

HAROLD

20TH C

BRITISH

SHORT FICTION

WEEK 13

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In a Blue Time

When the phone rings, who would you most like it to be? And who would you hate it to be? Who is the first person that comes into your mind, Roy liked to ask people, at that moment?

The phone rang and Roy jumped. He had thought, during supper in their new house, with most of their clothes and books in boxes they were too weary to unpack, that it would be pleasant to try their new bed early. He looked across the table at Clara and hoped she'd let the phone run on to the answering machine so he could tell who it was. He disliked talking to his friends in front of her; she seemed to scrutinise him. Somehow he had caused her to resent any life he might have outside her.

She picked up the phone, saying 'Hallo' suspiciously. Someone was speaking but didn't require or merit a reply. Roy mouthed at her, 'Is it Munday? Is it him?'

She shook her head.

At last she said, 'Oh God,' and waved the receiver at Roy.

In the hall he was putting on his jacket.

'Are you going to him?'

'He's in trouble.'

She said, 'We're in trouble, and what will you do about that?'

'Go inside. You'll get cold standing there.'

She clung to him. 'Will you be long?'

'I'll get back as soon as I can. I'm exhausted. You should go to bed.'

'Thank you. Aren't you going to kiss me?'

He put his mouth to hers, and she grunted. He said, 'But I don't even want to go.'

'You'd rather be anywhere else.'

At the gate he called, 'If Munday rings, please take his number. Say that otherwise I'll go to his office first thing tomorrow morning.'

She knew this call from the producer Munday was important to him, indeed to both of them. She nodded and then waved.

It wouldn't take him more than fifteen minutes to drive to the house in Chelsea where his old friend Jimmy had been staying the last few months. But Roy was tired, and parked at the side of the road to think. To think! Apprehension and dread swept through him.

Roy had met Jimmy in the mid-seventies in the back row of their university class on Wittgenstein. Being four years older than the other students, Jimmy appeared ironically knowing compared to Roy's first friends, who had just left school. After lectures Jimmy never merely retired to the library with a volume of Spinoza, or, as Roy did, go disappointedly home and study, while dreaming of the adventures he might have, were he less fearful. No - Jimmy did the college a favour by popping in for an hour or so after lunch. Then he'd hang out impressing some girls he was considering for his stage adaptation of *Remembrance of Things Past*.

After he'd auditioned them at length, and as the sky darkened over the river and the stream of commuters across Blackfriars Bridge thinned, Jimmy would saunter forth into the city's pleasures. He knew the happenin' cinemas, jazz clubs, parties. Or, since he ran his own magazine, *Blurred Edges*, he'd interview theatre directors, photographers, tattooists and performance artists who, to Roy's surprise, rarely refused. At that time students were still considered by some people to be of consequence, and Jimmy would light a joint, sit on the floor and let the recorder run. He would print only the trifling parts of the tape - the gossip and requests for drinks - satisfying his theory that what people were was more interesting than their opinions.

Tonight Jimmy had said he needed Roy more than he'd ever needed him. Or rather, Jimmy's companions had relayed that message. Jimmy himself hadn't made it to the phone or even to his feet. He was, nevertheless, audible in the background.

On the doorstep Roy hesitated. Next morning he had a critical breakfast meeting with Munday about the movie Roy had written and was, after two years of preparation, going to direct. He was also, for the first time, living with Clara. This had been a sort of choice, but its consequences - a child on the way - had somehow surprised them both.

He couldn't turn back. Jimmy's was the voice Roy most wanted to hear on the phone. Their friendship had survived even the mid-eighties, that vital and churning period when everything had been forced forward with a remorseless velocity. Roy had cancelled his debts to anyone whose affection failed to yield interest. At that time, when Roy lived alone, Jimmy would turn up late at night, just to talk. This was welcome and unusual in Roy's world, as they didn't work together and there was no question of loss or gain between them. Jimmy wasn't impressed by Roy's diligence. While Roy rushed between meetings Jimmy was, after all, idling in bars and the front of girls' shirts. But though Jimmy disappeared for weeks - one time he was in prison - when Roy had a free day, Jimmy was the person Roy wanted to spend it with. The two of them would lurch from pub to pub from lunchtime until midnight, laughing at everything. He had no other friends like this, because there are some conversations you can only have with certain people.

Roy pushed the door and cautiously made his way down the uncarpeted stairs, grasping the banister with feeble determination as, he realised, his father used to do. Someone seemed to have been clawing at the wallpaper with their fingernails. A freezing wind blew across the basement: a broken chair must have travelled through a window.

There was Jimmy, then, on the floor, with a broken bottle beside him. The only object intact was a yellowing photograph of Keith Richards pinned to the wall.

Not that Jimmy would have been able to get into his bed. It was occupied by a cloudy-faced middle-aged woman with well-cut hair who, though appearing otherwise healthy, kept nodding out. Cradled into her was a boy of around sixteen with a sly scared look, naked apart from a Lacoste crocodile tattooed onto his chest. Now and again the woman seemed to achieve a dim consciousness and tried shoving him away, but she couldn't shift him.

Jimmy lay on the floor like a child in the playground, with the foot of a bully on his chest. The foot belonged to Marco, the owner of the house, a wealthy junkie with a blood-stained white scarf tied around his throat. Another man, Jake, stood beside them.

'The cavalry's arrived,' Jake said to Marco, who lifted his boot.

Jimmy's eyes were shut. His twenty-one-year-old girlfriend Kara, the daughter of a notable bohemian family, who had been seeing Jimmy for a year, ran and kissed Roy gratefully. She was accompanied by an equally young friend, with vivid lips, leopard-skin hat and short skirt. If Roy regretted coming, he particularly regretted his black velvet jacket. Cut tight around the waist, it was long and shining and flared out over the thighs. The designer, a friend for whom Roy had shot a video, had said that ageing could only improve it. But wherever he wore it, Roy understood now, it sang of style and money, and made him look as if he had a job.

Kara and the girl took Roy to one side and explained that Jimmy had been drinking. Kara had found him in Brompton Cemetery with a smack dealer, though he claimed to have given that up. This time she was definitely leaving him until he sorted himself out.

'They're animals,' murmured Jimmy.

Marco replaced his foot on his chest.

The kid in the bed, who had now mounted the woman, glared over his shoulder, saying to Jimmy, 'What the fuck, you don't never sleep here no more. You got smarter people to be with than us.'

Jimmy shouted, 'It's my bed! And stop fucking that woman, she's overdosing!'

There was nothing in the woman's eyes.

'Is she all right?' Roy asked.

'She still alive,' the boy explained. 'My finger on her pulse.'

Jimmy cried, 'They stole my fucking booze and drunk it, found my speed and took it, and stole my money and spent it. I'm not having these bastards in my basement, they're bastards.'

Jake said to Roy: 'Number one, he's evicted right now this minute. He went berserk. Tried to punch us around, and then tried to kill himself.'

Jimmy winked up at Roy. 'Did I interrupt your evening, man? Were you talking about film concepts?'

For years Roy had made music videos and commercials, and directed episodes of soap operas. Sometimes he taught at the film school. He had also made a sixty-minute film for the BBC, a story about a black girl singer. He had imagined that this would be the start of something considerable, but although the film received decent reviews, it had taken him no further. In the mid-eighties he'd been considered for a couple of features, but like most films, they'd fallen through. He'd seen his contemporaries make films in Britain, move to LA and buy houses with pools. An acquaintance had been nominated for an Oscar.

Now at last his own movie was in place, apart from a third of the money and therefore the essential signed contracts and final go-ahead, which were imminent. In the past week Munday had been to LA and New York. He had been told that with a project of this quality he wouldn't have trouble raising the money.

Kara said, 'I expect Roy was doing some hard work.' She turned to him. 'He's too much. Bye-bye, Jimmy, I love you.'

While she bent down and kissed Jimmy, and he rubbed his hand between her legs, Roy looked at the picture of Keith Richards and considered how he'd longed for the uncontrolled life, seeking only pleasure and avoiding the ponderous difficulties of keeping everything together. He wondered if that was what he still wanted, or if he were still capable of it.

When Kara had gone, Roy stood over Jimmy and asked, 'What d'you want me to do?'

'Quote the lyrics of "Tumblin' Dice".'

The girl in the hat touched Roy's arm. 'We're going clubbing. Aren't you taking Jimmy to your place tonight?'

'What? Is that the idea?'

'He tells everyone you're his best friend. He can't stay here.' The girl went on. 'I'm Candy. Jimmy said you work with Munday.'

'That's right.'

'What are you doing with him, a promo?'

From the floor Jimmy threw up his protracted cackle.

Roy said, 'I'm going to direct a feature I've written.'

'Can I work on it with you?' she asked. 'I'll do anything.'

'You'd better ring me to discuss it,' he said.

Jimmy called, 'How's the pregnant wife?'

'Fine.'

'And that young girl who liked to sit on your face?'

Roy made a sign at Candy and led her into an unlit room next door. He cut out some coke, turned to the waiting girl and kissed her against the wall, smelling this stranger and running his hands over her. She inhaled her line, but before he could dispose of his and hold her again, she had gone.

Marco and Jake had carted Jimmy out, stashed him in Roy's car and instructed him to fuck off for good.

Roy drove Jimmy along the King's Road. As always now, Jimmy was dressed for outdoors, in sweaters, boots and

heavy coat. In contrast, Roy's colleagues dressed in light clothes and would never inadvertently enter the open air: when they wanted weather they would fly to a place that had the right kind. An over-ripe gutter odour rose from Jimmy, and Roy noticed the dusty imprint of Marco's foot on his chest. Jimmy pulled a pair of black lace-trimmed panties from his pocket and sniffed at them like a duchess mourning a relative.

This was an opportunity, Roy decided, to use on Jimmy some of the honest directness he had been practising at work. Surely it would be instructive and improving for Jimmy to survive without constant assistance. Besides, Roy couldn't be sucked into another emotional maelstrom.

He said, 'Isn't there anywhere you can go?'

'What for?' said Jimmy.

'To rest. To sleep. At night.'

'To sleep? Oh I see. It's okay. Leave me on the corner.'

'I didn't mean that.'

'I've slept out before.'

'I meant you've usually got someone. Some girl.'

'Sometimes I stay with Candy.'

'Really?'

Jimmy said, 'You liked her, yeah? I'll try and arrange something. Did I tell you she likes to stand on her head with her legs open?'

'You should have mentioned it to Clara on the phone.'

'It's a very convenient position for cunnilingus.'

'Particularly at our age when unusual postures can be a strain,' added Roy.

Jimmy put his hand in Roy's hair. 'You're going grey, you know.'

'I know.'

'But I'm not. Isn't that strange?' Jimmy mused a few seconds. 'But I can't stay with her. Kara wouldn't like it.'

'What about your parents?'

'I'm over forty! They're dying, they make me take my

shoes off! They weep when they see me! They - '

Jimmy's parents were political refugees from Eastern Europe who'd suffered badly in the war, left their families, and lived in Britain since 1949. They'd expected, in this city full of people who lived elsewhere in their minds, to be able to return home, but they never could. Britain hadn't engaged them; they barely spoke the language. Meanwhile Jimmy fell in love with pop. When he played the blues on his piano his parents had it locked in the garden shed. Jimmy and his parents had never understood one another, but he had remained as rootless as they had been, never even acquiring a permanent flat.

He was rummaging in his pockets where he kept his phone numbers on torn pieces of cigarette packet and ragged tube tickets. 'You remember when I brought that girl round one afternoon - '

'The eighteen-year-old?'

'She wanted your advice on getting into the media. You fucked her on the table in front of me.'

'The media got into her.'

'Indeed. Can you remember what you wore, who you pretended to be, and what you said?'

'What did I say?'

'It was your happiest moment.'

'It was a laugh.'

'One of our best.'

'One of many.'

They slapped hands.

Jimmy said, 'The next day she left me.'

'Sensible girl.'

'We'd exploited her. She had a soul which you were disrespectful to.' Jimmy reached over and stroked Roy's face. 'I just wanted to say, I love you, man, even if you are a bastard.'

Jimmy started clapping to the music. He could revive as quickly as a child. Nevertheless, Roy determined to beware

of his friend's manipulations; this was how Jimmy had survived since leaving university without ever working. For years women had fallen at Jimmy's feet; now he collapsed at theirs. Yet even as he descended they liked him as much. Many were convinced of his lost genius, which had been perfectly preserved for years, by procrastination. Jimmy got away with things; he didn't earn what he received. This was delicious but also a provocation, mocking justice.

Roy had pondered all this, not without incomprehension and envy, until he grasped how much Jimmy gave the women. Alcoholism, unhappiness, failure, ill-health, he showered them with despair, and guiltlessly extracted as much concern as they might proffer. They admired, Roy guessed, his having made a darkness to inhabit. Not everyone was brave enough to fall so far out of the light. To Roy it also demonstrated how many women still saw sacrifice as their purpose.

Friendship was the recurring idea in Roy's mind. He recalled some remarks of Montaigne. 'If I were pressed to say why I love him, I feel that my only reply could be, "because it was he, because it was I".' Also, 'Friendship is enjoyed even as it is desired; it is bred, nourished and increased only by enjoyment, since it is a spiritual thing and the soul is purified by its practice.' However, Montaigne had said nothing about the friend staying with you, as Jimmy seemed set on doing; or about dealing with someone who couldn't believe that, given the choice, anyone would rather be sober than drunk, and that once someone had started drinking they would not stop voluntarily before passing out - the only way of going to sleep that Jimmy found natural.

Roy no longer had any clue what social or political obligations he had, nor much idea where such duties could come from. At university he'd been a charged conscience, acquiring dozens of attitudes wholesale, which, over the years, he had let drop, rather as people stopped wearing

certain clothes one by one and started wearing others, until they transformed themselves without deciding to. Since then Roy hadn't settled in any of the worlds he inhabited, but only stepped through them like hotel rooms, and, in the process, hadn't considered what he might owe others. Tonight, what love did this lying, drunken, raggedy-arsed bastard demand?

'Hey.' Roy noticed that Jimmy's fingers were tightening around the handbrake.

'Stop.'

'Now?' Roy said.

'Yes!'

Jimmy was already clambering out of the car and making for an off-licence a few steps away. He wasn't sober but he knew where he was. Roy had no choice but to follow. Jimmy was asking for a bottle of vodka. Then, as Jimmy noticed Roy extracting a £50 note - which was all, to his annoyance, that he was carrying - he added a bottle of whisky to his order. When the assistant turned his back Jimmy swiped four beer cans and concealed them inside his jacket. He also collected Roy's change.

Outside, a beggar extended his cap and mumbled some words of a song. Jimmy squatted down at the man's level and stuffed the change from the £50 into his cap.

'I've got nothing else,' Jimmy said. 'Literally fuck-all. But take this. I'll be dead soon.'

The man held the notes up to the light. This was too much. Roy went to snatch them back. But the bum had disappeared them and was repeating, 'On yer way, on yer way...'

Roy turned to Jimmy. 'It's my money.'

'It's nothing to you, is it?'

'That doesn't make it yours.'

'Who cares whose it is? He needs it more than us.'

'... on yer way...'

'He's not our responsibility.'

Jimmy looked at Roy curiously. 'What makes you say that? He's pitiful.'

Roy noticed two more derelicts shuffling forward. Further up the street others had gathered, anticipating generosity.

'... on yer way...'

Roy pulled Jimmy into the car and locked the doors from inside.

Along from Roy's house, lounging by a wall with up-to-something looks on their faces, were two white boys who occupied a nearby basement. The police were often outside, and their mother begging them to take them away; but the authorities could do nothing until the lads were older. Most mornings when Roy went out to get his *Independent* he walked across glass where cars had been broken into. Several times he had greeted the boys. They nodded at him now; one day he would refuse his fear and speak properly. He didn't like to think there was anyone it was impossible to contact in some way, but he didn't know where to begin. Meanwhile he could hardly see out of his house for the bars and latticed slats. Beside his bed he kept a knife and hammer, and was mindful of not turning over too strenuously for fear of whacking the red alarm button adjacent to his pillow.

'This the new house? Looks comfortable,' said Jimmy. 'You didn't invite me to the house-warming, but Clara's gonna be delighted to see me now. Wished I owned a couple of suitcases so I could stand at the door and tell her I'm here for a while.'

'Don't make too much noise.'

Roy led Jimmy into the living room. Then he ran upstairs, opened the bedroom door and listened to Clara breathing in the darkness. He had wanted to fuck her that night. When the phone rang he was initiating the painstaking preparatory work. It was essential not to offend her in any way since a thumbs-down was easy, and agreeable, to her. He had

been sitting close by her and sending, telepathically - his preferred method of communication - loving sensual messages. As they rarely touched one another gratuitously, immediate physical contact - his hand in her hair - would be a risk. But if he did manage to touch her without a setback and even if, perhaps, he persuaded her to pull her skirt up a little - this made him feel as if he had reached the starting-gate, at least - he knew success was a possibility. Bearing this in mind he would rush upstairs to bed, changing into his pyjamas so as not to alarm her with uncovered flesh. He had, scrupulously, to avoid her getting the right idea.

He tried to anticipate which mood would carry her through the bedroom door. If there was something he'd neglected to do, like lock the back door or empty the dishwasher, arduous diplomacy would be imperative. Otherwise he would observe her undressing as she watched TV, knowing it would be only moments before his nails were in the bitch's fat arse.

But wait: she had perched on the end of the bed to inspect her corns while sucking on a throat pastille and discussing the cost of having the front of the house repointed. His desire was boiling, and he wanted to strike down his penis, which by now was through the front of his pyjamas, with a ruler.

As she watched TV beside him and he played with her breasts, she continued to pretend that this was not happening; perhaps, for her, it wasn't. She did, though, appear to believe in foreplay, at least for herself. After a time she would even remove all her clothes, though not without a histrionic shiver to demonstrate that sex altered one's temperature. At this encouragement he would scoot across the floor and hunt, in the back of a drawer, for a pair of crumpled black nylon French knickers. Rolling her eyes at the tawdry foolishness of men she might, if his luck was in, pull them on. He knew she was finally conquered when she stopped watching television. Unfortunately, she used this opportunity, while she had his attention, to scold him for

minor offences. He could, with pleasure, have taped over her mouth.

In all this there must have been, despite their efforts, a unifying pleasure, for next morning she liked to hold him, and wanted to be kissed.

Roy could only close the door now. Before returning to Jimmy he went into the room next door. Clara had bought a changing table on which lay pairs of mittens, baby boots, little red hats, cardigans smaller than handkerchiefs. The curtains were printed with airborne elephants; on the wall was a picture of a farmyard.

What had he done? She puzzled him still. Never had a woman pursued him as passionately as Clara over the past five years. Not a day would pass, at the beginning, when she didn't send him flowers and books, invite him to concerts and the cinema, or cook for him. Perhaps she had been attempting, by example, to kindle in him the romantic feeling she herself desired. He had accepted it like a pasha. At other times he'd attempted to brush her away, and had always kept other women. He saw now what a jejune protest that was. Her love had been an onslaught. She wanted a family. He, who liked to plan everything, but had really only known what sort of work he sought, had complied in order to see what might occur. He had been easily overrun; the child was coming; it gave him vertigo.

He was tugging at a mattress leaning against the wall. Jimmy would be cosy here, perhaps too cosy, reflected Roy, going downstairs without it.

Jimmy was lying with his feet on the sofa. Beside him he had arranged a beer, a glass and a bottle of Jack Daniels taken from the drinks cupboard. He was lighting a cigarette from the matches Roy had collected from the Royalton and the Odeon, smart New York restaurants, and kept to impress people.

There was no note from Clara about Munday, and no message on the machine.

Roy said, 'All right, pal?' He decided he loved his friend here. He envied his easy complacency, and was glad to have him here.

Jimmy said, 'Got everything I need.'

'Take it easy with the Jack. What about the bottle bought?'

'Don't start getting queenie. I didn't want to break it up with them straight away. So - here we are together again.' Jimmy presented his glass. 'What the fuck?'

'Yeah, what the fuck!'

'Fuck everything!'

'Fuck it!'

The rest of the Jack went and they were halfway through the vodka the next time Roy pitched towards the clock. The records had come out, including Black Sabbath. A German porn film was playing with the sound turned off. The room became dense with marijuana smoke. They must have gotten hungry. After smashing into a tin of baked beans with a hammer and spraying the walls, Roy climbed on Jimmy's shoulders to buff the mottled ceiling with a cushion cover and then stuffed it in Jimmy's mouth to calm him down. Roy didn't know what time the two of them stripped in order to demonstrate the Skinhead Moonstomp or whether he had imagined their neighbour banging on the wall and then at the front door.

It seemed not long after that Roy hurried into Soho for a buttered toast and coffee in the Patisserie Valerie. In his business, getting up early had become so habitual that if, by mistake, he woke up after seven, he panicked, fearing life had left without him.

Before ten he was at Munday's office where teams of girls with Home Counties accents, most of whom appeared to be wearing cocktail dresses, were striding across the vast spaces waving contracts. Roy's arrival surprised them; they had no idea whether Munday was in New York, Los

Angeles or Paris, or when he'd be back. He was 'raising money'. Because it had been on his mind, Roy asked seven people if they could recall the name of Harry Lime's English friend in *The Third Man*. But only two of them had seen the film and neither could remember.

There was nothing to do. He had cleared a year of other work to make this film. The previous night had sapped him, but he felt only as if he'd taken a sweet narcotic. Today he should have few worries. Soon he'd be hearing from Munday.

He drifted around Covent Garden, where, since the mid-eighties, he rarely ventured without buying. His parents had not been badly off but their attitude to money had been, if you want something think whether you really need it and if you can do without it. Well, he could do without most things, if pushed. But at the height of the decade money had gushed through his account. If he drank champagne rather than beer, if he used cocaine and took taxis from one end of Soho to the other five times a day, it barely dented the balance. It had been a poetic multiplication; the more he made the more he admired his own life.

He had loved that time. The manic entrepreneurialism, prancing individualism, self-indulgence and cynicism appealed to him as nothing had for ten years. Pretence was discarded. Punk disorder and nihilism ruled. Knowledge, tradition, decency and the lip-service paid to equality; socialist holiness, talk of 'principle', student clothes, feminist absurdities, and arguments defending regimes - 'flawed experiments' - that his friends wouldn't have been able to live under for five minutes: such pieties were trampled with a Nietzschean pitilessness. It was galvanising.

He would see something absurdly expensive - a suit, computers, cameras, cars, apartments - and dare himself to buy it, simply to discover what the consequences of such recklessness might be. How much fun could you have before everything went mad? He loved returning from the shops

and opening the designer carrier bags, removing the tissue paper, and trying on different combinations of clothes while playing the new CDs in their cute slim boxes. He adored the new restaurants, bars, clubs, shops, galleries, made of black metal, chrome or neon, each remaining fashionable for a month, if it was lucky.

Life had become like a party at the end of the world. He was sick of it, as one may grow sick of champagne or of kicking a dead body. It was over, and there was nothing. If there was to be anything it had to be made anew.

He had lived through an age when men and women with energy and ruthlessness but without much ability or persistence excelled. And even though most of them had gone under, their ignorance had confused Roy, making him wonder whether the things he had striven to learn, and thought of as 'culture', were irrelevant. Everything was supposed to be the same: commercials, Beethoven's late quartets, pop records, shopfronts, Freud, multi-coloured hair. Greatness, comparison, value, depth: gone, gone, gone. Anything could give some pleasure; he saw that. But not everything provided the sustenance of a deeper understanding.

His work had gone stale months ago. Whether making commercials, music videos or training films, Roy had always done his best. But now he would go along with whatever the client wanted, provided he could leave early.

Around the time he had begun to write his film, he started checking the age of the director or author if he saw a good movie or read a good book. He felt increasingly ashamed of his still active hope of being some sort of artist. The word itself sounded effete; and his wish seemed weakly adolescent, affected, awkward.

Once, in a restaurant in Vienna during a film festival, Roy saw that Fellini had come in with several friends. The maestro went to every table with his hands outstretched. Then the tall man with the head of an emperor sat down and

ate in peace. And what peace it would be! Roy thought often of how a man might feel had he made, for instance, *La Dolce Vita*, not to speak of *8½*. What insulating spirit this would give him, during breakfast, or waiting to see his doctor about a worrying complaint, enduring the empty spaces that boundary life's occasional rousing events!

Bergman, Fellini, Ozu, Wilder, Cassavetes, Rosi, Renoir: the radiance! Often Roy would rise at five in the morning to suck the essential vitamin of poetry in front of the video. A few minutes of *Amarcord*, in which Fellini's whole life was present, could give him perspective all day. Certain sequences he examined scores of times, studying the writing, acting, lighting and camera movements. In commercials he was able to replicate certain shots or the tone of entire scenes. 'Bit more Bergman?' he'd say. 'Or do you fancy some Fellini here?'

In New York he went to see *Hearts Of Darkness*, the documentary about Coppola's making of *Apocalypse Now*. He was becoming aware of what he wouldn't do now: parachute from a plane or fight in a war or revolution; travel across Indonesia with a backpack; go to bed with three women at once, or even two; learn Russian, or even French, properly; or be taught the principles of architecture. But for days he craved remarkable and noble schemes on which everything was risked.

What would they be? For most of his adult life he'd striven to keep up with the latest thing in cinema, music, literature and even the theatre, ensuring that no one mentioned an event without his having heard of it. But now he had lost the thread and didn't mind. What he wanted was to extend himself. He tormented himself with his own mediocrity. And he saw that, apart from dreams, the most imaginative activity most people allowed themselves was sexual fantasy. To live what you did - somehow - was surely the point.

In his garden in the mornings, he began to write, laying

out the scenes on index cards on the grass, as if he were playing patience. The concentration was difficult. He was unused to such a sustained effort of dreaming, particularly when the outcome was distant, uncertain and not immediately convertible into a cheque or interest from colleagues. Why not begin next year?

After a few days' persistence his mind focused and began to run in unstrained motion. In these moments - reminded of himself even as he got lost in what he was doing - the questions he had asked about life, its meaning and direction, if any, about how best to live, could receive only one reply. To be here now, doing this.

That was done. He was in a hurry to begin shooting. Private satisfactions were immaterial. The film had to make money. When he was growing up, the media wasn't considered a bright boy's beat. Like pop, television was disparaged. But it had turned out to be the jackpot. Compared to his contemporaries at school, he had prospered. Yet the way things were getting set up at home he had to achieve until he expired. He and Clara would live well: nannies, expensive schools, holidays, dinner parties, clothes. After setting off in the grand style, how could you retreat to less without anguish?

All morning his mind had whirled. Finally he phoned Clara. She'd been sick, and had come downstairs to discover Jimmy asleep on the floor amid the night's debris, wrapped in the tablecloth and the curtains, which had become detached from the rail. He had pissed in a pint glass and placed it on the table.

To Roy's surprise she was amused. She had, it was true, always liked Jimmy, who flirted with her. But he couldn't imagine her wanting him in her house. She wasn't a cool or loose hippie. She taught at a university and could be formidable. Most things could interest her, though, and she was able to make others interested. She was enthusiastic and took pleasure in being alive, always a boon in others, Roy

felt. Like Roy, she adored gossip. The misfortunes and vanity of others gave them pleasure. But it was still a mostly cerebral and calculating intelligence that she had. She lacked Jimmy's preferred kind of sentimental self-observation. It had been her clarity that had attracted Roy, at a time when they were both concerned with advancement.

Cheered by her friendliness towards Jimmy, Roy wanted to be with him today.

Jimmy came out of the bathroom in Roy's bathrobe and sat at the table with scrambled eggs, the newspaper, his cigarettes and 'Let It Bleed' on loud. Roy was reminded of their time at university, when, after a party, they would stay up all night and the next morning sit in a pub garden, or take LSD and walk along the river to the bridge at Hammersmith, which Jimmy, afraid of heights, would have to run across with his eyes closed.

Roy read his paper while surreptitiously watching Jimmy eat, drink and move about the room as if he'd inhabited it for years. He was amazed by the lengthy periods between minor tasks that Jimmy spent staring into space, as if each action set off another train of memory, regret and speculation. Then Jimmy would search his pockets for phone numbers and shuffle them repeatedly. Finally, Jimmy licked his plate and gave a satisfied burp. When Roy had brushed the crumbs from the floor, he decided to give Jimmy a little start.

'What are you going to do today?'

'Do? In what sense?'

'In the sense of . . . to do something.'

Jimmy laughed.

Roy went on, 'Maybe you should think of looking for work. The structure might do you good.'

'Structure?'

Jimmy raised himself to talk. There was a beer can from the previous night beside the sofa; he swigged from it and

then spat out, having forgotten he'd used it as an ashtray. He fetched another beer from the fridge and resumed his position.

Jimmy said, 'What sort of work is it that you're talking about here?'

'Paying work. You must have heard of it. You do something all day -'

'Usually something you don't like to do -'

'Whatever. Though you might like it.' Jimmy snorted.

'And at the end of the week they give you money with which you can buy things, instead of having to scrounge them.'

This idea forced Jimmy back in his seat. 'You used to revere the surrealists.'

'Shooting into a crowd! Yes, I adored it when -'

'D'you think they'd have done anything but kill themselves laughing at the idea of salaried work? You know it's serfdom.'

Roy lay down on the floor and giggled. Jimmy's views had become almost a novelty to Roy. Listening to him reminded Roy of the pleasures of failure, a satisfaction he considered to be unjustly unappreciated now he had time to think about it. In the republic of accumulation and accountancy there was no doubt Jimmy was a failure artist of ability. To enlarge a talent to disappoint, it was no good creeping into a corner and dying dismally. It was essential to raise, repeatedly, hope and expectation in both the gullible and the knowing, and then to shatter them. Jimmy was intelligent, alertly bright-eyed, convincing. With him there was always the possibility of things working out. It was an achievement, therefore, after a calculated build-up, to bring off a resounding fuck-up. Fortunately Jimmy would always, on the big occasion, let you down: hopelessness, impotence, disaster, all manner of wretchedness - he could bring them on like a regular nightmare.

Not that it hadn't cost him. It took resolution, organisa-

tion, and a measure of creativity to drink hard day and night; to insult friends and strangers; to go to parties uninvited and attempt to have sex with teenage girls; to borrow money and never pay it back; to lie, make feeble excuses, be evasive, shifty and selfish. He had had many advantages to overcome. But finally, after years of application, he had made a success, indeed a triumph, of failure.

Jimmy said, 'The rich love the poor to work, and the harder the better. It keeps them out of trouble while they're ripped off. Everyone knows that.' He picked up a porn magazine, *Peaches*, and flipped through the pages. 'You don't think I'm going to fall for that shit, do you?'

Roy's eyes felt heavy. He was falling asleep in the morning! To wake himself up he paced the carpet and strained to recall the virtues of employment.

'Jimmy, there's something I don't understand about this.'

'What?'

'Don't you ever wake up possessed by a feeling of things not done? Of time and possibility lost, wasted? And failure . . . failure in most things - that could be overcome. Don't you?'

Jimmy said, 'That's different. Of mundane work you know nothing. The worst jobs are impossible to get. You've lived for years in the enclosed world of the privileged with no idea what it's like outside. But the real work you mention, I tell you, every damn morning I wake up and feel time rushing past me. And it's not even light. Loneliness . . . fear. My heart vibrates.'

'Yes! and don't you think, this is a new morning, maybe this day I can redeem the past? Today something real might be done?'

'Sometimes I do think that,' Jimmy said. 'But most of the time . . . to tell you the truth, Roy, I know nothing will get done. Nothing, because that time is past.'

When the beer was gone they went out, putting their arms around one another. On the corner of Roy's street was a rough

pub with benches outside, where many local men gathered between March and September, usually wearing just shorts. They'd clamber from their basements at half past ten and eleven they'd be in place, chewing a piece of bread with the beer, smoking dope and shouting above the traffic. The women, who passed by in groups, pushing prams laden with shopping, were both angrier and more vital.

One time Roy walked past and heard Springsteen's hypodermic cry 'Hungry Heart' blaring from inside. He lingered apprehensively: surely the song would rouse the men to some sudden recklessness, the desire to move hunt down experience? But they merely mouthed the words.

He thought of the books which had spoken to him as a teenager and how concerned they were with young men fleeing home and domesticity, to hurl themselves at different boundaries. But where had it led except to self-destruction and madness? And how could you do that kind of thing now? Where could you run?

Roy's preferred local was a low-ceilinged place with a semicircular oak bar. Beyond, it was long and deep, broken up by booths, corners and turns. Men sat alone, reading, staring, talking to themselves, as if modelling for a picture entitled 'The Afternoon Drinkers'. There was a comfortable aimlessness; in here nothing had to happen.

Jimmy raised his glass. Roy saw that his hand trembled and that his skin looked bruised and discoloured, the knuckles raw, fingers bitten.

'By the way, how was Clara this morning?'

'That was her, right?' said Jimmy.

'Yeah.'

'She's big upfront but looking great. A bit like Jean Shrimpton.'

'You told her that?'

Jimmy nodded.

Roy said, 'That's what did the trick. You'll be in with her for a couple of days now.'

'Still fuck her?'

'When I can't help myself,' said Roy. 'You'd think she'd appreciate the interest but instead she says that lying beside me is like sleeping next to a bag of rubbish that hasn't been collected for a fortnight.'

'She's lucky to have you,' said Jimmy.

'Me?'

'Oh yes. And she knows it too. Still, thank Christ there's plenty of pussy back on stream now that that Aids frenzy has worn off.'

Roy said, 'All the same, it's easy to underestimate how casual and reassuring married love can be. You can talk about other things while you're doing it. It isn't athletic. You can drift. It's an amicable way of confirming that everything is all right.'

'I've never had that,' said Jimmy.

'You're not likely to, either.'

'Thanks.'

After a time Jimmy said, 'Did I mention there was a phone call this morning. Someone's office. Tuesday?'

'Tuesday?'

'Or was it Wednesday?'

'Monday!'

'Monday? Yeah, maybe it was . . . one of those early days.'

Roy grasped him by the back of the neck and vibrated him a little. 'Tell me what he said.'

Jimmy said, 'Gone. Everything vaporises into eternity - all thoughts and conversations.'

'Not this one.'

Jimmy sniggered, 'The person said he's in the air. Or was. And he's popping round for a drink.'

'When?'

'I think it was . . . today.'

'Christ,' said Roy. 'Finish your pint.'

'A quick one, I think, to improve our temper.'

'Get up. This is the big one. It's my film, man.'

'Film? When's it on?'

'Couple of years.'

'What? Where's the hurry? How can you think in those kinda time distances?'

Roy held Jimmy's glass to his lips. 'Drink.'

Munday night, Roy knew, swing by for a few minutes and treat Roy as if he were a mere employee; or he might hang out for five hours, discussing politics, books, life.

Munday embodied his age, particularly in his puritanism. He was surrounded by girls; he was rich and in the film business; everywhere there were decadent opportunities.

But work was his only vice, with the emphasis on negotiating contracts. His greatest pleasure was to roar after concluding a deal: 'Course, if you'd persisted, or had a better agent, I'd have paid far more.'

He did like cocaine. He didn't like to be offered it, for this might suggest he took it, which he didn't, since it was passé. He did, nevertheless, like to notice a few lines laid accidentally out on the table, into which he might dip his nose in passing.

Cocaine would surely help things go better. As Roy guided Jimmy back, he considered the problem. There was a man - Upton Turner - who was that rare thing, a fairly reliable dealer who made home visits and occasionally arrived on the stated day. Roy had been so grateful for this - and his need so urgent - that when Turner had visited in the past, Roy had inquired after his health and family, giving Turner, he was afraid, the misapprehension that he was a person as well as a vendor. He had become a nuisance. The last time Roy phoned him, Turner had flung the phone to one side, screaming that the cops were at the door and he was 'lookin' at twenty years!' As Roy listened, Turner was dumping thousands of pounds worth of powder down the toilet, only to discover that the person at the door was a neighbour who wanted to borrow a shovel.

Despite Turner's instability, Roy called him. Turner said he'd come round. At once Munday's office then rang. 'He's coming to you,' they said. 'Don't go anywhere.' 'But when?' Roy whined.

'Expect him in the near future,' the cool girl replied, and giggled, with a giggle, 'This century, definitely.'

Ha, ha. They had some time at least. While listening for Upton's call, Roy and Jimmy had a few more drinks. At last Roy pulled Jimmy over to the window.

'There.'

'No!' Jimmy seized the curtain to give him strength. 'It's a wind-up. That isn't Turner. Maybe it's Munday.'

'It is our man, without a doubt.'

'Doesn't he feel a little conspicuous - in his profession?'

'Wouldn't you think so?'

'Jesus, Roy, and you're letting this guy into your new home?'

They watched Turner trying to land the old black Rolls in space, his pit-bull sitting up front and music booming from the windows. He couldn't get the car in anywhere, and finally left it double-parked in the road with the traffic backing up around it, and rushed into the house with the noisy dog. Turner was small, balding and middle-aged, in a white shirt and grey suit that clung to his backside and flared at the ankles. He saw Jimmy drinking at the table and came to an abrupt standstill.

'Roy, son, you're all fucking pissed. You should have said we're having a bit of a laugh, I'd have brought the party acid.'

'This is Jimmy.'

Turner sat down, parting his legs and sweeping back his jacket, exposing his genitals outlined by tight trousers as if he anticipated applause. He reached into his pocket and tossed a plastic bag onto the table containing fifty or sixty small envelopes. Jimmy was rubbing his hands together in anticipation.

Turner said, 'How many of these are you having? Eh?'
 'Not sure yet.'

'Not sure? What d'you mean?'

'Just that.'

'All right,' Turner conceded. 'Try it, try it.'

Roy opened one of the envelopes.

'Never seen so many books an' videos as you got in the boxes,' Turner said, pacing about. He halted by a pile and said, 'Alphabetical. A mind well ordered. As a salesman evaluate the people from looking at their houses. Read 'em all?'

'It's surprising how many people ask that,' Roy said with relaxed enjoyment. 'It really is. Turner, d'you want a drink or something else?'

'You must know a lot then,' Turner insisted.

'Not necessarily,' Jimmy said. 'It doesn't follow.'

'I know what you mean,' Turner winked at Jimmy and they laughed. 'But the boy must know something. I'm gonna offer credit where it's due, I'm generous like that.' He lit a cigarette in his cupped hand and surveyed the kitchen. 'Nice place. You an' the wife getting the builders in?'

'Yeah.'

'Course. I bet you have a pretty nice life, all in all. Play travel, posh friends. The police aren't looking for you, are they?'

'Not like they are for you, Turner.'

'No. That's right.'

'Turner's looking at fifteen. Isn't that right, man?'

'Yeah,' said Turner. 'Sometimes twenty. I'm looking at -' He noticed Jimmy suppressing a giggle and turned to see Roy smirking. He said, 'I'm looking at a lot of shit. Now Mister Roy, if you know so fucking much I'll try and think there's something I need to ask you, while I'm here.'

Jimmy said to Roy, 'Are you ready for Mr Turner's questions?'

Roy tapped his razor blade on the table and organised the

powder into thick lines. He and Jimmy hunched over to inhale. Turner sat down at last and pointed at the envelopes.

'How many of them d'you want?'

'Three.'

'How many?'

'Three, I said.'

'Fuck,' Turner banged his fist on the table. 'Slags.'

Roy said, 'You want a piece of pie?'

'That I could go for.'

Roy cut a piece of Clara's cherry pie and gave it to Turner. Turner took two large bites and it was inside him. Roy cut another piece. This time Turner leaned back in his chair, raised his arm and hurled it across the kitchen as if he were trying to smash it through the wall. The dog thrashed after it like a shoal of piranhas. It was an aged creature and its eating was slobbery and breathless. The second it had finished, the dog ran back to Turner's feet and planted itself there, waiting for more.

Turner said to Roy, 'Three, did you say?'

'Yeah.'

'So I have come some considerable miles at your instant command for fuck-all. You know,' he said sarcastically, 'I'm looking at eighteen.'

'In that case four. All right. Four g's. Might as well, eh, Jimmy?'

Turner slapped the dog. 'You'll get another go in a minute,' he told it. He looked at Jimmy. 'What about ten?'

'Go for it,' said Jimmy to Roy. 'We'll be all right tomorrow. Ten should see us through.'

'Smart,' said Turner. 'Planning ahead.'

'Ten?' Roy said. 'No way. I don't think you should hustle people.'

Turner's voice became shrill. 'You saying I hustle you?'

Roy hesitated. 'I mean by that . . . it's not a good business idea.'

Turner raised his voice. 'I'm doing this to pay off my

brother's debts. My brother who was killed by scum. It's a shame for him.'

'Quite right,' murmured Jimmy.

'Hey, I've got a fucking question for you,' Turner said. 'Little Roy.'

'Yes?'

'Do you know how to love life?'

Jimmy and Roy looked at one another.

Turner said, 'That's stumped you, right? I'm saying here, is it a skill? Or a talent? Who can acquire it?' He was settling into his rap. 'I deal to the stars, you know.'

'Most of them introduced to you by me,' Roy murmured.

'And they the unhappiest people I seen.'

'It's still a difficult question,' said Roy.

He looked at Turner, who was so edgy and complicated it was hard to think of him as a child. But you could always see the light of childhood in Jimmy, he was luminous with curiosity.

'But a good one,' said Jimmy.

'You're pleased with that one,' Roy said to Turner.

'Yeah, I am.' Turner looked at Jimmy. 'You're right. It's a difficult question.'

Roy put his hand in his jeans pocket and dragged out a wad of £20 notes.

'Hallo,' Turner said.

'Jesus,' said Jimmy.

'What?' Roy said.

'I'll take a tenner off,' Turner said. 'As we're friends - if you buy six.'

'I told you, not six,' said Roy, counting the money. There was plenty of it, but he thumbed through it rapidly.

Turner reached out to take the whole wad and held it in his fist, looking down at the dog as his foot played on its stomach.

'Hey,' Roy said and turned to Jimmy who was laughing.

'What?' said Turner, crumpling the money in his hand.

he pulled the cherry pie towards him and cut a slice. His hand was shaking now. 'You are in a state,' Turner said. He took the mobile phone out of his pocket and turned it off.

'Am I?' Roy said. 'What are you going to do with that money?'

Turner got up and took a step towards Roy. 'Answer the fucking question!'

Roy put up his hands. 'I can't.'

Turner pushed three small envelopes towards Jimmy, put the money in his pocket, yanked away his drug bag, and, pursued by the dog, charged to the door. Roy ran to the window and watched the Rolls take off down the street.

'You wanker,' he said to Jimmy. 'You fucking wanker.'

'Me?'

'Christ. We should have done something.'

'Like what?'

'Where's the knife! You should have stuck it in the bastard's fucking throat! That pig's run off with my money!'

'Thing is, you can't trust them proles, man. Sit down.'

'I can't!'

'Here's the knife. Go after him then.'

'Fuck, fuck!'

'This will calm you down,' said Jimmy.

They started into the stuff straight away and there was no going back. Roy attempted to put one gram aside for Munday but Jimmy said, why worry, they could get more later. Roy didn't ask him where from.

Roy was glad to see Upton go. He'd be glad, too, to see the end of the chaos that Jimmy had brought with him.

'What are your plans?' he asked. 'I mean, what are you going to doing in the next few days?'

Jimmy shook his head. He knew what Roy was on about, but ignored him, as Roy sat there thinking that if he was capable of love he had to love all of Jimmy now, at this moment.

It was imperative, though, that he clear his mind for

Munday. The drug got him moving. He fetched a jersey, clean socks for Jimmy, thrust Jimmy's old clothes in a plastic bag, and, holding them at arm's length, pushed deep into the rubbish. He showered, got changed, opened the windows and prepared coffee.

It was only when Munday, who was ten years younger than him and Jimmy and far taller, came through the door, Roy realised how spaced he and Jimmy were. Fortunately Clara had said she'd be out that evening. Munday, who just got off the plane, wanted to relax and talk.

Roy forced his concentration as Munday explained latest good news. His business, for which Roy had made many music videos, was in the process of being sold to a conglomerate. Munday would be able to make more films and with bigger budgets. He would be managing directors and rich.

'Excellent,' said Roy.

'In some ways,' Munday said.

'What do you mean?'

'Let's have another drink.'

'Yes, we must celebrate.' Roy got up. 'I won't be home for a moment.'

At the door he heard Jimmy say, 'You might be interested to hear that I myself have attempted a bit of writing in my spare time . . .'

It was that 'I myself' that got him out.

Roy went to buy champagne. He was hurrying around the block. Powerful forces were keeping him from his house. His body ached and fluttered with anxiety; he had AIDS at least, and, without a doubt, cancer. A heart attack was imminent. On the verge of panic, he feared he might run yelling into the road but was, at that moment, unable to take another step. He couldn't, though, stay where he was for fear he might lie down and weep. In a pub he ordered a half but took only two sips. He didn't know how long he'd

been sitting there, but he didn't want to go home.

Munday and Jimmy were sitting head to head. Jimmy was telling him a 'scenario' for a film about a famous ageing film director and a drifting young couple who visit him, to pay homage. After they've eaten with him, praised his perceptiveness and vision, admired his awards and heard his Brando stories, they enquire if there is anything they can do for him. The director says he wants to witness the passion of their love-making, hear their conversation, see their bodies, hear their cries and look at them sleeping. The girl and her earnest young man co-operate until . . . They become his secretaries; they take him prisoner; maybe they murder him. Jimmy couldn't remember the rest. It was written down somewhere.

'It's a decent premise,' said Munday.

'Yes,' agreed Jimmy.

Munday turned to Roy, who had rejoined them. 'Where's this guy been hiding?'

He was durable and unobtrusive, Munday; and, in spite of his efforts, kindness and concern for others were obvious.

'In the pub,' said Roy.

'Artist on the edge,' said Jimmy.

'Right,' said Munday. 'Too much comfort takes away the hunger. I'll do this . . .' he said.

He would advance Jimmy the money to prepare a draft.

'How much?' asked Jimmy.

'Sufficient.'

Jimmy raised his glass. 'Sufficient. Brilliant - don't you think, Roy?'

Roy said he had to talk to Munday in the kitchen.

'OK,' said Munday. Roy closed the door behind them. Munday said, 'Terrific guy.'

'He used to be remarkable,' said Roy in a low voice, realising he'd left the champagne in the pub. 'Shame he's so fucked now.'

'He has some nice ideas.'

'How can he get them down? He's been dried out three times but always goes back on.'

'Anyhow, I'll see what I can do for him.'

'Good.'

'I meet so few interesting people these days. But I'm so glad to hear about your condition.'

'Pardon?'

'It happens to so many.'

'What happens?'

'I see. You don't want it to get around. But we've worked together for years. You're safe with me.'

'Is that right? Please tell me,' Roy said, 'what you're talking about.'

Munday explained that Jimmy had told him of Roy's addiction to cocaine as well as alcohol.

'You don't believe that, do you?' Roy said.

Munday put his arm around him. 'Don't fuck about, because you're one of my best video directors. It's tough enough as it is out there.'

'But you don't, do you?'

'He predicted you'd be in denial.'

'I'm not in fucking denial!'

Munday's eyes widened. 'Maybe not.'

'But I'm not - really!'

Nevertheless, Munday wouldn't stop regarding him as if he were contriving how to fit these startling new pieces into the puzzle that Roy had become.

He said, 'What's that white smear under your nose? and the blade on the table? You will always work, but not if you lie to my face. Roy, you're degrading yourself! I can't have you falling apart on a shoot. You haven't been giving one hundred per cent and you look like shit.'

'Do I?'

'Sure you feel okay now? Your face seems to be twitching. Better take some of these.'

'What are they?'

'Vitamins.'

'Munday -'

'Go on, swallow.'

'Please -'

'Here's some water. Get them down. Christ, you're choking. Lean forward so I can smack you on the back. Jesus, you won't work for me again until you've come out of the clinic. I'll get the office to make a booking tonight. Just think, you might meet some exciting people there.'

'Who?'

'Guitarists. Have you discussed it with Clara?'

'Not yet.'

'If you don't, I will.'

'Thank you. But I need to know what's happening with the film.'

'Listen up then. Just sip the water and concentrate - if you can.'

Later, at the front door Munday shook Jimmy's hand and said he'd be in touch. He said, 'You guys. Sitting around here, music, conversation, bit of dope. I'm going back to the airport now. Another plane, another hotel room. I'm not complaining. But you know.'

The moment Munday got in his Jag and started up the street, Roy screamed at Jimmy. Jimmy covered his face and swore, through his sobs, that he couldn't recall what he'd told Munday. Roy turned away. There was nothing to grasp or punish in Jimmy.

They stopped at an off-licence and drank on a bench in Kensington High Street. A young kid calling himself a traveller sat beside them and gave them a hit on some dope. Roy considered how enjoyably instructive it could be to take up such a position in the High Street, and how much one noticed about people, whereas to passers-by one was invisible, pitied or feared. After a while they went morosely

into a pub where the barman served everyone else first and then was rude.

Roy's film would be delayed for at least eighteen months until Munday was in a stronger position to argue 'unconventional' projects. Roy doubted it would happen now.

For most of his adult years he'd wanted success, and thought he knew what it was. But now he didn't. He would have to live with himself as he was and without the hope. Clara would be ashamed of him. As his financial burdens increased his resources had, in a few minutes, shrunk.

As the dark drew in and the street lights came on and people rushed through the tube stations, he and Jimmy walked about, stopping here and there. There seemed, in London, to be a pub on every corner, with many men on plush seats drinking concentratedly, having nothing better to do. Occasionally they passed restaurants where, in the old days, Roy was greeted warmly and had passed much time too much - sometimes four or five hours - with business acquaintances, now forgotten. Soon Roy was lost, fleeing with the energy of the frustrated and distressed, while Jimmy moved beside him with his customary cough and stumble and giggle, fuelled by the elation of unaccustomed success, and a beer glass under his coat.

At one point Jimmy suddenly pulled Roy towards a phone box. Jimmy ran in, waited crouching down, and shot out again, pulling Roy by his jacket across the road, where they shrank down beside a hedge.

'What are you doing?'

'We were going to get beaten up.' Though shuddering and looking about wildly, Jimmy didn't stop his drink. 'Didn't you hear them swearing at us? Poofs, poofs, they said.'

'Who, who?'

'Don't worry. But keep your head down!' After a while he said, 'Now come on. This way!'

Roy couldn't believe that anyone would attempt such a thing on the street, but how would he know? He and Jimmy hastened through crowds of young people queuing for a concert; and along streets lined with posters advertising groups and comedians whose names he didn't recognise.

There was a burst of laughter behind them. Roy wheeled round, but saw no one. The noise was coming from a parked car - no, from across the road. Then it seemed to disappear down the street like the tail of a typhoon. Now his name was being called. Assuming it was a spook, he pressed on, only to see a young actor he'd given work to, and to whom he'd promised a part in the film. Roy was aware of his swampy loafers and stained jacket that stank of pubs. Jimmy stood beside him, leaning on his shoulder, and they regarded the boy insolently.

'I'll wait to hear, shall I?' said the actor, after a time, having muttered some other things that neither of them understood.

They settled in a pub from which Roy refused to move. At last he was able to tell Jimmy what Munday had said, and explain what it meant. Jimmy listened. There was a silence.

'Tell me something, man,' Jimmy said. 'When you prepared your shooting scripts and stuff -'

'I suppose you're a big film writer now.'

'Give me a chance. That guy Munday seemed okay.'

'Did he?'

'He saw something good in me, didn't he?'

'Yes, yes. Perhaps he did.'

'Right. It's started, brother. I'm on the up. I need to get a room - a bedsitter with a table - to get things moving in the literary department. Lend me some money until Munday pays me.'

'There you go.'

Roy laid a £20 note on the table. It was all the cash he had now. Jimmy slid it away.

'What's that? It's got to be a grand.'

'A grand?'

Jimmy said, 'That's how expensive it is - a month's rent in advance, a deposit, phone. You've avoided the real world for ten years. You don't know how harsh it is. You'll get the money back - at least from him.'

Roy shook his head. 'I've got a family now, and I haven't got an income.'

'You're a jealous bastard - an' I just saved your life. It's a mistake to begrudge me my optimism. Lend me your pen.' Jimmy made a note on the back of a bus ticket, crossed it out and rejigged it. 'Wait and see. Soon you'll be coming to my office an' asking me for work. I'm gonna have to examine your CV to ensure it ain't too low-class. Now, do you do it every day?'

'Do what?'

'Work.'

'Of course.'

'Every single day?'

'Yes. I've worked every day since I left university. Many nights too.'

'Really?' Jimmy read back what he'd scrawled on the ticket, folded it up, and stuck it in his top pocket. 'That's what I must do.' But he sounded unconvinced by what he'd heard, as if, out of spite, Roy had made it sound gratuitously laborious.

Roy said, 'I feel a failure. It's hard to live with. Most people do it. I s'pose they have to find other sources of pride. But what - gardening? Christ. Everything's suddenly gone down. How am I going to cheer myself up?'

'Pride?' Jimmy sneered. 'It's a privilege of the complacent. What a stupid illusion.'

'You would think that.'

'Why would I?'

'You've always been a failure. You've never had any expectations to feel let down about.'

'Me?' Jimmy was incredulous. 'But I have.'

'They're alcoholic fantasies.'

Jimmy was staring at him. 'You cunt! You've never had a word for me or my talents!'

'Lifting a glass isn't a talent.'

'You could encourage me! You don't know how indifferent people can be when you're down.'

'Didn't I pick you up and invite you to stay in my house?'

'You been trying to shove me out. Everything about me is long or despised. You threw my clothes away. I tell you, you're shutting the door on everyone. It's bourgeois robbery, and it is ugly.'

'You're difficult, Jimmy.'

'At least I'm a friend who loves you.'

'You don't give me anything but a load of trouble.'

'I've got nothing, you know that! Now you've stolen my hope! Thanks for robbing me!' Jimmy finished his drink andumped up. 'You're safe. Whatever happens, you ain't really going down, but I am!'

Jimmy walked out. Roy had never before seen Jimmy leave a pub so decisively. Roy sat there another hour, until he knew Clara would be home.

He opened the front door and heard voices. Clara was showing the house to two couples, old friends, and was describing the conservatory she wanted built. Roy greeted them and made for the stairs.

'Roy.'

He joined them at the table. They drank wine and discussed the villa near Perugia they would take in the summer. He could see them wearing old linen and ancient straw hats, fanning themselves haughtily.

He tilted his head to get different perspectives, rubbed his forehead and studied his hands, which were trembling, but couldn't think of anything to say. Clara's friends were well off, and of unimaginative and unchallenged intelligence.

About most things, by now, they had some picked-up opinion, sufficient to aid party conversation. They were set and protected; Roy couldn't imagine them overdosing on their knees, howling.

The problem was that at the back of Roy's world-view lay the Rolling Stones, and the delinquent dream of his adolescence – the idea that vigour and spirit existed in excess, authenticity and the romantic unleashed self: a bourgeois idea that was strictly anti-bourgeois. It had never, finally, been Roy's way, though he'd played at it. But Jimmy had lived it to the end, for both of them.

The complacent talk made Roy weary. He went upstairs. As he undressed, a cat tripped the security lamps and he could see the sodden garden. He'd barely stepped into it, but there were trees and grass and bushes out there. Soon he would get a table and chair for the lawn. With the kid in its pram, he'd sit under the tree, brightened by the sun, eating Vignotte and sliced pear. What did one do when there was nothing to do?

He'd fallen asleep; Clara was standing over him, hissing. She ordered him to come down. He was being rude; he didn't know how to behave. He had 'let her down'. But he needed five minutes to think. The next thing he heard was her saying goodnight at the door.

He awoke abruptly. The front door bell was ringing. It was six in the morning. Roy tiptoed downstairs with a hammer in his hand. Jimmy's stringy body was soaked through and he was coughing uncontrollably. He had gone to Kara's house but she'd been out, so he'd decided to lie down in her doorway until she returned. At about five there had been a storm, and he'd realised she wasn't coming back.

Jimmy was delirious and Roy persuaded him to lie him on the sofa, where he covered him with a blanket. When he brought up blood Clara called the doctor. The ambulance took him away not long after, fearing a clot on the lung.

Roy got back into bed beside Clara and rested his drink on her hard stomach. Clara went to work but Roy couldn't get up. He stayed in bed all morning and thought he couldn't ever sleep enough to recover. At lunchtime he walked around town, lacking even the desire to buy anything. In the afternoon he visited Jimmy in the hospital.

'How you feeling, pal?'

A man in his pyjamas can only seem disabled. No amount of puffing-up can exchange the blue and white stripes for the daily dignity which has been put to bed with him. Jimmy hardly said hallo. He was wailing for a drink and a cigarette.

'It'll do you good, being here,' Roy patted Jimmy's hand. 'Time to sort yourself out.'

Jimmy almost leapt out of bed. 'Change places!'

'No thanks.'

'You smug bastard – if you'd looked after me I wouldn't be in this shit!'

A fine-suited consultant, pursued by white-coated disciples, entered the ward. A nurse drew the curtain across Jimmy's wounded face.

'Make no mistake, I'll be back!' Jimmy cried.

Roy walked past the withered, ashen patients, and towards the lift. Two men in lightweight uniforms were pushing a high bed to the doors on their way to the operating theatre. Roy slotted in behind them as they talked across a dumb patient who blinked up at the roof of the lift. They were discussing where they'd go drinking later. Roy hoped Jimmy wouldn't want him to return the next day.

Downstairs the wide revolving door swept people into the hospital and pushed him out into the town. From the corner of the building, where dressing-gowned patients had gathered to smoke, Roy turned to make a farewell gesture at the building where his friend lay. Then he saw the girl in the leopard-skin hat, Kara's friend.

He called out. Smiling, she came over, holding a bunch of

flowers. He asked her if she was working and when she shook her head, said, 'Give me your number. I'll call you tomorrow. I've got a couple of things on the go.'

Before, he hadn't seen her in daylight. What, now, might there be time for?

She said, 'When's the baby due?'

'Any day now.'

'You're going to have your hands full.'

He asked her if she wanted a drink.

'Jimmy's expecting me,' she said. 'But ring me.'

He joined the robust street. Jimmy couldn't walk here, but he, Roy, could trip along light-headed and singing to himself – as if it were he who'd been taken to hospital, and at the last moment, as the anaesthetic was inserted, a voice had shouted, 'No, not him!', and he'd been relieved.

Nearby was a coffee shop where he used to go. The manager waved at him, brought over hot chocolate and a cake, and, as usual, complained about the boredom and said he wished for a job like Roy's. When he'd gone, Roy opened his bag and extracted his newspaper, book, notebook and pens. But he just watched the passers-by. He couldn't stay long because he remembered that he and Clara had an antenatal class. He wanted to get back, to see what was between them and learn what it might give him. Some people you couldn't erase from your life.

We're Not Jews

Azhar's mother led him to the front of the lower deck, sat him down with his satchel, hurried back to retrieve her shopping, and took her place beside him. As the bus pulled away Azhar spotted Big Billy and his son Little Billy racing alongside, yelling and waving at the driver. Azhar closed his eyes and hoped it was moving too rapidly for them to get on. But they not only flung themselves onto the platform, they charged up the almost empty vehicle hooting and panting as if they were on a fairground ride. They settled directly across the aisle from where they could stare at Azhar and his mother.

At this his mother made to rise. So did Big Billy. Little Billy sprang up. They would follow her and Azhar. With a sigh she sank back down. The conductor came, holding the arm of his ticket machine. He knew the Billys, and had a laugh with them. He let them ride for nothing.

Mother's grey perfumed glove took some pennies from her purse. She handed them to Azhar who held them up as she had shown him.

'One and a half to the Three Kings,' he said.

'Please,' whispered Mother, making a sign of exasperation.

'Please,' he repeated.

The conductor passed over the tickets and went away.

'Hold onto them tightly,' said Mother. 'In case the inspector gets on.'

Big Billy said, 'Look, he's a big boy.'

'Big boy,' echoed Little Billy.

'So grown up he has to run to teacher,' said Big Billy.

'Cry baby!' trumpeted Little Billy.

'But you see . . . I do.'

That night, in that freezing room, he did everything she asked, for as long as she wanted. He praised her beauty and her intelligence. He had never kissed anyone for so long, until he forgot where he was, or who they both were, until there was nothing they wanted, and there was only the most satisfactory peace.

He got up and dressed. He was shivering. He wanted to wash, he smelled of her, but he wasn't prepared for a cold bath.

'Why are you leaving?' She leaped up and held him. 'Stay, stay, I haven't finished with you yet.'

He put on his coat and went into the living room. Without looking back he hurried out and down the stairs. He pulled the front door, anticipating the fresh damp night air. But the door held. He had forgotten: the door was locked. He stood there.

Upstairs she was wrapped in a fur coat, looking out of the window.

'The key,' he said.

'Old man,' she said, laughing. 'You are.'

She accompanied him barefoot down the stairs. While she unlocked the door he mumbled, 'Will you tell your father I saw you?'

'But why?'

He touched her face. She drew back. 'You should put something on that,' he said. 'I met him once. He knows my wife.'

'I rarely see him now,' she said.

She was holding out her arms. They danced a few steps across the hall. He was better at it now. He went out into the street. Several cabs passed him but he didn't hail them. He kept walking. There was comfort in the rain. He put his head back and looked up into the sky. He had some impression that happiness was beyond him and everything was coming down, and that life could not be grasped but only lived.

With Your Tongue down My Throat

1

I tell you, I feel tired and dirty, but I was told no baths allowed for a few days, so I'll stay dirty. Yesterday morning I was crying a lot and the woman asked me to give an address in case of emergencies and I made one up. I had to undress and get in a white smock and they took my temperature and blood pressure five times. Then a nurse pushed me in a wheelchair into a green room where I met the doctor. He called us all 'ladies' and told jokes. I could see some people getting annoyed. He was Indian, unfortunately, and he looked at me strangely as if to say, 'What are you doing here?' But maybe it was just my imagination.

I had to lie on a table and they put a needle or two into my left arm. Heat rushed over my face and I tried to speak. The next thing I know I'm in the recovery room with a nurse saying, 'Wake up, dear, it's all over.' The doctor poked me in the stomach and said, 'Fine.' I found myself feeling aggressive. 'Do you do this all the time?' I asked. He said he did nothing else.

They woke us at six and there were several awkward-looking, sleepy boyfriends outside. I got the bus and went back to the squat.

A few months later we got kicked out and I had to go back to Ma's place. So I'm back here now, writing this with my foot up on the table, reckoning I look like a painter. I sip water with a slice of lemon in it. I'm at Ma's kitchen table and there are herbs growing in pots around me. At least the place is clean, though it's shabby and all falling apart. There are photographs of Ma's women friends from the Labour Party and the Women's Support Group and there is Blake's

picture of Newton next to drawings by her kids from school. There are books everywhere, on the Alexander Method and the Suzuki Method and all the other methods in the world. And then there's her boyfriend.

Yes, the radical (ha!) television writer and well-known toss-pot Howard Coleman sits opposite me as I record him with my biro. He's reading one of his scripts, smoking and slowly turning the pages, but the awful thing is, he keeps giggling at them. Thank Christ Ma should be back any minute now from the Catholic girls' school where she teaches.

It's Howard who asked me to write this diary, who said write down some of the things that happen. My half-sister Nadia is about to come over from Pakistan to stay with us. Get it all down, he said.

If you could see Howard now like I can, you'd really laugh. I mean it. He's about forty-three and he's got on a squeaky leather jacket and jeans with the arse round his knees and these trainers with soles that look like mattresses. He looks like he's never bought anything new. Or if he has, when he gets it back from the shop, he throws it on the floor, empties the dustbin over it and walks up and down on it in a pair of dirty Dr Marten's. For him dirty clothes are a political act.

But this is the coup. Howard's smoking a roll-up. He's got this tin, his fag papers and the stubby yellow fingers with which he rolls, licks, fiddles, taps, lights, extinguishes and relights all day. This rigmarole goes on when he's in bed with Ma, presumably on her chest. I've gone in there in the morning for a snoop and found his ashtray by the bed, condom on top.

Christ, he's nodding at me as I write! It's because he's so keen on ordinary riff-raff expressing itself, especially no-hoper girls like me. One day we're writing, the next we're on the barricades.

Every Friday Howard comes over to see Ma.

To your credit, Howard the hero, you always take her somewhere a bit jazzy, maybe to the latest club (a big deal for a poverty-stricken teacher). When you get back you undo her bra and hoick your hands up her jumper and she warms hers down your trousers. I've walked in on this! Soon after this teenage game, mother and lover go to bed and rattle the room for half an hour. I light a candle, turn off the radio and lie there, ears flapping. It's strange, hearing your ma doing it. There are momentous cries and gasps and grunts, as if Howard's trying to bang a nail into a brick wall. Ma sounds like she's having an operation. Sometimes I feel like running in with the first-aid kit.

Does this Friday thing sound remarkable or not? It's only Fridays he will see Ma. If Howard has to collect an award for his writing or go to a smart dinner with a critic he won't come to see us until the next Friday. Saturdays are definitely out!

We're on the ninth floor. I say to Howard: 'Hey, clever boots. Tear your eyes away from yourself a minute. Look out the window.'

The estate looks like a building site. There's planks and window frames everywhere - poles, cement mixers, sand, grit, men with mouths and disintegrating brick underfoot.

'So?' he says.

'It's rubbish, isn't it? Nadia will think we're right trash.'

'My little Nina,' he says. This is how he talks to me.

'Yes, my big Howard?'

'Why be ashamed of what you are?'

'Because compared with Nadia we're not much, are we?'

'I'm much. You're much. Now get on with your writing.'

He touches my face with his finger. 'You're excited, aren't you? This is a big thing for you.'

It is, I suppose.

All my life I've been this only child living here in a council place with Ma, the drama teacher. I was an only child, that is, until I was eleven, when Ma says she has a surprise for

me, one of the nicest I've ever had. I have a half-sister the same age, living in another country.

'Your father had a wife in India,' Ma says, wincing every time she says *father*. They married when they were fifteen, which is the custom over there. When he decided to leave me because I was too strong a woman for him, he went right back to India and right back to Wifey. That's when I discovered I was pregnant with you. His other daughter Nadia was conceived a few days later but she was actually born the day after you. Imagine that, darling. Since then I've discovered that he's even got two other daughters as well!

I don't give my same-age half-sister in another country another thought except to dislike her in general for suddenly deciding to exist. Until one night, suddenly, I write to Dad and ask if he'll send her to stay with us. I get up and go down the lift and out in the street and post the letter before I change my mind. That night was one of my worst and I wanted Nadia to save me.

On some Friday afternoons, if I'm not busy writing ten-page hate letters to DJs, Howard does imagination exercises with me. I have to lie on my back on the floor, imagine things like mad and describe them. It's so sixties. But then I've heard him say of people: 'Oh, she had a wonderful sixties!'

'Nina,' he says during one of these gigs, 'you've got to work out this relationship with your sister. I want you to describe Nadia.'

I zap through my head's TV channels - Howard squatting beside me, hand on my forehead, sending loving signals. A girl materialises sitting under a palm tree, reading a Brontë novel and drinking yogurt. I see a girl being cuddled by my father. He tells stories of tigers and elephants and rickshaw wallahs. I see . . .

'I can't see any more!'

Because I can't visualise Nadia, I have to see her.

So. This is how it all comes about. Ma and I are sitting at breakfast, Ma chewing her vegetarian cheese. She's dressed for work in a long, baggy, purple pinafore dress with black stockings and a black band in her hair, and she looks like a 1950s teenager. Recently Ma's gone blonde and she keeps looking in the mirror. Me still in my T-shirt and pants. Ma tense about work as usual, talking about school for hours on the phone last night to friends. She tries to interest me in child abuse, incest and its relation to the GCSE. I say how much I hate eating, how boring it is and how I'd like to do it once a week and forget about it.

'But the palate is a sensitive organ,' Ma says. 'You should cultivate yours instead of -'

'Just stop talking if you've got to fucking lecture.'

The mail arrives. Ma cuts open an airmail letter. She reads it twice. I know it's from Dad. I snatch it out of her hand and walk round the room taking it in.

Dear You Both,

It's a good idea. Nadia will be arriving on the 5th. Please meet her at the airport. So generous of you to offer. Look after her, she is the most precious thing in the entire world to me.

Much love.

At the bottom Nadia has written: 'Looking forward to seeing you both soon.'

Hummmmm . . .

Ma pours herself more coffee and considers everything. She has these terrible coffee jags. Her stomach must be like distressed leather. She is determined to be businesslike, not emotional. She says I have to cancel the visit.

'It's simple. Just write a little note and say there's been a misunderstanding.'

And this is how I react: 'I don't believe it! Why? No way! But why?' Christ, don't I deserve to die, though God knows I've tried to die enough times.

'Because, Nina, I'm not at all prepared for this. I really don't know that I want to see this sister of yours. She symbolises my betrayal by your father.'

I clear the table of our sugar-free jam (no additives):

'Symbolises?' I say. 'But she's a person.'

Ma gets on her raincoat and collects last night's marking. You look very plain, I'm about to say. She kisses me on the head. The girls at school adore her. There, she's a star.

But I'm very severe. Get this: 'Ma. Nadia's coming. Or I'm going. I'm walking right out that door and it'll be junk and prostitution just like the old days.'

She drops her bag. She sits down. She slams her car keys on the table. 'Nina, I beg you.'

2

Heathrow. Three hours we've been here, Ma and I, burying our faces in doughnuts. People pour from the exit like released prisoners to walk the gauntlet of jumping relatives and chauffeurs holding cards: Welcome Ngogi of Nigeria.

But no Nadia. 'My day off,' Ma says, 'and I spend it in an airport.'

But then. It's her. Here she comes now. It is her! I know it is! I jump up and down waving like mad! Yes, yes, no, yes! At last! My sister! My mirror.

We both hug Nadia, and Ma suddenly cries and her nose runs and she can't control her mouth. I cry too and I don't even know who the hell I'm squashing so close to me. Until I sneak a good look at the girl.

You. Every day I've woken up trying to see your face, and now you're here, your head jerking nervously, saying little, with us drenching you. I can see you're someone I know nothing about. You make me very nervous.

You're smaller than me. Less pretty, if I can say that. Bigger nose. Darker, of course, with a glorious slab of hair like a piece of chocolate attached to your back. I imagined, I

don't know why (pure prejudice, I suppose), that you'd be wearing the national dress, the baggy pants, the long top and light scarf flung all over. But you have on FU jeans and a faded blue sweatshirt – you look as if you live in Enfield. We'll fix that.

Nadia sits in the front of the car. Ma glances at her whenever she can. She has to ask how Nadia's father is.

'Oh yes,' Nadia replies. 'Dad. The same as usual, thank you. No change really, Debbie.'

'But we rarely see him,' Ma says.

'I see,' Nadia says at last.

'So we don't,' Ma says, her voice rising, 'actually know what "same as usual" means.'

Nadia looks out of the window at green and grey old England. I don't want Ma getting in one of her resentful states.

After this not another peep for about a decade and then road euphoria just bursts from Nadia.

'What good roads you have here! So smooth, so wide, so long!'

'Yes, they go all over,' I say.

'Wow. All over.'

Christ, don't they even have fucking roads over there?

Nadia whispers. We lean towards her to hear about her dear father's health. How often the old man pisses now, running for the pot clutching his crotch. The sad state of his old gums and his obnoxious breath. Ma and I watch this sweetie compulsively, wondering who she is: so close to us and made from my substance, and yet so other, telling us about Dad with an outrageous intimacy we can never share. We arrive home, and she says in an accent as thick as treacle (which makes me hoot to myself when I first hear it): 'I'm so tired now. If I could rest for a little while.'

'Sleep in my bed!' I cry.

Earlier I'd said to Ma I'd never give it up. But the moment

my sister walks across the estate with us and finally stands there in our flat above the building site, drinking in all the oddness, picking up Ma's method books and her opera programmes, I melt, I melt. I'll have to kip in the living room from now on. But I'd kip in the toilet for her.

'In return for your bed,' she says, 'let me, I must, yes, give you something.'

She pulls a rug from her suitcase and presents it to Ma. 'This is from Dad.' Ma puts it on the floor, studies it and then treads on it.

And to me? I've always been a fan of crêpe paper and wrapped in it is the Pakistani dress I'm wearing now (with open-toed sandals – handmade). It's gorgeous: yellow and green, threaded with gold, thin summer material.

I'm due a trip to the dole office any minute now and I'm bracing myself for the looks I'll get in this gear. I'll keep you informed.

I write this outside my room waiting for Nadia to wake. Every fifteen minutes I tap lightly on the door like a worried nurse.

'Are you awake?' I whisper. And: 'Sister, sister.' I adore these new words. 'Do you want anything?'

I think I'm in love. At last.

Ma's gone out to take back her library books, leaving me to it. Ma's all heart, I expect you can see that. She's good and gentle and can't understand unkindness and violence. She thinks everyone's just waiting to be brought round to decency. 'This way we'll change the world a little bit,' she'd say, holding my hand and knocking on doors at elections. But she's lived on the edge of a nervous breakdown for as long as I can remember. She's had boyfriends before Howard but none of them lasted. Most of them were married because she was on this liberated kick of using men. There was one middle-class Labour Party smoothie I called Chubbie.

'Are you married?' I'd hiss when Ma went out of the room, sitting next to him and fingering his nylon tie.

'Yes.'

'You have to admit it, don't you? Where's your wife, then? She knows you're here? Get what you want this afternoon?'

You could see the men fleeing when they saw the deep needy well that Ma is, crying out to be filled with their love. And this monster kid with green hair glaring at them. Howard's too selfish and arrogant to be frightened of my ma's demands. He just ignores them.

What a job it is, walking round in this Paki gear!

I stop off at the chemist's to grab my drugs, my trancs. Jeanette, my friend on the estate, used to my eccentricities – the coonskin hat with the long rabbit tail, for example – comes along with me. The chemist woman in the white coat says to Jeanette, nodding at me when I hand over my script: 'Does she speak English?'

Becoming enthralled by this new me now, exotic and interior. With the scarf over my head I step into the Community Centre and look like a lost woman with village ways and chickens in the garden.

In a second, the communists and worthies are all over me. I mumble into my scarf. They give me leaflets and phone numbers. I'm oppressed, you see, beaten up, pig-ignorant with an arranged marriage and certain suttee ahead. But I get fed up and have a game of darts, a game of snooker and a couple of beers with a nice lesbian.

Home again I make my Nadia some pasta with red pepper, grated carrot, cheese and parsley. I run out to buy a bottle of white wine. Chasing along I see some kids on a passing bus. They eyeball me from the top deck, one of them black. They make a special journey down to the platform where the little monkeys swing on the pole and throw racial abuse from their gobs.

'Curry breath, curry breath, curry breath!'
The bus rushes on. I'm flummoxed.

She emerges at last, my Nadia, sleepy, creased around the eyes and dark. She sits at the table, eyelashes barely apart, not ready for small talk. I bring her the food and a glass of wine which she refuses with an upraised hand. I press my eyes into her, but she doesn't look at me. To puncture the silence I play her a jazz record - Wynton Marsalis's first. I ask her how she likes the record and she says nothing. Probably doesn't do much for her on first hearing. I watch her eating. She will not be interfered with.

She leaves most of the food and sits. I hand her a pair of black Levi 501s with the button fly. Plus a large cashmere polo-neck (stolen) and a black leather jacket.

'Try them on.'

She looks puzzled. 'It's the look I want you to have. You can wear any of my clothes.'

Still she doesn't move. I give her a little shove into the bedroom and shut the door. She should be so lucky. That's my best damn jacket. I wait. She comes out not wearing the clothes.

'Nina, I don't think so.'

I know how to get things done. I push her back in. She comes out, backwards, hands over her face.

'Show me, please.'

She spins round, arms out, hair jumping.

'Well?'

'The black suits your hair,' I manage to say. What a vast improvement on me, is all I can think. Stunning she is, dangerous, vulnerable, superior, with a jewel in her nose.

'But doesn't it . . . doesn't it make me look a little rough?'

'Oh yes! Now we're all ready to go. For a walk, yes? To see the sights and everything.'

'Is it safe?'

'Of course not. But I've got this.'

I show her.

'Oh, God, Nina. You would.'

Oh, this worries and ruins me. Already she has made up her mind about me and I haven't started on my excuses.

'Have you used it?'

'Only twice. Once on a racist in a pub. Once on some mugger who asked if I could spare him some jewellery.'

Her face becomes determined. She looks away. 'I'm training to be a doctor, you see. My life is set against human harm.'

She walks towards the door. I pack the switch-blade.

Daddy, these are the sights I show my sister. I tow her out of the flat and along the walkway. She sees the wind blaring through the busted windows. She catches her breath at the humming bad smells. Trapped dogs bark. She sees that one idiot's got on his door: *Don't burglar me theres nothin to steal ive got rid of it all*. She sees that some pig's sprayed on the wall: *Nina's a slag dog*. I push the lift button.

I've just about got her out of the building when the worst thing happens. There's three boys, ten or eleven years old, climbing out through a door they've kicked in. Neighbours stand and grumble. The kids've got a fat TV, a microwave oven and someone's favourite trainers under a little arm. The kid drops the trainers.

'Hey,' he says to Nadia (it's her first day here). Nadia stiffens. 'Hey, won't yer pick them up for me?'

She looks at me. I'm humming a tune. The tune is 'Just My Imagination'. I'm not scared of the little jerks. It's the bad impression that breaks my heart. Nadia picks up the trainers.

'Just tuck them right in there,' the little kid says, exposing his armpit.

'Won't they be a little large for you?' Nadia says.

'Eat shit.'

Soon we're out of there and into the air. We make for

South Africa Road and the General Smuts pub. Kids play football behind wire. The old women in thick overcoats look like lagged boilers on little feet. They huff and shove carts full of chocolate and cat food.

I'm all tense now and ready to say anything. I feel such a need to say everything in the hope of explaining all that I give a guided tour of my heart and days.

I explain (I can't help myself): this happened here, that happened there. I got pregnant in that squat. I bought bad smack from that geezer in the yellow T-shirt and straw hat. I got attacked there and legged it through that park. I stole pens from that shop, dropping them into my motorcycle helmet. (A motorcycle helmet is very good for shoplifting, if you're interested.) Standing on that corner I cared for nothing and no one and couldn't walk on or stay where I was or go back. My gears had stopped engaging with my motor. Then I had a nervous breakdown.

Without comment she listens and nods and shakes her head sometimes. Is anyone in? I take her arm and move my cheek close to hers.

'I tell you this stuff which I haven't told anyone before. I want us to know each other inside out.'

She stops there in the street and covers her face with her hands.

'But my father told me of such gorgeous places!'

'Nadia, what d'you mean?'

'And you show me filth!' she cries. She touches my arm. 'Oh, Nina, it would be so lovely if you could make the effort to show me something attractive.'

Something attractive. We'll have to get the bus and go east, to Holland Park and round Ladbroke Grove. This is now honeyed London for the rich. Here there are *La* restaurants, wine bars, bookshops, estate agents more prolific than doctors, and attractive people in black, few of them ageing. Here there are health food shops where you buy tofu, nuts, live-culture yoghurt and organic toothpaste.

Here the sweet little black kids practise on steel drums under the motorway for the Carnival and old blacks sit out in the open on orange boxes shouting. Here the dope dealers in Versace suits travel in from the suburbs on commuter trains, carrying briefcases, trying to sell slummers bits of old car tyre to smoke.

And there are more stars than beggars. For example? Van Morrison in a big overcoat is hurrying towards somewhere in a nervous mood.

'Hiya, Van! Van? Won't ya even say hello!' I scream across the street. At my words Van the Man accelerates like a dog with a winklepicker up its anus.

She looks tired so I take her into Julie's Bar where they have the newspapers and we sit on well-woven cushions on long benches. Christ only know how much they have the cheek to charge for a cup of tea. Nadia looks better now. We sit there all friendly and she starts off.

'How often have you met our father?'

'I see him every two or three years. When he comes on business, he makes it his business to see me.'

'That's nice of him.'

'Yes, that's what he thinks. Can you tell me something, Nadia?' I move closer to her. 'When he'd get home, our father, what would he tell you about me?'

If only I wouldn't tempt everything so. But you know me: can't live on life with slack in it.

'Oh, he was worried, worried, worried.'

'Christ. Worried three times.'

'He said you . . . no.'

'He said what?'

'No, no, he didn't say it.'

'Yes, he did, Nadia.'

She sits there looking at badly dressed television producers in linen suits with her gob firmly closed.

'Tell me what my father said or I'll pour this pot of tea over my head.'

I pick up the teapot and open the lid for pouring-over-the-head convenience. Nadia says nothing; in fact she looks away. So what choice do I have but to let go a stream of tea over the top of my noddle? It drips down my face and off my chin. It's pretty scalding, I can tell you.

'He said, all right, he said you were like a wild animal!'

'Like a wild animal?' I say.

'Yes. And sometimes he wished he could shoot you to put you out of your misery.' She looks straight ahead of her. 'You asked for it. You made me say it.'

'The bastard. His own daughter.'

She holds my hand. For the first time, she looks at me, with wide-open eyes and urgent mouth. 'It's terrible, just terrible there in the house. Nina, I had to get away! And I'm in love with someone! Someone who's indifferent to me!'

'And?'

And nothing. She says no more except: 'It's too cruel, too cruel.'

I glance around. Now this is exactly the kind of place suitable for doing a runner from. You could be out the door, halfway up the street and on the tube before they'd blink. I'm about to suggest it to Nadia, but, as I've already told her about my smack addiction, my two abortions and poured a pot of tea over my head, I wouldn't want her to get a bad impression of me.

'I hope,' I say to her, 'I hope to God we can be friends as well as relations.'

Well, what a bastard my dad turned out to be! Wild animal! He's no angel himself. How could he say that? I was always on my best behaviour and always covered my wrists and arms. Now I can't stop thinking about him. It makes me cry.

This is how he used to arrive at our place, my daddy, in the days when he used to visit us.

First there's a whole day's terror and anticipation and getting ready. When Ma and I are exhausted, having

practically cleaned the flat with our tongues, a black taxi slides over the horizon of the estate, rarer than an ambulance, with presents cheering on the back seat: champagne, bicycles, dresses that don't fit, books, dreams in boxes. Dad glows in a £3,000 suit and silk tie. Neighbours lean over the balconies to pleasure their eyeballs on the prince. It takes two or three of them working in shifts to hump the loot upstairs.

Then we're off in the taxi, speeding to restaurants with menus in French where Dad knows the manager. Dad tells us stories of extreme religion and hilarious corruption and when Ma catches herself laughing she bites her lip hard - why? I suppose she finds herself flying to the magnet of his charm once more.

After the grub we go to see a big show and Mum and Dad hold hands. All of these shows are written, on the later occasions, by Andrew Lloyd Webber.

This is all the best of life, except that, when Dad has gone and we have to slot back into our lives, we don't always feel like it. We're pretty uncomfortable, looking at each other and shuffling our ordinary feet once more in the mundane. Why does he always have to be leaving us?

After one of these occasions I go out, missing him. When alone, I talk to him. At five in the morning I get back. At eight Ma comes into my room and stands there, a woman alone and everything like that, in fury and despair.

'Are you involved in drugs and prostitution?'

I'd been going with guys for money. At the massage parlour you do as little as you can. None of them has disgusted me, and we have a laugh with them. Ma finds out because I've always got so much money. She knows the state of things. She stands over me.

'Yes.' No escape. I just say it. Yes, yes, yes.

'That's what I thought.'

'Yes, that is my life at the moment. Can I go back to sleep now? I'm expected at work at twelve.'

'Don't call it work, Nina. There are other words.'

She goes. Before her car has failed to start in the courtyard, I've run to the bathroom, filled the sink, taken Ma's lousy leg razor and jabbed into my wrists, first one, then the other, under water, digging for veins. (You should try it sometime; it's more difficult than you think: skin tough, throat contracting with vomit acid sour disgust.) The nerves in my hands went and they had to operate and everyone was annoyed that I'd caused such trouble.

Weeks later I vary the trick and swallow thirty pills and fly myself to a Surrey mental hospital where I do puzzles, make baskets and am fucked regularly for medicinal reasons by the art therapist who has a long nail on his little finger.

Suicide is one way of saying you're sorry.

With Nadia to the Tower of London, the Monument, Hyde Park, Buckingham Palace and something cultured with a lot of wigs at the National Theatre. Nadia keeps me from confession by small talk which wears into my shell like sugar into a tooth.

Ma sullen but doing a workmanlike hospitality job. Difficult to get Nadia out of her room most of the time. Hours she spends in the bathroom every day experimenting with make-up. And then Howard the hero decides to show up.

Ma not home yet. Early evening. Guess what? Nadia is sitting across the room on the sofa with Howard. This is their first meeting and they're practically on each other's laps. (I almost wrote lips.) All afternoon I've had to witness this meeting of minds. They're on politics. The words that ping off the walls are: pluralism, democracy, theocracy and Benazir! Howard's senses are on their toes! The little turd can't believe the same body (in a black cashmere sweater and black leather jacket) can contain such intelligence, such beauty, and yet jingle so brightly with facts about the Third World! There in her bangles and perfume I see her speak to

him as she hasn't spoken to me once – gesticulating!

'Howard. I say this to you from my heart, it is a corrupt country! Even the revolutionaries are corrupt! No one has any hope!'

In return he asks, surfacing through the Niagara of her conversation: 'Nadia, can I show you something? Videos of the TV stuff I've written?'

She can't wait.

None of us has seen her come in. Ma is here now, coat on, bags in her hands, looking at Nadia and Howard sitting so close their elbows keep knocking together.

'Hello,' she says to Howard, eventually. 'Hiya,' to Nadia. Ma has bought herself some flowers, which she has under her arm – carnations. Howard doesn't get up to kiss her. He's touching no one but Nadia and he's very pleased with himself. Nadia nods at Ma but her eyes rush back to Howard the hero.

Nadia says to Howard: 'The West doesn't care if we're an undemocratic country.'

'I'm exhausted,' Ma says.

'Well,' I say to her. 'Hello, anyway.'

Ma and I unpack the shopping in the kitchen. Howard calls through to Ma, asking her school questions which she ignores. The damage has been done. Oh yes. Nadia has virtually ignored Ma in her own house. Howard, I can see, is pretty uncomfortable at this. He is about to lift himself out of the seat when Nadia puts her hand on his arm and asks him: 'How do you create?'

'How do I create?'

How does Howard create? With four word-kisses she has induced in Howard a Nelson's Column of excitement. 'How do you create?' is the last thing you should ever ask one of these guys.

'They get along well, don't they?' Ma says, watching them through the crack of the door. I lean against the fridge.

'Why shouldn't they?'

'No reason,' she says. 'Except that this is my home. Everything I do outside here is a waste of time and no one thanks me for it and no one cares for me, and now I'm excluded from my own flat!'

'Hey, Ma, don't get -'

'Pour me a bloody whisky, will you?'

I pour her one right away. 'Your supper's in the oven, Ma. I give her the whisky. My ma cups her hands round the glass. Always been a struggle for her. Her dad in the army white trash. She had to fight to learn. 'It's fish pie. And I did the washing and ironing.'

'You've always been good in that way, I'll give you that. Even when you were sick you'd do the cooking. I'd come home and there it would be. I'd eat it alone and leave the rest outside your door. It was like feeding a hamster. You can be nice.'

'Are you sure?'

'Only your niceness has to live among so many other wild elements. Women that I know. Their children are the same. A tragedy or a disappointment. Their passions are too strong. It is our era in England. I only wish, I only wish you could have some kind of career or something.'

I watch her and she turns away to look at Howard all snug with the sister I brought here. Sad Ma is, and gentle. I could take her in my arms to console her now for what I am, but I don't want to indulge her. A strange question occurs to me. 'Ma, why do you keep Howard on?'

She sits on the kitchen stool and sips her drink. She looks at the lino for about three minutes, without saying anything, gathering herself up, punching her fist against her leg, like someone who's just swallowed a depth charge. Howard's explaining voice drifts through to us.

Ma gets up and kick-slams the door.

'Because I love him even if he doesn't love me!'

Her tumbler smashes on the floor and glass skids around our feet.

'Because I need sex and why shouldn't I! Because I'm lonely, I'm lonely, okay, and I need someone bright to talk to! D'you think I can talk to you? D'you think you'd ever be interested in me for one minute?'

'Ma -'

'You've never cared for me! And then you brought Nadia here against my wishes to be all sweet and hypercritical and remind me of all the terrible past and the struggle of being alone for so long!'

Ma sobbing in her room. Howard in with her. Nadia and me sit together at the two ends of the sofa. My ears are scarlet with the hearing of Ma's plain sorrow through the walls. 'Yes, I care for you,' Howard's voice rises. 'I love you, baby. And I love Nina, too. Both of you.'

'I don't know, Howard. You don't ever show it.'

'But I'm blocked as a human being!'

I say to Nadia: 'Men are pretty selfish bastards who don't understand us. That's all I know.'

'Howard's an interesting type,' she says coolly. 'Very open-minded in an artistic way.'

I'm getting protective in my old age and very pissed off.

'He's my mother's boyfriend and long-standing lover.'

'Yes, I know that.'

'So lay off him. Please, Nadia. Please understand.'

'What are you, of all people, accusing me of?'

I'm not too keen on this 'of all people' business. But get this.

'I thought you advanced Western people believed in the free intermingling of the sexes?'

'Yes, we do. We intermingle all the time.'

'What then, Nina, is your point?'

'It's him,' I explain, moving in. 'He has all the weaknesses. One kind word from a woman and he thinks they want to sleep with him. Two kind words and he thinks he's the only man in the world. It's a form of mental illness, of delusion. I

wouldn't tangle with that deluded man if I were you!
All right!

A few days later.

Here I am slouching at Howard's place. Howard's hole, or 'sock' as he calls it, is a red-brick mansion block with public school, stately dark oak corridors, off Kensington High Street. Things have been getting grimmer and grimmer. Nadia stays in her room or else goes out and pops her little camera at 'history'. Ma goes to every meeting she hears of. I'm just about ready for artery road.

I've just done you a favour. I could have described every moment of us sitting through Howard's television *œuvre* (which I always thought meant egg). But no – on to the juicy bits!

There they are in front of me, Howard and Nadia cheek to cheek, within breath-inhaling distance of each other, going through the script.

Earlier this morning we went shopping in Covent Garden. Nadia wanted my advice on what clothes to buy. So we went for a couple of sharp dogtooth jackets, distinctly city, fine brown and white wool, the jacket caught in at the waist with a black leather belt; short panelled skirt; white silk polo-neck shirt; plus black pillbox, suede gloves, high heels. If she likes something, if she wants it, she buys it. The rich. Nadia bought me a linen jacket.

Maybe I'm sighing too much. They glance at me with undelight.

'I can take Nadia home if you like,' Howard says.

'I'll take care of my sister,' I say. 'But I'm out for a stroll now. I'll be back at any time.'

I stroll towards a café in Rotting Hill. I head up through Holland Park, past the blue sloping roof of the Commonwealth Institute (or Nigger's Corner as we used to call it) in which on a school trip I pissed into a wastepaper basket. Past modern nannies – young women like me with dyed

black hair – walking dogs and kids.

The park's full of hip kids from Holland Park School, smoking on the grass; black guys with flat-tops and muscles; yuppies skimming frisbees and stuff; white boys playing Madonna and Prince. There are cruising turd-burglars with active eyes, and the usual London liggers, hang-gliders and no-goodies waiting to sign on. I feel outside everything, so up I go, through the flower-verged alley at the end of the park, where the fudge-packers used to line up at night for fucking. On the wall it says: *Gay solidarity is class solidarity*.

Outside the café is a police van with grilles over the windows full of little piggies giggling with their helmets off. It's a common sight around here, but the streets are a little quieter than usual. I walk past an Asian policewoman standing in the street who says hello to me. 'Auntie Tom,' I whisper and go into the café.

In this place they play the latest calypso and soca and the new Eric Satie recording. A white Rasta sits at the table with me. He pays for my tea. I have chilli with a baked potato and grated cheese, with tomato salad on the side, followed by Polish cheesecake. People in the café are more subdued than normal; all the pigs making everyone nervous. But what a nice guy the Rasta is. Even nicer, he takes my hand under the table and drops something in my palm. A chunky chocolate lozenge of dope.

'Hey. I'd like to buy some of this,' I say, wrapping my swooning nostrils round it.

'Sweetheart, it's all I've got,' he says. 'You take it. My last lump of blow.'

He leaves. I watch him go. As he walks across the street in his jumble-sale clothes, his hair jabbing out from his head like tiny bedsprings, the police get out of their van and stop him. He waves his arms at them. The van unpacks. There's about six of them surrounding him. There's an argument. He's giving them some heavy lip. They search him. One of them is pulling his hair. Everyone in the café is watching. I

pop the dope into my mouth and swallow it. Yum yum.

I go out into the street now. I don't care. My friend shout across to me: 'They're planting me. I've got nothing.'

I tell the bastard pigs to leave him alone. 'It's true! The man's got nothing!' I give them a good shouting at. One of them comes at me.

'You wanna be arrested too!' he says, shoving me in the chest.

'I don't mind,' I say. And I don't, really. Ma would visit me.

Some kids gather round, watching the rumpus. They look really straggly and pathetic and dignified and individual and defiant at the same time. I feel sorry for us all. The pig pull my friend into the van. It's the last I ever see of him. He's got two years of trouble ahead of him, I know.

When I get back from my walk they're sitting on Howard's Habitat sofa. Something is definitely going on and it ain't cultural. They're too far apart for comfort. Beadily I shove my aerial into the air and take the temperature. Yeah, can't I just smell humming dodginess in the atmosphere?

'Come on,' I say to Nadia. 'Ma will be waiting.'

'Yes, that's true,' Howard says, getting up. 'Give her my love.'

I give him one of my looks. 'All of it or just a touch?'

We're on the bus, sitting there nice and quiet, the bus going along past the shops and people and the dole office when these bad things start to happen that I can't explain. The seats in front of me, the entire top deck of the bus in fact, keeps rising up. I turn my head to the window expecting that the street at least will be anchored to the earth, but it's not. The whole street is throwing itself up at my head and heaving about and bending like a high rise in a tornado. The shops are dashing at me, at an angle. The world has turned into a monster. For God's sake, nothing will keep still, but

I've made up my mind to have it out. So I tie myself to the seat by my fists and say to Nadia, at least I think I say, 'You kiss him?'

She looks straight ahead as if she's been importuned by a beggar. I'm about to be hurled out of the bus, I know. But I go right ahead.

'Nadia. You did, right? You did.'

'But it's not important.'

Wasn't I right? Can't I sniff a kiss in the air at a hundred yards?

'Kissing's not important?'

'No,' she says. 'It's not, Nina. It's just affection. That's normal. But Howard and I have much to say to each other.' She seems depressed suddenly. 'He knows I'm in love with somebody.'

'I'm not against talking. But it's possible to talk without r-r-rubbing your tongues against each other's tonsils.'

'You have a crude way of putting things,' she replies, turning sharply to me and rising up to the roof of the bus. 'It's a shame you'll never understand passion.'

I am crude, yeah. And I'm about to be crushed into the corner of the bus by two hundred brown balloons. Oh, sister.

'Are you feeling sick?' she says, getting up.

The next thing I know we're stumbling off the moving bus and I lie down on an unusual piece of damp pavement outside the Albert Hall. The sky swings above me. Nadia's face hovers over mine like ectoplasm. Then she has her hand flat on my forehead in a doctory way. I give it a good hard slap.

'Why are you crying?'

If our father could see us now.

'Your bad behaviour with Howard makes me cry for my ma.'

'Bad behaviour? Wait till I tell my father -'

'Our father -'

'About you.'

'What will you say?'

'I'll tell him you've been a prostitute and a drug addict.'

'Would you say that, Nadia?'

'No,' she says, eventually. 'I suppose not.'

She offers me her hand and I take it.

'It's time I went home,' she says.

'Me, too,' I say.

3

It's not Friday, but Howard comes with us to Heathrow. Nadia flicks through fashion magazines, looking at clothes she won't be able to buy now. Her pride and dignity today is monstrous. Howard hands me a pile of books and writing pads and about twelve pens.

'Don't they have pens over there?' I say.

'It's a Third World country,' he says. 'They lack the basic necessities.'

Nadia slaps his arm. 'Howard, of course we have pens, you stupid idiot!'

'I was joking,' he says. 'They're for me.' He tries to stuff them all into the top pocket of his jacket. They spill on the floor. 'I'm writing something that might interest you all.'

'Everything you write interests us,' Nadia says.

'Not necessarily,' Ma says.

'But this is especially . . . relevant,' he says.

Ma takes me aside: 'If you must go, do write, Nina. And don't tell your father one thing about me!'

Nadia distracts everyone by raising her arms and putting her head back and shouting out in the middle of the airport: 'No, no, no, I don't want to go!'

My room, this cell, this safe, bare box stuck on the side of my father's house, has a stone floor and whitewashed walls. It has a single bed, my open suitcase, no wardrobe, no music. Not a frill in the grill. On everything there's a veil of khaki

dust waiting to irritate my nostrils. The window is tiny, just twice the size of my head. So it's pretty gloomy here. Next door there's a smaller room with an amateur shower, a sink and a hole in the ground over which you have to get used to squatting if you want to piss and shit.

Despite my moans, all this suits me fine. In fact, I requested this room. At first Dad wanted Nadia and me to share. But here I'm out of everyone's way, especially my two other half-sisters: Gloomie and Moonie I call them.

I wake up and the air is hot, hot, hot, and the noise and petrol fumes rise around me. I kick into my jeans and pull my Keith Haring T-shirt on. Once, on the King's Road, two separate people came up to me and said: 'Is that a Keith Haring T-shirt?'

Outside, the sun wants to burn you up. The light is different too: you can really see things. I put my shades on. These are cool shades. There aren't many women you see in shades here.

The driver is revving up one of Dad's three cars outside my room. I open the door of a car and jump in, except that it's like throwing your arse into a fire, and I jiggle around, the driver laughing, his teeth jutting as if he never saw anything funny before.

'Drive me,' I say. 'Drive me somewhere in all this sunlight. Please. Please.' I touch him and he pulls away from me. Well, he is rather handsome. These cars don't need to be revved. Drive!

He turns the wheel back and forth, pretending to drive and hit the horn. He's youngish and thin - they all look undernourished here - and he always teases me.

'You stupid bugger.'

See, ain't I just getting the knack of speaking to servants? It's taken me at least a week to erase my natural politeness to the poor.

'Get going! Get us out of this drive!'

'No shoes, no shoes, Nina!' He's pointing at my feet.

'No bananas, no pineapples,' I say. 'No job for you either Lulu. You'll be down the Job Centre if you don't shift it.'

Off we go then, the few yards to the end of the drive. The guard at the gate waves. I turn to look back and there you are standing on the porch of your house in your pyjamas, face covered with shaving cream, a piece of white sheet wrapped around your head because you've just oiled your hair. Your arms are waving not goodbye. Gloomie, my suddenly acquired sister, runs out behind you and shakes her fists, the dogs barking in their cage, the chickens screaming in theirs. Ha, ha.

We drive slowly through the estate on which Dad lives with all the other army and navy and air force people: big houses and big bungalows set back from the road, with sprinklers on the lawn, some with swimming pools, all with guards.

We move out on to the Superhighway, among the painted trucks, gaudier than Chinese dolls, a sparrow among peacocks. What a crappy road and no fun, like driving on the moon. Dad says the builders steal the materials, flood them and then there's not enough left to finish the road. So they just stop and leave whole stretches incomplete.

The thing about this place is that there's always something happening. Good or bad it's a happening place. And I'm thinking this, how cheerful I am and everything, when bouncing along in the opposite direction is a taxi, an old yellow and black Morris Minor stuck together with sellotape. It's swerving in and out of the traffic very fast until the driver loses it, and the taxi bangs the back of the car in front, glances off another and shoots off across the Superhighway and is coming straight for us. I can see the driver's face when Lulu finally brakes. Three feet from us the taxi flies into a wall that runs alongside the road. The two men keep travelling, and their heads crushed into their chests pull their bodies through the windscreen and out into the morning air. They look like Christmas puddings.

Lulu accelerates. I grab him and scream at him to stop but

we go faster and faster.

'Damn dead,' he says, when I've finished clawing him. 'A wild country. This kind of thing happen in England, yes?'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

Eventually I persuade him to stop and I get out of the car.

I'm alone in the bazaar, handling jewellery and carpets and pots and I'm confused. I know I have to get people presents. Especially Howard the hero who's paying for this. Ah, there's just the thing: a cage the size of a big paint tin, with three chickens inside. The owner sees me looking. He jerks a chicken out, decapitates it on a block and holds it up to my face, feathers flying into my hair.

I walk away and dodge a legless brat on a four-wheeled trolley made out of a door, who hurls herself at me and then disappears through an alley and across the sewers. Everywhere the sick and the uncured, and I'm just about ready for lunch when everyone starts running. They're jumping out of the road and pulling their kids away. There is a tidal wave of activity, generated by three big covered trucks full of soldiers crashing through the bazaar, the men standing still and nonchalant with rifles in the back. I'm half knocked to hell by some prick tossed off a bike. I am tiptoeing my way out along the edge of a fucking sewer, shit lapping against my shoes. I've just about had enough of this country, I'm just about to call for South Africa Road, when -

'Lulu,' I shout. 'Lulu.'

'I take care of you,' he says. 'Sorry for touching.'

He takes me back to the car. Fat, black buffalo snort and shift in the mud. I don't like these animals being everywhere, chickens and dogs and stuff, with sores and bleeding and threats and fear.

'You know?' I say. 'I'm lonely. There's no one I can talk to. No one to laugh with here, Lulu. And I think they hate me, my family. Does your family hate you?'

I stretch and bend and twist in the front garden in T-shirt and shorts. I pull sheets of air into my lungs. I open my eyes a moment and the world amazes me, its brightness. A servant is watching me, peeping round a tree.

'Hey, peeper!' I call, and carry on. When I look again, I notice the cook and the sweeper have joined him and they shake and trill.

'What am I doing?' I say. 'Giving a concert?'

In the morning papers I notice that potential wives are advertised as being 'virtuous and fair-skinned'. Why would I want to be unvirtuous and brown? But I do, I do!

I take a shower in my room and stroll across to the house. I stand outside your room, Dad, where the men always meet in the early evenings. I look through the wire mesh of the screen door and there you are, my father for all these years. And this is what you were doing while I sat in the back of the class at my school in Shepherd's Bush, pregnant, wondering why you didn't love me.

In the morning when I'm having my breakfast we meet in the living room by the bar and you ride on your exercise bicycle. You pant and look at me now and again, your stringy body sways and tightens, but you say fuck all. If I speak, you don't hear. You're one of those old-fashioned romantic men for whom women aren't really there unless you decide we are.

Now you lie on your bed and pluck up food with one hand and read an American comic with the other. A servant, a young boy, presses one of those fat vibrating electric instruments you see advertised in the *Observer* Magazine on to your short legs. You look up and see me. The sight of me angers you. You wave furiously for me to come in. No. Not yet. I walk on.

In the women's area of the house, where visitors rarely visit, Dad's wife sits sewing.

'Hello,' I say. 'I think I'll have a piece of sugar cane.'

I want to ask the names of the other pieces of fruit on the table, but Wifey is crabby inside and out, doesn't speak English and disapproves of me in all languages. She has two servants with her, squatting there watching Indian movies on the video. An old woman who was once, I can see, a screen goddess, now sweeps the floor on her knees with a handful of twigs. Accidentally, sitting there swinging my leg, I touch her back with my foot, leaving a dusty mark on her clothes.

'Imagine,' I say to Wifey.

I slip the sugar cane into my mouth. The squirting juice bounces off my taste buds. I gob out the sucked detritus and chuck it in front of the screen goddess's twigs. You can really enjoy talking to someone who doesn't understand you.

'Imagine my dad leaving my ma for you! And you don't ever leave that seat there. Except once a month you go to the bank to check up on your jewellery.'

Wifey keeps all her possessions on the floor around her. She is definitely mad. But I like the mad here: they just wander around the place with everyone else and no one bothers you and people give you food.

'You look like a bag lady. D'you know what a bag lady is?'

Moonie comes into the room. She's obviously heard every word I've said. She starts to yell at me. Wifey's beaky nozzle turns to me with interest now. Something's happening that's even more interesting than TV. They want to crush me. I think they like me here for that reason. If you could see, Ma, what they're doing to me just because you met a man at a dance in the Old Kent Road and his French letter burst as you lay in front of a gas fire with your legs up!

'You took the car when we had to go out to work!' yells Moonie. 'You forced the driver to take you! We had to sack him!'

'Why sack him?'

'He's naughty! Naughty! You said he drives you badly! Nearly killed! You're always causing trouble, Nina, doing

some stupid thing, some very stupid thing!

Gloomie and Moonie are older than Nadia and me. Both have been married, kicked around by husbands arranged by Dad, and separated. That was their small chance in life. Now they've come back to Daddy. Now they're secretaries. Now they're blaming me for everything.

'By the way. Here.' I reach into my pocket. 'Take this.'

Moonie's eyes bulge at my open palm. Her eyes quieten her mouth. She starts fatly towards me. She sways. She comes on. Her hand snatches at the lipstick.

'Now you'll be able to come out with me. We'll go to the Holiday Inn.'

'Yes, but you've been naughty.' She is distracted by the lipstick. 'What colour is it?'

'Can't you leave her alone for God's sake? Always picking on her!' This is Nadia coming into the room after work. She throws herself into a chair. 'I'm so tired.' To the servant she says: 'Bring me some tea.' At me she smiles. 'Hello, Nina. Good day? You were doing some exercises, I hear. They rang me at work to tell me.'

'Yes, Nadia.'

'Oh, sister, they have such priorities.'

For the others I am 'cousin'. From the start there's been embarrassment about how I am to be described. Usually, if it's Moonie or Gloomie they say: 'This is our distant cousin from England.' It amuses me to see my father deal with this. He can't bring himself to say either 'cousin' or 'daughter' so he just says Nina and leaves it. But of course everyone knows I am his illegitimate daughter. But Nadia is the real 'daughter' here. 'Nadia is an impressive person,' my father says, on my first day here, making it clear that I am diminished, the sort with dirt under her nails. Yes, she is clever, soon to be doctor, life-saver. Looking at her now she seems less small than she did in London. I'd say she has enough dignity for the entire government.

'They tear-gassed the hospital.'

'Who?'

'The clever police. Some people were demonstrating outside. The police broke it up. When they chased the demonstrators inside they tear-gassed them! What a day! What a country! I must wash my face.' She goes out.

'See, see!' Moonie trills. 'She is better than you! Yes, yes, yes!'

'I expect so. It's not difficult.'

'We know she is better than you for certain!'

I walk out of all this and into my father's room. It's like moving from one play to another. What is happening on this set? The room is perfumed with incense from a green coiled creation which burns outside the doors, causing mosquitoes to drop dead. Advanced telephones connect him to Paris, Dubai, London. On the video is an American movie. Five youths rape a woman. Father - what do I call him, Dad? - sits on the edge of the bed with his little legs sticking out. The servant teases father's feet into his socks.

'You'll get sunstroke,' he says, as if he's known me all my life and has the right to be high-handed. 'Cavorting naked in the garden.'

'Naked is it now?'

'We had to sack the driver, too. Sit down.'

I sit in the row of chairs beside him. It's like visiting someone in hospital. He lies on his side in his favourite mocking-me-for-sport position.

'Now -'

The lights go out. The TV goes off. I shut my eyes and laugh. Power cut. Father bounces up and down on the bed. 'Fuck this motherfucking country!' The servant rushes for candles and lights them. As it's Friday I sit here and think of Ma and Howard meeting today for food, talk and sex. I think Howard's not so bad after all, and even slightly good-looking. He's never deliberately hurt Ma. He has other women - but that's only vanity, a weakness, not a crime -

and he sees her only on Friday, but he hasn't undermined her. What more can you expect from men? Ma loves him a lot - from the first moment, she says; she couldn't help herself. She's still trusting and open, despite everything.

Never happen to me.

Dad turns to me: 'What do you do in England for God's sake?'

'Nadia has already given you a full report, hasn't she?'

A full report? For two days I gaped through the window lip-reading desperately as nose to nose, whispering and giggling, eyebrows shooting up, jaws dropping like guillotines, hands rubbing. Father and Nadia conducted my prosecution. The two rotund salt and pepper pots, Moonie and Gloomie, guarded the separate entrances to this room.

'Yes, but I want the full confession from your mouth.'

He loves to tease. But he is a dangerous person. Tell him something and soon everyone knows about it.

'Confess to what?'

'That you just roam around here and there. You do fuck all full time, in other words.'

'Everyone in England does fuck all except for the yuppies.'

'And do you go with one boy or with many?' I say nothing. 'But your mother has a boy, yes? Some dud writer, complete failure and playboy with unnatural eyebrows that cross in the middle?'

'Is that how Nadia described the man she tried to -'

'What?'

'Be rather close friends with?'

The servant has a pair of scissors. He trims Father's hair, he snips in Father's ear, he investigates Father's nostrils with the clipping steel shafts. He attaches a tea-cloth to Father's collar, lathers Father's face, sharpens the razor on the strop and shaves Father clean and reddish.

'Not necessarily,' says Father, spitting foam. 'I use my imagination. Nadia says eyebrows and I see bushes.'

He says to his servant and indicates me: 'An Englisher born and bred, eh?'

The servant falls about with the open razor.

'But you belong with us,' Dad says. 'Don't worry, I'll put you on the right track. But first there must be a strict course of discipline.'

The room is full of dressed-up people sitting around Dad's bed looking at him lying there in his best clothes. Dad yells out cheerful slanders about the tax evaders, bribe-takers and general scumbags who can't make it this evening. Father obviously a most popular man here. It's better to be entertaining than good. Ma would be drinking bleach by now.

At last Dad gives the order they've been waiting for.

'Bring the booze.'

The servant unlocks the cabinet and brings out the whisky.

'Give everyone a drink except Nina. She has to get used to the pure way of life!' he says, and everyone laughs at me.

The people here are tractor dealers (my first tractor dealer!), journalists, landowners and a newspaper tycoon aged thirty-one who inherited a bunch of papers. He's immensely cultured and massively fat. I suggest you look at him from the front and tell me if he doesn't look like a flounder. I look up to see my sister standing at the window of Dad's room, straining her heart's wet eyes at the Flounder who doesn't want to marry her because he already has the most pleasant life there is in the world.

Now here's a message for you fuckers back home. The men here invite Nadia and me to their houses, take us to their club, play tennis with us. They're chauvinistic as hell, but they put on a great show. They're funny and spend money and take you to their farms and show you their guns and kill a snake in front of your eyes. They flirt and want to poke their things in you, but they don't expect it.

Billy slides into the room in his puffy baseball jacket and pink plimsolls and patched jeans. He stands there and puts his hands in his pockets and takes them out again.

'Hey, Billy, have a drink.'

'OK. Thanks . . . Yeah. OK.'

'Don't be shy,' Dad says. 'Nina's not shy.'

So the entire room looks at shy Billy and Billy looks at the ground.

'No, well, I could do with a drink. Just one. Thanks.'

The servant gets Billy a drink. Someone says to someone else: 'He looks better since he had that break in Lahore.'

'It did him the whole world of damn good.'

'Terrible what happened to the boy.'

'Yes. Yes. Ghastly rotten.'

Billy comes and sits next to me. Their loud talking goes on.

'I've heard about you,' he says under the talking. 'They talk about you non-stop.'

'Goody.'

'Yeah. Juicy Fruit?' he says.

He sits down on the bed and I open my case and give him all my tapes.

'Latest stuff from England.'

He goes through them eagerly. 'You can't get any of this stuff here. This is the best thing that has ever happened to me.' He looks at me. 'Can I? Can I borrow them? Would you mind, you know?' I nod. 'My room is on top of the house. I'll never be far away.'

Oh, kiss me now! Though I can see that's a little premature, especially in a country where they cut off your arms or something for adultery. I like your black jeans.

'What's your accent?' I say.

'Canadian.' He gets up. No, don't leave now. Not yet. 'Wanna ride?' he says.

In the drive the chauffeurs smoke and talk. They stop

talking. They watch us. Billy puts his baseball cap on my head and touches my hair.

'Billy, push the bike out into the street so no one hears us leave.'

I ask him about himself. His mother was Canadian. She died. His father was Pakistani, though Billy was brought up in Vancouver. I turn and Moonie is yelling at me. 'Nina, Nina, it's late. Your father must see you now about a strict discipline business he has to discuss!'

'Billy, keep going.'

He just keeps pushing the bike, oblivious of Moonie. He glances at me now and again, as if he can't believe his luck. I can't believe mine, baby!

'So Pop and I came home to live. Home. This place isn't my home. But he always wanted to come home.'

We push the bike up the street till we get to the main road.

'This country was a shock after Vancouver,' he says.

'Same for me.'

'Yeah?' He gets sharp. 'But I'd been brought here to live. How can you ever understand what that's like?'

'I can't. All right, I fucking can't.'

He goes on. 'We were converting a house in Pindi, Pop and me. Digging the foundations, plastering the walls, doing the plumbing . . .'

We get on the bike and I hold him.

'Out by the beach, Billy.'

'Yeah. But it's not simple. You know the cops stop couples and ask to see their wedding certificates.'

It's true but fuck it. Slowly, stately, the two beige outlaws ride through the city of open fires. I shout an Aretha Franklin song into the night. Men squat by busted cars. Wild maimed pye-dogs run in our path. Traffic careers through dust, past hotels and airline buildings, past students squatting beside traffic lights to read, near where there are terrorist explosions and roads melt like plastic.

To the beach without showing our wedding certificate. It's

more a desert than a beach. There's just sand; no shops, no hotels, no ice-creamers, no tattooists. Utterly dark. Your eyes search for a light in panic, for safety. But the curtains of the world are well and truly pulled here.

I guide Billy to the Flounder's beach hut. Hut - this place is bigger than Ma's flat. We push against the back door and we're in the large living room. Billy and I dance about and chuck open the shutters. Enter moonlight and the beach as Billy continues his Dad rap.

'Pop asked me to drill some holes in the kitchen. But I had to empty the wheelbarrow. So he did the drilling. He hit a cable or something. Anyway, he's dead, isn't he?'

We kiss for a long time, about forty minutes. There's not a lot you can do in kissing; half an hour of someone's tongue in your mouth could seem an eternity, but what there is to do, we do. I take off all my clothes and listen to the sea and almost cry for missing South Africa Road so. But at least there is the light friction of our lips together, barely touching. Harder. I pull the strong bulk of his head towards mine, pressing my tongue to the corner of his mouth. Soon I pass through the mouth's parting to trace the inside curve of his lips. Suddenly his tongue fills my mouth, invading me, and I clench it with my teeth. Oh, oh, oh. As he withdraws I follow him, sliding my tongue into the oven of his gob and lie there on the bench by the open shutters overlooking the Arabian Sea, connected by tongue and saliva, my fingers in his ears and hair, his finger inside my body, our bodies dissolving until we forget ourselves and think of nothing, thank fuck.

It's still dark and no more than ninety minutes have passed, when I hear a car pulling up outside the hut. I shake Billy awake, push him off me and pull him across the hut and into the kitchen. The fucking door's warped and won't shut so we just lie down on the floor next to each other. I clam Billy up with my hand over his gob. There's a shit smell right next to my nose. I start to giggle. I stuff Billy's fingers into my

mouth. He's laughing all over the place too. But we shut up sharpish when a couple come into the hut and start to move around. For some reason I imagine we're going to be shot.

The man says: 'Curious, indeed. My sister must have left the shutters open last time she came here.'

The other person says it's lovely, the moonlight and so on. Then there's no talking. I can't see a sausage but my ears are at full stretch. Yes, kissing noises.

Nadia says: 'Here's the condoms, Bubble!'

My sister and the Flounder! Well. The Flounder lights a lantern. Yes, there they are now, I can see them: she's trying to pull his long shirt over his head, and he's resisting.

'Just my bottoms!' he squeals. 'My stomach! Oh, my God!'

I'm not surprised he's ashamed, looking in this low light at the size of the balcony over his toy shop.

I hear my name. Nadia starts to tell the Flounder - or 'Bubble' as she keeps calling him - how the Family Planning in London gave me condoms. The Flounder's clucking with disapproval and lying on the bench by the window looking like a hippo, with my sister squatting over his guts, rising and sitting, sighing and exclaiming sometimes, almost in surprise. They chat away quite naturally, fucking and gossiping and the Flounder talks about me. Am I promiscuous, he wants to know. Do I do it with just anyone? How is my father going to discipline me now he's got his hands on me? Billy shifts about. He could easily be believing this shit. I wish I had some paper and a pen to write him a note. I kiss him gently instead. When I kiss him I get a renewal of this strange sensation that I've never felt before today. I feel it's Billy I'm kissing, not just his lips or body, but some inside thing, as if his skin is just a representative of all of him, his past and his blood. Amour has never been this personal for me before!

Nadia and the Flounder are getting hotter. She keeps asking Bubble why they can't do this every day. He says, yes, yes, yes, and won't you tickle my balls? I wonder how

she'll find them. Then the Flounder shudders and Nadia, moving in rhythm like someone doing a slow dance, has to stop. 'Bubble!' she says and slaps him, as if he's a naughty child that's just thrown up. A long fart escapes Bubble's behind. 'Oh, Bubble,' she says, and falls on to him, holding him closer.

Soon he is asleep. Nadia unstraddles him and moves to a chair and has a little cry as she sits looking at him. She only wants to be held and kissed and touched. I feel like going to her myself.

When I wake up it's daylight and they're sitting there together, talking about their favourite subject. The Flounder is smoking and she is trying to masturbate him.

'So why did she come here with you?' he is asking. Billy opens his eyes and doesn't know where he is. Then he sighs. I agree with him. What a place to be, what a thing to be doing! (But then, come to think of it, you always find me in the kitchen at parties.)

'Nina just asked me one day at breakfast. I had no choice and this man, Howard -'

'Yes, yes,' the Flounder laughs. 'You said he was handsome.'

'I only said he had nice hair,' she says.

But I'm in sympathy with the Flounder here, finding this compliment a little gratuitous. The Flounder gets up. He's ready to go.

And so is Billy. 'I can't stand much more of this,' he says. Nadia suddenly jerks her head towards us. For a moment I think she's seen us. But the Flounder distracts her.

I hear the tinkle of the car keys and the Flounder says: 'Here, put your panties on. Wouldn't want to leave your panties here on the floor. But let me kiss them first! I kiss them!'

There are sucky kissing noises. Billy is twitching badly and drumming his heels on the floor. Nadia looks at the

Flounder with his face buried in a handful of white cotton.

'And,' he says with a muffled voice, 'I'm getting lead in my pencil again, Nadia. Let us lie down, my pretty one.'

The Flounder takes her hand enthusiastically and jerks it towards his ding-dong. She smacks him away. She's not looking too pleased.

'I've got my pants on, you bloody fool!' Nadia says harshly. 'That pair of knickers you've sunk your nose in must belong to another woman you've had here!'

'What! But I've had no other woman here!' The Flounder glares at her furiously. He examines the panties, as if hoping to find a name inside. 'Marks & Spencers. How strange. I feel sick now.'

'Marks & Spencers! Fuck this!' says Billy, forcing my hands off his face. 'My arms and legs are going to fucking drop off in a minute!'

So up gets Billy. He combs his hair and turns up the collar of his shirt and then strolls into the living room singing a couple of choruses from The The. I get up and follow him, just in time to see Nadia open her mouth and let off a huge scream at the sight of us. The Flounder, who has no bottoms on, gives a frightened yelp and drops my pants which I pick up and, quite naturally, put on. I'm calm and completely resigned to the worst. Anyway, I've got my arm round Billy.

'Hi, everyone,' Billy says. 'We were just asleep in the other room. Don't worry, we didn't hear anything, not about the condoms or Nina's character or the panties or anything. Not a thing. How about a cup of tea or something?'

I get off Billy's bike midday. 'Baby,' he says.

'Happy,' I say, wearing his checked shirt, tail out. Across the lawn with its sprinkler I set off for Dad's club, a sun-loved white palace set in flowers.

White-uniformed bearers humble as undertakers set down trays of foaming yogurt. I could do with a proper drink myself. Colonels with generals and ladies with perms,

fans and crossed legs sit in cane chairs. I wish I'd slept more.

The old man. There you are, blazer and slacks, turning the pages of *The Times* on an oak lectern overlooking the gardens. You look up. Well, well, well, say your eyes, not a dull day now. Her to play with.

You take me into the dining room. It's chill and smart and the tables have thick white cloths on them and silver cutlery. The men move chairs for the elegant thin women, and the waiters take the jackets of the plump men. I notice there are no young people here.

'Fill your plate,' you say, kindly. 'And come and sit with me. Bring me something too. A little meat and some dhal.'

I cover the plate with food from the copper pots at the buffet in the centre of the room and take it to you. And here we sit, father and daughter, all friendly and everything.

'How are you today, Daddy?' I say, touching your cheek.

Around us the sedate upper class fill their guts. You haven't heard me. I say once more, gently: 'How are you today?'

'You fucking bitch,' you say. You push away your food and light a cigarette.

'Goody,' I say, going a little cold. 'Now we know where we are with each other.'

'Where the fuck were you last night?' you inquire of me. You go on: 'You just fucked off and told no one. I was demented with worry. My blood pressure was through the roof. Anything could have happened to you.'

'It did.'

'That bloody boy's insane.'

'But Billy's pretty.'

'No, he's ugly like you. And a big pain in the arse.'

'Dad.'

'No, don't interrupt! A half-caste wastrel, a belong-nowhere, a problem to everyone, wandering around the face of the earth with no home like a stupid-mistake-mongrel dog that no one wants and everyone kicks in the backside.'

For those of you curious about the menu, I am drinking tear soup.

'You left us,' I say. I am shaking. You are shaking. 'Years ago, just look at it, you fucked us and left us and fucked off and never came back and never sent us money and instead made us sit through fucking *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Evita*.'

Someone comes over, a smart judge who helped hang the Prime Minister. We all shake hands. Christ, I can't stop crying all over the place.

It's dusk and I'm sitting upstairs in a deckchair outside Billy's room on the roof. Billy's sitting on a pillow. We're wearing cut-off jeans and drinking iced water and reading old English newspapers that we pass between us. Our washing is hanging up on a piece of string we've tied between the corner of the room and the television aerial. The door to the room is open and we're listening again and again to 'Who's Loving You' - very loud - because it's our favourite record. Billy keeps saying: 'Let's hear it again, one mo' time, you know.' We're like an old couple sitting on a concrete patio in Shepherd's Bush, until we get up and dance with no shoes on and laugh and gasp because the roof burns our feet so we have to go inside to make love again.

Billy goes in to take a shower and I watch him go. I don't like being separated from him. I hear the shower start and I sit down and throw the papers aside. I go downstairs to Nadia's room and knock on her door. Wifey is sitting there and Moonie is behind her.

'She's not in,' Moonie says.

'Come in,' Nadia says, opening her door, I go in and sit on the stool by the dressing table. It's a pretty room. There is pink everywhere and her things are all laid out neatly and she sits on the bed brushing her hair and it shines. I tell her we should have a bit of a talk. She smiles at me. She's prepared to make an effort, I can see that, though it surprises

LOVE IN A BLUE TIME

me. She did go pretty berserk the other day, when we came out of the kitchen, trying to punch me and everything.

'It was an accident,' I tell her now.

'Well,' she says. 'But what impression d'you think it made on the man I want to marry?'

'Blame me. Say I'm just a sicko Westerner. Say I'm mad.'

'It's the whole family it reflects on,' she says.

She goes to a drawer and opens it. She takes out an envelope and gives it to me.

'It's a present for you,' she says kindly. When I slip my finger into the flap of the envelope she puts her hand over mine. 'Please. It's a surprise for later.'

Billy is standing on the roof in his underpants. I fetch a towel and dry his hair and legs and he holds me and we move a little together to imaginary music. When I remember the envelope Nadia gave me, I open it and find a shiny folder inside. It's a ticket to London.

I'd given my ticket home to my father for safe-keeping, an open ticket I can use any time. I can see that Nadia's been to the airline and specified the date, and booked the flight. I'm to leave tomorrow morning. I go to my dad and ask him what it's all about. He just looks at me and I realise I'm to go.

4

Hello, reader. As I'm sure you've noticed by now, I, Howard, have written this Nina and Nadia stuff in my sock, without leaving the country, sitting right here on my spreading arse and listening to John Coltrane. (And rolling cigarettes.) Do you think Nina could have managed phrases like 'an accent as thick as treacle' and 'But the curtains are well and truly pulled here' and especially 'Oh, oh, oh'? With her education? So all along, it's been me, pulling faces, speaking in tongues, posing and making an attempt on the truth through lies. And also, I just wanted to be Nina. The days Deborah and I

WITH YOUR TONGUE DOWN MY THROAT

have spent beating on her head, trying to twist her the right way round, read this, study dancing, here's a book about Balanchine and the rest of it. What does she make of all this force feeding? So I became her, entered her. Sorry.

Nina in fact has been back a week, though it wasn't until yesterday that I heard from her when she phoned to tell me that I am a bastard and that she had to see me. I leave straightaway.

At Nina's place. There she is, sitting at the kitchen table with her foot up on the table by her ashtray in the posture of a painter. Deborah not back from school.

'You look superb,' I tell her. She doesn't recoil in repulsion when I kiss her.

'Do I look superb?' She is interested.

'Yeah. Tanned. Fit. Rested.'

'Oh, is that all? She looks hard at me. 'I thought for a moment you were going to say something interesting. Like I'd changed or something. Like something had happened.'

We walk through the estate, Friday afternoon. How she walks above it all now, as if she's already left! She tells me everything in a soft voice: her father, the servants, the boy Billy, the kiss, the panties. She says: 'I was devastated to leave Billy in that country on his own. What will he do? What will happen to that boy? I sent him a pack of tapes. I sent him some videos. But he'll be so lonely.' She is upset.

The three of us have supper and Deborah tries to talk about school while Nina ignores her. It's just like the old days. But Nina ignores Deborah not out of cruelty but because she is elsewhere. Deborah is thinking that probably Nina has left her for good. I am worried that Debbie will expect more from me.

The next day I fly to my desk, put on an early Miles Davis tape and let it all go, tip it out, what Nina said, how she looked, what we did, and I write (and later cross out) how I like to put my little finger up Deborah's arse when we're

fucking and how she does the same to me, when she can comfortably reach. I shove it all down shamelessly (and add bits) because it's my job to write down the things that happen round here and because I have a rule about no material being sacred.

What does that make me?

I once was in a cinema when the recently uncovered spy Anthony Blunt came in with a friend. The entire cinema (but not me) stood up and chanted 'Out, out, out' until the old queen got up and left. I feel like that old spy, a dirty betrayer with a loudspeaker, doing what I have to.

I offer this story to you, Deborah and Nina, to make of it what you will, before I send it to the publisher.

Dear Howard,

How very kind of you to leave your story on my kitchen table casually saying, 'I think you should read this before I publish it.' I was pleased: I gave you an extra kiss, thinking that at last you wanted me to share your work (I almost wrote world).

I could not believe you opened the story with an account of an abortion. As you know I know, it's lifted in its entirety from a letter written to you by your last girlfriend, Julie. You were conveniently in New York when she was having the abortion so that she had to spit out all the bits of her broken heart in a letter, and you put it into the story pretending it was written by my daughter.

The story does also concern me, our 'relationship' and even where we put our fingers. Your portrait of me as a miserable whiner let down by men would have desperately depressed me, but I've learned that unfeeling, blood-sucking men like you need to reduce women to manageable clichés, even to destroy them, for the sake of control.

I am only sorry it's taken me this long to realise what a low, corrupt and exploitative individual you are, who never deserved the love we both offered you. You have torn me

apart. I hope the same thing happens to you one day. Please never attempt to get in touch again.

Deborah

Someone bangs on the door of the flat. I've been alone all day. I'm not expecting anyone, and how did whoever it is get into the building in the first place?

'Let me in, let me in!' Nina calls out. I open up and she's standing there soaked through with a sports bag full of things and a couple of plastic bags under her arm.

'Moving in?' I say.

'You should be so lucky,' she says, barging past me. 'I'm on my way somewhere and I thought I'd pop by to borrow some money.'

She comes into the kitchen. It's gloomy and the rain hammers into the courtyard outside. But Nina's cheerful, happy to be back in England and she has no illusions about her father now. Apparently he was rough with her, called her a half-caste and so on.

'Well, Howard, you're in the shit, aren't you?' Nina says. 'Ma's pissed off no end with you, man. She's crying all over the shop. I couldn't stand it. I've moved out. You can die of a broken heart, you know. And you can kill someone that way too.'

'Don't talk about it,' I say, breaking up the ice with a hammer and dropping it into the glasses. 'She wrote me a pissed-off letter. Wanna read it?'

'It's private, Howard.'

'Read it, for Christ's sake, Nina,' I say, shoving it at her. She reads it and I walk round the kitchen looking at her. I stand behind her a long time. I can't stop looking at her today.

She puts it down without emotion. She's not sentimental; she's always practical about things, because she knows what cunts people are.

'You've ripped Ma off before. She'll get over it, and no one

reads the shit you write anyway except a lot of middle-class wankers. As long as you get paid and as long as you give me some of it you're all right with me.'

I was right. I knew she'd be flattered. I give her some money and she gathers up her things. I don't want her to go. 'Where are you off to?'

'Oh, a friend's place in Hackney. Someone I was in the loony bin with. I'll be living there. Oh, and Billy will be joining me.' She smiles broadly. 'I'm happy.'

'Wow. That's good. You and Billy.'

'Yeah, ain't it just!' She gets up and throws back the rest of the whisky. 'Be seeing ya!'

'Don't go yet.'

'Got to.'

At the door she says: 'Good luck with the writing and everything.'

I walk to the lift with her. We go down together. I go out to the front door of the building. As she goes out into the street running with sheets of rain, I say: 'I'll come with you to the corner,' and walk with her, even though I'm not dressed for it.

At the corner I can't let her go and I accompany her to the bus stop. I wait with her for fifteen minutes in my shirt and slippers. I'm soaked through holding all her bags but I think you can make too much of these things. 'Don't go,' I keep saying inside my head. Then the bus arrives and she takes her bags from me and gets on and I stand there watching her but she won't look at me because she is thinking of Billy. The bus moves off and I watch until it disappears and then I go inside the flat and take off my clothes and have a bath. Later. I write down the things she said but the place still smells of her.

Blue, Blue Pictures of You

I used to like talking about sex. All of life, I imagined – from politics to aesthetics – merged in passionate human conjunctions. A caress, not to speak of a kiss, could transport you from longing to Russia, on to Velazquez and ahead to anarchism. To illustrate this fancy, I did, at one time, consider collecting a 'book of desire', an anthology of outlandish, melancholy and droll stories about the subject. This particular story was one, had the project been finished – or even started – I would have included. It was an odd story. Eshan, the photographer who told it to me, used the word himself. At least he said it was the oddest request he'd had. When it was put to him by his pub companion, his first response was embarrassment and perplexity. But of course he was fascinated too.

At the end of the street where Eshan had a tiny office and small dark room, there was a pub where he'd go at half past six or seven, most days. He liked to work office hours, believing much discipline was required to do what he did, as if without it he would fly off into madness – though he had, in fact, never flown anywhere near madness, except to sit in that pub.

Eshan thought he liked routine, and for weeks would do exactly the same thing every day, while frequently loathing this decline into habit. In the pub he would smoke, drink and read the paper for an hour or longer, depending on his mood and on whether he felt sentimental, guilty or plain affectionate towards his wife and two children. Sometimes he'd get home before the children were asleep, and carry them around on his back, kick balls with them, and tell them stories of pigs with spiders on their heads. Other times he would