

What We Don't Know: Liminality, Marginality and Narrative Mode in  
David Belbin's Fiction

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis consists of a selection of my published work from 1989-2015, accompanied by an essay and a bibliography. The essay looks at the ways in which I am drawn towards marginal and liminal zones within fiction, including the areas between Young Adult (YA) and Adult fiction, crime fiction and literary fiction, and that between depicting reality and fictionalising it. I also consider the use of narrative mode in defining these liminal areas.

By ‘liminal’, I mean occupying a position at, or on both sides of a boundary or threshold, rather than the word’s other, looser sense, where it means ‘vague’.

The examples of fiction selected are intended to display the range of my published work since joining Nottingham Trent University. The order in which the pieces are discussed is broadly chronological. There is an introductory section about and brief examples of my work prior to 2002. While the work selected has been chosen primarily to be representative of my published work, they also illustrate the liminal and marginal zones referred to above.

The majority of the extracts and stories that follow are taken from those published during the thirteen years I have worked at Nottingham Trent University. The texts used are taken from the published versions. Consequently the editorial conventions applied to chapter headings, double or single speech marks et al. are not consistent. While I have endeavoured to correct typographical errors that appeared in the original publications, I have not attempted to improve the style.

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## What We Don't Know

### Foreword

I first came across the word *liminal* in relation to anthropology. In that discipline, *liminality* refers to the middle stage of rituals, where a young person is no longer a child but not yet an adult. Liminality has particular relevance to Young Adult Fiction (henceforth, YAF), which I will consider. Liminality is also, I will argue, central to my work, both in the anthropological sense and in a broader sense where the word has become synonymous with marginality, a distinction that I will explore. I will show how my work navigates the boundaries between different genres of fiction and thrives on the conflicts between those genres.

For a novelist, the PhD by Published Works is itself a marginal zone, one whose regulations are primarily designed to link retrospectively a group of academic papers rather than a body of creative work. As Butt points out, 'criteria are constantly evolving' in the creative PhD by Published Works<sup>1</sup>. There is no consensus on the function of the critical commentary in this essay. 'Never trust the teller, trust the tale,' I read in my first year as an undergraduate, 'the proper function of a critic is to save the tale from the artist who created it.'<sup>2</sup> Lawrence's dictum rules out the very form in which I am writing. Yet there are elements of exegesis only the author can supply: in particular, context and an account of the key debates affecting authors in the field during the period of publication. In the case of YAF, where I have

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<sup>1</sup> Maggie Butt, 'One I made earlier: on the PhD by publication' Text, Special Issue 22, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> DH Lawrence, *Classic Studies in American Literature*, London: Martin Secker, 1924.

written the largest part of my published work, these include audience, mode of narration, subject matter and censorship. In addressing these areas I intend, also, to demonstrate how my fiction forms a coherent whole.

The essential element of exegesis concerns the author's life and how it connects with the work. Some aspects of this are covered in the brief introductions to the short stories and extracts submitted.

I was born in Sheffield in 1958, the first child of a working class, Roman Catholic mother and lower middle class, Protestant father who both worked at an insurance company. We moved to Leicester when I was two and West Kirby, the Wirral (now Merseyside) when I was five. There, I began to write poetry. The family moved to Colne in Lancashire when I was sixteen. I went to university to study Law, but changed courses and left at the end of the first term, returning to take a degree in English Literature and American Studies the following autumn.

After graduation, I began but didn't finish two novels, became active in local politics and did some temporary work. In 1983 I undertook a PGCE in English and Drama, which introduced me to YAF (a literature that had emerged since I left school). I worked as a schoolteacher (English, Drama and Media Studies) full time for five years, writing in the evenings, weekends and holidays. My first novel, *The Foggiest*, was published in 1990. After four years working part-time, I became a full-time writer and remained one until, in 2002, I took a part-time job teaching Creative Writing as a Senior Lecturer in English at Nottingham Trent University, a post that I still hold.

## Introduction: the 1990s

YAF is a literature composed of multiple genres. Until recently, it was read primarily by people of secondary school age (eleven to sixteen). Robert Cormier's seminal *The Chocolate War* was published in 1974, the year I turned sixteen. YA novels began to proliferate in the late 1970s. I discovered the literature in 1983, when I trained to be an English teacher, and read YAF extensively throughout the 1980s, observing the literature's development.

Excited by the possibilities the form offered, I wrote a YA novel, *The Foggiest*. When this failed to get published, I wrote two adult, more 'literary' novels. In 1987-8, I reworked the second of these, about a pupil/teacher affair, and offered it to Penguin as a YA novel. Their response was enthusiastic but negative. Strong boundaries still governed the content of YAF. Ten years, during which I played a part in stretching some of those boundaries, were to pass before the novel, *Love Lessons*, was published.

Although my first published stories appeared in literary magazines, they have both YA and liminal characteristics. 'Witchcraft' is explicitly concerned with a rite of passage. Its narrator is an abused child, detailing then undocumented, now notorious events. While she is fictional, the voice in 'Being Bullied', my second published story, was inspired by a real sixteen-year-old boy. From the start, then, my work sought to speak on behalf of the disempowered and inhabited a zone between documentary and fiction.

My debut novel, *The Foggiest*, in its first version, predates these stories, but I rewrote it after their publication. The book follows many tropes of 1980s YA fiction: in length (30,000 words), character age (protagonists two years older than its target audience), the way it isolates these characters from

their parents (common in much children's literature) and in one of its themes, summed up by a snatch of lyrics from the radio in the first chapter:

*Shall we talk about the weather?*

*Shall we talk about the government?*<sup>3</sup>

The story has an environmental subtext, which wasn't unusual in 1990, and an overt political agenda, which remains rare in YAF. The novel's denouement reveals that what appeared to be an environmental disaster was caused by a far right group's attempt to engineer a coup against a government who were about to lose a general election. Discussion of democratic, electoral politics, then, was also a concern in my earliest work.<sup>4</sup>

My next publications were short stories. Three of them feature a first person narrator, Alison, who is a student at the University of Nottingham. Although Alison is only a little older than the protagonists of a YA novel, these stories are frank about drugs and sexuality in a way the YA novel could not, and still cannot be. Gatekeepers have to be appeased before novels on these themes can find their way into school libraries or the YA sections of bookshops. Twenty years would pass before *Student* – the novel that grew out of these stories - appeared in book form<sup>5</sup>.

This is one of the ironies of writing YA fiction: that the author is often not allowed to address the issues that most concern its audience: 'books that take them to the edge and allow them to face their darkest fears,' as Nicola

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<sup>3</sup> Bill Berry, Peter Buck, Mike Mills, Michael Stipe, 'Pop Song 89', *Green*, Warner Bros, 1989. This line was excised from later editions for copyright reasons.

<sup>4</sup> My first long work, written before *The Foggiest*, was *The Selection*, an unproduced, one-hour radio play set in the build-up to the 1983 General Election.

<sup>5</sup> In *Student*, Alison becomes 'Allison', for reasons explained in its introduction.

Morgan observed in 2004.<sup>6</sup> Over the next fifteen years I would find ways to address these issues, some more fully than others.

In 1993, I was asked to write for a new Crime series. Writing series fiction risks developing lazy habits of the kind that Raymond Chandler describes in ‘The Simple Art of Murder’: ‘When in doubt have a man come through a door with a gun in his hand.’<sup>7</sup> But, like the Irish novelist who has been my biggest influence, Brian Moore<sup>8</sup>, I was to learn a great deal about the craft of writing by accepting such commissions.

My first ‘Point Crime’ novels were aimed at the younger end of the YA group, what the US calls ‘middle-grade’ fiction (aimed at ten to thirteen year-olds, as against YAF, primarily aimed at thirteen plus). Each was commissioned from a synopsis that outlined the plot. My second, *Avenging Angel*, revolved around a theme: when does one have the right to take the law into one’s own hands? In all but this one synopsis, I left the ending open, on the grounds that I needed to be able to surprise myself, to discover the solution to the mystery in the course of writing it. But *Avenging Angel* had a moral twist I had planned from the start (the man who protagonist Clare thinks has got away with her brother’s death proves to be innocent; a revenge attack is narrowly averted). This I included in the outline.

I was to surprise myself in a different way towards the end of *Avenging Angel*. Architecture student Clare decides to drop out and become a police officer. There were many arguments against Clare joining a notoriously

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<sup>6</sup> Nicola Morgan, ‘What Is Young Adult Fiction?’ panel, Turning Point, Nottingham Trent University, November 27<sup>th</sup>, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Raymond Chandler, ‘The Simple Art of Murder’, 1950 April 15, Saturday Review of Literature, The Simple Art of Murder by Raymond Chandler, New York, Saturday Review Associates pp. 13-14.

<sup>8</sup> Moore wrote several pseudonymous, cheaply published thrillers just before and after the publication of his first novel under his own name, *Judith Hearne*.

sexist, racist institution, most of which I had other characters put to Clare in the novel. That her character took on a life of its own, and resisted its creator's scruples, was to prove fruitful. Two years later, Clare returned to university but, by then (six years in real time), I had written eleven novels about young police officers, including Clare, in a series called *The Beat*.

*The Beat* was crucial to my development as a writer. It also gave me what was – for a YAF writer - unparalleled artistic freedom. The series attracted little critical attention but, partly because of this, allowed me to write about the subjects to which I was most drawn. A stand-alone novel that dealt with controversial subjects such as racism, rape and paedophilia would have had to pass far more gatekeepers.

While the one-off Point Crime novels hovered between middle-grade and YAF, *The Beat* began as what I came to think of as 'true' YA Fiction, being aimed at readers who were teenagers both chronologically and in terms of their reading age. It also carved out a new, liminal area between YAF and the adult crime novel. Conventionally, YA characters were no older than seventeen, but the police's recruitment age was nineteen. My point-of-view protagonists aged from nineteen to twenty-one during the series. Some central characters were older. Each novel featured a character nearer in age to my core audience, either victim or villain, with whom the reader could potentially identify. One of my police officers was gay. Gary Monk was the first gay series character in UK YAF at a time when section 28 of the local government act banned the promotion of homosexuality in schools.<sup>9</sup> Again, my work pushed against boundaries and was aided in doing so by appearing 'under the radar'.

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<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/homeaffairs/page/0,11026,875944,00.html> accessed 7/3/16.

*The Beat* gave me a reputation for handling difficult, controversial issues ‘responsibly’ and enough commercial success for my publisher to commission the teacher/pupil affair novel I had written two versions of in the 1980s. When published, *Love Lessons* often appeared in the adult fiction section in bookshops, long before ‘cross-over’ became a category. The novel is liminal in many ways. At 63,000 words, it is half way between the accepted YA length at the time (40-45,000) and the 80-90,000 of a mainstream novel. I completed the final version in 1995 but publication was held back until 1998. It didn’t appear in a mass-market edition until 2001. These dates tell their own tale about the slow pace at which publishing mores were changing<sup>10</sup>.

There were six years between the adult and YA drafts of *Love Lessons*, which is the only novel that I have rewritten in that way. What did I then consider to be the differences between adult and YA fiction? The published book is twenty percent shorter than the first version. This signifies little. Most novels are too long. A few years’ perspective helps in the identification of redundancies. I extended the teen protagonist’s sections and reduced the teacher’s. In a long, new scene, Rachel goes for the morning after pill after having unprotected sex. As a former teacher, I was aware that this novel may become part of the information on which some schoolgirls based their own choices. I took seriously the educative responsibilities that I felt were an implicit duty of YA authors. I was also aware that young readers can read against the grain of a novel, so included an afterword making it clear that girls who had sex with their teachers generally found the experience damaging.

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<sup>10</sup> For more on the history of this novel, see David Belbin, 'Afterword: A Brief History of Love Lessons', *Love Lessons*, Nottingham, Five Leaves Publications, 2009, pp. 253-259.

There is less explicit sex in the YA book than there had been in the original adult version, but the sex is still there - is, indeed, crucial to the story, which deals with sex in a realistic manner without becoming salacious or titillating. For instance, when Mike and Rachel first sleep together, 'Mike found it awkward to get inside her' is as explicit as the description gets. Aware that some of my readers would be immature and drawn in by the subject matter, I learnt to write scenes that only made full sense if the reader understood the experience that they described. Thus, in part 2 chapter 2 (p.92) Rachel masturbates to orgasm in the bath while thinking about her teacher, but this is for the reader to decode. Immature readers are likely to slide over the relevant words without confusion.

There are writers for young people who claim not to bear in mind an age group when writing. I find this disingenuous. While *Love Lessons* has some non-YA characteristics (eg length, sexual content, an extended adult point of view), it was completely rewritten in the full knowledge that its core audience would be fourteen year-old girls. It pushed the limits of YAF at the time and was written by someone who knew what those limits were. By the time I came to my next non-crime YA novel, *Festival*, in 2001, I was able to write about sex in a fairly explicit, casual way. The area I had to be careful in representing was illicit drugs, which were central to my Glastonbury festival plot. I tried to do so accurately without glamourising or condemning. *Festival* was published the same year as *Love Lessons* was allowed onto the shelves of WH Smiths in a mass paperback edition and became a best-seller for the

second time<sup>11</sup>. Neither created any controversy. It could be argued that, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, YAF had come of age.

However, as the next section suggests, that maturity came with costs.

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<sup>11</sup> The novel's success preceded the digital sales records which now dictate the size of bookstore chain's future orders, but, to the best of my recollection, were roughly 30,000 for the 1998 trade paperback and a similar figure for the 2001 mass-market edition.

## 1: Turning Points

In 2002, I began teaching at Nottingham Trent University, where, in 2004, I organised the UK's first conference devoted solely to YAF, *Turning Point*. Adolescence is in itself a turning point, a liminal period where a young person is no longer a child but not yet an adult. I chose the title partly because YAF appeared to be at a turning point in its brief history. The panel on 'What is Young Adult Fiction' sought to define the term. The authors who spoke shared my view that Young Adult novels are not merely aimed at readers with a 13+ reading age, but at those who have attained that age chronologically, too: adolescents. We were writing novels for teenagers, about teenagers. A true teenage literature, keynote speaker Melvin Burgess argued, was one that teenagers want to buy for themselves.<sup>12</sup>

The publishers present did not contribute to the discussion about YAF's nature. With reason, for, as I have come to realise in the decade that has since passed, the only definition of YAF likely to remain consistent is one given by Crowe: '...all genres of literature published since 1967 that are written for and marketed to young adults.'<sup>13</sup> In short, YAF is whatever publishers say it is. The number of teenagers who buy YAF has never been large enough to make substantial profits. Other buyers must be encouraged. This has consequences for the content of YA novels and is one of the reasons why YAF is such a liminal form. It is intertwined with, yet discrete from, children's literature, where academia tends to place it, and fiction for adults,

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<sup>12</sup> <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/152/childrens-books/articles/other-articles/what-is-teenage-fiction> accessed 29/2/16.

<sup>13</sup> Chris Crowe, 'What is Young Adult Literature?', *The English Journal*, 88:1, 1998, pp. 120-122.

who now form the majority of its audience.<sup>14</sup> The form's definition is likely to remain fluid at both ends of the age range, a subject to which I will return.

Novels that dealt with moral questions dominated the conference discussion of the 'issue novel'. Anne Cassidy's novel about a child who kills another child, *Looking For Jf* (2004), had won that year's Booktrust prize (then the only major UK prize specifically for YAF). Elizabeth Laird's *A Little Piece of Ground* (2003), about Israel and Palestine, was cited by several as our literature's apex. Stephanie Meyer's hugely successful *Twilight* series (2008 on) was yet to be published. Soon, YAF sales would be dominated by vampires and dystopian fantasy.

Over the decade that has passed since *Turning Point*, YAF sales have boomed,<sup>15</sup> yet there has not been a second national conference, in academia or elsewhere. *Turning Point* took place at what now seems a high water mark in YAF's critical standing. Those who write primarily about teenagers for teenagers are no longer central in the literature marketed to teenagers. When the conference took place, keynote speaker Melvyn Burgess had recently published *Doing It* and I had published *The Last Virgin*, both explicit, well received novels about teenage sexuality.<sup>16</sup> But my new novel, *Denial*, discussed in the next section, had censorship and publications problems that diminished my freedom to manoeuvre. It would take several years and the

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/53937-new-study-55-of-ya-books-bought-by-adults.html> last accessed 25/2/16.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2167826/Boom-young-adult-fiction-sales-jump-150-percent-years-thanks-hits-like-Twilight-The-Hunger-Games.html> last accessed 25/2/16.

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, the novel's entry in Nicholas Tucker and Julia Eccleshare's *The Rough Guide to Books for Teenagers*, London, Penguin Books, 2003, pp. 59-60.

emergence of writers like David Levithan before YAF began to tackle such controversial areas again.

The conference's title turned out to be relevant to my career. Since then, all of the YA novels that have appeared under my name have been for 'reluctant' readers. Reluctant reader novels exist in a marginal zone which itself bears investigation in relation to YAF's liminal status. 'Reluctant' readers may have English as a second or third language, visual impairment, autism, dyslexia or other special needs. I was commissioned to write these novels because publishers wanted reluctant readers to be able to read the same authors their more able peers were reading, as opposed to the anodyne work available for them when I was a schoolteacher in the '80s.

I discovered an aptitude in myself to write stories with a reading age (as opposed to interest age) of six to eight. The challenges of writing for reluctant readers are not, however, restricted to language and syntax. Stories have to be told in a linear manner. Deciphering vocabulary requires huge effort on the reader's part, so even shifting point of view is too complicated a demand on them. My aim in writing these books was to tell a story that does what the best YAF does: expand the mind. But these stories, while structured like a full-length novel, are 3-13,000 words long. One is forced to condense to the essentials. At first, I found that such economy made the book's 'message' or moral cruder, tending more towards middle grade and children's fiction, where the moral universe make sense, rather than YAF, which accepts ambiguity. In *Gambler*, readers will not be surprised to learn that gambling is a risky habit. My themes became more complex and grittier as my storytelling grew simpler, aided by the move into first person with *Stray*.

*Stray* looks at girl gangs who use sex as a commodity to pay drug runners. The narrator falls for one of them. He gets out, but the girl remains trapped. In *China Girl*, the Chinese prostitute for whom the boy has fallen escapes, but the boy becomes trapped, working for his father, who turns out to be the girl's pimp. In my final reluctant reader novel, *Secret Gardens*, asylum seeker narrator Aazim ends the story on the verge of being captured and deported, while Nadimah, the trafficked girl slave he has rescued, stays in the UK. In this case, the refugees who are my story's subjects might well be given this novel to read, making it all the more important that I not sugar the reality they face.

Writing reluctant reader novels helped me to clarify what separates YA fiction from adult fiction. They are written to help the audience become more able readers, making the stories – in one sense - overtly educative. But are they educative in a less specific sense? At *Turning Point*, Nicola Morgan<sup>17</sup> discussed how YA authors are good at sneaking some spinach into the strawberry: that is, at helping readers develop their understanding of a serious issue while entertaining them. When one is writing stories that are boiled down to their essence, however, the spinach is in plain sight. One either has to persuade the reader to enjoy spinach, or leave the spinach out.

But, to run with this metaphor, I like spinach. So do many other people, regardless of whether spinach is 'good for you'. I enjoy stories that involve big moral choices and address society's most pressing issues. When writing, the author's duty, I would argue, is not to give answers, only to ask good questions. We write stories, as my thesis title suggests, to explore what

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<sup>17</sup> During the 'What Is Young Adult Fiction' panel referred to in the opening paragraph of this chapter.

we don't know, rather than to explicate what we do. If reluctant reader stories are to be any good, this duty must apply to them.

Some critics argue, conversely, that what I refer to as duty is self-deception, that much of YAF's role is to socialise and acculturate its readers into norms of behaviour and ideology.<sup>18</sup> Critics diminish YAF's artistic integrity on the grounds that it is curated by gatekeepers (primarily publishers, librarians and English teachers) who, under the guise of supporting personal development, inculcate impressionable adolescents with works that reinforce society's ideology and power structure. Some argue that adolescence itself is a dubious cultural construct invented to perpetuate existing power structures.<sup>19</sup>

If many YA novels have content that support the socialisation argument, the same could be said of the adult novels I read when growing up. Young readers read, in part, to understand how the world works. Much of what they read is likely to reflect prevailing ideologies. But YAF is liminal to children's, as well as adult literature. I would argue that the most interesting YAF, far from supporting societal norms, is a reaction to the educational, socialising aspects of Children's Literature. YAF's canon has multiple novels that challenge prevailing ideologies: most notably, the one that many identify as the first true YA novel, Cormier's *The Chocolate War*, whose central theme is the cost of resisting conformity.

While YAF, inevitably, has an educative role, this does not in itself distinguish it from fiction for adults. I would argue that what distinguishes YAF from adult fiction is not the message, but the messenger. A defining

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<sup>18</sup> Erica Hatley, 'Canon Fodder: Young Adult Literature as a Tool for Critiquing Canonicity', *English In Australia*, 48.2, 2013 p. 71.

<sup>19</sup> Nancy Lesko, *Act Your Age: A Cultural Construction of Adolescence*, New York, Routledge, 2012.

element of YAF, emphasizing its liminality, is the nature of its narrator, or focalizer, which I will discuss in the next section.

## 2: Narrative Mode

*Denial* is written in the first person, in the style that David Lodge calls ‘skaz’.<sup>20</sup> Skaz has the characteristics of the spoken word, a style that Lodge traces back to *Huckleberry Finn* and then to Salinger, whose influence on YAF written in the first person is enormous.<sup>21</sup> The term originates in Russia (*skazat* means ‘to tell’) and refers to fiction using dialect and slang. As *Denial*’s title intimates, its narrator, Cate, is unreliable. The novel deals explicitly with teenage sexuality and the sexual abuse of minors. It includes strong profanity and casual drug use and is not a novel I could have contemplated writing for a YA audience when I discovered YA literature, some twenty years earlier.

*Denial* anticipated a major shift in YAF: the increased use of first person narration. Indeed, of 103 novels submitted by publishers for the Young Adult section of 2014’s UKLA<sup>22</sup> book awards, thirty-four were in the third person, two mixed third and first, while sixty-seven were first person, a remarkable dominance.<sup>23</sup> *Denial* required first person because of the narrator’s unreliability. Furthermore, first person makes it easier for readers to empathise with a potentially unsympathetic narrator. But the approach has drawbacks. It can be hard for authors to distance their own voice from that of the narrator. Conversely, many first person narrators in YAF sound samey, as if possessed by J.D. Salinger.

There is another issue, which Maria Nikolajeva points out:

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<sup>20</sup> David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction*, London, Penguin Books, 1992, pp.18-20.

<sup>21</sup> See also my essay, ‘What Is Young Adult Fiction’, *English in Education*, 45.2, 2011, pp.132-145 p. 141.

<sup>25</sup> See <http://www.davidbelbin.com/downloads/2014-ukla-young-adult-novel-submissions/> last accessed on 13/3/2016.

'The first-person perspective, frequently employed in YA literature, attempts to convey the loneliness and confusion of a teenager in the world of adults. However, since the textual agency conveying ideology is the implied author rather than the narrator, there is always an empowered author behind the young, disempowered narrator.'<sup>24</sup>

YA 'Skaz', therefore, is inherently 'phony' *pace* Holden Caulfield, and requires a skilled author to bring off convincingly.

The third-person-subjective (a.k.a. third-person-limited) viewpoint used in most of my fiction has advantages. Like first person, it allows the writer to show the character's voice through thought as well as dialogue. It can also be used for more than one character. The ability to shift point of view and hence delay or hold back plot developments is useful in creating suspense. Narrative interest can also be heightened by the reader 'knowing' things that the current point of view character does not. The writer is able to adjust the degree of focalisation according to the narrative's needs. If s/he is skilled enough, the narrative can slip into first or second person, even into free indirect discourse (often called 'free indirect style' or even 'free style', still loosely approximating the original *discours indirect libre*) and remain successful.

I experimented with first person in the historical novel for younger readers that I wrote directly before *Denial. Boy King* (2002) is narrated by Edward VI from the period around his father's death and the last few days of his own life. I chose first person narration to make it easier for the reader to form a connection with a boy far removed from them by time and privilege. My most recent novels for reluctant readers, beginning with *Stray* (2006) are

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<sup>24</sup> Maria Nikolajeva, *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature For Young Readers*, Routledge, Oxon, 2010 p. 106.

also in first person, which can make it easier for the reader to relate to an outsider narrator.

First person is one way in which YAF differentiates itself from Children's Literature. The majority of stories for those under twelve are in third person. I suspect this is because it is hard to craft a convincing, articulate voice for a preadolescent. Adolescence is a time when people begin to find their voice. First person YAF shows this, providing models for readers to test their own voice against. First person narrators seldom identify a narratee other than the implied reader (whereas Holden Caulfield's posturing turns out to be an attempt to impress the narratee, his psychiatrist). By the end of *Boy King*, we find Edward addressing his half sister, Elizabeth, apologising that she will not get the throne. The irony here – that Elizabeth will become the most highly regarded monarch in British history - is only possible because of this use of a narratee.

Elizabeth is still a child, and the age of the narratee relates to how a novel is focalised. If we are to have a true teenage literature, rather than the marketing concept discussed at the beginning of my first chapter, I would argue that the majority of a novel's narration should be focalised by a narrator who is themselves a teenager. Barbara Wall, in her examination of narrative voice in Children's Literature, makes a related point. She argues that the double address found in Victorian works for children that have 'an adult narrative voice which exhibited strong consciousness of the presence of adult readers' has gradually been succeeded by either single address to children or a dual address that fuses the two approaches.<sup>25</sup> 'Does the narrator address children?' she concludes her study, 'is the real question.'<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Barbara Wall, *The Narrator's Voice*, Macmillan, London, 1991, p. 9.

<sup>26</sup> Wall, *op. cit.*, p. 271.

There are many stories (some awarded YAF prizes<sup>27</sup>) narrated by characters looking back on their adolescence with a mature perspective. These are not what I think of as YAF. Such novels may reflect on liminality but they are not liminal in the way that stories narrated from within adolescence are. Indeed, one of such novels' key qualities is often that the reader takes pleasure in discerning the distance between a young character's innocence and the (sometimes implied, sometimes overt) older character's mature knowledge. In this sense, they might be regarded as anti-liminal.

The mode of narration is not necessarily central to YAF's liminality, but the age of the focaliser is. Further, I would argue that the liminal period does not directly correspond to the ages that tend to be prescribed to YAF, but should be extended, with a cut off age of about thirty. We do not live in an era of precisely defined rituals that define adulthood. It can be argued that adolescence extends indefinitely, or at least until people become parents.

People in this period, eighteen to thirty, which I think of as 'late adolescence', form a large part of the audience of YAF, but do not tend to feature as protagonists or focalisers. *Love Lessons* and *The Beat* novels are exceptions. This is one of the aspects that makes my fiction individual, reinforcing my argument that liminality is a core quality in my work. However, since YAF does not traditionally cover such territory, perhaps we have to find a new phrase to describe it.

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<sup>27</sup> e.g. Jennifer Donnelly, *A Gathering Light* a.k.a. *A Northern Light*, London, Bloomsbury, 2003, which won numerous YAF awards.

### 3: Liminal Literatures

If, as I have argued, YAF is an intrinsically liminal literature, occupying a space between Children's and Adult literature, where do we place the novel of late adolescence? The coming-of-age story is also known as the rite of passage novel, suggesting links to ritual. Turner, as his widow has pointed out, regarded literature of this kind as a strong representation of liminality.<sup>28</sup>

*The Pretender* is a writer's coming of age story. In particular, it deals with the rite of passage that every writer undergoes, imitation of other writers, in the journey to find their own voice and subject. I avoid the word 'style', which is linked to, but not synonymous with 'voice'. Every story has to find its own style, as did the essay that you are reading.

Mark Trace's surname is a rare – in my work - use of a descriptive name in the manner of Dickens, the first writer whom Mark imitates. *Trace*, like the titles used in many of my novels, has more than one meaning. Mark is an indistinct character, not yet fully formed. He is essentially liminal. Mark traces the work of other writers, even copying out Hemingway's work before he begins to forge it. The reader is unable to fathom whether Mark leaves a trace of himself in his forgeries, for I do not show them.

*The Pretender* begins with a nod to Salinger: 'The first thing you need to hear about...'. This is a deliberate echo of *The Catcher In The Rye*'s: 'If you really want to hear about it, the *first* thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born...'. Salinger's sentence goes on: 'all of that *David Copperfield* crap'. My opening line, therefore, subliminally prepares the reader for both

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<sup>28</sup> Edith Turner, 'The Literary Roots of Victor Turner's Anthropology', *Victor Turner and the Construction of Cultural Criticism between literature and anthropology* ed. Ashley, Kathleen, Indiana, Indiana U, 1990, pp. 163-69.

the nature of the story, ostensibly an autobiographical novel like *David Copperfield*, and for the nature of Trace's first forgery, which will be of Dickens.

*The Pretender* was nearly published as a YA novel. The inclusion of Dahl amongst the forgeries suggests that possibility, as does the use of relatively informal first person narration. However, the style, unlike that of *Denial* or *Student*, is not what Lodge calls 'Skaz', but precociously mature. The narrative's focalizer, we discover at the conclusion, is twenty. My subject, the education of a writer, is not designed to appeal to adolescent readers. Indeed, the novel's most enthusiastic readership has been my peers. *The Pretender* is also, in a sense, a historical novel, set in a pre-internet age, depicting a now disappeared literary world that I experienced at the start of my career. Dahl and Greene's death dates (a few months apart in 1990 and 1991) demarcated the narrative's precise timing.

Evidently the term 'new-adult fiction' (NAF) was coined a year after *The Pretender* was published<sup>29</sup>, when St Martins Press called for "...fiction similar to YA that can be published and marketed as adult—a sort of an 'older YA' or 'new adult'."<sup>30</sup> The call says that 'the protagonist should be 18 or older, but 20s are preferred.' The term NAF was primarily taken up by self-published writers. NAF tends to deal with issues pertinent to late adolescence like leaving home, discovering one's sexuality, education and career choices. NAF, then, is an intrinsically liminal kind of fiction and, even more so than YAF, originated as a marketing construct for publishers or, to frame this point more generously, as a new category to help readers find the content for which they are looking. From my limited look at this area of

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<sup>29</sup> I am forced here to rely on information from Wikipedia, as 'new-adult fiction', with or without dash, yields no results in any academic data-base as of March, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> <http://sjaejones.com/blog/2009/st-martins-new-adult-contest/> last accessed 29/2/16.

publishing, most of the content thus far seems to be romantic fiction. However, as Hahn points out, YAF also began this way. He traces the literature's early roots to Beverly Cleary's *Fifteen* (1956) which he describes as working 'chiefly within the tradition of pulp romantic fiction.'<sup>31</sup>

The title *Student* suggests that my novel is about late adolescence. Melvyn Burgess wrote: 'We have almost no university literature in the UK... and this book is a valuable addition to the YA range.'<sup>32</sup> While Burgess places my novel in YAF, no UK YA publisher, on being told the content, was interested in considering it. As Andrea Wylie points out: 'The dividing line at either end of the young adult spectrum is difficult to draw. When do "older readers" become adults?'<sup>33</sup> After I transferred *Student*'s representation to my adult fiction agent, the publishers approached admired it but found the content too teenage. *Student* was published by *The Pretender*'s publisher who initially planned to brand it as YAF (hence Burgess's quote). However, when Waterstones, having initially made a substantial order, decided against stocking it as a YA novel, Five Leaves published it as an adult novel instead.

Unsurprisingly, then, *Student* – my most liminal novel – disappeared in the cracks between publishers' marketing categories. What stops it from being a YA novel? Certain aspects signify that it *is* YA: the 'skaz' narration is present tense and, therefore, focalizes the narrator at ages between seventeen and twenty-one (as against *The Pretender*'s twenty); the length (55,000 words) and the marginalisation of all non-teenage characters is also a YAF trait.

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<sup>31</sup> Daniel Hahn, 'young adult (YA)', *The Oxford Companion To Children's Literature*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, p 646.

<sup>32</sup> <http://amzn.to/1FogyCH> accessed August 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Andrea Wylie, 'Expanding The View of First Person Narration', *Children's Literature in Education*, 30.3, 1999, p.197.

Against this can be set the novel's overall bleakness, its frankness about illegal drugs and the consequences of risk (Aidan's 'edgy' behaviour causes deaths and, ultimately, leads to his suicide), a narrator who does not seek to be sympathetic and is chronically depressed for part of the narrative (especially the chapter, 'Nets') and its university setting. The latter, as Burgess points out, is generally absent from YAF. Campus novels tend to be written by and about academics for whom students are either an irritation or a source of casual sex.

The ending of *Student* is not entirely pessimistic. Mark and Allison are reunited and 'ready to face a new day together'. In 2013, a year after *Student's* publication, Kevin Brooks' Carnegie winning *The Bunker Diary*<sup>34</sup> would kill off all of its characters with no retribution for the unseen perpetrator. This created controversy and, eventually, acclaim. Janne Teller's *Nothing* (2011), winner of the Michael L. Printz Honor, which, unlike *The Bunker Diary*, has a cast composed entirely of teenagers, is equally bleak. Adolescents know that bad things happen, constantly, and expect the novels they read to know this, too. The definition of YAF, as Daniel Hahn recently pointed out, is always in flux. 'Conventions about what teenagers can read about, but also about how these stories are told (e.g. any subject can be broached as long as the book's resolution is ultimately hopeful) are no sooner defined than they are broken.'<sup>35</sup> However, as Coats argues, the nature of adolescence is not only liminal, but in constant flux, so 'substantial conclusions are necessarily contingent, because the nature of their subject is

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<sup>34</sup> The publication of which was delayed for many years because of his publishers' concern about its bleak content, as the author has told me.

<sup>35</sup> Hahn, 'young-adult fiction', p. 648.

always changing, or more precisely, the nature of their subject *is change*, both personal and cultural.<sup>36</sup>

*Student's* commercial fate may have been different had there been a big YAF publisher behind it. Its sales, compared to 60,000+ for *Love Lessons* and a similar figure for *Bone and Cane*, have so far been insignificant, in the hundreds. By contrast, in the 1990s, my *The Beat* series covered similarly explicit territory (albeit over a twelve novel sequence rather than nineteen chapters) and sold hundreds of thousands. It had central characters considerably older than the target audience. Anecdotal evidence suggests that it gathered a strong adult audience in addition to thirteen to sixteen year olds. I always had one character in the YA age bracket (fourteen to seventeen) in each novel for my target audience to relate to. But this may have been unnecessarily cautious. *The Beat's* point-of-view characters, mostly aged between nineteen and twenty-two, were 'relatable', in the current sense, to teenage readers, and had plenty of growing up to do. *The Beat* anticipated many concerns currently considered new-adult. Its success was under the radar because of two genre factors, both of which meant the novels were rarely written about: it was a series and it belonged to the crime genre. If I were to continue writing about the themes that continued to preoccupy me, there was a lesson to be taken from this.

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<sup>36</sup> Karen Coats, 'Growing Up In Theory', *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature*, London, Routledge, 2010, p. 320.

#### 4: Marginality

Arnold van Gennep, who first described the liminal period that occurs between different states of being, uses *marginal* as a synonym of *liminal*.<sup>37</sup> In this section, however, the terms need to be differentiated. Liminality is a state of becoming. Marginality is the property of being at an edge. In academia, the most apposite definition of marginality as it relates to my fiction is that used in Sociology, where marginality refers to a state of being affected by contact with disparate cultures, one in which the subject acquires some but not all of the traits or values common to those cultures.<sup>38</sup> The term is used more loosely and widely in literary studies<sup>39</sup> (even more so than ‘liminality’), most commonly suggesting exclusion from society’s power structures.

While YA and NA Fiction are intrinsically liminal, they are not, then, necessarily marginal. But marginality is a useful concept for looking at many novels that do not fit into one genre, including my ongoing *Bone and Cane* sequence. These novels adhere to the crime genre but are also, to some extent, political novels in the tradition of Trollope’s Palliser sequence (1865-80). In *I Married a Communist* (1999), Philip Roth’s narrator says: ‘Politics is the great generaliser, and literature the great particularizer... They are in an

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<sup>37</sup> Arnold Van Gennep, *Les Rites De Passage*, Paris, Librairie Critique, Emile Nourry, 1909.

<sup>38</sup> These distinctions are further explored in Donald Weber, ‘From Limen to Border: A Meditation on the Legacy of Victor Turner for American Cultural Studies’, *American Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 3, 1995, pp. 525-536. Charles LaShure discusses how Turner developed the term ‘marginality’ and the way in which it relates to liminality in ‘What is Liminality?’, <http://www.liminality.org/about/whatisliminality/> (2005), accessed 26/2/16.

<sup>39</sup> Nicola Allen, for instance, offers several different applications in the introduction to *Marginality in the Contemporary British Novel*, London, Continuum, 2008, pp. 3–29.

antagonistic relationship.' *Bone and Cane*<sup>40</sup> attempts to dramatise that conflict. I focus on particulars (say, the nuances of a crucial vote) and, in showing the political education of one fictional New Labour MP, try to cast light on large, general debates.

*Bone and Cane* are not, by most definitions, historical novels.<sup>41</sup> The events in *Bone and Cane* go back to the 1960s, through which I lived, albeit as a child. *Bone and Cane*, then, operates at the margins of the historical novel, a form that can be used to reappropriate historical narratives by giving the point of view of those previously marginalised or excluded from history. The marginalised ex-con, Nick Cane is given equal space with the MP, Sarah Bone. The sequence is also marginal with the non-fiction novel, or Faction, a form more closely associated with dramas like Peter Morgan's *The Deal* (2003). Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966) is the first novel in this genre. Brian Moore (about whom I wrote my undergraduate dissertation), the writer whose influence I can mostly closely trace in my work, wrote *The Revolution Script* (1971) about Quebec's October crisis. Many others followed. I have not written directly in this genre but have read widely in it, and, from the start, as discussed in the first chapter, used the possibilities Faction offers to create my own marginal zones between fiction and reality.

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<sup>40</sup> *Bone and Cane* throughout refers to the sequence rather than the novel of that name.

<sup>41</sup> The Historical Novel Society says a historical novel must be "written at least fifty years after the events described" but concedes that this is an arbitrary judgement. See <https://historicalnovelsociety.org/guides/defining-the-genre/> last accessed 14/7/15 The Walter Scott Prize for historical novels defines them, equally problematically, as 'books that are set, in the majority, at least 60 years ago, and therefore outside the mature personal experience of the author.' <http://www.walterscottprize.co.uk/the-2015-prize/> accessed 13/3/16.

*Bone and Cane* skirts fiction, in that real figures appear.<sup>42</sup> But I do not give myself the latitude used, for instance, by E.L. Doctorow in *Ragtime* (1975). My real people are never given a point of view. Hence their interior life is not portrayed, as was Edward VI's in my 2002 children's novel, *Boy King*, which is narrated by its subject. In *Bone and Cane*, I stick to a rule I developed in writing *Boy King*, of representing historical detail as accurately as research allows and only inventing details where no historical record exists or accounts are contradictory. When I portray living (at the time of writing) figures in *Bone and Cane*, their public behaviour can be verified by historical record. Any dialogue ascribed to living MPs is transcribed from Hansard. The only, unavoidable exception to this rule is the Prime Minister, who, by tradition, does not sue. It is necessary, on occasion, to show the boss. Despite this necessity, I was careful, in *What You Don't Know*, not to portray Sarah's immediate superior, Jack Straw, by name, even though well informed readers will remember who the then Home Secretary was. One walks a tightrope, telling stories where living figures, my contemporaries, have to be elided, but this creates a tension – in the writer and resulting work – that I find exciting and defines limits that make the scope of the series achievable.

The *Bone and Cane* novels chronicle the New Labour years. They are primarily told from the point of view of a fledgling MP and a reformed criminal. The crime aspects occasionally overlap with the political ones, but often don't. In the third novel, for instance, the political story is also a crime story of sorts, about spies (a subject more usually associated with the 'right wing'<sup>43</sup> thriller) and does not affect the other crime story, which is about

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<sup>42</sup> See also my essay 'What You Don't Know About Nottingham', op. cit., for some of the ethical issues that this raises.

<sup>43</sup> The thriller tends to see order restored, while the crime novel is critical of the status quo, Val McDermid argues at

drug dealers, prostitutes and an undercover policewoman. Thematically, the plots are closely linked: each storyline (one covering 1968-86, the other 1998-9) is about secrets and double agents. Structurally, it is my most complex novel.

*Bone and Cane* builds on my experience in writing *The Beat*, in which some stories are inspired by real events but none are set in a specific period. One recurring *Beat* character is a politician. The first two *Bone and Canes* use the same structure as many crime novels, with a mystery and a sub-plot that often, but not always, intersects with the main plot. *The Great Deception* is less conventional. The reader (and protagonist) must wait to discover what revelations about Sarah's grandfather will be released from 1968 cabinet papers. This is the first piece in a complicated jigsaw. After the epilogue, the reader sees how all of the pieces fit together, but the protagonists never will.

The fourth *Bone and Cane* novel will probably include the 2001 General Election. Sarah Bone's parliamentary seat is marginal in a particular sense of that word, having been Tory until a 1995 by-election. The area she represents cannot be pinned down. Nottingham West was a real constituency until 1987, when boundary changes abolished it. The novels never explicitly say which parts of Nottingham my fictional West includes. It would be accurate to say that its boundaries are not the same as the old Nottingham West, but include places from each of the remaining constituencies: South, East and North. The setting, then, is marginal in another sense. It borders every part of the city.

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<http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2015/apr/01/why-crime-fiction-is-leftwing-and-thrillers-are-rightwing> accessed 9/3/16.

*Bone and Cane* allows me explore the marginal areas that most interest me, creating a hybrid with enough crime tropes to satisfy some crime readers (a large group) while remaining political novels (a more niche interest).

*Bone and Cane* is written in third person limited, with the exception of the anonymous second person sections in *What You Don't Know*. Second person, used in short doses, is effective in forcing the reader's empathy for marginal characters whom s/he might otherwise feel little sympathy for. The character concerned, Jerry, is likely to be a continuing character in the sequence, one with whom the reader can empathise, even though they know she has committed a murder. I had not intended to put a disturbed teenager at the heart of the novels, but seem drawn to include adolescent viewpoints. This liminal eye, which at first sees in black and white, then starts to discern shades of grey, can cast illuminating light on other protagonists. At the end of *What You Don't Know*, Jerry becomes Nick's landlady. As she is assimilated by society, her life may become less marginal, but her character is likely to remain liminal. I do not know how she will develop until I come to write the next novel in the sequence.

Jerry occupies a similar position in *Bone and Cane* to Julie Wilder in *The Beat*. Julie was intended for a small role in *Losers* (1997), but her part grew. She is a significant character in the last six *Beat* novels. The similarity in the characters' names only struck me as I wrote the above and may indicate nothing more than a fondness for the letter 'J', because of my mother's name, 'Jo', which I have also used. Nevertheless, my tendency to foreground disempowered, marginalised characters like these, like the narrators of my first published stories, like the Falklands veteran Stone who saves the day in *The Foggiest*, is one of the most consistent characteristics of my fiction.

Writing in marginal forms that foreground marginal characters has probably limited my commercial success, affecting which publishers choose to distribute my work. A top agent, dismissing me as a client, made clear her view that novels which mix crime and politics do not have wide enough world appeal. She proved to be correct: no major publisher would take the series on. Its two publishers (the first went bust) have been independents who considered the sequence's marginality an asset.

There is an implicit irony in a white, middle-aged, middle-class, male author who works at a university claiming marginal status. It is hard to defend myself against the charge that I appropriate the experience of the marginalised and exploit them for my own (potential) profit. 'Real writers (as opposed to crowd-pleasers)', Jenny Diski wrote recently, in reference to Doris Lessing, 'are often uncomfortable if they aren't writing on the edge and even crossing it, rather than policing their prose to keep away the censors – particularly that inner one.'<sup>44</sup> I have tried, from time to time, to be a 'crowd-pleaser' and, early on, when I was still thrilled just to be published, wrote many best-sellers that are not submitted as part of this thesis. Their aim was to keep the reader turning the pages, improving their reading skills as they did so. Had I been content to stick to this kind of narrative, I would probably have had a more lucrative career, but, I suspect, a less interesting one. 'This song put me in the middle of the road,' Neil Young wrote of 'Heart of Gold' in the sleeve-notes to his 1978 retrospective *Decade*. 'Travelling there soon became a bore so I headed for the ditch. A rougher ride but I saw more interesting people there.' Those words have always

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<sup>44</sup> Jenny Diski, 'Why Can't People Just Be Sensible?', *London Review Of Books*, 37.15, 2015, p.14.

resonated with me, although, in my experience, writers have little choice about what kind of writer they become. If you can choose to write mainstream commercial fiction, you're not what Diski calls a 'real writer'. There is, of course, a large zone between the commercial and the artistic. It is not, by most definitions of the word, liminal, but I have negotiated my way through that zone, too, and the resulting tension can be seen in my work.

## Conclusion

‘It’s all one book you write anyway,’ Philip Roth said in the year when I started writing seriously,<sup>45</sup> and this essay has established that those words apply to my work. Marginality and liminality have been central to the many iterations of my one, ongoing book. I have established that YAF, the area I have devoted the largest part of my career to, is a liminal form which, like the adolescents who are its ostensible audience, is in constant flux. Certain characteristics remain constant, primarily that its protagonists are teenagers and the narrative’s focalizer is also likely to be a teenager. Much of my work, however, whether ostensibly for teenagers or adults, does not fit neatly into YAF, as the focalizer is at least twenty (in *The Pretender*) and often becomes twenty-one during the work’s course (*Student, The Beat*). In that sense, my work might be said to belong to the emerging New-Adult Fiction genre, but I am not yet convinced that such a genre exists in a significant, enduring way.

The quality that originally drew me to YAF was its newness and, equally, the newness of its readers. There was an exhilarating sense of freedom in writing crime and other fiction for an audience who had not read crime fiction before and would not make comparisons with authors I had learnt from, nor come with genre expectations they wanted me to fulfil. This newness will always remain true of YAF’s core readers, teenagers.

Yet there is danger for an author in his sixth decade writing for those born over forty years later. One’s ability to create a convincing teenage world is inevitably compromised. Teaching teenagers helps. It is also possible to concentrate on the constants of human character: Robert Cormier

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<sup>45</sup> Philip Roth, *The Art of Fiction* No. 84, *Interviewed by Hermione Lee*, *Paris Review* No 93, 1984 <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2957/the-art-of-fiction-no-84-philip-roth> accessed 7/3/2016.

managed it into his 70s. However, given that my YAF tends to make strong use of the *Zeitgeist* and contemporary issues, it would probably need to change significantly. Maybe it will, should I return to writing for teenagers.

My current subject is recent history. This is, in some ways, more challenging than reconstructing, say, the Tudors. The theme of these novels, insofar as I am aware of a theme when I am writing, is how the past is always present and that people have an infinite capacity to deceive themselves.

Perhaps I am deceiving myself, in arguing that the constant presence of liminality in my work makes it original or notable. Certainly, all literature is liminal, in numerous ways. But some literatures are more liminal than others. The liminal zones I have been drawn to tend to be areas where the rules are up for grabs and the risk of failure is high. This course has left me in another marginal zone, one between commercial fiction and the more respectable genre we no longer have an appropriate word for. Without the commercial aspects, my work would not be published. Without the – let’s call them *risky* - aspects my work may have been more commercially successful. Yet, I feel, less interesting.

It is possible, conversely, that the relevance of liminality to my writing, and the act of writing generally, is even greater than I have argued thus far. I have begun a fourth *Bone and Cane* novel. I *think* that the arrival of the internet will be a subject, and the 2001 General Election will be the setting. I *suspect* that crime, or criminals will be a factor in the novel. But I don’t know how. The crime itself tends to be the least interesting, but easiest part of the novel to write. Yet, should the crime elements fail to gel, the novel will fail. It will fail anyway. All novels do. So what? Failure is more interesting than success. There are numerous iterations of the following statement from writers much better than I, but this is the place to put it in my own words:

*Once a writer thinks they know what they're doing, they're finished. We write fiction to find out what we don't know. We write because writing fiction is what makes our lives feel most meaningful. We write because we 'for small reason, think/The world imagined is the ultimate good.'*<sup>46</sup>

*Communitas*, a concept original to Turner, is what waits at the other side of the liminal period. It's a way of fitting in with the world, of coming to a mutual understanding with one's fellow man. It's a state that, Turner argues, is never permanent. *Communitas* has to be balanced against society's rules of conduct. I do not find the notion of *communitas*, as he sets it out, entirely convincing. It feels like a dated, hippy ideal. Yet the need for community remains: our need to be *known*. Literature is Art's most effective tool for exploring what we can never know: what it is like to be inside somebody else's head. The mutual understanding that literature allows – whether it be the discussions of a vast, worldwide reading group or one reader communing with a long dead author – is unique.

Writing is, as Stevens' poem goes on, 'the intensest rendezvous.' Perhaps the very process of creative writing is the ultimate liminal zone, out of which emerges a work that, even if it does not entirely succeed, creates its own *communitas*, a place where writer and readers come, as equals, to share what we understand about the world. And what we don't.

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<sup>46</sup> Wallace Stevens, 'Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour', *Collected Poems*, London, Faber, 1984, p. 524.

## Witchcraft (1989)

'Witchcraft' was my first published story. I wrote it after hearing (through the husband of a social worker who was helping the victims) of the Nottingham child abuse cases that were, when they became public, initially described as the work of a 'satanic' cult. I later learnt that there was controversy within *Ambit's* editorial board over whether to accept and publish. Fiction editor J.G.Ballard decided the matter on the grounds that 'it's for the child.'<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Julia Casterton, 'Some Notes On Sex In *Ambit*', *Poetry London*, 1990.

## Witchcraft

Daddy says I'm a witch. He calls his thing 'my broomstick'. 'Come and have a ride,' he says. There's nowhere else to go.

I'm not the only witch round here. Last term, school took us on a trip to the Country Park. We were meant to find a tree to draw. I found this stump. It looked just like Uncle Fred's thing. (Mum likes me to call him 'Uncle', but he isn't really). I couldn't stop laughing.

'What are you giggling at, Tracy?' Miss Johnson asks. I pointed. Then Janis Bosworth, she looks at it. Janis can't stop either. Miss Johnson gives up and leaves us alone.

'Do you have an Uncle Fred?' I ask, and Janis does. Though it turns out he's not her real uncle, either.

'Mummy says I'm a witch,' she announces, proudly.

'Me too.'

Janis and I aren't sure what witches are meant to do. Dad says I'll learn to fly one day. He's been saying that for ages now. When it happens, Janis and I are going to fly out of this dumpy estate, where there's nothing to do, and go somewhere exciting. Bradford, perhaps. I know a girl who's been there. She said there were big houses and lots of posh shops. Round here, the streets are wide, but the houses are small. Them that people have bought off the Council have cladding stuff, or a bit of wall instead of hedge, but they're the same poky damp houses inside, just like ours.

When school finishes, and the long summer holiday starts, me and Janis knock about together. We walk round the estate, to see if anything's going on. Most nights, we hang around outside the chippy. Or we hide in

people's gardens, lurking inside sheds or behind old furniture. (People round here put old sofas out in their gardens and sit on them when it's dry.) And we watch.

Once, a man came out and caught us. He offered us a fiver each if we'd do something. Janis called him a name and we ran off.

'Why did we run off?' I ask Janis. 'We do that stuff at home.'

'But not for him,' says Janis. 'Not for money.'

'But Uncle Fred gives Mummy money. I've seen him.'

'That's different.'

Often Janis can't come out. She's been a witch longer than me and Uncle Fred has more jobs for her. Since I got friendly with Janis I don't go about so much with other girls from school. If Janis is busy, I mope around, or terrorise my little sister and her friends. The day after, Janis always buys a big pile of comics and we take them somewhere quiet to look at.

Sometimes, Janis asks me to make a spell. I invent words to transform us, make us beautiful, rich, free. We fly across the sky together, past the full moon, over the fields, and down into a new life.

Just before we broke up from school, Miss Johnson sent all the lads off to football. A lot of girls squirm as she tells us about the curse. Janis and I are careful not to look at each other. But we both know what the other's thinking. When it happens, will we stop being witches?

Later that summer, I ask Janis the question I can't bring myself to ask Mum.

'Does it stop when we get to the big school?'

Janis pretends not to hear. She stares over the fields that back onto the estate, into space.

'Why don't you ask your mum?'

'Why don't you ask yours?'

Eventually, we both agree to ask. I think Janis is brave. Her mum is dead big, with a temper to match. Mine is more sort of... beaten down. When I manage to find her alone she is cooking the dinner and doesn't really want me around.

'Mum, do I stop being a witch when I go to the big school?'

'Why, do you want to stop?' her voice is dry, expressionless. A beefburger spits from the grill. I nod. She is not looking at me.

'I was a witch when I was your age.'

This doesn't surprise me, though I haven't thought about it before.

'What about when my periods start?'

'I didn't stop 'til I had you.'

She looks at me warily.

'Have you been talking to someone about this?'

I shake my head innocently. People can't tell when I'm lying. I found that out long ago. Maybe it's because I'm a witch.

I talk to Janis outside the chippy.

'My mum used to be a witch.'

'Mine still is.'

Daddy came home the other night. He's not my real daddy and he's not around that much any more, but I still call him Daddy and I'm still his witch first, before the others. I run over and sit on his knee.

'You know about your friend Janis, don't you?'

I pretend not to, but then he starts doing the things he does and I say, 'Oh, witchcraft, you mean?'

'Aye, witchcraft.'

'Lots of girls do that.'

This is only a guess, but Daddy smiles.

'More than you think.'

He starts to tickle me and I have to pretend I enjoy it. I think about other girls at school. Mary? Becky? Ann Marie?

'Well, anyway,' he says. 'About Janis?'

Janis and I are together in a room. The leather things hurt a bit. Uncle Fred has explained about the gag. He says not to be scared. I look at Janis. Thin downy hairs cover what Miss Johnson calls her "special place".

'I'm still bruised from last time,' she tells Uncle Fred. He pretends not to hear. Then he goes out to get the blindfolds.

I don't like being here with Janis. I can tell she doesn't like having me here, either.

'Have you done this before?' I ask.

'Make a spell,' she says.

But I've run out of spells. I was always better at them than her. Now I've lost the knack. Before I know it, my eyes are covered and I'm biting on the gag. The chanting begins. It is suddenly familiar. When last I heard this noise, I didn't know what it was to be a witch.

After a while, the chanting stops, along with the other stuff. I can tell by the voices that there are three of them. They have paid their money, and they are drawing lots. The door opens. I hear my mother's voice, soft, comforting. It begins.

I listen to my sister crying.

She is learning to ride a broomstick.

Outside, there is a new moon.

## Being Bullied (1990)

'Being Bullied' is based on an account related to me during a one-to-one CSE oral exam. After he had told me his story, the sixteen-year-old boy asked me to share it in a school assembly. I could not persuade my school to let me tell the story in an assembly. It was too close to the bone. The incident at the end of the piece, where the teacher trusts the narrator with his own micro-cassette recorder, is based on something that happened when I was teaching the boy two years earlier.

## Being Bullied

At first I thought it was because I was Asian. You get used to being called 'Paki' all the time. It stops meaning much. Yet the other Asian lads got it less than me, even the ones who wore those stupid turbans. Maybe it was because they stuck together. Or maybe it was because I have this ugly nose, wide and battered, like a boxer's that's been broken once too often. Or maybe it was because I'm thick. Oh yes, I'm thick. But so are lots of people who don't get bullied.

I hated school. Still, I couldn't tell Dad, as he was so pleased about having got me in there -- this posh suburban comp, instead of the slummy school in the dump where we live. And if I had told him, he'd have gone up there and had a go at the teachers who ignored it when people hid my things, spat on my chair, beat on me in the fields, whatever. And that would have made it worse.

So I did what anyone would do. I skived off. It was easy to avoid getting caught. You just register with your form teacher, morning and afternoon, then clear off again. No-one checked because no-one noticed me when I was around. I never spoke, even when spoken to. If a teacher asked after me the bullies would make a crack. 'Where's Ali?' Grunts of laughter. 'Oh, he's probably in Special Needs, Sir. You know, where thickies go.' But I wasn't that thick.

My name isn't Ali, either, but the teacher couldn't pronounce my other name and I wouldn't change it to 'Fred' or 'Bobby' like some of the others did.

I first met them on one of my afternoons off, about half a mile from my home. I was on my bike, a twelve speed Raleigh racer. They were in a

van, a small, rusty green thing. One of them opened the door and nearly hit me with it. I had to swerve and came off in the middle of the road, scraped my knee. The big white one gets out and picks me up.

'Why aren't you at school?' he says.

I don't answer. Then the black one, a Pakistani like me, he asks, 'Where do you live?' in my own language. He frightens me, so I tell him. They look at each other, then the white one puts my bike in the back of their van.

'Get in.'

I have no choice but to speak.

'It's O.K. I'll cycle.'

The black bloke picks up my bike by the front wheel. He takes the wheel at both ends and bends it around his chest. It doesn't require much effort of him.

'You can't ride that. It's buckled.'

I cower in the back of the van with my broken bicycle. Two fears oppress me. First, they are going to tell my Dad I've been skiving. They will blame me for the bike accident and claim to be doing me a favour, bringing me home. Or, second, they're going to take me away and do something to me. I've heard of men like that.

But they do neither of these things. They stop at the end of my street and the black hands me my bike. While he's doing that, the white gets out and pulls a wad of money from his jeans pocket it's the most money I've ever seen – and peels off a twenty pound note.

'Get your bike fixed.'

'That's too much.'

Fixing the wheel will cost two pounds at the most.

'You'll earn it.'

I watch them drive off before I wheel the bike into town, to the Repair shop. Somewhere in me I know that nothing will be the same again.

The next morning, I see the van, parked down the street. Just the two of them in it. I pretend not to see them, but it's clear they see me. I cycle to school and the van follows. I don't look back, but I can feel it. Only when I'm at the school gates do I turn around. They're not there, but I think I see a green vehicle turning off just down the road. I dream about them at night. In the morning they're not there.

I've spent two whole days at school. Kids tease me about it, but my form teacher notices nothing unusual. I'm behind in all the classes, but I play really dumb and the teachers decide that helping me is more trouble than it's worth. Both lunchtimes I get a kicking.

That second night, they're waiting for me when I turn down the street.

'Get in.'

They take me to a big house. It's in the middle class suburb where the kids at my school live. The Pakistani has a key and I see from the films on top of the video that this must be his house. The white one parks the van out of sight in the garage. The car next to it looks like a Mercedes.

He is called Mukesh and the other just 'Baz'. They know everything about me and my family. They make it clear that there is no escape. They don't need to tell me how they keep people in line. But they do.

'Yes', I say. 'I'll do anything. Yes.'

At home, I have to change my underpants.

At first, it isn't too bad.

'Think of it as a paper round', Mukesh told me. 'Personal delivery.' I never went to Mukesh's house again. But many of the houses I deliver to are just as big, in the same rich area. The customers are like people I see in offices, or my teachers. They pay me in new notes, big denominations. When I give the money to my contact, he peels off a ten or twenty for me.

I buy clothes which I change into on my way to school. I walk a bit taller, looking down on the other thirteen and fourteen year olds. They can't do this, don't know about it, wouldn't have the nerve. But they just do me worse. So I stay away more. When I'm there, I try to bribe friendship with expensive gifts. I claim to have shoplifted them. They take the gifts then tell on me. I stop trying.

I don't know how much money goes through my hands. Thousands, every week. And every week I am trusted to do more, and more. Every week things get worse at school. I am in the Third year now. Acne explodes all over my face. There has been a letter home. The attendance officer is on to me. I have to go in.

One day, some lads from my form take me down the bank, and do me over really badly. My clothes are torn. My balls ache. I've had enough. After registration bell, I stay behind and tell my Form teacher what has been happening to me. He acts shocked and says a lot of things that I can't concentrate on.

Next day, in form period, he sends me off somewhere and talks to the whole class about what they did to me. After that, it gets worse.

My contact is called Sid. He's older than me, but should still be at school. He lives in a squat. That's where I meet him. It's dirty, but comfortable.

Sid's O.K. to me. he can see I'm under pressure, though he doesn't know all the school stuff. One day, he shows me how to shoot up.

The first hit is magic, bliss. It's like this space opens up at the back of your brain and you can go and hide there. No pressure.

I'd go into school stoned sometimes, just to help me cope. The bullying goes on, though. I don't know if it's better or worse because now I'm spending a lot of time in this dark, peaceful place. Only the magic starts to fade after the first few hits. And all the money I make goes straight back into buying stuff. It isn't always enough.

I start to get worried about what is happening to me. There is another Pakistani lad in my class. He doesn't bully me and sometimes he gets the others to lay off. I decide to tell him. I am guarded, not saying how much I take, how much I sell. He knows how dangerous my employers are. He will understand. I tell him.

He says he will keep silent if I give him five pounds. I give it to him, and more, but word gets around anyway. It's like a joke in the class, 'Ali's on drugs'. None of them really believe it. Just another way to get at me, that's all. Teachers hear, but don't do anything. I'm not the type. Or they just don't care.

I need help. I can't afford all the stuff I need now. I sell some of the clothes I bought. Clothes don't interest me now. I take money from the till in the shop, money my family can't afford. I still can't get as much as I need.

In English there's this new teacher. He's started for the Summer term of my third year. He's soft. Lets the kids talk a lot. In lessons he tries to get me to join in. I stay silent. Other kids call out. 'Don't ask Ali, Sir. He's on drugs!' He ignores them, but later he asks me.

'Is there anything in what they say? Tell me now. I won't get you into trouble.'

I feel the other kids looking at me as I talk to him. My face burns. But he is easy to lie to.

'No. They're just getting at me. They always get at me.'

'Why haven't you done your homework?'

'I forgot.'

'Do something for next lesson. Anything. Just make up a story.' But I can't. When he collects the books next lesson. I hide my face. The others joke, 'Ali never does homework, Sir!' He looks at me with regret.

In English the following week we're doing poetry. Learning poems, making them up, writing them out. I sit in a corner, pretending to read.

The teacher comes over, asks me to read to him. I won't. Kids call out, mocking me.

Later, he comes back. In his hand is a book of poems, and a new tape recorder - a tiny battery one, with microcassettes, like journalists use.

'I brought this in', he says. 'Take it off somewhere, find a poem you like, and record it for me.' He shows me how. 'Come back by the end of the lesson.' Adding, 'Make up something of your own if you like.'

I walk off. The space at the back of my head is an aching hole. I need to fill it. There are no school markings on the machine. It must belong to the teacher. If I took it to someone I know, he would give me fifteen, maybe twenty pounds for it. I wander round the school. I'm not supposed to do this but the teacher said I could, so he is the one who will get into trouble. I could make up some story about what happened to his cassette. I could make enough money for two fixes.

I am in the big hall. I could go through the fire escape and out to the bike sheds. I could ride into town. Instead I sit down, almost hiding myself beneath one of the big blue curtains. I open the book and begin to read the first poem I find. It is difficult and I have to pause the tape many times before I finish it. Some of the words I have to guess how to pronounce them. There are no rhymes. The poem is by Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

'Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,  
Tears from the depth of some divine despair,  
Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,  
In looking on the happy Autumn fields,  
And thinking of the days that are no more.'

I don't remember the rest. Term ends. The teacher leaves. Thinking about it, now, all I had to do was cut the heroin, just a little, add some talc, or baking soda. I could have supported my habit and made a lot of money on the side. I'm sure that's what Sid did. But then, like I told you, I'm thick.

This is how it ended. It was the beginning of the Summer holidays. I was making a delivery. One moment I was fine, the next I was in the middle of the road. I don't know how it happened. This woman motorist stops. She helps me up. She says a van hit me. I am shaken and cut. She says I need medical treatment. I stumble to the roadside, with her help. As I sit down, a silver packet drops from my jacket. She picks it up.

First she calls the ambulance, then she calls the police. The police get there first. They bully me. They say the quantity I was carrying sold for £250,000. I laugh. Or I cry, I forget. They offer to call my parents but I won't tell who they are, I am too ashamed. Later, I call my uncle. He

arranges a solicitor. The solicitor can't help. The police bully me some more. I tell them what they want to know. They put me in a home.

In the home they bully me. The cold turkey lasts a month and a half and the other kids taunt me about it. I cannot describe this. Eventually, I get a hearing. The solicitor persuades the magistrate that I acted under extreme pressure. They release me. I plead to stay in the home. If I get out, Baz and Mukesh will kill me. They let me out anyway.

My family are good to me, better than I feel I deserve. The police come round. Baz and Mukesh got away. They're abroad. They won't hurt me. I half believe them. They want me to help them get Sid. My family want me to do it, too, despite the risk. I think for a while. I think about the track marks on my arm, the cold and empty hole at the back of my head. I agree.

Sid no longer lives in the squat. It takes me a while to find him. When I do, he has moved up in the world. He drives a big car. Maybe he has taken over from Mukesh. I offer to deliver for him. He arranges a meet.

In the pub, he hands me a package - some for delivery, some for me to sell or use as I choose. Before he has gone, I go up to two plain clothes police and offer to sell them some. Sid knows I am not that stupid, but it is what I am told to do, and I do it. They arrest me, and they arrest Sid, but only Sid is charged.

I go home and wait to die.

When I finally go back to school, there have been many rumours. I don't answer any of the questions. I never skive off school now. There is less risk of a knife in the back when I'm there. My parents say to put it behind me. I had a lucky escape. Somehow, the rumours stop the bullies. Or maybe it is just that I am bigger now. Maybe I look as though I might fight back.

Sometimes, I see people who have bought drugs from me. I tell them I have none, but some just keep at me. I lead them to a toilet, then I run away. You, I recognised and was about to avoid. Then I placed you. The tape recorder, the poem.

This is my story.

## The Foggiest (1990)

*The Foggiest* was commissioned for Scholastic's *Mystery Thriller* series under their *Hippo* imprint, four years after I'd finished the first version of *The Foggiest* in 1985. I was able to take what I had learnt from the earlier version (and some advice from the rejections it received) to write a completely new version. The two novels I wrote next, *The Storyforger* (1985-7) and *Don't Stand So Close To Me* (1987-9) benefitted from the same process, becoming *The Pretender* (2008) and *Love Lessons* (1998).

In *The Foggiest*, a brother and sister are stranded in Derbyshire after their weather-expert father disappears. They work out that he has been kidnapped to prevent him from revealing a right-wing conspiracy. Plotters mean to overthrow the government by manipulating the weather. With the help of Stone, a Falklands war veteran, the young people undertake a hazardous journey in which they overcome various obstacles, make it to London, stop the plot and save their father. Stone dies before they prevail.

## The Foggiest (Chapter 1)

A classic Christmas Day. It had snowed and it was going to snow again. Roger Deakin stared out of the Weather Station window, wishing he was at home with the kids, making a snowman in the garden. Although doubtless they were in front of the telly, watching *The Wizard of Oz* or whatever was on this afternoon. It had been hard explaining to them that he'd drawn the short straw this Christmas. Harder explaining to his wife, Elsie. But the worst thing was that he had to share the duty with Stan Brown.

Stan had volunteered, of course. He volunteered for all the unsocial shifts. He had no home life, no social life, not even with his workmates. His only love was the weather computer. A perfect employee for a Weather Research Station, but hardly the sort of bloke you wanted to spend Christmas with.

Roger checked his monitors, then settled down to catch up on the week's newspapers. " 'No early election', says Prime Minister." No real news. Roger was just working up to the Christmas crossword when the blow came. It split his head open and sent him reeling across the floor. He didn't wake up for a long time.

Stan Brown tapped on a window. Then he unbolted the one outside door and let in a balaclavaed man wearing a green parka, who shook the snow from his boots. Together, the men dragged Roger Deakin into a side room, where Brown injected him with a strong sedative. Next he took a package from his locker, brightly wrapped to look like a Christmas present. The other man opened it.

While Harvey was setting up the transmitter, Brown made several phone calls, releasing various station officers from their duties. Sat at home on a

Christmas Day, none was in a mood to question the nature of the "breakdown". They were glad to get an extended holiday. Deakin's wife was less pleased when Brown explained that her husband had been called away on highly confidential business. But these things were part of the job, as Brown explained.

There was only one person Brown couldn't get through to - Jack Gunn, the new Chief Scientist. His old phone had been disconnected and no one was answering at his new home, so he couldn't have moved in yet. Still, Gunn wasn't due to start for three days. By then it would be impossible to travel. Brown decided to leave it. There were more important things that needed immediate attention. David Harvey had made contact with Control.

A crackle of static preceded the distant voice.

"Acknowledge."

"Receiving you. Awaiting instructions."

"Is takeover complete?"

"Complete. Without casualties."

"Very well. Begin. Over."

"Over and out."

There was silence on the airwaves. The two men glanced at each other, then went to work.

"How far is it now?"

Dad groaned. Rachel turned to Matthew in the back of the car and snapped:

"That's the third time you've asked in fifteen minutes! We'll be there when we're there!"

"Don't try and sound like Mum."

Rachel shivered, then shut up. Dad stared ahead at the motorway traffic, his face blank, the way it always went when you mentioned Mum. She'd been dead for six months.

It was Boxing Day. Christmas had been awful. Gran had insisted they stay in their tiny flat when all they really wanted was to ignore the festival. Dad had suggested making the move to Derbyshire on Boxing Day, when the roads wouldn't be crowded for once, though Gran had argued that a full Christmas was "important for the children". Rachel didn't feel like a child any more. She'd just turned sixteen. Matt, on the other hand, behaved like a baby, even though he was only three years younger. He'd woken up at five on Christmas Day and unwrapped all his presents. The tags were mixed up so you couldn't tell what was from whom for the thank-you letters. And no one even told him off.

Although a lot of people were still on holiday, the M1 was busy. Dad had to keep changing lanes as massive lorries flashed their lights at the back of them. Rachel would never learn to drive. The van that ran over her mother had seen to that. Mum hated cars too - said they were dirty and dangerous. She tried to persuade Dad to do without one, but he needed it for his job. Now they were moving to the middle of nowhere, he'd need it even more.

Radio One was on. Rachel didn't like the song that was playing. It had a chorus that went

*Should we talk about the weather?*

*Should we talk about the government?*

Weird.

"This is rubbish. Can I turn it off, Dad?"

"Sounds good to me."

Rachel endured the song. Dad loved rock music. At home he listened to all the stuff from the Seventies - Springsteen, the Sex Pistols, Steely Dan. Most of it was just noise to Rachel. She stared ahead, trying to imagine her new life in Derbyshire, living in a cottage she hadn't yet seen. The night sky was clear and held a crescent moon, the sort you expected a witch to fly across with a broomstick. Dad would be OK, with his important new job. Matt would get by; he was only in the second year. But Rachel had messed up school so badly that she was having to go down a year. Also, she'd already missed a term at her new school, so she'd have mounds of GCSE coursework to catch up on, despite being a year older than the other kids. It wasn't fair.

"That's all we need!"

Suddenly, a thick fog had descended on the motorway and they could see little further than the car in front of them. Dad braked sharply, reducing their speed from seventy to fifty. The lorry behind screeched its brakes, almost hitting them.

"Turn the radio off, Rachel. I need to concentrate."

Rachel did as she was told. Matt curled up in the back, keeping his fear to himself. The fog was getting thicker. It seemed to swirl in front of them, then settle, as though they were in the middle of a cloud. All Rachel could make out of the car in front were its tail lights.

"Shouldn't you put the headlights on full beam?"

Dad shook his head.

"It wouldn't help. The light reflects off the fog, so we can't see as far. In fact, we'd be able to make out more if we turned our lights off, but then no one could see us."

Rachel wasn't sure this made sense to her, but Dad was a meteorologist, among other things. He ought to know.

"How far is it now?"

This time Dad didn't groan and Rachel made no comment. Their speed was down to thirty miles an hour, and falling.

"It's the exit after next, Matt. I don't know how far. Not long."

But the next exit was a long time coming. Snow turned to sludge kept spraying the windscreen as other vehicles passed them at dangerous speeds. Rachel almost missed the sign when it came.

"Doesn't that say 'Loughborough'?"

"I think you're right. That's our turning. Can't have seen the last one."

Without signalling, Dad swerved off the motorway on to the slip road. Behind them a lorry sounded its horn angrily.

"Well spotted, Rachel."

At the roundabout, they took the A512 going away from Loughborough. It was narrow for an A road and much quieter than the M1. Tall trees concealed the landscape, but when they went you still couldn't see anything. It was just too foggy. Rachel made out a lorry park and the Dunlop factory on the right - little else. They'd gone two or three miles before Dad spoke again:

"I think we turn here."

"Are we nearly there now?"

"Only a mile or two, Matt."

The road they turned on to was narrow and unlit. You couldn't tell where the road ended and the verge began, or where a ditch was covered by old snow. A couple of times, the Fiesta scraped something on the side. They took another turning, and this time the road was even narrower - a one-car

track with an occasional widening for vehicles to pass. Dad looked apprehensive. Rachel found herself getting scared.

Suddenly, another car lunged out of the mire at them. Dad braked sharply, but they still nearly clashed. It was a Landrover, half a dozen white and red headlights shining at them, towering over the tiny Fiesta. Cautiously, Dad began to back up, but the Landrover simply drove around them, bounding over the hedge on their right as though it were a few weeds.

"Farmers!" Dad muttered. "No respect for hedgerows."

They drove on, passing nothing. After a mile or so, they reached a crossroads. The lane going one way was wider than the one they were on. The road ahead looked narrower still, just a dirt track.

"I don't remember this," Dad said. "Rachel, get out and have a look if there's a sign, will you?"

Rachel wished she had a coat to hand, yet, when she got out, it felt more damp than cold. There was a signpost to the right of the crossroads, but it had been bent out of its original position, and she could only guess which way it had originally pointed. One of the four arms pointed to "Nether Hulme 1/2 mile". The cottage was in Nether Hulme. Rachel sighed.

"What's wrong?"

"The sign's been knocked round. I can't tell which way it should go."

"I'll have a look."

Dad got out, though Rachel could have saved him the bother. Clearly the sign had been knocked over, uprooted, then put back in. Whichever way they went, it would be guesswork.

Dad examined the sign.

"Maybe if I check against the map book..."

Rachel felt someone coming up behind her.

"Matt . . .?"

She turned round. Matt was still in the car. She'd have heard him get out. There was something moving by the dry stone wall that ran along the road to their left. Some kind of animal perhaps. A large black shape loomed over the wall. Rachel tried to adjust to being in the country. Probably a cow. The shape came over the wall towards her, a large, moving lump.

"Dad!"

It stopped. Dad looked over from the car where he'd gone for the map book.

"Hello?"

"You look like you're lost."

The voice was gruff, with an accent that Rachel could only identify as northern. It was not friendly, but not exactly unfriendly either. The shape came closer - a large man, with a thick overcoat and heavysset face, all but covered by brown straggly hair and a full beard. When he was almost upon Rachel, she saw that his eyes were a penetrating blue. Dad joined her.

"We're trying to get to Nether Hulme. Do you know it?"

"Aye. You've gone past it."

"I thought as much. We must have missed a turning."

"Easily done in this weather."

"Yes. Could you show me...?"

"I can, but you're liable to miss it again unless you know what you're looking for."

Dad hesitated. Rachel knew what he was going to say next and she wished he wouldn't. On the other hand, they had to find their new home.

"I don't suppose you could see your way to ...?"

"I've got nothing better to do."

Rachel opened the door for the man.

"You can have my seat. I'll go in the back."

As he came closer she saw that his coat was ripped and the scarf round his neck filthy. The man was a common tramp. She'd seen many of them in London, homeless people living in cardboard boxes, scavenging off the capital leftovers. She'd thought that, by moving here, they were getting away from that kind of thing.

Matt opened the back passenger door for her, They exchanged repulsed glances, Matt shrivelling up his pudgy face. The tramp's smell filled the car - a dense, earthy odour. But Dad talked to him as though they were equals. It was embarrassing.

"You from round here?"

"Round and about."

"I'm Jack Gunn. My children Matt and Rachel in the back. We've bought the Low Farm cottage at Nether Hulme."

"Aye. I know."

This sounded menacing to Rachel, but Dad breezed on.

"Yes, I suppose everyone knows everyone's business round here."

"You're going to work at that weather place no one's supposed to have heard about over in Upper Hulme. Turn ten yards on your left."

Dad darted a nervous expression at the tramp, then smiled as he turned the wheel.

"That's right. I'm taking over as Chief Scientist. It's quite exciting. The place isn't exactly secret, though. It doesn't get publicised, that's all."

"Same thing."

"I suppose you're right. You didn't tell us your name."

"Stone. They call me Stone."

"No first name?"

"Not any more. Turn just on your right here."

Ahead of them was the cottage. Even in the fog, Rachel recognised it from the photographs. She squeezed Matt's arm. For the first time in the holiday, he smiled. They all got out.

"You've been a tremendous help. Can I offer you a drink or something?"

The two men talked for a minute as Matt and Rachel went up to the front door of their new home.

Then Dad came and unlocked it.

"He's not coming in, is he?" Matt asked.

Dad put a finger to his mouth and shook his head.

Inside, Rachel said, "He scared me."

Dad switched on the light and she stared at the passage. The building was three hundred years old, and looked it.

"Nothing to be afraid of. We're home." Rachel pushed the door shut behind them.

Outside, the tramp had already disappeared into the thick fog, back to wherever he had come from.

## The Beat: Black and Blue (1995)

*The Beat* series was commissioned in groups of two, the first of which was always substantially plotted in advance, while the second reflected areas that interested me at the time of writing. The second novel in the series, *Black and Blue*, was written in the wake of a National Front attack on Nottingham's alternative bookshop, *Mushroom*, and a Channel 4 Dispatches programme about racism in Nottinghamshire Police. At the time, I worked with the sister of an Asian officer who had been very publically discriminated against (he was eventually vindicated and reinstated). The second chapter submitted shows me integrating the news of the day into the novel, the beginning of a process that took me to *Bone and Cane*. The opening of this chapter refers to a racial attack by a group of police officers that only ended when the victim, Ben Shipman, reveals that he, too, is a police officer. This was shown in the prologue and is echoed at the end of the extract. The illustration, clipped from National Front propaganda, is as it appeared in the novel. The series' use of illustrations was inspired by Ed McBain's 87<sup>th</sup> Precinct series, which also used occasional illustrations in its early years. The rubric at the front of every novel in the sequence is very similar to the one that McBain used in all of the 87<sup>th</sup> precinct novels:

*The city in these pages is real. The events described in them are not. All of the characters, together with the police station where some of them work, are imaginary. The author wishes to thank the many people, including serving police officers, who helped him with this series. He alone is responsible for any mistakes.*

I sent the author a copy of the first book in the series in acknowledgement. He wrote me a kind letter in reply, saying ‘I don’t have a patent on police procedurals, and I’m happy you feel somehow indebted to me. But I don’t see any similarities except in the disclaimer at the beginning and the fact that my mother’s maiden name was Coppola.’<sup>48</sup>

The latter point was a happy coincidence.

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<sup>48</sup> Hunter, Evan. Letter to author. TS. 10<sup>th</sup> June, 1995.

Black and Blue. Chapter 7.

Monday was a rest day for Neil's shift. The week began on Tuesday morning, at five to six, in the parade room. Tim Cooper was telling a story. "There was this bank right by the Victoria Centre which had a night safe – you know, one of those big letter-box jobs. A lot of the market traders would use it, especially on a Saturday, because they didn't like to take a lot of readies home.

"So, this particular Saturday, there was a notice covering up the slot: *Temporarily out of order. Please use Security Guard.* And there's this bloke with a helmet and a uniform standing by the safe. And everybody hands him their money. End of the day he scarpers, taking ten grand with him. The perfect crime."

Everyone laughed.

"They never caught him?" Neil asked, not sure if the story was true or not.

"Nope," Tim told him. "Want to know my theory? I think it was Ben here."

Another round of laughter.

"What's the joke?" Neil asked Ben, who was his partner. Ben told him. The two men hadn't seen each other since Neil came off shift on Friday.

"You're not putting in a complaint?" Neil asked, when Ben had finished.

"Would you?"

"If I got a kicking, sure. They were well out of order."

"They apologized," Ben told him.

"And that made it all right, did it?"

Ben shrugged.

“This way, if I come up against any of those guys again, they owe me. The other way, I’m the coon that got them into trouble. It wasn’t a hard choice.”

Neil flinched. Words like “coon” make him uncomfortable, even when they were used by someone black. Every other kid at his school had been black, or Asian. You didn’t use words like that around them, not if you had an ounce of respect.

Before they could finish the conversation, Inspector Grace came in. The inspector, only a few years older than Neil, was in charge of five shifts, including this one. He was a high flyer, and, Neil thought, suspiciously slimy.

“You’ve got a new shift sergeant,” Grace announced, as the parade began. The shift sergeant actually ran the shift, deciding what each of the six to eight people on it should be doing. Everyone looked around, expecting someone to walk into the room. Then Jan Hunt, who was sitting in front of the bulletin board, gave a small wave.

Neil smiled. Jan had been the shift sergeant for a few months before she went off on maternity leave last year. She had also been his mentor, or tutor, while he was a probationer. When Jan returned after having her baby, Henry, she had been assigned to their shift on a temporary basis. Now that Bill Cope had retired, she was permanent, or as permanent as anyone ever was in this job.

There was a round of congratulations, then Jan got down to business.

“We’re really short-staffed at the moment. Mike’s sick leave has been extended and we won’t have Clare back from Ryton for a couple of months...” Clare Coppola was Neil’s girlfriend. “Therefore, I’ve asked Division to assign us two more officers for now.”

“Three cheers for the sarge,” John Farraday said, without irony.  
“Not a snowball in hell’s chance,” Tim Cooper told the parade.

“I thought,” Jan continued, “that we’d be lucky to get one officer, but – believe it or not, Tim – they’re giving us two. I want you to partner Carl Price.”

*Carl Price.* Neil knew that name well. He was the officer at West Bridgford who had originally been Clare’s tutor officer, but they hadn’t got on. Clare had avoided giving Neil many details, but the phrase “sexual harassment” had come up. Now, as if on cue, Price walked into the room, a large-faced, grinning copper, with short black hair, a couple of years older than Neil.

“And John, I’d like you to go on the beat with Baljit Singh.”

John turned his lip up. He and Tim were usually partnered together, but he knew better than to complain at the new sarge’s first parade.

“One of our Asian brothers, eh...”

Now Inspector Grace spoke.

“I think it’ll be particularly good for us to have an Asian officer in such a visible role. Be sure you make him welcome.”

Grace spoke again.

“Actually, I’m not just here to introduce Jan. I also want to inform you about something which is going on. CID have been on to this since last Thursday, but they only bothered to inform us when they accidentally picked up one of our officers as he came home from work on Friday night.” Everyone looked at Ben. He joined in the laughter.

“Cash machines,” Grace went on. “There’s a scam going on but no one’s sure what it is...”

He was interrupted by the arrival of an officer in a turban.

“PC Singh, please sit down.”

John Farraday introduced everybody. Neil remembered Baljit. They’d been at Ryton together. He wondered why he’d got a transfer.

“As I was saying,” Grace went on. “We’ve got a bit of a mystery. Have you heard the phrase ‘phantom withdrawals?’”

Baljit raised a hand, like a schoolboy in a classroom.

“Money disappearing from a cashpoint machine,” he said. “The card owner claims not to have had their card stolen, but not to have withdrawn the money themselves. It’s meant to amount to millions a year.”

“Quite right,” Grace said. “And that’s only the figure reported. It’s possible that tens of millions disappear without the bank account holders actually noticing. How many of you keep a complete list of all your withdrawals?”

No one responded. Grace continued.

“This is a crime which is very hard to pin down. We’ve all come across the situation where someone is mugged or kidnapped, and forced to reveal his cash card number to his attacker, but, with phantom withdrawals, there’s no proof that the crime even took place.”

“How do they do it?” Tim Cooper asked.

“That’s what CID are investigating. Ah, you’re just in time.”

A tall man in his late thirties walked into the room. He was in plain clothes but you’d never have mistaken him for a civilian.

“This is Inspector Greasby. CID. He’ll carry on this briefing.”

“Initially, the banks insisted that there was no such thing as a phantom withdrawal,” the inspector began. “They argued that it was a con – friends or relatives were using the victims’ cards to make withdrawals without their knowledge. Therefore it was the victims’ fault for letting their Personal

Identification Number be known to other people. But they had to back down when an ATM service engineer for the Clydesdale Bank admitted stealing £17,000 over two years using fake cards that he'd made.

“There are eighty million cards in circulation – at least two per adult – and there are three hundred thousand electric terminals which will take them. This kind of crime is big and getting enormous, but, so far, we've done little about it, preferring to concentrate on stolen and bogus credit cards.

“You see, it's often hard to pinpoint how the money's gone, which makes this kind of crime very hard to prove. There are five ways that we know of:

The cards are stolen in transit.

The cards are lost, stolen or borrowed.

The thief gets hold of the card's PIN number, then has it encoded on a fake card.

Machine malfunction.

Fraud within the bank itself.

“The operation which began this weekend is a stake-out. We're targetting machines where dodgy withdrawals are taking place, and trying to catch fraudsters in the act. Trouble is, you can't always tell when a crime's being committed until a long time afterwards. So cameras have been installed in the machines they're targetting.”

Greasby held out a photograph of a nondescript looking man in a hat and a raincoat.

“This is the chap who they should have arrested when they picked you up, Ben. The card he used had been reported lost in the post. But by the time the computer had got this information and relayed it to the boys hiding in the transit van, chummy here had scarpered.”

Ben smiled ruefully. Neil knew that look. His partner wished that this story would hurry up and go away.

Greasby produced two more photographs. Both were of youngish men. “So far, these three have been photographed using stolen cards. We don’t know if they’re connected with each other. Anyone recognize any of them?”

The photographs were passed around. Heads were shaken.

“All I’m saying is: be aware of this investigation; be on the look-out for these men; and if you run up against any of our officers investigating this case, be as cooperative as you can. That’s all.”

The CID man left. Everyone was getting up to go about their business when Inspector Grace came over to Neil and Ben.

“Ben, I’d like a word.”

Ben glanced at Neil.

“I’ll go and sort out the car,” Neil told him.

For once, Jan had everybody out but herself. She had some paperwork to dispose of and a court appearance later. It felt good to have a full section, even if it was only temporary.

“See you, Ben.”

“Yes, sir.”

She’d forgotten that Paul Grace was still in his office.

“Got a minute, Jan?”

“Of course, sir.”

She assumed that he wanted to talk to her about the cashpoint thing. She was wrong.

“Good officer, Shipman.”

Alarm bells rang in Jan's head. She had been Ben's tutor officer for a while, but they hadn't got on. Grace continued.

"Ben's not taking the events of Friday night any further. I thought you ought to know."

"I wouldn't have blamed him if he had," Jan said, cautiously.

"No. Nor would I."

Race was a hot issue in the force these days. When Jan first joined, Notts had a bad reputation for racism. There was a lot of publicity. You had to watch your words. Grace went on.

"Your newest recruit, Baljit: he had a pretty tough time out in the sticks."

Jan read between the lines.

"I'll make sure he's treated fairly, sir."

"I don't doubt that for a moment, Jan. I'd like you to do a bit more. Watch his back."

"Is there something I should know about him, sir?"

Grace thought for a moment.

"Baljit nearly failed his probation, put in a complaint about ... a superior. He's a good officer, I'm sure. He had every right to make a complaint, but..."

"We don't want to give him any grounds to make another one."

"Right. And while we're on the subject, have you seen this?"

He held out the weekly orders. One of the items pointed out that there was a place available on a racial awareness course to be held the weekend after next.

"A course like that would look very good on your CV," Grace told her.

Jan tried not to squirm.

“I’m sure it would, sir, but, as you know, I have a young child...”

Grace interrupted her.

“We’ve got two officers from ethnic minorities on this shift now.

That’s unusual.”

Jan sensed a hidden agenda.

“Are you telling me that I might get to keep Baljit on my shift?”

“If his face fits. I realize it’s short notice, but I’m sure you’ll agree an understanding of ethnic minority issues is an essential part of your job.” This isn’t a request, Jan thought. It’s an order.

“Would you think about it? Let me know by the end of the shift and I’ll see if I can get you that place.”

“Sir.”

The inspector left. It was a double-edged thing, Jan realized. Go on the course, and she might get to keep an extra officer. Don’t go, and Grace would keep reminding her that she had dumped on her black trainee PC at the first opportunity. She thought about it. Could she get childcare? What would Kevin, her husband, have to say? They’d missed Sunday dinner at his mother’s once this month already. All this hassle for a stupid course. Race awareness. Who needed it?

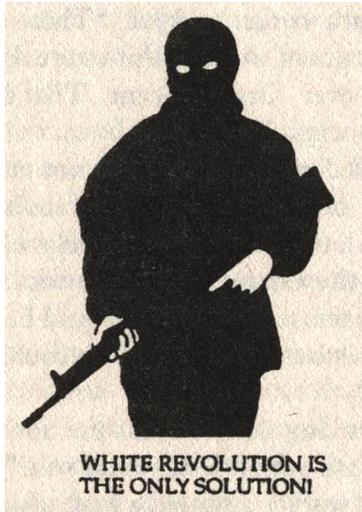
“You’re lucky that Mr Jagger’s taken an interest in you,” the youth worker told Jed. “There are tons of kids your age out of work on this estate. Unemployment here’s over fifty per cent. That’s why this club’s so important.”

Jed mumbled something, trying not to sound too surly. It was only a government training scheme. The pay was lousy. That was probably, why none of the kids on the estate wanted to work here. But Jagger had promised that there would be prospects for him. It was better than what he could get up to in Mansfield.

“Start by taking down any of the notices on the board which are out of date, would you?”

The youth worker gave Jed a look which implied that he doubted whether Jed could read. Jed ignored it. Appearances weren't everything. He might have his hair really short and heavy boots, but his GCSEs were pretty good. The careers officer had tried to persuade him to go to sixth form college. But Jed had other ideas.

The notices on the board were mostly boring, trivial: welfare advice, safe sex education, local councillor's surgeries. There was one for an ethnic arts festival. Jed tore that down, even though the festival hadn't happened yet. This estate was practically all white, and a lot of people wanted it to stay that way. He rearranged the posters so that the gap left wasn't obvious. Then he added one of his own to the display.



If anyone accused him of putting it up, he'd deny it, say the thing was there already and what was wrong with it, anyway? Stupidity was a good disguise. People took one look at him and thought: thick as a brick. But they'd have to think again when the brick was coming through their window.

## Chapter 8.

***A racially motivated incident is:***

***a) any incident in which it appears to the reporting or investigating officer that the complaint involves an element of racial motivation, or***

***b) any incident which includes an allegation of racial motivation by any persons.***

***“Incidents” include verbal abuse, threatening behaviour, graffiti, damage to property, physical attack, arson, and murder.***

### ***ASSOCIATION OF POLICE OFFICERS 1989***

Jan put the piece of paper down.

“Does that help you, Sergeant?” the instructor asked.

“Yes. Thank you.”

“Good. Now, what we’re looking at in this session is how racial discrimination can take place in the police force itself. We’ll be looking at some real case studies taken from successful complaints against the Notts police force...”

This was more interesting, Jan decided.

“I’m going to start by showing you something you probably didn’t have time to watch when it was first broadcast.”

The figure 4 appeared on the screen. Jan groaned. Had she come all this way to watch a Channel 4 documentary? Yet, as the story in the

*Dispatches* programme began to unfold, she found herself watching with a combination of fascination and unease.

The programme was about three Asian police officers, each of whom had been given a three month attachment to Notts CID back in the 1980s. Of twenty-three people attached to CID during that period, only three had failed to get permanent CID postings – the three Asians.

The case against the force got stronger and stronger. Actors playing senior officers stonewalled. One black CID officer described how he had ignored racist banter at first and was treated as one of the lads. Eventually, though, his pride couldn't take it any more. As soon as he complained, he was frozen out. But banter was the least of it. Black officers were given much less support than white ones. When they complained, allegations were made up or exaggerated to justify not offering them CID jobs.

The whole thing made Jan sick. And it wasn't only because what was happening was wrong. She was sick because she recognized the situations. She found herself thinking about Baljit Singh. How would he feel, watching this? Would he recognize Jan's behaviour, failing to fix him up with an experienced partner? She found herself thinking about Ben Shipman.

“That's enough,” Jed said. “Go on, you'd better get out of here. Someone might of called the police.”

Reluctantly, all seven of them stopped kicking the black guy. Brig slapped Jed on the back on his way out. When they'd gone, Jed looked at the black guy, who was now wheezing on the floor. He had received a professional kicking. They'd left his face, apart from a cut beneath the eye

and a swollen ear. But his body, beneath the jeans and blouson, would be covered with bruises.

The guy opened his eyes and stared at Jed. Jed stared right back.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked. “Call an ambulance? Call the police?”

“Why would you do that?” the bruised geezer asked. His voice, though croaky, was obviously educated.

“Look, you soft idiot,” Jed said. “You can claim that you were beaten up in here, but I’ll say that we found you outside, that we brought you in here before the police arrived. You got knocked about the head, so you were confused. Now, who’re they going to believe? Me, who’ll find witnesses to back me up, or some silly sod stupid enough to walk straight into a Nazi meeting?”

“I didn’t know what it was,” the man mumbled. “Well, then,” Jed told him, “I guess you should have knocked.”

The bloke was getting his breath back a bit. He sat up.

“Why do you do this?” he asked. “What did I ever do to you?”

Jed thought for a moment.

“Personally,” he said, “I haven’t got anything against Africans, or wherever it is that you’re from. It’s Pakis I don’t like, Pakis and Indians. You lot, you’re not much different from us, but they’re filth. Know what I mean?”

“Not really.”

“Trouble is ... my friends who just left, they don’t make such fine distinctions. They reckon...” He was interrupted by the door opening. It was Laurie, the stupid wimp who managed the place. “What do you want?”

“I tried to warn you,” Laurie said, “but you slammed the door in my face.”

“Tried to warn me what?”

Laurie didn’t answer. Instead he turned to the black bloke, who was slowly standing up.

“Are you all right?” Laurie asked.

“I’ll live.”

“Want me to call an ambulance? The police station?”

The guy shook his head. He knew what was good for him.

“Just get me a taxi.”

Jed tried to ask Laurie what he’d meant about warning him, but the black guy waved an arm at the centre manager.

“Leave us.”

And Laurie did. Jed couldn’t believe it – Laurie taking orders from a black guy ten years younger than him.

“I’ve seen you before,” the black bloke said, “in Mansfield.” Jed recognized him now. He’d been in the shop they did over the week before.

“I remember,” he told the bloke now. “You did right both times, not calling the police.”

“Not much point,” the guy replied, pulling something from his back pocket. “You see, I **am** the police.”

## Heritage (1992)

'Heritage' aka 'Christmas Past' was the second of three Christmas ghost stories published in YA anthologies in consecutive years. I retitled it for my 1999 collection *Haunting Time*, partly to avoid having two stories with 'Christmas' in the title, but also because the new title underlines the theme. I don't know which title works better. Each has an argument in its favour.

## Heritage

Late on Christmas Eve the motorway was empty but for a white BMW doing ninety in the fast lane. Therese Mortimer drove carefully, keeping her eyes on the road rather than the shadowy Pennine hills. This was a part of the country she loathed, but her stay with Sir Ronald had been worth the drive north. He'd promised Therese his support when he retired, at the next election. Therese, he said, would be the perfect candidate. She was intelligent, attractive and, already, Britain's youngest Euro MP.

"Your local background won't hurt either," he said, though that was something Therese preferred to play down.

"Pity you're single," Sir Ronald added, patting her knee. "Now, if I were a few years younger..."

Inwardly, Therese grimaced, but she smiled ingratiatingly at the elderly MP. She was thirty-three years old. Her ambition was to be the country's second female Prime Minister before she was fifty. Therese Mortimer MP wasn't going to have any man sharing the credit for her achievements. Not when she'd got so far without...

Her thoughts were interrupted. Something was wrong with the car. The engine noise was changing from a low purr to an intermittent rumble. The lights on the dashboard began to flicker and fade. This is ridiculous, Therese told herself. I'm driving one of the most reliable cars in the world. How can it go wrong at a time like this, in such a godforsaken place? Then the engine died. In the moment before the lights went out, Therese spotted an exit road coming up on her left. She swung the wheel round and the car drifted off the motorway. It slid downhill onto the grass verge, where it would be safe. At least the brakes worked. Therese hadn't been forced to

leave the car on the hard shoulder, where someone was bound to crunch into it.

Breathing deeply, she looked around for a signpost, so that she could tell the breakdown service where she was. There wasn't one. Annoyed, she picked up her car phone anyway. They'd have to find her somehow. And when she got back to Essex, she'd give the garage hell about... but this was the final straw! Her car phone wasn't working either. She knew that it ran off the car battery but it was meant to have a rechargeable back-up. She tried again.

Nothing.

Groaning with frustration, Therese got out of the car and began to walk down the slip road in the pitch black night. She wished she'd brought a heavier coat. There'd been some talk of snow. Therese found that hard to believe. It hadn't snowed at Christmas since she was young, barely a teenager.

But it was certainly cold. She felt something moist brush against her cheek. The first snowflakes were falling. She checked her watch. An hour before midnight. It might be a White Christmas, after all.

There were lights in the distance, but still Therese could find no sign to indicate where she was. She walked on, expecting to come to a roundabout, instead finding a narrow country lane. Perhaps the slip road hadn't been an official exit. Still, she had no choice but to keep going. Slowly, she walked towards the distant lights. The snow fell ever more thickly around her.

By the time she reached the village, Therese's coat was soaked through. The place looked familiar, but she had no time to think about that. It was just another decrepit Northern town full of back-to-back terraces.

There were still ancient cobbles on the side roads. Street lamps cast a ghostly amber hue over the grey buildings. She had to find a phone box. Therese turned a corner and found herself in the village square. Maybe here...

Recognition hit her like a kick in the stomach. She knew this place. She'd been here before. In fact, she'd been born here. It was called Hebblethwaite. All right, thought Therese, no reason to panic. At least I know where I am when I call the breakdown people, and.., if I remember correctly - yes, there it is - a phone box, one of the old-fashioned red ones. I won't stay here a minute longer than necessary. I'll make the call then hurry back to the car. Before dawn I'll be safely tucked up in my own bed.

Therese picked up the phone and began to dial. It was a real dial, rather than a push-button one. She hadn't seen a dial for years. She pulled out her phone card. Damn! The machine didn't take them. It only took two or ten pence pieces and she had none. The phone gave out a number unobtainable tone. Probably broken, it was so old. Therese left. She'd have to find another.

Looking around the square, it was amazing how little had changed. There was still a cobbler's and an ironmonger's, just as she remembered. But Therese could see no video shop, no Kentucky Fried Chicken. Hebblethwaite must be the only town in the country that didn't have these. The bus stop displayed the name of a County Council that had been abolished ten years before. How could that be? And surely the mill should have been demolished by now? It was like being stuck in a time warp.

Then Therese worked it out. Hebblethwaite had been designated a Heritage village. The EC gave a grant to preserve the character of a village as it had been in earlier years, when mills and textile factories were still profitable. You turned the old buildings into museums and created job for

local people as guides and curators. Redundant workers were re-employed doing the job they used to do for tourists to see. It was a useful way of reducing unemployment in depressed regions.

So that was it. The village only *looked* old. It was sure to have moved on. Few would remember what had happened twenty years ago, and those who did wouldn't blame her for it. All Therese had to do was find a modern phone. She crossed the square and turned a corner. She'd remembered right. There was a pub there, but it was closed. She was about to turn back, but felt herself being pulled in the opposite direction, towards a cobbled side street.

For a few moments, Therese resisted. But then she decided to be strong. If she became a local MP there were bound to be invitations to visit Hebblethwaite. Best to lay old ghosts to rest now. She crossed the road and entered Bright Street. Her aunt's old house was the third on the left. Therese would stand outside it for half a minute, that was all. Then she'd find a phone.

Even here, nothing had changed. The door was still painted that ugly magenta colour and there was a Christmas wreath hanging beneath the knocker. In the window was a small tree. On top of it, a plaster fairy. It was far too big, just like the one whose leg Therese broke the day after she came to live here. It was silly, but Therese couldn't resist leaning forwards. Yes, there it was, a hairline crack at the top of the leg. It must be the same one. Yet how, after all these years?

The magenta door opened.

"Theresa!"

A middle-aged woman stood in the doorway.

"I thought I saw someone outside. Come on in out of the snow, child. You'll freeze!"

The woman stood in shadow, but she looked terribly familiar.

"I'm... sorry., to have disturbed you," Therese said. "I was just passing. I'll be on my way now."

"Don't be silly, Theresa. Come inside."

"My name isn't Theresa. It's Therese," she told the insistent woman.

"Oh, Therese, is it? Now that's just a silly notion you got from your friend Stephanie. But you'll always be Theresa to me. Come inside!"

Reluctantly, Therese let herself be bundled into the room. She looked at the framed painting of the waves above the fireplace, the ducks on the opposite wall. There, on the mantelpiece, was a photo of her parents' wedding.

"Theresa. Sit down. You've turned white as a sheet."

She did as she was told. Somewhere outside, bells rang.

"Warm yourself by the fire now, dear. I'll be getting ready for Midnight Mass."

Therese looked up. She didn't know what to say. But somehow words tumbled out.

"Aunt Mary?"

"Yes?"

"How come you're still alive?"

Mary gave her a strange look, then laughed.

"You're not yourself tonight, are you, child? Why would I not be? I'm only ten years older than your mother was when the Lord took her and your father, and she was in the prime of her life."

Therese shook her head in disbelief. Mary kept talking.

"Your mother and I lost touch, like I told you at the funeral. But I can't believe she told you I was dead. We argued about her and your dad moving South. But you're back here now, and I'm going to bring you up as my own."

Mary went into the other room for her coat. Therese heard her bronchitic coughs as she moved from the warm room to the colder one. Quickly, she stood up. Once, after Mary died, she had owned this house. What happened to it? Did Someone buy the place, or had it always been haunted? Shivering with fright, Therese went to the door. She must escape now, before this nightmare got any worse. Now!

There was a tinkle of broken glass. Therese looked round. Her coat had caught the photo on the mantelpiece, knocking it to the floor.

"Theresa! What are you doing? My, you're a clumsy girl. First the fairy, and now..."

Her aunt stood in the doorway. You won't get me, thought Therese. You won't! Both of her hands gripped the door-handle. She expected it to be stiff, but it opened easily enough. Therese ran out into the street, then hurried through the snow towards the sound of ringing bells, towards any place where there might be people, light, safety.

As she turned the corner of Bright Street, Therese slammed straight into a tall young woman, almost knocking her over as she came out of a house.

"Sorry."

Therese looked up at the woman's amused face. It felt strangely comforting to see another real human being.

"Are you all right, dear?"

"Yes... I mean, no. I'm not. My car's broken down on the outskirts of the village and I can't find a phone to ring for help. Do you have one that I could use?"

The woman shook her head slowly.

"Phone... breakdown... I don't understand. Aren't you Theresa Shelton, the poor lass whose parents died in the car crash?"

"Yes, but that was twenty..."

"Ah, here comes your aunt. Mary, I think your niece has had a bit of a turn."

Aunt Mary was coming round the corner, a grim expression in her eyes.

"Thank you for catching her, Pat," she said. "Now Theresa, what's up?"

Theresa looked from Mary to the tall young woman, Pat.

Only now, next to Mary, Pat didn't seem so tall. Therese looked away from both of them and stared at the window of the house Pat had just left. There was light from a street lamp. Therese could see her own reflection. Only then did she realise what had happened. She fainted, falling onto the snowy ground before either woman could catch her.

The bedroom had a damp, musty smell that seemed to seep out of the green flock wallpaper. There was no heating of any kind. Therese pulled the blanket up over her flat chest and willed herself to wake. This nightmare had gone on long enough. The door opened.

"I've brought you some tea, Theresa. Merry Christmas!" Aunt Mary wore a long blue nylon dressing gown, and had rollers in her hair. Therese

took the china cup from the tray. Her aunt frowned impatiently. Therese remembered what she was meant to say.

"Merry Christmas."

Aunt Mary smiled. Therese sipped the sweet tea.

"I don't take..."

But then she remembered. She had taken sugar when she was thirteen: two lumps, It was only when she went to live with the Mortimers, none of whom took sugar, that she stopped.

"What happened last night?" Therese asked.

"You got a bit upset, that's all - forgot where you were. Pat from down the road helped me to bring you home and put you to bed."

"I made you miss Midnight Mass. I'm sorry."

"Never mind. We'll go to the morning service. I did think of calling a doctor, only it being Christmas..."

"No. I'm OK. Really. I'll get dressed in a minute."

"Would you like your presents before breakfast, or after?"

"I don't mind..."

Suddenly, Therese realised that she was very hungry.

"After."

Aunt Mary went back to her bedroom. Therese finished tea and got out of bed. Slowly, the details of the house came back to her. She looked in the chest of drawers and found her cheap childhood clothes. How dull they'd seemed next to Stephanie's. Now they seemed duller still, pathetic even. Today's thirteen-year-olds wore fashionable clothes loosely cut, with brand names on the outside. Here were shapeless cotton slacks, frumpy tartan skirts, white tights, blouses with nasty frills and old maid patterns. Therese chose the plainest, least objectionable clothes she could find: blue trousers

and a black sweater. Then, with a shudder of horror, she remembered the presents she was about to receive.

Finally, it was time to look in the mirror. Therese saw a thin, plain girl whose eyes seemed too big for her freckled face. Her lank, brown hair fell tiredly around her scrawny shoulders. An ugly mole (long since surgically removed) disfigured the bottom of her neck. In seven months time, Therese would begin her main adolescent growth spurt. She would fill out and grow six inches. Right now, she was ugly. The old self-hatred welled up inside her.

Therese heard Aunt Mary's bronchitic coughs from the bathroom. The full horror of the situation was only just becoming clear. Therese was going to have to live through the very worst period of her life all over again. How had this happened to her?

Downstairs, Aunt Mary spooned thick golden syrup onto Therese's porridge. Therese ate in silence. Aunt Mary ate little, but talked as her niece filled herself up.

"This has been a terrible two weeks for you, Theresa. The accident, and the funeral, then leaving your home and friends to return to a place you hardly remember - no child should have to go through such things. It's been difficult for me too, you know. I didn't tell you this, but I couldn't sleep a wink for three nights after I heard the news. I lay awake remembering your mother, regretting all the arguments we had. In the end, the doctor had to give me pills. Though I've stopped taking them now, of course."

Therese poured herself more tea, adding two lumps of sugar. Then she took a piece of toast, which she gave a liberal smearing of butter before covering it with marmalade. She knew everything her aunt was going to say. But there was a difference. Now Therese had the intelligence and experience of an adult woman. Maybe this time she could get Mary to change her mind.

"One thing kept preying on my mind," Aunt Mary went on. "What to do about you. I promised myself that I'd bring you up as my own, give you all the love that only your real family can provide. It'll be hard for both of us at first. My health's never been good and you'll need some time to get used to your new home. But we'll make it, I'm sure." Therese was sure that they wouldn't. She remembered her aunt's death all too well. When the doctor came he had told her:

"You mustn't feel bad about your aunt. You certainly mustn't feel that it's your fault. I told her when she came to see me after the accident. 'You've got bronchitis. Your heart is weak. You've got no business trying to raise an adolescent girl.' But she wouldn't hear any of it. Just asked me for something to help her sleep."

As Aunt Mary wittered on, Therese remembered her funeral. She'd been surprised at how many mourners there were: far more than at Mum and Dad's. Therese had stood there with the Mortimers, who were to be her new parents, while people from the village filed by.

"So sorry," they kept saying. "You mustn't blame yourself, Theresa."

But she had blamed herself. Oh yes she had.

Mary and Therese saved the presents until after church. Therese attracted sympathetic glances from what seemed like the whole congregation. Even the priest addressed a special prayer for "those who have suffered a recent, tragic loss". Therese didn't remember that from before. Probably she hadn't been listening. Today, all of her senses seemed very acute. She wanted to take everything in. She wanted to find out whether this was an hallucination. If it was, she had to work out how to end it.

Walking back to Mary's, Therese listened to the wind whistle through the snowbound streets. Aunt Mary kept pointing out houses that her relatives had lived and died in, then telling her about the people who'd come to offer their condolences in church.

"You see, you might feel like a stranger in this town, Theresa, but you've got a history here. There are families living here whose great grandparents came over from Ireland with your great grandparents. Before you know it, you'll have plenty of new friends."

"I don't want new friends. I want Stephanie." Aunt Mary frowned. "Oh yes. Stephanie. The Mortimers' girl. Well, you can stay in touch with her, of course. You can write letters, and you can visit in the holidays. Or she can visit here..."

Hard to imagine Steph in Hebblethwaite, Therese thought. She'd never been north of the Trent in her life. In twenty years' time, Steph would be living in New York with a commodities broker.

They arrived back at Mary's house. Now came the part Therese had been dreading. Mum and Dad had bought the Christmas presents before they died. Therese had to appear pleased as she unwrapped a record by a singer she had once liked and a Marks and Spencer sweater which she knew would be too tight. Stephanie's parents, by contrast, had bought her a gorgeous pair of leather boots. Therese remembered how disappointed she'd been six months later when they no longer fitted her.

"Well, they've got money, haven't they, the Mortimers?" Aunt Mary said, examining the boots with ill-disguised distaste. "They must have, if they could afford to pay both your Mum and your Dad to work for them."

"They both work themselves," Therese told her. "He's Managing Director of a publishing company and she's in Public Relations."

"Whatever that may be," Aunt Mary said, sarcastically. "I would have thought she'd be better off staying at home, looking after her children."

"Then Mum wouldn't have had a job, would she?" Therese retorted.

"If Langston Mill hadn't closed down before they left, your mother wouldn't have needed a job," Aunt Mary said, bitterly. "She might have had more children and stayed here. If only your father hadn't been made redundant... I told him, we can't have Sheltons going into service in this day and age. Your grandfather would turn in his grave. Do you know what your father said?"

Therese shook her head, though she knew exactly what he'd said. "We've got to do it for Theresa's sake, so that she can have a future."

Aunt Mary stopped. She seemed to snatch for air. Her eyes widened. Then she began one of her coughing fits. With one hand, she reached for a hanky. With the other, she gestured to Therese.

Therese hurried to Mary's bedroom for her cough mixture. There was a glass beside the bottle which contained the dregs of Mary's dose from the night before. The sight of it filled Therese with dread. She found the measure by the side of the bed and poured the required amount of medicine into the dirty glass.

"You're a good girl," Aunt Mary spluttered before pouring the vile-looking stuff down her throat.

The coughing fit ended. Perhaps now's the time, Therese thought. Strike while she's weak.

"Auntie," Therese said, measuring her words carefully. "I'm worried about your health. It can't be any good for you, all the stress brought on by your having to look after me. And there's another thing... I really don't belong here, in Hebblethwaite. I hardly remember the place. Mum and Dad

used to talk about it, of course. But they used to say how glad they were to have got away. They didn't want me to grow up here."

Aunt Mary's face seemed to harden, but she didn't interrupt.

"When Mum and Dad died, the Mortimers said they'd look after me, adopt me if they could, treat me as their own daughter. Mum and Dad were very close to the Mortimers. That's why they made them the executors of their will. And Stephanie and I are like sisters. But they told me, when they found out about you, they felt they couldn't interfere. What I'm trying to say is... perhaps it would be better if I went to live with them, in Essex. I feel I *belong* there."

"You *belong* here," Aunt Mary snapped, "with your kin, in the place where you were born. If your parents hadn't left here they'd still be alive today. Think on that. You don't need these fancy southerners, giving you silly ideas. What was the name you wanted to call yourself when you first came here?"

"Therese."

"*Therese*?"

It had been Stephanie's idea - a way to romanticise her boring old Roman Catholic name. Mum and Dad hadn't minded, but now Mary was scoffing at it.

"You were beginning to think you were French! Give it some time, Theresa. In a week or two you'll go to school, make friends, settle down. Soon you'll never want to leave Hebblethwaite."

"You're wrong!" Therese began to cry. "I hate it here! You're wrong!"

"Now, now," Mary got a hanky from her bag. "You're upset, that's all. Here." She got out her purse. "Why don't you ring your friend Stephanie, wish her a happy Christmas? I'm sure she's missing you too."

Still crying, Therese took the money and put her coat back on. She walked through the snow to the phone box in the square. Something was happening, Therese realised. She had been really upset just then, as though she actually was thirteen again. The last twenty years almost seemed like a dream, even though it was one which ended barely twelve hours ago. Now she found herself missing Steph - not the adult Steph, who she'd hardly spoken to since the Euro elections, but her childhood friend.

"Did you want the phone, love?" A man was holding the door open for her.

"Yes, sorry. I was miles away."

Therese dialled the Mortimers' number as she had done twenty years before. She remembered the conversation well, but, as she spoke now, her emotions churned up in just the same way.

"Thank you for the boots. I'm wearing them at the moment. They're lovely. I miss you all so much. I wish I was there. Not here."

Reassuring voices spoke at the other end of the line. They'd see her soon. Perhaps she could visit at half term. Then Stephanie was brought to the phone.

"Merry Christmas!" Steph as chirpy as ever, forcing Therese to try and be normal.

"Merry Christmas, Steph. The earrings you bought me were great !"

"God, I miss you, Therese. It's so tedious with just the little kids around. And the new couple Mum and Dad took on are so boring."

This hit Therese like a stab to the heart.

"But how are you? What's it like living in Heatherthwaite?"

"Hebblethwaite - it's awful. The accent, you should hear it, like they've all got speech impediments. And my Aunt's house is horrible and damp and

she's got bronchitis and I keep thinking that she's going to drop dead any moment. And she insists on calling me Theresa not Therese and introducing me to everyone as Theresa. And I miss you so much, Steph, and I hate it here - I just hate it..."

Then they were both bawling their eyes out over the phone and Therese heard Steph's dad taking the phone from her. He began to speak softly to Therese, in the gentle, comforting way he had.

"You might be miserable now but things will get better, even though it doesn't look that way. You can always ring us up, reverse the charges if you like. You mustn't let...!', Then the pips went and Therese had no more money. She thought of making a reverse charges call, but there was a queue of people outside who had already seen her crying. It embarrassed her. She hurried out of the phone box and ran across the square, stamping footprints into the virgin snow.

Therese kept running, falling over every so often, until she was nearly out of the village. She stood staring up from the valley to where the motorway would be built, wondering what had happened to the last twenty years of her life. She remembered the things that were going to happen from now on: crying herself to sleep every night in that damp bedroom, going to that awful comprehensive school, where all the other kids took the mickey out of her posh accent. It was no wonder that she'd done what she did.

A feeling of dread came over her. What happened took place so long ago that she'd almost convinced herself it wasn't real. For years she'd felt guilty about it, had woken up in the middle of the night with her aunt's face scorched across her mind. But the memory had faded and, with it, the guilt. When she did think about that last night, Therese could almost convince herself that she'd had no choice. She wasn't proud of what she'd done. The

shock of her parents' death might have clouded her judgement, but it had still been wrong.

Now, however, she was thinking rationally. If she was going to do it, it would be best to get it over with quickly.

Therese remembered the awful evenings at home with her aunt that January, the plot slowly hatching in her mind. But how could she do it again? She considered how she'd end up if she stayed in Hebblethwaite. Even if she managed to pull herself clear, she wouldn't be able to take advantage of the opportunities the Mortimers offered. There was no choice, really. She had to steel herself for the task ahead. You only had one life. It was survival of the fittest. The only crime was getting caught.

Therese walked slowly back to Bright Street. She didn't know why this had happened to her, but maybe she could like advantage of it. If she could just remember some of the things that would happen in the next twenty years, forewarned could be forearmed. She would avoid the few mistakes she had made.

"Theresa, where have you been? Dinner's almost ready!" Aunt Mary had done the full works - turkey, roast potatoes and parsnips, bread sauce, carrots and sprouts. The walk had made Therese hungry and she devoured it all.

Tactfully, Mary didn't ask about her conversation with the Mortimers.

After dinner, Aunt Mary fell asleep in her armchair watching the Queen's speech. The afternoon film was a first showing but Therese had seen it several times since. She left it on anyway. Her mind was focussed on what she was going to do to her aunt. Mary did not have a happy life, Therese thought. And the doctor had said that she might drop dead at any moment. There was no point in waiting until late January, as she had before.

Therese remembered reading that suicides were highest at Christmas. Should she write a note? No. She'd got away without it last time. To forge one would be to tempt fate.

While Mary slept, Therese sneaked upstairs and into her aunt's bedroom. It was a dark, cluttered room, but she knew where to look for what she wanted. The sleeping pills were on the dresser, concealed behind a make-up bag. Picking the bottle up with a hanky, Therese opened it and emptied the contents into a bit of Christmas wrapping paper she had brought upstairs with her. Then she went into her own room and hid the little packet in her dresser.

Mary woke a few minutes later. Therese gave her a progress report on the film, though her aunt had only asked about it out of politeness. Therese determined to be really nice to her for the rest of the evening, to make her last hours happy ones. She helped with the washing up and made the turkey sandwiches. Twice she refilled Mary's glass of sherry.

"I'm glad that your walk and phone call seem to have calmed you down," Mary told her.

Yes, said Therese. "I'm sorry I got so upset earlier." It was strange how, looking at Mary in the harsh light of her tiny kitchen, she reminded Therese so of her real mother. Mary was overweight, her hair was greying, and that perm did nothing for her. Yet, still, the resemblance was there. Recognising this filled Therese with a kind of sadness. She had almost forgotten her real parents. There was no photograph on display in her Brussels flat, or the family home. The Mortimers had replaced them completely.

At ten, Mary went to bed. Therese stayed up a while longer, watching the news. It was interesting, in a way. Yet Therese barely took in the series of

events she only dimly remembered from the first time round. She was too busy thinking about what she had to do.

Aunt Mary was always asleep by eleven. Invariably, she would wake up with a coughing attack between two and three. It used to wake Therese every night. Mary would have a glass of medicine poured out ready by the side of the bed. She would drink it, then drift off to sleep again. Only, tomorrow morning, she would not wake up.

When Therese reached the top of the narrow stairway Mary's light was already out. Therese called "good night" but there was no reply. Perhaps the sherry had knocked her out. She brushed her teeth but didn't get ready for bed. She would have to wait awhile, until she was sure her aunt was sleeping soundly.

Nervously, Therese counted the sleeping pills that she had taken from Mary's room. There were twenty-four, the same number as last time. How could there be less? She laid her bit of wrapping paper out flat on the dressing table and began to break the capsules open. There was only a little powder in each, but the pile grew steadily. When she had finished, Therese stared at the poison for a long time. For an instant, she even considered taking it herself, rather than face the next twenty years of her life all over again.

It had not been so happy a life, all things considered. Her new mother and father were wonderful to her, but she was always second fiddle to Stephanie, understandably. There'd been some resentment when Therese did better at school, then went to Oxford while Steph had to settle for Durham.

Therese worked so hard to be sure of her First that she'd hardly enjoyed university. Even her success in the Union debates had been more for

something to put on her CV than a form of pleasure. Everyone assumed she would go into politics, so she did. Central Office were pleased to have her.

The future was bright.

But it had been such a grind: building a reputation, sucking up to anyone who could help her, trooping up and down the country in search of some kind of parliamentary seat. And now, just as she was finally getting there, to be thrust back to square one. What was the point of it all? Snap out of it! Therese told herself. Don't let your thirteen-year-old brain second-guess your thirty-three-year-old one! And maybe this time things will be better. But not in Hebblethwaite, not with Aunt Mary. Do it! Do it tonight, before you lose your nerve.

The village clock struck midnight. Mary would be sound asleep now. Therese took the carefully rolled wrapping paper and tiptoed out onto the landing. No light came from her aunt's room. With her free hand, Therese gently turned the doorknob. With the smallest of squeaks, she had the door open. It rumbled slightly as she pushed it to, but Mary did not stir. Therese gave herself a moment or two for her eyes to get accustomed to the light. There was the glass on the bedside table, half an inch of medicine in it. Mary breathed noisily.

She started to turn over and Therese froze. Then her aunt settled down again. Now. Get it over with.

Therese crept up to the bed and leant over the table, being careful not to make any sound. She tipped the paper roll so that all of the sleeping powder went into Mary's medicine. Then she put a finger into the glass and swirled it round that most of the powder dissolved. She stepped back and breathed a tiny sight of relief. It was only a matter waiting.

"What are you doing?"

Aunt Mary pulled the light cord and Therese, blinking, faced her aunt in a fully lit room. She could say nothing. Mary stared at the piece of wrapping paper in her at the glass beside her.

"You were doing something with my drink. What?"

Her aunt was awake now: confused but alert. Therese tried to think of an acceptable lie. There wasn't one.

"I was trying to kill you," she said.

Aunt Mary's eyes widened. Her mouth fell open.

"Kill me?"

"You gave me no choice," Therese's words came out in an angry tumble. "Do you think I could settle for living here when I know what life could be like in Essex? If the Mortimers adopted me I could be famous, successful, I know I could. What would my life be like here?"

Aunt Mary started to say something, but it didn't come out. She spluttered, and began one of her coughing fits.

Blindly, she began to reach for the glass by her bed. Therese didn't stop her, but Mary remembered in time. Instead, she picked up the bottle beside the glass, took off the cap, and poured some of the red liquid straight into her mouth, then she lay back on the bed, wheezing. Therese thought of going, running away. But it was no good. Where could she run to, when Mary told everyone what she had tried to do?

"You're wrong about the Mortimers, Theresa," Aunt Mary said, when she had recovered her voice. "They wouldn't adopt you when they knew that you had family still alive. I asked them, believe me. Do you think I really wanted to be saddled with you? They said 'no'. They said they felt they had a duty to offer, since they were all you had, but when they found out about me..."

"No!" Therese said. "No! I don't believe you!"

"Believe what you want," Mary said coldly. "But I'm all you've got."

Therese shook her head miserably.

"But they'd still have me," she said between her tears. "If you died, they'd still have me, I know they would."

"You're still in shock," Mary said, gently, "from your mum and dad's death. You've been acting strangely for the last day. Go to bed. Things will look better in the morning." "No," Therese replied, wiping her eyes. "I'm not going to bed. I can't stay here. I'd rather take that drink myself." She reached out for it. Mary put her hand in the way.

Therese tried to knock it aside but her aunt grabbed her arm.

"You're being a silly, selfish girl. Grow up now!"

"I am grown up!" Therese shouted. "I know what I want!"

She tried to pull free but Mary only grabbed her more tightly. Therese struggled. She wasn't sure how much strength she had as a thirteen-year-old, but it had to be more than this middle aged woman. Furiously, they grappled with each other.

Aunt Mary was almost out of bed now. Somehow, she had forced Therese back.

"Theresa, Theresa, stop this! If your mother could see you . . ."

But Theresa was in a blind fury. Everything had fallen apart. Why did Mary have to wake up? Why did she have to tell her...

"Theresa, let me go!"

Therese had grabbed Mary now, and was shaking her. Suddenly, her aunt stopped fighting back. Her body seemed to crumple, and she fell to the floor.

Therese waited a moment, then felt her pulse. Nothing. She'd had a heart attack, as the doctor warned she might. Calmly, Therese took the glass from the side of the bed into the bathroom and washed it out. She returned to the room and once more checked Mary's pulse. Dead. Therese was relieved. This was a better death than sleeping pills. She would get even more sympathy. And if the Mortimers didn't really want her, too bad. They'd have to take her anyway.

Should she call an ambulance now, or wait until morning? She could say that she heard Mary fall. But suppose, just suppose, they were able to revive her? Best to wait a while.

Yet Therese couldn't stay in the house. It was so dank and oppressive. She had to take a walk. That was it. She'd get some air, then call the ambulance.

The snow had stopped falling. Therese walked, as she had before, to the edge of the village. There was no-one about. It was very cold. She couldn't be sure if she was shaking because of the cold or because of what had just happened. Try as she might, she couldn't make sense of it all. It was as though the village had given her a second chance, to see if she would change her mind and stay. But Therese was stronger than the village, stronger than her aunt. She was determined. If she had to do it all over again, she would. And she had.

Somewhere in the distance, a car passed. Therese glanced back. The village lights were nearly out of sight. In front of her, another car passed. Which road was that? Therese didn't think there was anything other than the quiet lane she was walking on. Yet there seemed to be a major road ahead. She kept walking. The road she was on bent off to the left, but on her

right was a small lane. She walked up it, past the 'Motorway Maintenance Only' sign.

Odd, Therese thought as she continued up the lane, that they've cleared all the snow round here. But then she saw something odder, which put everything else out of her mind. There was her BMW, exactly where she'd left it. There was the motorway beyond, ready to lead Therese back to her real home. Maybe the nightmare was over. Therese felt in her pocket. The car keys were there. She got into the BMW and, to her relief, it started, first time.

As she began to pull away, Therese glanced in the rear view mirror, to see if there were any cars coming. Her adult face looked back at her. She appeared older than her thirty-three years, and very tired. Therese stared at her ravaged reflection. She was past caring what had happened to her, or why. Whatever had happened, it was over. She pressed her foot down on the accelerator.

On Boxing Day, Rob Berry, from Hebblethwaite, went out bird watching with his father. While Dad was using his new binoculars to have a look at a heron by the frozen lake, Rob walked up the service road to the new motorway. He wanted to see if any cars were venturing through the treacherous snow and ice. None were. Rob probably wouldn't have spotted the BMW had it not been for the aerial, poking out above the white mound. Curious, Rob brushed some of the snow away. Then he ran off to fetch his father.

Rob hadn't thought to see if there was anyone in the car, but his dad did. Therese Mortimer was slumped over the wheel, dead. She was not, the coroner observed later, wearing a seat belt. It seemed that she had fallen

asleep at the wheel on Christmas Eve and driven off the road. However, the coroner added, the collision with the tree was not what killed her. She had received a severe concussion, and had then slowly frozen to death.

## Love Lessons (1998)

*Love Lessons* was my third full novel, originally titled *Don't Stand So Close To Me* (after a song by The Police), in 1986-7. I wrote it first as an adult novel, then as a YA one, but the subject matter was too teenage for adult publishers and too adult for 1980s YA publishers. In 1994, at a time when I was the biggest selling British author at the UK's biggest publisher for Young Adults, I was given *carte blanche* to write whatever I wanted. This was, I think, a means of keeping me from being tempted by offers from other publishers. I chose to rewrite (and retitl) this early novel. I delivered it in 1995. While the edit was straightforward, publication was not. Scholastic insisted they had to publish it 'responsibly', eventually putting it out in 1998, in a trade paperback that often found its way to the main Fiction section of bookshops rather than the YA section. This brief extract is from the first half of the novel, shortly after Rachel, the fifteen-year-old point-of-view protagonist, has bumped into the other point-of-view character, Mike, the twenty-three-year-old English teacher she lusts after, at a club night in a Nottingham music venue. Some of Rachel's friends have been passing around notes about this at school.

Love Lessons. Section 2, chapter 2.

The spring term began with a tutor period, followed by an English lesson. Everyone wanted to talk about their Christmas. Rachel preferred not to. Her Christmas had been rubbish, as usual.

Rachel had spent only one Christmas Day with Dad since the divorce. That was three years ago, when Mum stayed with her sister in Preston. Rowan and Phoebe were very young then, and Rachel enjoyed playing with them. Still, the festival left a bitter flavour in her mouth. It gave Rachel a taste of what it would have been like to live in a real family, with real brothers and sisters, not a substitute step-family where the kids confused her with the babysitter.

Since then, Rachel had spent Christmas Day with Mum and various friends or visiting family members, then gone to her father's on Boxing Day. There was always an expensive present waiting for her in Mapperley Park. Dad tried to make Boxing Day a second Christmas Day. The fantasy never worked. This year, it fell particularly flat. Phoebe and Rowan were more interested in their new videos and computer games than in Rachel. There was constant tension between Dad and Clarissa. Twice, Rachel walked into a room to find them suddenly go silent.

Rachel wondered if one of them was having an affair. Dad was past it, she thought, but Clarissa wasn't. After all, the children were both at school now. Clarissa was still attractive. She didn't have a job, though she did voluntary work for Citizen's Advice now and then. It would hardly be surprising if Clarissa had a fling to fill her empty days. Rachel thought that it would serve Dad right, for what he did to Mum. But Rachel hoped they

wouldn't split up. It wasn't fair, when children were involved. Rachel had long since lost her illusions about Dad returning to Mum.

Rachel would never admit it to her friends, but she was glad to be back at school. Over the holiday, she had read and reread the part of Juliet. Once the mock exams were over, the play rehearsals began in earnest.

Today, the class reached Act Four. Mr Steadman talked the group through difficult bits of vocabulary, making sure the plot was clear. He looked much nicer without his beard, Rachel thought, barely old enough to be a teacher. That night at Rock City, she had taken him for a teenager, wearing the same T-shirt as her. For a fleeting moment, she'd fancied him. Then Carla pointed out who he was. Now Steadman was coming to the end of the lesson. There was some whispering and giggling from behind Rachel. The teacher started to get irritated.

"Come on, everyone. There're only five minutes of the lesson left. Let's see if we can keep concentrating." He paused, seeing something. "What is that?"

"Nothing, sir," Kate Duerden said, unconvincingly.

Rachel glanced back. She couldn't believe it. Lisa and Kate were passing notes around, like little girls at junior school. As Steadman walked over, Kate thrust the note to Rachel, expecting her to hide it. Rachel did nothing of the kind. She glanced at the note, a page torn from an exercise book. It was a scribbled conversation between Kate and Carla. Rachel only read the middle of it.

*You should have seen the girl Hansen got off with! She looked younger than me!*  
Carla had written.

*What about Steadman's?* Kate wrote back.

*His looked older than my mother!* Carla replied. *She was all over him.*

“I’ll take that, Rachel.” Before Rachel could read any further, the English teacher snatched the note away from her. She blushed. When she looked up at the teacher, he was reading the note and turning red himself.

“Rachel, stay behind,” he ordered.

“Sorry,” Kate whispered, as the lesson ended. “I owe you.”

Carla avoided Rachel’s eyes as she walked out. Rachel told Becky what she’d been doing.

“That’s the last time she goes clubbing with us,” Becky whispered. “Still, it gets you and Steadman alone together. You know, I think he likes you.”

“Oh, sure,” Rachel said, loading on the sarcasm as Becky left the room.

“Who wrote this?” Mr Steadman asked, when they were alone in the room together. He looked angry.

“It wasn’t me,” Rachel said.

“I know that,” Steadman told her. “I know your writing. This looks more like Carla - and Kate. Am I right?”

There was no point in denying it.

“I had nothing to do with the note,” Rachel said.

“Except you were reading it.”

“There was nothing there that I didn’t know already.”

Mr Steadman sat on his desk and leant forward. “Look,” he said. “The people who ought to be embarrassed are you and your friends. Mr Hansen and I are old enough to go to Rock City. You aren’t. But we didn’t say anything, which could get us into trouble. Now I get... this. Next time, I think I’d better report you to the management, have you thrown out.”

Embarrassed, Rachel tried to apologize. “I wasn’t spreading gossip. I don’t want to fall out with you, sir. You helped me get the part in the play and I’m very grateful.”

Steadman sighed. “I suppose I kept the wrong girl behind,” he said.

He got up to go, but seemed in no hurry. “Did you have a good time?” he asked. “Christmas and all that?”

Rachel shrugged. “Rock City was all right. Christmas was pretty awful, as usual.” She could have left then, but found herself lingering. “How about you?” she asked.

“Not much better than yours, I suspect.” He frowned, then added, “My parents divorced while I was at university. Going home isn’t much fun.”

“Mine split up when I was five,” Rachel told him.

He smiled sympathetically.

“Your friend seemed nice,” Rachel said, trying to be cheerful.

“Evelyn. Are you still seeing her?”

Steadman shook his head with a wry smile.

“On that point, at least, Carla was right,” he said. “She was a little too old for me.”

“They say age is all in the mind,” Rachel told him.

“In that case,” Steadman replied, with a boyish grin, “you’re probably older than I am. I still feel about fourteen half the time.”

Rachel wanted to tell him that part of her seemed permanently stuck at twelve. The better part. But then the bell went for the end of break. Steadman opened the door and they both hurried to their next lessons.

At home that night, Mum was playing old records. She had everything by the Beatles, who were cool again at the moment. John, Paul and George were asking Rachel whether she believed in love at first sight. She didn't. For some people - the Romeos and Juliets of this world - it might happen all the time. Not Rachel. She knew that for her, if she was lucky, love would come more slowly, like a cut flower which steadily swelled until it reached full bloom. Though not all flowers opened fully. Some wilted and withered before they'd opened at all.

It was the second weekend of term and Rachel was surprised to find herself with feelings for someone new.

"Penny for them," Mum said.

"Oh, it's nothing," Rachel told her.

Sometimes Rachel felt like her mum could read her mind, and it was comforting. Today, though, Rachel didn't want Mum to know her secret thoughts.

"Are you disappointed about not seeing your father?" Mum asked.

Dad had cancelled her visit this weekend at short notice. "Something came up" was all he said by way of explanation. Rachel shook her head. "Hardly," she said, "except that it leaves me with nothing to do. Becky's out with Gary. Carmen's got a boyfriend now, too."

"That's the trouble with girl gangs," Mum said. "If you're not careful, as soon as boys become important, old loyalties get swept aside. But maybe you're sorry about dropping Nick. You could call him, you know."

"Definitely not," Rachel said. "I'll be seeing enough of him once the play rehearsals start on Tuesday."

"You could come to the pictures with Janice and me. We're going to see that film that's on at Broadway."

“It’s all right,” Rachel said, “I don’t like films with subtitles. I’ll stay home and revise.”

“Suit yourself,” Mum said. “But it is Saturday night.”

When Mum went out for the evening, Rachel read her science textbook for a few minutes, then ran herself a bath. She put some bubble bath in, and while the bath ran, looked at her naked body in the mirror. She was trying to decide what an older man would think of it. She was a bit skinny. But some men liked skinny girls. Rachel wondered if her new English teacher was one of them.

As steam misted the mirror, Rachel got into the bath. She wondered what sex would be like. Becky was always surprisingly coy on the subject. With one hand beneath the bubbles, Rachel imagined what it would be like with Mike (that was his first name - Rachel had heard Evelyn use it). None of her friends knew that she found him attractive. Oh, Becky had made a couple of jokes about the teacher keeping Rachel behind. She thought that Steadman had a thing about her. Rachel wasn’t so sure. She liked the way Mike talked to her today, like she was an adult. She caught him looking at her sometimes, too. But it was probably her imagination.

Rachel would never go out with the English teacher, she recognized that, even as her head flooded with feeling. This was only a fantasy, something to keep her going through cold, boring January. Steadman was too old and too straight to contemplate a relationship with a girl her age, even if Becky was right and he did fancy her. But it was fun to fantasize about Mike, her forbidden lover. Daydreams would have to keep her going until summer, when the exams were over, and she had time to look for the real thing.

## Denial (2004)

*Denial* was my final novel for Hodder Children's Books. Fourteen-year-old Cate falls out with her mother's new husband, Trevor, and moves in with Dan, her schoolteacher father, in Sheffield. Soon, Dan is accused of sexually assaulting one of his students, Natasha. Cate attends the same school as Natasha but has kept her relationship to Dan secret (her parents never married and she does not share his surname). Cate tries to clear Dan's name, all the time in denial about the sexual abuse he subjected her to three years earlier, during a period referred to in the first extract. In order to find out the truth, Cate befriends Natasha and their relationship becomes tangled, as indicated in the second extract. The story builds to a revelatory climax, at the end of which Cate accidentally kills her father, who, it transpires, had groomed and then carried on a secret affair with Natasha. Natasha falsely accused Dan of assaulting her after he broke their relationship off because Cate had come to live with him.

*Denial* was published at the same time as the *Turning Point* conference and is, to date, the last full-length David Belbin YA novel. It had a troubled gestation. The publishers commissioned the novel on a partial synopsis alone. Its original editor did not like the abuse revelation, nor the ending, in which daughter kills father. There was a stand-off. Eventually, after the editor was replaced, I came up with a new ending in which the killing is accidental. Additional research had made it clear that most victims were unlikely to feel sufficiently empowered to take violent revenge. That said, I dislike the published ending of *Denial*, a flatly written compromise that I

agreed to while grieving during the aftermath of my mother's sudden death, and have not republished the book since the rights reverted to me.

*Denial*, I later heard, divided opinion at my publisher and was not heavily promoted, with a subsequent drop in sales. This reduced my work's market price. No publisher was interested in taking my next proposed novel, about asylum seekers and allotments. It would be several years before I was able to write it for reluctant readers.

## Denial (Chapter 17 excerpt)

Mum drove me all the way home after the weekend visit. Dan had called, saying that something had come up and he couldn't get back to the services in time so would she mind? Mum didn't mind. We hadn't had time to talk that weekend because Daisy had been ill.

'Has he got a girlfriend?' Mum asked, as the Chart Show finished and she turned the radio off.

'Not unless he only sees her alternate weekends.'

'I thought maybe that was where he was. You'd tell me if he was drinking again, wouldn't you?'

'Yes, but he's not.'

'Only I can't forget that time he took you on holiday and I had to come and collect you. When we picked you up, he absolutely stank and you looked so lost.'

'Dan's not back on the booze. He couldn't hold down a job if he was. And I wouldn't stay with him.'

Dan had a good excuse for drinking that summer. His wife had left him for her boss. He had just as good a reason to drink now and he wasn't, hardly. But I couldn't tell Mum that.

'It wasn't just alcohol with your dad. He used to have this saying: *too much is, well, nowhere near enough*. Which was great when we were both students and everybody tried everything.'

'You tried everything?' I'd never even seen my mum drunk.

'I tried a few things I shouldn't have. Dan tried everything he could get his hands on.'

'I think he's grown out of that now.'

‘As long as you’d tell me if-‘  
‘-I’d tell you,’ I lied.

## Chapter 29

I bumped into Holly in the library after school. We didn't talk much at tutor time any more, each keeping ourselves to ourselves. So I was surprised when she sat down next to me.

'Your dad picking you up?'

'That's right,' I lied. 'Taking me to Meadowhall. You?'

'Overdue history coursework,' Holly said, but didn't get any work out.

'Are you still going out with Aaron?'

'Far as I know,' I said, coolly. 'Why?'

'Thought you ought to know that there's talk... probably only shit stirring, but...'

She hesitated, trying to choose the right words, so I cut to the chase.

'Me snogging Natasha Clark?'

'It's true then?'

I was about to have a go at Holly. Then I saw that she looked concerned, like she was after gossip.

'We were winding somebody up, that's all.'

'You chose an odd person to wind somebody up with.'

'Natasha's not so bad.' I didn't know why I was defending her.

'You believe the story about Fordham molesting her?'

'I don't know.' As I said it, I realised I was telling the truth. I still hated Natasha. But I didn't know what I thought about anything any more. That was why I'd stayed behind after school.

'You ask me, she offered it him on a plate, but he turned her down. So she's getting her own back. *Hell hath no fury like a woman spurned.* Shakespeare.'

Holly, having given me something to think about, sat on her own. I tried to read for a few minutes. There were no teachers around. They'd either gone home or were in meetings. I went to one of the reference shelves and looked up Holly's Shakespeare line in a book of quotations. It wasn't there. She must have got it wrong.

Trying to act casual, I left the library and looked for Michael. I had a cover story - a missing pen I'd left in the Year Nine common room at afternoon break. He wouldn't know I didn't have any lessons in that room.

I found him in the last place I looked, the staff room. The door was propped open with a bin and Michael was sitting in one of the easy chairs, having a brew. When I put my head round the door, he started. Then he saw who I was and relaxed. I put on my best, pleading voice.

'... I'm almost certain I left it there. Would you open the room up, please?'

Michael was in his late twenties with a slight limp and a swollen, wobbly jaw. I don't know what caused either of them. He was married - or, at least, wore a ring - and had a thick Barnsley accent. As I'd hoped, he didn't take much persuading. He even stayed and helped me look (the pen was just under a curtain, where no-one in last class was likely to have spotted and stolen it).

I spoke without looking at him. 'This is where it happened, isn't it? Natasha told me everything.'

'Did she now?'

'She said you saw everything. You're an important witness.'

'I see a lot of things,' he replied, slowly. 'Hear them too. People often forget I'm about. They leave the door open and they see right through me, if you know what I mean.'

'I do. I feel like that sometimes.'

'I doubt it. Pretty girl like you.'

This was getting a little creepy. The way he was looking at me, I was sure Michael had seen Natasha snogging me the day before. He bent down to look for my pen. Michael was near the curtain already, getting too warm, too quickly.

'What did you see?' I asked.

'More than either of them would have liked.'

'Was Natasha telling the truth? Did you see Mr Fordham force himself on her?'

'I didn't see that, no.'

'What did you see?'

Michael didn't reply. Why should he tell me? I was coming on way too strong. Michael considered for a moment, his hand moving beneath the curtain where the pen was concealed. Then he pulled his hand back and used it to lean on. With his free hand, he pointed out of the window.

'I was standing over there. I saw the girl, your friend, standing close to the teacher. He had an arm around her. She looked upset, only I couldn't tell what with, or even be sure who he was. The police wanted me to say he pulled her up towards him, but she could just as easily have been reaching up to kiss him. I thought best to ignore it. Best to ignore most things like that. But windows were open and I heard her shout, 'Drop dead. I never want to see you again.' Then your dad said something I couldn't hear and she came charging out, so fast I didn't think she'd noticed me. Only you tell me she did.'

'I think she found out about you from the police.'

'I see.' Michael swept the curtain aside, revealing my pen. 'Is this it?'

'Yes.' I took the pen and thanked him. Only then did I realise what he'd just said. 'How did you know that Mr Fordham's my father?'

Michael stood up, unfolding his awkward frame. 'Told you: I overhear things. Like Miss Jackson telling Taylor what effect this was having on Fordham's daughter. She were saying how you hid things really well.., so well, it's scary, she said. When I heard that, I remembered how you came looking for Fordham, night he got suspended. Now you make up this excuse to talk to me today. Doesn't take Sherlock Holmes to guess who you are.'

'Do you think my father... did what she says?'

'You're asking the wrong person.' Michael walked me to the door and locked it behind us. 'But the way he was with that girl...' He thought better of finishing the sentence. I didn't care what he thought. I knew what had happened. Michael had seen what Natasha wanted him to see.

## The Pretender (2008)

*The Pretender* is my most autobiographical novel, although the only episode directly based on something that happened to me is in Chapter One. I was seven or eight years old. The work that my teacher wrongly accused me of plagiarising by was a poem. I had used the form of another poem, but my work was original. I was punished for cheating.

After leaving school, Mark spends a gap year in Paris, where he teaches a fourteen-year-old called Francine to speak English, and Helen Mercer, twenty-year-old wife of manuscript dealer, Paul Mercer, to speak French. He writes two 'new' Hemingway stories on a flea market typewriter as exercises. These find their way into Paul Mercer's hands and Paul makes a great deal of money from their sale and publication. Mark starts university in London, where he begins to work for the fictional *Little Review* (a name shared by several real but defunct journals), which is in financial difficulty. He fabricates an unpublished short story by Graham Greene and pretends to have found it in the magazine's archive. This story (the plot of which is based on my 1997 story, 'Paying For It', not included here) is sent to Greene, who allows it to be published, despite having no recollection of writing it. Emboldened by his success, Mark fakes a story by Roald Dahl, who has just died. Legal problems prevents its publication. Then the fictional writer James Sherwin, who was a friend of *Little Review* editor Tony Bracken, dies, and Mark is tempted to commit a final forgery. Chapter 36 (second extract) begins with Tony's obituary of Sherwin. The remainder of the novel follows.

*The Pretender* is the most rewritten of my novels, existing in five major versions. The first, entitled *The Storyforger* was written from 1985-7. The

second, *Forgery: A Memoir*, was written, with the aid of an Arts Council grant, from 1999-2002. The third version, which removed the novel's last act of 40,000 words or so, was written at my agent's suggestion in around 2004. The fourth version was written in 2005 at the behest of a major publisher who wished to publish the novel for Young Adults. The final version, published in 2008, combined the third and fourth versions. The eventual publisher did not market it for Young Adults as he felt that they would have little interest in the subject of literary forgery.

## The Pretender

### ONE

The first thing you need to hear about happened when I was fourteen. In English, we were reading *David Copperfield*. The rest of the class complained that it was too long. I joined in, but, secretly, I was enjoying myself, especially when Mr Moss told us about Victorian London, a place bursting with invention and energy yet, at the same time, squalid, even depraved. I had already decided that I would live in London one day.

We'd got to the end of chapter twelve when Mr Moss gave us a different kind of assignment.

'I'd like you,' he said, 'to pretend you *are* Dickens. Write the beginning of the next chapter. Read it first, if you like. Yours must be different. You have *carte blanche* to do what you like, plot-wise, but it must be in the style of Dickens.' Then he went on about Style for a while. I only half listened. Yes, I thought. I'd like to have a go at that.

In my bedroom, I scribbled away, losing track of time. When I'd written enough, I typed it up, using the Amstrad word processor Mum had bought for me, second hand, from an ad in the evening paper. As a computer, it was an embarrassment. You couldn't play games. I used it for typing out essays and writing fiction, though my efforts so far had been pitiful, deleted the next day. After two or three drafts, the Dickens imitation was done. I printed it off, pleased with myself, yet sure Mr Moss - one of those sarcastic, nit-picking teachers - would find plenty of flaws in my work.

A week later, when he was returning the assignment, Moss did something I'd never seen a teacher do before. He gave back everybody's

homework but mine. Moss was a mild looking man, with a narrow nose, a small, wiry body and dark, greasy hair that he didn't have cut often enough. He returned to his desk, opened a drawer and lifted out my Dickens piece. The teacher raised it like a flustered referee holding up a red card.

'Trace,' he said, 'produced quite the most memorable piece of coursework that I have come across in my brief career as a teacher. So memorable, in fact, that I'd like to read it out to you.'

The other boys stared at me with contempt: smart arse Trace again, they were thinking. Then the teacher began to declaim my mock Dickens, using exactly the same tone and slightly exaggerated manner he used when reading bits of David Copperfield to us. I listened carefully, trying to pick up what I'd done wrong. Had I put in a modern word by mistake, or mixed up one of the character's names? Not that I could tell. When Moss stopped, I was half expecting to be congratulated.

'What did you think?' he asked the class.

There was the usual silence that greeted a question we hadn't already been told the answer to. This was a top set, but, even so, it didn't do to show off, or express an opinion that might be ridiculed by the teacher. So my classmates were silent.

'Didn't you find it convincing?' Moss asked, stressing each syllable in the final word in a way that might or might not be sarcastic. 'Don't you feel that Dickens would have been proud to write such prose at the tender age of - what is it now, Trace - fourteen?'

My youth regularly humiliated me. Some of the other boys in the class were already sixteen, but I had been put forward a year and my birthday wasn't until March. I stared furiously at the lid of my desk, oblivious to the

teacher's footsteps. Mr Moss grabbed me from behind, yanked me up by the collar of my shirt and turned me to face the whole class.

'Wouldn't you say that the piece was too convincing?' he barked, choking me. 'All right, Trace, I want the truth. Where does it come from?'

'I made it up, Sir,' I pleaded.

'I made it up, Sir,' he repeated, mimicking my voice. 'You're a devious sod, Trace. You dug around until you found a description that might have fitted, changed a couple of names then copied it out. Do you take me for a fool, boy?'

'No, Sir.'

'Then tell me where it came from.'

'Honest, Sir, I made it up.'

Moss's small, beady eyes began to bulge. 'If that's your attitude, we'll see how you feel about it after a headteacher's detention.'

He got out one of the yellow forms and began to fill it in. When he got to the space marked reason for detention, he wrote one word: *cheating*.

'But I didn't cheat, Sir. I ...'

I thought he was going to hit me. I was, perhaps because I had no father, terrified of male violence. On the rare occasions when I got into fights, I never hit back, only shielded myself from the worst blows. Now the teacher saw the fear in my eyes and took a deep breath.

'If you tell me where you took the piece from,' he told me, more temperately, 'I'll tear this up.'

I thought for a moment, desperately trying to recall the name of a Dickens book that wasn't in the school library.

'The American Notes', I muttered, shamefaced.

Moss smiled, vindicated. Then, as the bell rang, he took the yellow form and my coursework and methodically tore them into tiny pieces. These he let fall through his fingers into the bin, like a bird shitting. The class began to pack up, but, with a wave of his referee's arm, Moss halted them. He gave us a sermon about plagiarism in coursework, saying that, if we were caught cheating, even in such a seemingly minor manner as this, it would put all of our exam results at risk.

We were late out for lunch and the whole class blamed me.

## TWO

My mother and I lived in a terraced house at one end of a semicircle that bordered a small green. These houses were originally alms cottages for the poor. A housing association bought most of them as accommodation for the elderly. Kids at school used to tease me about living in an old folk's home. It was, I suppose, an odd place for a child to grow up. There were no other children, but I was doted on by the elderly residents. Mum, on the rare occasions she went out, had no shortage of baby-sitters.

She did have a shortage of boyfriends. My father was never spoken of. He had deserted Mum before I was born, giving her, I came to think, a deep distrust of men. Her own mother was a single parent. Gran died when I was five, so I barely remembered her. Mum was my entire family.

The house was full of books and Mum read to me every night until I was old enough to read fluently on my own. If I wanted more choice, I only had to go to the library where Mum worked. When I was young, she was strict about the times I could go to the library. It had to be once a week, when she was on duty. She said she didn't want me showing her up by behaving badly in her absence. But I wasn't a very naughty child.

Mum's library rule was like the trick she played with 'lights out'. By setting an early bedtime, Mum ensured that I sneaked a torch under the bedclothes so that I could keep reading. Fiction became a forbidden pleasure. By rationing library visits, Mum made me addicted to the places, so that, later in life, wherever I lived, the local library became my second home.

After the Dickens incident, it was a long time before I copied another writer's style. I read all the time, and couldn't help but write books in my head. I would tell myself the story of my imaginary life, the one where I got the girl and won the Nobel Prize for Literature, in the style of the author who I was reading at the time. Sometimes, in the night, I dreamt whole chapters of books, the words forming on the page as I read.

All that was a form of daydreaming. I started writing seriously in the Sixth form, after the school took us on a weekend visit to Paris. This was my first trip abroad. Paris in the spring was like stepping into a movie (we didn't have a TV at home, but Mum and I often went to the cinema). On returning, I immersed myself in French authors and American writers who had lived in Paris and began my own tentative jottings.

When university applications came up, I'd had enough of always being younger than everybody else on my course and deferred for a year. Mum wanted me to apply for Cambridge, but I refused. Cambridge would be full of rich, public school people. No matter how good I was, I'd always be an outsider, without the breeding, brilliance or money to fit it. I applied to London University instead, to study Eng Lit with French subsid. At the interview, I was asked why I wanted to be in London. Did I have friends there?

'No. I applied because I want to live here. I want to be a writer, and successful writers have to live in London.'

The interviewer asked who my favourite writers were. This was difficult. I didn't mention Dickens because he was too obvious. Ditto Shakespeare. Chandler and Collins were out because they wrote mystery fiction. Kurt Vonnegut was risky because he wrote sci-fi. So I brought up Hemingway, whose short stories I'd been reading on the train. Then I

mentioned Joyce, because he was difficult (so far, I'd only read *Portrait of the Artist* and *Dubliners*).

'Playwrights?' he said.

'Beckett, of course.'

He raised an eyebrow and I thought that he was about to catch me out with a difficult question. I'd never seen a Beckett play, though I'd once tried to read *Waiting For Godot*. It was his prose I knew.

'Perhaps you ought to study in Paris rather than London,' the tutor said, his voice becoming kindly. 'Those three all made their names there.'

'Actually,' I replied, a decision forming only as the words spilled out of my mouth. 'That's where I intend to spend my year out.'

## THIRTY-SIX

*For nearly twenty years, James Sherwin has been one of the missing men of English Literature. Now he is lost forever. I vividly recall reading what was to be his first published short story, 'Silent Gunner'. It arrived on my desk in 1964, part of the ever growing post-bag of the small magazine I edited. Finding a talented author you'd never heard of was then - still is - a delightful surprise. I invited Jim to lunch, expecting someone my own age, finding instead a freckle-faced twenty-three year old who took his writing as seriously as only a very young man can.*

*He was an orphan, his parents having died in the war (father in Egypt, mother in a London air raid). For the next ten years, Jim was passed around between relatives. He was also an autodidact who left school at fifteen and worked menial jobs (park keeper, street-sweeper, bricklayer) that allowed him time to think and write.*

*Jim wrote in no recognisable tradition. He used to talk about Hemingway and Borges, but his favourite books were Bleak House and Vanity Fair. For all the mysterious edginess of his prose, he was a storyteller at heart, and success came quickly. His work in magazines was noticed and written about even before his first novel, the semi-autobiographical I Singer was published in '67. Then, at 26, he became - albeit briefly - a celebrity, feted by John Lennon and Mick Jagger, dating models and movie stars, gushingly reviewed wherever he was published. It was enough to turn anybody's head. James ceased being Jim, turning himself into a legend. James immersed himself in the subculture of sex, drugs and rock and roll. Now and then he would clear his head with trips to a remote Greek island, where he could be anonymous, recover and write.*

*Fame did his writing no favours. All but one of the nine stories featured in his second book, User, were written before this great success. It didn't matter. The book's publication both confirmed his reputation and raised expectations.*

*However, James, always a slow writer, was drying up. His third and final book, Stargazer was a novella of fewer than thirty thousand words. Like I Singer, it told of a young man's disenchantment with the material world. Where the singer sought refuge in surrealism, sex and wild antics, the star gazer opted for mysticism, an ascetic life, becoming first a drop out, then a recluse. This was 1970. Sales and reviews were less good than for I Singer, but still healthy. James embarked on a reading tour of universities - first in Britain, then in the USA, where he befriended writers such as Donald Barthelme and Richard Brautigan. Rather than read from his earlier books, Sherwin would perform passages from a work in progress, A Commune.*

*The rest was silence. Sherwin retreated to the island of Karenos, where acolytes would try to track him down, usually failing. He wrote, farmed a little and meditated. A letter would come every few months. In the early ones, he talked about writing, but that soon stopped. Eventually, the letters slowed down to a trickle. Six years ago, he mentioned that he had married: 'a sweet American girl who wants to get me writing again'. But despite Sonia's encouragement, A Commune never appeared. When I wrote to him recently, asking for a piece for the Little Review's final issue, James wrote back 'Sonia bought me this computer in the hope that it would get me writing again, but all I seem to write on it are replies to prissy American doctoral students telling them to fuck off. Most days though, I sit down at the damned machine, try.'*

*James's death, of a heart attack, a few weeks after his fifty-third birthday, is a great loss. He was young still and might yet have finished the masterpiece many expected of him. Even so, he gave us two novels and ten enigmatic, exciting stories as good as anything written since the war. He is survived by his wife Sonia. They had no children.*

'What do you think?' Tony asked me, after I'd read the obituary.

'It reads well,' I said, thinking. 'Shouldn't it have a bit more on his parents, background, that sort of thing?'

‘I suppose so,’ Tony told me. ‘I could look all that stuff up.’

‘No need,’ I said. ‘I’ve been researching Sherwin.’

I told Tony everything he needed, and more. He made notes, then typed the changes into the computer.

‘I didn’t know you’d become such an expert,’ he said. ‘I’ll print this off and fax it to The Guardian,’ he said.

‘Wait,’ I told him. ‘There’s something you need to see first.’

I handed him the story I’d been working on.

‘What is it?’ Tony asked, glancing at the Ms. ‘Trying to get another of your friend’s stories in the magazine?’

Half the stuff we got from new writers - including Tim - was done on one of these Amstrads, with their slightly blurred dot matrix printouts.

‘It’s the same printer as James Sherwin used,’ I said.

‘I remember,’ Tony told me, taking the manuscript from me, reading the title. *A Commune: extract from a work in progress*. His eyes widened. ‘When did this arrive?’

I considered lying. I could say that it had come in the post with one of those envelope destroyed labels and no accompanying note, that I’d only just worked out what it was. But I’d lied too much already.

‘It didn’t,’ I said.

‘Maybe you found it in the archive,’ Tony suggested, his voice unusually quiet. ‘Something you missed earlier.’

‘No,’ I told him. ‘I wrote it myself.’

‘Ah.’ Tony sat back, put his feet up on the desk and, ignoring me, began to read. I couldn’t watch him, so I stared out of the window. The weather was warming up. Men were wearing jackets instead of coats. The girl from the CD shop down the road, whom I sometimes fantasised about,

had on a short sleeved T-shirt. I watched her rearranging the two for ten pounds boxes on the stall outside the shop and remembered what my mother told me about *A Commune*, how it was meant to be the definitive account of how the sixties' dream went sour. How could I write about the sixties? I wasn't born until 1971.

Forty minutes later, Tony finished.

'How long did this take you?'

'A long time.'

'Longer than the others?' he asked, bluntly.

'Yes.'

Had he known before, or did he work it out while reading? I'd expected a big scene, but Tony was subdued. I couldn't tell if he was disappointed in me.

'Where did you learn to do this?' he asked.

'It's a long story.'

'I don't have anywhere I have to be.'

I told him - hesitantly at first, starting with Dickens in school, finishing with breaking into Dahl's writing hut. As I recounted this last story, Tony burst into laughter and I knew that, however wrong I might have been, I was forgiven.

'The irony is,' he said when he'd recovered, 'that's the best one. Oh dear...'

His eyes had watered. He wiped them, then said, 'what am I going to tell Graham?'

'I don't know.'

'He suspected, you know. That was what first made me suspicious. I didn't read out all of his letter to you. Let me find it.'

He unlocked the top drawer of his desk, found the Greene letter and handed it to me. I read the familiar words, then got to the paragraph that Tony hadn't included when he read it aloud.

*From the photocopy, this looks right, but I have no recollection whatsoever of writing it. Was I overdoing the benzedrine at the time? The style's rather ragged, and that might explain it. Or is it possible somebody's pulling a fast one on you? If I remember correctly, St. Pancras was railway offices at the time, not closed down, which seems an odd mistake for me to make. Publish by all means, if you think it's good enough. I'm afraid I'm not up to doing a rewrite at the moment.*

I handed the letter back.

'I wasn't a hundred percent sure,' Tony told me. 'It seemed far too good for a nineteen year old, and the story was a godsend, so I wasn't inclined to challenge it. Then Roald Dahl died and I decided to set you a test.'

'You knew I'd faked the Dahl story?'

Tony gave me one of his supercilious looks. 'You didn't know Dahl. He wouldn't have left even a bad story lying around for forty years. He'd have recycled it. That's what writers do.'

'There's somebody you haven't mentioned,' I said, meaning Sherwin, but Tony started talking about Paul Mercer instead.

'I couldn't understand why he'd alighted on me and was overpaying for the archives. Then I discovered that he was the man who'd sold those Hemingway papers. And I put two and two together. You were in Paris when those stories were discovered. Ergo, Mercer got them from you. Mercer found me thanks to you.'

'I wrote to him,' I explained. 'I wanted to know what had happened to the money from the stories. Last week he told me that they still weren't sold.'

‘Bollocks,’ Tony told me. ‘The man’s a con artist. I don’t know what his game is and I doubt that I’ll see the seventy-five thousand he’s promised me. I’m interested to find out, that’s all. Have you slept with his wife yet?’

‘No!’

‘Why not? Don’t tell me she’s faithful to him.’

‘No. I mean, she doesn’t have to be. It’s just...’

‘You’ve got her to yourself most days. What are you waiting for? You should take every opportunity that presents itself, otherwise you’ll end up with nothing but regrets.’

It was hard to explain that Helen preferred me as a friend. Tony couldn’t understand how any man could fail to be completely controlled by his cock. I mumbled something then said what was really on my mind.

‘What did you think of the Sherwin story?’

‘Not bad,’ Tony told me. ‘Needs work. You know, I heard Jim reading some of *A Commune* in 1970. If I looked in my diary, I might have some notes on what it was about.’

‘Do you really want me to do some work on the story?’ I asked, still unsure what Tony was thinking.

‘Why not?’ Tony asked again. ‘Jim’s dead. It won’t hurt him where he is. The wife’s probably short of money. It’ll give her something to show publishers, and we’ll sell more copies of the magazine, too. But we have to make sure it’s good enough. How fast can you write?’

‘Pretty fast,’ I replied.

‘Good. Because it’s imperative that the issue goes to press by the end of the week. Now, how shall I rewrite the penultimate paragraph for *The Guardian*? Let’s see. *When I wrote to him recently, asking for a piece for the Little Review’s final issue, James wrote back ‘Sonia bought me this computer in the hope that it*

would get me writing again, but all I seem to write on it are replies to prissy American doctoral students telling them to fuck off. Most days though, I sit down at the damned machine, try. See what you think of this. Does that sound convincing?’

‘Sure,’ I said. ‘But you’ll have to explain what this is.’

Tony began to type. ‘This’ was an extract from *A Commune*, showing that he was still working on the book, twenty years on. The material he sent will appear in the final issue of the *Little Review*, to be published next month.

‘And then as before. What do you think?’

‘Great,’ I said. ‘Let’s do it.’

Only when he’d sent it off did I think of a complication. ‘If you’re selling the archive, then Paul will get the Sherwin letter and the manuscript.’

‘He can have them. We’ll print off a second copy of the story for the wife,’ Tony told me. ‘As for the letter...’

He found Sherwin’s original letter in the drawer and looked at the signature, then at the writing on the envelope.

‘Two choices. Either I hand write the extra words in blue-black ink. Or you retype the whole letter on your computer, print it off, and I forge the signature. What do you think?’

I thought about it. ‘It’s possible the wife will find the original letter on his computer and discover it was changed. Better to hand write the extra note, if you can do it convincingly.’

‘I’ll practise,’ Tony told me, with a mischievous grin. He was getting into the game. ‘Go to Ryman’s. Buy me as many different kinds of blue-black ink as they sell.’

When I returned, Tony showed me his imitation of Sherwin’s writing. He played about with ink until he’d got the right shade. Then, taking a deep breath, he wrote the note onto Sherwin’s original letter. His hand jerked at

one moment and I thought that he was going to lose it. But the words, as they appeared, looked convincing. *See what you think of this.* We watched the ink dry then compared the colour with that of the signature.

‘It looks right,’ I told Tony.

‘Let’s hope so. Now, we have to get on with your story.’

‘I could bring the word processor down and we could work in here.’

‘No,’ Tony told me. ‘Mercer may show up any time. The deal’s meant to be signed tomorrow. I don’t want him to see anything suspicious. Let’s move your computer to my flat. We can work on it there.’

‘I’ll book a taxi to take it. I’ve got to meet Helen in a few minutes, but I’ll join you there.’

‘Bring a change of clothes. You might need to work all night.’

## THIRTY-SEVEN

‘I thought you’d stood me up,’ Helen said, outside Buckingham Palace, where she’d been watching the Changing of the Guard.

‘Sorry,’ I told her. ‘A writer’s died. We need to remake the final issue. What was it like?’

‘OK,’ Helen said. ‘What writer? Anyone I’d have heard of?’

‘I doubt it,’ I said, hooking my arm through hers. ‘A guy from the sixties, James Sherwin.’

Helen blinked. We began to walk. ‘He wrote *Stargazer*, yeah?’

‘Yeah.’

‘My mum was keen on that book.’

‘Mine too.’

‘Where are we going?’ Helen asked.

‘I don’t know. Just walking, I guess. What do you want to do?’

‘Nothing special,’ Helen said. ‘I like just walking with you.’

‘Fine. We’ll stop when we see somewhere we want to go into. What did you do last night?’

‘Paul took me to Simpsons-on-the-Strand. I was the youngest person there by years. Come to think of it, Paul was the second youngest person there.’

We laughed.

‘You have to work tonight?’ she asked.

‘I’m afraid so. The last issue has to be ready to print by next week.’

‘Tomorrow’s my last night before we go back to New York.’

‘What are you doing?’

‘Nothing,’ Helen told me. ‘Paul’s got to go to Scotland. He’s negotiating to buy some Robert Louis Stevenson papers. He tried to persuade me to go with him but it’s cold up there. I’d prefer to be here, with you. Let me buy you dinner tomorrow night to thank you for showing me round these last few days.’

‘I’d love that,’ I said.

We discussed where to eat and arranged to meet at her hotel. Our wandering had somehow brought us back to Soho.

‘You’re so lucky,’ Helen said, ‘living in the heart of things.’

‘It’s not as romantic as it seems,’ I told her. ‘A bit of a hovel, really.’

‘I’ve never seen your room,’ Helen said, leaning into me as she spoke. ‘Will you show me?’

‘If you like,’ I said, trying to remember what kind of state I’d left it in.

‘Will Tony be there?’

‘No. He’s gone home for the day.’ And I was meant to be with him soon, but I didn’t tell Helen this. She followed me up to the office, then held onto my arm as we climbed the rickety stairs to my tiny flat.

‘It’s so small!’ she said. ‘Is this where you do your writing?’

‘Mostly. I sometimes use the office, but, at night, when the heat’s off, it’s easier to get this room warm.’

‘What do you use? A typewriter?’

‘Pen and ink,’ I lied, not wanting to explain where my computer had gone. But Helen had moved on to something else. She bounced on my three-quarter sized bed.

‘A big bed for such a small room.’

‘Tony used to use it for his assignments.’

‘Tony, but not you?’

Scarcely knowing how to reply, I stood at the window. I pointed to a building three doors down.

‘Graham Greene used to meet a prostitute called Pepe in that room. There’s a story about it in the last issue but one.’

‘And you?’ Helen asked again. Her hand stroked my back. ‘Do you ever..?’

I put my arm around her shoulders and she didn’t flinch from my touch

‘I know some of the working girls. They say hello, but that’s all. I’ve been waiting...’

‘I know you have,’ Helen said, and her touch changed. Her hand started to slide into the back of my jeans. Gently, I turned her towards me. We kissed.

It wasn’t like the enthusiastic but inexperienced kisses I’d shared with Francine. It was a carnal kiss. Our bodies rubbed against each other so hungrily, I thought we might make love then and there. But we didn’t.

‘I’ve got to go,’ Helen told me, breathlessly. ‘Paul’s expecting me. I’ll see you tomorrow.’

With that, she hurried out, not even giving me time to say goodbye. It seemed that Tony, this morning, had been right about Helen, as about so many other things. She was mine for the taking.

When I got to Highgate I found that Tony had set up my computer in the living room. He had a pot of coffee on the go.

‘By the time the obituaries appear in the morning, we’ve got to have a convincing Sherwin story ready,’ he told me.

The news of Sherwin's death had only just broken in the media. The BBC's Ceefax service had two sentences saying that Greek authorities had confirmed the death of British born author James Sherwin, at the age of fifty-three. As we worked into the evening, Tony put on the Radio Four programme *Kaleidoscope*, which ran a brief item about Sherwin's death.

'It's almost twenty years since he disappeared from the literary scene, but author James Sherwin, whose death was announced today, casts a long shadow. Twenty-four years since his only full length novel *I Singer*, Sherwin's many fans are still awaiting a successor. Now that he's dead, the question is: will his readers have to wait forever?'

Two Sherwin 'scholars' debated this issue (they had no idea) then moved on to place James Sherwin's place in history. The first said that he deserved to be talked about in the same breath as Borges or Kafka. The other thought he'd been overrated, perhaps because he published so little, when he was so young.

'There's bound to be a flood of posthumous publications, and then we'll see. My guess is that the Sherwin bubble will burst and he'll soon be little more than a sixties footnote...'

'Should we be doing this?' I asked Tony, as the item ended.

'How do you mean?'

'Whatever I do, however good it is, we'll be messing with his reputation.'

'James didn't give a fig what happened after he was dead,' Tony assured me. 'He didn't believe in a personal afterlife and a literary afterlife wouldn't have interested him either. He'd have enjoyed the joke.'

Tony showed me some notes he'd made at the last reading he saw Sherwin give. The details were scant. James read about a passage about

hippies living in caves on an island. Broad comedy at first, unusual for him. Hints of more characteristic darkness towards the end.

‘It’s too dangerous,’ I told Tony. ‘The stuff I’ve already written is based on so little information. Somebody might have taped his readings. In America, they almost certainly did. We’ll be caught out.’

‘Yet you tell me you’ve been trying to write the book he wrote.’

‘Or would have written,’ I explained to Tony. ‘I thought he’d given up writing altogether. But what I wrote was an exercise, for myself, not for publication. The part I showed you is the best bit.’

We agreed to look at my piece together, seeing what worked and what didn’t. It was an absorbing process. We examined each paragraph in detail, line by line, word by word. The only thing Tony left alone was the punctuation. I found it easy to imitate any writer’s punctuation habits. I knew all about Sherwin’s over-use of colons, his misuse of commas, his chaotic way with italics, his preference for the dash over parentheses.

Examining my story with Tony, I felt like I was learning more than ever before. His questions were very simple. ‘Why would he use that word? What’s he trying to say here?’ We examined the story as though it were by Sherwin himself and we, his editors, were trying to decipher his wishes.

‘Have you done this before?’ I asked Tony at one point. ‘Did you go over the two stories of Sherwin’s that you published with him?’

‘Not as closely as this,’ Tony said. ‘But, yes. I asked some questions. Jim made a few minor changes as a result. Great writers rarely mind being edited. All they want is for their work to be as good as possible.’

We worked for hours, losing track of time. Now and then I had a breakthrough. A sentence or two disappeared. A paragraph was moved to a different place. A new line of dialogue lifted the story, giving hints of a

meaning that shifted the ground in a typically elliptical way. I worked in a reference to living in caves, which anyone who remembered Sherwin's readings of nineteen years before might notice and say - *ah, yes, it comes back to me now*. By the early hours of the morning, we were as near as we were going to get.

'I suggest we sleep on it,' Tony said, pouring us both a large scotch. 'See how it looks in the morning.'

He made me up a bed on the sofa, then retired. It took me a while to get off. I was exhilarated by the work I'd done. It was the most demanding forgery I'd done, written in the full knowledge that what I wrote would be subjected to endless scrutiny. Yet, thanks to Tony's help, I felt confident.

'It's a funny thing,' Tony said to me at midday, when I was halfway through my second mug of tea. 'You hear of paintings being forged all the time, but never literature. Why? I've been wondering. Because there's so little demand? Hardly. Because it's hard to do convincingly? Surely not. Experts are easy to fool. Think of the Hitler Diaries and the nobs who were taken in by them. I think it's because writing great literature requires both enormous skill and immense talent. Painting skills are easily picked up. You can get by on a little talent and a lot of application. The painter is valued for originality, for innovation. Copying somebody else's innovations is relatively easy. But literature has to remake itself all the time. The writer himself often falls short of the mark. Every now and then an obscure academic tries to make a name for himself by attributing some long lost poem or play to Shakespeare. He may be right. We'll never know. But people don't want to believe the attribution because the piece simply isn't good enough.'

‘What are you getting at?’ I asked. ‘You want me to forge Shakespeare?’

‘No. You’ve been careful to do twentieth century writers, forging in an area where it’s still possible to create a patina of reality in the manuscripts. You’re able to mimic the minds of men who are nearly your contemporaries. That’s the clever thing. I don’t understand how you do it. Talent, sure, but it’s a special skill, too. Lots of writers copy others. But you become them. It’s a kind of genius. I wonder how long you’ll be able to do it.’

This was a question I often asked myself. In a way, I didn’t want my facility for forgery to last. I wanted my writing to become itself, not a copy.

‘Perhaps it’s like having a photographic memory,’ Tony went on, ‘something a few people have when they’re young, but which quickly fades in adulthood. You never know. Could be it’s a skill you’ll always possess. The only way to find out would be to locate other people who’ve shared the same skill. But if others existed, then, by the very nature of the thing, we wouldn’t know who they were.’

The phone rang, interrupting our conversation. Tony answered.

‘Paul, how are you? Yes, tomorrow is fine. I’ll sign the papers today, so that we can meet at your solicitors when you return. Have a good trip.’

He put the phone down, then told me, with a sly smile, ‘According to Paul Mercer, I should get my seventy-five thousand tomorrow.’

We went over the Sherwin story one more time, then Tony printed off two copies: one for the typesetters, one for Sonia Sherwin. Before leaving, I went and bought the day’s broadsheets. We wanted to read the Sherwin obituaries. Tony’s was the best informed. The paper had added tributes from JG Ballard and Michael Moorcock. Elsewhere, *The Independent* wrote that Sherwin was one of the most original British novelists to emerge since

the war. *The Times* was more niggardly, describing Sherwin as a sixties casualty who ‘had the good grace to disappear, rather than continue trading on his inflated reputation. He will be remembered, if at all, for the minor curiosity that is *I, Singer*, a book often begun but seldom finished by a generation of aspirant dropouts.’ *The Daily Telegraph* didn’t cover Sherwin’s death at all, giving all their space to two ex-army men and a senior figure from the British Medical Council.

Reading these obituaries, I worried again about how my story would affect posterity’s view of Sherwin. But Tony told me I was wrong.

‘Interest in writers tends to wane when they die. Their books turn up cheap in the second hand shops. Nobody wants to write about them. Most sink back into the obscurity they came from. Few rise again. We’re helping to keep Jim in the public eye. Don’t feel guilty about it.’

I noticed that Sherwin had become ‘Jim’ again. In death, Tony was able to reclaim the old friend whose work he’d discovered. Tony called a taxi. We loaded the computer, then rode to Soho, dropping the story off to be typeset on the way. The final issue was ready to go to press.

‘Paul’s spending the night in Scotland,’ Tony told me, as I struggled upstairs with my trusty Amstrad. ‘His young wife will be all alone. Just in case you wanted to know.’

## THIRTY-EIGHT

I was in a chipper mood when I collected Helen, wearing the clothes she'd helped me choose (and mostly paid for). My beard was trimmed, my hair washed. I was anxious to keep Helen to her half promise of the afternoon before. But Helen, while affectionate, seemed ill at ease. She was dressed young, in jeans, trainers, and a sliver of a silk top concealed beneath the khaki combat jacket that half the young women in London seemed to wear that year. Yet her face was lined with concerns she didn't share with me. Our conversation was aimless, arbitrary, as though we were both putting off the real point of our evening.

After the meal we walked, arms tentatively linked, along the Charing Cross Road. Some of its second hand bookshops were still open, even though it was after ten. Helen insisted on going in to Any Amount of Books, where she asked for a copy of *User*, Sherwin's book of short stories.

'Sorry. We had one, but it went earlier today. The book's still in paperback, I think.'

It was, and I had my mother's copy back at the office, but I didn't mention this to Helen, any more than I mentioned the Sherwin story about to appear in our final issue. I was beginning to doubt what had grown between us that week, to see how little, really, we had in common. Helen was a married woman from another country. I was a callow youth, inexperienced, a virgin. What happened later was bound to disappoint her and might humiliate me. My half-plan, to ask her to leave Paul, to stay here with me, seemed ridiculous. What would Helen want with a penniless nineteen-year-old who had no proper home or job?

We were near the office. I would be more at ease there than in a hotel room paid for by Paul. Also, If Helen refused to come up, I would know there was no chance. I would see her to the door of her hotel then walk back.

‘We’re right by my flat,’ I said. ‘Let’s go there.’

Helen didn’t look at me. ‘It’s not much further to the hotel,’ she said.

‘You spend most of your life in hotels,’ I told her. ‘Come to the flat. There’s a bottle of whisky in the office.’

‘There’s a mini-bar in the room,’ Helen told me. ‘I’d feel more comfortable there, Mark. Please.’

That *please* did it. In silence, we walked along the Strand. When we got to the hotel, the doormen in their top hats and Victorian coats were enough to intimidate me.

‘I don’t belong in there,’ I told Helen.

‘You must come in,’ she said, insistently.

‘No. Let’s say goodbye here,’ I told her.

‘I don’t want to say goodbye,’ she said, then kissed me fully on the mouth.

I wavered and she took my hand, guiding me towards the glass door that glided open for us. We crossed the lobby and were in the lift, alone, kissing again. Helen’s hands were all over me. Too eager. She had become the awkward one.

How many times since have I replayed in my head what happened next? The room is huge, with two beds, which is a relief because it allows me to think that Helen and Paul don’t sleep in the same bed, that they haven’t had sex in either one. Helen gets a bottle of champagne from the mini-bar and I’m all for opening it right away but Helen tells me to wait. So we kiss and caress and completely undress. Horniness makes me commandeering or

maybe it's that Helen is so submissive I feel able to thrust myself on her but she's experienced and knows how to stop me from entering her and it's just starting to occur to me that maybe this is some enormous set up and Paul is going to walk in at any moment freshly arrived from Scotland and shoot me or something like that when I hear Big Ben in the distance, chiming midnight and Helen is out from under me, removing the champagne from the fridge. As the last chime sounds, the glasses are full and, resplendently naked, she holds one out to me and says 'Happy Birthday'.

I am twenty years old. My birthday is something I've avoided thinking about since Helen told me she'd be gone by today and she will be gone but right now she's here, giving me champagne kisses, telling me it's time for my present, and I'm amazed that she's remembered, after all it's been nearly two years and I ask her what my present is, although I already know.

Afterwards, Helen pours the last of the chilled champagne, tells me I must take a bath with her. We get into the large, freestanding bath, filled with bubbles that begin to overflow onto the tiles below, and we sip champagne while washing each other. Now that I'm sated with sex, brilliant sex, Helen no longer seems older than me. She is only very beautiful, and vulnerable. And later, when we are holding each other in bed, I try to talk to Helen about the future, and leaving her husband. But she puts her finger to my lips and we begin to make love for a second time that threatens to last forever, yet doesn't.

Then Helen is sleeping, but I'm not. I'm wide awake. I want to shout, and sing, and I pull out my notebook and fill it with nonsense, all about Helen. Then I try to sleep, but can't. It's gone four in the morning. Helen's made no promises to me. We've not discussed the future. Maybe it would be

best if I go. Only, when I try to leave the bed, her arm reaches over and squeezes my shoulder, as if asking me to stay.

‘Are you all right?’ she murmurs.

‘I’m fine, but I can’t sleep.’

‘Talk to me then,’ she says, though her eyes aren’t open.

I know what I want to say, but I can’t. Helen wouldn’t leave Paul for me. Looking at her, I’m not even sure that I’d want her to. I have no idea where I’m going next. The magazine’s over and I’ve lost interest in returning to university. I’ve still got most of the money Helen gave me. Maybe it’s time to travel. I’m not ready to write yet, so what I need to do is have experiences, gather material.

‘Why did you try to buy that book, earlier?’ I ask her.

‘What book?’ She’s not really awake.

‘*User.*’

‘Paul rang earlier. He wanted me to find him a copy.’

Her husband’s name sends a chill through me. ‘Did he say why?’ I ask, but she’s gone back to sleep. I wash and dress. Helen doesn’t stir again. I kiss the nape of her neck, then let myself out of the room.

Downstairs, the doorman does not wish me ‘goodnight’ as I leave. Maybe he thinks I’m a gigolo who’s been servicing a wealthy guest. This thought amuses me and I get an idea for a story that I’ll start to write as soon as I get home.

Only that isn’t possible for, as I walk through Leicester Square at five in the morning, I’m conscious of commotion, sirens, large vehicles trying to move through narrow alleys. There’s a fire engine jammed between the Chinese supermarket and the triple X video store. I see a ladder rammed up

the outer wall of the office. A policeman tells me to get back and I tell him that I live there, on the top floor. His attitude changes.

‘Anybody else likely to be inside?’

‘Not at night, no.’

‘You’re very lucky,’ he tells me. ‘If you’d been asleep upstairs when this lot started, you’d be a goner by now.’

This news has no effect on me, for I am already certain about who was responsible for this fire, someone who knew I would not be home.

‘Insured, are you?’

I shake my head. While I have lost a few paltry possessions, Tony has lost his nest egg, his legacy. He will be devastated.

‘Pity,’ the officer says, before going off to tell the firefighters that nobody’s burning to death inside. I stare in horror when, on the top floor, there’s a sudden conflagration. Flames shoot into the clear, cloudless, Soho sky. A small part of the history of English Literature is consumed, translated into smoke, never to be seen again.

## THIRTY-NINE

Tony arrived a few minutes after me, frantic with worry that I was trapped inside. I called Helen at the hotel. Reception refused to put me through, saying they had instructions not to disturb her. By the time Tony and I made it back to his Highgate flat, early in the afternoon, there was a message from Paul on the answering machine.

‘Heard what happened. That’s really tough. Can’t talk. Got a flight to catch. Ciao.’

‘I’m a fool,’ Tony said. ‘If only I’d kept the stuff here. But it’s only paper, in the end. You’ve lost everything.’

‘At least I wasn’t hurt,’ I told him, adding, ‘and I’ve still got most of the thousand Paul gave me in the bank.’

‘I’ll help as much as I can,’ Tony told me. ‘Stay here as long as you want.’

I thanked him, my partner in crime, my surrogate father, but I still had no desire to live with him.

‘I think I’ll go back to Leam for a while,’ I said.

The next day found me there. I hadn’t written ahead to say I was coming. Tim and Magneta had said I was welcome any time. I hoped they really meant it.

Spring arrived later in Leam than London. There were still bluebells in the small flower bed at the front of the cottage. Its front door was newly painted in a rich green. Magneta answered my knock. Her hair was longer and wilder and she had put on weight. She shrieked with delight and hugged me.

‘We were only talking about you this morning,’ she said, ushering me inside. ‘We read about it in the papers.’

‘You read about it?’ I didn’t realise that the fire had been reported.

‘Yes. You were a big fan of his, weren’t you?’

‘Yes. I was. Am.’ Now I thought she meant Sherwin.

‘And so soon after him giving the story to the magazine.’

‘How did you know about that?’ I still thought she meant Sherwin.

Magneta looked perplexed.

‘I know because Tim was in the same issue. Mark, you do know what I’m talking about? It’s just been on the radio. Graham Greene’s dead. He died in Switzerland, yesterday. Mark, are you all right?’

My face must have gone pale. Greene had been ill for ages. He’d died, more or less, of old age. Even so, at that moment, I felt that I’d murdered him.

## FORTY

‘Is this all the stuff you’ve brought?’

‘It is.’ My belongings fitted, with room to spare, into an old flight bag of Tony’s. I was travelling light. ‘Something happened.’

I told Magneta about the fire, how it had destroyed my flat, the archive, even the typewriter that Graham Greene had once written on.

‘Was any of it insured?’

‘I never bothered with insurance. Tony told me when I moved in that contents insurance cost too much. It was one reason he wanted me there.’

‘What about your computer?’

‘Gone.’

‘With all your writing?’

‘That was on discs, but they were in the fire, too.’

‘Oh, Mark. All your work!’

‘It doesn’t matter.’ I found myself telling the story of Hemingway in Paris, how Hadley lost all of his stories on the train, so he had to rewrite them.

‘And in the end, you see, it worked out fine, because the rewritten stories were probably better than the originals.’

Only probably,’ Magneta said. ‘You can rewrite too much. Now we’ll never know. Anyway, as I recall, Hemingway didn’t rewrite everything he lost, not by a long shot. Didn’t a couple of those stories turn up?’

‘In Paris, yes.’

‘I remember. Found by this shady literary dealer who married his foster daughter...’

‘Step daughter. Funnily enough, I know them.’ Hesitantly, because there was so much I had to leave out, I told Magneta how Paul Mercer had been on the verge of buying the LR’s archives when the office burnt down.

‘Don’t you find that suspicious?’ Magneta asked when I’d finished.

I found it suspicious. There was nothing about Paul Mercer that wasn’t suspicious. But I couldn’t tell Magneta how I knew that, nor where I was on the night of the fire. It was too embarrassing.

‘I suggested the same to Tony, but he told me I was being paranoid. "What motive would Paul have for burning down the building?" he said.’

‘He could have taken the archive first.’

‘But he wouldn’t be able to sell it. He’d be caught first time he tried. Paul wouldn’t risk his reputation. No, I think we have to put it down to coincidence. The police reckon the fire started in the porn shop on the ground floor.’

I wasn’t sure I believed this, but Magneta seemed to accept it.

‘You’re lucky you woke up,’ she said. ‘Were you in danger?’

‘I wasn’t there,’ I admitted.

‘You weren’t... oh, Mark Trace, have you finally got a girlfriend?’

I shook my head, ‘Only sort of.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Meaning she’s married and her husband was out of town.’

‘Mark!’ Magneta gave me a look I hadn’t seen before, one that mixed admiration with disdain.

I was still avoiding questions about this girlfriend when Tim came in. He was wearing a pale blue uniform. Seeing me, he whooped enthusiastically.

‘You look well,’ he told me.

‘He’s got a girlfriend,’ Magneta whispered, sotto voce.

‘It shows. Did you hear about Greene?’

‘I heard. What’s with the postman’s uniform?’

‘I’ve just finished work. I’m still writing. Don’t worry. But with the baby on the way, we couldn’t get by on what Magneta makes from her dirty books.’

‘Baby?’

‘She hasn’t told you?’

‘I thought he’d notice,’ Magneta interjected, ‘but he’s only been here a few minutes.’

It was too much to take in: destruction, death, birth, going on all around me. I congratulated them from the bottom of my forger’s heart.

That evening, we talked about what I would do next. I wanted to remain in London. I could always stay with Tony for a while. I should study for my first year retakes, then, in the autumn, begin my second year at university. Maybe I would switch courses. Maybe not. Money might be a problem, unless I managed to find work on another magazine.

‘We should pay you more rent,’ Magneta suggested.

‘You’re looking after the house, improving it. That’s all I want.’

The day before I returned to London, the final issue of the *Little Review* arrived in the post. Tim and Magneta pored over it.

‘He could still pull it off,’ Tim said, gratifyingly, after reading my Sherwin story. ‘I hope there’s more where this came from.’

‘So do I,’ I said, though I would be worried if there was. The appearance of an extensive section of *A Commune* might demonstrate - especially if Sherwin had changed his style - that my version was a fake.

That night, Tim bought a bottle of scotch and we got drunk. Tim and I talked about our literary ambitions, about novels we wanted to write and the scene we wanted to be part of. Drink gave us confidence - our time would come. Maybe not until the next century. We were young, we could accept that. Possibly the novels we wanted to write were old fashioned, but then the form was an old one. We'd find ways to freshen it up, make our claim. Life, we agreed, was an inexhaustible subject.

As Tim got excited, he put CDs on: loud, punky music. He and Magneta danced. Fifteen minutes later, Tim flaked out. It was after ten and he'd been up since five. Magneta and I had to help him upstairs to bed. When that was done, I thought she'd join him, but neither of us was tired. So we went downstairs and talked, continuing the conversation in a more measured, cautious register.

'You haven't said much about your writing,' I ventured.

'The bottom's fallen out of the women's erotic novel,' Magneta told me. 'I'm not getting any new commissions.'

'I don't mean that,' I said. 'What about your real writing? It's ages since you sent anything to the LR. I know Tony asked you to contribute something for the final issue...'

Magneta sighed. 'All that's gone,' she said. 'I was never a real writer. I've got a bit of talent and I can give people what they want, whether it's a wank fantasy or a surreal, confessional monologue that makes editors like Tony think there's something there worth encouraging. But it's all fake. Tim's a real writer, working on his stuff every spare moment he can find, not bothered about who's going to buy it. I'm just a hack. I see a market and sell to it. When I try and write for myself, there's nothing there.'

I didn't know how to reply. 'You don't really mean that,' was all I said.

'I've been doing this for ten years. If I was on to something, I'd know by now.'

## FORTY-ONE

James Sherwin's memorial service was well-attended. I recognised many of the people there. There were faces I'd either seen at literary events or recognised from dust jackets and newspapers. Amongst them were several young writers who couldn't possibly have known Sherwin, and whom you wouldn't have guessed could have been influenced by him. Maybe they weren't and, to them, the memorial service was just another literary beano, where it was important to see and be seen, before retiring to the Coach and Horses to network and catch up on gossip. Richard Mayfield walked straight past me without so much as a nod. Maybe he was lost in thought or perhaps he had been so drunk the evening we spent together that he'd forgotten my face. I preferred these scenarios to the more cynical one, that he was seeking out more influential people than me to sit next to.

It was the first service of this kind that I'd been to. As people arrived, there was taped music by (according to the order of service) the Grateful Dead and the Pink Floyd. Tony said a few words about Sherwin. A well known actor read the passage about death from *Stargazer*. This was followed by an excruciating attempt to get everyone to sing Bob Dylan's 'Blowing In The Wind'.

'The publisher's suggestion,' Tony whispered to me.

An organ played Bach, restoring calm, and we all filed out.

It was then I noticed him. Paul Mercer, not accompanied by his wife, walked rapidly out of the building. He ignored me and gave Tony only a brusque nod of the head. Paul was making a beeline for the chief mourner, Sonia Sherwin. We watched as he offered his sympathies.

'I'll bet the shit's after Jim's manuscripts,' Tony whispered.

There'd been some doubt as to whether Sonia could cope with leaving Greece to attend this service. Tony, who'd organised the event, hadn't known that Sonia was coming until she showed up in the front row of the church. I watched her now, pleased to see her give Paul short shrift, although she accepted the business card he proffered.

'I suppose I ought to introduce myself,' Tony said, when Paul left her. 'Would you like to meet the widow Sherwin?'

There was an informal queue of people wanting to offer their sympathies. We waited for it to clear.

Sonia Sherwin's body language was twitchy. She gave the impression she would prefer to be anywhere but where she was. Just as she thought she was clear of well wishers, Tony approached her. The widow flinched at having to talk to somebody else. When Tony introduced himself, she relaxed, but only a little.

'Thank you so much for organising this. I wouldn't have known where to begin. And thank you for sending Jim's manuscript. It was very interesting.'

Tony murmured a few words of sympathy, then introduced me.

'Mark Trace, my editorial assistant. He's a great admirer of your husband's writing.'

Mrs Sherwin held out a black gloved hand and I shook it.

'I'd appreciate it if we could meet before I return to Greece, Mr Bracken. Would you have the time?'

'Of course.'

I could see I wasn't wanted, so melted into the background. Paul Mercer was still nearby, his red face standing out all the more because of his black suit and tie. Impulsively, I decided to speak to him. I might glean

whether he was behind the the fire. Also, Tony had made inquiries on my behalf: the Hemingway manuscripts had been sold for a large sum, if not quite what was reported in the newspapers. I ought to tap Paul up for more money. And I wanted to know if he knew I'd slept with his wife.

Seeing me approach, Mercer dragged himself away from the elderly poet he'd been chatting up.

'Do we have something to discuss, Mark?' Mercer's tone was mildly aggressive.

'You know we do,' I said, then added, provoking him. 'How's Helen?'

'She's busy furnishing the townhouse we've just bought in the Village.'

'You must give me your new address,' I said to him.

Paul eyed me coldly. 'What do you want, Mark?'

'Tony tells me that you sold the Hemingway stories, several months ago.'

'Yes, that's true.'

'You lied to me.'

'You lied to me about finding them,' Paul pointed out. 'Selling those fake manuscripts could have ruined my reputation.'

'Instead, it made you.'

'In a way,' Paul admitted. 'But not in the way I would have chosen. All that publicity was very embarrassing for Helen.'

'We never agreed what your percentage was,' I told him, businesslike.

'No, we didn't,' Paul said. 'As far as I'm concerned, I found those stories. There are plenty of people who'll remember Helen and me trawling through the flea-market, looking in old copies of *Paris Match*. Our story stands up. Whereas your story - what is it, exactly? That you found the stories, as you told Helen? No proof. That you faked the stories and I took

them from you? Again, no proof. And even if you were able to prove that you forged those stories, you couldn't establish that I knew about them, because I didn't. My reputation as a dealer would hardly suffer. Your reputation as - whatever you think you are - would be ruined.'

'But I could prove that you didn't pay me for the stories,' I argued.

'Oh but I did,' Paul said. 'You accepted a thousand pounds. I didn't ask for a receipt, so you may have avoided paying tax on it, but I have a very good witness who'll tell any court that you not only took the money, but you also accepted various goods in kind that were paid for from my credit card account. You did well out of me, Mark. Now, let it drop.'

My face burned. But I wouldn't leave it.

'What do you know about the fire?' I asked, and as soon as these crass words were out of my mouth, I regretted them.

'I know you were lucky,' Paul told me. 'Lucky that all evidence of your forgeries went up in smoke, lucky that Graham Greene died when he did, lucky you weren't in the building when it happened. Where were you, Mark?'

I didn't answer this, but I didn't have to. Paul Mercer was the sort of man who only asked questions to which he already knew the answer. He knew I'd fucked his wife and he didn't care. Maybe it was him who persuaded Helen to seduce me, but I couldn't countenance that, not then.

'If you stay in this game,' Paul lectured me, 'our paths will probably cross again. So remember this. You can't beat me. Whereas I know enough to destroy you.' He gave me a broad smile and turned round. 'Hey, Tony! Good to see you. Nice service, but I've got to run. I really liked that last issue you did. You went out in style, gotta give you that.'

We watched him scuttle away.

‘What did the widow want?’ I asked Tony.

‘I don’t know. I’m meeting her again later in the week, after she’s seen both sets of Jim’s publishers.’

‘You don’t think she suspects?’

‘Suspicion doesn’t come into it. She either knows, or she doesn’t know.’

Next day, I went to the British Library, where I found a facsimile edition of the recently discovered Paris Hemingway stories. My original few pages had been expanded into an expensive hardback, newly published by a university press. It had a scholarly introduction, extensive footnotes and my variant text for *Out Of Season*. Skimming the pages, I found it hard to believe I’d been so obsessed with the macho Hemingway, when I could have spent my time in Paris retracing the steps of Beckett or Joyce. Saul Bellow, I’d since discovered, had written most of his best novel there. I was over Hemingway, but my fakes were part of the canon. The reviews I’d seen had been respectful, convinced that Paul Mercer had made an important find. His reputation as a manuscript dealer rested on these two stories. Nothing would give me greater delight than to fuck him up.

I held one trump card Paul Mercer didn’t know about. But I couldn’t decide how to play my hand. I didn’t want to claim credit for my forgeries. I wanted to discredit Paul Mercer as a dealer in valuable manuscripts.

That evening, I tried to explain all this to Tony, who was in unusually good spirits. As we talked, I hit upon the answer.

‘I know exactly what to do,’ I told my friend.

‘And are you going to tell me?’ Tony asked.

‘I won't involve you. But I'll need to go to France, in a week or so. I lost most of my cash in the fire. Can you lend me some?’

‘No problem,’ Tony said. ‘The bank has increased my overdraft limit now I have an insurance payout on the way.’

‘I thought the offices weren't insured?’

‘The buildings were insured, but by the owners. I only had a lease. The office contents were never insured. However, after agreeing a price with Mercer, I insured the archive. Once I knew what it was worth I'd've been mad not to.’

‘Astute,’ I said.

Tony could be flakey in his personal life, but never where the magazine was concerned.

‘How much do you need?’

He offered me a generous amount. It would take me a few days to get a new passport. That was OK, because there was something I needed to do first.

## FORTY-TWO

‘Are you going to explain why you need the typewriter all of a sudden?’

Out of breath, I didn’t reply. I’d written to Francine and she’d collected the machine from the friend’s house where it was stashed. I’d met her taxi and was carrying the machine up to my hotel room in the seventh arrondissement.

At sixteen, Francine was the beauty I’d anticipated when she was fourteen. She had lost all of her gawkiness. Once I’d put the machine down, I wanted nothing more than to take up where her father had interrupted us in the summer of ‘89. But she wanted to talk about the typewriter.

‘You’re going to do another forgery, aren’t you? Do you still have any of the right paper?’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ I told her.

‘You must tell me everything. We never had secrets before.’

Her English had become more sophisticated than my French, so we spoke in my language. When I was done, she clapped her hands.

‘I think it will work, if I help you. But I don’t understand why you’re so determined to expose your own forgeries.’

Hesitantly, I told her the rest of it, up to and including the point where the office burnt down while I slept with Helen. Francine was not in the least shocked.

‘You think they planned it all, that her husband stole the documents?’

‘Not all the documents,’ I said. ‘Maybe a few of the most valuable ones - things that he can sell to collectors who won’t mind their not being able to show them in public. Or he’ll save them for a few years, then sell after Tony’s dead.’

‘He whored his own wife for papers worth a few thousand pounds! Didn’t you say he was a rich man?’

“‘Rich people stay that way by holding onto their money”, Tony says. Anyhow, I don’t know if Helen was in on it. We’d become very close. She knew how I felt about her. I think she was starting to feel that way about me. Maybe Paul used her, the way he used...’

Even as I said this, I knew how pathetic it sounded. I remembered Helen was keen we went to her hotel room, not the office, on the night of my birthday.

‘You poor romantic,’ Francine said, stroking my hair.

‘I’m over her now,’ I assured her.

She kissed me on the cheek. Then she told me she had to go. We arranged to meet again the following day.

When Francine was gone, I got out some paper. The sheets looked the same as the sheets I’d typed my first Hemingway stories on. They had a similar, brittle feel, but were of English manufacture, and only twenty years old.

I’d determined to give up forgery after the Sherwin story. Yet it seemed that, whenever I stopped, a burning necessity arose, sucking me back in. I had already drafted what I was going to type. The forgery had to be as good as the others, if not better. But I needn’t feel any guilt, or fear. This time, I was planning to get caught.

## FORTY-THREE

The address on the receipt was easy to find. The old lady was still alive, and at home. She invited us up to her cramped apartment. Francine did the bulk of the talking, giggling as if playing the part of a favourite granddaughter, disarming Madame Devonier. Without her, I suspect, the discussion that followed would have been much less *complaisant*.

Madame Devonier was eighty-three but her mind was still sharp. She'd heard of the Hemingway stories, seen the *Paris Match* article. It amused her to know that the stories were forgeries, typed on the machine she had sold to me. But she couldn't understand why I wanted to give the machine back. Francine said my behaviour was an example of the peculiar British sense of humour. Then she explained. Madame laughed a lot and opened the bottle of wine we'd brought with us. Once it became clear that she stood to make some money out of our plan, she became positively enthusiastic. As we drank the wine, Madame Devonier rehearsed the story she would tell, asking questions now and then. Relaxing into her role, she began adding details of her own that would increase the tale's authenticity. Francine and I played the part of journalists, taking it in turns to quiz her.

Later that afternoon, a little drunk and still excited by our visit to Madame Devonier, Francine and I returned to my hotel room, for reasons we hadn't discussed. There was no foreplay or seduction, not unless you count my taking Francine's hand as we climbed the stairs. We were doing the inevitable. She was more experienced than me, but not very much so. I was grateful, as we undressed, that I had already been with Helen and had some idea of what to do. But there was no need to worry. Francine and I were

easy with each other: passionate and friendly. Neither of us behaved as though our lives depended on this one act.

Afterwards, I would have promised to move back to Paris there and then, had Francine agreed to be my girlfriend. Only she already had a boyfriend, of whom she didn't speak, and had to return home for dinner at seven to parents who wouldn't abide me. Next day, she had to go to school. I had to go back to England. I had no more chance of a future with her than I had with Helen.

That evening, when I returned with the typewriter, I worried that Madame Devonier might have changed her mind. But she hadn't. I heaved the typewriter into her spare room, cleaned it carefully to avoid fingerprints, then watched as the old lady covered it in dust, swept from the top of an old wardrobe.

## FORTY-FOUR

The meeting with Sonia Sherwin was to take place in her hotel suite the day after my return from France. In the taxi, on our way there, Tony gave me a belated warning about the Hemingway plan.

‘Paul Mercer did well out of your Hemingway forgeries. But you weren’t going to sell them. You haven’t lost anything... yet. By exposing that the stories were faked, you may expose yourself. You want to be a writer, but you’re risking your reputation before you start.’

‘Mercer can’t bring me into it without revealing how he really got the stories.’

‘He’s cleverer than you give him credit for. A man like Mercer is good at revenge. He might sit on your secret for years, then decide to expose you just when you’re making a name for yourself.’

‘It’s a risk I’m willing to take.’

Sonia Sherwin was an elegant American woman with dark, Italianate features. She was forty but looked five years younger. Sonia wore black, confidently allowing the odd fleck of grey to highlight her dark hair. With her aristocratic air, the widow could have been a smaller, older version of Helen Mercer. She talked about James Sherwin as though she were describing a historical figure, rather than a husband.

‘When I first met him, he’d stopped writing altogether. That novel you published part of, he’d abandoned it years ago.’

Her words were addressed to Tony. I sat to his side, trying to work out whether she’d sussed us. So far, we seemed to be in the clear.

‘Pity,’ Tony said.

‘As I told you in my letter, I am Jim’s literary executor. He left very strict instructions on what was to be preserved. There are barely enough good unpublished or uncollected pieces to fill a slim book. Jim didn’t want to rehash anything that would harm his reputation.’

‘I’m sure that wouldn’t happen,’ Tony murmured.

‘My husband used to speak about the terrible Hemingway stuff that got published decades after he died. Jim wasn’t satisfied by most of his output, even when he was at his peak. He destroyed nearly everything he wrote in the last twenty years.’

‘Nearly *everything*?’ Tony said, sounding alarmed. I wondered if the Hemingway comment was a sly dig. Probably not. The poor quality of Hemingway’s late work was one reason why the recent discovery of early material from his nascent, vital years had been greeted with such excitement.

‘His publishers have been on to me, Tony. They want me to include the material you published in his last book, Tony. They’d given up on *A Commune* years ago. The contract was cancelled. But they love what you published. They say if they put something out quickly it will sell in vast quantities. They think Jim must have been getting ready to finish the thing. They don’t understand why I’m reluctant to hand everything over. But I expect you do.’

She held up a copy of the final edition of the *Little Review*. This issue had had the largest print run of the magazine’s history, staying on shop shelves for less than two weeks before it completely sold out. Sonia’s voice became cold, toneless.

‘I was surprised when this contained an extract from *A Commune*, especially as I’d watched Jim burn his only copy of the unfinished,

handwritten manuscript. It was a huge weight off his mind, he told me at the time.'

'Jim was always a perfectionist,' Tony murmured. 'But...'

He thought better of finishing the sentence. Sonia was reaching into a cheap, brown cardboard box at the side of her chair.

'You were good enough to send me the original print-out of the extract Jim sent you.' She took some loose leaf pages out of the box, held them up. 'Mark, would you like a look at the stuff Jim was working on when he died?'

'Very much,' I said.

'They're more memoir than fiction, and very fragmentary, not publishable as they stand. I printed them off before I left the island. I wanted a hard copy in case there was anything wrong with the disks. But I haven't had time to separate the pages.'

She rested the loose leaf sheets on the carpet, then began to pull a stack of cheap, thin computer paper out of the box. To make such paper A4 in size, you needed to tear narrow strips from each side, every strip punctured where the sheets were held by the roller. Then you must tear the perforated pages apart. Sonia concertinaed the connected sheets in front of us.

'This was the only kind of paper Jim used for his creative work,' she told me. 'With single sheets, you have to stand by the printer and feed it in a page at a time. Jim didn't have the patience for that.'

'Maybe...' Tony began, but Sonia silenced him with a glare. She picked up the final issue of the *Little Review* again, opening it at the Sherwin story.

'Jim didn't write this. I want to know who did.'



## FORTY-FIVE

As Sonia Sherwin was interrogating us, an interrogation of a different kind was taking place across the English channel. Madame Devonier was busy telling journalists about her amazing find. She had rung *Paris Match* first. Several papers had beat a path to the old lady's door and listened to her well rehearsed story. Madame Devonier insisted that, for months, she hadn't realised the famous 'Hemingway' stories came from her flat. One day a friend suggested the stories might have been discovered in the old copies of *Paris Match* she had taken to the flea market two years earlier. Madame Devonier went through the rest of the magazines she kept under the bed in her spare room.

After her discovery, she didn't at first consider the old typewriter, which still sat above the wardrobe in the same room. She was too excited by having found the third story, which turned out to be a previously unknown piece, one Hemingway never rewrote. She hoped it would make her rich. But the typeface on the story was worryingly familiar. She occasionally typed letters on the old machine. The last time that the typewriter was used by another person, she realised, would have been twenty years ago, just after she was widowed. That summer, a young American had rented her spare room for a couple of months.

No, after all this time, she couldn't remember the young man's name, but he had borrowed the typewriter, with her permission. It was never used often. She recalled there was some very old paper with it. The lodger finished this paper off and replaced it. He left in a hurry, owing two weeks rent, she remembered that. The old *Paris Match* magazines were kept in the

spare room for visitors to read. He must have stashed his stories amongst them before he left.

Were the Hemingway stories a deliberate attempt to defraud the finder? Not on her behalf. Maybe on the young American's. After so many years, who could guess his intentions? It could be that the stories were an exercise he practised to pass the time while he was supposed to be studying French. She recalled that his spoken French was not very good.

Madame Devonier was too honest a person to profit from a forgery. She didn't know whether this last story would be worth anything. But even forgeries had a monetary value, she had read somewhere, if they became famous enough. So she had gone to the journalists, seeking advice.

In the weeks that followed, the university that had bought the Hemingway manuscripts allowed comparison tests to be done. There was no doubt: the 'new' Hemingway story was typed on the same typewriter as the other pieces, a Royal, the same brand of machine Hemingway used in the twenties. However, while the first two stories had been typed on paper at least seventy years old, this third one was on paper a good fifty years younger.

As soon as the forgery was proved, other, previously suppressed, doubts began to circulate. Some of the typical Hemingway 'mistakes' in each story seemed a little studied. Literary critics remarked that the writing in the 'previously unknown' piece verged on parody.

Madame Devonier got a good price for a faked manuscript. *Different Ways Of Getting Drunk* was published in *The New York Review Of Books*. Anybody who wanted could do their own comparisons. In due course, at least three men came forward as the 'author of the great Hemingway hoax'. All

claimed to have spent the summer of 1971 in Paris. Madame Devonier refuted each one.

Paul Mercer had no choice but to throw himself at the mercy of the Texas university. He had been completely taken in, he said. In his defence, all he could offer was that he had found the stories in the way he described, then had them authenticated by experts whose opinion he had no reason to doubt. Nobody questioned this account. Nevertheless, Mercer's reputation took a big knock. If, as I suspected, he had stolen the cream of the *Little Review* archive before setting fire to the office, he would have even more trouble selling it. From then on, nobody was going to buy a manuscript from him unless its provenance was perfect.

## FORTY-SIX

When Tony finished talking, I was too ashamed to speak.

‘Well?’

I tried to say ‘I’m sorry’, but Sonia gave me a stare of such ferocity, I wished I could shrink and hide inside my clothes. Tony and I didn’t as much as glance at each other. Heads bowed, we waited for her verdict.

Tony’s explanation had been craven, pleading the magazine’s imminent demise as an excuse, if not a justification. I couldn’t tell how much sense this made to Sonia. It made little to me. The Sherwin story had helped sales. Yet, while the last issue had sold out, it was always likely to sell out. Tony couldn’t afford to print extra copies, or order a reprint. Until the insurance money came through, he was broke. Neither of us had profited from my Sherwin forgery. We hadn’t done this one for money. We’d forged for the thrill of it. Because we could.

‘You said the magazine published another of Mark’s faked stories,’ Sonia said. ‘Was the writer of that one dead, too?’

‘No.’ Tony told her about the Graham Greene story. ‘But Graham guessed someone was pulling my leg. It amused him, I think.’

‘Do you think James would have been amused? Is that your defence?’

‘There’s no defence,’ I said. ‘We were in the wrong. I’m sorry.’

She ignored me.

‘How do you think it will look?’ she asked Tony, ‘when you own up? You’re a respected poet, James admired your work. You should be receiving honours, appearing at literary festivals, winning prizes. Instead, you’ll be notorious for betraying a friend. The invitations won’t come. You’ll be a pariah.’

Tony's face was pallid. The gravity of his situation was starting to sink in. She turned to me.

'You must have some respect for literature, to be working for a magazine like Tony's when you're so young. And you must be talented, to convince so many people. You're not original, but maybe that would have come, with maturity. What did you plan to do with your life?'

'I wanted to write,' I admitted. 'Novels.' Then I added, truthfully, 'your husband was my hero.'

'Didn't you realise? Once this gets out, any literary career you might have had will be over before it's begun.'

'There must be a way I can make amends,' I pleaded. I thought of telling her about the Hemingway stories and how I was planning to expose them. But I'd be digging myself into an even deeper hole. Best not to mention Dahl either.

'I've been trying to decide what Jim would have wanted,' Sonia said. 'He liked you, Tony. He respected you. If he'd written anything he thought was worthy of your magazine, he'd have sent it to you. He was reckless about money. It wouldn't have bothered him that he could have made a small fortune publishing it elsewhere. But it would have disturbed him to see you utterly humiliated, destroyed.'

'I'll do anything...' Tony began.

'Yes,' Sonia interrupted, 'you will. But, for the moment, you'll keep quiet. I don't want a word of this to leak out.'

'You must forgive Mark,' he said. 'He's very young and he was only trying to help.'

'Not too young to go to prison,' she said. 'Leave him with me. You can go home now.'

‘But, what...?’

‘You’ll find out in due course.’

As he left the room, with his back to Sonia, Tony gave one of his hopeless shrugs. He flashed a sympathetic smile in my direction. There was still a little mischief in it. He thought we were getting off lightly.

When we were alone, Sonia at last turned to me. I tried to meet her long, hard gaze, but couldn’t. She was so frostily beautiful, so scary, and I was so guilty. My eyes drifted to the small coffee table beside her. The computer disks containing her husband’s last few pages lay on it, underlining my outrageous behaviour. I could hardly begin to imagine the mind of a writer who would only allow his very best work to be published. I would never have that kind of integrity, or dignity.

‘What do you want me to do?’ I asked.

She told me.

## FORTY-SEVEN

Three weeks after my meeting with Sonia Sherwin, I was back in the small living room of my house in Leam. Magneta, tired by her pregnancy, had gone to bed. Tim and I were finishing off a second bottle of wine.

‘We’ll miss you,’ Tim said, ‘but it does sound exciting.’

‘It’s too good an opportunity to turn down,’ I said, trying to sound enthusiastic. ‘But I hope I can make it back in time for the christening.’

Living with Tony had become uncomfortable. He was the only person I was allowed to tell about my ‘punishment’. But neither of us wanted to talk about it. At first, I’d kept my head down and revised for my first year retakes. While I waited for the results I realised that, with the magazine gone, we had less and less in common. So I came to Leam.

Tim and I discussed the Hemingway forgeries, news of which had been all over the broadsheets. I couldn’t tell Tim that I was responsible for them. If I revealed that much, he would work out the rest.

‘I remember you telling me about Mercer,’ Tim said. ‘He was the guy who was going to buy the *Little Review* archive before the fire.’

‘The one whose wife I was sleeping with on the night of the fire.’

‘Jeez. You never told us who she was before.’

I was drunk, or I wouldn’t have let my guard slip. I badly wanted to tell Tim how I really got to know Helen, how I’d wanted her and obsessed over her long before I knew she was Mercer’s mistress. But once I started it would be difficult to know where to stop.

‘Come on,’ Tim said. ‘Spill the beans.’

Since Magneta wasn’t there, I could describe my seduction without becoming embarrassed. Even so, I kept the account brief, emphasising

Helen's 'open marriage', trying to come over more used than user.

Whatever words I used, it still sounded like a tacky episode.

'When I saw Mercer at Sherwin's funeral, he *knew*. But I find it hard to believe he set the situation up. I think the fire was a coincidence.'

'I don't believe in coincidences,' Tim said.

'We'll only know for certain if those manuscripts appear on the market,' I told him. 'I'll bet they don't. Mercer's survived two scandals. Even if he did steal some of the archive, I can't see him risking a third.'

'Don't be so sure,' Tim told me. 'Some people are addicted to risk.' I returned to Highgate to collect my stuff and say goodbye. I still had some of the cash Tony had loaned me for the Paris escapade, but Tony insisted on giving me a large sum in traveller's cheques as well.

'You don't want to be completely reliant on Sonia Sherwin.'

'I don't have much choice. She's got me by the balls.'

'Both of us,' Tony said, then rose, creakily, from his armchair. 'I want to show you a couple of things.'

He handed me a letter from Roald Dahl's agent. This venerable gent stated that he could find no trace of Dahl ever having written a story called *The Woman Who Married Herself*. 'It's pretty good but there's something not right about it,' the agent wrote. 'The main problem is that there is no record of Dahl having sent a story of this title to his typist. Dahl himself never learned to type and this has rather too many errors for it to be the work of a professional typist.'

'You reckoned without that information,' Tony said.

The idea of a modern author who couldn't type staggered me. I managed a hollow laugh. To think that I had gone to all that trouble to

borrow a typewriter which its owner never learned how to use. Tony gave one of his wry smiles and changed the subject.

‘How long do you think it’ll take you to do?’ he asked.

‘It’ll take as long as it takes. Tim and Magneta want me to be godfather to their baby, but I don’t suppose I’ll have finished by the time it’s born. I don’t even know if Sonia Sherwin will let me come back for the christening. At least the university don’t seem bothered about my taking another year out.’

‘I wish I could be there to help you.’

‘I’ll write to you, if she lets me.’

Tony nodded, a distracted look in his eyes. I stood.

‘I’d better get to the airport.’

‘I’ll pay for a taxi,’ Tony said, lifting himself once more from the armchair, supporting himself with the cane that he had begun to use all the time. He phoned for a cab. ‘Before you go, there’s something I have to show you. You may hate me for this, but I’ll hate myself more if I let you go without telling you what really happened.’

I followed him down to the basement. There, he showed me a multitude of manuscripts and envelopes. They were in cardboard boxes and plastic bags rather than the old tea chests I had methodically sorted through. Nevertheless, I knew exactly what they were.

‘You? You stole the archive, not Paul Mercer!’

‘Can you forgive me for deceiving you?’

Back upstairs, in his dusty flat, Tony confessed that he had painstakingly planned and executed the Soho fire himself, tracking my pursuit of Helen until he was sure I would be out all night. At his signal, an

acquaintance of the equally well insured porn store owner set alight the shop below the office. Both beneficiaries had unimpeachable alibis.

'I knew Paul Mercer would find a way to rip me off over the archive, but the insurance company wouldn't.'

Tony had taken home most of the best stuff and planned to sell it privately, piecemeal, over the next few years. He'd worked out how to make his retirement plan pay up twice. Devious old sod.

'Without Mercer's offer, I couldn't have insured the archive for anything like as much. He did me a favour, in a sense.'

'I wish you'd found a way to take his money off him, too.'

'Don't harbour grudges,' Tony advised me. 'You got your revenge by exposing the fake Hemingways. Mercer's no worse a shark than plenty of others out there.'

The taxi sounded its horn.

'Write to me if you can,' Tony begged. 'I'll be lonely.'

'You'll enjoy retirement,' I said. 'Time to catch up with loads of people.'

'Editors who have ceased to edit soon lose most of their friends', he told me. 'But we'll stay friends, won't we? Despite it all.'

'Despite it all,' I repeated, and hugged him goodbye.

## FORTY-EIGHT

Ghosts aren't real, rational people know that. They're in our heads. A trick of memory. I've never believed in ghosts. But now I am one.

In her Bloomsbury hotel, after Tony had left, Sonia told me that Sherwin's books have never sold as well as his reputation might suggest. His royalties have dwindled since the 70s. They barely provided enough for one person to get by on. Sonia spent all of her savings supporting Sherwin. Now she wants a larger inheritance.

Before I left London I wrote to Francine. I longed to tell her the truth. Instead I told her the same tale I'd given Tim and Magneta. Tony had been commissioned to write the authorised biography of James Sherwin. I was flying to Greece to collect material for him.

At Athens airport I caught a bus to the port of Piraeus. The bus had no air conditioning and the heat was stifling. Piraeus was worse. I spent hours sweltering, clinging to scraps of shade. There were no longer any direct ferries to Karenos. There was, however, one ferry a day that would take me to its nearest neighbour. After a long voyage I had to wait another day for the final leg of my journey. I was to catch the supply boat that, twice a week, took provisions to Karenos.

All of this waiting around gave me plenty of time to think about what I was doing. I used to believe that there was a profound infallibility about the way the world recognised great writing. But if Tony has taught me one thing about the literary world, it is this: luck and timing are far more important than talent. Once successful writers reach a certain status, people applaud anything they've touched, regardless of its quality.

None of my forgeries are wonderful pieces of writing. I got better as I went on, exercising whatever tiny muscle of talent I possess, but that was not the reason for my stories' success. They were believed because they appeared in the right place at the right time. They were believed because their readers wanted to believe.

Back in London, Sonia Sherwin told me how, because my Sherwin forgery had been so warmly received, she was being offered large sums of money for her husband's final novel. But the offers were conditional. Publishers wanted to see more before forking out. Sonia had nothing else to show them. There was much anticipation, the publishers told Sonia. The cheque was waiting. How long would it take her to edit her husband's papers? Sonia said that she would return to Karenos and consider the matter, only selling the manuscript when the time was right.

In the years before he burnt the manuscript, James Sherwin allowed his wife to read a few sections of *A Commune*. Her recollections, however, are garbled and unreliable. She wants me to make the story up. In London, I warned Sonia that any book I wrote was likely to damage Sherwin's reputation. No matter, she said. Sonia, it turns out, is a practical woman. Her scruples are outweighed by need. And greed, some would say, but I am not in a position to criticise.

During the long wait for the Karenos supply boat, I began to doubt that I retained the ability to step inside another writer's style. I doubted whether any writer could pull off the vast forgery that Sonia requires of me. I used to believe there was something sacred about the creative process. I thought that real writers knew divine secrets. I hoped that, if I worked hard enough, these secrets would be revealed to me. I can't afford to think like that any more. I'm on the lookout for shortcuts.

When the boat arrived, I followed Sonia Sherwin's instructions. As soon as the old craft was secured to the harbour, I identified myself. Enormous seagulls squawked loudly overhead. There was no breeze. Despite the temperature, the boatman wore a black donkey jacket and a navy blue cap with a decorative pleat over the peak. His face was tanned and lined. I was motioned to wait nearby, in the full sun. I asked him about return times, thinking ahead to when my godchild is born. He spoke some English, but did not give a clear reply. I have since discovered that George is a loyal friend of Sonia's. He will not take me off the island unless she tells him to. No matter. Should I find a means to escape, I have decided not to take it. I will keep my word and perform my penance.

It's easy to see why Sherwin made this place his home. There are no near neighbours. The days are long and peaceful. Most afternoons, a gentle breeze wafts through the pines, making the heat bearable. When I want a break, there is good swimming at the bottom of the hill. A man can lose himself here.

Sonia does not rush me. A complete novel, as she knows all too well, is tougher to write than an extract or a short story. Sonia answers my questions. She shows me around the island. She cooks simple meals. Mostly, she leaves me alone, with nothing to do but write.

James Sherwin was in his fifties when he died. I am only twenty, although, some days, I feel much older. I have Sherwin's library, and his collected works around me. But I don't have his wisdom or his talent. I don't have his experience. I sit in Sherwin's book lined study for hours on end. When I'm stuck for words, I play tricks on myself to make the inspiration flow. Sherwin's computer is identical to the one I lost in the fire. I imagine

myself back in my Soho garret, forging my favourite writer for love, with no thought of publication. I try to summon up the innocence I once had.

*A Commune* was to be Sherwin's epic. But he was economical. Only one novel lasted more than fifty thousand words. I might get away with sixty. At the rate I'm going, that will take forever. I have a few thousand faked words to build on. These act as a touchstone for the rest. Every day I delete most of what I write, then edit away the previous day's work for good measure.

When I can't get any further I turn to this memoir. I need to remind myself who I am, or used to be. Only his voice creeps into mine as mine creeps into his, until I can't tell which is which. Sherwin's ghost is always here, looking over my shoulder. He mocks me, the perpetual pretender, impersonating a man whose shoes he can never hope to fill.

Most days, though, I sit down at the damned machine, try.

## Boy King (2002)

At the turn of the century, YAF sales steeply declined. This was, in part, a consequence of the Harry Potter craze soaking up much of the market. I diversified. I wrote what would become *The Pretender*, several stories for reluctant readers and two historical novels for the A and C Black ‘flashback’ series. The subject of the first, Germany’s occupation of France during the Second World War, was an easy choice, as I had just read a fascinating account of this by Ian Ousby. When approached to write about the Tudors, I initially declined, feeling they had been overdone, and aware of how the one subject that really interested me, Elizabethan theatre, had recently been the subject of a prize-winning YA novel. Then the publishers asked me again. I happened on the story of Edward VI, which had been little written about. Had I realised that the research process for this novel would occupy me for several months, much longer than the writing process, I might not have undertaken the commission. However, it proved useful experience when I began work on *Bone and Cane*. In giving voice to the child king, I was careful to represent historical events accurately. Where accounts varied, I tried to establish the most likely turn of events rather than the most dramatic. I was forced to invent all of the king’s dialogue, except for his final words, which were recorded, and which appear at the end of this, the novel’s final chapter.

## Boy King

### Chapter 15: The King's Device

It's summer. Time is running out. In the city, rumours spread that I am dead already. Dudley makes me appear at a window of the palace so that the crowd can see me. I wave feebly, feeling as though I'm in a masque. The well-wishers cheer half-heartedly, then go away.

Dudley asks my permission for his son, Guildford, to marry the Lady Jane Grey. I give it, warmly. He is plotting something, I know that. After the marriage, the couple do not live together. I can see what is going on. It will be easy to get Lady Jane's marriage annulled if she has not shared a marriage bed with Guildford.

No marriage bed for me now. That's one pleasure I will never know. The only feeling I have is in my stomach. The blood I cough up is purple-black and reeks so badly it would make those sick who smell it. I can't sleep unless they pump me full of opiates to kill the pain. Nights merge with the days. Only one thought possesses me now, obsesses me. I must stop Mary from becoming queen.

Dudley brings me a woman doctor. Who has heard of such a thing? The medicine she gives me is potent and painful. She looks strange - small and round - but she insists that she can save my life. I'm sure that she's a quack. Why, the medicine she gives me hurts even more than my disease. But I linger on. I should be dead by now. My nails are falling out. So is my hair. My skin flakes in all the places where it isn't covered in scabs. My eyes are bloodshot, hollow.

I send for Dudley. When he comes, I am screaming with pain. He asks the quack to give me more drugs. I say no. I want to be able to think clearly.

'I am not going to live to see sixteen, you must realise that.'

'I fear it, Your Grace,' Dudley replies.

'I want to make a will.'

'You cannot make a will before you're sixteen, Your Grace. The law regards you as a child.'

Groaning, I begin to lift myself up. Dudley, concealing his distaste, reaches forward to help me. I spit the words which seal our fate.

'I am the law. You ... are my instrument. If I will it, so it shall be.'

'The Council... ' Dudley begins, but I interrupt.

'The Council will do what I tell them to do.'

'I don't know if that's true, Your Grace,' Dudley whispers.

'Then we'd better find out,' I reply. 'Tell them I wish to disinherit the Lady Mary. My sister Elizabeth must become queen after I die. She will carry on what I have started.'

'It won't work,' Dudley tells me. 'If you disinherit Mary, you must disinherit Elizabeth too. They are both bastards.'

We argue the toss for some time, until I am tired and can see no way around it. In truth, I'm not sure that Elizabeth will accept the throne if I disinherit Mary. For, if Mary fights back, and wins, she will have Elizabeth's head.

'Very well then,' I say. 'My father's sister, the Lady Jane's mother, is next in line.'

'She can be persuaded to relinquish her claim in favour of her daughter.'

'Get it done.'

When Dudley returns, a day later, I'm having a nightmare. My father, bloated and old, invites me to share his grave. Dudley is standing by me when I wake.

'It is done. The time has come for you to write a will.'

Together, we work on the wording. Even so, when I write it down, I make a mistake about whose children follow whom. Too tired to start again, I write a correction above.

'You think your son will make a good king?' I tease Dudley.

'King Consort,' Dudley corrects me. 'The Lady Jane would become queen if...'

'Consort or no, you will rule. You will make sure my work carries on.'

'Oh yes, Your Grace.'

'Better send Guildford to share his marriage bed,' I mutter.

'It is done, Your Grace,' Dudley replies. I imagine the dull, oafish Guildford with the clever, sensitive Jane and I retch, spraying the bed clothes with purple sputum.

'Have the papers drawn up,' I order.

The rest is detail. Some members of the Council protest about my device to deprive Mary of the throne. There are arguments, even talk of treason.

'I won't let them stand in your way,' Dudley tells me. 'I have offered to fight in my shirt sleeves any man who dares challenge your will.'

'Send the Council to see me now,' I instruct him, and they come, man after man, to see me on my death bed. I ask each to sign a document, supporting my new will. If they argue or show signs of doubt, I fix them with a stare of such holy desperation, they cave in. Archbishop Cranmer asks if he might consult a judge before signing (he's worried about committing

treason). He is my godfather so I let him, for which he is grateful. John Cheke, now a Council member, is harder to convince.

'I do not trust a god whose true religion disinherits orphans,' he says. But in the end, he, too signs. Most agree willingly, for they love me. And who can deny such a holy king, in such agony, his dying wish?

Dudley sends away the quack. Rumours spread that he is poisoning me. Dudley is the sort of man about whom there will always be rumours. There are fresh rumours that I have died. One night a huge crowd gathers at Greenwich, hearing that I would show myself. But I can't get out of bed. The next night they come again, but are told that the air is too chilly for me to appear. It's July, but my bones feel as cold as the grave.

I'm sorry, Elizabeth, sorry it couldn't be you.

The end must be near now. Men gather in my room. I can barely make out their faces. The doctor asks what I am doing and I tell him that I was praying to God. Where are my friends? Come closer. Hold me.

'I am faint. Lord have mercy on me and take my spirit.'

## Student (2012)

*Student* combines stories originally written in the late 1980s and early '90s with work from the last decade, since I began to work as a university lecturer, a career move that reawakened my interest in the undergraduate experience. It follows the narrator, Allison, from the week she gets her A level results to her final term at university (in earlier versions, she was called 'Alison', but I decided to use the most modern-sounding spelling). All of the submitted stories were written in the last decade and intended as a chapter within this novel, rather than a discrete story. 'Limerance' is the middle chapter of the book. 'The Old Gang' is the fourteenth of nineteen chapters. 'Random' is chapter sixteen. The last two chapters conclude the extracts, to give a sense of the full shape. The book referred to at the start of 'Random' is, of course, B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates*.

## Limerance

Tessa leaves post-it notes on the fridge. *Soya milk for my use only - please respect my allergies. Does anyone but me unload the dishwasher? Gas bill due.* Finn frowns when he sees Vic, who is the worst offender in the house-keeping stakes. I make a point of picking up a J-cloth whenever I'm in the kitchen at the same time as Finn or Tessa. So far, I seem to have them fooled.

As a household, we haven't exactly bonded. Things have been in decline since the party. Next day, Finn and Tessa did most of the clearing up before the rest of us got out of bed. Being medics, they work long hours so they resent having to do more. In addition, they're a couple, and two years older than us, so it's hardly surprising they don't want to hang out with me, Steve and Vic all the time. Or at all. Our shared Sunday meals dribbled away by November. Now it's February and they never join us down the pub.

Steve, since he kissed me at the party, hasn't made any moves. Tonight, he tells us that he has a job.

'I'm working the phones at a ticket agency in town. It's a prime deal. Once you've been there a month, you get free tickets for shows as a bonus. And you get to reserve paid tickets before they go on sale. So if you ever want to see anything at the Arena, Rock City, Rescue Rooms, the Concert Hall even, I'm your man.'

The free tickets are a temptation, but I expect other girls will get first dibs. These days, I see more of Mark than I do of Steve. I usually have Vic in tow, so nobody can accuse us of having a thing. Mark moans about Helen, who has a separate life she doesn't invite him into. I moan about Aidan.

'It's like having a virtual boyfriend,' I tell him in *The Peacock*.

‘Did I tell you about my virtual girlfriend?’ Vic asks and starts telling me about how she had her first encounter with another woman when she was thirteen. She used to spend all her free time on this website called *Second Life*, which sounds like a multiplayer version of *The Sims*.

‘I have no way of knowing if she was really a girl,’ Vic admits. ‘Or a teenager, like her avatar. But the way I see it, who cares? You never really know what other people are like. You can’t get that close.’

‘Isn’t that what’s supposed to happen when you fall in love?’

Vic gives me such a disgusted look that I feel embarrassed to my core for using the word ‘love’. Then she gives me a lecture.

‘What people call *falling in love* or *romantic love* is better defined as *limerance*. It’s an obsessive state that some people fall into. If one person gets it, they’re seen as a stalker or a psycho, but if two people feel it equally for each other, that’s what we call ‘mutual limerance’ or ‘falling in love’. For most people, it never lasts more than a few weeks or months. It’s a drag when one lover loses it long before the other, but it’s also inevitable. Some people get limerance far more strongly than others and some get it much more often - young lesbians especially, which is why I know a lot about it. Other people never feel it at all. Maybe they’re the lucky ones.’

I’ve never heard of ‘limerance’ before and suspect it’s something she read up this week for her Psychology subsid. Later, I look the word up on Wikipedia. Turns out she’s got it right, near enough.

We go outside and smoke a joint.

‘What is love?’ I ask, digesting this new idea. ‘Is it what’s left after you’ve gone through the limerance period?’

‘Maybe there’s no such thing as true love,’ Vic says. ‘It’s a convenient fiction that allows people to stay together after the limerance period. An excuse for marriage, having kids, all that shit. An antidote to loneliness.’

I muse on this for a while, then look at my watch. Shit.

‘I have to go to work.’

I head off to Moxy’s on Lower Parliament St. I’ve started doing three shifts a week, serving shots to pissed up local yokels who don’t give a shit about finding love or limerance, just so long as the evening ends in a fuck or a fight. Sounds gross, but I quite enjoy it. We’re so busy that it keeps my mind off other stuff.

Easter vacation. This is where it gets serious. I have coursework to finish and exams to prepare for. Together they're worth half my final degree. I decide not to go home until I’ve finished two essays and message Zoe to tell her. I saw a lot of Zoe over Christmas, though I’ve not been round to her house since the party where I met Aidan. I don’t want to run into her dad.

Sometimes she phones. We talk about Aidan and she keeps me in touch with what’s happening in West Kirby. I’ve never told her what happened with Bob. We’re not responsible for our parents’ mistakes, so why bother her?

A-level results day feels like a lifetime ago, but it was only twenty months. Time is relative. I’m more than halfway through my degree and those five terms passed in a flash. Distance is relative. West Kirby is only three hours drive away, but feels like the other side of the world. Yet if I don’t get a job before I graduate, I might have to move back there.

Everyone goes home for Easter weekend except me and Steve. I haven’t seen Aidan since Christmas. Some days, he feels more like a patient than a boyfriend. We email less and less. Last time I phoned, I only spoke to

his mum. She said he was coming out of himself, a little. I persuaded Zoe to go over and see him (her news is that she's training to be an estate agent). She said he was OK with her, so maybe it's just me he's lost interest in.

They're short staffed on the holiday weekend, so I do more shifts at the bar. The money's good. If someone had told me a year ago that I'd become adept at dealing with drunks and enjoy flirting with strangers, I'd have laughed. But I'm cool with it. Steve's still up when I get back from Moxy's, no matter how late. We have a drink together, though sometimes I'd rather go straight to bed with a book. He doesn't try it on, just makes it clear that if I find myself free, he'd like to be front of the queue to ask me out. Which is flattering. He has enough women on tap for him not to be desperate to have sex with me. There've been at least half a dozen since Persia. But I haven't had sex with Aidan since the night of the party. I've never had regular sex, full stop.

The ticket agency quickly promotes Steve. He's on 'difficult calls', or 'complaints', as they used to be known: tickets that haven't arrived or turned out not to be as good seats as they were supposed to be. He can mollify anyone. And he's already started getting freebies. Tonight, when I got in, he asked if I'll be back from West Kirby in time to see a show at Rock City. If anyone else asked, this would be a date, but we're house-mates, so it's not.

'I'd love to, thanks.'

'You're not going to change your mind and stick around at home to see Peter Pan, are you? Because, you know, it's the end of next week and..'

'I'll be back. I've got loads more work to do that I need the library for. And I'm behind the bar again a week on Saturday. Anyway...'

'Anyway what?'

If I tell Steve I'm thinking of packing in Aidan, he'll make a pass at me. Tonight, I'm weak. I might succumb. Which would be mad, because we live in the same house and I don't like him enough to go out with him. He's arrogant and slippery and greedy, not to mention silly and adolescent sometimes. Also, I'm not the sort of woman who cheats on her boyfriend. I'm not. But is Aidan really my boyfriend when I haven't had a word from him in more than two weeks? I'd like to discuss Aidan with Steve because, despite what I've just said, he is a sharp guy. But to discuss Aidan honestly, I'd have to talk about the accident, which would feel like a betrayal of Aidan, who made it clear how much he hates it when people know.

'Anyway what?' Steve repeats, coming to sit next to me on the sofa.

'I don't know. Aidan's such hard work.'

'I can see that.'

'No, you can't. You don't know the half of it.'

'Then tell me.'

And, to my surprise, I do. When I'm done, he puts his arms around me and I press my head against his chest, cry a little. There's nothing sexual in the embrace. It's comforting.

'What should I do?' I ask him.

'I think you're in over your head. He needs a therapist. You need somebody you can have a laugh with.'

'Aidan has a therapist. He never tells me what they talk about.'

'You don't have to feel guilty about dumping him, because he isn't really your boyfriend. He doesn't behave like a boyfriend. He doesn't want that responsibility. So you don't have that responsibility either.'

I wipe my eyes. 'Thanks. You've helped me to clear a lot of things in my head.'

I never thought I'd hear myself say that but what he told me was true, and it took Steve to say it. Last year I told Aidan's sister, Anna, that I wasn't responsible for her brother. Only I didn't mean it. It's one thing to articulate something, another to believe what you say.

Steve kisses me on the forehead and wishes me goodnight. Classy. He's already argued me into being unfaithful to Aidan. I'm feeling vulnerable and it wouldn't have taken much to get me into bed. Is he playing me, or being a gentleman? Is there a difference?

In West Kirby, it's the dumping season. Helen has finished with Mark, just as they were on the verge of booking flights for a summer getaway. Mark's upset, but hardly devastated. Turns out he's been seeing a bit of this girl, Ro, who's in his hall of residence. By 'seeing' he means 'screwing', once or twice a week. He tells me this in the Ring O'Bells on Easter Saturday. Then he has the nerve to make a pass at me. When I turn him down, he's persistent.

'We ought to get back together. We were great before. Now's the right time.'

'Too complicated,' I say.

'Because of Aidan?'

'I don't want to talk about Aidan.'

So we talk about Helen instead. She has started seeing a third year - a public school, banking family bloke. Mark reckons he'll dump her in the summer, when he graduates, but I wouldn't bet on it. Helen's a catch. Mark and I get very stoned together and watch the original version of *Solaris* until three in the morning, cuddled up on the sofa. He sleeps in the spare room.

In the morning, after Mum has gone to work, he asks me to go out with him again. I say 'no'. I've always liked Mark, a lot, but I've never

obsessed over him, never felt that limerance thing Vic was on about. I was infatuated with Aidan for a while, but I'm not any more. Trouble is, I can feel myself going that way for Steve, which is crazy. If I were looking for a new boyfriend, I'd be much better off with Mark than I would be with Steve, but I couldn't stand it if he dumped me to go back to Helen. After a few drinks, it's obvious from his conversation: he's still hung up on her.

'I'm going to see Aidan,' I tell him. 'You can have a lift home if you want.'

'To Nottingham?'

'Do you think of Nottingham as home now?'

'Home is wherever you are, Aly.'

He's the only person I ever let call me Aly. I give him a wry *don't pull that line on me* smile, then take him to his parents' home. It's a warm day with a fresh sea breeze. For the first time since I got the car, I have the windows down. When I drop Mark off, he lingers by the car.

'Finish with him,' Mark says. 'I'll finish with Ro and we can start up properly. Go off somewhere over the summer.'

Before I know it, he'll be suggesting that we move in together.

'You can't go back,' I tell him. 'No matter how much you want to or how easy it looks. We wouldn't last, you know. We're much more use to each other as friends.'

'Men and women can't stay just friends,' he says.

I haven't phoned to say I'm coming, so Aidan's mum and step-dad are surprised to see me.

'He's still out,' Linda says.

‘Out? It’s only noon.’

‘He’s gone to church with Anna,’ she says, cheerfully. ‘It’s the second time.’

‘Wow!’ Aidan’s parents are Church of England which, according to my Irish-Catholic mother, makes them practically atheists. But Aidan isn’t a practising Christian. We’ve had the secular conversation, the one where you establish common ground, that God doesn’t exist and a lot of the world’s troubles are caused by the misguided primitives who insist on believing in him yet won’t tolerate those who don’t believe in their own, bigoted way.

‘He’s come out of himself a bit,’ says Keith. ‘I managed to get him a job.’

‘What kind of job?’

‘Trainee Financial Adviser.’

Again, all I can think of to say is ‘wow’. At university, Aidan did Philosophy, with Psychology subsid. He told me he wanted to be a don, or a poet. Or both. Not an accountant.

‘Here he is now,’ Linda says. ‘Aidan, look who’s here!’

That’s when I get the real shock. Aidan’s had his hair cut. All the curls have gone. His deep eyes are too big for his face, and his jaw looks too long. I don’t fancy him any more.

Instead of going to his room, we go for a walk through the dull, suburban streets.

‘That Tarot reading at your party made me think,’ he says. ‘It was bullshit, but it made me ask the big questions. I need to make peace with God for my sins. I need to earn my way in the world.’

‘You don’t believe in God,’ I say.

‘That was just arrogance. I knew I’d sinned. How could I believe in sin but not believe in God? I doubted because I was avoiding responsibility.’

‘I’m not sure I believe in sin,’ I tell him. ‘I can handle the concepts of crime and punishment, yes, but not sin, not guilt. You can know the difference between right and wrong without having religion.’

‘I suppose,’ Aidan says, but that’s as far as he wants to take this philosophical discussion. We walk in silence. Whichever of us speaks first will be the one to end it, I figure. I’ve only ever had one serious boyfriend and I finished with him. I ought to experience what it’s like to be finished with. But Aidan doesn’t say anything. He’s too passive. I figure it was Huw who persuaded him to play silly games in the car. Aidan didn’t have the nerve to refuse. Or the sense.

‘You and me?’ I say, when we’re in sight of the house. ‘There isn’t one, really, is there? I mean, we’re good friends, but...’

‘Yeah,’ he says. ‘You’re right, Allison.’

And that’s it. No warm wishes, no ‘thank you, stay in touch’. I will never get another phone call from him. The only mutual friend we have is Zoe and neither of us sees much of her at the moment. Aidan doesn't do social networks. If I want to know what happens to him in the future, I will have to try Google and hope there isn’t another Aidan Kinsale in the world of financial services.

I drive home without saying goodbye to his family. I feel bad about that, because I’m closer to Aidan’s mum than I am to him. Dad says life's all about cutting your losses. I’m not that ruthless. But I'm learning to be.

## The Old Gang

It was Zoe's idea.

'I can't go on holiday with Aidan on his own. You know what he's like.'

'You're the one going out with him.'

'I've already persuaded Mark and Helen to come.'

'Jesus, Zoe. I'd be going on holiday with my two ex-boyfriends.'

'But you finished with both of them. And Mark was so long ago. Steve doesn't look like the jealous type to me.'

'I'll discuss it with him,' I said. 'See what he thinks.'

'Persuade him,' Zoe said. 'It'll be like the old gang.'

'And I'll be the odd one out,' Steve says, when I put it to him.

'We were never really a gang. Zoe and Mark were at primary school together, but I've only known Aidan a year. And Helen, well...'

'I don't know.'

'We wouldn't have to spend all our time with them.'

I'm nervous about going on holiday with Steve on his own. Out of bed, we don't have that much in common. Anyway, he hasn't suggested that we go on holiday together. And I need to. I've had a crap year and I need to get away. Home is my mum. Nottingham is finals. I need to be elsewhere.

'It's not for long. A week, ten days at most. That's all any of us can afford.'

Steve's tight-fisted. It's taken me a while to work this out, but the signs are clear. The meals in restaurants haven't happened. He doesn't drive, and never offers to pay for petrol. He lives in the cheapest house going, has a

decent part time job and is usually the last to buy a round. I have to make this holiday worth his while.

After three days, he agrees to go. What impresses me most is that he doesn't once display any anxiety about us being in close proximity to my two ex-boyfriends. They're no threat to him. That's how sure of himself he is.

How sure am I? On the plane, I can't help but make comparisons. Steve, while the shortest of the three guys, only four inches taller than me, is the most conventionally good looking. Aidan, even with his curly hair cut short, looks coolest. Enigmatic. Unlike open-faced Mark, whose shaggy haircut is stuck somewhere in the late 1960's. Helen should tell him this, but to her he has become a comfort figure, a favourite family pet.

We girls compete too. Helen is way ahead in the tits and legs department, though Zoe, with her funky feather cut and artificial tan, competes in the glam stakes. She's already been mistaken for a travel rep, a career she has considered. I'm the odd one out here, prone to dressing down, with breasts you'd only notice if I went topless, which I have no intention of doing. Steve says I'm his ideal body type, that I look like a model (I'm not tall enough to be one), but I've already seen him ogling Helen's low top, hoping to chance on a nipple slip. On holiday, he might revert to type. I'll have to watch him.

Customs wakes us up. Mark's brought some weed with him. It's double wrapped and concealed in a trouser pocket somewhere in his suitcase. No E's. He says they're easy to get on the island. And no need to be nervous. The 'nothing to declare' line at Customs isn't staffed. Within half an hour of our reaching the hotel, Mark's skinning up and passing the spliff along the balcony to me and then to Aidan, on my left.

‘Should you be doing that?’ I hear Zoe say.

A few minutes later, on my right, I can hear Mark and Helen making love. So can Steve. He feels me up. I’m not comfortable, having sex in such close proximity to the others, and, for once, I don’t finish. Steve hardly notices. Mark is going to get some whiz so that we can hit the ground running. I hear him go out and come back. It takes him all of ten minutes. Everyone has some. Even Steve has a dab, but it doesn’t suit him. He’s even more confident than usual, annoyingly hyper. I thought speed might make Aidan more loquacious, but it has no visible effect.

From night one, a pattern establishes itself. We eat badly, neck a few beers and a couple of pills, then hit the clubs around midnight. Before dawn, we chill out on the beach or the balcony. Then we sleep until at least noon. Wander around, get a tan and/or screw in the afternoon, followed by a little more sleep, then the whole thing starts up again. On the third day, I try to persuade Steve to rent a bike and explore the island, but he’s not keen. Helen agrees to come with me instead.

‘I wonder how Mark and Steve will get on without us,’ Helen says as we leave the bike hire place.

‘Me too.’

Then she swears. Her period has started and she needs to go back to her room.

‘I’m sorry. It’s early. This always happens when I go on holiday. I guess I’ll have to cry off.’

I don’t want to cycle alone, so I head to the beach to see if I can find one of the others. Aidan is on his own. I ask where Zoe is and he gives me a ‘don’t know, don’t care’ look.

‘Helen’s got her period and she won’t cycle. Do you want to come with me instead?’

‘All right,’ he says. ‘Give me five minutes.’

He drapes his towel around shiny shoulders and leads the way. I look at his wiry frame, his flat bum, and wonder how I ever fancied him. His eyes are duller these days, perhaps because the drugs he’s on are working.

When we get to the road I start to worry. Aidan wobbles a lot and takes a while to find his pace. I haven’t used my bike much since Dad bought me the car, but it’s not a skill that deserts you. That said, Aidan, with his driving ban, isn’t used to roads. I cycle cautiously, keeping a constant eye on him. He doesn’t seem worried, or aware of my concern, but we can’t have done more than a couple of miles when he suggests that we stop for a beer.

‘I think it was somewhere round here that Nico died,’ he says. ‘She had a heart attack while she was riding her bike and fell off, hit her head on a rock. It was the rock, not the heart attack or heroin, that killed her.’

This is the longest speech he’s uttered all holiday. I get him to explain who Nico was. He gets quite enthusiastic when he talks about the Velvet Underground, although not the way Mark does when he’s talking about music. Maybe Zoe’s right and Aidan is becoming his old self again. Only I never knew his old self and everybody keeps changing, all the time. Other people rarely notice this, because they’re so wrapped up in themselves.

‘You and Zoe seem good together,’ I tell him.

‘Zoe and Aidan,’ he says, slurping Becks. ‘We sound like a children’s picture book. Zoe’s great. I thought you and Steve would get together. That party at yours, I could see how much he wanted you. Even the next morning, when he was with that Persia girl, it was you he looked at.’

‘She was more interested in you than him. I got Steve to take her off your hands. Maybe we should have swapped that night.’

‘I wouldn’t have done that to you.’

This is the most open conversation I’ve ever had with Aidan. He isn’t like this with the others (except, I hope, Zoe, when they’re alone).

‘What about you, Aidan. What do you really want?’

He lights a cigarette and his eyes seem to focus on the middle distance.

‘Not this,’ is all he finally says, stubbing out his cigarette, half smoked.

Without discussion we get back on our bikes and head back to the beach, reconnoitring clubs and bars as we cycle past them. We’ve done the best ones in walking distance, but spot a couple which look smart enough to justify forking out for a taxi. By the time I’m back in my room, I feel like I’ve made progress with Aidan. We’re mates, insofar as Aidan has mates.

From my room, I can hear Zoe giving Aidan a hard time for going off without telling her.

‘You could have been anywhere! I was worried sick. No, I didn’t think *that*. I trust you both. I thought Allison was with Steve, I thought... I don’t know what I thought.’

Aidan’s voice in reply is calm, soothing. I can barely make out the sound, never mind the words. Of Steve, there is no sign. Maybe he’s out on the pull, checking his average ‘yes’ rate. The place is full of single women, so he should do well. I doze off. When I wake, he’s in bed with me, his instant hard-on a sign that he’s not been straying. I decide to relax and trust him.

Afterwards, we shower together and he produces fresh drugs. For an abstainer, he’s discovered a strong affection for E’s and whiz. By midnight, we’re flying. Even Aidan, never much of a dancer, is making shapes. Zoe,

who usually restricts herself to a few puffs of spliff or half an E, is speeding like crazy.

‘This is the best I’ve ever felt,’ she tells anyone who’ll listen. ‘The very, very best.’

It’s four in the morning and we’re all on the beach with big bottles of San Miguel and Metaxa, smoking spliffs the shape of magic markers. Aidan drinks some of the beer. I’ve never seen him drink before. It loosens him up a little. The boys talk bullshit at the speed of sound. We girls are more chilled out, but my head’s still throbbing from the speed and E. The weed smoothes the edges but it’ll be hours before I’m ready for bed.

It’s Helen who suggests playing *Truth Or Dare*. Any other time, I would have put a stop to it, but I’m too fucked up to flash a warning sign.

‘That’s such a cliché,’ Steve says.

‘What is it you’re interested in?’ Zoe asks Helen. ‘The truth or the dare?’

‘I like to hear the truth,’ Helen says. ‘We’re all friends, so the truth can’t hurt us. It can only make us stronger.’

‘Telling the truth gets people into trouble,’ Steve says. ‘It’s dangerous. Sometimes, lies are all that keep people from beating each other up.’

‘Nobody’s going to beat anybody up,’ Aidan says.

Mark is quiet. So am I.

‘Is Steve always this middle aged?’ Helen, *sotto voce*.

‘Who wants to start?’ Zoe asks, before I can answer.

‘Truth, no dare,’ Helen says. ‘Can I start?’ She turns to me. ‘Allison, do you still have feelings for Mark?’

Easy one. The speed makes me open, articulate. ‘Of course I have feelings for him,’ I say. ‘He was my first serious boyfriend. I hope we’ll always be friends. But I’m not out to take him off you. I’m with Steve.’

Helen opens her mouth to ask a follow-up but Mark stops her.

‘Asked and answered. My turn. Steve, you’re always dropping hints when the women aren’t around. Now I want to know the honest truth. How many women have you slept with?’

Steve gives one of his lazy, arrogant smiles. ‘You don’t think I keep count, do you?’

‘I’m sure you do.’

‘We all do,’ I add, and Steve grins. Then I tense up a little. He may be a slut but he’s my slut.

‘Why doesn’t everyone have a guess?’ Steve says. ‘Make the game more interesting.’

‘Good idea.’ Helen gets out some green rizlas. ‘Everyone put their name and number on. Steve, you write it down too, so you can’t cheat. Remember, total honesty. No exaggeration.’

‘What about under-exaggeration?’ Steve says. ‘We’re talking about full sex, right?’

Everyone writes a number. Strangely, I want to win. I calculate what Steve’s told me about his first year in hall, average a conquest a week for term time, knocking off a few weeks for exams and illness. We hand the rizlas to Steve, who opens them.

‘OK, here we go,’ he says. ‘In reverse order. Helen: one. Very funny. Aidan, twelve. Not even close, buddy. Mark. Twenty-five. Getting warmer. Zoe, eighty-eight. Who do you think I am, Hugh Hefner? But the winner,

the one who gets the prize of my body tonight and the most significant digit on this illustrious list, is Allison.'

'What did you guess, Allison?' Helen.

'Forty-seven.'

'Show us, Steve,' Mark says.

'Come on,' Helen says. 'We all want to know what number Allison is.'

Steve hands over the rizla. Forty-three. Suddenly, I feel humiliated.

Forty-two women before me. How many will there be after?

'My turn,' Zoe says. 'Mark, do you still have a thing for Allison?'

'Jeez,' Helen says. 'Are you trying to split us up?'

'Actually, I am,' Zoe says. 'In the long run, I think Mark and Allison ought to be together. He calms her down. She keeps him more... together. Nothing personal, Helen, but you know that Mark's only a stop-gap for you.'

'Notice she doesn't apologise to me,' Steve says, as Helen strokes Mark's hair, murmurs something to him.

'Does speed do this to everyone?' Helen asks, 'puts them on a total honesty jag? I'm beginning to wish I'd never started this game.'

'Uh, Zoe and I took a little acid too,' Aidan says.

'And you didn't offer us any?' Mark says.

'I'm not sure I'd take acid,' I say. 'Too scary.'

'Too right,' Steve says.

'Obviously it wasn't acid,' Helen says. 'It was that truth drug they used in the fifties, sodium somethingtol. Go on, Mark, give your answer.'

Mark doesn't look at Helen, or at me.

'Realistically, none of us are going to be with the same person for the rest of our lives. I know Helen won't stay with me. And yeah, if I had to choose one person I already know who I'd like to end up with, it would be

Allison. She knows that, at least I hope she does. But, you know, we'll all probably get married, have kids etc with people we haven't even met yet.'

'Wow,' Zoe says. 'Allison, what do you make of that?'

'I've already answered my question,' I say.

We all see at once that Helen is crying.

'Why?' she says. 'Why do people have relationships they know aren't going to last? I don't mean Steve and his one night stands. I don't even mean you, Mark...'

'Tired and emotional,' Steve mumbles to me, as Mark gives Helen a cuddle.

'Sorry,' Zoe says. 'I didn't mean my question to...'

'It's OK,' Helen says. 'It's just that, I thought he was going to marry me. I thought he was the one.'

Aidan clicks that she isn't talking about Mark and turns to Steve. 'I think it's your turn. Uh, me or Zoe.'

'This doesn't have to be about relationships, does it?' Steve asks.

'Please,' Aidan says, 'anything else.'

'Anything? The sodium pentothal reply?'

'Anything.'

'OK,' Steve says softly. 'Tell us what really happened, the night of the crash. Goes no further, just the six of us.'

'That's not on,' Zoe says, sharply.

'You don't have to,' Helen tells him.

I stare daggers at Steve, but he's not looking. He's staring at Aidan, who's staring back at him. Mark was rolling a joint, but he's stopped.

'All right,' Aidan says. 'I agreed to play, so I will. You got any of that speed left, Mark?'

‘Isn’t it a bit late?’ Zoe says, as Mark gets the wrap out.

‘I won’t sleep tonight anyway.’

It’s nearly dawn. Aidan takes a large dab, washes it down with beer, and swigs from the brandy bottle as he talks. It takes him a while to warm up, but when he gets going, his voice is clear, strong, even defiant.

‘The thing was Huw’s idea in the first place. I passed my test two months before him and we’d go driving. Just driving. No destination. Once we drove through the Mersey tunnel stoned and I got disoriented, nearly crashed. After that, Huw passed his test and got given his own car, so he did most of the driving. He came up with the game one night when we were both off our face. How close could you go without hitting? How fast? He hated slow drivers, that was what really got to him. If you were behind the wheel on a road with no speed cameras, you ought to go at a fair lick, not twenty-eight fucking miles an hour. So he’d get right up their backside until they speeded up or pulled over.’

‘And if they didn’t?’ I hear myself ask.

‘They always did. Or turned off. Or something. We didn’t give them room to brake. Huw was better at it than me. I was worried about scratching my mum’s car. Huw had a banger, he didn’t give a shit.’

‘What sort of cars did you tail-gate?’ Steve asks.

‘Anything, as long as we could see the driver. Young. Old. Couples. As long as there were no kids in the back. That would have been too creepy.’

‘And didn’t you get any retaliation?’ Mark.

‘How many questions is that?’

‘You haven’t got to the crash yet,’ Steve points out. Aidan ignores him.

‘There was one time, a car braked slowly and we hit the bumper. He pulled over, tried to block the road. Big, angry guy got out. But he’d left us room to get past him. We scratched his car as we went round. He banged on our boot but there was nothing he could do to stop us.’

‘And he didn’t report you to the police?’ Helen.

‘Huw always put mud on the plates.’ Aidan pauses, takes a hit of brandy. ‘The police made a big thing of that at the trial, that we always put mud on the plates. Said it showed premeditation. Like we were looking to kill someone.’

‘The night of the crash was just like any other night. We were at a loose end. I didn’t have any weed. Huw wanted to go to a party but I wasn’t up for it. I suggested the drive. I thought it might get my adrenaline going, make me more sociable.’

‘I think Huw suggested that I drive. Not a dare. More that he was growing out of it. He had a car all the time, while I hardly got to use my mum’s. Driving was more of a thrill for me. Technically, I wasn’t insured to drive his car. That came up in court too.’

‘Sometimes, before, it was a random thing. We wouldn’t do it or we’d start to, then drop back, turn off. That night, we were really up for it, almost like we’d decided it was going to be the last time, so it better be good.’

‘They had a big car, a Volvo. Neither of us could tell how old they were. I suppose that made their reactions slower. They were on the long road out from the golf club. Blind corners, lots of dips. They were doing 25, 27 tops. Huw got really pissed off when they wouldn’t speed up at all. Then I started nudging them. Just tapping the bumper. And it had the required effect. They speeded up. We stayed right on their tail. Got up to forty, forty-five. Huw urged me to nudge them again, but it’s harder to do a nudge once

you get to forty. They were up to fifty when, suddenly, they start to brake and I ran into the back of them. Not hard, there was barely a scratch on Huw's car afterwards, but his brakes weren't as efficient as theirs and they had to keep going.

'If there hadn't been anything on the main road when they came out, it would have been OK. But there was. I swerved around the accident. You could tell it was bad. The woman whose car they hit, the airbag in her Polo came up and she was all right. Well, she started bleeding from the nose when Huw went to talk to her. She was in shock. Later it turned out she'd broken her forearm. She couldn't drive again for months afterwards. But basically, she was all right because the old couple only sideswiped her. After they did that, they went off the road, straight into the lamppost.

'Their car was really old. It didn't have airbags. An airbag wouldn't have saved the guy, anyway. They were going too fast.'

Steve breaks the silence that follows. 'How did they catch you?'

'I phoned the ambulance on my mobile. For five minutes, we were responsible citizens, looking after the woman from the Polo, putting out the red triangle from Huw's car. Then the police came and she must have said something because they arrested us both. She'd seen the way the old couple's car came out onto the main road, knew there was something odd going on. There were a couple of other witnesses. One of them talked about how terrified the old guy looked. He'd had heart surgery, his daughter told the court, thought he wouldn't live to see his second grandchild. And he didn't, because of us.

'I got off lightly, mainly because I'd been sectioned by then. Huw's parents told him what he had to do to get off and he got off. He wanted to

confess, he didn't want to dump me in it. Not that I gave a shit. Now I'm here and he isn't. Some dare, eh?'

'You can't beat yourself up forever,' Zoe says.

'Watch me try,' Aidan says. Then he quickly adds, 'anyway, it's Allison's turn now. Who hasn't had a question? Zoe?'

Zoe and I look at each other. She's pale. I look at Steve looking at Aidan. They can distance themselves, these men, see their own lives in abstract. Maybe it's the drugs they're on, or maybe it's in their characters. Tonight, I don't like Steve much and I don't want to stay around Aidan. Why did Steve have to ask that question? We could talk this through but he's off his face and won't remember in the morning, though I will. I suspect Zoe feels pretty much the same.

'I'm ready for bed,' I say. 'Zoe, do you want to sleep in our room tonight, leave the guys to it?'

She nods and gets up. We leave without making eye contact, without saying goodnight. On the way back to my room, neither of us utters a word.

## Random

Final Year. People panic over dissertation topics, stress over whether to take modules that are all coursework or fifty-fifty split with exams. I opt for coursework: it spreads the stress, makes me feel more in control.

One of my modules is called *Nottingham Fictions*. The lecturer passes round this memoir about a bloke going to a football match in the city. It comes in a box and you read the sections in any order you like. The first and last sections are always the same, but the rest are designed to be shuffled.

'Why do you think he chose to publish it this way?' the lecturer asks.

Nobody answers. We're in our third year, but still people are afraid to make fools of themselves. Including me. Yet I wave my arm.

'Allison?'

'Isn't he, like, saying that it's a book full of memories, so they come in a random order, because that's the way we remember things in life?'

'Yeah, random.' A guy at the other end of the room nods vigorously.

*Random*. Half the people at uni use that word all the time, peppering their sentence with it like the word means something profound. They don't use it the way I just used it, as a mathematical term. It's a kind of catch-all term for... I'm not sure. Aidan says it. So does Mark. A lot. Maybe it's a male thing. Only, recently, I've found myself using it too. I'm worried I've misunderstood and/or I won't notice that it's gone out of fashion while I wasn't looking. I saw Vic the other day, for the first time in weeks. When I asked what she and Liz had been up to, she said 'random stuff'.

Sometimes random seems to mean *meaningless, but not in a bad way*. Other times, it means *kind of cool, in a post-modern way*. I'm not sure I understand post-modernism. There was a professor at this Events Week

thing I helped out at the other day. He started talking about *post-post-modernism*, then, after a couple of perfectly formulated, impenetrable paragraphs he repeated the phrase and added: 'you do know what I mean by post-post-modernism?' I said 'sure'. Because I may be stupid, but I'm not stupid enough to admit my stupidity. Is that random? I decide *random* is a word for anything meaningful that you don't know how to articulate. So, life is random. We're living in the *post-post-post-modern* age where everything is of equal value so nothing really matters. Yeah, right. I decide that, from now on, I will avoid the word, use *arbitrary* instead.

The others are getting on to me about my kitten, Monsta. I feed her when I remember but Steve never does and she got really skinny while we were away. If Vic were here she'd feed her when I forgot. I suspect that Monsta is a Vic substitute. I miss having a friend who's around all the time. I know there's Steve, but a boyfriend isn't a friend, and, anyway, he's still out all the time. I'm not. Since Vic and Liz moved in together, I hardly see her. I miss her. I even miss Finn and Tessa, though we weren't close. The new people in the house make no effort to get to know me, or I them. It's just a place to live.

The guy in my old room asks if Monsta's been spayed.

'There are lots of strays out there and she spends most of her time on the streets. She's bound to get pregnant the minute she's old enough.'

How old is Monsta? Less than a year, but I have no idea how much less. Mum never told me about her, presumably because she knew what getting a cat signified. I make an appointment with the PDSA, a charity who'll do the operation in exchange for a donation, rather than a fat vet's fee.

The day before the appointment, Monsta doesn't come home. She must have sensed something, or maybe it's a coincidence. At first, I'm not too worried. She's bound to have picked up a few street smarts since moving to Nottingham. I mean to find her, not desert her. I mean to go street to street, looking for her. I mean to cancel the PDSA appointment. Then something happens to make me forget.

Steve's working late again. I reckon up how many nights he's done in the last three weeks. It's at least ten, maybe twelve. This is his final year too. He's meant to work no more than two nights a week. Bored, I ring up Zoe. She has a moan about Aidan, how little he's there for her, how he won't go to his therapy group, his secretiveness. It's all too familiar.

'He's fine when we're alone, but he's never been good in company.'

'Some people aren't.'

She asks what I'm doing at Christmas.

'Staying at Steve's. Dad's going to Barbados and Mum won't know what's going on, though I'll call her, obviously. How about you?'

'Aidan's lot have hired a cottage in Scotland for Christmas and New Year. They've invited me. It's got to be better than staying at home.'

For each of us, it'll be our first Christmas away from West Kirby, but that's cool. We're no longer teenagers.

'Have you seen Mark?' she asks.

I tell her about my embarrassing scenes in restaurants, concluding with Steve and the mysterious text message.

'It has to be a set up,' Zoe says. 'Steve wouldn't be that obvious.'

'He was never subtle.' We discuss the numbers game. I fill in some of the details he only hinted at on Ibiza.

‘Some of his conquests are bound to be resentful that he never called,’ Zoe says. ‘This one probably thought she was doing you a favour.’

‘Maybe she was.’

‘I thought you and Steve were solid.’

‘I’m sure he’s cheating on me,’ I say, realising as I say it that ‘sure’ is an overstatement.

‘Who with? How can you be certain?’

‘Knowing Steve, it could be more than one person. He likes taking risks and he doesn’t mind being obvious.’

‘You’re telling me. That guy could ogle for Britain in the Olympics. On Ibiza, on the beach, when I had my top off... and you should have seen the way he looked at Helen sometimes. Mind you, Helen seemed to enjoy the attention.’

‘Mark was worried that Helen was playing away again.’

‘You don’t think..?’ She doesn’t have to finish the sentence.

‘Steve and Helen? It has crossed my mind. Helen wouldn’t, though. Would she?’

‘Not if she thought you’d find out.’

In other words, she would. Zoe is a better judge of human character than I am, which makes me wonder why she’s still seeing Aidan. But we all have our blind spots.

‘Helen admires your taste. She always looked up to you at school.’

‘She did?’

We were at the same school for six years out of seven but I didn’t notice Helen until I was in the upper sixth. I barely noticed anything other than myself. It took Mark to teach me the meaning of the word ‘solipsism.’

‘Have you got her address?’

At eleven, I borrow a jacket with a hood on it and head out into the November chill. Helen's house is only a three minute drive away. She's in Old Lenton, by the hospital, an area full of tall, badly lit houses, each bigger than the one I live in. I park on a nearby road. Helen has a first floor room, Zoe told me. Only one first floor light is on, so that's the window I watch, hoping it's hers.

The room's occupant has company. I see more than one silhouette. I want it to be Mark. I so want it to be Mark that I ring his number, expecting to hear it ring. Instead, it goes to voicemail and I hang up. Then I dial Helen's number, which I got off Zoe. Sure enough, I see her silhouette answer the phone. I hang up quickly. All I have to do now is ring Steve's phone, and my suspicions will be squashed or confirmed. But I can't bring myself to. Instead, I wait. If I see Steve leave, I can get in my car and be in bed before he makes it back, then confront him at my leisure.

Only he doesn't leave. At quarter to twelve, Helen's light goes out. Whoever it is must be staying the night. I drive home.

Steve's already there, getting ready for bed.

'Where've you been?' he asks, and I have no answer for him.

'Walking. Thinking.'

He hugs me. 'You're freezing!'

He pours me a brandy from the stash he keeps in our chest of drawers. When I ask about his weekend, he isn't evasive, not exactly, but he doesn't have a lot to say. He makes up for this by coming on to me, and taking as long as I need before he allows himself to finish. And this release, this orgasm, this enormous feeling he gives me is enough to justify my living with him, going out with him, relying on him, for no-one else has been able to do

this for me before and, when it comes down to it, what does sexual fidelity matter, as long as he's there for me when I need him to be? What does any of it matter, when we're all dust in the end?

I spend the night hugging him close to me, so close I wake up in a sweat. In the morning, as I watch him dress to go to uni, I worry that I'm being over clingy. I've put all my eggs in the Steve basket.

I have a dissertation tutorial at eleven, but my tutor can't get much out of me. I'm dragging myself back to the car park, trying to remember where I left the mini, when the phone rings. It's Zoe.

'Guess what?'

She sounds so cheerful that I feel I ought to be able to guess.

'What?'

'Aidan's asked me to marry him.'

'You? Aidan? Married?' This is so far beyond my expectations that, for a minute I am flummoxed, utterly unable to respond, but Zoe is too excited to notice. 'That's so... random.'

'Now look, I've thought about this and discussed it with my mum, and with Aidan, of course. I'd like you to be maid of honour.'

'Wow! Thanks, that is an honour.'

I've not said I'll do it but Zoe takes my acceptance as read and starts going on about the big occasion, when it should be and, more crucially, where. I daren't ask why she's agreed to marry Aidan in the first place. She knows her own mind, I tell myself. Which is more than I do.

Steve's not working tonight. I will be able to have a proper talk with him. We can discuss how to cope with what is happening to my mum, work out how many days to go to his at Christmas, which is less than a month away. I'll tell him about Zoe, too. That'll get him going.

I'm waiting for him to get back from uni when my phone rings. I don't recognise the number. It's Helen Kent.

'Allison, hi! You rang me last night.'

'Did I?' I am utterly incapable of making up a lie to explain myself.

'Yeah, I got your number off Zoe. How did you...?'

Thankfully, she doesn't make me finish the sentence. 'Mark recognised your number. We got cut off somehow. I would have called you back, but we were... anyway, I figured you'd call again if it was important.'

'Has Zoe told you her news?' I ask, letting Helen assume that this was what my call was about.

'Just now. Isn't that incredible? Her and Aidan. I mean, I could see her going out with him out of pity but Jesus, marrying him? What's she on?'

'She says she's in love.'

'She's known him half her life. It's not love, it's desperation. She's dropped out of uni and got that *there may never be anyone else as good as this comes my way again* feeling. I can't blame her. I was nearly stupid enough to give up Mark. He's coming to Turkey with my family at Christmas, did he tell you that? What are you and Steve doing?'

'We're going to his,' I say, as though this is a routine visit rather than the first time I'll have met his family. I'm relieved that he isn't sleeping with Helen, but I'm hardly about to share confidences with her.

When I get off the phone, Steve's home, carrying a large suitcase that I don't recognise.

'Where's that from?' I ask, as I put on the kettle to make a brew, like a dutiful housewife.

'I borrowed it,' he says, 'from a friend', and at once I know what's coming.

‘You’re leaving?’

‘I wanted to tell you yesterday but you were so down and...’

‘You thought you’d screw me one more time for the hell of it. Who is she?’

‘She’s a second year. You don’t know her.’

‘She has nice luggage.’

‘I’m not moving in with her. I’m not moving today. This is more...’

‘Symbolic?’ I say. ‘Let me guess, she made you bring it with you because it would force you to tell me why you had it?’

‘Something like that,’ Steve admits. ‘I’m not the living together type, with you for six months, that’s five months longer than anybody before...’

‘But you’d have chucked me after a fortnight if we hadn’t happened to be living in the same house.’

‘That’s not true. I don’t want to hurt you. I’m sorry it’s a bad time, but there’d never be a good time, would there?’

‘I suppose not.’

I am torn between demanding details of his infidelities and wanting to be dignified. This is what happens when you date a slut. At least, because I knew about his past, we have always used condoms. I don’t need testing for STDs. I need my head examining for going out with him in the first place.

Steve can’t move out for several days. There are notice periods, deposits to be paid. But I can’t go on sharing a room with him. Next day, I persuade Jon, in my old room, to swap with me. The others are pissed off about losing the lounge/TV room but Steve’s hardly there, so they keep using his room anyway. I suppose he’s with his new woman. Changing rooms means that

it's Jon and not me who answers the door when a guy from five streets down shows up with a name tag and a flea collar.

'He said his daughter came across her on the street a week ago but this is the first time he's found anyone at home. She was run over.'

'What happened to her body?'

'I didn't ask. You could hardly expect him to hold onto a dead cat for a week, could you?'

'No, I suppose not.'

And I have to hurry upstairs because I am bursting into tears over a cat I never wanted in the first place. How will I explain to Mum that I let her cat die? How can I explain anything to her, the state she's in?

Two weeks pass. Then term ends and everyone goes away. Except me. This is a good opportunity to get a load of work done. I need a good 2:1 if I am to hang around and do an MA, which is the only plan I can think of at the moment. As I'm driving out of the university after my last tutorial, I pass Helen. She waves, and I could easily offer her a lift, but I pretend not to see her. I'd have to talk to her. *Mark isn't just for birthdays and Christmas*, I'd have to say. *Right now I need him more than you do.*

I decide I'll work my way through the next six months. Never mind a 2:1, I'll get a first.

I'm glad to be back in the attic room. I like the view from the window. Below, the students have gone home and the area is returned to its year-round residents, Asian and Italian families, young professionals in house shares. There are a few Christmas trees but they're easy to ignore.

Zoe rings. She and Aidan haven't decided a date yet but everything's hunky dory. Before she can ask me what I'm doing over Christmas my battery dies and I decide, then and there, not to recharge my phone. I delete my Facebook account. Email's easy to ignore. So are the other people in the house. Now it's just me, and my thoughts, in a high room, looking down on the world. Whatever happens is whatever happens. Random. Bring it on.

## No Depression

On New Year's Eve, I'm given the all clear on the pneumonia. Once again, I turn down the anti-depressants the doctor suggests. I've seen what they did to Aidan. The doctor offers to put me on the waiting list for counselling. I tell him I'll see someone at the university if I get depressed again. I was physically ill, not mentally ill, I insist. I wasn't suffering from depression, I was sad because my boyfriend split up with me. That's natural and, anyway, I'm over it now. Sort of. I go back to the empty house, pack a bag, and drive to West Kirby.

'No Steve?' my father asks, after a cursory hug.

'He's working,' I tell Dad, who doesn't notice that I have lost weight and become uncommunicative. Why should he? I've been acting withdrawn with him for five years. He's more interested in seeing Steve than he is me. Ingrid comments on how pale I look. I tell her it's because I spend so much time inside, studying. Then I go and hide in the spare room until everyone's gone to bed. Maybe this is how Aidan felt, back in the day.

'What happened to you?' Zoe asks when I call.

'My phone was on the blink.'

'I worked that out, but you didn't answer emails either.'

'I went off on one, but I'm back now.'

*Off on one* is Liverpudlian for 'let's not talk about it', only Zoe won't leave the subject.

'I wouldn't let Aidan get away with that, Allison, and he's on medication. What happened? Why haven't you been home?'

When I start crying she tells me to come round at once.

Her dad answers the door. I'm too numb to react, even though it's the first time I've seen him by myself since that time on the common, three summers ago. He's lost weight and become greyer. If he remembers what happened back then, his face doesn't show it. How much have I changed? My face is gaunter. I wear a little make-up, which I used to think was naff. My hair is shorter, less feminine, making my face look more pointy, or so I fear. But I am still recognisably the person I was two and a half years ago. Aren't I?

'How's your mother?'" Bob Pritchard asks. So he does know who I am. He's prone to black-outs, Zoe told me on holiday. Maybe he has no recollection of trying to rape me.

'No different. She could go on like this for years, the doctors say.'

'Give her my best, would you?'

'Sure. She won't understand but... sure.'

He nods, then backs away when Zoe appears. I've never told Zoe what happened with her dad that day. Why? Because he's her dad. What good would it do to tell her something that would make her despise him more than she already despises him? It does you no good to hate your dad, I could tell her that. Men know they're pathetic, we don't need to rub it in. They have a strength we crave, but it's a mistake to rely on it in them. They're also weaker than us, only in different places.

'You look like shit,' Zoe says. 'What have you done to yourself?'

We talk about me for an hour. I'm not used to talking about me, not since Mark left, anyway. Zoe sorts me out, sort of. I should get a new place in Nottingham, we agree, crack on with work, forget about blokes for a while. Sometimes all you need is a friend to spell out the obvious stuff.

‘I can’t believe Mark just backed out of your life like that.’

‘I wouldn’t have him back but Helen would. Why blame him?’

When we’re done dealing with me we go on to talk about Aidan. We make ourselves an elaborate coffee with the new Krups device that's appeared in the kitchen. Bob’s boat building business must be doing well.

‘Aidan’s the best he's been for years,’ Zoe says. ‘I mean, he’s still on a cocktail of stuff to ward off the anxiety and depression but he’s stopped self-medicating with hash and speed. He’s staying off the drink. I suppose you’d say he’s become a bit boring compared to how he was when I first knew him, or when he went out with you. But I love him. He suits me.’

‘And the marriage thing. What did you decide?’

‘That’s what I’ve been trying to phone and email you about. The church is booked for Easter. I still want you to be the maid of honour.’

How easy is it to move from total honesty to total pretence? Easier than it sounds. I give a definite ‘yes’, and we go all girly and start having the sort of conversation I always imagined having one day but thought would be with someone else at an unimaginable point in the future. My ongoing depression/lack of boyfriend problems are decreed to be sorted out and my being the groom-to-be’s previous girlfriend is conveniently ignored. We agree that, rather than go to my dad’s, I will stay at Zoe’s in the week leading up to the wedding (when, really, I should be getting ready for finals, but it seems churlish to mention this). The thought of a whole week in close proximity to Bob Pritchard sets my teeth on edge, but I don’t suppose it will do much for him, either.

‘I’m really, really happy for you,’ I tell Zoe, even though I’m pretty sure she’s making the biggest mistake of her life.

I'm saying goodbye to Zoe when her mum returns from the sales. I wave hello and start the car, for I need to get on. I have things to collect from home, stuff I put aside to take back to Nottingham. I'm going to collect them, then drop off my set of keys at the estate agent's. The house is for sale. Soon, I won't have a home in West Kirby any more.

'Allison, wait!' Mrs Pritchard shouts loudly enough for me to hear through the closed door. I wind down the window and she hurries over.

'Zoe's told you about the wedding?'

'Yes, she's asked me to be maid of honour, which is...' while I'm searching for a euphemism, Stella Pritchard carries on regardless.

'We think they're rushing into it.'

'They seem very determined.'

'You know Aidan better than we do.' Unlikely, given how long the two families have been friends, but I let this slide. 'We want Zoe to wait until the autumn, when Aidan's probation ends and he'll have finished his current course of treatment. Aidan's parents agree. They think Zoe's very good for Aidan, but they shouldn't commit their whole lives when they've only been together for a relatively short time.'

'I can see what you mean,' I say, though I don't like the way we're talking behind Zoe's back, like my friends are patients and we're their carers. What do they want me to do? Counsel them to delay until their parents think they're ready? Both of them are older than me. Both know their own minds. I want to get away. It's cold with the window down.

'You'll talk to her?' Mrs Pritchard asks.

'You haven't told her this yourself?'

'Not in as many words.'

‘You need to talk to her first. Then maybe she’ll talk it over with me.’

‘Thank you, Allison. And you’ll talk to Aidan, too?’

‘I was passing,’ I tell Aidan’s mum, Linda. ‘I should have phoned first.’

‘Oh, nonsense. How lovely it is of you to call. Keith will be delighted.’

Linda and Keith make me feel uncomfortable. They comment on how well I look, which is a lie. They talk about Aidan as though we’re related. I think they see me as the ‘good’ girlfriend, the one who stayed on at university, the one who dragged their son from the depths of depression. But last time I saw Aidan, back in September, he seemed so fucked up. Why have I come? I want to be reassured that he’s not messing around with Zoe, that he’s thought through this marriage. I’m not here because I’m being pestered to act as a go between by both sets of parents. Definitely not.

Aidan’s out. Maybe I should go.

‘He’ll be back from church soon,’ Keith says.

‘They’ll want a big breakfast when they get back,’ Linda says. ‘No eating before communion. Have you eaten, Allison?’

‘A bit.’

‘You’ve lost weight, I can tell. You’ll need feeding up before you make that long drive back to Nottingham.’

By the time Aidan walks through the door, the kitchen smells of bacon, sausage, fried mushrooms, baked beans, the Full English. I am persuaded to have scrambled eggs with mine. Aidan sits down opposite me. He looks less strait-laced than I was expecting. His eyes are almost as sunken as when we first met. He is thinner than ever and his curly, barbed-wire hair has started to grow longer again. It looks wild. I can’t imagine him as a married man.

Anna powers through her breakfast.

‘Did you say “yes” to Zoe?’ is her only question.

‘To be maid of honour? Of course I did.’

‘Thanks,’ Aidan says. ‘That’ll make her happy.’

When Anna’s finished, Aidan and I are alone, both picking at our food. I don’t know what to say, but I blunder in anyway.

‘Why are you and Zoe getting married? Wouldn’t living together first have made more sense?’

Aidan does that thing with his shoulders which looks like he’s squirming. When we were going out it took me weeks to work out it was meant to be a shrug.

‘It’s just... you’ve been through a lot. And Zoe’s a good mate. I’d hate to see her let down if you’re not really ready.’

I feel like an adult talking to a child. Does being maid-of-honour-designate qualify me to ask these questions? Adding to the air of unreality, Aidan doesn’t reply, merely toys with a bright yellow globule of congealed yolk that he is trying to position on his last piece of fried bread.

‘Aidan?’

‘Zoe keeps me grounded,’ Aidan says. ‘My shrink thinks she’s good for me.’

‘Your *shrink* told you to marry her?’

‘Marriage means a lot to women,’ Aidan mumbles. ‘I want Zoe to stay.’

‘That’s not enough reason to get married. Did you think she was going to finish with you?’

He gives another languid shrug, as if to say *well, you did*.

‘She’s talking about getting married at Easter, Aidan. It’s too soon. Do yourself a favour. Leave it until the autumn, when you’re off probation and you’re on less meds. Leave it until you’re both sure.’

‘You mean until you’re sure I’m in my right mind?’ Aidan asks, a trace of an old arrogance visible in his wary frown.

‘No. I mean, I don’t know.’ I want to tell Aidan about what’s happened to me, about how out of it I’ve been and how this makes it easier for me to relate to him. But our relationship has always been about Aidan, about his view of the world, his needs. I realise that, the less mysterious he becomes, the less I like him. He’s just another fucked-up bloke trying to get a woman to cater to all his needs. The world’s full of them.

‘It’s all right,’ Aidan says, pushing his plate to one side. ‘I’m going to be good to her.’

And probably he is. Zoe has known Aidan much longer than I have. Maybe the mundane Aidan, the Aidan of before the accident, is the Aidan she’s marrying. Maybe she knows how to bring him back. You never know what goes on in other people’s relationships. There was a time when most people were married by my age. Not any longer. This age, the university years, for lucky people like me, is a period to experiment, make mistakes. It’s a time when we’re anxious to define and prove ourselves, but nobody will hold us accountable if we fuck everything up. After all, we’re still young and have a lifetime to repay our debts.

I don’t know when the mistakes period ends. Twenty-five? Thirty? Aidan is desperate to get out of his mistakes period, to put all the drugs and depression and irresponsible acts behind him. Only, I don’t think you can choose when to leave it behind. Marrying Zoe will not stop Aidan from being responsible for the death of one person and the permanent injury of

another. It will not change his best friend being dead. A problem shared is not a problem halved. With Huw gone, the guilt seems to rest even more heavily on Aidan's shoulders. That must be why he goes to church.

I realise we've spent several minutes without talking, barely eating.  
'Got to go,' I say.

Aidan glances at me with his stranger's eyes, then gets up to see me to the door. There's no hug, no intimate moment to indicate that we were once, however briefly, lovers. Despite this ambivalence, I kiss Aidan on the cheek. His skin smells antiseptic.

As I drive through the Mersey Tunnel, I ask myself why I didn't tell Aidan about my own depression. He would have scoffed, possibly. *Your cat died, your mum had a stroke and your boyfriend dumped you because he prefers fucking someone else? Big deal. Try killing someone.* But I'd never been dumped before. And I hate where I'm living. And my friends weren't there for me. And, come to think of it, when were you ever there for anyone, Aidan? When are you going to grow up?

Maybe the discussion would have gone the other way. We'd have bonded over how bleak the world is, how suicide is the one act that makes complete sense and only a kind of lethargy keeps us from doing it. But neither of these imagined responses convince me. I can't see me and Aidan having a heart to heart. I can only see him evading the conversation again and again.

By the time I'm on the M1 I've decided that I don't want to be Aidan and Zoe's maid of honour. However, this hardly matters, for I am more and more convinced that the wedding will never happen.

On Albert Grove, a familiar looking guy stares at me. When I park, he crosses the street. I work out who he is, and consider rushing into the house, unloading the car later. But I have never been a coward. He is older than I thought, in his mid-thirties, and wears a brown v-necked sweat shirt beneath a black leather jacket. He has a receding hairline and rimless glasses. I smile at him. He smiles back.

‘How are you?’ he asks.

‘Better now,’ I say.

He looks inside the car. ‘Want a hand with your stuff?’

‘I’ll be all right, thanks.’

He’s interested in me, concerned about me. He wears no ring and he’s seen me naked. Possibly he fancies me. But he’s nervous. He’s long out of the learn-from-your-mistakes period and I’m definitely a potential mistake.

Close-up, I don’t fancy him. He’s too old and glasses are a turn off for me.

Maybe if he had laser eye surgery. But he wouldn’t be living round here if he could afford laser eye surgery.

‘I’m Robert.’ He offers me his hand. I shake it limply.

‘Allison.’

‘See you around.’

When he’s gone, I wonder if I should apologise for freaking him out over Christmas. But being open about your problems is not the English way. Later, as I’m unpacking, I see him sitting at his computer in the room across the yards. The table has moved and the machine is now side on, so that he can glance over towards my room at any moment, at any time of day.

That’s it, then. I really have to move.

## What Happened

‘Maybe it’s a plot to get us back together,’ Mark says.

‘The best man’s meant to screw the bridesmaids, not the maid of honour.’

‘I thought the maid of honour *was* a bridesmaid?’

He’s right, so I change the subject. ‘At least Aidan didn’t ask Steve to be best man.’

‘Who knows, Aidan might have asked him first. Seen Steve lately?’

‘Not since he moved out. You seeing much of Helen?’

Mark shakes his head. ‘Going away with her at Christmas was a mistake. We were at each other’s throats half the time. I used to think, however bad things got between us, it was worse when we were apart. Now I think, fuck it.’

‘Yeah. Fuck it’s my philosophy of life, too.’

‘Let’s go and spend the rest of our days on the distant island of Fuckit!’

As we laugh, our bodies brush against each other. I’m living in a small flat that is within my budget. The city has a glut of student accommodation and, halfway through the academic year, rents drop to tempting levels. Posters all over town read *Just because you’re a student doesn’t mean you have to live like one*. It’s the final year of my degree and I’ve bought into the advertiser’s dream.

We discuss the wedding.

‘How did Aidan ask you?’ I want to know. ‘I can’t imagine Aidan asking you.’

‘Actually, it wasn’t Aidan who asked. It was Zoe. She said he felt shy about it, or something.’

We both laugh again, but not in a good way.

‘I tried to get Aidan to put it off until the autumn,’ I tell Mark. ‘But he wasn’t having it.’

‘You tried to tell Aidan what to do? What got into you?’

‘Zoe’s parents were worried about everything. And they’re right. She’s rushing into it. Marrying Aidan could be a disaster.’

‘Promise you’ll stick with me at the wedding,’ Mark says. ‘The whole thing could get seriously weird if you’re not around.’

‘If they really do it at Easter, can I stay at yours? I’m meant to be staying at Zoe’s but I don’t think I can handle the intensity.’

‘I’ll get my mum to sort out the spare room for you. We’re meant to be staying at a hotel for the wedding itself. Can I tell them to give us a room together? I don’t want to share with anybody else.’

‘OK.’

‘I’ll do that, then. Better get going. Work to do.’

He kisses me on the forehead. We’ve sort of agreed to sleep together at Easter, but Mark remains firmly in big brother mode.

I’m glad he’s been in touch more lately. Maybe Zoe told him how down I’ve been. Right now, I need a big brother more than a lover. Until he gets a new girlfriend. The big brother bit only works when he’s single.

February is such a crap month that they have to keep it short. Most days I do nothing but work. I am up to date with my assignments and nearly on target with my dissertation. I did drop in at Moxy’s to pick up my wages from before Christmas. I wasn’t upset when they told me I’d been replaced. You don’t need much money when you don’t have a social life.

I’m trying to be better with my mates though. I email Vic with my new address and get a friendly reply but no visit, no phone call. I see Steve in

campus coffee bars a couple of times. Once he's with a tall woman who might be his new friend. I'm not bothered. He'll have worked his way through several women since dumping me. I can't believe I went out with Steve. What does that say about my self esteem? But the sex was good. When I get a new boyfriend, even if he's inexperienced, I'll be able to tell him what to do, train him up to please me before he pleases himself.

I study twelve hours a day. When I've finished studying, I watch crap on TV. I don't drink much. Sometimes I smoke a little hash to relax me at the end of the evening, but only on nights when I need something to help me sleep. I make sure I have a clear head in the morning.

February becomes March. Easter is early this year. Zoe hasn't been in touch for a while and I hope that the wedding has been postponed. I don't want to ring Zoe and put her on the spot about what's going on, so I send an email apologising for not being in touch. I ask how things are, if there's anything I need to do, explain how busy I am preparing for finals.

Zoe doesn't reply. Maybe I should visit her for the weekend. I haven't seen Mum for ages. Only what if Aidan's messing her around? I don't want to get sucked in. I have to protect my head until the exams are over. I'm being selfish, I know. We all have to be selfish from time to time.

I decide that a break from Nottingham would do me good. I want to go to West Kirby but Mum's house is in no fit state. I'd rather stay at Mark's than with Zoe or my dad. I'd rather spend time with Mark than anyone else I can think of but don't want to get carried away with that thought. I text him, suggesting we meet so I can sound him out about going to West Kirby together. When he doesn't reply, I text him again. *Need 2 Talk*. When he doesn't reply to that, I decide to go and see him.

Mark lives in a big old house on the edge of the Arboretum, at the end of Gill Street, by the tram line. At dusk, these streets are spooky. There's a vast graveyard on one side of the road and gothic university buildings on the other. A tram, long and shiny, filled with illuminated people, climbs the hill.

I've been in Mark's house once before. It's a rabbit's warren, with rooms on several floors. Most of the fittings look fifty years old. You ring a bell and wait to see if somebody answers the door. There are a couple of lights on, so I know that there are people home. But I also know that most people don't answer unless they're expecting a visitor. I ring the bell twice, each time holding it down for five seconds. An Asian student lets me in as she's going out. We don't exchange a word.

In the dark hallway, I check the pigeonholes. There's no mail in Mark's slot, so he's probably in Nottingham. If he isn't home, I'll leave a note. A handwritten note will guilt him out for not replying to my text.

I climb two flights of stairs. Before I reach Mark's floor, a timer turns off the light. I grope my way along a corridor. The place smells musty. I couldn't live here. I'm surprised Mark can. But he's probably got a new girlfriend. He's not bothered about this place because he spends all his time round there. Probably. I wonder what proportion of their time people our age spend being single. For some people, it's so scary, not having a partner, that they jump from one relationship to another without taking time to get comfortable with being themselves, alone.

I've so convinced myself that Mark's not here that, even when I see a trickle of light coming from beneath his door, I assume he's left a lamp on by mistake. Except, when I knock, the door opens at once.

'Allison, I was about to call you. I'm so sorry.'

He pulls me towards him into a deep, smokey hug, acting like I'm a long lost friend. It's only been a week.

'Have you spoken to Zoe?' he asks.

'Not for a while.'

'You don't know how she's taking it?'

'I don't...' I hesitate, seeing the awkward empathy in Mark's face give way to confusion. 'Taking what?'

'Oh shit, you haven't heard.'

For a few seconds, I'm relieved. The wedding's off. Aidan must have backed out. She's better off, I'll tell her.

'Aidan took an overdose yesterday. He died.'

I go numb, then shock gives way to flashes of irrational guilt. For I am sad, but I am also, in a way, relieved. Ought I to be crying?

'When did you..?'

'His mum rang an hour ago. She assumed, because of the best man thing, that we were close. They found him this morning. It wasn't spur of the moment. He'd been saving the pills for weeks.'

'Did he leave a note?'

'I don't know.'

'I have to ring Zoe.'

'Wait. Give yourself a little time to get over the shock first.'

He's right. I have to sit down. Someone I know well, someone I have slept with, is dead. People our age aren't supposed to die.

My phone rings. Zoe. I try to gather myself.

'Sweetheart, I'm with Mark. I only just heard.'

'How could he? He didn't even write me a note.'

'Nothing at all?'

‘His mum said he’s scribbled *sorry for everything* on his repeat prescription pad. She said she knew what he’d done when she found the bedroom door locked. She said she’s been expecting it since Huw... but nobody said anything to me. Did you think he’d do this, Allison? Did you?’

‘No. If he was going to, I’d have thought he’d have done it ages ago. Not now, when he was about to get...’

‘How could he do this to me, Allison?’

‘It wasn’t about you,’ I tell her. ‘It was about him.’

There’s more, but she’s crying a lot and so am I and we’ve already said all that can be said. I promise that Mark and I will see her soon.

‘I have to get out of here,’ I tell Mark when the call is over. ‘Can we go for a walk?’

We head down the hill, along the tram line, and before we get to town, turn in to the Arboretum. We walk aimlessly, circling the bandstand, pausing by an ancient cannon, hardly talking. Mark asks about my mum. There's no change. I don't want to think about what's happening to her, so I say what's on my mind.

‘I don’t think I can forgive him.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘We haven’t got the right to take our own lives. It’s cowardly.’

‘When you’re gone, you’re gone. What does it matter?’

I try to explain. ‘He did something stupid, something thoughtless, but he didn’t do it on purpose. He cared about what he'd done. Now he's hurt more people. He should have found ways to atone, to live with his guilt.’

‘He tried, didn’t he? But he couldn’t forgive himself.’

‘None of us can forgive ourselves. That’s not how it works.’

‘You getting religious on me?’

‘I wish I could.’

He puts his arm around my waist and we carry on towards the other side of the park, passing office workers at the end of their day, school kids with sports bags coming home from posh private schools further up the hill.

‘I spoke to his step-dad,’ Mark tells me. ‘Keith reckoned the healthier Aidan got, the more guilty he felt. He tried church, but it made him feel worse. The marriage thing was his last throw of the dice. Poor Zoe.’

We walk in silence until we're nearly at the park entrance on North Sherwood Street.

‘I don’t want to be alone tonight,’ I tell Mark.

‘Me neither.’

We go back to my flat, where I make us both a sandwich. We split a beer and watch the news on TV. Later, Mark borrows my toothbrush and sleeps beside me in the narrow bed. We're both in our underwear. Nothing sexual happens. But it will, sometime soon, I’m pretty sure of that. Aidan has brought us back together. We hold each other tight, all night. Neither of us sleeps much. The bed is too small and we are both preoccupied.

Where is Aidan now? Aidan was religious, while Mark is sort of agnostic. Some days, he goes on about the stupidity of all religions. Other times he says that atheism is arrogant: he believes in a vague form of reincarnation. As far as I'm concerned, there is no god, no heaven or hell. Only what we do here on earth. This is where it counts. Believing this makes the worst of our crimes worse, even more unbearable.

But what if I’m wrong and Aidan has just compounded one mortal sin with another, consigning himself to eternal darkness? How could he kill

himself if he believed that? Maybe he only made himself believe in God because otherwise he would have had to kill himself sooner.

Somewhere around four or five, it is very still and quiet. I can tell that Mark is wide awake, as I am, but I ask, just in case, and he whispers back, 'yes.'

'Do you want to talk?'

'Please. I've missed you. Tell me what I've missed.'

And I tell him what happened to me over Christmas and he holds me tight and apologises for not being there for me and for being so fucked up the night we went out for that meal. Then he tells me about what happened with Helen over the holidays and how she was always threatened by my relationship with him and what was said when they agreed to break up for good. Later I ask if I ever said about what happened with Bob Pritchard when I was seventeen. And he says 'no'. And I tell him, all the time holding him tight, feeling him breathe. And, although we don't say it tonight, we have said it before and meant it and for once I'm sure that I do still love him and he does still love me and even if he doesn't or if he does but we don't end up staying together, we will always have the knowing that we have been loved, that we have been as close to somebody as it's possible to be and the knowing that, if that can happen once, it can happen again, so the world must be a place where it's worth staying, no matter what.

This is how we pass the long, cold night, holding each other close and talking softly until it is no longer dark and we are ready to face a new day together, to get out of bed and find out what happens next.

## In a Hot Place (2009)

'In a Hot Place' was commissioned for a collection of crime stories aimed at reluctant readers. This story about illegal rendition was inspired by a news item in the *Guardian* newspaper, published on the day I wrote it. I wanted this protest story to reach a wider audience, and was able to persuade the publisher to make it copyright-free (all proceeds have gone to Amnesty International). This allowed the story to be distributed widely on the internet and published over a page of daily newspaper *The Morning Star*. When putting together my new and collected stories for 2016 publication I decided to include 'In a Hot Place', even though it was first published in a book aimed primarily at Young Adults. Reluctant readers are not necessarily teenagers. The story's second-person protagonist is a teenager, but the story's acceptance for publication in a daily newspaper suggests that it is of interest to adults. This liminality was intentional on my part.

## In a Hot Place

They grab you outside the airport. They put a bag over your head.

'Why are you doing this?' you ask.

But if they can hear, they do not answer.

'Where are my friends?' you ask.

You were with two mates. Your plane leaves in an hour. Will your friends go home without you?

They put you in the back of a van.

'Why don't you search me?' you ask. 'I've done nothing wrong. I've been on holiday.'

They don't reply. They take off the bag and put on a blindfold. They put you on a plane.

When you get out of the plane, you are in a hot place.

'Where are we?' you ask.

Nobody answers. They take off the blindfold. It's dark. They put the bag back on your head. You find it hard to breathe. At least they can't see you crying. You are hungry, but you're too proud to complain. Now and then they give you a sip from a water bottle. The water tastes old, bitter. The drinking straw hurts your dry mouth.

They put you in a cell. You do not know if it is day or night. All the time, you hear shouts and screams. You do not understand the words. You begin to shout too.

'I was on holiday! I did nothing wrong!'

Nobody comes.

'I didn't have a bomb!' you protest. 'Why did you take me, not my mates? Or did you take my mates too?'

Days pass. They take off the blindfold. At last, the questions begin.

'Why were you there? What did you do? Who do you know? Why were you there? Who did you see? What did they ask you to do?'

The room used to be white. Now the walls are covered in stains. The stains look like blood, sick, urine and worse. The room smells like a toilet. They tie you to the chair and put plastic cuffs around your wrists.

'What am I doing here?' you ask.

'We ask the questions,' they say.

'I've done nothing wrong,' you say.

'Then you have nothing to worry about,' they say.

'I'm only fifteen,' you say. 'I want my parents.'

'Were your parents with you?'

'No. I was with friends. Are my friends here too?'

'No. Did your parents send you?'

'They paid for my holiday,' you tell them.

You want them to know this was all a mistake. You were on holiday. It was only a holiday. You are not a terrorist. You do not want to be a terrorist. You did not meet any terrorists. You do not want to overthrow anybody. You only want to go home.

'Your parents paid, did they?' they say. 'Then maybe we will bring your parents here too.'

'What am I supposed to have done?'

'You tell us.'

You don't know what to say, so you say 'no comment.'

This is the wrong answer. More men come. They put the hood back on. They began to hit you again. They hit you on the heels. They hit you on the head. They punch you in the tummy. They are hitting you in places that

will not bruise. It hurts so much, you wish they would ask more questions.  
You beg them to ask more questions.

'I'll tell you anything you want to know,' you say.

But they do not believe you. Their questions are always the same.

'Where did you go? Who do you work for? What did you do? Where did you do it? What do you believe? Who do you plan to kill? Who are you working with?'

'I don't want to kill anybody!' you say.

'We all want to kill someone,' they say.

'Why won't you let me go? I've done nothing.'

'We've all done something,' they say.

'I want a lawyer!'

They laugh. 'You don't have any rights here,' they say.

'Where am I?' you ask.

'Nowhere. Tell us who you work for.'

'I don't work for anyone,' you say.

They do not believe you. They take your clothes off. They tie you to a wooden board. They put a plastic bag around your face. It has a hole in it. They pour water through the hole. You begin to gag.

'I'll tell you anything!' you say.

They take the bag off. You make things up. You tell them what you think they want to hear.

They do not believe you. They tie you to another board. They put the bag back on.

'I did it!' you say. 'Whatever you say I did, I did it!'

A lawyer comes to see you. You tell her what happened. You have no bruises, the lawyer says. They are very good at not leaving bruises, you say.

'It took your parents months to find you,' the lawyer says. 'They thought you were dead. What did you do?'

'I did nothing,' you say.

'That's what everyone says,' the lawyer says. 'But they usually have their reasons. What did you do?'

If you knew the answer, you would tell her.

'Nothing,' you say.

'I'll try to get you out,' the lawyer says.

'Don't I have rights?' you ask.

'Nobody has rights here,' the lawyer says.

She goes away. She does not come back. They leave you in a cell for weeks on end. You speak to no-one. But you dream. You have bad dreams. You dream they are right. You really are a terrorist. In your dreams, you understand why people become terrorists. Because you hate people like them.

You are about to turn sixteen, but are not sure when. There are no clocks, no calendar. Then they give you a birthday present. It hurts a lot. You ask to see a doctor. They give you one.

'You seem healthy to me,' the doctor says.

'You say this is healthy? I can't move my arm.'

'You still have your eyes, and your feet are still at the ends of your legs.'

'Are you really a doctor?' you ask.

They hit you again. They ask more questions. They hurt you again. They ask more questions. They hit you with questions. They ask more hits.

They question your hurt. They ask you again. You question their hurt. They hit you.

'You are not one of us,' they tell you.

'I am not one of them,' you tell them.

After a long while, a different lawyer came.

'You have human rights,' he says.

You do not believe him.

'People are asking questions about you,' he says.

You ask who these people are.

'Your parents would like to visit you,' the lawyer says, 'but they are not allowed to.'

'I don't want them to see me like this,' you say.

'What did you do to make them take you?' the lawyer asks.

'I was on holiday.'

'Why were you on holiday there?' he asks.

'My friends have family there. We stayed with them.'

'Have you or any of your family or friends ever been in trouble?'

'I don't know. Maybe.'

'That is the wrong answer,' the lawyer says. 'You and everyone you know have to be innocent. If not, it means you're guilty. That's how the system works.'

'How can I be sure of a thing like that?' you say.

'You have to say what I tell you to say,' he says.

So you say what he tells you to say. And you wait. And you wait. And they ask you more questions. But you can tell they're getting bored.

'Are you one of them? Are you one of us?'

You say 'no'. And you keep saying 'no'. And, after a long time, they get tired of asking you questions. They even get tired of hitting you. And they stop. And they agree to release you, as long as nobody makes a fuss. So you don't make a fuss. And they let you go.

Your family are very glad to have you home. Your friends are very glad to see you. They're very sorry they left you behind. But your friends have moved on. You're not the same, and neither are they.

You go to college to make up for what you missed. You make new friends. You explain where you were. Some people are impressed. Some ask you to join the fight. You know who the enemy are, they say. You know what they are afraid of. Help us to get them, you are asked. Give them what they deserve.

'What have you got to lose?' you are asked. 'Do you want them to think they won?'

You are not afraid. You say you will think about it. You think about it. You think about it. You're not afraid.

You think about it.

## Secret Gardens

### Chapters 1-3 & 6-28

I originally wanted to write about asylum seekers and allotments after the publication of *Denial* in 2004. My publishers told my agent that there was already a glut of books about asylum seekers (there were two) and would not commission. I wrote several stories for reluctant readers during this period. A few years later, I realised that I had developed this side of my craft sufficiently to be able to tell the story I wanted to tell in 10,000 words, which was then the longest one could make a novel for this readership. A shift of publisher meant that I was able to make it a little longer (13,000 words).

What follows is the beginning and ending of the book. In the middle, Aazim and Nadimah leave Nottingham to escape the man who has trafficked Nadimah (the girl in the window) to the UK, where she been used as a slave by a Nigerian family. They work on a farm in Lincolnshire but the trafficker tracks them down and they decide to return to Nottingham. The ‘bad smell’ referred to at the end of chapter twenty-six is the nearby sewage treatment works in Stoke Bardolph, which featured earlier in the novel.

## Chapter 1

### The Girl in the Window

One moment can change your life. Dad unlocks the gate to the allotments. I look across the big road. I see her, in the window. She has big, pale eyes and is darker than I am. Short hair. She looks at me. Then her body jerks forwards, like someone's hit her.

"Come on, Aazim!" Dad gives me a push. "Come on, dreamer!" he laughs.

"Hold on." I say and I look up at the window again but she's gone. I want to help her. But what can I do? I'm fifteen years old and I've been in the UK two years. I speak a bit of English, but not enough to tell the police what I've seen. *I've seen this young black girl in a big house, I'd like to tell them. I think the people there hit her.* Why would they even listen to me?

We walk downhill. The city is in front of us but you can't see it. All you can see is green. The hedges on both sides of the path are taller than me, taller than my father. Dad unlocks another gate and we are in our allotment.

An allotment is like a bit of farm land owned by the city. People rent them to grow fruit and vegetables. The council let us use this one because we don't have much to live on. Here, we can grow our own food.

It is a cold spring, more like our winters at home.

"How are you, Aazim?" calls Stefan, from the next allotment.

"OK," I say.

“Found a better place to live yet?” he asks.

I shake my head. “We have to win our appeal first.”

The people on the allotments are friendly. Nicer than the people at school. At the week-ends, it’s happy there. People visit each other. They share stuff. We’re making friends.

Squirrels play in the apple tree. I mow the grass path. Dad digs up some early potatoes. Thanks to all the rain, they’re big this year. We eat a lot of potatoes in our family. Not a lot of meat.

On the way out, I look across the road. I don’t see the girl this time. We turn down Hungerhill Road. On the walk home, I think about the girl. Then something happens to put her out of my mind.

Our house is small and damp. I share a room with my little brother, Malik. My sister, Sabeen, sleeps in the living room. When we get back, Mum is upset. Sabeen is crying. There’s a letter on the plastic table. Mum hands it to me because my English is best. I can tell Sabeen has already read it. We have lost our appeal. Any day now, they will come for us.

“I don’t want to go back!” Sabeen says.

“Where will they send us?” Malik asks.

They can’t send us home. We haven’t got a home.

“They will put us in a camp,” Dad says.

“I’m not going!” I shout.

“We have no choice,” Mum tells me.

## Chapter 2

### No Good-byes

I know what will happen. It's happened to people we know. They'll come for us. They will take us to a detention centre. Then they will put us on a plane. After the plane there'll be a bus. The bus will take us to a camp in the desert. For years and years. No school. No job. Nowhere to grow things. I like it here, except for the cold and wet. I want to stay. I plan to stay. But we can't all stay. Sabeen is eleven. Malik is eight. Too young to work. Too young to go on the run. Mum and Dad can't leave them.

But I can leave them.

Saturday on the allotment. Dad wants to tell Stefan that we'll soon be gone. But Stefan is not here. Tam has the allotment on the other side. He waves at us, but he's busy. Tam has three allotments. Sometimes he gives us stuff. Not today. Tam's not friends with Dad, the way Stefan is. So we don't say good-bye.

"It's a waste," Dad says. "All these things we started to grow."

I look around. There are three beds full of vegetables. We have redcurrants and blackcurrant bushes. An apple tree.

I watch two squirrels playing chase along the fence. I knew this day might come, but I don't know what to do. Should I tell Dad I plan to run away?

It starts to rain and we shelter inside. Stefan's hut is built of wood, so it's called a *shed*. Our hut is made of brick. It's called a *bothy*. The roof is rusty metal. When it rains hard, the sound is like a hundred hammers.

Dad looks at me like he knows what I'm thinking. But he doesn't say anything. When it stops raining, we walk home. After he's locked the gate, Dad gives me the allotment keys.

"You look after these," he says. "I have a hole in my pocket."

I can't look at Dad, so I look across the road. I see the girl I saw yesterday. Today I watch her pick up a mop. She is younger than I thought. Too young to mop floors.

## Chapter 3

### On the Run

They come at five on Monday morning. I hear them hammer on the door. I knew it would be fast, but not this fast. No chance to say goodbye to people at school. I pull on jeans and shirt, trainers. Malik rubs his eyes. I kiss him on the top of his head.

“I have to go, little brother. I will see you in the next life.”

He gives me a blank look. I hope he remembers. Then I'm out of the window. I jump onto next door's garage roof. I hear a shout. There's a man at the back door. He sees me but can't get to me. I climb down into next door's back yard. There is an alley-way. I run along it. I cross the road. No one comes after me. I hid my bag in the bothy yesterday but I dare not go there yet. They'll expect me to hide there. I need to be sure the place is safe.

The streets are empty. I take back roads. I walk on the dark side of the footpath. There is no one about. If they're looking for me, I'll be easy to spot. A police car comes and I duck into a driveway, feeling like a thief. The car goes by.

I get near the allotments but don't dare cross the main road. It takes time to open the big gates. Someone might see me. I must wait until the road is busy.

The big houses on this side have alleys that run along the side. I'll try to hide in one. The first alley I try is blocked by wheelie bins. The second has a locked gate. But the third is OK.

The gates to the allotments are across the road. I'll be able to tell when it's a good time. I go down the alley. I duck under the wall. The people in the house will not see me. Their bins are at the back of the alley. That's OK. Monday is not a bin day. I should be safe. I look at my watch. Six. In two hours it will be safe to cross the road. I stay by the bins.

I wait. It's light but it's still not warm. Time passes slowly. Rain begins to fall. Near me, I hear a door open. Should I run? Why would anyone come out so early in the morning? I stay where I am.

Mistake. The side gate opens. A tall, slim, black girl stands by me. She has a bag of rubbish. Our eyes meet. It's the girl I saw last week. With all the trouble, I forgot about her.

“Why you here?” she says.

## Chapter 26

### Train

By the time we have our tickets, the Nottingham train is already at the first platform. We get on. At the next platform, the London train leaves. When it's gone, I can see that platform. A tall man stares at us. Roland. He must have been watching the London train. He sees me and begins to run.

Nadimah hasn't seen him. She wants to hide in the toilet until the train leaves. Just in case. I say nothing.

*This is the 16.37 train to Nottingham, calling at ...*

One moment can change your life. To get to our train, Roland has to run up a bridge then come down again. Someone else gets on the train. When will the doors lock? Nadimah gets to the toilet.

"It's too late," I say. "He's here. He's seen us. He's coming."

She begins to shake. I look at the people in the carriage. Two teenagers and an old couple. Will any of them help us? Will Roland drag Nadimah off the train? I look out of the window. I see Roland running down the stairs of the bridge. Before he reaches the platform, there is a *clunk*. The doors have locked. The train begins to move.

Roland keeps running. He reaches our carriage. Nadimah sees him. He waves his fist, then opens his hand. He points at me, then pretends to cut his own throat. The train speeds up.

"Can he catch us?" Nadimah asks.

"I don't think so. Even a slow train is faster than the road."

“But he knows we’re going to Nottingham! He could phone the Ubanis. They’ll be waiting for us!”

“We’re not going to Nottingham.”

The train stops at some small stations, then at Newark, which is much bigger. Roland is not there.

The train goes on. Rolleston. Fiskerton. Bleasby. Thurgaton. At last we reach the place I know. Lowdham. It’s near Stoke Bardolph, where Mrs Babcock lives.

The station is small and old. We are the only people to get out. I look for bus information. There is a bus to Stoke Bardolph, but the last one left hours ago. We could walk, but I don’t know the way. I ask a taxi-driver for directions.

“It’s a long walk on a hot day,” he says. “I can drive you there for a fiver.”

If Mrs Babcock can’t help us, I’ll have to make our money last a long time. But we’re very tired and we get into the car. Ten minutes later we’re at her house.

I ring the doorbell. No one comes to the door. I call Mrs Babcock’s name. There is no reply. The taxi leaves. Nadimah looks like she’s about to cry. I’ve never seen her cry.

“It’s OK,” I say. “I know where we can wait.”

I take the back gate key from its hiding place beneath a pot. We go into the garden. I have not seen it like this before. Nearly every flower is in full bloom. Roses. Poppies. The smoke bush. Nadimah looks around.

“What’s that bad smell?” she asks.

## Chapter 27

### Goodbyes

Mrs Babcock comes home at half past six. Her daughter is with her.

“Aazim!” She says. “How lovely to see you. I thought you’d gone for good. And who is your friend?”

Her daughter, Penny, doesn’t look so happy to see us. I would rather see Mrs Babcock alone, but we have no choice. I tell them everything.

“How awful,” Mrs Babcock says to Nadimah. “You didn’t know the family before?”

“They’re not from my country,” Nadimah says, shyly.

“They ought to be arrested,” Penny Babcock says. “I’m going to make some phone calls.”

On Sunday, I help Mrs Babcock in her garden. We don’t talk much. Police come to talk to Nadimah. When they have gone, she sits in Mrs Babcock’s kitchen and reads Penny’s old books.

“What did they say?” I ask her.

“They say they will send someone who will care for me. Maybe they can care for you, too.”

She’s wrong. They will deport me. I find Mrs Babcock in the garden. I swallow my pride.

“Can I stay here?” I ask. “In secret. Just until I’m 16?”

Mistake. There is a cold look on her face.

“I’m not sure, dear,” Mrs Babcock says. “Penny will know what to do.”

I know Penny won’t help me. I’m on my own.

Later, the police come again. This time, they have a social worker with them. She wants to see Nadimah alone. When the social worker has finished, she speaks to Mrs Babcock, not me.

“Nadimah wants Aazim to come with her, but we can’t keep them together. We can’t sort Aazim out until tomorrow. We think his family are still in a detention centre, waiting to be deported. Is it OK for him to stay with you tonight?”

The social worker does not ask what I want. I’m too young – only fifteen. I don’t count. She turns to me. “Would you like to go and say good-bye to her?”

“You might not see me again,” I tell Nadimah, but she doesn’t believe me. “I’ll try to stay in touch.”

“Thank you,” she says. Her eyes are dry. Mine aren’t.

Penny comes to say good-bye to me.

“Will you be safe?” she says. “I mean, if they send you back to your own country?”

“I don’t know,” I say.

“Why did you come here? Were you escaping something? Or did you come for a better life?”

She doesn't want me to tell her a story that will make her feel bad.  
She doesn't want to know.

"Everyone wants a better life," I say. "Don't you?"

At bedtime I tell Mrs Babcock that I will leave in the morning.

"I thought you would," she says. "Here." She hands me a mobile phone. "Penny bought it for me but I never use it."

"Thank you," I say. "That will be very useful."

"Please call me from time to time," she says. "I'll try to keep track of Nadimah. I know you'll want to know how she is."

I thank her again and go to bed. It's my last night in a bed but I sleep badly. In the morning, I get up early. Mrs Babcock comes to the door to see me off.

"Good luck," she says. But she does not ask where I'm going.

## Chapter 28

### The Arrest

I came to Europe on a big boat. For days and days there was nothing to eat and little to drink. We had nowhere to wash or pee. We lived in our own mess. Then there was a lorry. The five of us nearly got split up but Dad gave the man extra money. Mum and Sabeen were the only women in the back.

The journey was very bad, but it was worth it to get here. We had been told what to do. As soon as we got to the UK, we asked for asylum. We asked for papers to let us stay. It took nearly two years for the UK to say no.

If the rest of my family go back, I can apply again when I am sixteen. Should I? There is nowhere to go back to. Yet I miss my family, more and more. Maybe it is time to hand myself in.

But not yet.

It's a hot summer's day. I walk up Hungerhill Road with my heavy bag. The schools are on holiday but I don't care who sees me. This time I'm not going to hide.

I open the allotment gates. A police car zooms down the road. They have come for me, I think. That was quick. OK, it's over. I won't run any more. At least I'll see my family soon.

But the police stop on the other side of the road. I watch from behind the gate. They bring Mrs Ubani out, and her three young children. There is a girl, too, of ten or eleven. She must be the new slave. Mrs Ubani shouts

and swears. No one looks across the road, at me. The police take all five of them away.

The allotment is wild. There is a lot of work to do. But there are plenty of potatoes for picking. The pumpkins are swelling. The courgettes have big flowers. Stefan once showed me how to fry these in batter. I covered the strawberries with netting, so the birds have not got to them. Some have gone to mush, but not all. There's plenty to eat.

From the next allotment, Stefan waves to me.

“Aazim, you're back!” he shouts. “How's your friend? Is she safe? Have you heard from your family?”

While I'm talking to Stefan, Tam comes round.

“I thought you'd be back. I have a spare key to your place so I've done a bit of watering.”

Stefan makes me a mug of tea.

“It didn't work out in Lincolnshire then?”

“Not exactly.” I go back to my allotment. The grass on the paths is knee high. I will need to borrow Tam's strimmer. First, I must tend to the strawberries. Weeds block out their light.

Later, I will pick some vegetables. I will make soup for lunch. Tomorrow, if I am still here, I'll plant some seeds.

## The Great Deception (2015)

### Prologue and excerpt

*The Great Deception* is the third *Bone and Cane* novel and my most formally ambitious work to date. It has three timelines: the late 1960s, in which Hugh Bone becomes a cabinet minister and discovers that his son (Sarah's father, Kevin Bone) is betraying secrets stolen from him to the Russians; the early 1980s, when Nick and Sarah visit Kevin and his male lover in Majorca; and the late 1990s, when the release of cabinet papers under the 'Thirty years rule' will reveal Sarah's father's treachery and, unless she can suppress the revelation, jeopardise Sarah's political career. 'The past is never dead. It's not even past,' as Faulkner wrote.<sup>49</sup>

The story cuts between the three timelines throughout, but the majority of the 1960s scenes are not included here. In them, we learn that Sarah's grandfather, Sir Hugh, is a friend of Peter (*Spycatcher*) Wright's and a former senior intelligence officer. Harold Wilson brings him into the 1966-70 Labour cabinet as a minister without portfolio whose job is to watch Wilson's back lest he be undermined by the security services who, Bone tells Wilson, are bugging him. But Hugh is also being spied on, by his own son, who Hugh has found photographing secret documents to sell to the Russians. In 1998, Nick Cane's best friend, Andrew Saint, has Nick help him deal with a recalcitrant drug supplier, Terence Tailor, who also runs a brothel. Andrew

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<sup>49</sup> William Faulkner, *Requiem For A Nun*, Act 1, Scene 3, New York, Random House, 1951.

falls for Nancy, a crack-addicted teacher turned prostitute who Nick had a relationship with in the previous *Bone and Cane* novel, *What You Don't Know*. Nick, meanwhile, is seeing Chantelle, thirteen years his junior, a woman of Caribbean origin who has her own secret, which is revealed in the prologue. When Andrew 'rescues' Nancy from the brothel, Terence Tailor threatens Chantelle until Nick is forced to reveal where Nancy has gone.

The long extract is the novel's final third, complete. It begins on the morning after a New Year's Eve party where 'Chantelle' failed to appear. Sarah is about to find out if her attempt to suppress the story about her father has been successful.

# The Great Deception

## Prologue

Deborah brushed her hair, refreshed her lipstick and adjusted her basque. Tonight, more than ever, it was crucial that she looked the part.

Outside her flat, a taxi sounded its horn. This was the busiest night of the year and she was costing the driver money. A squirt of *Issy Miyake* and she was good to go. Deborah double-checked that she had the right purse. The one that held several cards showing her fake ID.

“Chantelle Brown” had been created several months earlier and embedded as a receptionist in a drug rehabilitation centre. Originally, Chantelle wore big glasses, an obvious but effective disguise, and dressed badly. When the centre closed down, her bosses, rather than “retiring” Chantelle, gave Deborah a new target: a former employee of the centre, suspected of large scale distribution. That was when she switched to coloured contacts and a push-up bra.

Deborah was twenty-four years old and meant to be an inspector by the time she was thirty. A superintendent at forty, if she stayed lucky and smart. That was why she’d gone in for undercover work: it put her on the fast track. Chantelle was a more street version of her true self, embellished with bits of girls she’d known at school in Leicester. Chantelle had A levels, rather than a degree. Preferred old school disco to House. Liked to smoke a bit of spliff, when the situation required it, but drew the line at anything stronger.

Deborah locked up, got into the car, and gave an address on the far side of Sherwood. The party was in a big house not far from the prison

where her target, Nick Cane, had once been incarcerated. That was at the beginning of his eight-year sentence for drug dealing. Since Nick's release, three years early, he had kept his nose clean. If he was doing anything illegal, beyond smoking weed, Deborah had yet to spot it. But Nick had friends who were dodgy, and she needed to get closer to them. Which meant getting very close to Nick.

Normally, Nick wouldn't stand a chance with Deborah. She didn't date white guys, for a start. Also, for somebody his age, 37, with no proper career and a prison record, he was annoyingly sure of himself. He'd had a lot of girlfriends, including one who was now a Labour MP: Sarah Bone. The recent ones, however, were skanks. Nancy Tull, for instance: a teacher turned crack-head who became a prostitute not long after she finished with him.

And yet, Deborah had developed feelings for Nick. He had good hair, a square chin and warm, intelligent eyes. He'd kept in shape and was easy company, in every sense. He treated her like a queen. Deborah enjoyed playing the part of his flirtatious, initially hard to get, but increasingly enamoured young lover. There were times when she forgot that this was all an act.

It was a pity she had to dump him.

'Over here, please.'

This was the home of Nick's brother, Joe, who owned a taxi firm, and his wife Caroline, a school teacher. Deborah paid and got out of the car.

'Chantelle!'

Deborah turned to flash a smile at whoever was greeting her. And froze. There was no reason for this guy to be here tonight, with one hand behind his back. Unless...

The cab was gone. Nobody else on the street. In the party house, somebody turned up the music. Madonna had made it through the wilderness. The surrounding houses were quiet. He took a step towards her.

'I've been waiting for you.'

Sarah woke at half seven and took two Solpadeine capsules to clear her head. Her first fully formed thought was *did I really make a pass at Nick last night?* And, if so, why? Guilt about Chantelle? Sarah didn't do guilt. But she had felt elated when the spy story wasn't on the news. The other possibility was *in vino veritas*: she really wanted to be with him, despite having decided countless times that she couldn't. Not while she was still an MP.

Her next thought was, where can I get a paper? That the spy story wasn't on the radio news did not mean it hadn't been released. She had *The Independent* delivered when she was in Nottingham, but, on a Saturday, it didn't arrive until nine. If Sarah had the internet she could do a search on herself and her father, check the daily papers' websites to see if the story was out. However her six year old computer didn't have a modem.

Sarah got dressed and walked to town. At the newsagents underneath the Friar Lane roundabout she bought the *Times*, *Telegraph* and *Daily Mail*. Might as well get the bad news from the enemy papers, who would have the sourest take on it. She couldn't wait to get home to read them, so followed the tunnel to the Wimpy on the corner of Friar Lane and Maid Marion Way. An elderly man sipped tea next to the window. Otherwise, the place was deserted. She ordered a large coffee and spread the papers out on a Formica table top.

The 1968 revelations were deep in the inside pages: the same stories that were on the news last night, plus minor ones about House of Lords reform and the reasons for Ray Gunter's resignation. Nothing about spies. If Sarah had Jim Callaghan's home phone number, she would call him now,

offer eternal obeisance. She left her coffee unfinished. The girl at the till called her back.

'You've forgotten your papers!'

'I thought another customer might like them.'

'They can buy their own. Take your mess with you.'

Sarah picked up the papers and was back home by half past eight, with nothing to do for the rest of the day. She went back to bed.

Nick needed to see Chantelle. He couldn't leave it the way it was, with his knowing but not being meant to know. How would he act if he didn't know? Worried.

He'd left two messages last night, asking where she was. Today, he'd rung her mobile twice. Both times it went straight to voicemail. What was he supposed to do in this situation? Assume he'd been dumped, or call the police? The former, probably. He'd feel used, insulted, crapped on. The easy reaction would be to do nothing. Take it on the chin and learn to forget her.

But what if something bad *had* happened to her? They'd been all lovey-dovey on the phone until two days ago. He found it hard to believe she'd exit without a faked farewell. Also, whatever the situation, the police were bound to be keeping an eye on him. He had to act like he didn't know what she was.

Which meant he had to go and see her. Definitely. Only he'd never had Chantelle's home address. She'd told him that she lived with her parents and didn't want him to meet them. That was probably nonsense, but he ought to act as though he believed it. He could try to get the address from the dentist's where she worked. At least he knew where that was. But it

would be closed until Tuesday. Then he remembered that he knew somebody who had given her a lift home.

Eve took a while to answer the phone.

'It's nice to hear from you,' she said. 'Thanks for a lovely party. I met some interesting people.'

'You and Tony seemed to get on well.'

'He's a very smart guy. He thinks highly of you.'

'I'm glad somebody does. I think that Chantelle's dumped me.'

'Oh.' Short pause. 'I did wonder why she wasn't there.'

'Remember that night we tried to help Nancy, you gave her a lift home?'

'Yes.'

'Can you tell me where you took her?'

'It was a back street in Arnold. Don't you have her address?'

'No, she never took me there. She's not answering her phone and I want to go round and see her.'

'I didn't notice the name of the street, I'm sorry.'

'But would you remember where it was?'

'I expect so, though I'm not sure I can describe it. You're really desperate to see her, aren't you?'

'Yes.' Although he wasn't expecting to still find her there.

'Give me half an hour. I'll pick you up, see if I can remember the way.'

Nick shaved and dressed. He took with him the one photo that he had of Chantelle. Andrew had taken it despite Chantelle's complaint that she was camera-shy and truly, truly hated being photographed. Now Nick knew why.

In the photo, he was grinning. Chantelle's head rested on his shoulders so that her smiling face was partially covered by his. Clever girl.

Eve was as good as her word. She arrived just after two, and they set off at once.

'I like Chantelle,' Eve said. 'She's feisty and smart, a lot better for you than Nancy was, even without her... proclivities. There's probably a straight forward explanation for her no-show, like she's been throwing up all night.'

'She'd have called or texted.'

Eve turned left. 'I think it was one of these. Of course, it was dark...'

They were off the High Street, in a maze of old semis and terraces.

'I dropped her at the end of the street, but I waited until she went in. So, yes. I'm sure it was this one.' They turned onto Gilbey Road. 'I remember her walking past that post box.'

She pointed at two modern semi-detached houses in the centre of the street. There was a metre gap either side of them, just big enough to wheel a bin down. Nick got out of the car and tried the first one. No reply. He tried to look through the net curtains. This was the sort of house he could imagine Chantelle's parents living in, just big enough for three of them. Would Chantelle go under cover in her own city, when she could be spotted by someone she knew? Unlikely, but not impossible.

He knocked on the door of the other half of the building. This side was in need of paint. The alleyway held a flight of metal steps. The man who answered the door was in his seventies, at least.

'Sorry to disturb you. I'm looking for this woman, a friend of mine, and I wanted to check if she lives next door.' He held out the photo.

'Aye, I know her. I don't know her name, but she's not next door.'

'How do you know her, then?'

'She lives in the flat upstairs.'

Result. 'Is the entrance up those stairs?'

'It is. You won't find her in.'

'Why not?'

'She went out last night, just after ten. Taxi picked her up. She hasn't come home yet. I'd of heard her come in.'

'Is that unusual?' Nick asked.

'No. She's often away. Specially recently.'

'Did you see what kind of taxi it was?'

'A saloon, not one of the big black cabs.'

'Happen to notice the firm?'

He hadn't. Nick went up and tried the door anyway. No reply. At least, now, he knew where it was. She did not live with her parents, but maybe she had returned to her family for the holidays. He would come back tomorrow.

\*

Sarah spent New Year's Day in a pair of flannelette, stripey pyjamas that she had stolen from Nick some fifteen years earlier. Not that he ever wore them. They used to belong to his dad, who had died young, and whom she'd never met. She knew Nick's mum, a Sheffield woman who worked in a cutlery factory before having her sons and returned to it as soon as Joe started school. She was long dead, too, though Sarah didn't know when or what from. She and Nick had lost touch by then.

Liz Cane approved of Sarah as a girlfriend for Nick, let them share a bed in her council house home whenever they visited, which was more than Sarah's mum did. But then, Sarah's mum had two spare bedrooms and the

use of Grandad's place as well. Nick's home on Rock Street, Pitsmore, had just three bedrooms and his schoolboy kid brother occupied one of those.

Sarah was tempted to ring Nick. They needed to have a sober conversation. She was worried about him tracking down Chantelle, then giving away what Sarah had told him. Why did she tell Nick? To comfort him about her disappearance? Or to clear the decks for them to resume their relationship?

Madness, to start things back up with Nick. She wouldn't be giving him a second thought if it weren't the parliamentary recess, which gave her time to think, nor if she'd had sex in recent memory. The phone rang and she found herself wanting it to be him. But it was Mum, wishing her a happy new year.

'No story in the papers.'

'No,' Sarah allowed a hint of triumph into her voice.

'Clever girl. Come for your dinner tomorrow lunchtime, and we can finish talking about all this business.'

The next time Nick rang Chantelle, he left a message.

'Where are you? If this is your way of dumping me, at least have the good grace to text. I'm worried.'

He decided to cycle to hers before Sunday dinner at Joe and Caroline's. If that failed, he'd try the dentist's when it reopened. After what Sarah told him, he didn't expect Chantelle to be there, not now the case was over. But phoning her at work was what a jilted boyfriend would do. If he wanted to see her again, he had to act like he didn't know she was a police spy.

The more he thought about it, the less Nick understood the undercover operation. There would have been some logic to Chantelle seducing him while he was in charge of The Power Project - if the police thought the place was a front for drug dealing. But they only started seeing each other after he'd left. If it *was* Andrew the police were after, why go to the trouble of setting Nick up?

But Chantelle *had* suggested visiting Andy in London and Sarah *did* know the Chief Constable. Then there were all those months when Chantelle held him off in the bedroom department, citing the religious stuff. Also, Nick had spotted a guy spying on Andrew, which suggested that the Saint was under investigation.

*Maybe I should turn back*, he thought, as he cycled through persistent drizzle. *All I'm asking for is trouble*. Except he wanted to see her, to confront her. He wanted her to lie to his face one last time.

There was a light on in her flat that hadn't been on the day before. Nick locked his bike to the metal staircase and reminded himself that his

lover would be surprised to see him. She didn't know that he knew where she lived. He rehearsed what he was about to say, then climbed the metal stairs. What would he do if she didn't let him in? No idea. He rang the doorbell anyway.

'How did you keep the story out of the paper?' Mum wanted to know. She had the *Guardian* spread out over the dining room table.

'It wasn't me. Somebody did us a favour.'

'Somebody who owed you?'

'No. He did it out of the goodness of his heart, I think.'

'Politicians never act out of the goodness of their hearts. They always have a motive.'

'This was a retired one.'

'So that's why you saw Jim Callaghan. Politicians never completely retire. They have scores to settle and reputations to protect. Your grandfather always kept his guard up, even at the very end.'

'Hardly surprising, when he knew that his only child was a spy.'

'I don't think that bothered him much. You don't know what it was like. There were spies everywhere in the post war years. The sides had been confused, you see. Lots of left wing people loved the Russians. Then they became the enemy.'

'Dad had no great affection for communist Russia.'

'But he liked to live well, and he liked to get one over on your grandad, to make him look bad.'

'Is that why he did it - for a lark, and the money?'

'I never had the chance to ask him.'

Sarah got out the scrapbooks that she had looked at while Mum was in hospital. 'You know, I did a lot of thinking about you and Dad while you were sick. I tried to understand what made your marriage tick. I can't really remember what you were like together. I tried, and I looked at the photos in here, but they didn't help. Dad's hardly in them, for a start.'

'We soon realised the marriage was a mistake. If we hadn't had you, we wouldn't have stayed together long.'

'I don't understand what possessed you to get together in the first place. Dad must have had a fair idea that he was gay, or, at least, bisexual. All right, in those days, lots of gay men married to convince themselves and the world that they were normal. Dad wanted to be independent, yet he married his father's secretary. That tied him closer to his parents, helped keep him in Chesterfield. And the two of you had so little in common. I can't understand what you saw in him.'

'I can't speak for your father's motives, but he was a very good looking man, and I was young and naive. Looking back, I suppose I hero-worshipped your grandfather. I wanted to marry into the family.'

'By marrying my dad, you were also marrying Grandad.'

'That's one way of putting it.'

It was time for Sarah to confront a suspicion that had been growing since she looked at the scrapbooks. 'After Dad left and grandma died, did you and grandad... were you and he... involved?'

'Of course we were.'

Mum held up the scrapbook so that Sarah couldn't see the look on her face. Sarah's mouth hung open. She had a dozen questions and didn't know where to start. She meant to hide her distaste, but it was her grandad they were talking about.

'Grandad was thirty years older than you.'

Mum put down the scrapbook. Her expression was that of a sulky teenager. Do people ever grow up, Sarah wondered, or do they just get better at putting on an act?

'Age isn't very important', Mum said.

'He was your husband's father!'

'Not much of a husband. Hugh was more of a father to you than Kevin was.'

'No, he was a proper grandad. And you...'

Sarah remembered once how Nick, after visiting Chesterfield, asked if there was anything going on between her mum and her grandad. She had closed the conversation down with such determination that Nick had never brought the subject up again.

'When did it start?'

'I'm not sure you really want to know,' Mum said.

'No, I...'

Sarah knew what Mum was like. She had to get the story out of her today, because Mum would never discuss it with her again. Mum had a hundred ways of avoiding difficult or dangerous subjects.

'Was it going on while I was still living at home?'

'Yes, it was.'

'And it kept going on until he died?'

'He was the only one, yes. Hugh was the love of my life.'

Sarah was still formulating her next question when the phone rang. Mum answered it.

'For you. That Chief Constable.'

Sarah took the phone. 'Eric, what can I do for you?'

'Do you remember the last conversation we had?'

'About Chantelle Brown, yes.'

'Did you share the information I gave you then?'

'Of course not,' Sarah lied. 'Why?'

'Because she's disappeared.'

'How do you mean, *disappeared*?

'She told her parents that she would be returning for good yesterday. She was due back in uniform tomorrow. She spent most of Christmas at home, so her parents knew exactly how things stood. When she wasn't back by midnight, they called her handler. He was the only way for them to get in touch when she was under cover. He couldn't raise her either, so we went to her flat today. She hasn't been seen since just after ten on New Year's Eve.'

'Are you sure she isn't with Nick?' Sarah asked.

'We're sure. But that doesn't mean he hasn't done something to her - especially if he worked out she was a plant. We'll be questioning him today.'

'As it happens, I was at a party with Nick and some old friends on New Year's Eve. He was quite upset when Chantelle didn't show up. I don't think he has any idea about what she was up to.'

'OK, I'm sorry to have disturbed you, Sarah but obviously, we're worried when we lose one of ours, and I was stupidly indiscrete with you.'

'No, you were thoughtful to tell me. And I hope you locate her soon.'

'What did your boyfriend want?' Mum asked.

'Nothing important. And he's not my boyfriend. In fact, he's seeing someone else, a solicitor.'

'Another one you let get away.'

'I suppose,' Sarah said, 'but he was never going to be the love of my life. And I'm too young to settle for less, aren't I? You said that Grandad was the love of your life. When did you...?'

'I've said all I've got to say about that.'



The front door had a central panel of plastic, imitation smoked glass, through which Nick could only make out shape and colour. But the form behind the glass wasn't Chantelle. It was a white man in a brown mac. The door opened.

'Yes?'

'I'm looking for Chantelle.'

'And you are?' he asked, in a Nottingham accent.

'My name's Nick Cane.'

'Ah. Would you mind waiting there for a minute?'

Nick stepped into a small, empty vestibule. No coat on the hook, no notes on the small cork board to his right. There was a telephone table. Beneath the landline was a small pile of takeaway menus.

The man who greeted him next was older than the first. He had a more cultured voice, suggesting seniority.

'Mr Cane, we were going to come and see you. Thanks for saving us the trouble. You'd better come in.'

The living room was not quite empty. There was a TV and a mini CD system, with a few discs. No pictures on the walls. Some books along the window ledge. Self-help guides and, the dead giveaway, a *Jane's Police Review* crammer for sergeants and inspector's part 1 exams. The officer saw Nick looking at them, said nothing.

'When did you last see Chantelle Brown, Mr Cane?'

'Christmas Day.'

'And when did you last speak to her?'

'New Year's Eve. No, the day before. She was meant to come to a party at my brother's on New Year's Eve but didn't show up and she hasn't been answering her mobile. Do you know what's happened to her?'

'No, we don't. Her parents called us and that's why we're here.'

'They don't live round here, then?'

'Ms Brown seems to have disappeared. You don't have any idea why that might be?'

'I don't. We were very close. It isn't like her.'

The senior guy nodded. 'It's cold in here. She'd turned the heating off. Perhaps you wouldn't mind coming to Oxclose Lane station with me, answering a few questions that might help us to find Chantelle.'

'Of course,' Nick said, then thought aloud. 'If she'd turned the heating off, she can't have been intending to come back here on New Year's Eve.'

'No.'

It was comforting to know that Chantelle meant to spend the night with him, even if it would have been the last night they ever spent together. She didn't dump me, Nick told himself. Someone got to her before she could pull out. Which meant she was in great danger. Or worse.

What day was it? Deborah had lost track of time. She might have been in this room for 24 hours or three days. He had raped her three times. She was sore and soiled, inside and out. The exercise she'd done over Christmas, the self-defence classes she'd taken, counted for nothing when you were knocked out and tied up.

He had told her, again and again, that he was going to kill her. After he'd had his fun.

Not much noise. The distant rumble of traffic and the dripping of a tap, which had her constantly wanting to pee. He hadn't told her where she was. The only clue was a church bell, faint but familiar, like one she could hear when she stayed overnight at Nick's flat.

He had given her water, and offered her a cold burger, which she'd refused. Now she was hungry. And cold. Her prison felt like it was a cellar. No windows. The only ventilation came from the gaps around the frame of the locked door. He only removed the gag on the few occasions when he allowed her to drink. If she tried to scream, he told her, nobody would hear, and he would hit her. The bruises from Friday night were only just starting to heal. She didn't want more.

With her hands tied behind her back, Deborah had enough flexibility to pull down her knickers when she needed to use the bucket to piss and shit in. He took the bucket out to empty just before he raped her. Once, he arrived to find that she had accidentally knocked the bucket over. He hit her for that.

Deborah tried to work out what he wanted, long term. Would he really kill her once he got tired of raping her? At Hendon police training college, she'd been to an under-attended lecture that dealt with the psychology of women as victims. She'd had to overcome an inbuilt, irrational contempt for women who let themselves be used and abused by men, who felt in some fucked-up way that they deserved whatever they got. Now she needed to empathise with the victims. Hard to fake such a pathetic role. But it was her only chance. She'd managed to fool Nick. This guy wasn't as clever as Nick, but he probably knew more about women, and how their minds worked.

He terrified her.



Nick wanted to cycle to Oxclose Lane police station but the police insisted they take him in their Ford Focus. A uniform asked for the key to his bike lock.

'We'll have a van collect the bike for you, have it waiting at the station before we're finished.'

The guy talking, DI Rawlins, came over as suave, verging on smarmy. Nick knew better than to allow himself to relax, for even a moment.

'Can you account for your movements on New Year's Eve?'

Nick had been in company the entire evening. He told the officers this, without mentioning Sarah. He still hadn't got to the bottom of why he'd found her watching TV, or why the news had had such an effect on her.

While answering the police's questions, he thought about the answers that he needed. Did Chantelle's disappearance have something to do with Andrew's taking Nancy? Were the police looking for Terence?

He finished his account. 'I got a cab home at about half three. There'll be a record of it.'

Rawlins wrote something down then looked Nick in the eye.

'You said you spoke to Miss Brown every day except for New Year's Eve. Did you try to get in touch with her on New Year's Eve?'

'Yes. I phoned her two or three times when she didn't show. She wasn't picking up.'

'Did you leave a voice mail?'

'Once. After that, there was no point. She knew that I was expecting her. So I assume that she was sending me a message.'

'And what message would that be?'

'That she'd changed her mind... about me, the party, whatever.'

'Were there tensions between you?'

'I didn't think so.'

'But now you seem to think she finished the relationship.'

'Only because of what's happened since. We're from different cultures and I'm quite a bit older than her. She'd just spent a few days at home with her parents and I suppose that might have given her second thoughts.'

These were all the things that had been running through Nick's mind before Sarah told him the real reason for his girlfriend's non-appearance.

'You didn't try to contact her at her parents?'

'No. She didn't want them to meet me. She never gave me their address, so I had no way of contacting them.'

He didn't mention that she had misled him about living with them. Never give the police any information that they haven't directly asked for.

'I'd like a list of all the people who can vouch for your movements on New Year's Eve.'

Nick gave as many names as he could remember, including Eve and Sarah. Chantelle's disappearance must have something to do with Andrew and Nancy, though he couldn't satisfactorily state why, and the police hadn't mentioned them yet. Perhaps this was all a set-up. Soon the police would spring a surprise witness on him: Ms Undercover, a.k.a. Chantelle Brown, and ask the killer question: what jobs did you do for Andrew Saint? To which the answer was: nothing that could land me back inside.

All right, there might be something illegal about the messages he had passed on Andrew's behalf. Conspiracy, perhaps. But any half decent lawyer would be able to demonstrate that Nick had acted in ignorance.

He finished his list. 'There were more ex-footballers there, with their wives or girlfriends. I don't know their names, but my brother would.'

'And you didn't leave the house once?'

'Only to go into the back garden for a cigarette, and, even then, there was always somebody about.'

'Who?'

Once more, Nick tried to remember who was where, when, without revealing that he had been sharing a spliff rather than smoking a cigarette.

'Now I'd like you to go over the whole day's events again.'

This was how they got you. They found small inconsistencies in your story, then hammered a chisel into the gap until it was a gaping hole. Nick began at the beginning.

'I caught a bus to Sherwood just after four in the afternoon...'

Sarah rang Nick before she drove to Nottingham, but his phone went straight to voicemail and this wasn't the sort of thing you left a message about. She tried again once she was back in her flat. Again, voicemail. She needed to see him before going to London tomorrow. She considered delaying her return. Recess wasn't over, but she'd arranged dinner with Andrew Saint. Andrew had completed arrangements for local builders to fix up the villa in Majorca. Regardless of his recent bad publicity, she couldn't cancel on him a second time. Also, she was curious about Andy's reinvention of himself as a Good Samaritan. Andrew being Andrew, she expected he had a self-interested angle. The girl was bound to be good looking, for a start.

It was infuriating that Eric had called when he did. She knew her mum, and she knew that she would never open up again the way she had started to before the call. Sarah's feelings about the relationship fluctuated. Grandad had been dead nearly fifteen years. It was hard to hold grudges on Dad's behalf. Kevin Bone had been gone almost as long, victim of a disease that didn't have a name while Grandad was alive. Grandma Edith had lingered for thirteen years after her stroke. Sarah had only known her as a brain-damaged invalid. Did Gran know about Mum's affair with Grandad?

No, she couldn't have. Nevertheless, a large part of Sarah's childhood had been turned on its head. For a second time. At what point had she realised that her father preferred to sleep with men? It began to dawn on her when she was sixteen, in a vague way. Everyone knew about homosexuality in the 70's, but there were no 'out' gay men in Chesterfield. Only a handful at Nottingham University in the early 80's. None of her friends understood how you could have a gay dad. Except Nick. He didn't judge Kevin Bone until he met him.

Interview over, Nick looked for his bicycle. No sign. The police offered him a lift home, but Nick wouldn't be seen in a police car. He called Cane Cars.

In Sherwood, Nick was in time for roast duck. While Caroline was serving, he turned his mobile on. Three missed calls. One was from an unknown number, two were from Sarah. He called her back.

'I need to talk to you,' she said. 'Can you come round later?'

He said he would. She offered to cook.

'No need,' he replied. Sarah wasn't much of a cook. 'I'm about to eat.'

'I'll make us something light.'

Nick refused wine with his Sunday lunch, wanting to keep a straight head. Caroline, he noticed, didn't drink either. Which made the announcement after dessert less of a surprise.

'We've got something to tell you,' Joe said.

'When's it due?'

'Middle of June,' Caroline said. 'Everybody reckons that a two year gap between siblings is ideal.'

'Not that we planned it or anything,' Joe said.

'You're a lucky guy,' Nick told his brother.

'I know. This'll happen to you, one day.'

'Do you reckon?' Joe knew that Nick would like to be a dad. 'Funny thing is, I'd started to wonder what Chantelle and my kids would look like.'

'Ah. That reminds me. The police asked me to check whether Chantelle phoned for a cab, so I went through the records. She did. Quarter past ten. And the car brought her here.'

'That's strange,' Nick said. 'More than strange.'

She did come to the party at the time she said she'd arrive. Nick found that oddly comforting. Only why had she not come in?

'Who was on the switch New Year's Eve?'

'Tess and Bill. Beardy Bob did the pick-up.'

'Is he on tonight?'

Joe made a call and found out. He was.

'Get him to collect me from here at twenty past eight, would you?'

Sarah washed her hair then put on black Levis. She found a clean, black wonder-bra and selected a Nicole Farhi sweater that wasn't too opaque: a dusky pink cashmere with a scooped neck. Five minutes before Nick was due to arrive, she heard a car pull up outside. She looked through the living room window. A taxi. It was a cold night, but Nick must be flush, if he was coming by taxi rather than walking over or cycling. The car didn't leave straight away. It was a couple of minutes before the doorbell rang. Nick wore a leather bomber jacket that had seen better days, supplemented by a thick, woollen scarf. His smile radiated affection.

'Have you been sat outside, waiting for it to be half past?' Sarah teased.

'Outside, yes. Waiting, no. I was quizzing Bob, the driver who picked up Chantelle on Friday night.'

'And?'

'He dropped her at the party. But she didn't come in.'

'Do the police think someone kidnapped her?'

'I don't know what they think. They questioned me for the best part of two hours, but they didn't let on that she was an undercover cop.'

Sarah considered this for a moment. 'She must have found out something that upset somebody.'

'She did meet Terence, the pimp who ran the brothel where Andrew was picked up,' Nick said. 'He threatened her, but only to get at Andrew.'

'Did you tell the police about him threatening her?'

'I couldn't tell them without bringing Andrew into it, which I didn't want to do. Anyway, Chantelle's one of theirs. They'll already know about Terence.'

'But they couldn't tell you without letting on how they knew. Do you know who Terence works for?'

'I don't. It could be that he just works for Andrew, but both he and Andrew keep the structural stuff pretty vague.'

They chewed it over a little longer, but got no further.

'Was this what you asked me over to talk about?' Nick asked. 'On the phone, I got the sense that there was something else going on with you.'

'There is,' Sarah said. 'But you'll have to promise it'll go no further.'

She opened a bottle of Chianti. Then she told him everything. It was a relief to get it out. Her mother apart, Nick was the only person who had met everybody concerned. He listened carefully, prompting her with the occasional comment.

'Blimey,' he said when she was done, 'I do remember picking up a weird dynamic between your mum and your grandad that time we stayed with him in '82. But when I broached it with you, you freaked out.'

'Of course I did. It's like.... reverse incest.'

'Then, when we met your dad, he was always hinting that he had big secrets to tell, if only we'd ask him.'

'He was showing off.'

'Maybe, or maybe he wanted to spill but knew you weren't ready. The thing was, that week in Majorca, he irritated me so much, I wanted to irritate him back by not asking. Him in his little corner of paradise. The last night we were there he got me so stoned I virtually blacked out.'

'Seems I own that villa now.'

'You what?'

Sarah told him about her inheritance. 'Dad's boyfriend Sergio had the place after Dad died. He passed away nearly a year ago, after a long illness, but I only just found out. Under the terms of Dad's will, it comes to me. So I need to go over there once it's been fixed up, check the repairs, then put it on the market.'

'You don't want a holiday home?'

'I already own two flats. And I never take holidays.'

'Maybe you ought to.'

'When the place has been renovated, maybe we could go there together,' she heard herself ask, 'to look it over? Just as mates, obviously.'

Or not so obviously.

'That'd be good. I haven't had a holiday since I got out.'

She poured him another glass. They resumed talking about Chantelle. Sarah couldn't get her head around why the police had let the girl go undercover for so long. Unless they had something on Nick.

'There was no flirtation while we were both working at the Power Project,' Nick said. 'The opposite, if anything. One night she gave me a lift home from a club and I came onto her. Took a while to persuade her to go for a drink. Then she offered to help me move flat. Looking back, we took it very slowly. We'd been seeing each other for five months before we, you know...'

'Maybe she stayed on the case because she got to like you,' Sarah suggested. 'You became her boyfriend, rather than her target.'

'Or maybe the police were using me to get to somebody else.'

'Who?' Sarah asked, not sure she wanted to know the answer.

'There's only one person it can be.'

When he didn't fill in the name, she said it for him. 'Andrew.'

'You knew?'

'I don't know anything,' Sarah said. 'I'm not sure I want to know.'

'I don't blame you.'

Their eyes met. She couldn't avoid this.

'Drugs?' Sarah asked.

'On a huge scale. Paul Morris used to run his Nottingham operation. When Paul moved to London, there was a vacuum. Andrew tried to persuade me to be his new number two. I turned him down. Andrew took on some of the work himself. Not sure how much of that Chantelle worked out. Nothing from me, but she's smart. And she had the run of Andrew's place in London.'

Sarah had worked out that Paul Morris was killed because of his involvement in the drug trade. The police despaired of finding his killer. And she knew that Andrew dealt when they were students, not that anybody called it dealing then. It was helping out friends. Nick did the same, to some extent. Fair enough, people thought, if your friend made enough profit to pay for his own supply. Though, knowing Andrew, he did rather better than that.

'Do you think Andrew had anything to do with Paul's murder?'

'I'm certain that he didn't.'

'Are you equally sure he doesn't have anything to do with Chantelle's disappearance?'

Nick didn't answer. Sarah sighed. 'Do you know how long the police have been investigating him?'

'It's not the first time they've come after him. He was in some kind of trouble in '92 and had to get out of the country. But he doesn't have a

record. I had my suspicions that he was being investigated. Lately he's been followed by a guy I spotted twice, shaved head, baseball cap. He didn't look like police. I figured he could be working for a rival gang.'

Or, for Gill Temperley, Sarah thought, recalling a conversation they'd had. But she'd keep quiet about this until she'd found out what Gill knew. There was something else she had to confide.

'I spoke to Andrew,' she said, 'just before Christmas, to apologise for cancelling dinner. I'd had a lot to drink and I don't remember that much about the conversation. I agreed to have dinner with him in London on Tuesday. And I think... no, I'm sure, that I talked about Chantelle. I wanted advice. I didn't have an inkling that he was still in the drug business. He always gave the impression that he'd left all that behind at university. He talked about you like you were the reprobate kid brother who'd never grown up.'

'Did you tell him what Chantelle was?'

'I must have done. I think I remember him telling me not to tell you. He said it was kinder that way. I knew she was under instructions to finish with you at Christmas.'

Nick thought for a minute, head in hands, like he always used to when deep in concentration.

'At least, if the investigation was over, and Andrew knew that, he had no reason to hurt Chantelle.'

'You thought he might be behind her disappearance?' Sarah asked.

'Couldn't rule it out.'

'He's your oldest friend.'

'And he knew my girlfriend was a spy, but didn't tell me. It's still possible he knows what happened to her.'

'In that case,' Sarah said, 'one of us has to confront him.'

The walk home from Sarah's took fifteen minutes, the night chill eliminating the effects of the half bottle of wine he'd drunk. The way Sarah looked at him when he'd kissed her cheek goodnight, she might have let him stay the night. Nick had to be at work from midnight, but that wasn't why he'd left early. He couldn't use her that way, not while Chantelle was the one thing on his mind.

He'd been ready to settle down with Chantelle. For a while there, he'd thought he was in love. How had he let her take him in so completely? It couldn't all be lies. Was she a good enough actor to fake the way her body shuddered while she shouted words of love? Friday nights, wrapped in each other's arms like an old married couple, laughing at *Friends* and *Frasier*, were they a lie, too? The times she woke up smiling after he was relieved early from a night on the switch? She deserved an Oscar for those.

Nick's flat was nearly the way he wanted it. Decent art on the walls: a big Magritte poster and a psychedelic Rick Griffin screen print that covered the damp patches. He had two second-hand leather armchairs, a decent enough Persian rug in front of the gas fire. Yet, after an evening at Sarah's, his home felt like a shabby rental. Nick needed some framed black and white photographs to add personality, he decided – be-bop musicians might do it – and a more stylish sofa. Maybe one of those new widescreen TVs like Sarah had. Before that, however, he needed better paid, legitimate work to enable him to afford such things.

He poured himself a glass of water from the tap, then phoned Andrew. His end of the conversation was carefully planned.

'Happy new year.'

'Same to you. How was the party?'

'Good, thanks. Except that Chantelle didn't show up. She's not answering her phone. I think she's dumped me.'

'I'm sorry to hear that. You two are good together.'

'You haven't heard anything, have you?' Nick asked, carefully.

'Why would I have?'

'You tell me. How's it going with Nancy?'

'Hard. She won't go into rehab and she keeps offering me all sorts of... treats if I'll go out and get her a little taste. I try to explain that I can't have it in the house. But, that first night, I got her a little to ease her through Christmas, so she knows it isn't a cast-iron rule.'

'Are you with her all the time?'

'When she's awake. She sleeps a lot. We have a drink together in the evenings. I haven't taken her out of the house.'

'You didn't take her to meet your folks over Christmas?'

Andrew had family in Leeds, but they weren't close. His parents were getting on a bit and his kid sister, last Nick heard, was an estate agent.

'I didn't take her anywhere. We watch a lot of films on DVD. Nancy can make some clever comments, when she's not nodding off.'

'She was always very sharp, before the crack took hold. Look, if you want help, I've got a couple of days off work this week. I could babysit Nancy while you get on with your business.'

'You'd do that for us?'

'I got you into this. I feel responsible. And I care about Nancy.'

'As long as you don't care too much,' Andrew said, in a wistful tone.

He really was smitten.

'It would do me good to get away from the situation here.'

'Maybe Chantelle will phone, tell you she's had a fever.' Something slightly off in Andrew's tone when he said this. It took Nick a moment to recognise what this unexpected quality was intended to be: kindness.

'If she does, I'll get the first train back.'

'Do you know anyone who's got a grudge against her?'

Nick found himself caught in a morass of double-think. What could he tell Andrew without revealing that he knew Chantelle was a spy?

'There's one guy. He was going to Nancy and his wife found out, dumped him. Hang on though. He might have seen Chantelle behind the wheel of a car, but he wouldn't have known who she was.'

'What's his name?'

'Doesn't matter. He wouldn't know how to find her.'

'Like I say, there'll probably be a simple explanation.'

'Hope you're right. I'll come on Tuesday.'

When they were through, he rang Sarah.

'It's done. I'm on.'

'How did he sound?'

'Normal. I can't believe he has anything to do with this.'

Sarah went back to London on Monday. She found her secretary in the office, sorting the day's mail. They spent half an hour dealing with chronic cases, most of which she referred back to the office in Nottingham. Sarah made a couple of phone calls about urgent Immigration matters. There tended to be more deportations at this time of year, when the Immigration Service knew that bleeding heart MPs were liable to have their eyes off the ball.

The phone rang. Gill Temperley.

'Time for a coffee?'

They met in the plush Pugin Rooms, which they had to themselves. Sarah wasn't sure that it was good for her to be seen so publicly cosyng up to a senior Tory, but out of session they would only be noticed by parliamentary estate staff, who were much more discreet than the members.

'I'm having dinner with Andrew Saint tomorrow,' Sarah said.

'Is that wise, after what happened?'

'Andrew rang when I cancelled our dinner on New Year's Eve. He explained what he was doing in the brothel. He was rescuing a woman who'd fallen into drug addiction and prostitution.'

'If you believe that,' Gill said, with a sad smile, 'you'll believe...'

'... anything, I know. You're right to be suspicious. Only, another old friend confirmed the story. Andrew has the woman staying with him at the moment, I hear. She refuses to go into rehab, so Andrew is helping her through cold turkey himself.'

'A saint indeed.'

'I don't know about that, but I wouldn't judge him too harshly. Unless, that is, you know something I don't. Didn't you tell me you had him followed?'

'Until the arrest at the brothel, yes. Doing my due diligence. You have to be careful who you take money from.'

'You've not had him watched since?'

'The man I employed couldn't come up with anything definite against Andrew.' Gill paused. 'It was what he didn't find that worried me. I had Andrew looked into in both London and Nottingham. In London, there was little sign of him having anything to do with the property business that he's

supposed to be running. In Nottingham, most of the people and places he visited were of a... shall we say, dubious nature. He saw a lot of one guy who'd served five years in prison for growing vast amounts of cannabis.'

'I know about him,' Sarah said. 'They're old university friends. Was there anything else?'

'I've put some extra doubt in your mind, haven't I? I'm sorry. I know that you and Andrew go back a long way, but you do have a career to protect. Would you like to borrow the report?'

'Please. If there's anything I can't explain, I might be able to bring it up with him tomorrow. Without letting on where I got it, of course.'

'It hardly matters,' Gill said. 'I've severed my connection with Saint Holdings. He'll get a registered letter. In our job, you can't be too careful.'

'She's asleep,' Andrew told Nick, when he got to Notting Hill.

The two men shook hands with the same tight squeeze they always used.

'Did you know someone's watching your house?' Nick asked. He had spotted a Merc with darkened windows on his way in, guy behind the wheel.

'Same guy as before?'

'Couldn't tell. Different car.'

'Not police?'

'I don't think so. Too expensive a car.'

'I'll look into it.' Andrew dismissed the subject. Nick remembered how annoyed Andrew had been when he gave Terence the address of this house. He wondered whether this had anything to do with the car outside. Best not

to remind Andrew about all that. Instead, he held up his black Adidas carry-all.

'Which room am I in? I could do with a wash and change.'

'The one you and Chantelle were in. I'll put the kettle on.'

Nick had a quick shower in the *en-suite*, then put on a fresh shirt and underwear. On the landing, he ran into Nancy. She wore only a Sex Pistols T-shirt and black knickers. Her hair was matted, her eyes only half open.

'Andy, what time is it?'

'It's not Andrew, it's Nick.' When she didn't react to this, he added, 'Why don't you have a shower? There's lots of hot water.'

'Can't be bothered,' Nancy said, not evincing any surprise that Nick was here. 'I'll come downstairs with you.'

She seemed unsteady on her feet, but when Nick offered her his arm, she shook him off. He followed her down.

'Look who I met on the landing,' Nick said to Andrew.

He watched his oldest friend give his ex-girlfriend a cuddle. Andrew spooned sugar into a large mug of tea for her, then made a fresh one for Nick.

'Nick's visiting. He's going to look after you while I go out and do some business,' Andrew told her. 'How are you feeling?'

'Like tiny creatures have been crawling over me all night. Where are my cigs?'

'I'm not sure.'

'Let me roll you one,' Nick offered, getting out his tobacco.

'Why don't I run you a bath?' Andrew suggested, when she was lit up.

She didn't say "yes", but didn't say "no" either. Andrew went upstairs, leaving the two of them alone. Between sips of tea, Nancy shivered.

'Can I get you a dressing gown, or a blanket or something?' Nick offered.

Nancy bristled. 'I'm not a fucking invalid. If I want something, I'll get it myself.'

'Sorry.'

'If Andy has to get me a minder, he could have gone for someone younger and better looking.'

Nick gave her an amused smile. It was good to see her combative side. She sucked on the roll-up and her wide eyes became alert. She glared at Nick.

'All of this was your idea, wasn't it?'

'Andrew offered to get you into rehab. I didn't imagine he'd...'

'Fall for me?' she filled in. 'Does he often go for your cast-offs?'

'Never happened before. Anyway, it was you who finished with me. You went back to Carl, remember?'

'Carl liked smoking with me. You didn't.'

'I know.'

'How come you came looking me?' Nancy asked.

'Eve asked me to.'

'Oh, right. Eve.' A shadow crossed her face. He wondered whether she was remembering that Eve's husband had been one of her clients. How often had Nancy serviced Geoff? Nick had never met the guy, but he and Geoff had been with two of the same women, which created an odd, unsettling kinship.

Andrew returned. 'I've put some of that bubble bath in. The herbal essence you like.'

Nancy didn't react. Andrew began to ask Nick about his journey, the party he'd missed, his brother and sister-in-law. Nancy didn't join in. Andrew went back out to turn the water off. He yelled down that the bath was ready. Nancy left, like an obedient child. Alone, Nick topped up his tea from the pot and looked for Andrew's mobile. No sign. He rolled himself a cigarette. Five minutes later, Andrew returned.

'I told her I was going to pop out soon. She seemed to take it in. I really appreciate this. Especially when you must be deep down in the dumps, with Chantelle going off like that. Did you try and call her at work yesterday?'

'She never told me which dentist's she worked at,' Nick said. 'I looked up dentists in Arnold. There are five of them. I could ring round, try to track her down, but it seems pointless. The police will have been onto them.'

'I suppose,' Andrew said. 'What do the police reckon?'

'If they reckon anything, they've not told me. Have you had any medical help...? I mean, with Nancy?'

'I talked to professionals. They say, watch her all the time but in the long run, if it doesn't come from her, it's hopeless. I'm thinking of taking her on holiday somewhere warm, somewhere she'll find it very hard to score.'

He looked at his watch. 'I've set up a meeting in half an hour. I'd better get changed. I'm seeing Sarah for dinner this evening so I'll go straight there from my meeting. If that's OK with you?'

'It's why I'm here.'

Andrew's house had a dozen high ceilinged rooms. Nick searched them methodically, careful not to make much noise. He didn't want Nancy to hear and put two and two together.

At first, he couldn't help but feel ashamed of what he was doing. After a while, though, he began to feel oddly detached. What was his relationship with Andrew these days? Why were they still friends? *Precious villain*, Othello called Iago after discovering his betrayal. Jerry once asked Nick to explain Othello's use of 'precious'. He'd struggled to explain to a Sixth Former how one could value an old friendship even when the friend was irredeemably corrupt.

Nothing of interest downstairs, but it took twenty-five minutes to be sure. There was no cellar and no easy access to the attic. Nick moved on to the master bedroom, two doors down from the bathroom. It had pink walls. There was a fug of body odour and stale smoke. He looked out of the window. The Merc was gone. Had it followed Andrew? Old newspapers and magazines were scattered across the green carpet. The duvet cover had an elaborate oriental pattern while the sheet covering the mattress was jet black silk. Nick started with the obvious places: under the mattress, at the back of drawers. He went through the pockets of each jacket in Andrew's wardrobe. There was some porn stuffed beneath the pyjamas at the bottom of it. Big tits and spread legs, not hardcore or particularly kinky. There were condoms and lube in the bedside cabinet. No sex toys or stimulants. No letters or notebooks.

In the spare bedroom beyond the bathroom was a computer, with a modem, and a printer. There was also a red box file with the word, 'accounts' written on it: probably not worth looking into if it was out in the open. Nick checked anyway. Andrew had a conventional savings account, about fifty grand in total, and had paid income tax on a declared salary of thirty thousand a year from Saint Holdings for the previous year. There were no books referencing the company itself. Those accounts were probably on the computer.

Andrew's PC was password protected. What word might he use? In the movies, the hero always made a clever guess on the second attempt. Nick thought hard, but came up with no ideas. He went back onto the landing and tapped lightly on the bathroom door.

'Nancy, you awake?'

'Worried about me drowning in the bath?'

'Can I ask you something?'

'Come in. It's not locked. Nothing you haven't seen before.'

He did as she asked, though he wasn't sure that Andrew would be happy about it. Nancy sank beneath the water, half concealing her plump breasts.

'Sorry, I was a bit of a bitch earlier. It was a surprise to see you here.'

'It's a rough time. How are you doing?'

'My head feels empty, and raw, like I'm a building where all the walls have been stripped. There are big gaps in the floorboards and half the windows are cracked, so the wind gets in. A hot bath helps. I have two most days. Drinking doesn't help much. Have you brought any spliff with you?'

'Sorry, no.' He'd figured that, if Nancy was allowed dope, Andrew would have some in.

'Pity. What was it you wanted?'

'The password to Andrew's computer. There's something I need to look up.'

'Which computer? He's got a laptop downstairs, but he lets me use the PC in the spare room. The password's *Jethro*, after my ancestor, the guy who invented the seed drill.' Nancy's surname was Tull. 'Before you get sucked into the internet,' she went on, 'bring me another mug of tea, would you? Just one level spoonful of sugar. Andy always puts too much in.'

'I remember how you like it.'

While the kettle was on, Nick double-checked the kitchen cupboards. There was one drawer, beneath the cooker. It held a pile of brown envelopes and printed papers. Utility bills mostly. He checked the phone ones. Andrew's calls weren't itemised. Next, he located the chunky black laptop, which was on the sofa in the living room. He moved it onto the coffee table and put a bunch of newspapers and magazines over it, the sort of thing - he hoped - that Andrew would think Nancy would have done. He took two mugs of tea upstairs, knocked, then placed one of them on the edge of the bath without once glancing at the body he used to lust after. Only then did he sign in to Andrew's PC.

'Heard from Nick recently?' Andrew asked Sarah when they were settled at their table in *Quo Vadis*.

'Not since the New Year's party. You?'

'He's at my house now, looking after Nancy. Think I can trust him?'

'He seems pretty hung up on his new girlfriend,' Sarah said. 'He tried not to show it, but he was very upset when she didn't show up at the party.'

'But you knew why that was,' Andrew said.

'What do you mean?'

'You told me, remember? You weren't that drunk.'

Her betrayal confirmed, Sarah felt herself flush. She didn't try to hide her embarrassment. Andrew gave her one of those aren't-we-clever, complicit grins that some vain men were prone to.

'I shouldn't have mentioned it,' Sarah said, after sipping some over-priced Pinot Gris. 'You didn't tell him that I told you, did you?'

'God, no, but it was tempting. He's cut up about her vanishing like that.'

'Here's the problem,' Sarah said, prepared to spin the lie she'd rehearsed. 'Chantelle, or whatever her name really is, was meant to return to uniform yesterday. But she didn't show up. The police went to her house. She hadn't been home since New Year's Eve.'

Andrew sipped his wine, then looked her straight in the eye. 'And you want to know if I had anything to do with it?'

'Pardon?' Andrew had jumped ahead too quickly for her.

Andrew took a deep draught of wine. 'It's a fair question. The only people you told were me and Nick. You have told Nick by now, haven't you? That why he's at my house today, going through my stuff. He's trying to find out what happened to Chantelle. Waste of time. All he had to do was ask.'

Sarah took a deep glug of wine. Andrew did the same.

'I'll ask, then. Do you know what happened to Chantelle?'

The waitress approached. For the second time, Andrew told her that they weren't ready to order.

'I'm afraid we can only let you have this table for ninety minutes, sir.'

'Fuck off.'

She hurried away. It was the first time since they were students that Sarah had seen Andrew lose his cool.

'I don't know for sure,' he told Sarah. 'But I expect I can find out. If we're going to level with each other, I suggest we go back to my place, where we won't be overheard, and Nick can join the conversation.'

He filled up his wine glass and drank it in one long gulp, then left a twenty on the table to cover the cost of the bottle. Sarah followed him out of the restaurant.

On Dean Street, Andrew looked for a taxi to flag down. Sarah really shouldn't be seen with him. Gill's surveillance had finished, but the police might well be observing him. A cab pulled up. She took the jump seat opposite Andrew, rather than sit next to him, then leant forward.

'Are you sure your house isn't being watched?'

'I'm not sure about anything any more,' Andrew muttered.

This is a mistake, Sarah told herself. I'm going to the home of a man who is known as a drugs distributor. Why didn't Eric warn me against Andrew, rather than Nick? He can't know that we're connected. She got out her phone.

'Texting Nick to tell him we're on the way?'

That had crossed her mind. 'Just checking my messages.'

'Don't mind me. Text him if you want.'

She put the phone away.

The Notting Hill house was shabby on the outside, and soullessly functional inside, like one of those shared, barely occupied houses rented by provincial MPs for the Westminster week. Andrew didn't announce their return.

'Drink?' he asked Sarah in the vast kitchen. When she hesitated, he added, 'if we're going to talk frankly, you can't let me drink alone.'

He opened a bottle of something expensive and white. Nick hurried into the room, a guilty expression on his face. They had interrupted his search.

'Andrew? You're back early.' He noticed her. 'Sarah?'

'Found what you were looking for?' Andrew asked. 'I got you a glass.'

'I'm all right,' Nick said.

'No, you're not,' Andrew talked while he poured the entire bottle into three glasses. 'I'll bet you couldn't believe your luck when you pulled Chantelle. She's the kind of woman you always fancy, but who's never interested in you - built like an Amazon, high minded. After years of settling for bronze, you thought you'd won gold.'

'What does that make me?' Sarah asked, trying to take the sting out of Andrew's attack. 'Base metal? Or am I one of the bronze also-rans?'

'You're better than gold. Platinum. Better for Nick, too, than any of the women he's had since you. Especially the latest, way things turned out.'

Andrew got up, opened a drawer and pulled out an oblong, sealed wooden box, together with a small plastic device, whose function she could not at first work out.

'We're talking openly now. It's better that way. We're Nick's closest friends. He must have told you how I make my money.'

Andrew tore the seal from the box and opened it: five, long, fat cigars.

'He did,' Sarah said. 'I can't say I was too surprised.'

'I'm glad you're not shocked. Legalisation of cannabis was on your election manifesto when you stood for Student Union President. Remember?'

'I still support lowering cannabis from class B to C as a controlled drug. But it's not just dope you handle, is it? It's coke, ecstasy, God knows what else.'

Andrew pulled open the plastic device to reveal two metal blades, resembling a guillotine, with a half-moon hole in the centre of each.

'If I don't do it, somebody else will, Sarah. Simple as that. Any government that pretends otherwise is guilty of gross hypocrisy.'

'Politicians specialise in hypocrisy. It's the only way to get elected. Nick and I aren't here to debate drug policy. This is about Chantelle. Do you know what happened to her?'

Andrew put the tip of the cigar into the guillotine and snapped it shut, neatly cutting off the sealed tip of the cigar, which he put in his mouth.

'No.' He pushed the cigar box towards Nick, who shook his head.

'But you must have some idea,' Nick said.

Andrew lit the cigar with a long match. He took his time, waited until the fat end glowed red. 'Some idea, yes.'

'Do you know how we can find her?' Nick pressed.

'If I'm right about who's got her, Terence's boss is sending a message.'

'Who to?' Sarah asked.

'The police, of course. And, by extension, your lot.'

'The government? What message would that be?'

'"Fuck off and leave us alone."' He blew smoke at her.

'Wouldn't that be your message too?' Sarah asked.

Andrew flared with anger. 'If I were behind this and wanted to make an impression, I'd dump her dead, naked body on the steps of County Hall and make sure that the press had photos before the police got there.'

Nick knocked over his glass of wine. Before Sarah could stop him, he took a swing at Andrew. The smaller man tried to duck, but wasn't quick enough. Nick caught him on the side of the face. Andrew fell off his chair, landing hard on the wooden floor.

'What the fuck is going on in here?'

The new arrival was a slender, busty woman with long dark hair, wearing only tights, knickers and a see-through bra.

'Sarah,' Andrew said, reaching for the edge of the kitchen table in order to haul himself up, 'I'd like you to meet my girlfriend, Nancy.'

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He'd heard it said, if you really want to punish a man, give him the thing he most wants. Hugh was back in the cabinet, doing a proper job. Defence. Which meant minister for cutting the army. Until now, he had not known what it was like to be loathed. These were like the last days of the '66-'70 Labour government, only worse. The party had fought two elections in '74, winning a slender overall majority in the second. Two years on, the economy was back in the khazi. Inflation was 26%. The Chancellor was threatening to impose maximum wage increases of 10%. Bernard Donaghue was working on a voluntary flat rate increase of £6 a week. Harold liked the idea of a voluntary flat rate because it sounded socialist, but the Treasury wanted legislation.

If things were bad for Hugh, they were worse for the PM. The press had it in for Harold, always had done. The smears got worse and worse. During the four-year Heath government, there had been stories about Harold and the Soviets, most of them planted by MI5. *Private Eye* magazine had taken an almost pathological dislike to Wilson, and were happy to publish any lie the spooks fed them. Not Hugh's problem. These days, Ted Short, the Paymaster General, was the PM's conduit for dealing with the security services.

Hugh was surprised to get a summons to number ten. At short notice, too. During the years of opposition, his tenuous friendship with the PM had fallen into abeyance. He was still on the Christmas card list, and Harold had

sent a sincere note of condolence when Edith died, succumbing to a second stroke sixteen years after the first. Hugh had been expected to retire, but couldn't afford to. Not after paying off Kevin. Not unless he sold the house. He'd only been an MP for seventeen years. He needed to build up a bigger pension.

Tonight, Harold looked plumper than usual, more tired. He offered Hugh a cigar, but did not smoke one himself.

'How's Defence?' the PM asked.

'I've had worse jobs,' Hugh replied, and took the cigar cutter.

'This was the best I could give you. It had to be somebody utterly reliable, you understand that.'

'I do, and I was flattered to be offered it. Pity the role can't be expanded to include security liaison, though.'

'Exactly what I wanted to talk to you about. Not a cabinet reshuffle. That won't be until the spring, But I need your security expertise now.'

'Always at your service, Harold.' Hugh thought that this was going to be about one of Wilson's former protégés. Recently, John Stonehouse, who used to borrow the Wilsons' cottage in the Scilly Isles - a favour that had never been offered to Hugh - had faked his own death, then done a runner to the other side of the world. Rumour had it that Stonehouse was a double agent who had taken money from the Russians. The Australians had deported him back to the UK, where he was now awaiting trial for fraud.

'That story you told me. I didn't believe you at first.'

'The coup plot? I hardly dared believe it myself.' Hugh had saved his intelligence about the Mountbatten coup attempt until Harold had his overall majority, eighteen months ago. He'd timed the revelation well, so

that Harold felt in his debt, and offered him a cabinet job. Not the one Hugh wanted. Jim Callaghan had that. Harold went on.

'I kept it to myself, saving it up, if you like, in case I needed a weapon.'

'And did you?' Hugh still didn't know what was coming. Why would Harold need a weapon against Five, or Six? Peter had retired earlier this year. Gone to farm in Tasmania. Hugh no longer had a decent source in either security agency, a situation that left him feeling vulnerable, exposed. The PM changed his mind about the cigar. He chose one from the wooden box and trimmed it. Only when the corona was fully lit did he speak again.

'Let's go for a walk in the garden.'

So he was still worried about being bugged. They went outside and took a turn around the trees.

'Yesterday, I decided it was time. I called in Hanley.' Sir Michael Hanley was the Head of MI5. 'I put your conspiracy theories to him.'

'You did, did you? Good man.'

Harold nodded, as though he appreciated Hugh's approval.

'He told me, in essence, that everything you suggested was true. That there had been a motley group behaving oddly, or out of turn. Not the majority, but a significant number. He also said that the threat was long gone. Most of them had retired now, or were on their way to retirement. Does that ring true to your experience?'

'More or less, yes.' Hanley was probably including Peter in that group, which was fair enough. Peter had always loathed Wilson. Never found any evidence against him, though. 'What are you going to do about it?'

'Haven't decided yet. Why waste energy on a threat that has passed? Hanley told me something else, which is why I called you in. Something so

flabbergasting that it put the other thing out of my mind. He said there was an allegation that one of the former heads of MI5 was a Soviet mole.'

'Christ! What did you say?'

"Now I have heard everything."

'He didn't come up with any evidence, I take it?'

'The investigation was inconclusive, but MI5 was badly undermined by the whole affair; so they won't be any threat to me for a while.' Harold paused, allowing Hugh room for a question that he did not formulate. Hugh knew who had been under investigation: Peter's old boss, Roger Hollis. According to Peter, he had accused Hollis to his face of being a spy. The spymaster didn't deny it: he merely refused to reply.

Hollis had been dead three years. There was no proof of his betrayal. There would never be any proof. Harold became impatient.

'Well? Anything you feel the need to tell me?'

How much did Harold know? Hugh found it very hard to tell.

'I'd heard rumours, but you know what Five is like: paranoia upon paranoia. It's a disease. I have no idea whether it's true or not.'

Harold blew smoke at him. 'Truth'll come out after we're all dead.'

'It's not the truth you get when all the witnesses are dead. It's history.'

The two men walked and smoked in companionable silence until they were back at the door to number ten.

'How's that boy of yours?' Harold asked. 'Still lapping up the sun?'

'Last I heard, yes.'

'And your beautiful daughter, Sarah. She must be at Secondary School now.'

'Granddaughter, you mean. Yes, Sarah's thriving. She'll be starting her GCE's in the autumn.'

'Any idea what she wants to do with her life?'

'Last time we discussed it, she wanted to be an astronaut.'

'First woman in space, eh? There's bound to be one. Why shouldn't it be her, eh? Shall we go back inside?'

Hugh followed the Prime Minister into the old building, with its ghosts and its listening devices. Harold stopped on the threshold.

'There are going to be big changes in a week or two. Nothing will stay the same. Be prepared.'

'Thanks for the tip, Harold.'

The PM gave him an ambivalent smile, then saw him to the door. They shook hands like old friends. Hugh wasn't sure if he had just been promised a promotion. He wasn't sure about a lot of things, any more.

1999

49

'I seem to have knocked Andrew over,' Nick said. Wine was splashed all over the table and floor, but Andrew's glass, miraculously, hadn't broken. Nick went to the sink and got a cloth to mop up. Sarah stared at the three of them, agog. She'd already had a bit to drink, Nick could tell. He and Nancy were the only sober people in the room. And Nick wasn't thinking straight. He couldn't be, for he'd just hit his oldest friend. Precious villain. Nancy found some Nivea cream and began to rub it onto the side of Andrew's face.

Nick couldn't resist the impulse to apologise.

'Sorry, I lost it for a moment.'

'No, I asked for that', Andrew said. 'Get another bottle out of the fridge, why don't you?'

When Nick had found a glass for Nancy and they all had a full drink, he came to the point that he and Sarah had been pussyfooting around since they came to the house.

'Have you had any contact with Terence?' he asked Andrew.

'Not since before Christmas. He was planning to return to Jamaica. Didn't want to hang around to be deported for living off immoral earnings.'

'Do you know who his boss is?' Sarah asked.

'No, I never met him face to face or even heard a name.' He looked straight at Nick. 'I told you how these things work, on a need-to-know basis.'

'You also told me all that stuff about cells of three and how nobody knew who the other people were beyond their own cell. Only now you expect me to believe that your Nottingham business boils down to a cosy cell

with you, Terence and an anonymous kingpin who's behind Chantelle's kidnap.'

'It's not like that any more,' Andrew said. 'After you turned me down, I hooked up with one of the new Nottingham cartels. Terence was my contact, and, after a dodgy start, things worked smoothly. Terence's boss kept increasing his orders, even paid up front when he wanted a massive shipment. Then you asked me to help with Nancy. Only then I found out...!' He stopped, pulled on his cigar and looked at Sarah. 'You told him, right?'

Sarah nodded. 'At first, I forgot I'd told Andrew about the undercover operation. I'd had a few that night. Then I started to put together that Chantelle had been taken soon after I spoke to him.'

'What's she on about?' Nancy asked.

Andrew explained. 'Nick's girlfriend, Chantelle, is an undercover cop. She was trying to get to me through him. After Terence got busted, he wanted to know who had sent the police in. The people Terence works for are very dangerous, when they choose to be. Not telling him wasn't an option.'

The confession was coming now. Nick had expected to feel angry. Instead he felt a cold, rational hardness descend upon him.

'Go on,' Sarah said.

'I needed them to trust me.' Andrew turned to Nick. 'But when I told Terence that Chantelle was due to be at that party, I knew she'd been ordered to chuck Nick before Christmas. There was no chance she'd be there. So I thought it was safe to tell Terence.'

Nick glanced at Sarah to see if she'd confirm what Andrew was saying. No reaction. He turned back to Andrew, leant in closer.

'You think she's dead, don't you?'

'I'm sure of it.'

Nick and Sarah looked at each other, each trying to gauge whether the other thought Andrew was lying. Nancy spoke to Nick.

'Sounds to me like, if anyone's to blame for what happened to this spy girl, it's your ex here, spilling the beans. Not Andrew. He was only protecting his business.'

Before Nick could respond, his mobile rang. He checked the display. A Nottingham number. He didn't recognise it, but answered anyway.

'Nick, it's Eve.'

'I can't really talk just now.'

'Oh.'

'Are you OK?' She sounded upset. More than upset.

'Nick, I'm so sorry. It's all my fault. I've brought this on you.'

'What's happened?'

'I've just had the police round. They've taken Geoff in for questioning, my Geoff.'

'I don't understand. What for?'

'Abducting Chantelle.'

Sarah was too busy trying to piece everything together to pay attention to what Nick was saying on the phone. Then she saw his face freeze.

'Do you know how much evidence the police have?' he asked. 'I see. What about...? OK, I'll talk to you later.' He hung up.

'What is it?' Sarah asked.

'Eve's husband, Geoff, has been taken in for questioning on suspicion of involvement with Chantelle's disappearance.'

'Jesus,' Sarah said. 'But hold on. I thought Eve was single?'

She'd seen the woman leave the New Year's Eve party with Tony Bax.

'She kicked him out not long before Christmas.'

'What would be this Geoff guy's motive?' Andrew asked.

'I mentioned him to you once. Eve, his wife, was with Chantelle when they saw him leaving the brothel. Eve dumped Geoff as a result of that.'

'This creep was one of your clients?' Andrew asked Nancy.

'He was a regular,' Nancy said. 'Once a week for half and half.'

'I don't understand how Geoff knew who Chantelle was,' Sarah said.

'Eve must have told him,' Nick said. 'Geoff would have known about the party. He was invited with Eve before they split up. He must have lain in wait outside the house. Could be he was waiting for Eve, then spotted Chantelle, saw red.'

'That's hardly a motive for murder,' Nancy said.

'Her meddling cost him his marriage, that's how he'd see it.'

'Does this mean there's more chance that Chantelle's still alive?' Sarah asked Nick.

'Eve says they haven't found a body.'

'At least we know it had nothing to do with Andrew,' Nancy said.

Her comment sounded forced, but Nick nodded. He was easily taken in by women, Sarah thought. Especially good looking ones.

Andrew went to the bathroom. On his return, there was a slight redness about the eyes and the beginnings of a bruise on the right side of his forehead. When he spoke, it was only to Nancy.

'I need to leave the country, for a few months at least. Will you come with me?'

'We hardly know each other,' Nancy said. 'I'm a mess. I'd only slow you down.'

'I want you to come, but you can stay here if you prefer, look after the place for me.'

Nancy gave a weak laugh. 'We're a stone's throw from Ladbroke Grove! I'd be back on crack before you got to the airport.'

'Nick would look out for you, wouldn't you, Nick?'

Nick gave an unconvincing nod. Nancy shook her head. 'Thing about Nick is, he's well-meaning, but he needs to look after number one first, and he's got a long way to go with that before he can help anybody else.'

Sarah could see some truth in this, but said nothing. Nancy turned to her. 'Also, now I've met you, seen the two of you together, it's obvious.'

'What's obvious?' Sarah asked.

'He's still in love with you, isn't he? You two ought to work that out.'

Sarah didn't dare look at Nick. Nancy stood, drained her glass of wine, and turned to Andrew. 'I'm coming with you. Let's go and decide where.'

Andrew followed her out of the room. Sarah had had a fair bit of wine and nothing to eat. She wasn't in a fit state to talk about what Nancy had just said, so returned to the more urgent situation.

'Does Eve think Geoff killed Chantelle?'

'Eve wouldn't put it past him. Geoff has a temper, she says. He's an architect, has access to building sites. The police are searching a couple of them.'

'Chantelle's one of theirs,' Sarah pointed out. 'The police will be desperate for an arrest. It doesn't mean they're right about Geoff. Did you tell Andrew about him before?'

'Not by name.' Nick stared into space. He wasn't thinking about what Nancy had said about her and him, Sarah realised. He was thinking about Chantelle. Sarah looked away, to give him a moment, and saw that Andrew, unannounced, had returned to the room. He looked vulnerable, out of his depth. Then he spoke and the mask went back on.

'Nancy and I have come to an agreement. I'm taking her abroad, somewhere hot, with rehab facilities. The Bahamas, we thought.'

'Why do you need to go?' Nick asked him. 'They've got Geoff. The police haven't got anything on you or they'd have arrested you already.'

'You don't know that for sure,' Andrew said. 'Chantelle had the run of this house while we were both out of it. Who knows what evidence she found and passed to her bosses? Or what Terence will tell them if they catch him before he flees the country. I've dealt with this situation before. The only way out is to get somewhere the police can't extradite you *before* they have time to put a case together. Eventually files get closed, officers reassigned. Everything blows over.'

'I still don't see what the urgency is.'

'There's another problem,' Andrew said. 'Over Christmas, with the Nancy situation, I took my eye off the ball. Last time I saw Terence, he passed on an advance - a really big one - for the next shipment. But I was

playing out of my league and got ripped off. Terence's boss would have sent heavies after me by now but for what's going on with Chantelle. Even so, I can't stall him much longer.'

Nick wasn't convinced by this.

'Why can't you tell Terence - or whoever - what happened and get them to deal with the people who ripped you off?'

'As far as they're concerned, it's my problem, not theirs.'

'You can't afford to pay them?'

'Nowhere near. Even if I sold this house, it wouldn't cover it. Since you gave Terence my address I've had people watching the house. I can't be too careful. Nancy's on the internet now, looking for flights. You're welcome to stay another night, but Nancy and I may be gone by morning.'

He left Sarah and Nick on their own.

'I no longer believe anything Andrew tells me,' Sarah said.

'The story about him being ripped off doesn't ring true,' Nick agreed. 'I believe him about being watched, though. There was a guy following Andrew in Nottingham, but that was long before the tensions began with Terence'.

Sarah wasn't ready to tell him the truth about this. 'I'm going to call a cab,' she said. 'Want me to drop you at the station? You can still make the last train to Nottingham.'

He went to get his stuff together. When the cab arrived, Sarah yelled for him. They left without saying goodbye.

The street was empty. Nobody was watching, thank God. She and Andrew weren't really friends, Sarah decided, and hadn't been for fifteen years. She wondered how Nick felt about him now. Nancy's words about them being in love still rang around her brain.

'Do you think there's any chance the police will find Chantelle alive?' she asked Nick, when they were sat in the back of the minicab.

'If she were still alive, I think Geoff would have let her go by now.'

'Did you think it was a little odd, the way Nancy spoke about her?'

'Odd in what way?'

'Like Andrew had told her what to say.'

'Nobody tells Nancy what to do,' Nick insisted.

At St Pancras, a building site these days, she gave him a peck on the cheek. 'Promise you'll phone if you get any news. Whatever the time.'

He promised. She watched him haul his heavy bag into the station's temporary entrance.

1983

51

Andy drove Nick and Sarah to East Midlands Airport in Sarah's Cortina. They couldn't afford a taxi. Driving themselves and leaving the car in the airport car park was even more expensive.

'This is really kind of you,' Sarah told Andy

'My pleasure. Cool of you to lend me the flat and car while you're away.'

'Think you'll ever get your own place in Nottingham?'

'Nah. London's where the work is, what little there is of it.'

The recession showed no sign of ending and Andy didn't have a job. Nick's teacher-training course was nearly over, but he had yet to find a post. Sarah, because of her year out as president of the Students' Union, had only just taken her finals. They would return in time for her results. Her plans post-graduation were obscure - at least they were to Nick. She must have something in mind, for she didn't seem worried. Andy had spent the year since graduation doing manual jobs for an agency and had stepped up the dealing. Nick didn't let on to Sarah about the latter activity. Andy visited Nottingham regularly, to hang out with them and to see customers. The rest of his time he spent in his parents' Leeds home or at mates in London.

The couple needed this holiday. On top of finals and coursework, both had been working for Labour at the General Election. To no avail. The Falklands conflict had turned around the Tories' unpopularity and Thatcher had hugely increased their vote. Labour beat the newly formed Social Democratic Party by just two percentage points. The candidate that Nick

and Sarah had been working for, Ken Coates, had lost marginal Nottingham South. Now the city had just one Labour MP, in Nottingham North.

At the airport Andy confirmed the time of their return flight and promised to pick them up.

'Don't worry, I won't be sticking around afterwards. In fact, I plan to do some travelling myself.'

'Somewhere interesting?' Sarah asked.

'I make everywhere interesting,' Andy told her, and she frowned. Nick was aware that Andy's arrogant side irritated Sarah. The two of them would never normally be friends. Nevertheless, she kissed him goodbye.

Nick and Sarah slept for most of the flight. In Palma, they treated themselves to a taxi for the short journey to the train station.

The city was bigger and greener than Nick was expecting. The driver took them along dusty roads to the seafront, passing old windmills and a huge cathedral. There were trees everywhere, not just the ubiquitous palms.

'Let's have a day or two in the city on the way back,' Sarah said. 'I'm not sure I can take Dad's company for a whole week.'

There were only three trains a day to Soller. The couple were just in time for the middle one. They boarded an antique set of wooden carriages that catered for tourists and a few locals. After trundling across countryside for half an hour, they stopped at a high vista. Nick and Sarah stepped outside to stare at the town below, which was framed by a low mountain range and surrounded by orchards of olive trees.

'This is a very beautiful island,' Nick said. 'I can see why your dad's stayed here so long.'

What he couldn't see was why Sarah had only visited Kevin here once before. Or why, the way Sarah told it, Kevin Bone hadn't left the island since he arrived here, thirteen years earlier.

In Soller, they had lunch at a tapas bar in the town square, sheltered from the sun by ancient, enormous trees. Then, as instructed, they boarded the tram down to the port of Soller, a steep, fifteen minute journey that took them to the heart of a wide, busy harbour. Sarah found a phone box. After a couple of attempts she managed to ring her father, who promised he'd be with them in less than fifteen minutes. They killed the time by shopping for hats. Nick found a magnificent Panama, one that had actually been made in Panama, and was tempted to buy it, until Sarah told him not to.

'Hats like that are for middle aged men. There are some nice fisherman's caps over there. Or you could try one of these. She held up a cap with a stiff flap at the front.

'What's that?'

'I think they're called baseball caps.'

He tried one on. 'Makes me look daft. What about a beret?'

She shook her head. 'You look like an old Frenchman. How do I look?'

She tried on a sombrero that had several corks attached to it and a bright pink ribbon round the brim.

'Perfect. Though it could do with *kiss me quick* written on the ribbon.'

'Kiss me, stupid,' she said. 'We're on holiday.'

He obliged. It was good to see her relax. At least her year as union president seemed to have cured her of politics. He'd been worried that, given the family she came from, Sarah might want to become an MP. Nothing wrong with that, but it was the kind of job that didn't leave much room for a

personal life. For Nick, the big appeal of teaching was the long holidays. He wanted to travel the world with Sarah.

Back outside, the sun burnt their faces. Each of them soon regretted not having bought a hat.

Kevin Bone didn't behave like anyone's father. Or like a bloke in his mid-forties. He smoked dope all the time. The hash he had was stronger and fresher than the stuff that made it to the UK. Nick liked a smoke, but only in the evenings. Kevin's constant vagueness and wide-eyed stare were broken only by a forced bonhomie that got on Nick's nerves.

Happily, Kevin, assisted by Sergio, twenty years his junior, was a good cook. The four of them had long, al fresco meals, with a seemingly endless supply of excellent local red. Sarah was weird around her father, a different person to the one Nick knew at home: younger acting and straighter, with a barely concealed resentment that left Nick uncomfortable. Maybe her attitude contributed to Kevin smoking and drinking so heavily. The old man put away at least a bottle of wine a night, with beers and brandies on top.

Sergio was a tour guide, taking English and German speakers on boat trips from Soller harbour. He had to get up in the mornings, so was usually in bed by midnight. The exception was when they spent an evening at a cafe called Sa Fonda, in Deia. Kevin introduced them to a couple of English musicians, one of whom Nick had heard of. He was also called Kevin, and had recently moved to the island. Not much music was played, but a lot of dope was smoked, except by Sergio, who drove them home. Next day, while Kevin slept in, Sergio took Nick and Sarah to a hidden, private cove at Son Muleta. They swam in the sea and sunbathed for hours until Sergio returned to take them home, where Kevin seemed not to have noticed that they'd been gone.

Tonight, when Sergio announced that he was about to turn in, Sarah did the same. Nick joined her in the kitchen and squeezed her waist.

'Want me to come too?'

'No need. Dad seems to enjoy your company more than mine. I don't mind him stoned, but I don't like him when he's very drunk, too. Do you think we can escape tomorrow, go to Palma a day early like we said?'

Nick thought about this for a moment. 'He'll be offended.'

'I know. Still, maybe you can persuade Dad to drive us there, have a late lunch, show us round a bit then go home. I want more time alone with you.'

'You can be alone with me now,' Nick said.

'I'm tired. But explain to Dad that we'd like to go a day early.'

Nick felt awkward. This was a situation that Sarah ought to handle, not him. If they went tomorrow, there'd be no opportunity to say goodbye to Sergio, which was rude when he'd been such a good host. Nick's powers of diplomacy weren't great at the best of times, but tonight he was quite drunk and decidedly stoned. Also, he'd seen how much black Kevin had crumbled into the joint that he was rolling at the moment. If Nick was going to do this, he'd best broach the subject straight away, before his thoughts trailed off.

The joint was already lit when Nick returned to the patio. A low moon hung over the rolling mountains beyond. From this angle, the pale disc was reflected in the small swimming pool. Nick stared at the moon in the water.

'Here, have some of this,' Kevin Bone passed Nick the joint.

Sarah's dad was going to fat, but he still had a full head of dark, thick hair. At a distance, when you couldn't see the bags beneath his eyes or the broken veins around his nose, he could still pass as a youthful hippy. Nick toked on the joint, the black hash clouding corners of his mind that had been operational mere moments ago. He had worked out what to say, but already forgotten how he was going to phrase it. Best just get it over with.

'Sarah wants to go to Palma tomorrow.'

'Fine. There's a train just after eleven. I can take you to it. You wouldn't get long, though. There's only one train back.'

'We were thinking of staying there an extra night.'

'Oh.' Kevin frowned. Nick handed back the joint.

'The idea was that you could take us, I think. Show us round a little, have lunch, help us find a place to stay. Then we'd have more time to explore before we fly home on Monday.' There, he'd got it out.

'Ah. Sergio will be sorry not to come. He'd planned to take Sunday off.'

'Yeah,' Nick said, awkwardly. 'That's a drag.'

'Fuck it,' Kevin said. 'I'm too stoned to decide anything now. We'll work it out in the morning, yeah? Time for a brandy.'

Before Nick could argue, Kevin had poured them both huge glasses of Metaxa. Nick wasn't keen on the stuff. Too sweet for him.

'Sarah mentioned that you met my dad. How is the old goat?'

'In good form, I think,' Nick said.

'Felicity looking after him?'

'She seems to spend a lot of time with him, yeah.'

'Always the way.'

Was there a hint of something there? Nick had wondered about the father-daughter-in-law relationship, but the only time he'd tried to broach it with Sarah, she'd freaked out.

Nick remembered a question he'd wanted to ask. 'I can understand you not wanting anything to do with Felicity, but Hugh's your dad. If you don't mind me asking, why do you never have any contact with him?'

Kevin took a big gulp of brandy. 'I don't mind you asking.'

Nick sucked on the spliff. He thought of handing it back to Kevin, but decided to wait until he answered. It was that time of the night, when everything slowed down and it was okay to bogart the joint. Where did that phrase come from? *Don't bogart that joint, my friend?* He knew it was a song. It was on the soundtrack to *Easy Rider*, performed by the Holy Modal Rounders, though he didn't remember it being in the film itself. But where did the phrase originate? Something to do with Humphrey Bogart, maybe?

'The thing about Hugh is, he's not what he seems.'

'Pardon?' For a moment, Nick had forgotten what question he'd asked.

'I'd go so far as to call him a traitor. To me, to Sarah, to his country. He's one of those people who always gets his way and doesn't give a damn about the people who get in his way. Are you going to hand that joint back?'

Nick passed the spliff. He didn't know how to respond to what Kevin had just said. Everyone resented their parents. It was the nature of the relationship: both sides made mistakes: you grew up and got over them.

'Maybe it had something to do with your being gay,' Nick suggested, gently. 'A lot of people of his generation just don't understand it.'

'Bollocks,' Kevin said. 'Dad was at Cambridge in the thirties. Half the guys he hung out with were queer. He didn't see my being gay as a problem, he saw it as an opportunity. I'm telling you, he's a calculating bastard.'

'You'd better not let Sarah hear you saying that. She idolises him.'

'There are things I could tell Sarah that'd change all that in a heartbeat. But she wouldn't take them from me, matey. Maybe from you. She's in love with you, I can see that. You're good with each other. And you're more like me than her precious grandad. So there's hope for her yet, though she's still got some of her mother's prissy, uptight small town snootiness. Do you want the dirt on Felicity?'

Kevin handed Nick the joint back. He took another slurp of the brandy, which Kevin topped up. His head was beginning to feel decidedly fuzzy.

'You'd better let me think about that for a minute,' Nick said. Did he want to know secrets about Sarah's mother? He could barely hold onto the smallest thought. He spoke without knowing what he was about to say.

'I don't... want to hurt Sarah,' he said. 'Do me a favour, and don't upset Sarah. She'll come round to you eventually. You're her dad, after all.'

'No, I'm not,' Kevin replied.

1999

53

Still no sense of time. Day or night, it was all the same. The gaps between his visits had grown longer, or maybe it just seemed that way. He could leave her here and nobody would find her. Deborah could starve to death. Her mouth was dry, and she felt cold. Not physical cold so much as a kind of numbness. She hoped he hadn't fled the country, leaving her here to starve to death.

Or maybe he'd been arrested. The police must have worked it out by now: who had her, and why. Could be he was hiding out upstairs here, wherever *here* was, and coming down to rape her when he felt like it. Could be the gaps between visits were getting longer because he was becoming

bored with her. Or he was trying, in his perverted way, to make her dependent on him, make it so she looked forward to his visits.

Whatever. She would give him what he wanted.

Deborah lay on a mattress that smelt of him. Before his last two visits, she had arranged herself there, tried to look alluring, insofar as a woman with her hands tied behind her back could manage that. She had done her best to please him, to act pathetic. He had been a little surprised at first, then told her what he wanted her to do, became more excited when she complied. Last time, he had taken the gag off before he raped her. It was the hardest thing she had ever had to do. Rather than scream, she had let him ram his tongue between her lips, then gratefully given other favours with her dry, ulcerated mouth.

While waiting for him to return, Deborah exercised: stretches and sit-ups, as far as the ropes binding her arms and ankles would allow. She had to remain supple. When she rested, though, she stretched across the mattress with her legs apart. The defeated victim. The willing sexual slave. Next time, he would expect it to be like it had been before. He might give her a little more freedom. Or he might decide to kill her. Either way, she was prepared.

Eve phoned Nick while he was on the train home.

'They let Geoff go,' she said. 'He had an alibi.'

'Why did they pick him up in the first place?'

'An anonymous call.'

'When?'

'Late this afternoon.' Just before Nick arrived at Andrew's, then. 'Of course, Geoff thinks I made it. He phoned earlier, raging. Somebody had to

have told the police about Chantelle and me seeing him leave the brothel. And since it wasn't her, it must have been me.'

'Are you OK?' he asked Eve. 'I mean, would Geoff try to hurt you?'

'He hasn't before, but there always has to be a first time. I'm worried he might turn up here. I should have changed the locks.'

'He's probably over it now,' Nick said. 'I'd come straight to yours but I'm on a train. It doesn't get in until around eleven.'

'I could pick you up,' Eve offered.

'Well...'

'School doesn't start until Thursday. I could stay at yours.'

Nick understood what this offer involved. Before Chantelle, he would have been more than tempted.

'Please, Nick,' she said.

'Of course,' he told her. 'I'll sleep on the sofa. Come stay at mine.'

He hung up and returned to the computer he'd stolen from Andrew.

'You like this now, don't you?' He'd undone himself and his stubby cock poked out between the buttons. Deborah nodded and tried to look grateful.

'They all learn to love it.' He tore off the Gaffer tape that covered her mouth. 'Once you've had this, you're spoiled for anything else.'

'It's so...,' Deborah tried to sound innocent and scared, but excited at the same time, '...fat. It fills me up.' She braced herself, then added, 'Let me lick it.'

Terence lifted her chin and looked into her eyes. This was the biggest test of her performance. 'Are you messing with me?' he said.

Deborah made herself sound even more vulnerable now, utterly beaten.

'I'll do anything you want.' She thought of adding 'just let me live', but didn't want to remind him that every aspect of her behaviour was governed by fear for her life. 'Why don't I stroke your balls while I suck? Nick taught me to do that. Would you like me to?'

Should she have mentioned Nick? It seemed to be OK. Terence was smiling. 'He might have taught you a few things,' he told Deborah. 'But I can teach you a few more. By the time I'd finished with her, that Nancy gave the best blow-job on the planet.'

Deborah put on her sweetest smile. 'If you untied me, I could hold you while we do it.' Was she laying it on too thick? 'Or hold myself up while you come in from behind,' she added. 'Whatever you want.'

Terence hesitated. He was thinking about it.

'Whatever you want,' Deborah repeated. 'Wherever you want.'

'You can have a little reward.'

He gave her some water from the bottle, then began to untie her hands.

'Try anything stupid and I break your neck. Understood?'

She nodded, lowering her eyes to denote fear, modesty, whatever would convince him to let her suck his cock without her hands tied behind her back. She remembered what she had learnt at college. The tip was the softest part of the penis, and the area with the most sensation. Hurt him there and he would be in too much agony to break her neck. She hoped.

He got out the sharp knife he kept in his jeans and cut her bonds. Deborah stretched. Her arms were stiff and her hands felt tingly, grubby. How many days had it been? Terence handed her the water bottle. She dropped it.

'Sorry,' she said. 'So sorry', and found herself crying, for real. Could she do this?

'It's OK, honey.' He handed her the bottle, then slid off his jeans and boxers. He was already more than half erect and she worried that he would want to fuck her straight away rather than let her fellate him.

'Why don't you undress for me?'

She did as he asked, slowly removing the sweatshirt and tracksuit bottoms he had provided her with. Beneath it was the silk dress that she had worn for New Year's Eve, badly torn now. Her bra and knickers had gone the first time he raped her. They were shoved in a corner by the mattress.

She felt very cold but tried not to show it. She peeled the dress from her body and stood proud, pushing out her plump breasts for him to admire. When his cock began to rise, she gave him a big smile. He smiled back.

'Kneel,' he told her.

She did as he asked, then began to lick. Terence sighed with pleasure. She pulled her wide lips over her teeth and sucked him. Although it made her want to gag, terribly, she sucked him deep into her, moving her head in and out, while he moaned with delight, lost in rapture.

'Yes,' he said, 'yes. That's right, keep doing that.'

She pushed him into her and pulled out three more times before she relaxed her lips, remembering how her last boss, the dentist, used to tell her she had the best teeth he'd ever seen. The strongest, too.

She used them.

The route to Nick's flat from the station side of town was complicated. When they got to Alfreton Road, Eve wanted to weave her way through side roads. He told her not to bother.

'Streets that way are a warren, lots of dead ends. Wait until Forest Road.'

'It'll be even more difficult once they start building the tram lines. They're going right outside your house, aren't they?'

Eve kept making small talk like this. Probably, it was good for him. She was keeping him distracted, but it got on his nerves.

'That's your old flat, isn't it? Above the locksmiths. It seems an age since Chantelle and I helped you move.'

It wasn't an age. August. Less than five months ago. The mention of Chantelle only served to remind both why they were here. He did not reply. They turned right onto Forest Road West and Eve started speaking again.

'The police told me her real name, when they thought they had Geoff for kidnapping her. Deborah. Deborah Bryce. Can I cut down here?'

She was indicating a right turn that led past All Saint's Church, onto Waverley Street.

'Sure.' These badly lit roads were still partially cobbled. Buildings full of bedsits rubbed shoulders with crack dens and the homes of large families, usually second or third generation immigrants who needed the space provided by tall terraces with deep basements. Until this moment, Nick had forgotten seeing Andrew go into one of these houses a few weeks ago. A property visit, he'd assumed. Andrew had been on about buying places close to the new tram route while they were cheap, making a killing.

Now that Nick was paying attention, he noticed something out of place. From behind, the woman running down the street looked like, but couldn't be, the woman they had just been talking about. She wore a donkey jacket, which was unusual. Eve saw what Nick was staring at and slowed down.

'Is that...?'

'It'll be a working girl. They don't usually come down here though.'

'What's she wearing? I think she's barefoot.'

Eve stopped the car. The woman who looked like the woman who was not called Chantelle but whom Nick could not yet think of as Deborah turned the corner. It was her. She was running to his flat. To him.

'It is, isn't it?' Eve said.

'Don't spook her,' Nick replied.

Eve turned onto Waverley Street and parked opposite his building.

'Let me go to her first,' Nick said and got out of the car.

Deborah was at his gate now. He saw that Eve was right, the cop was barefoot. Deborah raised her head. Her shoulders slumped when she realised that there were no lights on in his flat. Nick waited for a car to pass, then ran across the road. Hearing his rapid footsteps, Deborah half turned, her face filled with fear. Recognising him, she threw herself into his arms. Her body shook. Whether the tremors were from the cold or shock, he didn't know.

'It's OK,' he told her. 'It's OK. I'm here now.'

Eve joined them. Still holding Deborah, Nick fished in a pocket for the house keys and handed them to Eve, who opened the door. He led Deborah inside, up the stairs, into the cold flat, where he only stopped holding her for a moment, to switch the gas fire on. He turned to find her leaned against the

sofa, bloody and dazed, then realised where he had seen the donkey jacket before. Terence wore it the day that he and two of his heavies threatened Chantelle.

'Would you like me to help you wash?' Eve asked Deborah.

Deborah shook her head and spoke for the first time.

'Forensics.' Her voice was surprisingly calm. 'There should be some clothes in the chest of drawers over there. Get me two sets. One to wear now, one for after the examination.'

'Do you want me to call the police?' Nick asked.

'No. I need to get my head together first. They'll have me in the rape suite for at least an hour.'

Her body was still shaking. Eve returned with the clothes. Nick helped her dress. He found it hard to look at her. She had been badly bruised. Strangely, there was blood smeared around her mouth.

'I'm not who you think I am,' she told him, after she had sat down on the sofa.

'I know what you are,' Nick said. 'Did Terence do this to you?'

She nodded.

'He grabbed you from outside the party on New Year's Eve?'

'Knocked me out with a baseball bat. Stupid thing was, my undercover had already been closed down. I didn't get enough evidence. But I wanted to see you one last time.'

'And you thought Andrew would be there.'

This time, when she looked at him, she was a stranger.

'He told Terence what I was.'

'Did Terence tell you that?'

'Not in so many words, but Andrew Saint is Terence's boss.'

'Are you sure?'

'There's nobody else it could be. I don't think he owns the brothel, but I'll bet he owns the building where I was being held. Terence was told where to find me and when. And he kept promising that, soon, he was going to kill me. He was waiting for the word.'

Nick remembered what Andrew had said earlier, about dumping Chantelle's body on the steps of County Hall. Nick had taken it as a bad joke.

'There's something I need you to get rid of.'

She reached into the pocket of Terence's donkey jacket and flinched. Then her look changed to one of surprise. She pulled out a cheap phone.

'I didn't know this was in here. You'd better not touch it. Prints.'

It was switched on. She opened the messages. Nick read them over her shoulder. There were only a handful. Terence must be fastidious about deleting them. The most recent was sent at ten, while Nick was on the train.

*Do it tonight* the message read.

'When did Terence come to you this evening?' Nick asked.

'An hour ago, maybe. After this was sent.' She began to shiver. Nick went and got the blanket from his bed to put around her.

'How about if I get you some sweet tea?' Eve offered.

'Yes. Yes, please. And you'd better call the police at once, now I think about it. He might send someone here, after me.'

Nick felt stupid that he hadn't thought of that himself. There were two locked doors and two flights of stairs between them and the outside world. He looked out of the window. Nobody on the street. He heard Eve on the phone.

'Police. And an ambulance. We have a woman here who's been raped.'

'Give me the jacket again,' Deborah said.

Nick did as she asked. She reached into the same pocket as before.

'Promise you'll get rid of this for me.'

'Of course,' Nick said. 'But what...?'

'I had to bite really hard,' she said. 'I thought he might stop me, but he was screaming with agony. Then I nearly swallowed it. Luckily, I choked.'

She handed him the bloody tip. 'I had to bring it with me,' she told Nick. 'If they catch him, and the medics get hold of this, they might be able to sew it back on.'

Once again, Sarah found herself speaking in the House of Commons, even though parliament wasn't in session. She was giving her resignation speech.

'This is not about what my father was, or what he did. You can't choose your parents. But you can choose your friends.'

'You dated a drug dealer,' someone from her own side yelled. 'He'd spent five years inside. Don't pretend you didn't know what he's like.'

'That's true, but so what? He served his time.' Why not say this? She was standing down. There would be a by-election. Labour would lose. 'But the drug trafficker this house should be concerned about is a much bigger player, one who was also my friend, Andrew Saint. My continued friendship with Saint has been a gross error. For this reason, and for this reason alone...'

A phone began to ring. Sarah snapped awake and looked at her alarm clock. 1.30 AM. It could only be Nick.

'She's alive. She was being held two hundred yards up the road from me. She escaped earlier tonight, just before I got home, came straight to my flat.'

'That's wonderful,' Sarah said. 'You must be so relieved.'

'The police took her away a few minutes ago. I wanted to go with them, but wasn't allowed.'

'Did they get whoever was holding her?'

'Not yet. They've been combing the streets.'

'Was it that Geoff guy?'

'No. Terence had her. She thinks he was working for Andrew. So do I.'

'How did she escape?'

Nick told her. Sarah gasped. She'd read that it was possible for a woman to bite off a penis, but had never heard of it happening.

'He raped her, Sarah. Repeatedly. If anyone deserves it...'

'I'm sure he did. I'm just worried that he got away. With that kind of injury, however...'

'This time, the police asked me about Andrew.'

'What did you tell them?'

'I'd confronted Andrew and he claimed to have nothing to do with the kidnap. And I told them that he and Nancy were about to go on the run.'

'You gave him away?'

'I had to. You see, there was something else.' He told her about a text message that Deborah had shown him on Terence's phone.

'You think it was from Andrew?'

'Who else could it be? I told them where he was planning to go. I also gave them Andrew's laptop, which I took from his house. There might be

something incriminating on there. I looked at it on the train, didn't find anything suspicious, but I expect the police will be more thorough than I was.'

'You did the right thing,' Sarah said. Now she understood why his bag looked so heavy when they left Notting Hill. Hopefully, there was nothing on the laptop about Dad's villa in Majorca. But if there was, so be it. She'd done nothing unethical where the villa was concerned.

They talked for several more minutes, getting their stories straight. Nick had not mentioned Sarah's being at Andrew's earlier. He'd told the police he went to confront Andrew about whether he was involved in the kidnap, but had not done so because Eve phoned to tell him of Geoff's arrest. He'd told them Andrew had worked out that Deborah was an undercover cop, but claimed not to know how he had worked it out. Nick had taken the laptop because he remained suspicious of his former friend and wasn't completely convinced that Geoff was responsible for Deborah's disappearance. The police appeared to have accepted all of these explanations at face value.

'Are you going to see Deborah again?' Sarah asked, when they were done.

He didn't reply for a few seconds. 'I don't know Deborah. The woman I knew doesn't exist.'

'Maybe the person she made up for you was more real than the one who became a police officer. All those years ago, when I left you and joined the police, I felt that way. Like I was pretending to be someone I wasn't. Like my true self was a secret identity, and you were the only friend I'd trusted it to.'

Another long pause. Sarah regretted being so forthright. This wasn't the right time to talk about how and why they had broken up, all those years ago.

'You should have told me all that,' Nick said, finally. 'We could have talked it over. We might even...'

He didn't finish the sentence. They wished each other a good night.

## THREE MONTHS LATER

55

Nancy had something to tell him. Andrew had an idea what it might be. He distracted himself by opening a bottle of good Rioja. Then he took the shrink-wrap off a DVD he'd bought in Palma the week before, a film called *The Big Lebowski*. She'd seen it at the cinema and insisted that he'd like it, although stoner comedies weren't his thing. Nancy deserved a treat. She'd been clean for more than two months, using nothing stronger than red wine and cigarettes. Though she'd have to give those up if he was right about what her news was.

The external renovations were done. Andrew had sweetened the builder with two hundred euros to delay his informing Sarah, lest she decided on an early visit. He doubted that she'd be so inclined. Majorca in winter was no picnic: grey and cold. Not as cold as the UK, maybe, but the villa wasn't geared up for winter, with cold tile floors and no central heating. It had started to warm up recently, but the Easter parliamentary recess was three weeks away. By then, he and Nancy would be in South America.

Andrew had enough money to buy a new identity and live comfortably for a year or two. After that, if he didn't find a new income stream, he would need to sell the London house. Probably he would need to sell it anyway, to finance a new business. He'd had enough of moving drugs. Too much violence, too many sharks. The last time wasn't the first time he'd been ripped off. This time, though, it wasn't his money. Which made it so much worse.

The villa didn't have internet access, but Andrew bought an occasional UK paper. He'd read how Chantelle Brown had escaped, and Terence Tailor had been captured. Good. For the time being, Tailor's boss would have bigger things to deal with than the million plus that Andrew owed him. Still, it made Andrew uneasy, ripping off people he hadn't met. Luckily, Tailor's boss - whoever he was - couldn't be all that competent. Chantelle had managed to get away, after all, while he couldn't even get Tailor out of the country undetected. He was unlikely to track Andrew down here, so far from the beaten track.

Nancy joined him in the living room, fresh and fragrant from a long bath. She let her gown fall open, so that he could see the sides of her plump breasts, her rounded belly and dark, soft pudenda.

'Think I'm putting on weight?' she asked, as he handed her a glass.

'A little, maybe. It suits you.'

'Liar!'

'I'd love you whatever size you were, my sweet.'

'That's good to hear,' she said, leaning over to tickle the beard on the underside of his chin. 'Because I'm about to get a lot bigger.'

'You're...'

'I think it happened the day we got here, but I only just took the test.'

He'd never asked her about birth control, had assumed, given her profession, that it was all sorted.

'It's so long since I had a period I didn't notice at first when I missed. But then I started to feel... something. So I bought a kit in Palma yesterday.'

He kissed her for a long time.

'You want me to keep it?' Nancy asked, gently, when he pulled away.

'Of course I do,' Andrew said. His head began to fill with vague visions of a family future. Not here, but in Brazil, or Argentina, whichever suited best.

'Where will we go?'

'Somewhere wonderful, I promise. But right now, let's go to bed.'

Sunlight streamed through the blinds. Most men fell asleep after sex but Andrew rarely did. Instead, it was Nancy who dozed while he planned their joint future. The first thing he must do, he decided, was change his will. That might prove complicated, because his current will was at a solicitor's in London, where he dared not return. Now that Nancy was carrying his child, he needed to make her his sole beneficiary. And soon, in case Andrew's enemies caught up with him before the baby was born. Come to think of it, he didn't actually need access to the old will, provided he made a valid new one.

He heard a noise. Had he locked the front door? Almost certainly, but Nancy had been outside after him and she wasn't always so security conscious. Especially today. Footsteps. Oh shit, Andrew thought. It must be Sarah. She had a key for the place and it would be just his luck for her to show up so early in the season, ready to inspect her property. The builder must have sent his final bill after all. She'd want to check the place out before she paid him.

The footsteps sounded too heavy to be Sarah's. Of course, she'd brought Nick with her. That felt appropriate. Here were Andrew's oldest friends to hear his good news and see the happy couple off to a new life. He could brazen this out. Dust had had time to settle. Nick was bound to be over Chantelle by now. The cop had, after all, lived to tell the tale. And Nick

was back with Sarah. The three of them could, perhaps, be friends again. Or, at least, part amicably. Surely they wouldn't try to hand him to the cops. Not that the cops had anything on Andrew, anyway, nothing substantial. It wasn't them that Andrew was worried about. There was no way the police even knew where Andrew was. Andrew had only taken one small risk. When he was leaving Notting Hill so hurriedly, he hadn't been able to find his laptop. And there might - probably not, but possibly - be some emails remaining in which he discussed the villa renovation project.

More footsteps. Doors opened and closed. Andrew sat up. Should he make himself known? Nick and Sarah would not be expecting to find him here. He needed to launch an immediate charm offensive, give them the full Saint bonhomie, insist they share in the celebration of his partner's pregnancy. He could fix this. Maybe he should wake Nancy so that she was forewarned.

Too late. The bedroom door opened. Andrew greeted the shadow in the hallway with a cheesy smile.

'Surprise!'

But the stranger in the doorway was not Nick, or Sarah. And he was holding a gun.

'Are you ready to return to duty?' The Chief Constable asked.

'I've been ready for weeks, sir.'

'No need to call me 'sir', Deborah. You're not seconded to my force any more. It's Eric.'

'Forgive me if I'm not comfortable using your first name, sir.'

'Eric' smiled sympathetically. Deborah was meant to appreciate that he'd come to her parents' home with a bouquet of lilies. Instead she worried that the Chief wanted to catch her off guard, that he was setting some kind of a trap.

'How have you been using your time, these last few weeks? I hope the counselling sessions have been useful?'

'They have, sir. But mainly I've been studying for my sergeant's exams.'

'I'm sure you'll do well. In the meantime, I've recommended you for the Queen's Gallantry Medal.'

Gallantry was a very odd word for what she had done, but Deborah kept this thought to herself. 'That's very good of you, sir.'

'It's the least you deserve.'

Deborah tried to imagine the citation. *Over a period of days, Constable Bryce succeeded in portraying herself as a defeated victim who had become a willing sexual slave, persuading her kidnapper to relax his guard until she was in a position to bite off his penis and make her escape.* So far, the sensational aspects of the case had been kept from the media, but people in the job were bound to have heard them. The story of Deborah's humiliation and violation would follow her for the rest of her career, no matter how successful she became. Were she to marry,

change her name, move to the other side of the UK, it would do no good. There weren't enough women of Afro-Caribbean origin on the force for her to become anonymous.

Her counsellor said that you had to turn your weaknesses into strengths. She must make this work for her. Already, when she encountered fellow officers, even the Chief, she could sense a new wariness: you didn't mess with a woman prepared to bite off a cock.

The Chief Constable still looked uncomfortable. She had no intention of making him feel comfortable, but decided to force his hand.

'I suppose you've come to see me about the court case.'

'You've been carefully prepared, I presume.'

'Yes, sir.' Terence Tailor had been caught at Dover, trying to leave the country on a fake passport. He would plead guilty to rape and kidnap and ask for the offence of living off the proceeds of immoral earnings to be taken into account. Deborah would give evidence in camera, so that she could not be identified. Neither prosecution nor defence thought that there was any use in making the case notorious by referring to Tailor's mutilation.

'Did you find out who he was working for?' she asked.

'He won't inform on any of his accomplices. There's insufficient evidence to bring any drug charges against Tailor. However, once he's facing twenty-odd years, he might want to earn remission and change his mind.'

'I still think his boss was Andrew Saint,' Deborah said. 'And I think Saint ordered him to kill me.'

'We never found Saint. He suggested to Nick Cane that he was going to the Bahamas, but there's no record of him or his mistress having arrived there. And there's no proof that Saint was behind the 'do it tonight' text. It was sent on a pay-as-you-go phone bought in Arnold under a fake name. It

could just as easily have been Tailor's Nottingham boss, whoever that is. We do know that Saint made the call claiming Geoff Shipton was behind your kidnapping.'

'Surely that proves something?'

'Only that he knew we were closing in on him. You may be right about Saint's involvement in distribution, but there was only a brief interruption in the city's drug supplies when Tailor was arrested and Saint vanished. Which suggests that we didn't take down the kingpin Tailor was working for.'

'What about the laptop that Nick Cane gave you?'

'It had an interesting internet history, but there was nothing directly incriminating on it.'

'What was interesting about the history?'

'I'm afraid I can't tell you that.'

Which meant what? Deborah knew that Saint was tied up with Sarah Bone, who was a close friend of the Chief. Saint also had a bigwig Tory MP in his pocket. The idea that 'Eric' knew all this and still came to see her, that he expected Deborah to play along, that kind of hypocrisy made her sick to the stomach.

'Did you find out who owned the house where I was being held?'

'A drug dealer called Frank Davis. He's serving a long prison sentence. Presumably Tailor knew that it was empty and took advantage of this.'

'Or Andrew Saint did. Did you find out who owned the brothel?'

'The brothels were bought with mortgages that were immediately defaulted. It takes building societies up to a year to repossess, by which time the brothel has moved on. The names on the mortgages led nowhere.'

Now that Deborah had all the details, it was time for the big questions.

'Do you know how Tailor found out I was undercover?'

'No, but some procedures were lax. Lessons have been learnt. In future, we'll leave this kind of operation to Special Branch, who have the expertise to create more substantial legends for officers in your position, genuine birth certificates, the works.'

While he waited for her to respond, his left eye twitched, a sign of stress. She wasn't going to let him off the hook.

'Did Sarah Bone know that I was an undercover cop?' Deborah asked.

Eric ignored the question, but the corner of his left eye twitched again, which was answer enough.

'It was very good of you to bring me up to speed,' she told the Chief Constable, her tone polite but formal, a dismissal. 'Thank you for the flowers.'

She let him shake her hand before he left. It was the game. Deborah was twenty-five years old and planned to be an inspector by the time she was thirty. A superintendent at forty, if she held her nerve. She'd been promised a transfer to Traffic after she passed her sergeant's exams. Modern policing didn't get more prestigious than that. The last few months would turn out to have been worth all the pain.

That was what she kept telling herself. One day, she might believe it.

## THREE WEEKS LATER

57

Nick and Sarah took a flight to Majorca from East Midlands airport, just as they had nearly fifteen years earlier. They hadn't spent this much time together since 1984. It was early in the season and the flight was only half full, so they had a free seat between them and the aisle. While they were waiting to take off, Nick told Sarah about his new computer course, which he had been talked into by a young woman called Jerry, who Sarah suspected he was seeing, although he insisted he was merely helping her study for A-levels.

It was an early flight. The day's newspapers had only arrived at WH Smith's minutes before they boarded. Sarah didn't look at her Independent until they were in the air. She found a short account of the Terence Taylor trial. Taylor was portrayed as a violent pimp. Deborah Bryce was given the anonymity due to rape victims. Her role as an undercover police officer was not revealed. Taylor had been sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment. After serving his time, he would be deported to Jamaica.

Sarah showed the report to Nick.

'I went to the first day of Taylor's trial,' Nick told her. 'It was strange to be in a courtroom again, on the other side.'

'Did you know any of the other spectators?'

'No, but Terence recognised me from the dock. He stared me down. I realised it was a mistake, giving in to my curiosity. I didn't go back after lunch.'

'You wouldn't have been able to see Deborah's evidence anyway. They held it in camera.'

'I glimpsed her when I was leaving. I didn't recognise her at first. She'd lost weight and her hair was pulled back. She had on these narrow glasses, made her look like a university lecturer, maybe, or an accountant.'

'Did she see you?'

'For a second. The expression on her face was like I'd stepped out of a bad dream. Then she lowered her eyes, stared at the floor until I was gone.'

'And that hurt?'

Nick hesitated. 'Sort of. It underlined that what went on between us wasn't real.' He gave a grudging laugh. 'Since you and I split up, I've had a poor track record with women. Every single one has lied to me then left me.'

'You're exaggerating.'

'Only a little. But Chantelle's lies were in a different league.'

'It's the liar who hurts themselves, not the person who's been deceived.'

'Says the MP. Don't politicians have to lie all the time?'

'And we hurt ourselves every time we do.' She changed the subject, but only a little. 'Have you heard from Andrew, or Nancy?'

'Not a thing.'

'Still think he was behind it all?'

'The police didn't find any evidence on that laptop.'

'Or if they did, it didn't suit them to use it.'

'What do you mean?' Nick gave her a sharp glance.

'I used to be in the police, Nick. There are plenty of bent coppers. Some are in the Drugs Squad. Whoever was behind Terence must have had a tame detective or two in their pocket.'

'Maybe. There was somebody following Andrew and he was very paranoid about it. I assumed it was the Drugs Squad, or CID.'

'You assumed wrong.' Sarah decided that it was time to tell him about Gill's 'due diligence'.

'How long did her investigation last?' Nick asked, when she was done.

'She decided to resign from Saint Holdings before Christmas.'

'Then who was outside Andrew's the last day we saw him?'

'I don't know. But it wasn't necessarily the police Andrew was running from. That night, in the restaurant, he was on edge, certainly not the guy I used to know. He'd become reckless. Maybe he was telling the truth when he said that he had to leave the country because he owed money.'

'There's something else I've been trying to figure out,' Nick said.

'When the police raided the brothel, they brought out five people. Four of them were in the news, including Andrew. But there was a fifth.'

'What did he look like?'

'All I know is he was white. The guy covered his head with his coat as he was being led away. It was an expensive looking coat.'

'Must have been somebody who could pull a few strings with the police, but that doesn't mean he was there for any reason other than to get laid.'

'Thing is, what if Andrew wasn't Terence's boss?' Nick said, thinking aloud. 'Which is more than possible, given the difficulty Andrew had tracking Terence down. Suppose Terence's boss was the other guy they arrested, and Andrew was there to meet him? On the day of the brothel bust, Andrew told me the police had nothing on him because the money man hadn't turned up. Suppose the guy he was meant to meet was the one who covered his head...'

'And he's well enough connected to have his name kept out of it.'

'Then who is he?'

'If he's that well connected, we'll never find out.'

They hired a car at Palma airport. Nick offered to drive. The island hadn't changed much. Sarah had never been so early in the year before. The valleys were even greener than she remembered. The steep, verdant terraces thronged with wild flowers. Once they joined the winding, narrow roads that took them past Deia, towards Soller, the traffic got hairy. Sarah was glad she wasn't behind the wheel. It took an hour to reach the port of Soller, where a lawyer was due to hand over the keys to the villa. On the harbour front, Nick insisted on buying Sarah a straw sun-hat. She bought him a baseball cap advertising the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Sarah had sent money for the necessary refurbishments and the house was now up to code. Or so she'd been told, in a fax from the local lawyer. He was on his lunch break, but the keys had been left at his office. Sarah asked what state the villa was in. The secretary didn't understand the question.

'Is there somewhere comfortable for us to sleep?' Sarah asked.

The villa had three bedrooms. Sarah sort of hoped that only one of them would be fit for use, as this would speed along the inevitable.

'I think, yes. Housekeeper looks after.'

'No housekeeper,' Sarah began to say, then thought better of it. Probably a mistranslation. The lawyer would have arranged for a cleaner to come in after the builders were done.

The villa - or *finca*, as Kevin sometimes called it - was off a side road, halfway between Soller and Deia, halfway down a single track road that ran towards the coast, but did not go all the way to the cliffs. They used to be

able to reach a cove near Muleta by following a wild path from near their back door. Sarah hoped that this area hadn't been developed. Building there was difficult, with so many steep, narrow terraces between the house and the coast.

'Once you've seen the place again do you think you might change your mind about selling?' Nick asked, once they were back on the road.

'Too much history. But I'm looking forward to a week when nobody has any idea where I am.'

'Nobody?'

'Well, Mum. She doesn't have the address, though. The only other people I told about this place are you, the Spanish lawyer, Gill and Andrew.'

And Eric, but she decided not to remind Nick of the chief constable's part in her romantic history.

'The police will have the address, if they had a good look at Andrew's email,' Nick pointed out. 'When I went through the stuff on his laptop on the train that night I found some deleted emails to his Spanish lawyer about the builders there. It would have looked too suspicious if I'd double deleted them.'

'Eric didn't say anything.' So much for not mentioning him.

'Do you still see him?'

'He rang me up to invite me to his retirement do this summer.'

'I knew he was old. I didn't think he was that old.'

'He's 54. That's ancient in police terms. He was really phoning to tell me that he's got engaged, to a solicitor younger than me. And good luck to him.'

Nick felt reassured that Sarah had no romantic interest in the police boss. Since they started planning this trip, she'd been giving him signals that she wanted to get back together. That was why, three days ago, he'd broken things off with Eve. They'd been... comforting each other, he supposed you'd call it, since the middle of January. There was an inevitability about their reunion. They were good for each other. But they weren't cut out to be a long term couple. Eve was only three years younger than the Chief Constable. Nick wanted to be with someone he could have children with. Eve already had kids at university, was too old to have more even if she wanted to.

This holiday had been the catalyst for their split.

'I think we should take a break,' Nick had told her, in bed, in the dark.

Eve didn't answer straight away. He thought she'd fallen asleep. Then:

'You want to sleep with Sarah in Majorca. It's OK. One gets more broadminded as one gets older. I'm fine with this being an open relationship.'

'I'm not. I can't work that way. Tried it once, felt guilty whichever one I was seeing.'

'Oh.' Eve sounded surprised. Maybe they didn't know each other as well as he thought. Or maybe...

'Are you sleeping with someone else?' Nick asked, catching on.

'I've been seeing Martin once a week since that party and things are... progressing.'

Which meant she was.

'Does he know that you and I...?'

'God, no.'

'That's not how you define an open relationship.'

'I suppose not. You won't tell him, will you?'

'He knows that we had a thing, once?'

'He knows that.'

'We'll leave it there, then.'

Another secret Nick was forced to keep. Martin was an old mate.

They had been out for a drink a fortnight ago. Neither man had mentioned Eve. They would go for another drink in a couple of weeks' time, when Nick returned from Majorca. Her name probably wouldn't pop up then, either.

'Did you say something about the lawyers providing a housekeeper?' he asked, as he slowed down to look for the narrow lane that led to the villa.

'The secretary said something about a housekeeper, but I never said I'd pay for one. I expect that whatever she meant was lost in translation.'

They turned into the tree-lined driveway, which reminded Nick of the road into Sarah's grandad's old pile, near Chesterfield, if on a smaller scale.

'Stop!' Sarah said, although the house was still round the next bend.

When they got out, Nick saw what she had spotted. Two marble gravestones, one lightly weathered, the other new: *Kevin Bone, 1939-1986* and *Sergio Mantelo 1951-1998*. Both men had died at the same age, Nick realised, 47, only ten years older than he was now: two generations ravaged by AIDS. Sarah crouched by the stones and took a tissue from her pocket. Silently, she wiped away the grime that had settled around her father's name and dates.

'Let's walk from here,' she suggested when she was done.

The pool had been filled, but not recently cleaned. The patio outside was dusty. Sarah went to unlock the door and it swung open.

'Wait!' Nick told her.

There was a crack in the door jamb and the lock casing was twisted. The door had been kicked in.

'Stay back,' he ordered. 'Have your phone ready, just in case.'

'I don't think there's a signal,' she said, but he went in anyway.

Whoever had done this would be long gone, or there would have been footprints in the dust. Still, best to make sure. He walked through the kitchen. There was food by the sink. A packet of corn flakes, half a loaf that, when he felt it, was rock hard. Two desiccated apples in a bowl on the shelf. A shrivelled peach.

There was a short corridor off the kitchen. It led to three bedrooms, a living room and bathroom. It was nearly sixteen years since Nick had been in the house, and he couldn't remember which room was which. The first bedroom he came to was empty, with only a stripped mattress on the single bed. The second was tiny, and stuffed with boxes. It would need clearing.

The room opposite, Nick remembered now, was the living room, where they used to retreat when it was too hot to sit outside. He opened the door. The room he found might have been abandoned the day before. There were magazines and two empty glasses on the coffee table. An open bottle of wine, half full, sat on the tiled floor, by the large TV. Only a thin layer of dust betrayed the owners' long absence. That, and the framed Miro print propped against the wall, which Nick remembered from his previous visit. It sat beneath the wall safe that it used to conceal.

'Nick?' Sarah called. 'Where are you? Is everything OK?'

'I'm in the living room,' Nick called. 'There's been a burglary.'

She joined him. 'What have they taken?'

He pointed to the hole in the safe's door mechanism. 'Looks like they helped themselves to some wine while they took turns to drill into the safe.'

'I doubt there was much of value in it. The lawyers didn't mention a safe, but whoever did this has saved me the trouble of having it opened.'

Nick reached into the safe and pulled out a few papers. He spread them out on the coffee table. Miscellaneous documents in Spanish. Kevin Bone's birth certificate and passport, presumably kept for sentimental reasons. Sarah took her father's passport and flicked through the pages. It had last been stamped in 1970, the year Kevin came to Majorca. A photograph fell out. Nick picked it up from the floor. The candid image could have been from a *Carry On* farce or a McGill postcard, were it not so explicit. He took a closer look.

'Oh.' The naked couple were Sarah's mother and grandfather, caught in flagrante, their embarrassment evident in their shocked faces. Sarah stared.

'You probably didn't want to see that. How come..?'

'I have no idea. And I don't think my mum's likely to tell me, do you?'

She put the photograph in her bag without another word. Nick opened a window. The room was suffused with a rancid smell that was starting to get to him. Warm air was better than the stench.

'These magazines,' Sarah said, holding up a copy of *Hello* magazine, 'they're only a few weeks old. What would Spanish builders be doing with British gossip rags?'

Nick felt a terrible foreboding.

'Stay here,' he said. 'There are two rooms I haven't checked yet.'

The next room along was the bathroom, which had a short bath as well as a shower. Towels were draped over it. The shelf above the sink was filled with bottles. Nick recognised some of the brands: for hair styling and make-up removal. He knew who they belonged to. Maybe, he told himself,

maybe they heard the men coming and had time to run for it. Maybe Nancy, at least, escaped. He opened the final door, to the master bedroom.

The bodies were naked and bloated, but still recognisable. They had both been shot in the head. Nick closed the door and returned to the bathroom, where he vomited in the sink. Sarah hurried in behind him.

'What is it?' she asked. 'What's wrong?'

He told her.

## SIX WEEKS LATER

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'This is my treat. To make up for missing your retirement do.'

'No need to apologise,' Eric told Sarah. 'You've had a lot on your plate.'

The former Chief Constable flicked through the rich dishes on the Rules menu, made decisions. First thoughts, best thoughts, in his experience. He suggested they share a bottle of Châteauneuf Du Pape.

'I'll only have a glass,' Sarah said. 'I hardly drink at lunchtimes.'

Women always said that, and never kept to it. Eric gave Sarah his most unctuous, admiring smile. She had worn a dress for him: light green, which wasn't really her colour, but the neckline showed off plenty of cleavage, and that he appreciated. He liked how the MP, so keen to seem worldly, remained a little awkward when it came to men she fancied.

Eric hadn't given up on bedding her. They had come close, more than once, but Sarah wasn't another of his eager to please, anxious for promotion police women. At first, he'd thought it was his being married that put her off. Then he'd become single, which seemed to put her off even more. She'd kept him at a distance and had an affair with Paul Morris, who was very married. Once Eric had remarried, to a woman younger than Sarah, the MP might become interested again, be flattered that he still wanted her, and finally succumb. He would bide his time.

The waiter arrived. Sarah finished looking at the menu.

'I'll have the monkfish,' she said.

Eric ordered his steak rare. Sarah got down to the real reason she had invited him to lunch.

'Have there been any developments in the Andrew Saint case?'

'The Spanish police had very little to go on. They checked the lists of people who visited the island during the relevant period, but found nobody suspicious. Officially, it remains a violent burglary. Saint was known to have a great deal of money. Presumably much of it was in that safe, in cash.'

The killing of Andrew Saint and Nancy Tull had had one unexpected benefit: it scuppered Sarah's reunion with Nick Cane, who had long been a thorn in Eric's side. Cane had taken control in Majorca, sent Sarah straight home, dealt with the authorities, and closed up the house before he returned to the UK. He had also made sure that the Spanish lawyer didn't mention Sarah's name to anyone. Since her return, Sarah had asked Eric to help keep the story out of the press. However, he'd had nothing to do. Cane had already done it all.

The wine arrived. Eric insisted that Sarah be the one to sample the bottle. She took a deep gulp.

'You didn't go to the funerals?' Eric asked.

'I took your advice and steered well clear. Haven't seen Nick since he came back. We spoke on the phone just the once, after the story died down. He said he hadn't had any press enquiries at all, so thanks again for that.'

Eric gave a modest half-nod. 'Do you recall the laptop Nick Cane took from Saint's house in Notting Hill? You'll be pleased to know that it was lost. So there's no trace of your connection with Saint in our files.'

The disappearance of that laptop had been convenient for other reasons. There was evidence on its hard drive that could, had a conscientious copper investigated it thoroughly, have implicated Eric and his

chief associate. It may also have suggested that Saint had misappropriated a large sum of money from Eric's associate, and this led to his elimination. But Eric had loyal officers on the enquiry squad, ones with their own secrets to protect. The computer had been smashed to pieces and dropped into a deep section of the Trent.

'I felt bad,' Sarah said, 'not going to Andrew's funeral. We went back a long way. Nick said only a handful of people were there. Just family and him.'

'Not just family. We had an officer present, in case anyone of interest showed up. At Nancy Tull's, too. That was rather better attended. People like to forgive a fallen woman. There is one thing I should say about Nick Cane.'

Sarah put down her glass, which she was already halfway through.

'I've already told Nick - I can't stay in touch with him any more. I care about him, but he does have this tendency to drag me into awkward situations.'

'And you'll no longer have me to drag you out of them, I'm afraid.'

She reached over and squeezed his hand. 'Don't think I don't appreciate it, Eric. I really do. I sometimes wonder why we never quite...'

He gave her his sincerest smile. 'Part of the reason that I never pressed you was your close involvement with Cane. It's still not clear how deep his association with Saint ran. He was in Saint's will, I'm told. I had to be careful who I associated with, even by proxy. Of course, none of that matters now.'

Sarah smiled gratefully, accepting that it was he who had held back, even though it had always been her. How easy it was to rewrite the past. If only the future were so straight forward.

'You're getting married soon,' she said. 'Life's all about timing, isn't it? Do promise me that we'll stay good friends, trusted friends. I need somebody outside politics that I can rely on to be straight with me. Believe it or not, you're my best friend.'

Eric reached beneath the table and squeezed her knee.

'I promise,' he said.

1984

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The Lords wasn't sitting, so Hugh went to Ashley Gardens first. When he visited the flat, he was told that the former Prime Minister had gone for a walk.

Since leaving the Commons, the ex-P.M. had become Baron Wilson of Rievaulx of Kirkstiles in the County of West Yorkshire, but Harold never went back to Yorkshire. These days, he rarely strayed far from his stately London flat. He was fond of St James Park, so Hugh tried there. Sure enough, after five minutes, Hugh found the baron sat at a wooden bench, watching the ducks. Harold seemed unaware of the alky who occupied the other end of the bench; an unappetising figure who lacked both front teeth.

Hugh approached them. Harold stared into space. The alky reeked of piss. Hugh fished in his wallet for a pound note and offered it to him.

'Take this and leave us alone, will you? I want a word with my friend.'

The drunk departed with alacrity. This got Harold's attention. His hair had thinned and he looked old. Hugh, his senior by several years, was looking old himself. And ill. The doctors said he'd be dead by Christmas. Pancreatic cancer. This would be his last chance to have a long talk with an old friend.

Hugh had, at least, enjoyed five good years of retirement. Quality time with Flic. He'd stood down from parliament at the 1979 General Election, the one where the Tories first got back in. Harold had hung on for another four, useless years at the Commons, only retiring last May. He'd

spent seven years in parliamentary limbo, for he had resigned as Prime Minister not long after his last formal meeting with Hugh.

That evening, in 1976, Harold had hinted to Hugh that he was about to go, but Hugh had misinterpreted him. He'd thought he was being offered a job, not being warned that he was about to lose his protector. No complaints: Harold's successor, Jim Callaghan, had sacked Hugh in the friendliest possible way.

Hugh sat next to the man who had won Labour four out of five General Elections.

'Harold, how are you? It's Hugh. Hugh Bone.'

'I know who you are.' Bit of a twinkle in the eye. 'Hugh. It's been years. Very good to see you. How's that lovely daughter of yours? Sarah, wasn't it?'

'Sarah's well, thanks. Have you heard the latest? She's only joined the police force.'

'Better than MI5. She'd have had to chase her own brother.'

Hugh smiled. Kevin was still in Spain, out of harm's way.

'I've always wanted to thank you,' Hugh said, 'for keeping my secret all those years.'

Harold chuckled. 'About your secretary having your baby? I've kept much bigger secrets than that. Marrying her off to your son so you could keep her close, that was shabby behaviour. It's why I didn't promote you for years.'

Harold sounded sharp as a new pin. Hugh was relieved to find him on one of his clear days. He'd had a long operation for bowel cancer in 1980. Since then, his memory had deteriorated badly. Alzheimer's, some said.

'Kevin and Felicity were happy with the arrangement at the time. She kept her small town respectability. He was rewarded with a well-paid job that gave him a reason to live in London. Even so, deep down, I always knew that was the reason you took so long to have me in the cabinet.'

A benign smile. 'Is that why you came, to tell me that you knew I knew but couldn't say so before?'

'Partly. Mainly because there's something I need to apologise for,' Hugh said. 'Confess, you might say. About MI5.'

'Never apologise unless you're cornered.' Harold looked Hugh straight in the eye: a familiar, no-nonsense gaze. 'About MI5? It was you who first told me the full extent of the plots against me. I didn't believe you at the time, but it was worse than you said. They were all after me. So it's I who should apologise.'

'One of my oldest friends in MI5 was one of your biggest enemies,' Hugh told him. 'Peter Wright. Used to be the Chief Scientific Officer.'

Harold frowned. 'I don't remember that name. Was he important? Was he the fifth man they're always talking about?'

Hugh shook his head. 'No, he wasn't. Actually, Harold, that's what I wanted to confess. You see, I was the fifth man.' He paused. 'Or the fiftieth, or the five hundredth. There were so many of us.'

'You.' Harold stared at Hugh, with no recrimination in his eyes.

'Yes. I joined the Communist party when I was a teenager, at Cambridge. Never left. Sometimes it seems like more of my generation were working for Moscow than for their country.'

'It does. I was never one of them, though. I expect you were told that.'

'I didn't know for sure.'

Harold thought for a moment, as though considering his verdict. 'Did you do much damage? To the country, I mean.'

'I don't think so.' Hugh hesitated. 'One doesn't get told. Betrayal is betrayal, but I never had the names of agents in the field. Budgets, decisions about weapon systems, how much we knew about the Soviet operation, those were the sorts of thing I passed on. I must have done some harm, I'm afraid.'

Harold frowned. 'And this happened while you were working for me?'

'Before, mostly. I all but stopped passing intelligence on once I got into parliament. Never completely. I needed money, you see.'

Harold mused on this for a moment. 'So it was for the money as well?'

'At first, not at all. But, after the stroke, there was Edith to look after. Then Sarah came along and I had to keep Kevin sweet. It got complicated.'

The warmth went out of Harold's voice. 'Life always gets complicated,' he said. 'Yet I find it hard to understand how a man can carry on for so long, living a lie.'

'You learn to lie to yourself, I suppose.'

'Yes, I expect that's it. Why are you telling me all this?'

'To make amends. You did right by me, but I tried to manipulate you. I so badly wanted to be in the cabinet. I fed your most paranoid fears.'

Harold shook his head emphatically. 'I had to be paranoid. They really were out to get me. You weren't though, were you? I never got the sense that you were a rival. As for what you just told me, well, you were only trying to protect your son.'

'No, I was a spy long before Kevin was born. I...'

Hugh stopped. There was no point in repeating himself. 'What I'm saying is that the pathetic bit of spying that Kevin did was the result of his carrying on a family

tradition. It was in the genes. Either that, or I instilled it in him when he was very young.'

'Instilled what in him?' Harold asked.

'The art of the double life. Treachery.'

'Treachery's a hard word. Still, I'm glad neither of mine followed me into politics.'

'I don't think Sarah got the bad seed. She's always seemed more innocent, more passionate than Kevin or I. More intelligent, too.'

Harold thought for a moment. 'We all want the next generation to outshine us, don't we? But it can't always be the way. Especially with people like us who...' He paused, then picked up the sentence again. 'People who...'

The former Prime Minister turned to look at a pigeon that had decided to perch on a nearby litter bin. Hugh waited patiently. You never knew how long the clear spells were going to last. It had been this way last month, and the month before. Harold turned back. His eyes lit up again.

'Hugh! It's been years. Very good to see you. How's that lovely daughter of yours?'

The old man stared at the lake, willing himself to remember.

'Sarah, wasn't it?'

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\* Det, Du Frygter Mest Af Alt ('Death, the most frightening thing of all') is a translation of a 1992 novel, *The Most Frightening Thing*, which has never appeared in the English language

\*\* Den Perfekte Forbrydelse ('The Perfect Crime') is a collection of three short stories that were not published in English until 1999, when they formed part of my Five Leaves collection, *Haunting Time*. The three are 'The Perfect Crime', 'Flood' and 'The Census Taker'

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