

Missed Chapters

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To the wronged.

This is a work of fiction. Characters, community organisations, and the sources of indented material are the product of the author's imagination. The period is close to the present. No main location is specified.

Other novels by Iain Brimswall:

The Zoo Keeper

blrlnd

The Shepherdess (forthcoming)

Missed Chapters is the second book of the Zoo Keeper trilogy. There is no requirement to have read the earlier book in order to enjoy this one.

1

This is me. Ten, I am there. Can you believe it? Quite the little madam, don't you think? It was taken on holiday, at Skegness. Stan always took us to Skeggy. We stayed with Mrs Cabbage. Not her real name, of course – it was Gammidge, or something like that, a relation of Stan's I think – but her guest house always smelled of boiled cabbage. And here I am with Margo, so serious Margo, at home, in the garden. That's the farmhouse, in the background. And this is me with Margo and Mum. Stan must have held the camera. Easy to spot the odd one out, yeh?

Su Gardeen is looking through a photograph album with a rush of memory that temporarily transports her back to a childhood spent in a farmless farmhouse in Derbyshire, on the edge of a craggy little village where everyone was sure they knew each other's business. When the mobile butcher bought the van of the rural milkman, after weeks of public vacillation, the new owner left the dairy lettering on the vehicle's side so as not to confuse his customers. Everyone knew that the young Suzie Gardeen – Suzie Earle since the age of seven, when her mother remarried, though few acknowledged the change – was as different from her sister Margo, older by three years, as chalk is from cheese. Everyone recognised the frolicsome spirit of childhood in her. Little Miss Chief, the village shopkeeper would call her, his gaze lingering on her as his fingers picked at the sometimes insufficient, though invariably accepted, loose change held forward on open palm as tender for a packet of crisps or a can of fizzy drink. Everyone recognised, except

the child herself; for childhood is not a conscious experience, it is something recalled as an adult.

There is no one with Su. She turns the album's pages and talks in her mind. It is a long time since the shiny cheap snapshots, which spring from their tiny retaining triangles as the stiff dark leaves are turned, last reflected light. A long time, till very recently. Now they hold a fascination, as if...

"Oi, you up there. We're ready, nearly."

Fee is calling from the bottom of the stairs, from the landing of the first floor, where the bedrooms are. Su is on the second floor, in the expertly converted attic that is her private den.

"*I'm* ready all the time," Su calls back in a cheerful tone, closing the album and sliding it into a drawer at the front of a large cluttered desk. "Why the big rush? It's Wednesday."

There is a response from below, but Su does not catch it. Her own self-referential comment is close to true: nowadays she feels ready for almost everything; ready and in charge. On her descent from the den to the landing, she comes face to face with Fee. Fee adjusts the free-hanging dress she is wearing as if in front of a full-length mirror. Su sighs, a good-natured exhalation from the throat, and murmurs a 'you'll do' before motioning they should go down to the ground floor.

Together, three depart the house: Su, Fee, Ellis. Were the farmhouse depicted in the picture in the album in the den desk drawer to be compared with the building that is behind them as they climb into the car, a certain immediate similarity would be observed. Both are spacious double-fronted well-detached houses, traditional and solid. Both have end-wall growths of ivy, shutters hinged from window frames, and tubs for plants aside the door. There are differences, however: this house stands not by a mud-splashed road that runs to nowhere in particular but at the heart of a commuter belt parish, overlooking a trim village green; it is not the peeling home of a family struggling by on the income from a smallholding but is – to borrow the prose of estate agents –

period property maintained to the highest specifications, a desirable residence guaranteed to find appeal with the discerning professional.

They drive to a restaurant in the country. It is no special occasion – eating out during the week is habitual for the trio. A diner sitting at an adjacent table, and possessed with a curiosity of the world immediately around, could not of course be expected to know this. That looker-on of life might covertly scan the scene and see a happy family unit, doting parents indulging a daughter. The daughter's birthday, perhaps. Eighteenth, nineteen? Or an exam passed? Pretty girl in a passing Nordic way, with long blonde plaits, wearing an unbelted pale blue dress of light loose material cut a couple of inches short of the knee. On closer study, maybe a little older, into the twenties. And the parents? He: quiet and easy and a brow freed from stress. A man who appears to have found the main of what he was looking for, and considers the remainder too great an effort. Dressed casual-anonymous; entirely off the peg. Thinning hair halfway silver – fifty, at a guess. She: dark, younger than him by a good decade; overweight but smart with it, in a navy trouser suit sympathetically cut. Earrings each of which is a spiky sphere at the end of a chain, like a medieval hand weapon made expensively miniature. Blue-tinged spectacles that somehow seem larger than they actually are, or need to be. Wide-strapped watch vying with charm-laden chain for wrist space below a multicoiled band which impresses upon the plump flesh of forearm. And finger rings, as if the wearer were plurally married.

The three drink and laugh and eat. Then, with the main course consumed, it is time for some business to be discussed. They look the type of family who cannot go long before some business must be discussed. Snatches of conversation drift across from the group. The daughter uses the word 'surely' a lot and speaks with a trace of finishing school. Their business concerns a payment of money.

“They fanned about like this before,” the woman says, evidently annoyed that it should happen again.

“Surely it’s to their advantage to run the programme as a continuous process. A break now doesn’t bear thinking about. Recovery would take for *ages*. Surely they can see that.” The daughter applies an ingredient of passion to almost all her sentences.

The man smiles and looks wise. “I would say the money is perfectly assured and always has been. They wait till the last minute because they have a desperate need to feel appreciated. After they’ve put you through anxiety nudging panic, you’re ready to fling your arms around their necks when they finally hand over. That’s the bit they like – the induced adoration.”

“I’m not nudging panic. But I know what you mean. I do hate it when they play masters of the universe. Rrr, I could...” The woman stage-shakes clenched fists just above the table. Who ‘they’ are or what the money relates to is not for the curious listener at the adjacent table to learn. A little later, the same diner might notice that it is the woman who pays for the meal, by plastic card, while the man discreetly rewards the waitress with a cash tip. Should the interest continue, the fellow diner might turn to the window that looks out on to the car park, where she or he would observe the woman direct a remote activator at a model of saloon which has proved popular among upper management; and perhaps speculate on the choice (it being most unlikely a random issue) of letters for the vehicle’s licence plate to spell the word ZOO.

Once more at home, in the double-fronted house overlooking the village green, Su returns to her den. Although she retrieves the photograph album from the drawer, it remains unopened on the desktop. Minutes pass before she returns it to the drawer. She takes a deep breath, and goes downstairs. The three enjoy a nightcap together, chatting, yawning, closing down the day.

* * * * *

“Tell me, are you able to say with any precision just how many individuals in this city over the age of fifty have actually committed to voluntary work during the past six months?”

The truthful answer would be ‘yes’. And ‘yes’ might reasonably be the reply expected of an organisational agency barely through its first year of existence and wishing to demonstrate an operational efficiency matched only by an effervescent fulfilment of any initiative handed to it from on high. ‘Yes’, it could be argued, was the reply the head of such an organisation was paid – and, by some standards, generously so – to deliver. But the truthful answer could not be given. It would not be to advantage. Even a monosyllabic affirmative would require a number to follow – an arithmetic value that, despite a liberal interpretation of the initiative’s parameters and the last minute addition of a ‘maybe’ count, would be low. Embarrassingly, unacceptably low. Su looked the man from the government department in the eye, a gaze steady through big blue lenses. It usually worked.

“A precise figure isn’t possible because it changes all the time. The figure is growing, month on month, in line with expectations.”

“I’ve no doubt the figure *is* growing, and that’s reassuring. But we still don’t have a figure – one that we can take away with us – do we?” The man from the government department was not the sort you would wish to share a desert island with, unless you were taking up distance swimming. A granite sixties, and probably had been since his forties. Impassive, slow voiced, a too deep thinker behind delicate half spectacles which he used for referring to documents on the desk before him but otherwise peered over accusingly. At least the Granite One spoke. The two others at his side of the table: a man with a tic, a regular contraction of one eyelid which possibly brought him trouble in men’s toilets; and a prim

frigid-looking female with crooked teeth – neither of them were apparently wired for sound. Their role was to study the face of the person undergoing inquisition, and write notes. Disconcertingly, the writing did not synchronise with words said. What could the notes possibly be recording? Su decided she must remember the technique. Across the table, in the functionally appointed ground floor room used for meetings, three pairs of eyes were on her, three pairs of ears awaiting a reply.

“Our projections put the objective in range within the limits of the programme.”

There was a short silence, then Su and the man from the government department started to speak at the same time. She stopped immediately. A ghost of a smile flicked across his lips as he raised a horizontal palm inviting her to go on.

“I was going to say – am saying – that the success of the initiative depends crucially on prompt arrival of funding instalments. Delays can cause potentially damaging backslippage.”

“Did not the first tranche arrive on time?”

“Yes. Yes, it did. I’m merely suggesting that a delay now might cause a break in continuity, which would be a bad thing.”

The Prim One whispered something to the Granite One, glancing as she did so at Su – the kind of calculated side glance which one member of the village sewing circle might cast to another if the second were suspected of marital infidelity. The Granite One again.

“I see from the returns that you launched the initiative with – ahm – promotional vigour.”

Accompanying a practised drop of the head, the eyes shifted from below the rim of the half spectacles to above. It was unnerving, and the Granite One knew it. Was this the trick question? There was always a trick question, a check of common understanding. Normally it was slotted in at the beginning. It broke the ice. This lot could be playing by a

different set of rules – they were from London. Perhaps the trick question came later in London. In any case, it had not been a proper question, not one a question mark could be attached to if written down, though the Granite One clearly expected a response.

“The key to recruitment is awareness, more especially in the voluntary sector. The volunteer who wishes to offer their time is not so focused on seeking out an opportunity as someone who is looking for paid work. The volunteer has to be attracted, has to be made aware that she is needed, and where. The only way to harness the valuable time of the volunteer is through effective promotion of the initiative.”

The Granite One slowly stroked his chin.

“Indeed.” Silence again before: “Don’t you think your campaign of publicity has tended rather to centre on – how shall I say this – on the prime deliverer, and not the valuable time of the volunteer?”

“Sorry?”

The man from the government department made a show of scrutinising the sheet before him, a sheet not held in his hand but lying flat on the table, before continuing.

“A proportion – a not insignificant proportion, I may add – of your budget is spent on publicity. Publicity in which you are the star.” This was a joke. The Granite one turned to the Prim One, then to the One with the Tic. Both smiled. Su, alone in the exposed expanse of the wrong side of the table, also smiled. The Granite One continued.

“You used, just now, the phrase ‘effective promotion’. We can plainly see the ‘promotion’. We wish to have a readout for ‘effective’. This returns us to the original question. By how many has the number increased of over-fifties entering the voluntary field since the initiative’s launch?”

“We calculate by percentage. We find it more meaningful in a local context than actual numbers.”

“Quite. So I should perhaps recast my question. By what *percentage* is the over-fifty component increased?”

“As I mentioned earlier, the figure changes – rises – constantly. It is difficult to pick out any one calculation and say this reflects the true overall situation.”

“But you *do* calculate?” This was another joke from the Granite One. Another round of smiles.

“Oh, yes. The agency holds its own for statistics.”

Too late, Su realised this was not a clever thing to say. She had cornered herself. But, amazingly, the kill did not come. Instead, the Granite One changed tack.

“Some monitors of the initiative, and I’m being countrywide here, have suggested that the potential volunteer in the target age group responds better to direct contact, or through an established social network, than to what may be regarded as the call centre approach, or access via a website. Have you any thoughts on methods of recruitment that you could share with us?”

At last, the trick question. These Londoners really did leave it late.

“I do admit our campaign may have placed a little too much emphasis on centralised application processing in the early stages. It’s a learning curve, though, and we plan to use a different strategy for phase two. We will be reaching out to the individual.”

The Granite One leant back in his chair, removed his half spectacles, and rubbed his eyes. His words carried the prospect of weariness.

“Would it be fair, therefore, to say you are learning from mistakes made?”

No, it would not be fair. There had been no mistakes. The agency was still in its infancy. It had no real experience of dealing with the voluntary sector, not on this scale, and was doing the best it could. But these were thoughts which could not be put into words – the agency needed the funding.

“We are always seeking ways in which we can improve our operation. The agency’s commitment to development of the community supersedes any other consideration.”

Back off! she screamed to herself. This was pure starchy press statement. What the situation needed was the Gardeen touch. A switch from reactive rhetoric to homely humble; eyes towards the floor; self-reproaching sigh; voice dropped to just above a whisper. “And that includes my own inflated sense of importance, I suppose.”

The pained silence of deliberation – seconds? minutes? – before Granite emitted a noise that could have been a chuckle. It was a signal to the others. Tic and Prim smiled freely, put down their pens, and leant back in imitation of their leader. The ordeal was over. Just the induced adoration remained. The Granite One handed over to the One with the Tic, who spoke with a reedy voice. Maybe the involuntary wink was not such a drawback in the men’s toilet. Reading from a card in the manner of a presenter at an award ceremony, he announced the next tranche would be released according to the original timetable. Su flung her arms, metaphorically speaking, as Ellis said she would, round the neck of the Granite One. Someone consulted a watch and mentioned the train for London. There was small talk over the dregs of earlier refreshments while they waited for the taxicab to arrive. Su thanked them for coming, led them from the meetings room to the building’s entrance, thanked them again, waved goodbye as if seeing off favourite relatives, and punched the air of the staircase leading to the first floor and her office.

Geri, Su’s personal assistant, was waiting with a smile of congratulation and a spring-clip of coloured messages.

“Thanks, Ger.”

“Fee wants you, urgently. As ever. She’s been on twice in the last hour. Lucy Grainger’s dying to know how you got on. Ring her first, she said. Don’t forget StreetArt are coming at half four. That guy from Office Supplies – you know, the dishy one, if you’re into fellahs – he’s been in so many times we’re charging him rent for the waiting area. And there’s the meeting tonight at —”

“I know, I know. I haven’t forgotten. What are the chances of a massive meteor striking the Earth between now and then?”

* * * * *

Su is a busy woman. She is Head of Combined Community Development working for an agency called Community Advance. The organisation is a recent amalgamation of lesser community development agencies which existed within and around the same impoverished city. The largest of the former bodies, officially styled Advancing This Community but otherwise invariably referred to as ATC, had itself for a short time been headed by a busy woman. That woman joined ATC as a trainee development worker and in a little over four busy years had risen to take the top post. That remarkable busy woman also was Su Gardeen.

When Su pulls up outside the house which faces the village green, it is nine o’clock in the evening. She is tired but determined not to show it. A meal awaits her, prepared by Ellis to instructions delivered by mobile phone earlier in the day as an afterthought to communication of the result of the meeting with the people from London. A glass of wine is handed to her as she replays messages on the telephone answering machine. Ellis slips out to put the car away in the double garage, reversing it skilfully alongside Fee’s untidily parked runabout. He checks and locks up outside and returns to join Su at the table in the dining area. Fee comes down from her room and picks up a bowl of salted peanuts from the kitchen on her way to join the others. Peanuts spill across the table’s surface as she greets Su.

“Hi, you.”

“Hi, yourself. Did you get the photocopier fixed?”

“Sort of. The man said we’re using the wrong paper. It’s too hydro-something.”

Ellis corrects and explains. “Hygroscopic. Absorbs moisture, from the atmosphere.”

Between mouthfuls, Su retorts that the man would say that since he wants to supply a more expensive paper.

Fee again. “Surely he’s just the engineer. He doesn’t supply the paper.”

“No, but his brother does. Was it Wayne? Chubby chap, with funny hair – dark with a blond fringe, yeh?”

“Yes, Wayne.”

“There you are. Wayne always comes that one.”

Peanuts are chewed and swallowed. “But that place *is* damp after a weekend, and the loo ceiling lets in water every time it rains – it’s like taking a leak in the shower, sometimes. You said you were going to have the roof seen to.”

They are talking about the premises that were known as ATC North when ATC existed as a separate organisation. It is an outreach office situated on a deprived council estate on the northern edge of the city that Community Advance regards as its own. The dilapidated single-storeyed building, described by the agency as a local resource centre, is still known as ATC North. It is where Su cut her community development teeth. Su is making Fee cut her teeth there, too.

“It’s in hand.”

“You said that last time.”

Ellis, gently firm, breaks in. “Enough of that.”

Fee gives him a look but shuts up. He refills Su’s glass and pours a drink for himself.

“How was tonight’s meeting? Crunch time for them, isn’t it?”

“Oh, you know... They talk in circles, they do.” Su takes a mouthful before continuing. “Ng – it’s not their fault, really. The problem is the low bank rate. There’s no incentive for people to save.” A brief conversation follows on the difficulties faced by the city’s credit union. Ellis asks why the cash-strapped operation needed to advertise for a second administrator when, in his opinion, one keen type with

experience should be enough. Su replies that, when there are two, one is able to keep an eye on the other.

“Tell us more about how you got on with the people from London.” This is said with steadily rising volume as Ellis takes Su’s empty plate through to the kitchen and removes something from the oven. He returns with a sponge pudding running with hot custard. It is one of Su’s supposedly relinquished favourites, and a surprise. Fee, elbows on table, backs of hands under chin, is frowning. She gets up and lollops from the room, a twenty-two-year-old teenager.

“Like I said on the phone, they played it out to the end. Bum-aching, actually. Though I think the head guy took a shine to me – once he’d seen me grovel. The prickle.”

“Why does it take three of them, I wonder?”

“Why does it take *one* of them?” you mean. All this can be done automatically.” She digs generously into the sponge, and steadies the overfilled spoon above the dish before bringing her mouth to it. Ellis replies, quietly, a voiced thought.

“Taxpayers’ money. They have to be seen to monitor the process. Must demonstrate value for money, and all that. So they employ three expensive suits to travel the country.”

Two more loaded spoonfuls follow. Su smiles. “The head guy thought I was spending too much on promotion. Said I was making myself a star. *Me-e-e?*”

“Never!” They both laugh.

Another refill of glasses. A nod from Su towards the doorway that leads to the lounge. “What’s got madam’s goat?”

“I think she’s had a rough day. Rough days only happen to Fee.”

“I’ll sort her out later. Did you book the carpet fitter?”

“Yes, I did.”

“What about the back hedge?”

“The leylandii Gardeenis are down to regulation height. Niggling Nigel no longer has anything to moan about – not to us, at least. And I arranged delivery of the clock – they’re

bringing it tomorrow. I'll get them to lug it up to the half-landing. I also sent a letter to Hetheringtons. Crisp, to the point, no room for misconstruction this time. *And* I sorted out the dry cleaning bill."

"*And* you're worth every penny."

The three are watching the news on the flat-screen television in the lounge. Ellis is in his adjustable armchair, nursing a tumbler of single malt whisky, offering the occasional remark on world events. Su sits at one end of a long sofa. Fee is curled up besides Su, her head on Su's lap and thumb in mouth while Su runs soothing fingers through Fee's loosened hair. The girl's unbelted dress has worked high up her legs, showing bare white thighs, but she makes no move to adjust it.

"I'm going to Derbyshire this weekend." Su makes the announcement. Within the words there is a trace of defiant determination, as in 'I shall go and no one will stop me!' Ellis picks this up. It is unusual. Su journeys to Derbyshire every other month, on her own, to see her family. No big deal. A visit is due; there is no reason why she should not go; so why the tone of resolve? Maybe Su is more tired than she realises. It has been a long day for her.

"We'll try and manage without you," says Ellis, humorously. 'We' in effect being 'I'. Fee is reliably absent as Su is absent, staying over at Amy's place, where she used to live. Amy is married now and has a toddler. It doesn't matter where Fee goes – it is not his business; it obviously has Su's approval.

"I just thought I'd tell you."

But you always tell us. Why the ingredient of special purpose this time? Ellis thinks the question but does not put it into words. In vain, he searches his memory for something she might have said earlier. To cover himself, he asks, "Do you want me to get you anything special?"

"Such as?" Then, almost immediately, aware that too much attention is being drawn to the matter, "No. I'll be all right."

They watch the long-term forecast, Fee opining that the weathergirl is pregnant.

“I may go Friday tea-time, come back early Monday.” Attention is back to the matter. Fee gives a little girl’s ‘oua’ of disappointment and is ignored.

“A long weekend it is, then. You might run into fog, early Monday.” He nods towards the television.

“I’ll chance it.” Whatever is behind her plan, Su is not going to share, and Ellis is not going to probe. He gets up and pours himself another whisky. With some roughness, Su shakes Fee.

“C’mon. I want some R and R.”

The casual observer, as might occupy an adjacent table in a country restaurant on a Wednesday evening, may see in Ellis, Su and Fee a family unit comprising a man, his younger wife or partner, and their late-developing daughter. Such a conclusion would be wrong. For the wife is not a wife, nor a partner to the man in an accepted sense, but is head and complete owner of the household. Therefore, the man is not a husband, nor the woman’s partner, though he was once her lover. The man takes care of the household in exchange for comfortable quarters. He also provides intellectual support for the busy woman who is Head of Combined Community Development. Their previous relationship is a story told elsewhere. Suffice for the present to regard the man, as indeed the woman regards him, in terms of someone rescued. Nor is the daughter the progeny of anyone living in the house that overlooks the village green. Her rescue is perhaps a story for another time.

When Su leads Fee up the stairs, they pass Fee’s room and enter Su’s bedroom, nicknamed the Chamber. The Chamber is a spacious opening out of two previously separate rooms. Its burgundy walls support a series of vertical mirrors, like step-through hatches into an adjoining reverse-image boudoir world. The window wall carries full-length plush red curtains

hung from within deep upholstered pelmets. Centrally positioned in the room, and dominating it, is a substantial four-poster bed built of dark wood. The bed's canopy of tasselled black-and-gold drapes give it a medieval air; grand and vaguely sinister. Across the bed is a throw of fluffy white wool, a soft virginal surface. Two high-backed bedroom chairs, and a cluttered crystal-topped dressing table in decadent cream, occupy one end of the room. Nearer the bed, a video camera waits on a tripod. There lingers in the heated air of the Chamber an indistinct odour, despite scented attempts to remove it, of newness: a blend of emulsion, wood stain, adhesive and textile.

Without bidding, Fee casually casts off her dress, letting it fall to the deep twists of mixed greys and pinks where she stands. She waits as Su unfastens her bra from behind and slides the straps forward down compliant arms.

"We won't be needing egg warmers, I think." Su tosses the garment towards one of the chairs but is well short.

"It's not my fault my boobs are small."

"It's all right, dear. Keep up the exercises."

Fee allows herself to be led to the bed, and sits on its edge while Su places a leather choker round the girl's neck. Gently, Su pushes Fee on to her back, turning her so she aligns with the rug's length. Fee stretches out her arms; eyes closed, she ovals her mouth and slowly moistens lips while Su carefully arranges blonde hair over billowy pillows.

"There's no hurry. Just relax."

For a while, the still-dressed Su runs her hands very lightly over the almost naked body, producing gooseflesh. Fee gives a soft moan of pleasure.

Su whispers, "Don't go away. I'll be right back," and lightly pats the knickered crotch.

Near the dressing table are doors, mirrored panels, to a walk-in wardrobe. Su slides a door, enters, reaches up and takes down from a shelf a towel bag from which she removes a plastic-rubber imitation of the male sexual organ, fitted with

straps. Undressing, she places her clothes on one of the chairs, though she does not remove earrings or arm accessories. Taking the artificial device, she secures it to her groin, tugging at the straps till they dig into the flesh of her hips. She applies petroleum jelly to the permanently erect penis in liberally loaded strokes, and uses baby wipes to clean her fingers. There's no hurry, she breathes to a reflection, as she hurries.

At the bed, she pulls Fee's panties down and from her legs.

"I know what you're waiting for. Here's a taster." Su's tongue finds and washes Fee's clitoris. Fee's body is growing urgent. Su crawls up the rug and thrusts her tongue into Fee's mouth while her fingers massage the top of Fee's vagina.

"Steady, now," Su whispers seductively. "I've got something for you that I think you're gonna like. Something just about your size."

"Please —"

"Steady makes ready. And I think — you're — just about — ready."

Downstairs, Ellis checks doors and switches off lights. He hears moans and gasps as he climbs the stairs and goes to his room. The girls don't care about the noise they make. Lesbians never do. Undressed and in bed, he picks up a book: Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*. The Chamber eventually falls quiet. Fee does not leave for her own room. After a session of rough and ready, she rarely does. All is well in the double-fronted house overlooking the village green. Ellis reads for a while, then drifts into untroubled sleep.

2

Su was prepared to concede that the decision to travel to Derbyshire on the Friday evening instead of the customary Saturday morning may have been a mistake. Before her, six beaded bands of red snaked up an unseen hill, the brow marked only by no more red. Traffic was at a complete standstill in all three lanes. Why does traffic jam up like this, in the middle of nowhere, on an ordinary Friday night? She was hungry. A couple of cold and probably old sausage rolls bought from the kiosk near the office were never going to be enough to sustain a growing woman to the next meal. And a stiff drink wouldn't go down badly right now, either. As she changed the music, one of the lanes began to move. Then another. Only the lorries were left behind to fret and fume. But she was still hungry.

The mobile in the shoulder bag on the passenger seat played its musical trill. Not Fee again. Surely. The day had carried a wearisome log of calls from her, presumably as a protest against the long weekend. Fee getting her knickers in a twist over some wally from the estate sounding off after being refused community Internet access because he hadn't booked. Fee in a fluster because a fire officer makes a routine check and comments on some metal chairs stacked against the emergency exit. Fee making a fanny out of handling another team member's request for a couple of days' unscheduled leave to take the kids to see the lights at Blackpool, so much so that both Fee and the other member, older and significantly longer in the job than the boss's pet, take it in turns to ring HQ and whinge. All this while, at Su's side, Roger and Geri pretend patience, exchange glances, carry on with the draft annual report that the three of them

are in the process of preparing. Fee who can't go for a pee without the roof raining in on her. Fee who is forgiven everything because she's a brilliant lay.

She reached an arm across and blind-rummaged for the source of the tinny classical tune she kept meaning to remember the name of. The caller wasn't Fee. It was Lucy Grainger, CA's part-time voluntary services liaison officer, supposedly wanting a word about the volunteers' recruitment programme, but really itching to catch up with gossip. Luce was one of those people who could smile and laugh all the time, seemingly deflecting problems like they were summer flies. To be able to live with Simon, that boorish alcoholic self-adoring prat of a husband of hers, an always-on positive approach to life must be an absolute must – even if Simon did earn megabucks from supplying computer systems to big companies. Lucy, expecting Su to be at home, had tried the landline but Ellis had merely said Su was out. Ellis would say that. He protected the weekends in Derbyshire as much as Su herself did. Derbyshire was a side to her life that she was not prepared to share with the rest of the world. And, for the rest of the world, you merely had to say Lucy Grainger. Su said she was on the motorway, escaping for the weekend, like Lucy knew she sometimes did but would still pick away at, given half a chance. That was not going to happen: Su would ring when she got back and they could have a good girl-to-girl.

“Better still, why not meet over a drink – Tuesday night's free for me – and charge it to expenses as out-of-hours consultation, yeh?”

“Do you really think the boss would approve?”

“I *am* the boss.”

It was a verbal routine Su had yet to tire of.

The motorway was on the move, but not at motorway speeds. There had been an accident. Blue police lights flashed from the hard shoulder, and a breakdown truck was hoisting a

hatchback up its ramp. She craned her neck as she passed, aware that she might share her own accident should the car in front brake, but could see no gore. A sign informed her – it seemed to be there just for her, big and brightly lit – that the next services were five miles. Services meant food. But services also meant another half hour added to the journey. Decision time. Drive on – there will be food at journey's end.

The one advantage of motorway driving, perhaps the only advantage, is that it allows time to think. This may be disciplined thinking, in which the traveller resolves that a stage of conclusion be reached by the end of the trip. 'When I arrive at place X, I will have worked out what to do about problem Y.' That sort of thinking; the sort Su knew she was not good at but persisted with anyway. The mind which travels the motorway is not allowed to close down but must be kept active, especially when the body is tired and hungry.

Su thought about Ellis's writing. Would this book of his ever be completed? Was it really a book? Ellis used to speak of it as a thesis, but a thesis is for someone who hangs on at university. Ellis had finished with university after taking his degree as a mature. He referred to his work as a polemic, a word Su used to associate with something to do with plastic. Her proper knowledge of the word, that it means a forceful one-sided written or verbal attack, was a product of her recent education, for which in large part she had Ellis to thank. The book, thesis, whatever, had a title: 'Tending Poverty, the maintenance and management of social deprivation'. Or maybe it was management and maintenance. Ellis supposedly started on the writing during his off the radar period, when he cut all communication with the outside world, locking himself away in that crummy high-rise flat of his, playing the council estate doley and slowly losing his marbles. Su had little doubt that Ellis had suffered some kind of breakdown during that time. It had aged him – years in as many months. It had changed him. For example, he seemed to have emerged from it completely impotent – no interest in

physical sex. There had been no attempt whatsoever on his part to resume the relationship they once had. Nor had he made any advance to Fee, who he occasionally caught sight of in careless states of undress, not that Fee of course would have responded. Fee hardly ever spoke to Ellis, and Ellis not often to Fee: it was as if they existed in parallel universes, sharing the same life under one roof but for the most part each ignoring the other's existence, while she – Su – played the honest broker. The post-breakdown Ellis was docile, attentive, protective – in short, the perfect male companion for a successful woman who had released the might of the inner self.

One change that had not taken place within Ellis was his view that some poverty was planned, that social deprivation was a form of poverty cultivated so that the middle classes were guaranteed employment by professing to fight it. Ellis continued to insist that community development was the most insincere manifestation of the poverty industry. He no longer got heated up about the subject like he used to, didn't jump down your throat at the mere mention. The new improved Ellis explained his ideas patiently and encouragingly, as if demonstrating the operation of a washing machine. She could hear his voice now over after-dinner crackers and cheese.

'Our middle class is growing all the time. The government relies on middle-class votes, and the middle class has to be looked after. If there aren't enough jobs for the middle class, then jobs must be made. Fill out the bureaucracy. Pump up the problems. Poverty is blue chip; nobody complains if people are employed to tackle it; so the government expands the poverty and – pachinko! – you have the jobs. Except that the tackle part is all pretence. People are employed to go through the motions of fighting poverty but in reality theirs is to ensure it brews at the right strength. Not so weak that the problem of poverty isn't evident as a warning to the rest of society; not so strong that the poor spill from their estates.'

Yep! Ellis had it all worked out. Nothing escaped him. Always bang on. Everything he complained about could be observed in the real. But Su believed Ellis would never finish his book. He had good reason not to. His comfortable living depended on her going through the motions of pretending to tackle poverty.

That estate he had made home for – what? – five, six years. It was bandit territory, where they would steal the wheels from your car as you drove by, where the police sent the press in first, where bad people went when they died. Asylum seekers directed there to fill the empty tower blocks would take one look, then grab the tunnel freight back to persecution. There had been that guy who told the newspaper that even the dogs go somewhere else to crap. Most of the jokes about the place came from the residents themselves.

The estate was where she and Ellis had met: the one doing his ‘experience the life to discover the truth’ thing and nearly going under as a result; the other finally getting her act together, starting a new career that would fit her like a skin. Not that there was any way of knowing it would, not to begin with. Question: what woman in her right mind would abandon suburban security to move to an unfamiliar city and become a trainee community development worker on one of its grottiest sinks? Answer: a woman who needed to prove she had balls.

The estate was also where she had been joined by Fee. Fiona Something-hyphen-Somebody, as Ellis once referred to her, daughter of a jailed property tycoon and wannabe nob. Fee had been accepted for undergraduate placement and assigned to ATC North. That was three years ago, and ATC North was where Fee had stayed, though now she was team leader, following Su’s own example of rise through the ranks, except that Fee was not exactly self-raising. Fee hated ATC North as much as ATC North hated Fee. That was good – good for Fee, good for ATC North, and good for

Community Advance. She was useless at the job, but that didn't matter. Fee was eyes and ears in the north of the empire.

A police car passed on the outside lane, in a hurry but not audibly announcing so. The officer in the passenger seat gave Su a frown as the car went by. Maybe she had a tail-light out. No, her rear fogs were on – she must have caught the switch as she poked about in search of strayed sweets. She lifted a hand of thanks to the policeman, now several yards ahead.

The police were good on the motorway. On any road. They could detect an unfastened seat belt at half a mile. They sensed immediately you were in schedule-catch-up mode, and would be there, right on your tail, at the very moment of breaching the speed limit. They didn't care for the humble street. Ellis said their absence on the street was part of a social strategy to nurture a fear of crime. Paranoia, he said, means easy power to those who wield it.

Jason had lived on the street, sometimes quite literally, despite having come from a reasonable home. Addicted to drugs, stealing in order to feed his habit – 'shop and pop', as it was known on the estate – Jason was a lost cause. Su had tried to help the young man during her latter days at ATC North. Persuaded by a persistent probation officer, a bronzed sandal-wearing Tarzan who saw infinite good in everyone, she had employed Jason in the office, his pay funded through an initiative. She had offered support during his rehab programme, smartened him up, shown him respect, listened as he loosened the lid on trapped anger. For a short while, she began to doubt whether she really was completely free of the maternal instinct. Despite her efforts, when the initiative came to an end, as all initiatives do, and the money for his wages was no more, Jason returned to the wild.

Su had seen Jason only once afterwards. He was behind the wheel of her car – recently bought as a present to herself on becoming head of ATC – looking scared and panicky. She at

the time was clinging to the car's bonnet for dear life. The ruse that brought the situation about had been a clever one. An accomplice loiters around a supermarket cashpoint on a Sunday night, when the store is closed and the car park stark and creepy. The accomplice flags down a potential victim, a woman on her own, after she has withdrawn cash and is about to drive away. Through the car's window, he engages her in conversation, asking if the cash machine is working all right, and casually mentions that the car's front tyre is losing air. The victim, wisely, stays in the car and drives on, but stops before departing the car park for the main road, to get out and check the tyre. Someone is hiding in the bushes. A car that has engine running and door open to a card wallet of cash on the passenger seat is exactly what Jason is waiting for. Su told the police and interested others how she had been pushed to the ground from behind as she bent forward to listen for escaping air but had immediately sprung up and hurled herself on to the bonnet of the car as it started to move, clutching hold of the wiper arms. She had managed to catch a glimpse of the thief through the windscreen – a sharp-featured grim-mouthed young white male under a dark bobble hat, as she described him – before the car abruptly braked to fling her from the bonnet. A tanker driver had found her sprawled unconscious on the surface of the dual carriageway that ran past the supermarket.

But she had been less than complete in relating the events. Jason, hiding in the shrubbery, had no way of knowing who his victim might be. Any lone female would have suited. He was after money, but maybe also a little sport. If so, the plan was curtailed when he realised his victim was someone who had once tried to help him. Although Jason had put Su in hospital with damaged ribs and other injuries, had made off with her money, bank cards and important office papers, and – this the most painful – had torched her precious car on a piece of estate wasteland, his identity did not appear on the police report. She had not been able to turn Jason in. The

police were left to rely on their own skills of investigation which, she reasoned, almost guaranteed Jason would not be brought to account for this particular crime.

The weeks after the attack – ‘attack’ being her word; the police condescendingly preferred ‘incident’ – and the thought that she knowingly concealed the identity of a potential molester had troubled her. The point was, could she be sure that Jason had intended sexual assault before the moment of recognition? His hands had been at her thighs, and his lips had slobbered just a beer breath away from her ear. In the dreams that attended her while she lay in the hospital bed, dreams sufficiently vivid to have been lived, she was downed and turned and entered, there on the gritty surface of the supermarket car park – and her all the while enjoying it, laughing at and taunting her attacker. Then, in the clinical daytime reality of the ward, she would put the delicious rape down to an overactive imagination, the result of shock from theft and physical injury.

Had a sexual assault on anyone taken place during those weeks, she would have divulged Jason’s name. But no assault was reported, none at least that the police had no one lined up for. Did Jason understand why she had not given him up? She doubted it: she herself did not fully do so. Would he have come after her, to threaten her had she said anything? She very much doubted that, too.

Nevertheless, those weeks after hospital had left her feeling spooked. Not with regard to Jason: knowing your attacker, understanding his motives, were in a strange way comforting. It was all explainable. No, it was the thought that an attack was possible by a complete stranger, someone who might go the whole violence hog, that produced the anxiety in her. She found herself reluctant to travel alone in the evening, and even during the daytime when duty took her to any of the worst estates. Ellis, during his high-rise period, had accused her of having caught a middle-class professional’s fear of the poor. After the attack, she started to think this might be the

case. But community development people cannot allow themselves a fear of the poor. As Ellis continued to say, present-day poverty is a creation of the middle class. So, who would fear the very thing they are supposed to have created? She had thrown the question at him, hoping to trip him, except clever Ellis had replied 'Frankenstein'. Anyhow, her post-attack sensitivities were not the result of a fear of the poor but the realisation that she loathed men.

Jason had done that to her. He had spooked her, and for this he could not be forgiven. He had also acted as unwitting catalyst in a major life change. Thanks to Jason and the attack, she had finally been able to set free the inner woman, to announce the real Su. The actual violation of her possessions and dreamt violation of her body had provided the last tug necessary to break away from the male world order. For this Jason could be forgiven. And had not Jason indirectly delivered Ellis to her? Ellis, creeping out of his self-imposed high-rise exile to visit her in hospital. Ellis with his bunch of flowers and get-well-soon card and genuine concern. Ellis ready to fall right into her lap.

Jason was now out of the picture, banged up for any number of drug-related crimes. The clincher, the one that put him away, had been a farcical attempt to rob a service station with an imitation handgun. Apparently, he forgot his lines; stumbled against a pile of bagged barbecue charcoal; dropped the replica weapon, which then skimmed under an ice cream refrigerator; and failed to notice the arrival at the pumps of a mini-coach of rugby fans returning from an away win.

Su gave her head a shake. Why was Jason in there? It was suddenly too warm in the car. She pressed the window control although lowering the glass never seemed to work as a source of cool air. Ellis had explained it to her several times: the air outside, passing at speed, creates a fall of pressure inside the cabin which draws more air through the heater – or something like that. In his interpretation, opening the window like this when the car has air conditioning, was a

subconscious attempt at securing an escape route. Was she trying subconsciously to escape Jason? From *Jason*? Jason was – let's get this right – a complete toerag. They all were. Jason had been given a chance, a good chance, and had muffed it. He'd screwed up. Typical male weakness: they screw and they screw up. They just can't get the hang of it. Jason, you are definitely the weakest link. Goodbye.

The motorway exit was a mile further along. Because the inner lane was filled with slower moving traffic, mostly heavy goods vehicles, Su had to brake and seek a gap. She could feel the headlights of the car behind burning into the back of her head, and hear the driver's curses. The switch of lanes was not her best ever.

From the motorway, the slip road took Su under a vast halo of light that illuminated a multi-exit roundabout. Though she had made the same journey countless times, taking the same route, negotiating the same roundabout, she was momentarily unsure of the correct exit, indicating too early then too late. The rest of her journey was through landscape she could not see but knew well – a terrain more rugged by the mile.

Roger too was rugged. Bearded, brawny, filling his large suit while not visibly overfed. He had once been her superior, the head of agency, in her ATC days. Now she was his. Roger's fall from grace was his own doing. A zip job. The girl he had been unable to keep his trousers on in front of had been a school-leaver on work experience at ATC North. Donna had cock-crazy written all over her, if you were able to read her like a woman reads. Roger, being a mere male, could not. He had accepted Su's team leader assessment at the end of the six month period that the youngster held real promise, and agreed to find the girl a place at Central. More than half the staff at ATC Central, later the headquarters of Community Advance, were at the time employed as a result of internal recommendation. Roger had been the standard-issue happily married man before the arrival of Donna. Su was correct in

her judgement of Donna's possibilities: the teenager showed a flair for office work, proved no slow puncher when it came to keyboard skills, and demonstrated an aptitude for organisation. She was also willing to stay behind to help with the production of a newsletter, photocopying the sheets and stapling them together in the right order and the same way up. Or to assist with the completion of a report, typing in changes and new dates on the saved copy of the previous report. Willing to stay behind whenever Roger asked.

What happened next was never revealed to Su in detail, and she did not care. Much of it took place behind closed doors. Firstly behind the door of Roger's office, except that on one occasion the door had not been as securely closed as believed by those inside. Secondly behind the door of the most senior officer of the council department to which ATC was answerable. Roger was granted sickness leave, to resurface a year later in robust health at the birth of Community Advance, when his application for position as services adviser was one of the earliest to be considered and approved by the busy head of the new agency. Donna, so the grapevine had it, was invited to apply for a post within the council, in a department having very little contact with community development, but chose instead to be a croupier at a dubious casino before training as a nurse. Roger had turned out to be the best services adviser an agency could hope for. If there was a precedent to an issue of procedure, Roger would cite it. If there was a potential legal pratfall, Roger flagged it well in advance. Roger lived for small print and detail. He had a steady relationship with a new partner and kept his pecker under cover. Only a handful of people knew of his earlier misconduct. Only one person maintained it on file.

Ellis, Jason, Roger. For God's sake, why should they all be passengers on this journey? What was she doing, reviewing the men in her present and recent past? Su gave a growl of self-reproach. Her stomach was rumbling, and her mouth dry. Not far now.

Something would happen to Su whenever she visited the one-time family home. The change would begin to come over her as she entered the village, indeed as she left the A-road and took the hilly twisting minor road down to the village. And the change would continue as she passed the old school house. The building in which she had been acquainted with the three R's was intact, although converted to bijou apartments for second-homers. Then the shop, now boasting a gaudy eight-till-late fascia, though the 'late' was something of a retail embroidery. A small group of young people were gathered in and around the bus shelter, a modern metal and perspex cover that replaced the smelly rotting wooden hut of her own youth. They were not waiting for public transport since departures took place only twice a day: in the morning to deliver a boisterous clutch to a school some miles away; and in the middle of the afternoon to take nobody anywhere.

Youths and their females were drinking from cans and bottles. As her car neared the shelter, they began shouting, shrieking and gesticulating. Su heard a clack on the roof of the car as she passed them, but drove on. The change that came over her would be completed as she pulled into the yard behind the farmhouse. This night, she was more than usually aware of the change as she parked under the outside light and, having examined the roof of her car for coin damage to find none, lifted a carry-all from the boot and let herself into the kitchen through the rear stable-type door left unlocked for her. To say Margo and James had done a lot to the property would be to understate. In the fifteen or so years since they had married, when James moved in, they had practically rebuilt the place. The exposed ceiling beams survived in the kitchen, as did the Yorkist range. From being merely part of an unexceptional whole in Su's childhood, the timber and cast iron had undergone elevation to the status of retained original features. Over the years, Margo had made sure Su was brought up to date with each latest refurbishment

during her visits, a steady replacement of memory. Tonight, however, Su saw the snug if shabby unextended kitchen of the Earles, and smelt the smoke of the backdraught. The illusion lasted only a moment; no doubt the effect of tiredness and hunger following another busy day.

Margo had prepared a meal for one, which she warmed while Su took her bag upstairs. It was always difficult to tell what frame of mind Margo was in: she could be serious, distant, every smile giving the impression it might be forced, even when showing off the latest alteration to the house. Su had tried to imagine what Margo was like in bed. Perhaps Estelle had been created with all the excitement of a test tube and syringe. Estelle, she learnt as Margo laid out cutlery, was at a friend's house. Su had a flash vision of the coin-throwing group at the bus shelter. Margo would never permit Estelle to go anywhere near the bus shelter crowd, though that might not stop Estelle doing so. James was at home, but at work in his study. He would join them later, when the sisters and their mother had had a little time together.

Their mother. Mum. Physically indestructible, mentally crumbling. Mrs Gardeen, formerly Mrs Earle, and before that Mrs Gardeen, conversed mostly by repeating or rewording any part of what had just been said in her presence, and by exercising set phrases of comment.

"How was the journey?" Margo served Su a bowl of home-made soup accompanied by wholemeal rolls.

"I got off to a good start, but there was an accident this half. The traffic tailed back for miles."

"There's been an accident. The traffic was sinful. Sinful," Mum modified.

Margo, although herself largely inscrutable, was trained to read the minds of others. She produced a bottle of wine and poured Su a glass, leaving the bottle at hand. The next course was on its way: lasagne Margo in a Suzie-sized portion. Su supposed that her sister had worked out why this weekend was a long one. In a way, Margo had brought it about. During

the previous visit, over Sunday lunch, a roast with celebrity chef cookbook trimmings, Margo had delivered her carefully constructed bolt from the blue.

“Stan’s been in touch. Suzie, did you know he’s dying? He’s asked to see you.”

At the table, Su had concentrated on the plate in front of her and watched as knife and fork assumed a life of their own. No one spoke until she broke the spell.

“Oh, really?” As an attempt at detachment, she rated it utterly unconvincing.

“Never mind,” Mum had offered.

Nothing else was said on the subject during the remainder of that lunch, but Su had mentally chewed on the message, like her teeth the beef, as Margo must have known she would. *Stan’s been in touch.* By what means? Letter? Telephone? Someone from the village? In touch with who, exactly? *Did you know he’s dying?* How on earth would she, Su, possibly know that Stan was dying? Margo’s question was pitched to suggest that she had had contact with Stan, the stress delivered on the ‘know’ and not the ‘dying’. The full sting came in the last part. *He’s asked to see you.* Her senses must have blanked at the time the words were spoken: only later did she recall Margo’s laser gaze across the table.

That same Sunday evening, while helping to clear up in the kitchen, Su had asked her sister how the message arrived. Margo removed from the magnetic memo pad and handed over a folded strip of paper, the torn off top of a headed letter, bearing the details of a rest home.

“Ginny came. She left this.” Ginny, half-sister to Stan and, once or maybe twice a year, unprompted visitor to Mum.

“Good old Ginny, yeh?”

“Yes. Good old Ginny.”

Had it really been only weeks since Margo’s bolt from the blue? It seemed an entire life stage ago, perhaps because there

was where it belonged. Why does the busy, successful woman that is Su Gardeen – a reinvented woman in charge of her own destiny as well as the destiny of others – revert to an unsure subordinate Suzie whenever she enters a particular farmhouse in Derbyshire? Why did she make these trips, anyway? Family duty? A daughter's obligation to her mother? Or a compulsive return to the scene of the crime?

* * * * *

The Willows Residential Care Home was not at all like Su expected. In her imagination, she had seen a large to substantial property standing in its own quiet grounds, with a sweeping arc of a drive round a cluster of graceful willow trees, and a nurse-receptionist to answer the door. Instead, she found the address to be a high broad terraced house set back from a steep urban main road noisy with Saturday traffic. There was not a willow in sight, though neighbouring properties boasted trees of other kinds. Perhaps the willows had been removed to make way for the gravelled forecourt. A faded signboard announced the name of the establishment and, under this, an assurance: *Best residential care for the elderly*.

The journey from the village to this address in a town of only partial familiarity had taken the best part of an hour in pouring rain. It was still raining, though less so, when she parked the car by the side of the road, having decided against pulling in and on to the gravel since there was probably not enough gap between an overflowing builder's skip and a rust-bruised Jaguar. A van, some dismantled scaffolding, and another car occupied the rest of the space. Not knowing for sure whether there was an umbrella in the boot, so not bothering to look, Su pulled her coat collar to her throat and, skirting mats of wet mulchy leaves as if playing a game of hopscotch, joggled to the shallow open porch of the care home. Ignoring the bell push, she tried the door handle and went in.

Su glanced around the entrance hall but found no obvious reception point. On one wall, a notice board contained insurance and other certificates in cellophane sleeves, and a list of instructions to be gone through in case of fire. Besides the board was a bulbous red button marked 'push'. For attention, or to raise an alarm? The other wall held a mirror with browning edges. In the glass, Su adjusted herself, flicking rain from her hair, and made the reflection take a deep breath. Two doors ran off the hallway, left and right. Ahead, the hall turned into an offset corridor that pushed by a staircase fitted with a stairlift. The air carried evidence of old people and disinfectant. A girl, a slim wary teenager dressed in a cleaner's smock and holding a plastic dustpan, emerged from one of the side rooms.

"Can I help you?"

"It's raining, so I let myself in."

"That's all right. Are you looking for someone?"

"Mr Earle. Mr Stanley Earle. I understand he's a resident here. I rang during the week and spoke to a Mrs Fanshawe."

"Oh, you want to see Ron." The girl's face clouded in doubt. "He's out at the moment. He's gone to the wholesalers – but he'll be back soon."

"And Ron is?"

"Ron's the day supervisor."

Behind the girl, the door was ajar. Su could see into part of the room. A row of chairs were backed against a wall as seats might be at a party. Some of the chairs were occupied by expressionless residents looking at a television out of Su's line of sight. The volume was turned up giving range to high pitched American nasal exchanges and glottal yells of a children's cartoon. When the girl realised that Su was looking past her, she pulled the door to.

"Actually, it's Mr Earle I came to see. Is he in?"

"You need to see Ron first. He's in charge."

"Didn't you say Ron is out?"

"He'll be back soon. He won't be long. Watch out for his

car, if you like. It's a maroon Jag." The girl turned to go back into the room. Su spoke with a patience she wasn't feeling.

"There was a maroon Jaguar outside when I arrived. Would that be Ron's?"

"Oh, he must have come back without me noticing." Then, making Su start, a piercing rising "*Ro-on?*" directed along the corridor. "*Someone to see yoo-ou.*" To Su, "He'll be in the kitchen. He'll be along in a minute."

The girl, presumably considering her part over, left the visitor alone in the hall. Su consulted the mirror again. The frame being tall but narrow, an image was returned that appeared less weighty than the real thing. The brown corrosion at the mirror's edges added a touch of old-world charm, like a Victorian photograph.

No Ron arrived. Not wishing a second dialogue with the girl, Su walked quietly along the corridor to the rear of the house, listening out for movement but also curious about what went on in the back. She passed the entrance to a moderately sized dining room empty of diners but occupied by two old ladies, seated opposite each other across a table, playing cards. One, who faced the entrance, looked up at Su and smiled, a head-cocking motion of query.

"I'm looking for Ron."

"I wouldn't bother, if I were you. Save yourself the disappointment, dear." A conspiratorial wink accompanied educated vowels. "Come in. We won't bite you."

Su entered the dining room.

"I'm April and this is May. You're not a June by any chance?"

"No, I'm a Su."

"Well then Su, we're just about to take some tea. Would you like a cup of?"

"Thank you, but I'm just passing through."

"It is made."

"Go on, then. I must say I wouldn't mind one."

May stood at April's nod and disappeared through a swing

double-door in the back wall of the dining room.

“You’ve come to see our Mr Earle, I believe.”

Su turned to April, not sure whether to treat her words as question or statement.

“Don’t be surprised. A visitor here isn’t a secret for long. Are you family?”

“Yes, I am. In a manner of speaking.” She sensed April’s covert scrutiny. “I’m – I was his step-daughter.”

April gave an elongated soft *ah!* which suggested far more information had been transmitted than intended. Su turned to one of the room’s two windows to see trickles of rain distorting the view on to a raised lawn.

A rustle from the corridor heralded the arrival of a small, somewhat top-heavy man perhaps in his late forties, wiping his hands on a small towel.

“Oh, I didn’t know...”

“And hello to Ron. We’re refreshing our visitor with a cup of tea, if that’s all right with you.”

“Yes, yes. I thought...” His restless manner was meant to convey the preciousness of his time.

“The day lounge gets so stuffy. I’ve mentioned it before. This room is much more pleasant. Would you like a cup of tea, Ron?”

Ron ignored the offer. He extended an arm low behind Su, as if to scoop her from the room. Su repeated the purpose of her visit. Comprehension registered on the moon face.

“Yes, of course. To see Mr E, isn’t it. Mrs Fanshawe – she’s the owner – said to expect someone. I’ll take you up.” The man gestured for Su to follow him, the tea abandoned. Ron had a defective leg which demanded that the other leg did the leading, though the imbalance did nothing to impede his pace. Su strode after him, down the corridor and up the stairs. He said something she didn’t catch before stopping abruptly on an intermediate landing and tapping on a stout panelled door bearing the number four.

“Are you decent, Mr E? It’s Ron. You have a visitor.

Someone to see you.”

Without waiting for a response, Ron entered, holding the door back for Su. The voice remained at a level adjusted for penetrating woodwork.

“Now, everything’s all right, Mr E. No need to be disturbed.”

Su found a brown room that smelled of camphor. Brown carpet, brown wallpaper, brown curtains, two dark-wood wardrobes, two cheap beds of the sort that are supported on short plastic legs, an old drop-leaf table with heat marks, and two brown easy chairs. Stan wasn’t brown, not of skin, he was yellow. She didn’t recognise him at first, and wondered fleetingly if there had been a mix up with names. The Stan she remembered was upright and strong. Mr E was shrunken and collapsed, even as he stood from his chair.

Giving his hands another rub with the towel, Ron half whispered to Su through the side of his mouth. “He’s not so well, you know, but bearing up.”

Ron moved aside so Mr E and his visitor could eye each other. Mr E too showed uncertain recognition. Ron was hovering, playing with the towel, before Su caught his eye. He gave a quick little bow like an oriental might perform.

“Look, I’ve got to get on. I’ll be downstairs if you need me, through the back. There’s a pull cord, here, by the bed, in case...”

“Thank you, Ron. I’ll make sure to see you before I leave.”

Su waited until Ron’s uneven treads were gone before stepping forward. Temporarily masking the camphor was a whiff from childhood: Stan had always smelt like a smoker though he did not smoke. Had he started? Was the odour carried from others? Are residents of care homes allowed to smoke? Was it her imagination?

“Hello, Stan.”

“Hello, Suzie.”

“How are you?” It sounded stiff and corny, but originality had deserted her.

“Sit down.” Stan indicated the spare chair as he sank down into his own. He explained that there were two of everything because it was by rights a shared room, though he had had it to himself since the previous winter when the other fellow passed on. The home couldn’t find anybody daft enough to fill the vacancy, Stan said: the little joke to jolly the situation. Back to the question.

“I feel better than I look. Better, I reckon, for not taking the rubbish they’re always wanting to put down me throat. Some days are better than others, and I get out a bit. Not today – it’s more than wet. Look at it. In any case, I knew you were coming, didn’t I.”

Su allowed a thought on how much of the peculiar skin colour was due to not taking the rubbish.

“Where do you go to – when you go out?” She supposed there was nothing else to do in this place other than try to escape it.

“Oh, here and there, you know. The library’s good. It’s not far, just down the hill. You’ll have passed it on your way up. And I have a walk over to the park. I manage the odd bevvy in the *Bull*. Not supposed to, like, but to hang with it, heh?”

“I don’t think the occasional drink will do you any harm.”

Despite his appearance, Stan was not an old man by any means – Su calculated his age as sixty-two. He had always possessed an old man’s manner of speaking, somehow time shifted, as if he belonged to a generation before his own. It now seemed appropriate. They were still taking each other in. It occurred to Su that Stan, too, would see differences in the other person: older by a factor of two, no doubt heavier by a factor of two, finally grown up and responsible.

“So, what are you doing with yourself?” Stan’s first question to her had a guarded tone as if he thought he might cause embarrassment by asking it. The implication disappointed her, but she forced herself to brighten.

“Would you believe, I’m head of community development for an entire city and its surrounds. Made good, I have. Posh

office, name on the door, staff who call me sir. Honestly. Here's my card." Su delved inside her coat, unbuttoned but still around her, for proof that she wasn't exaggerating. Stan read the card carefully.

"Back to Gardeen, then."

"Yep. Gardeen to an Earle, a Porter for ten years, then back to what I was born with. It can stay that way, for me."

"Su, it says here. Do I call you Su?"

"It's an image thing." She looked at him for a second or two before continuing. "It's all right. You can still call me Suzie, if you like."

"I always did."

"That's right, you did." Stan held out the card for her to retrieve but she told him to keep it. It had her office number on, and her email address, she said. He put the card on the table, replying lightly he didn't understand all the business about emails and interwebs and such. At Stan's asking if she was warm enough, and his getting up to twiddle the valve on one of the room's two small central heating radiators, Su slipped off her coat and laid it across her lap. She let the silk scarf hang loose around her neck. Stan checked the other radiator.

"Downstairs gets all the circulation during the day."

He shuffled to a corner of the room; on a shelf were things ready for making tea. They talked about nothing either would remember while he carried out his hostly task. Su glanced at her watch, and was instantly annoyed at breaking her resolve not to. Stan brought the drinks – teabags floating in cups on saucers – with a plate of plain biscuits to the table on an unsteady tray. He declined his guest's offer of help. Su ate a biscuit, fished the teabag from the cup with a spoon, added milk and sugar, stirred the tea, then nibbled at another biscuit. Stan used the string to remove his teabag. Both were lost in thought for a few moments. It was now or never, Su told herself. The time had come. Deep breath.

"Stan. I'm sorry, for – you know. I just want you to know."

Stan stared at her, a haunted look. She couldn't tell what emotions backed it. Maybe he thought her words sounded hollow. Could he hate her so much? The sick man's eyes seem to compress years of reflection. Stan moved his head first to one side then to the other, a slow emphatic movement, his mouth open.

“No, no, Angel. *I'm* the one who should be saying sorry. That's the truth. If we just had chance of our time over again – eh?”

Stan's use of 'angel' momentarily stung Su. Stan had probably not mouthed the private name since she last heard it from him. He, too, seemed uncomfortable. Neither spoke. There, in the indifferently heated brown room, yellow Stan in his baggy navy-blue trousers and lumberjack shirt and beige woollen cardigan with its stretched-elbow sleeves; and Su, flushed in face, blinking behind her sky-tinted lenses, nursing her black coat and plucking at the tail of her violet scarf as if together the garments formed a corpulent sleeping cat – in that room the word acted as a code between them. A code to say nothing. As it had once before.

3

Stan's special word stalked Su through the remainder of the weekend and into the new week where, in the very different context of the agency's regularly held Start of Week meeting, it was once more to step out in front of her.

"What about the Angel Parade, this year?"

Geri spoke without looking up from her papers. Brisk, businesslike, more authoritative by the meeting, Geri was consciously or unconsciously modelling herself on her superior. Tinged lenses in full frames; ear ornamentation that had undergone steady expansion from stud to mini-mace; a hair style trimmed boyishly short, though not lesbian severe. There was no weight sensitivity, no regular announcement of an as-never-before regime of dieting from Geri, however. She remained a slimline version of her superior, a feature which could emphasise the excess poundage of the head of agency whenever the two were in close proximity. Such proximity, at least in staff meetings, was avoided on the grounds that the taker of the meeting's minutes should sit at the far end of the group: if the scribe can hear what is going on, then so can everyone present. On the other hand, the officer equipped with all the facts and figures should sit at the Chair's right hand – this officer taking the bulky bear-like form of Roger.

Another difference between head and PA was that Geri acted sexually straight, though she was perfectly broad-minded about girls on girls. Having no particular man in her life, Geri was a clubber, and she liked to pull. Su would josh her, calling her unenlightened, saying there would come the time.

"Same as last Christmas?" Geri prompted, giving her pen a couple of taps on the notepad and looking up. "I've already

primed all parties concerned.”

“Yes. No. Bigger. It’s growing a bit stale. Make this one a one to be remembered. I know – let’s have another minor celeb, if there’s still time. I’m sure someone or other’ll be available. Will the budget run to it?”

Roger said it would, with a bit of juggling.

“And can we make sure everyone’s on message with this one, right from the starting grid, yeh?” Su was making a reference to an item on the previous week’s agenda, a report on a recent event organised by Community Advance in which the agency had not, in her opinion, received full and proper credit.

At the beginning of autumn, Su had announced, through the local newspaper, in an article accompanied by a picture which depicted her dressed in outdoors garb and holding separately a Catherine wheel and rocket, that fireworks are potentially dangerous and cause many injuries each year. In response to growing concerns over the risks, Community Advance were to supervise a spectacular public display to celebrate the Fifth of November. She said very much the same on the region’s FM radio station. When a listener rang in during the live broadcast to ask whether the agency would support a ban on the sale of fireworks over shop counters during the weeks in the run-up to Bonfire Night, this so that peace-loving residents – especially the elderly – would not have to endure a nightly hell of loud noises, Su replied that the caller should contact the council’s consumer affairs department. Only later did she learn the council, not wishing to be seen as thwarting retail trade, had expressed its opposition to the idea of restricting the early sale of fireworks. The nightly hell turned out to be more protracted than for previous years. So bad was it in one neighbourhood that the newspaper ran the problem as a leader. The paper had contacted shops which sold fireworks and, when these reported that sales were up, made the suggestion that premature announcement of organised

displays serves only to increase the period of antisocial bangs. Although the display itself had been a visual success, there was a feeling within the agency that the handling of the event's promotion had somewhat back-fired.

Su felt on safe ground with the Angel Parade. Four years earlier, the first event, organised by ATC North, had been opened by a minor actress from a television soap and supported by a local pop group desiring to give an airing to their debut single. School children dressed as angels, holding sparklers and singing carols, had taken pre-Christmas cheer through the centre of the estate watched by a good turn-out of residents. Over the holiday period, a laser beam in the likeness of an angel played up and down the front face of a tower block. But even minor actresses and nascent pop groups are expensive for community budgets. Subsequent Christmases retained the parade and the laser display, while performers were replaced by speech-prone ward councillors.

"Did you have anyone specific in mind?" Geri asked. Su took a moment to register the question.

"There's what's-his-name, the funny man – appearing in panto here after Christmas."

Geri supplied the name.

"I like him. I've seen him on television. See if you can get hold of his agent, will you?"

An okay from Geri.

"And find a DJ who doesn't mind the cold. Do it asap – we're running out of year. Next item. And it's over to you, Cliff. The Angel Parade's all right by you, yeh? Does it show in your field of interests?"

Cliff was present by invitation, to submit a case in his capacity as a young people's activities adviser. His knowledge of the workings of Community Advance was limited. Su had seen no reason why he could not sit in on some of the meeting's business, to give him an idea of the way CA did things. It would, she said, give him a chance to adjust to personalities and to dispel any fears he might have that the

CA team would try to bamboozle him. The man – late twenties or early thirties; boldly bespectacled; wearing the green windcheater with orange stripes that he had arrived in on his bicycle though had since unfastened to reveal a white sweatshirt that begged to carry a slogan but was blank; whiff of cheap aftershave; the archetypal honest and ardent campaigner type – cleared his throat.

“Not really – my focus is teen youth – but I personally think it’s a good idea. I’m often on the estate – my sister lives there – and I saw a bit of the parade last year. I was surprised that no copies of the photographs taken of the children were available. It’s possible that some parents would like a permanent record of the event.”

“That’s to prevent paedophiles getting hold of them. It’s necessary, I’m afraid.”

“An over-reaction, though, isn’t it?”

“I don’t think so. Anyway, there’s nothing to stop people taking their own photographs, if they wish.”

“Including paedophiles, presumably.” Cliff seemed to realise he was digging a hole for himself. His task was to win hearts and minds, not to get under fingernails. He signified this purpose by continuing in a formal tone.

“The recent opening of the Hadley Centre is of course to be warmly welcomed. It’s an important milestone for youth in the northern area of the city, and I’m proud to be involved. However, my colleagues are concerned that the centre will consume most of the youth activities budget and that local community drop-ins may be lost as a result.”

The Hadley Centre was a high profile project, one of the largest that Community Advance had so far been partner to. Su had put in the hours to help deliver it from political rhetoric to community reality. Although there was no cause to doubt its long-term success, the centre was still in a sensitive start-up phase. Any criticism, direct or indirect, had to be headed off.

“The Hadley Centre has all the facilities young people need

– we’ve all made sure of that. You, Cliff, were in at the consultation stage. Community drop-ins simply don’t have the facilities. It’s sensible to channel the funding towards the facilities, yeh?”

But Cliff was not for heading off.

“Young people are tribal. They have their own territories. They need their own places to hang out. It’s a mistake to expect them to travel distances and then to take part in planned activities when all they want to do is relax on their own patch and do their own thing, you know? Attempts to direct them into a centralised venue and close their regular meeting places can be counter-productive. The consequence is that more young people are on the street, bored and getting into trouble.”

Su sought the roots. “Who told you drop-ins might close, Cliff?”

“The word is strong among the community centres that the aggregate funding to them is to be slashed next year – possibly by as much as twenty per cent. The worry is young people’s activities might be curtailed.”

“Who on earth starts these potty rumours?”

“Is this a rumour? Can you say categorically that there will not be cuts?”

A sigh from Su, a sigh that said senior management really did not have time to listen to every rumour doing the rounds. A sigh that gave Geri a chance to interject. She addressed the visitor.

“Efficiency savings that have been made throughout the year translate through as budget adjustments. These are not cuts as such. Nothing is being squeezed out, if that’s what you mean.”

Thank you, Geri. That should have been Susu’s line. Grab the reigns back, Su.

“It’s true community funding is under review. All budgets are reviewed, each year. It would be gross dereliction of responsibility if they weren’t. No decisions are made until

everything can be looked at, so the rumours are just coughed-out air – nothing more.”

The visitor did not appear convinced. Su continued.

“CA is not responsible for service budgets of the kind we’re talking about, Cliff. Like yours, our role is to advise. We look at the situation from all angles, we listen to the people concerned – like we’re listening to you, today – and we advise. I take on board all you say, and your comments will be included in our recommendations to the relevant authorities. Did you get that, Geri?”

It sounded sharp. Both Cliff and Geri shot a glance to the top of the table. Roger pursed his lips. Su replied to all three with a smile – not mechanical or managerial or facetious or forced but one from the genuine winning smile collection.

“Don’t look so worried, Cliff. Your case is in good hands.”

The honest and ardent representative of the city’s young people did not return the smile.

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“And the great news is I can make good even gooder.”

“How’s that?”

Still smiling, Su scanned faces again to ensure she had everyone’s attention.

“Well, what have we got. We have the Hadley Centre providing a wonderful range of facilities in a state-of-the-art environment. I don’t think anyone would disagree with that. From the point of view of the young person’s activities budget, it offers excellent value for money – or it will when up to speed – and therefore there are no grounds for increasing the budget. Don’t forget, the YPA budget has only to meet one part of the centre’s operational costs, and none of the building costs.”

“I appreciate that.” Cliff with knowledgeable precision quoted the contribution expected from youth services, and meant to continue. “The point is —”

“And then we have the council, the major funder of community services. It’s common knowledge that the council

have fouled up on their forecasts again. So what's new – yeh? Central government is breathing hard down the council's neck and the only way forward for the council is for them to look for greater efficiencies.”

“You mean to make cuts.”

“I mean not to duplicate activities.”

The visitor looked confused.

“But you said you could help.”

Leaning back and putting her hands on the table surface at the end of straight arms as if to steady a capricious chair, Su switched to an expression of pronouncement. Cliff waited – he was unfamiliar with the technique. Nothing happened. Seconds went by as words seemed to be mentally selected only to be discarded. Suddenly, with a light clap of both palms on the surface, Su leaned forward as if about to stand.

“Why don't we have some refreshment? Geri – could you?”

Geri nodded obediently and made for the door. Roger said he had to take a walk to the end of the corridor. Monique, the office manager, said she had something to check on and would be back soon. Su and Cliff were left alone. By the time tea and coffee and fruit juice and biscuits arrived, and everyone had returned, the honest and ardent representative from youth services, in his green windcheater with orange flashes, had agreed that Community Advance, having not just the ear of the council but also a hand on its crotch, should act as grant securing agent for his organisation.

At first, Cliff had struggled with doubt. It seemed he might decline the offer. But Su, in their privacy, had assured him that this was not just another layer of bureaucracy, nor a stick poked into someone else's pie to make CA look good. To back the words with deed, she herself would join the youth services board – if they would have her. She would take the utmost care not to step on other members' toes in matters of policy or process – her role would be to apply some serious clout in discussions on funding held with the council and

other sources. Community Advance would do everything in its power to ensure that local provision of young people's activities would remain untouched by council predation. Cliff said he personally saw the advantage of having the head of the region's umbrella agency on side, and felt sure the board would agree to the proposal. But he also sought clarification. What exactly would be in it for Community Advance? Was not the agency committed to championing the Hadley Centre above all other youth facilities? And how could personal participation by the head of agency be justified?

These were perfectly valid questions, Su had replied, with another sample from the winning smile collection, and she was glad he had asked them. CA's remit covered the interests of every section of the community in as many ways possible. Yes, the Hadley Centre was an important milestone for youth – Cliff's own words – but the opening of the complex shouldn't be at the expense of other means of contact. CA existed to offer support at every level. And the agency was only too pleased to do so. She, Su, made it a point to add the personal touch in these matters. Things tended to happen faster when she was in the picture.

Then the close. Looking the visitor in the face, Su had pushed her hands in clenched union over the table top towards him. In lots of cases, advice and support are given freely, she said, adopting a confidential tone. This is usually when the client is a small, very localised group with no income to speak of. In other cases, such as registered bodies, semi-official organisations, and auxiliary services – like youth activities – a scale is applied, depending on the extent of involvement, to cover expenses.

Cliff opened his mouth to speak but Su continued without a pause. She explained that on every single occasion that the agency had so far been asked to help as regards the grants securing process, the outcome had been successful. No client, the representative of youth had been assured, ever lost out with Community Advance. All he needed to do was trust her.

Later, Geri and Su together.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Why do you ask?”

“You weren’t entirely with it first thing.”

“Was I not?”

“No. But you made up for it later. Like the man said, you’re a star.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

This was said pleasantly: Su was pleased with the outcome of the Start of Week meeting. Geri fussed around her.

“You landed Cliff, didn’t you? Brought him on board.”

“A bit prickly around the edges, that one. He doesn’t know us properly yet. Give him chance, poor lad.”

The head of agency had an office that was light and spacious and modern, as befitted her position. The PA had an office that too was light and modern, though it could claim only half the floor area, and a lot of that was filled by office hardware. The head of agency’s office had, by its window, two substantial desks placed back to back, so that sitters at each faced one another. One desk, its top strewn with paperwork, represented the very seat of agency executive power. The other, its burden of paper arranged in tidy rectangles, had initially been installed in order to accommodate overspill. Geri used the overspill desk more often than her own in the adjoining room: role model and slimmer imitator seated on opposite sides of a paper-dominated expanse of mahogany. There was little that Geri was not privy to in the daily official life of her boss, and she did her best – though considerably less successfully – to attain a similar measure of knowledge about the boss’s private life. As now.

“What sort of weekend did you have?”

“Oh, just the normal run. Nothing to bowl me over. Why?”

“Just wondered. As I said, you were a bit off, this morning. I thought you might be coming down with the bug that’s

doing the rounds.”

“No. My health is in perfectly good health, like me. Good of you to ask, though.”

“I worry about you.”

The direct line phone rang from under some papers. Su gave a curl of the mouth but made no other movement so Geri pulled the instrument out and answered.

“Community Advance.”

No personal element such as *Geri speaking, how may I help you?* Su didn't favour that degree of intimacy with someone whose identity was yet to be revealed, and discouraged the practice. Geri put her hand over the mouthpiece.

“It's Fee, for you.”

Another twist of the mouth from Su.

“Shall I tell her —”

“No. Let's do it.”

The receiver changed hands.

“Yes, sweetie. What's your little local difficulty this time?”

The PA continued with the task of sorting through documents, sometimes adding a comment with a click-action pencil, occasionally looking up to catch her boss's grimace.

“I hope you told him we don't do that sort of thing and warned him a refusal often offends before you refused and offended him...He's still there?...Hey, I don't want him *here*...Well, tell him the answer's no, that's N, O – the consonant comes before the vowel...Oh, never mind...Yes, all right, put him on.”

The receiver crossed the desks again, Su hissing, “It's Santa Claus again – be nice but just really get rid of him, will you.”

Geri concluded in three minutes that which Fee had failed to achieve in what was probably the best part of an afternoon.

“Thanks, Geri.”

“It's my job.”

They both smiled and worked at the documents for a while until Su spoke again, with a comedy routine inflection.

“Ge-eri?”

“Ye-es?”

“I’ve been thinking, Geri. You – em – wouldn’t like to spend a couple of days at ATC North, would you? Putting some shine on Fee.”

“I thought you did that.”

“I don’t mean that sort of shine. I mean some basic skills on running an outreach office that she appears to be rusting up on.”

“You know I don’t like that place.”

“It’s not there to be liked. I’m asking you as a favour, actually.”

“I will if I must.”

“I think you must.”

Over dinner at home, Fee complained. After dinner, Fee complained. During the television late news Fee complained. She even tried to enlist support from Ellis, who wasn’t biting. Su was adamant: she explained to the girl that Geri would only be with her for a couple of days – three days at the most. Fee was still complaining when Su led her upstairs. Ellis sipped his whisky, musing over Su’s moments of distraction since returning from Derbyshire, and why she wanted Geri out of the way.

Had Su been able to shut herself in her office, cut off from the world outside, disconnected from all means of telecommunication, relieved completely for a while of the contractual commitment to develop disadvantaged communities, she would have done so. Since that was not possible, and an absence from the office would have invited the need for explanation, she orchestrated the next best thing. Geri away from the overspill desk; Fee’s twice daily crises sorted on the spot by Geri; Indira, on reception, instructed to deflect all but the most exciting calls; Roger buried under piles of legal stuff; and group meetings postponed for any reason that sounded a quarter convincing. With the space

these arrangements won her, Su got down to some serious non-motorway thinking. Ellis, sensing something was on her mind, held the domestic fort like a trooper, not once pushing his curiosity at her. Fee entered a sullen mood, proving she could still act the door-slamming teenager, but Su knew that would lift as soon as Fee had her crises back. Surely.

It was the first occasion in her life Su had taken time out to unpick her mind like this. Su had always believed hers was a brain wired for making decisions on the hoof, knowing instinctively what was the best course of action in the context of the moment. Better to strike while everything is clear, and sod the consequences. She had read somewhere that thinking things through was a waste of time: if there is an obvious net benefit to be had from a particular option, then the decision is as good as made; and when there is little difference in gain from the various options, then it does not matter which of them is chosen.

Her methods had served her well. She was nicely in front, had a lot going for her. So, there must have been more good decisions than bad, yeh? Life had rewarded her, presented her with success, surrounded her with willing people, and had gift-wrapped it all by the death of an old maid of an aunt who, for reasons no one could fathom, though over which the rest of the family would fume ever more, had left near enough her entire secret hoard to dear little Suzie.

Was it right, this reward? Had she deserved it? Ellis had explained to her, during one of his intellectual rambles over a bottle of good wine, the notion that fate happens without recourse to a prescriptive set of rules. A person receives as a result of the greater world contingency regardless of what is individually deserved. He had been talking about wins on the National Lottery, but his words had helped clear her own moral balance sheet.

Su's purpose for sitting undisturbed at her desk, trying out a new way of thinking, was therefore not to contemplate the accidents of good fortune. It was the desire to improve her

performance on life's stage, to fine tune the success machine. Su was aware of a particular fault within her character, perhaps a fundamental flaw. It weakened her while she wanted to be ever stronger. The fault was that of not being able to square up to the past. You can ignore the baggage of history as it spreads about at your feet, threatening to trip you. You can detach yourself from all sense of responsibility, instead transferring the blame to others. You can pardon yourself of all guilt, and shower self-forgiveness on everything not already forgotten. But there is a cost. By not being able to face your own past, you risk missed chapters. It means the book of life can never fully be read, and you cannot hope to be complete. Su's purpose was to make her book whole.

Christmas came and joyously went, the New Year boisterously born; January was out, and May had died. April told her. It was a sad loss, April said, but the Lord had other duties for her – if you believed in that twaddle. As on Su's first visit to the Willows, Ron had had to be called by a junior member of staff, and waited for, before she could go up to Stan's room. Stan looked weaker, but he insisted they go for a walk round the park. Su warned him there was a chill to the wind despite the sunshine but Stan replied he no longer felt the cold. He said with a lightness born of resignation that he regarded each walk in the fresh air as possibly his last.

They sat for a while on a park bench, screened from the breeze by a tall hedge. Children played and whooped within a compound of playground furniture made uninterestingly safe by the fear of legal claims for injury. Su imagined this would be a favourite seat with Stan. She asked him, gently, about prison.

"If you keep your nose clean, hold your corner in the showers, let the screws beat you at draughts, it's bearable, I suppose."

"Did anyone give you a hard time because of – you know?"

"Because of what I was sent down for? No. No one knew,

really.”

“Oh?”

“No. You see, it’s all down to the screws. If they think you’re guilty, then you’re in for it. They make sure you have a bloody hard time. I’ve seen it. But if they think you’ve been unlucky, you don’t deserve to be there, then things soon settle down. There was no *true* evidence against me, was there now. Not like, say, a stack of loot found at a burglar’s.”

Su inhaled, deeply. “No. No true evidence.”

Stan lifted his tone. “They let me work in the kitchen. All sorts of perks.”

“That was good. Where you in a special wing?”

“Nah. Only for a few weeks. They needed the room. I wasn’t a risk to myself. I wasn’t a danger to others. Leastways, not in there.”

She turned to him, adjusting her mouth while she found the safest words, but he returned her look and cut her short.

“We’re not going all through the ‘sorry’ business again, are we?”

She smiled. “Not like that, no. But I am sorry, nevertheless.”

“I messed up your life, Suzie – your younger life. I shall never forgive myself for that. My time inside was my punishment. I deserved it. I’m just pleased to see that you’ve made all right now.”

“You didn’t mess up my younger life, Stan. I did that all by my own.”

A child, a girl of perhaps ten, approached them.

“Cuse me. Have you got any change you could lend me for an ice cream? I lost all my money on the swings.”

Su answered.

“It’s too cold for ice cream. Have you had a good look for you money, near the swings? You can get your friends to help you.”

At the blue-tinted glare that accompanied the advice, the girl shrugged her shoulders and wandered off. Su took hold

of Stan's arm. "C'mon, I'll treat you to a pint, if you feel up to it."

In the pub, only part filled by a huddle at one end of the bar preparing for an afternoon of Saturday televised sport, Stan asked after Mum. He had asked on Su's first visit. Su repeated the previous reply, that Mum seemed content in her own little world.

"Your mother went through purgatory when..."

"I know."

"She —"

"What?" Coaxing.

"She was on her way before all the business, you know. She was seeing a doctor. I'd noticed the signs. Hah! — I can remember her mowing that little patch of grass at the front of the house late one night, holding a torch in one hand. And wanting me to take her to do the week's shop only the day after we'd already done it. She had a thing about soap — we ended up with a cupboard full of the stuff — remember? I don't know, I reckon the court do must've been the last straw."

Su took a drink, chasing the unrequested ice cube with her tongue. Mum's was a rare form of dementia. Early onset familial Alzheimer's, apparently. Passed down the generations on a duff gene. Mum's own mother had for a time been committed to an institution. Mum too was lodged in an institution, in a manner of speaking: the Meredith household, chief custodian Margo. Anyhow, the Gardeen sperm seemed to have been sound. Su trusted so.

"Yes, it wasn't a good time for any of us."

Stan, seemingly having nothing to add, sipped at his beer. Su continued.

"The situation got out of hand. I didn't mean it to go the way it did — it took on a life of its own."

"That's enough. I don't want to hear no more about it, if you don't mind, Suzie."

"All right. If you say so."

Margo had heated some mulled wine. It smelt delicious, and tasted delicious. She asked after Stan in the distracted tone she reserved for strangers, and sometimes for Su.

“He’s bearing up. We went for a walk.”

“How nice for you both.”

They were in the kitchen, after the evening meal, which Su had given her absence for. Mum stood at the double sink, washing up, often the same plate or cup twice over. Margo had entrusted the task to her instead of slotting the crockery on racks in the cavernous dishwasher. No knives or forks, Su noticed. Estelle appeared, ostensibly to collect an apple. An attractive slim girl, she was dressed in jeans that did not completely cover her bum cleavage when she bent over, and a top that displayed her midriff when she straightened up.

“Is it all right if I go to Allie’s?”

“Hmm. I’m not exactly transported into higher rapture by the prospect.”

“Oh, please!”

“Very well. Don’t be late back. You know what happened last time.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

Mum watched the fifteen-year-old skip from the room.

“There’s always a palaver.”

Margo checked the sink. “There is, Mum, you’re right.”

Su asked to which family in the village Allie belonged. Allison’s, Margo replied, was one of the new families. The adjective was used locally to describe any family that had moved into the village during the last twenty or so years. By the definition, some three-quarters of the village’s families were new. The village had been demographically a much smaller place when Su was Estelle’s age. Unlike Estelle, the early-teen Suzie would never have thought to ask before going out. Indeed, rarely was she in. Suzie left school with four indifferent GCSEs the same year as Margaret entered university. One sister went up to Durham to learn applied

psychology while the other went down to the bus shelter to instruct on finger fucking.

“Margo. I’d like to talk to you about something. Later, in private.” Su emphasised the last part by a jerk of the head towards the kitchen sink. The request might have been – was expected to be – a brusque ‘What about?’ or a difficult ‘There is nothing to be said that Mum can’t hear.’ Instead, Margo cast her eyes down to the bowl of fruit she was delicately rearranging after Estelle’s assault.

“Yes. All right.”

Another Monday, another Start of Week meeting. Another lamb to the fold. This time, Community Advance was to champion late literacy, to advance the case for additional money with which to hold classes that hoped to improve the standard of reading and writing among citizens who were deemed to have reached adulthood without noticing the disadvantage in not possessing these skills. Also, Geri, her half week spell at ATC North over, had reclaimed the overspill desk, to find there was a lot to catch up on.

“That makes,” she said, counting, “eighteen opted in all. We’re getting there.” The term ‘opted’ referred to a community group or organisation that had agreed, like Cliff’s, to allow the agency to present applications to the various funding authorities on the group’s behalf.

“Keep on trucking, yeh?”

“One small snag, though.”

“Like what?” Su glanced across the white sea.

“We’re running out of fielders. *You* can’t be everywhere; *I* can’t be; Roger has other things to do; Monique has her young family; Indira *doesn’t want* to be everywhere; Jeannine says she —”

“Okay, okay, I get the picture. Too much like work.”

“Too much like *after hours* work. Many of our client groups only come out at night.”

“I guess so. Any ideas?”

This was the line the PA was waiting for. Geri grabbed her chance.

“Well, you remember last week, when you sent me north into no-man’s land?”

“I know it well. They say the deprivation’s at its best this time of year.”

“The thing is, ATC North is falling apart. I don’t mean the building, though that as well.”

“Roger’s on the look-out for new premises.”

“I mean the organisation. Fee is – well, I don’t want to hurt touchy feelings here, but —”

“Bloody useless.”

Geri gave a short humourless laugh. “Revolution’s in the air. We’re going to lose some good people if we’re not careful.”

“Where would they go? We’re the only game in town.”

“To social services, for one. To health. To other parts of the country. We may be the only community development game in town, but we ain’t the only town. Actually, there’s a lot going on out there.”

“I know, I know. Just testing.” Su sent a smile over.

“Perhaps we could hit two birds with one stone. What if Fee were to —”

“I’m way ahead of you. Fee out of ATC North; Monique in; Fee on the road as rep; all our problems solved. Right?”

A cheerful nod from the overspill desk. “Yes. That’d do it.”

“Do you think Fee would be up to raising passions here there and everywhere?”

“As a matter of fact, I think she would. She has the party line patter, it’s her – her lack of authority that lets her down.”

“Like she hasn’t got any.”

“The people working under her don’t take her seriously. She uses your name as a threat on nearly every occasion.”

“Big Bad Su?”

“I would rather not say what they call you.”

“I would rather not know, thank you.”

The phone rang. Reaching out to it, but before lifting the receiver, Su was crisp and managerial, a response that Geri admired.

“Yep. The idea’s a success already. Let’s go for it.”

* * * * *

Not so late in the same day’s evening, they went up to the Chamber. Fee was in high spirits, delighted to be departing ATC North and excited to be given the chance to spread the gospel, as she put it. She was willing to get drunk, to take a tablet, to do anything Su wanted her to do. As she rolled and turned on the bed in her underwear, Su sat at the dressing table, fully clothed, cleaning the plastic-rubber penis with a baby wipe. Presently, Su stood before the wardrobe and withdrew a large plastic bag from its floor, which she took over to the bed.

“I’d like to try something new.”

“Sounds cool to me.”

One by one, Su removed four cords from the bag. Each length, of red braided nylon, had at one end a stout black padded restraining strap and buckle.

“We need to fit these up.” In a public announcement voice, she added, “Please be patient. Abnormal service will be resumed as soon as possible. In the meantime, please feel free to view our other products.”

Drawing the bemused Fee out across the bed in the style of a letter X, Su pulled the straps through their buckles, first around the girl’s wrists, then around her ankles. When all the straps were fastened, she tugged each cord towards an upright of the bed canopy, wound it twice round, and tied it securely.

“There. That’s about in the middle.” She checked for slack in the cords.

“Nice and tight. You’re not going anywhere for a while.”

Su changed unhurriedly into a plunging black leotard with red trimming. She replied to questions from the bed in

non-listening monosyllables as she positioned the video camera. After some bodily caressing, which brought Fee out in gooseflesh, Su produced a pair of dressmaker's scissors and wielded them about as if preparing a ritual. With the girl below her looking a little apprehensive, the mistress carefully snipped at the tie between bra cups, drawing the light blue garment from under the body and dropping it on to the carpet. The scissors moved down and clipped away at the side bands of pale pink briefs. There was protest from the bed.

In his chair in the lounge, Ellis sat back with a tumbler of whisky to watch the flat-screen television which displayed an image sent by the Chamber's camera. The picture was pleasingly crisp.

* * * * *

Su formally introduced Monique, their new team leader, to the staff of ATC North. The frizzy-haired befreckled red-head was hiding any nervousness she may have felt. Monique had been in community development for almost a decade and knew the administration routines as well as anyone, but had not seen much of the grass roots. A spell of fronting ATC North would, in Su's opinion, change that. And Monique's supervisory skills would no doubt be welcome at ATC North in the wake of Fee's fumbles.

After a morning of familiarisation with the office and its personnel, Su took Monique on a car drive round the estate. During her own time as team leader, Su considered the estate to be totally toilet. It had gone downhill since. The neighbourhood centre was a complete mess. Demolition of homes to make way for the approach road to a new health centre had been completed the year before but site clearance had proceeded no further than the formation of hills of debris. On the proposed site for the new structure, some trenches had been dug, to be filled with rainwater and supermarket trolleys. Any safety fencing erected round the

initial excavations was gone, no doubt sold for scrap. Residents from the eastern half of the estate were obliged to follow a roughly surfaced path between the trenches in order to reach the neighbourhood centre. At the centre itself, the single-storeyed shop units were as unappealing as ever, and the wooden community centre pleaded to be put out of its misery. Only the existing health centre, to be vacated in the near future, looked at all maintained. A burnt-out car sat on the shopping centre car park. Some children, to whom school was apparently no more than an option, were busy dismantling a second vehicle, abandoned, possibly stolen, but not yet offered up to the flames.

Su pulled to a stop, leaving the engine running. Monique scanned the scene, then spoke.

“Blair’s Britain.”

“Don’t *you* start.” When Ellis lived on the estate, he had been the driving force behind a group calling itself Arcade whose members hoped to act as the voice of the community in a scheme to improve the neighbourhood hub. Su realised Monique, whose brow expressed puzzlement at the response, would not be aware of Ellis’s involvement.

“You remember back at the office, a group called Arcade was mentioned?”

“Yes, they’re the group campaigning for regeneration, aren’t they?”

“That’s right,” nodded Su.

“Well, they’ve certainly got their work cut out, that’s all I can say.”

“The new health centre *is* on its way – I’ve seen the model. It’s bound to attract better shops. And a new community hall’s been promised.”

“Before the present one falls down, I hope.”

“It’s a PPP project, that’s why there’s a delay.” Su could hear herself promoting the idea as if to a community group, which annoyed her.

“Sounds like a stutter.”

“Public – private —”

“I know what it means. Pathetic partial performance.”

The Monique surveying the run-down neighbourhood centre was not the Monique that had worked at Community Advance head office. In just over half a day’s exposure at the coalface, the woman was beginning to sound like an activist. Su slipped the car into gear.

“Anyhow, none of this affects our work.”

“No. We’re just here to pick up the pieces.”

Su turned to Monique, momentarily giving the woman one of her glares.

“You do want this position, don’t you, Monique?”

“Yes, of course I do, Su. I’m looking forward to it. I need to reconnect with the reality of our work.”

The words were right but the tone was somehow wrong. Su let it pass. A touch of culture shock. Monique would be able to reconnect with all the reality she ever wanted on this estate.

“Don’t let it get to you, that’s all. Do the best you can – you can’t do more than that. You know what your responsibilities are, and you know what CA’s mission is. I’m just a telephone call away, day or night. You have my number.”

Chicken casserole from the kitchen of Ellis. And a decent wine, one of a consignment purchased through a Sunday glossy. Ellis asked how Monique had done on her first day. She’ll be fine, Su replied. Fee told them about her first day. That, too, had gone well. She had chosen a desk from the catalogue of Office Supplies and had managed to ‘bag’ the nearly new computer left behind by Monique. Her appointment book was at the ready and her Christian Year calendar on the wall. She couldn’t wait to go and look at cars, as Su had said they would, later in the week. When Fee left to take a bath, Ellis told Su they should find time to go over the home budget together, sooner rather than later. They discussed the meal they would serve the Mainses for dinner at the weekend. The Mainses were honoured guests.

4

Ellis tries to establish the model and year of the vehicle which conveys the principal guest and his partner, but all he is able to discern over bobbing shoulders entering the hallway is the vague outline of a recreational four-by-four. It is not parked on the roadway nor, as it could have been, in the drive by the side of the house or the yard behind, but has been driven – contrary to the requests of regularly spaced notices erected by the parish council – on to the grass of the village green.

“Andrea, you already know Ellis, I think.”

“Hi, Andrea. We met at the Brighter Lights launch.”

“Yes, that’s right, we did.”

Ellis shakes a willing hand. Andrea is a tall teathy thirty-something with a good figure and a spontaneous personality. It is Andrea’s turn to introduce her male, which she does proudly.

“This is Craig, everyone.”

“A-hello.”

Ellis shakes a dutiful hand. House of Gardeen protocol demands that Su should be the first to be addressed, but Craig is not to know. After her own welcome, Su brings forward Fee. Andrea gives Fee a smile of familiarity, leaving Craig to perform a tactile greeting, an action which draws both his hands.

The arrivals are shown into the lounge where Lucy and Simon, and a couple who live in the village – a headteacher and his wife, who is also a teacher, but not at the same school – await introduction. Ellis serves drinks to the newcomers, then excuses himself to check on the kitchen while Su engages the guests in small talk. A few minutes later, Ellis rejoins the group, but only to stand at the edge. He is not yet

ready for conversation. Here, just inches away from him stands the figure of Craig Mains. Average height and build; dressed in a thin brown leather jacket over a cream roll-neck vest, with dark cords slightly short at the ankle, and white socks in brown slip-on shoes. At first glance he looks to be a young man made older by facial growth, but closer inspection identifies an older man somehow made younger by the same designer stubble. The hair, though long, does not conceal completely a top going thin. A free-thinker, they who know him are said to say; a mind always active and occasionally elsewhere. A true intellectual of the alternate school; and every bit the caricature.

“It’s almost ready. A few minutes more should do it. Perhaps we can go through to the dining room.”

“Certainly smells good,” someone compliments.

The meal is under way. Su leads the conversation through starters, giving a lightweight overview of the burdens of office. Ellis knows she is tense behind the chatter, and that she will want to stay with familiar territory. The women respond while the men affect to listen. Gradually, wider topics are introduced, until talk reaches the possibility of war in the Middle East. The consensus is that an American invasion of Iraq will go ahead, that there is certain to be an Arab backlash, that the price of oil is bound to shoot through the roof, that a great mistake is about to be made.

With the main course served, Andrea makes an announcement, the one they suppose they are waiting for.

“Craig has just finished his latest book.”

The principal guest takes the cue with rehearsed ease.

“It’s true. The manuscript will soon be winging its way to my publisher. Not a living manuscript as such – a sterile print-out with CD backup. It can’t be nearly so exciting to receive at the other end, but there you go.”

Ellis excuses himself to attend to a bleeping timer in the kitchen. He returns to realise that Craig is talking not about

his latest work but a book published some two years previous, a title that sold in sufficient numbers for it briefly to show on the best-sellers chart. Ellis has recently bought a copy, a paperback edition. When, earlier in the day, Su said he must get Craig to write on the inner cover, Ellis told her that one corner of the book had caught the water as he read it in the bath, and the paper was crinkled. It might be considered rude to present a soiled copy. The book currently lies on Ellis's bedside table, beside Mandeville, with a page marker inserted at roughly two-thirds through. Ellis has mentally condensed whole sections.

Man has achieved his position at the top of the Tree of Being by a neat evolutionary trick. Natural selection for all other species is essentially a passive process. Environmental challenge is something that 'happens' to the species population, delivered from outside and imposed blindly on individuals or clusters within the population. An individual may survive because it is physically equipped to meet the challenge, or it may perish because it is not. Those that survive carry with them the correct genetic template by which to produce an improved stock, improved in the sense that subsequent generations have a higher probability of being endowed with the particular feature that equips them to counter the challenge. The drawback to this system of natural selection is that, where there is no environmental challenge, there is no evolutionary change. The species does not progress. It becomes marooned in time. Relatively speaking, it loses position on the Tree of Being. Man, however, has developed a unique means by which to ensure continual progress. It is the capacity for self-culling, for selectively removing the less progressive elements of his own species.

The basic animal brain is wired so as to not bring certain death to its own kind; to instead have the

creatures posture and make noises, to resolve disputes and establish precedence with the least physical damage inflicted on the contending parties. This protects the species, though arguably it also holds the species back. Some researchers believe the violent ape that is Man is some sort of an evolutionary aberration. Not so – indeed, the opposite is true. Man’s brain has advanced substantially beyond an organ providing the procedures necessary solely for survival and is now the very source of its own advancement. The proof, if any were needed, is the superior position of *Homo sapiens* in the grand scheme of life as we know it.

It works like this. Not only does each individual have to deal with whatever nature may throw at him but has in addition to be ever alert to the threat presented by his own kind – from a species he instinctively knows is capable of murder. The continual universal pressure accelerates the process of evolution quicker than can be achieved by responses to sporadic environmental changes. There may have been rapid evolutions in the past but the evolution of the human brain almost certainly holds the record for biological improvement over a brief span of time. And the show has only just begun. Man is merely crawling along the nursery slopes of a biological learning curve that has the potential to ascend far beyond our present imagination. Fast-track evolution takes place precisely because we can deliberately be bad to one another.

In modern society, where large groupings are essential for realising the ambitions of leaders, acts of savagery and intertribal annihilation are generally outlawed for practical reasons – though of course the urges continue to lurk just below the surface and occasionally the self-culling imperative breaks through, increasingly on a genocidal scale.

In the book by Ellis's bed, Mains supports his statement with a long list of examples of multiple slaughter throughout history, more gory and depressingly commonplace than a casual reader might wish to digest, supported by evidence of examples of palaeolithic mass carnage. Human on human annihilation, it seems, is as old as the hills. With the brotherly bloodshed dealt with, the writer puts the evolutionary device to use in the modern social context. Ellis reluctantly finds the argument attractive.

Meanwhile, we exercise the drive by exploiting our fellow citizens for all we – and they – are worth. Social and economic exploitation – that is: misinforming for gain; taking advantage of; sucking dry and spitting out – is the civilised, attenuated form of killing, rape and plunder. Politicians know it as a job requirement; big business is built on it. Capitalism is a synonym for it. We're all at it, for god's sake. The fact is, Man owes his very social development to systematic victimisation and exploitation of his own kind.

The secret of successful exploitation is in convincing people they themselves are making the decisions that delivers them to the cleaners. The present generation are therefore persuaded to mortgage the homes they live in, commit chunks of their earnings to pension schemes, and collect credit cards by the walletful. These examples of supreme manipulation are sold as the sensible thing to do. The greater mass of society is brainwashed into believing this is the only way it can all work.

It would be a mistake, however, to have people completely unawares they are being exploited. That would hamper the evolutionary process since a crucial condition is that the exploited must deep down *feel* what is going on, even if they inhabit a state of superficial denial. Accordingly, rock stars to

international corporations flaunt the obscene wealth accumulated from the money you spend while governments breezily squander the taxes you pay. If there is no feel to being a loser, then there can be no sense of being a winner. And the winners are mankind's future.

While Craig refills his glass with wine – and Andrea's, too, since she slides hers over – Simon speaks. Simon had at one time a reputation for drinking copiously and becoming obnoxious at social gatherings. His was part of a double act in which Lucy would apply the sweet after her man poured the sour. All very past tense since his doctor called him in. The story, according to Lucy, is that Simon demanded to know why the summons. His doctor replied he wanted to say goodbye. Simon asked where the physician was going. Nowhere, came the answer. It was Simon who would be leaving – if he didn't reign in. The outcome is that Simon has transformed into a moderate imbiber. He no longer grows obnoxious, just a little boorish. At the moment, he is ingratiating and almost certainly lying.

“I've been thinking along the same lines myself. I've read your book, by the way. Right on song. I'd recommended it to anyone.”

“Thank you.”

Ellis next.

“So you fully advocate exploitation of one's fellow man.”

“It's not a matter of what I advocate – I do no more than articulate a hypothesis for Man's phenomenal success. Look at it this way. In physical terms, the human frame is a rather pathetic affair and, had we been stupid as well, the northern hemisphere branch of the species would without question have perished during the last ice age, like Neanderthal. We're not stupid; we didn't die out; we completely colonised the world. There has to be an explanation. In my book, one is offered: that the human animal provides his own evolutionary

impetus by constantly trying to down the next guy. Nastiness comes perfectly natural to us as a species and the strategy is demonstrably successful.”

But Craig, whistle-stopping through his previous book for the benefit of anyone who may not have yet had the opportunity to peruse it, is tiring of the trip. The author has already travelled the route many times, promoting and often defending its ideas through newspaper articles and once on television, and has delivered the same lesson over any number of dinner tables. As desserts are distributed, Craig switches to his latest work, which he describes in a tone suddenly academic, as essentially a series of linked essays which, taken together, query the continued necessity for religion. Andrea warns the others in a stage whisper that her husband is about to attempt to talk over their heads. Her husband pauses, menacingly expressionless, then humorously delivers a couple of sentences as if from a pulpit.

“God sent his first son – let us go with the assumption of first – sent him to Earth to announce among mankind a revised manifesto. ‘An eye for an eye is out,’ the son told the listening multitudes, ‘to turn the other cheek is in.’”

A swift check that he is being well received before Craig relaxes his voice and continues.

“This was just one of a whole raft of radical ideas – which today we might regard as left wing. And how did the conservative Jews react to the new thinking? They crucified the messenger. Or, to be accurate, panicked the Romans into doing it for them. This upset God, as you might imagine. Intensely so. Sensibly, he took a couple of millennia to calm down and think things through, before sending another son. Perhaps the heavenly household is all male, but there you go. Anyway, the son carried with him a message which read: don’t mess with God and his boys – and this time it’s personal. The son was instructed to give the Jews something that would help them remember the message. If the Jews preferred the old rules, God was perfectly willing to play by

them. ‘You take something of mine, I take something of yours. That’s fair, isn’t it?’

“Well, the son was sent to Earth, was given an earthly form and called by an earthly name. God chose very carefully the time and place of the Second Coming. Not a dusty Third World backlot under the thumb of repressive imperialist occupiers, like the first time, but into the very cradle of modern civilisation, among some of the most gifted and refined people ever to inhabit the planet. You see, God wanted it made clear that what was about to take place was his doing, and his alone. It had to be obvious to the world that this could only be the work of a revengeful Almighty. When the Lord, who – we are assured – is at bottom a decent enough guy, decided the point had been made, he instructed his son to take his own life, and destroy his own body, so that it would not become part of the world.”

Fee, who has so far this evening said little to anyone, breaks the author’s flow.

“Did you say a second coming?”

“Oh, yes. Many await it still, but it’s already been and gone. How could we have missed it? Perhaps because the Jews claimed this one, too.”

“You’re talking about Adolf Hitler, surely.”

Craig drops his voice low. “Yes, my dear. Well done. I am indeed.”

“And the Holocaust.”

“That’s right. The Holocaust, as the Jews call it. Did you know the word means a sacrificial burnt offering at the Jewish altar? Its Greek roots mean ‘burnt whole’. They use the term to refer to their own fate, though of course other groups suffered as the Jews were punished. The son was trying too hard, I guess to impress his dad. If young Adolf had concentrated on the Jews, as instructed, no one would have much bothered.”

“No one would have much bothered? Can you really say that?” Ellis asks, sounding more interested than he intended.

“Events speak for themselves. When the Germans under Hitler were dispatching Jews, other countries knew – of course they knew. Many of them couldn’t wait to join in. Our own RAF was taking high resolution photographs of Auschwitz, and the high command had a damn good idea what was going on in that place. If surveillance craft were able to overfly the camps, so could have bombers. But the Allies were not going to risk good Christian lives for the sake of Jews. A thinning out of Jews would bring no harm to the European gene pool; the Germans were in line to take the rap for generations to come; so let the Germans get on with it, if they wanted to – that was the prevailing attitude on this side of the barbed wire.”

“It sounds a bit anti-Semitic, this book. What does the publisher say?”

“I’m sampling from one chapter of the book, a chapter which acknowledges that some believe the Jews had only themselves to blame for the Holocaust. Casting blame where it belongs is a principle of justice, not an expression of anti. Whether the Jews learnt the lesson is another matter, of course. In Israel, they’re trying to get back into God’s good books by kicking the shite out of their Islamic neighbours.”

Su offers her contribution.

“They say that what is received is handed out. The Jews had a bad time under the Nazis so they’re taking it out on the Palestinians.”

“And they buy Mercs.” This comes from Simon. Lucy sniggers, then says sorry, it’s the wine. Craig ignores the Graingers.

“You know, at some time in the future, perhaps measured in terms of four or five centuries, maybe before that, possibly much later, the full meaning of Hitler’s work will be appreciated, and future faiths might place him at their centre. Remember how it took a while for the first son to elevate from loud-mouth peasant rabble-rouser to world-class saviour. His early followers were considered weird enough to

be thrown to lions. In time, Hitler could be hailed as the Lord's second sacrifice, and that's the title I've given to this essay. Followed by the all important question mark, of course – for the sake of distance.”

“Not so many dog turds through the post, eh?” Simon is warming up.

The author returns to the earlier question. “Mm, you asked me, Ellis, what the publisher says. ‘Will it sell?’ – that’s all the buggers ever say nowadays. ‘Is it strong enough to budge the latest celebrity self-drool?’ Publishers don’t concern themselves with the intellectual argument. As a matter of fact, the essay isn’t anti-Semitic – if anything, it backs the Jewish case. I actually have a high regard for the Jews – they’re hard workers. They paid a heavy price for a little local misunderstanding two thousand years ago.”

Su serves coffee, and Ellis brings out the brandy. “Is there likely to be a third coming, do you think?”

“Ho-ho! Who can tell? If so, it will not be for a long time. No need, is there. The Jews have received their punishment. The next question for God is one of presentation. Which version of himself does he like best? His problem is he likes them all. One big self-obsessive is our Lord. He’s stricken by a vice of mankind, though he probably wouldn’t admit it to your face. He likes to see his picture in the papers – all of them, regardless of faith or denomination.

“In the Christian context, the Catholic versus Protestant thing has run its course. Northern Ireland, for instance, is reduced to a working museum of religious conflict.”

Simon interrupts. “Bells and smells and sex with little boys versus manic marchers with too much poster paint, you mean.”

“Quite so. You agree, then – Christian against Christian is so last Elizabeth. It’s not the same without the burnings at the stake. No, the clever money is on Christian versus Islam. The Bible browsers are in danger of losing their faith. That means they’re not giving God his dues. So he nudges the

balance in favour of Kor'an readers. Now there's a crowd who know how to give a god his dues. God, ay-kay-ay Allah, only has to promise them however many virgins by the eternal pool and point them towards the twin towers of avarice."

It is all very interesting, says Su, and suggests a move to the lounge, which for this evening is referred to as the drawing room. She, Andrea and the couple from the village leave the dining room, taking drinks or second coffees. Fee starts to follow but stops and sits on a vacated chair next to Craig, who has not moved. Her behaviour surprises Ellis.

"Surely there is still a need for religion. That's what your new book asks, doesn't it?"

"Yes it does, my dear. You're absolutely right. Do *you* think there is still a need for religion?"

"Our faith leads us to the Lord and He instructs us."

"I'm sure he does. But does that answer the question of whether we still need him around?"

From the other side of the table, a standing Ellis is momentarily struck by the impression that the author has slipped his hand on to Fee's bare knee. Fee, however, shows no movement to suggest this is the case.

"But surely it's not a proper question. God will always be there for us whether we need him or not. Surely the real question is —"

"Fee! We're in here. Come and join us!" The hail comes from Su, from the drawing room. For an instant, Fee looks uncertain, then sighs and departs.

"Bright girl, your daughter," Craig comments to Ellis. Ellis smiles at the mistake, then is unsure it is one. Andrea knows the true House of Gardeen relationships and it seems inconceivable she has not shared the information with her spouse. Craig disapproves of the separation of genders and motions for the men to join the women. Ellis stays behind to clear the table. His mind returns to the book by his bed.

Racial antagonism is a result of *Homo sapiens* being at the point of dividing into a number of new subspecies. The racial hostility we feel is nature's way of preparing us for the genetic goodbyes. What this implies is that everyone is, by nature, a racist. It depends on our social environment how we deal with it. The *H. sapiens* line is a continuation of *H. heidelbergensis*, which issued from *H. ergaster*, an offshoot of an offshoot of *Australopithecus africanus*, who were the great-grandsons of *Ardipithecus ramidus*, coming from – well, you get the drift. During the period when the Neanderthals began their split from the family bough, there must have been a tension between them and *sapiens* whenever the groups found themselves working the same gorge, a tension which we would call racial. At first, there's suspicion, then dislike, advancing to a loathing, and finally a stage of sexual repulsion between the groups which signifies the absolute break between species. The present sapient line is close to a multiple split. If civilisation were to collapse, and modern transglobal movement ceased, the process of biological division would continue from where it left off before oceans were crossed.

The hominid evolution was launched by the move to stand bipedally on the parched savannah in order to scan the surrounding terrain. Because of climatic change, the hitherto lush habitat had vanished, and the long grasses replacing the trees provided excellent cover for predators. To be able to see above the swaying vines was to survive – it assisted the tracking of quarry while at the same time helped to avoid being the quarry. The very puny of the species became an advantage. With no specialised body parts offering effective defence against predators and the elements, the proto-human had to invent protection. All hominid hope rested on the brain.

As the organ developed, its remit progressed from

mere reception and reaction towards reason and abstract thought. A danger or an opportunity did not have to be there, before the eyes, for a response to be prepared; the threat or treat could be in another place and at another time. The hominid brain was, if you like, able to see round corners. But the constantly expanding perception of a universe beyond the near and immediate was potentially mind-blowing. Literally so. If things that could be understood entered the mind in a trickle, things that could *not* be understood fairly poured in, threatening to engulf the immature delicate cerebral fabric. The brain needed a means of accommodating the flood of the not understood, the myriad unanswered questions. Hey, there! Are you looking for a universal metaphysical receptacle, able to handle everything, everlasting, easy to use, totally reliable, available twenty-four seven three-sixty-five? Then you need GOD!

Ellis enters the drawing room, where three different conversations appear to be taking place. Su and Andrea and the teacher share a sofa, with a leaning laughing Lucy facing them from a brought-over chair. Across the room, in adjacent easy chairs, the headteacher is turned to listen, adding occasional polite nods, as Simon divulges supposed secrets of the computer supply trade between tonguefuls of brandy. Fee is standing with the principal guest by the fireplace, her talk aided by hand gestures. Craig's arm rests on the mantelshelf, like a Victorian father with a member of his family.

“And how often were you told *that* at Sunday school?” Craig asks Fee, raising his head forward as if to peek down the loose front of her dress.

After a while, Lucy goes across to Simon, perhaps in response to the tell-tale change in his voice: slower and louder and increasingly course in content. She declares that time is getting on and they should be going. Andrea says they too

must be off as they have an early start tomorrow. There is a ten-minute joint farewell, with female partners securing keys to cars. But Ellis still does not catch detail of the Maines vehicle. The couple from the village finish their drinks before they respectfully depart. They say they are honoured to have met the author, and in turn thank Su with kisses on the cheek for giving them the opportunity.

Half substance, half bullshit, all right-wing cant, Ellis opines as he fills the dishwasher and sets the dial. Su sits on a high stool at the breakfast bar, throwing back the last of a glass of wine to mask her disappointment at the comment. Sensing his tone of disparagement may be interpreted as an expression of envy regarding Craig's success at spreading ideas, Ellis revises his stance. In fairness – he says – Craig's approach is tongue in cheek and his style can be quite engrossing at times. Through intellectual exaggeration, he mocks those with inflexible opinions. The true Craig is concealed behind the words he writes. Irony – with a firm eye on the royalty cheque. Su is not sure what Ellis means but inclines her head in agreement nonetheless. Fee flounces into the kitchen. Ellis is about to raise the topic of her new-found interest in religion, then decides against it. She leads to it herself.

“Honestly, that Craig!”

“He certainly knows how to cast an interesting slant on things.”

“Interesting? Surely you mean loopy.”

“*You* seem to find him interesting. He finds you interesting, I'm sure,” Ellis winks at Su.

“Well, he might be a famous writer who gets his books published but he needs a check up from the neck up, if you ask me.”

“I wouldn't exactly say he's famous. Though I have to say he doesn't look bad on the books he does sell. There's obviously a market for loopy.”

“Not here, there isn’t.”

“Have you read any of his books, Fee?”

“No – and I don’t want to.”

“Perhaps you should, before dismissing his work out of hand.”

Exchanges between Ellis and Fee are uncommon, and whenever they extend beyond simple domestic queries, likely to become conversation, Su is quick to intervene. “Yes, you should. You’d learn something. Craig is a clever man.”

“But he has it all wrong, surely. A belief in the Lord gives strength to millions. He can’t just say God is an excuse for sweeping difficult problems under the carpet. It doesn’t make sense.”

Ellis answers. “It sounds like he already has. Said it.”

“Well, he’s wrong. He’s got it wrong.”

“So what’s right?”

“That’s what he asked me. He said I should search for some evidence before I accept that God is up there benevolently keeping watch over us all.”

“And will you?”

“Surely faith is evidence enough. Millions of people wouldn’t pray to someone who wasn’t there. Would they?”

“I think what Craig’s getting at is that blind faith lends itself to being misappropriated by people in positions of power for their own ends. The masses can be misled, and the greater the number the easier it is. Millions of people once thought the sun circled the earth because they were told to do so by the church. Come to think of it, millions of people voted Hitler into power – another of Craig’s points.”

“But that’s different, surely. God doesn’t mislead.”

“How do you know? Didn’t Craig say it: how do we know God isn’t one of the bad guys? His – God’s – record is far from good. He sets us at each other’s throats, delivers catastrophes on a regular basis, gives us conflicting rules to follow, even lies to us on occasions. Is that the way of a benevolent watcher?”

“God moves in ways we don’t always understand. It doesn’t mean He’s bad.”

The discussion has gone on long enough for Su. She brings it to an end, trying to do so lightly.

“You’re coming from the wrong century, dearie. I hope you’re not going to start quoting from the Bible. That’d do my head in.”

“No, of course I’m not. It just so happens —”

Fee is informed it is bedtime and receives a double pat on the bottom before being gently turned towards the exit. Su stays behind and signs a cheque for Ellis to hand to the delivery men, to cover the balance on an inlaid occasional table bought at auction to fill a space in the hall, and gives him a verbal list of things to do tomorrow. He goes to bed, waits for quiet along the corridor, and from his bedside table picks up the Craig Mains book, opening it at the marker, reading but a paragraph before switching off the light.

New Man will be pure capitalist. The worst exploited people of the present day will become a separate species. Remember the stages of hominid division – suspicion, dislike, loathing, and finally sexual repulsion? Well, the rich already exhibit all these stages to one degree or another in their relationships with the poor. The result will conform neatly to the traditions of taxonomy. *Homo sapiens vulgaris* splits into *Homo sapiens capitalis* and *Homo sapiens utilis*. Just think – a species at the driving seat of its own evolutionary destiny!

* * * * *

The matter of the eagerness of the world’s biggest consumer of oil to secure the world’s second largest known reserve of the fuel, an aspiration backed by the biggest consumer’s best friend ever, reached to the very ear of the Head of Combined Community Development. The journalist at the other end of

the telephone had questions at the ready. What was Community Advance's stance on the Stop the War fever currently gripping the city? Did the agency in fact have a stance? Would CA be represented in the protest march on Saturday?

At home, Ellis railed against the invasion of Iraq, calling it breathtaking imperialism on a scale our own government should know better than to involve us in. It would set the agenda of global conflict for future generations. Fee also railed against the invasion on the grounds that all war is, by its very nature, surely bad. Su believed Fee was undergoing some sort of transformation driven by a belated teenage angst, and could not be sure how it would end.

At the office, it became known that Geri's latest lay was a leading member of a group responsible for a storm of emails and leaflets sent to every business, institution and organisation for miles around. The fellow had given Geri a badge to wear, and Indira a poster to put up behind the reception desk. Roger murmured that he hoped to God the supposed weapons of mass destruction actually existed if only so they could be found. Su had not given the issue much thought, not until the journalist telephoned. Cautiously, she replied that she had yet to meet anyone in the real world who was willing to give an unconditional blessing to military action. The journalist wanted to know if the agency stood by its constitutional principle of respecting the views of the people, a question she must have answered in the affirmative because the words appeared the following day in print for all to see. A juxtaposing of quotes and slogans in the article gave the impression that the agency stood firmly with the protesters.

In the late afternoon of the day of the article's appearance, Su received a different type of call on the same matter. It was rare for her, when on the telephone, to motion Geri out of the room. This, though, was a rare call. Before closing the door behind her, Geri may have caught the 'Yes, I see' said in

a tone of deference reserved for higher strata of the community development hierarchy. That evening, Su composed, with no help from Roger or Ellis or Geri or from anyone, a memo that would be despatched to every outpost of the agency for signing and returning, and individually to each member of staff at Central. The position of the agency, it informed, needed to be made clear. Community Advance had no mandate to support a particular cause beyond the agency's sphere of responsibility or outside its defined limits of territory. As from receipt of the communication, posters and insignia which might suggest otherwise were not to be displayed within any of the agency's premises. Employees of the agency were not to speak with representatives of the media. All callers from newspapers, radio or television must be referred directly to her.

When she saw that the poster in Central's reception was still in place despite the memo, Su felt a crossness well up inside her that steered her towards the main office where she was going to show her displeasure by bawling out that the agency had more than enough to do in the city without passing judgement on the entire world. But she did not bawl out. It took but an instant to see the badges pinned on every chest, and another to visualise every single member of her staff on the protest march. This head of agency had not reached the top position by walking into brick walls. She told the faces, all looking up at her in response to the dramatic entrance, that the memo had had to be sent, to be on the safe side. She didn't like it any more than they did, but it was standard practice for a community development organisation that relied on external funding to distance itself from the political scene.

"Do you think stopping a war is only a political scene?" Indira asked. Su had not before noticed how intensely black Indira's eyes were, nor how accusing they could be.

"No, it isn't. It's the political scene that brought us this problem in the first place. All I'm saying is that the agency

itself has a job to do, and it should stay with that.”

“Will you be marching with us, on Saturday?”

“I’d love to. But I won’t be here. I’ll be out of town.”

It was a cop-out, and she guessed everyone would regard it as such. For the rest of the morning, Su was alone. Felt alone. Geri had taken to her own office and closed the interconnecting door. When Su called through on the intercom for an expenses slip, it was delivered in silence. A little before lunch, Geri knocked and entered. A letter needed Su’s signature. Su held her pen over the document but didn’t write.

“Why the cold shoulder treatment? All I’ve done is cover our backs.”

“Would you like my honest opinion?”

“Do I deserve less?”

Geri stood by the side of the desk, hands resting on its surface, which allowed her to lean a little forward.

“The memo. It was a mistake.”

“I had a decision to make, and I —”

“A big mistake. You asked me, so I’m telling you. What gives you the right to tell everyone what to think?”

“I’m not telling *anyone* what to think.”

“You are, Su. Just because London orders you to take down the posters —”

“What do you know what London said? Have you been listening in on my confidential calls?”

“I don’t *have* to listen in on your confidential calls.” Geri had moved away from the desk and was rubbing one foot into the carpet, as if extinguishing a cigarette butt.

“Come on, Su. Who’s side are you on? This war stinks. It’s total shit. If CA is forced to tape up its mouth and cringe in the corner because some government department has it by the short and curlies – that’s one thing. But neither you nor the freaking department has any right to dictate to the people who work here.”

Su sighed, noisily. “Have you finished?”

“I’m sorry. It’s just that...” Geri’s arms left her sides as her shoulders lifted in a shrug. Su attempted managerial recovery.

“When I receive an instruction, I carry it out. When I give an instruction, I expect *that* to be carried out. It sounds reasonable, yeh?”

Geri came back with more.

“Not when it’s a crap instruction, it isn’t. All you do is lose everyone’s respect.”

“I haven’t lost any respect. I handled it the way I saw fit.”

For a moment, Su thought the conversation had run its course. Geri resumed the sole grinding and was looking down as if watching for a hole to appear in the carpet. She stopped the treading and raised her head.

“You know, it would be a big plus if you, as head of community development, were there on the march. A big plus for you, a big plus for all of us. You’re a name in this city. You’re looked up to. You should make use of it.”

“I —”

“Know what? I expected you to tell London where to shove their instruction. I really did. I can’t believe Su Gardeen would just – just lie down in front of them like this.”

“That’ll do. I don’t want to hear this from you, Geri.” Then, less sharp: “I told you, I can’t join the march because I won’t be here.”

“That’s not true. You could if you wanted.”

“Don’t try to tell me what is and isn’t true in my private arrangements.” Su signed the letter in front of her. “There. Now can we get on with the work we’re paid to do, if that’s not too much like pain?”

Geri snatched up the letter and departed.

After tea, over wine, Ellis listened as Su admitted she had mishandled the situation. She wished she had asked his help before sending the memo, acknowledging that, had she done so, there would not have been a memo. Ellis was sympathetic, as Ellis always was. A sturdy rock whenever the sea is

troubled. He shook his head before replying.

“Yes, siree. This war will leave a lot to be answered for. Democracy, eh? Bet you thought it means government according to the majority. As in: a president who was elected by *less* than the vote-casting majority; and a prime minister who wants to take us to war on substantially *less* than the majority’s wishes.”

He half sang.

“Onward Christian soldiers, Marching us to war, We’ll be plagued by Islam, For a thousand years or more.”

Su gave a weak smile. Ellis returned to normal voice.

“‘Never trust anyone with eyes close together’, my old gran used to say. We’ve got two of ’em with eyes that meet in the middle. If that’s not enough, we’ve also got a United Nations that’s about as effective as a fishnet johnny.”

“That’s one way of putting it, I suppose.”

“Then we come to li’l ole you. London shouts; you salute; London believes you – and others in your position – are on message. Meanwhile, there’s trouble up at t’ mill. Your trusting band of followers think you’ve gone shock and awe. What on earth is a girl to do? They say it’s tough at the top.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Geri will come round. You’re her role model – you said it yourself.”

“Rather a battered role model at the moment.”

Ellis suggested Su could work the situation to her advantage by turning up unannounced and taking part in the march. Geri was spot on, Ellis told her. Su’s name stood for something. Her presence at the demonstration would catapult her back into favour. Think of the publicity, he said.

“What about London?”

“Tell them you hold a personal view which you have every right to express. Considering the social deprivation our local city boasts, London are unlikely to meddle with CA’s funding. Besides, London has the political memory of a goldfish.”

“I hope you’re right.”

The march of protest drew more numbers than anyone expected; the day stayed fine; the media were well positioned. London didn't ring again; and Su was hailed the sort of leader any community development agency would die for. But the war still happened.

5

The marriage ceremony was a dignified church and hired white Rolls affair, followed by a reception held in a marquee behind a hotel popular for its proximity to a golf course. Apart from the best man being affected by a bout of hiccups as he prepared to read messages of congratulation, and an inquisitive small child who tipped over an ice bucket for the partially melted contents to spill on to the laps and legs of those seated nearby, the occasion was considered to have gone well. As far as the bride could tell, no expense had been spared on the day. Not that any sparing should have been necessary: Peter Porter came from a family that Stan might have described as not short of a bob or two.

Stan himself did not attend the wedding. He was elsewhere, unable to get away from a branch of Her Majesty's Prisons, where he was serving the first months of a five year sentence, out in under four if behaviour good. Stan's unavailability was not an inconvenience, however, since he was no longer recognised as part of the family – Mum's divorce was pending and she had already reverted to Gardeen. Indeed, only two Earles attended the wedding, and one of them, twenty-one year old Suzanne Angela, finished the day not an Earle but a Porter. The other, Margaret Pearl, was preparing for her own special day, a few months into the future, which she would end as a Meredith. Margaret had adjusted the first part of her name to Margo during her university years in order to avoid the diminutive Maggie, which she considered ugly and working class and wondered how the Prime Minister dealt with it. Neither sister exercised their middle names except for official purposes. Both girls had decided not to follow Mum's example and drop the surname Earle in favour of Gardeen,

the one with which they were born, since it had the potential to draw attention to an episode of their recent family history that was better left to rest. It was hardly an issue – the Earle tag would disappear for all time with marriage.

Nor were there many Gardeens or Tathers present at the ceremony: just a pew huddle of aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, most of whom Suzie had not seen since childhood. The Gardeen representation was drawn from a rather unproductive outcome of a migratory movement three generations earlier out of Scotland; and the Tathers were said to have never been close-knit. Aunt Doris had made it, bless her, eccentric and truculent as ever, dressed in her best Oxfam. The rumour among the Tathers was that Auntie Doris might be sitting on a pretty mound of money, the result of a legacy of title to a row of cottages that had blocked the only viable road access to land on which now stood a vale of executive homes. And the old house she lived in, just herself with a clowder of cats, was apparently valued at quite a few of Stan's bobs. No one of course would know the true situation until dear old Auntie Doris called it a day.

In contrast, there were lots of Porters. Among themselves, some must have thought Peter had lost his marbles. Whatever could he see in the Earle girl? No proper qualifications, no culture, no family background to speak of, not even much of a looker. That sister of hers must have taken for both. But Peter could always see a promise where others noticed none. Peter was the one – it is told – who, as a boy, had brought home the crow with a broken wing, the kitten with an eye gouged out, the mangy dog hit by a car and limping. Peter, the man to pick up a stray from the street, and marry her.

In a way, by her own reckoning, Suzie truly was a stray from the street. Not when Peter had met her. But earlier she had been. That was something she had insisted Peter knew right from the start. Well, not quite from the start. The first contact between them had been on a hired coach taking ticket holders to see an almost famous country and western duo

playing live on stage. Her double seat offered the only vacant place when Peter boarded. It turned out neither Suzie nor Peter were any great fans of the nearly stars nor particularly of the C & W genre, but trips like this were a way of meeting people. A couple of years earlier, Suzie would have regarded Peter as evilly posh and totally out of her frame of reference. That had been Suzie the screwed up low expectation teenager. Suzie twenty wanted better. She could handle posh, couldn't she? A self-administered crash course in growing up was launched with a ruthless disposal, carried out one urgent Saturday morning, of all the tasteless clothes and cheap cosmetics and naff wall posters associated with the screwed up Suzie. A butterfly emerging from the crass cocoon of yesterday, as her too nose-y landlord who fancied himself as a bit of poet, described it. Yes, next stop posh – why not? And here, on the coach, was posh sitting next to her.

The second time Peter and Suzie met, over dinner at a newly opened restaurant everyone in Peter's circle were talking about, Suzie discovered her escort was nine years her elder and worked for the listening bank, where his grade put him in lower management. She guessed future career promotion would depend on his being able to demonstrate a stable family man setting. Peter admitted he had not really had much to do with the opposite sex, had not really had the time. Suzie said he was doing just fine. She told him she wasn't the sort to rush things anyway.

On the next date, he took her briefly to see where he lived – posh house in a posh neighbourhood – and, through photographs in fancy frames, she met his parents. She asked where they were and he, laughing, replied at home, of course – their home. This was his house – he lived in it alone. In a lively country pub where a presenter of daytime television was said occasionally to water, Suzie announced there were some things he should know about her. But this was not the right place or time, she added, expecting the air of sinister mystery to rouse his curiosity. He had replied 'fair enough', and not

pressed her. She thought he may have forgotten the moment until, on a later outing, a warm Sunday afternoon's hand-in-hand walk round some castle ruins, he led her away from the mossy pile before taking her by the shoulders and sitting her on a grassy rise. The place and time would probably never be righter, he said. What were the things she thought he should know about her?

Holding her hand up against the sun, Suzie explained that the admission he had made about not having had much to do with the opposite sex did not apply to her. There had been 'others'. She hoped it sounded matter of fact, that she was not bragging or, on the other hand, in any way ashamed. Peter asked how many others. Suzie smiled and shook her head. He was insistent. A few, actually – came the hushed reply. Some ducks squabbled on the old canal that ran by the ruins. The bickering fowl and a few scattered sheep in the middle distance were the only signs of sentient life in the surrounding lazy meadows. From beneath her hand shade, Suzie studied the man sat beside her. He showed no disappointment, no alarm, no disgust. He moved close, asking for a number, an idea of how many could be called a few. Suzie, teasingly, said she had lost count. Closer still, he wanted humorously to know if she kept a little black book. She might, came the answer – though little black books have a habit of filling. Now Peter's lips were brushing hers, urging her to tell him how many.

What came next took her by surprise. With mock lower bank manager seriousness, or maybe it was not mock, Peter asked had she ever taken money for 'you know'. The good girl in her called for her to back off, feign an assault on dignity, perhaps stand and walk away. Suzie, though, did not back off. The bad girl in her cast her eyes down and returned an almost imperceptible silent nod before being pulled urgently to her feet and behind a hedge and well and truly fucked as she heard herself answer 'yes, yes, every time!'.

After the wedding and a honeymoon spent on a Greek island at a hotel which Peter had stayed at before, the Porters settled down to married life. By the standards of anyone in lower bank management – standards to which the determined Suzie found herself adopting rather well – Peter's semi was perhaps not so much posh as pleasant, having a pleasant rear garden that caught the afternoon sun as it traversed a pleasant suburb. Peter had bought the house with the help of a low interest staff mortgage a year before meeting Suzie. Gauging when a suitable period had elapsed, Suzie broached the subject of possible shared ownership as a means of security. Peter continued after marriage to refer to the house and its contents by the possessive 'my' instead of 'our' which, she said, made her feel like a lodger. He told her the loan arrangement depended on the property staying in his name but, as regards everything else, whatever was his also belonged to her. Occasionally, he even let her do the choosing when they shopped for furnishings and the like.

In due course, Peter was promoted to manager, one of three at the same city centre branch. The news coincided with a brother's offer of a partnership in a burgeoning though not long established fitted kitchen business and, for a short time, Peter gave it some thought. No, he finally decided, it was too risky. Banking was safer, especially for someone contemplating a family. And this was a couple contemplating a family – in fact, trying hard for one. A Peter seemingly wearied after a day of listening at the bank could be magically revitalised by a Suzie donning her Ann Summers latest and making light about all the men she had had. However, for all the bedroom performances, for all the monthly timing and testing of temperature, for all the special foods and loose fitting underpants, there was no pregnancy. Peter underwent a test to see if he was firing blanks. He was informed his sperm count was excellent. A second opinion confirmed his seed was biologically up to the job. Suzie learned of Peter's visits to specialists after the results arrived. She was presented

with the logical next step, and agreed to submit to an internal examination provided that she could handle the arrangements herself. She put the matter off for as long as she could, saying she was not exactly enthralled by the thought of sundry mine-working equipment being inserted up her. Besides, the trying for a baby was fun. Peter, though, earnestly wanted it done. To support his case, he made a cutting reference to Margo. Contact between the sisters remained – had been since Suzie’s leaving home – for the most part limited to exchanges of cards and sometimes inexpensive gifts on birthdays and at Christmas. Out of politeness, reciprocity, family obligation, and not least curiosity, Suzie with Peter had attended Margo’s wedding, followed a year later by – the essence of Peter’s cutting reference – the baptism of baby Estelle.

At the time of Suzie’s marriage, Margo had expressed concern about Mum, about the accelerating deterioration of her state of mind. Within a few months, Mum’s mental condition was such that she could no longer responsibly be left on her own. Margo had already decided the best course of action was for James, on marriage, to move into the family farmhouse so they could take care of Mum and not place her in an institution. The psychology graduate made allusion to noble sacrifice in respect of a career given up for the sake of their mother. Also, Suzie could imagine that Margo considered her younger sibling had, in being accepted by Peter, been blessed with fortune greatly in excess of any she could lay claim to. Well, Margo knew all about opportunity: value-added transformation of the Gardeen then Earle then Meredith farmhouse had begun immediately after marriage and, save only for the disruption of childbirth, continued on.

The gynaecologist that Suzie arranged to see was a peach. That old gyno joke came to mind: this guy could charm the pants off any girl. He was sympathetic, goosey gentle, very understanding of her situation, and worded the report to the effect that, regrettably, Mrs Porter would not be able to conceive a child owing to an untreatable condition that is

thought to affect one woman in dot dot thousand. The Porters' love-making did not stop after the report, but was never again the same tempo.

They discussed adoption and made initial enquiries but, to Suzie's silent relief, Peter stopped talking about the idea before backgrounds were checked. Peter's workload increased as the bank restructured. From what Suzie could gather, bank restructuring – thinning out the counter staff, piling more client files on to managers, finding new ways to rip off the customer – was a process without end. Peter's libido lessened but his salary grew, and the Porters moved. An earlier Suzie might have regarded the new home as super posh: curved sett-paved driveway from a quiet and leafy road; exterior Tudor beams that had weathered their fifteen years well; roomy, with a conservatory; and a suitably emphasised detachment from the neighbours. Every Thursday, rustic Andy would come to mow the lawns and tidy the flower beds and pick about in the greenhouse. Two and sometimes three half days a week, single-mother Penny helped with the housework, the cash wages augmenting her social benefits. Penny was a happy type, a slim young thing with darting energy. Her mother looked after the toddler for the half days, a child that Penny had given birth to while still a schoolgirl. Suzie was alarmed one morning when in the kitchen to realise how Penny, standing before a working top hardly a touch away, chopping vegetables and chatting about nothing in particular, was so pleasing to look at – was attractive in a deep active sexual way that was new in Suzie's experience. She wanted to lie across a bed with Penny, on Penny, in Penny – naked; now; quite desperately. Suzie bit into her bottom lip and fought the notion, fought it for the moment, for the rest of the day, and commanded herself to find an outside interest – become a volunteer or something – without delay.

Apart from the paid help, Suzie had the house to herself. Once or maybe twice a month the Porters entertained guests – clients of the bank mostly: small business people planning

expansion, people ripe for secured bank loans. Suzie did not mind playing hostess if only because the arranging gave her something to do. The Porters were a couple who could demonstrate they had made it in an age when making it was the prime objective of existence. Later, higher rated clients were invited for dinner, perhaps an entrepreneur or developer going over the ground for a big loan. The accompanying partner would often seem effortlessly stylish and so marvellously in control of life; Suzie would find herself drawn to watching every movement, and sensitive to every nuance whether real or imagined.

Suzie learnt to drive and Peter bought her a new small car. At weekends, they sometimes packed the boot of his bulky Rover and went away. When not away they did the garden centres and megastores and bought things for the home. Summer holidays were taken under a foreign sun, Peter one year daring her to go topless on the beach, which she did, and enjoyed. Throughout her twenties, Suzie had everything a middle-class materialist suburban house pet could aim to boast about. At least, on the surface. Peter would not budge on the joint home ownership issue. Suzie was under no illusion that the 'whatever is mine is also yours' declaration with regard to the home's contents and other assets was intended to apply operationally rather than proprietorially.

The bank restructuring assumed a new tempo. Competition, so Peter explained, was hotting up. An electronic age is upon us, he told his wife, an age when virtually every service would be accessible from the home. The queue at the counter – which, he had once confided, the bank cultivated as a symbol of its power – was giving way to taped Vivaldi as the customer went on hold. In time, every bank user in the land would know *The Four Seasons* like they knew the National Anthem. Peter began working late. It came with the times, he said. He would occasionally bring home presents, small gifts as recompense for an absentee husband. Or were they to ease guilt? Suzie regularly checked his clothes

in the linen basket for a whiff of another woman's perfume – what wife can say, hand on heart, she has never done this? – but whiff there never was. She wished there had been. Another woman in the frame would be a challenge she could deal with, would provide a bargaining chip. It might even be fun. It might even be Penny! A threesome with Penny would be infinitely preferable to the twin marital cancers of suburban predictability and ceaseless corporate restructuring.

One thought she cast to the back of her mind when it first appeared, but an idea that insisted on being dealt with, was that Peter was seeing a prostitute. It would fit his arousal strategy – he had a thing about women who had had lots of men, or said they had. Although Suzie could handle Peter's having a mistress, his going with a prostitute was a different matter. A wife can gain no advantage over a whore.

To check Peter's movements required careful planning. It was his custom to ring home during the working day to see if Suzie was all right, at deliberately irregular times. If his wife was not in the house to answer a call he would later angle for a reason, not in a demanding or overbearing or overtly suspicious way, though irritating enough for her to want to catch the calls. Summoning up courage after it twice failed her, Suzie hired a private investigator. She braced herself for a beer-bellied greaseball with a fixed leer and was not sure whether to feel disappointed or amused at being confronted by a rake-thin middle-aged hangdog of a man wearing a brimmed hat straight out of private eye folklore. Jack was his name. Not quite the lad, he said. Sorry. Suzie had no way of knowing how efficient Jack's methods were – who investigates the investigators? – but she would have to take a chance on his reliability, on whatever his profession regarded as reliability. Jack was on the case for a week, then a second, and the greater part of a third. Nothing mischievous to report, he told her at the end of each surveillance, adding apologies for taking her money. Nothing whatsoever. The subject went to his place of employment, worked, sometimes

went for a short stroll around lunchtime, worked again, then returned home. Rotary night was spent at the Rotary club. Ditto for golf. And so on. It grieved him, Jack said, to hand over a bill for not so much as a hint of wink-wink. Some PIs he could mention would invent something just to have the client feel they'd received their money's worth, but not him. In Jack's book, straightness was always the best business. Suzie wished she could be so straight about the large dent in the regularly monitored housekeeping provision. Unlike Jack, she would have to invent something.

Suzie took a part-time clerical job at an auction and sales room that handled house clearances and repossessed goods. She saw the vacancy advertised in a local freesheet picked up at the shops by Penny, and responded on the spur of the moment. Apply in own handwriting, the lineage instructed, but Suzie applied in person, that afternoon, without an appointment. The address she found was a shabby place, a flaking high single-storeyed warehouse with a broken yard, in a neglected part of town. The owner: medium height, not young, long sideburns like a gypsy's, kindly crows' feet around the eyes, wearing a three-quarter coat with a turned-up fur-lined collar, never sitting, calling her 'Love', holding on to a telephone conversation while at the same time shouting ribald instructions through an open metal-framed window to men loading a van – the owner asked about her experience of accounts and savvy of VAT. She told him what he wanted to hear. Her being married to a bank manager clinched it. All she had to do, when she arrived home, was to dig out her work preparation notes from a carton in the box room, and to inform her husband.

Peter was not pleased. Why on earth did she have to go out to work? he demanded. Was her allowance not more than enough? And if she wanted something to busy herself with, why a two-a-penny job in the back office of a crummy sales room, of all places? Whatever would his friends think? She

told him he worked in a back office but, being at this precise moment away from the listening bank, he wasn't listening. Arguments between the couple were uncommon and rarely heated. This was because the good suburban housewife, who had everything she could possibly wish for, knew – was supposed to know – her position. The husband would exhibit displeasure; the wife would put up a token defence; the husband's displeasure would turn to explanation and advice; the wife would admit her error. In an earlier period of the marriage, the two might then make love. During the argument about her two-a-penny job, Suzie disregarded the convention and stood her ground. Didn't he understand, she demanded with the anger of desperation in her voice, that she *had* to get out of the house? Yes, she did have everything money could buy, a kitchenful of gadgets, a wardrobe to smother in – but she was bored out of her bloody skull. If she didn't get something to do, somewhere else to go, she would go completely sodding gaga. To her surprise, Peter caved in. He muttered something about there being no call for bad language, and told her it was up to her, that it didn't matter anyway because she probably wouldn't be able to stand it for more than a week.

But Peter was wrong. She did stand it. She made herself. There were initial mistakes, some potentially serious, but she managed to right many of them with the indulgent help of the owner – whom everyone called Moose – and rectify others without his being aware a mistake had been made in the first place. Suzie soon began to like the environment for itself, not just to prove a point to Peter. Sale days were noisy and chaotic. All types of individuals wandered into the office to peel notes from rubber-banded rolls or tug from bulging wallets and carelessly toss the money on the desk or rest it on a filing cabinet under a paper punch or whatever came to hand. Before she got to know the regulars by name and face, she would end a sale day holding large amounts of cash – more than she had ever seen before – while uncertain about

who had paid how much for what. During those first bewildering weeks, she sometimes took a guess, but nobody complained. The other days were quieter. People came in off the street to wander around the piled tables and chairs and chest of draws and mattresses and televisions and bicycles and refrigerators. Vans arrived to take goods away. Suzie believed it completely impossible for any one person to keep track of the crazy movements of cash and goods, till she realised that was exactly what she was doing. Just as Moose had said she would.

With a job she enjoyed and a husband no longer passing remarks on the subject, Suzie turned her attention to taking a lover – as any fit and normal woman yet in her twenties and getting not enough at home is surely justified in doing. Suzie felt she needed a lover – a lusty male lover, rough and thrusting – if she were to rid her brain of Penny. Penny had left the Porter employ, gone to start a life with a bricklayer who could not possibly be as wonderful as she described; and the gardener's taciturn wife, Peter's choice of replacement for a domestic helper, was no cute-bum Penny. The gone girl represented a moment of madness, a temporary unexplained infatuation which was the result of dull routine and frustration, an aberration that had no right to exist in the life of a middle-class wife to a bank manager. Penny was a crossed wire, a wrong turning, the road to damned-forever dykedom. But no matter how often Suzie repeated these phrases to herself, they would not register. When she masturbated, Penny provided the fantasy. After having stimulated her, it disturbed her.

Suzie expected the plan's execution would be a doddle – just open your blouse a couple of extra buttons and leave the rest to nature. But it was not a doddle. There was plenty of plug-in-and-play available – though that, to her confusion, was not what she was in search of. A hunk of a man called Pete – an easy name for her to remember – took a bite. Pete worked at the service station where she topped up her car

twice a week. Banter to begin with, followed by a tank-fill calculated to coincided with a shift break. They talked for nearly an hour at the air line. He was big and powerful, the sort that blocks out the light. And, being married, easy to steer. By arrangement, Suzie the next day drove to meet him at a secluded woodlands picnic area. The environment and the risk felt good: she wanted to strip off and skip around on the grass, arms waving high, so the world that was not looking would see what a brazen hussy she could be. She sometimes danced naked in her dreams, on grass like this, and at other places, too. Pete, though, wanted to get down to it. No foreplay or polite fumbling, no asking was she sure. A rally man was Pete – nought to flat out in under sixty seconds. As she might have confided to a close female friend, had she had a close friend: knees up to your ears in the back of a Fiat Uno with last night's beer breathing down your throat and a dash of four-star for good measure is as rough as it gets. Cheap and pathetic and going absolutely nowhere – so wrong, wrong, wrong!

The following weekend, Suzie told Peter about Pete. For her husband's benefit, a single mistaken quickie with someone she hardly knew was steadily stretched, in the relating of its detail, to being perhaps a bit of a regular and sensuous thing. Pete showed considerable displeasure; Suzie put up a token defence; he ordered her to change service station with immediate effect; she said sorry. Then they went to bed and made long loud love, and that night they were back in their first years together. Come the morning, Peter was in a resolute mood. He talked about the acute embarrassment this would cause him if news of her fling with a filling station operative should get out. The blame, he said, lay with himself as much as with her. He could see that, now. He was too wrapped up in his work and was not paying her enough attention. That had to change.

And he was as good as his word. Peter spent as much time with her as the bank would allow between restructurings. For

a few weeks at least, attentions were paid and details remembered; small talk replaced the morning paper at the breakfast table. The Fiat was traded in for a Nissan, though the new vehicle was registered, like the old one, in Peter's name. A birthday was celebrated by a weekend in Paris; and Suzie's personal allowance was increased significantly above inflation. Peter brought a fancy mounted camera into the bedroom and said Suzie should pose. They laughed together over the first results, after which the quality of performance on both sides of the camera quickly improved. Peter especially liked it when she fondled herself, which she also liked.

Part of the deal had been that Suzie must give up her job at the sales room. If she wanted a little business of her own – a shop selling greetings cards or something – then he could arrange a bank loan. This made good sense. She could draw on the experience of the sales room and be her very own independent self – an ambition that was now pressing.

Suzie looked for suitable premises. In little time, she found a shop along a street that held a certain old world charm and which promised just the right environment for her enterprise. There was a small pub on the corner with iron railings and colourful displays of flowers in hanging baskets. The houses of the street were solidly Victorian, proud of their heritage and well maintained. Fenced trees between the pavement and carriageway completed the ambience. The shop Suzie enquired about, set slightly back from the road and having an extended rear, had previously belonged to a newsagent. Its aluminium door and window frames, and a garish fascia, were completely out of place. She could see why the business had failed: it was entirely the wrong location for a vendor of tabloids and tobacco, but ideal for a purveyor of fine antique furniture.

With an excited confidence that generated its own energy, Suzie in a single day negotiated a rent, asked a firm of shopfitters to quote for a traditional frontage, went to see an

agreeable Moose about supplying a start-up stock, with maybe a little sale-or-return. She chose a trading name: Anne Teakes. The same evening, she presented her neatly written costings to Peter. No, no, no, he responded. This would never do. Where were the cash flow projections? What was the expected balance after a year's trading – two years, three? How would she provide for the servicing of the loan? On and on, in bankspeak. Suzie asked him, meekly – like a mortgage applicant at the bank, how a proper business plan should look.

It was an approach Peter was better with. The next day, he set up the computer in his study for her to enter on an electronic form the information the bank would require. She could not help but feel a stab of disappointment on realising that Peter's total contribution to her business would be to guide her through the loan application process and to act as guarantor up to a modest figure. Suzie had hoped Peter would pitch in with some money of his own to get the business off the ground. It occurred to her, as she tapped figures into tiny rectangles, that she had no idea how much her husband was worth. Didn't half of whatever the amount might be belong in law to her, as his legally married partner? She could ask her solicitor, of course, but her solicitor was also Peter's, acting for her on his behalf. Wasn't it the truth that she was naive about matters of such importance because she always allowed her husband to deal with everything – because her husband would have it no other way? How could she have let the position come about? It was no consolation to suppose that countless other women were locked in the same situation. Anyway, the shop would change all that. Moose said she had a natural eye for picking out the sparkle among the tat. Anne Teakes would be a self made woman – no mistake. Suzie thought about going to see if Penny would provide part-time cover at the shop.

The application was delayed. Peter told her why: as she was the spouse of a manager, the process had to be dealt with at

another branch, by someone who had no personal involvement. Suzie asked Peter for a cheque with which to secure the leasehold on the shop since the agent had rung to warn her another party was interested in the premises. An advance should not be paid, Peter returned, until the loan was definitely agreed, otherwise the money might be lost. Besides, estate agents had been pulling that one for as long as there have been estate agents. The agent, thought, was not bluffing: when Suzie called into the office with savings accumulated from allowances, the receptionist breezily informed her that three months' rent had just been deposited on the property by a young woman who intended opening a party shop – fancy dress hire, balloons, streamers, indoor fireworks, everything to make that special occasion one to remember. However, there were other retail premises on the books, eminently suitable for furniture retail – would she like the keys to look over one located not far away? Suzie told the girl to forget it. She had caught sight of the cheque attached by a paper clip to the property's folder lying on the shelf below and behind the counter, and by reading upside down she learnt the issuing branch of the party woman's bank. Suzie's words were repeated, to her husband, over the evening meal.

Peter approached forty at a rate of ageing that Suzie considered to be twice her own. Suddenly, it was as if a generation separated them. Appearances suggested he was on his way to being a portly Porter, and he began to exhibit the obsessive personality that older husbands develop. Suzie was accused of giving the eye to men when she was doing no such thing – well, not every time. The fascinating woman of uncounted previous lovers was, it seemed, now expected to be the perfect blinkered housewife never straying from her glossy-pages home. Suzie wondered when the chastity belt would arrive.

It was at about the same time that Peter began buying girlie magazines, top shelf stuff. She found a magazine, in the deep

map pocket of the passenger door of Peter's car, while searching for a lost bottle of contact lens fluid. Then, deliberately rooting, she came across more magazines concealed under papers in a drawer of his desk. There may have been others hidden away elsewhere – she looked no further, having told herself she was not bothered. Peter's late evenings spent on his own watching videos through the television led Suzie to believe the top shelf girls were no longer enough to satisfy his tastes. This did not bother her either, she informed herself, though curiosity finally got the better of her. In the quiet of an afternoon, she drew close the curtains to subdue the sunlight and sat down to view a sample of discovered cassettes. She was reminded, if she needed reminding, of what the fairer sex will do for money.

It passed through Suzie's thoughts that perhaps she should make an effort to share her husband's interest. The present state of affairs was not happy for either of them. Maybe if she confronted him and allowed him to be open, then something could be salvaged. She honestly did not mind the porno material, only that her husband chose to exclude her from his sexual preserve.

Suzie grew tired of girlies with pouting mouths and oiled knockers, girlies with legs spread and fingers with painted nails stroking genitalia. She picked up a cassette bearing a different design of label. The video tape depicted models who could more accurately be described as women rather than girlies. The standard of photography tended to be amateurish, familiarly so, and the subject might be giggling, unsure, embarrassed, flirty – or fondling herself. These were wives posing for their husbands. 'Randy Mandy', 'Theresa the Teaser', 'Pam the Wham', 'Hot Chocolate'. An inspection of the label informed that the recording came from an exchange club. She found no 'Floozy Suzie' on the tape, but copies of her doing her thing were bound to be somewhere. How many VCRs up and down the land – across the world – was she exercised on?

Perhaps finding the magazines and coming across the videos had been a little too easy. Men close to the midlife crisis need to signal that there is still plenty of sexual bounce left. That is what young mistresses are essentially about. Well, she had received Peter's signal, had followed his unsubtle trail of mucky magazines and revealing videos. What now?

The placing of cards on the table, the 'let's have it all out', the breath of fresh air that Suzie planned turned out to be a disaster. It was the wine that did it. Suzie's days were got through increasingly with support from the product of the vine. A glass with the evening meal, a glass afterwards, say two, and so on; then it had become a glass to help lunch go down, another in the middle of the afternoon; why not take the bottle on to the patio? The day of the evening on which she proposed to clear the decks with Peter warranted a doubling of support. She did not feel drunk when she told him she knew about the magazines, about the wife sharing video club, but he informed her she was, or at least that she had 'been drinking' in that condescending manner he could use. Her head seemed clear when she broached the subject of joint home ownership, with her points of argument at the ready. But she was caught off guard by the fierce snarl which was supposed to remind her that, if it was not for him and all the hard work he put in at the bank, she would be out on the very street he had picked her up from. Suzie retorted to the effect that living on the street would be preferable to living with a tight-arsed sod like him. She failed to brace for the heavy back of his hand across her face.

One bright morning shortly before her thirtieth birthday, and with only a bare minimum of preparation (though she suspected the action was subconsciously already planned), Suzie emerged from the suspended animation of leylandii suburbia and caught a train north. Nine years of nothing were left behind; nothing was taken. Divorce came later when Peter plucked a busty bimbo from the bank's business development section to train as a new trophy wife. Suzie

heard her ex's world was severely rocked a few months afterwards when he was restructured out of a job. She was strangely unmoved by any of the news, had difficulty even identifying with the man whose possession she had been for almost a decade, filling in between church and court (as Ellis describes most people's marriages), a chapter of life written from a pen dipped in water.

6

Is it not phenomenally curious the way in which neighbours can one minute, or possibly even for year on year, be friendly towards you and helpful, exchanging pleasantries and light gossip on the street, pushing your just-emptied wheelie bin round the back with their own, or taking in parcels when you are out – and the next minute be baying for your blood? No matter that the newspaper gets its facts wrong, or bothers little to get them right – if you are the one individual on an entire housing estate, in an entire city, chosen to be named and shamed in a national campaign of moral outrage, then you may be in for a less than peaceful time.

The first sign of anything being out of a summer Sunday's ordinary was in the late afternoon, when a small group of people assembled in front of the house, a terraced property of council design separated from the street by a fence of wooden palings and a couple of paces of garden. Some women accompanied by nervously excited children held a banner, its message painted in crudely formed characters and displaying a twelve inch spelling error. Some men, standing slightly apart from the women, pushed mobile phones to their ears, making one call after another. More people joined the group in ones or twos, but also as families. Placards were prepared on the spot, and handed out. By early evening, the gathering had swollen so that it blocked the street, causing difficulty to passing vehicles. A man's voice shouted out, initiating a patchy chant. Someone threw a part brick at the ground floor window of the house, the missile remarkably rebounding off the unbroken glass. A second attempt succeeded where the first had failed. The wail of an approaching police car caused a moment of hushed

uncertainty before another male voice – or maybe the same one as before – encouraged a fresh phase of hostility to ripple through the crowd.

Two more windows of the target address were smashed, and one window belonging to an adjacent house. A police van drew up alongside the car. A young woman police officer opened the van's passenger door to emerge and be hit on the temple by a small but sharp-edged piece of concrete, the blow causing her to stumble bleeding to the ground. At about the same time, an ignited rag was tossed through a jagged pane of the house's bay window. After a short delay, a flicker of flames could be seen inside the house. A scuffle broke out between some of the protesters and those of the police who were not attending to their injured colleague. When a fire engine lurched into the street, its approach heralded by an undulating siren and flashing lights, the appliance came under attack, its windscreen shattered by something thrown. Residents of houses along the street who had come out to watch from their gates retreated to their doorways or went indoors altogether, preferring the relative safety of viewing from upstairs windows. A nearby parked car was jounced up and down in an aggressive prelude to it being turned on its side. As the middle-aged owner came out of his home to remonstrate, he was surrounded by youths and serially punched before being pulled back by his wife. From the crowd's other side, a media cameraman recorded the general scene, creeping tangentially while his companion, a young female reporter emboldened by the possibility of national distribution, directly approached individuals standing at the edge of the fray to obtain their comments. From within the mass, a small woman full of loud menace burst upon the girl.

“They ought to 'ave their fuckin' balls cut off, the fuckin' lot of 'em. Fuckin' perverts.”

It was a point of view not relayed by the media in its adjectival entirety, although a placard which read ‘castrate!’

and another that urged 'hang them' were given visual acknowledgement. A police spokesman described the events as a peaceful demonstration that regrettably led to an outbreak of violent behaviour while the local newspaper went for the single word headline: *Riot!*

The paper told how a major public disturbance had terrified a street for hours and caused thousands of pounds' worth of damage. A police officer had required stitches to a head wound, another officer had been hit with a placard, and two fire officers had received cuts from flying glass. There had been a number of arrests; however, no one had been detained in custody. The man at the centre of the attack was believed not at home at the time, though a fire caused by (according to the report) a Molotov cocktail had ravaged the house.

Inside pages of the newspaper informed the reader that the individual at the focus of the disturbance was indeed entered on the sex offenders' register but, according to his solicitor, wrongly so since his client's relatively minor offence had not put anyone – especially young children – at risk, and unjustly so because offences more serious than his client's single transgression were not required to be entered on the register. This was a clear case of mistaken identity, and his client would without question be suing the national Sunday newspaper which had incorrectly and improperly named him.

A woman neighbour described the man as quiet and easy to get on with but was shocked to think that her own two had been in his house on occasions. 'You just can't tell what kind of person you live next door to, these days, can you?' The neighbour on the other side, whose home had suffered the broken window, told the paper 'never mind a sex offenders' register, there ought to be a rioters' register' and wanted to know who was going to pay for the damage to his property. His insurance company had already advised him the policy did not provide cover for civil commotion. Why had the police been unprepared? he asked. Didn't they know about

the leaflets pushed through doors in the area before the riot, specifying the address? Weren't law-abiding people entitled to protection? No one offered a reply to the neighbour's questions. Across the street, the man who had painfully and unsuccessfully tried to protect his car refused to be interviewed or photographed for fear of reprisal.

Some blamed boredom, some the heat of a long summer. Others said there were old scores to settle – the victim of the attack was rumoured to have once passed on information to the police about a gang handling stolen goods. The level of debate widened as it moved away from the estate and entered into the mainstream media. With the mishandling of the Stop the War campaign still stinging, even though she came out of it with credibility largely restored, Su agreed without hesitation to take part in a live discussion at the studio of the regional FM radio station. She had met the presenter on a previous occasion but did not know the two other guests. One was introduced as a lecturer in social policy at the university. He looked dangerously clever. The other was a resident of the estate where the demonstration had been held, a small man with a pockmarked face, perhaps in his forties, the permanently angry type. The Clever One opened.

“It takes very little to incite an uneducated deprived community to join in collective action reminiscent of a seventeenth-century style witch-hunt. Indeed, the lynch law mentality is never far below the surface in these places. Evidence and a balanced argument are of little concern to these people – a mere allegation is enough to stimulate disorder.”

The Pocked One was about to object to the Clever One's tone – Su could sense it from his bristling – but she was there first.

“That's right. Once punishment for an offence has been served, the wrong-doer has a right to be left in peace and have a home life like anyone else. The publication of names

and addresses by a national paper is, to my mind, a crime in itself, almost as serious in its way as the potential danger the newspaper claims to be protecting us from. It's a violation of human rights and socially irresponsible – a sure recipe for anarchy, in fact. When innocent people are caught up in violence as a result of a blind to sell more newspapers, then reason is thrown completely out of the window. Quite honestly, if the newspapers are so bent on naming and shaming, why don't they name and shame directors of companies which cause major accidents through neglect and cost-cutting – like the rail companies, for example?"

Having apparently dismissed the lecturer's tone, the resident turned to Su.

"We have enough problems on the estates without the children being exposed to abuse and put in danger from paedophiles. We need to know where the paedophiles are, for the sake of our children's safety."

Su had rehearsed; she was ready.

"I agree. That's why the police maintain a sex offenders' register. That's why the movements of people whose names are on the register are monitored. But the information should not be made public, especially when the information is unsafe. I understand there have been cases where children of wrongly targeted individuals are themselves attacked by the very people demonstrating against child abuse."

The peppery reply.

"What good are the police? They won't do anything – not until it's too late. They only protect the child molesters. The paper was right to let us who live on the estate know we had a paedophile living amongst us."

Su threw a glance over to the Clever One, who was sitting impassively, staring unseeingly into the middle distance as if detached from the discussion. As she was about to continue the exchange with the Pocked One, the presenter asked the lecturer what he thought.

"This is a newspaper that positively *thrives* on smut and

depravity. It capitalises on the sexual repression of its sad readers. These rags are often run by public schoolboys who – let’s face it – hardly have anything to tell *us* about perversion! I agree with the lady – this particular Sunday paper may claim to publish the names for the sake of the children, but you can be assured it’s making money from a boosted circulation at the same time. I wouldn’t mind wagering that one or two tabloid editors themselves have a taste for the same perverted tendencies they are quick to condemn in others.”

An awkward silence threatened as the presenter made a disapproving hand gesture. Su took advantage.

“Well, *I* believe there should be some attempt to understand the underlying problem of paedophilia. Once we know what impels these men to do what they do, then we’ll gain a fuller understanding of the disease and have a better chance of helping them overcome it.”

The estate resident responded with spittled anger.

“That’s rubbish! It’s not a disease. Child molesters can never be cured. They should be locked up for good and the key thrown away. They should be tattooed on their foreheads. They always reoffend when released. It’s in their nature.”

Su’s reaction was to adopt a voice of patient explanation.

“You can’t lock up all paedophiles – our prisons just aren’t big enough. They have to live somewhere. They’re people, just like you or me.”

“The punishment should fit the crime, then there would be much less reoffending.”

“They also have to be supervised and helped. To threaten them with harsh punishment would simply drive many of them underground. That would be to no one’s advantage – least of all our children’s.”

The presenter once again asked the lecturer’s opinion.

“Unquestionably, protection of the child has to be balanced against the criminal’s rights. Let me ask you a question.” He dropped a finger at Su. “I don’t know if you are a parent, but let’s assume for the moment that you are. Here’s my question.

What would you do if it came to your knowledge that a registered paedophile was living in your particular neighbourhood, near to where you live? Perhaps moved in to the house next door. I would wager you'd be on the telephone to someone at the highest level. You see, it's all very well to be liberal and forgiving when there's someone else's family at risk. Quite another response when the problem appears on your own doorstep. Isn't that the truth?"

Tactlessly, so Su thought, the presenter asked her if in fact she was a parent. The reply in the negative brought the shadow of a smirk to the Clever One's face. She continued.

"The truth is, not all of us can sit on the fence, looking down on one side and then the other, and wagering as the fancy takes us. In the real world, some of us have to make front line judgements. The sort of behaviour witnessed over the weekend brings no credit to anyone on that estate. The residents didn't actually get the right man, neither did the Sunday newspaper, but even if they had, all the damage and injury does nothing to make things better. Not one child is any the more protected because houses are torched and cars are overturned and policewomen stoned. I repeat what I said before: it's important to find out the cause of the illness, and to deal with it in a sensible and civilised manner. Please, for everyone's sake, no more scenes like we saw at the weekend."

The presenter, responding to his earpiece, thanked them for their time and reminded listeners of the number through which to call in and have a say. A gesture from behind the soundproof glass screen told him the lines were already jammed.

* * * * *

"What *on earth* is it?" Fee stepped around it as if it might spring up at her.

"It's a bend-over-and-be-spanked horse."

"A what?"

“It’s an instrument of punishment for naughty girls.”

Gingerly, Fee ran a hand along the lacquered surface of the device’s largest component, a two-piece vertically mounted board having a central hole for a neck and two smaller holes for wrists, like in a pillory of old. The board was supported on a pair of short uprights that were part of a frame which ran at floor level perhaps a couple of feet or so to another pair of uprights, the tops of which were bridged by a broad rounded padded bar. The bar, at waist height, was on a level with the bottom of the headboard. Below the bar, just above floor height, a further two-piece board crossed the frame, slimmer than the headboard and horizontally mounted. In the board were holes, spaced well apart, to constrain ankles. Steel pegs and small holes drilled in the frame allowed for various adjustments. The device was built of sturdy thicknesses of pine.

“What’s it do?”

“I’m glad you asked. Strip off and I’ll show you.”

Fee backed away. “No. I want to know what it is, first.”

“I told you. It’s a spanking frame.”

“I don’t want to be spanked, thank you.”

“It’s not a matter of what you want. It’s what you need. Now off with the kit.”

Fee threw herself diagonally across the bed and propped her head on one arm.

“Where did you get it from, anyway?”

“The postman brought it.”

“Seriously, what are you going to do with it?”

“I just said.”

Su checked the frame over. “Now come over here. I want to make sure it fits.”

A defiant note sounded from the bed.

“You’re not getting *me* in that.”

“Wanna bet?”

“No, Su. Not till I know what it’s for.”

“How many more times? It’s a spanking horse. Craftsman

made – only the best for my girls.”

“Girls? How many have you got?”

“Just the one – and I want her here. Now.”

Su moved towards the bed. Fee giggled and dropped to her knees on the opposite side of the bed, shrinking as Su went round to her. An arm as noose pulled the girl towards the apparatus.

“No, no,” Fee gasped in feigned horror.

“Yes, yes. C’mon, let’s give it a whirl.”

With some lack of certainty, Fee allowed herself to be undressed, and positioned in the frame as Su reset pegs.

“It’s uncomfortable.”

“It’s meant to be. Now shut up while I get it right.”

Su stood back to inspect the alterations.

“Just so, yeh?”

“It’s still uncomfortable.”

Su gave Fee’s bare buttocks a light smack.

“You’ll get used to it.”

“What are you going to do?”

There was no answer. Without haste, the mistress changed into her dominatrix wear and paraded before a full-length mirror.

“Like the boots?” she asked. “These have kinky knee cups.”

“I can’t see them from here.”

Pulling a chair near to the frame. Su sat and intrusively groped the restrained Fee.

“Let’s see what we’ve got, shall we?”

When Fee began complaining again, Su released the girl, saying that some modifications might be necessary as she inspected the wood around the neck hole.

“No they won’t. You’re not getting me in that thing ever again.”

“You’ll be put in it whenever you don’t behave, my lass. And spanked.” But Su was being mock severe. She chased the naked squealing girl to the bed, on the bed, turning her to be face up. Fee put on a show of resistance, as Su liked.

“You’re a wicked witch, do you know?”

“Getting wickeder.”

Still feigning a struggle, Fee allowed herself to be tied to the bedposts. Su checked that the ties were taut. She adjusted the camera on its mount.

“Is that thing connected up? I never see you with a video or anything,” asked Fee, neck angled.

“Oh, yes. I flick this switch here – click, like that – and all the world can see you laid out as nature didn’t intend.”

“Knowing you, I wouldn’t be surprised. Seriously, though, can I watch the video, seeing as I’m on it?”

“When you’re a big girl. These tapes are adult rated.”

“Meanie. You’re making fun of me again.”

“That’s right. In the meantime, a big smile for the camera, please.” Su secured a choker round Fee’s neck, the choker connected to the bed frame by a tie, like the wrist and ankle cuffs. Fee confirmed she was completely immobile.

“Go on, then. Have your wicked witch way with me, if you must.”

“Don’t worry. I intend to.”

* * * * *

Roger passed Su a copy of the report. As one of the internal review’s authors, she was already familiar with its contents. Ellis called such documents a mindless repetition of words in an artificial language using a syntax of incomprehensibility. Or something like that. She flicked through the first pages, in which the Community Advance mission statement was reproduced in stark Arial, the preferred style and font of poverty warriors. It was all there.

...enabling people to meet their needs and have greater control over the decision-making processes which affect their lives ...removing barriers that prevent people from participating ...challenging discrimination and oppressive

practices within organisations, institutions and communities ...increasing our understanding of communities ...developing practice and policy that protects the environment ...influencing policy from the perspective of communities ...prioritising the issues of concern to people experiencing poverty and social exclusion ...promoting social change ...supporting community led action ...reversing imbalance of power relationships in society

Her eye caught and ran through the last line. The final phrase had been her own contribution to a list recycled and rearranged from wherever. It fitted in rather well, she thought.

The others waited for her to start: Roger at her right; Fee – attending her first strategy meeting in the capacity of Opted Body Representative; the five outreach team leaders, including Monique; Jeannine, Monique’s replacement at Central; Geri at the back taking minutes; Indira serving refreshments.

“I’m sure you’ve all carefully read the report and absorbed every single word.” Humour to settle the air.

“The message is clear. Our industry is currently undergoing a bout of soul searching. According to a national survey conducted by none other than the esteemed foundation that speaks on our behalf, some seventy percent of agency time is now spent on less than fifty percent engagement with the community. In other words, less and less time is being spent on direct support to groups and individuals out there. What the survey omits to mention, of course, is the increased amounts of time consumed by tracking and securing funds.” This brought a titter; the table was with her.

“The same survey also informs us that, nationally, women earn less than men in community development. I *mean* – tell us something we *don’t* know.” Open laughter. Roger, the only male present, contributed in the same spirit.

“Believe me, the national income structure is not my doing.

And – I hasten to point out – CA absolutely refuses to recognise gender differences within the pay scale. It certainly refuses as far as *my* salary's concerned, I can assure you."

"That's right. We can't be doing with differentials, here. Boys and girls are all the same as far as CA is concerned. At least we get some things right."

Fee agreed.

"Surely it doesn't matter who does the job – a man or a woman. It's the job that pays, not the sex."

"Let's not go there, shall we?" Further laughter, except from Fee, who smiled uncertainly.

Su paused to mark a change of tone.

"Community Advance needs to raise its profile in the communities it serves. It's not enough for people to know that CA goes where the poverty goes, we have to show them what we do when we get there. We have to be seen to support community-led action, to build capacity within the community, to emphasise the importance of involvement by local people. The government's aim is to ensure that, in ten to twenty years' time, no one is disadvantaged by where they live. We must forge local strategic partnerships if we are to hold on to our rightful place in the line-up for funding. That's the condition imposed from above. We want to be part of the project. We need to be."

Monique had a question. "I've read the results of the survey and I'm aware of the implications. What do you want us to do that we aren't doing already?"

"Okay. Our plan of campaign will have two prongs. One of these is already well under way. Since Fee here became our chief scout, the number of organisations having joined our Opted Body Programme has risen to twenty-five. She's been working hard and I'm sure she deserves a round of appreciation for that."

Again, Fee smiled, this time to mask embarrassment as the others said 'well done' and clapped. A good part of the praise was genuinely expressed. To everyone's surprise – including

Su's – Fee had, during the few weeks in the new position, shown a talent for persuading groups to gather under the CA umbrella. She cultivated the leads while Su or Roger did the closing. Besides, it was a job no one else in the agency wanted.

“The recruiting will continue. I'd like Jeannine as dedicated contact for the programme here at HQ. Is that all right with you, Jeannine?” Jeannine nodded. “Good. You and Fee will liaise on a regular basis from now on. Keep it up, Fee.” Su threw a covert wink.

“Now, for the outreachers, I suggest an awareness week. That'll be our other prong. We'll hold open days and have some razzmatazz to remind the community that CA is still very much in business as a grass roots organisation. We'll back it up with media promotion. I'm arranging another meeting later this week at which I want each and every one of you outreach leaders to flood us out with ideas. I'll start the ball rolling with an idea of my own. Our slogan for the event could be 'get included', with an enlarged U in included. Good, yeh?”

Su was pleased at the pace of the meeting. Other items on the agenda, issues raised in the national survey, included the poor ratio of ethnic paid workers. Indira remarked lightly that she had done her bit by becoming an employee of CA. The agency was very grateful, Su replied, but were there any more Indiras out there? The difficulty was identified as a poor mix of applicants. Su had already discussed the issue with Roger: although he did not completely like the idea since it could infringe racial discrimination legislation, he agreed that future job processing would have to be conducted with a fuller ethnic profile in mind.

Many of the agency's paid workers, it seemed, harboured anxieties about the impermanent nature of their jobs. Biennial contracts offered insufficient security when arranging mortgages and planning for the longer term. The way to look at it, Su replied, was that contracts allowed for greater

personal flexibility and development. No one was tied at one level for ever, nobody was stuck in a groove. Contracts were a creation of the funding structure, the supply of money itself also being of an impermanent nature. There was nothing that might be done to change the situation, though paid staff could do everything in their power to make sure the agency made it through each round of funding by demonstrating their individual section's value for money.

"In this business, you learn to negotiate your own next contract," Su told the meeting with an exaggerated smile.

Ellis asked Su how her day had been, specifically the meeting, but he was in a crotchety mood. There was a brief return to the Ellis of the tower block days, an Ellis who would set off on a carping verbal jog that only he knew the route for. The awareness week idea produced a cynical laugh from him, more a bark, not a nice sound. He asked, in rhetorical question style, had community development work become so middle class it had forgotten what it was supposed to do? Had the workers lost sight of the social deprivation that daily festers around them? When Su made reference to his mood, he sourly retorted that the silencing of non-aligned opinion was her day job – she was at home now, she could relax. He continued: it might well be interpreted that the manual, when it talks of 'informed view', means 'we'll inform you what your view is', but not everybody was under the community development yoke. Su replied that she would put him under a yoke if he didn't shut up. Her tack of levity seemed to work. Ellis lifted from the floor of his mood with a quote:

"Whilst others never came to play. And staid at Home for Double Pay."

She asked who had said it. Mandeville, he told her. *The Grumbling Hive*. She was no wiser but the grumbling bit sounded right.

The cause of the mood was drawn out of him. Ellis had been doing the household accounts. He informed her they

were spending too freely. ‘They’ in this sense meant Su. In short, nothing was being accumulated. Too many months were showing significantly more expenditure than income. The capital situation was being eroded instead of consolidated. Su said she couldn’t see the problem since the house was increasing in value quicker than an estate agent’s estimate could be crossed through and altered. The property market was booming – or hadn’t he heard? It was a common misconception, Ellis declared, that a rise in the value of one’s house equated greater spending power. House owners believe they are wealthier and spend accordingly. But they are eating into the asset so it is actually worth *less* to them. If there were to be a day of reckoning, they would find that the net sum available to them was nowhere near what they deluded themselves into believing. Besides, that was not this household’s immediate problem. Su was simply spending too much. She had no savings discipline to speak of. As quickly as her salary arrived at the bank, and the mortgage and the loan for the conservatory and the car instalments paid, it poured out through the plastic and the cheque book into non-asset spending. Ellis called it resource haemorrhaging.

Su was unconvinced. The furniture she bought was an investment, she said – some of it. She enjoyed her jaunts round the sales rooms and had not Ellis agreed on more than one occasion that she possessed an eye for a bargain? The purchase of a true bargain puts you in front as soon as you hand over the money. Her jewellery – the various spikes and chains of adornment that, in the private view of Ellis, continued to increase in bizarreness as they did in carats – would hold its worth, wouldn’t it? And what about her pension fund, for her old age? Wasn’t that saving?

The pension fund, Ellis told her, was part of the problem. The rather generous sums of money she was blithely channelling in to it each month might not be there when she came to call on it.

“A good many pension plans end in tears. The papers are

full of crashes and bitter disappointments. A pension is only as good as the financial adviser who recommended it in the first place.”

“There you are, then. I happen to have a tame financial wizard handling mine, don’t I? Solly wouldn’t lead me up the garden path.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. Everyone has the most dependable PFA ever to walk the earth – till payout day. I wouldn’t trust Solly any more than I trust anyone else who smiled gold teeth.”

“Don’t be so prejudiced. You sound like Craig Mains.”

“All I’m saying is that you shouldn’t put your eggs in the same basket, that’s all.”

Su resented discussion of her personal spending, especially with a counting finger wagged at her. How much she spent, and on what, was no concern of his, of anyone’s. She worked for what she earned and she deserved to spend it in whichever way she chose. Her money kept him, didn’t it? – he should bloody well remember that. But Su said none of these things. She was tired, too tired for an Ellis-type argument. In any case, it was she who had put him charge of the domestic accounts. Ellis would make sure everything was paid on time and correctly, and check that nobody was trying to stick something on. She knew she needed someone to tell her that which she would simply ignore if she herself were doing the books. Her nod to prudence satisfied Ellis, who poured the wine and served nibbles while she unloaded the rest of her day.

That night, with Fee snuggled close – it was a cuddle night – Su asked how the week’s leads were progressing. She was referring to the Opted Body Programme. Fee said she didn’t want to talk about work, and surely they had dealt with it all at the strategy meeting. It was important, Su replied, but she didn’t press the sleepy girl.

* * * * *

Monique, who took the job far too seriously, was playing up. When based at CA Central she had been a good worker, well capable of self organisation and resolving difficulties as soon as they cropped up, though she could sometimes be a little waspish and was never quite one of the girls. Since her promotion to outreach team leader at ATC North – though she seemed to regard it not as promotion but penal exile – Monique had developed a social conscience straight out of the Ellis Carmichael mould. During a visit to ATC North which Su tried to dress up as routine, Monique insisted on taking Su on a tour of the estate, following almost the same route that Su had taken at the time of Monique's relocation.

The outreach leader pointed out an abandoned primary school, closed because of falling pupil numbers. The premises were deemed suitable for no other purpose than that for which they had been designed and the buildings were earmarked for demolition. A high content of asbestos in the linings of the structure made the work an expensive proposition. According to Monique, the council had deliberately allowed the perimeter fencing to fall into disrepair so the local kids could wreck and set fire to the place. At one stage during the recent half-term holidays, the fire brigade had attended call-outs on a daily basis. The council's response was to urge parents to keep their children away from the site and to tell them of the potential dangers, yet the fences were not strengthened, only patched up. Su suggested that perhaps this was all the council could do for the time being. After all, parents were responsible for their children and should know where they were. But Monique carried on as if her superior had said nothing.

"The thing is, Su, the council are getting hazardous demolition done on the cheap. This asbestos is supposed to be so deadly that contractors wear protective clothing and demand danger money. But it's all right to send it up in

flames to fall out over the entire estate. It lands on washing hung out on the line, and gets into the house, into lungs – including the children’s. And what’s Town Hall doing about it? Nothing. Sweet Fanny Adams. Except defer it to next month’s meeting, and the next, and the next.”

Su looked over the blackened shell from the car. “Well, it looks like most of it’s gone now.”

“And what is the community left with? A damned eyesore. This’ll be here for months and years, won’t it.”

“Probably.” Su was not in the mood for absorbing outreach frustration. “I agree, it’s a blot on the local landscape, but it’s purely a matter for the local authority. There’s honestly nothing CA can do about it, Monique.”

“It’s *another* blot on the landscape, as if there aren’t enough already. Come on, I’ll show you something else.” Monique turned the car away from the school site and drove towards a part of the estate Su could only dimly recall. “There’s been some changes since you were here.”

A quarter mile curve of feeder road accessed about a dozen cul-de-sacs on the edge of the estate, where the city protruded into forsaken countryside. Within the urban lobe, piecemeal demolition of homes was taking place. The action had created a surreal landscape of short isolated terraces of occupied houses within an extensive plateau of crushed rubble and struggling weeds. Monique left the road and drove bumpily for several yards before stopping beside the wrecked remains of a van.

“Look at it, for God’s sake! It’s a man-made desert.”

“I suppose these remaining houses belong to owner occupiers, yeh?”

“They were promised a complete make-over of the area – trees, grass, flower beds, a new road layout – if they would agree to selective demolition. Promised.”

“Perhaps it’s on its way.”

“No – that’s the point. It isn’t. This is *it* – strictly what you see is what you get. The council has said there are projects in

more urgent need of the money. These people were lied to. Now their homes are worthless. I mean – would you want to buy a house up for sale here?”

“No, I suppose not.” Su was going to say more, but Monique had opened the door and was standing by the car. With a sigh, Su also climbed from the car. There was a faint obnoxious smell: Su identified it as farm manure spread on agricultural land that lay somewhere upwind. Monique was taking photographs with a digital camera. Su spoke.

“Okay, Monique. It’s not pretty out here, but what’s your punchline? We’re not in the make-over business. We don’t have a magic wand to wave.”

Monique continued with the camera, passing the van shell as she replied.

“We shouldn’t let it happen in the first place. Our job is to *advance the community* – Community Advance, get it? – not to stand idly by while the local authority deliberately trash it.”

“They aren’t deliberately trashing it.”

Camera lowered, Monique turned to Su, who had just rounded the van body. The outreach leader’s eyes were hard.

“I suppose you’re going to blame the residents.”

“It’s not my place to blame anyone. Nor yours. We take the situation as we find it and try our best to improve it.”

“This —” Monique threw her free arm in a wide sweep to indicate the expanse of mottled grey and dull ochre and patchy green, “None of this was like it is now when *you* were doing my job. It’s happened in the meantime. We didn’t just *find it*, Su. We let it happen.”

Su returned to the car. “Come on. Let’s get back to the office.”

Monique got in, started the engine, and drove without speaking. They passed the neighbourhood centre, looking no better than when they had visited it together on Monique’s first day. Su expected Monique to stop or slow down in order to make further comment. She didn’t. They both knew that the building of a new health centre was once again delayed by

renewed wrangling among the funding partners.

“The whole place is going down the tube,” Monique murmured, speaking to herself more than to her boss sitting next to her. Su grasped the nettle.

“Look, Monique. If it’s getting to you then we’ll have you back at HQ. It’s as simple as that. Really, it is.”

“No, Su. It isn’t getting to me – not the place, not the people. I get on wonderfully with them. It’s – oh...”

“Oh what? We may as well have it out, now we’ve come this far.”

“It’s – the agency. Us. We don’t *do* anything, do we?” Monique was expressing herself with a hand gesture while trying to look Su in the face. A bus travelling in the opposite direction gave the car a bad-tempered blast of horn.

“We do a lot, actually. The agency has made great inroads since formation.”

“Not on this estate, it hasn’t.”

“We can’t be everywhere, do everything, be all things to all people. You know that, Monique. You know how we stretch ourselves till it hurts. There’s this little thing called money.”

Monique’s anger spilled away. Her tone became reconciliatory.

“Oh, Su, I don’t know... I just wish we could see where we’ve been – here, I mean.”

“I know. One step forward, one back. I used to feel like that.”

At Su’s suggestion, they continued on the main road and drove to a public house away from the estate. Su asked the barman of the near empty establishment if he could serve two coffees to which he perfunctorily replied that he could. Over the coffee, which was served by a smiling attractive girl in a fetching white pinafore and who compensated for the barman’s lack of enthusiasm, Su explained the paradox of community development, as espoused by a website she had visited. It had read something along the lines of the following. In a given community of limited opportunity, the more

enterprising members will leave. They take their skills and chances of better rewards elsewhere. Less enterprising members remain. The concentration of poor achievers therefore increases. It may seem to the development worker that her efforts to improve the community have been a waste of time. But this is not true – indeed, a greater concentration of deprivation may indicate there has been an *increase* in enterprise and hope among the people. The community development worker does not see the fruits of her work because, at the first break, the improved individuals take off. Yes, there may well be an impression of taking one step forward only to slide one step back – though this is never the full picture.

Su could not tell whether Monique was mollified. Leaving the pub, the team leader showed a brighter disposition; but on returning to the outreach office she snapped a ‘not now’ at a woman – middle-aged, small and narrow, and hoarse of voice – who, as they entered, pressed on the leader a clipboard of signatures.

“What was that all about?” Su asked Monique in the cramped privacy of the leader’s screened cubicle in the corner of the office.

“She’s a volunteer. She’s raising a petition, trying to prevent the installation of a mobile phone mast. Says there’s enough cancer on the estate already. Doreen has cancer herself, so she tells everyone.”

“Then perhaps her concern is legitimate.”

“The mast site is nowhere near houses or a school. It won’t be seen from the road.”

“What’s the harm in her campaigning? At least she’s engaging.”

“There is no harm in it as such, but it’s a gross waste of time. And irrational. The roofs of the high-rises are chock-a-block with antennae. You can see them from miles away. It must be like the inside of a microwave oven up there. But nobody has ever campaigned against those. And other masts,

too, dotted here and there. They never attracted attention when they went up.”

“I still don’t see why you were short with her like. It was a tad on the rude side, don’t you think?”

Monique gasped. “No. *She* was rude. She didn’t even acknowledge your presence before pushing that petition in my face as soon as we walked in.”

“Maybe. But you could have humoured her. You said she’s a volunteer. We look after our volunteers at CA, remember? Especially the fifty-plus ones.”

Su, believing the incident had run its course, was taken aback by Monique’s persistence.

“It’s so stupid! If there’s as much cancer on the estate as she says, then it comes from smoking. Doreen is one of the worst culprits. I’ve had to tick her off for snatching a drag in the kitchen area here. It’s the cigarettes already smoked that’s caused the cancer, not a mobile phone mast yet to be erected on waste land at the other end of the estate.”

“The link’s not proven – between smoking and lung cancer.” Su, who disliked the smoke from cigarettes and, with a growing intensity, the very act of smoking, wasn’t sure why she had offered the defence and immediately wished she had not. The reply was predictable.

“A link’s not proven between mobile phone masts and cancer. And what about mobile phones themselves – a source of radiation regularly emitted just millimetres away from the brain?”

“The experts say they’re perfectly safe to use, although I must say my brain sometimes feels well and truly fried after some of the calls I receive.”

“There you are then. The verdict of the experts – no radiation risk. So how about asbestos dust? Now *there’s* a proven link. It’s well known about the high risk of cancer from asbestos particles in the lungs. But even we, mighty Community Advance, champions of the poor, developing practices that protect the environment – we don’t lift a finger

to prevent clouds carrying asbestos dust from wafting over the estate. Yet it's all right to support a resident trying to whip up a storm about something she knows absolutely nothing about and which the experts say is safe."

Su responded quietly. "I didn't say I *support* her, just that I can't see what harm she's doing." The voice of the Clever One from the FM radio discussion forced its way into her head. She had not been aware of remembering it. *Evidence and a balanced argument are of little concern to these people – a mere allegation is enough...* The cubicle was suddenly claustrophobic.

"Look, Monique, deal with Doreen as you see fit. Just don't get CA involved with mobile phone masts, that's all. We've enough on."

"That's what I've been trying to get over to her, but you've seen how she carries on."

"All right. I accept your point. These things are sent to try us."

They left the cubicle and were walking through the office. Doreen had gone.

"And the asbestos?"

"What's done is done. I can't see the point in raising it as an issue now the school building is thoroughly gutted. There'll be no more clouds wafting over the estate as far as I can see."

"Asbestos is still there. Kids are playing on the site. It's a dangerous place. It must be *someone's* responsibility – besides the parents', that is."

Su felt tired. The visit was over. She opened the door to leave.

"Leave it with me. I'll see what I can do."

But Su did not chase up the responsibility for asbestos. She asked Geri to stand in at ATC North while Monique would take some leave. It was clear, she said, that Monique was suffering a bad dose of cultural shock. Geri objected, saying she hated the place. Geri reacted, lifting into the air a clutch of papers from the overspill desk to signify the work load.

Geri argued, insisting that Fee was the obvious person to stand in. Geri reasoned, pointing out that the preparations for Awareness Week called for everyone to be at their own stations, particularly the outreach leaders. Nonetheless, Geri went. Su informed Monique over the telephone. The words were to the effect that a short break would be to everyone's good, while the tone intimated that the morally burdened team leader had just failed to negotiate her own next contract.

7

A weekend in Derbyshire had been planned, including another trip to see Stan, but the return invitation from the Maineses to come over for dinner effected an immediate postponement of the trip. The invite also justified an afternoon's shopping for a complete new outfit. Andrea had said just a handful of old friends and their partners would be present, one old friend which just happened to be the sitting member for their parliamentary constituency – 'a really nice chap, not in the least way pompous or full of himself'. She and he had been at university together, Andrea said, rather too casually. In Su's mind that meant they had probably also slept together – possibly still did.

Ellis drove to the Maineses while, beside him in the passenger seat, Su fussed with her clothes and hair. He said she looked fine but kept to himself the suggestion that she could also pass as quite the gentleman about town. Tailored trouser suits were in with Su, and collared shirts. All she needed was the topper and a cane. Her appointment the previous evening at the hair salon had produced a style that he thought a little too short. For a woman to make it in a man's world, was it really necessary to make herself into a man? In any case, this woman didn't inhabit a man's world as such: the men of Su's world were tolerated for their specialised uses which were called upon only when required. In the back of the car, a silent Fee gazed out of the window, pensive but not pouting. Fee had eschewed the flimsy loose dress style for a smart skirt and jacket. And gone too had the plaits, her blonde hair falling loosely over her shoulders. It was in keeping with her new status, she said. Fee was reinventing herself.

Arriving at the Mainses, they learned that the MP and his wife had been unavoidably delayed but would be along shortly. In the meantime, Craig was treating those already present to a verbal excursion through his latest book. After introductions among guests and a short round of pleasantries, he continued with the tour.

One chapter of the book threw into the ring the possibility that the Catholic Church may be an institution cunningly set up and disguised as a Christian house by the Devil. For centuries, the church's hierarchy had either knowingly or unknowingly been implementing a grand plan for world domination that only a corruptive genius could have devised. One did not have to look far for evidence, Craig told his guests. History provides the data. Would God have devised the Inquisition? Was there anyone to deny that the systematic persecution, torture and execution of hundreds of thousands of people carried out in the church's name was the product of the purest evil? With such enthusiasm were the orders performed in Spain that the Inquisition produced a significant drop in the country's population. Then there is the Catholic Church's historical opposition to science, to inventions and methods that promise to benefit mankind. Galileo, as an old man, was dragged in front of the church's interrogators and forced publicly to retract his research findings, which were of course perfectly sound.

Craig was animated. Flushed cheeks indicated the downing of a glass or two before the arrival of his guests. Perhaps the star of other people's dinner tables needed to acquire an inner glow when other stars favoured his table. An upright forefinger threatened the air as he directed questions to no one in particular.

"Good or evil? Quickly now – answer yes or no. You see – there is doubt. Only the thoroughly brainwashed would offer a defence – and that, by its very nature, would not be of their own reasoning. Isn't the inescapable fact this: that the Catholic Church is responsible for terrible ravages which

typify the will of one who is evil rather than one who is benevolent? And isn't the truth that the Catholic Church sat on its hands during the European Holocaust, even sometimes assisting the Germans to root out hiding Jews? Knocking out the competition while appearing so saintly innocent? And what does this fabulously wealthy institution, a compulsive amasser of loot since its inception, do for the world's poor, exactly? Why, like any noble money house, the Bank of God treads them into the ground."

Ellis wondered when dinner would be served. His thoughts must have been shared because Andrea was hovering, like an attendant seraph, waiting for a break. Her husband acknowledged her with a sideways glance of faint suspicion before insisting his listeners understood the author's position.

"This, of course, like all the chapters of the book, is not a reflection of my *personal* view. It's a mere topic for debate. I am not anti-Catholic in any way, and if any of you are Catholic I hope I haven't offended. There is the other side of the argument that says the Catholic Church has a great unifying quality. I am the first to admit that there have been times when, without the church, chaos would have been the standard. But I think you'll agree, there are lots of questions that need answering, not sweeping under the ecumenical rug."

To collective relief, the principal guest and his spouse arrived. Not a tall man, and neither old nor young, the serving Member gave a first impression of being a middle layer sales representative with a sun tan. Although he possessed no clinging aura that Ellis could detect, nevertheless the atmosphere of the gathering changed from captive listening to genial enquiry. Over dinner, Andrea spoke for everyone when she asked what parliamentary life was *really* like. The MP regaled with humorous anecdotes and imparted, in exaggerated hushed tones, snippets of information about the behind-the-scenes habits of some of the leading political lights.

"Most of them actually believe their own hype, you know."

Turning serious for a moment, he told his fellow diners that the House was no place for wide-eyed idealism, and that he had been left to discover this the hard way. He himself held no ambitions for higher office since it meant he would by necessity have to cut ties with the ordinary people, with much of the real world. His was a very minor part in the grand spectacle, he said, but he was satisfied for the role to be so, and no more. The interests and concerns of his constituents were all that mattered.

“Oh, yes – and don’t forget who desperately needs your vote the next time round.” Lightness returned.

After dinner, Andrea tried to avoid fragmentation of the group but failed. The MP made it clear in a pleasant way that he had had enough of being the centre of attention. Craig and Fee took the opportunity to pick up from where their conversation had left off at the Gardeen household dinner party – Craig perched on the arm of an easy chair and Fee sitting on a pouffe with hands clasped round knees. Su listened as others discussed the world and its problems from a deeply upholstered professional class viewpoint, while a standing Ellis positioned himself discreetly behind her in case the current topic was tossed her way and she needed a cue. He didn’t notice the MP, who had excused himself for a few minutes, arrive at his elbow.

“What is it you do, Ellis?”

“Me? Well, I’m a writer too, as it happens – like Craig. But distinctly unlike Craig, I haven’t managed to be published yet. I’m still working on my first draft, actually.”

“What sort of things do you write about?”

“Class, social structure, social injustice.”

“Enough there to keep a writer occupied, I’m sure. Have you read any of Craig’s books?”

“I’ve read *The Evolution of Man Unkind*. Just finished it, as a matter of fact.”

“What did you think of it?”

It was a question stripped of any clue as to the asker’s own

impressions. Ellis hoped his reply was similarly non-committal.

“Some interesting ideas. Quite a few, actually. Stimulating.”

“Yes, ideas come naturally to Craig. I envy him for that.”

Ellis was aware of being studied. He tried for impassivity. The MP changed tack.

“Tell me about your work. What are your thoughts on class, for instance.”

Both men used a brief interruption by the ladies to replenish their glasses, but the Member pulled the conversation back, smiling at Ellis as his free hand directed them away from further interruption.

“How, for example, do you see the present relationship between the classes? Is that how you see things, in social divisions?”

“The classes? Actually, I’ve had to develop my own scheme, to explain my argument better. I don’t mean I’ve invented classes or anything, just that I’ve simplified.”

“That’s good. Tell me how it works, this scheme of yours – if you don’t mind, that is. We’re here to enjoy ourselves when all’s said and done. But I’m fascinated.”

“I’d be glad to. I don’t often get to talk about class. It’s not supposed to exist anymore.”

“I know.”

“Let’s see if I can remember them all. Well, we have the upper invisible – the ultimate rulers, mostly members of the old aristocracy, who rarely show themselves or their power. The upper political – responsible for converting that power to methods of control through enacting legislation. And the upper business, who finance the operation by extracting wealth from the classes below. Then we have the vast middle class. The upper middle class is made up of professionals, academics, businessmen, and politicians like yourself – sorry, I don’t mean...”

“No, no. Go on.”

“They call the shots in everyday life, using the authority

invested from above. Below these we have a weighty lower middle class: they can be found, for instance, in service industries and running tiny businesses; and a marginal class – created and added to as a result of the progressive lowering of the boundary by those anxious to inflate the middle class.”

“The ‘we’re all middle class now’ brigade, you mean.”

“That’s right. Then we come to the true working class. Economically, I define working class as comprising individuals whose income situation is always someone else’s decision.”

“Like Craig’s suggestion that being working class gives another the right to exploit you?”

“Yes, in a way. I’m not so sure about his employment equals the right to exploit, though.”

“Quite. Craig, of course, is speaking in a different context. Is that all the classes?”

“No. Finally, we have the estate class. This is my own definition, as far as I know.”

“Fine.”

“The estate class are subjugated by the imposition of a dependency culture. They are stripped of prime responsibility – responsibility for taking care of self – and therefore of social responsibility. This means they have no developed sense of responsibility for others or for the environment. Because self-confidence is thwarted from an early age – through the local education process – they’re unlikely to overcome subjugation, or its effects, at a later time. I’m quoting from text committed to memory so it sounds a bit formal, I’m afraid.”

“That’s all right. But, tell me, why is the estate class subjugated, do you think?”

Andrea had joined her husband and Fee to spoil the curious image of great thinker and his thirsting disciple seated before him. Su also went over, placing her hands firmly on Fee’s shoulders as if preparing to strangle her from behind. Fee rose to her feet and flicked her head to spread her hair. The

movements caught Ellis's attention, but he retained his concentration. It is not every day you have a Member of Parliament hanging on to your words.

"In my humble opinion – as they say – an estate class has been deliberately forged from the remnants of the traditional poor. Poverty was on its way out in the post-war prosperity of the twentieth century. Fewer poor, but more middle class. Many more, in fact. And more jobs were needed to keep them all occupied and voting correctly. When poverty looked like slipping between the pages of history, it was caught and corralled into hundreds of specially designated areas – council estates – throughout the land. These were made suitably dreadful, ready for the troops to go in, armed with their ring binders and chanting their endless empty promises to rout the poverty. Which everybody knows is never going to happen, is not meant to happen."

"I see. What about the subjugation?"

"That's needed to remove all hope and ambition among the estate class, to reduce reaction, to maintain the poverty. You know, being socially deprived isn't the choice of the deprived individual but the will of the rest of society."

"I'm sure you're right when you say social deprivation isn't the choice of the individual. As for an estate class being deliberately forged, I'll have to chew on that one."

The MP was looking away. His attention too was caught by the four around the pouffe. Few words could be made out but the slight rise in Craig's voice suggested a deteriorating situation. With a breathed 'excuse me' to Ellis, the Member resumed his role as guest of honour. He moved to the centre of the room, somehow making his glass disappear on the way, and stood as if about to address the Lower Chamber.

"I would like to thank Craig and Andrea for inviting me and my lady wife into their home, and the rest of you for a most pleasant evening. I hope you have enjoyed it as much as I have. Before we go, I have a little speech prepared – yes, it is political – but I ask you to indulge me. The truth is, I am

trying it out on you good people. It's short, I promise. Here goes.

“Growing numbers of my colleagues are coming round to the opinion that the government will not be able to deliver on its original promise regarding improvement of the public services. In fairness, the vision was bold, admirably so, and the intention genuine, but the pledges were uttered before the implications could properly be thought through. In those rosy days of ninety-seven, the road looked clear: gain power, bury the opposition, jolly everyone up for the job ahead. Our heroic leaders were perhaps a little intoxicated by electoral success when they confronted the beast that bears several heads. They were filled with bravado brought about by mass adoration and sheer inexperience. They were under the illusion that right is enough to carry the day. They were new, and had a lot to learn.

“Now, I can forgive them that, as I'm sure so can you. They omitted the factor of time from the equation. It takes time to bring round the mighty ship of state. It takes time to transform public services, to change the culture of the civil service, to implement reform. They didn't know what they were letting themselves in for. I can forgive them that.

“However, I find it far less easy to forgive our leaders for taking this country to war against the people's wishes. I am not alone in this view among my colleagues, I can assure you. The invasion of another country on a pretext that has not been properly validated is in my opinion both illegal and immoral. It is completely indefensible. It risks repercussions that we cannot begin to contemplate. I have every regard for my party in all other respects, but I am deeply ashamed to be associated with the episode that is currently unfolding on the international stage. Thank you.”

The room sounded to supportive applause. From wherever the MP had hidden his drink, he retrieved it and proposed a raising of glasses to his hosts. They replied with a toast to their honoured guest. The Member and his spouse departed

to handshaking and shoulder patting, and each a kiss on the cheek from Andrea. Craig took up position on the spot where the distinguished visitor had delivered the pilot speech and prepared to reward his remaining guests with a rendering of another chapter from his latest book. A little later, others realised they too must be going.

For the return journey, Su drove. There were few vehicles on the country roads and none were police patrol cars, which was just as well since she occasionally steered wide at bends. And there was little conversation in the car: Su chewed mints and occasionally fiddled with the radio; a slumped Ellis was lost in unshared thought; Fee dozed, or at least had her eyes shut and head against a side pillar. Ellis, when asked about the conversation he had been having with the MP, replied cryptically without elaboration.

“Social deprivation will be with us for a long time yet.”

“That’s a relief.” Su’s response brought further brooding from the passenger seat. As the car approached the village, Su spoke again, announcing that she had felt out of her league during the evening, that she doubted there was anything to be gained by attempting to associate with people on an intellectual plane different from one’s own.

“A woman has to know her limitations,” she said, in a movie accent. Ellis made a grunt of acknowledgement, hiding his surprise at Su’s apparent renouncement of social climbing. There were three explanations for the remark he could think of. One: Su did not like him holding a discussion with a VIP when that same VIP had hardly spoken to her other than to say hello and goodbye. Two: Su did not like Fee being chatted up by Craig, who obviously thought Fee was pullable. Two-A: Su did not like Fee in a tête-à-tête with Craig about a subject they made no effort to share with Su. What had the moment of friction been about – the one that had broken up his conversation with the MP? He asked Su.

“Oh, that? Craig just getting above himself, that’s all. And

madam here basking in the attention. I think Andrea was getting a tad jealous.”

“Andrea? I expect she and Craig have an understanding. They seem the sort.”

“Yes, I’m sure they have, but not right in the middle of your own living room, not in front of your local MP, for crying out loud.”

“I suppose not.” And, from Su’s point of view, certainly not with Fee taking part.

Three: Su does not like being surrounded by people who talk about things other than community development. Su is not a good listener when not in full command of the conversation. Indeed, she was becoming less of a listener altogether, with an increasing tendency to reply before the other person had fully finished. All the time he had known her, it was her habit to look away as she spoke, unless she was trying to beat you into submission with that magnified stare of hers. Recently, she would pick something up as you addressed her, such as a document which she would start to read, or she would open the cover and dab away at her personal organiser. This evening, she had done none of those things, just knocked back the wine while the conversation rolled from publishing to literature to the theatre and back to publishing. Fairly highbrow stuff, much of it, against which community development had struggled and ultimately withered.

They were home. Ellis put the car away while Su checked the answering machine for messages, as was her regular urgency on entering the house. Fee said she was dog tired and went upstairs. Su wrote notes at the bureau before saying she too was bushed and going to bed. Ellis completed his rounds and followed, feeling neither dog tired nor bushed after his evening but imprecisely resentful and patronised.

A society is like an organism in that it grows old. When an individual ages, he or she accepts that some faculties

can never be the same again, and certain activities have to be curtailed or dropped altogether. Ambitions and dreams have to be quietly removed from the mind as unachievable. Likewise, a society when in decline loses its energy and vitality. It can no longer look after every part of itself. In a modern context, transport, health, education, police and other public services which together form the social fabric – all will fall into decline as the body draws into itself. The lower classes are the first to suffer, while the higher classes make it their priority to ensure they won't suffer. It is a divisive process, marked by a widening economic and cultural gulf between the rich and the poor. A spent society becomes a paranoid society once its confidence dwindles, and it grows frightened of its own shadow. The symptoms are readily observed: mistrust of foreigners; an obsession fear of crime; surveillance cameras on every street corner; the introduction of identity cards...

Ellis slid the draft on to the bedside table, his eyes not wanting to read on. It was the 'whinge' part of his thesis, the part he had decided might need revision. The trouble was that the whinge part was extensive, almost the whole. All whinge and no punch. Craig Mains delivered punch. He thought of an idea that was bound to shock, and bashed it out on the keyboard. And sent it to the waiting publisher, who put it on the shelves of the nation's book shops, from which the nation picked it up and bought it. Well, perhaps not the entire nation, but enough of it for Craig to receive a regular quarter day cheque that encouraged him to shock some more.

Ellis acknowledged his own work lacked the shock factor – he had known that right from the start. Who exactly was the intended reader of a text about the maintenance and management of social deprivation? Not the socially deprived. The estate class don't read books about social deprivation:

when they experience it every day they don't need to. Nor the middle class, who maintain and manage the social deprivation. They have their own books and their overfilled ring binders to guide them. Once the parties who deliver social deprivation and those subjected to it are removed, there is no one else who gives a toss.

During his time of exposure to estate life he had announced to members of his community group that he planned to write a thesis based on his observations. The news had generated not so much as a flicker of interest. He could mentally hear them behind his back saying of him that which he had heard them say of others. In proposing to draw attention to the injustice they receive at the hands of the rest of society, he ceased to be a fellow campaigner and was cast as a stuck-up wannabe. The estate class only trust you if you are one of them, sharing their same grotty lifestyle, speaking their same limited vocabulary, sniggering at their same coarse humour. They prefer to moan than to bring about palpable change, to live their social deprivation and bleat forever that something should be done. It dovetailed perfectly with the doctrine of the community development industry: things must not be improved, just talked about. Perhaps the estate class and their keepers were meant for each other.

What the hell was he saying? The estate class were moulded into moaners not doers from the earliest age. They were systematically stripped of self-confidence and ambition – had he not tried to impress that upon the guest of honour this evening? For what good it had done. The MP, being a really nice chap, was no more interested in his ideas on New Poverty than the community group had been in his plan for a thesis. Nobody was interested. Maybe he should scrap the thesis and use the material to write a novel. Fiction distances the reality and makes it more palatable. The crass awfulness of estate reality is far more credible when dressed up as a story. Was he, Ellis Carmichael, capable of writing a novel? He picked up the draft and read from a different section.

Although it is the fulcrum of western political philosophy, democracy is not proved to be the best social system. In fact, it has a number of shortcomings. A major flaw is exposed when two opposing though fairly evenly supported political parties may together represent the dichotomous wishes of the vast majority, but a small third party can swing the vote on decisions, thus conferring to its few followers a hugely disproportionate power. Also, democracy without competent leadership can produce a shambles by which everyone suffers. But the biggest problem posed by democracy as it concerns mesocrats (exponents of rule by the middle class) is that the lesser classes also have the right to a vote. Present-day governments overcome the problem by creating a crippling apathy among the lower electorate, ensuring the working class vote is effectively cancelled as if it were never granted. Confuse, misinform, underinform. Numb the franchise of the poorest of the land; convince them their vote will make not a jot of difference to their lives; drain them of the energy to visit the polling booth. To entrust the decision of who governs to the only class perceived to matter is a fundamental mesocratic imperative. That is why our government cultivates a universal political indifference among those it does not intend to serve.

The draft was returned to the table. How could a paragraph like that be turned into fiction? Even from a character in a story, it would hardly race the blood of the reader on the train, in the airport lounge, on the beach. That reader could not be expected to want to learn about the moral wrongs of social deprivation. Revelations of deliberately imposed poverty were not the sort of titillation the average paperback buyer sought. In any case, the Craigs of the world did not

need to use fiction – they shot from the hip. Craig had written that poverty was necessary because without it wealth had absolutely no meaning. How can you tell if a thing is hot if you don't know cold? Or high if you haven't a low? Or good without a bad? In the same way, how do you know you are well off if there is not on your journey home a council estate to circumvent? Clever punchy Craig. The Ellis Carmichael draft thesis contained the same point, expressed in different words, expressed at a higher intellectual level. But Craig's version of the gospel was out there and being read – yes, on the train, at the airport, on the beach. Craig had made sure his version was not to languish, months into years, as a double-spaced A4 printout, now on a table by the bed.

He climbed from the bed and donned a robe to go to the bathroom. A pyjamaed Fee emerged from her room at the same time as he passed from his own, and made for the same destination. She did not look at him or say anything but quickened her pace to reach the bathroom first. Ellis went to the downstairs toilet, listening for the upstairs flush so as not to encounter Fee on the way back.

* * * * *

The Grosvenor Rooms, of which there is only a single room, has three deep-yellow walls, discoloured here and there almost to brown through age. One of these walls bears an oblong board, not unlike a railway station sign, to carry the Word. Another wall is almost split by two unnecessarily massive double doors that provide entrance to the room from the wide echoing junction of corridors outside. A third remains unadorned, while a fourth is largely concealed by a heavy sea-green curtain hung from a stout brass-plated pole. It is hard to imagine a purpose for the curtain since there cannot be a window behind: the single Grosvenor Rooms lies within the windowless belly of a rambling structure erected in the Victorian municipal style, a building that boasts many

functions, most of them obscure to the passer-by.

Underfoot lies a carpet of plain dark blue relieved by coin-size gold blobs which produce a pattern that continues diagonally in all directions before terminating at high skirting boards painted in chocolate brown. To walk across the carpet is to appreciate its springy pile and to sense it is recently fitted. Thirty or so chairs are arranged across the carpet; they too are blue – plastic blue with black tubes for legs and dimpled-rubber feet to protect the carpet. The seating forms three gently curved rows the focal point of which is a desk-cum-table positioned under the curtained wall. The remainder of the room's area, about a half, is carpeted open space, devoid of furniture save for a cabinet in light wood mounted by shelves bearing lots of identical hand-sized books bound in maroon. Being windowless, the room depends completely on artificial lighting. Diffusing globes the size of footballs hang on the ends of chains from a high once-white ceiling which is crazed by crusty cracks and, in the corners, graced by cobwebs that trail and sometimes lazily sway.

There are two people in the room. They sit on two chairs of the front row, a third chair between them. One of the two is male. He is middle-aged and distinguished looking, well-dressed and carefully manicured. The fragrance of his deodorant is expensive and strong. He holds out a hand across the vacant interposing chair, though not to touch. The other of the two is a young woman, blonde, pretty in a faintly Nordic way. She is telling the man yes she is sure, he having asked. The woman is sure she is able to give herself to the Lord, to walk in His Light, to do His Bidding. The man offers more time to consider, to reflect, to plumb the soul, but the young woman replies she has had all the time she needs. Yes, she is sure.

Ours is a simple faith, the man tells her and not for the first time; a faith stretching across the world, reaching out to all people. The Lord's World; the Lord's Children. There is a place in the Lord's World for everyone. It is a simple faith but

one bestowing great power to its followers. The Lord provides that power for us to gather up and to share our good providence with others less fortunate. He rewards us with a sight of Himself; we are able to see Him in our mind's eye. *Give, and ye shall receive.* The faith asks nothing in return. Commitment must flow naturally, from the inner being. No one should demand commitment of another, and no one shall. Ours is a simple faith with no material encumbrance. Worldly possessions are as nothing to the Lord. He asks of sacrifice not for Himself, but for those of His children who cannot provide for themselves. *Give, and ye shall receive.*

The man falls silent and drops his head, placing his hands together on lap in silent prayer. For a moment, the sure young woman is unsure what to do. She reaches for a shoulder bag propped on the chair to her other side. From the bag she removes a narrow long stiffened envelope of the kind still found in the offices of solicitors and the better banks, and from the envelope she withdraws a cheque book. Her hand returns to the shoulder bag and feels around for a pen. A cheque is written and held out to the still praying man. He does not respond immediately; when after some seconds he looks up, it is like a sudden waking from a sleep. He regards the cheque with apparent incomprehension before taking and inspecting it. The fulsome gratitude is not his but the Lord's.

* * * * *

A slight breeze cooled the heat of the sun and occasionally picked at paper plates, threatening to snatch them from the garden table. Su caught one before it launched during a prankish lift of air, while Margo weighted others down with cutlery and condiment containers.

“Still, what can you do?” commented Mum.

“Not a lot, Mum. Be very quick, that's all,” Margo replied.

James and Estelle were on opposite sides of the lawn

beyond the patio, passing a frisbee one to the other, while Estelle's latest boyfriend sat on the grass waiting for one of the players to be out. A shriek of girly excitement and a male pretend protest made Su turn.

"She's grown up fast."

"They do."

The sisters and their mother were sitting at the table, the siblings sipping wine. Presently, Mum became agitated. She needed the toilet. The table was of a beer-garden design – slatted top with a hole for a parasol mast, and a bench fixed either side along the length. Mum had to be helped from the bench before making her own way to the house, murmuring to herself about what a palaver it was. Margo watched her to the door.

"She's getting worse."

"Are you still managing to cope with her?"

"I always have." It was delivered with accusation. A pause, then softer: "If you mean is she ready for a home, no. I won't see her in one of those places. There is nothing a home can provide her with that she hasn't access to here."

And it's a damn sight cheaper, thought Su. She resented the martyr's edge that Margo was occasionally apt to apply. Margo was reading her thoughts.

"I know how you feel about our living here, Suzie, but you haven't done so badly yourself."

"Aunt Doris, you mean."

"And your job. Don't forget, I gave up a career to look after Mum."

"You didn't have to."

"I couldn't see you and Peter taking her in."

Su was anxious to avoid old ground. So, it seemed, was Margo. She gave a brief smile of truce and started again.

"During your last visit, you said there was something you wanted to talk to me about – remember? We didn't get round to it. Was it about Mum you wanted to talk about?"

"No. It wasn't." They hadn't got round to it because, soon

after, Su had had second thoughts. “It doesn’t matter. Anyway, Mum’ll be back soon.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it. It’s time for her afternoon nap. She can still handle that by herself.”

Estelle came over from the lawn. She wanted a drink of orange juice. The others followed. Attempting to sound as if they had just thought of the idea, the teenagers announced they were going for a walk. James said had some work he must finish this weekend, and was going up to his study. When they had left, Margo continued.

“I think you wanted to talk to me about Stan. What was it you wanted to say?”

“I said it doesn’t matter.”

“I think it does, Suzie. You’d feel better for letting it out, you know.”

Su shook her head in dismissal. Margo persisted.

“Perhaps there is something you would like to get off your chest while Stan is still around. It can help to share these times.” Margo waited. “Confidence is perfectly assured, if that’s what’s worrying you. I know the story and I don’t pass these things on, not even to James. You know that.”

“Yes, I do. You always were good at keeping secrets. But it’s resolved itself, thank you.”

“You went to see Stan yesterday and it affected you. I can see that. Something was said, wasn’t it?”

Su wanted to stand and move from the table but the bench had to be climbed out of, so she sighed instead.

“Look, Suzie. I’m trying to help. You – and Stan. And I can help.”

“Why, Margo? Why would you want to help?”

The wind had picked up enough to be uncomfortable on bare arms. Su, looking away from her sister, caught a movement through the open door of the kitchen.

“Because I want the family ghost laid to rest. For all our sakes. That’s why. Is it too much to ask?”

Mum came towards them, twice veering, distraught.

“The bed’s wet. Wet through. It’s sinful.”

The sisters adroitly extricated themselves from the table like synchronised gymnasts.

“It’s all right, Mum. Everything’s all right. Let’s go back and sort you out.”

Together, they guided their mother to the house. Margo calmly issued instructions to Su regarding the stripping of Mum’s bed while she led Mum into the bathroom.

Later, Su said she was sorry to find that Mum had become incontinent. Margo told her it had started only recently, was not yet a daily event, and was in any case to be expected. It was part of a process by which some of us inexorably return to the same helpless state in which we are born. In Mum’s case, she simply forgot she needed the loo. The evening before, Su had tried to watch a detective drama on the television in company with Mum while James and Margo went down to the village pub. At one time, Mum would have sat with little comment until drifting into a snoring head-back unconsciousness. Mum’s state now made her fidget, and repeatedly squawk from a tiny stock of questions: ‘Who’s that one?’; ‘What’s he doing now?’; and, over dialogue which as a consequence was missed, ‘What’s he say?’.

They were alone in the kitchen. Margo took Su’s concern over Mum as a signal to resume the theme started in the garden. Su repeated she did not wish to talk about Stan. There was no need. It was sorted. However, there was another family ghost to be exorcised. Su had something to ask, not from Margo as a sister but from Margo the psychology graduate with some psychiatric training. What was the likelihood of Mum’s condition continuing down the generations? It was the sort of question that could easily have resulted in a haughty suggestion of Su’s being ridiculous or something. But Margo replaced sister-critical with a clinical tone which made her sound not unlike Ellis in lecture mode. Margo perceptively answered as if Su had enquired about the

personal risk. Had Su noticed any undesirable changes in herself, or had any been mentioned by someone else, such as short-term memory loss, lapses in concentration, difficulty in recognising a face that should be familiar, hesitation in carrying out simple calculations? Obsessive tendencies, perhaps? Or mood swings that could not be attributed to the time of the month? No to all these, Su replied. Was she aware of any new aggressive inclination? Could she readily empathise with people around her, or did she sometimes see people as inanimate objects? No problem there, Su smiled. It was part of her job description to empathise.

It seemed the best time to reverse the enquiry. A flicker of reproach crossed Margo's face as she composed her reply. Since well before her fortieth birthday last year she had assessed herself on a regular basis, Margo admitted. There was no behaviour that could not be explained as a quirk of personality or to a normal situational reaction – though self examination, of course, was hardly to be recommended as a method in this particular field. Su asked about Estelle, wishing as soon as the words came out that she had not. Margo remained clinical. Estelle was too young to display symptoms. The respected medical consensus was that children should not be tested without definite cause. Diagnostic symptoms, if the disease were present at all, would not emerge until the subject had entered her forties, towards the onset of the menopause. And, in many cases, only then after psychological trauma.

The silence that followed the phrase served to underline it, and the phrase itself was an open invitation for the return of Margo the sister. But Su was not finished with the clinical Margo. She repeated the initial question.

“I can't answer with the level of confidence you would like,” Margo told her. “Case studies suggest a low probability – but the chances are not negligible. It's something you should keep in mind.”

“Maybe poor Mum is a one off, after all.”

“Maybe Mum is merely one of a line.”

“You mean her mother? Mum’s mum?”

Margo sighed. “I mean her mother and her mother’s mother. I checked back. And what about dear Aunt Doris? All right, she wasn’t senile, but she *was* batty – to use a non-medical term.”

“She may have gone batty for other reasons. I thought she was just eccentric. People can be.” Su decided against a mention that Aunt Doris’s battiness had not stopped her making a canny business deal.

“Unfortunately, that’s not all. A few years before we were born, a cousin of Mum’s called Harriette was found dead on a railway line – hit and killed by a train – in her night dress, in winter, two miles across fields from her home. She was forty-three – coincidentally the same age that Mum had her breakdown. It does run in the family, Suzie.”

Margo gave her sister a curious look, to which Su was not sure how she should respond.

“I didn’t know. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Knowing the history neither increases nor diminishes the risk.”

“What about treatment? There must be drugs that can hold the thing off.”

Clinical Margo was fading.

“If effective treatment existed, don’t you think I would have obtained it for Mum before today?”

“I know you would. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.”

“What did you mean?”

“What if it’s caught in the early stages?”

“That would be too late for Mum.”

Su stopped herself from pursuing the matter any further. Margo had returned fully to type. In any case, it was time to set off for home. She rang Ellis from her mobile to say she would be on her way. He sounded happier than when she left. James emerged from his study to say goodbye. Estelle too, appearing from upstairs, where boy band music played on.

Mum was brought from the lounge, where she had been sitting in front of the television. Her goodbye was perfunctory as she strained to return to the lounge. It occurred to Su that Mum had not once called her by name, any name, over the weekend. Mum had no idea who she was.

8

Margo had been correct in her assumption that Su's visit the previous day to Stan had affected her. Su had listened to Stan; listened and tried to not exercise that distracted manner which she was aware had become her way; listened if only to oblige him. She had listened, but the weight of what he had had to say began to settle only later, in the car journey back to Margo's, and – as Margo picked up on – during the same evening. What precisely was she supposed to do with them, Stan's wonderful insights? Keep them to herself? Pass them on? What was Stan's true motive for sharing them with her? So she could understand? So she should feel some of the pain? And should she?

Stan's room was hot even with the window open. It was an old-fashioned sash frame and one of the bobweights must have dropped because the raised lower half was propped by a length of wood that may once have been the leg of a stool. There was no movement among the leaves of the trees in the garden at the rear of the nursing home, no breeze. The air inside the room was stock-still and stale – didn't they have any fans in the place? Stan had visibly deteriorated since Su last saw him; she felt a pang of conscience over the visit planned and promised but cancelled in favour of a dinner party at the Mainses. Su wondered if this was the atmosphere of impending death. Stan seemed to think so.

"I'm on my last round, Angel."

"No, you're not. You mustn't talk like that."

"I am. The doctor doesn't bother hiding it anymore – not that he ever did, mind. He's a Yorkshireman and calls a spade a ruddy spade. At least I have that to thank him for."

“It’s mind over matter. You’re as fit as you will yourself to be.”

Stan chuckled, more a croak. “That’s the thing – I don’t will.”

They were drinking tea on the agreed premise that nothing refreshes on a hot day like a good cup of char. The host sat up on his the bed, a pillow at his back, while the visitor took a chair near the window. The other bed and second wardrobe had been removed and the room was slightly less claustrophobic than before, though just as brown. Su became aware that Stan was covertly scrutinising her, as if gauging her mood. She herself was unable to gauge her present mood so doubted he could. Stan launched his subject all the same.

“Look – talking about wills, they got me to make a last will and testament. It makes things tidied, I expect. They keep the forms in the office, downstairs. I don’t have nothing to leave that’s worth the bother of totting up. What I have goes to you.”

“That’s not necessary. I don’t deserve anything.”

He waved a weak arm. “It’s already done. It’ll pay for some petrol, coming to see me like you did.”

“That’s all right. The petrol’s on the house. No good being boss if you can’t fiddle the odd expense claim.”

“All the same, you made the effort. Anyhow, like I say, it’s done.”

“I think you’re being morbid.”

“Just facing up to things, Angel. Any day now, they’ll be taking me in down yonder and I won’t be coming out. Only in a box. Either that or Ron’ll find me here in bed one o’ these mornings. Stiff and cold, like. Give him summat to do.”

“Stop talking like this, will you. Stop it or I’m leaving this instant!” The scolding was good natured.

“Quite right, Angel, quite right. It’s being so cheerful that keeps me going.” Stan inhaled deeply through his nose and fixed his gaze on her. Her full attention was being sought. “You know, there are things I want to tell you, I want you to

hear while I've got the wind."

Su nodded to confirm that full attention was being given.

"You see, when I was inside I got to doing some thinking. I had plenty of time for it, that's for sure. Trouble is, I never wrote nothing down. Didn't dare. Not even when I got out. Never was much of a writer, if truth's known. Anyway, I started to read a lot – they let me borrow books from the staff library – medical books, books on behaviour, stuff like that. I wanted to read about what I was sent down for. And believe me, there's a welter of tripe written by some of these so-called experts. I'd say it's pure guesswork, often as not."

"It is – you're right."

"They don't really know what goes on inside the head so they make it up."

"I'm sure they do."

"What you don't know, since I never told you – I didn't want you to know till I was good and ready – is they sent me through therapy. That's what they called it. Not electric shocks and the like, but weeks of sitting in the same room with a couple of brain doctors. An Indian fellow, he was – Dr Singh – and he had a young woman with him. She was a bit like our Maggie – never smiled. Fresh out of college I dare say, just like our Maggie at that time. I called them Sing and Be Merry. It seemed like weeks, anyway. They must have thought I was a special case or summat – which I was. I didn't mind, I suppose. It got me off swilling out."

"What did they ask you, these brain doctors? Were they all right with you?"

"They wanted to know if I'd been abused as a child."

Su thought better of asking the obvious. It struck her that she knew nothing whatsoever about Stan's early life. Stan answered the unvoiced question.

"I told them, no I wasn't. Nothing like that. They wouldn't leave it alone, though. Kept coming back to it, they did, like they were trying to catch me out. The cycle of abuse, the experts call it. It means if you were abused yourself, as a

youngster, then you're almost bound to abuse other youngsters as you get older."

"I know."

"It's daft, though. I mean, it's men what do the abusing, most of the time, and young girls that get abused. Seven out o' ten cases, at least. Real abuse, I'm talking about. I don't know as many women abuse, when they grow up, not in a sexual way."

"No."

"I reckon it's more likely a cop out. Them had up for abuse can allus say it's not their fault and ask the court for leniency."

"You could be right. Experts prefer their answers straight off the shelf – it makes their job easier. Though I think it must be awful to have been abused and then learn that you're a predicted abuser yourself – just because the experts say so. It's hardly fair on people who were abused as children and have managed to put it all behind them."

"Aye." Stan reflected for a moment before continuing. "Anyway, after a while, Sing and Be Merry dropped the cycle of abuse idea. They wanted to know what started me off, if it wasn't abuse."

Su looked out the window for a few seconds, then turned to the bed.

"What did you tell them?"

Stan shot her a glance. Su pretended she had not caught it, instead discovering a loose thread on her slacks.

"Later on, after they'd gone, I read one of Dr Singh's books. Well, not really his book, but he was in it. A couple of chapters, like. It said that he didn't think paedos were born as paedos, like homosexuals aren't born homosexual. Learnt behaviour, he called it. Something makes you into a paedo. If it's learnt, it can be unlearnt, with the right therapy – that's what it said in this book."

"What sort of therapy is the right therapy?"

"I never found out, Angel. Nothing happened. I finished

my time early, got out, and they forgot all about me after that. Except the police. And the sort of therapy *they* hand out never makes nobody better for it, as far as I can see.”

“That’s true. Did they – this Dr Singh – ask you what *you* thought?”

“Thought about what?” Stan shifted his position on the bed, lifting his weight with his arms straight, and pushing himself back.

“Well – about his ideas on therapy.”

“No. I suppose I didn’t think anything at the time. Afterwards, when I’d read his book, I thought he was wrong. I would’ve liked to have told him as much.”

“Wrong? Which bit?”

“Unlearning, for a start. That’s rubbish – it’s there forever. You can learn to control it, yes, but you won’t shake it off. It’s not like giving up cigs.”

“Perhaps not.”

“It’s about handling it. How to be a dirty old man in a raincoat, eh? But an harmless old man. No danger to children, and the rest of it.”

Finding the new position no more comfortable than the last, Stan again rearranged his body. This was followed by an immobile silence, giving Su a moment of anxiety. But he was just collecting his thoughts.

“I read other books, like I said. They made more sense – some of them did. One reckoned it’s a disease, a mental condition. The brain’s wired up wonky.” Stan adopted a tone of mocking formality. “The patient cannot account for his own mental state. He cannot be held responsible for his own conscious actions.” The effort made him cough. He returned to his normal voice.

“Like as not, that would be what went down in the report on me at the end of it all. The prisoner never gets to see the report – it could say anything. The worse thing is, people lump all paedos together, as evil perverts who attack and abuse kids. It’s not true, you know. It’s not true.”

The sudden change of tone to aggressive-defensive caught Su off guard. “I know that. I’m sorry, I —”

“No, no, no, no. I don’t mean it’s not true about whether guilty or not – that’s all by the board now. I mean not all paedos are bad. There *is* evil, plenty of evil, from some very twisted minds, and I wouldn’t waste my time making excuses for their kind. They can go rot in hell for all I care.”

Su felt a little confused by Stan’s quick switches, not fully catching his meaning, and must have shown it on her face because Stan sighed in frustration. The thought crossed Su’s mind that this level of unburdening of the soul on such a hot day was a sure route to heart attack. Getting up, she went over to the handbasin. Turning on the cold tap to let it run for a few moments, she soaked a face flannel before squeezing and carrying it, catching drips, over to Stan. He took the flannel and held it against his brow, then each cheek. Motioning for Su to leave him and return to the seat by the window, he was ready to continue.

“The thing is, I can admit I’m a paedo, Angel. ‘Coming out’, as they call it, don’t they? I’ve done time for it and my name’s in the big book. I’m a fully signed-up member of eight watchers. That’s what they call us, down at the nick. That and other names they use – to your face, mind. Anyway, as I see it, I’ve nothing to lose by what people think of me. Life can’t get any less and when I’m six foot under I don’t suppose I’ll be all that much bothered.”

A pause before: “Angel, this next bit’s important. I need to rid myself of the load while I’m still drawing breath.”

Su was as gentle as she knew how. While it would not have been a first choice to sit in an airless bedroom on a sweltering day with the beginnings of a headache and receive the confessions of a dying paedophile, well – here she was.

“That’s all right. I’m listening.” A power-driven lawnmower started up in a neighbouring garden. Stan appeared not to notice.

“You see, the books go on about how it’s wrong – always

wrong – for a grown-up and a kiddie to get intimate, sexually like. Sometimes it is. I can't for the life of me see what a bloke gets out of messing about with little boys. That's perversion, that is – like homosexuals but worse. Now, a man and a young girl – that's different. So long as the girl doesn't get hurt. So long as she isn't forced into doing nothing she doesn't want. When it's mutual, like. That way it's natural."

"Natural?"

"The thing is, when we lived out in caves, someone had to tell the young girls about sex. It's not there to start with, is it? Someone has to be there with the instruction, so the youngsters know what to do when they're ripe and ready. And what to expect, like. That way the young girl can make her own mind up. Well, that's where the old man comes in. He knows the form, he teaches the young girls what to do. He doesn't need to do sex, just show the actions. He can do it better than a woman can. A woman can't show them a man's parts, can she now?"

"No, I suppose not."

"And it didn't stop with caves. Right through the ages, families have slept together in the same room, the same bed, and thought nowt of it. It was part of the instruction, you see. It wasn't till near our own times, and all these separate rooms, that things turned different."

An inward sigh from Su. Where was this leading? She must circle round the subject, as Ellis would say, and get to the other side of it. Who, in this cave world, taught the boys what to do – the older women? Or was it the young girls, once they had been through the 'instruction' with the old man? She imagined Ellis in lecture mode, standing beside his desk like he did, posing as if before a class, explaining in his finger-dancing manner how our cave-dwelling ancestors went about the sexual education of their young. Ellis's presentation would be more sophisticated than Stan's, of course, and for that reason more convincing, even though Stan could boast the fieldwork. Would Ellis have gone for 'natural'? She tried

to clear the Ellis scene. Stan, now sitting on the edge of the bed, went on. The unburdening was doing something for him, if not for her. This could be his last chance of virtual orgasm.

“It’s with us yet, Angel. Believe me, every man alive is a natural paedo. There’d be plenty who’d admit it if there weren’t any chance of trouble. Like I said, it’s how we keep control that matters.”

“If you say so.”

“The young girls don’t mind, do they? They’re not harmed by it, and their curiosity is satisfied. They finish up wiser. Look at all these schoolgirl mums – they wouldn’t get in the mess they’re in if they’d been told everything properly beforehand.”

“Well, it’s an interesting idea, Stan. You’ve obviously given it a lot of thought.”

Stan nodded in self-reassurance. He seemed to have completed the presentation of the evolutionary case for intergenerational intimacy, and moved on to a personal classification of pre-pubescent females. All grown men, he suspected, sorted their little girls. Except of course homosexuals, who for all he knew might sort boys. Stan’s girls progressed through the stages of tot, babe, belle, then snapper. Tots are way too young to understand, he said, and any man who attempts sexual instruction with a tot has something foully wrong with him. Babes are also too young, though a babe is aware of sexual differences. These should be left unexplained for the time being. Instruction given too early leads only to confusion, and is bound to do more harm than good. Su, sitting by the window, her eyes struggling to stay open, was listening to Stan against the drone of the mower, its motor momentarily changing pitch at the start of each return run. Ellis had re-entered her mind; Su could hear his words carried on Stan’s voice.

A belle, however, is fully fired up with curiosity. A belle is ready to investigate her sexuality. She is introduced to her

potential power. The built-in urge to display the female body, present from a surprisingly early age, is exercised for example by handstands in the playground, school skirt dropping back to reveal knickers. Hips are wriggled, and budding breasts frequently publicly inspected under clothes. A belle is ready for instruction. To the paedophile mind, the belle represents the peak of female excellence – the ideal form, a veritable goddess to be placed on a plinth. Yet perfection is short lived. The ideal is quickly dissolved by the advent of body hair and menstruation, and goddess turns into gum-chewing foul-mouthed navel-pierced snapper.

“Snappers can still be cute, mind, very cute – it’s what they grow into that brings the grief.” Stan was back, and Su accepted she may have missed a line or two.

“You mean they grow up and tell tales?”

It was the wrong thing to say, and Stan looked hurt. It wasn’t what he meant, he said. He agreed that a relationship between grown man and young girl is always a time bomb, a landmine lying in the sand. But he had been referring to snappers growing into women. It had been meant as a joke. Stan, using the bed as a seat, his hands gripping the edge of the mattress under the covers, looked down and scanned the floor as if he had dropped a secret thought. The lawn-mower had stopped. There was silence, inside and out. Su trailed her arm, trawling for her bag by the side of the chair, and considered the right phrase of departure. The movement brought Stan’s head up and towards her.

“There’s no logic, Angel.”

Bag handle slowly released, Su sat upright on her chair. She desperately wanted to nap, but a stifled yawn was the nearest she would allow herself. The sound of garden shears – snip, snep, snip-snep – came through the window. A brief human wail was heard from within the house, from somewhere downstairs. It was impossible to tell whether distress or delight was being broadcast.

“In what way?”

Stan's apparent tussle with logic began with an explanation. Ellis would have put it better. Ellis would have suggested – 'suggest' was one of Ellis's lecture verbs – he would have suggested that the man who cultivates a paedophile philosophy wishes to avoid intercourse with an adult woman because he is not confidence of his performance. Despite the inadequacy, the male sexual drive persists, making him seek intimate contact with a female. The man's wish to avoid the act of intercourse extends to a wish to avoid the context of intercourse: that is, the mature female body with its developed breasts, full hips, and pubic hair. The pre-pubescent female form is substituted. Symbolism takes over. Symbols for recognising the mature female are replaced by those that identify a young girl: flat chest, slim thighs, absence of body hair. There is no urge for intercourse, this being the very act that is to be avoided. Here's the rub, though. If the primeval drive that attracts male to female in the first place is the compulsion to reproduce, then what is the point of an attraction that will not lead to reproduction?

"It makes no sense at all."

"No," replied Su, sensing that a response was expected. She was still listening to Ellis in his conjured lecture theatre. Ellis was investigating the deeper reason.

So, we know the sight of a fully developed female body in the flesh will panic the average paedophile. He believes the female will expect action: thrusting, sexual penetration, moans and gasps and sighs, with points given for technique. That's where our man fears he will fall down. He just ain't got what it takes. That's what he believes, and he's probably right. He risks certain ridicule if he is drawn into the act of copulation. Thus goes the conventional wisdom. Venture beyond the popular explanation, however, and we find a deeper fear. That fear is the fear of responsibility. Our man is not worried about not being able to perform – on the contrary, he's worried that he might succeed! It's the possibility of parenthood he is in mortal terror of. He simply cannot deal

with the responsibility. A female capable of bearing a child is anathema to him. Young girls, fine, before they grow a crop. Also, post-menopausal women. Yes, indeed, the paedophile will often have an eye for the well-kept Older Woman.

Su shook her head. Where was all this stuff coming from? Ellis had never spoken about paedophilia, not to her. She must have read it somewhere and filed it with a lot of other junk in the ample warehouse of her subconscious. Anyway, all paedos are crazy, aren't they? They don't know what they're missing – the supple curves of a willing filly, breasts high and a proud bush pushing on your lips.

“No sense – less I'm right.”

“Sorry?” She had let Stan lose her.

“Less I'm right about natural paedos. There's no need to want sex if all you're doing is instructing. People get it wrong when they think a paedo is after sex – that he wants to do it. That's why they think paedos are bad. See?”

Su didn't see. The heat was preventing her brain from working. The brown room seemed to be getting smaller all the time, like that prisoner's cell in – was it Edgar Allen Poe? But Stan evidently thought she had seen because he moved on.

“The daft thing is, I allus get a shock when they open their mouths and they talk like kids. It's as if I expect them to be women.”

She could hear Stan but was in the company of Ellis – or should that be the other way round? No, the first was right: Ellis had definitely not opinionated on paedophilia, not even as she rehearsed her lines for the radio after the paedo riot. Ellis was a voyeur, an outed reveller in girl-on-girl frolics much as Stan was an outed eight watcher. Ellis said voyeurs were normal men who simply liked others to do the work. To Ellis, voyeurism was a perfectly acceptable activity spawning a vast industry from which everyone gained. The girlies made a few quid, the magazines and video hawkers did well, the punters got their thrills. Perhaps every man alive was a natural

voyeur as well as being a natural paedophile. Maybe a paedophile was nothing more than a failed voyeur. Except the gurlies in the pictures make a choice; the children usually don't.

"I see them, down at the park. They take sweets with 'em – pocketfuls. Winkels must do a roaring trade."

"Who?"

"Winkels. It's the paper shop down near the big gates. Sells sweets and packets of crisps and —"

"No, who takes the sweets with them?"

"The other paedos – I just said."

Su nodded in false recall.

"They make me sick, they do."

Su supposed Stan was talking about other old men sitting in the park near the swings and roundabouts.

"I know what they've gone to the park for. I know what's going on in their heads. And it makes me want to puke. Daft, init, though? They're there for the same as me, and when I see them on the benches, handing out sweets one at a time and leering like they do, they disgust me."

"Don't you speak to any of them? The – these other men?"

"Don't know 'em. Don't want to."

In an effort she would rank as supreme, Su marshalled her thoughts. There was an opportunity here to get something out of the conversation.

"Stan. I hear what you say. I'll need to take it away with me to give it full mull. It's good for you to get it out your system. But it hasn't always been like that, has it? I mean, before, when we were a family."

A fire bell sounded, one brief piercing burst followed a moment later by a second.

"God, what's that for? It startled the life out of me."

"Teatime. In five minutes. Ron's on, today. He likes us on time – or go without pudding." Stan was already standing, hand against the wardrobe, easing his feet awkwardly into slip-ons, like the old man he wasn't.

“Well, I hope it’s salad, or something cold.”

“It’s Saturday, and Ron’s on, so it’ll be stew. You can smell it. Salad is Sunday. Though like as not there’ll be ice cream to follow. Easy to do is ice cream.”

“That’s something to look forward to, I suppose.”

“Double helpings for them of us who don’t have trouble with our teeth.”

“Look – about what we were talking about...”

“It’ll keep till next time, if you want to come again.”

“Yes, of course I do.”

“We’ll sort it out good and proper then. What d’you say?”

She had agreed to the arrangement, there being no alternative. Maybe it was for the best. The afternoon had been a minor nightmare for her. The next visit might be on a cooler day; at least she would be prepared for the topic. Leaving the rest home, she felt like a drink. Could she find a wine bar or half-decent pub where a woman could unwind for a bit? No, because Margo was expecting her back. Like Ron at the nursing home, Margo likes us on time – or no pudding.

Sod Margo! Sod elder sisters who think they own your innermost secrets. Margo didn’t know everything. Sod her, sod her, sod her.

Su stopped the car outside a pub near the town centre that attempted a continental ambience – its customers imbibing under brightly logoed parasols at small round tables on a paved area at the front of the building, almost in the street – and on a hot late afternoon this ambition of the hostelry was achieved. With a lager in a tall fluted glass, she sat at a table as it became vacated. Stan’s release of the paedophile mind had disturbed her for reasons she had yet to get a handle on. His situation was more advanced than she had realised – it had engulfed him, perhaps turned his brain. He actually believed he was a dirty old man.

A young woman appeared at the table, holding a small glass containing a clear drink, and asked if a seat was taken. Su

replied no, though was slightly irritated by the intrusion into her thinking space.

“Isn’t this weather just dreamy?”

The young woman spoke softly, as if she knew Su, although the accent was American. About the same age as Fee, but entirely urbane. Cream slacks; beige safari shirt, unbuttoned to display cleavage; broad-rimmed hat; sandals and painted toenails; shoulder bag to match the slacks – no sign anywhere of a strained budget. Flawless skin; eyes that met eyes; easy smile; slow sensual movements.

“It’s been a tad too much on the warm side for me, today, if I’m to be honest,” Su replied. “I suppose it depends on what you’re doing.”

“Doesn’t it.”

The dark eyes remained on their target as ruby lips sipped. Then: “I don’t think we’ve had the pleasure.”

“No. I don’t live locally.”

“Sounds like passing through.”

“Yes. You could say that.”

“That’s the rhythm.”

A discreet survey of occupants of other tables confirmed Su’s sudden suspicion.

“Is this a gay bar, by any chance?”

“Nh-nh. Not by ‘any chance’. Freedom is as freedom longs to be...”

Su’s glass contained one last mouthful. She moved to drink up and be off – Margo’s fire bell was ringing in her ear – but her hand hesitated. The dark full eyes under long lashes under the broad brim held on to her own. That smile, an upturn at the hinges of a mouth that conveyed any kind of message.

“What’s your name?”

“Celia. Heavenly Girl.”

“Well, Celia. It’s been nice talking to you, but I really do have to go.”

“So soo-oon?”

“So soon. Sorry.”

At the offices of Community Advance, just before the Start of Week meeting, Su related the experience to Geri: of stopping for a drink on a hot day; of unintentionally choosing a gay bar; of being given the come-on by an upmarket lesbo *fille de joie*. Geri said she hadn't known there were such operators, though supposed it made sense.

The meeting followed a routine agenda, filled in the main by discussions on preparations for Awareness Day, but which also required an update from the representative of the Opted Body Programme. All targets met and exceeded, an ebullient Fee reported. Su asked her, not without a trace of sarcasm, how she did it. The self-effacing reply was that most community groups were probably planning to apply for CA support anyway, and she – Fee – just happened along at the right time. That was how Su was inclined to see it, too.

Consider an attractive young blonde; dressed businesslike in a smart suit cut just above the knee; with a job to do that is clear in purpose and beneficial to others. Fee soon learnt that male spokespersons of community groups and organisations made the better listeners. She would sit before such a spokesperson, explaining the advantages of association with Community Advance, making notes on a spiral-bound pad, occasionally applying a downward little tug at the smart skirt to correct its creep along a thigh. The subject of community group finances would be handled with all the serious this surely demanded, while the prospective client – rarely her side of forty – would delight at girlish appreciation of even the simplest humour. And she flattered – oh, she could flirt and say the nicest things before smilingly redirecting attention to the matter of signing up with CA.

Fee enjoyed her work. It gave her flexibility. The detail of her daily call schedule was unquestioned; this allowed her to stop off at the single Grosvenor Rooms which, at certain times of the week, was open to welcome the Word of the

Lord. *Let us pray, and while we pray, let the salver pass amongst us.
To give is to receive.*

* * * * *

Like Su Gardeen, Lucy Grainger had an elder sister. Dr Julia was a specialist in the field of child abuse. She knew about paedophiles. Su arranged to see Dr Julia at her place of practice which turned out to be an airy third-floor consulting room at the corner of one wing of a modern if somewhat bland clinic. The two women had met before, at a showy restaurant party put on by Simon to celebrate a tenth wedding anniversary. Julia, a robust red-head, dressed in a green top and black slacks but without the unbuttoned white coat Su had stereotypically expected, smiled and nodded as Su explained the reason for the appointment.

“It’s a delicate matter, actually.”

“I understand, and it goes without saying that anything said in this room will be treated in the strictest confidence.”

“Thank you.”

Dr Julia listened to Su’s enquiry with professional head-to-one-side interest. The specialist’s style of response suggested a regularly trodden path.

“What’s a child, exactly? Definitions of maturity differ according to culture and to the historical setting. In medieval times, children were thought of as small adults. Today, we like to cocoon them in a make-believe world shielded from the realities of adulthood. Then again, what’s a paedophile, exactly? Individuals having a sexual attraction to children are a diverse bunch, to be sure. One case may be a sad loner who has trouble connecting with the rest of society; another will lead an otherwise normal life in a successful relationship, and may be in a position of great trust, possibly and all too probably working with children. I personally distrust the word ‘paedophile’. As a term of diagnostic description, it’s practically useless.”

And:

“Contrary to popular wisdom, the paedophile’s attraction to children may transcend thoughts of sexual intimacy – which, I should emphasise, does not necessarily mean desire for penetrative intercourse. Most of them couldn’t do it, anyway: they’re likely to be sexually dysfunctional. Paedophiles are largely passive creatures. It’s the rarer active ones we hear about in the media. Sometimes there’s a longing to be with children, to think and do like them. The Peter Pan complex, we call it.”

Also:

“Most paedophiles can self-identify. They know what they are and they don’t really present all that much of a risk. But they do think differently. You know, it’s incredible what lengths a paedophile will go to in order to justify his disposition. There’s always a rational explanation for what is essentially a permanent state of fantasy.”

A warning:

“Some types are a considerable danger – let’s have no doubt on that. The assault sequence follows four classic stages: desire; disinhibiting the victim; overcoming resistance – grooming, if you like; isolating the victim. Threats usually follow the crime, and sometimes these may be carried out. In extreme cases, the child will end up dead. We should keep in mind that abuse and physical coercion are not relationships. Fortunately, the sequence often fails in an early stage. Your friendly local paedophile may be a little disconcerting but he’s no psychopath.”

Su asked about treatment.

“Treatment? Goodness. For a long while, the approach used to be to do nothing – nothing that could be called treatment – on the grounds that sexual disorientation was unresponsive to treatment. In more recent times – I’m talking about when I did my training, so perhaps not so recent, I don’t know – anyway, ‘do nothing’ was replaced by therapy. We would probe away for childhood traumas, or try to dismantle the

abuser's armoury of justification. The behaviouralists' camp went in for 'unlearning', including the use of shock treatment. A lot of the effort went on studies of homosexuality – child attraction was not a fashionable field then. The eternal hope was to make homosexuals 'better' again – healthy, normal, 'one of us' – to help them stop doing their disgusting thing. It was called depth therapy – probably because most practitioners were out of theirs. Treatment of sex offenders was said to go on in prisons and mental hospitals, well away from the public eye, but it promised to be expensive and was probably a flop since we didn't hear much about it. Nowadays, we prefer support therapy. The offender as victim. I suppose the prevailing wisdom is back to where it was before – we don't think there is a cure."

"Really?"

"Well, the evidence reveals no decline in recidivism, no matter how much therapy is applied, or in what form. We wish it were not so – it means we're forever barking up the wrong trees. Oh, I know you can fill the gaps with made-up nonsense, and some in the profession do, believe me. One problem is that traditional methodologies rely on a control group – for comparison. Trouble is, there isn't one. Also, drop out rates among offenders are sky high. Human rights, and all that. Paedophiles simply refuse to open up their minds, so we don't know what's in there. It's our own fault, of course. Society's current hysterical attitude to paedophilia simply sends it scurrying behind the woodwork. Any data we do manage to collect is contaminated by prejudice. From a scientific point of view, we haven't left the Middle Ages."

For the second time in a week, Su felt she was the agent of release of some pent-up frustrations on the subject of intergenerational intimacy, first from one angle then another. Dr Julia had not finished.

"You know, research into paedophilia is surprisingly scant. People fight shy of it. It's an intellectual no-go area. I imagine the fear is that any investigation will rebound on the agent. I

can't help but think there's a significance in that. I mean, people don't dodge writing about murder on the grounds that, if they do write, they may be suspected of harbouring a secret desire to go out and kill somebody. Do they? What is it about paedophilia?"

Su saw the chance to rein in.

"You said that studies have been – were conducted on homosexuality. Can't some of the findings be applied to paedophilia?"

"That's the thing, you see. The gay libbers lost no time in disassociating themselves from paedophiles. Society's attitudes to homosexuality have softened considerably, but paedophilia remains the pits. The gays broke loose and they're not going back for the stragglers."

It did not answer the deeper question. Another tack.

"What's the thinking with you and your colleagues, say?"

"I wish we were left alone and trusted to do our job, quite honestly. To my mind, the child protection lobby has a lot to answer for. These people inflate the problem at every opportunity – well, they would, wouldn't they. What is it they say?: 'We scare because we care'. Raising the profile, they call it. And next you know, child abuse is a far bigger problem than we ever imagined. Anyone who so much as looks at a child that isn't their own is an abuser-in-waiting. It blurs the picture, makes our job that much more difficult."

Su found herself half agreeing with the protection lobby – wasn't a raised profile to the professional's advantage? – but decided to leave it at half. Time was passing.

"At what age do you think children should receive sexual instruction? And who in your opinion is the best person to deliver the instruction?"

"Ah, that old chestnut. I personally believe there is a real danger of some sex instruction being self-defeating. Sex is taught at school at an ever lower age, then the kids can't wait to go out and give it a try. I don't think parents pull it off, the little talk about the birds and the bees. Too near home, you

see. Can you imagine a father sitting a ten-year-old on his knee and explaining how it comes together? The in-laws would waste no time in alerting social services. And mother somehow never gets round to it. School is probably the best place, though the curriculum doesn't take account of the individual child's readiness for learning the facts of life. It's a pity."

"What happened before there were any schools?"

"What?"

"Before schools. I mean, a long time before. Before we lived in cities, for instance? When we lived in caves – who would do the instruction?"

Dr Julia's brow furrowed in puzzlement. It made her look angry.

"Well, I would imagine the young would follow by example. It's quite possible the sex act was a family performance – if not communal. I really hadn't given it much thought. Why do you ask?"

"I just wondered about 'natural' instruction. Maybe – what I mean is, could it have been up to the men – the old men – of the tribe, or whatever, to instruct the young girls about sex?"

The specialist's bafflement gave way to cautious curiosity. "Go on."

"The thing is, the old men might be in the best position to do the instructing. They would be explaining, and nothing else – if you see what I mean."

"I think so. But where does this bring us, exactly?"

"I'm saying that, maybe if it was natural, done over thousands of years of evolution, for the old men to teach the young girls, then it might explain why we have adults today wanting to engage with children. Except we call them paedophiles."

"Well, it's certainly an intriguing idea, Su. I'll say that for it." Dr Julia became lost in thought for a few seconds. Then: "Is that why you're here? To sound out the case for paedophilia? You know someone who is, or might be, in some kind of

trouble, don't you? Someone in the family, perhaps?"

Do all older sisters like to pry open your mind?

"I'm interested in where we're at on the overall scale of understanding, that's all."

"There's still plenty of mileage left, if that's what you mean." The specialist glanced at the clock on the wall. Su responded.

"So it seems. Look, I'm aware that time's getting on, but I want to make sure I've got this tied down. Society judges a sexual relationship between male adult and female child to be at all times and to any degree wrong, yeh? So why does nature allow it, do you think, by way of attraction?"

"The attraction is a delusion. It's a fantasy that gets out of control. When a paedophile locks on to a young girl – we'll say girl because over three-quarters of targets are female – her status is elevated in his eyes. Physical appearance accords with a norm, and reinforces that norm. The child becomes a figure to be worshipped. She represents some kind of perfection. Nabokov at least got that bit right."

"Nabokov?"

"*Lolita*. Anyway, should our paedophile meet up with his dream target, physically, closely, then he is disappointed. The goddess turns out to be a child, doing and saying childish things. Our paedophile will avoid disappointment by putting off the contact. The enjoyment is all in the fantasy; realisation simply shatters the fantasy."

"So, to recap, you're saying most of them – most paedophiles – are actually quite harmless."

The intercom buzzed. Dr Julia picked it up, listened, and told it 'two minutes'. She stood and nodded at the intercom.

"My eleven o'clock – cigarette burns; not pleasant. To answer your question, I think so, yes. Most are. It's the remaining few who cause the damage. For them I'd say the problem is more than honest paedophilia, if I dare use that expression. When a man commits a physical sexual assault on a child, he has something else going on. That's how I see it, at

least. I should warn you my view is not mainstream. Probably why I'm still here."

The little joke ended the session. They were at the door, which was opened by the doctor. A little girl behind a dull expression sat in the waiting area, with – it could be presumed – her mother, a young woman of the estate type, in her early twenties, who watched through suspicious eyes.

Su walked on, believing the doctor behind her.

"Thank you for seeing me, Julia. You've been most helpful."

But the specialist had turned her attention to the little girl, crouching down to child eye level with an unexpected lightness of balance, and speaking to the girl with perfectly adjusted intonation. Dr Julia had just entered another world.

9

Nobody knew where Suzie Earle went to when she bunked off school. She never told anyone, and it was unlikely that anyone wanted to know. On the days of truancy, Suzie would board the bus at the wooden shelter in the village along with half-a-dozen or so other pupils. More were picked up on the way, and all would disembark at a stop outside a comprehensive in the nearby market town. All except Suzie. She stayed in her seat as the bus continued its journey to the town's band-stand centre. The late afternoon outward service would pick up pupils from outside the school. If the vehicle was a double-decker, the boarders clambered noisily up the metal stairs to the upper deck. If a single-decker, they bustled down the aisle to fill the wide seat across the back. Suzie would have boarded the bus earlier, choosing a seat in the middle section so as to minimise contact. The half-a-dozen or so pupils who got off at the village shelter did not ask about her day.

Absences from school were supposed to be explained. At first, Suzie satisfied the requirement by handing over a note on her return purporting to have been written by her mother and telling of some incapacitating illness or calamitous event within the family. On one occasion she dropped the note in a puddle in the rain, and left it there to dissolve, but in class nothing was said to her. There was no further need for fake explanation.

These were the days she spent with Merv. Merv, who lived in the town, had been a pupil at the school, at least according to the records. On formally parting with the notion of

compulsory education, Merv hung around with a group of similarly minded ex-pupils and absent current pupils, as he had for much of the previous year. One day shortly after her fifteenth birthday, Suzie joined the group, out of curiosity. Merv was cultivating a street cred. He spoke of knowing people who could get things, fix things. Tall if a little gangling, Merv imagined himself a leader, though his commands invariably reflected the wishes of those around him. He would tell the gang to meet at a certain café, and they did, because that was where they always met. He liked belts with shiny conspicuous buckles: a favourite bore a badge prised from the bonnet of a Mercedes Benz.

Merv took hardly any notice of the schoolgirl from one of the villages. Suzie put it down to the institutional semi-uniform. She made some changes: for a while she smuggled teenwear out of the house in her school bag and changed in a public toilet; later, she left the house dressed completely in casuals, telling Mum it was allowed in the final year. Still no attention from Merv. She distanced herself from him, stopped following him around, stopped sitting as near to him as possible. The strategy seemed to work because Merv began to converse: a few words one day, a few more another. Suzie asked where he lived. He had a flat, he replied. On impulse, she asked him to take her there. He was unsure. Other people lived there, he said. He'd have to ask them if it was all right. Came the afternoon when it was all right.

The address was above a butcher's shop which stood by itself along a minor through street. The shop was white where it wasn't oozing red: white tiles for the frontage; white slabs for the window display; white mosaic for a floor. They stepped across streamlets of sudsy water trickling from the doorway over the pavement into the street gutter. At the rear of the premises, an exterior wooden staircase led to an elevated platform from which a door allowed entry into an untidy flat that was immediately feminine. The motor which refrigerated the butcher's cold store was mounted in a

housing under the staircase, and the noise penetrated the flat even after the door was closed. Merv switched on the radio. Charts pop. Suzie cast her eyes down to, in front of an electric fireplace, a drying rack filled with women's clothes, stylish and grown-up; then cast them up to a light circular plastic frame which hung from the ceiling of the kitchen end, and from which items of women's underwear – black and scarlet and laced and sexy – were secured in attached pegs, catching the sun's warmth through the window. Merv said the clothes belonged to his flatmates. She could try some on, if she wanted; his flatmates wouldn't mind; they were always wearing each others clothes. From an ironing board, left out in the sitting area, he selected a skirt, holding it to her for size, and a top.

“Go on. There's the bedroom.” He nodded carelessly towards a door.

“No, I don't think so.”

“Suit yourself. I'm having a beer.”

Suzie grabbed up the garments and made for the door. The bedroom in which she found herself was plush and comfortable, heavily scented, with a big bed taking up much of the space. She changed into the flatmate's things and checked the result in a wardrobe's long mirror. The skirt displayed knee and thigh to good effect, but the top's plunging front offered only schoolgirl white bra. To borrow a phrase used by Stan, here was a sack done up ugly. Working under the top, she took off her bra. Merv called from the living room and she replied 'just a minute'. Rose lipstick on a dressing table, and scent, and jewellery. A pair of calf boots from the bottom of the wardrobe, a silk neckerchief from a drawer. She put them all on. Neither the boots nor the clothes offered a perfect fit, but dressing up like this felt good. Without warning, Merv entered the room, as she part knew and mostly hoped he would.

A brief spell of intense physical activity followed. Suddenly spent, Merv fell beside her on the bed.

“You’ve done it before, haven’t you?” he gasped.

“I was in class the day we did practical sex.”

“No, I mean you know exactly what to do.”

“Well, so do you.”

Suzie studied the ceiling mouldings, and the light fittings.

“Who’s room is this anyway? It’s a bit posh.”

“You think so?”

“Yes, it’s like...”

“Like what?” A grin from Merv.

“Like a – you know.”

“Boudoir?”

“What’s one of them?”

“A place for doing business. If you know what I mean.”

Suzie tried to lift herself but he drew her back. She protested.

“Don’t. I need the loo. It all comes out again, you know.”

Merv was suddenly serious. “You know what I’m on about, don’t you?”

She pulled away sullenly and went to the toilet. As she pushed down the flushing button, she noticed that the window was barred on the outside. It occurred to her all the windows of the flat were barred. This was a prison. A sex prison, where girls were made to do sex things. Where were the others? What had happened to the owner of the clothes she was wearing?

She returned to the bedroom. Merv had not moved, except to light a cigarette. He was practising the leader pose.

“You can’t keep me here, you know.”

He smiled at her tone of defiance.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. You know where the door is. You can go any time you want. Am I stopping you?”

He was playing with her, making her out to be a silly schoolgirl.

“Well, that’s all right then.”

She was not a silly schoolgirl, she told herself, and wanted to

tell Merv. Suzie Earle might be only fifteen but here was a girl no one should underestimate.

The relationship cooled for a few weeks. There were other boys, at school, in the village. But none of them like Merv. He was connected to a world that Suzie had to admit she did not fully understand: that was what made him interesting. She found herself once more at the café where Merv told people to meet and at which they were going to meet anyway. Merv talked awhile, then said they could go to the flat. She said no; not till some things had been straightened out between them. Two women entered the café but did not sit. Merv turned his head towards them.

“Shit!”

The women looked out of place among the teens and were clearly seeking out Merv, who went over to speak with them. One of the women was wearing the top that Suzie had tried on, or a top very much like it. These women were Merv’s flatmates! Suzie left the café. It was evening when Merv returned to the flat. She was waiting for him on the exterior wooden platform, sitting on the decking with her feet resting on a step, feeling cold and hungry and the last person in the world. She had missed the bus back to the village. A call to her mother from a telephone box in the town square had informed that she was staying over with a friend to do some revision. Merv had been drinking – she could smell it on his breath. He carried a plastic bag which bulged with cans.

“Well, well, well. What have we here?”

“Hi! I thought you might like some company.” She hoped her words sounded more cheerful than she was feeling.

“It so happens I can get all the company I want.” A loud deliberate burp followed. It produced a thought. “But I like your style. Since you’re sat on the doorstep you might as well come in. You might learn something.”

Inside the flat, warm but no less untidy that the last time, Merv handed her a can of beer, then a swig of vodka, and

more beer. She asked for a cigarette, and he threw her an opened packet. She felt better. Merv seemed to be waiting for something, listening above the pop from the radio, not entirely able to conceal a restlessness. When a noise was heard from outside – someone climbing the stairs – he sprang up from the easy chair and pulled her urgently into a room off the living area. Another bedroom, a cupboard of a room, windowless, very different from the ‘boudoir’ across the flat. She assumed it must be Merv’s: an unmade single bed; the odour of teenage male; pictures pinned to the wall, pages cut from magazines of aggressively naked women. He sat her on the bed and motioned for her to be quiet, though he himself spoke, in almost a whisper.

“You’ll have to leave now. It’s getting busy.”

“I can’t. I told you, there’s no bus. I’ve nowhere to go,” she hissed.

“You shouldn’t’ve come in the first place. Not this time of night.”

“Well, I’m here now, aren’t I.”

Merv held her arm, squeezing perhaps harder than he realised, and hurting. He cocked his head to listen. Voices came from the living area, one male, one female. There was giggling. The voices moved away. Soon, there were other sounds, muffled. Merv relaxed a little, taking a pull from the can of lager that had not left his other hand since the living room. Suzie looked up at him standing above her

“Can I stay the night, then?”

“No. I told you, you’ll have to shove off.”

“And I told you, I’ve nowhere to go to.” She leant back on the mattress, propped up on her elbows. “You can have me, if you want.”

“You’re under-aged. I’m not Merv the perv.”

“You didn’t let that stop you last time.”

“That was different. I didn’t know.”

“Yes you did. That’s why you did it.”

Merv said nothing but slid from the room, silently closing

the door behind him. After a while, the voices returned briefly to the living area, then the outside door slammed, and Suzie heard the thud of feet on the wooden stairs. Merv did not return; she had no idea where he had gone. Tired, she climbed between the sheets in her clothes. Eventually she fell into a sleep disturbed occasionally by movement within the flat. When she needed the toilet, she made her way stealthily across the main room; the lights were on, and the electric fire. She could not tell if anyone was in the plush bedroom since the door was closed and there was no noise. Back in Merv's stale bed she drifted back to sleep.

She awoke abruptly to a noise beneath her. At first, she could not remember where she was. Her head ached and her mouth was furred. She climbed out of the bed and left the room. It was daybreak. A faintly acrid smell pervaded the living area: the smell of raw meat. The sound of chopping started, coming from below. After using the toilet and performing a perfunctory wash she looked around for something to eat. From a cupboard in the kitchen a box of cornflakes; from the fridge an opened carton of milk. Pulling a bowl from a sink of unwashed crockery, she ran it under the tap and filled it with cereal. She had almost finished the meal when the door to the plush bedroom opened, and a woman emerged, wrapping a dressing-gown around her. The woman's hair hung loose. As she swept it back, she noticed Suzie sitting at the table, and stopped moving.

"Who the *fuck* are you?"

Suzie recognised the woman as one of the two Merv had spoken to at the café, though she looked older in her morning state.

"I'm a friend of Merv's?"

"What you doing here, for fuck's sake?"

"I couldn't get home. He let me stay the night."

The woman said something that sounded like 'Oh my god' and shut herself in the toilet cubicle. When she emerged, Suzie asked if she would like a cup of tea. The woman

nodded.

“What’s your name?”

“Suzie.”

“Well, Suzie. You shouldn’t be here. You know that?”

“Everybody tells me that. I’m just having a bite of breakfast then I’m gone.”

The woman went into the plush bedroom and came back with a lighted cigarette, which she drew on and then coughed as if choked with phlegm.

“I’m Vanessa, by the way. Look – no offence, but Merv has no right bringing you here. It’s not his fucking flat.”

“He didn’t bring me here. I came.”

“How did you know where it was?”

“I followed him.”

Vanessa laughed, which started a new spasm of coughing.

“You followed Merv? Here? God, you must be fucking moonstruck or some’ing. I feel sorry for you.”

Suzie busied herself with preparing two cups of tea.

“Would you like some cornflakes?” Suzie cleared a space at the table.

“Yeah, all right.”

“You say this isn’t Merv’s flat.”

“Like fuck it isn’t.”

Vanessa was now sitting at the table, one hand supporting the elbow of the arm of the hand holding the cigarette. For the first time, she smiled.

“Is that what he told you?”

“Sort of. That’s why I came round here, when I missed my bus.”

Tea and cornflakes were placed on the table in front of Vanessa. Suzie turned the hot water tap at the sink. A wall-mounted heater popped into life.

“I’ll wash up while I’m here. Like paying my way.”

Vanessa made no reply but munched and sipped and inhaled as Suzie clinked and rinsed at the sink. A telephone rang. Suzie looked around: the insistent noise came from the

plush bedroom. She remembered seeing a phone during her first visit. Vanessa steadied a spoon of flakes at her lips, hesitated, then completed the delivery. With a motion of the head towards the plush bedroom, she spoke through a filled mouth.

“Be a treasure and bring it for us. Long wire – it’ll reach.” Suzie dried her hands and went. Then an afterthought from Vanessa: “Don’t answer it – just bring it.”

The phone on the table, extension lead trailing across the carpet, Vanessa picked up the handset and tucked it between ear and shoulder. A suddenly seductive voice arranged a time with someone called Big Boy while spoon continued to scoop and transfer. The conversation ended and Vanessa replaced the handset.

“First of the day. Always bright and early, that one.”

With breakfast over, Vanessa disappeared into the bathroom. Suzie finished the washing up and considered what to do next. Should she leave, as she said she was going to? Shout bye to Vanessa on the way out? Go and look for Merv at the café? Go to school? Go home? She tried a tall cupboard in the kitchen and found an upright vacuum cleaner. Its use allowed an exploration of the flat. One door off the main room was locked. Vanessa emerged from the steamy bathroom, vigorously drying her hair. The dressing gown fell open to reveal well-shaped breasts and a flat stomach and a frizzy bush. Vanessa didn’t seem to care. Above the noise of the vacuum cleaner, Suzie heard a stretched ‘fucking hell’ of feigned astonishment as Vanessa left a trail of wet footprints into the plush bedroom, closing the door behind her.

The flat was convincingly tidier by the time Vanessa reappeared, dressed. She commented on the housework, humorously, giving Suzie a smile that made Suzie feel good inside. But, Vanessa explained, Suzie would really have to go now because there were things to see to. Suzie did not proceed to the café to meet Merv. She walked and sat on a

bench and shivered and walked some more, until the middle of the afternoon when she caught the bus on its way to the school, and jostled with the others at the end of the journey.

Suzie modified her behaviour over the winter, paying attention to her schoolwork. GCSEs were coming up. Only a couple of times did she remain on the bus to the town centre; on neither occasion did Merv come to the café. These months represented Suzie's village bus shelter period. There was nothing much else to do in the evenings. Margaret spent her time up in her room studying for A-levels; Mum and Stan slumped in front of the television. When Suzie sat with them, Mum was often a little odd, which she interpreted as a show of displeasure, while Stan ignored his younger stepdaughter in a nothing-to-talk-about way. The bus shelter crowd provided laughs. And cigarettes, which did not interest Suzie so much. And lager or cider, which did. She would charge one can of beer for a finger up. Going all the way will cost a full bottle of cider, she would regularly announce when tipsy, though the boys of the village were too bashful to take her up, what with their mates being there and all.

She achieved her four low-grade GCSEs the same summer as clever clogs Margaret was offered a place at the university of first choice. Margaret set about preparing to leave the village for a new life. Stan said he would help as far as he could. The farm had struggled to break even during the recent recession, but a growing market for organic crops was now producing a small surplus. Margaret said she appreciated the sacrifice and promised to pay back as soon as she was earning.

On leaving school, Suzie signed on for social benefits and started to look for a job. Invitations to interviews were few, and the interviews themselves irritated her. Who did these people think they were, asking all daft questions like: 'where do you see yourself in five years' time?' How the fuck should she know what she would be doing in five years' time?

Shacked up with a bloke who had pots of money if she had any sense. Interviews were boring. They were a waste of friggig time. A secretarial agency rang the farmhouse one morning. Mum answered, and somehow was mistaken for Suzie. Remembering, hours later, Mum told the family about the incident over the evening meal.

“What did they want?” asked a tired Stan.

“The lady wanted to know why I hadn’t gone for an interview this morning, to somewhere or other. Nice manner. Polite. I think she was put out, mind, when I told her I was only Suzie’s mum.”

Stan had turned to Suzie. “Is that right? Did you have an interview to go to?”

“Maybe.”

“And what’s ‘maybe’ supposed to mean? Did you or didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“So why didn’t you go?”

“Didn’t feel like it. All right?”

Stan retorted that she mustn’t turn down the opportunity of a job just because she ‘didn’t feel like it’. She was old enough to bring in a wage, and that’s what she should be doing. Suzie pointed to Margaret.

“What about her, then? She won’t be bringing in a wage for a while, will she?”

“Your sister’s bettering herself. That’s more than you’re doing, young lady.”

“Yeah, well it’s all right for some, that’s all I can say. And what’s she ever let you do to her – eh?”

What followed was a verbal explosion from Stan, a man not given to losing his temper or even raising his voice. Suzie learnt she was lazy, insolent, eating them out of house and home, coming in late at night stinking of booze, mixing with the wrong crowd, heading straight for trouble if she didn’t pull her socks up. Soon, everyone was talking – shouting, shrieking – at once. Suzie leapt from the table. She ran noisily

upstairs and slammed the door to her room. Later that evening, without a word to anyone, she left the house heaving a sports kit bag on to her shoulder.

On the dark drizzly road from the village, she thumbed a lift in a large old fusty car driven by a man whose other passenger was a woman with a creepy fixed smile. Both were elderly, and both went on about what an awful night it was for a young girl to be wandering alone in the middle of nowhere. They dropped her in the town square from where she walked to the butcher's shop. She climbed the exterior wooden staircase and knocked on the door. Vanessa answered, obviously expecting someone in particular. It took her a moment to recognise Suzie.

"Fuckin' 'ell. What do *you* want?"

"Can I come in?"

"No, sweetie, you can't. It's not convenient right now. I'm got visitors coming."

Vanessa was about to close the door. Suzie lifted her hand forward, to stop it. Vanessa held the door ajar and waited for a cough to clear.

"Look, my brother don't live 'ere no more. I don't know where he is. He just upped and left. Now do me a favour – will you, love? – and scoot."

"Merv's your brother?" Suzie had not considered the possibility.

"Yeah – didn't you know? Fucking Jesus, an' all. Don't tell me you thought –"

"Anyway, it's not Merv I came to see."

"No?"

"You see, I know what you do here, and I want in."

Vanessa let Suzie stay the night; told her to stay out of the way; let her tidy the flat the following day; ate the meal she prepared; let her stay another night. And so on. Suzie was introduced to Cis: 'not Sis as in sister but Cis as in Francesca'. Cis was the woman Suzie had seen with Vanessa at the café.

Petite, dark-haired, dressed for cock-teasing. Italian roots. Worked the big city but occasionally returned to the flat when she needed to crash out. Cis's room was the locked one. The room vacated by Merv became Suzie's. She stayed in it or went out during the hours when Vanessa was entertaining. But this was boring and, besides, she needed money. Vanessa gave her cash with which to go to the supermarket, but there was none for self. Time for a talk with Vanessa.

Suzie was just a kid with the wrong idea, Vanessa told her. This was not the set-up she seemed to think it was. She should mind her own fucking business, or move out. End of conversation. Suzie persisted and, a couple of days later, Vanessa reconsidered. Over delivered curry and a bottle of wine in front of the electric fire, Vanessa explained how she had a small book of regulars, all discreet and manageable. This was not the town for kerb perching – too small. She had no hard habit to feed so did not need the drive-throughs. The local pubs were only any good for pick-ups at weekends, and you had to okay it with the guy behind the bar. Vanessa did not see Suzie as the street type, anyway. Wrong shape, for starters. No offence, but she had no come-on. You don't need come-on when working from home, just the spiel on the telephone. The flat was just right – for one girl. Too much foot-traffic up the stairs would attract the wrong kind of attention. Suzie could hang around for the time being and look after the place, like Merv was supposed to. She was a good kid – Vanessa said she liked her. Things might change later.

Things did change when Vanessa went down with a flu virus and the butcher, also the landlord of the flat, called for his regular freebie. Suzie took it. A sweating heaving mass not very different from how some of the carcasses hung up in his cold store must have been when alive. But it felt good to be shagged like this – to be needed, if only for a few minutes. Ever the businessman, the butcher-landlord raised the rent on the flat on account of the additional 'utility factor'.

“Turning a friggin’ blind eye, he means,” moaned Vanessa.

“I’m sorry. It’s my fault. Do you want me to go?” asked Suzie.

“Nope! You did a great job. He’ll want twice the freebies now. He’s all yours, sweetheart.”

The months went by. In Cis’s room – smaller and less plush than Vanessa’s, but larger and lighter than Merv’s claustrophobic closet, and unlocked by Vanessa for the sessions – Suzie continued to service the butcher. Vanessa introduced her to a second client, then another. None were physically attractive specimens, nor into any sort of warm-up. It meant the sessions were over quickly. A further client, a loan shark who Vanessa deferred to because she was in debt to him, was more of a problem. He wanted to tie Suzie up. No S and M, Vanessa had advised; don’t ever let the fuckers tie you up, not even when you owe them money. Especially when you owe them money. Suzie nonetheless agreed to having her hands secured behind her back, kneeling naked on the bed, while the loan shark groped leeringly about her body, but she did not like the constraint and panicked when he placed his hands round her neck. Her distress was precisely what turned him on. On the next visit, the man settled for a threesome on Vanessa’s big bed in the plush room, with Vanessa holding Suzie down.

Suzie rang the farm. Mum told her Margaret was doing well, calling herself Margo now. Stan was still working hard. And asked when was she, Suzie, coming home?

In the main, Suzie and Vanessa got on. Vanessa had her moods, then so did Suzie. They sometimes got very drunk together. Cis moved to London, and Suzie moved into the vacated bedroom. Merv was doing time for aggravated burglary. The butcher-landlord began to bring small gifts after Suzie made a remark, just as he approached climax, about the covered lorry that sometimes backed up to the cold store in

the middle of the night to offload dead complete animals. Months came, months went. Then Suzie began to feel sick in the mornings. She said nothing, and the sickness went. But Vanessa knew.

“You’ve only gone and got yourself up the spout, you silly little fucker,” was Vanessa’s wisdom aired. “It’s all right. First happened to me when I was about your age. Chance you take with riding bare-back. You’re not having it – the kid – are you?”

Suzie shook her head. “No, I can’t do that. I don’t even know who the father is, do I.”

“Here, I’ll give you an address. Go and see Beryl – tell her I sent you. It’s best done private – know what I mean? Too many fuckers sticking their noses in, otherwise. Legal, mind, and qualified. She’s retired now, but still with it. Course, it’ll cost. I can wangle a loan through you-know-who. You’ll have to pay it back, with interest, and a bit on top for all the bother, seeing as it’s your own stupid fault, an’ all. Fancy getting yerself fucking pouched.”

The quotation for a termination served to emphasise the weakness of the arrangement by which Vanessa passed on to Suzie only clients who apparently did not hand over money but were merely ‘collecting dues’. Suzie’s income was in effect a weekly allowance from Vanessa, like pocket money, quickly consumed by clothes and drink. Suzie had for some time resented this control but accepted it as part of the deal. To borrow from the strangling loan shark would take forever to repay, in ways she knew she must avoid.

Stan was surprised to see her, and at first appeared pleased. He was working in the long open shelter behind the farmhouse, weighing potatoes in double-thickness paper sacks under a chute at the end of a rattling conveyer belt.

“Mum said you’d be here,” Suzie smiled.

He looked her up and down, asked how she was and what was she doing, and chided her for not coming to see them

earlier.

“I’m working in an office. Secretary, I am. The money’s not fantastic, but it keeps me out of mischief.”

Then Stan’s initial welcome showed signs of evaporating. He finished the sack he was working on and asked her what she had come for.

“The thing is, I need some money. Not much, but I need it soon, straightaway. It’s for a deposit. On a flat. I’ve seen a flat I like. I might lose it if I’m not quick.”

Stan asked where exactly the flat was, and said they could go in the Land Rover to look it over.

“We can’t. Someone’s still living there at the moment.”

The conveyor clunked to a stop as Stan wrenched the switch. He told Suzie that things were tight with the farm. The buying group was continually squeezing him on price, and trade from the village was slow. He would need a better idea of why she should suddenly turn up out of the blue and ask for money.

“I told you. I’m after a flat.”

Her mother, Stan told her, had wept buckets, had been worried sick about her. They both had.

“I’ve rang.”

That was not the same, he retorted. It wasn’t as if she was living in some distant city – she was only a bus ride down the road. Did she have any idea how long it had been since they last set eyes on her? Not even at Christmas had she crossed the threshold.

“There’s no buses on a Sunday. That’s the only day I’m free.”

Stan pointed out today was not a Sunday, yet here she was.

“I’m on holiday at the moment. That’s why I want to get this sorted out.”

Suzie fought a spasm of nausea. Stan motioned they should walk across to the house. She didn’t want to go: negotiation had to be conducted away from Mum.

“How much help have you given to our Margaret since she

left. Must run into thousands, I bet. So where's mine?"

Stan told her Margaret was doing well. A first class degree looked certain. It will have been worth every single penny, he continued. Margaret had promised to repay, not that it mattered. Margaret was a credit to the family.

"I'll repay. I never said I wanted a handout, did I? That's not my style. I pay my way, I do."

A car entered the yard, heavily mud splattered and splattering more mud. Probably a sales rep. There wasn't much time.

"I really need this money. You owe me it, Stan. If you don't give me it, I'll tell. I mean it, too."

The threat proved counter-productive. Had it not been made, Stan might have been won round. She could have shown him the flat. Vanessa would have gone along with the act. But Stan called her bluff. He said he knew all about her mixing with the wrong crowd and he did not believe her story about the deposit. If she was in trouble she should come right out and say so. Tell him and Mum. Then, and only then, might they be able to help. She would have to come home for a while where they could keep an eye on her. In the long shelter, she told him to forget it. For the second time in her life, Suzie left the farm vowing never to return.

The abortion was successful in that the promise of self-supporting life, a living being in its own right, was reduced to a horrible vile mess, an image she forced herself to mentally dissociate from. However, there were complications. The next day, her stomach felt as if a red-hot iron had been plunged into it, and she was taken away on a stretcher in an ambulance with only a cursing Vanessa to pack her things. The sepsis was intensively overcome, but the doctor informed her of the likelihood of irreparable internal damage. He warned her that any future attempt to conceive would present a serious risk both to her own health and that of the unborn child, even if conception were at all possible, which

he firmly doubted. This was something she should know, he said, with a sternness that contained despair at her current lifestyle.

Suzie left hospital weak and lonely and internally sore and wishing she had died. She considered suicide as an option but knew she would not be able to go through with it. Some people just can't. Vanessa mixed rough sympathy with impatience, declaring that Suzie had become more trouble than she was worth.

The police, when Suzie went to see them, took her allegations of sexual abuse as a child seriously and allocated a female officer trained in such matters. The officer visited Suzie at the flat with a male colleague in order to begin building a case. Vanessa's fury, when she found out the police had been poking around, frightened Suzie. Never had she seen her flatmate, or indeed anyone, so pushing the limits. The woman shouted and hurled things across the flat. At one point she opened the door on to the wooden landing and yelled at the top of her voice into the night, informing the neighbourhood that Suzie was a fucking stupid little cow who couldn't tell her fucking fanny from her fucking gob. So much for not wishing to attract the wrong kind of attention. But Suzie was leaving anyway. The trained officer had decided that for her to give an address in court which was also suspected of being a knocking shop would be a prosecution own goal. Suzie was offered the tenancy of a council flat, which she accepted.

The case was diligently assembled over a number of weeks. During the period, Suzie heard herself confirming increasingly embellished scenarios, her contribution often reduced to a passive yes to carefully worded questions. In court, Suzie answered as instructed without remembering later what she had said, and caught the accusing gaze of people she later would not recall as having been present. She became someone else for two days, a complete stranger to herself. The accused strenuously denied the charges, saying he

had showed no more than normal affection, like any father present in the court today. The judge summed up, and the jury retired to deliberate. Eventually, and only after the increasingly irritable judge lowered the majority which the court was prepared to accept as verdict, the foreman was able to announce that a decision had been reached. A visibly shocked Raymond Stanley Earle was sentenced to five years imprisonment for cynically and systematically abusing a child under his protection for his own sexual gratification repeatedly over an extended period of time. That was all Suzie could remember.

A careers adviser at the employment exchange persuaded Suzie to take a typing and office skills course and helped her, under a government scheme, into a subsidised job at the local branch of a firm of insurance brokers. Working in an office, just as she had told Stan. The money was not much, but more than Vanessa had paid. From Mum, she learnt that Mum had obtained a divorce. From Margo, shortly after, she learnt that Mum had been admitted into hospital following a mental collapse. On Mum's discharge, a month later, Suzie caught a Saturday bus to the village.

"It's worse than we thought," said Margo when Suzie arrived. Margo was living at the farmhouse, occupying her old room, and courting a young man called James, who frequently stayed over.

"How do you mean?"

"We think an irreversible change has taken place. Mum is diagnosed as having DAT – a dementia of the Alzheimer's type," Margo informed.

"I thought Alzheimer's was what old people got."

"It is usually associated with ageing, yes. This looks like an early-onset form of the disease. We think it's triggered by emotional trauma." Suzie's furrowed brow caused her sister's voice to rise. "Shock, Suzie. As in 'allegations by daughter followed by husband sent to prison' shock, you know? As in

‘reporters from the gutter press crawling around the farmyard’ shock. The sort you wouldn’t understand, of course.”

“Reporters? Here?”

“Afraid so. Lonely farmhouse; a village off the beaten track; long winter nights; depraved sex with children. The copy writes itself.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Of course you didn’t.”

“And Mum. Will she be okay?”

“As I said, the condition is irreversible – as far as we know. There can be little hope of recovery. It calls for constant observation. It’s very likely – certain, in fact – that she will progressively deteriorate. She may get worse very suddenly at any time. There you have it.”

Suzie was not entirely sure who Margo’s ‘we’ were. Did she mean the doctors and specialists? Margo had been awarded a grant from a medical research institution to help her take a higher qualification; did this place her among the medical fraternity? Maybe ‘we’ were just Margo and this James. She asked the question Margo was waiting for.

“What’s to happen now?”

One option put to Suzie was that she should return to live at home and look after Mum while Margo pursued her career. Another was that the two sisters should live together and share the responsibility. A third would see Margo carrying on for a while, juggling Mum’s welfare with her own studies, with James helping out. A fourth option was to put Mum in a home and forget about her. What would happen to the house, if Mum went away? asked Suzie. Sold, and the money used to pay for Mum’s upkeep, was the curt reply. This, though, was not going to happen – no way. For a moment, Suzie caught the voice of the prosecution solicitor preparing the case for court. ‘Would you say that your sister has already made her mind up what she wants?’ Passive yes. ‘And would you agree that she in fact has you by the pubes?’ Yes again.

Slowly, Suzie felt she was regaining control over her life. Her job survived the end of the subsidy and she became staff. Shortly after, she was promoted to reception because of her telephone manner – the branch manager called it ‘reassuringly down to earth’. When the black guy living in the flat above hers played booming music, music which boomed all the more after she asked him to turn it down, Suzie abandoned local authority housing, moving to a self-contained flat in a large lop-sided Victorian residence off the town’s market place. The live-in landlord, Mr Tillotson, was a retired schoolteacher from down south who wrote poetry and drank cheap sherry. Mr Tillotson’s loneliness drove him sometimes to pry, and to offer unwanted opinion, but he was harmless and never suggested anything improper. Now and again she caught sight of Vanessa, though avoided speaking with her. Till one Friday evening when they met face to face in the supermarket, each pushing their trolleys from adjacent aisles.

“You never let on about your old man and you, did yeh? I read it in the paper.”

“I didn’t want to talk about it.”

“Well, some people get what’s coming to them – that’s all I can say.”

At the time, Suzie thought Vanessa was referring to Stan; but a little later, rehearing in her head the words and the tone of voice, it crossed her mind that Vanessa had been referring to her own ex-skivvy. The thought hurt. Suzie decided that a reinvention was called for. Out went all traces of the Vanessa period in a ruthless purge of clothes and cosmetics and the butcher’s trinkets. Mr Tillotson was right about a butterfly emerging from yesterday’s cocoon. This butterfly intended to fly high.

New nice girl Suzie began to spread her wings. She attended evening classes and went on day trips to get away from the town. The world was suddenly a bigger place. Life held promise like it never had before. All she needed was

Mr Right to come along. Which he did, to sit beside her on a motor coach on its way to a country and western concert.

10

As the old adage has it, misfortunes tend to come in threes. The saying does not stipulate a time frame. Su Gardeen's peculiar triplet of adverse events was delivered within a single span of forty-eight hours.

It began on a Derbyshire Saturday late morning, after a small-talk grouse concerning the issuing of bills by power utilities based on estimated usage. Such a notification had arrived in the post that morning at the farmhouse. Su said she believed utilities grossly inflate their estimates on the assumption that the indignant customer will contact them and supply the correct meter reading without the utility having to bear the cost of sending a meter reader. Margo was of the opinion that they deliberately underestimate usage by the customer so that, at a later date, the true outstanding amount can be collected at a higher tariff.

Then, from Margo:

"By the way, did the Willows contact you about Stan?"

"No. What about him?"

"He passed away last week."

A mixture of emotions hit Su. "Why didn't you let me know?"

"I assumed the care home would have done that. They have your number, don't they?"

"They do. I gave it them, in case.... Nobody rang me." Anger towards the care home; anger towards Margo. Anger towards herself. Su contained it. "Do you know when the funeral is?"

"It's already taken place."

“Has it? I see. Did you go?” Silly question.

“Ginny went. One or two others were there as well, apparently.”

“Have you told Mum?” Silly question number two.

“Mum doesn’t know. I don’t think she needs to, do you? It would only upset her.”

Stan dead and buried. Without the chance of a proper goodbye. His crackpot theories gone with him to the grave. Maybe that part was for the better.

The weekend was of the shorter kind: journey down Saturday morning, return Sunday evening. Su’s mood, on arriving back at the house overlooking the village green, was of forced pleasantness, a signal to Ellis not to ask, beyond the level of platitude, how the weekend had gone. Forced pleasantness was Su at her worst, was too-bright sunshine before an approaching storm. Ellis willed the storm to come and be over. Fee’s response to the threat was to try to please. She even let Su lead her over to the punishment frame, and for Su to secure her in it, in order to ‘carry out some adjustments’, so long as it was just for a few minutes.

But the naked girl was left in the device while Su distractedly sorted her wardrobe. Fee, whose head was locked to face the opposite end of the Chamber, called out to ask what Su was doing, and to let her out of the frame.

“It won’t do you any harm.”

“Yes it will. It hurts.”

“Good.”

“I mean it.”

“Even better.”

Presently, a Su still dressed for car travel came over to the frame.

“Look what nice Mr Postman brought us this time.”

“What?” This was meant to sound sullen, and did. “Let me out of this contraption – I don’t like it.”

“Just the thing to deal with your complaints, dearie.”

From a plain carton Su lifted a black rubber mouth gag. After methodically cleaning the whole with baby wipes, she fitted the strap over Fee's head and inserted a bulbous protuberance attached to the inner side of the gag into the girl's resisting mouth. An angry humming was accompanied by angry eyes. Su caressed the head gently for a few moments then, with her foot, nudged the carton on the floor forward for Fee to see into it. The girl's eyes held alarm as she struggled in the uncomfortable frame. Carefully, as if handling something fragile, Su raised a black whip, similar to a riding crop, from the box.

"This is for *really* naughty girls. Shall we leave it there, just to remind us?"

Su lowered the whip back into the carton and moved away to the wardrobe. She stripped completely, then took down from the shelf the strap-on penis and cleaned it. Before tugging with the penis straps, she put on the new black leather thigh boots taken from the floor of the wardrobe, and adjusted the knee cups. The penis in place, straps biting into flesh, she approached and caressed the bare buttocks held over the pine frame.

Ellis could not avoid overhearing the argument between the two women that late evening. Fee was angry. Very angry. Su, it seemed, had gone too far. Su was turning weird; losing it; there was something wrong with her; surely she could see that. Su's retort was of the 'look who's talking' variety: Fee did not have to go further than the nearest mirror to see a person who had something wrong with them. Fee should be grateful, didn't know exactly how lucky she was. And so on. The exchange took place upstairs, on the landing, while Ellis listened downstairs, standing at the door of the lounge. It was ended by a sharp slap as made by a palm across a face, and a yelp of pain. There followed the muffled sound of a brief tussle. Ellis, from the hallway, heard a breathed 'let – me – go', then the slam of a door, then silence.

Not sure what to do, Ellis returned to his favourite easy chair, flicked the remote for the television, adjusted the volume to low, and picked up the Sunday broadsheet. He did not hear Su come down the stairs. She made him start when she spoke.

“You’ll have to ring the garage tomorrow. That front wheel’s still not right. It makes a noise every time I brake.”

“Right. I will. Might be a loose brake pad.” Ellis waited for a reference to ‘Madam’ but none came. It was as if the struggle on the landing had not taken place. Su picked up the remote and increased the volume of the television. She sat, glaring glassily at the screen itself rather than taking in the image. Perhaps she was waiting for Fee to come down from her room and say how sorry she was, and to roll up on the sofa and snuggle her head into Su’s lap. Fee, though, was to disappoint. Ellis poured himself a whisky, brought Su a glass of wine. Both sat silently as they watched a late film they had seen possibly twice before. As the credits scrolled, Ellis braced the arms of the chair, ready to stand. It was well past the time for him to do his nightly rounds. But Su turned to him, and he dropped back into the chair.

“Ellis, can I ask you something – something personal?”

“I would imagine so. If it’s personal, about me, then I’m probably the best person to ask.”

“Have you ever been attracted to little girls?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know – schoolgirls, before they grow tits and scowl all the time.”

Ellis played with his empty glass. “You mean, have I any paedophile tendencies?”

“Yes, that too.”

“No. I have to say I haven’t. Not in the slightest. Why do you ask?”

“Just wondered.”

Ignoring precisely the advice he would have given to another, the advice to leave it there, he pursued the thread.

“Is it me you’re wanting to know about, or men in general?”

“No, not you. I just wanted to know what makes them do it. What they see in it.”

“I suppose we all have our drives. Little girls are probably less of an effort than big girls.”

Su threw him a glance. He stood and made for the door. But she had not finished.

“What do you think of the idea that all men are basically paedophiles? That they are naturally wired up that way, and it’s only self control that stops them from – you know.”

Ellis stopped, turned and sighed. “Not a lot, if you really want to know. I can’t see the attraction of an immature female body. Or of an immature female mind, come to that. They’re kids.” He tried to make his tone as casual as possible. “What is all this, anyway?”

“It’s something I heard. It would go a long way towards explaining people’s behaviour – if there was anything in it.”

“You think so? Which people did you have in mind?”

“No one. It doesn’t matter.”

Su liked to be at the office early on a Monday morning, an hour or so before anyone else. It gave her time to look through the previous week’s time sheets and project reports from staff in preparation for the Start of Week meeting. The morning after the false pleasantness at home, and the ensuing storm, conformed to the normal Monday pattern except that Fee had not make her yawny appearance at the breakfast table, nor had she responded when Su tapped on her door.

As the organisation that was Community Advance was brought to life by the arrival of chatting staff and the flicker of booting computer screens, Su poured a coffee from the machine and took it into the meetings room. During the half hour before Start of Week, individual members came to Su if they had an item to add to the agenda, or a matter they thought Su should be informed or consulted about. At nine-thirty each Monday morning, the meeting would be declared

under way. This Monday, there was a delay while the group waited for the arrival of Fee. But by a quarter to ten, Fee had not made an appearance. Her mobile phone was switched off, and all Ellis could offer over the house landline was that Fee had slipped out, taking her car, while he was in the shower. Su decided the fidgety meeting should start without the Opted Body Representative.

The agenda was routine in content, its course punctuated by attempts from Su to raise Fee on her mobile. When an agitated tap was heard on the door of the room, Su called out a sarcastic ‘do join us’. The door partially opened. Not Fee, but Indira – head only.

“What is it, Indira?” The receptionist would not interrupt a Start of Day without good reason.

“I think you should come.” Indira was urgent. In Su’s mind’s eye was a policeman in the foyer, the bearer of some bad news; or a sad-faced paramedic. And snatches caught of Fee, in a roadside ditch, mangled in metal; and Fee in a hospital ward, swathed in bandages, tangled in tubes. Su dashed from the room. At the reception desk stood three figures, not uniformed – at least, not in any services sense – nor garbed in medical green. There was that moment of recognition where names and contexts have yet to be retrieved from memory, though the subconscious warns instantly of a dark encounter.

“Ms Gardeen. May we talk, in private? Your office, perhaps?”

Labels rather than names arrived from the memory bank. The Granite One; the Prim One. From London. And a new one. Faces without smiles. Su led them up the stairs, extending pleasantries, noting that none were returned. When all were in her office, the New One closed the door in that special way exercised by those who have something very serious they want to say. This was a young man in a dark heavy coat doing his utmost to suppress the joys of youth. The New One opened a black boxy briefcase and took out

some papers. Su examined the face of the Granite One for any sign of the twinkle in his eye that had been there at the end of his last visit. Devoid of twinkle, the Granite One spoke.

“I’ll come straight to the point, if I may. It has come to our attention that certain transactions may have taken place in connection with the normal business of the agency which are not wholly reconcilable with the articles of its foundation.”

“And which, when cast in a certain light, might be construed as an intention to defraud,” the New One added.

The Granite One gave a sideways blink as an indication that the Young One was perhaps getting ahead of himself.

“We are here to reassure ourselves that no actual abuse has taken place. You understand, it’s our duty and responsibility to do so. I hope we can rely on your full co-operation. Su.”

Su nodded. “Please...” She indicated the chair at the overspill desk, and went through into Geri’s room for two more chairs which she dragged on their castors to the side of her desk. She sat in her own chair. The thing was to stay calm. And smile the Gardeen smile.

“What seems to be the problem?”

The Granite One let the Young One explain. “The agency acts in an advisory capacity, assisting various groups and organisations within this city and in the surrounding rural areas in their efforts to access funding from a number of sources. Is that correct?”

“It is, yes. Among lots else.”

“And the agency charges for its time?”

“In some cases it does.”

“You have a scale, then.”

“We have a scale, yes.”

“Quite.” The Young One glanced at a sheet of paper, then turned it for Su to take. “Could you confirm these figures represent an accurate application of that scale within the current period?”

In her hand, Su was holding a typed list of names of

community organisations under the heading ‘Opted to CA’. Each name was preceded by a date in abbreviated style and followed by an amount neatly tabulated beneath a monetary pound symbol. She wanted to ask the Young One from where he had obtained the information, since the agency had not yet published its figures, but held back.

“They look correct. I would have to check, of course.”

“Let’s assume for the moment the amounts are correct. There is no reason for us to believe otherwise. What we need to establish is that the organisations appearing on this list have in fact been invoiced for specific services delivered by this agency – those services being the provision of advice and direct assistance in connection with applications by the same organisations for grants and other allowances from funding authorities.”

“That’s right.” Get to the *point*.

Another sheet of paper, another list. “Would you take a look at this, please, and tell us what the contents represent?”

“Where did you get this?” *Shit!*

“Just answer the question, if you would.”

Su read the sheet, pretending to be matter of fact about its contents.

“It’s a list of invoices. Like the other.”

The Granite One had a question. “Could you tell us what the invoices are for?”

“Professional consultancy.”

“Professional consultancy from *whom*, may we know?” As he asked, the Granite One looked over to the Prim One, ever more Prim.

“From whomever is available, I suppose.” Did the ‘whomever’ sound too defensive? Was it grammatically correct?

“I see.”

A short silence followed, and Su considered pressing the intercom for refreshments to be brought up, only to decide against it. The Young One resumed the questioning.

“So, you make a distinction between advice and assistance from the agency, and professional consultancy?”

It was a question.

“Yes, sometimes. I mean, the agency deals with the paperwork and normal procedures, but occasionally a level of advice is required beyond that which the agency can provide.”

The Young One made to give way to the Granite One for the next question, but the Granite One returned a gesture for the Young One to continue.

“‘Occasionally’ is perhaps not the best description. ‘Invariably’ might be more appropriate. Wouldn’t you say?”

“We’re treading new ground all the time. The funding structures are changing rapidly. Someone has to keep on top of —”

The Young One cut her off. “And to help themselves to cream. Let me put it this way, Ms Gardeen: from the fees charged to these opted bodies as you call them, you take a percentage for yourself, wrapping it up as ‘professional consultancy’. Is that how it works?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The Granite One took over.

“I think you do, Su.”

There followed a further silence, which was broken by the ringtone of Su’s mobile. The jolly tune, a light classic selected by Ellis, was distinctly the wrong music for the circumstances. Su desperately wanted to answer it, very nearly did, but knew she would lose precious ground by doing so. She switched off the tune. Extending her arms on the desk in front of her, she clasped her hands, and scanned the faces of the three.

“I have received no complaint from any of our clients. Not one. But what I have received is a great many thanks. As far as I am able to judge, this agency carries out its affairs in full accordance with the articles of foundation. My services adviser is very competent at his job; he’s been through this with a fine toothcomb. If you,” Su threw a glare at the Young One, “believe that in a certain light there is intention to

defraud, then let's have that light switched on. Right here and now. Will I need to get my solicitor to come over?"

The Prim One spoke. She had a surprisingly deep voice.

"That won't be necessary. I'm sure we can resolve this query amongst ourselves."

"Query?" Su shouted the word, making the Prim One start. "This is more than a query. I've just been accused of fraud."

The Granite One became calmness itself. "There's no reason for anyone to get upset about this. No one's accusing anyone of fraud. I think what we're looking at is a simple misinterpretation of remit." He addressed his colleagues. "As Su has said, we're treading a lot of new ground here."

The Prim One retreated into her shell but the Young One had scented blood. "We're still waiting an explanation, Ms Gardeen —"

"I've just given you one —"

"An explanation regarding exactly towards whose pocket the fees for professional consultancy are guided."

Su felt the fight threaten to drain from her. For the lists to be in the hands of the suits, someone on the CA team must have leaked them. Only herself, Fee, Geri and Roger had access to the information. Anyone else would need to break into computer files and put the list together. Monique? – she was the one with an axe to grind. And she had had the opportunity, since working back at HQ. It had to be Monique. Su answered the Young One.

"Towards my pocket, if you want to know. I am a professional. It is my duty to offer professional help and assistance where it is required. I levy a small charge to cover essential expenses."

"Hmm." The Granite One lowered his head to meet a hand. He pressed a forefinger under his nose as if depicting a Hitler moustache. The finger left the nose and briefly wagged at the air.

"I think I see where the problem lies. You see, your contract – the contract of employment – has an exclusion clause.

Clearly articulated, if I recall. It prohibits you from working independently in a professional capacity for your own gain.”

Sensing Su was about to reply, he held his hand in a stop pose.

“I know, I know. To cover essential expenses can hardly be to gain. And that, I would say, offers us a way out of the situation.”

Su sat back in her seat. The Young One pounced for the kill.

“Does not the agency have a perfectly adequate system for reimbursing out-of-pocket expenses? All you have to do is retain and hand in the receipts. And, for essential expenses, are not these amounts,” he indicated the list still lying open on the desk as he smiled a killer’s smile, “somewhat on the excessive side? Tell me, do you travel everywhere in a chauffeured limousine with outriders?”

“All right.” The Granite One meant it as a ‘that’ll do’. “I’m sure Ms Gardeen will see to it that the system is improved, to eliminate as far as she can the possibility of a misunderstanding occurring in the future.” He looked at her, his chin high, for confirmation. She nodded. It was not enough. She gave it more.

“I will. I’ll see to it straightaway. Today – this morning.”

The Granite One smiled. “There you are. Resolution. Now, a nice cup of tea would be in order, I feel.”

Su saw the visitors go and shut herself in her office. Geri came up, asking if Su was all right and telling her that the Start of Week had gone ahead in her absence since this seemed the best thing to do. In response to Su’s only question, Geri said there had been no message from Fee. Ellis had said the same thing, during the return of the mobile call she had earlier switched off. Su wanted to be on her own at the same time that Geri wanted to stay and comfort.

After half an hour of growing restlessness, Su left the office and went for a drive. At a public park, she stopped the car

where the metalled driveway ended, and stared through the windscreen into the distance across the grass. Spits of rain distorted the view though she was not wanting to look at anything. She calculated the visit by the suits had lasted forty minutes – a very long forty minutes in which everything had changed. A movement at the right of her field of vision made her turn. A shabbily dressed man just a few feet away was staring at her, his idiot's grin displaying as many gaps as teeth, while the small dog with him defecated at the edge of the grass. She realised she was weeping. The image in the car's interior mirror was one of self-pity.

Eyes puffy but dried, she started the car and drove back to HQ. She would march in boldly and announce to the main office that there had been some confusion over the agency's invoicing procedures which had caused fluttering among Those With Nothing Better To Do, but which was now sorted. Lunchtime, however, had emptied the office except for Indira, who informed her there had been no word from Fee. Su went home.

Ellis poured her a vodka. And another. She told him of the visit by the suits; how they had played the good cop bad cop routine; how the Granite One had taken her aside to say her position did not entitle her to write her own rules. A knuckle rap was all they could do, she told Ellis. They would not want the faeces to collide with the mechanical ventilator, she said. Politically too embarrassing for them. Besides, it was no big deal. It really wasn't. The amounts were relatively small. The Granite One had agreed as much. He had told her over tea and biscuits in her office, as the other two shuffled documents from the New One's briefcase in preparation for the next hit, that the opted groups themselves were probably equally to blame for the misunderstanding. Maybe their leaders had submitted to the additional fees in the mistaken belief that payment was the only way to ensure the right words were spoken into the right ears at the right time. That sort of thing went on, did it not, even in community

development circles? The Granite One had tapped the side of his nose when delivering this rhetorical question. He was signalling to her that he knew, and that he hoped she knew he knew, what was going on, and that it had to stop. This might, the Granite One suggested, be an opportune time for her to free up any outstanding leave due to her. To take a break and to use the opportunity to reflect. Su told Ellis that, in the nicest possible way, she had been placed on temporary suspension.

Around mid-afternoon, Fee arrived home. She went from the hallway up the stairs to her room. Su and Ellis were at the kitchen breakfast bar, where they had sat since Su's own arrival home. Su, on her fourth or fifth vodka and apparently a little cheered, called a rising 'hel-lo' but got no reply. She continued her conversation with Ellis.

"Being a dyke's not all it's hyped up to be. D'you know that?"

"I wouldn't know."

"You don't *have* to be a rampant lesbian in order to be an effective community development worker."

"I'm sure that's true."

"It comes with the territory."

"It's a conscious choice. Surely." Ellis emphasised the word in the way Fee normally did. They both laughed. He followed through.

"You thinking of reverting?"

"I may have to. I don't seem to cut it any more with the fillies. Maybe I'm too butch. What d'you think?"

"How can I know how strong you come on?"

"By installing a video link to watch the Su and Fee show. That's how."

Su drained her tumbler. Ellis moved to refill it but she put her hand over the top.

"Better go and make my peace with Madam."

But peace was not to be made. Fee informed Su, at her

bedroom door, that it was all over and she was leaving. Her mind was made up; there was nothing to talk about. Ellis listened from the bottom of the stairs as best he could. He had switched on the dishwasher in the kitchen to give the impression he was busy there. He heard Su tell Fee she couldn't leave, and Fee's 'Just watch me!' Su demanded to know where Fee was going to stay but Ellis's eavesdropping was cut short when Su entered Fee's room and closed the door behind her. A short period of raised voices followed, though he could not distinguish words. He considered creeping up the stairs but decided against it. Too dangerous – besides, was he that interested? Su came down a few minutes later and rejoined him at the breakfast bar.

"I'll have that drink now. What a day this is turning out to be."

Ellis poured another vodka and said nothing. Su drank some, then studied the remainder.

"She's fleeing the nest."

"She'll soon be back."

"That's what I told her."

"Where's she going?"

"Didn't say. Amy's, I would imagine. Where else could she go? A taxi's coming for her – she's given me the car back. Quit her job. The letter of resignation's in the post, so she tells me."

Su emptied her glass. Ellis hesitated over a refill but relented before screwing the cap tightly and pushing the bottle away. The landline rang. Su grimaced.

"My fan club. Answer it, will you. Tell them I'm not here."

"I've been telling them that since lunchtime."

"I don't want to speak to anybody right now. Pass me that bottle – all I want is to get plastered, and the world can go screw itself for all I care. Tell 'em that, will you?"

Ellis informed the caller, an anxious Geri, that he would pass the message on. Su would be in contact later – probably tomorrow, now. It occurred to him that Geri might not know

the true nature of the morning's outcome. The front door bell chimed. It gave him the chance to end the conversation. He answered the door to a denim-capped man in a denim jacket and jeans.

“Cab for Kemp-Davies.”

Fee had heard the chime and was struggling down the stairs with a suitcase and a cloth bag. She told the driver, who took the case from her, there was more. Without speaking, Ellis helped bring other bags and a couple of taped up supermarket cartons from the door of her room. The driver of the private hire car, a roomy estate, sensed the mood: after a comment that Ellis failed to catch, the all-denim man entered a seamless sequence in which he packed the luggage, slammed down the tailgate, climbed in behind the wheel, reached across the passenger seat, pushed the door open for his fare. Fee gave a muted eye-avoiding ‘thank you’ to Ellis before climbing in, pulling shut the door, tugging the safety belt over her chest. She said something to the driver, who nodded. The car crept out of the drive and accelerated away from the house overlooking the village green. Ellis watched after it, even when it was gone.

By the early evening, Su had fallen asleep on the long sofa in the lounge, open mouthed and snoring loudly. Ellis thought about carrying her upstairs but, given Su's bulk, judged it too perilous. Besides, the door to the Chamber would be locked, as it was during the day, to prevent delivery men or workmen blundering into the room by mistake, and the key could be anywhere. He climbed the stairs and rummaged around Fee's room, looking for nothing in particular, finding nothing in particular. Fee had left it as a guest might: neatly made bed; drawers and wardrobe emptied; full liner bag in the waste paper basket, tied at the top and waiting to be taken out. The only personal evidence of Fee's occupancy was the lingering fragrance of her deodorant, and a poster on the wall. *Christians awake!* Outlines of figures kneeling at the foot of an

outlined crucifixion – a scene in cream against a background of dark blue, with red lettering edged in gold. Crude; an art style borrowed from the totalitarian propagandist school; but undeniably eye-catching. Ellis reached out to a crumpled corner of the poster. An attempt had been made to remove the adhesive pad from the wall. He tried to smooth the ruck, but the paper had stretched. From his trouser pocket he brought out a comb and inserted it behind the poster, near the pad, and gave the comb a gentle twist. This was repeated for the other corners. Despite his care, the operation tore at the underlying wall covering, leaving small jagged exfoliations. He folded the poster in half, and again, before lifting from the waste basket the filled liner and taking the last visible vestiges of Fee down to the swing bin in the kitchen.

The phone rang, as it had while he had been upstairs, and once more he let the answering machine record the call. He searched the hall and kitchen for the key to Fee's car, parked untidily in the yard. Eventually, he found the key – in the vehicle's ignition. He put the car away in the garage, and Su's too. Returning to the house, his plan was to carry out a few household chores before settling with a glass of single malt to watch television. He would then rouse Su, help her upstairs to bed, and himself retire to read a few more pages of a three-volume copy of *Capital* bought from a second-hand bookstall at an open market in the city. An eventful day deserved a tranquil end.

* * * * *

The double-fronted house overlooking the village green was behind her now, in terms of experience, and a home of a very different architectural style stood before her, physically. It was reached through tall opened gates and down a steeply inclined hairpin drive which must be hell to get up in winter. At the bottom of the drive, the visitor entered an extensive rectangular courtyard paved in an attractive Meso-American

design of brown and honey setts which stretched between the house and a row of what could have been stables but were garages. Doors to two of the bays were open. One unit was empty; the other housed a gleaming classic sports car. At its far end, the courtyard was walled except for a wrought single gate which led to a terraced garden beyond the wall, and to a stunning view of half the county.

The house itself was long rather than wide, its front door set in a position that might have defined it as a side entrance had it not been for an imposing portico. A flat roof, and large metal-framed windows surrounded by smooth white surfaces gracefully epitomised the Art Deco movement. There was nothing to indicate to the uninformed first time visitor the dual character of the property. Beyond the courtyard, past the garden wall, the house gained another storey, the additional floor appearing under the assumed ground floor since the entire structure was built into a hillside. This end of the house was finished in timber cladding, chalet style. A roofed L-shaped balcony extended over the gardens along one arm, and adventurously over a precipitous drop to woodland on the other. Fee, though, knew of the house's Alpinesque aspect.

She had sat out on the balcony, drinking iced pure fruit juice, listening, answering questions, and joining in prayers. Praying was regular practice in this villa built into the hillside. Every activity, every intention, every new thought was blessed by a prayer. At first, she had not been sure what to do when the host suddenly closed his eyes and become completely motionless, his lips pressed tight together, remaining that way for several minutes to then resume the conversation as if there had been no break. It was as if he had been switched off, then back on again. Soon, she would follow his example, this seeming the most sensible course of action, and the one expected of her. Very quickly, she was able to synchronise her own return to the temporal world with his; this pleased her and she took it as a sign of being suited for the spiritual path

that lay before her.

Her host had been Dominic – just Dominic: he insisted that his role of being merely a messenger of the Lord precluded him from taking a formal title. Fee did not know his surname – he never gave it. Cheques of donation were made out to the Church of the Message of God. Dominic’s modernist hillside house was an operational extension of the single-roomed Grosvenor Rooms. More than an extension: a place of higher worship. To be invited here, to sit out on the balcony and drink iced pure fruit juice, was to know you were accepted. To be given the chance to listen to Dominic, who – between stops for prayer – would patiently explain the true meaning of the Lord’s work in a voice that was both soft and deep and made you feel special, was to enter into a beautiful state. Fee fancied the balcony, with its commanding view of all that lay below, might be modelled on Heaven.

The taxi stopped and the driver unloaded the luggage as Dominic, standing under the portico, welcomed Fee into his home as a priest might a troubled parishioner. Fee paid the driver who turned his car which paused for a moment in front of the classic sports car before setting off with diesel determination up the slope of the drive. Dominic showed her to a room which, he said, would be hers for as long as she wanted. It looked across the courtyard to the garages and, while more spacious than the bedroom she had left behind, it possessed the impersonal quality of a hostel. She opened the top light of the window and lay on the bed, Dominic having excused himself to attend to ‘matters of the faith’. She would be safe here, he had assured her. Safe and protected.

A noise awoke her. Not a loud noise, just an unfamiliar one. Rising from the bed, she went over to the window. A man, Dominic’s handyman Louis, had brought out the big modern Bentley from one of the garage bays. As she gazed out, Dominic appeared from the direction of the house and walked over to Louis, saying something to him, patting him

on the shoulder. Dominic then caught her window and waved. She pulled back into the room, then told herself not to be silly and moved forward to wave back. Her smiling host gestured to the watch on his wrist; the action was followed by an exaggerated circular motion of the hand at his stomach, then seven fingers held spaced and erect at shoulder height. She glanced at her own watch and was surprised at how the afternoon had disappeared.

She had expected to sit down just with Dominic at the dinner table since the impression gained was that there was no one else at the house, apart from Louis. Not so. Three others were present, chatting, looking up as she entered. One a woman, perhaps in her forties, in a gypsy-style dress. One a younger woman, nearer in age and appearance to herself. One a young man whose face was remarkably clean shaven, like a girl's. The three fell silent as Dominic made introductions, and offered up a prayer for Fee, their new faith-sister. As she sat down with them, a further prayer was offered for the food of which they were about to partake. The others showed a friendly curiosity, asking questions, wanting to know about her. Soup was served by a small chubby woman in a black skirt and blouse with white apron who appeared seemingly from nowhere pushing a small trolley and fixing a smile. In the absence of introduction, Fee assumed the woman to be part of a catering service.

Fee learned a little about the others. The woman in the gypsy dress had once been headteacher of a comprehensive school; the younger woman had been something in television; and the man said he was from a family of faded aristocrats. When he described himself as an escapee, Dominic insisted they all had broken free of earthly mundanity to follow their inner imperative. Each of them was a most noble seeker after the truth and for this, the Lord's gift, they should now pray.

They talked at length about the Lord and His Works, about the constant temptation from outside. The ex-headteacher praised the selfless energy of Dominic, an inspired leader

whom the Lord had sent to point the way, to which Dominic replied that he was entirely a mortal expression of the greater will. They carried on talking even when the small chubby woman whispered in Dominic's ear and he got up to follow her out of the room. Fee was enjoying herself: here, among these new friends, she was free – free to be Fee. Su would soon be just a memory. She could hear Su's voice in her head. An angry voice, a voice raised such that the others were also hearing it. Su wasn't in her head – Su was at the front door. Fee left the table and hurried along the corridor to the building's entrance.

Su was standing directly beneath a powerful light recessed into the underside of the portico, like she was a special artefact at an exhibition. Standing, and swaying – the stridency of her tone confirming she was the worse for drink.

“Oh there you are, Madam.”

“Su? How did you know...?”

“Collect your things. It's time to say thank you and goodnight.”

“But...”

Dominic faced up to adversity.

“Fiona is staying here, as my guest.”

“Let's get this straight – ‘Fiona’ is coming home with me.”

Fee caught a reflection from the lamps of the courtyard and, peering out, saw Su's car move, very slowly, Ellis at the wheel, the driver's window down. He returned her look and gave what may have been a shrug of helplessness. Dominic stepped out under the light in front of Su. His voice was soft, firm, clear – a leader's voice.

“Fiona remains here. I am asking you to leave. If you decline, you are committing a wilful act of trespass.”

Su to Fee:

“You, get in that car! Now!”

Dominic produced a mobile phone and dabbed at the keypad.

“You had your warning. I am now calling the police.”

“You can call who you bloody well like – that child is not staying under your roof a minute longer.”

As Dominic turned away to speak into the instrument, Fee replaced him to stand before Su.

“I’m not coming with you, Su. I’m not going back. It’s over.”

“You’re bloody right it’s over – your little escapade.”

Ellis was out of the car and behind Su, gently touching at her elbow.

“I think you’re wasting your time. Come on.”

Su’s nostrils flared at the advice as she continued to face Fee.

“This guy’s set you up – can’t you see? He’s a fraudster. He just wants your cheques signed and your knickers down.”

Fee no longer feared Su. There was no need to.

“He’s already given me more than you ever did, Su. A lot more.”

“Look – !” Su threw out an arm to signify the property and had to catch her balance, “It’s all *your* money! You and the fools like you.”

Behind her, Fee could feel the presence of the others from the dining table. Their arrival fuelled Su.

“He’s peddling God and you’ve all fallen for it. Can’t you see?”

Dominic had finished his call. Ellis placed his hands on Su’s shoulders.

“Come on,” he repeated, a whisper.

“I’m all right. I’m...” For a moment, she was ready to give up. Then, revitalised:

“I came here for *her*, and I’m not going to leave without her. Okay?”

The young man with the clean-shaven face stepped forward. In the strong light he looked plastic. He approached Su, his smooth flawless features a contrast to Su’s angered flush.

“I urge you – go home. Nothing can come of this.”

“Not without her.”

Fee again:

“I told you, I’m never going back. I don’t want to see you again. Ever. You can’t know how much I mean that.”

A pause, then a kinder note.

“Take care of yourself, Su.”

With that said, Fee turned and walked calmly away down the corridor. Su tried to follow but bodies blocked her way. She allowed Ellis to lead her to the car, which he then drove away, up the steep incline of the drive, watched by the small group, who followed the motion with their heads in silent unison from under the bright light of the imposing portico, and a silhouetted Fee standing at the window of her room.

Su was determined to not let the events of Black Monday impinge on her heroic project. 'Black Monday' was her own immediate reference, one she acknowledged lacked originality, though it stated the fact; 'impinge' and 'heroic project' was probably language borrowed from Ellis, though he wouldn't mind. Actually, Ellis was being most supportive – being there when she wanted to talk while making himself scarce whenever he sensed she wished to be alone. Ellis was the one person she could always depend on, yeh?

She had thought Fee dependable, had she not? Well, Fee was gone. Outwardly, Su sustained the lines that 'Madam will soon get bored' and 'she'll be back when they've taken her last penny and thrown her out'; but, deep down, she didn't believe any of it. For weeks, she had sensed an ominous change of mood in Fee, like the charged air that is said to precede an earthquake, and had caught the momentary sharp cold looks in Fee's blue eyes, glints she now acknowledged as accusation or even loathing. Fee had moved on, in every way. It was best to forget about Fee, something that Su reckoned was probably going to be quite easy. Love had not been the driver of the relationship, but power. That's right: power over another individual. Su recognised herself as not a woman scorned but a mistress disobeyed. And the anger from being disobeyed, especially in front of others, was ultimately far greater than being deserted. Were Fee to return, which she wasn't going to, would any punishment ever be enough?

With the resolution generated by the slamming down of an emotional shutter, and a quick snifter of vodka, Su went into the office. Things were rattling alone just fine, according to Geri, from the boss's chair. Geri was putting on weight; this

and a crisply tailored trouser suit made her appear uncannily similar to the leader she was standing in for. Yes, everything was under control, agreed Roger, whose delay before replying might have been a fraction too long. No problems this end, Indira told her, in the sometimes haughty manner that ethnics have when they sense a moral advantage. Coping the best we can, replied an unsmiling Monique, who was apparently tying up loose ends left by Fee. Su, having wandered around the entire premises, feeling like a royal personage visiting a factory whose product is yet to be explained, made her way back to her own office where, with a coffee from the dispenser, she sat at the overspill desk, facing Geri.

“You all seem to be doing very well without me.”

“You’re on vacation, Su. We manage, like we always do when you’re not here. Why should this time be any different?”

“You know why this time is different.”

Geri put down her pen and placed her arms on the desk, hands clasped, Su fashion.

“Look, the suits had a word. With me and Roger, no one else. It goes no farther. They have the highest regard for you, if you want to know. In a couple of weeks you’ll be back and nothing happened – right? In the meantime, the show must go on, as they say.”

“Why are they so starchy, then, in the main office?”

Geri gave a dismissive laugh.

“They’re not starchy. That’s the Fee factor, nothing else. They know you’ve ditched her. That’s all.”

“Ditched her?”

“They caught a rumour that Fee was seeing someone else – a guy. That’s right, isn’t it?”

Su sighed to give herself thinking time.

“So the secret’s out, is it?”

“Fraid so. I have her letter of resignation, somewhere...”

Geri ran her hand across documents laid out on the desk till she found the handwritten notification. “It arrived in the

post. ‘...and I have therefore decided to tender my resignation for personal reasons’. Here, read it yourself.” She handed it to Su, who took hold of it to glance over the loopy blue contents.

“I know what it says. I practically dictated it.”

“There you are, then. Today, it’s the buzz of the office. Tomorrow, the attention will be on someone else’s love nest woes.”

Su smiled. Geri stood up and went round the desks to her.

“Go and enjoy your break. Go away for a few days. Forget the suits – like you said, they have to invent something to do. I’m sorry about the Fee thing, but it’s happened to us all, at some time or other. Why d’you think I choose to stay permanently non-repeatable? I can’t be doing with the heartache.”

Su was also standing. They hugged, arms round each other’s shoulders.

“Thanks, Geri. Keep the seat warm for me.” Backing away, a happier Su gave a Schwarzenegger impression. “I’ll be back.”

Ellis wanted to discuss money. Under the present circumstances, he urged, perhaps the proposed kitchen extension should be postponed. Su disagreed. Postponement would signify a lack of trust in the future. Create the need to earn, and the earning will happen, she told him. The philosophy of saving till you can afford never produces the necessary urgency. Ellis gave a low grunt; he had a name for this – he called it Gardeenomics.

Su knew privately he had a point. Aunt Doris’s legacy, a close-run thing between our Suzie and the cats, was all but used up. Stan’s bequest was hardly likely to go beyond loose change and some dirty books. Ellis was against the raising of a bank loan to pay for the extension; though, according to the principles of Gardeenomics, it was the obvious thing to do – even in the present situation. Especially in the present situation. She brought the conversation to a stinging close by

reminding him it was her house, her money, her extension, her decision. It was, she snapped without meaning to snap, as simple as that.

Two evenings later, they were waiting for the builder to come round and present his estimate for the work. It was a bad time for Lucy Grainger to make an unplanned visit. As far as Ellis could recollect, Lucy did not make unplanned visits – not to this house. She looked distinctly odd: happy-go-lucky Lucy wasn't being happy-go-lucky. She was trembling; she was pale. Her voice put her on the edge of some kind of hysteria. Su sat her down and spoke to calm her while Ellis produced a bottle and three glasses. It seemed Lucy had left a house where Simon had ranted and raved at the police as they tore the place apart, and had then been arrested and taken away.

Su coaxed for the full story. Lucy tried to oblige. The police had arrived without warning, a van load of them – well, there must have been four or five. The officer in charge waved a piece of paper and they poured into the house. Simon, the officer informed them, was suspected of distributing images and printed matter of a sexual nature depicting young children. The address was suspected of being part of a network.

Within seconds, a whoop of predatory excitement had come from one of the uniforms on discovering the drop-ladder leading to the enormous boarded loft of the Grainger bungalow. Down came the ladder, up went policemen. Then, after a series of clumsy thuds, a disappointed shout from the hatch to say there was nothing but a train set. The only evidence they found up there was that of years of fine attention to the reproduction – in 00 scale – of Kings Cross Station circa 1930s, and one of the largest collections in the county, in running model form, of what the London & North Eastern Railway from that golden age of steam could boast in terms of motive power and rolling stock. The police would not of course possess an eye for the historical detail, nor did

Lucy relate any in the telling, but Ellis had once been invited into the loft and he was able to appreciate the scene beheld by the police. Kings Cross in intricate miniature was the only thing he would ever like about Simon.

Apparently, the police became impatient with Simon, and Simon became furious with the police about the vandalism they were causing. When, in searching through the bookshelves of the lounge, the police turned deliberately careless, Simon lost it altogether. To save an ugly situation getting worse, and to avoid damage to their home, Lucy told the police where to look.

Su and Ellis exchanged glances.

“You – you told them? How...? I mean...” Su’s confusion was genuine.

Lucy sobbed. “I didn’t *know*.” The mournful delivery explained nothing.

For a second time, the doorbell rang. Ellis directed the builder, dressed in smart casuals and carrying a rolled plan, into the reception room across the hall. The sound of sobbing drifted from the lounge.

“It’s a friend – a little trouble on the home front, I think,” Ellis said quietly. The builder offered to come back another time if more convenient.

“No, no. It’s all right. I’ll go through the figures with you. Just let me get my calculator.”

A little later, Su looked into the room where the men were pouring over costings, to say she was taking Lucy home and she’d be back to join them soon. She did not return and the builder left. It was past midnight when the telephone rang. Ellis expected Su asking to be picked up: she had driven Lucy’s car. But Su said she was going to stay the night with Lucy.

“I can’t leave her – she’s suicidal.”

“Lucy? Suicidal? Lucy in the sky with diamonds?”

“It’s a long story. When’s the builder coming back?”

Ellis could hear the vodka on Su's breath.

"It's all sorted. Saved you two-and-a-half grand. If we go for the sandstone instead of the —"

"It's not all sorted, Ellis. I want to see him myself. We're going for what I said." Ellis heard an indistinct sound, then: "Oh, I knew I couldn't leave you to do it. Get him back, tomorrow night."

"But —"

"*Tomorrow night!* You heard me." The line was cut. Ellis slowly replaced the receiver.

The two-and-a-half thousand pounds trimmed by Ellis was returned to the builder's estimate, and a further thousand added. Ellis listened as Su was ready prey to the builder's sucking teeth.

"Of course, we could get away with what Mr Gardeen said instead of what you really wanted. Just about, I suppose. At a pinch, maybe."

Or:

"If that's too rich there's always the cheaper alternative. Does the same job, so they say. Though I've never risked it myself."

The builder had been in no doubt about who wore the trousers. He knew the trousers' weak points. And, perhaps in response to being messed about, he prised at those weak points. He left with a smile and a deposit to confirm his engagement. Ellis brooded while Su poured herself a drink; he wanted to know, desperately wanted to ask, about Lucy and Simon, but refrained from doing so.

He was angry with himself for wanting to know. Whether Simon had been into kiddy porn should not be of any interest to him. Simon was a boor of the first order but he didn't come across as pervy. Also, Simon had made it big and must tread on plenty of toes. Maybe an aggrieved competitor had authored spiteful talk. But malevolent whispering alone would not materialise into a van load of police arriving to turn the

home upside down.

Finally, he had to ask.

“Do you believe the charge against Simon?”

“He hasn’t been charged with anything, as far as I’m aware. He’s ‘helping with enquiries’, last I heard.”

Ellis was already regretting the capitulation to curiosity.

“Do you think there is any substance in the allegations?”

“Allegations of what?”

“Possession of child pornography. Seeking gratification from child abuse, I suppose.”

Su put down her glass – not a good sign.

“Child abuse? Shall I tell you what child abuse is? Do you really want to know? Child abuse is what happens out there, on every crummy council estate in the land. Child abuse is parents who smoke, who fill the home and young lungs with cancer. It’s not caring whether your kids are at school or sat in an underpass sniffing from a bag. It’s not having any books in the house. It’s not taking your kids anywhere special. It’s calling them fucking little cunts to their face when they knock over your can of beer. Child abuse is what chavs everywhere do to their kids. Can’t you see, it’s what they call *normal*.”

Ellis opted for caution.

“I’ll go along with that, certainly. Never a truer analysis. It’s ironic how the estate class will dramatically defend their children against all accusations and perceived threats from outside while in the home they perpetuate a culture which thwarts in every way the life opportunities of the very same young.”

Then tried for bolder.

“But that does not answer the question about Simon. Simon isn’t a chav. He’s a middle-class success story. What makes a man do these things? Sexual frustration, perhaps.”

Su finished her drink. She looked suddenly older than her years.

“We don’t know that he did, do we? Personally, I can’t see it.” She poured herself a refill while Ellis replied.

“I’ve always thought Lucy and Simon have a happy life together. They’re made for one another.”

“They *are* made for one another.”

“Odd they’ve never had children.”

“That’s for medical reasons, Ellis. None of your business. Some woman can’t have children. Some men can’t.” Su half emptied the glass in one swallow.

“They hate me. Do you know that?”

“Lucy and Simon? I don’t think so.”

“Not *them*. At the office. They’re all enjoying this. I can tell.”

“I don’t think that, either.”

The drink threatened to spill as she used the arm of the hand that held it to emphasise her point.

“How the hell would you know? You don’t work there. You don’t know them like I do. They’ve been waiting for this.”

Ellis half expected the glass to be projected towards him, or at least across the room. Instead, it was saved and refilled. He wanted to end the conversation, to go to bed, but believed Su might see the move as an admission of defeat. It would not help to hand her victory in drink. His voice was rebellious:

“Well, why don’t you go and ask them? To their faces. Then you’ll know.”

“Don’t worry. I will.”

And so she did. The next day. Never one to suffer hangover, Su rose early, dressed for power, and left the house with purpose. Geri displayed no surprise as the office door opened without a warning knock.

“You just can’t stay away, can you?” was the breezy welcome.

“Having my knuckles rapped doesn’t mean I can’t keep up to speed.”

“Su, you’re not having your knuckles rapped. The suits are simply miffed because they didn’t think of the wheeze themselves.”

The term ‘wheeze’ jarred with Su, but she let it go. It was

sufficient to know that Geri thought of the situation in that light. In the inner office, they would no doubt be talking about Su's little fiddle, Su's cooking of the books. She made herself sound casual.

"Any problems? Anything I should know about?"

"Well, there is one thing that isn't going to please you."

"Only one?"

Geri fished about for the letter. "The over-fifties volunteer initiative has been given the boot."

"What?"

Su reached out for and read the curt text.

"Shit! After all the effort..."

She skimmed the letter on to the desk. A smile of comfort from Geri.

"Don't let it get to you. It's something off our back."

Su wanted it to get to her.

"What about the funding?"

"There's plenty of other initiatives. One a day, by my reckoning."

"Yes, but they don't all pay so well, do they?"

An anxious look from Geri.

"Er – neither did this one, actually."

"What do you mean?"

"The really bad news is that the last payment, the one we were told to expect, isn't going to happen. I rang to gee them up, and they said to forget it, now the scheme is dead. They can do that – and they did."

"Double shit. We spent the money."

Moving down the corridor, Su walked in on Roger as she had Geri. His welcome was almost a repeat of Geri's. Dependable Roger had the detail on the dropped initiative.

"Audit Commission's to blame, by the looks. They say we community toilers have been inflating the figures, just to please. As if we'd do that. It's worse for some poor sloggers: all the regional managers given their marching orders, a

hundred animators gone.”

“Animators?”

“Government-speak. An animator is a wet-behind-the-ears bureaucrat sent out to tell professionals at the coal face to change what works. They’re specially trained not to do any listening.”

Su could smell perfume – not hers, a more come-and-get-me fragrance. She had remained standing since entering the room; it was a couple of steps to a walk-in cupboard; taking the steps she opened the door of the cupboard; and looked in at shelves of stationery. What was she expecting to find? She closed the door and turned back to Roger, who was watching her.

“We didn’t have one these animator types come here, did we?”

“No. You had some top brass to see you, remember?”

“Yeah. Going on about my spending habits. Like everyone does.”

Roger adopted his eager-to-please voice.

“There cannot be a single word against how you implemented the actual drive. You played it by the book. You always do.”

“For what good it does me.” Su said this quietly, to herself; nonetheless, Roger stood up in response and moved towards her as if to embrace.

“Su, we’re all of us behind you. One hundred per cent. You have to believe that. Community Advance would be nothing without you. We ride the waves with you.”

A grunt from Su. “I’m not so sure.”

“What do you mean by that?”

She crossed the room to the window and looked out. It had started to rain: heavy drops bursting and running down the glass in jerky trickles. The Willows care home flashed into her mind – the first visit.

“A PA who is more boss than the boss herself. An office where conversation thrives on the boss’s troubles.”

Roger laughed – a deliberate, loud guffaw. Su turned to see him also turn, towering towards her, his arms spread in an operatic gesture of incredulity. Momentarily, she felt alarm.

“Su Gardeen. You are truly amazing.” He was almost shouting though had stopped his advance. “Geri worships you. She worships the very ground you walk on, the very seat you sit on. She wants so hard to please that she tries to *be* you. She’s not after your job, if that’s what you’re thinking. No way. As for the ‘office’, as you call your most loyal supporters – of course, you’re the topic of their conversation. That’s your fan club out there.”

“I hardly think Monique is a member of this fan club you imagine.”

“Monique? She’s leaving.”

“Is she?”

“Yes. She came to see me. She’s decided to move on, to seek pastures new and incidentally well away from here. It doesn’t matter about Monique – the others are with you all the way.”

Roger returned to the chair side of the desk and sat. Su stayed by the window, leaning back against the radiator.

“And you. What about you? What do you think of me?”

“What do I think? Of you?” He searched for the words. “Well, I would not want things to be any different – between you and me – from what they are, Su. You gave me a second chance, careerwise and relationshipwise, when I was bent on male mid-life self-destruction. I owe you.” He grinned. “You can be a pain in the arse, sometimes. I have to say. Demanding, overbearing, opinionated – the perfect leader, no less. I love you, Su Gardeen.”

A smile came to Su’s lips; she realised she hadn’t smiled, not spontaneously, since before Black Monday. Then serious again.

“Monique. Was it Monique who dropped the word to the suits, about – you know...?”

Roger looked up.

“N-not Monique. I don’t think so. Her war is with the system, the ideology, the philosophy, not you. Monique’s —”

“Who, then? Someone made sure the suits knew about the — Geri calls it a wheeze.”

He was standing once again, studying her.

“I think you should look a little closer to home for that one.”

“Home?”

“Home home. As it used to be, that is.”

There was a pause while Su pretended Roger’s suggestion did not come as a surprise, a shock. Roger tried to reduce the impact of his accusation.

“I don’t think it was personal.”

“Oh, what do you think it was then?” She pushed herself from the radiator. Roger once more came round from his side of the desk.

“Protection of the client base. You gave her the groups to woo and win over. She did exactly that. My guess is some of them won her over, too.”

“And she didn’t like the thought of them being screwed more than they needed to be.”

“Your words, Su. No one else’s.”

They were facing each other. Roger continued.

“It was the only thing she ever did well — representing the opted bodies. She took it seriously, you know. Too seriously, it would seem. We should never let the job get the better of us.”

Su emitted a deep sigh. She angled her arms behind her, and stretched back wrists and fingers till they hurt. Her next action was one she had never contemplated as likely. She reached out and up to Roger, and kissed him on the cheek — a peck.

“Thanks, Roj.”

When Su had been advised, by the Granite One on Black Monday, to take some leave, she had no precedent to follow

regarding the length of time this should occupy in order for it to demonstrate true penitence. It was not a formal suspension; no reprimand had been recorded. The poverty industry looks after its own, and the Granite One had made his suggestion with only the best paternal intention. Su was a community development darling, wasn't she? She knew the battle plan, had helped draw it up. Just a gentle hand to steady her, to nudge her back on course – that's all the Granite One meant. No real harm done.

But a third week of enforced reflection was surely enough for anyone. She was going up the wall. It was like house arrest. The builder brought a couple of his men and some equipment on site, though no sooner had they dug a rectangle out of the yard and started removing a corner of the lawn than she was getting in their way.

"We'll be needing only the one foreman on this job," the builder told her, wrapping a plea in a joke.

She wanted to get back to the office before the daily churn of a cement mixer would raw her nerves, and before dust covered everything. Ellis could deal with the mess. He owed her that. His support through the hours, days, weeks of anguish had come with a request attached. That book of his was almost ready. Self-publication, he declared, was the way forward. No mainstream publisher would be interested in a text on social justice – they were right in their 'thanks but no thanks' responses to his letters of enquiry and synopses. However, commercial return was not the object of a book of this nature. It was the message that mattered. She had asked him, sourly, what the message was this time. Social justice, he had replied, can come not from any struggle put up by the estate class but only by influencing middle-class attitudes. The middle class alone are responsible for generating the very poverty they despise and fear. And so on.

Self-publication costs the author. Costs the author's keeper. She had retorted that it was fine he should have a go at her about putting off or cutting back on the extension, then bring

the talk around to wanting some money to publish a book that criticised her calling. The calling that fed him, kept him in clothes. And so on.

In other circumstances she would have said no, as in no. This book – how many years in the writing? – was a waste of tree. It wouldn't make the slightest bit of difference to anything except the Gardeen bank balance. Hadn't Ellis lectured her, when she had been lecturable, on how society bends to the least resistant shape? Society has the poor because it suits society to have the poor. The greater good of the greater number. She thought back to the previous Ellis, an Ellis she had accepted as clever. He had not stopped being clever, but he had become one of life's losers. There is no room in the real world for a clever loser; less in fact than there is for an unclever one. The clever loser always imagines his position at the bottom of the toilet bowl is the result of being misunderstood by the inferior intellect that surrounds him. One day the world will wise up and take notice. Yeah, yeah, like it's going to. That's why Ellis the great social reformer cooks the meals and cleans house and tactfully conveys her latest change of mind to the builder.

She had not said no. She had not yet said yes. Maybe she owed him, as he owed her. Not just for the loyalty he showed – the 'living in a house overlooking the village green' loyalty, a loyalty in return for a fake status he did not have to earn himself. Any loser would find that sort of loyalty. No, it was something else she owed him for.

There had been a row followed by vodka. Maybe there had been vodka followed by a row. Or, vodka following a row following wine. The combination was forgotten as was the cause of the row. Rows during the three weeks of enforced reflection tended to be like that: the original subject lost from memory sometimes during the very row itself. It didn't matter.

Ellis had been visibly angry. She had provoked him, made

him angry. Maybe she had wanted to find the edge. His anger signified her victory – surely. But after victory she realised there was nothing more to be had. The row had blown itself out and now only the debris was left, to be swilled away by more vodka.

The little girl in her found voice.

“Ellis, I’m worried.”

Ellis let her be worried.

“No – honestly, I am.”

She had the stage to herself.

“I – I’ve never told you before. My mother has Alzheimer’s.”

A moody pause. He broke the silence.

“I know. You have told me before. More than once. Remember?”

She could not remember. She did remember. That was not what she meant.

“That was not what I meant.”

He was waiting. Maybe he wasn’t.

“She suffers from a particular kind of Alzheimer’s.”

Maybe he was waiting.

“It’s brought on prematurely, by shock – trauma. A bad happening. Like a trigger. It’s triggered by a shock. That’s what they say.”

“Who say?”

“The doctors, the consultants, the specialists, the experts.”

“They’re the people who know.”

He was trying to avoid her eyes. She removed her glasses so her eyes would not seem so big and aggressive.

“Well, it runs in the family, you see. There was a cousin of my mother’s who... A female cousin. And my mother’s mother.”

With the glasses removed, he would see her unplanned tears.

“It’s there, Ellis. It’s in the family. The female line.”

He did see her unplanned tears. Maybe they were planned.

“What are you saying? Your sister’s fine, isn’t she?”

“There’s nothing wrong with Margo. Nothing wrong with her. But I’m worried that...”

She had his full attention.

“I’m worried that the shock of – everything, might start it off. You know? Just recently, I sometimes forget things. Little things. The silliest things. What if it’s come down to me?”

His full attention. She dabbed at a trickle on her cheek. Her words came out as an ooze of anguish.

“What should I do?”

She waited for the comforting gesture, the metaphorical if perhaps not physical arm around the shoulder, the ‘there, there’ moment. There was no comforting gesture. Instead, Ellis was out of his chair and moving away. She could see his shape through the tears and myopia. He returned, and stood over her.

“You think you’ve got Alzheimer’s, do you?”

A tearful nod.

“You’re pitiful, Su. You really are. You’ve got nothing of the sort.”

She could feel the flood break in her eyes.

“You have *not got* Alzheimer’s, and you mock those that have.”

“What do you mean...?”

She was blubbering. Su Gardeen reduced to blubbering.

“My god. It doesn’t take an expert to say what’s wrong with you.”

Again, he moved away. She could see his shape. He turned. He came close, to stand above her. And was very loud.

“Su, you haven’t got Alzheimer’s – you’ve got alcohol. And you’re so damned pitiful. You spend your life abusing others and now you abuse yourself. Look at yourself – go on. You’re a bloody disgrace.”

He moved away. She saw no shape. He did not come back.

Ellis's cold blade did the trick. Not there and then, of course. The night was one long wretch and cough of self-pity. Why had everyone – Fee, even Ellis – turned against her? With no worth, no self-esteem, how could she go on? What was the point of existence? She was filthy, a drunk, a thief, perverted – evil. She had lost everything. She destroyed everything. There was nothing to live for, no light, no hope.

Morning came, and a new woman arose from the stale-smelling sheets and damp pillow of the old. Su Gardeen reborn. A tiger moth emerging from the cocoon of yesteryear. Throw back the bed covers, open the curtains, meet naked the morning sun. Shower. Shower again. Scrub every nook and cranny of the body till it hurts. This is a woman of position, of decision, of responsibility to others – a champion among women and a leader among men. This is a woman who has fought her way up, who had suffered adversity and turned it in her favour. This is how woman was designed to be.

The reinvented woman immediately sets about to clean up her act. She announces a healthy diet regime as from that same breakfast; tells the builder he'll have to move the drains because the sink unit is going on the other side; bemuses Ellis by sharing a mighty queen's deliverance on having the body of a weak and feeble woman; appears at the head office of Community Advance and boldly announces her period of leave is at an end.

At the office, she enters into a monologue based on something Ellis said, or may have written, which proposes that smart people don't change a leader in times of turmoil, while the smart leader does not prolong the turmoil just to stay in power, but sees beyond. People want a leader who brings results. In return for unfailing loyalty and support, they look for guidance and security. No problem – they shall with this leader have the very best guidance and security.

She knows that a bringer of security to others should herself not feel insecure. A leader's strength comes from within. All

self-doubt must be cast aside. She is a compassionate leader: it is Monique's final week in the employ of the organisation and the appreciative leader arranges for a jolly farewell spread. She is a visionary leader: the organisation is lacking the profile it deserves and a wave of publicity is ordered which will explain the valuable essential work it does in and around the city; which will extol the organisation's achievements, past and present; which will hail its glorious and assured future under a tireless liberator of the poor.

At home, the drains have been relaid though not yet covered. She approves. The new kitchen will be bigger and better than anything Margo has done, and will take many less years. Ellis is waiting with a meal and a glass of wine: the vodka has been put away, out of sight and temptation. He is less servile, more mein affable host. It suits him. There is just to two of them, now. Maybe there always was. If only, for once in her life, she could know what it is to feel love.

Later, when everything is cleared away, she tells him of her day. CA is back on track, a more dynamic force than ever. Lucy rings and news is exchanged. Simon's solicitor has done a deal with the police: Simon escapes a charge of assaulting a police officer if he is willing to see the funny side of the police targeting and trashing the wrong address. Yes, Lucy says, Simon had some porn. So what? It's never bothered her, she says. It's nothing. Some of the images were of young girls – you'll never stop young teenage girls wanting to show themselves off. They'll bare all at the first opportunity, most of them. But none of children. Never children. Simon is not a paedophile – he's not a monster. He's a perfectly normal alpha male.

A remarkable day, then. It was good to smile, good to see Ellis smile. It was good to hear the old bright Lucy putting a gloss on every black deed and repulsive thought of her prick of a partner. Su should have been tired after a day so fulsome, but there was room for more. She fought the craving for a

drink of vodka and invited Ellis upstairs, to the Chamber. He could sense her inner struggle, see it in her restless movement, hear it in her horny voice.

There was little said in the Chamber. It was as if each knew what the other wanted – as if the roles were already scripted and rehearsed. There was no hurry but neither was there any hesitation. Ellis helped Su adjust the punishment frame. Stripped and locked in the frame, he was made to watch while the dominatrix dressed up and strutted and menaced with the whip. He squirmed as his testicles were tapped and stroked with the handle of the whip, and flinched as the leather lash was played along his back and buttocks. He watched his tormentor strip, and clean and lubricate and don the plastic penis; and pleaded, at her insistence, to be entered. He moaned as she brought herself to him from behind. The end of a remarkable day.

* * * * *

“It’s a decision that can’t be put off any longer, and that’s it.”

Margo served the home-made soup. Su waited for her to continue. The soup smelt delicious, as it always did.

“It’s not fair on James or Estelle. Too much of their lives are sacrificed.”

The sisters, alone in Margo’s kitchen, sat opposite one another. Su wondered if she would ever attain Margo’s indefinable middle-class quality. Did she want to? Did she need to?

“They’ve been simply fantastic throughout, really they have. You know that.”

“Yes, I do.”

“But there are things we want to do, as a family. It’s been a long time.”

It had. Su twisted a bread roll.

“So – we looked around and, well, the brochures are there for you to have a read through.”

“I will. Have you a preference?”

“We liked Lakeside.”

“Yeah?”

“We’ve been over to see it. James and I went. Estelle stayed behind with Mum. But Mum’s condition frightens her now. It’s not fair on her.”

“And you like it – Lakeside?”

“I think it’ll be comfortable. Go and see for yourself, if you like. Or we can go together.”

Su, her mouth full, shook her head. She swallowed.

“It’s all right. I accept your judgement.”

Margo’s turn to say nothing. Su chanced it.

“I remember you saying a home for Mum was out of the question, that’s all.”

It was unusual to observe Margo on the defensive, and Su knew it would not last.

“I know I did. I refused to even contemplate it. But it’s as I said – she’s become too much. We can’t cope any longer. We can’t give her the sort of help she needs. It’s not a nice decision to have to make.”

“I’m sure it can’t be.”

“More soup?”

Yes to more soup. Then:

“You still blame me for everything, Margo, don’t you?”

Margo ran the emptied saucepan under the cold water tap. She brought down a hinged cover over the cooker rings, one of them which would still be hot. Force of habit.

“What’s done’s done, I suppose.” It was a phrase Mum used to use.

“I can take that as a yes, can I?”

Margo smiled – a mirthless, humourless stretch of carefully touched-up lips.

“We’re not going through all that again. It’s the present that’s important. And the future.”

“That’s how I look at things.”

The snack was served, slices of ham with salad trimmings,

and drinking chocolate in tall pastel mugs. Gone was the defensive; Margo turned imperious.

“There is one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Lakeside – if you agree Lakeside – is not the cheapest. None are *cheap*, are they? The tariffs are in the brochure.”

The latest re-invented Su rose to the occasion.

“I know none are cheap. Anyway, we’re not looking for cheap, yeh? Not for Mum. I’ll pay my whack, don’t worry about that. And I’ll visit her.”

“You may not find that rewarding – she hasn’t recognised you properly in years. You’re simply ‘that lady’ – when you’re anyone. You don’t have to visit her.”

“Well, she’s my mother, too.”

Cool it! Don’t throw yourself on the barbs.

“She is. But she doesn’t know it – that’s what I’m saying to you, Suzie. It’s a trail just to sit and be ignored by a drooling deranged shell for half an hour.”

Trail? Trail was another of Mum’s words, before she drooled. As for deranged shell – was this Margo speaking? The stress of having to make a tough decision was showing. Su had a moment of pleasure from the thought of a Margo not fully in control of the situation – there was a word for it, a German word, for experiencing joy at someone else’s discomfort, which she could never get her tongue round.

“Okay. You’re probably right. I guess this is the end of an era.”

Margo didn’t look up, when she should have.

“You’re welcome to come and stay any time, Suzie. You and Ellis. We’ve never met Ellis, have we? He’s a disembodied voice at the end of a telephone. We’d like to meet him in person sometime. Perhaps he’d like to see your ancestral home.”

Perhaps he would. But this was no invitation.

“Thank you. We’ll bear it in mind. Now where’s the blurb on Lakeside?”

Ellis poured a glass of wine and asked Su how the weekend had been. She felt herself genuinely wanting to talk about it to him instead of throwing the usual dismissive ‘all right’. No need to conceal an era that has come to an end. She told him about the family decision to put Mum into a home, and the high cost of a place at Lakeside, to which she had agreed a significant contribution. Ellis fell silent as the publication of his book seemed suddenly to retreat into the distance, and turned to brooding when the reinvented mistress talked of a reprioritised domestic budget.

Su did not pass on the empty invitation to Derbyshire. Ellis would probably take to the Merediths, and they to him. They all shared that intellectual plane which comes from being clever and going to university. But what would be the point of them meeting? The opportunity had arisen to close the book on the past. She would visit Mum at Lakeside, maybe not often, not so often as she had gone to the farmhouse. Like Margo said, Mum saw her second daughter only as a stranger. The only time in the future there would be reason to step foot in the farmhouse might be if Estelle got married or when Mum died. No other reason. The busy woman has to move on.

Su became the caring face of Community Advance. Literally. Her smile radiated from the home page of the organisation’s website, from the front of a widely distributed new glossy booklet, and from street posters around the city. One conspicuously large poster covered a hoarding near a roundabout close to the general hospital, and she made a detour on the way to the office each morning for a whole week just so she could come face to face with herself, if only for a few seconds before an impatient horn might toot from behind. The posters did not advertise her name nor indicate her position within the organisation – that would have smacked of what Ellis referred to as a personality cult. A

similar design, which was displayed around the city's ethnic communities, offered an equally cheerful-looking Indira. The graphics artists had wanted to use models but Su insisted on using members of the Community Advance team.

“CA is about real people and so should have real people to tell the world,” she said on a television interview for regional news. “We want human faces, not meaningless block capitals or an impersonalised corporate logo.”

This campaign, Su had told the Start of Week meeting, was all about inclusion. Screen-filling pictures of Geri and Roger headed important pages of the website, and other employees of the agency were represented in smaller images elsewhere, in which they could be seen engaging in typical community activities. She braced herself for critical murmurings from the suits but instead received congratulations and a comment to the effect that community development agencies in other parts of the country could do worse than follow her example.

For her birthday, Ellis had a card especially printed which depicted the new face of inclusion on the front side. He also arranged for a set of plastic table coasters to carry the smile. More were ordered and given out to groups and associations as part of Awareness Week.

Mum was delivered to Lakeside and, according to Margo over the telephone, had settled in nicely. ‘Nicely’ was another of Mum’s words. From a fake enquiry, Su learnt that Fee had gone to Africa, to spread the word among the unenlightened. It was Ellis’s opinion that Fee’s target audience would probably be better off with a free trade agreement than sanctimonious sermons, and of course Ellis had something to go on. His book said it all. The book would be at the printers as soon as the kitchen extension was completed, she promised him. Ellis had a way with the bigger social picture like he had way with the builder, who had threatened to walk off the job on two occasions of her change of mind. Kitchen, then book. Simple Gardenenomics.

She felt herself go from strength to strength. This came from the confidence brought of a voyage of self-discovery. The new woman had circumnavigated the whole woman. It had been a long voyage, one of downs and ups and outs and ins, but one she would recommend to anybody. Turn back through those missed chapters, if you consider yourself an honest person. Get to understand yourself. Cleanse yourself, purify yourself, recast yourself. The heroic woman can do all these things, and more. Go on, take a voyage through your life. Free the morality, the doubt, the regrets, and the unstoppable spirit. Raise a toast to your image. That's you, yes you, looking back at yourself in the mirror of truth. And you're looking Sugar Deen good.

* * * * *

Actually, the voyage is not yet over. Our retracing heroine has one chapter of her life still to navigate.

* * * * *

12

Mum was right. There always was a palaver, at bath time. It was the shampoo. Soapy water gets in your eyes and stings, stings, stings. Suzie could wash and rinse her hair by herself – there was a big plastic jug in the bathroom for the purpose – but it was nicer to have someone do it for you. She loved the water running from her hair and down her body. Again, do it again! And if you squealed about soap in your eyes then there would be more water poured over head and running down body.

Bath nights were twice a week, with maybe an additional shove in the tub if someone special was coming to the farm, or if the girls were going to visit relatives, which was not very often. Once upon a time, the sisters used to share the bath – Margaret at the plug end, careful not to lean back against the taps; Mum washing squirming faces and lifting the jug to rinse wringing hair; with Stan occasionally bringing in a fresh towel, his hand humorously shielding his view. Mum did the jug for a time after, when baths were taken not together but one and then the other, until Suzie was a big girl now and could rinse her own hair, and a bath became a solitary affair.

One early evening, a Sunday with school the next day, Mum went to collect Margaret from a friend's birthday party. Suzie, in the lonely echoey bathroom, was feeling ignored. It wasn't her friend, it wasn't her party, it wasn't fair. She called out, and again. Stan came to the bathroom door and asked what was the matter. Soap in the eyes was the matter. She was going blind. Would he rinse her hair? Stan was hesitant, Suzie was pleading pretty please. He took the plastic jug, plunged it under the water at her feet, and poured it over her head. Again, again. Water off the head and down the body. Stan

was looking at her, paying her attention. He wasn't ignoring her, like everyone else. Again, again.

It might have been unlikely to be repeated but it was repeated. Suzie changed a bath night 'because it's PE tomorrow', the new night happening to coincide with Mum's country women evening at the village hall. Margaret, downstairs in the living room, was watching television as she played the noisy hairdryer over her head after a token sulk about having to alter her bath night because of Suzie. There were other times, as well; then Mum fell out with that too big for her boots Noreen Pringle who had moved in with Bernard at the pub, and stopped going to country women.

The household came into a bit of money when a field was sold to Willy Ancliffe, enough to pay off the bank, buy an automatic washing machine and other things including a proper carpet for Suzie's room. The old rug left areas of spotted lino, cold to bare feet, and smelt of something dead. Stan cleared the bedroom and laid newspapers over scrubbed floorboards. Suzie wanted to help – it was her room after all. Together, they dragged the awkward roll up the staircase and into the bedroom, where Stan cut the tape and ran the carpet out and started to trim the edges with a small sharp stubby knife he wouldn't let her have a go with.

Gone was the pong of the dead, this smelt new and swish. Stan was kneeling, gathering up bits, looking over the pink nylon pile at a job well done. The room was filled with sunlight that momentarily turned it into a princess's palace. Suzie felt happy, special. She flung her arms around Stan's neck and her legs around his torso and sat astride his thighs. She hugged him, and he hugged her. It was good.

Margaret came top of the class again and they all went out to a pub for Sunday lunch. Maggie – she hated the name so all the more reason to call her by it – was now a 'young lady' with sprouting breasts and a pack of junior sanitary towels in

the bathroom cupboard as a symbol of growing up. Maggie with her airs and graces. Our Margaret this, our Margaret that.

Suzie did not have breasts, she had tousled hair, and eyes that could hold eyes that looked in hers. Older than her body, Mum was heard to say of her. Little Suzie would come up close, almost touching, maybe touching, when she wanted something; come up close and hold the eyes. It worked with Stan; it worked with the village shopkeeper; it worked with Mr Tidman who took Science.

They were in one of the sheds, an old wooden peeling-brown box that had once been a railway goods van. Stan was clearing the store of mouldy beets and, it being school holidays with nothing to do, Suzie had been volunteered to help him. He chose the hot rank shed to tell her the facts of life, about the birds and the bees, where babies come from. Stan called it ‘what happens’, and he told her what happens although she did not altogether believe it at the time. He said sex – the true what happens bit – was a very private thing, something you didn’t talk about to anyone, not your best friend, not even your mother or sister. No one.

Half a year later, Stan introduced her to the male body and the fascinating male erection. He had been drinking. Mum and Margaret were over at Ginny’s, when Ginny still lived in the village, to deliver and pick up Christmas presents. Suzie was dancing in front of the Christmas tree which was lit up in a corner of the living room, her style a repeated sway from side to side with exaggerated arm movements like they do in ballet, knowing that Stan was watching her from the kitchen but pretending not to know. She was supposed to try on the party dress that hung from the picture rail after Mum’s earlier ironing session, to see if it still fit. Down to her underwear, she had felt the urge to dance, to dance in front of the tree, to dance for the angel at the top of the tree. And for Stan.

He crept into the room and stood behind her. Feigning surprise and embarrassment, she snatched up her removed

jeans and jumper, and ran upstairs. Stan chased her, making loud mock threats. She threw herself on to her bed and curled herself into a ball, giggling, giggling, while he hovered above her, and patted her bottom, calling her his runaway angel that fell off the tree.

Then he went quiet. She slowly turned her head. Stan was lying beside her, on the narrow bed, his trousers down, his underpants down. He invited her to go on, take hold of it. She was stunned, but not frightened. Squeeze it, up and down. She knew what he meant. He wasn't looking at her, but seemed like he was going to sleep. She gingerly reached out to it, touched it, curled her fingers round it. It was hard, like a small wrist, and she thought hard was normal. She gave it a gentle press. Go on, Stan urged, more. Up and down. This was naughty; this was grown up. She followed Stan's moaned directions.

Suddenly, Stan sat up and pushed her arm away. He grabbed his thing with his hand, gasped hoarsely, half pulled the trousers up with his other hand, and shuffled hurriedly to the bathroom.

Stan had called it making him feel good – but she must tell no one, understand? Sex education during personal development lessons with Miss Brocklebank did not cover Stan's feeling good. Suzie's friends called it tossing off. When boys do it by themselves, it's called wanking. Suzie asked Stan if he was a wanker. It embarrassed him, which she knew it would.

Over Christmas, Stan avoided her, or at least avoided being near her, and ignored her overt covert glances thrown his way. Mum sensed the strained atmosphere but said nothing. Margaret sensed it, too, and – later – she did say something.

“I know, you know. Don't think you can pretend.”

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Yes you do.”

“Yes I don't, you mean.”

Margaret did not pursue the exchange, and so Suzie was left

to wonder exactly what it was Margaret thought she knew. How *could* swotty Maggie know anything? How could she know about tossing off? She couldn't – Maggie knew nothing about real sex.

When Stan continued to avoid her, she waited for an opportunity to tell him everything was all right. It was early January. The farm was in difficulties; payments for its produce were constantly being cut and increasingly delayed; Christmas had been a struggle for the family – she knew all this and offered to make Stan feel good again, if that was what he wanted. He replied no, it was wrong, it had been very wrong, they mustn't talk about it. She asked if he wanted to touch her instead. She would let him touch up his angel from the top of the tree, reach inside her school blouse and pluck her little apples. That's what they called it at school – all the craze, when they weren't just saying it – though she did not mention school. He was visibly shocked, and shook his head as if to shake it off.

“Oh, Suzie – no. Don't say such things. They're bad. You mustn't think such things. Ever.”

She hugged him, and he her.

Suzie Earle allowed herself to be deflowered on damp grass behind the sports pavilion, a traditional place of village defloration, at the age of fourteen by a youth she did not fully like while a second youth, and a girl slightly older than herself whom she desperately wanted to impress, put on a show of unseeing snogging. The physically joyless experience left her internally sore, and she worried that something might be wrong with her because she had felt absolutely no desire to gasp and shriek and heave like they do in films. However, it won her brief awe when word got round the school playground, as well as a self-awarded higher mark than her sister in one subject at least.

* * * * *

“That day, when he came to you in your bedroom, did he touch you? Take your time. Did your stepfather interfere with your clothing? Can you remember? He did, didn’t he? Say yes if he did.”

“Well, he might of.”

“What where you wearing? Try to remember, if you can.”

“I – school things.”

“A skirt? Where you wearing a school skirt? Did he put his hand up your skirt?”

“Not a skirt – we wore trousers for school, in winter. It was winter.”

“All right. What else did you wear for school? A blouse? A jumper? Cardigan?”

“A blouse – I was wearing a white blouse. It had to be white. The jumper had to be red but I hated the jumper.”

“No jumper?”

“I took it off as soon as I got in – from school.”

“So you were wearing a white blouse?”

“Yes.”

“Did he touch you on the upper body? Did he put his hand inside your blouse?”

“He —”

“Go on.”

“Well, he —”

“He put his hand inside your blouse – is that right?”

“Yes.”

“And touched your upper body.”

“Yes.”

“Did he put his hands on your breasts?”

“Yes.”

“Was there anything else?”

“There might of been.”

“There was something else, wasn’t there? I know this isn’t easy for you, Suzie, but it is important for me to know

everything. Were you on the bed?”

“Yes. On the bed. Lying on the bed. My bed, in my bedroom.”

“Just you on the bed? Was your stepfather with you – on the bed?”

“Yes. Next to me. He – he pulled down his trousers.”

“He pulled down his trousers? Down his legs. Then what happened? Did he take his trousers off?”

“He pulled down his trousers and took them off. Yes.”

“And his underpants? Did he take them off, too?”

“He must’ve done. I can’t remember...”

“It doesn’t matter. He was naked from below the waist – that’s what you’re saying, is it?”

“He wanted me to touch him.”

“Touch his penis, you mean?”

“Yes, that’s right. His penis.”

“And did you touch it?”

“Yes.”

“Just touch it?”

“Yes. No.”

“Go on. Take your time.”

“He told me to —”

“It’s all right. You can tell me – I’m here to help you. What did he tell you to do?”

“He told me to put it – his penis – in my mouth.”

“In your mouth? That’s what he told you to do?”

“Yes. And suck. He held the back of my head with his hand while I sucked. That’s what he would do.”

“*Would* do? Are you saying there were other times?”

“Yes. Other times.”

“How many other times?”

“I don’t – I can’t remember.”

“Try to remember. Just try for me. Were there two, three, four? A few? Not so many? A lot? Were there a lot?”

“A lot. Yes.”

“And when did your stepfather ask you to do these things?”

“When I was ten, to begin with.”

“No, I mean: was it during the day? In the evening? At night?”

“When I came home from school.”

“When you came home from school?”

“Yes. Mostly.”

“And where was your mum when you came home from school? Would she be out? Out of the house?”

“In the village. She went to see someone.”

“Who did she go to see?”

“A friend.”

“A friend?”

“That’s right. She was seeing someone – a friend.”

“I see. Well, you have a sister, don’t you? Your sister – would she be home from school, too?”

“Yes. But no always.”

“Not always?”

“She stayed behind at school, sometimes. Homework club. Netball practice. School play rehearsal. That’s when – when it would happen. When our Maggie stayed late at school. She stayed late a lot. She’d get a lift home with other girls from the village. Their mums would pick them up.”

“So, your mum at her friend’s, and your sister not home from school – just you and your stepfather alone in the house. Is that what you’re saying?”

“Yes. Alone together.”

“All right. I know this is painful for you. Was there anything else your stepfather would ask you to do? Take your time.”

“Yes.”

“Could you tell me? It’s important, Suzie. I wouldn’t be asking you these questions if they weren’t important.”

“He —”

“Go on. Please. It’s for your own good.”

“He wanted to lick me.”

“Lick you?”

“Yes, down below. You know – between the legs. He liked

that.”

“With his tongue, you mean?”

“Yes. At first.”

“At first?”

“Then he would put his penis there. Rest it there.”

“Rest it there? How, exactly?”

“Before —”

“Before what? Before penetration?”

“Yes. He said it made him feel good. That’s what he called it.”

“It made him feel good. Is that what he said?”

“Yes. He said I made him feel good. But it didn’t make me feel good. It hurt. It was horrible —”

“Okay, Suzie. Everything’s all right. We’ll leave it there for today. You’ve been very helpful. I’m sorry to have to put you through it all again. Truly I am.”

She had got a kick out of lying to the woman police officer. The officer had treated her as if she were a little girl – well, it was good to be a little girl for a while and to make things up. More details were made up, allowed to be coaxed out, and added to the case file during further interviews, like for example the taste of semen. The officer seemed curious about the taste of semen, kept returning to it – probably never tasted it herself. Also the veiled threats, the fear for her safety if she did not comply with Stan’s wishes. The officer was insistent on firming up the threats.

Not everything was a lie, of course: Stan had asked her to masturbate him. And those other things had been done to her, if not by Stan then later by a man old enough to be her father, the butcher-landlord, who hated condoms. And the loan shark, he liked to threaten people – it was part of his job. Anyway, the police officer had wanted her to tell a story. The police were after a conviction, weren’t they; they needed a story the prosecution could pitch to the jury, steamy and juicy. Juries like a few porny particulars to brighten up their

dreary lives.

She had got a kick out of lying about Stan. If only he'd found the money for her to get rid of the kid. Stan the wanker had let her down when she most needed help. He had turned her away. Beryl's unwritten bill remains unpaid to this day. At the time, Beryl was told she could go fuck herself with a carrot for making such a balls-up of the job and nearly killing her. If the drunken old crone wanted to take it further then there was always the newspapers. In a sense, it was as well Stan had not given her the money to pay Beryl. But he had still let her down.

“Gentlemen and ladies of the jury. You have heard the evidence, most shocking evidence, very distressing evidence, against the accused. Words are hard to find that describe what the victim, this young woman who has been brave enough to come forward, was compelled to undergo as an innocent child. Betrayed and abused by the very person she thought she could trust, she should have been able to trust, the one person whose familial duty and moral obligation was to protect her. Abused in an obscene manner, the memory of which this young woman will have to carry with her for the rest of her life. We can only speculate on the damage this shameful and deplorable episode may have done.”

It was in the bag, the woman police officer told her with a click of tongue against teeth. The jury were with her all the way. The officer put it down to her stint on the stand, her appealing directly to the women, just as instructed, and the women of the jury had gone for it. That was bollocks – she had appealed directly to the men. They had joined in the fantasy; they had wanted to believe her, be on that bed with her, being tossed off by her. The officer knew nothing.

“Ladies and gentlemen. You have heard the testimony of my client, a hard-working, honest man who has always made

every effort to provide for his family, and a respected man in the community. He has admitted to you, to the court, of an uncharacteristic moment of weakness, of which he is deeply ashamed. One single regrettable act, of gross misconduct, but of limited harm. On oath, he has strenuously denied the rest of the charges, serious charges, against him. He denies carrying out repeated abuse, of voicing threats, and of that most grave of charges, sexual intercourse with a minor. Yet he stands in the dock so accused by a young woman who enjoys, shall we say, a somewhat questionable lifestyle. This young woman, as you have heard, asked my client for money, for purposes we have not here been able clearly to ascertain, and when she was refused, her vengeance was to fabricate deceit of a most fanciful and malevolent nature. May I remind you, ladies and gentlemen, that we have only her word for the alleged abuses taking place. I put it to you that my client is simply not guilty of these things.”

Poor Stan. He never stood a chance. Admitting the masturbation part was a big mistake. It made everything else possible in the eyes of the jury. The possible had happened because she convinced them it happened. Stan, ashamed of the masturbation, which the prosecution loved, had been unable to raise his head to look at the faces who would decide his fate. He came across as every inch the perv. No contest. The wanker.

* * * * *

It was all a long time ago. How had she atoned for her lies, the lies she enjoyed telling, the lies that put a man in prison and sent his wife – her own mother – over the edge of sanity? What had been her penance?

Well, she had pulled herself out of the gutter, reinvented herself, become a nice subordinated passive obedient wife. She had paid the price, by way of a destroyed womb, of

denying her husband that which he had wanted the most. But the Potter period had been about suppression of memory; a door deliberately closed on the past. It was not penance.

To walk out of security and gracious living, to take yourself to a coarse alien city, without a job and with only the loose change in your pocket, to walk untidy streets among scruffy hopeless people, to rent the upper floor of a gloomy house shared with an old woman who smelt of pee – to go and live in a poor city when you fear the city, as does anyone brought up in the county, and when you despise poverty for its own sake, as does anyone connected to the bank hierarchy. She had forced herself to enter and inhabit an environment that was as near to a hell as she could bear. Was that not penance enough?

In the alien city, at a meeting for applicant trainees, the speaker had explained that community development is a tough career – highly rewarding but also at times severely challenging. There were no easy rides. The professional doing the talking, a large round white woman wearing an ethnic shawl across her shoulders, an Anglo tribute to an Asian culture, was accompanied by a young male aide who endorsed the remark by telling those present that it's a concrete jungle out there. It was somewhere Suzie felt she needed to be, the jungle. Survival of the fittest. In the jungle, the past doesn't matter – it's the right here and now that counts. The jungle sorts the women from the girls. Is that why Fee had gone to Africa?

* * * * *

“Hello Mum. How are we, today?”

“Who is it? What do you want?”

“It's Suzie, your daughter. Your little girl.”

“Where's Margaret?”

“She'll be coming later, I'm sure.”

“Margaret?”

“She’ll be along. I bet she comes a lot, doesn’t she?”

“She’ll catch her death of cold, out in this wind.”

“I’m sure she wraps up well.”

“She thinks more of them blessed chickens than she does me. Still, what can you do?”

“Mum, I’ve come to say I’m sorry. I’m truly sorry for everything that’s happened.”

“It’s sinful.”

“That’s the least you could call it.”

“Still, what can you do?”

“Well, Mum. I’m here to say it, to you, personally. Do you understand what I’m telling you?”

“Has the postman been?”

“Yes. Nothing for us today. Do you remember Alan? Tubby Alan, delivering the post, in his red van?”

“He’s left his eggs.”

“No, Mum. I ran after him. I shouted to him, remember? ‘Alan, your eggs, you’ve forgotten your eggs,’ I yelled at the top of my voice. He heard me above the noise of his engine and came back for them.”

“There’s always a palaver.”

“There was that day.”

“Margaret...?”

“No, Suzie. It’s your Suzie. Do you remember Suzie.”

“Of course I remember Suzie.”

“Well, that’s me. I’ve come to tell you how sorry I am for what happened to Stan. And to you.”

“I don’t want to...”

“No, all right, I know. But Stan never did those things to me, not like I told it in court. I made them up, just to get Stan into trouble. I didn’t know it would end up like this. I had no idea what it would do to – to you.”

“Never mind.”

“But I do mind. Stan was a good man. He did his best. He loved us all.”

“Has the postman been?”

“He came five minutes ago. Nothing for us today, I’m afraid. He’s taken his eggs.”

“Is Margaret looking after the chickens?”

“Margaret always looks after the chickens. She has a name for each of them: Mrs Allcluck, Mrs Speckles, Mrs Flapwing. Mum, Stan was a good man. He did none of those things to me. I just want you to understand.”

“Have you seen Estelle? Is she here? She’s growing up like she’s in a hurry, that one.”

“I know. They do, nowadays. Do you remember Suzie?”

“That lady...?”

“That lady, yes. That lady is me. I’m your daughter. I’ve come to apologise for all the trouble I’ve caused.”

“Margaret?”

“No. Margaret is your daughter, but so is Suzie. And Suzie wants to make her peace before – well, anything should happen. Stan has passed away, and I said sorry to him. I would have liked to have seen him one more time.”

“Never mind.”

“Now I want to do the same with you. Can you ever forgive me? Am I worthy of forgiveness?”

“We are His lambs.”

“We are, we are. And we’re grateful for what He gives us. Most of the time. Even when we’re bad we get something. I just wanted you to know about Stan, that’s all. I don’t suppose Margaret told you. Always got your best interests at heart, has our Maggie. Mum, I do believe you’re nodding off on me, in that comfortable chair of yours. You *are* nodding off. Am I that much of a bore? Guess I must be. The insomniac’s best friend, yeh? Margo – Margaret – will be here soon, no doubt. Tell her that lady has been. I’ll say ta-ta, then. See you next time. Okay?”

Everyone has some missed chapters in their life’s story. Maybe these chapters are best left that way; it can be a mistake to go back over them, certainly a mistake to go back

and try to rewrite them. Contexts change, as do the *dramatis personae*. Mum has it about right: just ditch the whole confounded book.

In the concrete jungle, submissive Suzie had become unstoppable Su – leader of the pack, top of the heap, queen of the hill. The little woman hiding away in the closet had burst open the doors, had made her presence known. Here I am – you’d better believe it. And why not? Like Stan, she had done her time, served her sentence. Su Gardeen owes nobody nothing.