

HARRY
20TH
BRITISH
SHORT
STORIES
WEEK 11
/ AM
MCEWAN

First love, last rites

From the beginning of summer until it seemed pointless, we lifted the thin mattress on to the heavy oak table and made love in front of the large open window. We always had a breeze blowing into the room and smells of the quayside four floors down. I was drawn into fantasies against my will, fantasies of the creature, and afterwards when we lay on our backs on the huge table, in those deep silences I heard it faintly running and clawing. It was new to me, all this, and I worried, I tried to talk to Sissel about it for reassurance. She had nothing to say, she did not make abstractions or discuss situations, she lived inside them. We watched the seagulls wheeling about in our square of sky and wondered if they had been watching us up there, that was the kind of thing we talked about, mildly entertaining hypotheses of the present moment. Sissel did things as they came to her, stirred her coffee, made love, listened to her records, looked out the window. She did not say things like I'm happy, or confused, or I want to make love, or I don't, or I'm tired of the fights in my family, she had no language to split herself in two, so I suffered alone what seemed like crimes in my head while we fucked, and afterwards listened alone to it scrabbling in the silence. Then one afternoon Sissel woke from a doze, raised her head from the mattress and said, 'What's that scratching noise behind the wall?'

My friends were far away in London, they sent me anguished and reflective letters, what would they do now? Who were they, and what was the point of it all? They were my age, seventeen and eighteen, but I pretended not to understand them. I sent back postcards, find a big table and an open window, I told them. I was happy and it seemed easy, I was making eel traps, it was so easy to have a purpose. The summer went on and I no longer heard from them. Only Adrian came to see us, he was Sissel's ten-year-old brother and he came to escape the misery of his disintegrating home, the quick reversals of his mother's moods, the endless competitive piano playing of his

sisters, the occasional bitter visits of his father. Adrian and Sissel's parents after twenty-seven years of marriage and six children hated each other with sour resignation, they could no longer bear to live in the same house. The father moved out to a hostel a few streets away to be near his children. He was a businessman who was out of work and looked like Gregory Peck, he was an optimist and had a hundred schemes to make money in an interesting way. I used to meet him in the pub. He did not want to talk about his redundancy or his marriage, he did not mind me living in a room over the quayside with his daughter. Instead he told me about his time in the Korean war, and when he was an international salesman, and of the legal fraudery of his friends who were now at the top and knighted, and then one day of the eels in the River Ouse, how the river bed swarmed with eels, how there was money to be made catching them and taking them alive to London. I told him how I had eighty pounds in the bank, and the next morning we bought netting, twine, wire hoops and an old cistern tank to keep eels in. I spent the next two months making eel traps.

On fine days I took my net, hoops and twine outside and worked on the quay, sitting on a bollard. An eel trap is cylinder-shaped, sealed at one end, and at the other is a long tapering funnel entrance. It lies on the river bed, the eels swim in to eat the bait and in their blindness cannot find their way out. The fishermen were friendly and amused. There's eels down there, they said, and you'll catch a few but you won't make no living on it. The tide'll lose your nets fast as you make them. We're using iron weights, I told them, and they shrugged in a good-natured way and showed me a better way to lash the net to the hoops, they believed it was my right to try it for myself. When the fishermen were out in their boats and I did not feel like working I sat about and watched the tidal water slip across the mud, I felt no urgency about the eel traps but I was certain we would be rich.

I tried to interest Sissel in the eel adventure, I told her about the rowing-boat someone was lending to us for the summer, but she had nothing to say. So instead we lifted the mattress on to the table and lay down with our clothes on. Then she began to talk. We pressed our palms together, she made a careful examination of the size and shape of our hands and gave a running commentary. Exactly the same size, your fingers are thicker, you've got this extra bit here. She

measured my eyelashes with the end of her thumb and wished hers were as long, she told me about the dog she had when she was small, it had long white eye-lashes. She looked at the sunburn on my nose and talked about that, which of her brothers and sisters went red in the sun, who went brown, what her youngest sister said once. We slowly undressed. She kicked off her plimsolls and talked about her foot rot. I listened with my eyes closed, I could smell mud and seaweed and dust through the open window. Wittering on, she called it, this kind of talk. Then once I was inside her I was moved, I was inside my fantasy, there could be no separation now of my mushrooming sensations from my knowledge that we could make a creature grow in Sissel's belly. I had no wish to be a father, that was not in it at all. It was eggs, sperms, chromosomes, feathers, gills, claws, inches from my cock's end the unstoppable chemistry of a creature growing out of a dark red slime, my fantasy was of being helpless before the age and strength of this process and the thought alone could make me come before I wanted. When I told Sissel she laughed. Oh, Gawd, she said. To me Sissel was right inside the process, she was the process and the power of its fascination grew. She was meant to be on the pill and every month she forgot it at least two or three times. Without discussion we came to the arrangement that I was to come outside her, but it rarely worked. As we were swept down the long slopes to our orgasms, in those last desperate seconds I struggled to find my way out but I was caught like an eel in my fantasy of the creature in the dark, waiting, hungry, and I fed it great white gobs. In those careless fractions of a second I abandoned my life to feeding the creature, whatever it was, in or out of the womb, to fucking only Sissel, to feeding more creatures, my whole life given over to this in a moment's weakness. I watched out for Sissel's periods, everything about women was new to me and I could take nothing for granted. We made love in Sissel's copious, effortless periods, got good and sticky and brown with the blood and I thought we were the creatures now in the slime, we were inside fed by gobs of cloud coming through the window, by gases drawn from the mudflats by the sun. I worried about my fantasies, I knew I could not come without them. I asked Sissel what she thought about and she giggled. Not feathers and gills, anyway. What *do* you think about, then? Nothing much, nothing really. I pressed my question and she withdrew into silence.

I knew it was my own creature I heard scrabbling, and when Sissel heard it one afternoon and began to worry, I realized her fantasies were involved too, it was a sound which grew out of our lovemaking. We heard it when we were finished and lying quite still on our backs, when we were empty and clear, perfectly quiet. It was the impression of small claws scratching blindly against a wall, such a distant sound it needed two people to hear it. We thought it came from one part of the wall. When I knelt down and put my ear to the skirting-board it stopped, I sensed it on the other side of the wall, frozen in its action, waiting in the dark. As the weeks passed we heard it at other times in the day, and now and then at night. I wanted to ask Adrian what he thought it was. Listen, there it is, Adrian, shut up a moment, what do you think that noise is, Adrian? He strained impatiently to hear what we could hear but he would not be still long enough. There's nothing there, he shouted. Nothing, nothing, nothing. He became very excited, jumped on his sister's back, yelling and yodelling. He did not want whatever it was to be heard, he did not want to be left out. I pulled him off Sissel's back and we rolled about on the bed. Listen again, I said, pinning him down, there it was again. He struggled free and ran out of the room shouting his two-tone police-car siren. We listened to it fade down the stairs and when I could hear him no more I said, Perhaps Adrian is really afraid of mice. Rats, you mean, said his sister, and put her hands between my legs.

By mid-July we were not so happy in our room, there was a growing dishevelment and uncase, and it did not seem possible to discuss it with Sissel. Adrian was coming to us every day now because it was the summer holidays and he could not bear to be at home. We would hear him four floors down, shouting and stamping on the stairs on his way up to us. He came in noisily, doing handstands and showing off to us. Frequently he jumped on Sissel's back to impress me, he was anxious, he was worried we might not find him good company and send him away, send him back home. He was worried too because he could no longer understand his sister. At one time she was always ready for a fight, and she was a good fighter, I heard him boast that to his friends, he was proud of her. Now changes had come over his sister, she pushed him off sulkily, she wanted to be left alone to do nothing, she wanted to listen to records. She was angry when he got his shoes on her skirt, and she had breasts now like his

mother, she talked to him now like his mother. Get down off there, Adrian. Please, Adrian, please, not now, later. He could not quite believe it all the same, it was a mood of his sister's, a phase, and he went on taunting and attacking her hopefully, he badly wanted things to stay as they were before his father left home. When he locked his forearms round Sissel's neck and pulled her backwards on to the bed his eyes were on me for encouragement, he thought the real bond was between us, the two men against the girl. He did not see there was no encouragement, he wanted it so badly. Sissel never sent Adrian away, she understood why he was here, but it was hard for her. One long afternoon of torment she left the room almost crying with frustration. Adrian turned to me and raised his eyebrows in mock horror. I tried to talk to him then but he was already making his yodelling sound and squaring up for a fight with me. Nor did Sissel have anything to say to me about her brother, she never made general remarks about people because she never made general remarks. Sometimes when we heard Adrian on his way up the stairs she glanced across at me and seemed to betray herself by a slight pursing of her beautiful lips.

There was only one way to persuade Adrian to leave us in peace. He could not bear to see us touch, it pained him, it genuinely disgusted him. When he saw one of us move across the room to the other he pleaded with us silently, he ran between us, pretending playfulness, wanted to decoy us into another game. He imitated us frantically in a desperate last attempt to show us how fatuous we appeared. Then he could stand it no more, he ran out of the room machine-gunning German soldiers and young lovers on the stairs.

But Sissel and I were touching less and less now, in our quiet ways we could not bring ourselves to it. It was not that we were in decline, not that we did not delight in each other, but that our opportunities were faded. It was the room itself. It was no longer four floors up and detached, there was no breeze through the windows, only a mushy heat rising off the quayside and dead jellyfish and clouds of flies, fiery grey flies who found our armpits and bit fiercely, houseflies who hung in clouds over our food. Our hair was too long and dank and hung in our eyes. The food we bought melted and tasted like the river. We no longer lifted the mattress on to the table, the coolest place now was the floor and the floor was covered with greasy sand which would not go away. Sissel grew tired of her

records, and her foot rot spread from one foot to the other and added to the smell. Our room stank. We did not talk about leaving because we did not talk about anything. Every night now we were woken by the scrabbling behind the wall, louder now and more insistent. When we made love it listened to us behind the wall. We made love less and our rubbish gathered around us, milk bottles we could not bring ourselves to carry away, grey sweating cheese, butter wrappers, yogurt cartons, over-ripe salami. And among it all Adrian cart-wheeling, yodelling, machine-gunning and attacking Sissel. I tried to write poems about my fantasies, about the creature, but I could see no way in and I wrote nothing down, not even a first line. Instead I took long walks along the river dyke into the Norfolk hinterland of dull beet fields, telegraph poles, uniform grey skies. I had two more eel nets to make, I was forcing myself to sit down to them each day. But in my heart I was sick of them, I could not really believe that eels would ever go inside them and I wondered if I wanted them to, if it was not better that the eels should remain undisturbed in the cool mud at the bottom of the river. But I went on with it because Sissel's father was ready to begin, because I had to expiate all the money and hours I had spent so far, because the idea had its own tired, fragile momentum now and I could no more stop it than carry the milk bottles from our room.

Then Sissel found a job and it made me see we were different from no one, they all had rooms, houses, jobs, careers, that's what they all did, they had cleaner rooms, better jobs, we were anywhere's striving couple. It was one of the windowless factories across the river where they canned vegetables and fruit. For ten hours a day she was to sit in the roar of machines by a moving conveyor belt, talk to no one and pick out the rotten carrots before they were canned. At the end of her first day Sissel came home in a pink-and-white nylon raincoat and pink cap. I said, Why don't you take it off? Sissel shrugged. It was all the same to her, sitting around in the room, sitting around in a factory where they relayed Radio One through speakers strung along the steel girders, where four hundred women half listened, half dreamed, while their hands spun backwards and forwards like powered shuttles. On Sissel's second day I took the ferry across the river and waited for her at the factory gates. A few women stepped through a small tin door in a great windowless wall and a wailing siren sounded all across the factory complex. Other

small doors opened and they streamed out, converging on the gates, scores of women in pink-and-white nylon coats and pink caps. I stood on a low wall and tried to see Sissel, it was suddenly very important. I thought that if I could not pick her out from this rustling stream of pink nylon then she was lost, we were both lost and our time was worthless. As it approached the factory gates the main body was moving fast. Some were half running in the splayed, hopeless way that women have been taught to run, the others walked as fast as they could. I found out later they were hurrying home to cook suppers for their families, to make an early start on the housework. Latecomers on the next shift tried to push their way through in the opposite direction. I could not see Sissel and I felt on the edge of panic, I shouted her name and my words were trampled underfoot. Two older women who stopped by the wall to light cigarettes grinned up at me. Sizzle yerself. I walked home by the long way, over the bridge, and decided not to tell Sissel I had been to wait for her because I would have to explain my panic and I did not know how. She was sitting on the bed when I came in, she was still wearing her nylon coat. The cap was on the floor. Why don't you take that thing off? I said. She said, Was that you outside the factory? I nodded. Why didn't you speak to me if you saw me standing there? Sissel turned and lay face downwards on the bed. Her coat was stained and smelled of machine oil and earth. I dunno, she said into the pillow, I didn't think. I didn't think of anything after my shift. Her words had a deadening finality, I glanced around our room and fell silent.

Two days later, on Saturday afternoon, I bought pounds of rubbery cows' lungs sodden with blood (lights, they were called) for bait. That same afternoon we filled the traps and rowed out into mid-channel at low tide to lay them on the river bed. Each of the seven traps was marked by a buoy. Four o'clock Sunday morning Sissel's father called for me and we set out in his van to where we kept the borrowed boat. We were rowing out now to find the marker buoys and pull the traps in, it was the testing time, would there be eels in the nets, would it be profitable to make more nets, catch more eels and drive them once a week to Billingsgate market, would we be rich? It was a dull windy morning, I felt no anticipation, only tiredness and a continuous erection. I half dozed in the warmth of

the van's heater. I had spent many hours of the night awake listening to the scrabbling noises behind the wall. Once I got out of bed and banged the skirting-board with a spoon. There was a pause, then the digging continued. It seemed certain now that it was digging its way into the room. While Sissel's father rowed I watched over the side for markers. It was not as easy as I thought to find them, they did not show up white against the water but as dark low silhouettes. It was twenty minutes before we found the first. As we pulled it up I was amazed at how soon the clean white rope from the chandlers had become like all other ropes near the river, brown and hung about with fine strands of green weed. The net too was old-looking and alien, I could not believe that one of us had made it. Inside were two crabs and a large eel. He untied the closed end of the trap, let the two crabs drop into the water and put the eel in the plastic bucket we had brought with us. We put fresh lights in the trap and dropped it over the side. It took another fifteen minutes to find the next trap and that one had nothing inside. We rowed up and down the channel for half an hour after that without finding another trap, and by this time the tide was coming up and covering the markers. It was then that I took the oars and made for the shore.

We went back to the hostel where Sissel's father was staying and he cooked breakfast. We did not want to discuss the lost traps, we pretended to ourselves and to each other that we would find them when we went out at the next low tide. But we knew they were lost, swept up or downstream by the powerful tides, and I knew I could never make another eel trap in my life. I knew also that my partner was taking Adrian with him on a short holiday, they were leaving that afternoon. They were going to visit military airfields, and hoped to end up at the Imperial War Museum. We ate eggs, bacon and mushrooms and drank coffee. Sissel's father told me of an idea he had, a simple but lucrative idea. Shrimps cost very little on the quayside here and they were very expensive in Brussels. We could drive two vanloads across there each week, he was optimistic in his relaxed, friendly way and for a moment I was sure his scheme would work. I drank the last of my coffee. Well, I said, I suppose that needs some thinking about. I picked up the bucket with the eel in, Sissel and I could eat that one. My partner told me as we shook hands that the surest way of killing an eel was to cover it with salt. I wished him a

good holiday and we parted, still maintaining the silent pretence that one of us would be rowing out at the next low tide to search for the traps.

After a week at the factory I did not expect Sissel to be awake when I got home, but she was sitting up in bed, pale and clasping her knees. She was staring into one corner of the room. It's in here, she said. It's behind those books on the floor. I sat down on the bed and took off my wet shoes and socks. The mouse? You mean you heard the mouse? Sissel spoke quietly. It's a rat. I saw it run across the room, and it's a rat. I went over to the books and kicked them, and instantly it was out, I heard its claws on the floorboards and then I saw it run along the wall, the size of a small dog it seemed to me then, a rat, a squat, powerful grey rat dragging its belly along the floor. It ran the whole length of the wall and crept behind a chest of drawers. We've got to get it out of here, Sissel wailed, in a voice which was strange to me. I nodded, but I could not move for the moment, or speak, it was so big, the rat, and it had been with us all summer, scabbling at the wall in the deep, clear silences after our fucking, and in our sleep, it was our familiar. I was terrified, more afraid than Sissel, I was certain the rat knew us as well as we knew it, it was aware of us in the room now just as we were aware of it behind the chest of drawers. Sissel was about to speak again when we heard a noise on the stairs, a familiar stamping, machine-gunning noise. I was relieved to hear it. Adrian came in the way he usually did, he kicked the door and leaped in, crouching low, a machine-gun ready at his hip. He sprayed us with raw noises from the back of his throat, we crossed our lips with our fingers and tried to hush him. You're dead, both of you, he said, and got ready for a cartwheel across the room. Sissel shushed him again, she tried to wave him towards the bed. Why sshh? What's wrong with you? We pointed to the chest of drawers. It's a rat, we told him. He was down on his knees at once, peering. A rat? he gasped. Fantastic, it's a big one, look at it. Fantastic. What are you going to do? Let's catch it. I crossed the room quickly and picked up a poker from the fireplace, I could lose my fear in Adrian's excitement, pretend it was just a fat rat in our room, an adventure to catch it. From the bed Sissel wailed again. What are you going to do with that? For a moment I felt my grip loosen on the poker, it was not just a rat, it was not an adventure, we both knew that. Meanwhile Adrian danced his dance.

Yes, that, use that. Adrian helped me carry the books across the room, we built a wall right round the chest of drawers with only one gap in the middle where the rat could get through. Sissel went on asking, What are you doing? What are you going to do with that? but she did not dare leave the bed. We had finished the wall and I was giving Adrian a coathanger to drive the rat out with when Sissel jumped across the room and tried to snatch the poker from my hand. Give me that, she cried, and hung on to my lifted arm. At that moment the rat ran out through the gap in the books, it ran straight at us and I thought I saw its teeth bared and ready. We scattered, Adrian jumped on the table, Sissel and I were back on the bed. Now we all had time to see the rat as it paused in the centre of the room and then ran forward again, we had time to see how powerful and fat and fast it was, how its whole body quivered, how its tail slid behind it like an attendant parasite. It knows us, I thought, it wants us. I could not bring myself to look at Sissel. As I stood up on the bed, raised the poker and aimed it, she screamed. I threw it as hard as I could, it struck the floor point first several inches from the rat's narrow head. It turned instantly and ran back between the gap in the books. We heard the scratch of its claws on the floor as it settled itself behind the chest of drawers to wait.

I unwound the wire coat-hanger, straightened it and doubled it over and gave it to Adrian. He was quieter now, slightly more fearful. His sister sat on the bed with her knees drawn up again. I stood several feet from the gap in the books with the poker held tight in both hands. I glanced down and saw my pale bare feet and saw a ghost rat's teeth bared and tearing nail from flesh. I called out, Wait, I want to get my shoes. But it was too late, Adrian was jabbing the wire behind the chest of drawers and now I dared not move. I crouched a little lower over the poker, like a batsman. Adrian climbed on to the chest and thrust the wire right down into the corner. He was in the middle of shouting something to me, I did not hear what it was. The frenzied rat was running through the gap, it was running at my feet to take its revenge. Like the ghost rat its teeth were bared. With both hands I swung the poker down, caught it clean and whole smack under its belly, and it lifted clear off the ground, sailed across the room, borne up by Sissel's long scream through her hand in her mouth, it dashed against the wall and I thought in an instant, It must have broken its back. It dropped to the ground, legs in the

air, split from end to end like a ripe fruit. Sissel did not take her hand from her mouth, Adrian did not move from the chest, I did not shift my weight from where I had struck, and no one breathed out. A faint smell crept across the room, musty and intimate, like the smell of Sissel's monthly blood. Then Adrian farted and giggled from his held-back fear, his human smell mingled with the wide-open rat smell. I stood over the rat and prodded it gently with the poker. It rolled on its side, and from the mighty gash which ran its belly's length there protruded and slid partially free from the lower abdomen a translucent purple bag, and inside five pale crouching shapes, their knees drawn up around their chins. As the bag touched the floor I saw a movement, the leg of one unborn rat quivered as if in hope, but the mother was hopelessly dead and there was no more for it.

Sissel knelt by the rat, Adrian and I stood behind her like guards, it was as if she had some special right, kneeling there with her long red skirt spilling round her. She parted the gash in the mother rat with her forefinger and thumb, pushed the bag back inside and closed the blood-spiked fur over it. She remained kneeling a little while and we still stood behind her. Then she cleared some dishes from the sink to wash her hands. We all wanted to get outside now, so Sissel wrapped the rat in newspaper and we carried it downstairs. Sissel lifted the lid of the dustbin and I placed it carefully inside. Then I remembered something, I told the other two to wait for me and I ran back up the stairs. It was the eel I came back for, it lay quite still in its few inches of water and for a moment I thought that it too was dead till I saw it stir when I picked up the bucket. The wind had dropped now and the cloud was breaking up, we walked to the quay in alternative light and shade. The tide was coming in fast. We walked down the stone steps to the water's edge and there I tipped the eel back in the river and we watched him flick out of sight, a flash of white underside in the brown water. Adrian said goodbye to us, and I thought he was going to hug his sister. He hesitated and then ran off, calling out something over his shoulder. We shouted after him to have a good holiday. On the way back Sissel and I stopped to look at the factories on the other side of the river. She told me she was going to give up her job there.

We lifted the mattress on to the table and lay down in front of the open window, face to face, the way we did at the beginning of summer. We had a light breeze blowing in, a distant smoky smell

of autumn, and I felt calm, very clear. Sissel said, This afternoon let's clean the room up and then go for a long walk, a walk along the river dyke. I pressed the flat of my palm against her warm belly and said, Yes.

and I was beginning to push them through, past each other. 'What's happening?' cried Maisie. Now the positioning of her limbs expressed the breathtaking beauty, the nobility of the human form, and, as in the paper flower, there was a fascinating power in its symmetry. I felt the trance coming on again and the numbness settling over the back of my head. As I drew her arms and legs through, Maisie appeared to turn in on herself like a sock. 'Oh God,' she sighed, 'what's happening?' and her voice sounded very far away. Then she was gone . . . and not gone. Her voice was quite tiny. 'What's happening?' and all that remained was the echo of her question above the deep-blue sheets.

Last day of summer

I am twelve and lying near-naked on my belly out on the back lawn in the sun when for the first time I hear her laugh. I don't know, I don't move, I just close my eyes. It's a girl's laugh, a young woman's, short and nervous like laughing at nothing funny. I got half my face in the grass I cut an hour before and I can smell the cold soil beneath it. There's a faint breeze coming off the river, the late afternoon sun stinging my back and that laugh jabbing at me like it's all one thing, one taste in my head. The laughing stops and all I can hear is the breeze flapping the pages of my comic, Alice crying somewhere upstairs and a kind of summer heaviness all over the garden. Then I hear them walking across the lawn towards me and I sit up so quickly it makes me dizzy, and the colours have gone out of everything. And there's this fat woman, or girl, walking towards me with my brother. She's so fat her arms can't hang right from her shoulders. She's got rubber tyres round her neck. They're both looking at me and talking about me, and when they get really close I stand up and she shakes my hand and still looking right at me she makes a kind of yelping noise like a polite horse. It's the noise I heard just now, her laugh. Her hand is hot and wet and pink like a sponge, with dimples at the base of each finger. My brother introduces her as Jenny. She's going to take the attic bedroom. She's got a very large face, round like a red moon, and thick glasses which make her eyes as big as golf balls. When she lets go of my hand I can't think of one thing to say. But my brother Peter talks on and on, he tells her what vegetables we are growing and what flowers, he makes her stand where she can get a view of the river between the trees and then he leads her back to the house. My brother is exactly twice my age and he's good at that sort of thing, just talking.

Jenny takes the attic. I've been up there a few times looking for things in the old boxes, or watching the river out of the small window. There's nothing much in the boxes really, just cloth

scraps and dressmaking patterns. Perhaps some of them actually belonged to my mother. In one corner there's a pile of picture frames without pictures. Once I was up there because it was raining outside, and downstairs there was a row going on between Peter and some of the others. I helped José clear out the place ready for a bedroom. José used to be Kate's boyfriend and then last spring he moved his things out of Kate's bedroom and moved into the spare room next to mine. We carried the boxes and frames to the garage, we stained the wooden floor black and put down rugs. We took apart the extra bed in my room and carried it up. With that, a table and a chair, a small cupboard and the sloping ceiling, there is just room for two people standing up. All Jenny has for luggage is a small suitcase and a carrier bag. I take them up to her room for her and she follows, breathing harder and harder and stopping half way up the third set of stairs to get a rest. My brother Peter comes up behind and we squeeze in as if we are all going to be living there and we're seeing it for the first time. I point out the window for her so she can see the river. Jenny sits with her big elbows on the table. Sometimes she dabs at her damp red face with a large white handkerchief while she's listening to some story of Peter's. I'm sitting on the bed behind her looking at how immense her back is, and under her chair I can see her thick pink legs, how they taper away and squeeze into tiny shoes at the bottom. Everywhere she's pink. The smell of her sweat fills the room. It smells like the new cut grass outside, and I get this idea that I mustn't breathe it in too deeply or I'll get fat too. We stand up to go so she can get on with her unpacking and she's saying thank you for everything, and as I go through the door she makes her little yelp, her nervous laugh. Without meaning to I glance back at her through the doorway and she's looking right at me with her magnified golf-balls eyes.

'You don't say much, do you?' she says. Which sort of makes it even harder to think of something to say. So I just smile at her and carry on down the stairs.

Downstairs it's my turn to help Kate cook the supper. Kate is tall and slim and sad. Really the opposite of Jenny. When I have girl friends I'm going to have them like Kate. She's very pale, though, even at this time in the summer. She has strange-coloured hair. Once I heard Sam say it was the colour of a brown envelope. Sam is one of Peter's friends who also lives here and who wanted to move his

things into Kate's bedroom when José moved his out. But Kate is sort of haughty and she doesn't like Sam because he's too noisy. If Sam moved into Kate's room he'd always be waking up Alice, Kate's little girl. When Kate and José are in the same room I always watch them to see if they ever look at each other, and they never do. Last April I went into Kate's room one afternoon to borrow something and she and José were in bed asleep. José's parents come from Spain and his skin is very dark. Kate was lying on her back with one arm stretched out, and José was lying on her arm, snuggling up to her side. They didn't have pyjamas on, and the sheet came up to their waists. They were so black and so white. I stood at the foot of the bed a long time, watching them. It was like some secret I'd found out. Then Kate opened her eyes and saw me there and told me very softly to get out. It seems pretty strange to me that they were lying there like that and now they don't even look at each other. That wouldn't happen with me if I was lying on some girl's arm. Kate doesn't like cooking. She has to spend a lot of time making sure Alice doesn't put knives in her mouth or pull boiling pots off the stove. Kate prefers dressing-up and going out, or talking for hours on the telephone, which is what I would rather do if I was a girl. Once she stayed out late and my brother Peter had to put Alice to bed. Kate always looks sad when she speaks to Alice, when she's telling her what to do she speaks very softly as if she doesn't really want to be speaking to Alice at all. And it's the same when she talks to me, as if it's not really talking at all. When she sees my back in the kitchen she takes me through to the downstairs bathroom and dabs calamine lotion over me with a piece of cotton wool. I can see her in the mirror, she doesn't seem to have any particular expression on her face. She makes a sound between her teeth, half a whistle and half a sigh, and when she wants a different part of my back towards the light she pushes or pulls me about by my arm. She asks me quickly and quietly what the girl upstairs is like, and when I tell her, 'She's very fat and she's got a funny laugh,' she doesn't make any reply. I cut up vegetables for Kate and lay the table. Then I walk down to the river to look at my boat. I bought it with some money I got when my parents died. By the time I get to the jetty it's past sunset and the river is black with scraps of red like the cloth scraps that used to be in the attic. Tonight the river is slow and the air is warm and smooth. I don't untie the boat, my back is too sore from the sun to row. In-

stead I climb in and sit with the quiet rise and fall of the river, watching the red cloth sink in the black water and wondering if I breathed in too much of Jenny's smell.

When I get back they are about to start eating. Jenny is sitting next to Peter and when I come in she doesn't look up from her plate, even when I sit down on the other side of her. She's so big beside me, and yet so bowed down over her plate, looking as if she doesn't really want to exist, that I feel sorry for her in a way and I want to speak to her. But I can't think of anything to say. In fact no one has anything to say this meal, they're all just pushing their knives and forks backwards and forwards over their plates, and now and then someone murmurs for something to be passed. It doesn't usually happen like this when we're eating, there's usually something going on. But Jenny's here, more silent than any of us, and bigger, too, and not looking up from her plate. Sam clears his throat and looks down our end of the table at Jenny, and everyone else looks up too, except for her, waiting for something. Sam clears his throat again and says,

'Where were you living before, Jenny?' Because no one's been speaking it comes out flat, as if Sam's in an office filling in a form for her. And Jenny, still looking down at her plate, says,

'Manchester.' Then she looks at Sam. 'In a flat.' And she gives a little yelp of a laugh, probably because we're all listening and looking at her, and then she sinks back into her plate while Sam's saying something like, 'Ah, I see,' and thinking of the next thing to say. Upstairs, Alice starts crying so Kate goes and brings her down and lets her sit on her lap. When she stops crying she points at each one of us in turn and shouts, 'UH, UH, UH,' and so on right round the table while we all sit there eating and not speaking. It's like she's telling us off for not thinking of things to say. Kate tells her to be quiet in the sad way she always has when she's with Alice. Sometimes I think she's like that because Alice doesn't have a father. She doesn't look at all like Kate, she has very fair hair and ears that are too large for her head. A year or two ago when Alice was very little I used to think that José was her father. But his hair is black, and he never pays much attention to Alice. When everybody's finished the first course and I'm helping Kate collect the dishes, Jenny offers to have Alice on her lap. Alice is still shouting and pointing at different things in the room, but once she's on Jenny's lap she goes very quiet.

Probably because it's the biggest lap she's ever seen. Kate and I bring in fruit and tea, and when we are peeling oranges and bananas, eating the apples from our tree in the garden, pouring tea and passing cups with milk and sugar round, everyone starts talking and laughing like they usually do, like there never was anything holding them back. And Jenny is giving Alice a really good time on her lap, making her knees gallop like a horse, making her hand swoop down like a bird on to Alice's belly, showing her tricks with her fingers, so that all the time Alice is shouting for more. It's the first time I've heard her laugh like that. And then Jenny glances down the table at Kate who's been watching them play with the same kind of look she might have on her face if she was watching the telly. Jenny carries Alice to her mother like she's suddenly feeling guilty about having Alice on her lap for such a long time and having so much fun. Alice is shouting, 'More, more, more,' when she's back at the other end of the table, and she's still shouting it five minutes later when her mother carries her up to bed.

Because my brother asks me to, I take coffee up to Jenny's room early next morning. When I go in she's already up, sitting at her table putting stamps on letters. She looks smaller than she did last night. She has her window wide open and her room is full of morning air, it feels like she's been up for a long time. Out of her window I can see the river stretching between the trees, light and quiet in the sun. I want to get outside, I want to see my boat before breakfast. But Jenny wants to talk. She makes me sit on her bed and tell her about myself. She doesn't ask me any questions and since I'm not sure how to start off telling someone about myself I sit there and watch while she writes addresses on her letters and sips her coffee. But I don't mind, it's all right in Jenny's room. She's put two pictures on the wall. One is a framed photograph taken in a zoo of a monkey walking upside down along a branch with its baby hanging on to its stomach. You can tell it is a zoo because in the bottom corner there's a zoo-keeper's cap and part of his face. The other is a colour picture taken out of a magazine of two children running along the sea shore holding hands. The sun is setting and everything in the picture is deep red, even the children. It's a very good picture. She finishes with her letters and asks me where I go to school. I tell her about the new school I'm going to when the holidays are over, the big comprehensive in Reading. But I haven't been there yet, so

there isn't much I can tell her about it. She sees me looking out the window again.

'Are you going down to the river?'

'Yes, I have to see my boat.'

'Can I come with you? Will you show me the river?' I wait for her by the door, watching her squeeze her round, pink feet into small, flat shoes and brush her very short hair with a brush which has a mirror on the back. We walk across the lawn to the kissing gate at the bottom of the garden and along the path through the high ferns. Half way down I stop to listen to a yellow-hammer, and she tells me that she doesn't know the song of one bird. Most grown-up people will never tell you that they don't know things. So farther on down the path just before it opens out on to the jetty we stop under an old oak tree so she can hear a blackbird. I know there's one up there, it's always up there singing this time in the morning. Just as we get there it stops and we have to wait quietly for it to begin again. Standing by that half-dead old trunk I can hear other birds in other trees and the river just round the corner washing under the jetty. But our bird is taking a rest. Something about waiting in silence makes Jenny nervous and she pinches her nose tight to stop her yelp of a laugh getting out. I want her to hear the blackbird so much I put my hand on her arm, and when I do that she takes her hand away from her nose and smiles. Just a few seconds after that the blackbird sets out on its long complicated song. It was waiting all the time for us to get settled. We walk out on to the jetty and I show her my boat tied up at the end. It's a rowing boat, green on the outside and red on the inside like a fruit. I've been down here every day all this summer to row it, paint it, wipe it down, and sometimes just to look at it. Once I rowed it seven miles upstream and spent the rest of the day drifting back down. We sit on the edge of the jetty looking at my boat, the river and the trees on the other side. Then Jenny looks downstream and says,

'London's down there.' London is a terrible secret I try to keep from the river. It doesn't know about it yet while it's flowing past our house. So I just nod and say nothing. Jenny asks me if she can sit in the boat. It worries me at first that she's going to be too heavy. But of course I cannot tell her that. I lean over the jetty and hold the painter rope for her to climb in. She does it with a lot of grunting and rocking around. And since the boat doesn't look any lower now than

it usually does, I get in too and we watch the river from this new level where you can see how strong and old it really is. We sit talking for a long time. First I tell her about how my parents died two years ago in a car crash and how my brother had ideas for turning the house into a kind of commune. At first he was going to have over twenty people living here. But now I think he wants to keep it down to about eight. Then Jenny tells me about the time she was a teacher in a big school in Manchester where all the children were always laughing at her because she was fat. She doesn't seem to mind talking about it, though. She has some funny stories of her time there. When she's telling me of the time when the children locked her in a book cupboard we both laugh so much the boat rocks from side to side and pushes small waves out into the river. This time Jenny's laugh is easy and kind of rhythmic, not hard and yelping like before. On the way back she recognises two blackbirds by their songs, and when we're crossing the lawn she points out another. I just nod. It's a song-thrush really, but I'm too hungry to tell her the difference.

Three days later I hear Jenny singing. I'm in the back yard trying to put together a bicycle out of bits and pieces and I hear her through the open kitchen window. She's in there cooking lunch and looking after Alice while Kate visits friends. It's a song she doesn't know the words for, half way between happy and sad, and she's singing like an old croaky Negress to Alice. New morning man la-la, la-la-la-, I'la, new morning man la-la-la, la-la, I'la, new morning man take me 'way from here. That afternoon I row her out on the river and she has another song with the same kind of tune, but this time with no words at all. Ya-la-la, ya-laaa, ya-cccc. She spreads her hands out and rolls her big magnified eyes around like it's a serenade especially for me. A week later Jenny's songs are all over the house, sometimes with a line or two if she can remember it, most often with no words at all. She spends a lot of her time in the kitchen and that's where she does most of her singing. Somehow she makes more space in there. She scrapes paint off the north window to let in more light. No one can think why it was painted over in the first place. She carries out an old table, and when it's out everyone realizes that it was always in the way. One afternoon she paints the whole of one wall white to make the kitchen look bigger, and she arranges the pots and plates so that you always know where they are and even I can reach them. She makes it into the kind of kitchen you can sit around in

when you've got nothing else to do. Jenny makes her own bread and bakes cakes, things we usually go to the shop for. On the third day she's here I find clean sheets on my bed. She takes the sheets I've been using all summer and most of my clothes away for washing. She spends all of one afternoon making a curry, and that night I eat the best meal in two years. When the others tell her how good they think it is Jenny gets nervous and does her yelping laugh. I can see the others are still bothered when she does it, they sort of look away as if it is something disgusting that would be rude to look at. But it doesn't worry me at all when she does that laugh, I don't even hear it except when the others are there at the table looking away. Most afternoons we go out on the river together and I try to teach her to row, and listen to her stories of when she was teaching, and when she was working in a supermarket, how she used to watch old people come in each day to shoplift bacon and butter. I teach her some more birdsongs, but the only one she can really remember is the first one, the blackbird. In her room she shows me pictures of her parents and her brother and she says,

'I'm the only fat one.' I show her some pictures of my parents, too. One of them was taken a month before they died, and in it they are walking down some steps holding hands and laughing at something outside the picture. They were laughing at my brother who was fooling around to make them laugh for the picture I was taking. I had just got the camera for my tenth birthday and that was one of the first pictures I took with it. Jenny looks at it for a long time and says something about her looking like a very nice woman, and suddenly I see my mother as just a woman in a picture, it could be any woman, and for the first time she's far off, not in my head looking out, but outside my head being looked at by me, Jenny or anyone who picks up the photo. Jenny takes it out of my hand and puts it away with the others in the shoe box. As we go downstairs she starts off on a long story about a friend of hers who was producing a play which ended strangely and quietly. The friend wanted Jenny to start off the clapping at the end but Jenny got it all wrong somehow and started everyone clapping fifteen minutes before the end during a quiet bit so that the last part of the play was lost and the clapping was all the louder because no one knew what the play was about. All this, I suppose, is to make me stop thinking about my mother, which it does.

Kate spends more time with her friends in Reading. One morning I'm in the kitchen when she comes in very smartly dressed in a kind of leather suit and high leather boots. She sits down opposite me to wait for Jenny to come down so she can tell her what food to give Alice that day, and what time she'll be back. It reminds me of another morning almost two years ago when Kate came into the kitchen in the same kind of suit. She sat down at the table, undid her blouse and started to knead with her fingers blueish-white milk into a bottle from one tit and then the other. She didn't seem to notice me sitting there.

'What are you doing that for?' I asked her.

She said, 'It's for Janet to give to Alice later on today. I've got to go out.' Janet was a black girl who used to be living here. It was strange watching Kate milk herself into a bottle. It made me think how we're just animals with clothes on doing very peculiar things, like monkeys at a tea party. But we get so used to each other most of the time. I wonder if Kate is thinking of that time now, sitting with me in the kitchen first thing in the morning. She's got orange lipstick on and her hair tied back and that makes her look even thinner than usual. Her lipstick is sort of fluorescent, like a road sign. Every minute she looks at her watch and her leather creaks. She looks like some beautiful woman from outer space. Then Jenny comes down, wearing a huge old dressing-gown made out of patches and yawning because she's just got out of bed, and Kate speaks to her very quickly and quietly about Alice's food for the day. It's as if it makes her sad, talking about that sort of thing. She picks up her bag and runs out of the kitchen and calls, 'Bye,' over her shoulder. Jenny sits down at the table and drinks tea and it's like she really is the big mama left behind at home to look after the rich lady's daughter. Yo' daddy's rich and yo' mama's goodlookin', lah la-la-la la-la don' yo' cry. And there's something in the way the others treat Jenny. Like she's outside things, and not really a person like they are. They've got used to her cooking big meals and making cakes. No one says anything about it now. Sometimes in the evenings Peter, Kate, José and Sam sit around and smoke hashish in Peter's homemade water-pipe and listen to the stereo turned up loud. When they do that Jenny usually goes up to her room, she doesn't like to be with them when they're doing that, and I can see they sort of resent it. And though she's a girl she's not beautiful like Kate or Sharon, my brother's girlfriend.

She doesn't wear jeans and Indian shirts like they do, either, probably because she can't find any to fit her. She wears dresses with flowers on and ordinary things like my mother or the lady in the post office wears. And when she gets nervous about something and does her laugh I can tell they think of her like some sort of mental patient, I know that by the way they turn their eyes away. And they still think about how fat she is. Sometimes when she's not there Sam calls her Slim Jim, and it always makes the others laugh. It's not that they're unfriendly to her or anything like that, it's just that in some way that's hard to describe they keep her apart from themselves. One time we're out on the river she asks me about hashish.

'What do you think about it all?' she says, and I tell her my brother won't let me try it till I'm fifteen. I know she's dead against it, but she doesn't mention it again. It's that same afternoon I take a photograph of her leaning by the kitchen door holding Alice and squinting a little into the sun. She takes mine too, riding no-hands round the back yard on the bicycle I put together out of bits and pieces.

It's hard to say exactly when Jenny becomes Alice's mother. At first she's just looking after her while Kate visits friends. Then the visits get more often till they are almost every day. So the three of us, Jenny, Alice and me, spend a lot of time together by the river. By the jetty there's a grass bank which slopes down on to a tiny sand beach about six feet across. Jenny sits on the bank playing with Alice while I do things to my boat. When we first put Alice in the boat she squeals like a baby pig. She doesn't trust the water. It's a long time before she'll stand on the small beach, and when she does at last she never takes her eyes off the water's edge to make sure it doesn't creep up on her. But when she sees Jenny waving to her from the boat, and quite safe, she changes her mind and we make a trip to the other side of the river. Alice doesn't mind about Kate being away because she likes Jenny, who sings her the bits of songs she knows and talks to her all the time when they are sitting on the grass bank by the river. Alice does not understand a word of it but she likes the sound of Jenny's voice going on and on. Sometimes Alice points up to Jenny's mouth and says, 'More, more.' Kate is always so quiet and sad with her she doesn't hear many voices speaking right at her. One night Kate stays away and doesn't come back till the next morning.

Alice is sitting on Jenny's knee spreading her breakfast across the kitchen table when Kate comes running in, scoops her up, hugs her and asks over and over again without giving anyone time to reply,

'Has she been all right? Has she been all right? Has she been all right?' The same afternoon Alice is back with Jenny because Kate has to go off somewhere again. I'm in the hall outside the kitchen when I hear her tell Jenny she'll be back in the early evening, and a few minutes later I see her walking down the drive carrying a small suitcase. When she gets back two days later she just puts her head round the door to see if Alice is still there, and then she goes up to her room. It's not always such a good thing having Alice with us all the time. We can't go very far in the boat. After twenty minutes Alice gets suspicious of the water again and wants to be back on the shore. And if we want to walk somewhere Alice has to be carried most of the way. It means I can't show Jenny some of my special places along the river. By the end of the day Alice gets pretty miserable, moaning and crying about nothing because she's tired. I get fed up spending so much time with Alice. Kate stays up in her room most of the day. One afternoon I take her up some tea and she's sitting in a chair asleep. With Alice there so much of the time Jenny and I don't talk together as much as we did when she first came. Not because Alice is listening, but because all Jenny's time is taken up with her. She doesn't think of anything else, really, it seems like she doesn't want to talk with anyone but Alice. One evening we are all sitting around in the front room after supper. Kate is in the hall having a long argument with someone on the telephone. She finishes, comes in, sits down in a noisy kind of way and carries on reading. But I can see she's angry and not really reading at all. No one speaks for a while, then Alice starts crying upstairs and shouting for Jenny. Jenny and Kate both look up at once and stare at each other for a moment. Then Kate gets up and leaves the room. We all pretend to go on reading but really we are listening to Kate's footsteps on the stairs. We hear her walk into Alice's room, which is right over this one, and we hear Alice shout louder and louder for Jenny to come up. Kate comes back down the stairs, this time quickly. When she comes in the room Jenny looks up and they stare at each other again. And all the time Alice goes on shouting for Jenny. Jenny gets up and squeezes past Kate at the door. They don't speak. The rest of us, Peter, Sam, José and me, we carry on with our pretend reading and

listen to Jenny's footsteps upstairs. The crying stops and she stays up there a long time. When she comes down Kate is back in her chair with her magazine. Jenny sits down and no one looks up, no one speaks.

Suddenly the summer is over. Jenny comes into my room early one morning to drag the sheets off my bed and all the clothes she can find in the room. Everything has to be washed before I go to school. Then she gets me to clean out my room, all the old comics and plates and cups which have been collecting under my bed all summer, all the dust and the pots of paint I've been using on my boat. She finds a small table in the garage and I help her carry it to my room. It's going to be my desk for doing homework on. She takes me into the village for a treat, and she won't tell me what it is. When we get there it turns out to be a haircut. I'm about to walk away when she puts her hand on my shoulder.

'Don't be silly,' she says. 'You can't go to school looking like that, you won't last a day.' So I sit still for the barber and let him cut away my whole summer while Jenny sits behind me, laughing at me scowling at her in the mirror. She gets some money from my brother Peter and takes me on the bus into town to buy a school uniform. It's strange having her tell me what to do all of a sudden after our times out on the river. But I don't mind, really, I can't think of any good reasons for not doing the things she says. She steers me through the main shopping streets, into shoe shops and outfitters, she buys me a red blazer and a cap, two pairs of black leather shoes, six pairs of grey socks, two pairs of grey trousers and five grey shirts, and all the time she's saying, 'Do you like these ones? Do you like this?' and since I don't have any special feeling for one particular shade of grey, I agree with whatever she thinks is the best. It's all over in an hour. That evening she empties my drawers of my rock collection to make room for the new clothes, and she gets me to put on the whole uniform. They all laugh downstairs, especially when I put the red cap on. Sam says I look like an inter-galactic postman. For three nights in a row she has me scrubbing my knees with a nail-brush to get the dirt out from under the skin.

Then on Sunday, the day before I start back at school, I go down to the boat with Jenny and Alice for the last time. In the evening I'm going to help Peter and Sam drag my boat up the path and across the lawn into the garage for the winter. Then we're going to build an-

other jetty, a stronger one. It's the last boat trip of the summer. Jenny lifts Alice in and climbs in herself while I hold the boat steady from the jetty. As I'm pushing us off with an oar, Jenny starts one of her songs. Jeesus won't you come on down, Jeesus won't you come on down, Jeesus won't you come on down, lah, la-la-la-lah, la-la. Alice stands between Jenny's knees watching me row. She thinks it's funny, the way I strain backwards and forwards. She thinks it's a game I'm playing with her, moving close up to her face and away again. It's strange, our last day on the river. When Jenny's finished her song no one speaks for a long time. Just Alice laughing at me. It's so still on the river, her laugh carries across the water to nowhere. The sun is a kind of pale yellow like it's burnt out at the end of summer, there's no wind in the trees on the banks, and no bird-song. Even the oars make no sound in the water. I row upstream with the sun on my back, but it's too pale to feel it, it's too pale to make shadows, even. Up ahead there's an old man standing under an oak tree, fishing. When we are level with him he looks up and stares at us in our boat and we stare back at him on the bank. His face does not change when he's looking at us. Our faces do not change, either, no one says hello. He has a long piece of grass in his mouth and when we've passed he takes it out and spits quietly into the river. Jenny trails her hand in the thick water and watches the bank as if it's something she's only seeing in her mind. It makes me think she doesn't really want to be out there on the river with me. She only came because of all the other times we've been rowing together, and because this is the last time this summer. It sort of makes me sad, thinking that, it makes it harder to row. Then after we've been going for about half an hour she looks at me and smiles and I can tell it's all in my head about her not wanting to be on the river because she starts talking about the summer, about all the things we've been doing. She makes it sound really great, much better than it was really. About the long walks we went on, and paddling at the edge of the river with Alice, how I tried to teach her to row and remember different birdsongs, and the times we used to get up while the others were still asleep and row on the river before breakfast. She gets me going too, remembering all the things we did, like the time we thought we saw a waxwing, and another time we waited one evening behind a bush for a badger to come out of its hole. Pretty soon we get really excited about what a summer it's been

and the things we're going to do next year, shouting and laughing into the dead air. And then Jenny says,

'And tomorrow you put on your red cap and go to school.' There's something in the way she says it, pretending to be serious and telling me off, with one finger wagging in the air, that makes it the funniest thing I ever heard. And the idea of it too, of doing all those things in the summer and then at the end of it putting on a red cap and going to school. We start laughing and it seems like we're never going to stop. I have to put down the oars. Our hooting and cackling gets louder and louder because the still air doesn't carry it across the water and the noise of it stays with us in the boat. Each time we catch the other's eye we laugh harder and louder till it begins to hurt down my sides, and more than anything I want to stop. Alice starts to cry because she doesn't know what's happening, and that makes us laugh more. Jenny leans over the side of the boat so she can't see me. But her laugh is getting tighter and drier, little hard yelps like pieces of stone from her throat. Her big pink face and her big pink arms are shaking and straining to catch a mouthful of air, but it's all going out of her in little pieces of stone. She leans back into the boat. Her mouth is laughing but her eyes look kind of scared and dry. She drops to her knees, holding her stomach with the pain of laughing, and knocks Alice down with her. And the boat tips over. It tips over because Jenny falls against the side, because Jenny is big and my boat is small. It goes over quickly, like the click of my camera shutter, and suddenly I'm at the deep green bottom of the river touching the cold soft mud with the back of my hand and feeling the reeds on my face. I can hear laughter like sinking pieces of stone by my ear. But when I push upwards to the surface I feel no one near me. When I come up it's dark on the river. I've been down a long time. Something touches my head and I realize I'm inside the upturned boat. I go down again and up the other side. It takes me a long time to get my breath. I work my way round the boat shouting over and over for Jenny and Alice. I put my mouth in the water and shout their names. But no one answers, nothing breaks the surface. I'm the only one on the river. So I hang on to the side of the boat and wait for them to come up. I wait a long time, drifting along with the boat, with the laughter still in my head, watching the river and the yellow patches on it from the sun getting low. Sometimes great shivers run through my legs and back, but mostly I'm calm, hanging

on to the green shell with nothing in my mind, nothing at all, just watching the river, waiting for the surface to break and the yellow patches to scatter. I drift past the place where the old man was fishing and it seems like a very long time ago. He's gone now, there's just a paper bag in the place where he was standing. I get so tired I close my eyes and it feels like I'm at home in bed and it's winter and my mother's coming into my room to say goodnight. She turns out the light and I slip off the boat into the river. Then I remember and I shout for Jenny and Alice and watch the river again and my eyes start to close and my mother comes into my room and says goodnight and turns out the light and I sink back into the water again. After a long time I forget to shout for Jenny and Alice, I just hang there and drift down. I'm looking at a place on the bank I used to know very well a long time ago. There's a patch of sand and a grass bank by a jetty. The yellow patches are sinking into the river when I push away from the boat. I let it drift on down to London and I swim slowly through the black water to the jetty.

In Between the Sheets

That night Stephen Cooke had a wet dream, the first in many years. Afterwards he lay awake on his back, hands behind his head, while its last images receded in the darkness and his cum, strangely located across the small of his back, turned cold. He lay still till the light was bluish-grey, and then he took a bath. He lay there a long time too, staring sleepily at his bright body under water.

That preceding day he had kept an appointment with his wife in a fluorescent café with red formica table tops. It was five o'clock when he arrived and almost dark. As he expected he was there before her. The waitress was an Italian girl, nine or ten years old perhaps, her eyes heavy and dull with adult cares. Laboriously she wrote out the word 'coffee' twice on her notepad, tore the page in half and carefully laid one piece on his table, face downwards. Then she shuffled away to operate the vast and gleaming Gaggia machine. He was the café's only customer.

His wife was observing him from the pavement outside. She disliked cheap cafés and she would make sure he was there before she came in. He noticed her as he turned in his seat to take his coffee from the child. She stood behind the shoulder of his own reflected image, like a ghost, half-hidden in a doorway across the street. No doubt she believed he could not see out of a bright café into the darkness. To reassure her he moved his chair to give her a more complete view of his face. He stirred his coffee and watched the waitress who leaned against the counter in a trance, and who now drew a long silver thread from her nose. The thread snapped and settled on the end of

her forefinger, a colourless pearl. She glared at it briefly and spread it across her thighs, so finely it disappeared.

When his wife came in she did not look at him first. She went straight to the counter and ordered a coffee from the girl and carried it to the table herself.

'I wish,' she hissed as she unwrapped the sugar, 'you wouldn't pick places like this.' He smiled indulgently and downed his coffee in one. She finished hers in careful pouting sips. Then she took a small mirror and some tissues from her bag. She blotted her red lips and swabbed from an incisor a red stain. She crumpled the tissue into her saucer and snapped her bag shut. Stephen watched the tissue absorb the coffee slop and turn grey. He said, 'Have you got another one of those I can have?' She gave him two.

'You're not going to cry are you?' At one such meeting he had cried. He smiled. 'I want to blow my nose.' The Italian girl sat down at a table near theirs and spread out several sheets of paper. She glanced across at them, and then leaned forwards till her nose was inches from the table. She began to fill in columns of numbers. Stephen murmured, 'She's doing the accounts.'

His wife whispered, 'It shouldn't be allowed, a child of that age.' Finding themselves in rare agreement, they looked away from each other's faces.

'How's Miranda?' Stephen said at last.

'She's all right.'

'I'll be over to see her this Sunday.'

'If that's what you want.'

'And the other thing . . .' Stephen kept his eyes on the girl who dangled her legs now and day-dreamed. Or perhaps she was listening.

'Yes?'

'The other thing is that when the holidays start I want Miranda to come and spend a few days with me.'

'She doesn't want to.'

'I'd rather hear that from her.'

'She won't tell you herself. You'll make her feel guilty if you ask her.' He banged the table hard with his open hand.

'Listen!' He almost shouted. The child looked up and Stephen felt her approach. 'Listen,' he said quietly, 'I'll speak to her on Sunday and judge for myself.'

'She won't come,' said his wife, and snapped shut her bag once more as if their daughter lay curled up inside. They both stood up. The girl stood up too and came over to take Stephen's money, accepting a large tip without recognition. Outside the café Stephen said, 'Sunday then.' But his wife was already walking away and did not hear.

That night he had the wet dream. The dream itself concerned the café, the girl and the coffee machine. It ended in sudden and intense pleasure, but for the moment the details were beyond recall. He got out of the bath hot and dizzy, on the edge, he thought, of an hallucination. Balanced on the side of the bath, he waited for it to wear off, a certain warping of the space between objects. He dressed and went outside, into the small garden of dying trees he shared with other residents in the square. It was seven o'clock. Already Drake, self-appointed custodian of the garden, was down on his knees by one of the benches. Paint-scraper in one hand, a bottle of colourless liquid in the other.

'Pigeon crap,' Drake barked at Stephen. 'Pigeons crap and no one can sit down. No one.' Stephen stood behind the old man, his hands deep in his pockets, and watched him work at the grey and white stains. He felt comforted. Round the edge of the garden ran a narrow path worn to a trough by the daily traffic of dog walkers, writers with blocks and married couples in crisis.

Walking there now Stephen thought, as he often did, of Miranda his daughter. On Sunday she would be fourteen, today he should find her a present. Two months ago she sent him a letter. 'Dear Daddy, are you looking after yourself? Can I have twenty-five pounds please to buy a record-player? With

all my love, Miranda.' He replied by return post and regretted it the instant the letter left his hands. 'Dear Miranda, I am looking after myself, but not sufficiently to comply with ... etc.' In effect it was his wife he had addressed. At the sorting office he spoke to a sympathetic official who led him away by the elbow. You wish to retrieve a letter? This way please. They passed through a glass door and stepped out on to a small balcony. The kindly official indicated with a sweep of his hand the spectacular view, two acres of men, women, machinery and moving conveyor belts. Now where would you like us to start?

Returning to his point of departure for the third time he noticed that Drake was gone. The bench was spotless and smelling of spirit. He sat down. He had sent Miranda thirty pounds, three new ten-pound notes in a registered letter. He regretted that too. The extra five so clearly spelled out his guilt. He spent two days over a letter to her, fumbling, with reference to nothing in particular, maudlin. 'Dear Miranda, I heard some pop music on the radio the other day and I couldn't help wondering at the words which ...' To such a letter he could conceive of no reply. But it came about ten days later. 'Dear Daddy, thanks for the money. I bought a Musivox Junior the same as my friend Charmian. With all my love, Miranda. PS. It's got two speakers.'

Back indoors he made coffee, took it into his study and fell into the mild trance which allowed him to work three and a half hours without a break. He reviewed a pamphlet on Victorian attitudes to menstruation, he completed another three pages of a short story he was writing, he wrote a little in his random journal. He typed, 'nocturnal emission like an old man's last gasp' and crossed it out. From a drawer he took a thick ledger and entered in the credit column 'Review ... 1500 words. Short story ... 1020 words. Journal ... 60 words'. Taking a red biro from a box marked 'pens' he ruled off the day, closed the book and returned it to its drawer. He replaced the dust-cover on his typewriter, returned the telephone to its cradle, gathered up the coffee things on to a tray and carried

them out, locking the study door behind him, thus terminating the morning's rite, unchanged for twenty-three years.

He moved quickly up Oxford Street gathering presents for his daughter's birthday. He bought a pair of jeans, a pair of coloured canvas running shoes suggestive of the Stars and Stripes. He bought three coloured T-shirts with funny slogans ... *It's Raining In My Heart*, *Still a Virgin*, and *Ohio State University*. He bought a pomander and a game of dice from a woman in the street and a necklace of plastic beads. He bought a book about women heroes, a game with mirrors, a record token for £5, a silk scarf and a glass pony. The silk scarf putting him in mind of underwear, he returned to the shop determined.

The erotic, pastel hush of the lingerie floor aroused in him a sense of taboo, he longed to lie down somewhere. He hesitated at the entrance to the department then turned back. He bought a bottle of cologne on another floor and came home in a mood of gloomy excitement. He arranged his presents on the kitchen table and surveyed them with loathing, their sickly excess and condescension. For several minutes he stood in front of the kitchen table staring at each object in turn, trying to relive the certainty with which he had bought it. The record token he put on one side, the rest he swept into a carrier bag and threw it into the cupboard in the hallway. Then he took off his shoes and socks, lay down on his unmade bed, examined with his finger the colourless stain that had hardened on the sheet, and then slept till it was dark.

Naked from the waist Miranda Cooke lay across her bed, arms spread, face buried deep in the pillow, and the pillow buried deep under her yellow hair. From a chair by the bed a pink transistor radio played methodically through the top twenty. The late afternoon sun shone through closed curtains and cast the room in the cerulean green of a tropical aquarium. Little Charmian, Miranda's friend, plied her fingernails backwards and forwards across Miranda's pale unblemished back.

Charmian too was naked, and time seemed to stand still.

Ranged along the mirror of the dressing table, their feet concealed by cosmetic jars and tubes, their hands raised in perpetual surprise, sat the discarded dolls of Miranda's childhood. Charmian's caresses slowed to nothing, her hands came to rest in the small of her friend's back. She stared at the wall in front of her, swaying abstractedly. Listening.

... They're all locked in the nursery,
They got earphone heads, they got dirty necks,
They're so twentieth century.

'I didn't know *that* was in,' she said. Miranda twisted her head and spoke from under her hair.

'It's come back,' she explained. 'The Rolling Stones used to sing it.'

Don'cha think there's a place for you
In between the sheets?

When it was over Miranda spoke peevishly over the dj's hysterical routine. 'You've stopped. Why have you stopped?' 'I've been doing it for ages.'

'You said half an hour for my birthday. You promised.' Charmian began again. Miranda, sighing as one who only receives her due, sank her mouth into the pillow. Outside the room the traffic droned soothingly, the pitch of an ambulance siren rose and fell, a bird began to sing, broke off, started again, a bell rang somewhere downstairs and later a voice called out, over and over again, another siren passed, this time more distant ... it was all so remote from the aquatic gloom where time had stopped, where Charmian gently drew her nails across her friend's back for her birthday. The voice reached them again. Miranda stirred and said, 'I think that's my mum calling me. My dad must've come.'

When he rang the front door bell, this house where he had lived sixteen years, Stephen assumed his daughter would answer. She usually did. But it was his wife. She had the advantage of three concrete steps and she glared down at him, waiting for him to speak. He had nothing ready for her.

'Is . . . is Miranda there?' he said finally. 'I'm a little late,' he added, and taking his chance, advanced up the steps. At the very last moment she stepped aside and opened the door wider.

'She's upstairs,' she said tonelessly as Stephen tried to squeeze by without touching her. 'We'll go in the big room.' Stephen followed her into the comfortable, unchanging room, lined from floor to ceiling with books he had left behind. In one corner, under its canvas cover, was his grand piano. Stephen ran his hand along its curving edge. Indicating the books he said, 'I must take all these off your hands.'

'In your own good time,' she said as she poured sherry for him. 'There's no hurry.' Stephen sat down at the piano and lifted the cover.

'Do either of you play it now?' She crossed the room with his glass and stood behind him.

'I never have the time. And Miranda isn't interested now.' He spread his hands over a soft, spacious chord, sustained it with the pedal and listened to it die away.

'Still in tune then?'

'Yes.' He played more chords, he began to improvise a melody, almost a melody. He could happily forget what he had come for and be left alone to play for an hour or so, his piano.

'I haven't played for over a year,' he said by way of explanation. His wife was over by the door now about to call out to Miranda, and she had to snatch back her breath to say,

'Really? It sounds fine to me. Miranda,' she called, 'Miranda, Miranda,' rising and falling on three notes, the third note higher than the first, and trailing away inquisitively. Stephen played the three-note tune back, and his wife broke off abruptly. She looked sharply in his direction. 'Very clever.'

'You know you have a musical voice,' said Stephen without irony. She advanced farther into the room.

'Are you still intending to ask Miranda to stay with you?' Stephen closed the piano and resigned himself to hostilities.

'Have you been working on her then?' She folded her arms.

'She won't go with you. Not alone anyway.'

'There isn't room in the flat for you as well.'

'And thank God there isn't.' Stephen stood up and raised his hand like an Indian chief.

'Let's not,' he said. 'Let's not.' She nodded and returned to the door and called out to their daughter in a steady tone, immune to imitation. Then she said quietly. 'I'm talking about Charmian. Miranda's friend.'

'What's she like?'

She hesitated. 'She's upstairs. You'll see her.'

'Ah . . .'

They sat in silence. From upstairs Stephen heard giggling, the familiar, distant hiss of the plumbing, a bedroom door opening and closing. From his shelves he picked out a book about dreams and thumbed through. He was aware of his wife leaving the room, but he did not look up. The setting afternoon sun lit the room. 'An emission during a dream indicates the sexual nature of the whole dream, however obscure and unlikely the contents are. Dreams culminating in emission may reveal the object of the dreamer's desire as well as his inner conflicts. An orgasm cannot lie.'

'Hello, Daddy,' said Miranda. 'This is Charmian, my friend.' The light was in his eyes and at first he thought they held hands, like mother and child side by side before him, illuminated from behind by the orange dying sun, waiting to be greeted. Their recent laughter seemed concealed in their silence. Stephen stood up and embraced his daughter. She felt different to the touch, stronger perhaps. She smelt unfamiliar, she had a private life at last, accountable to no one. Her bare arms were very warm.

'Happy birthday,' Stephen said, closing his eyes as he squeezed her and preparing to greet the minute figure at her side. He stepped back smiling and virtually knelt before her on the carpet to shake hands, this doll-like figurine who stood no more than 3 foot 6 at his daughter's side, whose wooden, oversized face smiled steadily back at him.

'I've read one of your books,' was her calm first remark. Stephen sat back in his chair. The two girls still stood before him as though they wished to be described and compared. Miranda's T-shirt did not reach her waist by several inches and her growing breasts lifted the edge of the shirt clear of her belly. Her hand rested on her friend's shoulder protectively.

'Really?' said Stephen after some pause. 'Which one?'

'The one about evolution.'

'Ah ...' Stephen took from his pocket the envelope containing the record token and gave it to Miranda. 'It's not much,' he said, remembering the bag full of gifts. Miranda retired to a chair to open her envelope. The dwarf however remained standing in front of him, regarding him fixedly. She fingered the hem of her child's dress.

'Miranda told me a lot about you,' she said politely. Miranda looked up and giggled.

'No I didn't,' she protested. Charmian went on.

'She's very proud of you.' Miranda blushed. Stephen wondered at Charmian's age.

'I haven't given her much reason to be,' he found himself saying, and gestured at the room to indicate the nature of his domestic situation. The tiny girl gazed patiently into his eyes and he felt for a moment poised on the edge of total confession. I never satisfied my wife in marriage, you see. Her orgasms terrified me. Miranda had discovered her present. With a little cry she left her chair, cradled his head between her hands and stooping down kissed his ear.

'Thank you,' she murmured hotly and loudly, 'thank you, thank you.' Charmian took a couple of paces nearer till she was almost standing between his open knees. Miranda settled on the arm of his chair. It grew darker. He felt the warmth of Miranda's body on his neck. She slipped down a little farther and rested her head on his shoulder. Charmian stirred. Miranda said, 'I'm glad you came,' and drew her knees up to make herself smaller. From outside Stephen heard his wife moving from one room to another. He lifted his arm round his

daughter's shoulder, careful not to touch her breasts, and hugged her to him.

'Are you coming to stay with me when the holidays begin?'

'Charmian too ...' She spoke childishly, but her words were delicately pitched between inquiry and stipulation.

'Charmian too,' Stephen agreed. 'If she wants to.' Charmian let her gaze drop and said demurely, 'Thank you.'

During the following week Stephen made preparations. He swept the floor of his only spare room, he cleaned the windows there and hung new curtains. He hired a television. In the mornings he worked with customary numbness and entered his achievements in the ledger book. He brought himself at last to set out what he could remember of his dream. The details seemed to be accumulating satisfactorily. His wife was in the café. It was for her that he was buying coffee. A young girl took a cup and held it to the machine. But now *he* was the machine, now *he* filled the cup. This sequence, laid out neatly, cryptically in his journal, worried him less now. It had, as far as he was concerned, a certain literary potential. It needed fleshing out, and since he could remember no more he would have to invent the rest. He thought of Charmian, of how small she was, and he examined carefully the chairs ranged round the dining-room table. She was small enough for a baby's high chair. In a department store he carefully chose two cushions. The impulse to buy the girls presents he distrusted and resisted. But still he wanted to do things for them. What could he do? He raked out gobs of ancient filth from under the kitchen sink, poured dead flies and spiders from the lamp fixtures, boiled fetid dishclothes; he bought a toilet brush and scrubbed the crusty bowl. Things they would never notice. Had he really become such an old fool? He spoke to his wife on the phone.

'You never mentioned Charmian before.'

'No,' she agreed. 'It's a fairly recent thing.'

'Well ...' he shrugged, 'how do you feel about it?'

'It's fine by me,' she said, very relaxed. 'They're good friends.' She was trying him out, he thought. She hated him for his

fearfulness, his passivity and for all the wasted hours between the sheets. It took her many years of marriage to say so. The experimentation in his writing, the lack of it in his life. She hated him. And now she had a lover, a vigorous lover. And still he wanted to say, is it right, our lovely daughter with a friend who belongs by rights in a circus or silk-hung brothel serving tea? Our flaxen-haired, perfectly formed daughter, our tender bud, is it not perverse?

'Expect them Thursday evening,' said his wife by way of goodbye.

When Stephen answered the door he saw only Charmian at first, and then he made out Miranda outside the tight circle of light from the hall, struggling with both sets of luggage. Charmian stood with her hands on her hips, her heavy head tipped slightly to one side. Without greeting she said, 'We had to take a taxi and he's downstairs waiting.'

Stephen kissed his daughter, helped her in with the cases and went downstairs to pay the taxi. When he returned, a little out of breath from the two flights of stairs, the front door of his flat was closed. He knocked and had to wait. It was Charmian who opened the door and stood in his path.

'You can't come in,' she said solemnly. 'You'll have to come back later,' and she made as if to close the door. Laughing in his nasal, unconvincing way, Stephen lunged forwards, caught her under her arms and scooped her into the air. At the same time he stepped into the flat and closed the door behind him with his foot. He meant to lift her high in the air like a child, but she was heavy, heavy like an adult, and her feet trailed a few inches above the ground, it was all he could manage. She thumped his hand with her fists and shouted.

'Put me . . .' Her last word was cut off by the crash of the door. Stephen released her instantly. ' . . . down,' she said softly. They stood in the bright hallway, both a little out of breath. For the first time he saw Charmian's face clearly. Her head was bullet shaped and ponderous, her lower lip curled per-

manently outwards and she had the beginnings of a double chin. Her nose was squat and she had the faint downy greyness of a moustache. Her neck was thick and bullish. Her eyes were large and calm, set far apart, brown like a dog's. She was not ugly, not with these eyes. Miranda was at the far end of the long hall. She wore ready-faded jeans and a yellow shirt. Her hair was in plaits and tied at the end with a scrap of blue denim. She came and stood by her friend's side.

'Charmian doesn't like being lifted about,' she explained. Stephen guided them towards his sitting room.

'I'm sorry,' he said to Charmian and laid his hand on her shoulder for an instant. 'I didn't know that.'

'I was only joking when I came to the door,' she said evenly.

'Yes of course,' Stephen said hurriedly. 'I didn't think anything else.'

During dinner, which Stephen had bought ready-cooked from a local Italian restaurant, the girls talked to him about their school. He allowed them a little wine and they giggled a lot and clutched at each other when they fell about. They prompted each other through a story about their head master who looked up girls' skirts. He remembered some anecdotes of his own time at school, or perhaps they were other people's time, but he told them well and they laughed delightedly. They became very excited. They pleaded for more wine. He told them one glass was enough.

Charmian and Miranda said they wanted to do the dishes. Stephen sprawled in an armchair with a large brandy, soothed by the blur of their voices and the homely clatter of dishes. This was where he lived, this was his home. Miranda brought him coffee. She set it down on the table with the mock deference of a waitress.

'Coffee, sir?' she said. Stephen moved over in his chair and she sat in close beside him. She moved easily between woman and child. She drew her legs up like before and pressed herself against her large shaggy father. She had unloosened her plaits

and her hair spread across Stephen's chest, golden in the electric light.

'Have you found a boy-friend at school?' he asked.

She shook her head and kept it pressed against his shoulder.

'Can't find a boy-friend, eh?' Stephen insisted. She sat up suddenly and lifted her hair clear of her face.

'There are loads of boys,' she said angrily, 'loads of them, but they're so *stupid*, they're such show-offs.' Never before had the resemblance between his wife and daughter seemed so strong. She glared at him. She included him with the boys at school. 'They're always doing things.'

'What sort of thing?' She shook her head impatiently.

'I don't know ... the way they comb their hair and bend their knees.'

'Bend their knees?'

'Yes. When they think you're watching them. They stand in front of our window and pretend they're combing their hair when they're just looking in at us, showing off. Like this.' She sprang out of the chair and crouched in the centre of the room in front of an imaginary mirror, bent low like a singer over a microphone, her head tilted grotesquely, combing with long, elaborate strokes; she stepped back, preened and then combed again. It was a furious imitation. Charmian was watching it too. She stood in the doorway with coffee in each hand.

'What about you, Charmian,' Stephen said carelessly, 'do you have a boy-friend?' Charmian set the coffee cups down and said, 'Of course I don't,' and then looked up and smiled at them both with the tolerance of a wise old woman.

Later on he showed them their bedroom.

'There's only one bed,' he told them. 'I thought you wouldn't mind sharing it.' It was an enormous bed, seven foot by seven, one of the few large objects he had brought with him from his marriage. The sheets were deep red and very old, from a time when all sheets were white. He did not care to sleep between them now, they had been a wedding present.

Charmian lay across the bed, she hardly took up more room than one of the pillows. Stephen said goodnight. Miranda followed him into the hall, stood on tiptoe to kiss him on the cheek.

'You're not a show-off,' she whispered and clung to him. Stephen stood perfectly still. 'I wish you'd come home,' she said. He kissed the top of her head.

'This is home,' he said. 'You've got two homes now.' He broke her hold and led her back to the entrance of the bedroom. He squeezed her hand. 'See you in the morning,' he murmured, left her there and hurried into his study. He sat down, horrified at his erection, elated. Ten minutes passed. He thought he should be sombre, analytical, this was a serious matter. But he wanted to sing, he wanted to play his piano, he wanted to go for a walk. He did none of those things. He sat still, staring ahead, thinking of nothing in particular, and waited for the chill of excitement to leave his belly.

When it did he went to bed. He slept badly. For many hours he was tormented by the thought that he was still awake. He awoke completely from fragmentary dreams into total darkness. It seemed to him then that for some time he had been hearing a sound. He could not remember what the sound was, only that he had not liked it. It was silent now, the darkness hissed about his ears. He wanted to piss, and for a moment he was afraid to leave his bed. The certainty of his own death came to him now as it occasionally did, but of dying now, 3.15 a.m. lying still with the sheet drawn up round his neck and wanting, like all mortal animals, to urinate. He turned the light on and went to the bathroom. His cock was small in his hands, nut brown and wrinkled by the cold, or perhaps the fear. He felt sorry for it. As he pissed his stream split in two. He pulled his foreskin a little and the streams converged. He felt sorry for himself. He stepped back into the hallway, and as he closed the bathroom door behind him and cut off the rumble of the cistern he heard that sound again, the sound he had listened to in his sleep. A sound so forgotten, so utterly familiar that

only now as he advanced very cautiously along the hallway did he know it to be the background for all other sounds, the frame of all anxieties. The sound of his wife in, or approaching, orgasm. He stopped several yards short of the girls' bedroom. It was a low moan through the medium of a harsh, barking cough, it rose imperceptibly in pitch through fractions of a tone, then fell away at the end, down but not very far, still higher than the starting-point. He did not dare to go nearer the door. He strained to listen. The end came and he heard the bed creak a little, and footsteps across the floor. He saw the door handle turn. Like a dreamer he asked no questions, he forgot his nakedness, he had no expectations.

Miranda screwed up her eyes in the brightness. Her yellow hair was loose. Her white cotton nightdress reached her ankles and its folds concealed the lines of her body. She could be any age. She hugged her arms round her body. Her father stood in front of her, very still, very massive, one foot in front of the other as though frozen mid-step, arms limp by his side, his naked black hairs, his wrinkled, nut-brown naked self. She could be a child or a woman, she could be any age. She took a little step forward.

'Daddy,' she moaned, 'I can't get to sleep.' She took his hand and he led her into the bedroom. Charmian lay curled up on the far side of the bed, her back to them. Was she awake, was she innocent? Stephen held back the bedclothes and Miranda climbed between the sheets. He tucked her in and sat on the edge of the bed. She arranged her hair.

'Sometimes I get frightened when I wake up in the middle of the night,' she told him.

'So do I,' he said and bent over and kissed her lightly on the lips.

'But there's nothing to be frightened of really, is there?'

'No,' he said. 'Nothing.' She settled herself deeper into the deep red sheets and gazed into his face.

'Tell me something though, tell me something to make me go to sleep.' He looked across at Charmian.

'Tomorrow you can look in the cupboard in the hall. There's a whole bag of presents in there.'

'For Charmian too?'

'Yes.' He studied her face by the light from the hall. He was beginning to feel the cold. 'I bought them for your birthday,' he added. But she was asleep and almost smiling, and in the pallor of her upturned throat he thought he saw from one bright morning in his childhood a field of dazzling white snow which he, a small boy of eight, had not dared scar with footprints.

Pornography

O'Byrne walked through Soho market to his brother's shop in Brewer Street. A handful of customers leafing through the magazines and Harold watching them through pebble-thick lenses from his raised platform in the corner. Harold was barely five foot and wore built-up shoes. Before becoming his employee O'Byrne used to call him Little Runt. At Harold's elbow a miniature radio rasped details of race meetings for the afternoon. 'So,' said Harold with thin contempt, 'the prodigal brother ...' His magnified eyes fluttered at every consonant. He looked past O'Byrne's shoulder. 'All the magazines are for sale, gentlemen.' The readers stirred uneasily like troubled dreamers. One replaced a magazine and walked quickly from the shop. 'Where d'you get to?' Harold said in a quieter voice. He stepped from the dais, put on his coat and glared up at O'Byrne, waiting for an answer. Little Runt. O'Byrne was ten years younger than his brother, detested him and his success but now, strangely, wanted his approbation. 'I had an appointment, didn't I,' he said quietly. 'I got the clap.' Harold was pleased. He reached up and punched O'Byrne's shoulder playfully. 'Serves you,' he said and cackled theatrically. Another customer edged out of the shop. From the doorway Harold called, 'I'll be back at five.' O'Byrne smiled as his brother left. He hooked his thumbs into his jeans and sauntered towards the tight knot of customers. 'Can I help you gentlemen, the magazines are all for sale.' They scattered before him like frightened fowl, and suddenly he was alone in the shop.

A plump woman of fifty or more stood in front of a plastic shower curtain, naked but for panties and gasmask. Her hands

hung limply at her sides and in one of them a cigarette smouldered. Wife of the Month. Since gasmasks and a thick rubber sheet on the bed, wrote JN of Andover, we've never looked back. O'Byrne played with the radio for a while then switched it off. Rhythmically he turned the pages of the magazine, and stopped to read the letters. An uncircumcised male virgin, without hygiene, forty-two next May, dared not peel back his foreskin now for fear of what he might see. I get these nightmares of worms. O'Byrne laughed and crossed his legs. He replaced the magazine, returned to the radio, switched it on and off rapidly and caught the unintelligible middle of a word. He walked about the shop straightening the magazines in the racks. He stood by the door and stared at the wet street intersected by the coloured strips of the plastic walk-thru. He whistled over and over a tune whose end immediately suggested its beginning. Then he returned to Harold's raised platform and made two telephone calls, both to the hospital, the first to Lucy. But sister Drew was busy in the ward and could not come to the phone. O'Byrne left a message that he would not be able to see her that evening after all and would phone again tomorrow. He dialled the hospital switchboard and this time asked for trainee Nurse Shepherd in the children's ward. 'Hi,' O'Byrne said when Pauline picked up the phone. 'It's me.' And he stretched and leaned against the wall. Pauline was a silent girl who once wept in a film about the effects of pesticides on butterflies, who wanted to redeem O'Byrne with her love. Now she laughed, 'I've been phoning you all morning,' she said. 'Didn't your brother tell you?'

'Listen,' said O'Byrne, 'I'll be at your place about eight,' and replaced the receiver.

Harold did not return till after six, and O'Byrne was almost asleep, his head pillowed on his forearm. There were no customers. O'Byrne's only sale was *American Bitch*. 'Those American mags,' said Harold as he emptied the till of £15 and a handful of silver, 'are good.' Harold's new leather jacket. O'Byrne

fingered it appreciatively. 'Seventy-eight quid,' said Harold and braced himself in front of the fish-eye mirror. His glasses flashed. 'It's all right,' said O'Byrne. 'Fucking right it is,' said Harold, and began to close up shop. 'Never take much on Wednesdays,' he said wistfully as he reached up and switched on the burglar alarm. 'Wednesday's a cunt of a day.' Now O'Byrne was in front of the mirror, examining a small trail of acne that led from the corner of his mouth. 'You're not fucking kidding,' he agreed.

Harold's house lay at the foot of the Post Office Tower and O'Byrne rented a room from him. They walked along together without speaking. From time to time Harold glanced sideways into a dark shop window to catch the reflection of himself and his new leather jacket. Little Runt. O'Byrne said, 'Cold, innit?' and Harold said nothing. Minutes later, when they were passing a pub, Harold steered O'Byrne into the dank, deserted public saying, 'Since you got the clap I'll buy you a drink.' The publican heard the remark and regarded O'Byrne with interest. They drank three scotches apiece, and as O'Byrne was paying for the fourth round Harold said, 'Oh yeah, one of those two nurses you've been knocking around with phoned.' O'Byrne nodded and wiped his lips. After a pause Harold said, 'You're well in there ...' O'Byrne nodded again. 'Yep.' Harold's jacket shone. When he reached for his drink it creaked. O'Byrne was not going to tell him anything. He banged his hands together. 'Yep,' he said once more, and stared over his brother's head at the empty bar. Harold tried again. 'She wanted to know where you'd been ...' 'I bet she did,' O'Byrne muttered, and then smiled.

Pauline, short and untalkative, her face bloodlessly pale, intersected by a heavy black fringe, her eyes large, green and watchful, her flat small, damp and shared with a secretary who was never there. O'Byrne arrived after ten, a little drunk and in need of a bath to purge the faint purulent scent that lately had hung about his fingers. She sat on a small wooden stool to watch

him luxuriate. Once she leaned forwards and touched his body where it broke the surface. O'Byrne's eyes were closed, his hands floating at his side, the only sound the diminishing hiss of the cistern. Pauline rose quietly to bring a clean white towel from her bedroom, and O'Byrne did not hear her leave or return. She sat down again and ruffled, as far as it was possible, O'Byrne's damp, matted hair. 'The food is ruined,' she said without accusation. Beads of perspiration collected in the corners of O'Byrne's eyes and rolled down the line of his nose like tears. Pauline rested her hand on O'Byrne's knee where it jutted through the grey water. Steam turned to water on the cold walls, senseless minutes passed. 'Never mind, love,' said O'Byrne, and stood up.

Pauline went out to buy beer and pizzas, and O'Byrne lay down in her tiny bedroom to wait. Ten minutes passed. He dressed after cursory examination of his clean but swelling meatus, and wandered listlessly about the sitting room. Nothing interested him in Pauline's small collection of books. There were no magazines. He entered the kitchen in search of a drink. There was nothing but an overcooked meat pie. He picked round the burnt bits and as he ate turned the pages of a picture calendar. When he finished he remembered again he was waiting for Pauline. He looked at his watch. She had been gone now almost half an hour. He stood up quickly, tipping the kitchen chair behind him to the floor. He paused in the sitting room and then walked decisively out of the flat and slammed the front door on his way. He hurried down the stairs, anxious not to meet her now he had decided to get out. But she was there. Halfway up the second flight, a little out of breath, her arms full of bottles and tinfoil parcels. 'Where d'you get to?' said O'Byrne. Pauline stopped several steps down from him, her face tilted up awkwardly over her goods, the white of her eyes and the tinfoil vivid in the dark. 'The usual place was closed. I had to walk miles ... sorry.' They stood. O'Byrne was not hungry. He wanted to go. He hitched his thumbs into the waist of his jeans and cocked his head towards the invisible

ceiling, then he looked down at Pauline who waited. 'Well,' he said at last, 'I was thinking of going.' Pauline came up, and as she pushed past whispered, 'Silly.' O'Byrne turned and followed her, obscurely cheated.

He leaned in the doorway, she righted the chair. With a movement of his head O'Byrne indicated that he wanted none of the food Pauline was setting out on plates. She poured him a beer and knelt to gather a few black pastry droppings from the floor. They sat in the sitting room. O'Byrne drank, Pauline ate slowly, neither spoke. O'Byrne finished all the beer and placed his hand on Pauline's knee. She did not turn. He said cheerily, 'What's wrong with you?' and she said, 'Nothing.' Alive with irritation O'Byrne moved closer and placed his arm protectively across her shoulders. 'Tell you what,' he half whispered. 'Let's go to bed.' Suddenly Pauline rose and went into the bedroom. O'Byrne sat with his hands clasped behind his head. He listened to Pauline undress, and he heard the creak of the bed. He got to his feet and, still without desire, entered the bedroom.

Pauline lay on her back and O'Byrne, having undressed quickly, lay beside her. She did not acknowledge him in her usual way, she did not move. O'Byrne raised his arm to stroke her shoulder, but instead let his hand fall back heavily against the sheet. They both lay on their backs in mounting silence, until O'Byrne decided to give her one last chance and with naked grunts hauled himself on to his elbow and arranged his face over hers. Her eyes, thick with tears, stared past him. 'What's the matter?' he said in resignatory sing-song. The eyes budged a fraction and fixed on his own. 'You,' she said simply. O'Byrne returned to his side of the bed, and after a moment said threateningly, 'I see.' Then he was up, and on top of her, and then past her and on the far side of the room. 'All right then ...' he said. He wrenched his laces into a knot, and searched for his shirt. Pauline's back was to him. But as he crossed the sitting room her rising, accelerating wail of denial made him stop and turn. All white, in a cotton nightdress, she

was there in the bedroom doorway and in the air, simultaneously at every point of arc in the intervening space, like the trick photographer's diver, she was on the far side of the room and she was at his lapels, knuckles in her mouth and shaking her head. O'Byrne smiled, and put his arms around her shoulders. Forgiveness swept through him. Clinging to each other they returned to the bedroom. O'Byrne undressed and they lay down again, O'Byrne on his back, Pauline with her head pillowed on his shoulder.

O'Byrne said, 'I never know what's going on in your mind,' and deeply comforted by this thought, he fell asleep. Half an hour later he woke. Pauline, exhausted by a week of twelve-hour shifts, slept deeply on his arm. He shook her gently. 'Hey,' he said. He shook her firmly, and as the rhythm of her breathing broke and she began to stir, he said in a laconic parody of some unremembered film, 'Hey, there's something we ain't done yet ...'

Harold was excited. When O'Byrne walked into the shop towards noon the following day Harold took hold of his arms and waved in the air a sheet of paper. He was almost shouting. 'I've worked it all out. I know what I want to do with the shop.' 'Oh yeah,' said O'Byrne dully, and put his fingers in his eyes and scratched till the intolerable itch there became a bearable pain. Harold rubbed his small pink hands together and explained rapidly. 'I'm going All American. I spoke to their rep on the phone this morning and he'll be here in half an hour. I'm getting rid of all the quid a time piss-in-her-cunt letters. I'm gonna carry the whole of the House of Florence range at £4.50 a time.'

O'Byrne walked across the shop to where Harold's jacket was spread across a chair. He tried it on. It was, of course, too small. 'And I'm going to call it Transatlantic Books,' Harold was saying. O'Byrne tossed the jacket on to the chair. It slid to the floor and deflated there like some reptilian air sac. Harold picked it up, and did not cease talking. 'If I carry

Florence exclusive I get a special discount *and*,' he giggled, 'they pay for the fucking neon sign.'

O'Byrne sat down and interrupted his brother. 'How many of those soddin' inflatable women did you unload? There's still twenty-five of the fuckers in the cellar.' But Harold was pouring out Scotch into two glasses. 'He'll be here in half an hour,' he repeated, and offered one glass to O'Byrne. 'Big deal,' said O'Byrne, and sipped. 'I want you to take the van over to Norbury and collect the order this afternoon. I want to get into this straight away.'

O'Byrne sat moodily with his drink while his brother whistled and was busy about the shop. A man came in and bought a magazine. 'See,' said O'Byrne sourly while the customer was still lingering over the tentacled condoms, 'he bought English, didn't he?' The man turned guiltily and left. Harold came and crouched by O'Byrne's chair and spoke as one who explains copulation to an infant. 'And what do I make? Forty per cent of 75p. Thirty p. Thirty fucking p. On House of Florence I'll make fifty per cent of £4.50. And that,' he rested his hand briefly on O'Byrne's knee, 'is what I call business.'

O'Byrne wriggled his empty glass in front of Harold's face, and waited patiently for his brother to fill it ... Little Runt.

The House of Florence warehouse was a disused church in a narrow terraced street on the Brixton side of Norbury. O'Byrne entered by the main porch. A crude plasterboard office and waiting room had been set up in the west end. The font was a large ash-tray in the waiting room. An elderly woman with a blue rinse sat alone in the office typing. When O'Byrne tapped on the sliding window she ignored him, then she rose and slid aside the glass panel. She took the order form he pushed towards her, glancing at him with unconcealed distaste. She spoke primly. 'You better wait there.' O'Byrne tap-danced abstractedly about the font, and combed his hair, and whistled the tune that went in a circle. Suddenly a shrivelled man with a brown coat and clipboard was at his side. 'Transatlantic

Books?' he said. O'Byrne shrugged and followed him. They moved together slowly down long aisles of bolted steel shelves, the old man pushing a large trolley and O'Byrne walking a little in front with his hands clasped behind his back. Every few yards the warehouseman stopped, and with bad-tempered gasps lifted a thick pile of magazines from the shelves. The load on the trolley grew. The old man's breath echoed hoarsely around the church. At the end of the first aisle he sat down on the trolley, between his neat piles, and coughed and hawked for a minute or so into a paper handkerchief. Then, carefully folding the tissue and its ponderous green contents back into his pocket, he said to O'Byrne, 'Here, you're young. You push this thing.' And O'Byrne said, 'Push the fucker yourself. It's your job,' and offered the man a cigarette and lit it for him.

O'Byrne nodded at the shelves. 'You get some reading done here.' The old man exhaled irritably. 'It's all rubbish. It ought to be banned.' They moved on. At the end, as he was signing the invoice, O'Byrne said, 'Who you got lined up for tonight? Madam in the office there?' The warehouseman was pleased. His cackles rang out like bells, then tailed into another coughing fit. He leaned feebly against the wall, and when he had recovered sufficiently he raised his head and meaningfully winked his watery eye. But O'Byrne had turned and was wheeling the magazines out to the van.

Lucy was ten years older than Pauline, and a little plump. But her flat was large and comfortable. She was a sister and Pauline no more than a trainee nurse. They knew nothing of each other. At the underground station O'Byrne bought flowers for Lucy, and when she opened the door to him he presented them with a mock bow and the clicking of heels. 'A peace offering?' she said contemptuously and took the daffodils away. She had led him into the bedroom. They sat down side by side on the bed. O'Byrne ran his hand up her leg in a perfunctory kind of way. She pushed away his arm and said, 'Come on then. Where have you been the past three days?' O'Byrne could barely remember.

Two nights with Pauline, one night in the pub with friends of his brother.

He stretched back luxuriously on the pink candlewick. 'You know . . . working late for Harold. Changing the shop around. That kind of thing.'

'Those dirty books,' said Lucy with a little high-pitched laugh.

O'Byrne stood up and kicked off his shoes. 'Don't start that,' he said, glad to be off the defensive. Lucy leaned forwards and gathered up his shoes. 'You're going to ruin the backs of these,' she said busily, 'kicking them off like that.'

They both undressed. Lucy hung her clothes neatly in the wardrobe. When O'Byrne stood almost naked before her she wrinkled her nose in disgust. 'Is that you smelling?' O'Byrne was hurt. 'I'll have a bath,' he offered curtly.

Lucy stirred the bathwater with her hand, and spoke loudly over the thunder of the taps. 'You should have brought me some clothes to wash.' She hooked her fingers into the elastic of his pants. 'Give me these now and they'll be dry by the morning.' O'Byrne laced his fingers into hers in a decoy of affection. 'No, no,' he shouted rapidly. 'They were clean on this morning, they were.' Playfully Lucy tried to get them off. They wrestled across the bathroom floor, Lucy shrieking with laughter, O'Byrne excited but determined.

Finally Lucy put on her dressing gown and went away. O'Byrne heard her in the kitchen. He sat in the bath and washed away the bright green stains. When Lucy returned his pants were drying on the radiator. 'Women's Lib, innit?' said O'Byrne from the bath. Lucy said, 'I'm getting in too,' and took off her dressing gown. O'Byrne made room for her. 'Please yourself,' he said with a smile as she settled herself in the grey water.

O'Byrne lay on his back on the clean white sheets, and Lucy eased herself on to his belly like a vast nesting bird. She would have it no other way, from the beginning she had said, 'I'm in charge.' O'Byrne had replied, 'We'll see about that.' He was

horrified, sickened, that he could enjoy being overwhelmed, like one of those cripples in his brother's magazines. Lucy had spoken briskly, the kind of voice she used for difficult patients. 'If you don't like it then don't come back.' Imperceptibly O'Byrne was initiated into Lucy's wants. It was not simply that she wished to squat on him. She did not want him to move. 'If you move again,' she warned him once, 'you've had it.' From mere habit O'Byrne thrust upwards and deeper, and quick as the tongue of a snake she lashed his face several times with her open palm. On the instant she came, and afterwards lay across the bed, half sobbing, half laughing. O'Byrne one side of his face swollen and pink, departed sulking. 'You're a bloody pervert,' he had shouted from the door.

Next day he was back, and Lucy agreed not to hit him again. Instead she abused him. 'You pathetic helpless little shit,' she would scream at the peak of her excitement. And she seemed to intuit O'Byrne's guilty thrill of pleasure, and wish to push it further. One time she had suddenly lifted herself clear of him and, with a far-away smile, urinated on his head and chest. O'Byrne had struggled to get clear, but Lucy held him down and seemed deeply satisfied by his unsought orgasm. This time O'Byrne left the flat enraged. Lucy's strong, chemical smell was with him for days, and it was during this time that he met Pauline. But within the week he was back at Lucy's to collect, so he insisted, his razor, and Lucy was persuading him to try on her underwear. O'Byrne resisted with horror and excitement. 'The trouble with you,' said Lucy, 'is that you're scared of what you like.'

Now Lucy gripped his throat in one hand. 'You dare move,' she hissed, and closed her eyes. O'Byrne lay still. Above him Lucy swayed like a giant tree. Her lips were forming a word, but there was no sound. Many minutes later she opened her eyes and stared down, frowning a little as though struggling to place him. And all the while she eased backwards and forwards. Finally she spoke, more to herself than to him. 'Worm . . .' O'Byrne moaned. Lucy's legs and thighs tightened and

trembled. 'Worm . . . worm . . . you little worm. I'm going to tread on you . . . dirty little worm.' Once more her hand was closed about his throat. His eyes were sunk deep, and his word travelled a long way before it left his lips. 'Yes,' he whispered.

The following day O'Byrne attended the clinic. The doctor and his male assistant were matter-of-fact, unimpressed. The assistant filled out a form and wanted details of O'Byrne's recent sexual history. O'Byrne invented a whore at Ipswich bus station. For many days after that he kept to himself. Attending the clinic mornings and evenings, for injections, he was sapped of desire. When Pauline or Lucy phoned, Harold told them he did not know where O'Byrne was. 'Probably taken off for somewhere,' he said, winking across the shop at his brother. Both women phoned each day for three or four days, and then suddenly there were no calls from either.

O'Byrne paid no attention. The shop was taking good money now. In the evenings he drank with his brother and his brother's friends. He felt himself to be both busy and ill. Ten days passed. With the extra cash Harold was giving him, he bought a leather jacket, like Harold's, but somewhat better, sharper, lined with red imitation silk. It both shone and creaked. He spent many minutes in front of the fish-eye mirror, standing sideways on, admiring the manner in which his shoulders and biceps pulled the leather to a tight sheen. He wore his jacket between the shop and the clinic and sensed the glances of women in the street. He thought of Pauline and Lucy. He passed a day considering which to phone first. He chose Pauline, and phoned her from the shop.

Trainee Nurse Shepherd was not available, O'Byrne was told after many minutes of waiting. She was sitting an examination. O'Byrne had his call transferred to the other side of the hospital. 'Hi,' he said when Lucy picked up the phone. 'It's me.' Lucy was delighted. 'When did you get back? Where have you been? When are you coming round?' He sat down. 'How about tonight?' he said. Lucy whispered in sex-kitten French,

'I can 'ardly wait . . .' O'Byrne laughed and pressed his thumb and forefinger against his forehead and heard other distant voices on the line. He heard Lucy giving instructions. Then she spoke rapidly to him. 'I've got to go. They've just brought a case in. About eight tonight then . . .' and she was gone.

O'Byrne prepared his story, but Lucy did not ask him where he had been. She was too happy. She laughed when she opened the door to him, she hugged him and laughed again. She looked different. O'Byrne could not remember her so beautiful. Her hair was shorter and a deeper brown, her nails were pale orange, she wore a short black dress with orange dots. There were candles and wine glasses on the dining table, music on the record player. She stood back, her eyes bright, almost wild, and admired his leather jacket. She ran her hands up the red lining. She pressed herself against it. 'Very smooth,' she said. 'Reduced to sixty quid,' O'Byrne said proudly, and tried to kiss her. But she laughed again and pushed him into a chair. 'You wait there and I'll get something to drink.'

O'Byrne lay back. From the record player a man sang of love in a restaurant with clean white tablecloths. Lucy brought an icy bottle of white wine. She sat on the arm of his chair and they drank and talked. Lucy told him recent stories of the ward, of nurses who fell in and out of love, patients who recovered or died. As she spoke she undid the top buttons of his shirt and pushed her hand down to his belly. And when O'Byrne turned in his chair and reached up for her she pushed him away, leaned down and kissed him on the nose. 'Now now,' she said primly. O'Byrne exerted himself. He recounted anecdotes he had heard in the pub. Lucy laughed crazily at the end of each, and as he was beginning the third she let her hand drop lightly between his legs and rest there. O'Byrne closed his eyes. The hand was gone and Lucy was nudging him. 'Go on,' she said. 'It was getting interesting.' He caught her wrist and wanted to pull her on to his lap. With a little sigh she slipped away and returned with a second bottle. 'We should have wine more often,' she said, 'if it makes you tell such funny stories.'

Encouraged, O'Byrne told his story, something about a car and what a garage mechanic said to a vicar. Once again Lucy was fishing round his fly and laughing, laughing. It was a funnier story than he thought. The floor rose and fell beneath his feet. And Lucy so beautiful, scented, warm . . . her eyes glowed. He was paralysed by her teasing. He loved her, and she laughed and robbed him of his will. Now he saw, he had come to live with her, and each night she teased him to the edge of madness. He pressed his face into her breasts. 'I love you,' he mumbled, and again Lucy was laughing, shaking, wiping the tears from her eyes. 'Do you . . . do you . . .' she kept trying to say. She emptied the bottle into his glass. 'Here's a toast . . .' 'Yeah,' said O'Byrne, 'To us.' Lucy was holding down her laughter. 'No, no,' she squealed. 'To you.' 'All right,' he said, and downed his wine in one. Then Lucy was standing in front of him pulling his arm. 'C'mon,' she said. 'C'mon.' O'Byrne struggled out of the chair. 'What about dinner then?' he said. 'You're the dinner,' she said, and they giggled as they tottered towards the bedroom.

As they undressed Lucy said, 'I've got a special little surprise for you so . . . no fuss.' O'Byrne sat on the edge of Lucy's large bed and shivered. 'I'm ready for anything,' he said. 'Good . . . good,' and for the first time she kissed him deeply, and pushed him gently backwards on to the bed. She climbed forward and sat astride his chest. O'Byrne closed his eyes. Months ago he would have resisted furiously. Lucy lifted his left hand to her mouth and kissed each finger. 'Hmmm . . . the first course.' O'Byrne laughed. The bed and the room undulated softly about him. Lucy was pushing his hand towards the top corner of the bed. O'Byrne heard a distant jingle, like bells. Lucy knelt by his shoulder, holding down his wrist, buckling it to a leather strap. She had always said she would tie him up one day and fuck him. She bent low over his face and they kissed again. She was licking his eyes and whispering, 'You're not going anywhere.' O'Byrne gasped for air. He could not move his face to smile. Now she was tugging at his right arm, pulling

it, stretching it to the far corner of the bed. With a dread thrill of compliance O'Byrne felt his arm die. Now that was secure and Lucy was running her hands along the inside of his thigh, and on down to his feet . . . he lay stretched almost to breaking, splitting, fixed to each corner, spread out against the white sheet. Lucy knelt at the apex of his legs. She stared down at him with a faint, objective smile, and fingered herself delicately. O'Byrne lay waiting for her to settle on him like a vast white nesting bird. She was tracing with the top of one finger the curve of his excitement, and then with the thumb and forefinger making a tight ring about its base. A sigh fled between his teeth. Lucy leaned forwards. Her eyes were wild. She whispered, 'We're going to get you, me and Pauline are . . .'

Pauline. For an instant, syllables hollow of meaning. 'What?' said O'Byrne, and as he spoke the word he remembered, and understood a threat. 'Untie me,' he said quickly. But Lucy's finger curled under her crotch and her eyes half closed. Her breathing was slow and deep. 'Untie me,' he shouted, and struggled hopelessly with his straps. Lucy's breath came now in light little gasps. As he struggled, so they accelerated. She was saying something . . . moaning something. What was she saying? He could not hear. 'Lucy,' he said, 'please untie me.' Suddenly she was silent, her eyes wide open and clear. She climbed off the bed. 'Your friend Pauline will be here, soon,' she said, and began to get dressed. She was different, her movements brisk and efficient, she no longer looked at him. O'Byrne tried to sound casual. His voice was a little high. 'What's going on?' Lucy stood at the foot of the bed buttoning her dress. Her lip curled. 'You're a bastard,' she said. The doorbell rang and she smiled. 'Now that's good timing, isn't it?'

'Yes, he went down very quietly,' Lucy was saying as she showed Pauline into the bedroom. Pauline said nothing. She avoided looking at either O'Byrne or Lucy. And O'Byrne's eyes were fixed on the object she carried in her arms. It was large and silver, like an outsized electric toaster. 'It can plug in just here,' said Lucy. Pauline set it down on the bedside table. Lucy sat

down at her dressing table and began to comb her hair. 'I'll get some water for it in a minute,' she said.

Pauline went and stood by the window. There was silence. Then O'Byrne said hoarsely. 'What's that thing?' Lucy turned in her seat. 'It's a sterilizer,' she said breezily. 'Sterilizer?' 'You know, for sterilizing surgical instruments.' The next question O'Byrne did not dare to ask. He felt sick and dizzy. Lucy left the room. Pauline continued to stare out the window into the dark. O'Byrne felt the need to whisper. 'Hey, Pauline, what's going on?' She turned to face him, and said nothing. O'Byrne discovered that the strap round his right wrist was slackening a little, the leather was stretching. His hand was concealed by pillows. He worked it backwards and forwards, and spoke urgently. 'Look, let's get out of here. Undo these things.'

For a moment she hesitated, then she walked round the side of the bed and stared down at him. She shook her head. 'We're going to get you.' The repetition terrified him. He thrashed from side to side. 'It's not my idea of a fucking joke,' he shouted. Pauline turned away. 'I hate you,' he heard her say. The right-hand strap gave a little more. 'I hate you. I hate you.' He pulled till he thought his arm would break. His hand was too large still for the noose around his wrist. He gave up.

Now Lucy was at the bedside pouring water into the sterilizer. 'This is a sick joke,' said O'Byrne. Lucy lifted a flat, black case on to the table. She snapped it open and began to take out long-handled scissors, scalpels and other bright, tapering, silver objects. She lowered them carefully into the water. O'Byrne started to work his right hand again. Lucy removed the black case and set on the table two white kidney bowls with blue rims. In one lay two hypodermic needles, one large, one small. In the other was cotton wool. O'Byrne's voice shook. 'What is all this?' Lucy rested her cool hand on his forehead. She enunciated with precision. 'This is what they should have done for you at the clinic.' 'The clinic . . .?' he echoed. He could see now that Pauline was leaning against the wall drinking from a bottle of Scotch. 'Yes,' said Lucy, reaching down to take his pulse. 'Stop you spreading round your secret little diseases.'

'And telling lies,' said Pauline, her voice strained with indignation.

O'Byrne laughed uncontrollably. 'Telling lies . . . telling lies,' he spluttered. Lucy took the scotch from Pauline and raised it to her lips. O'Byrne recovered. His legs were shaking. 'You're both out of your minds.' Lucy tapped the sterilizer and said to Pauline, 'This will take a few minutes yet. We'll scrub down in the kitchen.' O'Byrne tried to raise his head. 'Where are you going?' he called after them. 'Pauline . . . Pauline.'

But Pauline had nothing more to say. Lucy stopped in the bedroom doorway and smiled at him. 'We'll leave you a pretty little stump to remember us by,' and she closed the door.

On the bedside table the sterilizer began to hiss. Shortly after it gave out the low rumble of boiling water, and inside the instruments clinked together gently. In terror he pumped his hand. The leather was flaying the skin off his wrist. The noose was riding now round the base of his thumb. Timeless minutes passed. He whimpered and pulled and the edge of the leather cut deep into his hand. He was almost free.

The door opened, and Lucy and Pauline carried in a small, low table. Through his fear O'Byrne felt excitement once more, horrified excitement. They arranged the table close to the bed. Lucy bent low over his erection. 'Oh dear . . . oh dear,' she murmured. With tongs Pauline lifted instruments from the boiling water and laid them out in neat silver rows on the starched white tablecloth she had spread across the table. The leather noose slipped forwards fractionally. Lucy sat on the edge of the bed and took the large hypodermic from the bowl. 'This will make you a little sleepy,' she promised. She held it upright and expelled a small jet of liquid. And as she reached for the cotton wool O'Byrne's arm pulled clear. Lucy smiled. She set aside the hypodermic. She leaned forwards once more . . . warm, scented . . . she was fixing him with wild red eyes . . . her fingers played over his tip . . . she held him still between her fingers. 'Lie back, Michael, my sweet.' She nodded briskly at Pauline. 'If you'll secure that strap, Nurse Shepherd, then I think we can begin.'

Reflections of a Kept Ape

Eaters of asparagus know the scent it lends the urine. It has been described as reptilian, or as a repulsive inorganic stench, or again as a sharp, womanly odour . . . exciting. Certainly it suggests sexual activity of some kind between exotic creatures, perhaps from a distant land, another planet. This unworldly smell is a matter for poets and I challenge them to face their responsibilities. All this . . . a preamble that you may discover me as the curtain rises, standing, urinating, reflecting in a small overheated closet which adjoins the kitchen. The three walls which fill my vision are painted a bright and cloying red, decorated by Sally Klee when she cared for such things, a time of remote and singular optimism. The meal, which passed in total silence and from which I have just risen, consisted of a variety of tinned foods, compressed meat, potatoes, asparagus, served at room temperature. It was Sally Klee who opened the tins and set their contents on paper plates. Now I linger at my toilet washing my hands, climbing on to the sink to regard my face in the mirror, yawning. Do I deserve to be ignored?

I find Sally Klee as I left her. She is in her dining room playing with used matches in a musty pool of light. We were lovers once, living almost as man and wife, happier than most wives and men. Then, she wearying of my ways and I daily exacerbating her displeasure with my persistence, we now inhabit different rooms. Sally Klee does not look up as I enter the room, and I hover between her chair and mine, the plates and tins arranged before me. Perhaps I am a little too squat to be taken seriously, my arms are a little too long. With them I reach out and stroke gently Sally Klee's gleaming black hair. I feel the