was hardly room for two people to stand up without touching each other. The journey had left him uncomfortable and fidgety. He forced himself to slide back on the bed and lean against the wall with his feet off the ground, as though he were at ease. And the playful eroticism of sitting on a girl's bed unsettled him.

All the way in the car it had been Susie that had driven the conversation.

'Rachel didn't mind?' she said.

'Why should she?'

'She resents things where I am concerned. Always has. She can be very jealous. But you did say, didn't you – say you'd give me a lift? You *did* want to, didn't you?'

He was conscious of her striving for his approbation.

'No, she didn't mind. I suggested she come along but she decided that she could use her time more profitably at home. I think three in a car is awkward, don't you?'

'Three's often an awkward number. We had a brother. At least Rachel did. He died when he was a baby, before I was born. If he hadn't died, I might not have been born. I think that sometimes.'

Again, he thought and wondered whether she wanted him to express some sort of delight at her existence.

Susie soon started talking again.

'I never expected Rachel to go for someone like you. You're not really the type that she usually went out with. They were always a bit flash. One had a Porsche and another took her for a weekend to Paris, the rest were all suits, Sierras and wine-bars during the day, and patterned sweaters and country pubs in the evening. Same car of course, they always had firms' cars – nobody actually buys Sierras, do they? Of course, Mother never knew. That was why Rachel had a flat of her own. So that no one knew exactly what she was doing, but sometimes she had to tell me so that I could cover for her. I don't think she liked doing that. Gave me a hold over her, I suppose. But why should I care who she went out with. Or slept with for that matter. Not that I ever had any hard evidence one way or the other. But I suppose the kind of men you have fun with are not necessarily the kind that you would want to marry. As soon as she met you I could see that she would end up marrying you. And I could see why. I just hoped you wanted to marry her. She's a terror for getting her own way, you know, with men anyway. I can never work out how she does it. I can only imagine that she makes them think that they there's something in it for them if they go along with whatever is her current whim. Not that I am implying that ... well ... she *does* promise anything or if she did that she actually fulfils her promise. She has a way of conjuring up fantasies in men. I

can't do it. I have to be straight. I always say, if you trying to pluck up courage to ask me out then the answer's yes. Or no. I had a chap in my room the other evening who seemed reluctant to go. So I said to him, Are you waiting, hoping I'll ask you to stay the night? And he said, Yes. So I said, Well, I'm not going to. He left straightaway. Not Rachel. She keeps – kept I should say – half a dozen at her beck and call. Never saying no and never saying yes. I used to tell her that she used men. Used them to ensure she had a good time. Often at their expense. Until she got the flat and her own telephone it was quite difficult knowing what to say on the phone when one rang up and she was out with another. But then I suppose it's different when you're married to someone.'

'Of course,' she continued, 'I'm only her sister, and, as you've seen, we don't always see eye-to-eye about everything. I could be adding my own embroidery to what is a very plain cloth.'

'You could be, couldn't you?' he said, but he knew she wasn't.

'Yes.' She laughed.

'And why would you want to do that?' he teased.

'Well, for example, I might be ... trying to get back at her through her husband for something she has done to me in the past ... or I might simply hate her and want to besmirch her character ... or I might be ... just a little bit jealous.'

'Now there's a thought.' It seemed like a game.

'You're laughing at me.'

'Me? Laughing?'

'Yes, you. You think I'm making a play for my older sister's husband.'

'And you're not?'

She did not answer.

'I'm not lying,' she said. 'She is like that.'

‘Like what?’

‘Oh, damn you. A sharp-featured selfish scheming man-eater.’ She softened her harsh judgement with a quick smile before she looked down at her hands with her big brown eyes.

‘And you think I can’t handle her?’

‘I don’t know.’

Alasdair had smiled in his head. Now that smile seemed dangerous. It had hinted at duplicity and weakness.

The room had the faint fragrance that accompanies exclusive femininity. The fragrance was disturbingly contrapuntal. There were echoes of childhood in it, the closeness of his mother. There was also unfamiliarity in it, unrealised possibilities of womanhood. Of Susie. What was she playing at? A game. Perhaps it was a game. Only a game. Talking like that about Rachel. Like putting a rat in a T-maze. Rachel was Rachel. Nothing that Susie had said jarred with the truth as he knew it. So Rachel had had a bit of a reputation before he had known her. He had known that, it had all come to him on the male grapevine, inevitably elaborated. Men, when they report their dealings with women, imply more than they say, and other men infer more than is implied, and all add their own gloss when recounting it to someone else. In the recounting of sexual achievements there is truth, there is also implied truth, and there is imaginary truth that is designed to glorify the truth the teller is talking about and is intended, by association, to elevate the speaker in the ears of the listener. It begins as vicarious bragging in adolescence, but remains despite the passing of adolescence and the onset of maturity. For some men, the world – outside the hearing of women – is still a boys’ world.

But Rachel had shown him such – he wished he could use the word love – such tenderness, loyalty, closeness in the past year and a half that he had forgotten what he had heard about her, and merely wondered at her attachment to him. They were, the two of them, he supposed, complementary. He knew he was a careful, planning,

thinking person, who did little hastily. She was carefree – almost careless at times – lively, exciting, and intense. That was it, she was intense. She filled seconds and minutes, not hours and days. That was why she found her family so dull, and it made her bitchy and carping. He could absorb her excess excitement, use it and direct it. Not like Susie who resented her sister's social angularity which could scratch and tear if you got too near when she was in a sharp mood. Perhaps it was inevitable that she, Susie, should, because of her more humane approach, find it necessary to warn people about Rachel. Susie was still young, still altruistic, still able to guard her ideals against the abrasions of experience. But why today? There had been dozens of opportunities in the past, even before he and Rachel had made it clear that they would marry, when Susie could have pointed out the defects in her sister's character. Would he have taken any notice? Not in the early months when he was almost full up with a subdued conceit because of the girl that he now had in tow. Her personality had been of secondary concern. She was an alluring, smart, provocative woman that men noticed and women dismantled with their eyes. And she was in some sense his, and he was pleased to be in a similar sense hers. Once he was publicly committed to marriage he would have brushed aside any suggestions from anyone that she was an undesirable match. So maybe Susie had to wait until now. But what could her remarks achieve? What could she expect them to achieve?

Susie flung back the door and announced: 'Milk!'

She placed it on the table, and moved to get a tin that was on the lowest shelf above the bed. She had to lean over him to do so and although he tried to move back her breast brushed his temple.

Rachel was slim, almost thin, like her father. Susie was rounder, fuller and would be dumpy like her mother by the time she was forty. Rachel's features, nose, eyes, lips were fine-edged and technical, always meticulously coloured, ready to be photographed. Susie was natural and soft with hefty still-young breasts. Rachel always wore high heels, even when she had jeans on. Susie wore grey trainers.

She poured water into the two mugs, slopped in some milk from the borrowed carton and stirred each vigorously with a spoon. Alasdair half stood as she held his coffee out to him. He took it and sat down again on the bed. She offered him a biscuit from the tin. Chocolate-coated digestive. He was sitting at the foot of the bed near the door and away from the window. Susie carried her cup and sat on the pillow end. After pushing off her trainers she lifted up her legs and resting her back to the window wall stretched out until her feet pushed up against his thigh.

‘You’re all right. Lean against the wall, but mind your head on the shelf.’

She seemed satisfied at something.

‘This is cosy,’ she said, and wriggled her toes against him.

Alasdair wanted to hold those toes. Damn. What game *was* she playing? He was pleased at the thought that she might more than like him. But he did not see how she could expect him to respond. Any response would put him the difficult position, as he saw it, of having to pretend that at some time in the future it had not happened. He already had enough incidents that recalled themselves with awkward discomfort.

‘When’s Rachel going away with her boss? What’s he called? Donald.’

‘Tuesday. How did you know about it?’

‘Mum mentioned it? ‘Do you think he has designs on her?’

‘I’m sure he finds her attractive. A lot of men – as you so correctly pointed out – do.’

‘And you trust her.’

It was a statement, but she made it sound like she admired him for this trust while musing on the possible foolishness of it.

‘There must be trust in a marriage.’ God, he sounded like a woman’s magazine.

'You're really something, aren't you? You really amaze me. Knowing what kind of a woman she is, you let her go off for a couple of days to London with a man whose marriage is a sham. What the hell do you think he asked her to go for. Naive. Naive's not the word for it. And don't think it'll make any difference what he's like as a person – you've got that as an extra – all that matters is that he is a man.'

'You sound as though you know more about him than I do.'

'Mother asks questions. Rachel answers them. Mum talks to me. You know, when I ring her. It's her way of being caring.'

Alasdair sipped at his coffee. He wanted to defend Rachel, to put aside his own doubts. He wanted to defend himself. 'It's only the one night.'

'Only the one night,' she repeated. 'Only the one *night*.' She giggled. 'Sorry, I shouldn't.'

He laughed and there was no amusement in the sound.

She got up and brought the tin of biscuits to him. He took one.

'Suppose what you say is true.' He looked at her. 'What should I do about it?'

'Say she can't go?'

'Why?'

Still standing she shrugged her shoulders. Big, soft shoulders.

'She'd laugh at me,' he said.

Susie put her empty mug on the desk and sat down next to him. 'I'm sorry. You are worried.'

'Not really.'

'I shouldn't have said anything.'

'Nothing new.'

'She can hurt without knowing she's doing it.'

‘I’ve got to trust her.’

‘I suppose so.’

For the first time Alasdair regretted his marriage. For a half a second he wished it had never taken place. Then the nostalgic brightness was gone. He was married. He was married to Rachel. It would have helped if he could tell Susie. He wanted to know how she would react, but it would only be a signal for increased complications. He had better go.

He stood up. ‘I’ll be getting back. Thanks for the coffee.’

Susie stood up as well.

At the door of the room he turned to her. ‘I did enjoy the drive. I’ll see myself out.’

Somehow as he was opening the door she managed to kiss him on the cheek.

‘Thanks,’ she said.

Walking down the stairs he wished he could have held those big shoulders and pressed her breasts against his chest. And felt her hair beneath his chin. And.



## 10

The window of the shed remained light long after the inside had become cellar dark. The tools hanging from nails and hooks, the old pots of paint, tins, bottles and small boxes, weed-killers, empty jars, and jars part-filled with nails and screws on the narrow shelf. The lawnmower, the rake, the spade and the fork, and the stiff-bristled sweeping brush, everything had gradually seeped into the darkening walls. A diamond of yellow-orange light shaped by the shed's single window lit a strip that started a third of the way up the opposite wall, ran down and across a plastic sack, illuminating the words HUMAX GARDEN PEAT, diagonally over the pale knees of his jeans and stopped just before the metal tool box. From where he was lying he could see, through the window, the middle part of the concrete lamp standard rising above the hedge that divided the garden from that of the next house, but he could not see the sodium lamp itself. The lamppost stood in the ginnel.

Joey was sitting on the wooden floor with his back to the end wall and his legs stretched out in front of him. He had hardly moved his position since first struggling to make himself comfortable. The ankle was still painful and the lower part of his chest ached. He had remained unmoving because he feared that if he did try to move the pain in his ankle would become sharp again, or his ribs would pull. Yesterday's pain was less noticeable and he had convinced himself that the pain in his ankle was growing less and that eventually it would go away. A slight sprain, he had told himself, that's all it was. It needed resting. Any suspicion that trying to walk might initiate a repetition of the

sequence of agonising shocks that he had experienced while hobbling and hopping into his refuge would undermine his hope that in a short while everything would be all right. He allowed the pain to dull and did not consider testing his ankle to see if it would bear his weight. He waited for the pain to go away.

Now that dusk had darkened into night, he began to make a sort of plan. There was not much to the plan, but by calling it a plan he felt that he was retaining some control over his circumstances. He would stay in the shed until morning. His foot, his ankle would be better then. Not completely recovered but better than it was now. He would be able to walk. Then he would be able to go and get something to eat. He could manage without food or drink until then. He had the five-pound note that Terry had given him. That would buy him food. A sudden flush of adrenaline left him cold. He could not remember where he had put the note. Tentatively he leaned his torso sideways so that he could reach into his right hand back pocket. Nothing. He leaned further resting his left hand on the bag of peat, and tried to reach into the front pocket of his jeans. The pocket was folded under his pelvis and he had partly to straighten and lift his right side to allow his hand access. He pulled out his handkerchief, inch by inch, carefully feeling for the note. He remembered it had been crumpled, but Terry had straightened it and he had folded it. Nothing. Damn, it must be in his left hand pocket. He relaxed his leg, his mind actively trying to recall what he had done with the fiver. If he could be sure that it was in his left hand pocket then there would be no need to move his injured foot to reassure himself. But if it turned out that he had lost the five-pound note in his flight then any plan he made which depended on that five pounds would be useless. Still taking care, he leaned over to the right lifting his left buttock off the floor and slowly straightening his left side. He found nothing in his left back pocket and only his front door key in the front one. Bugger. He rested his left hand on the bag of peat again so that he could lower himself back into his previously comfortable position. As he relaxed again, the bag moved, not much, but enough to lessen its support, bring his bottom hard down on the floor and jolt his whole leg. He made an involuntary noise through his closed teeth as his ankle flared like lightning. ‘Ohhh, fuck!’ he hissed. He rested against the side

of the shed and endeavoured to control his breathing. Soon it was no longer deep and irregular, but shallow and steady. Then he breathed out forcefully. It came to him without any further effort that the note was zipped into the right hand pocket of his jacket. It was easy to verify this. The note was there, flat, folded in four, with a sharp corner where the creases met. Yes, that would buy him breakfast and lunch and then he could get a bus down to the hostel and meet up with Terry. Joey pictured the notes that Terry had been holding as he had come out of the room in the house. Joey's share would be at least twenty quid. That was tomorrow sorted out. And that was far enough ahead for Joey.

Determined not to move, Joey was constrained to think. He thought about what had happened that day. How he had learnt to be a thief.

A thief.

There was something simple and inoffensive about being a thief, a tea-leaf. Different from being a burglar. A burglar had nefarious motives. There was the intention to do harm. And being a thief was different from being a robber. Robbers planned enormous robberies and stole thousands if not millions of pounds, like in the Great Train Robbery or the Brinks-Mat Robbery. There was something innocent about being a thief. Taking a little here and a little there to keep body and soul together. Not enough to hurt, but enough for his needs. Like Terry. He did not have to be too successful as long as he was careful. He should be able to make a tenner or possibly twenty pounds in a day. That would be more than enough. Enough for what? Enough to eat. And drink.

He felt thirsty. He had had a pint a lunch time, at least five hours ago. He had no watch. His tongue tasted rough as he tried to increase the saliva in his mouth. A drink of water. The thought of water reminded him that he had not had a pee since before lunch. And once he had thought about it he knew he wasn't going to forget it. He tried, but the signals from his bladder became more pressing. He would have to get up. He would have to go outside. He bent his right leg until his right heel was pressed against the top of his leg and using the plastic bag of peat as a support again pushed himself up the wall which

continued to take most of his weight. His bruised side hurt. He stood. The pain in his ankle was sharp. He lifted his left leg off the ground. The pain diminished. Thrusting with his back he balanced on his right leg and by leaning against the wall with his left hand he hopped round to the shed door and pushed it open. Propped up in the door frame with his left leg bent so that not even the toes of his left foot reached the ground he prepared to urinate. There were voices from the ginnel and the clack-clack of high-heeled shoes. The splatter of his steaming urine seemed very loud. He zipped his fly and waited until the voices and the heels could no longer be heard. He lost his balance as he turned to go back inside and, instinctively determined to protect his latest injury, he twisted right round and fell on his back, his legs in the air. The pain in his ankle surged, his ribs gripped him hard, and the place where he had hit his head earlier throbbed again. 'Oh, shit, oh shit, oh shit.' He struggled to pull the door shut and as his fingers slipped off the wood for the second time, he began to cry. His face was wet with tears by the time the door was properly closed. He lay back in the corner to one side of the window and sniffed and wiped his face with his knuckles. His feet lay in the block of light now. No one knew he was here.

Joey slept. He woke several times. Each time his heart thumped as his brain tried to make sense of the shapes of darkness and light that his eyes saw, and it was always the pain in his ankle and the stiffness in his side that restored his memory. At last a grey light reluctantly announced that it was morning. Joey was cold, with a cold that was inside his clothes. He was thirsty. His stomach was empty.

He remembered his plan.

Using the narrow sill of the wooden framed window and the frame of the door he pulled himself on to his right foot. His left foot had swollen. His boot was tighter round the ankle. With every expectation of pain, despite his confidence of the night before, he lowered the injured foot to the ground. The first contact brought no unpleasant sensation. He increased the pressure until he was standing upright his weight equally divided between his left and right feet. It was better. He

was looking out of the window. There was a coating of moisture on the inside of the glass. He smeared it with his palm. Through the wet pane he could see the garden and further to the right, away from the ginnel, he could see the blurred outline of a house, fairly large and seemingly detached from its not too close neighbours. The garden might be twenty yards in length. The nearer end had been used for vegetables (there were some plants that Joey thought were rather spindly cabbages) and between the vegetable garden and the house was a small lawn. He pulled the cuff of his sweatshirt over his hand and rubbed the window the sleeve. He could see a patio with some white-painted metal furniture and at the back of it a French window and a door. A path, which started out as flagstones, became flaking brick, then trodden earth, ran down the middle of the garden from the door of the house to the shed. A movement in the bedroom window caught his eye, but it was gone before he could confirm that there was someone there. He wanted to eat immediately, but was wary about going out into the garden as he might be seen from the house.

Hesitantly he shuffled round to face the door and stepped out with his left foot, a short pace which he completed by delicately transferring his weight from his good foot to his injured one and quickly bringing the good foot alongside. There was the threat of pain rather than pain itself. He pushed open the door. The shed was about four feet from the back fence and there was a single full paving stone inside the gate. The side of the shed in which the door was hung was completely hidden from the house, so, knowing he could not be observed, he went out, slowly and with further cautious steps, turned and closed the shed door firmly. Now all he needed was a series of coordinated movements to open the garden gate and slip out into the ginnel. If he did it without fumbling he could be out of the garden in a couple of seconds. There would be little risk of being seen. He did it all in a rush and it was only when he put his left foot down in the ginnel without thinking that he winced.

Once in the ginnel he hobbled along to the end away from the one he had entered the previous afternoon. He came out in another road with houses on both sides. There was a concrete-and-wood bench set in the verge. He rested on it for a minute or two before he took the

downhill direction, somehow going downhill meant going towards an area where the houses would be slightly older and where, because the community was longer established, there would be shops and where there were shops there might be somewhere where he could buy some breakfast.

His pace increased slightly as he devised a gait which balanced speed against discomfort. His ankle *was* better, but not recovered. He had to stop every forty or fifty yards to lean against a fence, or sit on a low wall. When he came to the first parade of shops, there was a newsagent, a launderette, an antiques shop, and a general dealer on the corner. He could buy something to eat and drink at the corner shop, but in his plan he had been sitting down at a table having a bacon sandwich and a cup of tea. He sat down again in the bus shelter outside the launderette. Several other people were waiting. When a bus came he got on after them. Nearer town there would be places where he could buy breakfast.

He said, 'City centre' to the driver and held out his five-pound note.

'That all y've got?'

Joey said, 'Ym,' meaning yes.

'Can't change that. Y'll 'ave to get off. Sorry mate.'

He did not sound sorry.

'But - ' said Joey.

'Look son, I've just come out the garage. I've got no change. Now get off and I can get going.'

Joey held tightly to the chrome handle as he lowered himself off the bus.

'Hurry up, mate.'

'Piss off,' Joey said, but not so loud that the driver would hear. The doors closed and the bus moved off. Joey hobbled across the wide pavement to the corner shop.

\* \* \*

Joanne had watched with distant curiosity as the youth in the leather jacket had limped through the gate at the far end of the garden. She had been standing in Susie's bedroom and had not long pulled back the curtains. She drew the curtains in all the bedrooms each evening as soon as it was dark to shut out the unknown and prevent the night drawing the life and warmth out of the house, and each morning she toured the house ensuring that what daylight there was could enter through all the windows of the house to refresh the rooms. She invariably stopped and looked out of each window, as if each familiar scene that was laid out before her was pristine. Usually there was something fresh to be noticed: a strange car, blossom on a tree, falling leaves, snow (that was the best), another magpie, a pair of blue tits, bright beads of water along the telephone line. The youth had appeared from behind her garden shed and awkwardly hobbled out into the ginnel. His tousled head had bobbed above the fence as he had gone towards Churchill Avenue. He was tall.

## 11

Before going out to the shops, Joanne walked down the garden. She had tried to put it out of her mind, but it had niggled all through the morning. She could not satisfactorily explain to herself why the lad in the leather jacket had been behind the shed in her garden. There had not been anything hasty or furtive about his movements. He had not left in a hurry, or surreptitiously. He had simply come from behind the shed and opened the gate and walked off down the ginnel. He had seemed lame.

She had already put on her short coat, but it was still unbuttoned and she passed the Brussels sprouts with her hands thrust into the patch pockets making the corners of the coat stick out sharply. She knew the niggle would be with her all day if she could not quiet it with the semblance of an explanation. Standing on the path she looked at the barren space behind the garden shed. The square yard of trodden earth was fringed with uneven grass and assorted weeds. It was unmarked. She was hoping to see something that should not have been there, something that had appeared recently, something that might have explained the youth's presence. But it was as flat and bare as it had ever been. No hint of an explanation, nothing that needed explaining. If it had been in the late evening of a long summer's day when she had seen him she would have assumed that he had been drinking and, while walking home, had quickly nipped through the gate to relieve himself. But in the early morning that seemed improbable. The ground was evenly dark and uniformly damp so there was no way she could really tell.



It seemed rational to look at the shed door. It was closed, properly closed. It was not locked. The hasp had broken years ago, and not been replaced. The little padlock that had secured the hasp had been put somewhere, but she had forgotten where. It had been silly to expect signs of a forced entry. It took a few seconds of struggling before the warped door opened and she could inspect the inside of the shed. Again nothing. Everything was there that should be there. Nothing was there that should not have been. She swung the door and pressed it shut with the palms of her hands which she then rubbed together to remove any adhering dirt, holding them at a distance and lifting her nose up and her face to one side in case the air should float the rising particles towards her eyes. She glanced round the small square and then returned to the house.

The irritating niggle, the mind-itch, persisted.

When she came back from her shopping, the telephone began to ring as soon as she had opened the door. She put down her bags and rushed to answer it. Denis never rushed to answer the telephone; Denis always took his time. If it's important they'll keep ringing, or ring again. If it's not important then it does not matter whether it is answered or not. According to him calling someone on the telephone could be considered ill-mannered like butting in in the middle of a conversation, or walking into someone's house uninvited. His view did not stop him telephoning other people.

She snatched up the handset. 'Hello,' she said, still a little breathless from walking quickly (the route from the shops was slightly uphill all the way).

'It's - ' she heard a voice say.

'Hello?'

'I can't - h - h - h - '

'Mrs Flecknow?'

'H - h - yes.'

'I'm coming. I'll be there in a minute.'

Mrs Flecknow lived by herself in the next street. Joanne had visited her at least once a week for years. It had started when Mr Flecknow had been ill and Joanne had been asked to take some flowers round from chapel. Her husband had died a day or two later and Joanne had helped her sort things out. Mrs Flecknow was well over seventy now, and Joanne usually went on a Thursday evening, or in answer to one of Mrs Flecknow's cries for help. There had been more of them recently.

Joanne had a key and so she was able to get into Mrs Flecknow's house without any delay. The old lady was slumped in a chair, in the front room, next to the telephone.

'Hello. Mrs Flecknow. I'm here.' Joanne used an unnaturally high voice like the one mothers use when trying to wake up a sleeping child.

Behind her spectacles, Mrs Flecknow's eyes opened.

'How do you feel? Can you sit up?'

With some help from Joanne, Mrs Flecknow raised herself to a sitting position. Her arms and head lay at angles that made her look uncomfortable. Joanne, if she had been in such a position, would have had to try to push herself into a better configuration. The old woman moved only her eyes.

'Thank you, Mrs Marchland,' she said, underlining her gratitude with a hint that she did not expect such consideration.

'Better?'

She nodded and breathed deeply. 'I - ' She breathed again. 'I couldn't - ' Another breath. 'For a minute or two I couldn't seem to get my breath.'

'You're all right now, aren't you?' Again the rising voice for speaking to children.

Mrs Flecknow made a little smile with her little crinkled mouth, but her mind seemed a long way behind the watery eyes behind her pale-framed spectacles.

'I'm sure you'd like a cup of tea.' Joanne had almost said, I suppose, instead of, I'm sure. She did not mind attending to Mrs Flecknow, but the lack of more widespread recognition for this small duty engendered a minor current of resentment. She acknowledged that it was not justified, and forgave herself.

She went through to the kitchen. As always the house and its contents had not changed since her last visit. Everything was exactly the same. It had been that way for years. Mrs Flecknow had a son and a daughter, one in Canada and the other in California. They had each been back once to see her since their father had died. She did not seem to have any other relatives. Joanne waited for the kettle to come to the boil. Mrs Flecknow's life was an empty life, each day a near copy of the previous one, except for Sunday when she was taken by car to chapel, and important events like the three-weekly visit of the hairdresser, which was necessary if her steel grey hair was to remain curled. The only things to look forward to was either a letter or a brief telephone call. And that it could not go on for ever. Joanne was not sure how well Mrs Flecknow looked after herself, whether she ate properly or not. She did get out to the nearest shops, but whenever Joanne met her she only had a small bag which did not hold much.

Joanne took the two cups of tea through on a metal tray which commemorated the Coronation. The dark blue background was scratched, but the oval portraits of the young Queen and Prince Philip were still recognisable.

'Here you are.' She put the tray on the rug in front of the small gas-fire and held out a cup and saucer. Mrs Flecknow's dithering hand advanced as she pushed herself forward pressing hard with her other hand on the chair arm. The unsteady hand was skeletal, the skin was tight and shiny, blotched with yellow and purple. She grasped the saucer and the dithering rattled the cup. She settled back and then took hold of the saucer with her other hand, before she lifted the cup and began to suck tea out of it. The cup hung from her frail fingers at a slight angle that threatened to increase without warning.

Joanne watched every movement.

The saucer tilted downwards and having finished drinking for the moment, Mrs Flecknow brought the base of the cup and the saucer towards each other. The saucer drooped a bit more and the cup leaned in the other direction. It was like a badly managed space link-up. Joanne had put her cup down on the edge of the hearth and was leaning, poised to prevent, if she could, the hot tea from spilling into the old lady's lap.

The saucer clinked against the underside of the cup. The hand holding the cup relaxed and the cup swung down until it rested on the saucer. The hand gripping the saucer sensed the extra weight pushing it down and after a moment when it seemed that the angle of the saucer was so great that the cup, which was not in the centre of the saucer, would slide, the hand jerked the saucer upwards and the cup became relatively secure but not quite upright.

These manoeuvres were repeated several times and Joanne said nothing for fear of distracting the old lady from her task. As the cup became emptier and the tea cooler, the likelihood of an accident became less and its potential severity decreased.

Eventually, when the cup appeared to be empty, Joanne felt able to speak.

‘Shall I take your cup and saucer.’

She removed them from the old lady's hand and placed it with her own cup and saucer on the tray.

‘I've had a letter,’ said Mrs Flecknow, her hands moving in anticipation of locating the letter. ‘With some photographs.’ She reached down the left hand side of the chair, her hand running jerkily between the cushion and the arm. ‘I had it just before you came.’ She searched the other side of the chair with her other hand. ‘I had it in my hand.’ She moved her head searching the air in front of her as if the letter might be floating there. ‘I couldn't have put it anywhere else. I had it here.’ Her crabbed hand slid sideways across the magazine next to the telephone on the table at her side, like a blind person feeling for a familiar object. She turned in her chair so that she could use both hands. She lifted the magazine with one and searched with the other.

Joanne got up and she looked down each side of the chair and the under the table. There was a letter in an airmail envelope under the table. She picked it.

‘Here it is. It must have fallen on the floor.’ Of course it had fallen on the floor, Joanne told herself.

Mrs Flecknow waved her hands to prevent Joanne giving her the letter.

‘You read it. It’s a nice letter. From Christopher.’ Christopher was Mrs Flecknow’s elder child.

Joanne read the handwritten letter – blue ball-pen on pale blue paper – written in a style of handwriting which had unnecessary loops and squiggles making it attractive, but difficult to read. Richard had started high school. Helen was still doing very well, especially in music. They had enjoyed their holiday. Joanne skimmed the six pages, wondering how much of it the old lady actually read, and how many millions of similarly banal letters crossed the Atlantic each year. She commented appropriately on the three photographs: Richard, Helen and a family group with some snow-capped mountains in the background. She carefully returned them to the envelope and placed it behind the clock on the small mantelpiece. It would stay there until replaced by the next communication.

‘Now, you’re sure you’re all right,’ said Joanne. ‘I’ll have to go. I’ll come round as usual on Thursday. Bye Mrs Flecknow. Bye.’

Mrs Flecknow face moved in circles and her right hand rose in the air. ‘Bye,’ she said feebly.

Joanne left. One day she would be left like that.

At home the niggle returned. Each time she was near a window that gave on to the rear garden, she stopped and waited, wondering about the young lad. He had limped, but not with the limp of the lame. The lame limp as a natural part of walking, in keeping with the movement of the whole body, their shoulders drop and rise. He had limped with

awkwardness, exhibiting no compensating movements from the rest of his body. He was injured, not lame. He had been limping to protect an injured leg or foot. It seemed even less reasonable that a young man with an injured foot should come into her garden. In the evening, when she was in Susie's room she stared into the dark distance of the garden. If he had been in the garden, or more probably in the shed, all night then his being there in the morning would make sense. And now he had gone home. She hoped his parents had not been too worried. If a son of hers had been missing all night then she would have been beside herself. Martin would have been twenty in February. The youth with the injured foot could have been nineteen or eighteen or less. It was hard to tell.

Joanne shut out the night and went downstairs.

'I may have to go over to Brussels for a couple of days the week after next,' said Denis as Joanne sat down in her chair.

'Brussels?' said Joanne.

Denis had worked for the same firm for over twenty years, most of their married life. It had been a small office equipment business back in the late sixties had moved in calculators and then opportunistically into computers. Personal computers, associated software and peripherals accounted for almost all their business these days. It had been started by an old school friend, who had persuaded Denis to leave his job with an insurance company and work every hour God sent to build it up. And with every new development the work had become more demanding. At the outset it had just been stationery and typewriters with Denis nipping from office to office during the day and doing the paperwork in the evening. Later they strove to establish a reputation in the region for stocking a wide selection of calculators. Moving into microcomputers had nearly brought them to bankruptcy and Denis had travelled the length of the country just to keep the books balanced. Now, just as the personal computer market seemed to have stabilised, Ted, had turned his attention to Europe. Because 1992 and all that could not be ignored he thought the company ought to have a 'European Strategy'. No longer was it merely dashing down the motorway in his BMW, now Denis would be hopping on a flight to

Brussels, Amsterdam, Paris, Copenhagen, Spain, Italy, Portugal, Germany, Greece.

‘For a couple of days.’

‘That’ll be nice,’ she said, trying to sound as though what he was going to do might be exciting.

‘A small consortium has been set up to make a proposal under one the CEC’s R and D programmes. Ted thinks that by getting involved we’ll be able to get to know some of the competition. This is just a preliminary meeting. Nothing’s settled.’

Joanne smiled faintly, she did not keep track of what Denis was doing at work and most of what he said to her was just words or worse just strings of initials or even words that she did not know or clearly meant something different from what she understood them to mean. Denis talked about PCs, rams, roms, D base three, MS doss and how many megabytes a machine had. She could only ask ordinary questions: ‘Which day do you go?’

Denis told her that the meeting started first thing in the afternoon so that it might be possible to get there on an early flight.

‘However,’ he said, ‘it may be that I’ll have to go the night before, or,’ he paused, ‘if it goes on late, stay over until the next morning. One night at least, and that’s if the meeting’s only one day. It might be two. At the worst I’ll go Tuesday and come back Thursday.’

Going over to Belgium seemed a different kind of being away. He would be less contactable, more remote, further than just the distance in miles, or kilometres. She would have liked him to ask her if she minded him going, and then she could have asked him whether it mattered if she minded, but she knew he would only emphasise that he *had* to go, otherwise .... She was never quite sure what the unspecified otherwise actually was.

Instead she asked, ‘Why you?’ as if it might either be an honour or a chore.

‘It needs somebody who is technically competent, but has marketing nous as well.’

He was striving hard not to seem smug. Denis was pleased to be going, she thought.

‘And the only person is Denis Marchland.’

‘Well. Not the only one,’ he said, ‘and anyway I *want* to go.’

I knew that, she thought, mentally scoring a point.

‘Alice in the office has got a couple of tickets for the opera and she and her husband can’t go. She was asking if anyone wanted them. This Thursday night. Stalls, I think. It’s *The Magic Flute*, you know, Mozart, *Die Zauberflöte*.’

His German accent was awful.

‘You’ll have to improve your pronunciation if you’re going to get on with all these Europeans.’

‘It’s all right, everyone speaks English.’

‘And if they didn’t you’d think they should.’

He ran his hand through his thick white hair and then picked with unconscious determination at his scalp. It made her cringe. In a moment he would loosen whatever it was and holding it carefully between his fingers slide it along a hair, give it a quick visual inspection and then flick it away from him. She hoped it would not come in her direction.

‘No,’ he said, ‘I would *willingly* learn a European language if I knew which one I should learn. Should I improve my French? Should I learn German, Italian, Dutch, Danish, Spanish, Greek or Portuguese?’

He was smug and he was obviously reiterating an argument that someone else had presented to him recently. He flicked with his finger and Joanne closed her eyes.

‘Or Irish,’ she offered as an afterthought.



He ignored her obliqueness. 'It's easy for them. What other choice of a second language is there for them? English is the obvious one. And they can all practise it by watching English and American films on television. Did you know they get BBC television in Brussels. What about the Opera? It's something I've always fancied going to, but never got round to.'

Joanne was vague in her answer.

'Alice wants to know tomorrow, otherwise she'll return them.'

'I don't know.'

She wished she had the courage to tell him that the thought of going to the opera held no attraction whatsoever for her.

'In that case...'

'I suppose so.'

'I'm sure you'll enjoy it.'

## 12

He pressed the white button. The double-noted double chime rang inside the hostel. He was standing on one leg with his left leg slightly bent to keep his left foot off the ground, propping himself up with his hand against the brickwork, his arm straight. The raised ankle ached. It was further from where he had got off the bus to the hostel than he had recalled and his ankle had twinged with every step. He rang the bell again, and almost immediately the door opened.

‘Terry,’ he said, ‘Is Terry in?’

It was Yvette. She wore a very short bright blue skirt, about as long as it was wide, and black tights. Her sweater was black, tightly tucked into her skirt and might have been an upward continuation of her tights.

She pushed up her bottom lip and pulled down the sides of her mouth. She looked at him.

‘You were ’ere yes’day.’

Joey nodded.

‘Aven’t seen ’im ’s morning. Y’d better go up an’ knock on ’is door.’

She turned her back to him and went into one of the rooms off the hall. Joey limped inside and closed the wide door behind him, then set off up the stairs pulling himself up by the bannister rail to lessen the weight on his left foot. Terry’s door was closed. Joey did not want to

knock on the door. The place was so quiet, deserted. He listened at the door. He heard nothing. Shifting a little of his weight on to his left foot to ease the growing ache in his good leg, he tapped the door with the front of his fist. It sounded loud enough. Glancing anxiously at the other doors around the stairwell, he waited. Terry might be asleep. He could knock louder, but he had no wish to wake Terry up. Terry might be annoyed at being woken up. He knocked on the door because he would be happier with Terry to talk to, with Terry to say what they were going to do. The building seemed desolate and despite the light coming in through the windows almost eerie. He would go away. He would come back later. Terry would be here later, or awake. Joey preferred not to be seen standing there when someone came out of one of the other rooms. Someone, he felt, would come out soon. He left the door and started back down the stairs. By pressing one hand against the wall and putting the other on the rail he could swing his right leg from step to step without having to put his left foot down at all. He made a relatively quick descent and at the bottom he rested.

The front door opened.

A woman came in. Handbag, thick sweater and baggy cord trousers tucked into short black boots. She closed the door without noticing Joey sitting at the bottom of the stairs. Then she saw him.

‘Hello,’ she said, ‘and who are you?’

‘Joey Almond. Friend o’ Terry’s. I’ve knocked at his door, but he’s either not in or asleep.’

‘Probably not in. I’ll ask the others.’

She went down the hall. Joey followed her tied-up reddish hair, curly on top, neat below.

She opened the door opposite the kitchen and then, clearly not finding anybody, looked in the kitchen. Joey immediately heard the sound of crackling, and smelled burning fat.

‘Good God, Michael!’

The woman went into the kitchen quickly and when Joey got to the door he saw her in the centre of a dense blue haze holding a frying-pan away from the flaring gas hob. Her handbag had slipped to her elbow. Michael was standing long-armed holding a plastic spatula.

‘I was goin’ t’ fry an egg, but I dropped it.’

‘Please, Michael, you don’t leave the gas high under a bloody frying-pan even while you’re clearing up the mess from a broken egg. I know I like you to clean up immediately, but *I do not want* another damned kitchen fire this year.’

Michael said, ‘Sorry, Val.’ Then he noticed Joey. ‘What you lookin’ at. Think this is a zoo an’ I’m a monkey, eh? ‘A’n’t y’ ever seen –’

‘Shut up, Michael. Turn the damned gas off. He’s a friend of Terry’s.’

‘E was lookin’ at me.’ His eyes flicked at Joey. ‘I’ll ‘it y’,’ he said, and made a half step in Joey’s direction.

Joey moved half a step back into the hall.

‘Michael, have you seen Terry?’ Val had put down the pan.

‘No,’ he said and deliberately stared at Joey as if he could throttle him with the power of his eyes.

Val said, ‘Sorry, don’t know where he is. I’ll tell him if I see him.’

‘I’ll go then,’ said Joey. ‘Is it all right if I come back later?’ She nodded.

He limped down the hall and out of the house. He was glad to be away from Michael. When he had gone a hundred yards up the road, he sat on a wall. The stone was cold through the seat of his jeans. After a minute or two he set off again. So he progressed, walking till his ankle began to hurt then sitting until he felt cold. Each time he sat down, whether on bench or wall, he felt colder more quickly. It was not long before he felt cold all the time. Even with his jacket zipped up fully and his hands in his pockets he remained cold. If he could have walked faster then he would have soon become warmer, but anything but a

slow pace caused his ankle to jab back at him. He pressed his chin on to his chest and held his shoulders in. He did not want to go too far. Every step he took would have to be repeated when he came back to see Terry. There was nothing else to do but see Terry. Terry would have things he planned to do, and Joey could do them with him. Whatever they were. Terry had Joey's share of the money. Joey felt that it was his, he had earned it, even suffered for it, and that there would be more. And he would need money.

At the corner of two main roads there was a little paved square with empty flower beds and painted benches. The dull grass was patterned with damp dead leaves. The litter basket in the corner was overflowing with take-away-chicken boxes and drinks cans. Joey sat on one of the benches and watched the cars and lorries and buses and vans and motor-cyclists. If he had enough money he would buy a motorbike. Black leathers with a stripe right down each side, arms and legs, and a black helmet with a visor which looked black from outside. The movement of traffic at the crossroads was controlled by lights. There was a pattern to the changing of the lights. When the lights turned to red for the traffic nearest him, the traffic coming in the opposite direction was allowed a few extra seconds before it was forced to stop and then the green men came on so that pedestrians could cross in front of the opposing lines of traffic. But while the green men were lit the vehicles from the road to the left and from the road to the right were only allowed to go straight on so that pedestrians could cross in safety. When the red men came back on then the traffic from left and from the right could go in any direction it wanted. Some vehicles came along the road nearest to where Joey was sitting. Often at this point in the sequence there was some confusion in the middle of the junction when people travelling in opposite directions both wanted to turn right. The traffic from the left was stopped by a red light before that coming from the right. Traffic in the opposite direction could keep going allowing a good number of vehicles to make the awkward right turn away from Joey as directed by a green arrow. While they were doing this, vehicles from the road opposite Joey were allowed to turn left inside the right-turning stream. When the traffic from the right was stopped as well as that from the left, the vehicles coming towards Joey were free to take all

three routes out of the junction. Finally the lights nearest Joey turned to green allowing the traffic alongside him to move again. After a few cycles by counting slowly Joey could predict each change with fair accuracy. Then unexpectedly the stage in the cycle when the traffic coming from his right could make the awkward right turn with impunity protected by a green arrow did not occur. Joey was puzzled. He paid attention to this particular phase in the cycle and watched it reappear and then disappear. It was some time before he worked out that the green arrow only came on if there was a vehicle that had moved forward to turn right. How did the traffic lights know that there was a vehicle waiting? He went to take a closer look. His legs were stiff and his sprained ankle stiffer. The air blew cold against his face. Thinking had taken his mind off the cold. Now he was moving he was suddenly sensitive, almost frail. The cold was inside his clothes again and he was also beginning to feel hungry. At the far corner there were some shops. As he walked round, crossing the roads at the bidding of each green man, he had noticed that wherever vehicles might be waiting there was the outline of a square marked in the road. The sides of the square were at forty-five degrees to the lanes so that the squares looked like diamonds. They must be detectors of some kind. His hunger now predominated. There was a bakers which had a printed card saying FRESH CUT SANDWICHES. When he asked what sandwiches they had the girl reeled off a long fast list. He asked for a ham sandwich and bought a can of Coke. He now had three sixty-five left out of his fiver. He completed his tour of the junction and sat down again on the same bench to eat his lunch.

By the time Joey got back to the hostel it was late afternoon. The cold was part of him. The ache and twinge of his ankle were part of him. The tiredness of his other leg was part of walking. It was all part of being on his own. Things would be better when he saw Terry again.

It was Michael that opened the door.

'E isn't 'ere. 'E a'n't been 'ere, an' I don't bloody well know when 'e will be 'ere so piss off.'

Joey was taller than Michael, but Michael looked unpredictable, clumsily strong. Joey went away without saying anything.

Mindlessly, Joey made his way to the *Wellington* where he had met Terry on Saturday. It was early, so he bought a pint and sat in a corner. He drank slowly. He had less than three pounds left. It was warm in the pub and his leg was tired and his ankle ached. Awkwardly he pulled a stool near to him and rested his injured ankle on it. Not having to walk and not feeling cold was a relief. It was not a pleasure. He did not enjoy his lager. Drinking it was like measuring time. The moment his glass became empty he would then feel under pressure to buy another drink, but if he bought another drink and he did not see Terry then he would not have much money left to buy something to eat. Maybe fish and chips. Each drink from his glass marked another minute or so. If Terry did not turn up, or if Terry had no money, or did not give him his share of the money, if .... Mentally he imagined Terry coming through the door, his cropped hair, his V-shaped scar, his confident smile. Joey replayed the short reunion scene in his head. Terry would have some ideas. Terry would say, Come on, let's .... Terry would say, Where the hell did you .... Terry would say, What happened to ...? Terry would turn away from the rest of the people in the pub and motion for Joey to do likewise and count out in the darkness of their twin leather jackets Joey's share of the money, saying, Five, ten, .... Terry would .... Joey would tell him about his ankle, the shed, going to the hostel, coming here and waiting, waiting till Terry came in smiling, confident, his earrings, his black leather jacket, his V-shaped scar on his scalp.

Joey sat for half an hour with half an inch of flat lager in the bottom his glass.

A group came in together. Joey recognised them. He did not really know them, but he thought they knew Terry. One of the men went to the bar to buy drinks while the others clustered round a fruit-machine. Joey limped over and stood next to the one at the bar.

Joey said, 'Er.'

The other acknowledged Joey's presence, and then continued with his drinks order.

'You 'aven't seen Terry?'

'Terry?'

'Ye', Terry.'

'Terry? Terry who?'

'Terry with scar on his 'ead.' Joey lifted a finger to his forehead.

'Naw. 'S in 'ere couple o' night ago. 'A'n't seen 'im since.'

His order completed, he paid and began to take the drinks over to his companions.

'You bein' served?' The barmaid smiled her early evening smile.

'Pint. Lager.'

'Please,' she chided.

'Please,' he echoed.

He took his drink back to his corner. The place was beginning to fill up with the usual evening crowd. Terry would be here soon. The music from the video jukebox was loud. He was still alone when Cathy came in. Terry was not with her. Instead there was another girl. Both girls wore black coats, thick black tight, socks and little ankle boots. Cathy's coat was open. She had on a long plain deep pink tee-shirt with such a wide neck that it looked as though it had slipped over one shoulder. Joey could see a hint of one breast. His fingers itched. The girls spoke to each other covertly. Cathy fixed her eyes on Joey, said something further and then, in a few seconds while the jukebox was silent, came straight over to him. She was one of those girls who, when her mind was empty, looked pretty, but as soon as she started thinking the need to scheme and plot dragged angles into her features and the prettiness vanished. The unemotional depth in her dark eyes made it quite clear that she wanted something, and would get it. There was no prettiness in her face as she stopped in front of Joey.

'Don' think you're goin' t' get away with it.' The music filled the room again, covering up the sound of conversations. She shouted at him. 'You were in it with 'im. Alison saw y' with 'im Sat'day. Di' n' y?'

The gawky girl next to her nodded. 'An' Val said you w' lookin' fr 'im 's



mornin'. 'S funny i'n't 'ow you're 'ere and 'e's down at Hillgate. Why di'n't they pull you in as well, ey?'

This black-haired girl with the white made-up face and purple lips and the decorated eyes waited for him to say something.

'The police – ?' he said. Joey hadn't thought about the police.

'Yeah,' she said raising her eyes, 'the police.'

Suddenly Joey got up. He didn't like what was happening.

'Where y' goin'?'

Joey did not know what she wanted him to say.

'I'm talkin' t' y',' she said, glaring up at him.

Half his lager was left. He picked it up.

'You're bloody cool aren't y'. God, look at 'im, Alison.'

He drained the glass.

'Y' grassed, di' y'?' She grabbed his arm. 'You telled 'em, di' n' y'? Bloody 'ell, Alison, no fuckin' wonder they were waitin' for 'im 's mornin'. This shit 'd –'

He pulled away from her, crossed over to the bar and strode out of the pub. Every step hurt.

The door swung shut behind him leaving him in the cold dark quietness of the street. He set off down the road. Two policemen were standing at the next corner. He half hopped, half limped to the other side of the road. The police had got Terry. How? How had they got him? The fellow had chased him, Joey, not Terry. How had they known it was Terry? Would Cathy tell them? If she told them what would they do? Would they believe her? What could she tell them. Joey, he's called Joey. Joey what? they would ask. I don' know. Joey.

He stepped off a kerb that was higher than he thought and hot pain jumped up his leg again. He slowed down, and began to walk more carefully. He wanted to run, to hide, to keep away from places where people knew him. He wanted to go home. That's where the police would

go. Someone would know. Joey Almond, they would say. Lives somewhere over ... near ... They'd soon find out. He had to keep away from home. He hadn't wanted to go home. Not to him. The bastard. There was a number of bus shelters along the street. Joey looked at each in turn. Thirty-five. He sat down on one of the narrow tip-up seats inside the shelter. The bus arrived in less than five minutes. Joey got on and paid the maximum off-peak fare. He could go as far as he liked. It was three or four minutes before the bus left. There were only half a dozen people in the bus. Joey had taken the nearest seat inside. He usually went upstairs on buses, but it would do his ankle no good. The bus travelled slowly. The driver could keep to the schedule easily when there was little traffic and at half-past eight on a Monday night there was little traffic. At one stop the driver waited until it was exactly the right time to leave before he pulled out and continued the journey.

Joey knew where he was going, though he could not recall deciding to go there. He got off the thirty-five bus opposite the parade of shops, limped across the zebra crossing, and made his way up the slight hill in stages, stopping to ease the pain about every fifty yards. By the time he reached the ginnel he desperate for a piss. Inside the gate in the dark square between shed and fence he urinated and having zipped his fly, yanked open the shed door and hopped in. He pulled the door shut and sat down on the floor. This time the relief from the pain in his ankle was pleasure. He smiled to himself at the peaceful delight that being inside, sitting down, resting and hidden gave him. He had made it.

An hour later he wanted to eat. The shed was colder than he had remembered it. He shuffled the bag of peat around to make a pillow and lay down. He did not want to go out. He wanted time to pass. Sleep made time pass. But like on Christmas night in a warm bed when he had wanted the time to go by in a subjective instant, so on the hard boards with the stiff plastic against his face he stayed awake and all his mind kept telling him was that eventually he would sleep and suddenly it would be morning and the night would have gone.

Despite the light from the lamp in the ginnel, he could see the sky. And when he could no longer listen to the doggerel of his mind, he

began to watch a bright star. He watched it as it moved slowly across the window from left to right. It moves because the earth is turning, he told himself. Spinning in space. Dashing round the sun at over eighteen miles per second. Where had he learnt that?

## 13

The gate from the garden into the ginnel kept banging. It was raining hard cold rain that irregularly hit the kitchen window with sufficient force to startle her. Earlier Joanne had been outside the front door long enough to pick up the two pints of semi-skimmed milk that were her regular order. The rain had struck at her icily as she was bending. There was no reason for her to leave the house again today, and she did not want to go out to fasten the gate. She wished the gate would stop banging. It wasn't loud, merely irritating. While standing at the sink, looking at the window but not through it, she had seen it open and then be thrown back, until then she had not heard it. Now, knowing that it wasn't properly fastened she heard it every time. She watched it from the dining room window for a while hoping that it would catch and hold. If the rain lessened she would go and see to it, but she would be soaked in seconds if she went at that moment. Later in the morning, when she had finished her round of cleaning, she went into Susie's bedroom and looked down the garden. The wind was less wild and although the gate swung she could not hear it banging. The rain persisted, heavy and very wet. She would be happier if the gate was firmly closed. She decided to do it, before she had her coffee.

She put on a waterproof coat with a hood, and her Wellington boots which she kept in the cupboard in the kitchen where the gas and electricity meters were. Gripping the bottom of the hood tight at her neck she ran awkwardly down the path angling her face away from the wind and rain. She had to lift the gate slightly to make the sneck catch. As she turned back to the house, curiosity guided her towards the shed.

She approached the window from the side, so that she could see in without being seen. Not that there would be anyone there to see her. Nevertheless, she was cautious. The pane was running with water and she had to stare hard into the reflection to discern any detail inside the shed. What she saw made her pull back. She had seen a pair of boots and trousered legs. Jeans. She backed towards the gate, regaining the line of the path, and then as though skirting a dangerous, but apparently sleepy, animal walked carefully towards the house, quickening her step. By the time she reached the back door she was almost running. When she opened the door she heard the telephone ringing. She pushed off her Wellingtons, draped her coat over the draining board and went into the hall.

‘Hello,’ she said. She never said anything more than this until she was sure who the caller was. It was Rachel. Rachel reminded her that she was going down to London with Donald on shop business, and that she would be back tomorrow. She thought she might have time to look round Harrod’s or Liberty – was there anything she could get her.

Joanne couldn’t think, she could only see the boots and the legs, so she said there wasn’t.

While the kettle was coming to the boil, Joanne shook her coat outside the kitchen door and hung it up under the stairs. Her boots went back into the meter cupboard. She took her coffee through into the lounge and put on the fire.

That young lad was in her shed. It must be the same one. It would be too much of a coincidence to see two people in or near her shed on two consecutive days. It was obvious that he was sleeping there. Better than sleeping in a shop doorway, or in a cardboard box, or on a park bench or wherever vagrants slept these days, especially in this weather. She felt that she ought to feel sorry for him. She was in a warm house, sitting in front of a blazing fire, and he was lying in her cold damp shed. But she could not encourage any sympathy for him, because she could not understand how he came to be where he was. Her lack of information robbed her of any basis for a sound inference. She could not tell what he might do. The same suppressed fear that had hurried

her back into the house froze her chest and she had to work hard to breathe for a moment.

She went to the back door and turned the security bolt that she usually only used at night or when they were away.

She wanted to do something. Tell someone. Report what she knew. He might be wanted by the police. He might be dangerous, even violent. That's why it had been sensible to bolt the back door. He had been tall, the one she had seen yesterday. But young. She was certain that he was young. Someone's son. Every man is someone's son, she told herself, as if she was being silly. But if she could *think* of him as having a mother then she might not feel so ... so ... uncertain. A boy without a home was very different from a criminal hiding from the police. She could sympathise with a homeless boy. Then she would have some basis on which to work. But she could not be sure. And her vacillation led to inaction and, for Joanne, inaction was unacceptable.

Alasdair waited until eleven o'clock. The telephone number was written on the pad by the telephone in the hall. He had insisted that Rachel found out the name of the hotel that she and Donald would be staying at 'in case he had to get in touch'. He had asked as she had left for the shop on Monday morning and when he had asked her on Monday night she had made light of it, and told him that Donald had made all the arrangements and she didn't know and she had forgotten to ask him. 'It's only a couple of days. One night. I'll be back on Wednesday.' He had changed his request that morning and asked her to promise that she would ring him as soon as she got to London and tell him the name of the hotel and its telephone number. 'All right,' she had said with some annoyance, if it would keep him happy. Holding his body against the driving rain, he had carried her suitcase to Donald's car. The weather undermined his intention of asking Donald where they were staying. He had contemplated doing so but he had not been able to make himself determine to do it. The wind and rain was sufficient to excuse his spinelessness. Anyway Rachel would have interfered and made out that he was fussing unnecessarily. Later, she had rung him at

the bank. She had still been at the shop. She only told him the name of the hotel, and he had rung Directory Enquiries as soon as he had got home that evening and obtained the hotel's telephone number. Now, standing by the telephone, he pressed the buttons slowly and deliberately and with a certain unwillingness. The reluctance arose directly from Rachel not wanting him to know where she and Donald were going. To Alasdair it seemed quite normal that he should know how to contact her and where she was. He had expected that she would offer the necessary information. That he had had to persuade her to obtain it and that it was incomplete tormented him. He could only imagine that there was a reason for her keeping him in ignorance. Yet he knew she would scoff at his concern and make some remark about their being adults. As if adults didn't worry. While he waited for the telephone to be answered he endeavoured to put on one side his sense of deceit, of intruding where he was not wanted, of being jealous.

After three rings a disinterested and brittle-bright female voice announced the name of the hotel.

'Could I speak to Rachel Quirke, I don't know her room number.'

'Just a moment, sir.'

He waited, failing to picture the scene at the other end of the line. He forced himself to breathe and then, becoming aware of the tension in his stance, allowed one part of his mind to soothe the other by telling him that he was only ringing up his wife – why should he feel that it was wrong?

'I'm sorry, sir, there's no reply.'

'Thank you. I'll ring again later.' He hurriedly replaced the receiver before the receptionist could suggest leaving a message or paging Rachel. In part he was relieved as he anticipated that any conversation with Rachel would be awkward because he would keep thinking that Donald was also listening. Nevertheless, he wanted an explanation for her not being in her room. She was most likely to be sitting in the bar with Donald. Again he tried to imagine the scene, what the bar looked like. Dark wood and brass with high stools and a rail to rest your feet on. And Donald too close to Rachel.

There was snooker on the television. He sat down in front of it and watched Cliff Thorburn appear to decide to play and then change his mind. This happened a number of times before Thorburn played a slow careful stroke to send the cue ball down to the baulk end after the thinnest of contacts on a red on the outside of the the pack. Safety play fascinated Alasdair. He was bored by the rhythmic thunk of well potted red followed by an equally confident black with an occasional diversion to take a pink or a blue, the strokes interleaved with the emotionless announcement of the break score by the referee, while the seated opponent observed with apparent lack of interest and patent impotence. Calmed by the whispered commentary and the unhurried performance Alasdair passed the next half hour without thinking about Rachel or Donald.

At eleven thirty he rang the hotel again. There was still no answer from Rachel's room. He thanked the girl again and returned to the snooker. His sense of involvement had gone. He had forgotten the frame score and had no idea who was at the table. He studied the hands and arms as the player vacillated over which shot to play. Eventually there was a cut to another camera and he saw that it was Thorburn again. He might have guessed. He waited for the caption to appear with the score, but before it did he was already thinking about other things.

The words that Susie had said on Sunday replayed in his mind for the hundredth time. 'Knowing what kind of a woman she is ...' Since Sunday he had watched Rachel in a neutral way that made him feel guilty and prying. He had pretended he was being detached, assessing her as a woman not as a wife, trying to guess her thoughts, her intentions, her values. He had begun to detect artful signals in what she said and did. The careful way in which she checked her appearance in the hall mirror and the last minute spray of perfume on her throat before going out to the car when Donald arrived to pick her up each morning. The formality of the way she held her head as she was about to go out of the front door so that he could only just touch her cheek with his lips as she said goodbye with her hands pressed against his chest to ensure the correct separation. The tacit imperative in her poise that prevented him from being warm and friendly was not new to him. It was familiar, and although he could not remember when he had first



noticed it, it was already a habit with him to obey. Of course, it was not there all the time. But, whereas it had seemed to be acceptable and even desirable when they were among other men in a public place, at home, in their house, it made him feel unnecessary and unwanted. The pattern of their relationship had changed. In the past there had been a continual closeness, now it was intermittent and in the barren periods she seemed to put him on one side and discount him. Sometimes when she was silent he imagined that she was deliberately refusing to speak to him, when she talked it always seemed to be about her life. If her face did not smile, he assumed she was hurt at something he had done or not done or that she expected he should have done. There had been days when he had almost spoken his thoughts to her and times like Sunday morning when it was as if he was everything in the world she should want. And then she would talk about Donald. He noted how many times she mentioned Donald: how Donald was considerate, calm when dealing with people, excitable when examining new fashions. She mentioned Donald a lot to him. As if she was testing him. Yet, most nights when Alasdair touched her, laid a hand on her shoulder, put his fingers to the nape of her neck, she always smiled and felt soft. The exclusivity of the shared bed had an obliterating significance and was warmer, softer, more enduring than the business of the day, the decisions, the compromises, the transience of purpose. The end of each day brought a subtle dark almost concealed reassurance and he wanted that reassurance now, her wide-eyed look that promised him all he had expected of marriage. He should not have needed it, that he knew. Love, love between a man and a woman, long-lasting, life-time love should have no questions, be unquestionable.

Sudden applause from the television made him look at the time. Almost midnight. One last ring and then to bed.

‘Would you like to leave a message?’

‘No, thank you,’ he said.

He would have liked to ring Donald’s room, but he could not remember his surname, and if he had he would not have liked to ask the receptionist to try his room in case she suspected what he suspected and smiled in secret at his ignominy. That behind-the-back word lit up

in his mind and humiliated him: cuckolded. Lines of a song he had not heard in years tripped into his mind: I wonder who's kissing her now, I wonder who's showing her how.... He could so easily have changed a word or two to hurt himself some more.

He had no evidence. There would be an explanation. She would have an explanation. And you trust her. He saw Susie's small natural pink lips whisper the words. Susie. You could trust her. He imagined her shoulders in his arms. She did not know the purpose of deceit. What she said was merely the enunciation of the the thoughts that went through her mind. Her mouth was permanently connected to her mind. No mental watchdog intervened with cautionary remarks nor was there any censorship. To think was to speak. What she had said about Rachel was what she thought about Rachel but what she thought was not necessarily the truth.

Nor was what he thought necessarily true.

He switched off the television and went upstairs.

Later in the silent dark the he listened to the house creaking at its emptiness. I wonder who's.... Out loud he said, 'Damn, damn, damn.' And it was himself he cursed.

## 14

It had rained all day yesterday. The day before yesterday he had tried to locate Terry. And the day before that was when he had done his ankle in. That was Sunday, so today was Wednesday. He had done nothing yesterday, Tuesday. Propped up he had remained almost unmoving in the corner of the shed. The rain had streaked across the window and battered at the thin roof. A dozy kind of sleep had dragged down his eyelids from time to time. And the day had passed. He had thought about lots of things. But he had done nothing. Now he could not recall what he had thought about except anticipating that if he did not eat or drink then he would feel thirsty and then feel hungry. He had not noticed any sensations of thirst or hunger, he had simply deduced that he should have such sensations because he wasn't eating or drinking. He could have chosen to do both. He could have struggled to the shops at the bottom of Churchill Avenue and bought something to eat and something to drink. He had chosen to do neither. He could do without, and by doing without he did not have to find out whether his ankle was worse or better. It would be better now than it had been on Monday because he had rested it. By denying himself food and water he had allowed his ankle to get better. It had been unwise of him to go rambling around on Monday.

There was a dull metallic light outside the shed. Inside it was dim. The dimness furnished the shed with a close softness. Joey could imagine he was not cold. Not hungry. Not thirsty. That he was where he was by his own choice. Other than the vague realisation that it was morning, Wednesday morning, he had no idea what time it was. On

grey November days the light gives no clue to the elevation of a clouded sun. Inside there was nothing to do, nothing to decide. Outside was the world of problems, decisions, worries. Joey Almond was free of all such encumbrances. There was nothing he had to get done today, this week, this year. He could sit and be. There was something eternal about being. He stopped and thought about what he was thinking, but it made no more sense and he knew that a capricious truth had slipped over the edge of his mind and that he had lost it. How long could he do nothing? As soon as he had asked himself the question he knew that within minutes he would have to do something. Within him he had roused an irksomeness that could only be satisfied by movement, movement with a purpose, with a goal. Without trying his ankle he pulled himself upright. Stiff sinews and muscles creaked and his right knee cracked. Supporting himself on one leg he put his face to the window. Everything was wet, but there was no rain. The low hanging clouds moved slowly trailing torn smoky curtains above the rooftops.

He swallowed drily. He would go and buy something to drink. He put down his left foot and allowed his weight to be distributed equally between both feet. The left was weak, but it did not hurt. It was potentially painful, but with care he would be able to walk. He raised his left leg and navigated out of the shed and into the ginnel. Once in the ginnel he tried walking normally. Instinct or intuition made him adopt a slightly hitching gait which minimised the risk of unnecessary strain on his left ankle. He set off with bright confidence for the shops. The steady swing of his body began to dissipate the deep dull cold inside him. He had become used to it, and it was the beginning of its disappearance that made him aware of it.

After the can of Coke he was hungry, hungry for proper food. With only about one-fifty left there was little choice. He asked the girl in the shop if there was somewhere nearby where he could buy fish and chips. She gave him directions that were full of hesitation and uncertainty, but told him it would take him no more than ten minutes at the most. It was further than she said it was, but the fish and chips were good. He screwed up the paper while he enjoyed the last large mouthful then roughly wiped his hands before he threw the ball of paper into a litter bin. What more could he want?

The clock in the fish shop had told him it was half-past twelve. The afternoon was in front of him, and he need not do anything. His arrhythmic pace was smoothing out as the ankle eased. It was well on the way to being better. All he needed was a little money. He recognised a primitive appeal in living minimally: a shelter and barely enough food, managing in an inhospitable environment. But he would need some money. He walked, trying to feel free, while his hands played with the few remaining copper coins in his pocket. Money. Money was the one thing he could not manage without. It was a simple fact, an undeniable truth, a truth that was at odds with the other truths of the universe, a wrong truth. If he asked nothing of anyone why should he need money to pay for anything? It was unfair. At least he thought it was unfair. He did not need much.

He had been walking back the way he had come, but he must have missed a turning because he came to a main road with a lot of shops over-topped with high offices. He turned along the front of the shops in the direction that he judged would soon bring him to where he was heading. Some of the newer shops were set well back from the road and the offices above them extended out on to brick pillars providing a covered area which ran the whole length of the parade. Between the pillars were red-painted seats. On one of them sat a man in an old tweed coat, open and hanging down to the ground either side of his baggy trousers which were worn at the bottoms where they had dragged along behind his heels. The boots sticking out of the trousers were dull and heavy. The man leaned back at an angle, the parts of his dark face above his dark grey growth were like well-worn leather, but dull like his shoes. His eyes were small with little white showing and his hair stuck out from under his cloth cap which, round the peak, was worn through and shiny. Joey walked near enough to the tramp to trigger his attention. The small brown eyes moved and his arm lifted and the big dirty hand cupped as it turned over. The nails round the rim of the cup were the colour of old cheese, thick and black-edged. There was grime in every crease and line.

‘Jus’ the price of a cup o’ tea, son.’

There was not even the lilt of appeal in the voice. It was automatic, machine-like.

Joey ignored the hand and the voice. The man said something else. It was a rambling, accusatory collection of automatic curses.

Joey tried to pretend he had not heard and hurried on. His ankle twinged as he put too much weight on it.

Further on, at random, Joey turned off the main road, and when he had gone about a hundred yards he entered the drive of a house. He rang the bell and when there was no answer he took the path down the side of the house and tried the rear door. It opened. He had not expected it to. He had been daring himself to try to be like Terry knowing that he would not hit lucky. But he had. Here was a house he could get into. He went in, wiped his feet on a door mat and began to search the house. He did not really know where to look. He opened drawers and cupboards at random in the kitchen then went through to the other rooms. He found a pound coin in front of a clock on the sideboard in the dining room. He put it in his pocket. Terry had known where to look. He went upstairs. There was a child's bedroom and on the drawers there was a piggy bank with a plastic stopper underneath. He removed it and shook out all the small change and put that into his pocket as well. He opened more cupboards and more drawers. He didn't root around inside. He didn't touch anything inside. He just glanced. Some drawers were scented. One had a woman's underwear in it. He didn't touch any of it.

Suddenly he seemed to have been in the house a long time. Terry had said he should be in and out quickly. The door had not been locked which probably meant that whoever had left it unlocked was not far away. Next door, or across the road. That person could come back at any minute. Joey did not want to have to run again. Not with his ankle the way it was. He went down the stairs as fast as he could and straight out through the kitchen. He closed the door behind him and rushed round the end of the house. If he bumped into anyone now he could get away. At the front of the house he stopped and forced himself to walk casually down the path and out on to the pavement. He kept his pace slow until he was convinced that he had got away with it. He was

pleased with himself that he had done it, but annoyed that he had been scared and disappointed that he had not found much. When he counted it he had nearly three pounds. He was better off than he had been that morning.

The drive back from London was taking longer than she had expected. It was going to be ten o'clock before he dropped her off at home. On the M1 north of Leicester Forest they encountered roadworks and the traffic was queued for miles in front of them: single-line working and a contraflow. Sitting in the darkness of the car listening to Donald grumble about the delay only exacerbated her depression. She had had to endure too much of Donald's conversation. In the day when they were busy and they were meeting other people it wasn't so bad, but in the car and in the evening at the hotel she could have screamed. He just went on. Most of the time it was about his plans, his road to success, and how he was going to make it. He was so repetitive she knew he had doubts. The only time he seemed sure of himself was when he was griping about his marriage. It was all self-centred. She had asked him about the shop he had said he planned to open. If he was going to ask her to manage it then she wanted to know when. He'd avoided answering the question by telling her that there were some financial matters that needed clearing up before he could finalise his plans. Financial matters! The bank wouldn't lend him any more and he could get no more of his wife's money. He had no real plans. He merely thought more was better. During the evening of the day before, he had taken her out to dinner and then they had come back to the hotel. She had been pleasant, tolerantly pleasant, but his hands and eyes told her that he was looking for some sign, hoping for some reaction to occasional touch of his fingertips or weight of his palm. That he was not receiving the hoped-for message had been obvious by the tight set of his lips and the increasing tenor of his complaints about the difficulties that beset him. When he had worn out the threadbare topic of his marriage, he moved on to the pressures of running a business, of the problems he had with staff, especially the part-timers, about suppliers and manufacturers, about the quality of the materials and the readiness of

the customers to bring back items with which they were not satisfied. He had started again in the car and had begun to sound quite vindictive. Rachel judged that it was because he had nothing to lose as far as she was concerned. She had not lived up to his expectations, because he had not come up to her moderate standards. She had not been looking for something deep, merely a diversion. She had soon realised – and she should have realised it earlier – he was not the kind of man she wanted to go to bed with. He had been there, and she had wanted to flout the rules that were implicit in being married to someone. He'd been the wrong person to try it with, and he knew it, so he was peevish, and catalogued other possible causes of his mood to disguise his suppressed vituperation towards her. Now he took it out of the motorway contractors and the vehicles that crawled spasmodically ahead of him.

When the roadworks were behind them and the traffic had thinned out, Donald drove immoderately fast in hard petulant silence, as though he was put out by the fact that there was little left to rail at. Rachel offered nothing for his comfort, but her silence was only external. She would be glad to get home and in spite of being guiltless – guilty of nothing more than intention – she felt accused and knowing she was accused was angry that she could not prove her innocence. She should not have to prove her innocence. Alasdair should trust her, yet his perseverance over where they were staying demonstrated that he had suspicions.

When the car drew up outside the house, she noticed Alasdair at the window. It was well after ten. Donald opened the boot and handed Rachel her case, said goodnight, and was back in the car and driving down the road before she had reached the gate.

The curtains were now drawn across the window.

She opened the front door and lugged her case on to the hall carpet and pushed the door shut with the sole of her right foot and then with her bottom. Alasdair came out of the lounge.

'It's you,' he said.



‘Of course it’s me. Who the hell else might it be?’ She did not want him to be nice to her. She didn’t feel like a person that someone should be nice to.

She straightened up and he stepped forward his arms rising. She avoided his eyes stepped sideways and under, avoiding his embrace and went into the lounge. He followed.

‘I’m buggered,’ she said, splayed out in a chair.

‘Not literally I hope.’

Don’t start that clever-clever humour, she thought. ‘We’ve never stopped,’ she said.

‘Been all go, has it?’

‘Don’t ask.’ She did not want to go into the dull details of what had happened. It had been interesting, but not exciting. ‘I’d love a cup of coffee,’ she said. ‘Donald didn’t stop all the way back. Said we could easily do it three hours, but we queued ages at the contraflow somewhere after the M6 turns off.’

‘Instant do?’

She nodded.

Immediately he was out of the room she turned on the television. She was watching the tail end of the news when he returned with two cups of coffee. The television provided a neutral focus.

He sighed a large sigh full of pent up tension.

‘What are you sighing for now?’ She resented his tacit solicitude, she did not know how to react to it.

‘Oh, nothing,’ he said.

He did not like the way she was. She knew it. She was maintaining a distance between him and her. He was trying to act as though the gap were not there. She needed the emptiness to keep him from the inner person she was at that moment, an unloving person.

'If something's bothering you I'd like to know.' If they were going to talk about anyone, she would rather it were him.

'Nothing, I said, nothing.'

'You're not still brooding over – '

'I'm not brooding over anything.'

She had been going to say something about her avoiding giving him the name and telephone number of the hotel. It would have sounded so trivial now.

'What did you do last night?' he asked.

'Went out. For a meal. Why?'

'Nothing,' he said, suddenly interested in the television. 'I tried to ring you that's all.' He spoke casually with contrived lack of consequence.

'What time did you ring?'

'Can't remember. Latish. They girl tried your room, but you weren't in. I tried again later.'

'We must have been out. Or in the bar.'

'I just – '

'What?'

'Wondered.'

'What?'

'Where you...'

'Where I was?'

'Mm.'

'As I said. Out. Or in the bar. What time did you ring?'

'Let's see.' He paused. 'Must have been about eleven.'

'We were back by then. In the bar.'

‘Oh.’

‘You said you rang again.’

‘Yes.’

‘Much later?’

‘Can’t remember. Were you late going to bed?’

‘Can’t remember.’ She said it in an up-and-down voice, parroting him.

‘Oh, Rachel,’ he said, as though there were some deep mutual feeling that she was ignoring.

‘And what’s that supposed to mean?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You don’t know and you don’t remember. What are you trying to say? What do you want me to say. I know. You want me to say that I – Damn you. I’m not going to say it. You’ve been suspicious all along, haven’t you. What do you think I am? What kind of a person do you think I am? You think I might have been doing something that I wouldn’t want you to know about. Is that it? Well there’s nothing. I’m sorry that I wasn’t in my room when you rang, but I was only talking to Donald. God damn it.’

‘I’m sorry. I couldn’t explain why you weren’t there and I ... I missed you. Oh, I know it might seem silly but I did – ’

‘I was only away one night.’

‘I wanted to talk to you. I suppose I was lonely. The house seemed so empty. And when you weren’t there well I began to imagine things. I began to try to work out why you weren’t in your room and I kept thinking ... well ... I – ’

‘You thought I was with Donald, didn’t you? In his room. Look, if I’d wanted to deceive you we would have been in my room where I could have answered the telephone. Don’t you see. The fact that I *wasn’t* in my room proves it. Doesn’t it?’

She knew that the same argument might be applied to make it wiser for Donald to be in *his* room.

'It hurts,' she said. 'You thinking things like that.' Self-righteousness would maintain her dignity and keep him in the wrong. She could blame him for the way she felt if she convinced herself that it was his fault.

'I'm sorry. I believe you.'

'Thank *you*,' she said. 'It's the possibility that you might not believe me that hurts.'

'What else can I say?' He bent forward again and rested his chin on his hands.

An American police car screamed from the television. She leaned over and pressed the off button. The screaming siren was cut off abruptly. Silence. He lifted his head to see the screen. She caught his eye. She went over and knelt at his side. The equation had been balanced. She had been wrong and now he had revealed a commensurate amount of wrong.

'Come on, we're both tired,' she said.

## 15

November deadens gardens with sodden leaves and heavy mornings. And in November Joanne paid little attention to her garden. Two or three weeks ago there had been the bright, crisp leaves. A month from now the bareness might be decorated with crystalline frost and the air might be clear once more. Even so during each day she found time to look out of the rear windows of her house over the drab garden and at the shed in the dirty distance, wanting a glimpse of the boy – youth, really, but she preferred to think of him as a boy. She had become convinced he was sleeping there every night. She saw him a number of times, and like a bird-watcher, who thinks she has identified a rare visitor, she studied him hoping to be able to classify him, and by classifying him establish what her attitude should be. Should she tell others about him, or keep his presence a secret? His limp lessened. He usually departed during the morning, never early. She had never seen him return. Where did he go? What did he do? Who was he? There was no way of her knowing, or of getting to know. But they were important questions. Why did he sleep in her shed? Each day she wondered whether she would see him, and if she did not then she wondered if he had gone, and if he *had* gone then whether he would return on another day. Her intuition nagged at her, and repeatedly her thoughts ran along the same groove that they had first marked when she had seen his trousered legs through the shed window. There must be something that she should do, could do, ought to do. She thought of him as needy, but she could not discern his needs. But if he had needs then she, surely, was in a position to meet them. It was her duty. But her ignorance of

him brought uncertainty and uncertainty triggered insecurity. He was, because she knew so little – almost nothing – about him, unpredictable. She could not assume conventional motivations. He might be moved to threaten her, to break in and steal, or worse. There was no clue in his behaviour to help her evaluate the risks or pin down the possibilities. All the same she could not ignore him. And she felt he would not go away. Each night, as soon as it was dark, she, as always, drew the curtains throughout the house, but now she drew them more carefully in the windows that could be seen from the bottom of the garden, tugging at the top to eliminate the triangle of night sky. She checked the bolt on the rear door and the two on the French window even though the French window had not been opened since August. If she observed him depart in a morning then she relaxed during the remainder of the day; if she did not see him then she carried a cold burden of expectation with her that he might appear suddenly and incongruously. She could tolerate him at the bottom of the garden. That he had been there the best part of a week and had up to now not impinged upon her life reassured her. Yet she could not put him out of her mind. She needed to know more.

On the Friday at the end of the week in which she had first seen him, on the morning after she and Denis had been to the opera – a waste of time and money – she saw him leave at about ten o'clock. It was a slightly brighter day, dry with a high but total covering of cloud. About a half hour after he had closed the gate behind him, Joanne went down to the shed and opened the door. Inside there was a faint smell, the smell of dirty clothes on a warm body, but the air was cold and the smell lacked pungency. Lifting her nose away from the rising smell she scanned the shelves and walls. Everything was as it had been before. She stepped forward to search behind the items on the shelves and stood on something softer than boards. In was a crumpled blanket, grubby and pink, though the poor light made it almost seem grey. It was a large blanket, double-bed size and she could see by the way it was arranged that he slept along the length of the shed and folded the blanket over him. The bag of peat was squashed on its side to make a pillow. The blanket lay where he had thrown it off that morning. She picked up a corner and pulled it carefully to one side so that she could

get closer to the shelves without stepping on it. Her fingers fussed among the old tins, bottles and boxes. She was looking for anything that did not belong in the shed, thinking that the youth might be using the shed as a place to hide something. Like drugs. Cannabis or cocaine or heroin. He *did* seem the kind that might be using (and possibly selling) drugs and it would be logical to keep them out of the way, somewhere that no one would connect with him. She was searching instinctively, not knowing what she would do if she found anything suspicious. What did cannabis look like? Tobacco? Cocaine and heroine were white powders. At the end of one shelf she came across a small yellow-and-red striped cardboard box of tile grouting. The polythene bag inside was as full of a white powder as it should be. But the youth might have thrown away the grouting and replaced it with something of similar appearance. The plastic bag was still sealed and if it were heroin or cocaine then its 'street value' – she had heard the phrase on television – would be enormous. No, it was almost certainly the unnecessary bag of grouting that Denis had bought with the intention of smartening up the bathroom tiles. Anyone with that much heroin would not need to sleep in a shed. Denis had not used the grouting because they had had the bathroom completely re-fitted, re-tiled and a shower added. Even re-grouting tiles was beyond Denis's inclination. He found it much easier to spend money having someone else do the work. The incompetence of other do-it-yourselfers was too often too obvious, and too often it provided an excuse to fish for undeserved compliments and to make boasts of tremendous savings. The savings divided by the time taken did not usually amount to a high rate per hour. It was all right if you enjoyed it, but to see it as a way of saving money and hence of earning money was financial nonsense. That was Denis's view. Joanne continued to examine the items on the shelves. She moved plastic plant-pots, old tins of paint, a bottle of white spirit and a tin of some magic substance that claimed to remove every trace of rust from cars, some crumpled packets of seeds and a box of lawn food. It was all the kind of things that anyone might keep in a garden shed. She looked inside the cardboard boxes to see if they contained what they should and shook the small jars in which screws and nails were kept. There was a box full of white curtain fittings, hooks and brackets and bits that slid along the rail. There was the clinging dampness of new rust on the rims

of some of the tins, the cardboard was limp, and under her fingertips all the glass was matt with cold moisture. There was nothing that had not been there before. She could not tell whether anything had been taken, though what there was (or had been) that was worthy of removal she could not name. Except for the addition of the blanket he had had no effect on her shed. And one blanket would be insufficient on a really frosty night. It took her less than five minutes to return with two further blankets, single ones she had put away when Susie had insisted upon a duvet. Denis and Joanne used sheets and blankets as they had always done. Rachel had wanted a duvet, but Susie had been the only one in the family to have one. Joanne left the two extra blankets folded neatly in a corner.

When Joey had set out on Friday morning he had no money. On Thursday with enough money to eat a little and drink too much he had not really bothered to try to find a house that he could get into though he had been quite pleased with the blanket. He had walked up one long drive to see if the house at the end looked a likely place. As he had come round the last curve bordered with thick laurels he had come upon a large Mercedes parked with its boot open. The boot was full of old clothes with the blanket on top. He had scooped it up and bundled it up under his arm and hurried away as quickly as possible. He had slept a little better last night. Today, because he was broke, he was more determined, but by mid-afternoon his lack of success was making him angry. He kicked at a gate as he left a house where the ringing of the doorbell had been answered by the menacing growl of a large dog from the other side of the letter box which was stuck partly open. As the gate banged back, a voice shouted at him from the front door and he turned round and raised the middle finger of his left hand vertically and stretching out towards the woman who stood at the now open door he thrust the finger up in the air. As he continued, harassed by futility, he told himself he was too careful, too cautious. He was relying on the coincidence of other people's carelessness with his opportunity. Terry had made it sound so easy. But the series of unanswered doorbells followed by securely locked doors and unopened windows disheartened



him. The door of the next house he picked out was opened almost immediately he had pressed the bell and he was nearly startled into running, but he stood his ground and found himself being very insistent that this was where he *knew* that Ben Arkwright lived. He even accused the ugly middle-aged lady of lying deliberately to keep him from seeing Ben. He laughed at himself as he walked away, but this minor diversion did not compensate for the lack of success. Joey needed to succeed. He had spent hours walking, no he had spent hours trudging, the bleak streets, empty of contact and friends in the hope that he might (by complete chance) select a house that had an unlocked door or open window, and that that same house would have no one at home. He was betting on very small odds.

And what for? He was unwashed, unshaven. Since he had learned that the police had hauled in Terry he had only been to a pub where he was not known and he had drunk alone until he did not care what people thought about him. Even if he had a thousand pounds he did not know how it would help him to make things better. He could rent a flat, but could he be sure to steal enough to pay the rent? He couldn't manage to steal fifty quid a week or whatever just to keep a roof over his head. At least, with his present situation, every pound he found was available to spend. But he had nothing.

Hungry, he kept walking. To have headed back to his shed would have been to recognise his failure. He had to keep going. It was late and very dark when walking along a street of medium-sized semi-detached houses he noticed one which had no lights on at all. There was no response to his repeated ringing. Round the back he bumped into a dustbin and stumbled over a large box. It made his ankle hurt again. Having tried the back door and found it fastened he peered at the rear windows of the house. One of the upper ones caught the light from the next street. It was a long window and it looked open. With a ladder he could reach it easily. The open window was his first bit of luck that day, there had to be some means of taking advantage of it. He tried the door of the wooden garage and it opened, catching on the concrete. He eased himself through the narrow gap and tried to see in the dark. If he searched enough then he would find something that would turn his frustration into good fortune. He began to explore with his hands

moving slowly and carefully around the walls. A shelf. He fumbled with the objects on the shelf. His hands recognised one object as a large torch with a handle. He pushed at the button and old yellow circles wearily lit up the far wall of the garage. Joey swung the torch about. There was a ladder! Joey caught with a sudden surge of deep fear wished that the ladder had not been there. His bravado, which now belonged to a person who had shrunk to the back of his mind, impelled him to go through with his simple plan. His body was frozen with the weakness of the irresolute. But he would do it. He moved the heavy ladder to the door, switched off the torch and then slid the ladder along the ground through the gap provided by the slightly open door. Waving it about in the air to get it to extend as far as the first floor was far harder than he had foreseen. Twice he almost toppled backwards with the ladder's weight pressing on his up-stretched arms, but eventually he had it extended sufficiently and resting against the wall with its top end by the open window. Halfway up the ladder he stopped and went back down for the torch. At the top of the ladder he stretched to unfasten the window. He it opened it wide until the outer edge rested against the ladder. Using both hands he thought he could step from the ladder to the window sill. He leaned across and thrust the torch inside the window on to the window sill. He lifted himself three more rungs and then with his left foot reached out into the darkness around the open section until his toe made contact with the narrowly projecting outer sill of the window. Slowly he placed more weight on his left foot. His ankle felt weak. Then suddenly the ladder supporting his right foot began to feel unstable. He grabbed for the top of the window frame with his left hand and, as his right foot pushed more strongly, the ladder began to move. Muscles in his side where he had been beaten felt as though they were weak and tearing. Despite the pain he tightened his grip and pulled upwards with his left hand straining to straighten his left leg. His ankle ached. For a moment he was completely secure, crouched with both feet on the sill and his hand across his chest holding the window,. He waited to hear the crash of the falling ladder. It did not come. His legs were tiring. He needed to get his left hand on the left hand side of the open window and his free right hand holding the place where his left hand gripped. He took hold of the frame with his right hand just below his left hand and his body began to pivot involuntarily.

Instinctively he pushed towards the opening and tumbled into the bedroom. On the floor he lay still waiting for his mind to become silent so that he could listen for any noise within the house. After a minute or two both his mind and the house were quiet. He searched round for the torch and switched it on. It was a single bedroom. On the dressing table with a hair brush and comb, some after-shave and an electric razor. In a black box was an unopened half-bottle of whisky. He took it. He shone the torch on all the surfaces looking for money. He searched the other two bedrooms and then went downstairs. It was very slow working with the pale ringed light of the torch. He found no money. The air in the kitchen was tainted with the residual smell of a cooked meal. Joey's hunger intensified. A empty plastic shopping bag had been left on top of the fridge. Joey opened the fridge and took some cheese and some cooked meat and put them in the bag. He found some bread in a cupboard so he took that too. He also put his bottle of whisky in the bag. He was breathing in short sharp breaths. The fear that he had suppressed earlier now began to fill his body with fitful movements. He had to get out. Someone might come. The back door was bolted. He pulled back the bolts. But it was still locked. There was no key in the lock. He went to the front door. It had a Yale lock. recalling his struggle with the door when he had been with Terry he checked for a chain. There wasn't one. The door opened easily. Joey closed it behind him and carrying his plastic bag and the torch he ran down the street, hopping occasionally as his ankle pained him.

## 16

His feet tired and his hands cold, Joey entered the ginnel. It was almost like coming home. Soon he would be able to stop walking, sit down and eat. The anticipation of the imminent cessation of weariness made the last few determined yards a pleasure. He pushed open the gate and then shut it. He pulled open the door, put down the plastic bag and the torch, then closed the door with his fingertips. He sat down. He was still breathing heavily as he felt about in the plastic bag for the bread. The light from the lamp in the ginnel lay across his lap. There was almost half a loaf of white bread and he tore off a chunk with his hand and bit into it while he struggled to extract the cheese from its clinging wrapper. He hesitated. Stealing money from people who had too much or did not look after it properly was clever, it was a way of telling those people that they were not as clever as they thought they were. It was heroic, in a small way. Stealing food because he was hungry made him feel not as clever as he thought he had been. He stopped chewing, the bread large and dry in his mouth. There was a pettiness about the theft of food which he despised because of its association with desperation. Making a living out of crime, provided that no one got hurt, was just another way of working. But stealing food was just another way of begging. The tramp with the drooping coat and the small dark eyes was a beggar. The bread in his mouth moved around, but he could not swallow it. His hunger, no longer urgent, was a distant discomfort. There had to be a better way than this. Eventually his mouth was empty, and he promised himself that tomorrow he would not steal any food. The promise lightened his self-condemnation and his hunger

reasserted itself. He started to eat. It would be silly not to. Alternately he took bites of cheese and bread, swallowing over large inadequately chewed lumps. There was no enjoyment in the eating. When the cheese had gone he lifted whole slices of cooked ham and held them above his tipped-back face to gobble them into his mouth. Without warning he became weak and shivery. He leaned back against the shed wall. The delayed terror of the moving ladder was ice in his gut. He experienced again the fear of the expected fall as, outside the window ten or more feet up in the air, his body had swung freely around the fulcrum of his gripping hands. The desperation of lurch through the window and the relief that had flooded through him as he lay on the floor swept through him once more and ice melted and drained slowly down to his toes. He needed a drink. He turned the top of the whisky bottle until the seal parted then unscrewed it completely. He held the bottle to his lips and raised it slowly. His tensioned arm trembled and liquid came into his mouth and over his lips and down his chin. He spluttered, and swallowed too much, searing his throat. He coughed and choked. When he had recovered his breath, he tried again, more carefully. This time he sipped, he sipped some more, and the rhythm of lift and sip, sip and swallow, soon brought an internal warmth and an external woolliness. It was not long before he did not want to drink any more. His hand flapped about for the bottle top and he incompetently screwed it on to the bottle. He pushed the upright bottle into a corner and reached for his blanket. His hand fell on an unexpected thickness of blanket and he switched on the torch and saw the low pile of extra blankets. He awkwardly pulled them over him and then dragged his first blanket on top and then fell asleep.

The morning sun offered a few rays, sufficient to make a pale parallelogram on the shed wall shadowing the shelves and tools. His head throbbed. He ached where his limbs had lain uncomfortably through the night. The blankets were awry and had covered him inefficiently. He was partly cold. He lay with one arm behind his head. The extra blankets had been put in the shed by someone else. Beneath the beating in his head he puzzled about who that someone else might be. Each thump in his brain misdirected his struggle to understand. This shed was not his. It belonged to whoever lived in the house. Even

this late in the year the indirect light was too bright for his eyes and the noise in his skull seemed to soften when he closed them. He had not thought about who lived in the house. That was where the blankets had come from. Someone knew he was here. The blankets were for him. He wished the beating pain in his head would go away so he could think. What did the blankets mean? They were a good sign. There was someone who did not wish him ill. But if one person knew about him then there might be others, others who would tell the police, who might want him to go, who might wish him harm. He did not want people to know he was here. This was his place, his secret, a place to hide. He wished the blankets had not been there. If he had wanted extra blankets then he could get them himself. He opened his eyes and the brightness hurt.

He sat up and reached for the bottle of whisky. He drank hurriedly from it. It was easier now that there was less in it. He drank again. The sun added a little to his imagined warmth. He shuffled his body across the floor so that his chest was in the light from the sun. There was space among the tools to get his shoulders against the wall of the shed. He closed his eyes. The yellowish pinkness inside his eyes was soothing. Another sip from the bottle. Too careful and too cautious, he thought. Success is born of big ideas. Big ideas. Big ideas. Another swig. All I need is one big idea. What's the big idea? That's what I need to know. A big plan for a big idea. Not a couple of quid here and a couple of quid there, but thousands and thousands. Thousands of big ideas. There must be thousands of big ideas. All he needed was one big idea. One big idea. He closed his eyes tight so that the pinkness darkened and he imagined the piles of notes that represented more money than he could spend. It was *the* solution to all his problems. With money you could do everything. Everything. Some more whisky. He would buy ... He would buy ... He would buy a ... car. Yes a car. A car. He would drive a fast car, changing gears and roaring round corners and screeching to a stop and ... A red car. Just one big idea.

He woke feeling sick.

He crawled to the door and pushed it open and vomited on to the cold bare earth. The hot vomit steamed under his nose and he retched

again. His arms had no strength and to get away from the rising stench he rolled sideways until his back rested against edge of the the door. His stomach heaved unsuccessfully and a flash of acid bile burned his throat. Every muscle and every organ of his body felt wrong with a rottenness that was so thorough it reduced all sensation to the fundamental awareness of the passing of time, the slow awful passing of time that holds out a faint almost futile hopefulness that there is, in the barely imaginable future, a moment when this endurable pervasive sick existence would be part of the past. He shut his eyes and blanked his mind praying that some time-consuming unconsciousness would cover up his discomfort until it had passed. An empty spasm intensified his perception and he became accurately aware of the full stretch of his frame from toes to scalp, from spine to fingernails. The tenseness dissipated and relief relaxed him. He concentrated on stabilising his feeling of illness. If he could hold it in check, acceptably unchanging, without violent eruption or the threat of a disembowelling catastrophe, then he would be content. Minutes passed and his body stayed quiet. He levered himself into a sitting position and feebly pulled the door towards him to shut off the stink of the cooling contents of his stomach. Automatically he drew his leather sleeve across his mouth and the coat was streaked with slime and part-digested food. Repeatedly he curled his index finger against his thumb and flicked at the more solid bits. Then he rubbed the sleeve against the thigh of his jeans. Above his immediate sensations a rationality forced his eyes to search for the whisky bottle. It was lying horizontally under the window against the wall of the shed. He grasped the neck and held it upright. About an inch remained in the bottom. It had been something more than half full when he had woken this morning. A further twenty minutes without movement other than the gentle lowering of his eyelids and a careful concentration on the rhythms of his breathing brought back something of his normal feelings. He needed fresh air inside his stinking lungs. Using the battens of the inner frame of the shed as hand-holds he pulled himself to his feet and leaning against the jamb of the door he pushed open the door and breathed in real cold air. He stepped out across the patch of vomit and staggered on to his knees. God, he was bloody drunk. The purging that he associated with violent vomiting did not extend, it seemed, to cleansing his system of alcohol as he had

imagined it would. Yet his thinking was not that of the drunkard. He was thinking clearly, but his legs were out of control. With determination he regained his feet, and some command of his legs. He laughed inside his head. You bloody comic. When his careful closing of the shed door resulted in a careless bang he realised that his arms and hands were wayward as well and would need special concentration. He made his way through the gate and into the ginnel. He was pleased with this achievement although he also knew that the time he had taken was greatly in excess of what he would normally need for this familiar operation. Walking along he was compelled to keep placing the flat of his right hand against the passing fences to prevent his shoulder bumping into their looming heights. Before reaching the end of the narrow path he paused to recuperate, resting the broadness of his shoulders against a solid gatepost. Following a well-known route he progressed in short stages until he came to the bench made from wooden slats set into concrete end pieces. Joey sat down in the middle and as an irresistible sleepiness came over him he allowed himself to slip sideways until his head was resting on his folded arms.

A poke in the ribs woke him.

'I wouldn't touch him. He stinks.'

'Mister, you all right?'

Joey opened his eyes. The dark figure started back. Joey focused. A boy, who looked younger than Robin, wearing a light-blue quilted jacket and carrying a red and navy pack on his back turned away.

'His eyes are open,' shouted the boy. A second later something hit Joey on the upper side of his head making him grunt. The boy fled.

Joey sat up slowly. 'Little buggers.' He could see a group of boys at the corner near the pillar box. He put up two fingers in their direction, but they did not move. He watched as one of them raised a bent arm and then straightened it. A clod of grass and earth struck the kerb in front of Joey.

'Fucking little bastards!' he shouted. 'Fucking bastards,' he muttered, rubbing his head where the earlier missile had hit him.



## 17

It was hardly light when Joanne pulled open the curtains in Susie's room. Denis was in the kitchen eating his breakfast in silence with the *Telegraph* folded in half next to his coffee, reading in bursts between mouthfuls of food and inelegant gulps from his cup. At this time each morning, Joanne busied herself as soon as she could, putting things in the dishwasher, bringing in the morning milk, or tidying up anything that had somehow moved to a place other than its rightful one. Today she had come upstairs a little earlier than usual and begun her round of letting the new day into each bedroom. The sky was thinly clouded and there was a low sun, hazed and indistinct. The shed was a vague outline in the far corner of the garden. She did not expect to see anything. She supposed he was there inside, or if he wasn't then he had not long gone.

No doubt he had left home, or a home, or a children's home, or an orphanage on account of his having reached the age at which he was too old to stay. If he had left his family home then what was the reason and did his parents care? Joanne would have liked a son. She had had a son, but she had never seen him grow up. He would have been younger than Rachel but older than Susie. Martin had been his name. He had cried, often cried. She heard again the cold cry in the night, heard from within the close warmth of the double bed. A sudden cry that each night had terminated the distant silence of sleep or disrupted the increasing rhythm of Denis – a little cry from from a far off little body. Again she heard it, now from another room, and her maternity responded, as though the primordial summons were real and present and not simply an old echo in the caves of memory.

With Rachel and Martin that might have been it, and Susie – dear Susie – would never have existed. And never have known she had not been born. The boy in the shed was someone’s son. Some woman somewhere had in pain and pleasure thrust him crying into the world. She wondered if he had known his mother or whether he had been separated from her early in life, fostered until he recognised the lack of love in the unnatural paid parent and broken off the artificial relationship. He would be without warmth and comfort, without friends, without a family, with only the emptying streets of the dark night and the crude shelter of a borrowed hut.

The house seemed blatantly luxurious with its warm circulating air, thick carpets, soft cushions and heavy curtains, with its full fridge and full freezer, split-level cooker, microwave oven, dishwasher, food-processor, television, video-recorder,.... The stratum of essential sadness that lies beneath the busy cracked optimism of civilisation welled up in Joanne and the sentimentality that is surreptitious, as when watching a film or play, made her want to be sorry on behalf of all creation. She had to wipe her watering eyes. When she had dried her cheeks and blown her nose the transcendent emotion had gone and she had disengaged herself. He almost certainly had a long criminal record, a history of violence when he was a school, and no thought at all for the effect he had on his fellow human beings. Denis would not sympathise with her indulgent sentimentality. Denis liked a world that was rigidly simple, where right and wrong were clearly defined and where compassion should be measurable in reciprocal benefits. She could hear his voice: And what good will it do you trying to do something for him? Her answer would not be worth putting into words even if she could because he would dismiss it as unrealistic and lacking rationality. Be reasonable, he would say, as if to indicate that whatever chain of reasoning she thought she had used to come to her particular conclusion was undeserving of the slightest effort on his part to comprehend. What he meant when he said, Be reasonable, was, Forget it, I know what’s sensible. She could do without that kind of dismissive argument that assumes superiority and does not deign to justify *its* conclusions. Whoever he was, that boy had had a raw deal. Somewhere in the past something could have been done to prevent him ending up

where he was now. And maybe there was something that yet could be done. She had given him the blankets. She urged herself to make a resolution to see what more she might do to help him, but the urging did not result in a definite decision, it remained a wisp of a good intention that alternately soothed her conscience and prodded her with guilt.

While she was standing cycling through guilt and good intention, Denis spoke to her from the open door of the bedroom.

‘What are you doing?’

He had surprised her and her mind had been jolted free of whatever train of thought in had been pursuing.

‘Nothing, just looking and thinking.’

He had his suit on and looked ready to leave for work.

‘I can’t find a clean handkerchief.’

‘Have you looked in the drawer?’

‘Of course I’ve looked in the drawer.’

‘Let me look.’

She walked out of the room and into their bedroom. She pulled open a drawer.

‘Here,’ she said, ‘what’s this?’

He took the neat clean white handkerchief from her and put it in his trouser pocket.

‘Must have been at the back,’ he said.

She followed him down into the hall and waited until he had gone before she went back to the kitchen to continue her morning routine. Every so often an involuntary pathos stupefied her movements and she stopped statue-like, her mind oscillating between the need to do good and the self-reproach that anticipated her inability to do anything and censured her for her comfortable life. The oscillation broadened into a circle as a string-and-bead pendulum does when suspended from the

fingers. Each time she broke the spell with a determination to be realistic and practical, knowing that she deceived herself in part because merely to make some gesture – like the blankets – would not clear her conscience and to attempt something worthwhile and significant had hidden risks and consequences which she could not ascertain with any precision, but which she knew would not be easy to contain or control. By eleven she was well behind her schedule. If only it was up to her, she said to herself, if it did not have to involve others, affect others. Denis, she meant.

Impulse ended her prevarication and she hurried down the garden to look in through the window of the shed.

He was lying on the floor of the shed. On first seeing him through the window she stepped back in case he had seen her, but the image she retained was one of someone asleep. She approached the edge of the window slowly and, showing the minimum of her face, she looked at him again. He seemed quite still almost unalive. His face was dirty with a thin stubble of young beard. He held a bottle in a limp right hand. It could be whisky or vodka or gin or rum, she did not know. She had a horror of alcohol and of drunkenness. It was the lack of control exhibited by the drunk and the thought of the confused mind in charge of a reckless body. Erratic. She only had alcohol in the house because Denis could not have managed to explain its absence to his colleagues and friends in a way that did not belittle her for her puritan principle. Even the foolishness and idiocy that accompanied socially acceptable inebriation mocked the human spirit. How any drunkard could dare to claim kinship with the great and the self-sacrificing she did not know.

She watched him through the window ready to step back quickly should his eyes open. When she was convinced that he was breathing she went back into the house. If he had been dead she would have been unequivocal about what to do, or if he did die, then she would have to (and could) deal with that. His hair was uncombed, needing cutting rather than being noticeably long. She estimated his age to be about seventeen or eighteen, but the state of him, unkempt and stupefied might have added a year or two to her estimate. She did not know what to do. He might only be sixteen. The simplest action would be to do

nothing further, to pretend that she had no knowledge of his presence and carry on with her day-to-day living. She would have no genuine reason to go to the shed until spring when the wintered garden would begin to turn green and untidy. It had only been an odd chance that had resulted in her knowing that he was there and without that she might still not know, and she would be not have any choice to make. No one knew. No one need know. She could not be held responsible for the consequences of not keeping an eye on her garden shed throughout the winter months in case a vagrant happened to use it for shelter and fell ill and died. It was a simple accident that had made aware of his existence, but it would take a determined effort of self-deceit to remove that awareness. She could do it. She had done it as a girl. She had deliberately determined to forget about something and then remembered hours later that she had, in fact, forgotten about it. It was a useful way to deal with those irritating things that mothers reminded you about. Don't forget, Joanne, to clean your shoes, to tidy up your room, to do your homework before you go out to play. But she did forget, by a studious effort of her will she guaranteed that the tiny chore would be banished completely from her consciousness allowing her with total honesty to say, I'm sorry, Mum, I forgot.

She could do that.

But she didn't.

She couldn't forget and she couldn't ignore what she knew. That afternoon she went down the garden again. He was not there. There was a puddle of cold vomit outside the door of the shed. The almost empty whisky bottle was there. The faint dusty sourness was there. There was a plastic bag with a ragged chunk of white bread and a wrapper that smelled of cheese. She picked up the torch, checked that it worked and replaced it. She dug a hole in the corner of the garden and buried the vomit. She smoothed over the patch were it had been, and flattened it with the back of the spade. She straightened the blankets. She put the bottle in the bag with the bread and the wrapper and put them all in her dustbin. Now she knew what she would do.

Dusk was hard and cold as Joey having wandered aimlessly under the distant direction of his intoxicated brain began to make his way back to his shed and his blankets. The deepening sky was clear and he could see a few of the brighter stars where the sodium glow of street lamps did not veil the light from billions of miles away. His legs were obedient now, and his mind encompassed a larger span of past and future. But the future that he could contemplate extended no further than the wrapping of the blankets. He knew he needed food, but his hunger was far away. His mouth was dry, but he did not want a drink. All he wanted was quietness and darkness.

In the manner of one waking in an strange place, Joey's slow mind struggled to see in the early darkness the familiar in the unfamiliar. His first feeling was one of relief. He was at home. And he had forgotten to draw the curtains. Then his brain filled in recent memories, the window became too small to be the window of any bedroom and the brightening light added a dirty greyness to his surroundings. It was still the shed. He was lying at the wrong end, the window was on the wrong side, the door was at his head. He felt ill. And hungry. His tongue was dry and rough, his lips sticky, and his head ached in the distance. He moved an arm that was bent and straightened it, easing the stiffness into discomfort. Despite some concentration, irritatingly undermined by pins and needles in his hand which he tried to dissipate by rubbing, the details of the previous day did not return to his memory. He remembered the boys. He remembered being sick. He remembered the whisky. It was now light enough to see the familiar contents of the shed even if from an unfamiliar angle. He used the straightened arm to push himself into a sitting position. He rubbed his arms and elbows. The cold was behind him, because the door of the shed was a few inches open. Without attempting to stand he tried to pull it shut. Even with a one inch gap he could feel the cold air. He shuffled around the floor searching for his bottle of whisky, but could not find it. There had been some left he was sure. His inability to recall where he had put it last night, because it must have been last night when he last had it, made him quietly cross at his own ineffectiveness. After a few minutes during

which he looked twice among all the items that stood on the floor he came to the frustrating conclusion that it was not there. The plastic bag had gone as well. He was convinced that he had not finished the whisky, that there was a last gulp at the bottom of the clear glass. Thinking that he might have put it on one of the shelves he stood up and began moving tins of paint and other bottles. He did not find his whisky. It was as he slumped down that he noticed the wooden, flat-topped stool in the dark corner near the door. It had not been there before. On it stood a large dark red thermos flask with a pale green lid that had a small handle so that it could be used as a cup. There was a piece of paper sellotaped to the thermos flask. On the piece of paper had been written HOT SOUP with black felt-pen.

Hot soup? What was a thermos flask of hot soup doing in this shed? He lifted the thermos and unscrewed the cup and then the stopper. He poured some out into the cup. It was soup, pleasantly warm to drink. Joey drank three large cupfuls. It was unusual soup, thicker with more vegetables and things in than soup he had had at home. Not soup out of a tin, he thought. He enjoyed the soup. He poured the remainder of the soup into the cup and put the thermos flask back on the stool. Who had provided the soup? The same person who had provided the blankets. It had to be someone who lived in the house. The lady of the house, he thought. But why would she put hot soup in the shed? She had put it there for him and it was true then she knew he was sleeping in her shed. He had thought of the shed as his. Then there had been the blankets. He had to think of it as someone else's. She might have been watching him for days. He pressed his face to the cold glass of the window but he could not see anyone watching him now. She could be watching like a curtain-twitcher from the edge of window, seeing him but not being seen. Even when the blankets had appeared he had given little thought to the house and its occupants, to the people for whom it was home. He had no mental picture of what or who they were. It was merely a house in which no doubt someone lived. He found it hard to imagine everything that went on in another house. He knew what had gone on in the house where he had lived, at least most of it. He had been in friends' houses and seen them sitting watching television or in the middle of a meal, but it was not enough to know

what went on the rest of the time. On the television you were shown what went on in houses, but was that really what went on? In the houses he had been in these last few days it had not occurred to him that people actually lived there, had lived there for years, called it home and to whom every detail was familiar. To Joey they had just been strange houses. He had seen photographs on sideboards and wondered whether the people in the photograph lived in the house. Most photographs are out of date and show people as they were years ago. Different people, not the people in the house any more. He knew so little about other people. The people he had worked with for those few weeks had remained strangers. He had thought he was getting to know them, but what were they like in their own homes? Who did they live with? He would never know and he would never have got to know however long he had been there. He would only share in some shallow way a daily segment of their lives, nothing more. He would never know them. He knew himself, Joey Almond, he thought. But the person he was, sitting here in a wooden shed at the bottom of another person's garden, was only remotely connected to the person he had been a fortnight ago at home, with his mother. He knew that other person. He could remember how that person thought and why he did things. But he would never be that person ever again. His memory of him was no better than a photograph. Nor was he the little boy he remembered playing football in the park, being late for school, trying to get to sleep on Christmas night. He was lonely. And being lonely is boring. All there is is time. Time to use up. No one cared what he did, how he felt, what he thought. He had never had any close, any true friends. He had never know anyone that had. You had mates that you did things with. Drank yourself silly with. Went ten-pin bowling with. Chatted up girls with. But once you didn't go along with the crowd you were on your own. There was nobody special that you could rely on, talk to, get close to, confide in, tell things to. Once his mother had been like that, but mother's are for when you're little, when you want someone warm and gentle to touch, when the sound of the words mean more than the words themselves.

It was as light as it was going to get. The cloud was heavy and low, but there was no wind. He could not sit there all day, so he went



outside. The ground had been turned over where he had been sick and the fresh soil lightly flattened. He peed in the corner where the two fences met and then went walking. Down at the shops there were people. A tall man in a overcoat and a brimmed hat marched along swinging one arm, looking where he was going. A queue waiting for a bus. A mother with two girls, a lad and his girlfriend, an elderly couple who looked as though they had been together for fifty years and now had nothing left to say to each other. An old woman came towards him bent forward pulling a tartan-patterned shopping bag on wheels. Two girls with very short skirts and thin legs, each wearing similar black coats. Their almost uniform appearance included their black hair tied up in a scraggy bunches sprouting out of the tops of their heads. They talked as they walked, with sharp snapped syllables issuing from curled lips. Each coarse contribution was a purple-lipped snarl. Even when they spoke their teeth stayed closed to hold the chewing gum. They each had one arm stretched straight down holding a burning cigarette that pointed horizontally outwards. Mechanically the hands came up and they sucked smoke from their cigarettes and blew it out straight away. It was Saturday and they were schoolgirls dressed up for Saturday. A man in a short zipped jacket, carrying an old leather briefcase with stitching open at one end, strode with noticeable rapidity to wherever he was going. A smart – really smart, almost hard smart – woman in a stiff suit with full white blouse tucked tightly into the top of her straight skirt and a red scarf at her neck stood waiting in the chill. Joey felt her hardness would have softened if she had a head resting on her determined bosom. She clicked the pointed heel of one black shoe on the pavement. She was waiting for someone to take her somewhere and she was not the kind who waited.

The world was full of people.

## 18

The flask of soup on Saturday morning was the first item in a series. Sometimes, instead of soup, a plate of sandwiches – ham or cheese – covered in transparent film to stop them drying out. When it was sandwiches there was always a flask of coffee, when it was soup then a roll in a plastic bag. Joey worked out that the food was placed in the shed during the afternoon. If there had been a plate it was always replaced by a clean one, often of a different colour or pattern. He always went out during the afternoon and he did not change his routine for fear that he might see whoever provided him with this one meal a day and whoever it was, having been seen, would not come and would never come again, like the Tooth Fairy or Father Christmas. The fact that there was always something to eat each evening intensified his routine. He looked forward to it. He came back to the shed wondering what it would be today. One day he was surprised when it was a salad, not lettuce and cucumber, but different kinds of chopped things, some of them in something like salad cream, but blander. It was only one meal a day, but it freed him from total reliance on his own endeavours and kept at bay any impending sense of desperation.

He still needed money and when he had it he spent it on snacks during the day and lager in the evening. But it did not matter if he did not find any. On the Monday following the first soup, he struck really lucky. On inspecting a likely house he saw through a hall window a purse on the sill inside. Instead of ringing the doorbell, he tried the front door and when it opened slowly he pushed it inwards until he could step through, pick up the purse and go. There was thirty-five

pounds in notes, some coins, and various plastic cards. It was a leather purse and he took all the money from it and hid the purse with its cards behind a tin on a shelf in the shed. He did not want to throw it away. Thirty-five pounds kept him going all week. He could afford to slip into a pub at lunchtime and have a bar-snack. It was better than walking to keep warm. He took a bus into the city centre and wandered round the big shops and shopping centres where it was warmer. He did not look at what was for sale, he hadn't enough money to buy anything. He did notice his reflection in a window and saw that the growth on his face was quite dark. It had passed both the long stubble stage and the itchy stage and could almost be called a beard, of the short variety at least. His head remain itchy and his hair felt dirty, but he knew kids who did not wash their hair for weeks. After a time their hair became sort of natural, like it must have been in days before shampoos and soap. His would get like that. He did not think he would have started to stink yet. It was only about two weeks since his last bath. His last bath. How long would it be before his next bath? His next shave? He might never shave again.

By the next weekend, Joey had become curious about his benefactor or more likely, he thought, benefactress. What was she like? His acceptance of her food tied him to her in some way, made him feel obliged. What might she expect in return? Might she make him do something? On the Sunday night before going back to the shed to consume whatever had been put out for him – did she put food out for him like some people put milk out for hedgehogs? – he walked up the cul-de-sac which led to the house. He had to think carefully to work out which house was the one with his shed at the bottom of its garden. He had never seen the front of it. Most of the houses were in darkness. There was little light coming through the thick curtains which hung at all the downstairs windows, just the occasional wedge where the curtains did not quite meet or where a curtain hung at an angle to the vertical frame of the window. He decided on the house with the BMW. Carefully and as quietly as he could but still walking as though he had a right to approach the house he walked up the drive.

Through a triangular gap at the edge of the window through which he peeped into the room. In front of him was the rear of a

television set and over the top of it he could see two people, a man and a woman. The man had lots of near-white hair and was sitting in an armchair. The woman was sitting neatly at the end of the sofa, her back straight and her hands clasped together between her knees. Her straight greying hair seemed to focus her attention like the blinkers of a race horse. The room reminded Joey of rooms in a museum, rooms that are set out to show visitors what living conditions were like in times past. The similarity arose not because it was full of old things, but because it was full of too many things that had to be found a place. The furniture – tables, cabinet, bookshelves – had no freedom from the arrangement of ornaments and pictures and vases and photographs. There were candlesticks, and a calendar, and two lamps. Everything was properly positioned as in the best museums. He had been to one when he was at school which had rooms set out as old workshops: cobblers, blacksmith, wheelwright and every one was overfull with the collected ill-matched items from a dozen real workshops. The ones in the museum did not impress him as places that men had worked in. They were contrived. This room he was looking at was contrived. Not lived in. And the people did not seem to be living. In Madame Tussaud's in London – where he had never been – were waxworks (so he had been told) so lifelike that people spoke to them. He could faintly hear the sound from the television.

He crept away. He did not think she was the person who took meals to someone who had started to sleep in her shed. But then he did not know what kind of a person would do such a thing. He was not sure he understood what might motivate such a person. Whoever it was would have nothing to gain from the exercise.

Joanne kept it a secret. It was important to her that no one else knew. It was another focus for each day. A more significant one, because she did not have to do it and it was not expected that she do it. It was appreciated. It was a Christian thing to do. 'Inasmuch as ye have done it to one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.' The words of the newer translations did not seem so memorable. Denis would have objected, anyway, and so by doing it she was defying him.

But there was a darker reason which she did not dwell on. Because it was a part of her day, her attitude to 'the boy' had been regularised. She had initiated a contract with him which he had accepted. That she provide him with a little food, enough to prevent him starving, and he did not trespass on her life. It was a bargain. It maintained a distance. It made her feel comfortable about his presence. There was no question of right or wrong, because what she was doing she knew was right. And she was ignorant of what he was doing. She could guess at what he was not doing. He was not going to work, not a proper job, that is. She was sure he was not on any government scheme, but she felt he should be. For that would provide him with some money. She would not leave him money. If she left him money he might buy more whisky. She did wonder where he had got the money from to buy the bottle of whisky. He could have had some money, but spent it all. She avoided thinking of other ways in which he might obtain money. If she suspected him of stealing then she might begin to think of other crimes, worse crimes, more threatening crimes. And then she might have to do something different, like tell the police. She did not want to tell the police. She had no reason to tell the police. He was doing no harm. At least as far as she knew he was doing no harm, and she could not tell the police about him simply because it was possible that he might be doing something that was technically against the law. Stealing if you had nothing did not seem to be a crime. If she fed him then he might not need to steal, or whatever. She could only give him one meal a day. It was impractical to do more. He should have more food, but to provide him with breakfast, lunch and dinner would be difficult. He was never there at lunch-time. And Denis would be sure to suspect something. Doing something three times a day was much more difficult to conceal than only doing it once a day. No, she told herself, you are doing enough, otherwise you should have done nothing.

'Joanne!'

Joanne heard Denis calling her and she congratulated herself on her timing. Their evening meal was ready.

'Joanne!'

She lowered the hot casserole slowly on to the heat-resistant mat in the centre of the table and, with oven gloves still in one hand opened the door from the dining room to the hall.

Denis was hanging his suit jacket in the under-stairs cupboard. 'Joanne,' he said before she could ask him why he kept calling, 'what's this I hear about you feeding some damned tramp who is sleeping in our garden shed? Gerry made some remark as I got out of the car. He tried to be funny something like: I see you've started letting out rooms. I hope you're not charging the poor bugger who has the cabin in the grounds. I had no idea what he was talking about. I made it quite clear that his intended-to-be-humorous remarks were completely incomprehensible. He explained that Lottie had told him that every afternoon you take a vacuum flask and food down the garden and leave it in the shed. And that she's seen a tramp coming out of the shed in the morning. Gerry assumed I knew about it. I felt such a twit. It makes a man feel such an idiot when someone tells him what's happening in his own home, what his wife is doing. I had to say, oh, him, and pretend I knew all about it and that there was nothing to make a fuss about. He looked at me as if he could see that I was flannelling. Or a fool.'

Joanne had backed off into the dining room and Denis had followed. She sat down at the table and started serving. Denis sat down opposite her.

'Anyway, you know what Lottie's like. Sometimes I think she's a bit looped. Talk about putting two and two together and making five, she only needs a couple of halves and she can make a hundred out of it. I wouldn't say it to Gerry, but I think she embroiders things – that's what Mother used to say – you know, makes everything a bit fancier.' He picked up his knife and fork ready to eat. 'But,' he said, 'she must have seen something to set her off. It is possible, I suppose, that some old codger has been kipping in our garden shed and she's added the bit about you feeding him to make it more interesting. Spends too much time on her own, that woman. Has to invent things to make her life interesting. She could have made it all up, of course, just to have something to tell Gerry when he comes in. Poor woman. You'd think he'd realise that it was all fabricated and not mention it. I won't know

what to say when I see him next. If I don't give him an explanation ... and if I tell him the truth .... Well you can't tell a fellow that his wife is seeing things or making up stories can you?'

Denis stopped and devoted himself to eating.

Joanne allowed the silence to continue. She did not want to say anything nor did she wish to lie: the truth was simple and easy to maintain. Once she had lied or – what was the phrase? – been economical with the truth then she had to keep up the lies to preserve the consistency of her story and even her childhood experience had taught her that lying is an exponential process with each successive invention more complicated and less believable than the last. Truth, if hard to tell and even if hurtful, remains self-consistent.

Denis asked, 'Have you seen anyone?'

'Yes,' she said, keenly conscious she was telling the truth, but not the whole truth. She was prevented by her agitation from spelling out the complete story. But in saying, yes, she acknowledged that she was inviting interrogation.

'Yes? What do you mean, yes?'

'Yes, I have seen someone.'

'You mean someone in our shed?'

'Yes.'

'Have you told the police?'

'What's it got to do with the police?'

'It's my land. That makes it trespass.'

'Trespass.' She laughed lightly. 'Your land. Trespass.'

'Well there must be something to stop people – ' He became suddenly distant. 'Could he be said to be squatting? It might be that if we don't do something quick – '

'Denis, Denis. It's a young lad. About the age Martin would have been, maybe bit more.'

‘Martin?’ He paused. ‘Oh, *Martin*. Sorry.’

‘This lad looks eighteen or nineteen. Tall.’

‘Well maybe it was just for one night. Late home from a party. Too drunk, possibly.’

‘No, he’ll come back.’ She could have said, He comes back, but she didn’t.

‘How do you know?’ It was a casual, academic question, implying that he had got the picture and determined the outcome, but if there was another point of view he was prepared to listen, but not change his mind.

‘I think he’s been sleeping rough in the shed for at least a fortnight.’

‘Two weeks! Then dotty Lottie was right. Why’s he keep coming back? She was completely right! You’re feeding the lazy idle bugger. Aren’t you? Come on. I’m right aren’t I? God. Now what am I going to say to Gerry? What *will he think?*’ Each word was uttered separately and emphasised with a slight downward movement of his head, like a woodpecker. ‘I can just hear him. Gone soft, have you? Started feeding the poor? You know Gerry. He thinks that being poor or unemployed is a deliberate choice, a vocation, an undesirable parasitic vocation. He knows how to make the feckless buggers work – give them nothing. No dole. No Family Credit or whatever it’s called. Nothing. Work or starve. Work or die. That’s Gerry. He’ll laugh himself silly when I have to admit that we’re being taken for a ride by a lazy good-for-nothing youth. Yes, I can hear him: Next thing you’ll be telling me your going to vote Labour. And when I protest he’ll say, Sorry, I should have known – green! Damn! I suppose you felt sorry for him – ’

‘Yes I did!’ She banged down her knife and fork and stood up. The straight-backed chair she had been sitting on keeled over and crashed against a glass-doored cabinet. The glass rattled and something small fell off a shelf inside and smashed, a timid diminutive smash.



‘He's got no one. All I do is give him a flask of hot soup or a sandwich each day. He sleeps on the floor with a half empty bag of peat for a pillow and a few blankets.’

‘You seem to know a hell of a lot. Where did he get the blankets?’

‘I don't know. Maybe someone with a bit of compassion gave him them.’

‘Well I wouldn't give him the time of day.’

‘Very witty.’

‘Don't, Joanne, you know what I think of sarcasm. What else do you know?’

Joanne righted her chair up and sat down again at the table. ‘He goes out every day and comes back at night. I don't speak to him. I don't ask him questions. I – I – Damn you Denis Marchland you don't care a damn for anyone else but yourself. If I feel sorry for someone and if it makes me feel good to help them what the hell does it matter to you? Eh? Does it? Does it, I ask you?’

‘No, I suppose it doesn't, but – ’

‘Always a bloody but. Why can't you just say yes or no?’

‘Finish eating.’

‘Don't tell *me* what to do? Anyway, I don't want to eat. Why should I eat if there is one other person in this world with nothing to eat.’

‘Now you're being ludicrous. You'll be telling me next that we could reduce our spending on food and send what we save to Oxfam – ’

‘And why not?’

‘Because the fact that there are millions starving will not be changed by people sending the odd pound halfway round the world. It's more fundamental than that. Its an economic problem.’

‘If I can’t send my money to the other side of the world then surely I can give it to a young lad down on his luck that happens to pick our garden shed as shelter.’

‘You can, but it won’t do him any good. This is Britain. He has to face the fact that in Britain you have to earn your keep. There are plenty of opportunities. All he needs is a bit of enterprise and a lot of hard work. Charity, even your tiny bit of charity, however well intentioned, will merely discourage him from facing up to the truth. Once he – ’

‘Crap!’ Joanne had never said the word before. The girls used it as though it were a polite synonym for rubbish, but for Joanne it had strength, and the vehemence of its single syllable coupled with its earthy unspeakable meaning made it exactly the word she wanted at that moment.

Its unexpectedness silenced Denis for a number of seconds. Joanne waited until he started to speak.

‘If you won’t listen – ’ he began.

‘You never think for yourself, do you?’

‘I think I do.’

‘No you don’t. If you really thought for yourself you wouldn’t be so worried about what other people thought of you. You want to be right in their eyes. You don’t think through what’s right for yourself and live by it. Who was it that put going to the opera into your head? And having gone you couldn’t even admit to me that you didn’t like it. You had to like it because you had to go back to whoever it was that had persuaded you that people who are anybody – anybody by their standards – just *loves* opera. I’d have thought much more about you if you’d stood out for a Volvo rather than that flash BMW.’

‘I wanted a BMW.’

‘But you always talk about the safety features in Volvos. Not the right image is it? An entrepreneurial businessman driving a Volvo – real men don’t drive Volvos.’

‘What’s this got to do with this toy boy you’ve got tucked away in the garden shed?’

‘Everything. And if you knew what a toy boy really was you wouldn’t use the expression. You’ve listened to so much rubbish about value-for-money, and added value and investment and return that you only think in money terms. You’ve forgotten the people in this world. They should come first not the bloody shareholders. The Denis Marchland I married twenty-four years ago didn’t think like that.’

She put her knife and fork together across the half-eaten meal and stood up carefully this time.

‘Twenty-three years ago. It’s only twenty-three years since we got married.’

‘It feels a damn sight longer.’ She opened the door leading to the hall. ‘There’s an apple pie in the kitchen. I don’t want any.’ She closed the door firmly behind her and went upstairs to Susie’s bedroom and lay down on the bed.

Denis flew to Brussels the following day.

## 19

The British Midland flight from Leeds/Bradford Airport was more than half an hour late taking off and then, as the captain smoothly told them in a voice that could have announced the end of the world without a tremor, it was held over Heathrow for an extra ten minutes. The passenger sitting next to Denis, a slightly younger man with greying red beard and one eye that was slightly more closed than the other, explained that there were always delays through Heathrow.

‘Not enough airspace. Half our upper air space is given over to the military.’

Denis was more concerned about missing his flight to Brussels. He need not have worried. The Brussels flight was delayed by forty-minutes and his dash from domestic arrivals through to the international departure lounge was unnecessary. The first meeting was scheduled for two o’clock, Brussels time, and if both flights had been punctual he should have been able to get there with an hour and a half to spare, but by the time the plane left the runway it seemed that he might be over an hour late arriving at Brussels airport and then he still had to find his way to the centre of the city and then to the venue of the meeting.

He moved his watch forward one hour and tried to relax while he picked his way through the meal he was presented with soon after the Boeing 737 had levelled off and headed for somewhere to the north of the Thames Estuary. The information about their anticipated height and route had been delivered as they queued behind a number of other

planes waiting for clearance to take off in a comforting confidential announcement broken by deliberate hesitations as if the pilot's true attention was elsewhere and at intervals he had to switch off his voice in order to concentrate on something that was, for the moment, more important. There was no visible confirmation that they were passing over the coast as his view outside was of almost flat brightly lit cloud, the same cloud that had made Heathrow Novembery and damp.

He could get a taxi. He was reluctant to take a taxi. Taxis were too expensive and he had been known to criticise colleagues when they had used a taxi in place of adequate public transport. He knew there was a train service from Brussels airport to the city and he had planned to use that. The trouble with using taxis in a strange place was that you could never tell whether you were being taken, literally, for a ride, on an excursion that had no other justification than inflating the bill.

The aircraft touched down about noon. As they were taxiing across the airport one of the stewardesses made various announcements over the public address system including a statement confirming that there was a frequent train service into Brussels and that tickets must be purchased before boarding the train. Five minutes later he was in the terminal building riding the moving walkway with his winter overcoat open but still far too warm. The queues at passport control were long, four queues with about fifty people in each moving forward across the open space at one end of the high terminal building, almost like a giant conservatory, glazed to the ceiling on one side and clearly illuminated, but heavily warm. The far wall, some eighty metres distant, had an array of small clocks, all of a similar design to those seen in hospital waiting areas, showing the time at different places throughout the world. The Brussels clock showed that it was almost ten past twelve. If everything went smoothly he should easily be on a train by half-past, say half an hour to get to Brussels. He should be able to get to his meeting by two. There would be no time for lunch, but he had eaten on the plane.

It was quarter-past when the immigration officer took his passport from the narrow high curved counter on which Denis had placed it unopened. Although he could not see anything more than the

immigration officer's head and shoulders, Denis could tell by his movements that his name and number were being tapped into a computer keyboard.

Denis had no checked-in baggage to wait for and walked quickly through customs and out through the glass doors into the thronged arrivals hall. There seemed to be a more than adequate number of people to meet all the arrivals, emphasising that he was on his own. He eased his way through the rectangle of people held back by the barriers and looked about for something that would tell him the way to the trains. It was several minutes before he located a blue sign to the left of the glass doors he had come through announcing *Train, Trein, Train, Zug*. He went down a long escalator into an empty pale-tiled hall. Standing astride his case, he located his Belgian money and then walked to the ticket office where he said, 'Brussels' and a small red seven-segment digital display at the other side of the glass screen changed to show 70F. He only had thousand-franc notes. He placed one on the tray which was pulled through by the man on the other side of the screen and returned with his ticket and his change. He picked up the ticket and the notes then awkwardly scooped up the coins. He followed another passenger through automatic sliding glass doors on to the platform. It was twelve-thirty and the two dead-end lines were empty. He studied the various notices as he put the coins in his pocket and the notes into his wallet until he realised that one notice gave all the departure times. The trains left at nine minutes and forty-six minutes past each hour. He puzzled for a moment why they did not depart every half hour. He had a fifteen minutes or so to wait. He sat down on a bench and slowed his breathing.

All his confidence had gone. He had less time than he had expected. He was in a dark empty railway station in a foreign country waiting for a train to take him to a foreign city where in a little over an hour he had to find an office in a building whose address he had, but which he had no idea how to find. He had been told that he could either get the Metro but as it was only the next stop along *Ligne 1* from from where the train came in from the airport then it was almost as easy to walk. He searched through the pockets of his suit jacket to find the sheet of paper with the address on it. He failed to find it at his first

attempt. Instead he retrieved a city map from his case. He had been given the map by someone who had been to Brussels before. There were small holes where the folds met. He wondered whether it was up-to-date. The map was merely a grid of names without significance. He began to look for a name that was familiar. Without the address his task was futile. He searched through his pockets again, telling himself to calm down and approach things logically. When he located the piece of paper it was where he had put it, inside the small card folder that held his air tickets. He had placed it in there with forethought so that he could find it quickly. Holding the map and the sheet of paper in one hand, he sucked in through his nose and closed his fingers tightly on the palm of the other hand.

The address was *Place de Brouckère*. While he was studying the map the train came in and holding the map and the piece of paper in his left hand he picked up his case. It seemed heavier each time he had to lift it. On the train he walked until he found a foursome of empty seats. After sitting down and depositing his case on the adjacent seat he resumed his study of the map. Self-conscious about his ignorance, he kept glancing at the small number of other passengers to see if they were watching him. No one else needed to puzzle over a map. Eventually he found *Place de Brouckère* (or *De Brouckère plein* as it was in Flemish) and started to look for the name of the station. He noticed it as the electric train began to move: *Gare Centrale* or *Centraal Station*. It seemed a straightforward walk so he decided to finish his journey on foot.

When the ticket inspector asked for his ticket he could not find it and it took him several seconds to locate it in his left inside pocket. The inspector, having dealt with all the nearby passengers, waited patiently and silently. Denis, his face tingling with heat and incipient perspiration, kept thinking, as he thrust alternate hands into his various pockets, how to say in French that he'd lost his ticket. With relief he handed it over to the uniformed man who appeared to clip it with a hand-held device like pliers. As he turned away to move along the train, the ticket inspector said something. The sounds had no meaning, and seemed to expect no response. Examination of the yellow ticket showed that it had been stamped on the reverse with the date in blue ink.

After about fifteen minutes the train stopped at *Brussels Nord* and Denis had to restrain himself from checking with his map that it *was* the central station that he wanted. This was not his destination. While the train was stationary it made a restrained yet impatient periodic noise somewhere between a groan and a squeak. A few minutes later the train entered a sombre gloom under a low roof supported by brick walls and pillars. The darkness was inadequately lit with white vertical fluorescent tubes. The empty platforms made the arrival of the near-silent train somewhat ghostly. The other passengers were ahead of him riding an escalator. The escalator took him to a busier, well-lit area. Denis followed the *sortie* and *uitgang* signs until he came out on to a wide street. It was time to study the map again. He noticed, for the first time, that the map showed two central stations, adjacent to each other, but clearly separated. He did not know which was the one that he had arrived at. He turned right and walked along looking for street names. He noticed an office block with SABENA on it and recalled that he had seen the name on the map. That enabled him to get his bearings and he set off towards the *Boulevard de l'Impératrice* and after walking over several pedestrian crossings (and patiently waiting for several green men) he headed down *rue de Arenberg* confident that it would bring him to *Place de Brouckère*.

The office block where the meeting was to be held was easy to spot, and the porter at the desk was able, in moderate English, to direct him to the room where he was to meet the representatives of the other organisations. Denis was hot, flustered, tired, thirsty and apprehensive as he entered the darkly walled room. The meeting had not started and he was approached by a tall young man who spoke English with accent and who asked Denis his name, offered him coffee and introduced him to those who had already arrived.

Denis said, 'Hello, Denis Marchland' to each of them without remembering what any one of them was called.



## 20

Lying in bed on the morning that Denis had departed early for Brussels, Joanne floated in a cloud of potentialities. An empty house, an empty day. A day to fill with little things, with the quiet busyness of being. Of being Joanne. The close limpid brightness of that strange thought dispelled the fuzziness of unrealised possibilities and bridged the years between now and a time far into the past when, as a fourteen-year-old, she had first looked into a mirror and seen herself. For Joanne, adolescence had been the time of recognition that she was not a compilation of what other people thought her to be – a daughter, a sister, a pupil, a friend, an enemy – but she was what she thought herself to be. It had been a moment in which her relationship with the world had changed. Instead of the world constraining, directing and moulding her, she had determined that she would constrain and direct and mould the world. Nearly thirty years later she realised that she had buried that sharp revelation, and the world – no, people – had wrested the initiative from her. Not violently or aggressively, but considerably and insidiously. She had become wife and a mother, lacking full freedom, responding to the demands of each day, convinced she was planning and exercising some control, but in reality being eased from one set of constraints to another. And now, today, there were no constraints. She could, if she so wished, lie in bed all day. She could eat when she liked and eat what she liked. She could be untidy, deliberately untidy, and not feel that everything she touched or moved had to be replaced or put away. She was not the girl of fourteen and yet within her was the vestigial vitality of that girl, pale and white after years hidden

away from the light of self-determination. Without thinking she took the edge of the bedclothes in her left hand and in a single smooth movement turned back the blankets and sheet, swung her legs out and sat on the bed. There was a whole day in front of her, and tomorrow and the day after and then – and then Denis would be back. Rachel had gone, Susie had gone, Denis had gone, but Denis, damn him, would come back, bringing with him his expectations, his requirements, his routine, his predictability. Joanne was tempted to get back into bed pull the disordered bedclothes over her head and shut out the strictures of living with people. Denis needed disturbing, she thought. All these years he has built up his life like layers of wallpaper and paint in an ageing house. The surface appearance was different, but essentially he was the same, unchanged and unchanging. Suddenly she felt mischievous. But the mischief was tinged with a vengeful aggression. She wanted to do something that would unsettle him, upset his balance, his equilibrium.

About twelve o'clock she went down to the shed to collect the empty thermos. He would have gone by now. She pulled open the shed door. He was there curled up on the floor under a tangle of blankets. Immediately she shut the door. It banged. Afraid he would wake and be violent she stepped back and keeping her eye on the shed began to move towards the house. Her steps were hesitant, as she tried to evaluate the situation. He did not appear. She stood and watched. She could not leave him, put him out of her mind and get on with the rest of the day. There was a wrongness that needed righting. Warily she returned to the shed, looked in at the window and when she saw that he had not changed his position, she slowly opened the door.

The blankets were twisted around his body. The flask and the wrapped roll were untouched. The shed stank. It had reminded her that what she was doing, had been doing, was altruistic. Today, the stench was pervasive, entering her nostrils and catching in her throat. She swallowed to inhibit the retching of her stomach, and with sudden decisiveness, kicked the sole of his nearer foot with the toe of her simple flat-heeled shoe. He moaned and shuffled. She kicked the foot again, and said, 'Wake up.' He made a sniffing sound that developed into something like a harsh, rattling snore and shuddered. The shudder

was desperate and uncared for. She stepped forward so that she could see his face. He was pale with a shiny dampness. Tentatively she reached down, holding her breath, and cupping her hand slightly laid the backs of her fingers against his forehead. He was hot. He was ill. He needed to be looked after. Now she knew what to do. Denis would not like it, but she could justify it. It was right. Wanting to complete her mission in the minimum of time so that she did not have to endure the sourness in her nose any longer than was necessary, she shook him by the shoulder, and shouted in his ear, 'Wake up!'

His eyes opened. Wide, white eyes with fluttering pupils and flat brown irises.

'You're not dead then,' she said, with a toneless sarcasm.

His pupils stopped darting and his eyes looked at her.

'You can't lie here all day,' she said, 'come on, get up.'

'Me alone,' he muttered, and pulled at the blankets.

'Get up.' She tried to harden her voice with command.

'M all right.' The voice was muffled by the blankets.

Joanne gripped the edge of the blankets and yanked at them, aiming to strip them off him. He sensed her intention and held on to them. Joanne overbalanced as the blankets pulled taut. She staggered against the stool and the flask and roll toppled off. The flask hit the floor and Joanne heard the insides shatter.

'Now look what you've done.' The words were reactive, unconsidered.

He had covered his head with the blankets once more.

'Get up!' She was beginning to be cross with the crossness of a parent handling an uncooperative child. But this was no child. She pushed her toe into his ribs with the movement of someone turning over a dead cat in the street. 'Up!' She dug harder with her toe. 'I'm not leaving you here. Come on. Up this minute.'

His head appeared. 'Leave me alone!'

‘No, I won’t.’ She pushed at his body using the flat of her foot.

When the movement came she was surprised.

‘Bloody ’ell’ he exclaimed, getting to his feet far more quickly than she had expected. He wobbled and fell against the side of the shed. He was well over six feet tall, and the thought that he might – she did not allow herself to complete the thought.

‘You’re ill,’ she said to his face up above her. ‘You can’t stay here. Now come on.’

She picked up the useless thermos and the roll and turned her back on him daring him to attack her from behind. There was a clatter. She heard him mutter something. Outside the shed she strode up the path. Part way to the house, she paused and turned: he was leaning against the shed. ‘Come on,’ she badgered. When she reached the kitchen door she held it open while he came up the path and stepped inside. He leaned against the door frame.

‘Come in.’ She pointed at a stool. He sat. She closed the door.

She studied him. He did not look well. His face was pale under the thin soft growth. Not nineteen, more like seventeen. Not as old as Martin would have been.

His eyes were more thoughtful now. She was about to ask him what his name was when he spoke.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said.

Joanne waited. It was a deliberate act. She had noted how television interviewers, particularly after a train or air accident in which tens of people have died, compel people to speak – despite their obvious reluctance – by remaining silent after a few words from a victim’s wife or husband have failed to tell enough. The need to cooperate in conversation is strong. Most people, she thought, find a silence uncomfortable and, like nature with its abhorrence of a vacuum, struggle against their will to fill it. They fill it with words, words which they hope will make someone else speak and relieve them of the burden

of turning ragged thoughts into cogent sentences. If he spoke he would be admitting her authority, because her silence had made him speak.

‘I’m sorry I didn’t eat the soup.’

It seemed trivial.

‘You’re in a bit of a mess, ...’ She let the sentence remain incomplete so that he might provide his name.

‘Joey,’ he said.

‘Please take off your boots, Joey.’

He did.

‘Thank you.’

He looked at her, silently asking, What next?

‘Come on, Joey.’ For a moment she imagined him as a pet, a large unthinking animal that could not understand her words that needed to be coaxed along by her tone. She led the way upstairs. He followed, clumsily.

‘You should be in bed. You’ve got flu or some virus or something. A day or two in bed and you’ll be right as rain. But a bath first.’

She wasn’t sure whether a hot bath was good for someone with a temperature, but she wasn’t having him sleep on her clean sheets in one of her beds until he, himself, was clean.

She turned on the bath taps while he stood on the landing and hurried about bringing a towel, some underpants, a pair pyjamas and a paisley patterned purple dressing gown, all belonging to Denis. She put soap and shampoo on the side of the bath. The bath had filled rapidly and when she had turned off the taps and checked that the water was not too hot she told him to get himself clean and to put on the clothes she had given him and when he was ready he had to come downstairs.

As she turned away from him and he moved towards the steamy bathroom she stopped and said, ‘Wait a moment.’

He stood in the doorway and waited.

She hurried down the stairs and came back with a large black plastic dustbin liner. 'Put your old clothes in this.'

He took the bag from her hand and went into the bathroom.

'I'll take that' she said.

He had taken off his leather jacket. He held it out and she took it. He was wearing a thin tee-shirt on top of another shirt. The top one was grubby and had been printed across the front with some faces and names which had no significance for her. She gripped the leather jacket by its collar and reached out to pull the door shut. She stood looking at the white-painted wood, imagining him silently getting undressed.

The hot water enclosed his body as he lowered himself carefully into the bath. The clean water made his skin feel dirty. He was dirty, but in the last couple of weeks he had become used to it. But now the bathroom with its inherent anticipated cleanness made him ashamed of his accumulated grime, and it was with systematic contrition that he began with his hands and face and then progressed down to the lower parts of his body. He stood up when necessary and sat down again. He ducked his head into the water, which was grey and opaque and coated with the scum of dead skin, and then shampooed his hair, and then once more. When every part of his skin had been soaped and cleaned he lay back in the bath and allowed the opaque water to rise up over his chest.

The aches in his limbs had gone.

This dumpy woman with the chopped off hair and soft brown eyes and busy hands frightened him. She had made him do things, things which he did not want to do and yet was glad he had done them. Partly glad. Lying in a warm bath, despite the flaky film and dark dirty density of the water, was better than lying in the cold shed. But you didn't get owt for nowt. He was frightened at what she would make him do next. Not because he had terrible ideas as to what it might be, more because he had no idea, but knew that he would do it. He wanted to be somewhere else. He did not want to put on the pyjamas she had left him, nor the dressing gown. He did not want to put his clothes in her

shiny plastic bag. He did not want to open the door and go down the stairs of this big, fresh, tidy, arranged house. He did not want to have to look down at her upturned face and be forced to think of things to say that she would find acceptable. And yet he wanted to please her because – because she seemed – she seemed to *care* about him. There was an implicit obligation placed on him by her caring and he could not turn away from it. He was free to get dressed – in his own clothes – and creep quietly down to the front door and leave the house, and her, and go back to his .... He did not want to go back. And she had taken his jacket. He wanted to stay clean and fresh. She would make him do it, but that did not stop him wanting to do it. There would be a price. It would cost him.

The water in the bath was now barely warm. He stood up and dried himself on the big blue fluffy towel. While the water was protesting at being forced down the drain, he stood in front of the handbasin and after wiping away the steam with the towel looked into the mirror. He needed a shave. The hair that covered his face was too long to be bristle, but too sparse to be a beard. In the bathroom cabinet he found an old safety razor with a blade in it and a brush. He lathered his face with toilet soap and tried to shave off the long hair. The blade was not sharp and instead of cutting the hair it pulled. He winced and lathered up his chin again. Eventually he had removed all the hair and some skin and flesh. Bright thin blood seeped out of two nicks and he dabbed at them with cotton wool until the bleeding stopped.

With the intention of being defiant, of exercising some independence, he picked up one of his tee-shirts. It had been next to his skin for two weeks. The touch of it was limp and dead on his water-wrinkled finger tips. An unwashed touch. He could not wear it. He put it and the underpants he had been wearing since he had left home in the plastic bag. He searched through the pockets of his jeans and found only his handkerchief. He thrust the jeans and the handkerchief into the plastic bag. And his socks. The bag was full enough to stand by itself. He pulled on the pale cream pyjama bottoms that she had put on the stool in the bathroom then the jacket. The buttons had pulled a little and the fabric was slightly torn where each was sewn. Her husband's, he thought. The thought struck him that her husband might be dead,

that he, Joey Almond, was wearing the pyjamas of a dead man – the pyjamas he had died in in. No, he had seen him through the window – unless he was someone else. He put the thought from his mind and dressed in the rest of the clothes. He found a comb and combed his damp hair. He tied the dressing gown tightly round his waist and taking the plastic bag in his right hand opened the bathroom door into the cool air and headed down the stairs towards the short woman with black high-necked jumper with the silver necklace and the smart grey skirt, and the straight dark hair with the perfect fringe. And the soft brown eyes.



## 21

On the radio two women were discussing the difficulties and stresses imposed on family life by having one child in hospital for a long period. Joanne had emptied the washing machine and was about to take the basket of clothes out into the garden and peg them on the line. She had just opened the back door when there was a surge of air through the house: someone had opened the front door. She hurriedly stepped inside, put the red basket on the floor, and closed the door.

‘Joey!’ she called, going into the hall already thinking that he had left. Surely he would not have gone off in a dressing gown and pyjamas. She did not want him to leave. He seemed a nice boy. She quickly reflected that that was the kind of thing mothers were supposed to say about a daughter’s first boyfriend. She met Rachel in the hall. Rachel clearly had something that she wanted to say and Joanne was about to suggest that they went into the kitchen when Rachel opened the door into the lounge and saw Joey calmly watching television. His temperature was only ninety-nine so Joanne had changed her mind and not insisted that he go to bed. Rachel turned and closed the door quietly behind her.

‘Who’s he?’

‘Joey.’

‘What’s he doing in there?’

‘Watching television.’

‘I can see that, but *why* is he in there?’

‘Because he hasn’t anywhere else to be.’

‘What do you mean?’

Joanne could see that Rachel was heating up.

‘He’s homeless.’

‘How do you know that. Did he turn up on the front doorstep and announce that he was homeless?’

‘No, not quite.’

Rachel sniffed short and hard, lifting her shoulders. Her lips were thin and tight.

‘He was asleep in our shed.’ Joanne deliberately exaggerated the note of concern in her voice. She walked towards the kitchen.

‘And you feel sorry for him,’ said Rachel, following. ‘Mother! You don’t know where he’s from, what he’s like. He’ll probably empty your purse and disappear. How long as he been here?’

‘Let me see.’ Joanne stopped and holding out a hand counted on her fingers slowly and then said, ‘two and half hours.’

‘Today?’

‘This morning. I think he’s been sleeping in our shed for a couple of weeks.’

‘And you decided that seeing you had all this spare space you could give him somewhere to lay his little tousled head.’

Joanne raised her eyebrows, stretched her pressed lips over her teeth and made her head nod with a pleased vertical oscillation, like a child accepting the offer of a sweet.

‘What on earth will Dad say?’

‘I don’t know and I don’t much care.’ Joanne led the way into the kitchen and switched off the radio.

Rachel came in after her. ‘He’ll go up the wall.’

‘Cup of tea? Shouldn’t you be at the shop?’

‘Yes, I should, but I’m not.’

‘And you’re not going back there ever again.’

‘That’s right,’ said Rachel, a bit surprised. ‘How did you work that out?’

‘A look in your eye, an edge to your voice and the way you stand with your left knee slightly relaxed ready to raise your foot and stamp it like you used to when you were little. You never do it now, but your leg prepares itself when you’re cross.’

Joanne had filled the kettle and switched it on. She put some tea in a brown pot and stood waiting for the kettle to boil. Rachel sat on one of the stools. Joanne kept silence. Rachel had come to tell her something and would not leave without explaining everything and asking for support in whatever action she had already planned to take.

Joanne poured the boiling water into the teapot and took two white mugs with a pattern of tiny red hearts on them from a cupboard, and then put four chocolate digestives from a flat square biscuit tin on a plate and placed the mugs and the biscuits on a circular enamelled tray patterned with cornflowers. She stirred the tea in the pot and waited again.

‘It’s Donald,’ said Rachel, off-handedly, while her finger tip traced an invisible pattern on the work surface next to her.

‘What about Donald?’

‘Oh, you know. Men.’

Joanne knew men, especially in their attitude to Rachel.

‘Has he – ?’

‘He hasn’t done anything. It’s what he’d like to do. I’ve tried to be just friendly. I wanted to be good at the job and *I am* interested. That’s why I went to London. But he had other ideas. And this new shop is all

talk. We were having lunch in the pub and he mentioned another trip but this time he made it quite clear – bloody clear – that the trip was only an excuse. I told him straight that going to bed with him wasn't part of the deal and walked out and came here.'

Joanne put milk into the two mugs and filled them with tea. She picked up the tray and went through to the dining room where, in addition to the dining table and its chairs there were two narrow low fireside chairs with wooden arms. She put the tray on a low table in front of the unlit gas fire. They each sat down and helped themselves to a mug of tea and a biscuit.

'I suppose I must have given him the wrong impression.'

No doubt about it, thought Joanne, wondering whether Rachel had intended it to be the right impression until she had changed her mind.

'Is it fair just to leave him like that? Shouldn't you give notice?'

'I don't know. He'll just have to manage without me.' She paused as if to give emphasis to what she was going to say then lifted her chin. 'I'm not going back.'

'I think I'll take Joey some tea and a biscuit.' Joanne returned to the kitchen took another biscuit from the tin, put it on another identical plate, filled another identical mug with tea, and took them through to Joey. He did not notice her entrance.

'Here's a cup of tea and a biscuit.'

Joey looked up from the television and took the mug and the plate out of Joanne's hands.

'Thanks,' he said.

'What are you watching?'

'Some old film.' He then gave her a rapid tangled synopsis which she could not follow.

'Who was that that came in 'ere?'

‘That’s Rachel, my elder daughter,’ said Joanne leaving and going back to the dining room.

Rachel waited until Joanne had sat down again.

‘You’re not serious about letting him stay?’

‘Are you serious about leaving the shop?’

‘Yes, and I’ve a perfect right to do so.’

Joanne let her mouth slowly drift into a smile.

‘I don’t see why I shouldn’t. After all I can’t help it if his wife’s a bitch and he wants a bit – ’

There was silence between them for a minute or so. Then Joanne bent over to turn on the gas fire which ignited automatically. ‘Denis is always telling me that the central heating should keep this room warm. But, it doesn’t, not in winter.’

‘You’re going to let him sleep here?’

‘Yes, I thought he could have your old room.’

‘My room,’ said Rachel, as though she was being put to great inconvenience.

‘Well, Susie still needs her room during the holidays,’

‘Vacations. They’re called vacations when you’re at university.’

‘I used to take him soup in a flask and leave it in the shed, or some sandwiches, but that’s no way for a boy to live.’

‘How old is he?’

‘Sixteen, seventeen.’

‘Surely he has a home to go to.’

‘Oh, I’m sure he has, but if he doesn’t want to, what’s that to me. I can easily afford to accommodate him here. And it’ll be nice to have someone around during the day to talk to.’

‘Oh, mother,’ said Rachel with mock sympathetic appreciation.

‘Don’t talk to me as if I was half-way senile. I’ve made my decision – as you have made yours – and I’m going through with it. If Joey needs a home then I’ll provide him with one. If he wants to leave he can leave. If he wants to take money from my purse then I will tell him that I would rather give it him. He only has to ask.’

‘But, Mother.’ This time the tone was sympathetic exasperation. ‘He might be one of those young thugs that break into old people’s houses and beat them up and take all their savings and ... and do vile things. Mother, be sensible, you can’t take the risk of having someone you don’t know around the house who might decide to attack you at any moment. And as for having him sleeping here at night –’

‘That’s the time most people sleep.’

‘ – well I don’t want to have to come here and find you battered to death in your own bed.’

‘You won’t. Or if you do it’ll be nothing to do with Joey. Have you told Alasdair about Donald?’

‘Good God, no.’ She pushed her hair from off her face with an open hand. ‘And you won’t either. I can handle Alasdair.’

I bet you can, thought Joanne.

There are all sorts of girls. There are the girls who always have boyfriends that are, by some unfathomable female consensus, attractive; such girls hang on to their boys as though letting go would result in their flowing down into lumpy puddles on the pavement. There are other girls who do not seem to have boyfriends and hang about in groups discussing what each other is wearing or plans to wear. There are girls who are unapproachable, who can never be addressed, whose eyes never see you, and who seem sensible and ordinary with clear skin and clothes approved by their mothers. There are smart, showy, well-dressed girls who by the age of thirteen know precisely which way to pin their hair and how to use their eyes so that every boy in the school fancies them. They often hide behind a remote, even

fictitious, older boy who works away, is in the army, or has gone off to college. Joey had studied them all, but he had only come kissing-close to three or four, and then mainly at lights-out parties where (if the girl whose home it was had got her invitations right) he ended up paired to the little girl who was enthusiastic, looked half her age and who normally talked so much that all anyone ever said to her was ‘Shut up’. Joey knew he was missing out. But somehow the right kind of meeting with the right kind of girl had never occurred, and if it did occur he knew he would be so *sure* that it was the right kind of meeting with the right kind of girl that he would be tongue-tied, nervous and unable to give a hint or take one. He would continue to be a watcher for some time. He looked at faces. He looked at legs. At breasts and buttocks, at lips and eyes. He was aware of shapes and sizes from the broadest and fullest to the thinnest and the flattest. He had criteria and standards. He liked balance. He marked down thin lips in round faces, or big breasts on narrow chests. If a girl was small then she should be slim and defenceless; if a girl was tall then he preferred her to be athletic as well. Long hair should not hang down by hollow cheeks, or black hair surround a pale face. Blue eyes should be close together and big brown eyes set wide apart. His impression was that Rachel had scored highly on his various scales. And yet each feature he recalled seemed slightly defective. Thin lips in an oval face, large blue eyes, sharp shoulders, small round breasts. She was not very tall, but strung with sufficient hidden strength to struggle. The combination of the features was somehow of greater worth than the sum of their individual values. A girl, or a woman, like that had never come so close to him. Not merely geographically close – you could always sit next to the best-looking girl on a bus, or follow the sweetest moving figure on the street – but reachably close. He might get to speak to Rachel, be introduced to her, take her hand. She frightened him with a fear that was deep inside and which wanted to rise up and fill his mouth. She had the glossiness of the magazine cover combined with softness and touchability. He wanted to be close enough to breathe in her warm breath and accidentally touch her hip with his leg as he walked past her. That would be enough.

Joey lay in the strange bedroom that had been hers, on the bed that she had slept in, and allowed his desires to stretch reality into

fantasy. There was always the possibility that some event would allow him to perform for her some kind or even brave act that might make her look at him with appreciation, appreciation that might develop into friendship, friendship which with increased familiarity, with conversations and understanding might become a relationship, a relationship in which her wide blue eyes (he was sure they were blue) would catch his as though with unbreakable threads and draw his face to hers, his lips to hers, his tall hard body to her small soft submissive strength. This was as far as his imagination went. At this point in his fantasy, he returned to the beginning and elaborated the event that might be the catalyst, bringing into being a selfless love that was foreordained, fated, inevitable. He might be walking along the street when a car, driven by a drunken driver, mounts the pavement and threatens to trap her sharp delicateness between its hard metal and the office block she has just come out of. In the single slow second available he throws himself at her and grabs her slim waist and rolls with her out of the path of the ploughing vehicle coming to rest with his face between her breasts. *Or*, he might be on a late night bus when she and the man she is with are accosted and insulted by a loud intoxicated thug who, when remonstrated with by Rachel's companion, knocks him to the floor and then tries to kiss and cuddle her. He could walk up to the lout and pull his shoulder back and when the assailant turns like a wild animal distracted from its prey he could drive his fist into the ugly broad nose, and then into the ribs, and the stomach and, when the brute had fallen dazed and in pain, he, Joey Almond, would drag him to the front of the bus and, when the driver had opened the door, roll the body out on to the road. Later she would invite him out for a meal, or to the theatre, as a reward and she would begin to realise that he was the man for her. Joey and Rachel. Rachel and Joey. Or better, Rachel and Joseph. Rachel and Joseph.



## 22

‘Coffee for everyone?’

Denis stopped listening to Madeleine and raised a curved index finger to just below his shoulder. Around the rectangular table others nodded. Nine of those who had been at the afternoon’s meeting had gone along with the suggestion that they meet up at one of the many restaurants in the *rue de Bouchers*. Denis had spent most of the meal talking to the only woman present, Madeleine. Madeleine worked for the CEC and had been at the meeting as both observer and adviser. She was English, but had been living in Brussels since the summer. Denis judged her to be in her early forties, considered her attractive and, to use a somewhat dated word, engaging. When he asked the best way to get to his hotel she offered to accompany him as her flat was not far from it. When they came up from the Metro she hurriedly said that she would meet him back in *Brouckère* and walk with him to the restaurant where a table had been booked, a walk which was short but difficult-to-describe.

He had taken up her offer and later as they had walked from *Place de Brouckère* she had talked continuously and, as they approached their destination, had drawn his attention to the impressive and surprising displays of fresh fish and shellfish packed in ice outside many of the restaurants which lined both sides of the narrowing cobbled street that curved up a gentle slope. The meal had been intended to provide an opportunity for everyone to get to know each other. Denis had arrived with Madeleine and sat next to Madeleine and

conversed with Madeleine and failed to get to know anyone else. She was almost as tall as Denis (she wore rather severe high-heeled shoes), had black shoulder length hair and dark skin that, although it was marked with some thin lines (smoothed over with make-up), still retained the softness of her earlier years. She wore no ring on the third finger of her left hand. During the evening Denis had told her something of himself, mostly about his work, contriving to avoid mentioning wife or daughters. She had spoken mostly about living in a foreign city like Brussels. Denis sensed that there were reasons for her reticence about her life prior to her coming to Brussels and discreetly did not steer into areas about which she might not wish to speak. Whether she was separated or divorced or in the middle of a difficult marriage he did not know, but he was certain she had been, or still was, married.

Around ten the divided bill was paid and the party filed down the narrow jointed staircase and out into the cold air. Denis and Madeleine were at the rear and continued talking as they walked along the surprisingly busy street. Soon their fellow-diners ahead of them became difficult to pick out among the numerous knots of other people. When Madeleine took his arm and steered him into a narrower street he assumed that she was taking the shortest route to the Metro station, but she did not release his arm. Walking along with her near him, he searched for an excuse to prolong the evening. All the bother and bluster, that had enshrouded him between the airport and the meeting, had cleared leaving him unencumbered, unfettered and quite light-hearted. Joanne and the house where he lived were both remote in distance and in memory. It was a long time since he had spent so much of an evening with a woman other than Joanne – an evening that had yet to end – and the foreignness of Brussels, the certainty that there was no one who knew him or would recognise him within a hundred miles or more made the inevitable qualms seem petty and immature. In England it might have been different, but then in England things like this never happened to him.

‘Is there anywhere one can get a drink at this time of night in Brussels?’ The sound of his own voice and the spacing of the words

betrayed to his own ear the hidden uncertain motive that he had hoped to disguise within the simple suggestion.

‘Now there’s a bright idea.’ Her voice had a spontaneous eagerness which made him look at her and remember distant times when the future, unlike now, had more significance than the past. And girls were newly formed and unspoilt. Times when decisions were made in the hope of what might be. Now decisions were always determined by what had been. She smiled and he felt pleased that he had said the right thing, and the past became truly ephemeral and the future full of magical possibilities. So often with women, he reflected, it was so easy to say the wrong thing.

They crossed a wider street and then after a few yards came out in a large cobbled rectangular open space with tall ornate floodlit buildings on all four sides.

‘The *Grande Place*,’ she announced, ‘the *Grote Markt*.’

The architecture was all vertical patterns with intricate carvings and decoration. The windows were narrow and set in rectangular arrays. Most of the buildings were like narrow slices set next to one another, each different from the next and yet with a complementary similarity adding to the overall impression. One larger longer building had a very tall, almost too-thin, tower with a fancily carved spire spiking the high darkness.

‘I’m impressed,’ he said.

He followed her through a door into a bar where upstairs the tables were set around a wooden balcony that circumscribed the square open stairwell. The wooden ceilings were low and the small windows leaded. She led him to a table next to one of the windows where they could look out into the old market place.

They drank beers and they talked inconsequentially. She told him how the *Grande Place*, or at least all the buildings in it, had been destroyed at the end of the seventeenth century by order of Louis XIV of France and then rebuilt in less than four years.

‘The *Grande Place* itself goes back to the twelfth century.’

‘You seem to know a lot,’ he said.

‘It only what you can read in any guide book.’

With each minute he seemed to find less to say. The risk that was attached to a wrong word or a presumptuous phrase grew with each of those minutes. At the end of the longest silence during which he could not look at her and had stared out of the window at the people passing across the square, she touched his hand to attract his attention, finished her beer and said, ‘If we don’t want to miss the last Metro we had better be going.’

She did not take his arm this time, but Denis felt they walked together. It did not seem far to the white-M-on-blue sign and the steps that went down to the *Gare Centrale*. Madeleine used her multi-journey ticket which she inserted into a machine to have it time stamped. Denis bought a *direct* from the ticket office.

On the platform, which was almost deserted, he studied the diagrams of the line.

‘This is the same line we came down on and the same one I went out to the hotel on.’

She nodded.

‘And I’m going to *Schuman*,’ he said with exaggerated boyish delight at his discovery.

‘And so am I. I have a flat not far from the *Berlaymont*.’

His let his lack of comprehension show on his face. It was part of the cooperative game. Each wanted to impress the other and so in return each had to provide opportunities to allow the other to do so. The whole evening had been a series of questions, invitations to elaborate, and requests for information politely offered as openings alternating with explanations, recountings of personal experience, and extracts from the vast array of knowledge both useful and useless that the human mind scavenges and hoards throughout its individual existence. Through these exchanges each in turn told something – a

carefully selected something – of themselves either directly or indirectly.

She said, ‘That’s the large building shaped like an uneven curved cross that they always show on the BBC when they’ve a news item about the Community, or the Commission or even the European Parliament, but that meets in Strasbourg.’

Denis wanted the train to come. Standing on the station platform he was conscious that they were strangers pretending to be friends. Within the brightness of the train sitting together they would at least be companions.

The two-coach train came in and the few waiting passengers converged on its length to pull aside the doors which remained unopened as no one got off. The warning buzzer which preceded the closing of the doors sounded as Denis and Madeleine sat down. He sat next to her and she looked out of the window into the blackness between stations. He checked off the stations as the train stopped in each one, noting that on the map above the window some had distinct names in Flemish and French, others a common name. *Park/Parc, Arts-Loi/Kunst-Wet, Maelbeek/Maalbeek* and finally *Schuman*.

As they came up the steps into the open air below one of the curved unclimable windowed cliffs of the *Berlaymont* he offered to walk with her to her flat.

She took his arm once more and said, ‘Thanks.’

‘My hotel is down there and on the right, isn’t?’

‘Yes, just past the bank.’

It was about five minutes walk to her flat. The entrance was next to a bar. At the top of three stone steps there was a broad wooden door with four bell pushes fastened to its frame. She found her keys in her handbag as he stood with his hands in the pockets of his overcoat. She went up the steps and unlocked the door on a dark hallway. Denis moved from the middle of the pavement to the bottom of the steps. She reached for a light switch and pressed it. The hall was plain, bare,

almost seedy with a dustbin at the bottom of the straight stairway. Denis waited, reluctant to make an end of a pleasant evening.

Madeleine came back to the steps and said, 'I've enjoyed this evening. See you at nine-thirty in the morning.' She reached for his shoulders and kissed him on each cheek like the French do. The perfume which he had noticed on and off during the evening flowed around him with a close coolness.

Denis did not know how to respond. 'Good night,' he said as she drew back.

'Good night.'

Denis turned away before she closed the door.

At four o'clock the following day the final session ended earlier than Denis had expected. Everyone else was in an hurry to get to the airport or to catch their trains. Denis felt naive again. He had presumed that the meeting would go on until five if not later and that he would not be able to get to the airport in time to fly back to Leeds that night. Since yesterday he had observed that there were others in the group who despite their loquacity were possibly less knowledgeable less expert than they pretended to be. Denis, when he was unsure, listened rather than speaking. However, during the sessions he had gradually become more sure. He had asked questions which had been considered worth answering and made contributions that were built on by others. Now he had been uncoupled and did not know what to do.

He could check out of his hotel and go to the airport. Even if he could get on a flight to Heathrow there might not be a place on the last flight to Leeds/Bradford. Or the flight from Brussels might arrive at Heathrow either after the latest connecting flight had departed or with insufficient time to guarantee his catching it. Then, if he did get to Heathrow, he would have the hassle of finding somewhere to spend the night. If he stayed he could relax, spend the evening in Brussels (doing what?) and go back tomorrow morning as he had planned. Although the easier course of action was to remain, the thought of several hours with

no company but his own, in a city he had little acquaintance with, in a foreign country, urged precipitate action. He desperately needed a helping hand. The others, who minutes ago had been sitting round the same table, had made, or were making, their farewells. Briefcases were closed. Hands were shaken. His hand was shaken, but he could only keep repeating, Goodbye. He had learnt some names, but could not identify his well-wishers when they were not seated in their positions at the table. He wished Madeleine was there. He could have explained his problem to her, and that might have determined what he should do. Just to have set out his dilemma would help him decide what to do because if one avenue were clearly deficient then his hearer would indicate by a facial expression or a change in stance that it were so and Denis would be able to plump for the other one confident that he was unlikely to be ridiculed for his lack of nous. But she had disappeared at lunch time and had not reappeared during the afternoon. His earlier thought repeated itself: he did not want to spend the evening in Brussels by himself. He lacked information. He did not know what time the flights left for Heathrow. If he had the information, how would it affect his deliberations? He was not good at these kinds of decisions and he did not know how to (did not want to?) make enquiries. He was hesitant about making enquiries. He had always been reluctant to ask questions. Questions which could have been avoided by adequate planning or forethought should not be asked. Doing so would only highlight his ignorance and lack of preparation, and might even suggest to the person questioned that he was stupid. Nor might questions be asked of people who might give him a wrong answer rather than admit *their* ignorance. Nor questions which might not be understood, or misinterpreted. He could not ask questions which might bring forth an answer which he could not understand, in a language he did not understand. Seasoned business travellers in his position would know exactly what was feasible and how to go about it. They would relax and make a rational choice. A business man of his age should be able to do this. He did know, but he was not sure. Madeleine would know. She would help him to be sure. He could call on Madeleine.

He could call on Madeleine. There were numerous motives for calling on Madeleine. The indecision about his return was only a

pretence, and he knew it. But the pretence arose out doubts and insecurity that the young feel they will soon lose and the old are surprised to find they still have. It takes a strong will, familiar surroundings, and sound knowledge to be out of step with others. Following a custom, a habit or the pattern set by someone else is much easier. Denis had nothing to follow and neither the will, nor the surroundings, nor the knowledge to empower him to act independently. And so he wanted to call on Madeleine.

He could not remember whether he had told her when he was going back to England. He must have mentioned it. He did not know her telephone number. There was a directory in his hotel room, but would she be listed? He knew where her flat was. He could call round at her flat, but he needed a reason and he could not even think of an excuse. It would have been so much easier in England. The need for immediate action returned and for a moment he was tempted to run, take the Metro to his hotel, then to the *Gare Centrale*, catch a train to the airport, a flight to London (there was bound to be a flight that would get him back to London tonight) stay overnight at Heathrow and fly up to Leeds in the morning. But the thought of dashing to his hotel, packing his case and paying his bill, rushing to the airport and then finding that the flights were full or that he could not get to Heathrow and then having to find accommodation in Brussels made him decide to keep to his original plan. Time might drag, but the situation was manageable.

He left the building and while he was on the Metro he began to construct possible plans for the evening. At the worst he would have to eat by himself. It was not attractive to him. However, it would pass the evening. He could, as had occurred to him earlier, call on Madeleine. This immediately brought back a soft dark unstable maelstrom which had disturbed him irregularly throughout the day. What had happened the night before was not easy to interpret. Had she enjoyed his company? Or was she just a friendly considerate person? He was almost sure that if she were at home she would be pleased to see him unless there was some special circumstances which he could know nothing about which might make his presence undesirable, or awkward, or embarrassing. Even so he did not want to appear a fool who, like some



gauche adolescent, could not read the real message hidden in a careful choice of words or recognise the kindness that endeavours to discourage without hurting. He wished that he knew her telephone number. A vocal rebuff would make him redden, but at least she would not see it.

It was not yet five o'clock when he unlocked the door of his hotel room. By the bed his digital alarm clock and the copy of John le Carré's *A Perfect Spy* that he had brought with him imbued the dim curtained room with a transient familiarity and sense of reassurance connecting the world he really knew to this time and this place. He put on the television and found that BBC 1 was in the middle of a programme for young children and BBC 2 in the middle of a black-and-white film. He flipped through the other channels: Belgian, French, Dutch, German and Italian, but there was nothing to strengthen the link with home. He would have liked to watch the news, but the six o'clock news on the BBC would not be broadcast until seven o'clock, local time. He sat down on the bed: six or seven hours until bed-time, almost a working day to occupy. In another place, at another time he would have welcomed this extra time, but he was not used to using time on his own. He needed someone to be there. If Joanne had been with him she would have been getting ready, excited by the prospect of all those restaurants to choose from. She would have pointed out that the guide says that there are five thousand restaurants in Brussels and its not much more than twice as big as Leeds. And he would have been quite content to read or watch the television while she popped in and out of the bathroom as she progressed through the various stages of getting dressed up. In an English hotel he might have gone down to the bar and had a beer or a gin-and-tonic. Here in Brussels he was frozen, paralysed by the palpable unfamiliarity that pressed in from all sides. The uncommon courtesies, the unknown expectations of speech and manner, and the propensity of every situation to provoke an embarrassing error. His face tingled at the thought of inadvertently being wrong and having to acknowledge his lack of knowledge.

Denis stood and took off his jacket, and his tie, and then sat down on the bed again. He pushed off his shoes and swung his legs on to the bed and lay down looking up at the room's plain ceiling, devoid of even

a central light fitting. He wished he could relax. Someone had once told him that to relax he should become conscious of his body. To use up unwanted time he experimented. He began with his feet with the intention of working systematically up to his chest and arms and head. After five minutes he was up and walking to the window. There were parts of his body that were always (except when he showered) outside the realm of conscious thought. As long as they worked properly he did not want to think about them. The human body as a machine seems ridiculous. The multiple functions of so many parts would be comic in a machine. How many things could you do with your mouth? Imagine a car where you put the petrol in through one of the stereo speakers. The window of his room looked out of the back of the hotel into a dark volume of space that was entirely enclosed by five and six storey buildings. Some of the windows in the other buildings gave out light but it was impossible to make out what the darkness at ground level contained. He looked at his watch: half-past five. He needed a drink. No, he needed a drink in order to have something to do that would pass time in a way that was acceptable. The minutes he was struggling to get through had no value, yet they were the same kind of minutes that at other times, in different circumstances would tick away like seconds. Those high-speed minutes were precious minutes full of happening and experience, the jewels of memory that gave significance to the future. Does the worth of exhilarating experiences lie entirely in the experiencing of them? Or is their worth in the memory of having experienced something exhilarating? Should not all experience be of significance? Denis was not comfortable with these almost-philosophical thoughts. They emphasised the discord that hummed harshly between him and his context. Deep in him he sensed an *alter ego* that asked deep questions to which there were no answers, questions that were asked in stillness and in darkness, questions that ought to be asked, but could not be answered. He would rather be busy. If he kept doing, working, solving problems, then there was never any stillness and the only true darkness was the twilight between wakefulness and sleep into which he slipped each day with ease and which he knew was a foretaste of death. To die, he hoped, was to slip softly into unending sleep. And death was the end of memory.

Denis forced himself to shudder, not to rid himself of the shroud of death, but to banish the cold questioner that had risen within him, that tested his judgement, that undermined his evaluation of his life-so-far. Denis had done well. He was successful. He had money and possessions. Having children had been a disappointment. If they had been boys then there might have been some synergy between father and sons. But daughters seemed wayward, like wives, apparently dependent yet independent, lacking a compatible point of view. He had money to spend. Enough, he felt, to create the experiences that he could store until his dying seconds. To die having tried to fill his life with worthwhile events was all a man could hope for. That was an ambition that he was failing to fulfil. Somehow the conspiratorial constraints of circumstance edged him into actions and situations that were unremarkable and empty. Evenings of fireside silence. Weekends of beauty spots and traffic queues. Holidays among deckchairs, putting greens, in hotels with shared bathrooms and women who told you with motherly pride that their Jack had his own plumbing business. Life had Denis in an arm-lock and he stumbled forward hoping each day to break into a freeing run in which every moment would have novelty, surprise, relish, and recountable pleasure. He wanted experiences that were worth telling and retelling, even if only secretly, to himself. But he knew he would keep on stumbling.

The telephone rang in its un-British way.

He picked it up and without thinking announced his room number in English. It was Madeleine. He listened.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘eight o’clock will be fine.’

The arm-lock had gone and he was hurrying. As yet his steps were short and uncertain, but he was going where he wanted to go.

## 23

Joey was still quietly asleep when, at nine o'clock, Joanne gently pushed the bedroom door with her fingertips. Once the door was wide open she picked up the tray, which she had rested only a moment ago on the small table at the top of the stairs, and carried it stealthily into what had been Rachel's bedroom.

She looked at him, breathing easily and regularly, like a baby. She wished he would open his eyes and turn to her and smile, like a child.

She put down the tray again on the cabinet next to the bed. There was fruit juice, fresh coffee – real coffee – a bowl for cereal, a plate with triangles of cooling toast, a jar of marmalade, butter, sugar, milk in a little jug, knife, spoons, a clinical thermometer, and three small single-serving packets of breakfast cereals to choose from – she had bought them yesterday afternoon, after Rachel had gone.

She walked round the end of the bed to the window and drew the curtains hoping that the sudden noise would disturb him and he would awaken. He did not stir or murmur. The light was grey and damp and the fence had a touch of crystalline frost. It would soon be December. She skirted the bed again and leaned over him. His face was pale and smooth with uneven stubble where he had shaved inexpertly yesterday.

'Joey,' she whispered, putting a hand on the shoulder that thrust up a quilted alp.

'Joey,' she said, moving the mountain with her hand.

‘Joey.’ This time her voice was more abrupt with a mixture of frustration and mild reprimand.

His face became screwed up for an instant, then his mouth muttered and his eyes opened in a far unseeing way.

Returning memory dissipated the lack of comprehension and wordlessly he acknowledged her presence as he turned on to his back and pushed himself up with his elbows.

‘Good morning Joey.’ Joanne spoke brightly as if the day held a glory of prospects.

Joey said, ‘Morning,’ as if he was surprised that any one should feel so optimistic at that time of the day.

‘I’ve brought you some breakfast,’ said Joanne. ‘Sit forward and I’ll pull your pillow up.’ Joey cooperated as she placed the tray in front of him. ‘But first your temperature.’ She held the thermometer near his mouth and he took it like a fish taking water. She studied her watch until the second hand had made a complete circuit and then pulled out the thermometer. She had to twist it and angle it until the thin thread was magnified enough for her to read it.

‘Ninety-eight point seven. Near enough normal. You can get properly dressed today.’ She proceeded to explain that it was real coffee and that the fruit juice was orange and that he could choose his cereal and there was milk in the jug. Then she waited a moment wanting him to begin eating or drinking, but she realised in a second that he was going to wait until she had left the room. He doesn’t want to do anything that I might not approve of, thought Joanne. Without speaking again she went across the landing into the main bedroom and collected clean underwear and socks, a shirt and a sweater, and a pair of trousers that Denis no longer liked. Before she re-entered Rachel’s bedroom she tapped with one knuckle on the door panel and when there was no reply – did she expect one? – she went in as quietly as if she had been on tiptoe.

‘I’ve brought your clean things. You can have a shower if you want. There’s plenty of hot water.’

Joey was eating cereal and when his mouth was almost empty he said, 'Thanks.'

'See you in a few minutes, then,' suggested Joanne.

Joey had put another spoonful of cereal in his mouth. He nodded, and Joanne went downstairs.

Joanne crept quietly about the house listening. A footfall on the bedroom floor, the sound of the lock on the bathroom door, water running in the pipes, anything that would have told her that he was getting up would have allowed her to breathe normally and get on with the day. But she was apprehensive lest he just lie in bed. Young people did that. And he might be afraid of what was going to happen. She tried to see it from his point of view – invited into a strange house and expected to feel at home. Maybe he did not know how to feel at home. She wanted him to come down, to be part of the day. He would need some clothes of his own, clothes he would like and feel comfortable in. She looked forward to his delight in his good fortune. There was a sharp pre-Christmas kind of expectation in her stomach that anticipates surprise and overflowing excitement. She foresaw the brightness in his eyes that would be her reward. This thing that she was doing and what she planned to do were good. He hadn't been naked, or in prison, only a bit sick. But he had been hungry and thirsty and a stranger, and he might have become really ill or ended up in prison. And she had fed him and clothed him and taken him in. What had happened to him before he had begun sleeping in her shed was of no concern to her. She considered him almost newborn, but condemned, and it was her responsibility to give him a chance. Without her endeavours his life would, she argued, have been wasted, blood running down a dirty gutter into a stinking drain.

She moved from room to room putting things more precisely in their places, adjusting the fall of the curtains, and wiping house dust from shiny surfaces.

He would be successful. A public figure, explaining on the radio or television how if it had not been for Joanne – yes, she would insist that he called her Joanne – he would not have got where he had. And

she, old and frail, would take pride. She could look back on a life that had been worthwhile. She would have taken something worthless and nurtured it into something valued and admired. Denis had drawn her attention once to a beautiful small car exhibited at a summer fair. An ordinary family saloon that had been new fifteen or twenty years ago, driven until it had become unreliable, kept in a garage until it had rusted and then restored and rebuilt until it was almost a work of art. There had been a dozen or so photographs of the stages in the restoration, and the exhibitor claimed that he had hundreds of such photographs. Joanne imagined the album of photographs she might have in twenty years time. The shed – should she get a film for her camera and take the photograph today – where he had slept. Joey dressed in Denis's clothes. Joey going for his first interview. She would help him to find a job, and she wondered as to his talents. Joey being awarded this, promoted to that, meeting important people, being written about in the newspapers, seen on television.

She wished he would get up and come down. She wanted to get started.

The toast was cold and the coffee lukewarm by the time Joey had eaten two small boxes of cereal. He would have eaten all three, but there was insufficient milk. Spreading butter and marmalade on crisp toast while trying to keep the tray level on his stretched-flat knees caused the mug of coffee to slide along the tray. Rather than keep snatching at it, Joey drank the coffee, emptying the mug in several uncomfortable gulps. The toast was thin and hard and the butter and marmalade lay coldly on top of it. There was no melding of the tastes. He could feel the toast, the butter and the marmalade separately in his mouth, but to have not eaten it would have been to spurn a kindness.

Being the involuntary target of kindness unsettled Joey. There was always an angle, but he did not know what Joanne's angle was, or could be. Altruism was to him an alien commodity, and if he had had it named and defined he would have argued that it did not exist. He would not deny duty and responsibility, but his unarticulated

philosophical premise was that all action was motivated by gain. Not necessarily material gain, but the satisfaction of some need or desire. He expected mothers (and to a lesser extent fathers) to cater to their children's welfare, and similarly pet owners to their cats and dogs. He expected the rich to secure their property against theft, but had no sympathy for those who through their own carelessness were the victims of crime. Drinking alcohol was understandable, drunken driving abominable. Killing in war was clearly right: the rule was kill or be killed. He had convinced himself that he could kill in order to protect his own life. However, he had learnt at school that with a little planning serious conflict could be avoided, and apparent cowardice rather than conceited bravery did not necessarily reduce one's status. Most people hadn't the guts to be a coward. Most people did not have the true essential courage to be individualistic and would rather follow a party line or an expected route. Joey wanted to be different, to stand out as an individual in the panoramic crowd of typicality. Out there, living by his wits, he had tried, and though it had not turned out the way he had hoped, his situation remained unusual. He was, he conceded, close to being able to wallow in near luxury, waited on hand and foot by an eccentric middle-aged lady who clearly had more money than she knew what to do with. Eccentricity is a severe form of individualism and, therefore, Joey told himself he should have some admiration for this woman who was doing something which most people (at least most of the kinds of people that Joey assumed inhabited the world) would judge to be foolish. Yet the freedom which she exercised did, by some disquieting arcane logic, reduce his freedom. She was calling the shots. It was she (and it would continue to be she) who organised his day, decided what he would eat, wear, do. She would decide when he slept when he went to bed when he got up, went out, came back. Joey resolved that this would not be.

He put the tray on one side, had the suggested shower, and dressed in the clothes she had provided. The trousers were slightly short for him. Carefully carrying the tray he went softly down the stairs. Standing in the hall he heard her voice.

'Good morning, Joey.'



‘Good morning,’ he replied, tentatively.

He turned toward the kitchen and she appeared at his right shoulder.

‘Joanne,’ she said. ‘Say it – Good morning, Joanne.’

‘Er, good morning, er, Joanne.’

‘I’ll take that,’ she said, holding her hands ready to receive the tray. She was slightly taller than his mother, heavier, and much older. His mother’s beauty which he had seen on photographs had dried and hardened, Joanne’s – which he could only guess at – had been folded up in flesh. He could still see it deep in her soft brown eyes. His mother’s eyes were opaque, hiding the remnant of beauty from prying predators. Only when the dryness was watered by her tears did the softness and the depth return. Joey hurt at the memories of his mother’s stifled sobs.

Unable to decide what to do, he followed Joanne into the kitchen.

‘Now what are you going to do today?’

‘Er.’ He had decided while he was showering that he must do something specific to demonstrate that he had a mind of his own. But he still did not know what action to take.

She had transferred everything from the tray to either the dishwasher or one of the cupboards.

‘I thought I might get a bit of fresh air.’

‘Joanne,’ she prompted.

‘Joanne,’ he said nervously, trying to make it sound as though it was a natural suffix to his earlier statement.

Joanne smiled at him as if to say: Good boy.

‘Well then, if you’re to go for a walk you’ll need something on your feet. Now what size are you?’

‘Nine, nine and a half.’

‘Denis only takes an eight,’ she said with a little frown, which was smoothed away by her next thought. ‘Anyway its not good to wear other people’s shoes.’

‘I’ll put my Docs on.’

‘Docs?’

‘Boots.’

‘I’ve put them out. Ugly things. Too heavy. Uncomfortable. You need some proper comfortable shoes.’ She opened her palms to the ceiling as though testing for rain. ‘Give you weak ankles.’

‘Look, Missus – ’

‘Joanne, please.’ She extended the last syllable with a smile.

‘You’ve no right to chuck ’em out.’

‘Well, I haven’t exactly put them out. I’ve put them away. Proper shoes, that’s what you need. We’ll just have to get you something.’

‘Joanne,’ he said, trying to sound reasonable. ‘There’s nothing wrong with my Docs. They’re comfortable – honest – an’ waterproof an’ hardwearn’. I don’t need no new shoes.’

‘Any new shoes – now there’s a newspaper in the hall and you know how to work the television. I won’t be more than half and hour. I’ve got to shop for dinner and it’s not far out of my way to call in at the shoe shop. I suppose you would like something more fashionable than that shirt and those trousers. Well that probably means me taking you into town. If we’re going to go before Denis gets back it will have to be this afternoon or tomorrow morning. I don’t think he will be pleased if he finds you wearing his clothes. First thing tomorrow morning, I think. Now you go and sit down.’

Joey sighed and did so, picking up the paper in the hall to find out what was on television. Denis must be her husband.

## 24

As the jet engines reached full power and the aircraft was pushed down the wet runway, Denis waited for the nose to lift and the ungainly machine to leave the ground and fly. An aircraft is under its greatest stress at take-off, he thought, and was relieved when the invisible peril passed and he heard the dull clunk as the undercarriage was folded away a second or two after the plane had risen reluctantly into the air.

As the aircraft had come unstuck from the concrete, so Denis became detached from Brussels. He was left with a set of snapshot memories. The unknown Madeleine at the first meeting. Madeleine's eyes looking at him as she told him some trivial tale. The weight of Madeleine's arm on his. The wordless timbre of her bright voice hung against his ear. A hint of her perfume caught his nose. He saw her sitting across the table from him in the quiet restaurant. He felt his heart lift again and his stomach sink as they had when she had taken him up to her flat. He tried to reconstruct the moment at which he had realised what was going to happen and known that she had realised also, but he could only recall the lightness that had accompanied the sureness, the certainty, the confidence and the inevitability. He put the sweating, physical exertion out of his mind and was belatedly embarrassed by his hurried early morning return in the rain to his hotel. Brussels would always be a city with a hidden extra that only he could see beyond the dark, grey, unexciting streets.

But it had all been firmly recorded in the past. Unalterable. Unforgettable. And unreported.

The ping on the public address system intruded. The FASTEN YOUR SEATBELTS sign was no longer illuminated. Denis began to think of other things. Travelling brings together people whose lives would otherwise have nothing in common, who knew nothing of each other save that they had a need or desire to travel from Brussels to London on a Thursday morning in November. They, that is the other passengers, knew nothing of what had happened to Denis in the last two days, or in the days before that. They were ignorant of the possibilities that lay before him and of the sudden hollow panic that seized him as he realised he carried a secret that he could not risk revealing to anyone.

He had to keep it to himself.

He had slept with, made love to, another woman. Life seemed ten percent bigger when he thought about it. Somehow he had to squeeze that enlarged experience into narrow everyday normality, and that meant not telling anyone. If anyone who was part of his life were even to suspect what had happened he felt that the curtilage of habits and expectations that delimited his freedom would be breached and his sureness and stability destroyed. What had taken place in Brussels, what had occurred between him and Madeleine could not be a visible part of the pattern to which he was returning. It had to be suppressed, partitioned off, hidden behind a screen of partial truth. He did not want to lie to Joanne, but he knew he could not tell the whole truth. Ever. And yet a true secret, unshared, or unshareable, is a negative consuming thing. It drains the spontaneity from relationships, from conversation, from the telling and re-telling of experiences. It creates a no-go area in the memory. But Denis could not help but mark these two days in Brussels as significant. They were days he would remember and recount to himself in years to come. He would try to replay in his mind the subtle steps by which a chance encounter, a fortuitous action or remark, the bright gleam of a hesitant hint had steered him to the culmination of the previous night. And what was almost vertiginous was the recall of decisions that might have been made, that would have had different, unmemorable consequences. Had he missed such opportunities before? The fixedness of memory is an argument for

fatalism. There are no experimental procedures which allow alternatives to be explored and evaluated. He could only imagine.

The arrival of his flat-packed meal brought back to his awareness the details of the reality that surrounded him. Out of the window there were bright white lumpy clouds above which the aircraft hung. The closeness of the large passenger in the adjacent seat made him feel more cramped, he had to strain to keep elbows in, and wrists bent and still slice chicken with a toddler-sized knife and fork. There was comfort in the unreality of eating prettily arranged food, in a confined space twenty or thirty thousand feet above the sea. Brussels was unreal. Home was unreal. Madeleine was a character in someone else's story.

When the beginning of their descent towards Heathrow was announced, Denis folded away his tray and turned his watch back one hour, back to Greenwich Mean Time, back to the time before he went away. The plane descended into the clouds and for four or five minutes there was no view until they broke through over a colourless London – the loop of the river, Tower Bridge and then the Palace of Westminster falling towards the rear of the plane and Buckingham Palace almost below. Then they were over the unrecognisable western sprawl of the capital. The plane landed and he was back in England, almost back home. Soon he would be landing at Leeds/Bradford Airport, and driving his car up the cul-de-sac to the house where Joanne, who would never know, would be waiting.

'It's ridiculous, and you *know* Dad will *not* understand. Why should he? He's waited years to get Susie and me off his hands so that you can begin that slow comfortable decline into Darby-and-Joanism. He's all right is Dad, but ... well ... family life is a bit ordinary, a bit stultifying. It's not as if you two really enjoy doing anything together. And he thinks it's because you've always put us first. What d'you think he'll make of suddenly having a ... sort of ... well, foster son foisted upon him, someone for you to put first just when he thought the way was clear?' Rachel was finding it difficult to say what was simple and straightforward in her mind. Before she began each sentence the whole

of it was precise and unambiguous, but as soon as the first few words were said and she heard them repeating themselves through her ears she no longer liked the sound of them. She heard them through her mother's ears and the hurt that she realised could ensue from a different interpretation of the words lashed back at her destroying the confidence she had had in her intended statement. Her speech stumbled and the sentences crumbled into fragments.

Rachel, reluctant to compound her blundering, kept silence. Her mother appeared to look at the picture hung on the wall to the right of the chimney breast: a painting of a street scene with an electric tram. Without changing her gaze her mother spoke as if speaking her thoughts, for which she required no hearer.

'You sound just like him. That's what he says. He's always wanting to do things. Let's go out. See this. Go to that. I'm happy in my own way looking after the house, getting meals ready, making things look nice. And the garden. Joey's a sort of hobby. A reason for doing things. I can see that. People have all sorts of hobbies. I like looking after people. Why shouldn't it be my hobby. I liked looking after you and Susie and your Dad. I still do like looking after your Dad. But - '

'And that *but* is important, isn't it?'

The interruption broke the steadiness of the gaze. Her mother's eyes drifted down to the carpet, her head turning slightly towards Rachel.

'I don't know, Rachel, I don't.'

Rachel had driven Alasdair into the bank for nine o'clock and spent some time idly wandering around the shops and had called in at her mother's towards the end of the morning. She had found her mother busy wiping, placing, adjusting in the lounge. She had stopped when Rachel had arrived and the two of them had been talking for half an hour. Joey was out getting a breath of fresh air. He seemed to like walking, her mother had explained, and he had some new clothes and some proper shoes. She had let him continue to wear his leather jacket.

‘Are you staying for lunch?’ asked her mother. ‘Joey and I will only be having a snack.’

Rachel nodded. Her father was due back early that afternoon and she felt it might be easier if she was there. Her father would listen to her, though she had no idea what she might say to defend this silly behaviour of her mother.

Joey came in while they were making tuna sandwiches. When Rachel heard her mother greet him she turned sharply and awkwardly and the knife she had been using spun out of her hand across the kitchen floor. Joey picked it up and silently held it out for her to take.

‘Get a clean one, Rachel.’

She did.

Joey stood in the doorway while they put the sandwiches and a selection of small cakes and biscuits on two plates. The kettle began to boil and Rachel prepared to make a pot of tea. She turned to look at Joey while she waited for the kettle to come fully to the boil. He was tall with square bony shoulders and brown hair that would never look as though it had been combed. His eyes were pale and flicked towards the window as she nearly made eye-contact with him. The movement of his eyes contradicted the natural confidence of his straight, gently pointed nose and wide mouth. He looked more than seventeen. He wore a pale-blue sweatshirt and light-grey belted trousers, with a permanent crease.

The kettle boiled and she turned her back to him while she made the tea.

‘I think we’ll sit in the front room.’ Her mother used her I’m-talking-common-sense voice that acknowledged there might be opposition, but did not encourage its overt expression. Rachel and her father always glanced at each other when they heard it. Rachel glanced at Joey, but his face was turned towards her mother.

Her mother gave Joey the tray with everything on it except the teapot which Rachel picked up along with the printed heat-resistant mat. Her mother then led the way to the lounge where she placed a table in the angle between one armchair and the settee and then sat

down in the armchair. Joey placed the tray on the table leaving room for Rachel to put down the teapot.

The siting of the table made it quite obvious that Joey and Rachel would have to share the settee. Rachel sat at the end nearer the table and nearer her mother, who edged back from the table indicating that it was Rachel's responsibility to hand out plates and offer sandwiches. Each time she invited Joey to take something from the plate that she held in front of him she tried to catch his eye. Each time he managed to avoid her gaze, but could not hide the touch of pink at his cheeks. He had long-fingered hands and he held things with the second phalanxes of his fingers rather than their tips. In his fingers the small cakes looked tiny. When she asked him if he would like a biscuit and lifted the plate from the table so that it was within his reach she waited until he was about to take the only chocolate covered one and pulled back the plate. He looked at her and this time she held his eyes with hers and gave him a practised soft smile.

'They're my favourite.' She angled her head and looked up at him out of her left eye.

He went very red, and took a different biscuit.

Rachel took the chocolate one and said with deliberate sweetness, 'Thank you, Joey.'

The paling flush brightened again, and she made her lips tighten and twitch a little as an embryonic laugh tickled her mind. When he agreed to have a second cup of tea she made him hold the cup and saucer in the air between them and pretended to steady his hand by placing her fingertips on his wrist. The cup rattled and she caught his eye again and this time he seemed to share a little of the amusement that she felt. His sensitivity surprised her. She had expected someone hard, hardened by the hardness and insensitivity of others, and sharpened by neglect and ignorance. But instead of a youth driven by a matter-of-fact logic that took the world as it was and was prepared to exploit it whenever the opportunity arose, she saw a young man who was neither callous nor thoughtless, and who was very very young. She rather liked him and she wanted him to like her.



Later, while her mother was upstairs, Rachel spoke quickly and urgently to Joey.

‘My father will be back from his business trip soon, probably within the next hour. He knows nothing about you and if – God I’m as crazy as my mother – and if you want to stay here then your best bet is to keep out of the way because I suspect – no, I know – there will be an unholy row about you. Don’t worry, we’ll win, no father can stand up to the united forces of mother and daughter, but you can help most by doing nothing. Keep quiet and, if possible, out of sight.’

Joey, leaning backwards under the pressure of her urgency, nodded as much as his pressed-down chin would let him.

## 25

The lull in the car after the engine had died seeped into Denis and was transformed into lethargy. He had come to the end of his journey and he did not want to – not a for a minute or two – re-enter his other life. Inside the house that stood in front of him, with the attached garage like a guard at attention, were the trappings of Denis the father. Not Denis the husband. Joanne thought of him as father. He tried to be a husband, but to be a husband you have to have a wife. To be a father you only need to be in the presence of the mother of your children. Your children may be at the other side of the world, but with their mother you are a father. He had had enough of being a father, the trappings and accoutrements no longer interested him. The part, if it ever had been, was no longer inspiring. He was no longer motivated to take the stage, to say his lines, to pretend. Incoherently and autonomously his mind searched for alternatives, for actions that could be considered, with outcomes that could be weighed and assessed. But that imperious determinism, empowered by fear of the novel and untried, held him in thrall, and at the front of his mind he knew he would perform as he had performed before. The silliness of sitting silently in his car outside his own house intruded and stirred him. He got out and, carrying his case, crossed to the front door. It opened before his hand had pressed on the grained wood.

‘Dad.’

Rachel stood not quite in front of him in a position that barely allowed him to step into the hall. Awkwardly he closed the door behind

him. Something in the tone of Rachel's greeting caused him to think rather than speak. Before he was able to say anything she spoke again.

'Before you go in –'

Denis maintained a catalogue of tragic, catastrophic or devastating homecomings that he had compiled over the years of short absences from home. Serious illness. Death of a child. Or of Joanne. (If Joanne were dead then perhaps he and Madeleine ....) Burglary. Violence. Fire. He had even contemplated finding Joanne with another man. In his mental dramatisations of these prognostications, some happenings or events would announce themselves, others he would discover in the course of time, in some he would be met and prepared by a friend or relative. Rachel was preparing him for something. Tragic, catastrophic or devastating? There was no evidence of anything catastrophic. Covertly, he glanced around to see if his mind had only allowed him to see what he had expected to see, leading him to miss some obvious piece of evidence. If it was tragic then he would have been encouraged to sit down first, given chance for his imagination to create the anticipation of shock, not that the blow would have a lessened impact because of the mental foretaste. The road to devastation would be similarly smoothed. Unless ... unless on entering the lounge he would be confronted with signs that would tell part of the story and complicate the full revelation. Bad news should be communicated simply.

Despite his cerebral logic his mouth muttered: 'Joanne? Susie?'

'Dad, just listen.' Rachel was positive, workmanlike.

The tension in his lips and neck eased. He was about to be given some intelligence. Helpful intelligence. Knowledge that would arm him for some conflict that might occur. Knowledge that was better spelled out than inferred from actions, from tones of voice and from uncompleted sentences.

He squeezed his eyebrows together as a sign of maturity and clamped his teeth making his unopened mouth puff a little. He was prepared for anything, willing to cooperate.

‘Mum’s sort of taken in a lodger – ’

‘What?’ Denis heard the words, understood the meaning, but balked at the significance.

‘Listen. He’s a young lad whose been sleeping – ’

‘ – in our bloody garden shed!’

‘You know?’

‘I knew she’d been leaving food out in the shed for some tramp. That woman.’ His cheeks filled and he forced exasperated air out through pursed lips.

‘He’s only sixteen or seventeen.’ Rachel offered the statement in mitigation.

‘I know.’ He remembered. A young lad about the age Martin would have been. ‘She said he was older, eighteen or nineteen.’

‘He’s tall, but not that old.’

‘Gerry – Gerry, next door – put me wise. Lottie had seen Joanne ...’ Denis had forgotten all about his argument with Joanne. Now he recalled how strong she had sounded. She had spat the word crap at him at some point. He remembered that. He could remember trying to argue logically and feeling that he was making little headway against the current. Something had been driving her. Martin. He had forgotten about Martin as well. Forgotten the silent stillness of the cot that morning when he had gone in. Eyes covered by pale pink-veined lids, closed in peaceful endless sleep. Lips soft and relaxed. There had been no warmth when Denis had picked him up. Martin had stopped crying forever. Sudden infant death syndrome, a cot death, dead in his cot. He remembered the little white coffin carried under one arm from the boot of the ordinary black car by one of the undertaker’s men. They shouldn’t have seen that. It was a long time ago. It – he – should have remained forgotten.

It did not alter the present situation.

Joanne was sitting, facing away from the door, when Denis went into the lounge. Rachel was behind him.

‘Joanne,’ he said, to attract her attention.

She looked at him. ‘Nice trip?’

‘Yes,’ he said, controlling his voice and expression as he thought of Madeleine in the dark, the darkness in Madeleine.

‘This youth,’ he said, announcing the first item on the agenda.

‘Joey?’ Joanne twisted round in her chair so that she could look at him more easily. He sat down on the settee and leaned forward. Rachel remained standing near the door.

‘Joey,’ he said with distaste, not wanting to turn a problem into a person.

She waited. Her beautiful brown eyes reminded him of a younger Joanne.

‘He can’t stay.’ He heard himself, rational, smooth, sympathetic, reasonable, understanding, authoritative.

‘Why not?’

She provided no support for the implied opposing view. He tried the same approach.

‘Why on earth should he?’ This time he was slightly ruffled, unsympathetic, unreasonable, and on the defensive. Sod it, he said to himself.

Joanne said: ‘He has no home, nowhere to live, no money, no family, no chance.’

‘It’s the same for millions of others.’

‘That’s why I want to help one person.’

He thought: Self-righteousness is an intransigent opponent.

‘You’re being used, taken for a ride,’ he said.

‘I don’t mind if I am.’

‘But I do. It matters to me. It affects me.’

‘It has nothing whatsoever to do with you – it’s my decision.’

‘But it’s my house.’ He cursed in his mind as he regretted his statement. Technically he was right.

She moved her chin to one side, reproachfully. ‘Ours,’ she said.

He felt defensive: ‘That doesn’t stop it being mine.’

‘Childish logic. You always have used childish logic when reasonable common sense fails.’

‘Logic is logic whether it is childish or not.’

‘Grow up, Denis. We – and that includes you – have responsibilities, wider responsibilities. To society. Or do you just think that those who can’t look after themselves should be allowed to fall by the wayside.’

‘You can’t go looking after every waif and stray or down-and-out.’

‘But I can look after one.’

‘God, Joanne, why can’t you be reasonable for a minute?’

‘Don’t talk to me as if I was a silly woman.’

He got to his feet and walked to the window. ‘But you are!’

‘Dad.’

‘You stay out of it. This is between your mother and me.’ He was frustrated. He had lost his grip on the debate. He needed to take charge of it.

He returned to his seat. Joanne’s eyes were directed towards the fireplace.

‘Let’s consider this sensibly – ’

Joanne’s brown eyes were unusually hard and bright as they flashed in his direction, challenging him.

‘It seems to me that there are a number of questions. One. Why is he homeless? Two – ’

‘Does it matter? And this is not a bloody business meeting. Perhaps he’s run away from home, or been kicked out, or never had a proper home, I don’t know. I’ve not asked him. But I couldn’t leave him there in the shed in the cold. God you are heartless.’

Silence. He used the silence to think.

He spoke more slowly with more control. ‘But I’m not soft. There are hostels for people like him. Or Borstal or gaol or whatever under eighteens get these days.’

‘You are prejudiced! How do you know he’s broken any law?’

‘How’s he managed to live?’ He made the words sarcastic.

‘What’s he supposed to do for God’s sake. He has no home, no job. He can’t steal and, according to you, people like me are not allowed to help him. We just leave him as he is, where he is. And then what happens?’

‘It’s not our fault that he’s there.’

‘And it’s probably not his.’

‘He’ll have to apply for social security.’

‘Your damned government got rid of that for kids like him.’

‘Don’t be stupid. There’s always some kind of hand-out for every kind of scrounger. You’re being used – ’

‘You’ve told me that already.’

‘ – he’s only taking you for as much as he can get.’

‘Well I think I’ve got plenty to give.’

‘You’ve made up your mind, haven’t you. It doesn’t make a soddin’ bit of difference what I say or how bloody carefully I argue my case you will not admit I am right. You’ll regret it. I know. The day will come when – ’

‘Doom and gloom. Doom and gloom.’

Rachel laughed.

Joanne smiled in response.

‘Bugger the pair of you. Do as you bloody well like. But don’t ask me to put myself out for your –’

Denis went out into the hall, picked up his bag and stamped up the stairs.

Since Denis had come back, it had been expected that Joey ate dinner in his bedroom. Joanne brought it up on the first day, explained that she thought it would help smooth things over, but he had known it would be the same on the day after and the day following that.

Rachel had told him something of what had happened when her father had come home. Joey did not understand it. Denis was a stranger to him. He knew Joanne, but he did not know Denis. Some days he watched him from an upstairs window as he went out in a morning and got into his BMW which he always left parked on the drive, never in the garage. A man with white hair that made his skin look unwashed; his eyes were shadowed under still-dark eyebrows; his nose had clearly grown more irregular over the years. No young man had a nose like that. Tall with narrow shoulders, he wore a suit, and carried a case, one of those hard rectangular ones with a combination lock at each catch. Joey had seen it standing in the hall. Without knowing him, Joey did not like him. He did not like him because, as Rachel had tried to explain, he did not want Joey in his house. Joanne did, but Denis did not. Joanne had her odd motherly ways and her odd ways could be irritating. Denis was distant, and Rachel had suggested that Joey respect the separation. ‘Keep out of his way,’ she had advised. ‘If he never sees you he can’t complain.’ It seemed peculiar, living in the same house as another person and having to think ahead so that there were no meetings or even sightings. Consequently, Joey did not get up until the front door was slammed and he was careful about when he used the bathroom. The first weekend was like some crazy game with Joanne



shutting him in rooms and then telling him when the coast was clear so that he could move upstairs or downstairs or across the landing or through the hall. The simplest strategy was to stay in his room or get out of the house.

Joey helped Joanne to move an old drop-leaf table from the back of the garage up into his bedroom. There was a door from the hall straight into the garage, Joey went back down for the straight-backed chair she had shown him, she remained in his room and she wiped down the table and covered it with a cloth. Each evening she brought up his dinner on a tray and set everything out neatly on the table then came back and took everything away. At weekends he had most of his other meals in his room as well.

Between weekends Joey had the freedom of the house during the day. He followed Joanne about when she was there or watched television. Sometimes Rachel called. Joey was mesmerised to the point of staring by her calculated perfection. She did stay long and Joey could not easily speak to her, though she addressed him as though she was indifferent to the churning that went on inside him, strangling his words and binding his movements. Each weekday afternoon ended when he heard the sound of the BMW on the drive, the signal for Joey to switch off the television and go up to his room. He could only come down again if Denis went out. Joey ate alone and in silence. If Denis did not go out, Joey crept stealthily down the stairs and went out. Walking in the cold knowing that he had a warm house to return to was better than sitting in the silence of Rachel's room. Not having any money to spend, he could only walk and think, and he often thought about Rachel. He talked to Joanne about her married daughter – Joanne had shown him photographs of both Rachel and Susie at various ages – and discovered her married name was Quirke. He looked it up in the phone book. There were only two entries for Quirke and he soon learnt that her husband's name was Alasdair which enabled him to eliminate one of the entries. Then he studied the street map that Joanne kept next to the telephone directory in the drawer in the hall table.

One evening when Denis's presence forced him to go out, Joey set off with purpose, the street map in the pocket of the overcoat that

Joanne had found for him in a nearly-new shop. The night was dark with invisible cloud and the wind which was at his back as he started down towards the main road carried the promise of frost. After over an hour of walking and stopping under street lamps to check the map, Joey turned into an estate of small modern houses. The roads of the estate were curved with correspondingly curved swathes of grass, sliced by straight drives and narrow paths that ran up from the roadside pavement. The houses were almost detached, built in pairs linked by twin adjacent garages. Rachel's house was in darkness. He was disappointed. The purpose, which had driven his feet, had been to bring him nearer to her. That she was not there had frustrated his intention. He walked up the drive as if proximity to the house would in some way compensate.

There was no one about. Joey followed the path along the side of the house to the back. When he surveyed the rear of the house he noticed that the flat concrete roof of the garage extended beyond the rear wall of the house and continued round the corner to form a porch over the back door. The transom pane of the upstairs window over this rear porch was open. It was quite easy for Joey to reach up to the top of the concrete apron and by pulling with his arms and pushing with his feet against the bricks of the garage wall to swing up on to the top of the porch. He was out of sight of all the other houses in the same road, and the occupiers of houses on the next street seemed to have uniformly agreed to plant dwarf conifers (that were now over ten feet tall) along the rear fences of their gardens with the result that Joey was hidden from anyone looking out of any downstairs window. Nevertheless, Joey moved quickly. He reached in through the open transom and unlatched the larger lower pane which opened door-like. He put one leg through the opening and eased his long body into the small bedroom.

There was sufficient light for him to see that the room, which was about two metres by three, had once been the bedroom of a child. The wallpaper was patterned with teddy bears. Now now there was only some cardboard boxes and a small table with a single chair. The unshaded bulb hung down like an isolated pear.

Joey went out on to the landing and put on the light so that he could see into the other two bedrooms. One had a single bed, but no carpet, the other had a larger than average double bed with a pink-covered duvet, curtains in a matching material and plain white walls with pink-painted woodwork. Joey began opening drawers in the dressing table. He found handkerchiefs and socks. There was some loose jewellery, he fingered an earring with a fine hook and a black glass pendant. He imagined it hanging from Rachel's small earlobe. He imagined her removing it, two hands to a single ear, and then the naked ear. He put the earring back and closed the drawer. In the tall chest of drawers he found a man's underwear – Alasdair's – and in the second drawer Rachel's underwear: knickers no bigger than a child's handkerchief, and bras, inadequate pieces of material, black, white, red and blue, and a suspender belt. Joey touched them. In the other drawers were tee-shirts, sweaters, pyjamas, nightdresses. He took a nightdress by its thin shiny straps and let it fall open. He held it up towards the door through which the light from the landing came. He could see the shape of the doorway through the material and in his mind saw the shape of Rachel's body through it, in it, the light fabric draped over breasts, touching and shadowing her nipples, and hardly reaching far enough down to hide, to hide –

As though to escape his thoughts he quickly folded up the flimsy catching garment and thrust it untidily back into the drawer. He shut the drawer, went out on to the landing, switched out the light, returned to the small bedroom, fell over the chair, picked it up, reached the window, climbed out on to the porch canopy, made the window look properly closed and from sitting on the edge jumped down into the darkness of the garden. As he walked down the path into the well-lit road, he kept his pace in check. He could do with a drink. But he had no money.

## 26

Money. Without money, Joey remained passive, ushered through each day by the will and the pressure of other people. Even a few notes in his back pocket would have lessened the weight of lack of choice. With money he could do other things. When he was in the streets he saw money, not so much in the flash of a new car as in the bags of shopping, the queues at the bus stops, the lights through the windows of pubs, the flattened boxes that had held chicken and chips, the empty drink cans, dirty foot-trodden sweet wrappers – all evidence of things unattainable. He could buy nothing. He could give nothing. He was given things and he took. Joanne was rewarded by his presence, by his willingness to let her talk to him, by his help in tidying up. She gave him a list written in tiny writing on a square of paper from a block, and a ten pound note to go to the shops. If he did dare to spend some of it on a pint in a pub, or kept back a pound or two, then he would not be able to go back. And Joanne wanted him to go back. And he did not want to injure her, to damage her belief that what she was doing was intrinsically good. He valued that belief even if he could not fathom its source or intention. So he bought the items she had requested and returned with all the change. She was pleased.

‘You’re a good boy, really.’

Was he? His mother had thought so, but what she thought somehow was without import now. He had, as it were, emigrated to another country, and going back required planning. It was not a small decision. He had had to make his way here, where he was. Yet this was

an interlude. It could not last. One day he would have to go. When such thoughts unnerved him, he pictured Rachel. More than money, he wanted Rachel to be part of his future. If she became no more than his friend then he would know that he might one day come close to another girl like her, who would like him. This was something he needed to work at. At the moment his relationship with her hardly existed. He had seen her, she had spoken to him. Several times. He would like to see her again, because he chose to, not because she happened to come within his ambit as a side effect of some more important goal. He would like to give her something, a present.

The giving of a present established itself as a secondary objective, a first stepping stone. Presents had to be bought, and buying required cash. This became the primary objective.

Nearly three weeks after Joanne had brought him in from the shed, the first night in that particular week that Denis had not gone out, Joey stayed in his room until almost eight and then went down into the hall. As he was putting on his overcoat he noticed Denis's suit jacket on a peg in the under-stairs cupboard. Inside he found a wallet, and the wallet contained money. One five-pound note and several tenners. He took one of the ten-pound notes. Out in the street his stride was hurried. The ten-pound note was in his hand in his pocket, a piece of paper, crumpled. It was still in his hand in his pocket when he returned from his aimless walk. He could not spend it. He would keep it for a day or two. If it was not missed by Thursday he would spend it. Joanne had said nothing by Thursday, but he was not sure if she would mention it to him even if she knew that Denis had suspected that some money had gone missing from his wallet. Joey would have liked to have heard all their meal-time conversations, dinner and breakfast. He might have picked up a hint. By Thursday he neither knew that Denis had noticed his loss, nor did he know that he had not missed the note. In his bedroom that morning, Joey took the note from the place where he had hidden it behind the round mirror that hung on the wall and spread it out over his knee. Ten pounds. Not his ten pounds, but his to spend. Denis would not miss it now and if he did it would be better if it had been spent. Spending it would destroy the evidence that Joey had had it. After lunch he went out. There was white frost on the ground where

the low fuzzy-bright sun had not yet reached. He walked further than the local shops to the larger suburban centre where in the middle of the long parade tucked under the rise of the windowed office block there was a small flower shop. He pointed to some small multi-coloured flowers. The woman wrapped them around with paper and he took his change and bought a box of chocolates at the newsagent.

It was mid-afternoon, and the cold creep of twilight was beginning to lower a veil of indistinctness when Joey arrived outside Rachel's house. Certain that she would be in, he rang the bell. He saw her red-and-white indistinct shape through the glazed upper half of the door. He could say nothing when she opened the door.

'Hello, Joey.'

She was wearing a horizontally striped shirt. The broad stripes made little waves over her breasts. He held out the flowers and the chocolates.

Rachel was surprised to see Joey. And yet his presence seemed consistent with what had gone before as though she should have expected him to call on her, or take some similar initiative. She took the flowers and the chocolates in separate hands. 'Come in, Joey.' She transferred the flowers to the hand holding the chocolates and rubbed the damp hand down her jeans before she closed the door behind Joey who was wiping his feet vigorously. 'Put your coat on the chair and go in the lounge – through there.' She pointed with her free hand and then pushed her hair off her face.

In the kitchen she put some water in a spherical white vase and slipped the freesias in it. Her hair fell forward again and she spent a moment with a comb tidying it up. She was avoiding thinking about Joey. She did not know how to interpret his visit or his gifts. There was no obvious reason for either. If he had been mentally slow she might have put his actions down to a childlike need to be nice, to communicate, but Joey had plenty of wit. And yet there was an innocence about the way he had stood at the door. That innocence

should make her wary, she told herself, he is not innocent. She must not be fooled by his apparent simpleness. She must be decisive and in command.

She took the flowers back to the lounge. His eyes followed her as she placed them on the top of narrow shelf unit in the corner. 'They are nice. Thank you, Joey. I was going to make a cup of tea. Would you like one? I'll go and make it. You sit there, I won't be a minute.' At some point while she was talking he nodded. She closed the lounge door behind her and went to make some tea. The kettle boiled too quickly and she carried two mugs and a plate of biscuits back to the lounge wishing that he had not come and hoping that he would soon go.

She gave him his tea, offered him a biscuit and sat down. She kept talking. She asked him if he had come on the bus, commented on the weather, asked him what he had been doing, told him that she was going to go late-night shopping and see the Christmas lights later on that day. He listened and watched and said Yes, or No, as was appropriate. She remembered the chocolates and went out of the room to get them. They had one each and she asked him which were his favourites and told him which were hers. It was quarter-past four. She would have to start getting the evening meal ready. Surely he must go soon. She said less. Joey said more. He said how nice the room was. He said how nice she looked.

'Red suits you,' he said.

She smiled, her cheeks she knew had turned pinker. He was only a boy but he looked at her with man's eyes. She could sense the trace of his eyes over her body drawing a zigzag line from left-right and diagonally up and down, lifting to her face, her mouth. Only once did she meet his eyes and that was when she said, 'Oh look at the time.'

He took the hint. As she opened the front door for him he asked, 'Can I come again?'

She made a sound which was just on the affirmative side of non-committal and he went.

'Rachel!' Alasdair shouted up the stairs having come in through the unlatched front door and gone straight through to the empty kitchen. He glanced in the lounge, noticed the flowers and then went back into the hall. He shouted again. He was about halfway up the stairs when he heard the sound of the bath emptying. There was a click as the bathroom door was unlocked, and the tumbling water became slightly louder. At the top he met Rachel in her long white towelling dressing gown, and, he guessed, nothing else. Her hair was wet and dripping. She carried a blue towel.

Alasdair was pleased to see her, pleased to be home. The contest between Donald and himself had come to an end and Alasdair Quirke had won. It had been an undeclared war with neither participant acknowledging that the conflict existed or that there was an opponent. That was the way Alasdair had thought about it. And because the war was undeclared, Alasdair had not been able to fight. Instead he had looked to his defences, examined his weaknesses and taken care not to leave unguarded those inroads where he was most vulnerable. He had tried to be carefree and carry on as though he knew nothing. This he told himself was his strength, and it was that steadfastness that had gained him the victory. In the past week or so the determined steadfastness had become a natural confidence which made him genuinely carefree. On some days he had been inclined to describe himself as happy. Their relationship had come through the refiner's fire and between him and Rachel were spun fine threads of gold, linking them together while permitting each freedom to move and twirl. And Alasdair enjoyed the changes in the light as the movement of the glistening fibres reflected the brightness in a diversity of patterns. Marriage, their marriage, was stable and yet ever changing. He understood more aspects of Rachel's personality each day and was sure she understood more of his, and with each understanding a new filament was added to the web that was woven between them. As they grew older, the web would become denser, more like a fabric, with strength and elasticity, holding them close yet permitting them to strive in different directions and explore life in different ways. The doubts and anguish that had tormented him had taught him that every experience was positive and that he was an improved person, with more tolerance,



more understanding, realistic expectations, and translucent hope through which he saw a worthwhile future. Each day when he arrived home, Rachel was already there.

‘There you are,’ he said, moving to put his arms round her. ‘I wondered where you were. The front door wasn’t fastened and the house seemed empty.’

She pushed him away. ‘You’ll get your suit wet.’

He followed her into the bedroom.

‘I didn’t realise what time it was,’ she said. ‘I just felt like a bath and I just kept topping it up with hot water.’

‘You all right?’

‘Yes, why?’

‘Don’t know. You just seem – ’

‘Seem what?’

‘Well, under the weather.’

‘No, I’m fine.’ Her voice had a false lightness. ‘I probably shouldn’t have stayed in the bath that long.’

She sat down on the stool in front of the dressing table and began to rub at her hair with the towel, occasionally stopping to move her face towards the mirror to examine her skin or something more closely.

Alasdair sat on the pink duvet that covered the bed.

She combed her hair in silence.

‘Where’re the flowers from?’

‘Flowers? Oh, the freesias. I was tempted as I passed the florist.’ She held her head on one side while she pulled the comb down through a plane of vertical hair.

‘What are we eating?’

'I'd planned to drive into town shopping. They're open late tonight.' She took her hair drier out of the drawer and reached down to plug it in.

'You mean now? Soon?'

She turned the hair drier on and began lifting her hair with a cylindrical brush and drying it from underneath.

'When are we going to eat then?' Alasdair raised his voice to speak above the soft roar of the drier.

'It's no good talking. You know I can't hear you.'

Alasdair sat watching until she had fully dried her hair. It fell straight and silken curling slightly into her neck.

She stood up.

'Are you going to get dressed?'

'Not with you sitting there.'

'And why not?'

'Because you look at me.'

'And what is wrong with that?'

'I don't like it. You've still got your suit on.'

'I can take it off.' He stood up and took off his jacket and went round the bed towards her.

'No,' she said, and her body jerked ever so slightly as if she might have begun to stamp her foot. She looked at the wardrobe, she was determined not to look at him.

He was standing in front of her and tried with his fingertips to turn her face upwards and towards his. She pulled her chin away from his hand.

'Don't touch me.'

'Oh God, what is the matter now?'

‘Nothing. Just leave me alone to get dressed.’

‘All right, all right.’

He picked up his jacket and left the bedroom. Downstairs he turned on the television and watched the early evening news. Fifteen minutes later Rachel appeared in a straight black dress with a high neck and short puff sleeves.

The television continued despite the fact that neither of them was listening to it.

‘What is the matter?’

‘Will you stop asking me if there’s anything the matter. I’m all right I said. I just don’t feel like eating now. We can have something when I get back.’

‘Look, Rachel I’m not daft. There *is* something the matter and I’m going to wait here until you tell me.’

‘You’ll have a hell of a long wait.’ She flopped back against the floral material.

‘Rachel, there’s no need to be nasty.’

‘There’s no need for you to keep harping on at me as though I had some guilty secret that I was trying to keep from you.’

‘Have you?’

‘No, damn it, I haven’t. You are the limit. And if I had you’re the last person I would tell.’

Alasdair prevented himself from asking why and forced himself to react logically to her statement. Everyone has secrets, and keeping them is essential, but some secrets eventually get told, told to people you can trust or who will help you carry the heavier secrets. Like husbands or wives. Secrets Rachel could not or would not tell him had to be secrets of a different kind, the kind the would sear the soul, and rise like rocks to wreck a relationship. That she might have such secrets hurt him, so he said so.

‘That hurts.’

‘Oh diddums, is the little boy hurt.’

It was a device she had used before, pretending to aspire to maternal role with him as her child. But she did not look maternal. She had crossed her knees and the skirt of the black dress reached the top of her knee, far enough to be proper but not too far so as to be unexciting. Her make-up was careful and precise, like a face on the front of *Women’s Own*, out of reach, unreal, with a professional pleasantness that is donned in a moment and discarded in less.

‘Don’t talk as if you were so worldly-wise. It isn’t a sign of maturity, you know, not caring who gets hurt.’

‘I care, but I don’t care to be treated like a little girl who has to account for every moment of her day.’

‘I was being interested – ’

‘Prying.’

‘I can’t win, can I? If I ask how you feel I’m prying, if I don’t ask then later you’ll use my apparent lack of concern against me.’

‘I like you asking, but if I don’t want to tell you then I’d rather you let it be. But you can’t. You keep at it even when it should be quite plain that I don’t want to tell you.’

‘But why?’

‘Hell, just because we’re married, doesn’t mean we have to have everything out in the open, no secrets, nothing hidden. What I think is my own business. Private. Shut. Keep out.’

‘Dear God, sometimes you are an impossible – ’

‘Bitch,’ she completed with artificial sweetness.

They sat without speaking. Alasdair heard the words from the flickering screen, but did not understand what was being said. He was angry. Something, someone had pulled apart the golden web and revealed a chasm he had thought was not there. The six feet of carpet

between him and Rachel was uncrossable. She was on one side, he on the other, and he did not know why. He had been perfectly cheerful when he had come in, looking forward to an evening with her. He would have been glad she was going out, even glad to go with her. And what had happened? He went over the events that had followed on from his arrival and could find no demarcation line where things had gone wrong. There should have been a point at which he could have said sorry (with a smile) or made a small joke and laughed. Instead, each time he had spoken he had felt that he was defending his right to say what he had already said against her suggestion that he did not have a right to say it. And now he had been provoked into giving away his right to say anything. Somehow the decline of the dialogue had been beyond his control. She had been determined to be at odds with him and she had succeeded. Yes, bitch, he thought, bloody bitch.

## 27

Joey came again. This time he brought a box of chocolates, but no flowers. It was earlier in the afternoon and Rachel feared he might stay a long time. She offered him tea and biscuits again, and he sat there again, and watched her again. Again she was criss-crossed by his eyes. And yet he made no move, took no initiative. She maintained a conversation, tried to talk about him, asked where he was from, what he had done. He answered her questions in a simple way, not volunteering anything more than was necessary. It was hard work. She wanted him to be more assertive, more like a man, not like a boy. It was as if he needed educating in the way to be with a woman. His manner assumed she was his mother, but his eyes were fascinated by her appearance, by her movements. She was not unused to this. Men and boys had been looking at her since she first started wearing a bra. Their attention was like sunshine, warm and invigorating. Those with more confidence or more daring contrived situations in which they came close, touched. And then she reflected the sunshine, promising everything and giving away nothing. She was good at it. She had practised it with Donald. She had ceased to use it with Alasdair. For him there was no caution left and she did not need to promise without fulfilling, it was sufficient to offer. He would respond. He always did. For her, response was optional. She did not need to. Not responding was a way of retaining the initiative. Joey had made a first move. He had come to visit her and given her presents. She wondered at what kind of a response he expected from her, and how he would react to her if she did respond.

She got up out of the chair and walked across to the window. The air was clear and from within the room the sun appeared to have some heat.

‘Let’s go for a walk,’ she said, ‘to the park.’

She looked at Joey.

‘What do you say?’

‘Yes,’ said Joey.

‘I’ll have to change. Can’t go out like this. It won’t take me a minute.’

She went out of the lounge leaving the door open.

‘I like walking in parks,’ she said, raising her voice to carry into the lounge. ‘Don’t you?’

She could not be sure whether he answered or not. ‘Come up here,’ she called, ‘so I can still talk to you.’

She waited at the top of the stairs. Joey appeared at the bottom. ‘Come on,’ she encouraged, and went into the bedroom. When she heard him reach the landing she said, ‘You can come in. It’s all right.’

He stood at the door. She let him stand at the door and, deliberately not looking at him, she took off her shirt, crossing her arms and peeling it over her head, then pushed down her jeans and stepped out of them. She hung up the jeans in the wardrobe and put the shirt on the bed. From the wardrobe she took some looser warmer trousers and with her back to him stepped into them. She had to pull and push to ease them over her hips. She sat on the edge of the bed to haul on her boots and stood up to put on a thick sweater, tossing her hair back into place after she had thrust her head through the round neck. She used a wide copper-coloured slide to hold her hair in a low flat bunch at the nape of her neck and hooked large gold rings into her ears.

‘That’s it, I’m ready,’ and she presented herself to him. He was hypnotised. Inside her the exhilaration of natural power rose hot and liquid.

As soon as they were outside she turned up the wide collar of her coat and put an arm through his. 'Faster,' she said, and forced him to a brisker pace.

When they came back from the park, Joey stopped at the end of the road, as soon as they could see Rachel's house and explained that he ought to go. He had been with her too long. The pressure of her proximity, her voice, her urging, her femaleness made him want to bolt. He kept seeing the nightdress.

'Bye then, Joey' she said and let go of his arm.

Joey stretched his mouth into a tight closed-lipped smile in reply.

'See you,' she said and walked off towards the house.

Joey watched her for only a few seconds, frightened she might turn and wave. He strode off so that he was soon out of her sight.

'Bloody fucking hell,' he said in a disbelieving whisper, and then as if to underline his ability to handle these situations, he told himself, 'You need a drink.'

He had helped himself to a ten-pound note from Denis's wallet again, but because he had only bought chocolates he had more than enough for a couple of pints before he went back. He chose a pub that was well on his way to Joanne's but not too near and ordered a pint of lager. He drank it quickly, in steady swallows and in between each he recreated what he had seen in Rachel's bedroom. Somehow the visual detail was elusive and he could only conjure up impressions and unsettling deep-seated feelings. It was as if some involuntary censor had been at work. He knew what he had seen, but he could not see it again, not in his mind. And yet the thought of what he knew he had experienced was enough to rouse him again as he had been roused in the bedroom. He could remember her face. He could picture it when they had been sitting drinking tea, he could see it below his shoulder as they had walked in the park, but he could not see it in the bedroom. But she had looked at him and he had looked at her. He had watched her



get undressed and get dressed again. He had seen her take off her shirt and her jeans and seen her bra and her pants and her legs and her arms and her back and her waist, but he could not see them again in his mind. He had seen her put on her trousers and her sweater and fasten back her hair and put in her earrings and pull on her boots. And she had held on to his arm as they had walked.

He finished his pint and bought another one.

He replayed the sequence over and over in his mind hoping each time he played it he might notice more, but each time through the pictures were less detailed as though he was wearing them out, and as they became more worn his imagination took over and he began to picture what he had not seen, what he knew must be there, but which he did not know.

While he was drinking his third pint he started to sketch out his strategy for the next visit and by his fourth pint the sketch had been filled out with some unstable imaginings that flowed through his mind like water sloshing around in the bottom of a rocking boat. Each splash as the single wave hit the side of his head threw up exciting possibilities which fell back unrealised into the curving water.

He did not finish his fifth pint. In the toilets he peed contentedly and diagonally into the urinal bowl as he leaned against the jutting end wall until his bladder was comfortably empty and then walked straight out into the cold night. The air abraded his face, but his body felt warm enough for him to walk with his coat flapping open. He caught his shoulder on a lamppost which surprised him with its unexpected nearness and was hooted at by the driver of a car which came far too close to the edge of the road as he was stepping back on to the kerb to look left and right before he crossed.

Coming up the cul-de-sac towards the house the street lights were stellated blurs. He walked up the middle and the tarmacked breadth stretched out in front of him with carefree undulation. He felt good.

Joanne lifted her head at the sound of the front door, and spoke to Denis.

‘That’ll be him. I wonder where he’s been.’

Denis was reading something he had brought home from work, a small book bound with a thin cylinder of plastic that had teeth that curled through slots in the pages.

‘Don’t expect me to be pleased at his return. As far as I’m concerned the little parasite can go to hell.’ And then, as if to a private audience, ‘What am I supposed to do? Weep when he’s not here for his free dinner. Get worried when he is out of my house for a few hours. Don’t tell me I should have concern for my fellow humans, I do, but honestly should I be expected to welcome every sponger who can’t manage his own life and adapt to his needs and wants?’

Joanne stood at the door of the room.

‘You don’t have to put yourself out one iota for him.’

‘But I know he’s there.’

She went out and pulled the door behind her. In the hall, Joey was leaning with his back to the closed front door.

‘You all right?’ she asked.

‘Um fine – am fine.’ He stood up away from the door. ‘I’m fine.’

‘Joey!’ He lurched towards her. ‘You’ve been drinking.’

He smiled loosely.

She wanted to get cross. She was disappointed. She disliked drunkenness, especially good-humoured drunkenness.

‘I think you had better go straight up to your room.’

‘OK, Jo – anne, OK.’ He reached out for the end of the bannister but as his body curved backwards from glued feet his grasping hand made no contact. He began to fall away from the stairs. One foot lifted and attempted to move backwards beneath his fugitive centre of gravity. It failed and his lengthening body folded as he fell to the

ground. A flailing arm slid the telephone from its table into a jangling heap on the floor as he clumsily laid himself out on the hall carpet.

‘Joey, be careful.’

‘S – orry,’ he said waving the other gangling arm.

He levered himself up and pushed his body up over his folded legs which seemed squeezed between his feet that were firmly flat on the floor and the sagging mass of his torso. His legs began to straighten but the upward thrust was off centre and he toppled trapping between his shoulder blades the small picture which hung on the wall.

‘Oops,’ he said and made a little laugh. He stood up almost to attention and the picture fell to the floor.

‘Please, Joey, be careful.’ Joanne picked up the picture. It was a print of a pen-and-ink drawing of the bridge over the Wharfe at Burnsall. The fall had cracked the glass. She was distracted from her search for the small nail that had held up the picture by the sound of Joey trying to replace the telephone. As she looked up from her examination along the skirting board, she saw Joey waver a little and, with the telephone in his hand, take a long unintended stride backwards. The wire that was strung out from the telephone to the socket screwed to the frame of the small hall window rose into view. As the wire straightened it pulled over her Dartington crystal vase of fresh flowers. The vase fell over on to its side. It lay on the windowsill spilling its water down the wall. A few flowers slipped out and then it rolled in a gentle arc towards the edge. Joey still holding the telephone, lunged for the vase and got a grip on it at its widest part before it fell. He turned to her with something near to triumph struggling to express itself on his face until the vase was projected out of his hand by the pressure of his clutching fingers and dropped on to the table where the telephone should have been. The vase broke into three large pieces. The flowers fell untidily and the remaining water pooled and splashed.

‘Joey!’ she shouted. ‘Stop it! Stop it!’ She grabbed the telephone from his hand and thrust it down on the table. ‘Please, please, just go up to your room.’

‘What the hell – ’ Denis stood in the doorway of the front room.

‘An accident,’ said Joanne, turning her back on Joey and facing her husband. She looked over her shoulder, ‘Go on Joey, up you go.’

‘He’s drunk. I can see it from here. Bloody drunk. Get out. I’m not having you in my house. I said, Get out. You heard me. This is it. This is as much as I can stand. Go on. Now. Don’t you dare take another step up those stairs. Out. Out I say.’

‘Denis,’ said Joanne.

‘Oh, no, my dear. No more. He’s going or I’ll – ’

‘What?’ said Joey, his chin on the staircase rail.

‘Don’t you be so bloody cheeky you little twerp.’

‘Twerp?’ said Joey, the pressure on his chin limiting the opening of his mouth. ‘What’s a twerp? Am I a twerp, Joanne? Am I? I don’t know what a twerp is, do you?’

‘Joey, please, just go upstairs. Leave this to me.’

‘Leave what to you? I’ve said he’s got to go. I’m not changing my mind. He can’t come into my house drunk and break things and expect me to take no notice and carry on as if everything was normal. It’s not normal having a idle bastard like him living off what I earn.’ He eyed Joey who was still resting his face on the sloping wood. ‘It’s my money that fills your belly, y’know, don’t you. I worked bloody hard to get where I am and not so a lazy sod like you can live like a bloody queen – king – damn it. Damn it, Joanne, I will not put up with it. I will not.’

‘D’n’t e go on,’ said Joey and set off to climb the stairs.

‘Let me get my hands on ’im.’ Denis made as if to pass Joanne put he did not succeed even though she made no attempt to prevent him. It was all noise and drama. ‘Calm down, Denis, it’s only a vase.’

‘It’s not just a vase though is it,’ he said, ‘it’s everything else.’

‘What else?’

‘Everything.’

‘Don’t be so childish. You can’t say everything and not explain. Joey’s no bother to you. He shouldn’t have come in drunk. That’s wrong and I’ll talk to him later. But you going off like that is not going to help, is it? He’ll listen to reason, but if you can only shout and bawl at him then –’

‘What?’

‘Well you’re inviting him to do the same back to you. He’s a straightforward sort of soul really. He doesn’t mean any harm. Let me talk to him.’

‘I don’t know where he gets the money from.’ Denis stopped as he was about to return to the front room. ‘Where the hell *does* he get the money from? You don’t – you don’t give him money to go bloody boozing? Do you? ... Joanne?’

‘Denis Marchland. You know me better than that. I don’t know that he has any money. Somebody probably bought him a drink or two.’

‘He’s had more than two. And who’d buy *him* a drink?’

‘There’s no reason why he shouldn’t have friends. From school. From where he used to live.’

‘If he has friends why doesn’t he go and live with them instead of forcing himself on us and making a mess of our lives.’

‘He did not force himself on us and if it wasn’t for your selfishness he would not be – as you say – making a mess of our lives which I don’t think *he* is.’

‘And you mean *I* am.’

‘I didn’t say. And I’m not going to discuss it any more. I’m going to clear this up and then I’m going up to talk to him. If you haven’t got anything constructive to offer then leave him to me.’

Denis knew when he could not win.

## 28

The phone on his desk rang, and Alasdair picked it up while continuing to read the sheet of paper in front of him.

‘Alasdair Quirke,’ he said, shutting out the background noise of the open plan office, and concentrating his attention on the silence in the earpiece.

A quiet voice which could have been male or female said, ‘He’s there. Now. Arrived a couple of minutes ago. Usually stays for best part of the afternoon as I said in the letter. I thought you’d like to know.’

Beyond the glass wall of the office Alasdair could see tellers dealing with customers.

The caller said nothing more. Alasdair hadn’t said anything. There was no purpose in saying anything. Slowly he replaced the telephone and glanced at the clock on the office wall. A bit after two. He would have to give some excuse and leave.

Malcolm appeared to believe him when he said that he did not feel well and would like to go home. What he had said was true, in a sense. He felt sick. Nausea of a cold insoluble kind had lain in the pit of his stomach since he had read the letter. And whenever he recalled its words the flat surface of that coldness lifted and sank like the swell of a green sea. The letter had arrived among the office mail yesterday, a bright white envelope and a handwritten address. He did not know who the letter was from. The letter, like the envelope, had been written in block capitals with a ball-point pen and consisted of a single small sheet

of flimsy lined notepaper. It was the kind of stationery you can buy at *Woolworth's* or at the corner shop. In a few words it had said that a young man visited his house regularly and stayed most of the afternoon. He had not mentioned it to Rachel. He could not work out how he could ask about something he was not supposed to know about without appearing to accuse. If there was something to hide then she would deny it. If there wasn't then she would eventually mention it herself. His bringing up the subject before she did would merely indicate that he assumed that there was something to hide. She would react to that. She would say he was being suspicious, prying, not letting her have a moment which she could call her own. She would tell him that she had nothing to be ashamed of and he would say that he hoped there wasn't. Susie's words repeated themselves in his brain: You know what kind of a woman she is. Why the hell had Susie said that? Of course he knew. But he had known for a long time and had chosen to marry her, to take her on, to take the risk. Leashing a wayward woman in marriage had kudos, he had considered it a success. Not only a success by his lights, but a success in the eyes of others. Susie had implied he was a fool. If that was the general opinion of those who knew them, then he had to win some other way. He could be wrong, but he must not be a failure. According to his informant – a neighbour he supposed, but they hardly knew their neighbours – she might be leading someone else on. Someone that appeared to be quite young. The letter had said: Take it from me he doesn't just come for a cup of tea and a chat. That might be a deliberate attempt to cause trouble or it might be based on – he suddenly imagined the letter writer as a grey-haired little lady with an enormous pair of binoculars. He was not amused by his imaginings. God knows what she might have seen.

It was almost half-past two when he turned the last corner on the route home. He did not drive right up to the house, but left his car parked about thirty yards away from it and walked the rest of the way. As he prepared to unlock the front door he surveyed the houses that overlooked it hoping to catch a movement in a window. Nothing.

He gently eased back the lock, but he did not prevent the sudden click. He paused then opened the door slowly. It squeaked painfully. He stopped. He could hear nothing. He listened. Then a long loud scream.

He ran up the stairs and as he reached the top a figure carrying a bundle rushed out of the bedroom opposite and straight into him. Alasdair staggered backwards and stumbled down the stairs gradually losing his balance until he caught hold of the bannister rail and his body swung round in a heavy arc and he sat down.

‘Joey,’ he said.

A breath later he was back up the stairs. Joey had gone. The bedroom door was open and he rushed in. Rachel was curled up on the pink duvet, sobbing. She was wearing only her underclothes.

‘Rachel!’ He went round to the other side of the bed and knelt down by her head. ‘Rachel, are you all right?’

Her sobbing heightened into a wail which was deadened by the softness of the duvet into which she pressed her face.

‘What happened? What was Joey doing here? What did he do? Rachel. Rachel. Are you all right? Did he hurt you? Did he do anything to you?’

The wailing became sobbing again and he tentatively put a hand on her bare shoulder. She quietened. Her shoulder convulsed under his touch as her body heaved in silence.

‘What happened?’

She turned her head on its side. Her eyes were red and her mascara had made dark stains on the cover. She shook her head like a little girl.

‘Did he – ?’

She shook her head again against the duvet, a small restricted movement.

‘Tell me.’

She shook her head again. Her hand reached for his. He held it. It was hot.



It was half an hour before she said anything and then all she asked for was a cup of tea. When Alasdair returned with it she was sitting up on the side of the bed with her white towelling dressing gown round her shoulders. He gave her the mug of tea carefully, turning the handle towards her so that she could more easily get hold of it. Alasdair heard the noise of a vehicle outside the house. He went to the window.

‘What is it?’ she said into her mug.

‘A blue and white van at number twelve.’

‘Doreen’s mail order catalogue – a delivery.’

‘Better?’

She nodded.

‘You want to talk?’

She took her mouth from the rim of the mug and shook her head. She looked frail like a sickly child, shoulders hunched and elbows tightly in at her sides, but her hair hung smooth and silky. He sat down on the bed and put his arm around her shoulders.

‘Careful,’ she said, ‘I’ll spill my tea.’

He lifted his arm and stroked her hair. Her lips smiled briefly as though she was fighting a deep pain and her full eyes reflected the light like moving water.

She placed her free hand rested on top of his and said, ‘Nothing happened. I’m all right. Just give me time.’

‘It was that damned Joey, wasn’t it? Why your mother feels she has to provide for that feckless overgrown waif beats me. I knew no good would come of it. You can’t change people. Now look what’s happened. If it hadn’t been for her then this would never have happened. It think I ought to talk to your father about it. I never did think it was right. Kids like him can’t be trusted. No wonder their own parents get rid of them. Pity they were’nt – ’

‘Alasdair – ’

‘What?’

‘Look I’m all right. Let’s not make a fuss.’

‘Yes, but who the hell is he going to have a go at next? I think we ought to tell the police.’

‘Alasdair, we can’t tell the police.’

‘Why not?’

‘Well, I don’t know, but – ’

‘We should.’

‘They might say that it was partly my fault.’

‘Let them try.’

‘Don’t be silly, Alasdair, please.’

‘Rachel, be rational. He was sleeping in your mother’s garden shed. He’s probably sniffs glue, takes drugs, beats up old ladies – ’

‘He came round with flowers and a box of chocolates. I had to let him in. He seemed as though he wanted company. Perhaps I shouldn’t have.’

‘What?’

‘I mean, maybe I should have discouraged him from coming again. But he seemed harmless, like a big kid. Any way, it’ll only cause more bother.’

‘What will?’

‘Telling the police. He must have found out where I lived. A couple of weeks ago. I gave him a cup of tea and a biscuit.’

‘How many times has he been?’

‘Three, no four.’

‘I’m still going to talk to your father. He’s got to go. He’s probably on probation or wanted by the police anyway. And I’ll tell little Joey that if I see him within a mile of this house I’ll – ’

‘Grow up, Alasdair, what are you going to do?’

‘Right now I could – ’

‘He’s bigger than you and probably stronger. You’ll only cause a lot of fuss and upset for nothing.’

‘Nothing! My wife is almost raped by a young thug and you call it nothing. If I hadn’t – ’

‘That’s not – why *are* you home so early?’

‘Didn’t feel well.’

‘You seem OK to me.’

‘Must have been the fish I had for lunch.’

‘You go and sit down. I’m going to have a shower and make myself feel clean again.’

‘He might come back.’

‘No, I think he was damned scared.’

Alasdair stopped as he was leaving the bedroom and standing in the doorway said, ‘I wonder how he got out of the house.’

Joey had left the house by the route he had first used to enter it. In the rear porch in the corner made by the garage he had struggled into his sweater and put on his overcoat. It was lucky he taken it up to the bedroom with him.

As he walked he fought against the increasing conviction that he had done something wrong. That he would be blamed. It began to rain when he was little more than halfway from Rachel’s to Joanne’s. He pulled up his coat collar thinking about what had happened.

When he had rung the bell she had not come to the door, she had opened the bedroom window and called to him to let himself in. When he was inside she had shouted that she was upstairs and that he should go up. He had. He had entered her bedroom, and she had begun to get

changed. Just as it had happened before. This time was a bit different. This time she was full dressed she seemed to think better of it and started all over again. She tried on different things. Not only winter clothes, but light summer things, evening wear, different slippers, a suspender belt and stockings. She had kept posing and saying, 'How do you like me in this?' He had watched. He had taken his coat off and watched. The room had been warm and he had taken off his sweater. He had kept telling himself that she wanted him to do something, but he could not. If he was wrong, he had kept saying in his mind, and she reprimanded him for his presumption then the spell she had woven for him would have been broken. He had been a contented voyeur. But she had persisted and he had gone up behind her as she was looking in the long mirror and laid his trembling hands on her naked shoulders. She had turned a little towards the window that looked down the road. In silence he looked out on to a common place world. The road empty but for one parked car. He would remember that silence for a long time. The soft skin and his tense tingling palms. And the click and squeak of the front door opening. Why the hell had she screamed?

The rain was cold and sufficiently heavy that in a few minutes his hair was saturated and water was dribbling over his eyebrows and around his shirt collar. As he leaned into the rain which was driven at an angle by a wind that seemed stronger than before the rain had started, he struggled to anticipate the consequences of the afternoon. It all hung on what Rachel decided to tell Alasdair. She would not tell him the whole truth. Joey had met Alasdair on no more than three, may be four occasions and always in the company of Rachel. Joey had noticed the way that Alasdair was always behind Rachel almost like an attendant waiting to respond to a small gesture of the hand or to a quickly spoken single word. Rachel created Alasdair's world for him, and that meant that she would fabricate whatever story was best for her. Certainly not for Joey. So Joey would become the wrongdoer. Joey was in no doubt of that, but he could only guess as to the nature of the wrongdoing that would be alleged. If the blame was placed on Joey then Alasdair would

want to do something. But the blame for what? Rachel would make out that she had been – assaulted?

And Alasdair might call the police.

Joey stopped and sheltered in a shop doorway. Vehicles swished rhythmically past spraying water across the pavement. A small woman wearing a headscarf and carrying two white plastic bags bulging with shopping bent doggedly into the cold lashing weather.

Joey began to consider alternative courses of action. Was it sensible to go back to Joanne's. Was this the time to move on? If Alasdair had called the police – if only she hadn't screamed – they might be waiting for him. Then what would he say. Would they believe his truth that would, no doubt, differ from Rachel's truth? And if he lied what lies would they believe? His lies would have to fit in with Rachel's truth. She would be careful what she said. But she would not need fabricate anything, she could just weep, and the police would imagine the rest and what they imagined could be far worse than the truth. That might mean he had to tell the truth.

The rain had lessened, but the wind continued to have an icy chill in it. His head was cold under his wet hair. He longed for the warmth of the house, whose welcome had been withdrawn from him.

He went on walking in the same direction unable to imagine another destination. Was it possible that Rachel would persuade Alasdair not to inform the police? Was it possible – and at this thought his pace quickened – that Alasdair had not recognised him and that Rachel would not tell him who it was that had almost pushed him down the stairs? Rachel would gain nothing by mentioning his name. It would be to her advantage and credibility that her assailant – because that's what she would let people believe he had been – was anonymous, unknown, nondescript. If the police questioned Joey then she would expect him to defend himself by telling the truth, however far-fetched it might appear, and there might be something to support Joey's version and cast doubt on whatever story she chose to tell. She had more to lose than he. Within the next hundred paces, Joey was utterly convinced that he could go back to Joanne's without any fear of encountering the

police, even if the police were brought in. But Rachel, because of the truth, would surely be moved to persuade Alasdair to make no fuss at all. She was not innocent.

As he approached the house, Joey turned round and went the longer way to the ginnel and in through the gate in the back fence. Before going into the house he edged carefully around the corner of the garage where there was a narrow gap between it and the boundary fence and surveyed the front of the house. There was no police car, no strange car. If the police had been called and his name given then they had either not come yet or had already been and left. He went in through the back door and took his wet shoes off in the kitchen. Joanne was having a nap in the front room. Without disturbing her he went up to the bathroom and took a shower.

## 29

The letter was warm in his pocket. He wanted to get it out again and read it through. The pub was quiet. People were coming in by twos and threes for a quick after-work drink before facing traffic queues or squeezing on to a crowded train. Madeleine had written to him: the words were visible in his mind in large capitals. The letter had been among the morning's mail at work. He had read it with haste, conscious that it was evidence of his secret. When he had come to the end ('All my love, Madeleine'), he had re-folded it and slipped it into the cream envelope and breathed in the rich romantic feeling that had risen from the handwriting and remained like persistent perfume. He could not bring back the sentences though he had read the letter three further times during the day. Instead he pictured her. He heard her voice, and felt the pressure of her hand in his. She mattered, and he mattered to her. She was coming back to England at Christmas. She had been offered a job in Manchester, an hour's drive away. She was looking forward to seeing him again – had she written that? He was not sure, but it was true. And if they met again then – the heavy darkness of that Brussels room fell over him like a velvet blanket, and for a second he had her scent in his nose –

'Sir?'

The barman wore a maroon waistcoat, a white shirt and a black bow tie.

'A pint of bitter and a pint of lager.' Denis reached in his pocket for a couple of pound coins.

‘Any particular kind of lager, sir?’

Denis pointed vaguely at one of the pumps. The lager was for Alasdair and Denis took a guess as to which he would prefer. If he was honest, he hardly knew him and thought of him merely as Rachel’s husband. No doubt Joanne knew a lot more about him. Where he had gone to school, how he was getting along at the bank, what his father did for a living. Denis couldn’t even recall the name of Alasdair’s father, or his mother, never mind what job the old man did. Joanne had probably told him. They had been introduced at the wedding, had been polite to one another. But nothing more. He had never been more than polite to Alasdair. As with many bank employees that he had met, Denis did not think of Alasdair as sparkling company. Dealing in money, in contradistinction to making it, was a sort of second-hand trade. What you were handling always belonged to someone else. Any success was other people’s success and similarly with failure. What excitement was there in that? And, what was worse, somehow banks benefited from both. Twenty years ago, being part of a small new company, hoping for success and aware of the threat of failure had kept Denis hopping from one foot to another in anticipation of what each day might bring. He had willingly put in extra hours, reworked costings, and revamped contracts, negotiated with suppliers, and haggled with customers. At the end of each year when the balance sheet showed the profit that they had hardly dared expect, they had celebrated as though there was no tomorrow. It was not like that now. In recent years the business had become secure, the profits predictable. There was a tomorrow and they planned for it. They had caught the tide of the new technology and had been swept along on it without losing control of their vessel and were make sure progress across calmer, deeper waters. He had those exciting days to look back on, and perhaps some to look forward to, in a different sphere. He pressed the outside of his jacket with his hand and felt the stiffness of the long cream envelope.

Alasdair had not yet told him why he had asked for this meeting. He hoped it was not about money. Rachel had shown signs, at times, of being defiantly extravagant, but she seemed to grow out of it when she began to have to spend her own money, rather than someone else’s. Joanne said she wasn’t working at the moment, so it was conceivable



that she was wantonly spending Alasdair's money. Alasdair would be the budgeting type. Putting income and expenditure into a balance and adjusting the latter to ensure that the former was always greater, carefully avoiding unnecessary expenditure and not risking the loss of money in the hope of making a large gain. Borrowing would not be out of the question – not to take advantage of available credit would go against the predilections of a banking man – but what one owed must be controlled, carefully and systematically, so that debts were gradually eliminated rather than carelessly accumulated. No, Alasdair would not want to talk about money. What else did sons-in-law want to discuss with their fathers-in-law. Daughters? Now it was more likely that there would be much to be said on her account. But those kind of problems were not generally spelled out to one's father-in-law over a pint in a pub. He shook his head as he waited for his change, *he* was not going to talk about Rachel. Rachel was now Alasdair's pigeon. He picked up the two large glasses and crossed the carpeted floor to a table hidden by a dark wooden partition.

Each wordlessly acknowledged the other as they both tasted their drinks. Denis leaned back and looked at Alasdair expectantly.

'This – er – lad Joey,' said Alasdair, announcing the topic for discussion.

Denis made a little sound which was intended to encourage Alasdair to say more. As far as Denis was concerned Joey could go to hell, and the sooner the better, but Joey was Joanne's project and he was not going to let Alasdair know his own feelings until he was sure that Joanne was going to be kept out of it.

'Well, he's been – ' It was plain to Denis that Alasdair was searching for the right way of saying something. 'Well, he's been bothering Rachel. Been round to the house a few times and the last time well ...' Alasdair had lifted his glass off the table. He moved the beermat that had been under it and then with some determination replaced the glass on top of it. The next words came out with more emphasis. 'He came into the bedroom while she was getting changed and ... tried to

molest – 'The last word was like sour piece of meat in his mouth which he had to dispose of without offending his companion. His face twisted as his lips manipulated the word and then it came out quickly. He had no breath left to finish the statement. Alasdair took a large drink from his glass as if the lager would cleanse his tongue.

Surprised, Denis did not know what to say. Rather he did not know what Alasdair expected him to say. This was a tricky game, and he wanted to play it Alasdair's way for as long as possible. Denis could not decide whether to sympathise with Rachel, castigate Joey, or try to see it from Alasdair's point of view. His indecision came through in a tumble of words.

'She's not hurt? The little bugger. Have you done anything?'

'I've done nothing. As yet. Rachel's upset, but fortunately nothing worse, and she did not want me to call in the police.'

Denis nodded with a vague gesture that he hoped might be interpreted as wisdom. He was unable to follow through what the effect of a police investigation might be.

'When did this happen?'

'Yesterday.'

'Well, he's still here – I mean, the parasite's still taking bed and board at my bloody house.'

Alasdair put his hands on the edge of the table, each set of four fingers visible, thumbs underneath, and pushed his body back with straightening arms. He might have been chairing a committee. 'He's got to go. Surely you can see that. You wouldn't like anything to happen to Joanne.'

'Can't see that happening – I mean him going. She's his bloody fairy godmother.'

'Susie, then. You never know what'll happen when she comes home. In the same house as him.'

Denis took hold of his glass, raised his eyebrows and said 'There is that to consider.' He drank. Susie would be home for nearly a month over Christmas. He sensed that Alasdair wanted him to say something more condemnatory, but Joey was not much more than an unwelcome pet, a pest. You might trip over him, you might be annoyed by his antics, you might even get cross when considerations of him came before your welfare, but he didn't pose any threat.

'See it my way,' said Alasdair, 'I think Rachel was trying to be altruistic, like her mother, and I think it went wrong. Strictly speaking I suppose it is a matter for the police, but that's not going to be pleasant for either Rachel or Joanne. And he might lie. I mean he seems to have enough gall to carry on as if nothing had happened. I know he's probably not too bright, but you'd think he would have the wit to disappear. I don't know why you put up with him at all. Why at the very beginning you didn't just – well, put your foot down. If it had been my house I'd –'

'It's not, and Joanne's doing it from the best of motives. She may not be so clever, but her heart's in the right place.' Denis took another drink, slowly, underlining what he had said. As he swallowed he remembered what had happened on the day he had returned from Brussels. 'Anyway, when I did sort of object, Rachel took his side along with her mother.'

'That's as may be, but I don't see how you can honestly blame any of this on her.'

'I'm not, but what I'm trying to say is that Rachel obviously didn't anticipate what happened yesterday.'

'Nor did you, or Joanne. You can't trust his kind.'

'All right –'

'Well I'd like to see something done about him.'

'Such as?' Denis was annoyed at being bullied.

'Come on, he's not hiding behind Joanne's skirts for nothing. What the hell was he doing before she took pity on him? Mugging?'

Thieving? For all we know he might be wanted for rape or whatever. What do we know? There must be some way we could let the authorities know where he is. They won't look for him in middle-class suburbia, now, will they.'

'The way Joanne talks about him, he seems harmless enough. A bit down on his luck. Unfortunate family background.'

'You don't believe that ... rubbish.'

The loyalty of years compelled him to defend Joanne. Instead of responding he said: 'And for all we know Joey Almond may not be his real name.'

In the silence that followed, Denis put on a thoughtful mask. It was an expression he used when a customer, having heard all the pluses and minuses of various purchases, was waiting for him to suggest a good solution to the problem. The longer he waited the greater the probability that they would accept his suggestion. They were paying for his expert opinion and so it was his responsibility to ensure that they thought their problem had been given a good measure of consideration.

'I don't want to be confrontational. I don't want to tell him to go in case he says no. And, like you, I'd rather not bring the police into it. It would be easier – and probably more effective – if I had some leverage, something to threaten him with. I could tell him that if he wasn't gone within, say, twenty-four hours then Rachel would make a statement to the police.'

Alasdair breathed through his slightly open mouth.

Denis had lost this customer.

'Rachel won't like it, and if we have to go through with it – calling in the police – then it's a lot of fuss, very messy and won't do any of us any good.'

Denis shrugged. 'What else?'

'To be honest, I was thinking of something more direct.'

'Direct? Like what?'

‘Take things into our own hands.’

‘Nothing –’

‘As I see it, he’s a big lad. Strong. But two of us could easily hold him down –’

Denis shuddered.

‘ – tie him up and get him into your car – ’

‘My car?’

‘Well, my car, it doesn’t matter. Into the boot and drive him somewhere a long way off and let him go. With no money it’ll take him ages to get back and if he’s what I think he is then he’ll just take up whatever lifestyle he had before he turned up in your garden shed and we’ll never see him again.’

Denis thought. It would get rid of him, but it would not be as easy as Alasdair said it would. But it could be done.

‘Seems a bit drastic.’

‘God, Denis –’

Alasdair had never called him Denis before.

‘ – as long as that juvenile sex maniac is within a hundred miles of our house...’

‘He’ll not try it in the same place twice – ’

‘No, but I can’t convince Rachel, can I? Anyway, there are other places and other women. Like Susie?’

‘Yes, I suppose we must take that into account.’

‘No suppose about it.’

‘I don’t like it. He might go to the police. Worse, he might have cronies – ’

‘He’s on his own. OK, so there is a risk, but you don’t get anywhere without risking something.’

Denis had to agree and it would be something positive. Yes, if it worked – and it could work – he would get a deal of satisfaction out of it. The young slob.

‘Look, I’ll threaten him with the police and if that has no effect then we’ll talk again. Agreed?’

Alasdair nodded, drained his glass and stood up.

‘Same again,’ he asked.

‘No, I’d better go. Joanne is expecting me by six.’

‘Well, I am. I need another.’

‘See you,’ said Denis getting up.

‘You will give me a ring, won’t you.’

Denis nodded.

‘Bye.’

Denis lifted a hand and strode off.

## 30

With each pip the time signal for six o'clock added an extra sharpness to Rachel's annoyance. She had spent a good deal of the afternoon preparing this evening's meal. Pork fillet in a mushroom sauce, with Brussels sprouts and potatoes Anna. The stuffed avocados were already on the table and she had opened a bottle of red wine. Alasdair was normally home by quarter to six. With a childishly extravagant movements she removed the grill pan from under the hob and banged the casseroles into the space above the hot oven. She could keep the main course warm, but she had already resigned herself to the baked apples having collapsed into a heap by the time she came to serve them. The therapeutic pleasure she had built up during the leisurely careful cooking had already been partially dismantled by his lateness. She had decided to cook something a little more elaborate than usual, not because she wanted to please him, but because she wanted to please herself. The positive creative delight that she had experienced as she had marshalled the necessary ingredients, cleaned and chopped, trimmed, stirred, tasted, waited and watched during her orderly preparation which had now resulted in carefully arranged dishes had lifted Rachel's spirits as day had darkened into dusk and the black of night had painted each window pane. She was pleased at her productivity. And just as the story-writer needs to be read, or the painter needs an exhibition, or the actor needs an audience, so Rachel needed Alasdair to sit down, express some surprise, eat and, at the end, offer the expected praise.

And he was not there.

He was late. She suspected he might be late, because – without perhaps realising – he was reluctant to come home. Gossiping at the bank. Gone shopping for a something for his camera and taken ‘far longer than he had intended’. He had been economical with his words since yesterday afternoon when he had, so inopportunistically, come home early. And the longer than usual silences during the previous evening – and at breakfast this morning – seemed, to Rachel, to be asking various questions. Alasdair would never suspect her little game. It had only been a game. And there had been no harm in it. Yet because she could not tell him that, she did not speak easily about it, and because she did not speak easily, she could not use carefree words to brush aside the silent interrogation.

She was waiting for him to come home. And it was possible that he was waiting for her to come clean.

Reaching for a spoon, her knuckle touched the hot casserole in which the potatoes had cooked. ‘Shit,’ she said.

She would stand by what she had said. She sucked at the painful joint. There was nothing more she could tell. Anything Joey said would seem like fantasy. The untold part – trivial as it was – lay heavily inside her like undigested bread. And in the same way that such bread will in time work its way through the system and the discomfort pass, Rachel hoped that with each day the gravity of the undisclosed facts would lessen until they were nearly forgotten. Never completely forgotten, just hidden away ready to pounce into her mind at some unnoticed resonance and make her shiver at the might-have-beens.

The news reader announced the time as six-fifteen and re-read the headlines.

Five minutes later Alasdair arrived. He apologised for being late, and sat down at the table.

‘Special occasion?’ he asked, picking up his spoon almost before Rachel had made herself comfortable in the chair opposite.

‘No, I just felt like making an effort.’



She began cutting away at the avocado with her spoon. As she tasted it, a combination of cues combined to catch her attention. A faint smell, the loose way Alasdair had sat down, the dullness in his voice.

‘You’ve been for a drink,’ she said. She gave a positive lilt to her voice as if she was interested in the reason for his drinking.

‘One of the fellows at the bank wanted to ask my advice about something, so we dropped in at the *Victoria*.’

‘What was it?’

‘Confidential, I’m afraid.’ He beamed a silly smile at her.

‘How much have you had?’

‘Two.’ He took the bottle of red wine with his left hand and aimed the neck at Rachel’s glass. The wine rushed forward and splashed into the glass. Some of it went on the tablecloth.

‘Alasdair! Be careful.’

He finished pouring it in an exaggeratedly careful manner, scrutinising the flow of liquid from the bottle to her glass as though he were checking for foreign bodies.

He was annoying her. His being late had annoyed her. Now his slight intoxication was annoying her more.

They did finish the main course before the apples had slumped, but the anticipated pleasure of the meal had evaporated. By the time she had made the coffee the bottle was empty. He had drunk four glasses of wine and she only two. He set off to carry his coffee through to the lounge. In the hall he wavered into the wall and the cup fell from the saucer emptying the coffee. It ran down the patterned wall and along the top edge of the skirting board.

‘You bloody fool!’

The cup had not broken and he picked it up.

‘Don’t just stand there go and get a cloth.’

When he returned with a roll of disposable cloths, Rachel grabbed them from him, ripped one off and dabbed at the wallpaper and wiped the liquid off the paintwork. Only a little had soaked into the carpet.

‘Go and sit down.’

She brought two cups of coffee through and handed him one with a warning not to spill this one. She spoke to him as if he were a child.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said in a flabby voice.

‘Shut up. You make me sick. It was bad enough you coming in late, but drunk as well –’

‘You’re upset, dear.’

‘Upset? Of course, I’m upset.’

‘I mean –’ Alasdair hesitated between drinking his coffee and completing his explanation. As a result, some coffee slopped into his saucer. ‘I mean about yesterday.’

‘I’ll get over yesterday.’

‘I’m only trying –’ he caught his breath involuntarily ‘ – to be sympathetic.’

‘I’d rather you came in on time and were sober.’

‘I only had two.’

She made a disbelieving sound.

‘S true.’

She sipped at her coffee.

‘You wouldn’t like it if I di’n’t b’lieve what you tell me. Would you?’

She said nothing. It did not seem sensible to argue with him.

He went on. ‘S’pose, yest – erday, when I came home and caught you –’

‘What do you mean *caught* me?’

‘Him. Well suppose – ’

‘Suppose nothing, Alasdair Quirke, if you think that there was anything prearranged about what happened yesterday then you must be a bigger fool than I thought. Joey’s only a kid. A big kid with big ideas maybe, but there’s no way I’d – ’

‘I never said – ’

‘You were thinking it weren’t you. You knew he was here didn’t you. Some nose-y so-and-so told you that he’d been coming round and you thought something was going on so you came round to see. Well, you small-minded pillock you were wrong, weren’t you.’

‘It was a good job – ’

‘Good job nothing – ’

‘Look, if I hadn’t arrived when I did – ’

Rachel decided it was time for a different tack.

‘I know. I know. But – ’ She sniffed and got out a white handkerchief with a lace border.

Alasdair with clearly demonstrated care put his cup and saucer down on the carpet and came across to her on his knees.

‘I’m sorry.’

She sniffed and rubbed at her eyes.

He put his arm over her shoulders.

‘No. Please. I don’t want to be touched.’

‘Good God Rachel!’

The telephone began to ring. Alasdair stood and Rachel wiped her eyes. ‘You’d better answer it,’ she said.

When he came back she asked him who it had been.

‘Susie,’ he said. ‘She wants me to pick her up and bring her and her things back at the end of term. Saturday.’

‘Are you going to?’

‘Yes.’

It was Thursday so Joanne had gone round to see Mrs Flecknow. Denis went up to Joey’s room – no, Rachel’s room. Without knocking he pushed the door back against the wall and looked at Joey who was lying on the bed.

‘I want to talk to you,’ said Denis deliberately trying to sound authoritative.

‘Well I don’t want to talk to you. So you can piss off.’

‘Don’t you talk to me like that.’

‘You’re wastin’ y’ breath, I’m not listening.’ His eyes traced some random pattern on the ceiling.

‘Listen you little – ‘ Denis took a breath. ‘Look, I’ll be straight. I don’t like you being here. But my wife seems to think she’s doing you some good, so I’ve gone along with her so far. But I heard something today which has made me change my mind. I am not having someone who molests women living in in my house, especially when he’s had a go at my eldest daughter. Now I don’t care what you say – you’re going. You’re nothing better than a sponging layabout with a dirty mind. You can go. And the sooner the better.’

‘You’re one to talk, aren’t you. Molestin’ women. What about you?’ Joey sat up on the bed his arms encircling his knees. He smirked.

‘Look, we’re talking about you not me. And I haven’t – ’

The smirk enlarged into a grin, not a pleasant grin. His lips stretched without showing his teeth and his eyes stared straight into Denis’s.

‘What about Madeleine?’ He pronounced the name as Mad-el-lyne.

Denis, disconcerted, shifted his gaze away and then back again, trying to reassert his command.

‘How do you – ?’ He had lost the initiative.

‘I’ve got a letter.’

‘What letter?’

‘A letter from Madeleine – I want to *be* with you again – I know what she means. It means you’ve *been* with her. It has come all the way from Bruxelles’ – he pronounced the X and the S – ‘that’s Brussels.’

‘Where is it?’

Joey shook his head as though tut-tutting.

Denis took a short pace forward. ‘Give me it.’ He endeavoured to edge his voice with tone of one who cannot be refused.

Joey quickly swung his legs to the floor and stood up. He was an inch or so taller than Denis. Denis had to raise his eyes to maintain the imperative.

‘Give – me – it.’ He said the three words separately, so that Joey had no reason to think he did not mean what he was saying.

‘No.’

Joey stepped forward and repeated the word. There was no more than three feet between them.

Denis was slowly filling with a sense of impotence that fuelled his anger. His arms hung by his sides and his hands began to tighten in to fists. He knew he could not use those fists. He knew that he could only back down. But he did not want to back down. He wanted to fight and to win. He wanted to flail into the little bastard – he probably was one anyway – and make him give him Madeleine’s letter back. That letter was his, and it was secret, a soft inner secret. And this, this. Inside he was beginning to weep. Outside he was calm and matter of fact.

‘Do you often go through other people’s pockets?’

‘When I’m short of cash. Thought I might go out for a couple of drinks and I was lookin’ for a spare fiver or a tenner.’

‘Thief.’

‘You wouldn’t have missed it. You didn’t last week. Nor the week before. I don’t see owt wrong with taking from those who won’t miss it or are careless enough to leave it where I can find it.’

‘Do a lot of stealing, do you?’ Denis had to make him produce the letter. If he saw it he might get an opportunity to get it back. He had to talk to Joey. Listen to him.

‘Some. Not much since I’ve been ’ere. Don’t need to. The odd drink. Maybe the pictures. You know. Is she nice?’

Denis hesitated.

‘Madeleine. Your little lady in Brussels.’

‘Damn you. Where’s that letter?’

‘She wanted me to.’

‘Who?’

‘Rachel?’

Denis clenched his fists again. ‘She did not, and if her husband hadn’t come in – ’

‘You did, didn’t you? You and Madeleine.’

Denis had lost his grip on the conversation. ‘Shut up,’ he said.

‘Did you watch her getting undressed? I watched Rachel. Each time. She wanted me to? I could tell. She liked bein’ watched.’

‘You dirty little bastard!’

Denis leaped out of his chair and went for Joey. Joey got up quickly and held out his left hand straight in front of him.

‘Don’t,’ said Joey. ‘Lay one little finger on me and I’ll show the letter to Joanne.’

Denis held back. He nearly said: I'll kill you. But he neither could kill him nor really wanted to. What he really wanted was Joey to vanish as though he had never been. And he wanted the letter back.

There was half a second of silence. By the end of it Denis had realised that he had lost. The second time that he had lost since leaving the office. With the realisation came resignation and he felt his body sag inside his skin.

Joey merely lowered his arm.

'I'm going out,' said Joey and twisted sideways to walk past Denis and out of the room. 'You needn't bother to look for the letter I've got it with me.'

After he had heard the front door Denis allowed himself to walk down the stairs. Maybe Alasdair had the right idea.

## 31

It was Saturday.

Denis had put off getting up for so long that he had heard the radio news twice. Joanne had been up for some time, since eight. She never stayed in bed much after she had woken. She would soon be going out. Each Saturday she took the bus into town. She would look at the shops. She would have lunch and wander around the department stores and boutiques until late in the afternoon.

By that time it would be all over.

Alasdair was coming round at about ten. Joanne would have gone by then. Joey would still be in bed, keeping out of the way. The plan that Alasdair had suggested, and to which Denis had agreed, was that as soon as *he* was dressed then they would overpower him – a dramatic phrase – and tie him up with some rope that Alasdair was going to bring. They would carry him through the door that led directly from the house into the garage and put him in the boot of Denis's BMW. Alasdair would then drive off with the ostensible sole purpose of collecting Susie. Susie had such a lot to bring back that they could easily justify the bigger car. Somewhere among the higher Pennines Alasdair would drive off the main road along one of the many lanes and on reaching somewhere isolated would manhandle Joey out of the boot – Alasdair was sure he could manage it – and cut Joey's hands free and drive off leaving him to untie his feet and make his way wherever he wanted to.

It was incredible.



He, Denis Marchland, was going to collaborate with his son-in-law in abducting and abandoning a young vagrant who had become a bit of a nuisance. Ever since Alasdair had first suggested it, Denis had cycled through alternating periods of elation and horror. Last night he had been uplifted by the daring that was involved. It was the kind of direct action that he had, as a boy, contemplated but never carried out. Other boys bragged of such things, practical jokes, like ordering a lorry-load of gravel to be dumped on someone's drive, or ringing up some old battleaxe and by pretending to be an engineer get her to do something ridiculous with the telephone. As an adult he had found his excitement in making money, not a lot of money, but enough to have been thrilled at the results of his endeavours. But the backwater of security and middle-aged stability that he had entered no longer offered the soft terror of make-or-break decisions, of a successful or unsuccessful deal, of praise or disparagement.

This Saturday morning was already providing more unfocused fear than he had foreseen. He was strung up, overwrought and sick with dread. By not getting up he was pretending it did not have to happen.

Why the hell had he said he would do it?

Last night, when he had met Alasdair and they had made these outrageous – transparently outrageous – arrangements the inherent malice in what they were planning had tinged his anticipation with the piquancy of revenge. Despite the Hollywood scenario the project had seemed logical, pragmatic and necessary. One way or another Joey had to go. Alasdair wanted him out of Rachel's life. He, Denis, wanted him out of Joanne's life. And out of his own. But now that he had no choice but to carry it through (he could not fabricate anything other than the least subtle prevarication that might either excuse him or absent him from the scene), the escapade seemed reckless and doomed. The scheme had, in Denis's imagination, some deficiencies. There were numerous ways in which it could go wrong. Either he or Alasdair could be hurt in the struggle or something in the house might get damaged and explanations would be required. The car might break down, or Alasdair might have a road accident. He might be noticed by a lone walker on a distant hill who just happened to be scanning the scenery

with a pair of binoculars and see one man bundling another out of the boot of a BMW. Perhaps it would be better if Alasdair took his own car. It was less identifiable than the BMW. At least he could deny his involvement. But then the BMW would have to be moved out of the garage and Alasdair's car would have to be driven in. One of the neighbours might wonder why. Joanne had already quizzed him about him spending time in the garage after he had returned from his meeting with Alasdair. He had rearranged some of the junk – yes, most of it was junk – in the garage so that he could get the car an extra foot further in to make sufficient space between the garage door and the rear of the car to stand as they lifted Joey into the boot. He had told her that something had fallen over as he had driven in and it had been necessary to move things around to get the car positioned so that the up-and-over door would close properly. What he had told her had been partly true. More true than some reports he gave her. Over the past ten years or so the need to be wholly truthful with Joanne had diminished. He had nothing to gain by telling her everything.

The front door was opened and the closed. Joanne had gone out.

Alasdair would be here soon.

When the front door bell rang, Denis was sitting next to an almost cold cup of coffee, forcing himself to read the newspaper but assimilating little of what he read.

Alasdair was carrying a green *Marks and Spencer* plastic carrier bag. Denis led Alasdair through to the kitchen, which seemed a more suitable place to put the final touches to a conspiracy, and offered him coffee. Alasdair refused. Alasdair took some rope out of the plastic bag and put it on the table.

'It just looks like a washing line,' said Denis, with a light-heartedness that was not matched by the weight in his chest, and the sharp stretch of muscles from shoulder to shoulder. God, he thought, this is just the thing to bring on a bloody heart attack. He inhaled slowly and reminded himself that a coronary was usually marked by a severe pain not only in the chest but in the left arm as well.

‘That’s what it is. I bought it on the way round.’ Alasdair looked about him. ‘Have you a sharp knife or some decent scissors?’

‘What for?’

‘To cut it up into pieces.’

Denis found a pair of kitchen scissors with orange handles. They were good enough and Alasdair soon had four two-metre lengths. There was a lot of spare rope, thought Denis, enough to hang himself. What if Joey died of exposure up in the Pennines?

‘We should only need two bits. Go and see if he’s getting up.’

Alasdair was at ease, but not in the quiet, boring way that was normally his mien. The quick darting of his eyes as he prepared the rope indicated that Alasdair was keyed to a high pitch. Denis chided himself for beginning to think like a film script.

At the bottom of the stairs Denis halted and listened before slowly climbing them. As he reached the top step he remembered that it was his house and there was no need for him to be silent or circumspect. He marched to the bathroom, which was unoccupied, urinated in the toilet and flushed it, then washed his hands. Coming out of the bathroom he saw the door of Rachel’s room opening. Joey appeared wearing patterned boxer shorts. Without speaking, Denis hurried down the stairs.

‘He’s up, but not dressed.’ His whisper was sharp and contrasted with Alasdair’s matter-of-fact response:

‘Good. He should be dressed in say ten, fifteen minutes.’

‘Less,’ said Denis.

Alasdair, who had sat down while Denis was upstairs, picked up the newspaper.

‘Funny business this.’ Alasdair waved his hand at a headline about some city fraud, or alleged fraud.

Denis walked to the window and watched a small bird, a sparrow, sitting on the right-hand fence. As he watched it flew down to the end of

the garden and rested for a few seconds on the roof of the garden shed. If Joanne had not insisted on a shed then none of this would be happening. Until they had acquired a shed they had managed well enough keeping the gardening equipment in the garage, but Joanne said it was a long way round from the front of the house and then he had got a better and therefore longer car. A shed for less than two-hundred pounds was an acceptable solution to a trivial problem. Not like this problem: not trivial and without an acceptable solution.

‘Time to move.’

Denis was minded for an instant to tell Alasdair to stop thinking he was in a movie.

‘You go upstairs first,’ said Alasdair, ‘and when you are sure he is in his bedroom and dressed give me a sign and we’ll go in together.’

‘What’s that for,’ he asked, pointing at the piece of torn sheeting that Alasdair was holding along with the pieces of rope.

‘To gag him. Can’t have him screaming his idiotic head off, can we?’

As they passed the door of the cupboard under the stairs, Denis opened it and took out Joey’s navy overcoat. ‘Can’t dump him without a coat.’ He threw it on to the straight chair by the hall table. Joanne had polished out the short scratch where the breaking vase had scarred the glossed wood

By the time he had gained the landing, Denis was sweating. His chest was tight, his breathing short and shallow. He recalled his earlier thought about a heart attack. There was no pain in his left arm. He leaned on the wall of the landing and took a deep slow breath. The hard tension remained. Rachel’s door was shut, so there was no way he could tell whether Joey was dressed or not. He faced Alasdair who was half way up the flight and shrugged. Alasdair came up the last few steps and whispered that it did not really matter whether he was dressed or not they could take whatever clothes he had not put on and leave them with him. Denis indicated which was Joey’s room.

Alasdair mouthed, ‘Are you ready?’

Denis made himself nod.

Alasdair rushed for the closed door. Denis followed. The door banged open, vibrating off the wall. Denis saw Alasdair take a flying leap at Joey who stood – fully dressed – with his back to the bed. Alasdair collided with Joey. Joey fell backwards, his knees bending, on to the bed.

‘Get his feet. Get his bloody feet!’ The words were low-pitched, imperative.

Denis went for Joey’s legs and held them with one arm. Joey kicked with both feet as though doing an Olympic crawl. Denis bore down with his weight, his head low. One booted foot caught him on his cheekbone, but using both arms he held on. The legs struggled.

‘Tie them.’

A piece of rope fell across Denis’s neck. Leaning heavily on the wriggling legs he withdrew one arm to get hold of the rope. A foot jerked and came free. The other leg bent and pushed. The ugly deep-patterned sole of the boot caught Denis’s shoulder and he was thrust backwards and upwards. His body twisted, his legs crossed and he fell on to the thick pile carpet. There was a stifled yell from the bed. Denis rolled over on the floor and he saw Joey rise up one wild arm sweeping Alasdair against the bedside cabinet. The tall leaping giraffe-like shape filled the space over Denis. He thought about getting out of the way, but Joey tripped as he tried to stride over him. The shadow over Denis’s head disappeared and he watched as Alasdair collapsed awkwardly to the floor losing his footing.

Suddenly all was still. Then the front door slammed.

‘Sod it,’ said Alasdair. ‘He bit me.’

Denis pushed himself up into a sitting position. The sweat on his face had turned cold. Alasdair had pulled up the left sleeve of his sweater and was rubbing his forearm. There were red teeth-marks like a hideous mouth. Denis pulled himself to his feet and tugged a handkerchief out of his pocket. He began to rub his face.

‘Well, he’s gone,’ he said, trying to sound positive.

‘He’d better stay gone. Next time I’ll bring something heavy and brain him first.’

Denis hoped and prayed that there would not be a next time.

Perplexed terror isolated Joey’s awareness from his fleeing body. He ran, but he ran because his body wanted to, while his mind used what spare energy he had to try to understand what had happened. He pounded down the stairs. His churning thoughts hesitated as he came to the bottom and his hand with incongruous foresight picked up his coat from the chair. The door slamming behind him chopped off the source of the fright, but his body did not stop striding and thumping until he had left the cul-de-sac and was a hundred yards further on. Then he forced himself to a halt and look behind him. Nothing. His body took up the stride again, but now with determination rather than fear, and his feet did not pound the pavement any more. The rhythmically increasing distance between him and the house soothed him, and he began to think. But he could only fill his mind with questions. What had they been going to do? Why? They had some rope – to tie him up? What if he had not escaped? Where would they have taken him? Done to him? Had they planned to beat him up? Even kill him! People disappeared everyday. Many of them are never seen again. For a second he imagined himself dead, in a wood, covered with mouldy leaves, unable to see any light, unable to breathe, or move. Forever. Who would have missed him? Joanne? But Joanne was married to Denis and Denis had held him down. Joey felt the restriction of Denis’s arms around his legs, like being in a dream unable to run. And the weight of Alasdair across his shoulders, an arm across his face. He had bitten. He had bitten because he had been scared. And now he was ashamed of biting. He had cheated. If he had not cheated they might have succeeded, tied him up, gagged him, taken him somewhere, left him. Not dead. Just left him. To die. Slowly. Cold. Hunger. Thirst. Dark. Dead. He thought the words in time with his pace. Cold. Hunger. Thirst. Dark. Dead. Cold – hunger – thirst – dark – dead. His pace

quicken. He had been forced to bite, to fill his mouth with the dry taste of wool and close his teeth on the flesh within. Otherwise –

He was still carrying his coat, and he pulled it on as he walked.

Denis did not like him. Joey had accepted from the beginning that Denis did not like him. But neither did his father. Joey expected not to be liked by fathers and men who represented fathers. It had been normal for Denis to show some resentment, to complain when Joey had influenced his wife, when what Joey wanted or what was good for Joey became or was made a priority. Joey had grown up with that. ‘Don’t tell me that boy needs another pair of bloody trousers.’ Fathers were like that. And because of his father he had left. He had left again. But whereas last time he had made a gesture of independence and freewill, a protest, this time others had taken the initiative and there had been malicious intent behind his involuntary expulsion. They had wanted rid of him, wanted to dispose of him. His father would not have done that. His father had not directly compelled him to go. Joey had taken a decision. Joey felt he had been denied something and hesitated as he acknowledged the right to go back, to fight, to fight fairly. But he would lose. They would win. He should have known that when it came to a contest they would win. He should never have used the letter. Denis could not have made him go, not as long as Joanne wanted him to stay. And so he would have put up with him. If it hadn’t been for the letter. Just as Joey wanted to live there, so did Denis. Joey liked Joanne, and he supposed that Denis liked her as well. Joanne liked Joey. Did she like Denis? Could that be it? Perhaps Denis knew she didn’t. Could it be that Denis didn’t like the fact that he and Joanne were friends? That she liked Joey instead of Denis. The letter must have been the last straw. And Alasdair, if he knew that it had been Joey who had pushed him down the stairs that afternoon, would be delighted to go along with Denis’s scheme. Rachel must have told him something. Joey tried to force the incompatible pieces into a clear picture, but they did not marry. He had thought Rachel liked him, maybe more than liked him. He knew Denis resented him, but Joanne liked him, and he had assumed that if Joanne liked him then Denis would put up with him, and he had hoped that Denis would get used to him being around. Alasdair, he hardly knew Alasdair. If Alasdair knew everything then

Joey could understand. But he could not know everything. What had Rachel to gain by telling him everything? For her own good she should have kept her mouth shut. Alasdair would hit her, like his father had hit his mother. Had Denis hit Joanne? What did people get married for? Why had his mother married his father?

The broad door of the hostel was opened by a girl he did not know, tall thin. ‘Terry?’ he said, ‘did Terry come back? If he did – ’

‘Terry?’ she said and put her cigarette to the centre of her mouth and closed her invisible lips. Her cheeks hollowed and the cigarette brightened as she drew in the smoke. ‘Don’t know any Terry.’ The smoke came out of her face with each syllable, streams from her nose and mouth crossing.

‘Val then, can I see Val?’

‘S not ’ere on Sat’days.’ More smoke in irregular pulses.

‘I need somewhere to sleep. I thought – ’

‘Ave to see Val. An’ as I said she’s not ’ere. En’way we’re full up.’

‘Can I phone her?’

‘Don’ ask me.’ She put her cigarette to her lips again and began to close the door. She sucked in smoke again. ‘Look it’s bloody cold standin’ ’ere. You go’n t’piss off?’ She blew smoke at him and he stepped back. She shut the door.

It was almost one o’clock by the time Joey reached the street where the house he used to call home was. He had certainly not taken the shortest route and he had walked more slowly as the time had passed. It was only a few weeks since he had last been in the street, but it appeared different to him. The houses were more drab, the brickwork looked cheaper, the windows were opaque; the gardens were tatty, with irregular hedges, bushy and untrimmed. Most of the concrete paths were cracked and those that had gates had gates that were peeling or distorted. The cars that stood in the street looked as though they had been abandoned and might never move again, but as he approached the house where he had lived for as long as he could remember, an engaged



fired, died, fired again and roared. A canted Cortina billowing blue smoke staggered off the verge and into the road, levelled itself and moved around the corner giving out fresh clouds at each change of gear. Until the car had moved, the street had seemed lifeless.

When he reached the sun-cracked blue-painted front door and the concrete threshold Joey rang the bell. He had imagined that he would walk straight in, down the narrow hall and surprise who ever was in the living room. His father would not be in, he would still be at the *Mitre*. But he could not do it. The house was no longer his home and he should wait to be asked in.

After a few seconds the door opened. Charlotte looked round the door and then up.

‘Hello, Charlie.’

Charlotte disappeared and the door slowly closed leaving a narrow vertical gap of darkness.

Inside he heard Charlotte shout, ‘Mum, Mum, its Joey!’

Should he push the door open?

The door was pulled back once more and an excited Charlotte danced on the worn carpet. Up the ill-lit hall came his mother and he could see Robin hanging further back beyond the foot of the stairs. She was wiping her hands on her pinafore. As soon as she could make herself heard above Charlotte’s squeaking, she said:

‘Hello, Joey.’ There was restrained pleasure in her voice.

Joey lifted a foot on to the threshold. Charlotte flattened herself against the door. The door banged against the wall.

His mother shook her head. ‘You’d best not come in.’

‘Why not? Why not? Joey’s back.’ Charlotte lifted herself two or three inches and held herself at the increased height by resting her heels against the door. It moved, banged against wall again, and Charlotte’s feet slipped to the floor.

‘He’s upstairs.’

Joey waited for his mother to come closer, but she did not.

‘You all right?’ she asked.

He moved his head up and down a little to show that he was.

She turned and looked towards the staircase.

Joey waited. If his father was going to come down and shout at him, Joey was prepared to shout back.

‘Go,’ insisted his mother in a near soundless voice, ‘go.’

Joey stepped back, both feet on the step. When he looked into the house again, his father was at the bottom of the stairs. Joey primed himself. Charlotte darted across to her mother. His father hustled his short bulk past his wife and hit Joey in the face between the left eye and the bridge of his nose. Joey was too stiff to absorb the blow and he went down half on one knee, grabbing the frame of the doorway as he did. Sudden pain shot through the thumb of the hand resting on the jamb. He pulled his arm in and toppled to the ground. The door banged again and this time, because he had removed his hand, the tongue of the catch caught and the door stayed shut.

Joey got to his feet and with his injured thumb thrust under his left armpit he hurried awkwardly down the path and back along the street. The tears started in his eyes as he turned the corner, taking him out of the sight of anyone in the house he used to call home.

## 32

In front there was a rising stream of traffic bounded by a double white line on the right and headed by heavy lorry that was steadily pulling itself around the inclined bend. Alasdair shifted down to second gear and tried to keep a constant distance from the small car in front of him. Inside he wanted to drive fast, to pull out and roar down the approaching lane, to hear the engine whining at high revs, taking him further and further away from the morning's débâcle. After Joey had fled, Denis had sat down on the floor with his chest heaving. Alasdair had muttered and cursed as he had collected his pieces of rope together and then announced that he was going to collect Susie. He had driven recklessly since leaving the house. He had accelerated hard whenever the way ahead was clear and braked even harder whenever someone obstructed his passage or lights turned from amber to red. Twice he had pulled out to overtake on a narrow road and had to pull back and in with squealing tyres to avoid a previously unseen oncoming vehicle. He was angry. He was angry, not at Denis, not even at Joey, but at the way things had turned out. The vision he had had of cleaning up and disposing of a problem had been, from its very inception, complete with beginning, middle and end. He had not been prepared for its going wrong, for its abortion. Its lack of fulfilment had destroyed its original validity. It would have been better not to have tried than to have tried and failed. He felt a fool. He felt he had been seduced into attempting something foolish, for if he had suspected that it would not succeed then he would not have been fool enough to embark on the venture. In the planning it had seemed so simple, in retrospect so idiotic. He

banged the steering wheel with the side of his fist and the wheel sang in brief protest. Up in front, as the lorry crested the hill, the car immediately behind it pulled out and overtook it. Alasdair counted. There were seven more vehicles between him and the lorry. The black fumes at the back of the lorry dispersed as it and its train of cars picked up speed. Denis would say nothing, because he was older. Alasdair decided that Denis had more to lose by the story coming out. Not that Alasdair wanted to have to justify his actions to anyone. What the hell had Joanne been thinking about having anything to do with a lout like that? The scheming yob had carefully calculated what he could get out of the situation and even considered Rachel to be one of the options. Rachel *did* give the impression to any male that she would welcome a little more attention, or a little more than mere attention. The curtailing criterion was that she maintained control of the situation. With Joey, she had not bargained on being attacked. She should have known better. She should have known that his background would make him interpret any sign of friendliness as a strong come-on. And Rachel was damned good at the knee-weakening come-on, and the sharp stand-off laced with chilly incomprehension. Most men were unmanned by it – the impact of unexpected yet indubitable failure.

The lorry turned off and the traffic speeded up on to a newish by-pass.

He had believed Rachel, despite the implications of the anonymous note. He would have challenged her if it had been anyone but Joey. Too young and unattractive. Rachel was choosy, always had been. There had to be personality or looks. Alasdair reckoned he scored above average on both. But since the affair – well, not exactly an affair – with Donald, and even more so since the incident with Joey, Alasdair had had an uneasy sense of being superfluous. In the last few days he had put it down to Rachel being shocked. She had been treating him like a faithful friend but nothing more. He thought that her remoteness was a result of her not being able to tell him fully what had happened that afternoon. He was conscious of the invisible barrier that rises when part of the truth is withheld. Yet what else could there be to tell? Unless there had been some compliance on her part. His lips went hard and pressed against his closed teeth. His face was slack and cold with

distaste. No longer did he wish that he had smashed in Joey's skull. He wanted to rid himself of the touch of Rachel.

When Alasdair reached the road that climbed towards the winter-dark moors there were no vehicles visible ahead of him and he increased his speed as much as the twisting two-lane road would allow. Rachel and what had happened were both behind him and getting more distant. Susie was in front of him, getting nearer. He was looking forward to seeing Susie. Susie *was* a straight girl. She made her intentions clear and stuck to them. She had asked him to come early, before lunch if he could, and if he kept up his present rate of progress he would be at the university by twelve thirty. Susie's attitude to him was, in his experience, novel. He was attracted to her not because he had fancied her from a distance, but only because he had realised that she was attracted to him. Always, before, Alasdair had sized up a girl from afar, estimated his chances and planned his strategy and tactics. His strategy with Rachel had been, having watched her way of operating, to avoid those situations in which she could get one up on him by rebuffing his approach. He had done this by carefully stopping short of what he appeared to have in mind. Instead of her putting him down, he had left her wanting. It had worked and she had recognised the game he was playing and, when he had changed his ploy, she had given in to him with delight. And subsequently. But that had been in the early days. Since then he had lost the initiative. He had lost the art of being unpredictable with her in a way that surprised her. His attempts at surprise were always telegraphed, and he suffered, as he had seen others suffer, from unfulfilled expectations. Until recently, her surprises had compensated for his inability to influence what happened and he had become a grateful recipient of whatever favours – euphemistic word – she bestowed. But then there had been Donald and now ... again the skin of his face went cold. He thought of Susie. Susie was more of a puzzle. From various cues, her voice on the telephone, the request for him to come early, the request for him to come at all he had deduced that he was expected to expect something, but he did not know what he should expect and therefore in order to avoid disappointment he expected nothing. Yet there was a thrill in the deliberate expecting of nothing when he knew that there might be

something. Because if he was not to be disappointed then there was a good chance, he concluded, of something happening. The logic seemed circular, but it spurred him on.

They had lunch in one of the university bars. Susie paid, explaining that her father was generous in making up her grant and that he, Alasdair, was really doing *him* a favour. When she had explained this she curved her shoulders and smiled a silent giggle as if to say that they knew better. Alasdair's suppressed expectations flipped. No, he told himself, it's only her girlish way. They returned to Susie's room. Alasdair followed her up the stairs watching the swing of her long heavy skirt. He hurried through the door into the narrow space and as soon as he had crossed the threshold she stopped suddenly, and turned round. Alasdair more concerned about shutting the door on to an empty corridor walked into her. Susie allowed the soft contact to unbalance her and she stopped herself falling by putting her hands on his shoulders. Alasdair rocked back a little to support her weight and then she pushed on her toes and linked her hands at the back of his neck. Her full breasts were soft under the man's shirt that she wore with the tails hanging down over her skirt. There were buttons all the way down the front. He reached backwards and awkwardly thrust the door of the room until it almost closed. She leaned against him a little more heavily and he was forced to take a step and a half backwards. She released one hand and reached around him to lock the door.

'We don't have think about going yet, do we?' she said.

And it seemed quite in order, quite natural that he should lock his arms behind her and carefully kiss her. She closed her eyes and her body rose to his. She responded with a warmth and openness that guaranteed that even if he had not taken the precaution of expecting nothing he would still not have been disappointed.

Later when they lay in silence because there was no need to speak, Alasdair began to be tormented by imagined capricious consequences of the day. Not only the morning, but the afternoon. The possibilities skittered about in his mind, mercurial and uncontrollable. If what had

happened came to light, if Denis could not keep his mouth shut, if Susie – with all her wonderful naivety – should want to celebrate by confiding in a friend who let it be know to another who, not realising the effect of passing it on, communicated it further. It was one of those hours in which within the limits of its minutes the world seems right and good, but in the time before and the time that would inevitably follow there were innumerable outcomes that could result in disharmony and discomfort of mind and spirit. He recognised his happiness as a singularity in the undulating continuity of non-happiness that had preceded and would succeed the perfect present. The best he could hope to do was parcel up the present, gift wrap it and hoard it for the future. And to do that he had to bring it to a definite end.

‘Time to move,’ he said.

The loading up of the car took nearly an half an hour as all the separate items, midi-hifi, two cases, numerous plastic bags, two small boxes of books, various trinkets from around the room had to be carried down three flights of stairs and across fifty yards of flagstones to the nearest place where the car could be parked. Consequently it was almost four o’clock when they set off back. All through the process of gathering her belongings together and transporting them to the car, Alasdair and Susie had kept looking at each other, underlining the fact that for the time being they shared an enigmatic confidence that was, and would be, a spring of profound pleasure. There seemed to be, in the sharing, a reinforcement of the unarticulated agreement that this could be repeated, ought to be repeated, because there was an inexplicable rightness about it. The clash between its rightness and the reality to which they were returning threatened Alasdair. Could he keep control? In the car, whenever the road was straight and clear, Alasdair, instead of pressing down the accelerator and gaining some excitement from the increasing speed, he obtained a deeper satisfaction from twisting his head to the left and glimpsing the gentle smile and bright semi-circular eyes of Susie. It was nearly six when they arrived at the Marchlands’ house.

Rachel's appearance in the hall as Alasdair carried in the two suitcases broke his satisfied mood. He had not expected her to be there. The rightness became a wrongness and he resented it.

Joanne had prepared a meal for them and as they sat down to eat it, she said, studying the half-open door of the dining room, 'Joey hasn't been in all day.'

Rachel said, 'That's odd,' as if it wasn't.

Alasdair managed to hold himself still and not look at Denis.

After they had eaten, Susie said that she was going to go round to see Dinah, a school-friend of hers, who lived about twenty minutes walk away. Alasdair listened as she telephoned her friend, glad that she was going out. Without her the evening would be manageable.



## 33

The telephone did not sit correctly when Joanne put it down. She had not been paying attention to the movement of her hand and it had wavered uncertainly. She had rung Dinah to make sure that Susie had arrived. The instability of the handset resting awkwardly under her fingers attracted her mind for less than a second, enough time for her to jiggle it until it was properly positioned. Still thinking about Susie she returned to the lounge. Rachel had picked up a magazine and Denis and Alasdair were maintaining a common appearance of not wanting to be where they were. Alasdair had one elbow raised, pointing his neat hand down like a *grave* accent to make it possible for him to clean out the finger nails of that hand with those of the other. Denis appeared to be bored, with his neck on the back of the armchair, a finger autonomously exploring the crown of his head, and his eyes on the juncture between walls and ceiling in the corner of the room farthest from him. The silence was liquid rising slowly, filling the room, with Denis prepared to keep his nose above the surface long after the others had drowned.

‘Susie’s got there,’ said Joanne.

Her statement opened up some outlet for the silence and it began to drain away. Denis muttered as though trying to indicate that he had heard and was able to listen. Rachel lowered her magazine, cracking the glossy paper. Alasdair rubbed his hands on his trousers.

‘Of course she has,’ said Denis, still looking at the ceiling. ‘What did you expect?’

'You don't know. These days.'

Denis pulled himself back into his chair. 'You worry too much.'

'I wish she hadn't gone the short way. Not when it's dark. You never know who might be hanging about.' Joanne held her breath then allowing her shoulders to sag let it out.

'The short way?'

Rachel answered Alasdair. 'There's a short cut. Takes you along the back of Glebelands Road and round that electricity whastit.'

'Substation.'

'I'm not sure I would go that way. Not when it's dark.' Rachel resumed reading.

Joanne sat down and studied her older daughter. Rachel was wearing blue high-heeled shoes each with a bow at the back. The blue matched the plastic bangle on her right wrist and the heavy necklace of beads that hung down over her fuchsia coloured jumper. She might have been preparing to interview a studio guest on television.

'And not when there's people like – ' Alasdair stopped.

'Like who?' Rachel narrowed her eyes at him.

'Doesn't matter.'

'Did you ask Susie to ring before she sets off to come home?' asked Denis.

Joanne recognised his tone.

'Why?'

'Then one of us – Alasdair or me – could walk to meet her.'

'She said she might stay over. Lot to catch up.'

'Did you ask her?'

'What?'

'To ring?'

‘No. She said she’d stay.’

‘You said she *might* stay.’

‘Well she might. Probably will.’

‘Only probably.’

Joanne said nothing. Denis liked a plan that would covered all contingencies. There *was* uncertainty in her understanding with Susie. She had not felt the need to spell out to Susie what she should do in all circumstances. Susie was a sensible girl. Denis thought she was grown up, independent, able to think for herself and no longer his responsibility. He did not really think that Susie couldn’t look after herself. After all she looked after herself when she was away. Did he not really care about Susie? The exchange allowed him to demonstrate that he thought things through and his wife didn’t. It *would* have been better if she had been more specific with Susie and asked to ring in any case. Denis would like her to admit what he saw as her inadequacy so that he could shake his head in mock despair. Joanne did not want to give him that satisfaction, but she could tell that she had failed.

‘Does Susie know about Joey?’ Rachel was trying to steer the conversation.

Joanne shook her head. A conversation about Joey was best avoided.

‘Why not?’ said Denis with more force than she liked.

‘There never seemed the right time. And the telephone. I wanted to explain it to her face to face.’

‘Anyway where is he? He’s not upstairs.’ Denis was almost mocking.

‘I haven’t seen him since this morning. He was asleep when I went out and not there when I came back. He doesn’t normally stay out this long.’

‘He’ll be skulking about. Up to no good,’ said Alasdair as if voicing a universal truth.

Rachel scowled at Alasdair. In response, he shrugged.

Joanne said nothing.

‘Susie might find it awkward having him in the same house. Sharing a bathroom. Sleeping just across the landing.’ Rachel cast about for some sign of agreement.

‘It’s something to be taken into account,’ said Alasdair. ‘After all he’s young and he’ll have ... feelings.’

Denis nodded in Alasdair’s direction. ‘That’s dead right. Susie and him sleeping in the same house. You can see that, can’t you Joanne. Even you can see the sense of that.’

‘Of what?’ She dared him to be explicit.

‘You know.’

‘Do I?’

‘Joanne.’

‘If you mean he might find her sexually attractive then I’d be surprised if he didn’t. I’ll explain the situation and set some boundaries. Just like I have had to do to keep him out of your sight.’

‘That’s not the same.’

‘No. You’re right. It isn’t. He doesn’t want to be in your company whereas he and Susie might get on well together. They could be friends.’

‘Friends?’ Alasdair turned to Rachel as he spoke. ‘We know what happens when you try to be friendly. Don’t we?’

Rachel endeavoured to look hurt. ‘There’s no need to say anything.’

‘Rachel if there’s something – ’

‘Nothing, forget it.’

‘You can’t just say forget it, just like that.’ Joanne panned round for support.

‘No, we can’t.’ Alasdair turned to Joanne and setting himself as the one who has something difficult to communicate he began. ‘On Monday –’

‘I’ll tell her.’ Rachel hitched herself into a position where she could more properly see Joanne. ‘Joey found out our address and came round once or twice –’

‘A few times.’

Rachel glared at Alasdair, who leaned back in his corner of the settee.

‘He had a cup of tea and a biscuit and we talked. Sometimes we went for a walk in the park On Monday, I was upstairs when he arrived and I told him I wouldn’t be long. I had decided to get changed and I suppose I was longer than I had expected to be. Anyway there I was in only ... well, he must have come upstairs and the first thing I knew was that he was standing there watching. I told him to go away but he came in –’ Rachel stopped.

Alasdair continued for her. ‘I wasn’t feeling well so I came home early. As I came through the door, I heard this scream. As I ran up the stairs he came straight at me, pushed me down the stairs and got out of the house somehow.’

‘There you are. That proves it,’ exclaimed Denis. ‘The little bugger.’

Joanne looked at her daughter. ‘Why didn’t you say something?’

‘I didn’t want to upset anyone.’

‘You didn’t want people jumping to conclusions, more like.’

‘God, Alasdair, what has got into you. What are you getting at?’

‘You gave him ideas.’

‘Ideas, what ideas?’

‘Anything in trousers and you’re all –’

Rachel cut him short. ‘Alasdair Quirke!’

‘Don’t deny it. I knew about you long before I met you and you haven’t changed. I suppose when it all went wrong with Donald you thought you’d try for young Joey. Hardly out of nappies, is he? Did that make him interesting. You don’t think it was just chance that I came home early that day, do you?’ He stood up and went towards the closed door of the room and turned round.

‘If you think – ’ Rachel protested.

‘I don’t have to think. I was told.’

Joanne looked at Rachel who was pale and tense. Her lips were taut around her partly open mouth as though she was sucking her teeth. Her eyes were hard and steady. Alasdair wasn’t angry, but he was motivated by something strong, something positive, as if he had suddenly realised that inside himself there was something dark that had to be purged and he was going to feel much better when he had expressed it. Denis wanted to intervene, but Joanne noticed he was looking at her and pressed her lips together. He held back from saying what had been in his mind. She could see he was still thinking it.

‘Told?’ asked Joanne.

‘Told. A letter and then a telephone call. That my wife had a young man calling on her frequently.’

‘Well I did.’

‘And a hint that he wasn’t just coming for a cup of tea.’

‘Alasdair.’ Denis could hold his tongue no longer. ‘There is no need for this. Remember she is my daughter.’

Alasdair shook his head slowly and widely. ‘You should know the way she is. Susie does. And I’m sure your wife does.’

‘I’m not listening. I think you should apologise to all of us.’

‘Apologise. Apologise. To you?’ He breathed and his voice dropped. ‘Why? Why?’ He shook his head. ‘Susie is a far better person than any of you. If I – ’ Alasdair’s voice was low, heavy with regret, icy with malice.

Rachel's eyes widened so that her face seemed to shrink. 'That's it. I should have guessed. You and Susie. There was something about you after you took her back last month and I wondered why it had to take all day to bring her home this time.' Rachel sat back. 'You. Bastard.'

Joanne tightened the grip of her right hand on her left. The superficial tingling moved into her arms and shoulders. She wanted to shout. She wanted to tell everyone to stop and start again. She wanted to go back to when there had been no Susie, no Rachel, no Denis, just her. A growing girl of fourteen looking at her reflection in a mirror. Then she had been real. Now she was an actor in their play.

'What have we come to?' Denis was saying, as though he were the only person in the room capable of rational thought. He put his elbows on his knees and lowered his head, his interlaced fingers across his nose, his shoulders rounded and his back curved. He raised his eyes. 'My son-in-law is accusing his wife, my daughter, of – of carrying on with a homeless scrounger my wife has sort of adopted and my daughter is accusing her husband of having some kind of an affair with her younger sister. That's what you're saying, aren't you.' His gaze took them all in. 'I don't hear any protests. If it isn't the truth then it's damned near it. What kind of parents have we been? What kind of a father must I be, if my daughters can get into this tangled mess?' His face full of calculated bewilderment openly appealed to Joanne as though she might excuse his confessed incompetence.

Joanne despised him. 'I think you're a pious old fart. She,' she pointed at Rachel, 'is just a pretty slut, and he,' she thrust her chin at Alasdair, 'was a fool to get involved with her, never mind marry her. He'd be far better off with Susie – ' She stopped and felt her finger nails press into her palm. She closed her eyes for a long second and when she opened them again she directed them at her husband. 'And you, you don't have much room to talk.' She went over to the book shelf and extracted a large bible. From it she took the cream envelope she had found while tidying Joey's room that morning. It had slipped down the between the bed head and the mattress. The bed looked as though he'd had a fight in it and she had decided to strip it completely and start

again. The letter had been posted in Brussels, addressed to Denis at work, and she had wondered why it was in Joey's bedroom. That the envelope was handwritten was more puzzling.

The envelope had already been carefully opened, so she had no qualms about extracting the letter and reading it. It had been a while before the significance of what was written had become clear to her. She had not read it and reacted immediately, rather she had slowly filled in the background that was necessary for the letter to make sense. Even then it seemed peripheral, something that if she ignored might go away and, if it did not go away, might never seriously affect her. Now, as he manufactured self-righteousness in front of her she wanted to shatter his pretence. She swung round and waved it in the air. 'In a bible – you'd never have looked there for it, would you?'

Denis jumped up to snatch the letter, but she spun it through the air to Alasdair who stretched up and caught it.

'Read it. Read it.' She stepped away from her husband. 'And then you'll see where *she* gets it from. I'll bet little Madeleine wasn't the first one, eh? How many other scented floozies have you had on your bloody business trips. All that talk about us doing things together now. Flannel. An easy way to keep me happy, you thought, while every now and then you'd indulge yourself. Looks as though this Madeleine took you a bit too seriously, called your bluff.'

'Damn it, woman, you should be bloody glad I didn't go years ago. Damned good housekeeper you make, but not much else. You're dead right *she* certainly didn't get it from your side of the family. If it wasn't for the biological evidence to the contrary I could have been convinced that none of your antecedents had it in them.'

Joanne hated Denis. She had hated him for a long time, but habit had taught her that it was her duty to continue to be his wife as best she could. She could cook. Keep clean. Wash, iron, tidy up. But she had not loved him. Could not love him. She had hidden it, now she wanted it out in the open. The instant he stopped speaking she hit him with flat of her hand against the side of his face. She had wanted to do that every time he opened his mouth for a long while. It was strange that she



should do it when he stopped talking, but it would have been rude to interrupt him.

Joanne watched as Denis recovered his balance. And she saw him clench his right fist, saw him bend his elbow, saw the elbow rise and pull back. She lowered the shoulder that was further from him, lifted the shoulder that was nearer, and pulled her chin down on to her lowered shoulder. Her other arm began to rise defensively. He was going to punch her.

As she closed her eyes to blot out reality she noticed that Alasdair was still holding the cream envelope but he did not seem to have taken out the letter.

The darkness behind her eyelids was bright with the anticipation of pain, but when the blow came it was more like a shove and she merely fell. When she opened her eyes she saw Alasdair struggling face-to-face with Denis. He was holding Denis by his upper arms and Denis was thrashing with his half-closed fists and not quite reaching Alasdair. Rachel was trying desperately to get between them but Denis's arms were held too low.

Joanne shouted, 'Stop it! Stop it,' and then much more quietly, 'Stop it.'

They did not stop, but the tussle continued in silence. In that silence the front door bell rang.

'Somebody's at the door,' she said gently.

Arms dropped and Rachel went towards the door to the hall.

Rachel opened the front door. It was raining. Joey was already quite wet. Rachel shook her head. 'No Joey. Best if you go. Quick before they come to see who's here.'

Joey took a slow step backwards.

'Hurry.'

He turned.

Rachel began to close the door.

'Who was it?'

'Wrong house.'

'Let me see.' Alasdair grabbed the edge of the door and pulled hard.

The door edge it caught Rachel's foot. The sudden pain made her catch her breath. 'Careful.'

'Sorry.'

Rachel moved out of his way as he opened the door wide and went out. Denis followed him.

'Who was it?'

'She says it was someone at the wrong house.'

'But?'

'I think it was that little bugger.' Alasdair ran down the drive and Denis went after him.

Joanne came and stood beside her daughter.

'They think it was Joey?'

'Was it?'

She nodded.

## 34

She sat up. The bedroom was sudden black. Urgency pumped in her body, blanking her mind. An unformed need demanded her response. The darkness took on the shape of the room. Joanne heard Denis stir alongside her in the bed. She recalled the cry of a baby that had woken her, a short repeated nagging plaint. Slowly the shapes of curtains and cornices emerged from the blackness and the furniture stood back like discreet servants. There was no crying now. The red digits of the clock beyond Denis's rising landscaped form said five-thirteen. Joanne slipped down again into the bed, her eyes heavy with the remnant of the night's sleep.

Rachel and Alasdair had left not long after Denis and Alasdair had returned from their unsuccessful pursuit. Few words had been said. Rachel had gripped her mother's limp hand before joining Alasdair in the car. Denis had stood overseeing the departure and as soon as the front door was shut he returned to the lounge where she found him slumped in sullen silence unable to look directly at her. She had busied herself with a tour of the house, tidying and adjusting, most of which was unnecessary. She had drawn all the curtains and as she drew those in Rachel's room she glanced at the shed at the bottom of the garden, but it was just an old garden shed illuminated by the light from the ginnel.

In the hall she had rung Dinah's number and asked to speak to Susie. 'Best if you stay there if it's all right with Dinah. We've had a bit of a -' She stopped. 'I'll explain tomorrow.'

Denis had gone to bed first. When Joanne had gone up he was already asleep. She did not know how he could sleep, but she was glad that he was. She had nothing to say to him and she did not want him to say anything to her. She slipped into her side of the bed and lay her body straight, close to the edge, away from him. Soon Denis's breathing had deepened. She had lain awake rearranging the pieces of her life. She could not make a picture. Eventually she must have fallen asleep. Now she was awake again.

The baby cried again, a louder cry insistent for attention.

Instinctively Joanne moved and got out of bed. She stood by the bed until her eyes had once more become accustomed to the darkness in the bedroom. Her feet found her slippers. Carefully she went to the door of the room and slipped out on to the landing and into his bedroom. The cot was hidden in the darkness under the curtained window, but she heard his restlessness. The door squeaked and he started his uh-uh-er noise again, but quieter now he knew that she was near. She leaned over the high rail and wriggled one arm under his warm supple body. She lifted him up and held him, zipped in his babygro, against her breast and shoulder. His alert head was unsteadily supported by his immature neck muscles, a glint of light coming through a gap in the curtains caught his large eyes. They flashed with round curiosity and ambition. Shh, she said, it's not time to play. A tiny clutching hand grasped at the loose flesh of her face. She put a finger against his hand and he grasped it. Little boys should be asleep, she chided. You needn't look at me like that, Mummy knows best. Mummy knows that little boys need all the sleep they can get. There, there. She released her finger and slipped him into a more horizontal position so that she held him in both arms. Slowly her body began to sway. In her head a tune formed synchronising with the rhythm of her body. The tune crept out on to her lips and she hummed, the vibrations resonating in her throat. The whole world comprised the two of them, moving as one. His eyes closed and the reflections disappeared. Her humming changed into a fully voiced, but very soft, da-di-da-da da-di-da-da da-di-da-da-da which she repeated losing the other phrases of the melody. He snuffled, but he did not re-open his eyes. She lowered him into the cot and pulled up the sheets and blankets that he had kicked

off. She stopped singing. He whimpered when she tucked him in. Mummy's not going. She stroked his forehead with her fingertips, smooth skin, warm, and underneath the hardness of the tiny skull. He made a small sound, wordless, a primeval communication and Joanne murmured her response. Her hand moved rhythmically pressing gently with her fingers while her head rose and her eyes looked into the featureless darkness above the end of the cot. Denis would be waiting, impatient, blaming her. Every night it's the same, just as we're ... he starts. What the hell's the matter with him? Her hand continued its soothing stroking. She began the tune again, humming again. The tune was Brahms' Lullaby. On the end of the cot hung by a silken white cord was a little square musical box, white with a pastel transfer. To make it play you pulled on the little bead extending the string from the bottom and released it. It played Brahms' Lullaby. She removed her hand which moving with the tune, had become increasingly light until her fingers brushed his brow with the barest touch of a feather. She straightened fully. There was the periodic faint whistle of air in his nostrils. She stood back. After a significant interval of silence, no more than ten or fifteen seconds, she took another step back, and then another. She paused. Please God, let him be asleep, let him stay sleeping. Another backward step. Suddenly the cot was gone and her eyes saw Susie's empty bed. Joanne stepped forward towards the empty bed and stroked the cold pillow. She picked the pillow up and folded her arms around it. The pillow was cool against her cheek. He was cold. You, silly boy, Martin, kicking off all the clothes. She listened. She would hear him soon. Are you coming back to bed, or not? You shouldn't have cried just then. Daddy's a bit cross. Under the weight of Denis, she had kept saying inside her head, her head which seemed to be suspended high over her collaborating body, He will not wake, He will not wake. Over and over again to the rhythm of their two bodies. He will not wake. He will not wake. Not tonight. Not tonight. Please, please, not tonight. It had been a long time since she had not felt tense and untouchable. Denis had been careful, tender, not expecting too much. Then the first cry, sharp, slicing. Martin, why? That bloody kid, he had said. Every damned night. Joanne, leave him, can't you. Let him cry. He only wants attention. He'll get tired of it. She pushed him off. Joanne! She had got out of bed. He's only a baby. He's by himself. Her mood was broken. I

can't just leave him. He's crying. He's alone in the dark. The lightlessness of his bedroom might be the vastness of lightless space beyond the fringes of the universe for all he knows. To feel so alone. She hugged him close. The pillow was lifeless in her arms. Out on the landing the house was soundless except for the steady intrusive breathing of her husband. She went downstairs and along to the kitchen. She held the pillow under one arm as she turned the key and undid the two bolts that secured the back door. The noise she made was only slight. Outside, she closed the door behind her and walked away from the obsidian-windowed house. There was a bright moon and a delicate covering of airy frost settling on the grass and on the path. The concrete slabs struck cold through her thin-soled slippers and the sharp air tugged at her long white cotton nightdress. At the shed she stopped and waited for the silence to encompass her. The shed seemed too near and oversized in the moonlight. The snuffle and weak cough did not startle her. She had expected it. The door of the shed had not been properly closed and was unevenly ajar. In the light from the street lamp she could see an irregular strip of darkness down its open edge, widening towards the bottom as the warped wood curved away from the frame. She leaned against the shed and using her free hand and arm prised the door wider until the gap was about six inches. He was lying on his back with his head almost at the door. The blankets which she had given him less than three weeks ago were messily folded over and around him. She opened the door further and the orange light from over her shoulder fell across his face. He grumbled and muttered. She could smell stale beer. The smell was harsh when she knelt down on the hard earth just outside the door putting his face in her shadow. He said something, some disjointed syllables. Mummy knows best, Joey. Mummy know best. She placed the pillow over his face and pressed down on both sides of his head with her short arms. His head began to move from side to side as though protesting his innocence. She lowered the whole weight of her upper body on to the pillow pressing his head between her breasts. She made her body a dead weight, a deadly weight. The struggling grew stronger, but she held him down. She held him down. She held him down. She held him down. She – held – him – down. The movement under her ceased. His small body lay still. She kept pressing with both hands, the bar across the top of the cot was

digging into her ribs as she continued to press. It was done, and could not be undone. She heard his voice. When are you coming back to bed? He sounded resigned. He would want to carry on from where they had left off, but she no longer felt like it. She wanted to sleep forever. She would go back and pretend that everything was as it had been and he would pretend that he did not notice, but she would know that he did, and he would never know the difference. She would keep on living, deciding, avoiding, compromising, pleasing, hating. She lifted the pillow and there was sufficient light for her to see his small face round and at peace, the eyes motionless under the pink membranous lids, lightly veined. She smoothed his thin hair. No more crying. No more tears. His tiny fingers were curled. No more conflict. No more life to live. She stood up and the yellow-orange light slashed across the fixed staring eyes, the upward pointing chin and the gaping mouth. She closed the door, turning off the picture. Walking back up the path she smelt vomit on the pillow. An isolated cloud caught up with the moon as she reached the door and the darkness hurried her into the house. She relocked the door and twisted home the bolts. At the top of the stairs she stripped the pillow and put the pillowcase into the laundry basket just inside the bathroom door. She found a clean pillowcase in Susie's bedroom and put it on the pillow and put the pillow back on Susie's bed.

She stood at the window and drew apart the curtains. The clouds had built up a high opaqueness and the thin black fluid of night flowed coldly into the room.

Joanne shivered. Soon it would be Christmas. Where would they all be at Christmas?