HACO 4 20TH C
BRITISH SHORT STORIES

WEEK 7

PAT BARKER

All characters in this book are the invention of the author. None is identical with any person living or dead, neither do any of the described episodes coincide with actual events.

I

Kelly Brown

There was a square of cardboard in the window where the glass had been smashed. During the night one corner had worked loose and scraped against the frame whenever the wind blew.

Kelly Brown, disturbed by the noise, turned over, throwing one arm across her sister's face.

The older girl stirred in her sleep, grumbling a little through dry lips, and then, abruptly, woke.

'I wish you'd watch what you're doing. You nearly had my eye out there.'

Kelly opened her eyes, reluctantly. She lay in silence for a moment trying to identify the sound that had disturbed her. 'It's that thing,' she said, finally. 'It's that bloody cardboard. It's come unstuck.'

'That wouldn't be there either if you'd watch what you're doing.'

'Oh, I see. My fault. I suppose you weren't there when it happened?'

Linda had pulled the bedclothes over her head. Kelly waited a moment, then jabbed her in the kidneys. Hard.

'Time you were up.' Outside, a man's boots slurred over the cobbles: the first shift of the day. 'You'll be late.'

'What's it to you?'

'You'll get the sack.'

'No, I won't then, clever. Got the day off, haven't I?'

'I don't know. Have you?'

No reply. Kelly was doubled up under the sheet, her body jack-knifed against the cold. As usual, Linda had pinched most of the blankets and all the eiderdown.

'Well, have you?'

'Cross me heart and hope to die, cut me throat if I tell a lie.'

'Jammy bugger!'

'I don't mind turning out.'

'Not much!'

'*You've* nothing to turn out to.'

'School.'

'School!'

'I didn't notice you crying when you had to leave.'

Kelly abandoned the attempt to keep warm. She sat on the edge of the bed, sandpapering her arms with the palms of dirty hands. Then ran across the room to the chest of drawers.

As she pulled open the bottom drawer – the only one Linda would let her have – a characteristic smell met her.

'You mucky bloody sod!' The cold forgotten, she ran back to the bed and began dragging the blankets off her sister. 'Why can't you burn the buggers?'

'With him sat there? How can I?'

Both girls glanced at the wall that divided their mother's bedroom from their own. For a moment Kelly's anger died down.

Then: 'He wasn't there last night.'

'There was no fire.'

'You could've lit one.'

'What? At midnight? What do you think she'd say about that?' Linda jerked her head towards the intervening wall.

'Well, you could've wrapped them up and put them in

the dustbin then. Only the lowest of the bloody low go on the way you do.'

'What would you know about it?'

'I know one thing, I'll take bloody good care I never get like it.'

'You will, dear. It's nature.'

'I don't mean that.'

Though she did, perhaps. She looked at the hair in Linda's armpits, at the breasts that shook and wobbled when she ran, and no, she didn't want to get like that. And she certainly didn't want to drip foul-smelling, brown blood out of her fanny every month. 'Next one I find I'll rub your bloody mucky face in.'

'You and who else?'

'It won't need anybugger else.'

'You! You're not the size of twopenn'orth of copper.'

'See if that stops me.'

There was a yell from the next bedroom. 'For God's sake, you two, shut up! There's some of us still trying to sleep.'

'No bloody wonder. On the hump all night.'

'Linda!'

'Notice she blames me. You're getting to be a right cheeky little sod, you are.'

'Did you hear me, Linda?'

'Just watch it, that's all.'

'Linda!'

'I'll tell Kevin about you,' Kelly said. 'He wouldn't be so keen getting his hand up if he knew what you were really like.'

'Have I to come in there?'

The threat silenced both girls. With a final glare Kelly picked up her clothes and went downstairs to get dressed. On the landing she paused to look into her mother's bedroom. There was a dark, bearded man zipping up his

trousers. When he saw her his face twitched as if he wanted to smile. It wasn't Wilf. It was a man she had never seen before.

She ran all the way downstairs, remembering, though only just in time, to jump over the hole in the passage where the floorboards had given way.

Dressed, she turned her attention to the fire. Since there were no sticks, she would have to try to light it on paper alone, a long and not always successful job. Muttering to herself, she reached up and pulled one of her mother's sweaters from the airing line. There were sweaters of her own and Linda's there but she liked her mother's better. They were warmer, somehow, and she liked the smell.

She picked up the first sheet of newspaper. The face of a young soldier killed in Belfast disappeared beneath her scrumpling fingers. Then her mother came in, barefoot, wearing only a skirt and bra. The bunions on the sides of her feet were red with cold.

She was still angry. Or on the defensive. Kelly could tell at once by the way she moved.

'I see you've nicked another of me sweaters. Beats me why you can't wear your own. You'd think you had nowt to put on.'

She searched along the line and pulled down her old working jumper that had gone white under the armpits from deodorants and sweat. After a moment's thought she rejected it in favour of a blue blouse, the sort of thing she would never normally have worn at work. It was because of him, the man upstairs.

Kelly sniffed hungrily at the sweater she was wearing, which held all the mingled smells of her mother's body. Though the face she raised to her mother afterwards could not have been more hostile.

'You got started on the fire, then? Good lass.'

'I'd 've had it lit if there'd been owt to light it with.'

'Yes, well, I forgot the sticks.'

She perched on the edge of the armchair and began pulling on her tights. Kelly watched. She went on twisting rolls of newspaper, the twists becoming more vicious as the silence continued.

At last she said, 'Well, come on, then. Don't keep us in suspense. Who is it?'

'Who?'

Kelly drew a deep breath. 'Him. Upstairs. The woolly-faced bugger with the squint.'

'His name's Arthur. And he doesn't squint.'

'He was just now when he looked at me.'

'Oh, you'd make any bugger squint, you would!'

'Does that mean Wilf's had his chips?'

'You could put it that way.'

'I just did.'

'It isn't as if you were fond of Wilf. You weren't. Anything but.'

'You can get used to anything.'

'Kelly....' Mrs Brown's voice wavered. She didn't know whether to try persuasion first, or threats. Both had so often failed. 'Kelly, I hope you'll be all right with...with Uncle Arthur. I mean I hope...'

'What do you mean "all right"?'

'You know what I mean.' Her voice had hardened. 'I mean *all right*.'

'Why shouldn't I be all right with him?'

'You tell me. I couldn't see why you couldn't get on with Wilf. He was good to you.'

'He had no need to be.'

'Kelly ....'

There was a yell from the passage. Arthur, still unfamiliar with the geography of the house, had gone through the hole in the floor.

He came in smiling nervously, anxious to appear at ease.

'I'll have to see if I can't get that fixed for you, love.'

'Arthur, this is my youngest, Kelly.'

He managed a smile. 'Hello, flower.'

'I don't know what she'd better call you. Uncle Arthur?'

Kelly was twisting a roll of newspaper into a long rope. With a final wrench she got it finished and knotted the ends together to form a noose. Only when it was completed to her satisfaction did she smile and say, 'Hello, *Uncle* Arthur.'

'Well,' said Mrs Brown, her voice edging upwards, 'I'd better see what there is for breakfast.'

'I can tell you now,' said Kelly. 'There's nowt.'

Mrs Brown licked her lips. Then, in a refined voice, she said, 'Oh, there's sure to be something. Unless our Linda's eat the lot.'

'Our Linda's eat nothing. She's still in bed.'

'Still in bed? What's wrong with her?'

'Day off. She says.'

'Day off, my arse!' The shock had restored Mrs Brown to her normal accent. 'Linda!' Her voice rose to a shriek. She ran upstairs. They could still hear her in the bedroom. Screaming fit to break the glass. If there'd been any left to break.

'That'll roust her!' Arthur said, chuckling. He looked nice when he laughed. Kelly turned back to the fire, guarding herself from the temptation of liking him.

'You've done a grand job,' he said. 'It's not easy, is it, without sticks?'

'I think it'll go.'

After a few minutes Mrs Brown reappeared in the doorway. 'I'm sorry about that, Arthur.' She'd got her posh voice back on the way downstairs. 'But if you didn't keep on at them they'd be in bed all morning.'

She could talk!

'Anyway, she'll be down in a minute. Then you'll have

met both of them.' She was trying to make it sound like a treat. Arthur didn't look convinced. 'While we're waiting Kelly can go round the shop for a bit of bacon. Can't you love?'

'I'm doing the fire,' Kelly pointed out in a voice that held no hope of compromise.

'Don't go getting stuff in just for me.'

'Oh, it's no bother. I can't think how we've got so short.' Sucking up again. Pretending to be what she wasn't. And for what? He was nowt. 'Anyway, we can't have you going out with nothing on your stomach. You've got to keep your strength up.' There was a secret, grown-up joke in her voice. Kelly heard it, and bristled.

'She won't let you have owt anyway,' she said. 'There's over much on the slate as it is.'

Her mother rounded on her. 'That's right, Kelly, go on, stir the shit.'

'I'm not stirring the shit. I'm just saying there's too much on the slate.'

'I'm paying for this, aren't I?'

'I dunno. Are you?'

Mrs Brown's face was tight with rage and shame. Arthur had begun fumbling in his pockets for money. 'Put that away, Arthur,' she said quickly. 'I'm paying.'

The door opened and Linda came in. 'I can't find me jumper,' she said. She was naked except for a bra and pants.

'It'll be where you took it off.'

Linda shrugged. She wasn't bothered. She turned her attention to the man. 'Hello!'

'My eldest. Linda.'

Arthur, his eyes glued to Linda's nipples, opened and shut his mouth twice.

'I think he's trying to say "Hello",' Kelly said.

'Thank you, Kelly. When we need an interpreter we'll

let you know.' Mrs Brown was signalling to Linda to get dressed. Linda ignored her.

'Is there a cup of tea?' she asked.

Arthur's hand caressed the warm curve of the pot.

'There's some in,' he said. 'I don't know if it's hot enough.'

'Doesn't matter. I can make fresh.' She put one hand inside her bra and adjusted the position of her breast. Then she did the same for the other, taking her time about it. 'Do you fancy a cup?' she asked.

'No, he doesn't,' said her mother. 'He's just had some upstairs.'

Mrs Brown looked suddenly older, rat-like, as her eyes darted between Arthur and the girl.

Kelly, watching, said, 'I don't know what you're on about tea for, our Linda. If you're late again you're for the chop. And I don't know who you'd get to give you another job. 'T'isn't everybody fancies a filthy sod like you pawing at their food.'

'Language!' said Mrs Brown, automatically. She had almost given up trying to keep this situation under control. She would have liked to cry but from long habit held the tears back. 'Kelly, outside in the passage. Now! Linda, get dressed.'

As soon as the living room door was closed, Mrs Brown whispered, 'Now look, tell her half a pound of bacon, a loaf of bread – oh, and we'd better have a bottle of milk, and tell her here's ten bob off the bill and I'll give her the rest on Friday, *without fail*. Right?'

'She won't wear it.'

'Well, do the best you can. Get the bacon anyway.'

Now that they were alone their voices were serious, almost friendly. Mrs Brown watched her daughter pulling on her anorak. 'And Kelly,' she said, 'when you come back. . .'

'Yes?'

'Try and be nice.'

The girl tossed her long hair out of her eyes like a Shetland pony. 'Nice?' she said. 'I'm bloody marvellous!'

She went out, slamming the door.

'. . . and a bar of chocolate, please.' Kelly craned to see the sweets at the back of the counter. 'I'll have that one.'

'Eightpence, mind.'

'Doesn't matter.'

'Does to me! Forty pence off the bill and eightpence for a bar of chocolate. I suppose you want the tuppence change?'

'Yes, please.'

Grumbling to herself, Doris slapped the bar of chocolate down on the counter. 'Sure there's nowt else you fancy?'

'I get hungry at school.'

'Get that lot inside you, you won't be.' Doris indicated the bacon, milk and bread.

'Oh, that's not for me. That's for her and her fancy man.'

'But they'll give you some?'

'No they won't.'

'Eeeeee!' Doris raised her eyes to the washing powder on the top shelf. 'Dear God. You can tell your Mam if she's not here by six o'clock Friday I'll be up your street looking for her. And I won't care who I show up neither.'

'I'll tell her. Thanks, Missus.'

After the child had gone Doris stationed herself on the doorstep hoping for somebody to share the outrage with. Her and her fancy man! Dear God!

A few minutes later her patience was rewarded. Iris King came round the corner, bare legs white and

spotlessly clean, blonde hair bristling with rollers, obviously on her way to Mrs Bell's.

She listened avidly.

'Well,' she said 'I wish I could say I'm surprised, but if I did it'd be a lie. I saw her the other week sat round the Buffs with that Wilf Rogerson. I say nowt against him, it's not his bairn – mind you, he's rubbish – but her! They were there till past midnight and that bairn left to God and Providence. I know one thing, Missus, when my bairns were little they were never let roam the streets. And as for leave them on their own while I was pubbing it with a fella – no! By hell would I, not if his arse was decked with diamonds.'

'And they don't come like that, do they?'

'They do not!'

Kelly, meanwhile, was eating a bacon butty.

'Time you were thinking about school, our Kell.'

Kelly twisted round to look at the clock.

'No use looking at that. It's slow.'

'Now she tells me!'

'You knew. It's always slow.'

Kelly wiped her mouth on the back of her hand and started to get up. 'I'll get the stick if I'm late again.'

'They don't give lasses the stick.'

'They do, you know.'

'Well, they didn't when I was at school.'

'Well, they do now.'

Kelly was really worried. She tried twice to zip up her anorak and each time failed.

'And you can give your bloody mucky face a wipe. You're not going out looking like that, showing me up.'

'Oh, Mam, there isn't time!'

'You've time to give it a rub.' She went into the kitchen

and returned with a face flannel and tea towel. 'Here, you'll have to use this, I can't find a proper towel.'

All this was Arthur's fault. She'd never have bothered with breakfast or face-washing if he hadn't been there. Kelly dabbed at the corners of her mouth, cautiously.

'Go on, give it a scrub!' Mrs Brown piled the breakfast dishes together and took them into the kitchen.

'I'll give you a hand,' said Arthur.

'No, it's all right, love, I can manage. It won't take a minute.'

It had been known to take days.

Arthur sat down, glancing nervously at Kelly. He was afraid of being alone with her. Kelly, looking at her reflection in the mirror, thought, how sensible of him.

'Uncle Arthur?' she said.

He looked up, relieved by the friendliness of her tone.

'I was just wondering, are you and me Mam off round the Buffs tonight?' As if she needed to ask!

'I hadn't really thought about it, flower. I daresay we might have a look in.'

'It's just there's a film on at the Odeon: "Brides of Dracula".'

'Oh, I don't think your Mam'ld fancy that.'

Why not? She'd fancied worse.

'It wasn't me Mam I was thinking of.'

'Oh.' He started searching in his pockets for money. Slower on the uptake than Wilf had been, but he got there in the end. He produced a couple of tenpenny pieces.

'Cheapest seats are 50p.'

'I thought it was kids half price?'

'Not on Mondays. It's Old Age Pensioners' night.'

'Oh, I see. They're all sat there, are they, watching "Dracula"?'

'Yeah, well. Gives 'em a thrill, don't it?'

He wasn't as thick as he looked.

'Here's a coupla quid. And get yourself summat to eat.'

'Kelly! Are you still here?'

'Just going, Mam.' At the door she turned. 'Will you be in when I get back?'

'Don't be daft. Arthur's meeting me from work. Aren't you, love?' She smiled at him. Then became aware of the child watching her. 'I don't *know* when I'll be in.'

'Doesn't matter.'

'There's plenty to go at if you're hungry. There's that bit of bacon left. And you're old enough to get yourself to bed.'

'I said, it doesn't matter.'

The door slammed.

Kelly stared across the blackening school yard. The windows of the school were encased in wire cages: the children threw bricks. Behind the wire the glass had misted over, become a sweaty blur through which the lights of the Assembly Hall shone dimly.

There was a ragged sound of singing.

'New every morning is the love
Our wakening and uprising prove. . .'

If she went in as late as this she might well get the stick. Safer, really, to give school a miss. She could easily write a note tomorrow in her mother's handwriting. She had done it before.

There was a fair on, too, on the patch of waste ground behind the park. She hesitated, felt the crisp pound notes in her pocket, and made up her mind.

She ran into the railway tunnel, her footsteps echoing dismally behind her.

She wandered down a long avenue of trees, scuffling through the dead leaves. Horse chestnut leaves, she realised, like hands with spread fingers. Immediately she

began to look at the ground more closely, alert for the gleam of conkers in the grass.

It was too early though – only the beginning of September. They would not have ripened yet.

The early excitement of nicking off from school was gone. She was lonely. The afternoon had dragged. There was a smell of decay, of life ending. Limp rags of mist hung from the furthest trees.

As always when she was most unhappy, she started thinking about her father, imagining what it would be like when he came back home. She was always looking for him, expecting to meet him, though sometimes, in moments of panic and despair, she doubted if she would recognise him if she did.

There was only one memory she was sure of. Firelight. The smells of roast beef and gravy and the *News of the World*, and her father with nothing on but his vest and pants, throwing her up into the air again and again. If she closed her eyes she could see his warm and slightly oily brown skin and the snake on his arm that wriggled when he clenched the muscle underneath.

She was sure of that. Though the last time she had tried to talk to Linda about it, Linda had said . . . had said . . . Well, it didn't matter what Linda said.

Absorbed in her daydreams, she had almost missed it. But there it lay, half-hidden in the grass. It wasn't open, though. She bent down, liking the feel of the cool, green, spiky ball in her hand.

She had heard nothing, and yet there in front of her were the feet, shoes black and highly polished, menacingly elegant against the shabbiness of leaves and grass.

Slowly she looked up. He was tall and thin with a long head, so that she seemed from her present position to be looking up at a high tower.

'You found one then?'

She knew from the way he said it that he had been watching her a long time.

'Yes,' she said, standing up. 'But it's not ready yet.'

'Oh, I don't know. Sometimes they are. You can't always tell from the outside.'

He took it from her. She watched his long fingers with their curved nails probe the green skin, searching for the place where it would most easily open and admit them.

'Though everything's a bit late this year. I think it must be all the rain we've been having.'

She didn't want to watch. Instead she glanced rapidly from side to side, wishing she'd stayed near the railings where at least there might have been people walking past on the pavement outside.

There was nobody in sight.

When she looked back he had got the conker open. Through the gash in the green skin she could see the white seed.

'No, you were right,' he said. 'It's not ready yet.'

He threw it away and wiped his fingers very carefully and fastidiously on his handkerchief, as if they were more soiled than they could possibly have been.

'I've got some more,' he said, suddenly. 'You can have them to take home if you like.' He reached into his pockets and produced a mass of conkers, a dozen or more, and held them out to her on the palms of his cupped hands. She looked at them doubtfully. 'Go on, take them,' he said.

His voice shook with excitement.

Kelly took them, hoping that if she did as he said he would go away. But he showed no sign of wanting to go.

'What's your name?' he asked. He had a precise, slightly sibilant way of speaking that might've been funny, but wasn't.

'Kelly,' she said.

'Kelly. That's an unusual name.'

Kelly shrugged. It wasn't particularly unusual where she came from.

'And does your mother know you're here, Kelly? I mean, shouldn't you be at school?'

'I've had the flu. She said, Go and get some fresh air.'

Normally she was a very convincing liar. But uncertainty had robbed her of the skill and her words clattered down, as unmistakably empty as tin cans.

He smiled. 'I see. How sensible of her to let you come out. Much better than staying indoors.'

He had accepted the lie without believing it. Kelly shivered and looked longingly towards the road. She would have liked to turn and walk away from him, just like that, without explanation, without leave-taking. But she could not. He had done nothing, said nothing, wrong; and there was something in the softness of his voice that compelled her to stay.

'I've been ill too,' he said. 'That's why I'm not at work.'

And perhaps he had. He looked pale enough for anything. 'Well, I think I'd . . .' She didn't bother to finish the sentence.

'I come here every day,' he said abruptly. 'I come to feed the ducks.' He had been looking away from her towards the lake. Now, heavily – almost, it seemed, reluctantly – he bent his head to her again. 'You could come with me, if you liked,' he said.

And stood breathing.

'I don't think . . .'

'It's near the road.' He smiled faintly, holding out reassurance on an open palm.

He looked at her so intently. Other people – her mother, Linda, the teachers at school – merely glanced at her and then with indifference or haste, passed on. But

this man stared at her as if every pore in her skin mattered. His eyes created her. And so she had to go with him. She could not help herself. She had to go.

When they got to the lake she relaxed. It was, as he had said, quite close to the road though screened from it by a long line of willow trees that hung over their own reflections in the water. And there were people going past. You could hear their voices, the sound of their footsteps. There were even people at the lake itself: a youngish man with two small girls. They, too, had come to feed the ducks. Kelly watched enviously as the younger of the two girls leaned out over the water to scatter crumbs while her father held on to her skirt.

'I've got the bread here somewhere. And cake. They like cake.' He produced a greaseproof bag from an inside pocket. 'Only you have to watch the geese don't get the lot. They're very greedy.'

Already, from every corner of the lake, ducks and geese and swans were taking to the water, cleaving its smooth surface, while in their wake the willow-tree reflections rippled and re-formed.

The bread was still in slices. Kelly began tearing it into smaller pieces, scraping the really stale crusts with her fingernails so that the crumbs showered down. She was happy. She had put her fears to one side. The birds began to arrive. Some showed signs of wanting to clamber out of the water on to the path, but Kelly clung to the trunk of an overhanging tree and leaned far out to scatter the crumbs. With the surface of her mind she watched the long thick necks bend and sway as the birds squabbled over the bread, but deeper down she had begun telling herself stories again, fantasies whose warmth eased away the last ache of doubt. Her father had come back. It was her father behind her on the path. When she leaned still further out and felt the man's hand holding on to her skirt

it was so much part of the dream that she did not bother to turn round.

But the bag was empty. Kelly shook out the last crumbs and straightened up. The man standing on the path behind her was not her father. The family on the other side of the lake had gone. She started to say something and then stopped, for the geese would not accept that there was no more food. They came hissing and swaying from the water, long necks outstretched, wetting the path with their cracked orange feet. Kelly stepped back but they followed, thick necks thrust out, yellow beaks jabbing at her hands and thighs. She pushed them away, sickened by the feel of wet plumage over bone.

'It's all right. They won't hurt. They're more frightened of you than you are of them.'

He stamped his feet and clapped his hands. The geese swayed and rocked away, heads upraised in a long, sibilant hiss of protest.

'There, you're all right now.'

But she was not. She looked down at the mottled flesh of her thighs and remembered how the yellow beaks had jabbed. Then up at him. All her original distrust had returned.

'I've got to be going now,' she said.

'Oh, dear. I was hoping we might . . .'

'No, I've got to go. Me Mam'll be wondering where I am.'

There was a sudden blast of music that went on for a few bars, got stuck, started up again. Kelly's face lit up.

'Well,' said the man, 'It's been very nice. I've enjoyed it.'

He smiled at her and she smiled back. Now that she was going, now that he was making no attempt to keep her there, she felt again that yes, it had been nice.

Yet, as she walked away, the sense of oppression grew.

It was so dark near the pond. The light filtered down through the leaves, staining everything green. Even her skin was green.

She walked more quickly, not daring to look back, while the muscles at the back of her neck tightened. And tightened.

Suddenly she came out on to a field of brilliant, white light. There were seagulls there, hundreds of them, standing motionless in pools of reflected cloud. Kelly watched for a moment, while her knotted muscles relaxed and dissolved into streams of water or light. Then, with a shout of joy, she ran towards them.

One by one with the clapping of wings, and then in a whole flock, they rose up and burst like spray in the air above her head.

By the main gate she turned to look back but could see nothing. She stood, scanning the trees, for a full minute before she could bring herself to leave.

There was a moment of complete stillness. Then in the shadow of the trees, a shadow moved. He was no longer looking towards the gate. He had turned to stare in the direction of the music. The music that had seemed to interest her so much.

At the entrance to the Hall of Mirrors Kelly paused. There was somebody there she knew: Joanne Wilson, who lived only a few doors down. But it didn't matter. Joanne was with her boyfriend and too wrapped up in him to notice anybody else.

She stood with his arms around her waist and looked at their reflections in the glass. Hag and goblin, witch and toad, vampire and crow, and every face their own. They giggled and pointed, and fell silent. Joanne hid her face in the young man's neck.

'Don't reckon this is worth ten p,' Kelly said.

'Oh, I don't know.' Her friend, Sharon Scaife, who

was plump and suffered for it, had found a mirror that showed her long and stringy as a bean. 'I quite like it.'

'Well, I don't.' Kelly was watching the young man's reflection in the glass. 'I think it's crap.'

'O.K. We'll go somewhere else. There's no need to stop here if you don't want.'

'What about the Ghost Train?'

'Yeah. All right.'

They stood in the queue for the Ghost Train, eating chips so saturated in vinegar that it leaked out and trickled down their wrists. When the last chip was gone Kelly licked the paper, relishing the grittiness of salt on her tongue, worrying at the corners of the bag to get out the last crumb of burnt and crispy batter.

Ahead of them the Ghost Train rumbled and clanked. A girl's scream sliced the air.

Kelly felt that she was being watched. She looked around, but it was almost impossible to recognise anybody. People's faces were purple under the lights and a lot of the men wore funny glasses with big red noses stuck on to them. They were for sale just inside the gate. They hid so much of the face, you couldn't tell what was behind them.

'What you looking for?' Sharon asked.

'Teachers. Don't forget I nicked off today.'

'I dunno how you have the nerve.' Sharon, a well-behaved little girl, was breathless with admiration.

The Ghost Train burst through its swing doors.

'Try and get up front,' Sharon said. 'It's better there.'

But Kelly was still looking behind her. Even when they were in the front car – Sharon gripping the rail until her knuckles showed white – Kelly still looked back. The train began to vibrate and shudder beneath them. The last carriages filled quickly and there – yes, she was almost sure – there he was, dressed all in black as he had been

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in the park, standing out, thin and dark as an exclamation mark, against the coloured shirts and funny hats, the laughter and joking of the other men.

The train sprang into life, burst through the swing doors into hot and quivering darkness. Girls screamed as skulls and skeletons and vampires leaped down on them from the ramparts of cardboard castles.

'I thought you were going to pass out in there,' Sharon said, looking at her curiously, without the usual admiration.

'It was too hot.'

Kelly was watching the people leave the train. He was not among them. Perhaps he had slipped out before, or perhaps . . . perhaps she had just imagined it.

'I'll have to be going,' Sharon said awkwardly. Kelly was no fun at all tonight.

'It's only ten o'clock.'

'I'm meant to be in bed at nine. Me Mam'll go hairless.'

'Tell her you couldn't get on the bus.'

Sharon hesitated, afraid of seeming soft. 'She's got me Dad bad again.'

'Oh, your Dad. He's always bad.'

'It's not his fault, is it? Anyway, you can talk. Where's your Dad?'

If she stayed any longer they would quarrel. It was better to let her go.

At the gate Sharon said, 'Why don't you come with us?'

Kelly thought. 'No,' she said. 'I'll stop.'

She watched Sharon walk away. She felt a moment's fear as Sharon reached the gate, and called out to her. But the moment passed. When Sharon turned round, Kelly said only, 'No, it's O.K. Go on. I'll see you tomorrow.'

Slowly Kelly walked back into the swirl and dazzle of

the fairground. She was beginning to feel sick, and as she pushed and jostled her way through the crowds the feeling grew. She was not sure now that she liked the fair. All that screaming, and the smells of oil and sweat and stale beer, and people unrecognisable under funny hats. That woman in the booth, who had looked so fat and jolly before, looked rapacious now as she poured her cascade of pennies from palm to palm, and shouted for people to come up; and the goldfish she handed out – they were only too clearly dying inside their tiny polythene prisons.

Kelly made herself keep going. There was a roundabout, and she stopped to watch. The revolving animals twinkled, blurred, and finally stopped. She looked over their heads and there he was, watching her, a patch of darkness against the lurid brightness of the fair.

She started to run. The buffeting of the crowds and her own gasping breaths increased her fear. She did not dare look back, because she was afraid that he was following. She ran faster across the purple grass until at last she came out into the silence and darkness of the vans where there was only the throbbing of an engine to disturb the stillness.

There were long black passages between the vans. She started to walk down one of them but stopped when she heard a man cough close at hand. She started to run again, tripped over a coil of rope and fell, not into emptyness, but into hands that caught and held her.

'Hey up!' a voice said. 'You're not meant to be around here, you know. I only come here for a pee.'

He was fat and shiny with a black moustache. So much she could see in the glow from a caravan window. Nothing that she had feared, nothing that she had imagined, could have been more terrifying than this entirely ordinary face.

When he stood aside to let her pass she ran and did not stop running until she had reached the gate.

Her stomach was heaving. She hung on to the railings and hoped it would settle down. But it didn't. It got worse.

The pub opposite was just coming out. As Kelly watched, a woman turned suddenly and swung her handbag into a man's face. He backed off, swearing viciously. She thought of her mother sitting in the Buffs with Arthur.

She was so near to being sick that she daren't move. And in spite of her fear of what might lie behind her in the fairground she was in no hurry to move away from the lighted area near the gate. For beyond that was total darkness. And the Moor, by day a sour, brick-strewn stretch of waste land covered with dog shit, newspaper and beer cans, acquired at night a mysterious and threatening immensity. But it had to be crossed if she was to go home through the park.

So she hesitated. Until eventually her stomach took the decision for her. She staggered through the main gate and doubled up in the gutter.

When eventually she was able to look up he was there. Again she had the feeling that he had been there a long time. But he wasn't wearing black: he couldn't 've been the man on the Ghost Train. Or the man near the roundabout.

Perhaps there hadn't been a man at all.

She said, slowly, 'It wasn't you.'

He looked surprised. When no explanation came he said, 'I've only just got here. In fact . . .' He looked out over the darkness of the Moor, 'I was in two minds whether to come at all.'

She couldn't reply. A second spasm of vomiting had her squatting in the gutter. When she straightened up again he said, 'But now I'm glad I did.'

He had not been the man in the fairground. That ought to have been reassuring, but somehow it wasn't.

'Do you think that's all?' he asked. 'Or is there more to come?' He was staring at her with a kind of disgusted fascination.

'No, I think that's the finish.'

'I should hope so.'

He was wearing a light-coloured jacket, and fawn trousers. Casual clothes like all the men at the fairground wore. Only on him they looked like fancy dress.

'What have you been eating?'

As he spoke, he drew her towards him and began wiping her mouth with his handkerchief, which he first dampened with his spit. She was too surprised to resist and after a while she found it pleasant to be taken care of.

'Chips. Lolly.' She thought further back. 'Sherbet bomb, candyfloss, ice cream.'

'You *have* been having a good time.' He sounded jealous as another child would have done. But he wasn't a child.

'Do you always come to the fair?'

None of the other men had come alone.

'I usually look in.'

It wasn't the answer she wanted.

'Here,' he went on. 'You'd better hang on to my handkerchief. Just in case.'

'No, I'm all right now.' And she was. She could empty her stomach and be well again in seconds. Only she was shivering with cold.

A fat woman in a flowery dress had stopped to stare at them.

'Been sick, has she?'

'Yes.' His eyes when he looked at the woman were small and frightened.

'Poor bairn. Eyes bigger'n your belly, love?' She looked again at the man. 'Best place for her is bed.'

'We won't be long out of it.'

The fat woman ambled off to join her husband. The man stared after her.

Then he looked at Kelly again, and smiled. 'I suppose we *had* better think about getting you home.'

But there was something Kelly needed to get straight. 'That woman. She thought you were me father.'

'And I didn't say I wasn't?'

She stared at him.

'Perhaps I wish I was.'

Kelly drew in her breath. At first she wasn't even sure she'd heard properly.

'I don't even know your name,' she said. Nobody was going to con her.

'Lewis,' he said. And stopped, abruptly. He didn't say if it was his first or his last name. It didn't matter. At least he'd told her who he was. She relaxed a little. He didn't seem so much of a stranger now. In fact, when she looked around her at the people streaming in and out of the gate, his was the only familiar face.

'Where do you live?' he asked.

'Union Street,' she said.

'Where's that?'

'You go down Light Pipe Hall Road, past the steelworks, and then under the railway tunnel.'

'The steelworks. . . .'

The way he said it, in that light, precise, slightly sibilant voice, it sounded as remote as the Pyramids.

'It's quite a long way then. I don't suppose you've kept the money for the bus fare?'

She hadn't, of course.

'I can go home across the Moor. Through the park.'

'It's shut.'

'There's holes in the railings.'

'You'd go in there? After dark?' He sounded almost frightened.

'I can run, can't I?'

She was scornful, as if he were indeed another child. At the same time it was reassuring. He was saying exactly what any grown-up would have said. It might have been her own mother talking to her.

He said, 'But you mightn't be able to run fast enough.'

He was staring at her intently. For him at that moment she was not one child but hundreds of children, rough, noisy dirty children, the kind his mother dragged him past at bus stops, the kind he leant against the window pane to watch during the long afternoons of his childhood, those window panes that seemed in retrospect to have been always mizzled with rain. Children who played hard, fast, ruthless games, the girls as tough as the boys and always more humiliating because you were supposed to be able to beat them.

If only we didn't have to live here, his mother said. And sighed. It had been the refrain of his childhood: *if only we didn't have to live here.*

Now he said, 'I don't think you ought to walk all that way by yourself. I'll see you to the bus stop.'

So they set off together, the tall man and the child, while behind them the lights of the fairground shrivelled into darkness. And,

'You'll be safe with me,' he says, the quiet, precise man whom people set their clocks by, and avoid.

'*I know a short cut*,' he says, the small, pale boy, taking the girl by the hand.

'Will your parents be worried about you?'

'No.'

It was the first time he had spoken. At first the silence hadn't bothered her at all: she was tired, and she didn't

want to talk. But then, as street succeeded street, as his footsteps continued to ring out over the cobbles, she felt the quality of the silence change. It had become deeper, tense, finally a vortex sucking them both under. She was afraid. She was afraid that if she tried to leave him he might not let her go.

'It's me Mam's night for the club,' she made herself say.

'Oh, I see.'

No words could have broken this silence. They were like dead leaves that floated across the surface for a second or two and then were sucked under out of sight.

By now they had left the Moor behind and were walking through an area of mixed factories and housing. Here and there a window glowed the colour of its curtains: green, or yellow or red. But the streets themselves were ashen. More than once they had passed a row of houses that was boarded up and waiting for demolition.

'Here we are.' He was standing at the entrance to an alley. On one side was a tall factory. It had no windows at all on the ground floor and the single window in the upper storey seemed to be boarded up. 'You can cut through here. It brings you out into Wellington Street.' When she hesitated he said, 'You can get the bus from there.'

She could have got a bus from where they'd started from.

'Aren't you coming?'

'No, it's late. I'd better be getting back. But I'll stay a few minutes. Just to make sure you're all right.' He felt about in his pockets. 'How much do you think you'll need for the fare?'

'I don't know'

'Here's a pound.'

It was far too much.

There was a street lamp at the entrance to the alley, but its light did not carry far. The light shone directly on to his head so that his eyes looked like black holes in the shadow of his brows. She was glad he wasn't coming with her. The sense of oppression she had felt in the park was back, only worse. She was aware of the movement of her lungs, sucking in and expelling air.

'Go on, then. And mind you get the right bus.'

She started to walk forward into the darkness. His shadow cast by the street lamp stretched many yards in front of her as he followed her to the entrance of the alley. She was walking on his shadow.

She looked back and realised with a jolt of fear that not only the factory windows but those of the houses on either side were boarded up. The whole place was derelict.

Which meant they must be somewhere down by the river. Wharfe Street. Moat Street. Somewhere like that.

Nowhere near where she wanted to go.

She stopped.

At once the voice called after her, 'Are you all right?'

She turned round. He was still standing at the entrance to the alley, a tall, thin man casting an immense shadow.

'Are you all right?' he asked again.

His voice had changed. It was coarser, thicker. She turned back to stare into the darkness. It terrified her, but she would rather go on than go back and meet the owner of that voice.

'Yeah, I'm all right.'

Soon the alley way opened out on to a yard: the factory yard. She stopped again. There seemed to be no way out. But at least she could see. The moonlight streamed down. The yard look very white and blank, though there was darkness again on the other side, shadows, where the exit must be.

Slowly she stepped out into the yard. She felt herself crawling across that vast expanse of whiteness like an insect over an eyeball. A lifetime seemed to go by before she reached the other side.

But there *was* a way out. Only now when there was no more need for fear could she admit how frightened she had been. She had thought the yard was a trap.

She ran into the alley, her heart pounding with relief after dread. She had gone perhaps thirty feet when she saw the wall. At first her brain simply refused to accept it. She felt all over it with her hands, looking for the opening that must be there, although there was light enough for her to see that there was none.

The bricks were new. Perhaps the wall had been built quite recently. When the factory closed down. Perhaps he hadn't known it was there. Perhaps it was all a mistake.

Then she heard his footsteps crossing the yard. There had been no mistake.

She pressed herself against the wall, until she could feel every knob of her backbone against the brick. She looked around for a way of escape as her heart hammered blow after blow against her ribs. Climb the walls? Too high. Get into the yard and dodge round him there? Yes. She darted forward, but already it was too late. He came round the corner and stopped for a moment, watching her. She backed away until she felt the wall behind her again.

He started to walk towards her. His shirt front shone in the moonlight. Above it his face looked grey. She tried to think of something to say. Incoherent memories of other confrontations, with teachers or policemen, jostled together in her mind. If you thought of the right thing to say and said it quickly enough, sometimes they would let you off. But she couldn't think of anything. Her tongue felt big and furry against the roof of her mouth.

Then, as he closed in on her, deeper memories of childhood punishments choked her so that she cried out, 'Don't, please. I won't do it again. Oh, please.'

He was beyond hearing her. She looked into his eyes and there was nothing there that she could reach.

'Mam!' she screamed, then, with the full force of her lungs, 'Mam!'

His shadow towered over her, cutting off the light.

Don't be afraid, he had said. The words thick, terrifying. *Don't be afraid. I'm not going to hurt you.*

But he had hurt. He was hurting now.

She closed her eyes, because his glazed eyes and hanging face were too terrible to look at.

After the first shock of fear she had not cried out. There was no point: nobody could hear her. He had chosen the place well. And she was afraid that if she screamed again he might kill her.

At first he had just wanted her to touch him. 'Go on,' he whispered. A single mucoid eye leered at her from under the partially-retracted foreskin. 'Touch me,' he said again, more urgently. 'Go on.'

But even when he had succeeded in forcing her hand to close around the smelly purple toadstool, it wasn't enough. He forced her down and spread himself over her, his breath smelling strongly of peppermint and decay. At first her tight skin resisted him, and he swore at her until he found the way in.

She stiffened against the pain, but even then did not cry out, but lay still while he heaved and sweated. Then, with a final agonised convulsion, it was all over and he was looking at her as if he hated her more than anything else on earth. He stood up and turned aside modestly until he had got his trousers fastened. After a while, since there was no point in lying there, she stood up too. There was a pain between her legs, a mess of blood and slime on her

thighs, but she hardly noticed that. She was watching to see what he would do.

And he *was* tempted to kill her. She watched the thought form in his eyes like a cloud and then slowly dissolve.

They stood and stared at each other. He seemed to sag and shrivel as she watched, like a balloon that before Christmas is big and shiny and full of air and afterwards, when you take it down, is just a sticky, wrinkled bag. His eyes flickered. In another minute he would be gone.

'Don't leave me here,' she said.

'It's in the next street.' he said. 'The bus stop. It's in the next street.'

He was panting with fear.

'Don't leave me here.'

For a moment she thought that he might break away and run. Then, with an odd, wincing, ducking motion of his head, he gave in. 'I'll show you,' he said.

But as they came out on to Wellington Street he stopped as though the roar of the traffic startled him.

'You'll be all right now,' he said. He had got his normal voice back. His upper lip was working overtime as if he was in some sort of competition for speaking properly. 'If you go down here, the bus stop's past the second set of traffic lights. If you keep to the main road you'll be all right.'

The balloon had blown up again.

As she watched he pulled one cuff clear of his jacket sleeve. He was waiting for her to go.

'*No*,' she said. '*No*.'

'What do you mean, "No"?' He sounded frightened. Her voice had been loud enough to attract the attention of passers-by.

'I mean I don't want to go home yet.' There were no words for what she meant. 'I'm thirsty. I want something to drink.'

'Well, you can't,' he said savagely. 'There's nowhere open.'

There were beads of sweat on his upper lip. She saw them with pleasure.

'They're open, aren't they?' She nodded at the fish and chip bar across the road.

'But . . .'

'There's a place at the back.'

Still he hesitated, wiping sweaty hands on his thighs.

'Or would you rather I yelled?'

'Oh, all right.' Again the odd, wincing, ducking movement of his head. 'But you'll have to be quick.'

They crossed the street together. She thought, I don't have to be quick. I don't have to be anything I don't want. Though in spite of his words he lagged behind until she turned and hauled him on to the pavement. The more he hesitated, the more obviously afraid he became, the greater was her rage, until in the end she seemed to be borne along on a huge wave of anger that curved and foamed and never broke. She pushed him into the shop in front of her.

The woman behind the counter looked up as they entered, but without interest. While he spoke she went on fingering the back of her neck, enjoying a pimple or a boil. When he'd finished she stopped long enough to say 'You can't have a cup of tea this time of night, not without something to eat as well.'

He looked at Kelly. 'You're not hungry, are you?' For the woman's sake he managed a watery smile.

'I'm famished.'

Their eyes met for a moment, and again he admitted defeat. He was too easily defeated. Kelly's anger was turning to contempt: she had to fight to keep it alive. And always there was this dreadful intimacy of knowledge, so that when he blinked she knew how his eyeballs pricked

and burned, from the weight of the lids dragging across them. Because her own were doing the same.

They sat down opposite each other at the table in the centre of the room. A single light, harsh and glaring, hung from a cord in the ceiling, so low down that it left the upper part of the room in shadow. The cord swung in the draught from the open door, pulling the shadows after it, until the whole room dipped and swung like a silent bell.

She tried to make the man look at her. She needed him. He was all she had. But he did not want to look. His eyes, small and reddish-brown, skittered about like ants in a disturbed nest.

The woman came in to wipe and lay the table.

Suppose I told her? Kelly thought.

There were red burn-marks on the woman's arms where the fat from the chip pan had splashed them.

She would never tell anybody. Nobody else would understand. It wasn't like falling down, or getting run over by a car. She *was* what had just happened to her. It was between the man and her.

And he was . . . nothing!

She had started to think about what had happened, to try to place it in the context of her life. Half-understood jokes – 'Got to keep your strength up, Arthur!' – drawings on lavatory walls, the time she had gone into her mother's room and seen Wilf having a fit on the bed: all these pieces started to fall into position, began to make sense, though not yet a sense she could use.

This was deep and wordless. On the surface she felt . . . a revulsion from surfaces. The dishcloth had left slimy smears all over the table. The slipperiness disgusted her. Everything disgusted her. Her skin seemed to have flared up into an intense and irritable life of its own. Plastic was too plastic, wool too woolly, and the grains of salt and sugar left behind on the table felt like rocks beneath her

wincing fingertips. Most of all she hated the remembered texture of his jacket, the moist, lard-whiteness of his skin. She found herself wiping her hands on her thighs in a gesture that was the mirror-image of his.

She looked away from him again. But it was no use: the room was lined with mirror-tiles. Wherever she looked, their eyes met.

The fish and chips arrived. From sheer force of habit Kelly picked up her knife and fork and started to eat. One mouthful was enough. She said, 'I don't think I'm hungry after all.'

He didn't say anything. He was making no attempt to eat. The fish and chips, steaming up into his face, had opened the pores on his nose: he look coarser than she had seen him look before. But still unlined. There were no laughter or frown lines on his face. It wasn't a grown-up face at all, she thought.

Then, as she continued to stare, she saw a slight movement, a crumbling almost, at the corners of the lids. Something was happening to his face. It was beginning to split, to crack, to disintegrate from within, like an egg when the time for hatching has come. She wanted to run. She didn't want to stay there and see what would hatch out of this egg. But horror kept her pinned to her chair. And the face went on cracking. And now moisture of some kind was oozing out of the corners of his eyes, running into cracks that had not been there a minute before, dripping, finally, into the open, the agonised mouth. She watched, afraid. And looked away. But that was no use.

From every side his reflection leapt back at her, as the mirror-tiles filled with the fragments of his shattered face.

Kelly looked around for help. But the woman had gone. She stood up. It seemed necessary to say something

but the words would not come. He went on and on and on crying as if he had forgotten how to stop.

Kelly turned and ran.

Mrs Brown stood in the kitchen, and waited for the kettle to boil. She kept her hand on the handle and couldn't tell whether it was the vibration of the metal or her own distress that made her hand shake. She leaned forward, she was parched for a cup of tea, and her reflection loomed up, ox-jawed and brutal, in the curve of the teapot.

~~It was past schooltime and Kelly was still in bed. But~~ on this day it didn't matter. On this day there would be no nagging. Linda, pink and moist-eyed, had crept out to work early. Arthur was still asleep.

And Kelly, was she asleep? Or was she lying awake, staring at the ceiling? Mrs Brown didn't know and was afraid to go upstairs and find out. The sight of her daughter's misery would bring her own gushing to the surface again, and it had taken most of the night for her to get it under control. She had asked the doctor to give Kelly a sleeping pill, but he had said, no, let her shout and scream if she wants to. It was better for her to do that than go on bottling it up. Better for who? Mrs Brown had wanted to ask, though of course she didn't. She had wanted Kelly unconscious as fast as possible, as much for her own sake as the child's.

The kettle boiled. She made the tea, but when she tried to lift the tray her hand shook so much that some slopped over the sides of the cups. She dabbed at the mess with a dishcloth, ineffectually, and heard herself start to whimper. The whimpering frightened her; it sounded so lost, so out of control, so unlike her normal self. For she thought of herself as a hard, tough, realistic woman, able to cope with most things. She had had to be, bringing up two children on her own.

She felt a spasm of hatred for her husband whom she had not thought of for years but who was now, momentarily, identified in her mind with The Man. It had been so easy for him to walk out, and he didn't give a bugger, he never even sent them something for Christmas, not even a bloody card; not that she wanted him to, mind, she wouldn't 've thanked him for it if he had; they could do without him. Then there was Arthur, who, in spite of all his big talk last night, had fallen asleep as soon as his head touched the pillow, and was still asleep now, his cheeks juddering with every breath. God, what a ~~useless~~ lot!

She needed a woman to talk to, but in all this sodding street there wasn't one of 'em you could trust. They'd all turned against her, because since Tom left there'd been other men in the house. Jealous cows. And how they'd talk! Coo and sympathise, oh, yes. But talk. She could hear them now, 'Well, what can you expect, leaving the bairn alone half the bloody night? You know where *she'd* be, don't you? Out boozing at the Buffs with that Arthur Robson. Eeeee!'

Trouble was, none of them knew what Kelly was like. You'd need eyes in your arse to keep track of her.

She was crying as she carried the tray upstairs. She'd got up because she couldn't stand the warmth of Arthur's body a second longer. He never wore owt in bed and whenever in the night he'd turn over she could feel the fuzz of gingery-pink hairs on his backside. The first night that hair had excited her, though it made her shudder now. The hard, hairy, male bum clenching and unclenching . . . She twitched her thoughts away.

As she put the tray down Arthur started to wake up, bringing his lips together with little contented smacking sounds. It was intolerable. She could not bear to stay and watch it, or see the memory of what had happened in his eyes.

She left her own tea beside his on the table and ran downstairs. On the doorstep she hesitated, but only for a second. Muriel Scaife would be safest but she worked as a cleaner in the mornings and might not be back yet. Iris King, then. Iris, built like the side of a house, seemed to offer the same assurance of shelter.

She knocked on Iris's door and waited, hugging herself, protecting herself as much from the memory of last night as from the wind that whipped whirls of dust along the street. There was nobody about. The men were already at work. The women had not yet got ready to go shopping. Long and grey, the street stretched away into the distance. She shivered, knowing it too well to hate it.

Iris King's eyes widened when she saw who was on her doorstep, but only momentarily. She had seen the police car parked outside the Browns' last night as she was coming home from the Bingo, and had even made a special trip up to the fish and chip shop hoping for news. She had never thought that Mrs Brown would come to her, for she was apt to play her mouth on the subject of women who neglected their children and she didn't care who heard her. Iris saw that Mrs Brown was close to tears. She led her along the passage and into the living room, resting one massive freckled arm on the other woman's thin shoulders, for she was a woman who needed to touch people.

For a long time Mrs Brown could only sob and choke and when she did manage to speak it was only the single word 'Kelly', and then, 'My bairn.'

Iris stood with her back to the fire and waited. She was a formidable sight with her bare arms and massive breasts. Her frizzy blonde hair was in rollers: pink spikes stuck out aggressively at all angles, except where a headscarf pressed them uncomfortably close to her scalp. Her bairn indeed! Pity she hadn't thought of that a bit sooner.

Gradually, Iris got the full story out of her. My God, she thought, unwilling to believe it. She knew Kelly well. When Kelly's own house was empty – which, let's face it, was more often than not – she would go across to watch Iris's telly. She was no bother and the bit of food the bairn ate'ld never be missed.

'They should flog 'em,' she said when Mrs Brown's sobs had died down. 'It's no good mucking around with probation and all that. They should bring the birch back in.'

'I wouldn't flog 'em,' said Mrs Brown. 'I'd get a blowtorch and burn the bugger off. And I wouldn't care how they screamed. It's not even as if she was old-looking for her age. She's not. He could see she was a bairn.'

'No hope of them catching him?'

'No. Well, it's three weeks, he could be anywhere now. If only she'd come straight out with it!' This thought, arousing as it did all Mrs Brown's doubts about her daughter's story, reduced her to silence for a while. But her voice, cracked and bleating with distress, went on echoing all over the room. Both women heard the echoes and were made uncomfortable by them.

Mrs Brown said, 'You know she even tried to wash her own pants out? She was just going to put them away and not tell anybody. Then when she couldn't get the blood out she wrapped them up and put them in the bin. I knew a pair had gone missing, mind.' For a moment she hugged herself and rocked.

'We were just sat there,' she said. 'And suddenly she set on screaming. You know all I could think of was she must be ill. And then it all come out.'

They had been watching *Crossroads*. Even as Kelly screamed there had been a moment of resentment that she should have chosen that time of the day to get appendicitis or whatever it was she had.

'I wonder why she waited that long?'

'I don't know. I've thought and thought and I just don't know.'

'She's mebbe been too frightened, eh?'

'But she must've known he couldn't do anything to her.'

'Aye. But bairns don't think like that.'

It was a comforting line of thought, though Mrs Brown knew her daughter too well to believe it entirely. 'Yes, I suppose that must be it. She's been too scared. But that was what the police said, you know. If only she'd spoke up a bit sooner. Oh, and then there was the doctor messing her about. I mean, I know they have to, but you can't help thinking if they're not going to get him anyway ... what's the point? And that upset her.'

'What you need is a good strong cup of tea.'

Iris went into the kitchen to make it. Now she was no longer faced by the sight of Mrs Brown's misery she was more inclined to withhold her sympathy and make judgements. Her bairn! Where had she been when it happened?

And Mrs Brown, looking uneasily around the fanatically clean and tidy living room, wondered what on earth had possessed her to come. Iris wouldn't keep any of this to herself – well, you couldn't expect her to. But the version that went the rounds wouldn't be fair on her. And it had been late, and she had been at the club. But then what was Kelly doing wandering around at that time of night when she'd been told to come home? The police had blamed *her* for it. They hadn't said much but you could tell. The one with the moustache had been looking right down his nose...

Nobody understood. It was her child, her daughter, and in this extremity so utterly hers that she felt her own flesh torn.

'He didn't just muck around with her, you know,' she burst out as soon as Iris came back. She wanted them all

to understand the enormity of what had happened. 'He stuck it right the way in.'

The words felt solid and sticky in her mouth like phlegm, and after she had said them there was nothing else that she wanted to say. She huddled over the cup of tea and rocked herself for comfort.

Iris looked at her closely. Say what you like about her, she was feeling it. In fact, she was bloody knackered. 'Howay,' she said, when Mrs Brown had finished her tea, 'I'll take you back home.'

She led her across the street and saw her settled on to the sofa in the living room, sparing no more than a single glance of disapproval for the messy room and the unwashed hearth.

'I haven't had time ...' said Mrs Brown.

'No, of course you haven't, love.' Iris replied. There was six months' muck in the room if there was a day's. 'Tell you what, I'll put the fire on. You'll feel a lot better when you're warmed through.' She knelt down and started to rake out the ash. 'Still in bed, is she?'

'Yes,' said Mrs Brown.

'Best place.'

Iris had the fire alight in no time despite the lack of sticks. She waited until the paper she was holding over the fireplace turned bright orange and began to char, then whipped it away in a cloud of acrid smoke. 'There. That should go.'

She was remembering that she'd shown Kelly how to light a fire without sticks. Hanging was too good for the sods.

Arthur shambled in. He stopped abruptly when he saw Iris, for he was wary of her, as many men were.

'Now then,' she said.

'Now then.'

Arthur sat down in the armchair to demonstrate his

right to be there and immediately wished he hadn't, because she towered over him.

'Well,' she said, 'I'll be away now. If there's owt you need you know where I am. Or Ted. He's on two till ten so he'll be in the house all morning.'

'Right, thanks, Missus,' Arthur said, taking over the role of man of the house. He went to the front door with her and Mrs Brown could hear their voices on the step.

He came back looking furtive. Of course it was difficult for him, not being one of the family. He could neither take part in what was happening nor decently go away. But his creeping about, his attempts to obliterate himself, irritated her more than the most insensitive intervention could have done.

'Have I to stop home?' he asked.

'Oh no, you go to work. Keep everything normal.'

'Right.'

It was the answer she had wanted and yet she resented it. He needn't 've sounded so relieved. He stood there looking helpless and the sight of him increased her own feeling of helplessness. She wanted to cry again but she couldn't.

As if reading her thoughts, he said, 'You know, you'd be better if you could let yourself go. It's no use bottling things up.'

'Crying won't help.'

If he thought it might it was not his place to say so.

They sat in silence. She wanted to say something nasty to him but could find no justification. Instead she said, 'Iris doesn't miss much, does she? I saw her looking at the hearth.' Bending down, she started picking up cigarette butts.

'Oh, don't bother with that now,' he said.

One of the cigarette ends had pink smears round it. They always brought a woman with them, they said: to talk to the child.

Her eyes prickled. She might have cried after all if the sound of Kelly's footsteps on the landing had not stopped her.

'She's awake,' Arthur said, looking more than ever as though he would like to bolt for the door. She wished he would. Then was glad he was there. She was afraid of Kelly. Then, again, she wanted him out of the way.

'Pop out and see if I've opened the yard door, love. The bin men won't be able to get in and it's practically overflowing.'

But he sat on, frozen, as she was, by the sound of bare feet slapping across the lino overhead.

'Have you told the school?' he asked. 'I mean, that she's not going in today?'

She shook her head. 'No. They'll know soon enough.'

Kelly was on the stairs now. Mrs Brown tried to think of something to say, but her mind was blank. She half expected the child to look different; but she looked the same, only heavier perhaps, with something clay-like in the colour of her skin. She gave them one glance, cool, almost hostile, and hurried past them into the kitchen. It was hard to believe in the extreme distress of the previous night; but then it had vanished by the time the police arrived. She had been mulish, obstinate by then: not obviously disturbed at all.

She wore a skimpy nightdress. Mrs Brown noticed for the first time that she had outgrown it. It was almost up to her bottom at the back.

'Hadn't you better put something on? A cardigan?'

Mrs Brown reached up and pulled one down from the airing line.

'I'm not cold.'

'I'll get you something to eat.'

'I'm not hungry.'

'Oh, you must be.'

'I see the milk's off.'

By this time Mrs Brown had followed her daughter into the kitchen. Kelly, one eye closed, was squinting down the neck of a milk bottle.

'Oh, it's still usable. I'll put the kettle on.'

Kelly stood aside to let her get to the sink. Her skin, Mrs Brown could not help thinking, was exactly the same shade as the milk: blue-white, slightly 'off'-looking.

'I wish you'd put something on,' she said again.

'I've told you. I'm not cold.' Though the October morning outside the kitchen window looked like the dead of winter.

Mrs Brown had to endure those white, smooth, childlike and yet not sufficiently childlike shoulders. For something to do, she started to butter bread. Arthur hovered uncertainly in the passage between the living room and the kitchen. Everybody seemed to feel that if they moved too suddenly something might break. Mrs Brown found herself taking long, shallow, noiseless breaths.

'Who's all that for?' Kelly asked.

Mrs Brown looked down and realised that she had buttered enough bread for a family of six. Blushing, she pushed the plate aside. She felt a spasm of dislike for her daughter. She said, 'You know, you should make the effort to eat something. You didn't have anything last night.'

Kelly shrugged. She seemed so normal. Her hair fell in a greasy tangle over her face, but even that was usual. She was adept at using her hair to hide her thoughts. Mrs Brown was disappointed. She felt as if she was being cheated of a drama that she had the right to expect. Kelly couldn't scream like that and have police all over the house, and then go back to being normal.

'Did you sleep all right?' she asked.

'Not bad.'

The nightdress was slightly transparent. Although Kelly had nothing that you could call a bust, hardly as much as many men, her nipples seemed to demand attention. Like eyes in her chest. You couldn't avoid seeing them.

Arthur decided he would check that the yard door was open for the bin men. When he came back into the kitchen, Kelly was leaning against the larder with both hands round a cup of tea. He felt shy with her. He said, gruffly, he might have a walk down the town if nobody wanted him for anything? Nobody did. He hunched his shoulders, as if expecting a blow, and hurried out of the house.

Normally when Arthur left the relationship between mother and daughter became easier. Today of all days Mrs Brown needed that slackening of tension. It didn't come. Kelly had started picking at a slice of bread. Mrs Brown tried to catch her eye but her hair was all over her face. Kelly was determined not to look.

'If I was you I'd have a good wash and brush me hair. It'ld make you feel better.'

When had soap and water made Kelly feel better? But her grubbiness in this altered situation was no longer childish dirt. It looked sluttish.

'Later,' mumbled Kelly, through a mouthful of bread.

'I'm only trying to think what's best for you,' said Mrs Brown, her voice quivering. 'A nice bowl of water in front of the fire? I'll bring your clothes down.'

'No, thanks. I'm going back up in a minute.' She paused. 'Why aren't you at work?'

The question took Mrs Brown's breath away.

'You will have to go back, won't you?' Kelly sounded indifferent, if not cheeky.

'But not today!'

'Mam, it happened three weeks ago. You've been out every night since then.'

The remark chafed a raw edge in Mrs Brown's mind. 'Well, what do you expect? If you don't tell people anything. What are we meant to do? You know bloody well if you'd told us you wouldn't 've been left on your own for one night. And there might have been some chance of catching the bugger then . . .'

'They won't catch him.'

'No, thanks to you, they won't! He could be anywhere. Mucking about with some other little lass. I don't know, Kelly, I just don't understand. He mightn't let the next one go. Have you thought of that? He could have strangled you. That's what they do, you know. Why didn't you run away?'

Kelly screwed up her face with the effort of not listening. She was off. There was no stopping her now.

For Mrs Brown it was a relief. The questions chased each other out. Why go with him? Why didn't you run away? And afterwards, why did you stay with him? Why did you go into the café? If he made you go, why didn't you tell the woman. Why didn't you tell me? Why wait three weeks? And after waiting three weeks and nearly screaming the house down, why say so little to the police? Why?

Kelly waited for it to be over.

When her mother seemed to have finished, she put down the half-eaten slice of bread and made towards the door. She had to pass her mother to get to it. They looked at each other. Each at that moment expected, and perhaps wanted, an embrace.

Mrs Brown could smell her daughter. Was it her imagination or was there, mixed in with the smell of unwashed child, another smell, yeasty and acrid? There couldn't be. After all, three weeks! And yet the smell repelled her.

If only she could have reached out and held her daughter. The childish bones jutting through the off-white skin might have reassured her that what she felt was merely sympathy and outraged love, not a more complex mixture of fascination and distaste for this immature, and yet no longer innocent, flesh.

Kelly looked at her mother. If she longed for love she did not know it. She felt only a renewed and more savage pride in her ability to survive alone.

Mrs Brown stood aside to let her pass.

As Mrs Brown had foreseen it was not long before everybody knew, though they were not told by Iris King, who was quite capable of relishing that last refinement of power: to know what others do not know and yet say nothing.

Nobody knew how to react. They all knew and liked Kelly. You couldn't very well ignore it. And yet to come right out with it. . . . In the end they behaved as if the child had been ill. They asked after her, they gave comics and sweets, they clucked, they fussed; they even offered to do the shopping.

The women were more open in their sympathy than the men, who felt the outrage if anything more deeply but sidled past the subject, wincing.

The children were told to play with Kelly as usual and not ask any questions. They did play with her, dutifully, for a while, but they knew by instinct what their parents preferred to ignore: she was no longer a child. After a decent interval they left her alone. Which seemed to suit her very well.

Behind the family's back they talked, grown-ups and children alike. The whispering never stopped. Behind closed doors voices spoke out more freely. Mr Broad-bent, sparse hair standing up with excitement, spit flying, strode up and down the bedroom floor telling Mrs

Broadbent at great length and in some detail how he would punish sexual offenders. Finally, in a burst of civic zeal, he mounted that heap of white and defeated flesh and gave it such a pounding as it had not enjoyed, or endured, for many a long year.

Gradually the excitement died down. Most people in the street regretted that and made sporadic attempts to revive the topic. Only Mrs Broadbent was pleased.

But though the talk died away, Kelly remained alone. The other children avoided her – or she them. Mrs Brown, after the first shock was over, went out every night as she had always done. And Kelly roamed the streets till all hours, as *she* had always done, but alone.

Of course she was not the same. For one thing her appearance changed. People were used to the mane of coarse, dark hair. They were used to the way she hid behind it to avoid awkward questions. Suddenly, it was gone. She cut it off. You could tell she'd done it herself because it stood up all over her head in jagged spikes and chunks. Give the woman her due, Mrs Brown had her round to the hairdresser's the next day, and by the time they'd finished it didn't look too bad, not bad at all.

And yet it was shocking. She could have shaved her head, the effect it had. People took it for what it was: an act of rebellion, at once self-mutilating and aggressive. And they drew back from her because of it. In the past she had avoided their eyes. Now they found themselves avoiding hers, for the short hair revealed eyes of a curious naked amber: an animal's eyes.

The trouble was, she was not enough of a child. Her nipples were bigger than they had been. It was difficult to avoid seeing them. Even the scruffy boy's tee-shirts she'd taken to wearing didn't hide them, but rather made them, by contrast, more painfully apparent. You looked. You couldn't help yourself. And raised your eyes. And when you floundered, not knowing how to express, or

hide, your thoughts she didn't help at all: she let you flounder. And always there were those eyes. Cool. Amused. Hostile. Controlled.

They were affronted. They had offered sympathy and been rejected. What they could not know was that in their own eyes when they looked at her she saw not sympathy but an unadmitted speculation.

In the end they let her alone.

Whatever else she was, she was no longer the child they had known. Dimly they sensed an inner transformation that parallelled the one they saw. But they did not try, or hope, to understand it. She was accepted in Union Street as her mother was not. But for the moment at least, she had moved beyond the range of its understanding.

* * *

It was a cold night. Frost glinted on the surface of the cobbles as Kelly ran the few yards from the fish and chip shop to her house. Sometimes she regretted the loss of her hair: it had kept her neck warm better than any scarf. She burst into the house, too cold to feel frightened. She *was* still frightened sometimes, though only of the darkness, and only in the house, when she was alone.

The telly kept her company on the nights her Mam and Linda were out. She watched anything rather than switch it off. Tonight, there was a programme about Northern Ireland. She settled down, expecting to be bored. But then there was this young man, this soldier, and he was lying in a sort of cot, a bed with sides to it, and he was shouting out, great bellows of rage, as he looked out through the bars at the ward where nobody came. What caught her attention was: they'd shaved all his hair off. You could see the scars where they'd dug the bullets out. His head was like a turnip. That was what they'd done to him. They'd turned him into a turnip, a violent turnip, when they shot the bullets into his brain.

The cameras switched to gangs of youths throwing stones. But his eyes went on watching her.

She finished the fish and chips and pressed the bundle of greasy newspaper down on to the fire. Blue flames licked round it, reluctantly, then blazed up. She wiped her mouth on the back of her hand, switched the telly off, and felt her way along the passage to the front door. It was pitch black at first, but then the landing window gave a glimmering of light. She could almost feel her pupils dilate.

The street was her home now. Once over the step she was more herself. She picked her way along the cracked pavements as delicately as the cat that, seeing her, whisked itself into the gutter. There was a square of light cast by the fish and chip shop window. She hurried across it. Outside, in the street, it was not darkness that frightened her, but light.

After a few minutes she passed a woman walking home, alone, in the middle of the road, as Kelly had been taught to do. The idea was that if somebody – a man – leapt out at you, you would have more time to run away. Her lips curled. It was a bit late for that! She looked at the woman with contempt. The real defence was to be one of those who leapt.

Inside the boy's tee-shirt and jeans her skin felt cool and muscular. She was glad it was cold. Cold was clean.

Only once since that night had something happened that might reasonably have made her afraid. There had been a man standing in the shadow of a doorway, his face screened from the light. He had beckoned her to approach. She had stopped at once and gone towards him, cautious, but not afraid.

'Hello,' he had said. 'And what's your name?'

She had smiled. If he could have seen her smile he might

have been afraid. But she was standing in shadow. She was part of the shadow.

'Kelly,' she said.

And stood breathing.

'Come here, Kelly. I've got summat to show you. Summat you'll like.'

She went, but without hope. This man's voice was coarse.

'There,' he said. 'That enough for yer?'

She looked with her unblinking eyes. She watched the purple flesh-flower bloom, and wilt. He backed away from her, swearing, his hands clawed together over a shrivelling of flesh.

It didn't surprise her. She knew she had the power.

But tonight no voice accosted her as she slipped silently across the road. She knew what she was going to do because she had done it before. And tonight there was the same sensation of pressure, the same feeling of blood squeezing through narrowed veins.

The school this time.

The gate was easy. She climbed it, hung for a moment poised between pavement and sky, then dropped lightly into the playground on the other side. There was a huge pile of coke against the far wall. It would have made a marvellous slide but you were not allowed to play on it. Now, feeling that anything was permitted, she ran a little way up the slope and slid down again. Pieces of coke peppered down after her. But it was no fun playing that game by herself. And she wanted to get inside.

The window shattered, not at the first, but at the second blow. Despising herself for the timidity of her first attempt, she slipped her hand in through jagged glass and found the bolt. She opened the door and went in. There were the long, silent, forbidden corridors and she passed along them stealthily, noiselessly: the intruder.

But in the end it was disappointing. There was a smell

of chalk – an impersonal smell – and the cool sound of water gushing in the boys' toilets. All the cupboards were locked and when you found the keys and opened them it was still no use because the things inside didn't belong to anybody. Nobody cared about this place. There were no private smells.

She went into the Headmaster's study, but even that was impersonal despite the photographs of his wife and children. She was bolder now. She put the light on. There wasn't much danger of its being seen because the window overlooked the playground.

She sat down in his chair. Her bottom slid easily across the black leather which, on closer examination, was not leather at all, but plastic. It creaked, though, when she shifted her weight. He liked the way it creaked. If he was telling you off and it didn't creak enough to satisfy him he would wiggle his bum around until it did.

On top of the cupboard behind the door was the cane. She'd only had that once. Girls didn't get the cane very often. Girls did as they were told.

She wetted her fingers and rubbed them across the plastic, but she couldn't make it squeak as leather squeaks. She swivelled the chair experimentally from side to side. All the time anger and courage were draining away from her. It had been a mistake to come here.

The house. Oh, yes, the house had been better. . . .

She had gone to the park. It must have been about the middle of October. A month ago now. It had been her first trip outside since that dreadful day when she had started to scream and the police had come. She had gone to the park. To the exact place. To the same tree . . .

She thought she was being defiant. She thought she was proving to herself that she was not afraid. But in fact when the park was empty, when no shadow moved within the shadow of the trees, she felt . . . What did she

feel? Abandoned? Though she told herself that she was glad, and began making up what would have happened if he had been there – what she would have done, or said. Perhaps she would just have run home and told the police and then he would have been caught and put in prison.

She stood alone under the tree, feeling the blood squeeze through her veins. Her whole skin felt tight like a boil which you know is going to burst soon. She started to walk towards the lake.

The area bordering on the park was one of the wealthiest in town; the houses big, substantial Victorian houses that had preserved their air of smug assurance into a more violent and chaotic age. She wondered if The Man lived in one of those houses. He had sounded as if he might.

There was a lane between their long back gardens and the park, muddy and overgrown, a strip of the countryside, expensive in a steel town. One of the houses stood out from the rest, in Kelly's eyes, because it had a slide, a swing and a sandpit in the garden. She was too old for such things but they still caught her eye sometimes, just as she found herself looking at the toy pages in her mother's catalogue.

She felt a sudden need to be inside the peaceful, green enclosure of that garden. A month earlier she would have repressed it. Now she wriggled through a gap in the hedge almost before the thought was fully formed. If anybody caught her she could say she'd lost a ball. Or something. It didn't much matter. The fear of being caught was part of the thrill.

She approached the house, telling herself with every step that she would turn back now. The French windows were open. She stood outside and sniffed. Her nose told her at once that the house was empty. But they could not have gone far. On a long trip they would have remembered to shut the windows.

She stepped inside. When she closed the door behind her and stood in the big hall, everything seemed to stir around her, as if resenting the intrusion. Motes of dust seethed together in a beam of sunlight. She began to go from room to room very quietly, her gym shoes squeaking slightly on the polished wood of the floors. There was a smell of lavender. The living room was gold and white and pink, cool after the sunlight in the hall. There was a bowl of roses on top of the open piano, and a photograph of a girl on a pony. At first she touched things gently, feeling her rough skin catch on the silk of furniture and cushions, reluctant to disturb this peace, though she knew she would have to destroy it in the end.

She went upstairs. Her feet padded on soft carpets, fingernails – or claws – clicked on polished wood. She snuffled her way around like some small, predatory animal. She wanted to touch everything, but she was cautious too: her nerves quivered just beneath the surface of her skin. She could hear the dust settle in empty rooms.

The girl's bedroom bored her in the end. Photographs of school – imagine wanting to be reminded of that! Books about ballet, and ponies; lipstick in a drawer. She looked into the garden, so green, so enclosed, so sheltered. She might have pitied or despised the girl who lived in this room, but she would not have known how to envy her.

The bathroom next. She fingered the towels, she selected a bottle from the rows of bottles on a shelf and squirted aftershave on to her skin. It brought goose-pimples up all over her arms. Hidden away in a little cupboard were the nastier necessities: hair remover, acne cream, a long steel thing with a little hole in the end that you used for squeezing blackheads out. Linda had one.

She pulled handfuls of clothes out of the dirty linen

basket, shirts and underwear mainly. She could tell whether the pants belonged to a man or a woman with her eyes shut, by the smell alone. She snuffled into armpits and stained crotches, then sniffed her own armpits.

The parents' bedroom was best, though at first she could hardly take it in, it was so different from anywhere else she had been. She looked casually at the big, plump, satiny bed, sniffed the smells of perfume and powder, stood on tiptoe to reach the top of the wardrobe because that was where Uncle Arthur kept the things he put on to go with her mother. There was nothing there.

She turned her attention to the bed, rubbing her hands across the flesh-coloured satin until a roughened flap of skin from a healing blister snagged on one of the threads and tore. There was a pile of cushions at the head of the bed: big, soft, delicately-scented, plump, pink, flabby cushions, like the breasts and buttocks of the woman who slept in the bed. A man slept there too, of course, but you could not imagine him. It was a woman's room, a temple to femininity. And the altar was the dressing-table.

There were so many creams: moisturiser, night cream, throat cream, hand cream, special tissue cream for round the eyes. And so much make-up! Little jars and pots of eyeshadow: green, blue, mauve, gold, silver, opal, amethyst. Even yellow and pink. She opened one of them and rubbed a little on the back of her hand, then thrust her finger deep inside the pot for the pleasure of feeling the cream squirm.

She wanted something else, something more. She felt her skin tighten as if at any moment it might split open and deposit her, a new seed, on the earth. She began clawing at the satin skin of the bed dragging her nails across the dressing-table hard enough to leave scratches, claw marks, in the polished wood. Was this what she wanted? She thought of all the things she could do – pour

powder and nail polish all over the carpet, daub dressing-table and mirror with lipstick. She did none of them. Something was stopping her. She looked around. It was the mirror. It was her own reflection in the glass that caught and held her, and drained her anger away.

She looked as wild and unkempt as an ape, as savage as a wolf. Only her hair, glinting with bronze and gold threads, was beautiful. She dragged it down to frame her face; then lifted it high above her head and let it escape, strand by strand, until it was swinging, coarse and heavy, around her shoulders again. But she looked bad. She peered more closely in the glass and saw that the pores of her nose were bigger than they had been, and plugged with black. When Linda used the blackhead remover little worms of white stuff came wiggling out of the unblocked pores. Suddenly, Kelly hated the mirror. On the man's side of the bed was a heavy ashtray. She picked it up and threw it, hurling her whole body against the glass.

It smashed, as a sheet of ice explodes when you drop a stone on it. Lines and cracks radiated out, trapping, at the centre of the web, her shattered face.

She rocked herself, and moaned, thrusting her fingers deep into her mouth and biting on them to stop the groans. She got up. In a manicure case in the dressing-table drawer she found a pair of scissors, and began hacking at her hair. But the scissors were too small. She remembered a spare bedroom across the landing, with a sewing machine, and ran across to it. The dressmaking scissors she brought back bit into her hair with thick, satisfying crunches. In no time at all big loops and coils were slipping to the floor. When she was shorn, she looked back in the glass and was comforted a little by the sight of her ugliness.

She listened. In every room of the house there was the sound of clocks ticking, curtains breathing, the minute squeaks and rustles of an empty house. But her ears had

caught something. There it was again. A quickening of the silence. They were coming back. A second later, she heard a car turning into the road.

She slipped out through the French windows as they came in the front door, though not before she had felt the house begin to heal itself, to close like water, seamlessly, over the disruption of her presence. From the end of the lawn she looked back resentfully at the smug, bland windows, and wished she had done all the things she had thought of doing. She wished she had written all over the house, in bright red lipstick, the worst words that she knew. She wished she had torn and scattered and smashed, because then nobody could have pretended that nothing had happened.

Now, remembering that day, she twisted and turned in the Headmaster's chair, willing that tiny, impersonal box of a room to be vulnerable, to expose itself to her as those other more intimate rooms had done. She picked up the photograph of the Headmaster's wife and children and smashed it on a corner of the desk. She reached out for the paper knife and held it a second, poised above his chair. She expected the blow to jar her wrist but the knife slid in easily, through unresisting plastic. She ripped and tore at the soft, smooth, phoney skin while little white balls of polystyrene escaped from the cuts and trickled down on to the floor. She was sobbing, her excitement mounting on every breath.

There was nothing bad enough to do.

Yes, there was. She went into a corner of the room, pulled her jeans and pants down, and squatted. A lifetime of training was against her and at first she could do nothing but grunt and strain. But finally there it was: a smooth, gleaming, satiny turd. She picked it up and raised it to her face, smelling her own hot, animal stink.

It reminded her of The Man's cock, its shape, its weight. She clenched her fist.

She began to daub shit all over the Headmaster's chair and desk, smearing it over papers, wood and plastic. When there was no more left, except a bit between her fingers, she scraped it off carefully on the sides of a Register.

She careered down the corridor to her own classroom, the smell of her shit hot above the usual smells of gymshoes and custard. She almost ran at the blackboard, and wrote, sobbing, PISS, SHIT, FUCK. Then, scoring the board so hard that the chalk screamed, the worst word she knew: CUNT. The chalk broke on the final letter and her nails, dragging across the board, were torn down to the quick. She stood, panting, with her back to the board and sucked her fingers, glad of the pain and the taste of blood that soothed in some small measure the aching of her tight, her unappeased flesh.

The night she was raped Kelly had gone home across the park after all. As she stood on the pavement outside the fish and chip shop there had seemed to be nothing else to do but retrace her steps. As though in going back the past could be undone.

She did not look back, though if she had done so she would have seen him, there, in his mirror-tiled cell, moisture still oozing out of his eyes and dripping down his face. She did not need to look back. She would carry him with her always, wherever she went, a homunculus, coiled inside her brain.

It was her first experience of the street at night. Not just late: that she was used to. Real night.

At first she was afraid. She started away from every shadow. She had good reason for fear. And yet, as she walked, the empty streets with their pools of greasy, orange light grew on her. She no longer envied the life

that still went on here and there, behind coloured curtains. It was better outside. She walked past the drunks and other late-night stragglers without fear, for tonight her glance could kill; and her skin, where the moonlight fell on it, was as white and corrosive as salt.

She slid through a gap in the railings. Generations of children had made it. Next year she would be too big, next year she would have to use the gate. It was a tight fit even now and she scraped her knee on a jagged edge of metal. Normally she would have bent to examine the cut, even in this moonlight that made all blood look black, but tonight it hardly seemed worthwhile.

She went back to the tree. His face pursued her. In a gesture of defiance she pulled all the conkers from her pocket and threw them on the ground. The action looked, and was, futile. His face remained. And would be there always, trailing behind it, not the cardboard terrors of the fairground, those you buy for a few pennies and forget, but the real terror of the adult world, in which grown men open their mouths and howl like babies, where nothing that you feel, whether love or hate, is pure enough to withstand the contamination of pity.

She had said nothing to anybody that night, though next morning when she woke up the feeling of invulnerability was gone. For three weeks she was afraid. For three weeks she sweated in darkness while his face pursued her in and out of dreams and down the howling corridors of nightmares. Then, with a sensation of splitting open, of pissing on the floor, she started to scream.

They came. They sat over her. But the feeling of numbness was back. She tried to tell them about his face. She tried to tell them about that moment in the fish and chip shop when the grown-up man had started to cry. But they weren't interested in that. They wanted her to tell them what had happened in the alley behind the

boarded-up factory. And they wanted her to tell it again and again and again.

In the end they went away.

But she was not the same. Thank God, she was not the same. She could step out into the street now and become as quick and unfeeling as a cat. She moved through the empty streets with unnamed purposes at work inside her, and her body, inside its boy's clothing, was as cold and inviolate as ice.

Only she was afraid of herself. Increasingly, she was afraid of herself. And she was afraid of what she might do.

One night in early December Kelly came home to find her mother on her knees cleaning the fireplace. It was an odd time of night for the job and her mother was oddly dressed for doing it: she was wearing her best dress.

Kelly watched in silence. Her mother always turned to housework when she was especially distressed. It was a tribute to her stoicism that so little got done.

Eventually her mother looked round, a question in her eyes that she was too frightened to ask. Kelly found no difficulty in ignoring it. Then, as her mother looked down, she thought, We're alike. It had never struck her before, but it was true. There, in the lines of nose and chin, was her own face, glimpsed in a distorting mirror.

The brief realisation of kinship made her ask, 'Where's Arthur?'

'Arthur didn't fancy the club tonight. I went with Madge.'

So that was it. He'd packed her in.

'All right, was it?

'Oh, yeah. There was a smashing turn on at the finish. Bloke dressed up as woman. We howled and laughed. He ended up sticking pins in his tits.' Her voice shook. 'They were . . . balloons!' The word 'balloons' burst out of her

mouth like a cork, ugly sounds and cries came glugging after it. Her red, greasy mouth was square with anguish like an abandoned baby's. Her breasts, only too obviously flesh, shook as she cried. Kelly looked away to avoid seeing them.

'Arthur's not coming back. Is that it?'

'Yes.' She bowed her head, so that at least now you did not have to look at that ravaged face. Though the downcast cheeks had tears on them, ruthlessly revealing seams and cracks that make-up had tried in vain to hide.

Kelly looked round, half-expecting to see the ugly little scene reflected in mirrors. But there was only the familiar, untidy room. A bottle of milk going sour on the table.

'I'm going to stand that milk in water,' she said. 'That way we might get a decent cup of tea in the morning.'

On her way back from the kitchen she looked at her mother again. She was still kneeling by the half-washed hearth, but not crying now. She knew there was no point.

Kelly wanted to speak, but was afraid that sympathy would set her mother off again. And anyway she felt no sympathy. She felt, rather, distaste for this woman whose hard exterior had cracked to reveal an inner corruption. Her mother had been the one solid feature in the landscape of her mind, not much attended to, perhaps, but there, a presence on the skyline that you felt even when your back was turned. Now that was gone. Her mother's face, crumbling, reminded her of The Man. She could not allow herself to feel pity.

Kelly now turned her back altogether upon the spurious safety of home. More than ever she haunted the streets by night. She liked particularly the decaying, boarded-up streets by the river. There a whole community had been

cleared away: the houses waited for the bulldozers and the demolition men to move in, but they never came.

Grass grew between the cobbles, rosebay willowherb thronged the empty spaces, always threatening to encroach, but still the houses stood. Officially empty, but not in reality. You had only to walk down these streets at night to realise that life, life of a kind, still went on.

Kelly went cautiously. But however carefully you trod sooner or later glass crunched under your feet or a sagging floorboard creaked and threatened to give way, and instantly that hidden life revealed itself, if only by a quickening of the silence. Tramps. Drunks. As she became more skilful she saw them. These were not the drunks you meet wending a careful path home to the safety of hearth and bed. These were the hopeless, the abandoned, the derelict.

It shocked her at first to find a woman among them: a woman who bulged and waddled as if she were pregnant. Though when she took her coat off, it was to reveal only wads of newspaper fastened to her body with string. For the nights were cold now. An old woman could easily freeze to death.

She had the bluest, most muculent eyes Kelly had ever seen. They seemed to have melted and flowed over on to her cheeks, which were furrowed and cracked almost beyond belief. These were not laughter-lines, frown-lines, worry-lines. They seemed to occur at random, like the cracks in parched earth, the outward and visible signs of an inner and spiritual collapse.

Parched in any other sense she was not. Her conversations with Kelly were punctuated by frequent swigs from a bottle whose neck she wiped fastidiously on the palm of an indescribably filthy hand. Her name, she said, was Joan. As a younger woman she had worked at the cake bakery. She produced this fact with some surprise,

as if it referred to a time in her life she could hardly now recall.

'They used to think I was mad,' she said, her blue eyes less than ever confined to their sockets. 'But I wasn't mad. It was them buggers was mad, skivvying away for their three-piece suites. They wanted looking at.'

She muttered to herself and became suddenly alert, glancing rapidly from side to side, though her surroundings could not have been more bleak or empty in their desolation.

'They're listening, you know. They think I don't know, they think I can't tell. The buggers is always listening.'

She strained to hear. Eventually, somewhere down the street, a door banged in the wind.

'There,' she said, satisfied, lips pleated over empty gums. 'There. They'll have that nailed down tomorrow.'

She lapsed into silence. Kelly, thinking the conversation was over, got up to go, but Joan was suddenly convulsed with laughter, and caught her arm. 'I used to spit in it, you know. I did! I never let a batch get past without.'

Seeing Kelly look blank, she added, sulkily, 'The cake mixture.'

'You spat in the cake mixture?'

'Aye!'

'What you do that for?'

'Because I couldn't reach to piss in it.' She rocked herself with laughter or anguish or cold. 'It had years of my life, that place.'

But this was too near reality. Easier to raise the bottle and glug. Kelly watched the wasted throat working as she drank.

The men, Kelly avoided. Not out of fear, but because they became maudlin very easily, wanting to touch her

arms or stroke her hair. There was nothing sexual in this. They were too far gone for that. No. She was the daughter they had wanted and never had, or had had and lost. And she could not follow them along that road. She felt no pity. At times her mind seemed to slice through them like a knife through rotten meat. And in those odd flashes of total clarity that occur in alcoholics on the verge of stupor, they were aware of it, and shrank from her as if they had burned their hands on frozen steel.

She went back to Union Street. And there was Blonde Dinah staggering home, her hair daffodil yellow under the drooping light. Earlier that night, under that same lamp, a group of girls had been playing. Hands linked together to form a circle, they had turned slowly through the misty radiance; and their voices, chanting the half-understood words, were passionate and shrill. One of the girls was Sharon Scaife, who had been Kelly's friend and would be so again if Kelly would allow it. But Kelly had gone away. The circle in the lamplight was closed to her forever. She knew it, and she was afraid.

On another night, playing in the rubble of a partially-demolished street near her home, she found a baby buried under a heap of broken bricks, a baby as red and translucent as a ruby. She looked at him, at his sealed eyes and veined head, and put the rubble back carefully, brick by brick, guarding this secret as jealously as if it had been her own.

She haunted the park, too. She walked up and down, searching, perhaps, though if she was she did not know it. He never came.

Others came. Even in this weather people came to the park to make love. She watched a couple once. He had actually taken his trousers down. She shivered for him, watching his small hard buttocks bob up and down like golf balls. At first it was funny. Then something mechanical in his movements, a piston-like power and

regularity, began to make it seem not ridiculous, but terrible. When he lifted his head, his glazed eyes and hanging face revealed the existence of a private ritual, a compulsion of which he was both frightened and ashamed. The girl who lay beneath him was as much an intruder on it as Kelly would have been, had she chosen to step out of the shadow of the trees.

Christmas came and went. Kelly was given more presents than usual: a doll that wet itself, a hairdressing set, a matching necklace and brooch. She did not play with them or wear them, but arranged them carefully in her room, where they acquired, over the ensuing weeks, an extraordinary strangeness like the abandoned apparatus of a lunar probe.

It was a hard winter; the weather after Christmas was particularly cold. The miners were on strike. That didn't affect Kelly much, except that she was sometimes sent round all the corner shops to look for paper bags full of coal. You could still get those after the coalmen had stopped delivering. The cold weather did not keep her indoors. She still spent her evenings in the streets by the river, where she was expert now at stalking her shambling and shabby prey.

Her mother came in very late and often drunk. There was nobody to take Arthur's place, and if she went on like this there never would be. Linda was going steady. She solved her problems by spending more time at her boyfriend's house than she did at her own. Kelly cut herself off from both of them; but underneath the fear increased. She was more than ever alone. There were days now when she felt trapped inside her own skull.

One morning in late February she went out into the back yard to open the door for the bin men. The centre of the yard was so badly drained that in winter it became a sheet of ice. She had to pick her way across it. And there by the dustbin was a bird, its feathers fluffed out, too far

gone to fly away or even struggle in her hand. She felt the thinness, the lightness of its bones; she felt the heart flutter. Its neck rested between her forefinger and her thumb, and she thought, Suppose I squeezed? She could so easily let her fingers tighten. She could watch its eyes glaze, feel the final fluttering of its heart. And why not? Why should there be life rather than death? Then her mother came to the kitchen door to tell her to be quick, she was late for school again; and she put the bird down on the ground where she had found it.

When she came home at tea-time it was dead anyway.

In the end even her nights in the derelict streets lost their savour. She seemed to be drying up, to be turning into a machine. Her legs, pumping up and down the cold street, had the regularity and power of pistons. And her hands, dangling out of the sleeves of her anorak, were as heavy and lifeless as tools.

One dank afternoon at the very end of winter, she left the house. It was too early to go to the streets by the river, so she went to the park instead. It had been raining for days. The ground was covered with sheets of water that trapped the last light of the sky and reflected it back again. As Kelly walked on she was aware of the steely blue radiance gathering all around her. It was disorientating: the leaden, lifeless sky and the radiance of light beating up from the earth. She felt dizzy and had to stop.

The mist that had hung about all day had begun to clear, except for a few small pockets above the surface of the lake. Beyond the chemical works in the far distance the sun was setting, obscured by columns of drifting brown and yellow smoke. A brutal, bloody disc, scored by factory chimneys, it seemed to swell up until it filled half the western sky.

With a sensation of moving outside time, Kelly started to walk forward again. At first, there was total silence

except for the squeak of her gym shoes in the wet grass. Then a murmuring began and mixed in with it sharp, electric clicks, like the sound of women talking and brushing their hair at once. The noise became louder. She climbed to a ridge of higher ground and there at the centre was the tree, its branches fanned out, black and delicate, against the red furnace of sky. By now the murmur had become a fierce, ecstatic trilling, and when she looked more closely she saw that the tree was covered in birds that clustered along its branches as thick and bright as leaves, so that from a distance you might almost have thought that the tree was singing.

The singing went on. The tree pulsed and gleamed with light. But she could not break out of that room inside her head where she and The Man sat and stared at each other's reflections in the mirror tiles. She would have liked to scream and beat the air but lacked strength to raise her hands.

She fell back, and found herself standing on a patch of muddy ground.

She wandered on, not knowing or caring where her footsteps were leading her. She was hungry and had nothing to eat except a few crumbs of chocolate biscuit that she dug out of the deepest corners of her pockets. But she would not give in and go home.

In the hollow ground around the lake darkness came early. White birds shone through the dusk, heads tucked in, wings furled, feather upon feather furled. But on the open ground the light had become an electric, tingling gold. You did not walk through it: you waded or glided or swam.

In the big houses around the park lights were already being switched on. Homecomings. She turned into the main avenue of trees and began to walk along it, hoping for nothing.

But there on a bench at the far end was a dark figure,

sharply etched against the outpouring of gold. She began to hurry; she broke into a run; she arrived at the bench panting for breath, and alive with hope.

At first there seemed to be nothing there but a heap of old rags. Then the old woman lifted her head. Her face was an ivory carving etched in trembling gold. She peered at Kelly, evidently unable to see her properly. Her eyes, magnified by the thick lenses of her glasses, were milky with cataract. Her clothes were covered with egg and cereal stains where she had aimed for, and missed, her mouth.

'What are you doing here?' Kelly asked. Normally she would not have bothered with the old woman. Only the sharpness of her disappointment made her speak.

'Picking me nose with me elbow.'

Her speech was slurred. Kelly moved closer. The old woman's coat, or dressing gown, was open. Her dress had a lowish neck.

'Why don't you fasten the buttons?' Kelly asked. 'You'll catch your death.'

For the flood of warm gold was deceptive: it was cold enough to make your fingers ache.

'I'll fasten them if I want them fastened.'

Kelly was silent for a while. After a struggle, she said, 'Won't anybody be expecting you back home?'

She felt concern for the old woman: an ordinary, unfamiliar feeling. They had had a talk in Assembly about old people: how the cold could kill.

'Not a living soul.' It ought to have sounded bitter or self-pitying, but it didn't. There was another silence, then the old woman went on slowly, 'They're going to put me in a Home.' She laughed. '*Think* they are! I've got other ideas.' She paused, then added reluctantly, 'They say I can't see to meself.'

Even to Kelly's eyes this was obviously true. The old

woman's skin was stretched tight over the bones of her skull.

'They say I'm not getting me proper food.'

'Well, perhaps you're not.' The front of her dress seemed to have got most of it. 'At least in the Home you'd get your meals.' She paused. Then burst out, 'And they'd see you were warm. They'd see you had a fire.'

'Is not the life more than meat and the body than raiment?'

She wasn't quoting. She had lived long enough to make the words her own.

Again silence. The old woman's hands were like birds' claws clasped in her lap.

Kelly said, 'I could take you home.'

'No thanks. You bugger-off home yourself! I suppose you have got one?'

'Yes. I suppose I have.'

They sat in silence. The light increased.

'I used to come here when I was a little lass, aye, younger than you.' The old woman looked with dim eyes around the park. Kelly followed her gaze and, for the first time in her life, found it possible to believe that an old woman had once been a child. At the same moment, and also for the first time, she found it possible to believe in her own death. There was terror in this, but no sadness. She stared at the old woman as if she held, and might communicate, the secret of life.

'There used to be a band then,' the old woman said, nodding towards the bandstand that the dead leaves rattled through. 'You used to sit and listen to them on a Sunday afternoon.'

With renewed energy she looked at the child, who, sitting there with the sun behind her, seemed almost to be a gift of the light. 'Don't tell anybody I'm here,' she said. It was the closest she had come to pleading.

'You're crying,' Kelly said. She stared at the tears that

were streaming down into the cracks and furrows of the old woman's face. She looked at the throat that in its nakedness was as vulnerable as a bird's. 'There must be another way,' she almost pleaded in her turn.

'There's no other way. They're trying to take everything away from me. Everything.' She smiled. 'Well, this way they can't. That's all.'

In spite of the smile she was still crying. Kelly reached out and touched her hand.

'I won't tell anybody,' she said.

She looked down at their hands: the old woman's cracked and shiny from a lifetime of scrubbing floors, her own grubby, with scabs on two of the knuckles.

They sat together for a long time.

'I feel warmer now,' the old woman said, 'I think I'll have a little sleep.'

Kelly went on watching her. The old woman's tears had dried to a crust of white scurf at the corners of her lids. Which were closed now, in sleep, or unconsciousness, or death.

At any rate, it was time to go. Kelly slipped home through the growing darkness.

There was a sound ahead of her, a sound like the starlings had made. And there, coming out of the cake bakery, was a crowd of women, talking together. She stopped to watch them.

Most of them began to run as soon as they were released, with the peculiar stiff-legged gait that women adopt as they grow up, though it is not natural to them. They were anxious to get home, to cook the dinner, to make a start on the housework. A few lingered. Their hair, which might have caught in the machines or contaminated the food, was bound back under scarves or nets. Their voices as they talked together were shrill and discordant from a day of shouting over the noise of the conveyor belt.

Then a young girl came to the factory gates alone. She hesitated. On the other side of the street a boy dropped the newspaper he was reading, and waved. They ran to meet each other and, oblivious of the crowds around them, kissed.

Kelly stared after them, hungrily. Then she bent her head and followed in their footsteps. She was going home.

even dead, he was a nuisance. She would have to get rid of him quickly if she didn't want it to get around that her powers were waning. Then she remembered the place where she had buried some of her former children and considered that he would fit into the pram – he was small enough. Yet it was all so much bother and very unpleasant and unpleasantness always wore her out.

She went outside to take a look at the pram. The dogs were whining and pulling on the fence. Feeling ashamed by her neglect she returned to fetch their supper, when the barrel caught her eye. Inspiration came to her in a flash. The barrel was large – it was handy – and there would be an extra fillip added to the ointment. She felt humbled by the greatness of her power.

Cheerfully she approached the figure slumped like a rag doll against the table. It was easy to drag him outside, he was so fragile. Though he wasn't quite dead because she heard him whisper, "Sweet Jesus, help me." This only irritated her. She could have helped him if he had let her. She dragged his unresisting body towards the barrel and with no difficulty toppled him inside to join the healing ointment. With a sigh of satisfaction she replaced the lid. As usual everything had worked out well for her.

Bus Queue

The boy was out of breath. He had been running hard. He reached the bus stop with a sinking heart. There was only a solitary woman waiting – the bus must have gone.

"Is the bus away missus?" he gasped out. The woman regarded him coldly. "I really couldn't say," then drew the collar of her well-cut coat up round her face to protect herself against the cold wind blowing through the broken panes of the bus shelter. The boy rested against the wire fence of the adjacent garden taking in long gulps of air to ease the harshness in his lungs. Anxiously he glanced around when two middle-aged females approached and stood within the shelter.

"My it's awfy cauld the night," said one. The well-dressed woman nodded slightly, then turned her head away.

"Ah hope that bus comes soon," said the other woman to her companion, who replied, "The time you have to wait would sicken ye if you've jist missed one."

"I wonder something is not done about it," said the well-dressed woman sharply, turning back to them.

"Folks hiv been complainin' for years," was the cheerful reply, "but naebody cares. Sometimes they don't come this way at all, but go straight through by the main road. It's always the same for folk like us. If it was wan o' these

high-class districts like Milngavie or Bearsden they wid soon smarten their ideas."

At this point a shivering middle-aged man joined them. He stamped about impatiently with hands in pockets. "Bus no' due yet Maggie?" he asked one of the women.

"Probably overdue."

Her friend chipped in, "These buses would ruin your life. We very near missed the snowball in the bingo last week through the bloody bus no' comin'." The man nodded with sympathy.

"Gaun to the bingo yersel' Wullie?"

"Naw. Ah'm away to meet ma son. He's comin' hame on leave and is due in at the Central Station. Ah hope this bus comes on time or Ah might miss him."

"Oh aye – young Spud's in the army ower in Belfast. It must be terrible there."

"Better that than bein' on the dole."

"Still Ah widny like bein' in Belfast wi' all that bombin' and murder."

"Oor Spud's got guts," said the man proudly.

The boy leaning on the fence began to sway back and forth as if he was in some private agony.

The well-dressed woman said loudly, "I shouldn't wonder if that fence collapses."

The other three looked over at the boy. The man said, "Here son, you'll loosen that fence if you don't stop yer swingin'."

The boy looked back in surprise at being addressed. He gradually stopped swaying, but after a short time he began to kick the fence with the backs of his heels as if he was obliged to keep moving in some way.

"You wid think the young wans nooadays all had St Vitus dance," remarked the man.

The well-dressed woman muttered, "Hooligans."

It was now becoming dark and two or three more people emerged from the shadows to join the queue. The general question was asked if the bus was away, and answered with various pessimistic speculations.

"Hi son," someone called, "you'd better join the queue." The boy shook his head in the negative, and a moody silence enveloped the gathering. Finally it was broken by a raucous female voice saying, "Did you hear aboot Bella's man? Wan night he nivver came hame. When he got in at eight in the morning she asked him where hud he been. Waitin' for a bus, said he."

Everyone laughed except the well-dressed woman and the boy, who had not been listening.

"Look, there's a bus comin' up," spoke a hopeful voice. "Maybe there will be wan doon soon."

"Don't believe it," said another, "Ah've seen five buses go up at times and nothin' come doon. In this place they vanish into thin air."

"Bring back the Pakkies," someone shouted.

"They're all away hame. They couldny staun the pace."

"Don't believe it. They're all licensed grocers noo."

"You didny get ony cheap fares aff the Pakkies, but at least their buses were regular."

Conversation faded away as despondency set in. The boy's neck was painful from looking up the street. Suddenly he stiffened and drew himself off the fence when two youths came into view. They walked straight towards him and stood close, one at each side.

"You're no' feart," said one with long hair held in place with a bandeau.

"How?" the boy answered hoarsely.

"The Rock mob know whit to expect if they come oot here."

"Ah wis jist visitin' ma bird."

"Wan of oor team is in hospital because of the Rock. Twenty-four stitches he's got in his face – hit wi' a bottle."

"Ah had nothin' to dae wi' that."

"You were there, weren't ye?"

"Ah didny know big Jake wis gaun tae put a bottle on him."

"Neither did oor mate."

All this was said in whispers.

"Hey yous," said an irate woman, "Ah hope you don't think you're gaun tae jump the queue when the bus comes."

"That's all right," said the one with the bandeau. "We're jist talkin' tae oor mate. We'll get to the end when the bus comes."

The crowd regarded them with disapproval. On the other side of the fence where the youths were leaning, a dog which was running about the garden began to bark frantically at the bus queue.

"Shut yer noise," someone shouted, which incensed the dog further. One of the youths aimed a stone at its back. The bark changed to a pained howl and the dog retreated to a doorstep to whimper pitifully for some minutes.

"Nae need for that," said the man, as murmurs of sympathy were taken up for the dog.

"This generation has nae consideration for anyone nooadays," a voice declared boldly.

"Aye, they wid belt you as soon as look at you."

Everyone stared hard at the youths as if daring them to start belting, but the youths looked back with blank expressions.

"They want to join the army like ma son," the man said in a loud voice. "He disny have it easy. Discipline is what he gets and it's done him the world of good."

"Ower in Ireland, that's where Wullie's son is," declared one of the women who had joined the queue early.

"Poor lad," said the woman with the raucous voice, "havin' to deal wi' the murderin' swine in that place. They should send some o' these young thugs here tae Ireland. They'd soon change their tune."

"They wid be too feart to go," the man replied. "They've nae guts for that sort of thing."

At this point the youth in the middle of the trio on the fence was reflecting on the possibility of asking the people in the queue for help. He considered that he was safe for the moment but when the bus came he would be forced to enter and from then on he would be trapped with his escorts. But he didn't know how to ask for help. He suspected they wouldn't listen to him, judging by their comments. Even if the bizzies were to pass by at this moment, what could he say. Unless he got the boot or the knife they would only laugh.

Then someone shouted, "Here's the bus," and the queue cheered. The blood drained from the youth's face.

"Mind yous two," said a warning voice as the bus moved up to the stop, "the end of the queue."

"That lad in the middle can get to the front. He was wan o' the first here," a kindly voice spoke. The well-dressed woman was the first to climb aboard, saying, "Thank goodness."

"That's O.K.," said the youth with the bandeau, "we're all gettin' on together," as both he and his mate moved in front of the other youth to prevent any attempt on his part to break into the queue.

"Help me mister!" he shouted, now desperate. "These guys will not let me on." But even as he said this he knew it sounded feeble. The man glanced over but only momentarily. He had waited too long for the bus to be interested. "Away and fight like ma son," was his response. In a hopeless attempt the youth began punching and kicking at his guards when everyone was on. The faces of those who were seated peered out at the commotion. The driver started up the engine in an effort to get away quickly. One of the youths shouted to his mate as he tried to ward off the blows. "Quick, get on. We're no' hingin aboot here all night." He had already received a painful kick

which took the breath from him. The one with the bandeau had a split second to make up his mind, but he was reluctant to let his victim go without some kind of vengeance for his mate in hospital. Whilst dodging wild punches from the enemy he managed to get his hand into his pocket. It fastened on a knife. In a flash he had it out and open. He stuck it straight into the stomach of the youth. His companion who had not noticed this action pulled him on to the platform of the bus just as it was moving away.

"Get aff," shouted the driver, angry but unable to do anything about it. The other youth, bleeding, staggered against the fence, immersed in a sea of pain. The last words he heard when the bus moved away were, "Ah wis jist waitin' on wan number – " Then he heard no more. Someone peering out of the back window said, "There's a boy hingin ower the fence. Looks as if he's hurt bad."

"Och they canny fight for nuts nooadays. They should be in Belfast wi' ma son."

"True enough." The boy was dismissed from their thoughts. They were glad to be out of the cold and on their way.

Getting Sent For

Mrs Sharp knocked timidly on the door marked 'Headmistress'.

"Come in," a cool voice commanded.

She shuffled in, slightly hunched, clutching a black plastic shopping bag and stood waiting for the headmistress to raise her eyes from the notebook she was engrossed in.

"Do sit down," said the headmistress when Mrs Sharp coughed apologetically.

Mrs Sharp collapsed into a chair and placed her bag between her feet. The headmistress relinquished the notebook with a sigh and began.

"I'm sorry to bring you here, but recently George has become quite uncontrollable in class. Something will have to be done."

Mrs Sharp shifted about in the chair and assumed a placating smile.

"Oh dear – I thought he was doing fine. I didn't know – "

"It's been six months since I spoke to you," interrupted the headmistress, "and I'm sorry to say he has not improved one bit. In fact he's getting steadily worse."

Mrs Sharp met the impact of the gold-framed spectacles nervously as she said, "It's not as if he gets away with anything at home. His Da and me are always on at him, but he pays no attention."

A Change of Face

I was five pounds short of the two hundred I needed by Thursday, and I had only two days to make it up.

"Why do you need two hundred pounds?" asked Ingrid, my room-mate.

"Let's say I promised myself that amount."

"That explains everything," she said. "I once promised myself a holiday in Majorca, but things don't always work out."

"In your case things never work out."

"I think you're crazy," said Ingrid. "What good is money to you anyway?" Her fatuity was maddening, but I kept calm.

"Lend me a fiver. You won't regret it."

Her tinny laugh pierced my ear. "What me – with scarcely a bean!"

"Get out," I said, "before I cripple you."

She folded down her tartan skirt and walked out the door with a hoity-toity air, ludicrous, I thought, in a down and out whore. I waited a good five minutes to make sure she was gone before I fetched the briefcase from under my bed. I never failed to be impressed by the look of it. Good quality leather was more in my line than the trash Ingrid flaunted. The briefcase had originally belonged to one of her clients. I remembered his piggish stamp of respectability. Mind you that was ten years before when Ingrid was in better condition. He had left it by the side of the bed, complete with lock and key and containing two stale sandwiches, while Ingrid slept off her labours. I explained later I had found it in a dustbin. Once again I counted the money acquired in pounds and pence but it still totalled only one hundred and ninety-five.

In Joe's Eats Café I leaned over the counter. "Joe," I asked, "how's about lending me a couple of quid – five to be exact. Until the Giro comes on Saturday."

Joe kept his eyes on the trickle of heavy tea he was pouring. He breathed hard. "What for?"

"Oh I don't know. Who needs money."

"It don't pay to lend money. I should know."

"Of course, never a borrower or a lender be," I said, fishing for ten pence.

"I've been done before. No reflection on you."

I looked round, then leaned over and whispered. "You can have a free shot and I'll still owe you the fiver."

He recoiled then hooted with laughter. "You must be joking – not even with a bag over your head."

I shrugged and put on what passed for a smile. "It's your loss. I know some new tricks."

Joe patted my shoulder. "I know you mean well, Lolly, but you're not my taste – nothing personal."

We brooded together for a bit. Finally Joe said, "Ingrid might lend it to you."

"Not her."

"Oh well . . . " He turned to pour water into the pot.

"I've got one hundred and ninety-five pounds," I threw at him. His back stiffened.

"What's the problem then?"

I knew I was wasting my time but I explained. "I need two hundred by Thursday. It would alter my whole life."

He chortled. "You paying for a face lift or something?"

"Better than that."

He shook his head. "Sorry kid, you see – "

I took my cup of tea over to the table without listening. Ten minutes later I was strolling along a quiet part of the city occupied mainly by decaying mansions.

"I'm short of a fiver," I explained to the tall man in the black suit.

His eyes glowed with regret. "I'm sorry. Two hundred is the price. I can't accept less."

"Will it be too late after Thursday?"

"I'm afraid so." He could not have been more sympathetic.

"What should I do – steal?"

"I can give you no advice."

He closed the door gently in my face and left me staring at the peeling paint. A cat leapt on to the step and wound itself round my legs. I picked it up and forced it to look at my face. "Stupid animal," I said as it purred its pleasure. I threw it away from me and returned home.

I walked into the bedroom and grabbed Ingrid by her sparse hair as she lay splayed over Jimmy Font, identifiable by his dirty boots.

"Out," I shouted.

She pulled on her grey vest screaming, "I'll kill you."

Jimmy thrashed about like a tortoise on its back clutching his privates as if they were gold.

I towered above him. "Hurry!" He gained his feet, made the sign of the cross, grabbed his trousers and ran.

"May you burn in hell," moaned Ingrid, rubbing a bald patch on her head.

I tossed over a handful of hair. "Before you go, take that filth with you."

"Where can I go?" she sobbed.

"The gutter, the river, the madhouse. Take your choice."

She pulled on her dress. "I don't feel well." I didn't

answer. "Anyway," she added, "if you had let Jimmy stay I might have earned a fiver to lend you."

I was not swayed by her logic. A drink from Jimmy's bottle would have been the price. I walked out of the room to escape from her staleness.

At one time they had told me in the hospital, plastic surgery could eventually work wonders. I did not like the word 'eventually'. Civilly I had requested that they terminate my breath, but they merely pointed out how lucky I was to be given the opportunity. Suspecting they would only transform me into a different kind of monster I had left them studying diagrams. That happened a long time ago, but I still had my dreams of strolling along an avenue of trees holding up a perfect profile to the sun.

"Are you listening," said Ingrid, breaking through my thoughts with some outrageous arrangement she would fix for me to get five pounds. She backed away when I headed towards her. As she ran through the door and down the stairs I threw out her flea-ridden fur coat, which landed on her shoulders like the mottled skin of a hyena.

The Salvation Army Band on the street corner blared out its brassy music of hope. I settled down on the bench beside Teddy the tramp and spun thoughts of fine wire in my head.

"Nice?" commented Teddy from the depths of an abandoned army coat. He offered me a pale-green sandwich from a bread paper, which I declined.

"We have much to be thankful for," he said as he bit into the piece.

A body of people gathered on the far side. The music stopped. Everyone applauded. I joined the group, who courteously stood their ground when I brushed close. My eyes were on the Sally Ann coming towards us with trusting goodwill and the collection box in her hand. I slipped my hand beneath the other hands holding out

donations, then tugged the string loosely held by the good lady, and ran.

Six pounds and forty-seven pence lay strewn over my bed in pence and silver. I blessed the kindness of the common people and the compassion of the Salvation Army who would never persecute or prosecute a sorry person like me. Tomorrow was Thursday and I had the two hundred pounds, with one pound forty-seven to the good. With a mixture of joy and fear I poured five pounds into the briefcase. Then I studied a single sheet of parchment, the words on which I knew by heart. The message was direct and unfanciful, and unaccountably I believed it, perhaps because of its simplicity, and also the power which emanated from the black handwriting. Even the mercenary demand for two hundred pounds strengthened my belief in a force much deeper than plastic surgery. I calculated there must always be a price to pay, which for effort's sake should go beyond one's means, to accomplish results.

All evening Ingrid did not return. I wasn't surprised or sorry. In my mind's eye I could see her tossing against dank alley walls in drunken confusion – her wispy hair falling like damp thistledown over her forehead, her eyes rolling around like those of an old mare about to be serviced. Not that I wished her to be any different. Her degradation had afforded me stature, though after tomorrow I hoped never to see her again. Fancying a bout of self-torture to pass the time, I began searching for a mirror, suspecting it would be useless since I had forbidden them in the flat. I peered at my reflection in the window. Like a creature from outer space it stared back without pity. Satisfactorily sickened I raised two fingers, then turned away.

"See your pal Ingrid," declared Maidy Storr when I passed her stall of old hats, shoes and rusty brooches.

"Not recently."

"She stole a bundle of money from Dan Riley when he dozed off in Maitland's bar last night."

"Never."

"Well she did. I sat on one side of him and she was on the other. I remember she left quickly without finishing her drink. Next thing he woke up shouting he'd been robbed."

"How much?" I asked.

"Fifty quid, he said. Mind you I was surprised he had that much." She added winking, "You'll be all right for a tap."

"Haven't seen her since yesterday morning."

"Done a bunk has she?"

"Couldn't say."

"Well she would, wouldn't she. The law will be out for her."

"For stealing from a pickpocket. I don't see Dan complaining."

Maidy frowned. "I see what you mean. It makes you sick to think she'll get away with it."

"Couldn't care less whether she gets away with it or not." I picked up a single earring. "Have you many one-eared customers?"

"Leave that stuff and get going."

I walked away quickly when Maidy threw a shoe at me, and headed towards Joe's for breakfast.

"I think I'd like something special today," I informed him.

"How about some weedkiller," he suggested.

"I said something special, not the usual." I considered his confined choices.

"Be quick and move to your seat before the joint gets busy." Being a liberal-minded fellow Joe allowed me in his place when it was quiet, provided I sat in the alcove behind the huge spider plant. I chose a pizza and a glass of tomato juice.

"Living it up," he sneered.

"Might as well. Anyway I'm tired of the little creatures in your meat pies."

I could see Joe looking anxiously at a neatly dressed old lady approaching. Hastily I moved to the alcove with my pizza and tomato juice. The old lady was having an intense conversation with Joe. I suspected she was complaining about me. I finished my pizza and deliberately took my tomato juice over to a centre table. At a table near by a couple with a child looked at me, aghast. The child wailed. I smiled at them, or in my case, grimaced. The child's wails increased in volume. Joe charged over and signalled for me to get out. The neat old lady appeared out of the steam.

"Don't you know this is a friend of mine," she said, looking hard at Joe then bestowing a loving smile on me. Joe looked unconvinced, but he was stumped.

"If you say so." He moved the couple and the child behind the spider plant.

The old lady sat down beside me and said, "I'm sorry you have to put up with this sort of thing."

I shrugged. "That's all right."

"Such a lack of kindness is terrible," she continued.

"I suppose so."

"Can I get you something?" she asked.

"A pizza, if you don't mind."

She attended to me smartly. I could feel her eyes boring through me as I ate. She cleared her throat and asked, "Are you often exposed to such er – abuse?"

"Don't worry about it," I said. "You'll only upset yourself." Her eyes were brimming over by this time and I couldn't concentrate on eating.

"Is there nothing that can be done?" she asked just as I had the fork half-way up to my mouth.

"About what?" I was really fed up with her. I find it impossible to talk and eat at the same time.

"I mean, my dear – what about plastic surgery – or something."

I threw down my fork. "Listen, if you don't like the way I look, bugger off." I paid her no further attention when she left.

"That's another customer you've lost me," Joe called over. I told him to bugger off too, then hastily departed.

For the remainder of the day I kept checking on the time, which meant I had to keep searching for the odd clock in shop windows. I half expected to bump into Ingrid. In a way I would have been glad to see her, because even if she was completely uninteresting, in her vapid manner she used to converse with me. She was still out when I returned home, no doubt holed up somewhere, frightened to stir in case she met Riley. I washed my face, combed my hair, put on a fresh jumper, and looked no better than before, but at least it was a gesture. Then I checked the money in the briefcase and left without a backward glance. I headed slowly to my destination so that I would arrive on the exact minute of the hour of my appointment. Normally I don't get excited easily, for seldom is there anything to get excited about, but I must admit my heart was pounding when I stood on the steps of the shabby mansion. The tall man in the black suit received my briefcase solemnly. He bowed, then beckoned me to follow him.

"Are you not going to count the money?" I asked.

His sepulchral voice resounded down the corridor. "If you have faith in me I know the money will be correct."

I wanted to ask questions but I could scarcely keep pace as he passed smoothly ahead of me. Abruptly he stopped outside a door and turned. The questions died on my lips as I met his opaque glance. It was too late to have doubts so I allowed him to usher me into the room. I can give no explanation for what followed because once inside I was dazzled by a translucent orange glow so powerful that all my senses ceased to function. I knew nothing until I woke up outside the corridor holding on to the tall man. Even in that state of mesmerism I knew I was different. My lips felt rubbery and my eyes larger. Tears were running down my

cheeks, which in itself was a strange thing, since I had not cried for years. The man carefully escorted me into another room and placed me before a mirror, saying, "Don't be afraid. You will be pleased."

I breathed deep, and looked. I didn't say anything for a time because the image that faced me was that of Ingrid. I leaned forward to touch her, but it was only the glass of a mirror.

"You are much nicer now?" the man asked in an ingratiating manner.

What could I say? I didn't want to complain, but I had been definitely altered to be the double of Ingrid. Certainly the face was the same, and we had been of similar build anyway.

"Very nice," I croaked. "Thank you very much."

His lips curled into what could have been a smile, then he tapped me on the shoulder to get going. I shook hands with him when I stood on the step outside, clutching my empty briefcase.

"It's a funny thing – " I began to say, but he had vanished behind the closed door.

It might have been a coincidence but Ingrid never showed up. This was convenient because everyone assumed I was Ingrid, so I settled into her way of life and discovered it wasn't too bad. Certainly it has its ups and downs but I get a lot of laughs with her clients and it doesn't hurt my face either. The only snag is, now and again I worry about bumping into Dan Riley. Sometimes I consider saving up for a different face, but that might be tempting fate. Who knows what face I would get. Besides, I have acquired a taste for the good things in life, like cigarettes and vodka. So I take my chances and confront the world professionally equipped in a fur jacket and high black boots, trailing my boa feathers behind me.

Busted Scotch

I had been looking forward to this Friday night for a while. The first wage from the first job in England. The workmates had assured me they played Brag in this club's casino. It would start when the cabaret ended. Packed full of bodies inside the main hall; rows and rows of men-only drinking pints of bitter and yelling at the strippers. One of the filler acts turned out to be a scotchman doing this harrylauder thing complete with kilt and trimmings. A terrible disgrace. Keep Right On To The End Of The Road he sang with four hundred and fifty males screaming Get Them Off Jock. Fine if I had been drunk and able to join in on the chants but as it was I was staying sober for the Brag ahead. Give the scotchman his due but – he stuck it out till the last and turning his back on them all he gave a big boo boopsidoo with the kilt pulled right up and flashing the Y-fronts. Big applause he got as well. The next act on was an Indian Squaw. Later I saw the side door into the casino section opening. I went through. Blackjack was the game until the cabaret finished. I sat down facing a girl of around my own age, she was wearing a black dress cut off the shoulders. Apart from me there were no other punters in the room.

Want to start, she asked.

Aye. Might as well. I took out my wages.

O, you're scotch. One of your countrymen was on stage tonight.

That a fact.

She nodded as she prepared to deal. She said, How much are you wanting to bet.

I shrugged. I pointed to the wages lying there on the edge of the baize.

All of it . . .

Aye. The lot.

She covered the bet after counting what I had. She dealt the cards.

Twist.

Bust . . .

Nice to be nice

Strange thing wis it stertit oan a Wedinsday, A mean nothin ever sterts oan a Wedinsday kis it's the day afore pey day an A'm ey skint. Mibby git a buckshee pint roon the *Anchor* bit that's aboot it. Anywey it wis eftir 9 an A wis thinkin aboot gin hame kis a hidny a light whin Boab McCann threw us a dollar an A boat masel an auld Erchie a pint. The auld yin hid 2 boab ay his ain so A took it an won a couple a gemms a dominoes. Didny win much bit enough tae git us a hauf boattle a Lanny. Tae tell ye the truth A'm no fussy fir the wine bit auld Erchie'll guzzle till it comes oot his ears, A'm tellin ye. A'll drink it mine ye bit if A've goat a few boab A'd rethir git a hauf boattle a whisky thin 2 ir 3 boattles a magic. No auld Erchie. Anywey — nice tae be nice — every man tae his ain, comes 10 and we wint roon the coarner tae git inty the wine. Auld Erchie waantit me tae go up tae his place bit Jesus Christ it's like annickers midden up therr. So anywey A think A git aboot 2 moothfus oot it afore it wis done kis is A say, whin auld Erchie gits stertit oan that plonk ye canny haud him. The auld cunt's a disgrace.

A left him ootside his close an wint hame. It wis gittin cauld an A'm beginnin tae feel it merr these days. That young couple wir hinging aboot in the close in at it as usual. Every night in the week an A'm no kiddin ye! Thir parents waant tae gie thim a room tae thirsel, A mean everybody's young wance — know whit A mean. They waant tae git merrit anywey. Jesus Christ they young yins nooadays iv goat thir heid screwed oan merr thin we ever hid, an the sooner they git merrit the better. Anyhow, as usual they didny even notice me goin up the sterr.

Bit it's Betty Sutherland's lassie an young Peter Craig — A knew his faither an they tell me he's almost as hard as his auld man wis. Still, the perr iv thim ir winchin near enough 6 month noo so mibby she's knoaked some sense inty his heid. Good luck tae thim, A hope she his, a nice wee lassie — aye, an so wis her maw.

A hid tae stoap 2 flerrs up tae git ma breath back. A'm no as bad as A wis bit A'm still no right; that bronchitis — Jesus Christ, A hid it bad. Hid tae stoap work cause iv it. Good joab A hid tae, the lorry drivin. Hid tae chuck it bit. Landid up in the Western Infirmary. Nae breath at aw. Couldny fuckin breathe. Murder it wis. Still, A made it tae the toap okay. A stey in a room an kitchen an inside toilet an it's no bad kis A only pey 6 an a hauf a month fir rent an rates. A hear they're tae come doon right enough bit A hope it's no fir a while yit kis A'll git buggir aw bein a single man. If she wis here A'd git a coarpiration hoose bit she's gone fir good an anywey they coarpiration hooses urny worth a fuck. End up peying a haunful a week an dumped oot in the wilds! Naw, no me. No even a pub ir buggir aw! Naw, they kin stick them.

Wance in the hoose A pit oan the kettle fir a pot iv tea an picked up a book. A'm no much ay a sleeper at times an A sometimes end up readin aw night. Hauf an oor later the door goes. Funny — A mean A dont git that minny visitors.

Anywey it wis jist young Tony who'd firgoat his key, he wis wi that wee mate ay his an a perr a burds. Christ, whit dae ye dae? Invite thim in? Well A did — nice tae be nice — an anywey thir aw right they two; sipposed tae be a perr a terraways bit A ey fun Tony aw right, an his mate's his mate. The young yins ir aw right if ye lea thim alane. A've eywis maintained that. Gie thim a chance fir fuck sake. So A made thim at hame although it meant me hivin tae sit oan a widdin cherr kis A selt the couch a couple a months ago kis ay that auld cunt Erchie an his troubles. They four hid perred aff an were sittin oan the ermcherrs. They hid brung a cerry-oot wi thim so A goat the glesses an it turned oot no a bad wee night, jist chattin away aboot poalitics an the hoarses an aw that. A quite enjoyed it

although mine you A wis listenin merr thin A wis talkin, bit that's no unusual. An wan iv the burds didny say much either an A didny blame her kis she knew me. She didny let oan bit. See A used to work beside her man — aye she's nae chicken, bit nice tae be nice, she isny a bad lookin lassie. An A didny let oan either.

Anywey, must a been near 1 a cloak whin Tony gits me oan ma ain an asks me if they kin aw stey the night. Well some might ay thoat they wir takin liberties bit at the time it soundit reasonable. A said they kid sleep ben the room an A'd sleep here in the kitchen. Tae tell the truth A end up spennin the night here in the cherr hell iv a loat these days. Wan minute A'm sittin readin an the nix it's 6 a cloak in the moarnin an ma neck's as stiff as a poker ir somethin. A've bin thinkin ay movin the bed frae the room inty the kitchen recess anywey — might as well — A mean it looks hell iv a daft hivin wan double bed an nothin else. Aye, an A mean nothin else, sep the lino. Flogged every arra fuckin thin thit wis in the room an A sippose if A wis stuck A kid flog the bed. Comes tae that A kid even sell the fuckin room ir at least rent it oot. They Pakies wid jump at it — A hear they're sleepin twinty handit tae a room an mine's is a big room. Still, good luck tae thim, they work hard fir their money, an if they dont good luck tae thim if they kin git away wi it.

A goat a couple a blankets an that bit tae tell the truth A wisny even tired. Sometimes whin A git a taste ay that bevy that's me — awake tae aw oors. An A've goat tae read then kis thir's nae point sterring at the waw — nothin wrang wi the waw right enough, me an Tony done it up last spring, aye, an done no a bad joab tae. Jist the kitchen bit kis A didny see the point ay doin up the room wi it only hivin wan double bed fir furniture. He pit up a photy iv Jimi Hendrix oan the waw, a poster. A right big yin.

Whit's the story wi the darkie oan the waw? says auld Erchie the first time he comes up eftir it wis aw done. Wis the greatest guitarist in the World ya auld cunt ye! says Tony an he grabs the auld yin's bunnet an flings it oot the windy. First time A've seen yir heid, he says. Nae wunnir ye keep it covered.

The Erchie filla wisny too pleased. Mine you A hidny seen him much wioot that bunnet masell. He's goat 2 ir 3 strans a herr stretchin frae the back iv his heid tae the front. An the bunnet wis still lyin therr oan the pavement whin he wint doon fir it. Even the dugs widny go near it. It's a right dirty lookin oabjict bit then so's the auld yin's heid.

Anywey, A drapped aff to sleep eventually — wioot chinegin, well it wid be broo day the morra an A wis waantin tae git up early wi them bein therr an aw that.

Mibby it wis the bevy A dont know bit the nix thin Tony's pullin ma erm, staunin oor me wi a letter frae the tax an A kid see it wisny a form tae fill up. A'd nae idear whit it wis so A opind it right away and oot faws a cheque fir 42 quid. Jesus Christ A near collapsed. A mean A've been oan the broo fir well oor a year, an naebody gits money eftir a year. Therr ye ur bit — 42 quid tae prove me wrang. No bad eh!

Wiv knoaked it aff Stan, shouts Tony, grabbin it oot ma haun.

Well A mean A've seen a good few quid in ma days whit wi the hoarses an aw that bit it the time it wis like winnin the pools so it wis. A'm no kiddin ye. Some claes an mibby a deposit tae try fir that new HGV yiv goat tae git afore ye kin drive the lorries nooadays.

Tony gits his mate an the burds up an tells thim it's time tae be gaun an me an him wint doon the road fir a breakfist. We winty a cafe an hid the works an Tony boat a *Sporting Chronicle* an we dug oot a couple. Well he did kis A've merr ir less chucked it these days. Aye, long ago. Disny bother me much noo bit it wan time A couldny walk by a bettin shoap. Anywey, nae merr ay that. An Tony gammils enough fir the baith ay us. Course he wid bet oan 2 flies climbin a waw whirras A wis eywis a hoarsy man. Wance ir twice A mibby took an intrist in a dug bit really it wis eywis the hoarses wi me. A sippose the gammlin wis the real reason how the wife fukt aff an left me. Definitely canny blame her bit. I mean she near enough stuck it 30 year by Christ. Nae merr ay that.

A hid it aw figird oot how tae spen the cash. Tony wint fir his broo money an I decidet jist tae go hame fir merr iv a think.

Whin A goat therr Big Moira wis in daein the cleanin up fir me bit she wisny long in puttin oan a cup a tea. Jist aboot every time ye see her she's either drinkin tea ir jist aboot tae pit it oan. So wir sittin an she's bletherin away good style aboot her weans an the rest ay it whin aw iv a sudden she tells me she's gittin threw oot her hoose — ay an the 4 weans wi her. Said she goat a letter tellin her. Canny dae it A says.

Aye kin they no, says Moira. The coarpiration kin dae whit they like Stan.

Well A didny need Moira tae tell me that bit A also knew thit they widny throw a single wummin an 4 weans oot inty the street. A didny tell her bit — in case she thoat A wis oan therr side ir somethin. Big Moira's like that. A nice lassie, bit she's ey gittin thins inty her heid aboot people, so A said nothin. She telt me she wint straight up tae see the manager bit he wisny therr so she seen this young filla an he telt her she'd hivty git oot an it wisny cause ay her debts (she owes a few quid arrears). Naw, it seems 2 ir 3 ay her neighbours wir up complainin aboot her weans makin a mess in the close an shoutin an bawlin ir somethin. An thir's nothin ye kin dae aboot it, he says tae her.

Well that wis a diffrint story an A wis beginnin tae believe her. She wis aw fir sortin it oot wi the neighbours bit A telt her no tae bother till she fun oot fir certain whit the score wis. Anywey, eftir gittin the weans aff her maw she wint away hame. So Moira hid tae git oot ay her hoose afore the end ay the month. Course whether they'd cerry oot the threat ir no wis a diffrint story — surely the publicity alane wid pit thim aff. A must admit the merr A wis thinkin aboot it the angrier A wis gettin. Naw — nice tae be nice — ye canny go aboot pittin the fear a death inty folk, speshly a wummin like Moira. She's a big stroang lassie bit she's nae man tae back her up. An whin it comes tae talkin they bastirts up it Clive House wid run rings roon ye. Naw, A know whit like it is. Treat ye like A dont know whit so they dae. A wis gittin too worked up so I jist opind a book an tried tae firget aboot it. Anywey, A fell asleep in the cherr — oot like a light an didny wake up till well eftir 5 a cloak.

Ma neck wis hell iv a stiff bit A jist shoved oan the jaiket an wint doon the road.

The *Anchor* wis busy an A saw auld Erchie staunin near the dominoe table wherr he usually hings aboot if he's skint in case emdy waants a drink. Kis he sometimes gits a drink himsel fir gaun. A wint straight tae the bar an asked John fir 2 gless a whisky an a couple a hauf pints an whin A went tae pey the man A hid fuck aw bar some smash an a note sayin, Give you it back tomorrow, Tony.

40 quid! A'll gie ye it the morra! Jesus Christ Almighty. An he wis probly hauf wey oor tae Ashfield right noo. An therrs me staunin therr like a fuckin numbskull! 40 notes! Well well well, an it wisny the first time. A mean he disny let me doon, he's eywis goat it merr ir less whin he says he will bit nice tae be nice, know whit A mean! See A gave him a sperr key whin we wir daein up the kitchen an A let him hing oan tae it eftirwirds kis sometimes he's naewherr tae kip. Moira's maw's git the other yin in case ay emergencies an aw that. Bit Tony drapped me right in it. John's staunin therr behind the bar sayin nothin while A'm readin the note a hauf dozen times. The bill comes tae aboot 70 pence — aboot 6 boab in chinge. A leans oor the counter an whispers sorry an tells him A've come oot wioot ma money.

Right Stan it's aw right, he says, A'll see ye the morra — dont worry aboot it.

Whit a showin up. A gave the auld yin his drink oor an wint oor tae sit oan ma tod. Tae be honest, A wisny in the mood fir either Erchie's patter or the dominoes. 40 sovvies! Naw, the merr A thoat aboot it the merr A knew it wis oot ay order. Okay, he didny know A firgoat aboot ma broo money kis ay me hivin that kip — bit it's nae excuse, nae excuse. Aw he hid tae dae wis wake me up an A'd iv ay gave him the rest if wis needin it that bad. The trouble wis A knew the daft bastirt'd dae somethin stupit tae git it back if he wound up losin it aw at the dugs. Jesus Christ, aw the worries iv the day whit wi big Moira an the weans an noo him. An whit wid happen if they did git chucked oot! Naw, A couldny see it. Ye never know bit. I

decidet tae take a walk up tae the coarpiration masell. A kin talk whin A waant tae, bit right enough whin they bastirts up therr git stertit they end up blindin ye wi science. Anywey, I git inty John fir a hanfill oan the strength ay ma broo money an wint hame early wi a haufboattle an a big screwtap wioot sayin a word tae auld Erchie.

Tony still hidny showed up by the Monday, that wis 4 days so A knew A'd nae chance ay seein him till he hid the cash in his haun ready fir me. An it wis obvious he might hiv tae go tae the thievin gemms inty the bargin an thir wis nothin A could dae aboot it, A'd be too late. Big Moira's maw came up the sterr tae see me the nix moarnin. Word hid come aboot her hivin tae be oot the hoose by the 30th ir else they'd take immediate action. The lassie's maw wis in a hell iv a state kis she couldny take thim in wi her only hivin a single end. A offirt tae help oot bit it didny make matters much better. An so I went roon as minny factors as A could. Nae luck bit. Nothin, nothin at aw. Ach A didny expect much anyhow tae be honest aboot it. Hopeless. I jist telt her maw A'd take a walk up Clive House an see if they'd mibby offer some alternit accommodation — an no tae worry kis they'd never throw thim inty the street. Single wummin wi 4 weans! Naw, the coarpiration widny chance that yin. Imagine expectin her to pey that kinna rent tae! Beyond a joke so it is. An she says the rooms ir damp an aw that, and whin she cawed in the sanitry they telt her tae open the windaes an let the err in. The middle ay the fuckin winter! Let the err in! Ay, an as soon's her back's turnt aw the villains ir in screwin the meters an whit no. A wis ragin. An whin A left the hoose oan the Wedinsday moarnin A wis still hell iv a angry. Moira wis waantin tae come up wi me bit A telt her naw it might be better if A wint oan ma tod.

So up A goes an A queued up tae see the manager bit he wisny available so A saw the same wan Moira saw, a young filla cawed Mr Frederick. A telt him whit wis whit bit he wisny bothrin much an afore A'd finished he jumps in sayin that in the furst place he'd explained everythin tae Mrs Donnelly (Moira) an the department hid sent her oot letters which she'd no taken

the trouble tae answer — an in the second place it wis nane iv ma business. Then he shouts: Nix please.

A loast ma rag at that an the nix thin A know A'm lyin here an that wis yesterday, Thursday — A'd been oot the gemm since A grabbed the wee cunt by the throat. Lucky A didny strangle him tae afore A collapsed.

Dont even know if A'm gittin charged an tae be honest A couldny gie 2 monkeys whether A am ir no. Bit that's nothin. Moira's maw comes up tae visit me this moarnin an gies me the news. Young Tony gits back Wedinsday dinner time bit no findin me goes doon tae Moira's maw an gits telt the story. He says nothin tae her bit jist goes right up tae the coarpiration wherr he hings aboot till he finds oot whit's whit wi the clerks, then whin Mr Frederick goes hame a gang iv young thugs ir supposed ta iv set aboot him an done him up pretty bad bit the polis only manages tae catch wan ay thim an it turns oot tae be Tony who disny even run aboot wi embdy sem sometimes that wee mate iv his. So therr it is an A'll no really know the score till the nix time A see him. An big Moira an the weans, as far as A hear they've still naewherr tae go either, A mean nice tae be nice, know whit A mean.