

State of England

1. Mobile Phones

Big Mal stood there on the running track in his crinkly linen suit, with a cigarette in one mitt and a mobile phone in the other. He also bore a wound, did the big man: a shocking laceration on the side of his face, earlobe to cheekbone. The worst thing about his wound was how *recent* it looked. It wasn't bleeding. But it might have been seeping. He'd got his suit from *Contemporary Male* in Culver City, Los Angeles – five years ago. He'd got his wound from a medium-rise carpark off Leicester Square, London – last night. Under high flat-bottomed clouds and a shrill blue sky Big Mal stood there on the running track. Not tall but built like a brick khazi: five feet nine in all directions . . . Mal felt he was in a classic situation: wife, child, other woman. It was mid-September. It was Sports Day. The running track he was strolling along would soon be pounded in earnest by his nine-year-old son, little Jet. Jet's mother, Sheilagh, was on the clubhouse steps, fifty yards away, with the other mums. Mal could see her. She too wielded a cigarette and a mobile phone. They weren't talking except on their mobile phones.

He put the cigarette in his mouth and with big, white, cold, agitated fingers prodded out her number.

'A!' he said. A tight sound, sharp-pitched – the short 'a', as in 'Mal'. It was a sound Mal made a lot: his general response to pain, to inadvertency, to terrestrial imperfection. He went 'A!' this time because he had jammed his mobile into the wrong ear. The sore one: so swollen, so richly traumatized by the events of the night before. Then he said, 'It's me.'

'Yeah, I can see you.'

Sheilagh was moving away from the clump of mums, down the steps, towards him. He turned his back on her and said, 'Where's Jet?'

'They come up on the bus. Christ, Mal, whatever have you done to yourself? The state of your face.'

Well that was nice to know: that his wound was visible from fifty yards. 'Load of ballocks,' he said, by way of explanation. And it was true in a sense. Mal was forty-eight years old, and you could say he'd made a pretty good living from his fists: his fists, his toe caps, his veering, butting brow. Last night's spanking was by no means the worst he'd ever taken. But it was definitely the weirdest. 'Hang about,' he said, while he lit another cigarette. 'A!' he added. Wrong ear again. 'When's the bus due?'

'Have you had that looked at? You want to get that sorted.'

'It was dressed,' said Mal carefully, 'by a trained nurse.'

'Who's that then? Miss India? What she call herself? Linzi...'

'Oi. Not Linzi. Yvonne.'

The mention of this name (wearily yet powerfully stressed on the first syllable) would tell Sheilagh its own story.

'Don't tell me. You were out rucking with Fat Lol. Yeah. Well. If you've been with Fat Lol for thirty years...'

Mal followed her line of reasoning. Been with Fat Lol for thirty years and you knew your first aid. You were a trained nurse whether you liked it or not. 'Yvonne sorted it,' he went on. 'She cleaned it out and bunged some stuff on it.' This was no less than the truth. That morning, over tea and toast, Yvonne had scalded his cheek with Fat Lol's aftershave and then dressed it with a section of kitchen roll. But the section of kitchen roll had long since disappeared into the wound's gurgling depths. It was like that film with the young Steve McQueen. Oh, yeah: *The Blob*.

'Does it throb?'

'Yeah,' said Mal resignedly, 'it throbs. Look. Let's try and be civilized in front of the kid. Okay? Come on now, She. We owe it to Jet. Right?'

'Right.'

'Right. Now give me my fucking money.'

'Whoff fucking money?'

'Whoff fucking money? My fucking money.'

She hung up and so, unsuccessfully (and murmuring, 'Where are you mate?'), he tried Fat Lol – tried Fat Lol on his mobile.

Moving in a broad arc, maintaining a fixed distance from his wife, Mal trudged along the track and then closed in on the far end of the clubhouse. The clubhouse with its black Tudor wood: maybe they had a bar in there. Mal hesitated, and even staggered; the coil, the spring in the person was winding down awful low. And here were all the other dads, on the steps round the side, with *their* mobiles.

Delaying his approach, Mal tarried on the verge and tried Linzi on *her* mobile.

Jet's school, St Anthony's, was a smart one, or at least an

expensive one. Mal it was who somehow met the startling fees. And showed up on days like today, as you had to do. He also wanted and expected his boy to perform well.

During his earliest visits to the parent-teacher interface, Mal had been largely speechless with peer-group hypochondria: he kept thinking there was something terribly wrong with him. He wanted out of that peer group and into a different peer group with weaker opposition. Mal made She do all the talking, with her greater confidence and higher self-esteem – deriving, as their marriage counsellor had once phrased it, from her ‘more advanced literacy skills’. In truth, Mal’s writing left much to be desired, to put it mildly. Not what you’d call overly clever on the reading neither. Either. Confronted, say, by a billboard or the instructions on a Band-Aid tin, his lips moved, tremulously, miming his difficulty. He spoke bad too – he knew it. But all that prejudice against people such as himself was gone now. Or so they said. And maybe they were partly right. Mal could go to virtually any restaurant he liked, and sit there surrounded by all these types squawking and honking away, and pick up a tab as dear as an air ticket. He could go to this or that place. And yet nobody could guarantee that he would *feel okay* in this or that place. Nobody could guarantee that, ever. Big Mal, who grunted with a kind of assent when he saw a swung fist coming for his mouth, could nonetheless be laid out by the sight of a cocked pinkie. *A!* Always it was with him, every hour, like an illness, like a haunting. Go on then – stare. Go on then: laugh. Why else d’you think he’d loved the States so much? L.A., mate: working for Joseph Andrews . . .

Mal felt he was a man in a classic situation. He had run away from home (five months ago) and moved in with a younger woman (Linzi), abandoning his wife (Sheilagh) and

his child (little Jet). A classic situation is, by definition, a second-hand situation – third-hand, eleventh-hand. And more and more obviously so, as the aggregate climbed. Late at night, Mal sometimes found himself thinking, If Adam had left Eve, and run off with a younger woman – supposing he could find one – he’d have been stepping into the entirely unknown. Call Adam a cunt, but you couldn’t call him corny. Now all that was just routine: stock, stale, dead. And nowadays too there was this other level of known ground. You’d picked up some information from all the studies and the stats: and there you were on TV every night, in the soaps and the sitcoms, generally being played for laughs. One out of two did it: left home. Of course, *not* leaving home was corny, too, but nobody ever went on about that. And Adam, by sticking around, remained in the entirely unknown.

He sensed he was a cliché – and sensed further that he’d even fucked *that* up. Let’s think. *He ran away from home and moved in with a younger woman.* Ran away? Linzi only lived across the street. Moved in? He was at a bed-and-breakfast in King’s Cross. A younger woman? Mal was getting surer and surer that Linzi was, in fact, an *older* woman. One afternoon, while she was enjoying a drugged nap, Mal had come across her passport. Linzi’s date of birth was given as ‘25 Aug 19 . . .’ The last two digits had been scratched out, with a fingernail. Under the angle lamp you could still see a dot of nail polish – the same vampiric crimson she often used. Opposite, staring at him, was Linzi’s face: delusions of grandeur in a Woolworth’s photobooth. All he knew for certain was that Linzi had been born this century.

A! Wrong ear again. But he *wanted* the wrong ear, this time. For now he was about to join the dads – the peer group; and Mal’s mobile would help conceal his wound.

Mobiles meant social mobility. With a mobile riding on your jaw you could enter the arena enclosed in your own concerns, your own preoccupation, your own business. 'Cheers, lads,' he said, with a wave, and then frowned into his phone. He'd called Linzi, and was therefore saying things like 'Did you, babes? . . . Have a cup of tea and a Nurofen . . . Go back to bed. With them brochures . . . They the Curvilinear or the Crescent? . . . Are you, darling?' Hunched over his mobile, his knees bent, Mal looked like a man awaiting his moment in the shot put. He was doing what all the other dads were doing, which was putting in an appearance. Presenting an appearance to one another and to the world. And what did Mal's appearance say? With fights and fighting, this was ancient knowledge. When you received a wound, you didn't just have to take it, sustain it. You didn't just have to bear it. You also had to wear it, for all to see, until it healed.

Nodding, winking, grasping an arm or patting a shoulder here and there, he moved among them. Blazers, shell suits, jeans and open shirts, even the odd dhoti or kaftan or whatever you like to call them. The dads: half of them weren't even English – thus falling at the first hurdle, socially. Or so Mal might once have thought. 'Manjeet, mate,' he was saying. 'Mikio. Nusrat!' Socially, these days, even the Pakkis could put the wind up him. Paratosh, for instance, who was some kind of Sikh or Pathan and wore a cravat and acted in radio plays and had beautiful manners. And if I can tell he's got beautiful manners, thought Mal, then they must be really ace. 'Paratosh, mate!' he now cried . . . But Paratosh just gave him a flat smile and minutely re-angled his stately gaze. It seemed to Mal that they were all doing that. Adrian. Fardous. Why? Was it the wound? He thought not. See, these were the nuclear dads, the ones

who'd stuck with their families, so far, anyway. And everybody knew that Mal had broken out, had reneged on the treaty and gone non-nuclear. These men, some of them, were the husbands of Sheilagh's friends. Clumping and stamping around among them (and trying Fat Lol again now), Mal felt ancient censures ranged against him in these faces of ochre and hazel, of mocha and java. He was pariah, caste-polluter; and he thought they thought he had failed, as a man. Awkward, massively cuboid, finching under a thin swipe of dark hair, his fingers quaking over the contours of his damaged cheek, Mal was untouchable, like his wound.

Other dads talked on mobiles, their conversations disembodied, one-way. For a moment they sounded insane, like all the monologists and soliloquizers of the city streets.

2. Asian Babes

Linzi's real name was Shinsala, and her family came from Bombay, once upon a time. You wouldn't guess any of this, talking to her on the phone. Most of the foreign dads – the Nusrats, the Fardouses, the Paratoshes – spoke better English than Mal. Much better English. While presumably also being pretty good at Farsi, Urdu, Hindi, or whatever. And he had to wonder: how could that be? How come there was so little *left over* for Mal? Linzi, on the other hand, prompted no such reproaches. She spoke worse than Sheilagh, worse than Mal. She spoke as bad as Fat Lol. She spoke straight East End, with only this one little exoticism, in the way she handled her pronouns. Linzi said *he* where an English person would say *him* or *his*. Like 'compared to he'.

Or 'driving he car'. Same with *she*. Like 'the way she wears she skirts'. Or 'I hate she'. It sometimes gave Mal a fright, because he thought she was talking about She. Sheilagh. And Linzi was always threatening a confrontation with She: like today, for instance. Mal didn't want to think about those two getting together. *A!*

But now the big man was shouldering his way indoors. He passed a Coke machine, bulletin boards, the entrance to the changing rooms, a snack hatch and its hamburger breath. Jesus. Mal wasn't a big boozier, like some. But last night, after the smacking they'd taken, he and Fat Lol had got through a bottle of Scotch. A bottle of Scotch *each*. So he now had the notion that after a couple of pints he'd feel twice the price. He peered round a corner, paused, and then strode forward, jangling his change. Everything in him responded to what he saw: the fruit machine, the charity jar full of brown coins, the damp grey rags beneath the wok-sized ashtrays, the upended liquor bottles with their optics on the nozzles, guaranteeing fair trading, guaranteeing fair play. And here was the ornately affable barman, plodding up through the floor.

'Mal!

He turned. 'Bern, mate!

'All right?

'All right? How's little Clint?'

'He's a terror. How's . . . ?'

'Jet? He's handsome.'

'Here, Mal. Say hi to Toshiko.'

Toshiko smiled with her Japanese teeth.

'Nice to meet you,' said Mal, and added, uncertainly, helplessly, 'I'm sure.'

Bern was the dad that Mal knew best. They'd rigged up an acquaintanceship on the touchline of yet another sports

field: watching their sons represent St Anthony's at football. Clint and Jet, paired strikers for the Under Nines. The dads looked on, two terrible scouts or stringers, shouting things like 'Zonal marking!' and 'Sweeper system!' and '4-4-2!' – while their sons, and all the others, ran around the place like so many dogs chasing a ball. Afterwards Mal and Bern sloped off down the drinker. They agreed it was small fucking wonder their boys had taken a caning: nine-nil. The defence was crap and midfield created fuck-all. Where was the *service* to the lads up front?

'I heard an interesting thing the other night,' Bern was suddenly saying. Bern was a photographer, originally fashion but now glamour and social. He spoke worse than Mal. 'A very interesting thing. I was covering the mayor's do. Got talking to these uh, detectives. Scotland Yard. Remember that bloke who broke into Buckingham Palace? Caused all that fuss?'

Mal nodded. He remembered.

'Well guess what.' And here Bern's face went all solemn and priestly. 'They reckon he fucked her. Reckon he gave her one.'

'Who?'

'The Queen. Remember he was found in her bedroom, right?'

'Right.'

'Well these blokes reckon he fucked her.'

'Phew, that's a bit steep innit mate?'

'Yeah well that's what they reckon. Reckon he fucked her. So you uh – you moved out.'

'Yeah, mate. Couldn't hack it.'

'Because every man has a . . .'

'His limit.'

'Right. I mean, how much shit can you take, right?'

'Right.'

It was good, talking to Bern like this. Get it off your chest. Bern had left home while his wife was *pregnant* with little Clint. Not for this Toshiko, who was presumably Japanese, but for somebody else. Every time Mal bumped into him, Bern had some new sort on his arm: foreign, thirtyish. As if doing it country by country. To keep himself young.

'Look at this one,' said Bern. 'Twenty-eight. You know something? She's me first Nip. Ain't you, Tosh! Where they been all my life?' Without lowering his voice or changing his tone, he said, 'You know, I always thought they're built sideways. Down there. But they ain't. Same as all the others the world over. God bless 'em.

'She don't speak English, do you, Tosh?' continued Bern, putting Mal's mind at rest.

Toshiko quacked something back at him.

'Can speak French.'

Mal lowered his gaze. The thing was . . . The big thing with Mal was that his sexuality, like his sociality, was essentially sombre. As if everything had gone wrong forty years ago, some rainy Saturday, when he stared in through department-store windows at fawn, dun, taut, waxy, plastic women, their arms raised in postures of gift-bearing or patient explication . . . In bed together, he and Linzi – Big Mal and Shinsala – watched *Asian Babes*. By now their whole sex life was based on it. *Asian Babes*, the magazine, the video, the laser CD, or whatever: *Asian Babes*, Mal had a hunch, represented a milestone in race relations on this island. White men and dark women were coming together in electronic miscegenation. Every video wanker in England had now had his Fatima, his Fetnab. When *Asian Babes* was taking a rest, or when they were button-punching their way through it, and Linzi's set was in neutral, the channel of

choice was Zee TV – Indian musicals. And such a chaste culture! When a couple went to kiss, the camera would whip away to twirling, twittering lovebirds or great seas attacking a cliff face. Women of darkly heavenly beauty, laughing, singing, dancing, pouting, but above all weeping, weeping, weeping: milked of huge, glutinous, opalescent tears, on mountaintops, on street corners, under stage moons. Then Linzi would press the 'Play' button and you'd be back with some Arab bint, smiling, chortling, and taking her clothes off to slinky music in some Arab flat at once modern and mosquelike and contorting herself on a polythene-covered settee or an ankle-deep white carpet . . . The other video they kept watching was the one Linzi had procured from Kosmetique. Breast enhancement: Before and After. You could tell that plastic surgery sought to reverse natural prescript, because After was always better than Before, instead of a poor second, as in life. Although Mal liked Linzi as she was, he was nonetheless dead keen on Kosmetique, and this troubled him. But he too wanted to switch his skin. One time, at Speakers' Corner, where men on milk crates had one-way conversations with no visible audience, he had stood with a hand on Linzi's shoulder, staring at the fantastic shoeshine of her hair, and he had felt wonderfully evolved, like a racial rainbow, ready to encompass a new world. He wanted a change. This thing, he thought, this whole thing happened because he wanted a change. He wanted a change, and England wasn't going to give him one.

'Who you with now then?' Bern asked him.

'Linzi. Nuts about her.'

'Ah. Sweet. How old?'

He thought of saying, 'Fortyish.' Yeah: forty-nine. Or why not just say, 'Sixteen'? Mal was feeling particularly grateful

to Bern – for not saying anything about the state of his face. Well, that was Bern for you: a man of the world. Still, Mal felt unable to answer, and Bern soon started talking about the mysterious disappearance of the man who fucked the Queen (or so they reckoned). Toshiko stood there, smiling, her teeth strangely stacked. Mal had been in her company for half an hour and she still looked wholly terrifying to him, like something out of an old war comic. The extra cladding of the facial flesh, as if she was wearing a mask made out of skin; the brow, and then those orbits, those sockets, those faceted lids . . . He had gained the vague impression, over the years, that Nip skirt ran itself ragged for you in the sack. As they'd need to do, in his opinion. Mal's mind shrugged. Christ. Maybe they let you fuck them in the eye.

Sheilagh called him on his mobile to say that the boys' buses had finally arrived.

3. *Mortal Kombat*

He felt he was a man in a classic situation. Its oddities were just oddities: happenstance, not originality. As he moved outside into the air, exchanging the Irish colorations of the saloon (best expressed, perhaps, in the seething browns of Bern's bourbons) for the polar clarity of a mid-September noon, that was all he saw: his situation. The sun was neither hot nor high, just incredibly intense, as if you could *hear* it, the frying roar of its winds. Every year the sun did this, subjecting the kingdom to the fiercest and most critical scrutiny. It was checking up on the state of England. Sheilagh in her lime boiler suit came and stood beside him.

He turned away. He said, 'We've got to talk, She. Face to face.'

'When?'

'Later,' he said. Because now the boys were filing in through the gateway from the car park. Mal stood there, watching: a lesson in bad posture. In his peripheral vision Sheilagh breathed and swelled. How light the boys looked: how amazingly light.

For a younger woman. Abandoning his wife and his child . . . How true was that? Mal considered it possible to argue that Sheilagh wasn't really his wife. Okay, he'd married her. But only a year ago. As a nice surprise – like a birthday treat. Honestly, it didn't mean a thing. Mal had thought at the time that She overreacted. For months she went around with that greedy look on her face. And it wasn't just a look. She gained ten pounds over Christmas. *Abandoning his child.* Well, that was true enough. They had him bang to rights on that one. On the day he broke the news: the idea was, Mal'd tell him, and then She'd take him off to *Mortal Kombat*. Which Jet had been yearning to see for months – aching, pining. And Jet didn't want to go to it. Mal watched Sheilagh trying to drag him down the street, his gym shoes, his grey tracksuit bottoms, his stubborn burn. Mal took him to *Mortal Kombat* the following week. Fucking stupid. Booting each other in the face for twenty minutes without so much as a fat lip.

Here came the kid now, with his mother already bending over him to straighten the collar of his polo shirt and pat his styled hair. Styled hair? Since when was that? Jesus: an earring. That was Sheilagh playing the fun young mum. You know: take him down Camden Market and buy him a leather jacket. Keeping his counsel, for now, Mal crouched down (*A!*) to kiss Jet's cheek and tousle his – wait. No, he

wouldn't want that tousled. Jet wiped his cheek and said, 'Dad? Who beat you up?'

'We was outnumbered. Heavily outnumbered.' He did a calculation. There'd been about thirty of them. 'Fifteen to one. Me and Fat Lol.' He didn't tell Jet that fifteen of them had been women.

'Dad?'

'Yeah?'

'Are you running in the Fathers' Race?'

'No way.'

Jet looked at his mother, who said, 'Mal, you got to.'

'No way, no day. It'll do me back in.'

'Mal.'

'No shape, no form.'

'But Dad.'

'No way José.'

Mal looked down. The boy was staring with great narrowness of attention, almost cross-eyed, and with his mouth dropped open – staring into the hills and valleys of his father's wound.

'You just concentrate on your own performance,' Mal told him.

'But Dad. You're meant to be a *bouncer*,' said Jet.

Bouncing, being a bouncer – as a trade, as a calling – had the wrong reputation. Bouncing, Mal believed, was misunderstood.

Throughout the Seventies, he had served all night long at many an exclusive doorway, had manned many a prestigious portal, more often than not with Fat Lol at his side. The team: Big Mal and Fat Lol. They started together at the Hammersmith Palais. Soon they worked their way up to

West End places like Ponsonby's and Fauntleroy's. He did it for fifteen years, but it only took about a week to get the hang of it.

Bouncing wasn't really about bouncing – about chucking people out. Bouncing was about not letting people in. That was pretty much all there was to it – to bouncing. Oh, yeah. And saying 'Sir', and 'Gentlemen'.

See a heavy drunk or one of those white-lipped weasel-weights, and it's 'Sorry, sir, you can't come in. Why? Cos you're not a member, sir. If you can't find a taxi at this hour, sir, we'd be happy to call you a minicab here from the door.'

See a load of obvious steamers coming down the mews in their suits, and it's 'Good evening to you, gentlemen. No I'm sorry, gentlemen. Gentlemen, this club is members only. Oi! Look, hold up, lads. Gentlemen! Lol! Okay. Okay. If you're still wide awake, gentlemen, may I recommend Jimmy's, at 32 Noel Street, bottom bell. Left and left again.'

About once a week, usually at weekends, Mr Carburton would come down to the door, stare you in the eye, and say, with dreadful weariness, 'Who fucking let *them* in?'

You'd go, 'Who?'

'Who? Them two fucking nutcases who're six foot six with blue chins.'

'Seemed all right.' And you might have added, in your earlier days, 'They was with a bird.'

'They're *always* with a bird.'

But the bird's disappeared and the blokes are hurling soda siphons around and you head up the stairs and you . . . So the only time you did any actual bouncing was when you had failed: as a bouncer. Bouncing was a mop-up operation made necessary by faulty bouncing. The best bouncers never did any bouncing. Only bad bouncers bounced. It might have sounded complicated, but it wasn't.

... In their frilly shirts, their reeking tuxes, Mal and Fat Lol, on staircases, by fire exits, or standing bent over the till at five in the morning when the lights came on full, and at the flick of a switch you went from opulence to poverty – all the lacquer, glamour, sex, privilege, empire, wiped out, in a rush of electricity.

That was also the time of genuine danger. Astonishing, sometimes, the staying power of those you'd excluded and turned away – turned away, pushed away, shoved, shouldered, clipped, slapped, smacked, tripped, kicked, kneed, nugged, loafed. Or just told, 'Sorry, sir.' They'd wait all night – or come back, weeks or months later. You'd escort the palely breakfastless hat-check girl to her Mini and then head on down the mews to your own vehicle through the mist of the Ripper dawn. And he'd be waiting, leaning against the wall by the car, finishing a bottle of milk and weighing it in his hands.

Because some people will not be excluded. Some people will not be turned away ... Mal bounced here, Mal bounced there; he bounced away for year after year, without serious injury. Until one night. He was leaving early, and there on the steps was the usual shower of chauffeurs and minicabbies, hookers, hustlers, ponces, tricks, twanks, mugs and marks, and, as Mal jovially shouldered his way through, a small shape came close, saying breathily, dry-mouthed, *Hold that, mate* ... Suddenly Mal was backing off fast in an attempt to get a good look at himself: at the blade in his gut and the blood following the pleats of his soiled white shirt. He thought, What's all this you hear about getting stabbed not hurting? Comes later, doesn't it – the pain? No, mate: it comes now. Like a great papercut to the heart. Mal's belly, his proud, placid belly, was abruptly the scene of hysterical

rearrangements. And he felt the need to speak, before he fell.

The moment was familiar to him. He'd seen them go down, his comrades, the tuxed custodians of the bronze door-knocker and the coach-house lantern. The big schwartzer Darius, sliding down a lamppost after he'd stopped a tyre iron outside Ponsonby's. Or Fat Lol himself, in Faunteroy's, crashing from table to table with half a beer bottle in his crown. They wanted to say something, before they went. It made you think of Fifties war films. What was it? 'I've copped it in the back, sir.' Not that the falling bouncer ever managed to blurt much out: an oath, a vow. It was the look on their faces, wanting acknowledgement or respect, because here they were, in a kind of uniform – the big black bow tie, the little black shoes – and going down in the line of service. Going down, they wanted it recognized that they'd earned their salt. Did they want to say – or hear – the word 'Sir'?

He walked backward until his shoulders crashed into the windowsill. He landed heavily on his arse: *A!* Fat Lol knelt to cradle him.

'Here, Lol, I'm holding one,' said Mal. 'Jesus, I'm gone, mate. I'm gone!'

Fat Lol wanted the name of the man who'd done him. And so did the police. Mal couldn't help them with their inquiries. 'Don't know him from Adam,' he insisted, reckoning he'd never before set eyes on the bloke. But he had. It came to him eventually, his memory stirred by hospital food.

Hospital food. Mal would never own up to it, but he loved hospital food. Not a good sign, that, when you start fancying your hospital food. You hear the creak of the trolley, instantaneously suffusing the whole ward with that smell of

warm damp newspaper, and suddenly your mauled gut rips into life like an outboard motor and you're gulping down half a pint of drool. It shows you're getting institutionalized in the worst way. He had no use for the pies and quiches that Sheilagh brought in for him. Either he'd bin them or give the grub to the stiff on his ward. The old guys - in the furnace of the night they whinnied like pub dogs having nightmares under the low tables . . .

It was as he was kissing his bunched fingertips and congratulating the dinner lady on her most recent triumph that Mal suddenly remembered: remembered the man who'd done him. 'Jesus Christ,' he said to the dinner lady in her plastic pinafore. 'Ridiculous, innit. I mean I never even . . .' Warily, the old dear moved on, leaving Mal frowning and shaking his head (and digging into his meal). It was the fried skin of the fish fingers: in this surface Mal recognized the dark ginger of his assailant's hair. On the night of the stabbing, and on another night, months earlier, *months* . . . It was late, it was cold: Mal on the steps of Fautleroy's, sealing off the lit doorway like a boulder with his bulk, and the little ginge going, 'Am I hearing you saying that I'm not good enough?'

'I don't know what you're hearing, mate, but what I'm saying is it's members only.'

Calling him 'mate' and not 'sir': this meant that Mal's patience was being sorely tried.

'It's as I'm a working man like.'

'No, mate. I'm a working man too. But I won't be if I let you in. Regulations. This is a clipjoint, mate. What you want to do, come in here and buy some tart a glass of Lucozade for eighty-five quid? Go off home.'

'So you don't like my kind.'

'Yeah, it's your ginger hair, mate. Ginger-haired blokes ain't admitted. Here. It's late. It's cold. Walk away.'

'Am I hearing you saying I'm not good enough?'

'Look fuck off out of it.'

And that was that. Something of the sort happened ten times a night. But this little ginge waits until spring and then comes back and leaves a blade in Mal's gut: 'Hold that, mate.' And now *Mal* was on the Lucozade, and eating fish-fingers off a tray that slid up the bed.

I've copped it in the back, sir . . . From *The Dam Busters*, the film that, as a child, he had so pined to see. Like Jet with *Mortal Kombat*. He thought of another of its lines: 'Nigger's dead, sir.' Delivered awkwardly, tenderly, the man breaking it to the senior officer. Meaning the dog. They had a dog called Nigger. Their little black dog, their unofficial mascot, who dies, was called Nigger. You couldn't do that now. No way. In a film. Call a *dog* Nigger? No way, no day. Times change. Call a *black* dog Nigger? No shape, no form. Be down on you like a . . . Call a dead black dog Nigger in a film? No way José.

4. Burger King

So class and race and gender were supposedly gone (and other things were supposedly going, like age and beauty and even education): all the really automatic ways people had of telling who was better or worse - they were gone. Right-thinkers everywhere were claiming that they were clean of prejudice, that in them the inherited formulations had at last been purged. This they had decided. But for those on the

pointed end of the operation – the ignorant, say, or the ugly – it wasn't just a decision. Some of them had no new clothes. Some were still dressed in the uniform of their deficiencies. Some were still wearing the same old shit.

Some would never be admitted.

Mal looked on, and stiffened. The gym master went by, with his bullhorn like a prototype mobile phone, calling the names for the first event. The parents faced the track, and the fantastic interrogation of the low sun, with binoculars, cameras, camcorders, and all their *other* children – little sisters, big brothers, and babies (crying, yawning, dangling a pouched foot). Mal looked on, careful to maintain a distance of at least two parents between himself and Sheilaigh, her green boiler suit, her fine, light, russety hair. Between them bobbed other heads of hair work – grey streaks, pageboy, urchin, dyed caramel; and, among the men, various tragedies of disappearance, variously borne, and always the guy with a single strand pasted across his dome, as if one sideburn had thrown a line to the other. Maybe the sun wasn't staring but turning the lights on full, like at Fautleroy's when dawn came (and you wondered at the value of what you'd been guarding), so everybody could just see for themselves.

Runners in regulation off-white shorts and T-shirts were gathering on the starting line. Mal consulted his programme: a single cyclostyled sheet. Lost in concentration (lips working), he felt a pull on his arm.

'Oi,' he said. For it was Jet. 'Better get out there, mate.'

'This is the fourth form.'

'What are you in then?'

'Seventy metres and two-twenty.'

'... So you ain't on for a while. Right. Let's work on your preparation.'

Jet turned away. The styled hair, the gold earring. For a second the backs of his ears gleamed orange and transparent. Now Jet turned again and looked at him with that shy leer in the raised upper lip. Jesus: his teeth were blue. But that was okay. It was just the trace of a lolly he'd managed to get down him, not some new way of deliberately looking horrible. The law of fashion said that every child had to offend its parents aesthetically. Mal had offended his parents aesthetically: the drainpipes and brothelcreepers, the hair like a riptide of black grease. Jet had contrived to offend Mal aesthetically. And Jet's kids, when they came, would face the arduous task of aesthetically offending Jet.

'Okay, let's get your head right. Go through the prep drill. Point One.'

And again the boy turned away. Stood his ground, but turned away. For two academic years running, Jet had come nineteenth in his class of twenty. Mal liked to think that Jet made up for this with his dad-tweaked excellence on the sports field. The gym, the squash court, the pool, the park: training became the whole relationship. Of late, naturally, their sessions had been much reduced. But they still went to the rec on Saturday afternoons, with the stopwatch, the football, the discus, the talc. And Jet seemed less keen these days. And Mal, too, felt differently. Now, seeing Jet bottling a header or tanking a sprint, Mal would draw in breath to scold or embolden him and then silently exhale. And feel nothing but nausea. He no longer had the authority or the will. And then came the blackest hour: Jet dropped from the school football team... A distance was opening up between father and son, and how do you close it? How do you do that? Every Saturday lunchtime they sat in the tot-party toy-town of McDonald's, Jet with his Happy Meal (burger, fries, and a plastic doodad worth ten pence), Mal with his Chicken

McNuggets or his Fish McCod. They didn't eat. Like lovers over their last supper in a restaurant – the food not even looked at, let alone touched. Besides, for some time now the very sight of a burger was enough to give Mal's stomach a jolt. It was like firing a car when it was in first gear and the hand brake was on: a forward lurch that took you nowhere. Mal had had an extreme experience with burgers. Burger hell: he'd been there.

'Dad?'

'Yeah?'

'Are you running in the dads' race?'

'Told you. Can't do it, mate. Me back.'

'And your face.'

'Yeah. And me face.'

They watched the races. And, well, how clear do you want it to be, that a boy's life is all races? School is an exam and a competition and a popularity contest: it's racing demon. And you saw how the kids were equipped for it by nature – never mind the interminable trials in the rec (never mind the great bent thumb on the stopwatch): lummoxy lollopers, terrifying achievers, sloths, hares, and everything in between. They began as one body, the racers, one pack; and then as if by natural process they moved apart, some forging ahead, others (while still going forward) dropping back. The longer the race, the bigger the differences. Mal tried to imagine the runners staying in line all the way, and finishing as they had begun. And it wasn't human somehow. It couldn't be imagined, not on this planet.

Jet's first event was called.

'Now remember,' said Mal, all hunkered down. 'Accelerate into the lengthened stride. Back straight, knees high. Cut the air with the stiff palms. Shallow breathing till you breast that tape.'

In the short time it took Jet to reach the starting blocks – and despite the heat and colour of Sheilagh's boiler suit as it established itself at his side – Mal had fully transformed himself into the kind of sports-circuit horrorparent you read about in the magazines. Why? Simple: because he wanted to live his life again, through the boy. His white-knuckled dukes were held at shoulder height; his brow was scrunched up over the bridge of his nose; and his bloodless lips, in a desperate whisper, were saying, 'Ventilate! Work the flow! Loosen up! Loosen up!'

But Jet was not loosening up. He wasn't loosening and limbering the way Mal had taught him (the way TV had taught Mal), jogging on the spot and wiggling his arms in the air and gasping like an iron lung. Jet was just standing there. And as Mal stared pleadingly on, he felt that Jet looked – completely exceptional. He couldn't put his finger on it. Not the tallest, not the lithest. But Jet looked completely exceptional. The starting pistol gave its tinny report. After two seconds Mal slapped a hand over his eyes: A!

'Last?' he said, when the noise was over.

'Last,' said Sheilagh, steelily. 'Now you leave that boy be.'

Soon Jet was squirming his way through to them and Sheilagh was saying unlucky and never mind, darling, and all this; and his impulse, really, was to do what Mal's dad would have done to Mal at such loss of face, and put Jet in hospital for a couple of weeks. See how he liked that. But such ways were old and gone, and he had no will, and the impulse passed. Besides, the boy was uneasily casting himself about, and wouldn't meet his eye. Mal now felt that he had to offer something, something quixotic, perverse, childish.

'Listen. This Saturday, down the rec, we're going to work on your pace. We'll get a burger down you, for your

strength, and then we're going to work on your pace. And guess what. I'll eat a burger. I'll eat two.'

This was a family joke; and family jokes can go either way, when you're no longer a family.

Sheilagh said, 'Hark at Burger King.'

Jet said, 'Return of Burger King.'

Burger King was a kind of nickname. Jet was smiling at him sinisterly: teeth still blue.

'I will. I swear. For Jet. Blimey. Oop. Jesus. It's happening. I'm for it now. Here, She. Whoop.'

Eat burgers? He couldn't even *say* burgers.

California. When Joseph Andrews's final face-lift went so badly wrong, and he had to cancel the Vegas thing and shut down his whole West Coast operation, Big Mal decided to stay out in L.A. and give it a go on his own. He shifted his real money to London but kept back a few grand, as his stake. There were offers, schemes, projects. He had made many good friends in the business and entertainment communities. Time to call in a few favours.

And this was how it went: after twenty-three days he was, he believed, on the brink of clinical starvation. People had let him down. He had given up eating, drinking and smoking, in that order. He was seeing things, and hearing them, too. In the motel, at night, strangers who weren't really there moved round him, solicitously. He'd be sitting on a patch of grass somewhere and a bird in the tree would start singing a song. Not a bird's song. A Beatles song. Like 'Try and See It My Way', with all the words. By this stage he was rootling through supermarket dumpsters and discovering that food, so various in its colours and textures, could lose identity and become just one thing. Everywhere he went

he was turned away. Even the supermarket Dumpsters were often guarded, in case the trash was tainted, and you ate it, and then sued.

Dawn on the final morning: it was Mal's forty-fifth birthday. He awoke in the driver's seat of the old Subaru – in a cinema parking lot out by the airport somewhere. Sheilagh had sorted a ticket for him from the London end: fourteen hours to go. He regarded the flight home not as a journey, not as a return, not as a defeat, but as a free meal. Peanuts first, he thought. Or Bombay Mix.

When he saw the sign he thought it was just another hallucination. 'Maurie's Birthday Burger' . . . All you had to do was show up with your driver's licence. You could expect a free burger, and a hero's welcome. Maurie's had more than seventy outlets in Greater Los Angeles. And once Mal got going, there didn't seem any good reason to stop. After the thirtieth or thirty-fifth burger, you couldn't really say he was in it for the grub. But he kept going. It was because Maurie was doing what nobody else was doing: Maurie was letting Mal in.

Gastrically things were already not looking too bright when he arrived at LAX and checked in his luggage: a ripped ten-gallon bag containing all he owned. He made it to the gate more or less okay. It was on the plane that everything started getting out of hand. It appeared that Maurie, that week, had been sold a dodgy batch of meat. Whatever the facts of the matter, Mal felt, as he reached for his seat belt, that he was buckling in twenty pounds of mad cow.

Five hours later, over the Baffin Bay: serious flight-deck discussion of an emergency landing in Disko, Greenland, as Mal continued to reel around the aircraft patiently devastating one toilet after another. They even let him loose on

Business. Then, finally, as they cruised in over County Cork, and the passengers were being poked awake, and some of them, stretching and scratching, were slipping away with their wash-bags . . . well, it seemed to Mal (shrunken, mythically pale, and growing into his seat like a toadstool) that the only possibility was mass ejection. Three hundred parachutes, like three hundred burger buns, streaming down over the Welsh valleys, and the plane heading on, grand and blind.

At the airport he asked She to marry him. He was trembling. Winter was coming and he was afraid of it. He wanted to be safe.

'Jet!' cried Mal. He could hear the kid fumbling around outside.

'Dad!'

'In here!'

Mal was in the clubhouse toilet, alone, cooling his brow against the mirror and leaning on the smudged sink.

'You all right?'

'Yeah, mate. It passed.'

'Does it hurt?' said Jet, meaning his wound.

'Nah, mate. Bit of discomfort.'

'How'd you get it? Who did it?'

He straightened up. 'Son?' he began – for he felt he owed Jet an explanation, a testament, a valediction. The fall rays were staring through the thick wrinkled glass. 'Son? Listen to me.' His voice echoed, godlike, in the Lucozade light. 'Every now and again you're going to get into one. You go into one and it's not going to go your way. Sometimes you can see one coming and sometimes you can't. And some you can never see coming. So you just take what comes. Okay?'

'You and Fat Lol.'

'Me and Fat Lol. Should see the state of *him*.'

The boy wagged his haircut towards the door.

Mal said, 'Now what?'

'Two-twenty.'

'Oi. Listen. Jet. I'll run if you will. Okay? I'll run the dads' race. And give it me all. If you will. Deal?'

Jet nodded. Mal looked down at his hair: seemed like they'd gone round the edge of it with a clipper or whatever, leaving a shaved track two or three inches wide . . . As Mal followed him outside he realized something. Jet on the starting line with all the others: he had looked completely exceptional. Not the tallest. Not the lithest. What, then? He was the whitest. He was just the whitest.

Now that prejudice was gone everyone could relax and concentrate on money.

Which was fine if you had some.

5. Rhyming Slang

To be frank, Fat Lol couldn't believe that Mal was still interested.

'You?' he said. 'You? Big Mal: minder to the superstars?'

Yeah, that was it. Big Mal: megaminder. Mal said, 'How *you* doing then?'

'Me? I'm onna dole, mate. I'm onna street. So I put meself about. But you?'

'That's all kind of dried up. Joseph Andrews and that. I'm basically short. Temporarily. Hopefully. So with all the changes going down I need any extra I can get.'

Mal could not speak altogether freely. With the two men, round the table, sat Fat Lol's wife, Yvonne, and their six-year-old son, little Vic. They were having lunch in Del's Caff on Paradise Street in the East End – and it was like another world. Mal and Fat Lol were born in the same house in the same week; but Mal had come on, and Fat Lol hadn't. Mal had evolved. There he sat, in his shell suit, with his dark glasses – a modern person. *His* son had a modern name: Jet. Mal could call his Asian babe on his mobile phone. And he had left home. Which you didn't do. And there was Fat Lol in his Sloppy Joe, his sloppy jeans, and his old suedes, with his wife looking like a bank robber and his son flinching when either parent made a move for the vinegar or the brown sauce. Fat Lol was still in the muscle business (this and that). He had felt the tug of no other calling. He had stayed with it, like a brand loyalty.

'So,' said Fat Lol, 'what you're saying, if there's something going – this and that – you'd be on for a bit of it.'

'Exactly.'

'On a part-time basis. Nights.'

'Yeah.'

Fat Lol: he provided dramatic proof of the proposition that you are what you eat. Fat Lol was what he ate. More than this, Fat Lol was what he was eating. And he was eating, for his lunch, an English breakfast – Del's All Day Special at £3.25. His mouth was a strip of undercooked bacon, his eyes a mush of egg yolk and tinned tomatoes. His nose was like the end of a lightly grilled pork sausage – then the baked beans of his complexion, the furry mushrooms of his ears. Paradise Street right down to his bum crack – that was Fat Lol. A loaf of fried bread on legs. Mal considered the boy: silent, cautious, eyeing the fruit machine with cunning and patience.

Yvonne said, 'So you're having a bit of bother making ends meet. Since you went off with that Lucozade.'

'No unpleasantness, please, Yv,' said Mal, aghast. They didn't see each other so often now, but for many years Yv and She had been best mates. And Yv was always sharp, like her name, like her face. 'She ain't a Lucozade anyway. Come on, Yv. In this day and age?'

Yvonne went on eating, busily, with her head down. Last mouthful. There.

'She ain't a Lucozade anyway.' People thought that Lucozade was rhyming slang for *spade*. But Mal knew that spades weren't called Lucozades because spade rhymed with Lucozade. Spades were called Lucozades because spades *drank* Lucozade. Anyway, Linzi was from Bombay and she drank gin. 'She's of Indian extraction but she was born right here on Paradise Street.'

'Same difference,' said Yvonne.

'Shut it,' said Fat Lol.

When closed, as now, *it* – Yv's mouth – looked like a copper coin stuck in a slot. No, there wasn't any slot: just the nicked rim of the penny jamming it. Dear oh dear, thought Mal: the state of her boat. Boat was rhyming slang for face (via *boat race*). It had never struck him as appropriate or evocative until now. Her whole head like a prow, a tight corner, a hairpin bend.

'Linzi – when she signs her name,' said Yvonne. 'Does she do a little circle over the last "i"?''

Mal considered. 'Yeah,' he said.

'Thought so. Just like any other little English slag. Does she do the same with "Pakki"?''

'Shut it,' said Fat Lol.

Later, in the Queen Mum, Fat Lol said, 'What you doing tonight?'

'Not a lot.'

'There's some work on if you fancy it.'

'Yeah?'

'Clamping.'

'Clamping?'

'Yeah,' said Fat Lol. 'Onna clamps.'

Yv had a been-around face, and so did She. She's boat, as he remembered it, because he couldn't look at it, was trusting, gentle, yokelish, under its duster of shallow red hair. Soon Mal would be obliged to look at that face, and look into it, and face that face with his.

But first Jet in the two-twenty!

'Stick to the game plan,' Mal was telling him. 'Remember. Run it like it's three seventy-metre sprints. One after the other.'

Jet leered up at him. What Mal's game plan came down to, plainly enough, was that Jet should run flat out every step of the way.

'Go for it, son. Just do it.'

The raised starting pistol, the ragged lunge from the blocks . . . By the halfway point Jet had pelted himself into a narrow lead. 'Now you dig deep,' Mal murmured, on the terrace, with She's shape at his side. 'Now it's down to your desire. Dig, mate, dig. Dig! Dig! Dig!' As Jet came flailing on to the home straight - and as, one by one, all the other runners shot past him - Mal's cold right hand was slowly seeking his brow. But then Jet seemed to topple forward. It was as if the level track had suddenly been tipped at an angle, and Jet wasn't running but falling. He passed one runner, and another . . .

When Mal went over Jet was still lying face down in the

rusty cinders. Mal knelt, saying, 'Fourth. Talk about a recovery. Great effort, mate. It was your character got you through that. It was your heart. I saw your heart out there. I saw your heart.'

Sheilagh was beyond them, waiting. Mal helped Jet to his feet and slipped him a quid for a tin of drink. The running track was bounded by a low fence; further off lay a field or whatever, with a mob of trees and bushes in the middle of it. There She was heading, Mal coming up behind her, head bent. As he stepped over the fence he almost blacked out with culture shock: the running track was a running track but this was *the country* . . .

He came up to her wiggling a finger in the air. 'Look. Sounds stupid,' he said. 'But you go behind that bush and I'll call you.'

'Call me?'

'On your mobile.'

'Mal!'

Turning and bending, he poked out her number. And he began.

'Sheilagh? Mal. Right. You know that woman we went to said I had a problem communicating? Well okay. Maybe she was on to something. But here goes. Since I left you and little Jet I . . . It's like I got gangrene or something. It's all right for about ten minutes if I'm reading the paper or watching the golf. You know. Distracted. Or knocking a ball about with Val and Rodge.' Val and Rodge were, by some distance, the most elderly couple that Mal and Sheilagh played mixed doubles with at Kentish Town Sports. 'Then it ain't so bad. For ten minutes.' By now Mal had both his arms round his head, like a mouth-organist. Because he was talking into his phone and crying into his sleeve. 'I lost something and I never knew I had it. Me peace of mind. It's

like I know how you . . . how women feel. When you're upset, you're not just pissed off. You feel ill. Sick. It goes inside. I feel like a woman. Take me back, She. Do it. I swear I -'

He heard static and felt her hand on his shoulder. They hugged: *A!*

'Christ, Mal, who messed with your face?'

'Ridiculous, innit. I mean some people you just wouldn't believe.'

And she breathed out, frowning, and started straightening his collar and brushing away its scurf with the back of her hand.

6. Motor Show

'Park inna Inn onna Park,' said Fat Lol.

'We ain't doing it in there, are we?'

'Don't talk fucking stupid. Pick up me van.'

Access to the innards of the Inn on the Park having been eased by Fat Lol's acquaintance with - and remuneration of - one of the hotel's garage attendants, the two men drove boldly down the ramp in Mal's C-reg. BM. They then hoisted themselves into Fat Lol's Vauxhall Rascal and proceeded east through Mayfair and Soho. Mal kept peering in the back. The clamps lay there, heavily jumbled, like land mines from an old war.

'They don't look like normal clamps. Too big.'

'Early model. Before they introduced the more compact one.'

'Bet they weigh.'

'They ain't light,' conceded Fat Lol.

'How's it go again?'

Mal had to say that the scheme made pretty good sense to him. Because it relied on turnover. Mass clamping: that was the order of the day. Clearly (or so Fat Lol argued), there wasn't a lot of sense in tooling round the West End doing the odd Cortina on a double yellow line. Clamp a car, and you got seventy quid for declamping it. What you needed was cars in bulk. And where did you find cars in bulk? In a National Car Park.

But hang about: 'How can you clamp a car in a National Car Park?'

'If they not in they bay. The marked area.'

'Bit harsh innit mate?'

'It's legal,' said Fat Lol indignantly. 'You can clamp them even in an N.C.P. If they park bad.'

'Bet they ain't too pleased about it.'

'No, they ain't overly chuffed.'

Fat Lol handed Mal a sample windscreen sticker. 'Warning This Vehicle Is Illegally Parked. Do Not Attempt to Move It. For Prompt Assistance . . .' On the side window of his Rascal additional stickers indicated that Fat Lol welcomed all major credit cards.

'Give them a while and they cool off by the time you get there. Just want to get home. What's it going to be anyway? Some little slag from Luton bring his wife in for a night onna town.'

They decided to kick off with a medium-rise just north of Leicester Square. No gatekeeper, no bouncer to deny them entry. The automatic arm of the barrier rose like a salute. On the second floor: 'Bingo,' said Fat Lol. Twenty prime vehicles packed tight at one end, crouching, waiting, gleaming in the dangerous light of car parks.

Out they dropped. 'Fucking *Motor Show*,' said Fat Lol. And it was true: the chrome heraldry, the galvanized paintwork. They hesitated as a family saloon swung down from Level 3.

'Let's do it.'

Disappointingly, only four vehicles were adjudged by Fat Lol to have outstepped their prescribed boundaries. But he soon saw another way.

'Okay. Let's do them if they're *touching* the white lines.'

'In tennis,' said Mal moderately, 'the white lines count in.'

'Well in clamping,' said Fat Lol, in a tight voice, bending low, 'the white lines count *out*.'

It was warm and heavy work. These ancient gadgets, the clamps – they were like fucking steamrollers. You had to free them from the van and from each other and hump them into position. Next you got down there – *A!* – and worked the pipe wrench on the snap ratchet. Then: *thwock*. There was the clamp with its jaw fast on the car's wheel. One bit was quite satisfying: spreading the gummy white sticker all over the windscreen.

Fat Lol was down there doing a K-reg. Jag when Mal said, 'Oi. I can see you bum crack.'

'Bend down.' Fat Lol stood up. 'I can see yourn.'

'You said dress casual.'

'With a car like this,' Fat Lol announced huskily, '– it tears you apart. I mean, with a car like this, you don't want to clamp it.'

'You want to nick it.'

'Nah. To clamp a motor such as this, it's ...'

'Sacrilege.'

'Yeah. It's fucking *sacrilege* to mess with a motor such as this.'

Mal heard it first. Like something detaching itself from

the siren song of Leicester Square, where the old sounds of various thrashed and envassalled machines contended with the sound of the new, its pings, pips, peeps, beeps, bleeps, tweets and squawks and yawps ... Big Mal heard it first, and paused there, down on one knee with his pipe wrench. A concentrated body of purposeful human conversation was moving towards them, the sopranos and contraltos of the women, the sterling trebles and barrelly baritones of the men, coming up round the corner now, like a ballroom, like civilization, uniforms of tuxedo and then streaks and plumes of turquoise, emerald, taffeta, dimity.

'Lol mate,' said Mal.

Fat Lol was a couple of cars further in, doing a Range Rover and tightly swearing to himself.

'Lol!'

You know what it was like? A revolution in reverse – that's what it was like. Two bum-crack cowboys scragged and cudgelled by the quality. Jesus: strung up by the upper classes. What seemed most amazing, looking back, was how totally they folded, the two big lads, how their bottom, their legitimacy, just evaporated on them there and then. Fat Lol managed to get to his feet and splutter something about these vehicles being parked illegally. Or parked improperly. Or plain parked bad. And that was the extent of their resistance. Big Mal and Fat Lol, those bottle-ripped veterans of ruck and maul, dispensing the leather in cross alleys and on walkways, on dance-hall staircases, elbowing their way out of bowling alleys and snooker-hall toilets, crouching and panting by dully shining exit doors – they just rolled over. *We didn't want to know* ... Mal tried to wriggle in under the Lotus he was doing but they were on him like the SAS. The first blow he took from the pipe wrench knocked him spark-out. Soon afterwards he awoke and, leaning on an elbow in

a pool of blood and oil, watched Fat Lol being slowly hauled by the hair from car to car, with the ladies queuing and jockeying to give him another kick up the arse, as best they could, in their gowns. The ladies! The language! Then they were on Mal again, and he stopped another one from the pipe wrench. I've copped it in the back, sir. Nigger's dead, sir . . . No rest for the wicked. And ain't that the fucking truth. They hoisted Mal upright, giving his mouth a nice smack on the headlight frame, and had him slewing from bonnet to bonnet, prising at the windscreen stickers with his cold white fingers. This vehicle is illegally. For prompt assistance. All major . . . And after a last round of kicks and taunts their cars were chirruping and wincing and whirring into life; they were gone, leaving Fat Lol and Big Mal groping towards each other through the fumes and echoes and the heap of cheap clamps, gasping, dripping, jetsam of the machine age.

7. Sad Sprinter

'Operagoers.'

Sheilagh said, 'Operagoers?'

'Operagoers. Okay, it was a bit of a liberty, me and Fat Lol. You could argue we was out of order . . .'

'You sure it was operagoers?'

'Yeah. I thought it might have been a première crowd. Been to a Royal Première or something.' Mal and Linzi had recently attended a Royal Première, at considerable expense. And he thought it must have been decades since he had been with a rougher crew: fifteen hundred trogs in

dinner jackets, plus their molls. 'No, they left programmes. The Coliseum. They ain't nice, you know, She,' he cautioned her. Sheilagh had a weakness for films in which the aristocracy played cute. 'The contempt. They were like vicious.'

'I've been to the Coliseum. They do it in English. It's better because you can tell what's going on.'

Mal nodded long-sufferingly.

'You can follow the story.'

He nodded a second time.

'You doing the dads' race?'

'Well I got to now.'

'With your face in that state? You're no good on your own, Mal. You're no good on your own.'

Mal turned away. The shrubs, the falling leaves – the trees: what *kind* were they? Even in California . . . Even in California all he knew of nature was the mild reck of rest stops when he pulled over, in his chauffeur's cap, for leaks between cities (a can made of nature and butts and book-matches), or lagoon-style restaurants where mobsters ate lobsters; one year She came out with little Jet for a whole term (not a success) and Mal learned that American schools regarded tomato ketchup as a vegetable. And throughout his life there had been symbols, like fruit machines and hospital fruit salads and the plastic fruit on his mother's hat, forty years ago, at *his* Sports Day. And his dad's curt haircut and Sunday best. Say what you like about forty years ago. Say what you like about his parents, and everyone else's, then, but the main thing about them was that they were married, and looked it, and dressed it, and meant it.

She said, 'If you come back – don't do it if you don't mean it.'

'No way,' he said. 'No way, no day. No shape, no form...'

With a nod she started off, and Mal followed. Mal followed, watching the rhythmic but asymmetrical rearrangements of her big womanly backside, where all her strength and virtue seemed to live, her character, her fathom. And he could see it all. Coming through the door for the bear hug with Jet, and then the hug of Momma Bear and Poppa Bear. The deep-breathing assessment of all he had left behind. And the smile coagulating on his face. Knowing that in ten minutes, twenty, two hours, twenty-four, he would be back out the door with Jet's arms round his knees, his ankles, like a sliding tackle, and She behind him somewhere, flushed, tousled, in a light sweat of readiness to continue with the next fuck or fight, to continue, to continue. And Mal'd be out the door, across the street at Linzi's, watching *Asian Babes* and freeing his mind of all thoughts about the future... As he stepped over the fence he looked towards the car park and - whoops - there she was, Linzi, his Asian babe, perched on the low boot of her MG Midget. Sheilagh paused. Linzi on her car boot, She in her boiler suit. Boots and boilers. Where was transformation? If Linzi wanted new breasts, a new bum - if she wanted to climb into a catsuit made out of a teenager - then it was absolutely A-okay with Mal.

'Dad?'

'Jet mate.'

'They're ready.'

Mal kicked off his tasselled loafers and started limbering up: *A!* He was giving Jet his jacket to hold when his mobile rang.

'Lol! Been trying you all day, mate. Some Arab answered.'

Fat Lol said he'd had to flog it: his mobile.

'How come?'

His van got clamped!

'Tell me about it. They did me BM!'

You and all!

'Yeah. Look, can't talk, boy. Got a race to run.'

Fat Lol said he was going to do something tonight.

'Yeah?'

Onna car alarms.

'Yeah?'

'Dad? They're waiting. Boost it.'

'I'm on it, mate. Bye, son.'

'And don't fuck up,' said Jet.

'When do I ever?'

'You're a crap sprinter, Dad.'

'You what?'

'You're a *sad* sprinter.'

'Oh yeah? Watch this.'

The dads were in a rank on the starting line: Bern, Nusrat, Fardous, Someth, Adrian, Mikio, Paratosh and the rest of them, no great differences in age but all at various stages along the track, waistlines, hairlines, worldlines, with various c.v.'s of separation, contentment, estrangement, some of *their* dads dead, some of their mums still living. Mal joined them. This was the dads' race. But dads are always racing, against each other, against themselves. That's what dads do.

It was the gunshot that made the herd stampede. Instantly Mal felt about nineteen things go at once. All the links and joins - hip, knee, ankle, spine - plus an urgent liquefaction on the side of his face. After five stumbling bounds the pain barrier was on him and wouldn't get out of the way. But the big man raced on, as you've got to do. The

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dads raced on, with heavy ardour, and thundering, their feet stockinged or gym-shoed but all in the wooden clogs of their years. Their heads bent back, their chests outthrust, they gasped and slavered for the turn in the track and the post at the end of the straight.

New Yorker, 1996