PRIVATE VIEW

Colin Murry

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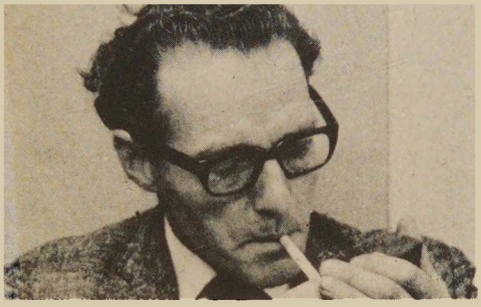
by

COLIN MURRY

'Take a man of twenty-eight; let him be joyfully in love with his wife; give him a five-year-old daughter whom he adores; let him hold a steady job—one he is even prepared to admit he enjoys at times—and let him be creative, no worrier, a feeler rather than a thinker. And then suddenly smash it all in one go. Everything but him. For the rest—fragments, shards, a scattering of dust . . .' Thus does Tony Braydon attempt to take stock of his own situation. As he gropes to come to terms with his disaster we are drawn relentlessly into the reality of his predicament by the intensity of Mr. Murry's imagination and the skill of a narrative style fashioned to enable us to share in the events ourselves. The long retrospective sequence in which Tony relives his love affair with Susan contains some of the most hilarious as well as some of the most tenderly moving scenes in modern fiction, while throughout the whole story we are made constantly aware that what we are witnessing is a man's desperate search for permanent values. As Tony is forced into accepting what seems to be an end but which for him must be a new beginning, he discovers for himself Blake's truth that, ultimately, experience is bought at the price of all that a man hath.

Jacket design by COLIN ANDREWS



Colin Murry is the son of the late John Middleton Murry. After service in the Fleet Air Arm during the war he took a degree in English and became a teacher, first in Sussex and later in Glamorgan where he held the post of Head of the English Department at Atlantic College. In 1970 he left teaching in order to devote himself to full-time writing. He is married with two daughters aged 15 and 17. His wife is a teacher of science. His main hobby is painting. At present he is living in South Wales.

His first novel *The Golden Valley* was published in 1958 and met with considerable critical acclaim. Since then he has published two further 'straight' novels and three works of science fiction under the pseudonym 'Richard Cowper' which have been well received both in this country and abroad.

Of his earlier novels the critics said:

'Mr. Murry disarms by the symplicity of his account of a bitter-sweet summer love-affair . . . [*The Golden Valley* is] an attractive first novel.'—Patricia Hodgart *Manchester Guardian*

'Mr. Murry . . . is completely successful in his treatment of characters and their setting.'—*The Times*

'The nearest thing to which I can compare [*The Golden Valley*] is Colette's *Le Ble en Herbe,* which is no small compliment.'—Peter Green *Daily Telegraph*

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PRIVATE VIEW

Author of :

THE GOLDEN VALLEY
RECOLLECTIONS OF A GHOST
A PATH TO THE SEA

PRIVATE VIEW

A Novel by

Colin Murry

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FOR RUTH

'To be alive: to be man alive: to be whole man alive —that is the point.'

D. H. Lawrence

'We must try to tell the truth—as only liars can tell it.'

Katherine Mansfield

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ONE

NIGHTMARE

THE electric bell at the end of the Art Room passage crowed like a brass rooster just as I turned the key in the cupboard. The class hushed, tense as sprinters awaiting the gun. I grinned at them. 'The two natterers, Robinson and MacAuley, stay and clean up. The rest scarper.'

For thirty seconds the room was slapped with waves of sound, now fortissimo, now muted, as the swing doors thumped back and forth and 3B stampeded for the refectory. Gradually the swish of the sink tap reasserted itself. I unbuttoned my paint-splashed overall and looped it over the peg beside the cupboard. Robinson, a sallow, brown-eyed boy with a talent for lino-cutting, nodded across at me. 'You ought to cut it up and frame it, Sir. You know—action painting.'

I twitched the overall out and glanced at it. The two boys paused in their work. Robinson screwed up one eye and spoke out of the corner of his mouth to MacAuley, parodying an American accent. 'That sleeve is worth all of ten thousand bucks. What say, Robbie?'

'Sure, man! Ah dig that crazy sleeve. Ah sure do, man!'

For a second my attention was caught by a fortuitous interweaving of three strokes of raw sienna and a stippling of chrome green, broken by a right-angled stitched seam round the patch pocket. It occurred to me that it might serve as a useful jumping off point for a lesson on the Abstract with the first year 'A' levels that afternoon. 'Maybe you're on to something,' I agreed, turning to the door. 'Make sure that tap's off when you finish.'

As I shouldered my way through the swing doors and began walking down the sun-buttressed corridor between bright banners of junior poster-colours, my mind was still vibrating faintly from the impact of that fluke Kandinsky to which Robinson had drawn my attention. By the time I reached the junction of the corridors I was remembering my own violent honeymoon with Abstractionism which had ended in the usual dismal divorce three years before. Another of those threads in the maze which at first seem so promising; which you follow with such absorbed concentration that all others vanish; until you're forced into the gradual numbing realization that you're back where you started.

I paused to light a cigarette, heard a sardonic chuckle, and turned to find Jenny grinning at me from the doorway of Junior Art. She pointed over my shoulder. I glanced up and found I'd stationed myself directly under our winning poster in the school's 'Lung Cancer' campaign—a grisly *danse macabre* reminiscent of George Grosz. I shrugged and waited for her to come over.

'By the way,' she said, 'it's O.K. for this evening. What time do you want me?'

I'd forgotten that Sue and I had asked her to do a baby-sit, and it took me a moment to focus. 'You can? Good girl. You'll come and have a bite first, won't you? Let's see, the programme'll start about half-seven. Round sixish, O.K.?'

She nodded and fell into step beside me. We climbed into Main Hall and zig-zagged our way between the groups of nattering kids who stood dipping into nose-bags of potato crisps. One or two blue jowled sixth formers ran their sexy eyes approvingly over Jenny, mentally undressing her and touching her up with hungry invisible fingers. I pretended not to notice and Jenny seemed genuinely unaware. A couple of juniors cannoned into us, gasped apologies, and were gone.

Outside the Staff Common Room the familiar group of petitioners was already stationed, and we entered to a chorus of shrill entreaty: 'Please, Miss, tell Mr Hopkins I'm here!

Please, Sir, tell Mr Vance I'm here. It's Norton, Sir. Please, Sir—'

I closed the door firmly on the agonized faces and elbowed my way over to the trolley. The Common Room fug had already achieved ten-tenths density and, of course, all the chairs were occupied. I poured out two cups of the gritty sludge that passed for coffee in Alderman Samson's, handed one to Jenny, and perched myself on the arm of Bill Vance's chair. 'Your little buddy-buddy is anxious to pay you his respects, Bill.'

'Norton?' he muttered. 'Here, I've put you down at number four. O.K.?'

'Promotion at last,' I grinned. 'Where's the list?'

'George's got it. Hey, George! Let's have that back a minute.'

I scanned the list of the Staff cricket team who were down to play the School First XI and then passed it back to Bill. 'Will Jarmain be playing?'

'I think he's got an interview for L.S.E. on the Wednesday.'

'Goody-gumdrops,' I cooed. 'The Braydon insurance doesn't rise to double indemnity.'

'Tony! Phone!'

I swigged off my lukewarm coffee, pushed the empty cup on to the trolley and filtered between the bodies to the corner where Charles Everett Bristow (M.A. Cantab.) Senior Maths, was holding out the receiver to me. 'Who is it, Charles?'

'The Duchess, dear boy.'

I wriggled my eyebrows at him. 'Hello. Mr Braydon here.'

There was a momentary pause and then the familiar accents of Miss Dutch, the Head's Secretary, quacked into my ear. 'Oh, Mr Braydon, would you come over to the Headmaster's study straight away, please. It's—' she hesitated '—it's rather urgent, I gather.'

'What's it about?'

'I really couldn't say, Mr Braydon.'

'O.K. I'll be right there.'

I replaced the receiver on its cradle and grimaced at Charles. He twitched his grizzled moustache interrogatively. 'Summons to Goldie?'

'The one and only,' I nodded, and tried to ignore the twinge of apprehension in my stomach.

Charles clucked. 'Importuning *again,* eh? You're for the high jump this time, my lad.'

My grin was a bit wan and abstracted. I couldn't for the life of me imagine what the Head could want to see me about.

I opened the door and was at once confronted by Norton's owlish face. 'Please, Sir. Did you tell him, Sir? Mr Vance, Sir?'

'He's coming,' I said. 'You hang on.' I pushed my way past him and glanced at my watch. It was three minutes to eleven.

* * *

I've purposely picked the story up *before* that phone call, because I want to see if getting the record straight won't maybe straighten me out on what happened next. There are any number of things which are still a bit blurred round the edges, but there's only one which I can't *explain.* Yet the odd thing is I'm more certain that it happened—*really* happened, I mean—than almost anything which came later. And it's the one thing which *couldn't* have happened.

I walked out of the Common Room, down the corridor past V Remove, and turned into the Staff Cloakroom. Typically enough the place is an architectural afterthought, as dim and scruffy as Fagin's cell, with a port-hole window set high up in the corner. There was no one else in there and I had a pee and rinsed my hands and was just beginning to tidy up my hair when I sort of got fixed. That's the only word I can think of to describe it—*fixed.* I had both hands up to my head and was staring at myself in the specky green mirror

over the basin, when I suddenly realized the place had gone deathly quiet. There's always a sort of dribbly whisper from the cisterns and the echo of footsteps in the corridor, *something,* anyway, but just then there wasn't a sound—nothing—absolute blankness. I saw my reflection blotched in the glass like a submarine Dali, looking even less like me than it usually did, and suddenly I felt my skin begin to crawl and a cold sweat pricked out under my arms and began trickling down my ribs. And then—well, let me put it as calmly and matter-of-factly as possible—I heard Sue say: 'Tony.' I swear to God she was only a couple of feet away. I spun round, and of course there was nothing. One of the cisterns gurgled derisively and I heard voices in the corridor outside.

I've tried to recall the exact tone of voice she used—for whatever anyone else may think I *know* it was her voice—and I believe I've managed to place it at last. It was the way she used to say my name when she was about to add something else like 'Tony, did you remember to have the tyres checked?' or 'Tony, did you remember to pay the gas bill?' It was always a sort of ranging shot, a preparation, a prelude to what followed. Only this time there wasn't anything to follow, or, if there was, I was out of range.

I took a deep breath and shrugged it off—my mind was pretty well taken up by my summons to the Head, anyway—and as I stuffed my comb back into my pocket and pushed my way out into the corridor, the bell rang for the end of break.

I cut across the lawn to the Admin. Wing and climbed the stairs to the first floor. The Head's study was the second door on the right and I knocked up the Duchess first to let her know I'd arrived, but any hopes I might have been entertaining on the lines of 'forewarned is forearmed' were dished by her carefully neutral: 'Will you go straight in please, Mr Braydon? The Headmaster's expecting you.'

I ducked out again, straightened my tie, and marched up to the door which bore the word 'Headmaster' in aseptic func-

tional lettering on a plastic nameplate, and underneath, smaller, 'F. J. P. Atkinson, MA. DSc.'

My knock and his 'Come in' were so almost simultaneous as to be improbable. I depressed the level handle and went in.

The Head was standing on the hearthrug facing me, which, I suppose, was unusual, since in such other interviews as we'd had he was always slouched behind his desk. I closed the door behind me, still looking at him expectantly. 'You sent for me, Sir?' A pretty obvious remark in the circumstances, but you have to start somewhere.

He nodded and treated me to a lip grin, exposing the gold pre-molar that gave him his nickname, then his eyes met mine for a moment and flicked helplessly to the other end of the room. I turned my head slightly and saw, for the first time, that we were not alone. Seated facing the Head, but just out of my earlier line of vision, was a grey-haired police sergeant. On the table before him was his cap and beside his cap a half-empty coffee cup.

I took in all this in an eye-blink and turned back to the Head. 'Sir?' I enquired weakly.

'This is Sergeant Wilson, Tony,'—never in his life had he called me *that* before—'I'm afraid he has some very grave news for you. *Very* grave.' He took a sort of half-shuffling step towards me and then chasséd back.

I didn't say anything—just stared round at the Sergeant. He thrust himself up from his chair and picked up his cap. When it was safely in his hand he looked at me with a sort of pitying curiosity. 'Mr Anthony Braydon?' he enquired.

I nodded.

'I'm afraid, Sir, that you must prepare yourself for a shock.'

My heart gave an almighty thump and I began to tremble all over. I couldn't have said anything even if I'd wanted to.

The Sergeant moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue and dropped his eyes a fraction. When he spoke again his voice sounded totally different, as though it had been pre-recorded and I was hearing the play-back. 'It is my painful

duty to inform you, Sir, that at ten minutes past ten this morning your wife and daughter met with a fatal automobile accident. They couldn't have felt any pain. They died instantaneously.'

I had the distinct sensation that this was a nightmare, and I remember willing myself to wake up. The trembling became quite uncontrollable. I felt a hand gripping my arm and I was sitting down. 'What?' I heard myself saying. 'What?'

The repeated words swirled out of the mist, haphazard: 'killed', 'no pain', 'wife', 'daughter'.

'Where are they?' I whispered.

'Up at the County, Sir. But I'm afraid there's no use in hoping for a miracle. I've seen them.'

'My God,' I said. 'Oh, my God. My God.' I shut my eyes as I spoke, and across the velvet darkness swam that damned insane pattern I'd seen on my overall, only this time it was gold, and vermilion and ivory black. I swallowed hard and forced my eyes open. 'I can see them, can't I?'

The Sergeant nodded. 'I've got a car waiting ready, Sir.' He seemed relieved that I hadn't passed out altogether.

I felt exactly as if I was in that weird state of drunkenness when part of your mind is still stone-cold sober but your body won't believe it and all the wires get crossed. I somehow contrived to push myself up from the chair and looked at the Head. He was murmuring something about 'getting right away for a time', 'having to re-adjust' and 'not to worry about us', but he might just as well have been talking Serbo-Croat for all I took in. The odd thing is I remember trying to reassure *him*—telling *him* not to worry. God knows what he must have thought. And then I was walking downstairs with the Sergeant and out into the sunlight, and inside myself I was saying over and over again 'Sue, Mandy: Sue, Mandy: Sue, Mandy' as though I'd been wound up like a kid's toy which goes on and on senselessly, for no reason at all.

The Sergeant wrenched open the back door of the car and I climbed in. He got into the front seat beside the driver. I

saw them exchange a glance, and the Sergeant gave a little rabbity jerk of his head that said more plainly than any words could have done: 'Christ! What a bloody job ours is.'

As we swung out of the school gates into Downshill Road I leant forward and touched the Sergeant on the shoulder. 'How did it happen?'

He half turned to face me. 'They were held up in a traffic jam on the London Road—the Broadmead lights. A big UP tanker was parked up the hill outside Hilver's filling station. As far as we can make out its entire braking system seems to have packed up. It rolled down slap into the side of them. Fifty-three yards down a one in eight gradient—'

'I feel sick,' I muttered. 'Stop a minute.'

The driver jammed on his brakes and I scrambled out and retched into the gutter. As I straightened up again, wiping my lips with my handkerchief, I caught sight of two old hags staring flintily at me over one of those shoulder-high brick walls which front all the Downshill Road semi-dets. They regarded me with undisguised loathing, and as I climbed back into the car, I caught the word 'disgusting' flicked after me like a poisoned dart.

The Sergeant smiled sympathetically and shrugged aside my apology. 'Had you been married long?' he asked.

'Six years.'

'Not a native of Hampton, are you?'

'No. I came down when I got the job.'

'Mr Atkinson tells me you teach art.'

I nodded. I realized he was talking for the sake of talking and while part of me wished he'd shut up, another part felt absurdly grateful to him.

'My youngest girl's going in for Commercial at the Tech. It's a pretty good course, I hear.'

'Yes,' I said.

'She's dead set on being a dress designer—"hote cootoore" I should say.' He snorted tolerantly and then leant over and muttered some direction to the driver.

As I turned and gazed glumly out at the traffic which was temporarily hemming us in, a sudden tide of misery swept me back three hours and I was coming downstairs for breakfast and glancing casually along the hall to the kitchen where Sue was standing in front of the sink furtively scraping a piece of overdone toast. The early sun was squirting in through the tiny window behind her, drenching her hair and shoulders until she seemed haloed in a golden fuzz. Bonnard might have made something of that but not Braydon. The car surged forward again and the tissue of memory swirled away leaving only a void.

* * *

Eighty years ago the County Hospital was a Victorian workhouse, and in spite of all the paint they've splashed around in the last twenty years it's still pretty grim. I'd only been to the 'Out Patients' before and this time we drove in through a back gate I'd never known existed. Some other cars were parked on a painted grid and we pulled up beside them. The Sergeant leant over and opened my door and I climbed out on to the asphalt.

'It's this way, Sir,' he said and set off towards a block on the far side of the courtyard. The driver of the car settled down to excavate crevices between his teeth with a split match stick. Half a mile down the hill the sun was turning the sea into wrinkled tinfoil. I floated in the wake of the Sergeant as though I were a balloon and he held my string. I knew I had only to jump and I'd sail clear over the top of the hospital.

He waited for me to catch up and then led me down a long paved slope between yellow brick walls into a place that seemed half-basement half-tunnel and was lit by greenish-white fluorescent tubes. Our shoes rang on the concrete floor. As we turned off down a side passage a young man in a white overall emerged from an office. The Sergeant explained who

I was and then the three of us were passing through some wide swing-doors.

The sudden cold and the harsh bite of disinfectant made me shudder. The attendant brushed his hand down the wall: more lights flickered on: and there they were, lying shrouded side by side, on a sort of long metal table.

I felt the Sergeant's hand on my elbow urging me gently but firmly forward until I was standing a couple of feet away from what I'd asked to see, and I swear that if it hadn't been for that grip I would have been out of that morgue and halfway to France in five seconds. The attendant slid forward, his hand outstretched to pull back the sheet, and at that instant I glimpsed the tips of Mandy's fingers—pink and soft as sea anemones—crooked piteously from under the hem of the shroud. I gave a sort of throttled groan, lurched forward, and snatched the sheet away.

They lay like two broken effigies and the hand I had thrust out drew back of itself as if it were ashamed. Through a lens of tears I saw them begin to blur and shift. I couldn't bring myself to touch them—it was as though my soul had frozen solid—but I had to do *some*thing. I turned my head slightly. 'Can't you put her arm round the child?' I muttered.

The Sergeant stepped forward and did it, gently, almost apologetically, and when it was done I turned and blundered blindly out through the swing doors, knowing it was no dream but the truth, and that I too was stone dead.

The Sergeant caught me up at the foot of the slope and put his arm across my shoulder. 'It's not the end, son,' he said gruffly. 'I know it seems that way now, but it isn't. Not for you. So I want you to promise me you won't go and do anything damned silly. Here, he put his hand inside his tunic and pulled out a slip of pasteboard. 'My address and phone are on that. If you want someone to talk to just you get on the old blower.' He smiled, and that smile was the most human thing I'd seen for an hour.

My hand took the card and put it into my pocket.

'The nights are the worst,' he said. 'They're so bloody long —even in summer. Have you got anyone you can stay with in Hampton?'

'No,' I said.

'How about your people?'

I stared at him.

'Your people,' he repeated. 'Where do they live?'

'In Suffolk.'

'Can't you stay with them for a bit?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'Yes, I suppose so.'

'You do that. Believe me, it's the best thing. What about her folks?'

'Eh?'

'Your wife's people. Where are they?'

'In London.'

'Do you want us to get in touch with them?'

'No,' I muttered. 'I'll do it.'

'You're all right,' he said and squeezed my arm. 'There'll have to be an inquest, of course, but don't you worry yourself about that now.'

'God, they're *dead*,' I whispered. 'Sue and Mandy. They really *are* dead. *Dead*. It isn't a dream.'

'Come on, son,' he said. 'Where would you like us to drop you?'

I frowned. 'The Midland Bank in Church Street,' I said vaguely and didn't know why I said it till I remembered that Sue had asked me to call in there during the lunch hour. As a matter of fact they were the last words she'd spoken to me. Anyway at that moment one place seemed much like any other.

No sooner was the car on its way than I wanted to turn and go back. The only thing which held any reality for me was down there in that cellar and I was running away from it. I suppose that's how you feel in an earthquake: the solid world melts into a jelly under your feet. I kept trying to push what I'd seen out of my mind, but it was more real than I

was myself. The harder I pushed the more I skidded backwards. I just couldn't come to terms with it at all. I kept saying to myself: 'They're dead. They're dead' but it was only words and they didn't even *begin* to fit what I'd just seen. The fact is I *couldn't* accept it. In that one second I'd been kicked into another dimension, transformed into a sort of cobweb ghost, a kind of pale grey X-ray of myself, and I remember turning my hands over and over in my lap and staring at them as though I expected to see right though them.

The car drew into the kerb outside the Bank. The Sergeant got out and came round to me. 'Now you've got that card I gave you, haven't you?'

I nodded.

He held out his hand. 'We'll be meeting again,' he said.

I mumbled some sort of thanks.

He nodded and smiled and was about to climb back into the car when he seemed to remember something. 'Life's what you *live,* son,' he said. 'All day and every day. It's right here and now, not up there or anywhere else. Take it from me. Good luck!' And then he was gone. The door slammed and the car accelerated away up the hill, indicator lights flashing.

I stood staring after it until it disappeared, and then I walked slowly up the steps into the Bank. The Sergeant's parting words seemed to have been directed at someone I didn't know. I had the odd sensation that I'd simply overheard them.

* * *

There were the usual Friday morning queues at every counter. I tagged on to the first one I came to and found myself staring at the scurf-speckled collar of a middle-aged clerk in a greasy pin-stripe suit. I don't suppose I'd ever looked so intently at the back of anyone's neck and yet I wasn't really seeing it at all. The fine criss-cross of grimy, diamond-shaped wrinkles, the bristly short hairs, the redness where his shirt

collar had rubbed the skin, these I probed with a blank, incurious eye. Had it been a brick wall I daresay I'd have stared just as fixedly, just as blindly.

He suffered my scrutiny for a minute or two and then began twisting his head from side to side as though his collar had suddenly become uncomfortable. Finally he turned and glanced at me. For a second our eyes met; his faintly hostile, defensive, questioning; mine switched-off, neutral. Then he jutted his chin an aggressive fraction, and muttering something about 'Nothing better to do than keep us hanging around', transferred his uneasiness from me to the anonymous cashiers. We shuffled forward and I came within reach of the counter.

I took out my cheque book, withdrew a pen from the stand and glanced up at the calendar. Friday July 19th. So far my movements were pure ritual. I filled in the date, moved the pen nib down to the space in which I had to write the sum required, and suddenly hesitated. What the hell was I doing? Why was I here? I looked up at the clock. Six minutes past twelve. A woman in the queue behind me coughed. I stared down at the cheque and at my hand holding the pen. The chain had looped itself over my wrist and was drooping in a series of silvery squiggles across the blotter. I became aware of a muscle vibrating in my thigh. The movement spread down to my foot which began to tap a rapid tattoo against the counter. I pressed down hard on the floor and, released from my dilemma, wrote rapidly: 'Twenty-five pounds,' scribbled in the figures and signed my name.

When my turn came I pushed the cheque over the counter. The cashier glanced at it, then at me. 'Would you mind signing across it, Sir? It's a crossed cheque.'

It was a mistake I'd made before. He held out a Biro to me and I filled in my name again. 'How would you like it, Sir?'

'Eh?'

'The notes, Sir. Ones? Fives?'

I nodded. The woman behind me whispered something to

her companion, who replied with a sort of clicking noise. The cashier singled out five notes, jotted a figure on the wrapper of the bundle, counted them again elaborately by flapping them between his thumb and middle finger, and then nudged them delicately across to me with his splayed fingertips. The light from the window behind me reflected itself in the gold-rimmed lenses of his glasses and, momentarily, his eyes became miniature skies peppered with tiny puffs of silver cloud. As I transferred the money to my wallet, the woman was already elbowing me aside. I pushed my way out through the swing doors and, as I stepped into the sunlight, I knew I was absolutely and utterly lost.

Take a man of twenty-eight; let him be joyfully in love with his wife; give him a five year old daughter whom he adores; let him hold a steady job—one he is even prepared to admit he enjoys at times—and let him be creative, no worrier, a feeler rather than a thinker. And then suddenly smash the lot in one go. Everything but him. For the rest—fragments, shards, a scattering of dust. What you've got left is me as I stood there on the Bank steps and felt the sun shining warm on my dead face. All around me was noise, colour, movement and purpose, and within me was nothing but a limitless desert of grey dust and a thin little voice like a lost wind moaning: 'Sue, Mandy. Oh God, why? Why? Why?' over and over again. Even the God I appealed to was for me little more than a word.

I'd been standing there for maybe five minutes when I felt something knock against my knee. People had been going in and out of the Bank all the time and I'd been vaguely aware of the constant muffled *wuff-wuff* sound those heavy doors make as they swing back into place. Now I turned my head and saw a man standing beside me. Dangling from his bent forearm was a white walking stick and it was this that had touched me. Somehow I'd always associated blindness with old age—or at any rate middle-age, but he couldn't have been more than thirty, if that. I hadn't said anything but he knew

I was there all right because he turned his head in my direction and said: 'Lovely day, isn't it?'

There was a strong trace of North Country in his voice and he was smiling, waiting for me to agree. 'Yes,' I said.

He finished buttoning up his jacket and shifted his stick into his other hand. Then he grinned again, turned his face to the sun and inhaled a breath so deep it must have reached his shoes. 'Ah,' he said, 'that's proper champion. Now, home James.'

I had a sudden prophetic vision of him crashing full length down the Bank steps and grabbed his elbow. 'Where do you want to get to?' I asked.

'I'll pick up a number 5,' he said. 'If you wouldn't mind just seeing me across.'

'Are you at St Dunstan's?'

'That's right. You must be a native.'

'I live at Rokeby,' I said.

'That just about makes us neighbours then, doesn't it?'

'I suppose it does,' I said. 'Have you been there long?'

'Two years, nine months.'

We reached the kerb and crossed over. 'I'll be fine from here,' he said. 'Thanks a lot.'

'I'll see you on to the bus,' I said. 'It's on my way.'

'My lucky day,' he grinned. 'Would you mind coming round to the other side? I'm more used to it.'

He laid his hand along my forearm and we moved down the street to the bus stop. 'You on holiday or something?' he asked.

It seemed simplest to say yes.

'You wouldn't be a chess player by any chance?'

'A what?' I thought I'd misheard him.

'Do you play chess?'

'I know the moves,' I said. 'That's about all.'

'I've just taken it up,' he said. 'Gone daft on it. It's like music.'

'How do you mean?'

'Well, it's a fact. I played through a game by some Russian the other evening and it was like Bach—nothing out of place —inevitable. D'you get me?'

'That's out my class altogether,' I said. 'The only inevitable thing about my chess is my getting mated.'

'Me too,' he chuckled. 'But it's a great game.'

I caught sight of a Number 5 coming down the hill towards us. 'Here's one of ours,' I said.

'You making your way home now?'

My stomach seemed to turn over.

'What's up?' he asked quickly.

'Come on,' I said and urged him forward. He let go of my arm, felt for the pole on the platform, and heaved himself up. The conductor guided him to a place with me following close behind.

He ran his hand along the seat then moved up beside the window and turned to me. I edged in beside him and handed the conductor my fare. In front of us two elderly women were discussing sales. The bus was not even half full. 'Thought I'd lost you for a moment,' he said. 'You'd be surprised how often that happens. It's one of the biggest drawbacks to this lark. I mean you can't go chasing off down the streets after someone you can't see, can you?'

I made a brief ineffectual attempt to imagine a world peopled with voices. 'No,' I said. 'I suppose not.'

'My name's Ron Harris,' he said.

'Braydon,' I said. 'Tony Braydon.'

He grinned. 'Pleased to make your acquaintance, Tony. How's life?'

'So so,' I said, and shook the hand he held out to me.

Before he let go of me he ran his fingers lightly over my palm and down my thumb. 'You like music?' he asked.

'Some.'

'Do you play an instrument?'

'No,' I said.

He shook his head. 'I'm on the wrong track. There's some-

thing though. Hands can tell you a lot, you know. You make things, don't you?'

'I'm supposed to be a painter,' I said. 'When I'm not teaching, that is.'

'Well, I wasn't so far out, was I? I always go for music first because I'm fond of it. It's a process of elimination—like "Twenty Questions".'

The bus turned in under the railway viaduct. I felt a swift knotting of terror in my guts—a stillness of apprehension. At once, like a sensitive compass needle, Ron's face had turned to mine. 'You've got the shakes, lad. What's up?'

I didn't trust myself to speak.

'You're right,' he said ruefully after a pause. 'It's none of my business.'

'It's not that,' I muttered. 'It's . . .'

He waited for me to go on but I couldn't. The bus growled to a stop and the two women in front of us gathered up their parcels and lurched past down the gangway. Ron touched me on the arm. 'Family trouble?' he murmured.

I had a sudden urge to jump up, fling myself off the bus and run away—anywhere. I couldn't do it. It was as if an invisible cord was tying me to this man whose eyes behind their dark glasses were like two ink blots in his pale, troubled face.

The bus started up again and just ahead I saw the traffic lights of Broadmead. The trembling in my limbs became grotesque. I *had* to look out and yet I had an insane dread of what I might see.

'You ill, lad?'

'I'll be all right in a moment,' I told him through teeth which rattled like dice.

It was the truth. As the bus ground on, I stared at the street and then up the hill towards the filling station. There was nothing to see. No wreckage, no sand scattered over the road, nothing. The trembling ebbed almost at once. I drew a deep breath, shivered, and turned to Ron. 'Sorry about that,' I apologized shakily.

'Sure you're all right?' he asked. 'You were going off like a fire alarm.'

I suddenly knew that I would have to tell him—that I *wanted* to tell him. Perhaps I wanted to see if he'd believe what I couldn't believe myself. 'My wife and daughter were killed in an accident just back there,' I said expressionlessly, and added: 'This morning.'

Ron sucked in his breath with a little dry hiss. 'You poor sod,' he murmured. 'You poor bloody sod.'

I stared at Ron, and something of the irony of our relation must have percolated through to me, because I became, for a moment, detached from my own situation. It was as though my floundering feet had touched a submerged and totally unexpected rock. I realized, even then, that I would be swept off again, but in that moment's respite, I remember noticing, with a prick of almost impossible pleasure how the sun struck along the banks of Siberian wallflowers which fringed the municipal bowling green and fused them into molten bronze.

The fading echoes of that instant lingered with me for the rest of the ride. I remember Ron asking me what I was going to do and my telling him I'd have to go up to Town to break the news to Sue's parents, but it all seemed curiously remote and improbable. Then the bus was slowing down outside the 'Red Fox' and I was getting to my feet. We gripped hands again and I promised I'd look him up when I got back and have a game of chess with him. As I climbed down into the road I heard him call: 'Good luck, Tony!' but my own reply was lost in the grinding of gears.

At once, too late, I wished I'd persuaded him to come and have a drink with me. If nothing else it would at least have postponed the moment when I would have to turn the key in the lock. Better still, I might have taken him home with me. But even as I revolved these impossibilities in my mind, my legs were already carrying me up the accustomed sidewalks, over the brown, dog-turded grass, past the mitred privet

hedges and the 'peep-proof' fences to Number 12, Rowan Terrace, Rokeby.

* * *

Have you ever woken up in the middle of the night with cramp in your leg? You lie there in the panting darkness trying to will yourself to move it but you can't. It's turned to lead, granite, immovable as a mountain and suddenly you're weaker than wet blotting paper. Yet you *know* that leg's got to be moved. The agony of effort is itself a pain of the spirit so huge it's almost exquisite. You grit your teeth. The sweat pours off you. The very darkness has become a smothering weight, a huge, plush eiderdown. You gasp for breath. White hot needles of pain skitter up and down your thigh. You're almost weeping from very weakness. Then, at the very moment when you've decided it's altogether too much and you're on the point of surrendering to gangrene, a kind of madness sweeps over you. You jerk up in bed, grab the dead limb with both hands, and heave it viciously to one side. Immediately, spent with the effort, you collapse. Gradually, slow and thick as cold treacle, the reluctant blood creeps back to thaw the frozen cells, and one by one the brittle nerves prick and tinkle like tiny glass springs. Yet the act of release was purely instinctive, its origins lying who knows where, in some region beyond volition, in the very quick of life itself.

So it is with me now as I turn in memory and begin walking up the final hill. How bright and still everything has become. Even the clouds seem pasted on to the sky, the shadows scribbled on the asphalt sidewalk. Nothing seems to move at all. The dun leaves droop motionless on the trees. The lace curtains in the windows are sly eyelids. The houses pretend not to see. Like a clockwork toy running down I move more and more slowly. Each pace takes me a minute, an hour. My shadow is nailed to the road. The hedges stretch themselves out longer and longer, each twig, each leaf has become elastic,

huge, and I microscopic; an atom; nothing at all. The clock of the world has stopped. An enormous, unbearable weariness overwhelms me. I am a wave which can never break, an uncompleted sigh. I no longer exist.

And then it happens. How can I hope to explain it? It is as though the sky is torn apart and a vast, invisible hand is thrust through the rent. It scoops me up like an insect and, in the twinkling of an eye, sets me down outside my own front door. All at once the street is alive again. It sings. The houses applaud madly, tossing their roofs in salute. The chimneys hug themselves. The leaves shiver with ecstasy. The shadows caper, and the clouds tumble like silver porpoises across the azure floor of the sky.

Stunned, battered by this sudden surging tide of life, I somehow managed to fumble the key into the lock, twisted it, and thrust wide the door. Immediately everything sank back. The merry-go-round stopped. Slowly I pushed the door to behind me. The latch clicked and the little familiar sound dropped to the mat and scuttled away like a beetle. I stood panting, with my back pressed up against the letter flap and listened. My heart was thudding like a trip hammer.

'Sue?'

It was a whisper addressed to the air and it seemed to linger and drift like a slim pennant of smoke along the hall and up the stairs, 'Sue? sue? sue?' growing fainter and fainter until it was no longer even a ripple in the silence, and I felt it spreading like an invisible layer of dust all over the silent, deserted house.

'Sue?' Louder this time. I took a step forward and thrust open the door to my workroom. The easel in the corner shrugged its shoulders; the brushes huddled crossly together in the brown jug and then appeared to waver and melt and flow into one another.

Very gently I backed out, closing the door softly, and set my foot upon the stairs. It was as though I were tiptoeing on the very brink of terror, carrying myself like a too-full cup

which any jog would spill. As I reached the landing and peered like a thief into Mandy's room I felt the whole house holding its breath for me.

All along the nearest wall stretched the mural of her own paintings which I had helped her fix up a few weeks before. How familiar they were and how strange: those weird elephants with trunks like licorice bootlaces, browsing in their two-dimensional jungles: those lions and tigers strutting in stiff self-conscious attitudes behind the wobbly bars of their mouse-trap cages: those colossal whales, with their melon-slice grins and their oars like viking raiders: those tiny steamers with their huge bearded captains, who wore their ships like shoes, and gazed steadfastly out on the horizon staunchly ignoring the gambolling wonders of the deep.

My eyes slid from revelation to revelation. As though in a trance I moved slowly from one picture to the next and came at last to the one she had thoughtfully titled: 'Tea in the Garden'. There we sat gazing straight ahead of us, perched precariously on the edges of our deck chairs, with our tiny flaccid legs dangling like washed socks above the emerald grass. Spread on the cloth before us was a meal that would have kept any normal family adequately nourished for a month. Plate after plate of precisely equilateral sandwiches, buns, ice-creams, jellies, biscuits, blancmanges; each lovingly depicted and coloured; while in the middle, inclining like some improbable oriental pagoda, and tinted the most nauseous rose-pink, stood a vast four-tiered cake. It was all ours. Prim and smug we sat beaming blandly out of the picture. No one attempted to cut the cake (no knife had been provided), the sandwiches and ice-creams remained unassailed and unmelted. After all there was no hurry. We knew they would always be there.

The more I stared at it, the more uneasy I became. Here, seen through the clear bright eye of childhood was the tiny world which Sue and I had built. Why had I never *seen* it before? It was as though I had just been handed the key to a

medieval allegory, and what had till then been mere diversion for the eye had become at one stroke sinister and pregnant with doom. As if to confirm my reading, I now noticed something for the first time. Lurking among the bushes that composed the backdrop to this Arcadian scene was a huge and sinister rat. It may well have been intended for a mouse and Mandy had been defeated by the problem of perspective, but rodent of some kind it undoubtedly was, and infinitely more sinister for being green. It did not appear to be doing anything, it was just *there*, slightly to Sue's left, crouching, observing, waiting. And suddenly I realized I would never be able to ask Mandy *why* it was there. I would never know. *Never.*

It was as though the ground had dropped away beneath me and I was suddenly falling, falling endlessly, into nothingness. In one flickering instant the tenuous filaments of my self-control drew out to invisibility and were gone. I felt as if my insides were being whipped out through a ragged rip in my side. I doubled up clutching at myself, and collapsed half on Mandy's bed, half on the floor. I was gripped by a spasm of insufferable shuddering. Tears spouted from my eyes. My bowels melted. At one stroke all my manhood dissolved. I became an infant; paralyzed by grief and terror; a mere passively suffering thing.

There, mercifully, my memory loses touch. When I came to the sun had moved round and was shining on my face. I felt as though a white hot spike had been hammered into my skull and each beat of my heart was thudding it deeper into my brain. For some seconds I could not grasp where I was or what had happened. It was the stench that brought it back to me. I whimpered involuntarily, and felt my seared eyelids burn as fresh tears squeezed along the protesting ducts. Groaning, half-blinded, and dizzy with the agony of my head, I thrust myself up slowly from the bed and lurched into the bathroom.

Retching at the stink, I peeled off my fouled clothes, then

stepped into the bath and wrenched the knob of the shower. The icy water hit me like a club. I gasped for breath and began clumsily to clean myself. Around my feet the earthy currents swirled first umber, then sienna and at last clear and colourless. Then I began to soap myself, scrubbing every hidden crevice, and ending with my hair. When I was finally satisfied that no trace of my shame remained on me I stepped out, swathed myself in a towel, picked up my trousers and underclothes and carried them downstairs, through the kitchen and out into the yard where I dropped them in the dustbin.

Back in the bathroom I swallowed three veganin tablets and set about drying myself. I had done my arms and my back and I had one foot up on the rim of the bath and was towelling my crotch when I caught sight of myself in one of the mirrors. I couldn't see my head, just from the ribs down, and it was as though I were looking through a window at someone else. Before I knew it, I was remembering the last time Sue and I had made love—well, more than just remembering, really *living* it. My body became a sort of hollow ache for her and, with my eyes still fixed on my stranger's reflection, I saw my JT swelling and stretching itself as though it were something almost foreign to me. And it looked enormous. It's a fact. A man always looks down on his penis and it's foreshortened, but when you see it as I was seeing mine, it gives you a shock. I remember thinking 'God, did she have all that in her?' and with the thought came the intensest recollection of that last time she had. I felt something was about to give. It was like a moving belt of little electric shocks running all along my belly and groin, and then the tip of old John brushed against the inside of my thigh. I put down my hand and that was that. The release was pure bliss. I remember how, when it was over, I straightened up and even managed to grin at myself. I don't think I've ever felt less ashamed in my life. At that moment even the realization that I would never have Sue again seemed somehow bearable. I cleaned up, chucked some talcum powder over myself, and padded into the bedroom.

The afternoon sun was streaming in through the window and for a minute or two I stood there bathing in the warmth, and gazing at the picture of Sue and Mandy I'd done four years ago. It was probably the best picture I'll ever paint and I did it in only two sittings. Usually my own stuff sickens me after the first enthusiasm but not this one. It was a real mother and a real baby and a real breast. I grinned as I recalled how, when I'd finished it, I'd told Sue that now I could call myself a painter and not feel I was lying. What I meant was that now I knew what it felt like to a real artist—a maker.

Old Renoir knew what he was talking about when he said he painted with his prick. Painting a good picture *is* like making love. There's the same total absorption in the object in front of you. You've got to lose yourself—dive in deep—and maybe, if you're lucky, it comes off and then it's out of this world. But I'm banging my head against the wall. You can't *talk* about art—talk, *real* talk about it, is poetry, and that's art itself.

Anyway I lifted this picture down from the wall and took a long hard look at it. Then I laid it face up on the bed and walked across to the wardrobe to get myself some clean clothes. I'd just got the top drawer open when the front door bell rang. It made me jump. I waited for half a minute and then it rang again, so I unhooked my dressing-gown from behind the door, knotted it round me and padded off downstairs.

I could make out a pair of vague shapes through the frosted glass, but even so I was in no sense prepared for the couple I found standing on the threshold when I opened the door. One, the man, was well over six foot and as thin as a fuse wire; the other was a woman of around fifty with a little beaky face that looked as sharp as if she'd kept it stropped. I stared from one to the other and then said: 'Yes?' in the most discouraging tone I could manage.

'We've been sent to you,' said the woman simply, and her companion nodded cadaverously.

My thoughts flashed back to Sergeant Wilson. 'Christ!' I thought. 'Surely not.'

'By He-Who-Dwells-Above,' she brought out in a rush, and raised her eyes to the roof of the porch.

I hadn't lived in Rokeby for six years and learned nothing. 'Sorry,' I said briskly, 'I'm a Mohammedan,' and made to close the door.

She was too quick for me. 'Oh, we're non-denominational. Heathen, Turk or Jew, we all belong to Him.'

'Please,' I said. 'Some other time.'

'To those who are Afflicted,' mourned her colleague, 'we bring the Succour of Faith. In the Hour of Your Need, we have come.'

I stared at him. 'Someone sent you?'

It was exactly as though I'd pressed a spring in the woman. Her eyeballs swivelled up. 'He Who Dwells—'

'Apart from Him,' I cut in. 'Was it Sergeant Wilson?'

For answer the man produced a folded newspaper from his pocket and tapped a yellow forefinger against a news item and a photograph. One glance was enough to tell me what it was. I looked up at him. With his stooped neck, hunched shoulders and sunken eyes he was the image of a Disney vulture.

'May we come in?' said the woman, and actually put her toe inside the door.

I shivered. 'No,' I said. 'Please go away.'

It was the wrong mode of address. She gave me a smile as sharp as an icicle. 'In your Hour of Need,' she reiterated, while the man brooded up behind her shoulder, and I felt a gentle, increasing pressure against the door.

'We'll pray together,' she promised, her eyes glittering, 'and then your dear departed ones will hover close.'

There was something terribly hypnotic about those pale, mad eyes of hers, and I could feel her will pressing against mine like a steel spring. She was part of the awfulness of death. 'Go away,' I said feebly, and at the same time shrank

back as her hand came round the door and groped for mine on the latch.

'Oh, they're here!' she breathed ecstatically. 'I can feel them all around me! It's a house of love, Herbert! A house of love!'

Her head and shrivelled chest squirmed round the door like a weasel. As she spoke she wasn't looking at me at all but over my shoulder, and God knows what mightn't have happened if at that moment her thin claw hadn't clutched my wrist.

The sensation I experienced is indescribable—a mixture of horror, intense fear, and, in some weird way, pity too. But the horror was uppermost. I snatched my hand away, dragged the door open, and thrust out blindly. Caught off balance she staggered back and the top of her skull cracked sickeningly against the bridge of her companion's nose. Then I had the door slammed to and the lock flipped down.

I heard them muttering to each other and saw through the frosted pane the distorted flurry of a white handkerchief. Then there was a pause. Just as I was beginning to think they might have gone round to try at the back, the letter flap inched up and a yellow pamphlet was poked through and fluttered to the mat. I didn't move. A minute or so later I heard their footsteps grating away down the path and then the reassuring click of the gate.

Without bothering to pick up the paper I hurried through into the living-room, poured myself out all that was left of the bottle of whisky, and drank it off as if it had been milk. Then I ran upstairs, flung off my dressing-gown and scrambled into some clothes. As soon as I was dressed I pulled out the attaché case from under the bed, chucked my pyjamas and a sponge bag into it, then ran downstairs and phoned for a taxi to take me to the station. I would have caught a bus if only I hadn't been so dead scared of bumping into that pair of human gargoyles.

While I was waiting for the cab to arrive I fetched down

the picture from the bedroom and wrapped some brown paper round it. On the spur of the moment I'd decided to give it to Sue's parents. Just as I finished fixing the last knot I heard the taxi drawing up outside. I locked the back door, scrawled 'No Bread—No Milk' on the slate in the kitchen window, drew a long deep breath and left.

* * *

As I was climbing into the cab I glanced back. I couldn't help it but I wish I hadn't. That old harpy had been on the right track when she'd called it 'a house of love'. Now it was like seeing something bright and precious sinking away down into deep water—a flicker, a vanishing gleam, and an ache of loss so poignant it could hardly be borne. I nearly told the driver to scrub round the whole thing, but the fact is I couldn't have trusted myself to speak without bursting into tears. So I just crouched miserably back in the corner clasping the picture to my chest and tried to fathom how I'd break my news to Mr and Mrs Dolfuss.

The more I thought about it the more impossible it seemed. In the first place I knew only too well that they didn't like me. For Sue's sake they'd been prepared to tolerate me, but that was about as far as it went. The truth is we existed on different planes. They had a social position to keep up and we hadn't. What's more, Sue had been their only child and her decision to throw in her lot with me must have come as a pretty nasty shock to them. In fact, until Mandy appeared on the scene, relations between the Dolfusses and the Braydons had been more or less sub-zero. Once they'd become grandparents things started to look up a bit, though, honestly, to hear them talking you might have thought Sue had managed to produce the baby by some sort of spontaneous combustion. As far as they were concerned I was never more than a sort of vague Unholy Ghost whose part in the proceedings was acknowledged obliquely—if, indeed, it was ever acknow-

ledged at all. I think I did my best to pretend it was all one to me but I can't kid myself I wasn't niggled deep down. After all, as I've admitted to myself often enough, my own self-confidence has always been a thing that's very much here-today-gone-tomorrow, and there's nothing better calculated to turn anyone into a ghost than for him to gain the impression that he's invisible.

I suppose my real problem was that right at the back of my mind I had a nasty suspicion they'd somehow try to pin what had happened on to me. And behind *that* suspicion lurked the not-even-to-be-thought-of one that maybe in some bloody awful inverted way they would be right. I know it *sounds* crazy—that it *was* crazy—but all the same I can't pretend it wasn't there. Perhaps that's why, on the spur of the moment, I'd felt prompted to give them the most precious thing I had left—as a sort of final despairing attempt to prove my good faith in the face of all those unspoken accusations I foresaw being shovelled silently on top of me.

In the ten minutes it took me to get from my house to the station I must have climbed those four flights of stairs to the Dolfusses' flat at least a dozen times. I'd manage to get exactly as far as their door every time. I'd put my finger on the bell push, and then—blank. I simply couldn't go through with it. I discovered I couldn't even imagine their *faces* any more! They were just vague shapes, like oval plates, bobbing about on the tops of shadows. And then, as the taxi turned into the station, it dawned on me that they'd never been anything else. Not to me, anyway. In all the years I'd known them they'd been, well, what? Vaguely hostile animated ideas labelled 'Mummy' and 'Daddy', certainly not one-tenth as real as the cheques they'd occasionally dropped in Sue's lap. Yet they'd been down to stay with us and we'd spent the odd week up in Town with them: indisputably they'd been part of our life. Yet there it was; as persons, as individual human souls capable of experiencing all the joys and ills that flesh is heir to, they just didn't exist for me, and try as I would I couldn't

make them. So no doubt the converse was just as true. It was a grim thought with which to be launched on my mission.

I paid off the taxi, lugged my case and the picture into the booking hall and bought a ticket. I saw the station clock was just coming up to six as I sprinted for the barrier. I struggled through and clambered into the last coach of the waiting train. It was occupied by a young woman who was nursing a baby on her lap and by two small children—hers I presumed—who had their noses buried in comics. In a far corner a sailor was curled up apparently asleep. I heaved my luggage on to the rack and sat back. A moment later the whistle blew and we were moving off.

Opposite me the woman had her eyes closed and her head tipped back against the upholstered bump that did for a pillow. She had a pale, freckled face and sandy gold hair, pulled back, from which stray wisps had worked loose across her forehead. A faint, worried frown was etched in thin lines above her eyebrows, and, in some odd way, the hand with which she was holding the baby to her looked as if it were frowning too. She was wearing a suit of misty, grey-green tweed and her blouse was fastened at her throat by a small gold brooch. There was something bewildered and defenceless about her, as though she had been pitch-forked into maternity before anyone had told her the facts of life. She couldn't have been more than twenty-five but already there was a sort of indefinable shadow of middle-age in the hollows at her temples and round the corners of her lips.

I was staring at her abstractedly—not really thinking about her at all—when suddenly she opened her eyes and gazed full into mine. For about a second we just stared at each other, both too surprised to look away, and then her eyelids dropped shut again and two little patches of red, like fingerprints, began to gather at the tips of her cheeks.

It was all I needed to shove my head back under the water, to remind me of what I no longer had. It was so unpremeditated and *human*. That's what really got me. At that moment

there didn't seem any point in my going up to London or in anything else. I'd come to a complete full stop.

I turned to the window and, as I gazed through the phantom image of my own face at the bright landscape wheeling past, I realized that nothing had any meaning at all. The things I had done since I'd walked out of that morgue were, like the tissue of a dream, all insubstantial. I was no longer sure they *had* really happened. Half involuntarily I put out my hand and touched the window. I think I expected it to dissolve, or in some way to transform itself into Sue's sleeping shoulder. I was aware of the smudged glass vibrating under my fingertips, and I watched them as they slid down and came to rest on the grimy window-sill. I think it was at that point it occurred to me that I might kill myself.

The effect of this realization was extremely strange. All at once it was as though some curtain, some muffling opaque screen, had been ripped aside. The sounds within the carriage became suddenly magnified in my ears. The rattle of the wheels, which before had been muted and distant, leapt upon me. The breath of the sleeping sailor came and went like the heavy surge of the sea. Even the faint whisper of the children's comics became crackling sharp and distinct. Not only that, every nerve in my body was instantly, prickingly alive. Beneath my hand the wood of the window-sill existed solid, wrought and grained; the brass heads of the screws proclaimed their roundness to my fingertips: even the atoms of grit in the corners were rough and real. Against my back I felt the worn plush of the seat stir and shiver irritably. It was as though the whole world had suddenly shouted at me.

I looked cautiously round. On the surface nothing appeared to have changed, and yet, in some extraordinary way I knew it had. I could *feel* it. It was a kind of busy to-ing and fro-ing, like bees; a sort of in-pouring of life, as though some invisible part of me were reaching out to mingle in the flux of the lives around me.

I don't know how long it went on for—honestly I don't

think it had anything to do with time in the normal sense—but I was aware of it gradually fading away and of everything settling slowly back again like ripples. Then, just as I lost touch with it altogether, I felt a vast sigh shuddering up through me. It was one of those huge gasps you experience as a child, long after a storm of grief is over, which seem to reach right down into the furthest forgotten crevice of your lungs and beyond there even, until you end by becoming nothing but that one, prodigious, in-drawn breath. Yet, when it was over, the thought which had triggered everything off was still there, bright and sharp as a broken bottle winking among the pebbles on a beach, and I knew that, sooner or later, I would have to stoop down and pick it up and learn the true shape and feel of it. But for the moment, knowing that it was real, I was content to let it rest. My head lolled back into the corner, I closed my eyes, and drifted off into a doze.

* * *

I woke up just as we were pulling into London and I found I couldn't stop yawning. The two small children who were being buttoned into their coats gaped at me in astonishment and then went off into fits of giggles. Their mother's attempts to shush them only made them worse. They staggered around, bumping into each other like a couple of small, round, brown bears, drunk with laughter. The sailor caught my eye and winked, and we both smiled at the mother. She gave a helpless shrug and began to laugh too. The train lurched, coming to a standstill, and the kids sprawled over each other and rolled on to the seat beside me, completely helpless with mirth. The sailor guffawed, scooped up one of them and set it back on its feet and I did the same with the other. Then we heaved down the woman's case from the rack. I collected my own case and the parcel, the woman hefted up the baby, and together we all shuffled out of the carriage on to the platform.

The sheer size and noise of the station seemed to have a sobering effect on the two drunkards, but I could sense their laughter still simmering inside them, and I knew I would only have to open my mouth to set them off again. I wish I'd done it because there's nothing in the world quite like the laughter of little kids. With them it's an all-or-nothing affair. A grown-up laughs with his mouth and his eyes, but a child does it with every bit of himself right down to his toes. He's as helpless as a feather in a hurricane.

I remember the time Sue and I took Mandy and a friend of hers to her first circus. She must have been about four because she was still at that chubby stage when her waist was an equator. The performance began with a parade round the ring. The lights went down, there was a shattering fanfare of trumpets, and into the arena stalked clowns on stilts. I looked at Mandy and I swear something melted in me. I suddenly saw what she was seeing. Men five yards high! Elephants, bears, horses—the lot! Magic! Her mouth fell open and her eyes seemed to swell like balloons until they contained the whole circus.

She sat like that popeyed and transfixed, until the clowns came on again and began some corny routine with hoses and buckets of water. All the other kids in the place started yelling their heads off. It was worse than Beachy Head in a gale! Mandy managed to hold out for a couple of minutes, then one of the clowns pulled another's trousers out from behind and a third tipped a bucket of water inside. That did it. She laughed so much it's a wonder she didn't wet her knickers. Then she was up on her feet and she and this other kid were hugging each other and rocking about absolutely possessed. Finally they staggered back and collapsed in their seats, but their seats had tipped up when they'd jumped off them and so they both ended up on the floor. This was the end, the genuine *ne plus ultra* and for months afterwards we only had to say to Mandy, 'Seen any good clowns lately?' to have her biting the carpet in hysterics. Talk about conditioned reflexes!

Five minutes with that child would have saved Pavlov a fortune.

There's no getting away from it, there's magic in kids, real magic. Wordsworth was on to something with his 'trailing clouds of glory.' Not *all* kids. Some are just little monsters. But the genuine article is out of this world. Of it and out of it. Time after time I've watched Mandy when she didn't know I was around, seen her absolutely absorbed, lost in what she was doing, and I sometimes used to feel a kind of tightness round my heart, a crazy sort of excitement as though I'd been singled out and privileged above all men. She had a way of slowing things up, focusing your attention, so you saw what you'd never have noticed if it hadn't been for her.

For me she was like that mirror in the fairy tale: through her I saw things come and go. Some I remember clearly, hundreds I must have forgotten, but she never remembered *any*. I mean even that clown business wasn't something she *remembered* exactly; each time it was a new experience which she lived through. I suppose the very act of remembering entails an awareness of detachment, a sense of looking in from the outside, and she was always on the inside, living it, *being* the things she did, the things she saw. And now she's dead. I have to write it down, to see the words on the paper, to convince myself yet again that it really is so. It just doesn't make sense. Light doesn't 'die' when the candle's blown out—it's going on somewhere. And what is 'death' anyway? Or 'life' for that matter? There have been times when I've been absolutely convinced that it's all some fantastic illusion worked with invisible mirrors. It was knowing Sue that first put the idea into my head, and then Mandy brought it back again. I mean she quite obviously didn't see the world I was seeing. Sometimes when I've been watching her I've felt I'm travelling on a course precisely parallel to life but a couple of paces to one side, and that between me and the real thing is a sky-high fence. Now and again I'll come across a gap—like I had in the train—but before I've collected my senses I'm back

where I started and I can never be sure I haven't just imagined it.

It was like that when I was walking up the platform behind the sailor and those two little kids. As long as they were there I was still in touch. I wanted to have them around as long as possible, and I'd made up my mind that I'd offer to share a taxi with them. But as we approached the barrier I saw a man waving from the other side. The woman caught sight of him at the same moment, her face lit up and she called out to the two kids. They looked round, saw him, and were off. Barriers? Tickets? What did they care? They bounced up against the fence and he bent down and hoisted them over onto his side. Within seconds they were off again, staggering round, hooting with laughter as they no doubt tried to tell him about their journey. By the time I was through, the family was reunited and the sailor was being thanked for having carried the case. I parked myself under the indicator board and pretended to be studying it while I watched them go, all talking at once and laughing, and I swear to God that if I'd had a gun handy I'd have shot myself there and then I felt so bloody awful.

* * *

I daresay there are people in the world who really relish being on their own, well, everyone does from time to time, but that isn't the same as being lonely. Knowing there's no one who really cares a damn where you are, whether you're drunk or sober, alive or dead—that's loneliness. When I saw that family disappearing down the station tunnel I swallowed a good mouthful of it. The need *to* need and the need to *be* needed. At that instant I experienced both so violently it was like claws in my stomach. I looked round at the swirling crowds and I didn't see *one* face which held anything in it for me. Not one. They were all bunched up tight like pale fists or just blank like bits of paper with nothing written on them.

There was a West Indian in a blue boiler-suit sweeping up discarded tea-cartons. I could see he was a thousand miles away in Barbados maybe or Trinidad, somewhere anyway where life was a bit more colourful than this. He never once looked up and when his broom reached me he just muttered the word 'Feet.' Feet! That's all I'd become! I wanted to say something to him, make *some* sort of contact, but I couldn't. Whoever heard of *feet* talking? I bent down and picked up my case and the picture and walked across to the buffet. At that moment I needed a drink more than I've ever needed one in my life.

I pushed through the swing door and looked round. It was just like every other station bar I'd ever been in only more so. I've sometimes wondered who designs these places and what he has in mind when he does it. A sort of filling station for robots maybe. It wouldn't have surprised me in the least if I'd found the pump handles labelled 'Commercial' and 'Super Octane'. It was about as matey as a dentist's waiting-room and so bright it squeezed up my eyeballs into pinsheads. There wasn't an inch of shadow anywhere except under the tables. It was all chromium and glass and plastic and little hard splinters of light pinging off from unlikely corners like sniper's bullets.

I made my way across to the bar, propped my picture up against a stool and sat down. On the wall immediately in front of me an animated apple dwarf was advertising a non-alcoholic cider. Every ten seconds his apple head went back, his apple arm came up, and a flagon of flickering lights discharged itself down his gullet.

I ordered a double Scotch and then I remembered that I hadn't had anything to eat since breakfast. I asked the girl what there was. She raised her pencilled eyebrows wearily. 'Just what you can see in front of you.'

I examined the glass display case and pointed to a dish of cellophane swathed rolls. 'What's in those?'

She stifled a yawn. 'Flam.'

'Flam?'

'That's right, *Flam*,' she reiterated. 'You know, what they advertise on the telly. And those is cheese and tomato.'

'I'll try one of each,' I said and pushed a note across to her.

She produced a plastic plate from under the bar, lifted two rolls on to it with an enormous pair of plastic tongs, and as an afterthought added a sort of plastic spatula shaped like a tiny steam-rollered banana. While she was fetching my change I surveyed my purchases and then took a long drink at my whisky.

As always I gagged on the first swallow but once it was safely down the rest followed easily enough. I set down the half-empty glass, picked up one of the rolls and turned it over, looking for a way in. Usually these things are fastened down with a bit of Sellotape and it's just a question of finding it and peeling it off, but on this there didn't seem anything to get hold of at all. I picked up the other one and looked at it. It was identical—a genuine, one hundred per cent hygienic, Twentieth Century catering masterpiece. I returned my attention to the first and began fumbling at the transparent envelope, but I couldn't make an impression anywhere—there just weren't any visible seams. Then I tried sawing at it with the plastic knife. I could see the thing inside squirming and gaping but the cover wouldn't budge, and as soon as I relinquished the pressure the roll humped itself up again and resumed its former shape. I tried holding on to one end of the sheath and squeezing the contents up to the opposite end like toothpaste and then I reversed the process. The roll slipped along easily enough but it still didn't come out. Finally, in desperation, I took hold of it in both hands and heaved. I could feel it stretching like a wet sock and in the gap between my fists the plastic envelope took on a curiously sweaty, milky shade. When it was almost twice its original length I gave up and looked round for the barmaid. She was leaning over the far end of the bar talking to a porter. While I was trying to catch her eye, I saw another customer pick up a roll similar to mine,

raise it to his lips and casually tear himself a way in with his teeth.

Feeling a complete fool, I retrieved my own tortured packet and began gnawing away at one end. The plastic parted reluctantly and I shook out the mangled victim on to my plate. By now it didn't look like a roll at all. At either end it was all welts and humps from the grip of my fingers, and its long thin middle was an intricate network of minute wrinkles. From one end a slip of bright pink material protruded like a tiny throttled tongue. It was with the strongest sensation of misgiving that I inserted the tip of the spatula half-way along its waist and prised it open. I suppose it sounds ridiculous, but I felt exactly as if I were about to perform an autopsy on some innocent creature I'd just killed. The thought of actually *eating* it was so repellent that without bothering to conclude my examination I pushed the corpse to one side, drank off the rest of my whisky and signalled for some more. Then I picked up the other roll, undressed it without much difficulty, and began to chew my way through it.

While I was eating I couldn't take my eyes off the thing on my plate. I'm not kidding, the experience with that roll had really upset me. Ever since I was knee high I've had a queer sort of sympathy with *things*—not *living* things necessarily, just *things* in general.

As a kid I really used to worry about what would happen if the brushes and brooms weren't put back in their right places in the cupboard and when no one was around I often made a point of sneaking in and rearranging them. It was the same with Dad's tools. I couldn't bear the thought of them not having their proper home. After all, what could a screwdriver possibly have in common with a bunch of cold chisels? I suppose it's crazy really, but I don't know. I'm not so sure that this animate and inanimate business is as cut and dried as some people make out. In fact the older I get the less sure I am of *anything*. When I hear someone laying down the law about something I immediately begin to suspect he's either a

fool or a liar. And if he happens to be talking about a subject I'm familiar with I'm usually forced to conclude that he's both. The ones who *know* don't make much of a song and dance about it because they don't need to. Simply *knowing* is enough for them. And if they do feel moved to get up on their hind legs they're either ignored or they're shouted down by the professional smarties. But when they're safely dead and can't protest, all they've said is dug up, purified, processed for human consumption, and finally churned out as a sort of tasteless, pre-digested lump of 'Flam'. God alone knows what a diet of that sort will produce in the end—it doesn't bear thinking about.

After I'd finished my cheese and tomato roll I swilled it down with the whisky and then lit a cigarette. The loneliness that had driven me up to the bar in the first place had by now settled down cat-like on its cushion of alcohol and become a sort of purring ache. I looked down at the parcelled picture and felt a sudden urge to strip off the wrapping and see it plain once more, but I was deterred by the thought of having to untie all those knots and then tie them all up again. While I was still contemplating it the barmaid came back and asked me if I wanted anything else.

I shook my head and gravely propelled the plate containing the dead roll across to her as though it were a tiny bier.

'Don't you want it?' she asked.

I looked at her and then down at the etiolated corpse.

She regarded it distastefully. 'What's the matter with it?'

'I killed it,' I murmured. 'I didn't mean to. It was pure accident.'

She surveyed me quizzically for a moment and then grinned. 'It does look a bit queer,' she admitted. 'Sort of stretched.'

'Strangled,' I corrected. 'Look you can see its poor little tongue poking out. It's a dirty business.'

She shook her head, though whether over me or the roll I

couldn't be sure, and transferred the plate to the shelf behind the bar. Then she produced a damp cloth and began wiping the top of the counter. 'Waiting for a train?' she asked.

'Just killing time.'

'Why don't you try the news theatre?' she suggested. 'It's a lot cheaper than what you're drinking.'

My attention was caught once more by that cider advertisement. 'Tell me,' I said. 'Where does he *put* all that stuff he drinks?'

As she turned her head I noticed she really had quite a nice profile. Her make-up was awful though. 'I don't know,' she shrugged. 'Where do you think?'

'You mean you haven't got a barrel somewhere down below full of little sparkling lights?'

Before she could answer she was summoned away to the other end of the bar. I stubbed out my cigarette, climbed off the stool, and picked up my things. Then, a little unsteadily, I walked out into the station.

* * *

I hadn't anything more than the vaguest idea of what I was going to do. Sue's people live in Hampstead and I was trying to make up my mind whether to go by bus or tube when I caught sight of a row of telephone kiosks. It occurred to me I might as well ring up and find out if they were in. I didn't intend to break the news over the phone but I couldn't see that it would do any harm to let them know I was coming.

I found an empty booth and managed to squeeze myself and my luggage inside. The place stank of stale tobacco fumes —a kind of dank, dead, phlegmy smell that made my stomach heave. I tried pulling the door open behind me but I'd forgotten it was rigged up to work the light switch and so I had to settle for holding my breath and keeping as far away from the mouthpiece as possible. I shoved in my pennies, dialled the number, and waited.

I heard the burring which told me the number was being rung and then a voice said: 'Hello?'

'Hello,' I replied. 'Is that Mrs. Dolfuss?'

'Hello?' said the voice again. 'Hello? Hello?'

'Is that Mrs Dolf—?' I tried again and then realized I hadn't pushed button 'A'. I stabbed with my thumb and there followed a series of metallic thumps and rattles. 'Sorry,' I apologized. 'My fault.'

'Is that you, Tony?'

'Yes,' I said, 'this is me. Who's that?' It didn't sound like Sue's mother.

'Pamela, of course. Who did you think it was?'

'Pamela!' I echoed. 'What are you doing there?'

'What am I doing *where,* for Christ's sake?'

'At the Dolfusses'?'

There was a peal of laughter. 'Are you fluted or something? I live here, remember?'

'Oh Christ,' I muttered, 'I'm going round the bend. I thought—'

'You thought you were ringing the D's,' she finished for me. 'Too bad. Where are you anyway?'

'The station. I'm up in Town.'

'I guessed as much. Well, it's nice to hear you again, even though you did think I was Mrs D.'

'Pamela,' I said and it was exactly as though I were listening to someone else speaking with my voice. 'Pamela, can I come over and see you?'

'See *me*? What about the D's?'

'No, *you*. Can I Pamela?'

'Now?'

'Yes. Now.'

She hesitated for a second or so then: 'Yes, of course you can.'

'You aren't booked up or anything?'

She laughed. 'First come: first served. What are you doing up in Town anyway?'

'I'll tell you when I get there,' I said. 'I'll be right over.'

'It sounds fascinating,' she said and laughed again. 'Does Sue know you're here?'

"Bye for now,' I said and put down the receiver.

There was an off-licence just opposite the bus stop and I went in and bought a bottle of Haig. I couldn't get over what had happened. On the surface it was an obvious enough mistake—Pamela had taken over the lease of their old flat from Sue's people and had kept on their phone—but I'd long since got accustomed to the Dolfusses' new number. I can only suppose that my sub-conscious had stepped in and done the job for me, because once I'd arranged to see Pamela I knew that was what I wanted to do—what I *had* to do. I seized on her as though she were the sole bright thread which could lead me out of the maze in which I was wandering and, as the bus began to grumble and jolt me across London, I allowed myself to slip back in time to when I'd first met her.

TWO

DAYDREAM

I'd come up to the RCAP on a County Schol. and with the sort of Dick Whittington determination to make good that only a thoroughbred provincial will understand—that excruciating mixture of pride and shyness which you wear like a hair shirt next to your skin for twenty-four hours a day. I found myself digs in a kind of residential club in Earls' Court which had the double merit of being cheap and forcing me to meet other people. What spare time I had I spent in the galleries or just wandering round, wherever my feet took me, sketching things. I must have a couple of dozen sketch books buried somewhere full of the stuff I did then. Not all of it bad, either. Derivative, maybe, but at eighteen who isn't?

It was the time when Expressos were sprouting up like toadstools all over London, and I've often wondered what people like us did before they were thought of. The hours I must have spent propped over a cup of lukewarm froth, talking and scribbling, trying to find something I probably wouldn't have recognized even if I *had* found it. Talk! It makes me grin to think of it. What we didn't discuss was nobody's business. The bigger the subject the better we liked it. Death; anarchy; sex; socialism; surrealism; sex; nihilism; existentialism; sex—the lot. Words, millions and millions of words, slugged back and forth like punch-drunk pugs, while the inevitable juke box thudded out Count Basie or Ella Fitzgerald.

Drifting around in all that whirlpool I found Pamela. I've

got a sketch of her somewhere, with her chin propped in her hands and a cigarette drooping from her mouth, gazing down sombrely at a cup of *cappucino* through eyelashes drawn down, Juliet Greco style, against the smoke. I remember how I was struck by the quality of stillness about her, as though she'd withdrawn everything except her mere physical presence to the dark side of the moon. When I'd finished the sketch and was turning over the page she looked up and asked to see it. I passed it over without comment. She gazed at it and then gave a little shug and handed it back. This lack of positive response nettled me into asking her what she thought of it.

She frowned. 'How do you expect *me* to know if the way you see me is the true way? I know it's not the way *I* see myself.'

'And how's that?' I asked her.

'A sort of cross between Lollobrigida and Audrey Hepburn.'

I looked down at my drawing and then across at her again, trying to make out if she was being serious. If she was I could understand her lack of enthusiasm for my sub-Soutine. She was a nice enough girl but she wasn't in the pin-up class by a long chalk. Her nose was too big for one thing, and so was her mouth, but there was something about her I couldn't help liking.

I dropped the subject of the sketch and asked her if she'd let me do a proper portrait of her.

'I might,' she said slowly. 'When?'

'Whenever suits *you*. Tomorrow if you like.'

She considered this for a while and then gave the same little shrug I'd seen when she first handed back the sketch. 'All right.'

No sooner had she agreed than I was racked by doubts. My portraits were pretty chancy affairs. What if I made a mess of the whole thing? 'You're sure it's all right?' I said. 'I mean I don't want to—'

She raised her eyebrows. 'What are *you* worried about? I'll be the one to get the shock.'

And so it was settled. She gave me an address in Hampstead and I arranged to be there at about five the following afternoon.

I'd assumed she came from the same sort of background as the rest of the Expresso crowd and when I arrived at the address she'd scribbled down on the back of a cigarette packet I was sure there was some mistake. It was an enormous mock Georgian affair set back in a couple of acres of garden. Then it occurred to me it might have been divided up into flats, so I walked up the drive to the front door and looked around for a row of bells. All I could see was a damned great circle of wrought iron set into a niche in the wall. It so obviously wasn't my territory that, without bothering to ring, I'd shouldered my easel and was about to clear off when the door opened and there she was.

'I saw you coming up the drive,' she said. 'Why on earth didn't you ring?'

I made a vague sort of gesture towards the house. 'You live *here*?'

'Well, I'd hardly be letting you in if I didn't, would I? Come on upstairs.'

I followed her into a panelled hall and up a staircase which seemed about as wide as a football pitch. It felt as if I was walking on a couple of thousand quid and I daresay I was. I swear the pile on those carpets must have been all of an inch and a half deep.

When we reached the landing she led me down a corridor and into a room which looked out over the garden at the back. Garden! It was more like a private park. Enormous beech trees scattered around; a tennis court; a swimming pool and God knows what else.

I shrugged off my easel, propped it against a chair, and looked round the room. Over the fireplace was a socking great Rouault reproduction which I didn't remember having seen

before. I went to get a better look and then I realized it was an original. 'Christ!' I exclaimed. 'Are you a millionaire or something?'

'I'm sorry,' she said, 'I suppose I should have warned you. But then you probably wouldn't have come.'

She held out a box of cigarettes to me and I daresay that if I'd been up in such things I'd have recognized it as Fabergé or something equally fabulous, but by then I was beyond surprise. I took a cigarette. 'Well, now I *am* here,' I said, 'you might as well put me straight. What *are* you, anyway?'

She told me her father owned a company which made, among other things, cigarette lighters—I recognized the name straight away—and that her mother was a daughter of Lord someone or other. To hear her say it you'd have thought she was ashamed or something, but maybe she was just trying to put me at my ease. Frankly I'd never felt less at ease in my life. At any moment I expected the door to fly open and some foaming aristocrat to leap in brandishing a cutlass and chase me out of the house. 'And you?' I asked her. 'What do you do?'

'I'm trying to get into university. That's why I need Latin.'

I remembered then that she'd mentioned something about Latin to me once before but it hadn't sunk in. I nodded. 'And if you get it?'

'I'll go to Bedford in October.'

'That's what you want to do?'

'Yes, I think so.'

I looked at her, and some of that remoteness in her that had first caught my attention seemed to explain itself. She was certainly an odd fish to be swimming in my pool. I wondered if her family knew what she did in the evenings.

She blew a thin jet of smoke towards me. 'How do you want me to pose?' she asked. 'In the nude?'

I must have looked so aghast at the suggestion that even she was taken aback. 'My figure's not *that* bad,' she protested.

'For Christ's sake!' I expostulated in a strangled whisper. 'Someone'll hear you!'

I think she was genuinely perplexed by my reaction. She shook her head. 'There's nothing to worry about,' she insisted. 'No one'll come in.'

And suddenly I did want very much to paint her in the nude—well, just to see her that way actually—but I was terrified of telling her so. Come to think of it, my hands were trembling so much I doubt if I'd have been able to hold a brush.

She looked at me with a sort of puzzled frown for a moment then shook her head. 'You *are* a case,' she said. 'I thought you were keen on the idea.'

'I am,' I hastened to reassure her, 'but you see I wasn't prepared for all this—' I waved my cigarette round and a lump of ash flew off. In a flash I was on my knees trying to brush it up off the carpet.

She laughed. 'Relax, buster! Wasn't it you who said that artists were the only genuine aristocracy?'

I felt myself blushing like a schoolgirl, and this, more than anything she'd said, riled me beyond words. 'OK then,' I said fiercely. 'Let's get on with it. Get your clothes off and sit over there by the window.'

I suppose I half expected her to back out now, but not a bit of it. She stood up, screwed her cigarette out in the ashtray, then caught hold of her jumper by its waist and heaved it over her head.

Before I'd got my easel half up she was in her undies and fumbling behind her shoulders for the hook of her bra. Then, while I tried to keep my mind on what I was doing, I saw her step out of her panties and stand there waiting for further orders. I looked at her over the top of the canvas I was struggling with and nodded. 'I think we'll have the door locked all the same,' I said. 'If only for my own peace of mind.'

She shrugged as though it made no odds to her, walked

across and clicked a bolt into place. Then she came back to where her clothes were lying. I finished anchoring the canvas and took a deep breath. 'All right,' I said, 'let's have you on this,' and as I spoke I lifted up a little gold-painted chair that I'd noticed in one corner, and planted it before the window.

She sat down obediently and looked at me. And suddenly I was gripped by excitement at the thought of painting her. I forgot all about where I was and who she was. I took hold of one of her arms and hooked it over the back of the chair and then crossed one of her ankles over her knee. 'Now bend your head a bit,' I told her, 'so your hair falls forward. That's it. Now hold that.'

I hurried back to the easel, shifted it round a couple of feet, and flung open my sketch-box. I was shaking with excitement and I kept saying over and over to myself, 'Christ, if only I can get it! If only I can!'

God knows how long I kept her sitting there. Whenever she seemed about to rebel I'd yelp: 'Hold it a second! For Christ's sake don't move *now*! I'll let you get up in a minute. Just let me get this shadow right,' until in the end she muttered desperately, 'I've *got* to move,' and staggered up, groaning.

I grunted sulkily, stood back a couple of paces, and looked at what I'd done. It was a bit rough and ready, of course, but by God, it was *alive*, and the first rush had taken me safely past that critical point where so many of my promising pictures seem to trip and fall flat. Another half hour, I reckoned, and I might have done something really worth doing.

'May I look?'

She was deferential and I took it quite as a matter of course. Maybe I hadn't been so far out with that remark about art and aristocracy. I stepped to one side and let her take my place in front of the easel.

'Well?' I said after she'd stared at it hard for a full minute.

She turned to me with real surprise in her eyes. 'But it's *good*,' she said. 'You really *can* paint.'

'I know that,' I said. 'Now give me ten more minutes.'

To my astonishment she shook her head firmly, and walking across to the pile of her clothes, picked up the bra and slipped into it. 'Do you know what the time is?' she asked.

'No.'

'Half past six!'

I didn't believe it, but she was right. I'd kept her sitting there for an hour and a quarter without a break! I started to apologize and then caught sight of my picture and the words died on my lips. Jesus! There was no getting away from it—it *was* good! I'd used a Fauve palette and those bloody great slabs of scarlet and cerulean seemed to quiver on the canvas. Alive, alive oh! It was then I knew for sure that if I laid another brush on it I'd spoil it. I scribbled 'Braydon '52' in cadmium orange across the bottom left hand corner and began scraping my palette clean. All at once I felt as tired and jittery as if I'd done a sub-four-minute mile.

Pamela had finished dressing and was combing her hair when I hooked up the catches on my box and began dismantling the easel. 'What are you going to do with it?' she asked.

I shrugged. My attachment to the picture seemed suddenly very tenuous. It's like that sometimes. They're born in some white hot plasma that exists in a sort of magnetic field between you and the thing you're painting, and once the field's broken they take on an independent life of their own.

'Will you sell it to me?'

'*Sell* it? You really want it?'

'Yes.'

'You can have it,' I said. 'A present. You've earned it anyway. It'll need a frame—white, fairly deep. You can buy that.'

She wouldn't have it. 'Don't be an idiot,' she said. 'You're hard up'—that was true enough—'and I get a decent allowance. Besides I *want* to buy it. Come on, how much?'

'All right,' I said. 'Why not? Let's say a quid.'

'That's all you think it's worth?'

'For Christ's sake,' I protested, 'my name's not Duveen. A quid'll cover me for paint and canvas and bus fares. What did you expect me to ask? A thousand?'

'I'll give you ten.'

Ten quid! I could *live* on that for a fortnight—three weeks with luck! I stood the canvas on top of the bookcase, as far away from the Rouault as possible, moved back beside Pamela and looked at it. In the waning light it seemed to smoulder and glow like crawling lava. I felt suddenly as sad as if I'd lost something whose value I hadn't appreciated till too late. 'All right,' I sighed. 'If you're sure that's what you want.'

'I'm quite sure, thank you.'

Before I could change my mind she walked across to the bureau desk in the corner, pulled open a little drawer and took out some notes. These she brought over and handed to me. 'There's ten pounds there. I drew it out this morning. Do you want me to count it?'

I shook my head. The whole thing had knocked me sideways. It was the first picture I'd ever sold and yet I couldn't be sure if I was pleased or sorry. I flipped the corners of the notes with my paint-stained fingertips and thanked her awkwardly.

She laughed. 'Now I'm broke till tomorrow so I'll let you buy me a drink out of your profits. Do you want to leave your things here?'

'No, I'll take them,' I said. 'Do you think I could have a wash first?'

She opened an adjoining door and I found myself in a bathroom that might have come straight out of the colour section of *Homes Beautiful*. The only personal touch was a packet of *Tampax* cowering coyly in a corner of the windowsill. I scrubbed my hands clean, dried them on an azure towel, and sneaked out like a thief.

We didn't meet a soul on our way downstairs, but just as we were turning from the drive into the road a great silver-

grey Jag whispered up and deep in its shadowy depths I saw a pale hand flutter like a frond of water weed. To the best of my knowledge Pamela made no answering sign at all. When the car had disappeared up the drive I asked her who was in it.

'Francesca,' she said.

'Who's she?'

'My mother.'

I digested this in silence for a moment—after all it was none of my business—but somehow the offhand, almost reluctant way she tendered the information struck me as more than a little odd. 'Well, it's a nice name,' I said at last and I confess it seemed a pretty feeble observation even for me.

Pamela burst out laughing. 'You really *are* a goon! People just don't *say* things like that any more.'

'But it's true,' I insisted. 'At least *I* think so.'

She looked at me sideways out of those shrewd dark eyes of hers and then shook her head slowly as though I were a hopeless case. But for all its thoughtful tolerance there was something about that look which gave me goose-pimples and set me remembering how I'd felt when I'd seen her getting undressed. Somehow she always seemed about ten clear jumps ahead of me and it was making me decidedly uneasy.

She led me to a little white-painted pub that was tucked away down a back alley. There was one of those blue and white LCC plaques stuck up beside the door saying that Leigh Hunt or someone had once lived there, and the walls inside were decorated with 18th Century bills advertising prize fights. I suppose it was all a bit twee really, but someone had obviously taken a lot of pains over it and the result wasn't at all bad.

Pamela sat herself down in one of the high-backed settles that jutted out from the walls, while I dumped my gear in a corner, asked her what she wanted, and went over to the bar. I was still standing there when the door opened and some

other people came in. There were four of them, all about my age, and as soon as they caught sight of Pamela they started yapping like a lot of puppies.

I couldn't be sure whether Pamela was glad to see them or not, but she introduced me in a vague sort of way and didn't seem to object when they sat down around her. As I carried our drinks across, one of them turned to me and said blandly: 'We'll have the same, old chap. Thanks a lot.'

I looked down at them. Ken, the one who'd spoken, was a sallow unhealthy-looking specimen with a crew cut and gold-rimmed glasses. As soon as he'd given me his order he ignored me and went on talking loudly to Pamela. I looked to her for guidance, but she too seemed to have forgotten I existed. Of the others only one paid me any attention. She glanced up, caught my eye, and gave a tiny shake of her blonde head. The movement was so small it was almost nothing, but it said, as clearly as if she'd shouted, 'Don't you do it.'

I decided that the best way out was to pretend I hadn't heard. Since all the seats at the settle were now occupied I fetched myself a chair which I parked at the end of the table facing Pamela. Then I sat down, lifted my glass to her, and drank. She acknowledged my gesture with a movement of her eyes and the faintest shadow of a smile. I felt the tension building up like static and wondered when the discharge would come.

I didn't have to wait long. Sensing something had gone awry, Ken looked round the table in a puzzled sort of way and then enquired: 'Where are those drinks?' He didn't say it to me but to the other male in his *entourage* who shrugged and twitched an eyebrow in my direction.

Ken turned to me and expanded his nostrils as though there was an unpleasant smell about. 'The custom of buying drinks for one's friends is, I assure you, normal practice among civilized peoples,' he informed me acidly. 'Can it be that the news hasn't yet percolated through to your portion of the outback?'

Suppressing the temptation to flatten his nose, I took a sip at my glass, set it down with elaborate precision in the exact centre of its little mat and said: 'Where I come from we are obviously far, far more particular in our choice of friends.' It wasn't much of a retort but it was a good deal better than I usually managed.

To my intense delight the girl who had, in a sense, provoked this exchange, gave a loud chuckle. I know now that she did it purposely to annoy Ken, but at the time it descended at my feet like a bunch of roses thrown into the bull ring.

He turned to her and choked her off in what sounded like Italian; then he told the other chap to go and make good my deficiencies. While this was being done I finished my drink and stood up. I think I hoped to shake some sort of positive response out of Pamela, but, if so, I was disappointed. She seemed to have sunk into that passive, quiescent state with which I was already familiar, though it may have been that she was simply entranced by the dissertation on Sartre with which Ken was now entertaining the company. He could certainly talk, but for all that he was a cold, dead fish. I disliked him instinctively and intensely. I somehow sensed that he was my own total negation, and that in his presence I was cancelled out to nothingness. I nodded goodbye to Pamela, collected up my gear, and walked out into the still, evening air. The door clicked to behind me; I drew in a long, deep breath; and, as I slowly let it out, I felt a sudden, inexplicable shiver skitter like a lizard down my backbone.

* * *

It must have been every day of a fortnight before I bumped into Pamela again. Our meeting occurred, of all the unlikely places, at the zoo. I'd gone to do some sketches of the big cats and I was propped up against the rail scribbling away when I sensed someone standing close behind me. I glanced round

and there she was. 'Hello,' I greeted her. 'What are you doing here?'

'I often come,' she said. 'Daddy's an honorary member and I get in on his ticket.'

The tiger I'd been drawing chose that moment to heave itself to its feet and slope off into its den, so I closed up my book and asked her if she'd like some tea. She didn't refuse, and on our way to the restaurant she told me she'd got into Bedford.

'That's terrific!' I exclaimed. 'When do you start?'

'The beginning of October.'

'You don't sound exactly enthralled. I thought you were dead keen on the idea.'

She shrugged. 'My whole life's a series of anti-climaxes. I daresay it'll pick up again once I've started. At the moment, frankly I couldn't care less.'

I shook my head. I couldn't be sure if she was serious or had simply adopted this attitude for my benefit. When I'd heard that I'd got *my* scholarship I'd been prancing on air for days—in a sense I suppose I still was. 'Are your folks pleased?' I asked.

She wrinkled her eyebrows. '"Folks"?' she repeated vaguely. Then her brow cleared. 'Oh, *Francesca*? Yes, I think so. She likes your picture by the way.'

'You *showed* it to her?'

Her eyes widened. 'Yes, of course.'

'And she didn't *mind*?'

This time I could see she was genuinely foxed. 'Mind? Why should she mind? What do you mean?'

'Well, me painting you like that. In the nude, I mean. She didn't think it—?'

Amused comprehension stole into her eyes. 'Well, of course she did,' she admitted gravely. 'That's why she insisted on my being examined by a gynaecologist. But once she'd seen his report she accepted the situation with a good grace. As a matter of fact she said she'd like to meet you.'

'She really said that?'

Pamela solemnly raised two fingers to her right temple. 'Brownie's honour.'

'Well, I'm damned!'

'That's only too likely,' she concurred. 'Francesca swallows promising young artists like oysters—by the dozen. Don't say I haven't warned you.'

'Is she really your mother?'

'From time to time.'

'I couldn't make head or tail of that one, so I dropped it and asked her if she'd done anything about a frame for the picture.

She nodded. 'I got it back from Turnstall's yesterday.'

'Turnstall's!' I whistled. 'You don't do things by halves, do you? Does it look all right?'

'More than all right. It looks splendid. Worth all that agonising cramp *and* the ten pounds. Which reminds me, I'm really supposed to be very angry with you.'

'With me?' I blinked innocently but I guessed what was coming.

'You behaved like an utter boor that evening. I was *livid*!'

'For Christ's sake!' I expostulated. 'Have a heart! What do you take me for? If I'd had the courage of my convictions I'd have given that specimen a good poke up the nose. *"We'll have the same, old chap."* Who in Christ's name does he think he is?'

'That "specimen" happens to be a very old friend of mine, *and* an ex*treme*ly brilliant writer,' she replied witheringly. 'It may interest you to know that a Considerable Number of Highly Influential People regard him as a genius.'

'Well, bully for him,' I smouldered. 'I'm just a simple country lad with straws in my ears. Where I come from geniuses are pretty rare birds. Maybe if he'd dropped his pants I might have recognized him.'

'And just *what* is that supposed to mean?'

'With all that crowd around to lick it for him, his arse must be shining like a mirror!' Honestly, I was hopping mad.

For a second or two I really thought she was going to land me one, but then her sense of humour seemed to get the better of her—maybe she had a visual imagination or something—for suddenly she giggled, no doubt in spite of herself, and I knew I'd got through.

In a sense I suppose that involuntary giggle of Pamela's was a turning point in my life. If she *had* batted me one—as, no doubt, I deserved—I would almost certainly have cleared off, because she didn't mean enough to me to make me want to hold on to her—certainly not at the expense of going through all the labour of back-pedalling on what I'd said about Ken. In the end we reached a compromise, and over tea I let her tell me all about him—what he had written and what he was going to write and who he admired and how it was natural for him—being a genius, of course—to overlook one or two outmoded social conventions like ordinary good manners. By the time I was able to get a word in I felt I'd had enough of Ken to last me six lifetimes, and in an attempt to loosen the stranglehold he seemed to have on the conversation I enquired about the people he'd had in his retinue—particularly the blonde.

'Susan Dolfuss, you mean?'

'I'm not sure,' I said. 'The introductions were a bit sketchy, weren't they? The one who laughed when I answered back and had Captain Marvel tear her off a strip for insubordination.'

'Yes, that was Susan,' she admitted. 'Sue and I don't see eye to eye on some things.'

'Such as him?' I interposed hopefully.

She shrugged and helped herself to a cigarette. 'Susan's really terribly *young*.'

'She didn't *look* any younger than the rest of you,' I observed. 'What does she do with herself all day?'

'She's at King's—reading Modern Languages. She's quite

bright really, but terribly *unawakened*. Ken says she's got a classic Oedipus.'

'He would, wouldn't he?' I groaned, and before she could take me up on it added: 'Is she a close friend of his?'

'She's not his mistress, if that's what you mean. Ken's only interested in mature women.'

'Like you?' I couldn't resist it.

She gave me the snub direct which my remark had asked for. 'I really can't see that that's any business of yours.'

'Quite right,' I grovelled, 'it isn't. But I couldn't help wondering. I mean you seem to know so much about him.'

She purred like a kitten. 'Well, we have dis*cuss*ed the possibility,' she admitted, 'but we're agreed there'd be no future in it at this stage. We're both too demanding. Besides, there's his aunt.'

'Yes?' I said in a neutral tone.

'She's a simply fan*tas*tic person. But you *must* have heard of her.' Here she mentioned a name I couldn't even pronounce, let alone spell. 'They're absolutely dependent on each other.'

'For *every*thing?'

'Does it shock you?'

Ken's puffy face rose to the surface of my memory like a bubble of sewage gas. I wondered what his aunt could be like. Maybe she was blind. I shrugged. 'Each to his own,' I said. 'Is Susan Dolfuss a millionairess too?'

'They're quite well off. Her father's on the Stock Exchange.' She glanced up at me. 'Would you like to meet her again?'

I considered for a moment. 'Yes,' I said carefully, 'providing I don't have to join Captain Marvel's caravan. My camel's gone lame.'

She chose to ignore this. 'We're going to "Les Diables" at the Academy tonight. I suppose you can come too if you like.'

'Who's "we"?' I enquired.

'Susan and I.'

'OK,' I said, 'in that case count me in. What time?'

She told me when they'd be there and I arranged to meet them in the foyer. As they heard me say this I don't doubt that the gods laughed themselves sick.

* * *

Susan Dolfuss: Susan: Sue. How can I describe you? Bring you back? Make you alive again? Even as I write this I can feel you hovering in the air behind my shoulder and I cannot, *dare not* turn my head. So I go on and go back, and there you are pattering down the rain-shiny street towards me; a thing born of the light, emerging, fragile as a breath, from the shimmering, neon-flickering London night. It is the one picture I could never paint, which haunts me like a dream. You with the raindrops beaded into tears along the fine-spun cobweb of your hair; your right arm raised to pull back your scarf; and, at the corners of your lips, the smile coming and going in little hesitant rushes, timid as a mouse. Again I listen as, breathlessly you explain why you are alone. The words are lost for ever, but *you* are there bright-shining in my mind's mirror, blue and gold and grey, spun into a bubble in the glass of time. I stretch out the hand of my thought, and down the echoing corridor of the years I seem to touch your wet cheek with my fingertips; to feel the cool softness of your skin; the fluttering birdwing pulse beneath your breast; the weight and sway of that curtain of golden hair. For one moment. Then, like Eurydice, you fade, back, back, till you are fainter than a star at sunrise and suddenly I know that you are gone. The terrifying darkness rushes in and drowns me like the African night.

Falling in love with Susan was being born all over again into a world of magic, but the odd thing is I don't know when it happened. There was never a moment when I stood still and calmly informed myself that I had fallen in love. There simply wasn't time for anything like that. Once Sue and I had found each other we *became* each other. Then how *did*

we find each other? I mean there must have been a time, a moment when we *knew*. Was it that first meeting in the cinema? I wonder—I'm not *sure*—but I don't think it was. Yet that moment's there all right, printed bright as a newly peeled transfer on my memory. So there must have been *something*, some spark which flashed between us, even though neither of us was conscious of it at the time. Anyway we were both shy and I remember how Sue kept feeling she had to apologise for Pamela's not being there. When I told her it was *her* I'd hoped to meet, she seemed to think I was just being polite. Honestly, to have heard her you'd have thought she'd never looked at herself in a mirror.

When the film was over we went and had coffee together and almost before I knew what was happening I was talking about painting—*really* talking I mean, not just chit-chat and name-dropping. Christ, I really disembowelled myself—told her things I hardly even *knew* I knew—things I couldn't have told Pamela—or anyone else for that matter—in a million years.

After about a couple of hours non-stop I paused for breath and she mentioned that she'd seen the picture I'd done of Pamela and had liked it.

'I'll do one of you too!' I crowed. 'One? A dozen!' and the rockets and roman candles were shooting out of my ears. At that moment I felt I could have taken on half a dozen Cezannes and been through the tape before they'd left their starting blocks. It makes me wince just to think of it.

Sue looked down at the table and suddenly I realized she was blushing. Well, 'blushing' is hardly the word. She was poppy scarlet from the tip of her nose to the roots of her hair. I daresay she was the same colour all over. I couldn't believe my eyes. 'Hey!' I said. 'What's up?'

She shook her head, and her hair—God, what hair she had! A wonder! Pure honey-gold!—swung back and forth and curled in under her cheeks. I'd never seen anything so lovely in my life. It knocked the breath out of me. *Me!* But

if you could have seen *her*—seen those corn gold tassels swinging out and in, trying to cling to her cheeks and hide their colour, I swear you'd never have slept easy again in your life.

'Don't look at me,' she whispered. 'Please don't.'

How could she *ask* such a thing? And how could I refuse? I thatched my fingers over my eyes and squinted through the cracks; and in the end, slowly, doubtfully, I saw her peer up from under her lowered brows. At last, having assured herself it was safe, she raised her head once more.

I waited for a minute longer and then emerged. 'My God,' I murmured reverently, 'do you do that often?'

'Quite often,' she confessed. 'Isn't it awful?'

'Awful!' I echoed faintly, and for an instant the sheer sacrilege of the word defeated me. 'It was out of this world—' I spread my hands helplessly. 'But *why*?' And of course, what always happens to me, I'd no sooner asked the question than I knew the answer.

Anyway she didn't reply except by looking at her watch and saying she'd got to go or she'd miss the last tube. 'I'll come with you,' I said. 'That is if you'll let me.'

She wouldn't have it. She pointed out, quite rightly, that if I went back to Hampstead with her I'd miss my own last train back to Earl's Court.

'But how will we meet?' I said. 'Where do you live? At least give me your phone number.'

She borrowed a pencil from me and wrote the number down, and then we walked along Oxford Street to the Underground Station. I watched her disappearing down the escalator, holding onto the moving rail like a child who is still unsure of itself. I hoped she'd turn her head and smile or wave to me but she didn't. The serious business of stepping off without falling over seemed already to have driven me right out of her mind.

My original intention had been to ring her up the next evening but no sooner had I finished my breakfast than my frayed resolution snapped and I found myself stuffing pennies

into the hostel phone. A man's voice answered and I asked if I could speak to Susan. He told me to hang on; I heard the clump of the receiver being laid down, and there was silence for about two minutes. Then: 'Hello? Susan speaking.'

For a wild second I thought it was a kid sister. She sounded about twelve. It was fantastic.

'Did I get you out of bed?' I asked.

'I was having a bath,' she explained, and as she said it I felt I could almost smell the delicious, warm, sleepy freshness of her. I was kicked rudely out of my reverie when she asked: 'Who's speaking?'

'It's me,' I said. 'Tony Braydon.'

There was a momentary pause, then she laughed. 'I didn't recognize your voice. You sound different over the phone.'

'Me?' I said. 'What about you? You sound about ten.'

'Do I?'

Another pause, during which I searched frantically for something to keep her there. 'Look,' I said desperately, 'there's an exhibition I thought you might like to see. That is if you haven't got anything fixed.'

'Well,' she hesitated. 'I don't know. What sort of exhibition?'

'Modern painting and sculpture.'

'But I don't know the first thing about modern art.'

'Nor do I,' I said. 'Nor does anyone else. Shall we risk it?'

She laughed. 'All right. I don't mind. What time?'

'This morning?'

'This *morn*ing? But don't you have classes or something?'

'They won't miss me. Besides it's in my line of business. We *could* make it this afternoon if you'd rather.'

She considered this. 'Yes,' she said finally, 'I think that *would* be better.'

'Splendid! It's a date.'

'But where is it?'

'At the IPA.'

'Where's that?'

I told her, and added: 'I'll be there at half past two.'

'Three o'clock?'

'All right. Three, then.' There followed yet another pause. I could sense that she was about to replace the receiver. 'Susan!' I called in sudden panic.

'Yes?'

'Wear that jumper again.'

'What?'

'That jumper you wore yesterday.'

'What about it?'

'Will you wear it this afternoon?'

'Why?'

'I just like it, that's all. What I mean is, then I'll be able to spot you straight away. In the crowd, I mean.'

'Is it going to be so crowded?'

'You never know. Still, you will wear it, won't you?'

'I'll think about it.'

Behind me someone coughed meaningfully and, glancing up, I saw a dark forefinger tapping the notice which said: *Keep Your Calls Short: Someone Else Is Waiting To Use This Phone!* I nodded. 'Till three then?'

'All right,' she said. 'Goodbye.'

'Goodbye, Susan,' I murmured and dreamily relinquished the receiver into the waiting hands of Mr Abu Sukani, student of Economics and table-tennis virtuoso extraordinary.

* * *

My eyes found her at once. It was as though she already held the end of a thread which was hooked into my heart. But instead of running to her I simply stood and watched as she threaded her way among the throng and dipped bare-headed in and out of the pools of shadow. I found myself recalling Pamela's comment 'unawakened'. In one sense at least it was true, for Susan seemed in some mysterious way to make everything about her appear to be the mere substance of a

dream which she was dreaming, a dream which owed its animation, its very being, to her alone. If there *is* a reality beyond the reality of everyday—and I believe there is—then most surely she was of it. As she came close the very shadows seemed to intensify themselves around her, the colours glowed rich and hot, and even the minute specks of quartz in the dull pavement beneath her feet twinkled like diamond dust.

She caught sight of me and hurried across, brushing threads of gold back from her forehead with the palm of her hand. 'Am I awfully late?'

As she came up to me I stretched out my hand and touched her still bent arm. I think I simply needed to reassure myself that she was real. 'I don't know,' I said vaguely.

'Well, that's all right then,' she laughed. 'It can't be too bad.'

She stepped back a pace so that my fingers slid from her arm, and then she looked about her. 'This is the first time I've ever been here,' she said. 'Where do we begin?'

I handed her a catalogue and pointed through the glass doors to where the usual people were tiptoeing round the usual exhibits. At that moment the idea that I might actually interest myself in the same things seemed ridiculous and totally irrelevant. 'Look here,' I said. 'We can see this sort of thing any old time. Let's go for a walk.'

'But I *want* to have a look,' she said. 'Come on.' And she led the way into the hall.

For me it was a weird half hour. I felt as if I'd been picked up and dropped in a strange country. What I knew no longer seemed to fit. The very words and phrases which had been meaningful the evenning before now seemed to transform themselves into gibberish as they left my lips. I wandered from picture to picture searching for some gleam of reality, some echo of a genuine experience, but all I could see were the familiar mind-forged manacles, the rusty skeletons of still-born ideas. The hushed voices of the worshippers about us came to me like the far-off twittering of ghosts as they intoned

their litany of 'colour rhythms', 'spatial harmonies', and 'significant forms'. 'Significant of *what*?' I wanted to shout. 'Am *I* blind? Are *you*?' And then, stuck away in a corner, I caught sight of a small bronze of a woman undressing. God knows how it had sneaked in—someone had blundered for sure—because everything within range of it seemed to waver and fade as I stared at it, and I knew that at least *I* wasn't out of my mind. I caught Sue by the arm and dragged her across to it. 'There you are,' I said, 'that's the only thing worth looking at in the whole bloody place—in fact it's the only *real* thing in the place!'

I must have raised my voice a bit for I heard a number of indignant voices say 'Shhh!' and even caught the epithet 'bar*bar*wian' fluted at me in a reedy alto.

Susan frowned and shook her head at me, but as she came under the influence of the little bronze a sort of rapt, dreamy smile crept into her eyes and I knew she knew. We stood there sipping at it as though it were a cup of ice cold spring water we'd stumbled across in the desert—which it was, in a way—and then with one accord we turned and walked out into the sunlight.

'Christ,' I groaned, 'if it hadn't been for that, I'd have collapsed in a heap of dust!'

'It was a bit depressing,' agreed Susan. 'Like bones.'

'Bones,' I echoed. 'That's about it. But at least bones are a part of *life*. That stuff's nothing to do with life. It's—it's *given up*. It's—I don't know what—well, *Ken* art. Yes, that's it. It's like his kind of talk only in paint. God preserve us!'

'It wasn't as bad as that,' she said.

For a moment I wasn't sure whether she meant the exhibition wasn't or *he* wasn't and I was getting all prepared to defend myself when she went on: 'He spoils things which other people like. I think he has to. He scares me sometimes.'

'Me too,' I agreed. 'Pamela seems to think he's the cat's whiskers.'

She glanced at me thoughtfully, seemed on the point of saying something and then, apparently, changed her mind.

'Go on,' I said. 'I'm on your side.'

She shrugged and looked a bit embarrassed. 'It wasn't anything,' she said. 'Really it wasn't.'

'If it's about Pamela, go ahead and say it,' I urged. 'Just because I happened to paint her doesn't mean I'm in *love* with her or something.'

'Well, I was just thinking,' she said at last, 'when you mentioned her—that she's a bit like that herself in some ways. A bit like Ken, I mean. Not altogether, of course, just a bit. Now and again.'

'How do you mean?'

'Oh, I don't know. But she *does* seem to get a kick out of spoiling things for other people.'

'In what way?'

She shook her head. 'She's my friend. I shouldn't be talking about her like this—I don't as a rule. But you *did* ask and . . .' The sentence petered out in a little, unhappy shrug.

We were walking along the street while we were talking and ahead I saw the park. 'Have you known her a long time?' I asked.

'Years,' she said. 'We went to nursery school together. The Honderscheins are awfully rich.'

'You're telling me! It shook me rigid when I turned up at her hovel. I wasn't what you'd call prepared for it. As far as I knew she was just another bed-sitter type like myself. You can't say she exactly flaunts her millions.'

'No,' said Susan as though she hadn't really been listening.

'Well, not in front of *me*, anyway.' I looked at her and suddenly said to myself: 'What the hell am I talking about Pamela for? She'll end up thinking I'm crazy about her or something', and I executed an abrupt mental about-turn. 'Now let's discuss realities,' I said brightly. 'When are you going to let me paint *you*?' The words were no sooner spoken than I recalled her breathtaking reaction to the same question

on the previous evening. 'Just a head and shoulders, I mean,' I concluded lamely.

We'd reached the end of the road by then and I was preparing to cross over when she gestured along the pavement. 'The Number 2 stop's along there.'

I gaped. 'You haven't got to go *yet*! You *can't*!'

'Mummy's expecting me home for tea.'

'But—but . . .'

She looked at me in astonishment and then burst out laughing. 'If you could only see yourself! You look like the end of the world.'

'Please!' I begged. 'Please, Susan. Miss Dolfuss. Just half an hour—twenty *min*utes! You were *late,* remember? You owe it to me. You can't walk out on me like this. You put on your blue *jumper* for me! You've only just *come,* for heaven's sake! Look, I'll go down on my knees!'

'Oh, all right,' she said as soon as she saw I was prepared to do exactly that. At that moment I swear I'd have done *any*thing rather than risk losing her.

'Blessings and peace be thine,' I crooned, salaaming profoundly. 'May Allah smile on thee and make thee fruitful. May He—'

'If you don't shut up I really *will* go,' she said. 'I mean it.'

'Forgive me,' I murmured abjectly. 'I'm just a poor crazy art-student. Nobody brought me up nicely. Just be patient with me. Teach me. Take me in hand and educate me.'

'I'll disown you in a minute,' she said, but I saw her smile.

I wagged an invisible tail. 'Park?' I wuffed doggily. 'Park?'

'All right,' she agreed. 'For half an hour. But only if you behave yourself.'

She let me take her arm and steer her across the road on to the grass, but as soon as we reached the other side she loosed herself from me with a gentle finality that was infinitely discouraging. I almost cried out: 'I only want to hold your *arm,*

for Christ's sake!' but I didn't. It wouldn't have been true anyway—not strictly. But God how I did want to hold her, to touch her, to learn the *feel* of her. There was I, going under for the third time, choking, and somehow it didn't seem to register on her at all. Or did it? As we passed under the trees and out into the sunlight beyond, I caught her glancing at me out of the tail of her grey eye and there was a strange expression on her face—a compound of wonder, dubiousness and awe which pulled me up short. For the merest fraction of an instant I became *her*, felt with her feelings and saw, in myself —what? The unknown; the dark sea which might prove to have no shore; the whole terrible, unthinkable future.

That moment of visionary identification passed as suddenly as it had come, but it left me with a sense of trembling disquiet. Like an inexperienced hunter who has blundered on some creature beyond the limits of his comprehension, I now found myself stumbling panic-stricken back along the track.

As though she too had read the message and wished to reassure either herself or me, she chose that very moment to step close and reach out for my hand. At the time I simply accepted it without question, but now, looking back, I can see it as a gesture of commitment as conscious as that of the channel swimmer who lifts his foot from the pebbles and offers himself to the sea.

But for me then the touch of her fingers upon mine was a portent and a marvel. In a moment I was transported to the seventh heaven of delight. As it had when I first saw her, walking alone among the crowd, the world became suddenly, pulsatingly alive, only this time I was a participant in the miracle. All around me I perceived a thousand fountaining revelations of light and shade, pattern and colour—the subject matter for infinite lifetimes of painting. At my feet a morsel of silver paper twinkled in the sunlight. Beside such a wonder even the little bronze statue was a fumbled artifact, the merest pathetic symbol of the sublime truth. Everything

was: it *existed*: had *being*! Awareness broke over me like a tidal wave, and in that sudden, blinding moment, I *saw*. I felt as though I were a child's balloon being blown up by a divine breath. Vaster and vaster I expanded. In a moment I contained the park; the whole city itself; the dim, blue, unseen hills. Seas broke and foamed within me; clouds spun through me like silver tops. I held the turning world; the blazing orb of the sun; all the heavens and the angelic hosts. Brighter and ever brighter throbbed the ineffable light. My blood smoked in my veins. I felt the last tatters of my sanity being scorched away. One moment more and I would *know*. In one long silent scream my terror rent the veil of the universe. *NO!* My eyelids dropped. A billion multi-coloured catherine wheels exploded behind them. Then blackness—*Nada*. It was over. Years passed: aeons: Eternity itself. My crazed senses rocked gradually to stillness. From outside faint sounds of traffic penetrated my ears. I opened my eyes and looked down. There, in my hand, lay Susan's hand. At my feet, netted by a tuft of grass, the tiny shred of silver paper still jigged in the breeze. I stooped, and picked it up, and turned it over. A thin sticky film transferred itself to my fingertips. With a spasm of distaste I flicked the scrap away and watched it flutter into the shadow of the trees. Nothing had happened. Nothing.

Yet even as I write this I know that I'm lying to myself. Something *had* happened. The fence dividing me from that other world had dissolved, leaving a gap large enough for me to pass through. And I had turned away. 'I'—I don't even know who I mean by that letter—some part of me, anyway, wouldn't face it. At the last instant the final surrender had proved to be beyond me, and never afterwards was I to come so close again. From now on it was to be half-glimpses only, at long intervals, and the haunting sense of something missed. Nevertheless, as Sue and I walked on calmly, happily, towards the pond, I was chiefly aware of the sense of heady release that must overwhelm the prisoner who is informed of a last-

minute stay of his execution. The mystery could wait; only the here and now was my concern. And who is to say I was wrong?

* * *

Falling in love, *being* in love—suddenly waking up to find that the hard shell I'd carted around all my life had simply cracked in two down the middle to expose the naked, palpitating, living thing that was *me*—surpassed everything I'd ever known. Yes, *everything*. While the trance was on me I became a god. Freed from the prison of my self, I felt the sun like a wrestler thudding his fists on my bare back. Marvellous iridescences, hitherto undreamt of, unfurled themselves to my gaze, and rainbows arched up laughing into the sky above my head. I saw Susan in everything. Stretched out along the evening clouds she became a golden glow in the west. Rippling water, rippling grass, all movement, all colour, all the infinite, infinitesimal delight of life vibrated with her, echoed her. The very air I breathed became an extension of her presence, posting me urgent messages of her in each of its invisible whorls and eddies. I became at one and the same time everything and nothing, a web of sensations that lacked any real centre of its own. I lived from ecstasy to ecstasy and the mundane became marvellous, the marvellous ordinary. Thus I dreamed my dream and saw my vision, and they were both of a girl with golden hair and grey eyes who breathed real breath and laughed, and was sometimes as sad as the sea for no reason at all.

It would, I suppose, be pleasant to write that falling in love with Susan turned me into a real artist. It would also be an outrageous lie. If every artist who ever lived had spent his life in love as I was in love there wouldn't *be* any art and that's for sure. There'd be a lot more happy people about though. I went on drawing and painting, of course, but my heart wasn't in it. I couldn't *lose* myself in what I was doing because

I simply didn't have a self to lose. My drawing became slick and superficial, and it didn't worry me one iota. I changed status from 'promising' to 'average' almost overnight and—I laugh aloud to recall it—I simply *did not care*. My engine was switched off—or, more accurately, switched somewhere else—and I gaily coasted down the long gradual slope towards artistic mediocrity. I skipped classes without a qualm, and only managed to redeem myself by carrying off a prize at the school's annual show. In a moment of last minute panic I borrowed back that study I'd done of Pamela and shoved it in. Receiving the President's Medal for it was like being handed a posthumous VC. No doubt I ought to have felt decently ashamed of my duplicity, but I didn't—far from it! I knew only too well that that slab of gunmetal was my passport to bread, beer and Woodbines for another whole year—maybe even *two* years if I was careful. Ashamed? Hell, I felt I was king of the world.

* * *

About a fortnight after I'd become 'Golden Boy' of the RCAP under false pretences, Sue and I became lovers. Seldom can a phrase have had its meaning so abused. In fact if we'd known beforehand how it was going to turn out I don't see how we could possibly have summoned up the courage to go through with it.

In the first place we were both virgins—if there are such things as degrees of virginity I daresay I was even a bit more of one than she was—and though we both *knew* (i.e. had read or been told about) who did what and with which and to whom, we were also, unlike those who write the books, quite desperately in love with one another. The trouble was that while we were both willing—even *eager*—to suffer *for* each other, neither was prepared to inflict suffering *on* the other. Yet the ache had to be appeased, and quickly too, if life was to remain bearable. This appeasing was, in practically every

sense, a fiasco, and yet, for all its pathos and anguish, perhaps it wasn't—not altogether, anyway.

The Dolfusses occupied the garden flat in one of those big Victorian houses near Swiss Cottage. By this time—late February—I'd been there on a number of occasions and had been formally introduced to Sue's parents. They appeared to tolerate me in a neutral sort of way as a friend of Sue's, and she and I were careful to keep our hands off each other while they were around. Even so I'd once or twice caught Mrs D. giving her daughter the odd, thoughtful stare when Sue wasn't looking. But the fact is Mrs D. was so wrapped up in her Conservative Women's Committees that these looks probably signified nothing at all. As for Mr D. he just never suspected a thing. For him the idea would have been simply unthinkable and he was a man for whom the unthinkable didn't exist. I featured in his world as a sort of receptacle, an object to be offered a glass of whisky and a cigarette while he regaled it with the latest merry jape he and his Stock Exchange cronies had been up to. This arrangement suited me very well, and I was only too happy to play along with him while things took their natural course.

What happened was that the senior D's took *their* course to Manchester. Sue had an aunt who lived there and Mr D's company had a branch there, so one Friday evening the senior D's boarded the train at King's Cross and set off for a weekend's business-cum-pleasure. Luckily Sue was in mid-term by this time and was able to opt for remaining behind. Since she had done this before, it aroused no adverse comment. The stage, as they say, was set; all that was needed was the cast.

Sue rang me from the station to say that she'd just seen them off, and I told her I'd come over to Hampstead right away.

'No,' she said, 'don't do that. Let's have a meal in Town somewhere first.'

'Have you got any money?'

'A five pound note! Daddy pressed it into my hot little hand just as the train was pulling out.'

'Well, bully for him! Where shall we go?'

'Chico's?'

'Chico's it is. Half an hour?'

'Twenty-five minutes.'

There was the sound of a kiss and she rang off. We didn't waste time on pointless endearments. We'd long since passed the stage where we needed that sort of reassurance.

She was there before I was. As I came up I saw her golden head gleaming in the light from Chico's window. She ran to me and flung herself into my arms, crushing her mouth to mine. We pulled apart breathless and laughing. 'I've been accosted three times already,' she gasped. 'You're only just in time.'

'The bastards,' I growled, and then looking at her, qualified it to, 'The poor bastards.'

She laughed again and taking my hand slipped it under her arm and cupped it round her breast. I felt her nipple like a live crumb between my fingertips. 'To hell with Chico's,' I murmured in her ear. 'Let's go to bed.'

'Not likely,' she said. 'I've been planning our meal. Come on.'

She unfastened my reluctant arm and led the way into the restaurant. A man with a beard of dangling spaghetti looked up as she came in and goggled at her. I couldn't blame him. She was a living gem, life to the *N*th degree. I twitched a disdainful nostril at him and he bowed his head, acknowledging the winner.

We found a table for two at the far end and sat down. Immediately, on the pretext that I'd dropped something, I ducked down beneath the table, slid my hand up under her skirt and just managed to reach the warm flesh above her stocking top. She gave a startled squeak which converted itself into a cough, banged my forearm hard between her knees, and wriggled back in her chair. I emerged innocently and grinned

at her just as the wine waiter came up proffering his list.

He was an old, grey-haired man whom I'd noticed on the rare occasions we'd been to Chico's before. He had two deep lines, like gashes, running down from the bowl of each nostril to the outer edges of his lips, and his eyes looked as if they were swimming behind a film of London soot. I beckoned him close and at the same time kicked Sue's ankle. 'We were married this morning,' I whispered hoarsely. 'In the circumstances what would you recommend?'

He tilted his head on one side like an ancient Roman eagle and gazed at Sue. I was looking up at his face, and the change in his expression when he got her in focus was almost uncanny. The smog of weariness dropped from him, his eyes glowed like electric elements, and the corners of his mouth curled up and up until they all but touched his eyebrows. Then he turned back to me, flicked through the cellophaned pages of his list and tapped something with his forefinger.

'OK', I said. 'We'll have a bottle.'

'Pardon me, Signor,' he corrected. 'The *half* bottle. Unless'—an eyebrow twitched—'you wish, perhaps, to sleep?'

I looked him in the eye. 'The half bottle,' I said.

He bowed formally and shuffled away as one of the other waiters came up for our order. I looked across at Sue. 'Well go on,' I said. 'You've been giving the matter some thought. Let's have the benefit.'

She held up her fingers and checked off the items one by one as she recited by heart: *'Prociutto con melone; ravioli al sugo; cottolette alla Milanese con faggioli e pattate frite; pesche Veronese con gelato e mielle: formaggio: caffe.'*

'For two,' I said blandly, and added *sotto voce*: 'I hope to God you know what you're up to.'

The waiter flipped me a sneer and whisked away, while Susan sat back with a smug smile spread all across her lovely face like honey syrup.

It was, as a matter of fact, one of the best meals I've ever eaten in my life, and the wine was a libation to Priapus. I

could feel it trickling down the walls of my stomach, pausing and starting off again like a series of little electric shocks, while on my palate lingered a flavour like that of sharp wild strawberries. The melon went in a flash—almost unnoticed—and the ravioli didn't last much longer. Half way through the main course I gave a little comfortable sigh and began to slow up. The peaches took me as long as all the rest put together. While I was pecking at the cheese, more from a sense of duty than anything else, Sue slid her hand across the table cloth to me and I filched the fiver from under it. As I did so I saw her glance up over my shoulder and frown.

My back was towards the door and I had to twist my head to see what it was that had caught her attention. 'It' was Pamela and Ken. They noticed us at the same moment and came over. '*Ciao*, you love birds,' Pamela greeted us. 'What's this? A celebration?'

Ken rested his hand on the back of my chair and breathed heavily through his nose. 'On heat, dears?' he queried with what, for him, was surprising geniality.

'We were enjoying a pleasant meal till a moment ago,' said Susan, and added for good measure, 'Has Aunty allowed you out?'

'She's attending a seance as a matter of fact,' said Ken, who was such an egotistical bastard he probably didn't even notice the edge to her voice.

Pamela did though. 'Have you let him paint you yet, dear?' she enquired silkily.

I rolled my eyes at Sue but she just grinned at me and said: 'No, not yet.'

And then, thank God, a waiter came up to show them to a vacant place. They moved off fluttering their fingers at us, and I divided the last of the wine between our glasses. Sue wrinkled up her nose at me and poked out the tip of her pink tongue, thereby causing me to fall in love with her for the million-and-oneth time.

On our way out we passed Pamela and Ken and exchanged

brief grins, but as I was going out of the door I happened to glance back and catch Pamela's eye. She touched her fingertips to her lips and wafted me a kiss. I was taken completely by surprise. It must have been about the last gesture in the world I expected from her at that moment. Even so I'd forgotten it inside a minute. There was room for only one thing in my life that evening and she was right there beside me.

We walked through to Tottenham Court Road and caught a bus. It was the slack time of the evening and we had the top deck more or less to ourselves. We sat right at the back in the seat which was half concealed by the stair partition and I slipped my arm round Sue's back and rubbed my cheek against her hair.

God, what a journey *that* was! By the time we reached Camden Town we were already wound up like a couple of elastic bands. Sue kept pushing me away and then pulling me back to her and squirming around as though she were sitting on top of an electric toaster. If we hadn't had to change buses for the last part of the journey we'd probably never have made it at all. As it was we stumbled off at Swiss Cottage feeling so weak-kneed and dithery that we'd already gone twenty paces in the wrong direction before we realized what was happening.

That must have sobered us up a bit because I suddenly remembered I'd got to visit the late-night chemist. I told Sue to go on ahead, promised her I'd be there before she was, and patted her tail. Then I trotted off down the Finchley Road.

I realize it must date me as pretty well Neolithic, but I have to confess that at that time I'd never even *seen* a contraceptive, let alone had cause to employ one. I had a vague mental image of a cross between a fingerstall and a football bladder but that was as far as it went. A chill thought struck me. What if they asked me what *size* I wanted? How would I know what to ask for? Large? Medium? Small? I thrust my hand into my trousers pocket and frantically tried to assess

my requirements, but a fistful of small change kept getting in the way. In the end I decided to settle for 'Medium' and hope for the best.

There was an elderly, grey-haired woman behind the counter—the cosy-looking type—and she smiled at me maternally as I closed the door behind me. Only the memory of Sue waiting for me prevented me from bolting out into the night. 'Yes, dear?' she said. 'What would you like?'

I swallowed. 'Er—do you sell—er, contraceptives?'

Her smile didn't waver. 'Two and six for three, dear.'

She hadn't mentioned anything about size and I was damned if I was going to. I put down half-a-crown on the counter and accepted the slim cardboard packet she handed me.

'Was there anything else, dear?'

'No,' I said. 'That's all.'

'Good night, dear.'

'Good night,' I echoed, and stepped out into the street.

I felt absurdly pleased with myself. Really, there was nothing to it. Or was there? I halted under a street lamp and fingered the packet doubtfully. Did they include instructions? Surely they must. What *were* the things like anyway? I glanced around. No one was coming. With trembling fingers I unfastened the flap of the carton and beheld three little puce envelopes ranged, shoulder to shoulder, inside. I lifted one out, opened it gingerly, and shook it. Something resembling a baby's teat dropped into my palm. I peered at it in disbelief. Was *that* a French Letter? That miserable looking thing? How the hell did it stay on? I turned it over between my fingers and then scrutinized the packet. Apart from the trade name and a few alliterative adjectives there was nothing, no merest hint of 'directions for use'. This evidence of the manufacturer's tact or confidence struck me as profoundly disconcerting. I slipped the teat back into its packet and set off thoughtfully up the hill. To the best of my knowledge none of the books I had consulted on the subject actually explained

how you operated the things. I wondered if Sue knew. It seemed most unlikely. Ah well, press on regardless!

The light was shining out on to the porch as I stooped down, poked open the letter box and whistled through it. There was a brisk patter of slippers and there she was. As she reached up to unfasten the Yale lock her dressing-gown opened down the front and I saw she was already in her underclothes. I straightened up. The door swung open and she was in my arms.

I kicked the door shut behind me, heaved her up against my chest, staggered with her down the passage to her bedroom and dumped her on the bed. It might not have been the way Victor Mature did it on the films but it sufficed. She lay back, smiling up at me. 'Well?' she asked.

'I got them,' I said. 'They're weird.'

'Let me see.'

I took out the packet, handed it to her and she unwrapped one. 'Lordy!' she exclaimed and then giggled.

While she was examining it I slipped a hand down inside her bra and kissed her on the tip of her nose. 'Sue,' I whispered. 'Sue.'

Her eyelids drooped and her eyelashes glinted in the lamplight. 'Umm', she murmured languorously. 'Umm. *Lovely.*'

I wriggled my other hand round into the small of her back and fumbled ineffectually with the hooks of her bra. 'Here,' I said at last. 'You do it.'

She sat up obediently, pulled off her dressing-gown and reached behind her. The artist who had slumbered in me for months was awoken as though by a kick in the teeth. The crooked arms, the bent head, the screen of hair, even the dark tufts in her armpits, wove themselves into sublimity. 'Christ!' I muttered. 'Christ! How splendid!'

She tossed her hair back and dropped the flimsy bit of lace on the floor. The aureoles of her nipples glowed palest pink like half-ripe cherries. 'Go on,' she said. 'Get undressed too.'

I clambered up off my knees, dragged my sweater over my head, and tugged at the clip on my trousers. As they con-

certinaed down around my ankles. Sue wriggled clear of her panties and looked up. Suddenly her hand leapt to her mouth and she rolled back overcome with laughter. I looked from her down to myself and back again. 'What's up?' I asked.

'Your *thing*!' she moaned. 'And those *pants*!' and she was off again.

I saw her point. I've never been one of those types who takes a narcissistic pride in his small clothes and my underpants had stretched a good bit in repeated launderings. So much so, in fact, that once or twice lately I'd found myself trying to step into them through a leg hole. If they resembled any known garment at all it was a rather floppy pair of French knickers. What added the finishing touch from Sue's viewpoint was my John Thomas which, by this time, was, naturally enough, up and raring to go. It was sticking out at right angles and from it the leg of my voluminous pants depended like a towel from a towel rail. Not wishing to prolong the comic interlude I made haste to step free from my trousers.

This, if anything, made matters worse. A man always looks a bit ridiculous if he's wearing shoes with his underwear, and I hadn't bothered to take mine off first. Now one of them stuck in my trousers leg. I hopped round on one foot trying to kick it free. Sue laughed so much she was nearly in tears. 'Stop it! Stop it!' she wailed. 'Oh, Tony, *please!*'

I got myself free at last, yanked off my shoes and socks and started to peel off my vest. It was half-way over my head and Sue was rolling around clutching herself in near-hysterics when there was a ring at the front door bell.

It was as though a film had broken in the middle. Sue stopped in mid-guffaw; I froze rigid. It rang again. 'Christ!' I whispered. 'They're back!'

Sue's startled eye met mine. 'Quick!' she hissed. 'Get in the cupboard!'

She scrambled off the bed, struggled into her dressing-gown and slippers, while I snatched up my scattered clothes, heaved open the wardrobe and clambered in on top of a pile of shoes.

Sue turned the key on me and there I was, my only illumination supplied by a tiny crack in the woodwork, half throttled by an arm hole of my vest which had got snagged up on an empty coat-hanger, and all but asphyxiated by the smell of moth-balls. I heard Sue scrabbling frantically around outside, then the wardrobe door was yanked open and the packet of contraceptives was thrust into my hand, with the whispered command: 'Don't *breathe*!' As if I could.

In the distance I heard her open the front door, and then there was a muffled sound of voices. I let the bundle of clothes I was clutching slip down to my feet and set about disentangling myself from the coat hanger. It came unhooked with a jerk and struck me sharply on the ear before clattering against the back of the cupboard with a noise like musketry. I swore under my breath and strained my ears. The voices were still there, if anything they sounded a little closer than before. In the confined darkness even my wristwatch seemed as noisy as a cheap alarm clock. Cautiously I shifted my weight on to my other foot and the spike of an invisible buckle sank into my heel like a fang. I sipped a painful breath and found myself recalling vividly the last sequence of a technicoloured romance Sue and I had recently taken in at the local Odeon. There ought to be a law against that sort of travesty! The hero and heroine had dropped in a clinch on the sandy beach of some convenient Pacific cove. There she'd lain flopped out on the water's edge, without even her lipstick smudged, while he got ready to crawl over her and the ripples lapped up her bare legs, and about a million violins worked themselves up into an orgasm in the background. Wicked! I reached down and had just succeeded in extracting the buckle when I heard the front door slam. A moment later Sue had the cupboard open. 'You poor love,' she soothed. 'Was it terrible?'

'Worse,' I muttered, massaging my punctured heel. 'Who was it?

'Miss Waitman from upstairs. She brought a parcel for Mummy which someone left this afternoon.'

'Was that all? It took her long enough.'

'I think she just wanted to chat really. She's awfully lonely.'

'Don't,' I said. 'You're breaking my poor heart,' and then I glimpsed her naked under her dressing-gown and forgot everything as I cupped a breast in either hand and drank her open mouth. Her knee insinuated itself between my legs and her fingers dug into my back.

Somehow or other she managed to get back on the bed and I contrived to get rid of those damned pants. This surely was what is popularly known as the moment of truth. Sue looked up at me and I saw a shadow of sudden fear gleam like a hooked fish in the depths of her grey eyes. I parted her legs with my hands and began stroking her softly, feeling the tenseness ebbing out of her like a tide. My own body seemed to have become one enormous throbbing pulse, a primitive drum, thudding and straining to be in her. Her eyes closed, her mouth fell open slackly, her breast panted and heaved, and she gave a little moan of hunger or fear. I was crouched above her, poised, and then—Christ in heaven!—lying on the floor by the cupboard where I'd dropped it, I saw that bloody little mauve packet!

Sue chose that instant to open her eyes and I suppose she divined what was up. I lowered my head, kissed her on the throat, and then stumbled back over to the wardrobe. I tipped the envelopes out, grabbed one, ripped it open, and seized hold of the teat. I was hardly in the state of mind which would have permitted me to work things out from first principles, so I simply seized 'A' in one hand and 'B' in the other and brought them together. All might have been well had I not, in my haste, attempted to put the thing on inside out. The result was, to say the least, disconcerting. Having been designed to unroll, it was now effectively prevented from doing so. It went on for a reluctant inch or so, reached the bump and stuck. Desperately I heaved. It slipped and *ping*! away it flew across the room like a Lilliputian spaceship. I followed its trajectory until I lost sight of it against the bookcase, but

I thought I heard it drop somewhere near the coal scuttle, and with a muttered: 'Christ Almighty!' I set off after it on hands and knees.

Sue by this time was sitting up on the bed demanding, reasonably enough, to know what I was up to.

'It's this bloody thing,' I said. 'It won't go on.'

That was enough to set her off again. 'Oh, Tony!' she stuttered. 'If you could only *see* yourself!'

I daresay I was a pretty rare sight but I wasn't in the mood to appreciate it, being at that moment hull down under the writing table. 'Did you see where it went?' I asked.

'How did it get over there?' she asked irrelevantly.

'It flew,' I grunted. 'Jet propelled.'

'Can't you use one of the others?'

The obvious solution! I began to back out from under the table and found myself entangled in the light flex. Before I could prevent it the table lamp had toppled over and dropped like a stone on the back of my neck. It was one of those faked up Corinthian pillar affairs that the Dolfusses went in for in a big way. It must have weighed close on a hundredweight, and if it hadn't been for the shade it might well have put paid to me there and then. All that happened, apart from the blow itself, was that the light went out.

'Are you all right?' called Sue.

I explored the back of my head tenderly in the darkness. To my surprise I could feel no blood. Cautiously I continued backwards, and the flex suddenly sprang up tight as a cheese-wire between my legs and all but castrated me. I groaned aloud.

'What is it?'

'Can't you turn on another light for Christ's sake?'

'There isn't one,' she said. 'The bulb in the centre one's gone too.'

'Well switch on the fire or something. I'm being just about bisected down here.'

I heard the springs of the divan jangle and then the sound

of padding feet followed by a click. I felt around me for the lamp and heaved it towards me. The pressure between my thighs eased off gratifyingly and I felt Sue's hand on my ankle. 'Here,' I said, 'lift this lump of masonry off your lover.'

Her reply was a bubbling giggle. 'Oh, Tony,' she gasped, 'it can't *always* be like this, can it? Otherwise no one would ever get born.'

'The book,' I muttered, 'was called "*Wedded* Love". Maybe that's different.'

She found the lamp, pulled it free and lifted it back on to the table. The element in the fire began to glow darkly. 'Shall we try again?' she asked.

'We'd better get one of these things fixed on first,' I said. 'You don't think she *can* have given me the wrong size?'

Sue held up one of the little envelopes in front of the fire and took out number two. She picked it up by the tip of its teat and tinkled it like a little bell. 'It's rolled up,' she announced brightly. 'All you need to do is *un*roll it.'

'And what the hell do you think I was *trying* to do?'

'It's like stockings, I expect,' she prattled on. 'You want to get the rolled up part on the *out*side.'

'Genius,' I told her sourly. 'I'd come to that precise conclusion the moment it went into orbit. Come on, hand it over.'

She relinquished it almost reluctantly and I bent to the task in hand. By now I was, perhaps understandably, in that state known to 'Wedded lovers' as 'detumescence'. My poor old JT seemed to have lost all interest in the proceedings and, in the circumstances, I could hardly blame him. I held the little bit of semi-transparent rubber over him hopefully and it was like putting a large plastic bucket over a small dead eel. She burst out laughing again.

'It's all very well for you,' I said. 'You haven't been locked up in a lousy cupboard and bashed over the head by a bloody great lamp.'

She squatted like a small copper statue in the firelight, her

arms locked round her shins, her cheek resting on her knees, regarding my unavailing efforts with a calm, even detached interest. 'It's terribly small now, isn't it?' she observed at last.

'Whose fault's that?' I said. 'Not mine.'

'It's a bit like a little old root,' she mused. 'You know—sort of hidden in the grass.'

I waggled myself encouragingly but it was no use. The fire was out. I took off the outsize snood and deposited it on the hearth. 'Ah well,' I said philosophically. 'Chalk it up to experience.'

'Shall I have a try?' she offered. 'Here, let me.'

She reached out for the discarded teat and the mere thought of her touching me was enough to work the magic. The game old root stirred among his undergrowth and stretched himself like a sleeper awakening.

'Look!' she cried in wonder. 'He's coming out after all!'

We both gazed down at this miracle. Sue's eyes gleamed and delicately, hesitantly, she stretched out her forefinger and laid it on his nose. He rose, nodding, and nuzzled her fingertip like a well-trained dolphin. 'Now,' she whispered, and taking the little circle of rubber she slipped it over him like a bridle and smoothly rolled it down his knotted flank. Then clapping her hands in delight she caught up one of mine and drew it down to where she wanted it most. 'Quickly, my love,' she breathed. 'Do it quickly,' and without bothering to get back on to the ill-fated bed she rolled over in the firelight and pulled me down on top of her.

And this time we *did* manage it. I tried to be gentle but once I was in her I couldn't stop myself. She gave one sharp gasp of pain and clutched me so tight that for some seconds I couldn't move. I felt her rigid in my arms like a knot being tugged tighter and tighter, and then suddenly she was limp and I was free. One more movement and it was all over. I lay spent and panting, letting the ache ebb out of me, and whispered to her if she was all right.

'Oooh,' was all she said. 'Oooh, my love.'

'Did I hurt you terribly?'

'It's all right,' she murmured. 'But—oh, you're so *big*. I can feel you right up here.' And she slid her hand across her navel.

I began easing myself out of her, but no sooner did she feel me move than she went rigid again. I lowered my face to her breast and let her hold me there while I listened to the thump of her heart. 'Sue,' I murmured, 'my lovely, lovely Sue. Was it awful?'

She shook her head. 'It was all right,' she whispered. 'Was it for you?'

'I couldn't be gentle,' I said. 'Once I was in you I went crazy. I felt as if I'd burst.'

'I feel as if I *have* burst,' she said with a ghost of a chuckle.

'Oh Christ,' I said. 'You don't think I've ruptured something, do you?'

This time she really did chuckle. 'Defloration,' she said. 'See page 97.'

Along the passage the phone began to ring. We lay there listening to it for a few seconds, then Sue groaned: 'That'll be Mummy. I'll have to answer it.'

'We're out at the flicks,' I muttered. 'We're up in the West End. *You* remember.'

'No, I told her I'd be in,' she sighed. 'Oh, *blast*! Come on.'

Reluctantly we relinquished each other, and she shrugged on her dressing-gown and hobbled off down the hall.

By the time she returned I'd managed to get the lamp working again and had straightened the room up a bit. 'How are things up in God's Own City?' I asked.

Sue perched herself on the edge of the bed and began scooping her hair up into a pony-tail. 'She wanted to know if I'd remembered to put the soup in the fridge,' she said.

'And had you?'

She grinned. 'What do you think? I have now though. I've put on some coffee too.'

'That's my girl,' I said approvingly. 'How are you feeling?'

'Raped,' she confessed. 'I've stopped bleeding though.' She finished fixing her hair and swung her head to one side so that the pony tail flicked over her shoulder.

'You know, Sue,' I said thoughtfully, 'I really think you're the most *beautiful* thing I've ever seen. No kidding, you really *are*. What I can't make out is why you weren't snapped up by some slavering wolf years ago.'

'How do you know I wasn't?' she retorted, and then, realizing no doubt that I had the best of reasons for knowing, added: 'He dropped me when I screamed for help.'

'Yeah?' I said. 'Seriously though, you must have had passes made at you. How come you emerged unscathed?'

She pursed her lips and appeared to consider the matter profoundly. Finally she shrugged. 'I don't know. I suppose I just wasn't interested.'

'Sue,' I said. 'Will you marry me?'

She propped her elbows on her knees, cupped her chin in her hands, and gazed down at me. Then she shook her head very slowly from side to side and said one word: *'Idiot.'*

What on earth did she mean? True, I could see that my behaviour in the last hour or so hadn't automatically qualified me for the rôle of Virgin's Dream Hero, and, furthermore, I would have been the first to admit that my worldly prospects were, even when viewed in the rosiest possible light, distinctly shaky—but *'Idiot'*? No, that was really going too far. I began to protest. I pointed out that with the bare minimum of luck I'd collect my diploma in a couple of years' time and thus might reasonably expect to land a decent teaching post. This meant that at least we wouldn't starve and, hell, why not face it, there was no reason why, given the time, I shouldn't break through as a painter in my own right. As I roughed in the outlines of the future for her, I found myself growing more and more enthusiastic. Possibilities become probabilities and then metamorphosed into certainties. It was not until I was well launched into an advertiser's description of my first one-man

show that I suddenly realized she was laughing at me—or was she crying? I stuttered to a stop. 'Uh?' I gulped.

'Idiot,' she repeated. 'Oh, you *idiot*. Of *course* I'll marry you.'

'You will?' I gasped. 'But that's *mar*vellous! Why the hell didn't you say so to begin with? Christ, we'll do it, Sue! Make the grade, I mean. I'll work like a bastard. God, *married!* To *you!* Think of it! *Yipee!* I leapt up, stark naked, caught her hands in mine and waltzed her crazily round the room until she squealed—'The coffee! I forgot it!' and struggling free, fled like a bacchante into the kitchen.

While she was out of the room I snatched up the mirror from the dressing-table and addressed my flushed reflection. 'Well, now you've done it, you half-pint Picasso! Any mug can *talk,* what we want to see is *action!* Christ Almighty, you haven't painted a thing worth looking at for six months! Get your finger out you lazy sod!' Married! I couldn't get over it. I set the mirror down again and side-slipped into a daydream. I'd take Sue down to Suffolk with me. 'Mum, this is Sue. We're going to be married.' No, better still: 'We *are* married'. 'Mum, we're married. Meet your new daughter-in-law.' 'Dad, this is Sue.' 'Sue, meet Grandad.' And that night Mum and Dad would talk it over in bed. 'Isn't she lovely, George? A real angel.' 'She is that. Young Tony's done all right for himself. I allus knew he would. It's in his blood. Us Braydons know how to pick 'em.' 'Get along with you. Proper turnip *you* looked at supper, gawping at the child.' Dad (chuckling): 'Well, who wouldn't? Did you see old Dad, eh? Sitting on red hot tintacks *he* was. Cor, I bet *they're* up to some larks right now.' 'George, you're nothing but an old goat!' 'Ah, give us a kiss.' 'Get away with you.' 'C'mon, old girl.' 'Well . . .'

Sue came in with the tray to find me laughing like a drain and asked what the joke was. When I'd told her she smiled and then looked pensive. 'I wonder how Mummy and Daddy will take it?'

I nodded. I could see clearly enough that as far as Sue's parents were concerned I wasn't in the same bracket as Sue would be for my people. An alarming vision of Mr D. at the wrong end of a horse-whip made me shiver involuntarily.

'Put your sweater on,' said Sue, misinterpreting my shudder, and she pushed a cup of coffee towards me.

While I was waving around in the dark feeling for armholes I heard her say: 'I think perhaps we'd better keep it to ourselves for a bit. Till they get more used to you anyway.'

The sound commonsense of this proposal was immediately apparent to me. 'Well, if *you* think so,' I said in a tone which tried to suggest I was letting her talk me into it. 'After all, you know them best.'

Sue sipped her coffee and nodded. 'As far as Daddy's concerned I'm still just a little girl in pigtails.'

'What about your mother?'

'I'll talk her round all right.'

'Well, that's a relief,' I said, hoping I echoed her confidence. 'Do you think she's guessed what's going on?'

'No, I don't think so. Why? Do you?'

'Search me,' I shrugged. 'It just struck me I've intercepted the odd glance now and again—you know—*pensive*. Probably I'm wrong.'

'We'll just have to tread carefully,' she said. 'But you know how it is. You can't think of them *all* the time.'

I grinned. 'You're not kidding! Still, we'll have to find somewhere we can be by ourselves. I've got my name down on the list for a single room at the hostel but that might take months. Can't *you* think of anything?'

She frowned. There was a pause, then she said hesitantly: 'Well, I suppose we *could* try Pamela.'

'Pamela? You think she'd play?'

'It's worth a try anyway.'

'You don't think she'd give the game away?'

'Why should she?'

'Yes, why should she?' I agreed. 'Will *you* ask her?'

'All right.' But I knew, as she said it, that she wasn't one hundred per cent happy with the idea. Still, what other alternative was there? I knew *I* couldn't think of one, and impoverished young lovers can't hope to be choosers—anyway not in this country in that day and age.

* * *

Actually it worked out rather well—that is, considering how it *might* have worked out. Pamela's household was such a peculiar affair anyway that an extra mattress in one of the attics passed unnoticed, and naturally *we* didn't go out of our way to make ourselves conspicuous. All we wanted was sufficient peace and quiet to enable us to become proficient in the arts of 'Wedded Love', and, after that inauspicious start, we soon made up our leeway. By the summer I don't doubt that we could have added an appendix or two on our own account. They wouldn't have blended very harmoniously with the rest of the manual though. The sacred-sacrament-ritual approach wasn't our line at all.

An awful lot of sheer cock is still talked about the holiness of sexual congress, as though it's some kind of super-solemn Anglican High Mass, and while I'd be the first to admit that there *is* something altogether out of this world about it when it really clicks, it's time someone pointed out that, above all, it's the most *enjoyable* activity in the world. No, even that isn't really the right word—'enjoyable' isn't sufficiently wholeheartedly *joyous*—but what other word is there? It's like trying to pick up quicksilver between your fingers. What I'm trying to convey is something like Mozart's music—an inexhaustible fountain bubbling over in the sunshine, all light and shade and shifting colours; the distilled essence of life itself.

And, what's more, you don't get tired of it or bored. At least *we* didn't—ever. Sue was a natural, mind you, and that must make a difference. Not a nymphomaniac or anything

crazy, just a born lover. The tricks she got up to are nobody's business but mine and I've no intention of going into them here. I don't very well see how I could anyway—I might just as well try to express the mystery of a gull's flight in algebra—it just *is*—something supremely natural, and joyous, and indescribably beautiful. But this I *will* say: if anyone who happens to read this thinks that the manuals of sexology or whatever are giving him the real dope on the matter, he's making a big mistake—they're not.

More to the point, perhaps, was the way we found ourselves getting increasingly careless about taking 'precautions'. Neither of us was particularly enamoured of the wretched things anyway. From the aesthetic point of view they leave a great deal to be desired—you can't get away from the fact that there's something distinctly *unlovely* about them—but it's not that exactly. Somehow they have the power to convert lovemaking into one of the less interesting natural functions like going to the lavatory. Anyway at tenpence a time they weren't so cheap either, judged from our financial standpoint. Still that was a minor point compared to our growing distaste for Messrs Whatsit's 'Super-Sensitized Sheaths' and we decided to look about for other means—continence excepted—of frustrating premature parenthood.

Every one turned out to be a complete and utter frost. Sue, under my goading, presented herself at a birth control clinic, only to flee in confusion when they took a look at her face and asked to see her marriage lines. Then we read somewhere about the 'safe period' and how it was now absolutely foolproof. This seemed at least worth a try, so Sue cashed a couple of savings certificates and we sent off for the handbag computer and the rest of the works.

The packet arrived for us one afternoon at Pamela's, and full of eager anticipation we raced upstairs to examine it. Sue unwrapped the box and took out the do-it-yourself kit, which comprised a thermometer, a mysterious plastic chart, a booklet of instructions and something which looked like a cross be-

tween an expensive fishing reel and a midget telephone dial. 'Ah-ha,' I said. 'This looks interesting.'

'*"The operation of this Calculator is Simplicity itself,"*' announced Sue, reading from the booklet of instructions. 'Blah, blah, blah—ah, here we are. *"First ascertain the onset of ovulation".*'

'Christ!' I exclaimed reverently, looking up from the glittering machinery. 'Does it *really* say *that*?'

'*"This",*' she continued, ignoring me, '*"is achieved by inserting Component 'A'"*—Which is Component "A"? Ah—I've got it! Component "A" is the "Clinical Thermometer". Now, where was I? Um, yes—*"inserting component 'A' into the neck of the"*—'

'Please', I said. 'None of that horrible technical language here.'

'You're putting me off,' said Sue. '*"vagina"*'—she turned over—'*"and leaving it for two minutes or for such time as is required to register a true reading".*' She looked across at me and pulled a face. 'It sounds horribly surgical, doesn't it?'

'It does a bit,' I admitted. 'But get on with it. I want to perform on this.'

Sue returned to the booklet. '*"When this has been obtained, check whether the temperature shown falls in the Red section of Band 2 on Component "B".*'

'This is Component "B",' I said. 'That's for sure. And this must be Band 2. Yes, here we are. Well, let's give you a hundred and two. OK. What next?'

'*"Move the dial round so that the figure shown coincides with the day of the month on Band 1—"*'

'Done it,' I said, briskly suiting the deed to the word.

'—*"and read off the figure which will now show in the window marked X in diagram two".*'

'Twenty-eight,' I announced promptly. 'I wondered what that little hole was for.'

Sue drew a breath. '*"Consult Component 'C' and ascertain*

if the figure shown falls between the two diagonal parallel lines".'

'Hang on,' I said. 'I've lost my place. Twenty-eight? Twenty-eight? Ah, bad luck, it doesn't. Miles out.'

'*"If it does"*' she concluded gravely, '*"congress may safely take place without risk of conception".*'

She lowered the book and looked at me. Our eyes met and in slow unison we shook our heads. 'It's such a bloody thin pair of parallel lines anyway,' I said.

'That ther*mom*eter,' said Sue. 'I just *could*n't, my love.'

'Do you think they'd give us our money back?'

'It doesn't say anything about that,' she said. 'I suppose we could try.'

I twirled the dial hopefully. 'I suppose you *might* get used to it.'

'Not that thermometer,' she said firmly.

'It isn't *you,* eh?'

'No,' she said. 'Quite definitely it isn't me. I'm sorry, my love, I can tell you're disappointed.'

I shrugged and then grinned at her. 'Ah, what the hell, old thing. We'd have loused it up for sure. What about leap years and so on? Besides neither of us is what you'd call the world's best adder-upper, and it strikes me this thing's been designed for a Catholic Maths don who's living in sin with a Harley Street gynaecologist.'

Sue laughed. 'I can't somehow see you holding back from "Congress" because I'm point five of a degree under. Do you think people really *use* those things?'

'Well, *someone* must buy them—apart from us, I mean.'

'Yes, I suppose so. But just imagine going through all that palaver every time you felt like making love. Tony, they *can't,* can they?'

'Maybe they work it up into a sort of parlour game,' I suggested. 'Guess the lucky number, spin the dial, and presto! the jackpot—always providing, of course, that it falls between the parallel lines.'

Sue sighed and began putting the bits and pieces back into the box. When she got to the thermometer she paused. 'I suppose I *could* try it,' she said, '—just once. Just to *see,* I mean.'

'Yes, go on,' I urged. 'Have a go.'

She grinned at me. 'My poor love. Do you so want to play with it?'

I nodded with Harpo Marxian emphasis.

She laughed. 'All right. Just this once then. I'll be back in a minute.'

'*Two* minutes,' I corrected, 'or such time as is required . . .'

She grinned, picked up the thermometer, and vanished downstairs. In five minutes she was back.

'OK,' I said antiseptically, 'now watch science take over. Come on, nurse, feed Professor Braydon the vital statistics.'

She told me a figure. I twiddled the dial; squinted into the little window; and finally consulted the plastic chart.

'Well,' she demanded. 'What's the verdict?'

'You're there!' I exclaimed in astonishment. 'No kidding! Plumb in the middle! See for yourself!'

Sue peered at where my finger pointed. 'Here, let me have a go,' she said. 'I bet you cheated.'

I handed over the computer and she went though it all from scratch, and came up with the same result. Our eyes met over the chart, bright with the unspoken question: 'Shall we risk it?'

We did, and somehow the thermometer got itself rolled on in the process, so that was that.

* * *

A fortnight later, at the beginning of August, Sue went abroad to spend a holiday with her parents in a villa they'd rented on the shores of Lake Como. I accompanied them to the airport to wish them *bon voyage* and stood waving frantically as the plane took off, only to discover, too late, that I'd been directing my well-meant attentions at a machine bound for

Scandinavia, and that theirs had already left. Uprooted, I wilted. Even the most vivid recollection of our last evening together was no sort of compensation for Sue's absence. The North Pole had been filched from my compass and now the needle lurched drunkenly from side to side trying to make sense of chaos. I mooched round the West End hoping to work up some enthusiasm for the galleries but it was like trying to summon up an appetite for yesterday's porridge. I must have walked miles. I remember finding myself leaning over a bridge in Regent's Park gazing tepidly down at the ducks and then, with no intervening recollection, I see myself trudging dolefully past the Dolfusses' house in the twilight. Nevertheless I must have had something to eat, and a good deal to drink, for when I found myself outside Pamela's it was well into dusk, and I recall having unusual difficulty in finding the bell. Pamela herself answered it, and from that point on my memory is only too harshly clear.

She regarded me with the sort of quizzical half-smile I might, in more sober circumstances, have found disturbing. 'My! Someone's been whooping it up,' she said. 'Come on in.'

I followed her up to her room, remarking, as always, the incredible *emptiness* of the Honderschein residence. Apart from Pamela herself no one ever seemed to *live* in the place. They flitted in and out, shadowy as bats in the twilight, and whenever you met them and talked to them they seemed somehow just on the point of leaving and gave you the impression that it was only your presence that was holding them back. The man and his wife who acted as butler and cook lived in a self-contained flat in one of the wings, and, in my memory, even they seem to be grey things of the half-light who were there and yet not there, to be detected only in the quiet closing of a door or the far-off murmur of a vacuum cleaner.

But Pamela herself was real enough—a unique compound of flesh, blood, and neuroses. In spite of her friendliness she always seemed to be holding herself aloof, speaking in allu-

sions and riddles which Sue and I couldn't be bothered to work out. I did my best to take her as I found her, but since I could never be quite sure how *I did* find her, our relations had become a sort of blind-man's-buff, played out in a sounding vault, where even the most ordinary words became strangely inflected and changed their meaning as they reverberated back and forth between invisible walls.

She had been listening to jazz records when I'd interrupted, and in her absence the record player had switched itself off. Now she walked across to it, turned the record over and the volume down, and set it going again. I flopped down in an armchair and lit a cigarette while she took a bottle and a couple of glasses out of a cupboard. I didn't recognize the record other than as blues but it fitted my mood of the moment like a black silk glove. I asked her who was playing and she told me. Apart from our initial greeting they were the first words we'd exchanged.

She put a tumbler down on the arm of my chair and began pouring whisky into it. The amber tide line mounted steadily. 'Hey, go easy,' I protested, 'I've taken plenty aboard already, and that's not beer.'

She laughed and glugged a similar amount into her own glass. 'How was the great departure?' she asked.

'Bloody,' I said. 'And to cap the lot I waved at the wrong plane.'

She laughed again and lifted her glass. 'Here's blue skies for them.'

Reflecting that my own ceiling hadn't looked so overcast for longer than I cared to recall, I acknowledged the toast.

'When are you going to declare yourself to the D's?' she enquired, her eyes downcast to the cigarette she was lighting. 'They're a pretty formal couple.'

I shrugged. 'It's up to Sue, really.'

She glanced across at me and nodded. 'No immediate plans then?'

I shook my head and brooded over my glass. 'Christ,' I muttered darkly, 'if you knew how *lost* I feel.'

'I might at that,' she said. 'After all you haven't got a monopoly of the feeling. *"My soul, like to a ship in a black storm, is driven, I know not whither."* '

I blinked at her. 'Yes,' I said slowly. 'That's it all right. Who's it by? Shakespeare?'

'Webster,' she said. 'I've just been doing an essay on him. He's fan*tas*tic! Here, listen to this!' She got up and fetched a book that was lying open on the divan. Then she curled up cat-like on the floor at my feet and began reading out that extraordinary interchange between Flamineo and Vittorio, from *The White Devil.*

As I listened to her I felt the gooseflesh creep up my arms and legs. It was as though all the windows had opened silently and a graveyard wind was stealing through the room carrying with it the thin, sea-bird voices of lost souls wailing in limbo, adrift for ever beyond the limits of all possible hope. The instant she finished reading, the record player clicked off. The silence was almost tangible.

After a while I pushed myself out of my chair and put the same record on again. My movements were already clumsy. Almost without realizing it I'd arrived at that stage of drunkenness when even the simplest act of will requires deliberate and careful concentration. I waited until the music started again then walked slowly back to my chair, lowered myself into it and picked up my glass.

Pamela closed up the book and with an extended forefinger began absently stroking the dangling lace on one of my shoes. 'I think we're *all* lost,' she said. 'We only try to pretend we're not.'

I shivered and took a long, comforting pull at my drink—only somehow it wasn't quite as comforting as I'd hoped.

'After all,' she mused, 'what are we *doing* here? Why *are* we here? Do *you* know? Does *anyone*?'

I tried to marshal my thoughts into some sort of coherent

order, but all at once my mind seemed to have become a hollow cavern of bone against whose walls the words she had been reading to me writhed like threads of mist and twisted themselves into weird and threatening patterns.

However, she did not appear to be expecting an answer, for she went on: 'We're all alone; every one of us. It doesn't matter how tightly we cling together. And we're all lost. The ones who pretend they're not are the most lost of all.'

It was then that I recovered the use of my tongue, but in the interval it had become as clumsy as a wooden spoon. My words seemed to form themselves at the back of my throat. ''N' what're we s'posed to do 'bout it?'

She pushed out her bottom lip and then smiled. 'Try to forget,' she said. 'What else is there to do?'

''N' isn't tha' jus' pretending?'

She shook her head. 'No. Not necessarily. It's a way of sleeping. You wake up again, of course, but you're that much further along the road.'

She glanced up, saw that my glass was empty, and filled it again.

''N' how d'you set 'bout f'getting?' I heard myself saying. ' 'Suming you want to, nat'chrelly.'

She got up from the floor, crossed over to the record player, stopped it and put a different record on the turntable. I swallowed another gulp of the whisky and fumbled around for a cigarette. 'Well, go on,' I said, ponderously flicking at her lighter. 'Tell me how you set 'bout it.'

'Whisky's quite a good way,' she said. Her voice seemed to come from a long way off and, turning my head slowly, I found she was speaking to me from the bathroom. 'I should imagine painting was another.'

'Painting's all right,' I said, 'providing you *can* paint. 'Sides it's cheaper than whisky.' A lucid afterthought prompted me to add. 'But painting's a way of rememb'ring.'

'Maybe they're not so different as you think,' she said, com-

ing back into the room and closing the door behind her. 'After all, take a look at this.'

She walked across to the far side of the room and pressed a switch. The painting I'd done of her leapt quivering out of the shadows, illuminated by its own private electric light. 'Chris'!' I exclaimed, awed. 'Did *I* do *that*?'

She came over, smiling, and sat down on the arm of the chair. 'Had you forgotten then?'

I shook my head. 'I'd jus' f'gotten I c'd ever paint like that. Look at tha' arm! I couldn't do tha' now if you paid me a thousan' pounds.'

'I don't believe it,' she said. 'You just don't want to.'

But I was remembering that afternoon when I'd come into this room for the first time. It was as clear as yesterday—much clearer in fact.

'What are you grinning at?' she asked.

'When I tol' you t' strip off,' I sniggered. ''N' you did. Chris', I was shakin' like a leaf.'

'You didn't expect me to?'

'Chris', *no*!' I avowed stoutly, and swigged off the rest of my drink.

'It was shock treatment,' she said, reaching for the bottle. 'And it worked.'

'Won me the Presiden's Medal,' I said. 'Firs' time a firs' year studen's won it for twenty-three years. D'served it too.'

She put the bottle down, took a sip from my glass and then held it to my lips. 'I know it deserved it,' she said. 'That's why I bought it.'

I drank, closed my eyes, and opened them again. I'll swear the picture was shifting about in its frame. 'It's *alive*!' I gasped. 'Chris', it really is!'

'So am I,' she chuckled.

I felt her hand on my far shoulder and my head lolled against the side of her chest. She held it there and I was in no way inclined to object. 'What did you think about,' she murmured, 'when you saw me undressing?'

'How the hell do I know?' I said. 'What d'you think?'

'You remember,' she said. 'I know you do. Go on, tell me.'

'Well,' I said, rubbing my cheek absently against her breast, 'I was a bit ess—ess*cited*. Chris', how do *I* know?'

Right against my ear I felt her heart thumping like a galloping horse. 'Go on,' she whispered. 'You can remember.'

I closed my eyes again—they closed *themselves* actually—and I felt as though I were stretched out on a couch of clouds. 'Well, le's go back,' I sighed. 'I 'member thinkin' I wonder what she'll be like und'neath? I wonder whether she'll have a nice sof' lil' pair've tits 'n' a nice sof' lil' bit of fur . . .'

'And did she?' she whispered, her lips breathing warm into my ear. 'Did she?'

I felt her hand take hold of mine and lift it on to her flesh. 'Did she?' she repeated.

Guided by her my fingertips, now wandering of their own volition, found what waited all too ready for them, explored the little curled petals at once so strange and so familiar, and learned the dark moist secrets wherein lurked oblivion. As though in a dream I became aware of her lips on my lips and her tongue like a little eager lizard flicking its way into my mouth. As though in a dream I felt her loosen the glass from my other hand, and then—was it then, or was it later? —she was tugging with deft, hasty fingers at my clothes, uncovering what she sought and easing it free. And then she was on my lap, her knees astride me gripping my hips, and she was feeding me into her, while I sat passive as a rock accepting her storming onslaught as though in some inexplicable way it was not really happening to me at all. And with every breath she gasped: 'Is it good? Is it better than her? Say it's better than her. *Say it's better than Susan!*'

Maybe if she hadn't actually *said* the name it would have been all right—whisky and the anonymity of 'her' might have seen me through—but 'Susan' pierced my drunken brain like a white hot bayonet. *And there was nothing I could do!* I

swear to God that some vital nerve in me had become totally paralysed. I couldn't prevent her using me, but neither, apparently could I come myself, and when finally she had shuddered herself free of her own torment I was left alone with mine. But I hadn't reckoned on her wealth of arcane experience—nor, to be honest, did I realize what it was she needed from me. I opened my eyes and saw her wildly scanning my face. Then, still staring at me, she reached down beneath her and squeezed.

The pain was like blinding bolts of electric blue fire—impossible to describe. I gave a wild, high-pitched moan. Tears gushed along my eyelids. She lifted herself on the arms of the chair, biting her bottom lip so hard that it turned white, and then, as the agony ebbed from me she gently twisted her hips and slowly lowered herself.

The sensation I experienced was like nothing I'd ever known—too ineffably exquisite to be borne—and the spurt of my release came like the gout from a severed artery. As she felt it within her a kind of translucent veil filmed over her dark eyes and a sigh welled up in her to die like a bubble on the trembling air. 'You can't tell me *that* wasn't better than Susan's,' she murmured.

I could not trust myself to speak. I felt overwhelmed by a sort of inarticulate horror and yet, more terrifying even than that, was the realization that she *knew,* without any words of mine to tell her, that she was speaking the truth. I wanted to cry like a child who has been betrayed, but those tears would not come. I looked up at her and saw a smile ghost across her lips. 'Well,' she whispered, 'would you like me to do it again?'

I started to shake my head, and opened my mouth intending to beg her to let me be, but then, from some dark abysmal centre, far, far remote from any conscious control of mine, there flashed the imperious command to ultimate betrayal. 'Yes,' I whispered, *'yes,'* and it was as though the words were being torn from my tongue with barbed pincers.

Pamela leant forward so that her face was all but touching mine, and I felt myself slipping from her. Before I was quite lost she paused. Her tongue lapped slowly round her lips. 'Then you must buy it,' she murmured. 'Go on. Buy it.'

She had no need to tell me what she meant, but even so the words would not form themselves on my lips.

'Well?' she prompted softly, and I felt those terrible, marvellous fingertips straying along my thighs.

My lips quivered: my eyes besought her to spare me this: but she would not be satisfied with a farthing less than her full price.

Her fingernails touched my skin. At the same instant I felt her sinking slowly back and down. The words she wanted came bubbling unbidden from my lips. 'Oh yes, yes, better! *Better than Sue!*'

I heard her laughing, very, very softly, and then on a dark, lightning-fissured whirlwind I was swept away, to take my rightful place beside her among the legions of the lost and the damned.

* * *

I was woken by all the birds in London screaming their heads off in the garden and I lay there, listening to them in blank astonishment. For a moment I could not make out where I was. Then I felt something warm stirring beside me and, rolling my head over on the pillow, I saw the back of Pamela's dark, tousled mop and her brown, naked shoulder, Christ in Heaven! What had I done? The question was only too pathetically rhetorical. *She* was what I had done! 'God', I found myself thinking desperately, 'what if she has a baby?' The sheer physical shock of the thought was like plunging stark naked into a glacial pool. My flesh became iron on my bones; my heart stopped in mid-pulse; my breath froze. Frantically I flicked back over the pages of memory search-

ing for I don't know what blurred scribble of hope. All were totally blank.

It seems odd now to reflect that there I was in a flat spin over Pamela and yet Sue and I had sometimes let things go gaily hang and hardly given the matter a second thought. But of course it wasn't so odd at all. I was in love with Sue—perhaps, at that moment, more desperately in love with her than I'd ever been—whereas with Pamela I'd been—well, what? Bewitched maybe; besotted, drugged—anything rather than in love.

'Had been'? As I put out my hand to shake her sleeping shoulder the knowledge of all that we had done together burst into bright, hungry flame within me. 'Pamela!' I whispered urgently. 'Pamela!'

She muttered something sleepily and tugged the sheet up to her chin.

'Pamela!'

'Later,' she grunted. 'Go sleep.'

I slid my hand all down her warm, naked body, hoping to evoke some more positive response. I might as well have been stroking a loaf of bread. Desperate, I brought my other hand into play and, at last, she rolled over. 'Christ Almighty!' she groaned bitterly. 'What *are* you? A machine?'

My fire went out as abruptly as if the whole Metropolitan Fire Brigade had directed their hoses on it. 'What if you have a baby?' I asked dismally.

She yawned cavernously. 'Is *that* all?' she said.

'But Christ, Pamela! *Think*!'

She opened one eye and surveyed me wearily. 'I won't,' she said. 'Now for sweet Jesus' sake let me get some sleep.'

'But how do you *know*?' I persisted miserably. 'I wasn't wearing anything.'

'Oh, *buster*,' she sighed. 'Will you *never* grow up? What do you think I was up to in the bathroom? Powdering my *nose*?'

I felt as though a pantechnicon had been suddenly trundled

off my chest. 'You mean *you* were?' I demanded. 'You mean you've got one of those whatsits?'

'I mean I've got one of those whatsits,' she repeated in a bored sing-song, as though she were spelling it out for a below par kindergartener.

'But that's *marvellous*!' I cried.

'Happy now?' she queried sarcastically.

I chuckled admiringly. 'You *really* had it all planned out, didn't you?'

'Look, baby,' she sighed. 'Momma's awful tired just now. Let her have a little sleepy-byes, huh? She'll play with you some more when she wakes up.'

I was only half listening to her. 'Hey, Pamela!' I said, shaking her awake again. 'Where did you get it?'

'Where the *hell* did I get *what*?'

'That thing—what you're wearing?'

She gave a sort of low, throttled scream of exasperation and weariness. 'At the *green*grocers,' she snarled through gritted teeth, and then went on with huge emphasis, 'And what's more, buster, if you don't shut up asking such bloody inane questions I swear to Almighty God I'll screw your bloody stupid balls off and stuff them down your bloody idiotic throat, so help me God!' Then she grabbed up the pillow, heaved it right over her head like a tea-cosy, and turned on me a back about as friendly and accessible as the door to the bullion vault in the Bank of England.

I lay back and blinked up at the dim ceiling. I felt astonishingly wide awake, alert, in all my separate senses. Remarkable to relate I could detect in myself no slightest trace of a hangover. Outside in the garden the birds were still at it, though not as frantically as they had been before. Suddenly I wanted to get out into the fresh air, to breathe, and to feel that I was free.

Taking care not to disturb the muffled shape beside me I rolled quietly out of bed and tiptoed through into the bathroom. Closing the door silently behind me, I walked over to

the shower cabinet, slid back the pink plastic curtains and turned on the cold water. As the stream gathered force I sprang inside, gasping for breath, and let the freezing javelins thrum down on my bare body.

I stood there for about two minutes, revelling in it, then switched it off and dried myself on one of the huge soft towels. I felt as brisk and glowing as an advert for fruit salts. Replacing the towel, I browsed along Pamela's selection of personal condiments and, settling on 'Mimosa', sprinkled it lasciviously into my armpits and between my legs. Then I looked around hopefully to see if there was a toothbrush-rack labelled 'Overnight Guests', found there wasn't, debated whether to borrow Pamela's, and delicately demurred. Instead I squeezed some toothpaste on to my finger, smeared it briskly round my gums, rinsed and spat. Then, my toilet completed, I crept back into the other room and hunted out my clothes from the odd corners into which she had flung them while she was undressing me.

When I was clothed I walked quietly over to the bed and stood gazing down at her. She looked incredibly small, curled up like a hibernating dormouse, with only the faintest movement of the blanket over her shoulders betraying her breath. Who she was, what she was, what she had done to me and I to her, seemed suddenly abstract, unimportant speculations. I felt a spontaneous gush of tenderness for her and, like the Ancient Mariner with the sea snakes, found myself 'blessing her, unaware'. Perhaps some tremor of that blessing pierced through the black storm in which the little boat of her soul pitched and tossed, for she stirred and murmured something in her sleep. Alarmed, I backed away on tiptoe, turned, crept silent as a cat to the door, and slid out into the shadowy corridor.

As I let myself out into the grey pre-dawn morning and crunched over the dewy gravel to the street, I tried to measure up what had happened with Pamela against Susan and myself. Useless to pretend I had been too drunk to realize what

was going on when my mind was still awash with its witchery. I played with it like a cat with a mouse, pretending it wasn't there and then swiftly pouncing on it, tossing it up into the air, rolling over with it, mauling it, living it again, as all the while my feet carried me in swift springing strides towards the open Heath.

As I stepped on to the grass and looked about me, the first spokes of sunlight wheeled across the rim of the eastern sky. It was a sight to make a corpse sit up and clap its hands and assuredly I was no corpse. I gazed with mouth agape, and as the first molten chip of the disc edged over the horizon I cupped my hands to my cheeks and shrilled out a wild *'Tally-ho!'* in salute,

The echo drifted back to me from the gloomy woods below, *'oh—oh'*, faint and regretful, shorn of all challenge and all joy. I dropped my hands to my sides. 'Animal,' I told myself. 'Beast. Lecher. Despicable object. Ugh! You disgust me.' And I meant it—up to a point. I knew that what I'd done was unforgivable, that I *ought* to hate myself—that I *did* hate myself—but only up to a point. In the deep red core of me I wasn't hating myself one little bit. Even when I thought of Sue I thought of her with hunger, not compassion. And—shudder my soul, and hide your face!—I wanted her in the way I'd had Pamela, sweating, and spiced with pain. I wanted to hurt her and be hurt by her. Damned, irrevocably damned!

But the blood singing in my veins; my eyeballs winkled by the pricking sun; every vibrant animal cell of me would not have it so. 'Rejoice!' they screamed. 'Shout! Sing! Hosannah in the Highest, cry! For life, sweet juicy life, is yours, all yours.' 'Susan!' I bawled, *'Sus-an!'* and the drowsy rooks snapped like black crackers into the air: 'Susan!' I yelled, rushing headlong down the shadow-filleted slope: *'Susan!'* I screamed, capering wildly beside the scummy pond: *'Susan, I am a-li-ive!'*

* * *

I fled from London as from the plague and arrived home to find a card from Sue waiting for me. She must have posted it *en route* somewhere. The picture was of an airport. On the back, apart from my address, were only two words: *'Sweet love.'* I tried them on my tongue and they slid down my throat like drops of boiling honey.

That same afternoon I took my easel out into the fields. On all sides the tawny corn rippled away into the blue distance and overhead tiny cherub clouds popped and spluttered in a sky as deep as night. It was as though I were gazing out on a giant Susan, spread out, gold glinting, ripe as harvest. I glutted my eyes on it until my brain was aswim, then, drunk with my vision, I began to paint.

The sweat streamed down my face and bit into my eyes. I stripped to the waist and attacked the canvas as though it were something I hated. Driven frantic, I found myself at one point shoving splurges of neat pigment on to the surface with my thumb. And then, quite suddenly, I realized that I was singing, and that a great stillness had descended over everything. I was alone with my vision and the dripping canvas. Sue, Pamela, my own all too familiar self had dropped from me like a shed skin. Nothing existed in the world but me and this and even *we* were not really *in* the world at all, but in some other place set apart, adrift, alone. And nothing mattered. Love, betrayal, fame, hope, despair, all the manifold clutter of life, dissolved, shrank into nothingness and was gone. I had stolen a moment out of time, stepped into it like a boat and cast off.

The boat drifted ashore at half past five precisely—I know because I remember looking at my watch!—and I stepped out and found the 'self' I had forgotten waiting like a pile of clothes on the shore. I dressed neither reluctantly nor joyfully but because that was what you did with clothes—put them on. I took out a cigarette, lit it, breathed in the smoke in a great sigh and stood back. My canvas eyed me coyly like a fat nude fraülein peeping over her sowlike shoulder. I

shuddered. What confronted me was a monster, a freak, an artistic abortion of herculean proportions! What in heaven's name had gone wrong? Was it the clouds? I screened them with my hand and the result made me wince as though I'd bitten on a bad tooth. The trees then? No, by God, it couldn't be them—they weren't bad at all, in fact they were pretty good—all things considered. Ah, but those 'all things', there was the rub. Instead of knitting together they were tugging apart, gaping at the seams. It was a wonder the bloody canvas hadn't split three ways. What had I been dreaming of, for Christ's sake? Disgustedly I dredged up a tongueful of slime and spat. The gob plopped fair and square right bang in the middle of that enormous belly of gamboge wheat. I gazed at it ruminatively for a minute, heaved a sigh, then, picking up my palette knife, began methodically scraping off the pigment and flicking it into the corn. When I was down to the priming, I took a turpsy rag and wiped away the last traces of what might well have been my masterpiece of ineptitude.

Next day I was there again. I just couldn't keep away from the place. The trouble was I *knew* there was a picture there just as surely as an experienced fisherman senses the presence of the trout he can't actually see. This time I tried a different approach and even went so far as to think for a bit before I started slapping the paint around. It was as though I were stalking it, sneaking up within arm's length and then, when everything was ready—*olé*—the kill! The idea may have been all right but the resultant pounce landed me slap on top of yet another heap of putrid carrion. I'm not kidding, under the rape of my brush that lovely succulent landscape had somehow transformed itself into the kind of leprous horror Mattias Grünewald might have knocked off if he'd worn distorting glasses and painted with a toy trowel. I couldn't believe my eyes. Where had it *come* from, for heaven's sake? The answer: 'Out of your mind, my friend', was too nauseating to contemplate, so this one too joined the other among the poppies.

But the bug really had hold of me by now. Not just this particular picture—the genuine old-fashioned painting bug. Unless you're a painter yourself you can't hope to appreciate the sheer primitive joy of struggling with colours on a square of canvas. Just the physical act of churning over flake white and linseed oil on the palette is a marvel. I can imagine getting sensuous satisfaction—*real* satisfaction at that—out of just covering a canvas from top to bottom, with pure, undiluted ivory black. Crazy maybe, but there it is. And add to this the throat-gripping, kidney-squeezing excitement kindled in you by some fortuitous interplay of colour and form—a sudden blinding perception of the sheer *realness* of the world you live in—and you're in—bitten—rabid—beyond all hope!

This is what had happened to me. Maybe if Sue had been there—or Pamela!—I'd have escaped infection. If they'd been there before it took hold that is. By now I was beyond even them for as long as the fit lasted. I got round Dad and he told one of the workshop hands to knock up a couple of dozen hardboard panels and I was out from morning to night in the fields lost in a frenzied dream of golden ripeness—drunk with colour.

At nights I sat up writing to Sue, trying vainly to tell her what I was after. I say 'vainly' because I didn't know myself. I clutched for sunbeams—for things which could never be—for an art which could stand beside Nature and not look the pale imitation it invariably must.

Within a week I was producing stuff that didn't make me physically ill to look at—providing I didn't look for long—and once or twice I seemed almost within clutching distance of the truth, brushing it with my fingertips as it were. And, for a moment or two, I experienced a tremor of that primal ecstasy I'd known when Sue had first touched my hand. It was so faint, so far away, I almost doubted that I'd really felt it, but when, next day, I looked at what I'd done I knew I hadn't lied to myself. *Something,* perhaps only the merest glimmer of a fugitive gleam was there, trapped like a midge

in the trembling web of colour, maybe no more than the whispered echo of an echo—but it *was* there, and it was enough.

Then one morning I opened the familiar letter from Sue and read that she'd be back in London on Friday. Friday! and this was Wednesday. I knew I would have to be there—that *I wanted* to be there—but . . . but . . . I propped my chin on my hand and gazed out of the window to where great floppy frigates of cloud were bumbling across an azure sky. I thought of the sweetness of Sue's mouth, the quicksilver touch of her tongue, her eyes, her face, her hair—and I sighed.

That afternoon I went back to the fatal field for my third and final try. And this time I found what I had been looking for and picked it up and flipped it on to the canvas as casually as though it had been a pebble I'd discovered lying at my feet.

* * *

I got back to London at four o'clock on Friday afternoon. I rang Sue from the station, found she'd arrived home half an hour earlier and told her I'd be over just as soon as I'd dumped my things at the hostel. 'Hurry,' she implored. 'Hurry, my love!'

The City was as stifling as only London can be in a heat-wave. Shop doorways gasped and lolled their parched blinds over sidewalks that shimmered like the Gobi. By the time the bus had dribbled me off at Swiss Cottage I was little more than a sticky blob of protoplasm. But the thought of Sue was like a mountain breeze, and with each step I took I felt the electric tingle of a delicious apprehension, the quickening of desire.

I skipped down the steps to her front door, two at a time, and pressed the bell with a trembling forefinger. The door was opened by Mrs. Dolfuss. 'Hello,' I said, swallowing my disappointment. 'Did you have a good journey?'

'Oh, Tony. How nice of you to call. Do come in. We're just making a cup of tea.'

'Thank you,' I said and then caught sight of Sue hovering behind her mother's shoulder. 'Well, hello there . . .'

The rest of that greeting never materialized and, thinking back, I'm surprised I managed even those three words. It was as though I'd been dropped into a furnace. I melted; bubbled for a second; and vapourized—*piff! paff! puff!* God knows what I'd expected her to be—the Sue I'd said goodbye to three weeks before, I suppose. But *this*! Well, I can do no more than try.

She was wearing the simplest of cotton dresses—little blue and white checks—with a flared skirt and a deep, square-cut neckline, which exposed the sloping shores of her breasts and a foamy edging of the white lace of her bra. Her legs and arms were bare and on her feet she had white openwork sandals. This, you realize, was the first click of the shutter, the initial retina image, before I'd really focussed. Then the mist dispersed and I saw her plain. Sweet God in Heaven! It was as though the Sue I'd known had been taken and cast in some new alloy as yet undreamt of in our laboratories—a blend of copper, gold, and bronze—and then dusted all over with platinum peach-down. Her eyebrows and eyelashes were bleached to silver and so were stray strands of her hair. She was rinsed in sunlight. It dripped from her, hazed her round, quivered like neon. The shadowy hall in which I stood and gaped, glowed with her. I'll swear it did. And then she smiled.

Mrs D—God bless her!—chose that moment to think she heard the kettle boiling over, and padded tactfully away. There wasn't time for us to speak. Mrs D couldn't have been more than five yards up the passage before we were in each other's arms, sunk back among the coats behind the front door, with our eyes closed, gorging on each other. Christ, the *taste* of her! It was like sipping the milk of young almond kernels—sweet and faintly bitter at the same time. Our

tongues were so far down each other's throats it's a wonder we didn't choke! In one sure movement my hand was up under her skirt and she was bending her knees and thrusting herself down on me. My fingers were like a second tongue in a second mouth. In ten seconds she was distraught, a single shiver of passion from her toes to the tips of her ears, a shuddering, flowing, inchoate thing. If her mother had allowed us one more moment I'd have had her there, but the brisk patter of returning footsteps and the clink of tea things on a tray wrenched us apart, twitching like a couple of cats' tails.

That tea was unforgettable. I was pumped so full of sex I couldn't sit in comfort for thirty seconds. If I'd been a steam turbine the needle on my pressure gauge would undoubtedly have been registering 'Run for your lives!' It was pure agony. Sue caught my eye across a plate of biscuits she was offering me and rolled her eyeballs upwards so that only the whites were showing. It was then that I noticed how her breasts had risen like twin loaves of golden dough behind their restraining bodice and her nipples were standing out like studs. How the hell they escaped the notice of Mrs D I can't imagine, but I daresay that never having been in a like state herself she couldn't see what was in front of her nose.

For my part I couldn't see anything else—or to be more exact I could hardly see at all! As for taking any appreciable part in the conversation, that was totally beyond me. Not that this worried Mrs D. She was only too happy to have the floor to herself while she ate her way in retrospect through every breakfast, lunch, and dinner they'd had in Italy. The only times she paused were when she needed to ask Sue the name of some particular delicacy whose title—though *never* its shape, colour or flavour—had temporarily eluded her memory. It was for all the world as though she were reliving the life history of some madly passionate *affaire,* sucking the juice from each succulent pip and then picking over her teeth for the last flavoursome morsels. Even the vocabularly she employed seemed weirdly suggestive, though this may well have

been occasioned by my own state of hyper-sensitive awareness. Nevertheless, as I listened to her slowly stripping her third fresh lake trout, exposing its sweet flesh, bone by fragile bone, and lapping up its slippery, delectable roe, I couldn't help wondering which of us was in the worse state.

She was just in the act of sinking her teeth into the memory of an enormous bosomy peach when the phone rang. Sue went to answer it and then came back to tell her mother it was for her. Mrs D wiped the retrospective peach juice from her lips and fingers and trotted out into the hall.

Sue came slowly towards me grinning like a goon and shaking her head. As she reached me she leant forward, stooping over the low table, ostensibly to refill her cup with tea. Her incredible breasts hung like golden globes a foot above my nose, utterly irresistible. I reached up and, as though they had been twin baby noses, gently tweaked her nipples between finger and thumb.

She squeaked and dropped the milk jug just as Mrs D reappeared in the doorway saying: 'The odd thing was we couldn't get bananas for love or money—and you *know* how Sue simply *adores* them.'

'Yes,' I said weakly, 'I had noticed it.'

'Peaches, melons, grapes, figs—oh, those *figs! mmm!* But not a single banana.'

'Not *one*?' I echoed. 'Well, I never!'

'Not *one*,' she insisted. 'Would you believe it?'

'Extraordinary,' I murmured and contrived to pinch Sue's calf as she concluded her mopping up of the table.

Shortly after this, Mrs Waitman, the tenant of the flat above, appeared to pay her respects, and, on the pretext of doing the washing-up, Sue and I were able to find a temporary haven in the kitchen. We were both so steamed up by then that it was only a matter of moments from the lighting of the fuse to the explosion, and, believe it or not, within five minutes we were ready to begin all over again. Fortunately Sue suggested taking a stroll up to the Heath, and, after some

schoolboy badinage with Mrs D about going to look for bananas, we set off.

It was by then about six o'clock. The air was sweltering. We bought a couple of jumbo sized ice-creams and before we were half-way through them they had subsided into a sticky soup which we drank from the soggy cornets. I told Sue about my painting and she told me about Italy. 'I'm this colour all over,' she said, licking a drop of ice-cream from her bare forearm. 'Would you like to see?'

I pinched her tail surreptitiously. 'Any time you like,' I murmured, and let my fingertips trail away in a caress along the crease of her bottom.

'Hey!' she whispered. 'You'll get us locked up.'

'You started it.'

'Oof!' she exclaimed. 'If only Pamela wasn't away we could go there.'

'*Is* she away?'

'Didn't you know?'

I shook my head.

'I had a card from her,' she said. 'From Spain. I thought I'd told you.'

'I would have remembered,' I said. 'What did she say?'

'Oh, just that she was there. Nothing. *You* know.'

'Now I'll tell *you* something,' I said, producing the choice morsel of news I'd been withholding. 'We've done with Pamela's.'

'What do you mean?'

'Just that I've got a room of my own—I will have on Monday, anyway.'

'Tony!' The word gushed up to heaven like incense from an altar. 'Why didn't you tell me?'

I grinned. 'Too many other things to think about.'

'Have you seen it?'

I nodded. 'It's right at the top. Paddy O'Dwyer's old room. You can see half-way across London.'

'Who cares about that?' she laughed. 'Just so long as there's a door.'

'And a bed,' I added.

'Who cares about a bed?'

'I'll have to sleep,' I pointed out. 'From time to time, anyway.'

'Not while I'm there.'

'You're nothing but a nympho,' I said. 'You can't have enough of it.'

'I'm not really. I only want *you*.'

'That's your story. What about all those liquid-eyed Italians?'

She grinned. 'They were nice. They said I was *come una secchia piena di sole*.'

'The filthy beasts! What's it mean, anyway?'

'A bucketful of sunlight.'

'Disgusting! It's a good thing I wasn't around.'

'What would you have done?'

'You,' I said. 'You and you and you. All day and all night. There wouldn't have been any room left for Italians or sunlight.'

She laughed. 'Guess what? I'm overdue again.'

'Christ!' I gulped. 'Not *again*! How long this time?'

'Ten days.'

I stared at her. 'Maximum or minimum?'

'Minimum. Maximum's a fortnight.'

'Jesus!'

She laughed. 'Cheer up. Look on the bright side.'

'And where the hell's that?'

'You needn't wear one of those things.'

I laughed in spite of myself. 'You're the *end,* Sue. Don't you *care*?'

'Not really,' she admitted. 'I mean *I* do if *you* do. After all we're married, aren't we?'

'Idiot. What about your parents?'

'I think we'd better tell them we're engaged.'

'*Engaged!* It strikes me we'd better tell them to put the banns up!'

'Don't be silly. It's only *ten* days, after all.'

'Minimum,' I pointed out.

'Well, a fortnight then.'

'What was it last time?'

'A week—eight days.'

'Maximum?'

She nodded. 'I *bet* it was that thermometer,' she mused. 'I never *could* read thermometers.'

'Sue, do you *feel* as if you're going to?'

'I don't know. I mean, how *do* you feel? I haven't been sick or anything.'

'But in your*self*? Well'—I waved my arms—'*motherly*?'

'Oh, yes,' she admitted, then, after a moment's reflection, added, 'but I always have.'

'You really *want* a baby?'

'Not *a* baby,' she corrected. '*Your* baby.'

'Christ, Sue, I love you so much it hurts!'

She nodded. 'Yes, I know.'

'I don't deserve you,' I muttered. 'God knows I don't.'

Those words were the nearest I was ever to come to telling her about Pamela. She just wrinkled up her nose at me.

'We'll tell them as soon as we get back,' I said.

'But we won't go back just yet, will we?'

'Sue, you're incredible!'

'No, I'm not.'

'Yes, you are. *And* you're incorrigible.'

'I am now,' she grinned, licking her lips. 'Where shall we go?'

'Who cares?'

'Over the wall?'

And over the wall we went. The rest is silence—two separate, individual lots of it—and there might well have been a third if the rain hadn't started.

'Rain' qualifies as a classic understatement for that deluge.

We were drenched before we'd got up off the grass. It was genuine 'Sanders of the River' stuff—monsoon variety—and it was *hot*!—well, *warm,* anyway. It made us want to strip off and run round whooping.

Since there was obviously no point in taking shelter unless it could have been in a Noah's Ark, we clambered back over the wall and began wading up the miniature Mississippi which had once been the path.

By the time we got home we couldn't have been any wetter if we'd fallen fully-clothed into a swimming pool. Sue's dress was clinging to her like a chequered blister and her hair was lank, pale seaweed. She could hardly have appeared more naked or more beautiful.

Mrs D let us in. 'Did you get caught in the rain?' she asked.

I don't know what else she thought we might have got caught in—the sinking of the *Titanic* maybe—but we just nodded and grinned. Then, before the door had closed behind us, Sue piped up: 'Mummy dear, Tony and I are engaged.' Just like that.

It was a tricky moment for all concerned and I must say Mrs D took it with stalwart Conservative phlegm. Well, that *is* a surprise,' she said. 'Now come along and get yourselves dried.'

I felt it incumbent upon me to add a word and I did my best. 'What Susan means, Mrs Dolfuss, is that I'd very much like to marry her if you and Mr Dolfuss would, er, give us your blessing.'

Mrs D gave me a rather strained smile. 'Yes,' she said, 'I rather thought that was what she meant. Now you'd better dry yourself in the bathroom, Tony. And Susan in her room. I'll see if I can find you some things of Charles's to change into. Susan, fetch Tony a towel, dear.'

Sue pulled a quizzical face and squelched her way along the hall in front of me. 'Do you think she's gone to tell Daddy now?' she whispered.

I shrugged. 'What do you think?'

As she blew me a kiss and closed the door on me, I heard Mr D call: *'Susan!'* in a voice which shook me to the giblets. If he was reacting to the news of the engagement in that tone, how on earth was he going to take Sue pregnant? It didn't bear thinking about.

Five minutes later there was a discreet rattle of fingernails against the frosted glass panels of the door and Mrs D called: 'I've left some things on the mat for you, Tony.'

'Thank you very much,' I said.

I waited a few seconds for her to get clear, then I turned the handle and scooped up the pile of garments that was lying just outside the door. Before ducking back again I strained my ears in an effort to catch the conversation from along the corridor but there was nothing doing.

The clothes Mrs D had provided constituted the bare minimum for social decency—namely trousers, a shirt, and, as an afterthought, a pair of heel-less bedroom slippers. Reasonable enough, one might think, for an emergency, but the snag lay in the marked discrepancy in physical stature between Susan's father and myself. Eight inches in height does not sound a great deal, but when you add to it a proportionate breadth of beam, prow, and stern it tots up to something pretty monstrous.

I climbed into the shirt and surveyed my reflection. The garment I had been lent was obviously the relic of some Mediterranean summer holiday, the by-product of an atavistic upsurge of blood to the head, and I suspected that Mr D had chosen it himself. It was a creation in alternate maroon and pale green stripes, short sleeved, and with a bright yellow albatross—or was it a seagull?—embroidered over the breast pocket. Even so I might have managed to cope somehow if it hadn't been for those sleeves. They hung flapping a clear three inches below my elbows and, try as I might, I could not get them to stay rolled up. My arms looked like a pair of hairy twigs poking out of large, striped paper bags, and, as I stared

at this extraordinary sartorial effect I found myself beginning to wonder if Mrs D hadn't chosen the garment on purpose. It would have been difficult to conceive of anything less likely to display me to advantage. And I still hadn't tried the trousers! Liquid with apprehension I stooped and picked them up and—God in Heaven!—they weren't trousers at all but *shorts*—pale, silver-grey shorts! Or were they?

To obtain the full effect I clambered into them and mounted the bath stool. With the waist heaved right up to my ribs and the divide threatening to split me up the middle, those enormous aluminium tubes still ended well below my knee-caps. *Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is fairest of them all?* The unspoken but inescapable answer nearly brought tears to my eyes. Dare I call Mrs D and implore her to find me something else? But how did I know what she might not have hidden away for just such an eventuality as this? Sick at heart I climbed down on to the bathmat and began struggling with the waistband buckles.

Even when they were tugged in to the point where the stitching was endangered, they still wouldn't grip my hips, but with desperate ingenuity I contrived to fasten one of the shirt buttons through the top fly hole and thus evolved something resembling a pair of outsize, variegated rompers. I didn't dare risk another look in the mirror so I can't be certain of the final effect, but judging from the way it impressed itself indelibly on the memories of the Dolfusses it must have been pretty *avant-garde*.

In the circumstances I suppose the slippers were something of an anti-climax. They were just five sizes too large and that's all there is to say about them except that they made me *sound* like something primeval. After I'd hung my own clothes in the drying cabinet and switched it on, I set off down the passage to the sitting-room, and I swear the noise I made was so bloody *sinister* that I twice looked over my shoulder to see if there wasn't something following me. But at least it kept my mind temporarily occupied and,

almost before I knew it, I found myself knocking on the door.

I didn't wait for the summons. I turned the handle with one hand, took a firm hold of a trouser-pocket with the other, and shuffled in. Six rifle eyes swung round, got me firmly in their sights, and—silence. Silence so deep, so unutterably profound, that I clearly heard myself swallow. 'I'm afraid they don't fit terribly well,' I murmured and gave a sort of helpless shrug of apology.

The movement, though slight, was sufficient to precipitate an avalanche. I let go of the door handle and grabbed for the other pocket just in time. Sue gave a sort of choking gasp. Mr and Mrs D just gaped. I lowered my eyes modestly and waited for someone to say something.

Looking back on it I can't help feeling that Mrs D's stratagem—if indeed it *was* one—had overleapt itself. Assuming she *had* hoped to make me appear inadequate, what she had actually done was to turn me into something unbelievable, something so far beyond the pale of ordinary social experience that nothing could bring me back again. It wasn't exactly that they couldn't take me seriously as a *son-in-law,* but that they couldn't even swallow me as a member of the human race! At one stroke I'd become extra-terrestrial, a vision, a wonder!

It took me some moments to latch on to the situation—after all, I couldn't *see* myself—but I began to realize that somehow the ball had landed in my court and not in theirs. The mercury of my self-confidence barometer, which had been registering strictly sub-zero ever since I'd first set eyes on that shirt, now began to climb, somewhat hesitantly, back up the scale. Intuitively I surmised that Mrs D had shot her bolt and that my target was Sue's father. Since I hadn't yet seen him since his return from holiday it seemed politic to shuffle forward with outstretched hand.

His reflex was, I'm sure, quite automatic. In his world when a hand was proffered you shook it. He did. 'Hah,' he

said. 'Hah, well—' and I saw that tell-tale, sliding-away look, drift across his eyes as he vainly tried to come to mental grips with just *what* he was shaking by the hand.

'You're looking awfully well, Sir.' I countered genially.

'Hah,' he said again. 'Well . . . Yes . . .' Then, with an effort of concentration that made a vein wriggle like a worm across his temple: 'What's this Susan's been telling me about you two?'

For one moment I felt I was falling down a well. Had Sue been mad enough to blurt out something about the baby? Impossible. I sank into a pile of metaphorical mattresses which were conveniently piled at the bottom of the well-shaft and catapulted upwards again. I smiled engagingly at him. 'It's quite true, Sir. We've fallen head over heels—I mean, we're deeply in love, Sir. We have been for ages really. So we'd like to ask you both to give us your permission to get married.'

I turned towards Mrs Dolfuss as I concluded this, but observing that she was still obviously floundering in deep water I pivoted back to him.

'Hah,' said Mr Dolfuss. 'Hah, well—marriage, eh?' He looked down at my fantastic trousers—at *his* trousers actually —as he said this, and the stream of his thought seemed to soak away into desert sand.

'Yes, Sir, *marriage*,' I prompted gently.

His abstracted eyes rose slowly to the level of the yellow albatross. 'Marriage,' he murmured. 'Well . . . Yes . . .'

'Yes?' I breathed. 'You mean, Sir—?'

He bent down a fraction, as though to ascertain if it really *was* an albatross after all, and frowned. 'Extraordinary,' he muttered. 'Did *I* buy that?'

'Sir,' I said. *'Please.'*

'Uh? Hah. Yes, young man.' He drew a breath, exhaled it slowly, and stared fixedly into the far corner of the room. 'Marriage,' he intoned sombrely, 'is a Very Serious Business.'

I waited for him to go on but the impetus had obviously

expended itself. 'Yes, Sir,' I said at last, 'it *is* serious. We realize that.'

My voice seemed to bring him some of the way back to me. 'Um?' he murmured absently.

'You were saying, Sir, that marriage is a very serious business,' I reminded him gently. 'Susan and I do realize that.'

He nodded, with approval I thought, but it was difficult to be sure. 'A Very Serious Business *indeed*,' he reiterated, and then added swiftly. 'Could you *support* her?'

I'd already woven a carpet answer to that one out of government grants, but before I had a chance to spread it before him, he was following up with: 'You'll have to prove yourself, you know.'

It occurred to me that if Sue's calculations were trustworthy, proof of a sort would not be long in making itself known. I swallowed. 'Of course, Sir,' I said. 'But in principle you'll agree, won't you?'

My choice of that phrase was a stroke of pure genius. It was so exactly the kind of language Mr D really understood. I'm sure he'd spent half his life agreeing to things 'in principle'. In his world details were what mattered or, better still, signatures appropriately sworn and witnessed. 'In principle', I couldn't help feeling, he would have been quite prepared to chuck in Mrs D as well if he'd thought it would ensure an end to this farce. He nodded portentously and glanced across at Sue who had been standing mute, damp, and rebellious, during the whole of our surrealistic interchange. 'Does that satisfy you, Miss?' he enquired.

Sue nodded, smiled happily, and held out her hands to me.

I reached for them instinctively. With a faint *plup*! the button of my rompers flipped off and, whispering regretfully, they subsided round my ankles like the envelope of an expiring barrage balloon.

'Hah!' barked Mr Dolfuss. 'Hah! Hah! Hah!'

* * *

So Sue and I became engaged 'in principle'. Since neither of us knew quite what this entailed we simply assumed we *were* engaged from that moment and made up our minds to tell as many people as we could as soon as possible. In this way we hoped to establish a *fait accompli* which would absorb some of the shock the next announcement was bound to produce. But, as luck or nature would have it, the second announcement never came, for the very next morning Sue rang up to tell me her period had started. Believe it or not, she sounded almost sorry.

After that our life settled down into a more or less domestic routine and, despite Sue's forecast, we didn't spend *all* the time making love. For one thing I did a whole series of studies of her—most of them nudes—and she developed an unsuspected passion for housekeeping, or rather 'roomkeeping'. I didn't ask her to, she just enjoyed doing it, and I couldn't find it in my heart to forbid it. In the evenings we went out to the flicks or toured the Expressos and the weeks flipped by in that effortless way they do when you're happy.

At Christmas I took her down with me to Suffolk and, just as I'd known they would, my people took her to their hearts. By that time we both felt as if we were an old married couple. I don't mean to imply that the fizz had gone off the champagne—it hadn't—but we were getting to know each other —filling in the blank spaces on our maps of each other—and if that isn't being in love, what is?

The one space I took care not to fill in on my chart was Pamela. Some time after she'd got back from Spain I trotted round to see her and told her Sue and I were now officially engaged. 'Well, well,' she said, smiling in that cat-like way she had. 'Congratulations.'

It was only too obvious that she was enjoying this situation as much as I wasn't. 'Pamela,' I said, 'you won't tell her anything, will you?'

'What about?'

'Come off it!'

She looked at me thoughtfully. 'Do you really think I would?'

'I don't know,' I admitted, then added: 'No, not really.'

'But you think I might?'

'I don't know,' I repeated unhappily. 'I just don't want to run the risk. Anyway I'd swear it was a lie. What else could I do?'

'You could tell her yourself.'

She was right of course, I could see that, but I knew I couldn't do it. Someone else, perhaps, but not me. I shook my head. 'I think I *would* have told her if I'd met her just after I left you that morning,' I said. 'But not now.'

She didn't say anything for a bit, then she smiled. 'Can you remember it?'

I nodded.

'Everything?'

'Most of it,' I admitted. 'Enough anyway.'

'It was good, wasn't it?'

I didn't say anything.

'Do you know how many times you fucked me?'

The way she used that word shook me rigid—it was so *casual*. I felt as if I were a puppy having its nose rubbed in its own mess. I mumbled something and avoided her eyes.

'Four times,' she said. 'Quite a respectable score, wasn't it?'

I made an effort to recall it and found I had no difficulty at all—the whole episode might have happened yesterday so vivid was it in my mind's eye. 'I wish—' I muttered and then, on the point of saying I wished it had never happened, I found I couldn't say it.

'Yes?' she nudged. 'What do you wish?'

I shrugged. 'I don't know. To be reassured I suppose.'

Her eyebrows rose. 'Do you? *Really?*'

'No,' I said hastily. 'I don't mean *that*. I just want you to promise me you won't tell Sue, that's all.'

'All right,' she said easily. 'I promise.'

'Thanks, Pamela,' I said. 'I didn't really think you would, but you know how it is.'

'No,' she said, 'I *don't* know how it is. But I know something else.'

'What?'

'If I came over there now,' she said slowly, 'and sat on that chair with you, you'd do it all over again—*and* without the whisky.'

And she was dead right. Even though I knew Sue would be there waiting for me when I got back to the hostel, it didn't make any difference. If Pamela had done what she threatened I'd have been in her up to the hilt in thirty seconds. It made me shake.

She laughed. 'It's all right, I won't—this time. It's temporarily out of season anyway. You can fix me a drink instead if you like.'

I poured out the whisky with an unsteady hand and she raised her glass to me. 'Here's to it,' she said.

'Here's to it,' I echoed, but just what particular 'it' we were celebrating I wouldn't like to say.

From then on, knowing full well I couldn't trust myself, I took good care not to be left alone with Pamela. Shortly afterwards she embarked on some sort of *liaison* with Ken and drifted out of our lives. In the circumstances it was just as well.

However, we made a point of inviting her to our wedding, which took place all of two years later, after we'd finished with College. Mr and Mrs D did us proud, but even so, on the day of the ceremony, they both had a rather puzzled look as though they sensed something wrong but couldn't be quite sure what it was. Sue told me later that, on the previous evening, her mother had come into her room and, after fussing around ineffectually for about twenty minutes had screwed herself up and tried to do a mother's duty and pass on the facts of life. I wish I'd been there. Apparently it had taken

Sue fully five minutes to grasp what her mother was getting at. 'I've never felt so *embarrassed* in my *life*,' she confessed, 'and you know how I blush.'

'Well, go on,' I said. 'I'm all agog as the saying goes. How did she put it?'

'Oh, Tony, *must* I?'

'There shall be no secrets between husband and wife,' I said gravely. 'Spill the beans, chick.'

'Well'—she giggled—'she asked me if I'd realized that men and women were *made* differently.'

'Ah,' I nodded approvingly, 'a good point that. And had you?'

'I honestly didn't know what she *meant*. I just *looked* at her.'

'Your poor mother,' I said. 'How did she react?'

'She thought I didn't *know,* I suppose. Anyway she said in a strangled sort of voice—poor Mummy, you should have *heard* her!—that they had something down here between their legs like ponies—'

'Ponies!' I blinked. 'That's stretching things a bit, isn't it?' Then I remembered those fantastic shorts of Mr D's and wondered.

'I suppose she remembered I'd been crazy on ponies once,' said Sue. 'And she *did* say *smaller* of course. Honestly I was on *fire* by that time.'

'I can imagine,' I said. 'And then?'

Sue began to blush again at the mere memory, but her sense of humour had got the better of her. 'She said I had to let you get on top of me—when I was lying in bed—and to shut my eyes tight and try to think of something else.'

'Crikey!' I said. 'Did she suggest *what*?'

Sue bit her lip but she couldn't stop herself now. 'She said *she'd* thought about what she'd have for dinner the next day.'

'Well, I'm damned!' I laughed. 'She didn't suggest the experience might be *enjoyable*?'

She shook her head. 'She said men *had* to do it and that it

wouldn't hurt so much after a bit. And then, if I was lucky, I'd have a baby in the spring.'

'Poor Mrs D!' I said, and I've never meant anything more. 'Christ, it's no wonder you're an only child, old thing.'

'It must have been pretty grim for Daddy too, mustn't it?' she said thoughtfully.

'It doesn't bear thinking about,' I said, and it didn't.

* * *

But for all that Mrs D *had* been right about one thing. In October Sue began being sick in the mornings. I'd started teaching in Hampton by that time and if there's anything more exhausting than your first term's teaching I'd like to know what it is. On top of that there was the house to decorate, the garden to get straight, and God knows what else. We had our hands full to overflowing. But Sue looked *marvellous*! She'd managed to hang on to the tan she'd picked up during our honeymoon in Italy and it wasn't till well after Christmas that she began to fill out to any noticeable extent.

She was completely enraptured by the idea of being pregnant—not *obsessed* but somehow *enchanted,* like the miller's daughter in the fairy tale who suddenly discovers she's a princess. It seemed to explain so many things she'd never really fathomed before. In no time at all she'd made friends with another girl up the street who was expecting her first baby at about the same time and together they used to trail off to 'Mothercraft' classes at the local pre-natal clinic.

From my own point of view, easily the most entertaining aspect of the mystery was the exercises. I used to lie in bed and watch Sue, clad in panties and bra, performing on the bedroom floor. It was a riot. The *pièce-de-résistance* was undoubtedly the 'frog hops', though the 'slow bicycling' and the 'elephant' had their inspired moments too. Ah me, those 'frog hops'! I can see her now, squatting like a golden egg in a pink egg cup, frowning with concentration, and then launching

herself in a series of thumping, six-inch lollops around the bedroom carpet. Anything less frog-like would be difficult to imagine, and my own attempts to add a bit of local colour with reptilian croaks of encouragement, invariably had the effect of ruining the performance altogether by reducing the star to helpless laughter.

That same spring—in February—I was invited to submit ten pictures for a 'Young Contemporaries Exhibition' at the Wilmann Gallery. Never having met Mr Wilmann I couldn't at first imagine how he'd got hold of my name—to be honest I thought he'd mixed me up with some other Braydon—but when I went up to London to have a word with him and he straight away mentioned Francesca Honderschein, I realized whom I had to thank for it.

Your first public exhibition—even though you're sharing it with five other people—is as unnerving as it is exhilarating. On the one hand you're telling yourself that nothing will come of it, while on the other you're running up pagodas of hope that made the Empire State Building look like a bungalow. You find yourself rapidly reviewing the critics, playing down their blindnesses and magnifying their rare moments of perception, while at the same time you're trying to decide what is most likely to attract their approving attention without betraying your own values. To say: 'Put in your best stuff and to hell with them all', is easy—for someone who's never been in the position of having to make the choice himself! The trouble is not only knowing what's at stake, but also knowing just how arbitrary the bloody public can be. By a fluke I'd landed a chance at the wheel: was I to shove everything on one number, or play it canny on black and red? I took the problem home with me and dropped it in Sue's lap.

She didn't hesitate. 'Look,' she said, 'say you *do* put in some of the ones you don't think much of, there's no *guarantee* the critics will like them, is there?'

I agreed there wasn't.

'So what have you got to lose? Surely there's more chance

of *someone* seeing what you're after if you don't try to confuse the issue.'

'You're right,' I said. 'God knows what I was thinking of.' And taking a piece of paper I rapidly scribbled down the titles of ten honest representatives and passed it over to her.

She went through the list, asked the odd question, and then handed it back. 'There's one thing,' she said. 'Don't you think you ought to include the one of Pamela? I mean, she'll expect it won't she?'

'You think so?'

'I'm sure of it. After all, if it wasn't for her—'

'OK,' I said. 'You know best. Which one shall we stand down?'

'One of the ones of me,' said Sue with a laugh. 'They'll have had enough of me anyway.'

So it was decided, and that evening I wrote to Pamela thanking her for what she'd done and asking for the loan of her picture. Her reply arrived a few days later:

'Dear Tony,

Of course you can have it for your show if you really want *it, but don't feel you have to put it in for* my *sake or anything so hideously old-fashioned. It may cheer you to know that I've instructed Francesca to whip in her pack of tame hacks so you ought to get one or two rave notices.*

I bumped into Mrs D the other day and she gave me all the details of your (impending) "happy event"—obstetrically blushmaking!

Give me a ring when you're in Town.

Good luck, and love to Sue,

Pamela.'

* * *

The exhibition was scheduled for the middle of May and the baby for the end of April—a programme which, we hoped,

would permit us both to be up in London for the opening. However, arbitrary to the last, Sue hung on till five days before D Day 2, and was still in hospital cursing her luck when I put on my only suit and trotted off to the Wilmann Gallery for my second *accouchement*.

I might have enjoyed it more if I hadn't been so nervous. I've never been at my best on formal occasions and, as always at this kind of affair, people had come to talk about themselves rather than look at the pictures. I drank far too much and was just beginning to get obstreperous when Pamela appeared and steered me away into an uninhabited corner. 'Look here,' she whispered fiercely, 'if you go on like this you're *finished*! Do you know who *that* was?'

'Yes,' I muttered truculently, 'a bloody fool. He knows as much about painting as I know about Japanese wrestling—less in fact. Who the hell let him in here, anyway?'

'That,' she hissed, 'is *Neville Crane*!'

'Really?' I blinked. 'Well I'm buggered.'

'You're lucky if you weren't,' she grunted. 'Did you tell him who *you* were?'

Had I? I couldn't remember, though I was rather inclined to think I hadn't. 'Do you think I'd better go and apologize?' I asked her.

She looked at me and then shook her head firmly. 'We'll leave well alone,' she said. 'Come on.'

She led me out of the hall, through a door marked 'Private', and up some narrow stairs. 'Hey,' I called, 'do you know where you're going?'

'To Martie's office,' she said. 'Where you won't be able to do yourself any more damage.'

'Christ,' I protested, 'I was only *telling* him!'

'I know,' she said. 'I heard you—from out in the street!'

We reached a tiny landing and she thrust open another door and pushed through it without bothering to knock. It swung back on me with a faint *wuff*. I raised my hand, hesi-

tated for a fraction of a second, then pushed it open and found myself in a dark, narrow passage. 'Aren't there any lights in this—' I began, and then I heard a faint chuckle and a rustle and Pamela had her arms round my neck and her mouth open on mine.

If this were a work of fiction I might at this point feel tempted to win back a shred of respect for my hero by having him recall to mind his lovely young wife sitting up in bed in a maternity ward nursing his week-old daughter. He would stagger back with a groan, pluck the offending arms from round his neck, thrust the wanton from him, and flee downstairs—possibly even twisting his ankle on the way for good measure. I just can't do it. For one thing Pamela wasn't the sort of girl to take kindly to being thrust away from anyone whose neck she was holding—ten to one she'd have pulled my ears off before she'd let go—and, for another, I'm not so slow on the uptake that I hadn't had a tiny suspicion of what I might find waiting for me on the other side of that baize-covered door. Furthermore I'd been on the wagon for several months now—a long time for anyone as active and healthy as I was—*and* I'd taken a good pint of Mr Wilmann's sherry on board too. Ultimately such considerations must, I realize, weigh less than nothing—but there it is. I *didn't* think of Susan; I *didn't* flee downstairs; and I *didn't* thrust Pamela from me—quite the opposite!

Even so it wasn't a particularly successful 'congress': it was, in fact, an unholy mess, for she'd no sooner laid hand on me than I was there—no, not 'there' but *there*—out and not in. In its delirious, horrible way it was incredibly comical. There we were, grunting and gasping like a couple of truffle hunters, when suddenly *wham! bam!* all over—for me.

'Christ,' she whispered. 'Have you come?'

'If I haven't, I don't know who has,' I said and gave a tipsy giggle.

'Well *I* haven't,' she said. 'Get cracking!'

I suppose it was something in the way she said it that got

me. I just couldn't stop laughing. Nervous reaction, doubtless, but I could no more have helped her then than I could have helped myself.

'Shut up, you crazy clot!' she hissed and gave me a push on the chest that landed me on my back on the floor.

I lay there, giggling hysterically, while she crawled around and finally anchored herself on top of me. 'Ride a cock *horse* to Banbury *Cross*,' I chanted, and suddenly, out of the darkness, her hand descended and landed me an almighty smack across the mouth.

'Ow!' I yelped. 'That *hurt*!'

'I meant it to,' she grunted. 'You'll have Martie up here in a minute.'

I saw her point. Heaving myself up on to my elbows I enquired politely how she was getting on.

'It's *you*,' she muttered. 'Can't you stiffen up a bit?'

She was demanding the impossible and for once her own little tricks proved unavailing. At last, realizing she was wasting her time, she gave up. I took out my cigarette lighter and flicked it into flame. 'Sorry about that, old thing,' I said. 'You deserved something better.'

She smiled wanly. 'Maybe it's just as well,' she said. 'I wasn't dressed for the occasion.'

'You mean you hadn't planned it?'

'You do flatter yourself, don't you?' she said, straightening her stocking seams. 'It hadn't crossed my mind till I caught hold of your arm.'

I wasn't sure whether this pleased me or not. From one point of view I could regard it as a tribute to my overwhelming sexual magnetism, and from another as an indication of the significant status our infrequent encounters held in her life. I was still pondering which was the more honest as we made our way through the door at the other end of the passage, traversed Martie's office and fetched up in the adjoining cloakroom.

When we'd cleaned up and Pamela was tidying her hair she asked me if I'd go home with her.

'I can't,' I said. 'I've got to be at the hospital at six.'

She didn't attempt to dissuade me. We went downstairs again, looked at the show together, and then said goodbye. And on the dot of six o'clock there was I prancing down the maternity ward like the proud young father I considered I had every (or almost every) right to be.

The notices of the exhibition were fair to middling. As I'd half-expected, those that mentioned me at all were patronising and used phrases like *'Fauviste exuberance'* and *'vibrant colour harmony'* as though they were somehow faintly derogatory. But I sold five of my pictures and landed three commissions—a result considerably better than my human deserts if not my artistic ones.

Perhaps the episode with Pamela had something to do with it, or it may have been my reaction to receiving a modicum of attention from the arty boys, or even—God knows—parenthood, but, whatever the cause, I took another header into painting and dived as deep as I'm ever likely to get. When I eventually surfaced I had a couple of dozen seed pearls and one real beauty.

I've mentioned this particular picture already, and I don't want to go on about it now except to say that occasionally a painter—or a writer or *any* artist for that matter—manages to surpass himself. Largely, I suppose, it's a matter of luck—or knowing when to stop. You come as close as it's possible to come to symbolizing your vision and then, like a comet, you begin to swing away. The trouble is you don't *know* you're swinging away till it's too late—you can't stand at your own side because you *are* the thing you've made. So you go on fiddling around with it till the horrible truth comes creeping up like a marsh mist and finally engulfs you. I've sometimes thought that if you set an alarm clock before you started painting and made up your mind to chuck down your brush the instant it rang, you'd end up with a lot more good pictures.

But then, as likely as not, you wouldn't even *hear* the bloody thing, even though it was slung round your neck on a bootlace!

The fact is that for this one picture everything clicked, and I reached a point when I *knew* that if I laid one more brush stroke on it the rot would set in. It was a struggle all right, but this time luck—in the shape of the electricity man—called Sue away, and while I was waiting for her to come back I was, in a manner of speaking, able to catch a glimpse of what I'd done from over my own shoulder. And, no kidding, it scared me! Doing something *good* is far more frightening than doing something *bad*! Maybe if you're right in the top rank it's a different matter, but I'm inclined to suspect that old Rembrandt got the shivers in front of his *Night Watch* and as for Vincent he must have felt a whole Gestapo was on his tail.

Anyway, I didn't spoil it. I exhibited it along with a dozen others a couple of years later and it must have made them look pretty tenuous. Yet the fact remains that it wasn't *once* singled out for a mention even though the notices were, on the whole, distinctly favourable. That's the way it goes. The only thing which shored up my sagging self-esteem was when that drunken old maestro Boyo Farson staggered up and tried to kiss my hand—'The hand of genuine seer' he called it—and he told me he'd have bought the picture like a shot if he hadn't been temporarily out of funds. I stood him a pint, slipped him a quid, and as I watched him bumbling off down the Burlington Arcade I felt, for a couple of moments, as if I'd been elected Vice-President of the Immortals.

After coming up with that winner I suppose I ought to have broken with Pamela—a sort of symbolic sacrifice or death bed recantation or something—but I didn't. Our meetings were infrequent—never more than a couple of times a year—but we *did* meet, and I'd be a worse liar than I am already if I tried to pretend I didn't get a kick out of it. I never consciously planned anything—I just permitted it to

happen, took what was going and asked no questions. I can see that this rates me a pretty low official grade as a human being, but at least I *know* that it does—which can be taken to mean that I *believe* nothing of the kind. It was just that I relished a change now and again. And I damn well wasn't going to get *emotionally* involved with Pamela. That way madness lies. Maybe if I hadn't *loved* Sue it would have been different, but loving her—and I *mean* loving her!—I was able to enjoy Pamela with hardly a qualm. I don't expect anyone to *understand* that, and I'm not entirely sure that I believed it myself at the time, but on the rare occasions when I weighed my qualms against the juicy delights of being straddled by Miss Honderschein, I knew, only too well, which way the balance tipped.

When the Dolfusses moved out of their old flat Pamela took over their lease. By then she'd inveigled herself into a part-time job with Martie Wilmann, not because she needed the money, but to give herself something to do—something apart from what she did with friends like me that is. She also got bitten by the psycho-analysis bug. This wasn't such fun. In fact it was discussing Pamela with Pamela that almost made me wonder whether I wouldn't be advised to call it a day. However, it had its bizarre moments too, among them the occasion when we lay stretched out in what had once been Mr and Mrs D's nuptial chamber and I listened idly to her probing into her father fixation or whatever it was while, with the fingers of one hand, she absentmindedly did her best to plait my pubic sporran into a doll's hearthrug.

The one thing I *never* got used to was her curiosity about Sue—well, to be physiologically precise, about that one portion of Sue that was so dear to me. Maybe it was my own reluctance to discuss the matter that whetted her appetite, or maybe she was a Lesbian at heart, but for whatever reason, she just couldn't let the subject alone. In her quest to discover the precise effect maternity had had on Sue's female machinery, she spent hours catechising me through the whole

thesaurus of sexual sensation. I got so fed up in the end I asked her why the hell *she* was so interested, and this started her off on one of those interminable 'well-that's-a-very-interesting-question' rambles of hers which invariably ended up with her, aged about two in the croquet pavilion with her grandfather or someone, and me playing the rôle of unwilling stand-in for Freud.

Naturally enough she'd never admit that she was *jealous* of Sue, and I had sufficient savvy to realize that if I let on that I suspected anything of the kind, these occasional and exhilarating tumults of ours might come to an abrupt full stop. Nor would I have put it past her to get her own back on me by blowing the gaff to the one person I didn't want to get hurt. In the end I settled for answering the majority of her questions with an equivocal 'um' which she could take to mean just whatever she liked.

* * *

And so I find that the thread I picked up all those years ago in the past has led me back into the present. Here I am again, still clutching my picture and my suitcase, huddled in the tatty seat of that Number 2 bus which has by now grumbled its stolid way across London and finally squealed to a halt in the Finchley Road. The nostalgic journey is over; it is time for me to get off.

THREE

NIGHTMARE (*Continued*)

WHEN I reached the corner by the church I set down my picture, opened the case, and took out the bottle of Haig. Then I stripped off the wrapping round the neck, wrenched out the cork and raised the bottle to my lips. There's a knack in drinking straight from a bottle that I've never mastered—you have to breathe through your nose or something—and I only managed to get down a couple of mouthfuls before it was spilling over my chin. I spluttered and jerked the bottle free and fumbled the cork back in. Then I wiped my mouth with my sleeve, chucked the bottle in on top of the jumble of pyjamas, clicked the case shut, and proceeded on my way.

I didn't have far to go and I daresay I could have walked it blindfold if I'd had to. They'd painted up the front of the house since I was last there but that was the only change. I turned in past the sentinel concrete urns which had never, to my knowledge, grown either weed or flower, and walked down the familiar steps to the basement area. As I stepped up to the door and reached for the bell, I felt my heart give a lurch like a wave-tossed rowing boat.

I didn't hear Pamela coming and, as the door opened, I remembered she'd laid a fitted carpet over those old tell-tale tiles. She smiled and stood back to let me in. 'Surprise, surprise,' she said, and then, all in the same breath added: 'God, you *stink* of booze!'

'I've had a couple,' I said. 'Do you mind?'

She laughed. 'Why should I? You run best on Scotch—

more miles per gallon,' and she kissed me on the lips.

Just to feel her mouth on mine was like tasting manna. I let go of my parcel and clutched her to me, holding her so tight that she grunted with pain and struggled free.

'God, you *are* in a state,' she gasped, kneading her bruised lips with the back of her hand. 'What's got into you?'

I reached out to her. 'Oh, Pam, I—'

'Not *Pam*!' she screeched. *'Pamela!'*

I felt the shock of her sudden antagonism whip itself round me like barbed wire. The news of Sue's death died on my lips. 'Sorry,' I muttered. 'I forgot.'

She led the way through into the sitting-room, making sure I saw her rubbing her sore arms, and I took the bottle out of my bag and followed her. It was the room in which, years before, I'd told Sue's parents about our engagement, but Pamela had had it expensively done up in accordance with the latest trends of interior decoration, and I hardly recognized it.

She produced two tumblers and held them out. I tipped up the bottle. 'You don't expect me to *drink* all that, do you?' she said.

'If you don't, I will,' I replied. 'Can I really *sit* on that thing?'

'That *is* one of its uses,' she said with a grin.

I set down my glass and edged myself gingerly on to the black leather settee. It enfolded me like a mother's lap. I let my head sink back and closed my eyes. At once magenta and lime green globes began to drift like fire balloons across the inward dark. I felt Pamela settle herself beside me and, without opening my eyes, I let my head slide sideways until it was resting on her shoulder. I inhaled the faint, warm odour of her scent and I sighed.

Fragile as butterflies her fingertips alighted on my cheek. Scarcely brushing the surface of the skin they trickled down, checked for a moment, and strayed idly along the outline of my lips. The wandering lights behind my eyelids darkened

under the eclipse of her approaching head. I sensed her mouth almost on mine and the terror which had lain coiled so tensely inside me began slowly to unwind. I seemed to hang suspended, to float like a petal on a dark pool, rocked by my own heart beats.

My hand rose, slipped through the slit of her housecoat and took the soft, drooping weight of her breast. I wanted nothing more. All mystery, all miracle, all ease for pain was here, nestling alive and warm in my palm. Breathing her breath, adrift in some region where death was only a word, I felt my body melt into a great throb of tenderness for her —something I'd felt only once before, long ago, when I'd looked down on her asleep.

As it rose, welling up in me like some immense, silent sigh, she shivered as though someone had walked over her grave. Her gentleness fled. As though they were being lashed by a blizzard, her hands raged over my body. The very flesh seemed to melt from her face leaving only the cold bone. I dragged my mouth away and forced back her head so that I could see into her eyes. They were wild, storm driven. 'What is it?' I besought her. 'What's the matter?'

'Do it!' she gasped. 'Get what you came for!'

My soul shrank within me.

'Yes,' she muttered, 'Yes,' and snatched down my zip.

I caught her wrists. 'Don't,' I begged. 'Pamela, don't. *Please!*'

But she was possessed by a demon, an ice-cold flame of self-annihilation which would not be denied. Sliding to the floor she elbowed my knees apart and buried her face in my lap. The touch of her lips was like an electric shock. I jerked forward, grasped her by the shoulders and thrust her back so hard I all but dislocated her neck. The saliva on her chin glittered for a moment like glass and then her whole face seemed to shiver and dissolve as though I were peering at it through a rain-bleared window pane. At that instant I swear to God I loved her—not with pity—but just for what she was,

a wild, racked, tormented thing, driven for ever on and on through the pitch black night of her own desolation.

I gazed down at her, at her splayed legs, her brown, blind-eyed little breasts, at the sand-ripple ribs and the drum tight skin of her belly, and I felt her tremble under the grip of my tense fingers. 'Do you need it so much?' I whispered.

Her mouth quivered like a child's and, for the first time in my life, I saw tears in her eyes. There was nothing pretty in that grief. Like her lust it was elemental, a thing of the outer darkness. She made no attempt to hide her face but tilted it up like an animal howling to the sky, and the tears ran down her cheeks in a bitter rain.

For a long moment I watched her and then, sinking to my knees beside her, I took her in my arms and began to stroke her gently, lovingly. First her hair and her shoulder and then her neck and her breasts and on down, stroking the ridge of soft muscle down the centre of her belly, and on along the pale insides of her thighs, until at last she began to melt and stir and quicken and her blotched and swollen face was burning against mine. Then when at last she was ready for me, I laid her gently down.

After it was over I rested my head in the vale of her breasts and told her what I had come to tell her. It took me just five words.

She stiffened for a moment in my arms and then, perceptibly, relaxed. 'What do you mean?' she breathed.

I wanted to tell her about it but I couldn't. The horror came upon me. At that moment I was again standing beside the iron table in the morgue staring at the two bodies which lay like a child and its broken doll. I clung to her like a drowning man.

'Are you sick or something?'

'No,' I muttered and knew she hadn't understood.

There was silence except for the thudding of our hearts. Then she said slowly: 'This is the last time you'll ever do this to me.'

'Can't you *ever* stop running away from yourself?' I groaned.

'It wasn't *me* you were fucking,' she said bitterly. 'It was Sue. You've just tried to crawl through me into her.'

'It was you all right,' I said. 'The *real* you. And you know it was. God knows why you can't face it.'

'Ah, you make me sick,' she muttered, and pushing me from her, she sat up and reached out for her glass.

I knelt up and began to fasten my clothes. I felt terrible—sick to the very bottom of my heart. 'You think I feel sorry for you, don't you?' I said. 'That's what you can't bear. Well, I don't. When I saw you howling down there it wasn't *pity* I felt—Christ, no!—it was *love*. And *that's* what *really* frightened you. Why you're even scared of a pet name because there might be a tiny little drop of love poison in it. That's why with you it always has to be "fucking" not "making love". Can't you understand that it's not just the *word* but the *feeling*? I wasn't *fucking* you just now, I was *loving* you. Fucking's just *using* someone, turning them into a *thing*, making a machine of them. To make love you've got to be *alive*. But *you*! Christ! You're so bloody *terrified* of life you can't even risk *being* loved!'

'Have you quite finished?' she enquired palely.

'Finished? I haven't even *begun*,' I said, reaching out for my glass and drinking deep.

Her lips curled disdainfully. 'For a professed widower, I must say you're—'

'That's just where you're wrong,' I broke in. 'Jesus! Are you *wrong*! Sue and Mandy aren't *dead*! They're *alive*'—I tapped my heart—'in here! If anyone's died it's me! You've never *been* alive! *You?* You're just another bloody little Hampstead zombie with a mechanical cunt between your legs!'

The dregs of her glass hit me in the eyes and for a moment it was like being blinded by liquid fire. But only for a moment. The sting passed. I blinked my eyelids open. 'So you

are alive after all,' I said. 'You really are. Well, I apologize.'

'You're drunk,' she said, 'stinking drunk! If you weren't I'd ring for the police and have you thrown out.'

'Maybe I am at that,' I said, and as I spoke I felt all my anger gutter and fizzle out. 'It was a bloody stupid thing to say anyway, because it isn't true. If it had been I'd never have got to know you in the first place. I'm sorry I said it. I am, really.'

'Oh, forget it,' she sighed. 'Life's too short.' She heaved herself to her feet and walked slowly across to where I'd left the bottle. 'But God knows what's eating you this evening. You aren't usually given to morbid fantasy.'

I mopped my face. 'You think that's what it is?'

She stilled, her back towards me, and then turned, frowning. 'Of course,' she said.

I shook my head. 'It's not.'

She seemed to go several shades paler. 'This is some sort of sick joke,' she whispered. 'It *must* be.'

I nodded. 'That's how I felt when I was told,' I said. 'It's the kind of thing that happens to other people—people you don't know. Only this time it isn't.'

She came slowly towards me. 'Oh, *no*,' she said. 'No, not *Sue*!'

'I've seen them,' I said. 'What's left of them.'

Her mouth opened but no words came out.

'It was an accident,' I said dully. 'Some sort of freak accident. They were caught up in a traffic jam and a petrol tanker rolled down into the side of them.' I looked down into the remains of my drink and frowned. 'Christ!' I said. 'It only *happened* this morning!'

'What do you mean?'

'*This* morning! To*day*! My God, it seems a thousand *years* ago!'

She sat down and crossed her arms over her chest so that one hand was resting on each shoulder, and now she began rocking herself backwards and forwards, while she stared blankly

down at the floor. 'Why?' she whispered. *'Why?* Why *Sue*?'

'Why anyone?' I muttered.

'You shouldn't have come here,' she said and shuddered. 'Why did you?'

The truthful answer evaded me. 'I don't know,' I said slowly. 'I just did.'

'I'm no use to you,' she said. 'I'm no use to anyone. Not even myself—least of all myself.'

'But you let me come,' I said. 'If you hadn't I'd probably have done myself in by now.' I raised my eyes and looked directly at her. 'Did you mean it when you said it was all over between us?'

She nodded.

'But why?' I persisted.

Her eyes met mine for an uneasy moment and then she glanced away. 'It wouldn't work,' she said. 'I'm sorry, Tony.'

'How do you know it wouldn't?'

'I'm just not Sue,' she said. 'I *couldn't* be.'

'No, that's not it,' I said. 'There's something else—something you're frightened of. What is it?'

She smiled wanly. 'Myself, I suppose. I don't want the responsibility of love.'

I pondered this for a moment. 'Were you jealous of Sue?' I asked.

'Only of her simplicity,' she said.

I suddenly realized that within Pamela there lurked something far more sensitive than I'd ever suspected, but it was too late to do anything about it now.

'What are you going to do?' she asked.

I groaned. 'Go and tell the D's, I suppose.'

'Don't they know yet?'

'No,' I said heavily. 'I told the police I'd tell them. I must have been crazy'.

'Was that why you were phoning them?'

I nodded. The prospect of telling Sue's parents reared up

before me like the north face of the Eiger. 'God, I *can't*,' I muttered. 'Not tonight.'

Pamela unclasped her hands, spread them on her knees, and then began stroking the backs of her fingers. 'I can't let you stay here,' she said. 'It's out of the question.'

'I promise to behave myself.'

She shook her head firmly. 'Look,' she said at last, 'there's some sort of do on at Martie's this evening. You're bound to find someone you know there.'

Anything was preferable to Sue's parents. 'What time are you going?' I asked.

'Ken's calling for me at nine.'

'*Ken?* Is *he* why I can't stay?'

For once she didn't bother to tell me to mind my own business. 'It's no one you know.' She got up and walked to the door. 'I'm going to have a bath,' she said. With one hand on the knob she turned. 'I'm sorry, Tony. I just can't cope with this sort of thing. If only you'd told me straight away I . . . perhaps . . . I don't know what to say . . . Sue . . . *We went to kindergarten together!* O God!' Her tense knuckles were white as bleached bone against the blue of her wrap. 'O God, *why wasn't it me*?' And she was gone.

I sat without moving for perhaps five minutes, then I reached out for the bottle and refilled my glass.

* * *

By the time Ken appeared there were no two ways about it —I was drunk. But my body was drunker than my head— especially my legs. I felt as though I'd contracted elephantiasis or was wearing diving boots or something. I'd never been hit that way before and was preoccupied by the novel sensation. I stood there in the hall, leaning against the wall, lifting first one foot and then the other like a Horse Guards sentry doing a slow motion mark time, while Pamela and Ken surveyed me doubtfully.

'Should we run him round to the D's first?' I heard Pamela whisper.

'Just you try it,' I said. 'That's all. Just you bloody well try it.'

'Boyo all over again,' murmured one or other with a groan.

It was as though I'd bashed a 'Hit the Bell' machine and scored a clanging bull's-eye. *'Boyo?'* I cried. 'Will Boyo be there? Why didn't you tell me?'

'Oh, come on,' grumbled Ken, glancing at his watch. 'We're late enough as it is. Is this his stuff?'

'He can pick it up tomorrow,' said Pamela. 'Quick march, Tony!'

'Wait!' I cried. 'My bottle!' and goosestepped back into the sitting-room. 'Present for Boyo,' I explained as Pamela shepherded me out. '*And* that.'

'I thought you were going to give that to the D's?'

'To *Boyo,*' I corrected. 'D's wouldn't 'preciate it.'

They frogmarched me up the steps and into the back seat of Ken's coupé. I sat there, clasping my picture to me and listening to the whisky tinkling musically in the bottle as we roared down St John's Wood Road and swung into Baker Street. I'd already decided I'd tell Boyo about Sue and Mandy. *He'd* understand. I leant forward and tapped Pamela on the shoulder, 'You're sure he'll *be* there? You're *sure* Boyo's coming?'

'Yes, yes,' she said irritably. 'Now go to sleep.'

I didn't feel in the least like going to sleep. The mere thought of meeting Boyo, the one person who could *understand,* made me feel friendly towards everyone, even Ken. I put my mouth to his ear. 'Written any good books lately, old boy?' I enquired amicably.

'Quiet, sot! I'm busy.'

'Snooty bastard,' I said genially. 'How's the old lunar arse these days? Still shining bright?'

He ignored me steadfastly and I sank back and consoled

myself by unwrapping my picture and stroking it. The pair of raw kippers I'd eaten out of Pamela's fridge repeated on me noisomely and I uncorked the other half of Boyo's present and took a surreptitious swig. I'd just succeeded in replacing the stopper when Ken pulled up. 'Out, sot!' he snapped. 'We're here.'

I wouldn't have put it past that sod to maroon me so I delayed my own exit till Pamela was safe on the pavement. 'Where are we?' I asked her.

'Leverhulme Crescent.'

It didn't mean a thing to me but I could see it wasn't exactly a slum area.

Ken locked up the car and the three of us trooped along to the door. You could hear the sounds of cultured merrymaking from fifty yards down the street. Pamela took out a key and was about to fit it into the lock when she realized the door was already ajar. As she pushed it open she turned to me. 'Now get this straight, Tony,' she said coldly. 'I didn't bring you—you *came*. Understand?'

'Have no fears, me proud beauty,' I assured her gallantly. 'The Braydon lips are sealed. Wonderboy brought me in his Auntie's au-to-mo-bile.'

'No one *brought* you,' she groaned. 'You *came*! Got it? You *came*!'

'OK I came,' I shrugged. 'I'm here anyway. Now conduct me to Boyo.'

They did no such thing. From that moment I ceased to exist for them. They scooted off along the hall leaving me to cope as best I might with my gifts and my hundredweight boots. By the time I was organized they'd vanished. Ah, well, sod them both! What did I care?

I clumped stolidly down the passage, scraping the corner of my picture frame along the Regency wallpaper, until I came to a wide arched doorway. I stood, feet apart, swaying slightly and squinted round for Boyo.

The place seethed with bodies, and every one of them

seemed to be yakking away at the top of its voice. I caught sight of one of the types who'd shared my last show with me and carefully set about negotiating the three steps down. It was like wading into the spilled catch of a trawl. I forged my way across and eventually came up with my quarry. I found I couldn't remember his name. 'Hey,' I said, tapping him on the arm with my bottle, 'have you seen Boyo?'

'Boyo Farson? He's inside, isn't he?'

'Inside where?' I said, looking round for another room.

'The Scrubs.' He shrugged. 'Maybe he's out now though.'

'You haven't seen him?'

'No,' he said and turned back to the girl he'd been talking to before I interrupted.

I felt like a child who's been promised a treat then told he can't have it. He *must* be here. 'Boy-oh!' I yodelled. *'Boy-oh-o-oh-o!'*

One or two faces turned and surveyed me curiously, and a very fat girl whom I vaguely remembered having met before somewhere, broke loose her moorings and billowed across to me. 'Hel-*lo,* lovely,' she greeted me and smiled like a dimpling bun.

'Hi,' I said. 'Have you seen Boyo?'

'Boyo *Far*son?'

'Yes,' I said. 'Have you seen him?'

She shook her head and the reflection from her spectacles flashed across my eyeballs. 'Can I see?' she asked winsomely.

'See what?'

'This.' She reached down and fatly patted the frame of the painting.

I relinquished it grudgingly. She handed me her glass and somehow contrived to hold the picture out at arm's length. I sampled a mouthful of her drink and peered about for Boyo.

'Mm,' she said. 'I think it's just *sweet.* Maybe just the *teen*iest bit conscious? But I like that.'

'Huh?'

She tilted her head on one side and sucked up her lips into

a little dewy-petalled scarlet rosebud. She really was the *fattest* girl I've ever seen—a proper Dunlopillo bolster. I swear you could have stuck your finger in her up to the knuckle and never reached a bone. 'Here,' I said, 'let me have it. It's a present for Boyo.'

'Shall I help you look for him?'

'All right,' I said. 'Thanks. I don't know my way round this place.'

'He's not in here, anyway,' she announced, hoisting herself up on to wobbling tip-toes and surveying the field. 'Let's try upstairs.'

She ballooned off in the direction of the door and I stumbled along in her wake, fetching someone a nasty crack with the corner of the frame as I passed.

I caught up with her at the top of the stairs where she was apparently having difficulty with some obstruction. 'Giddy-up!' I called and gave her an encouraging poke up the fanny with the neck of the bottle.

'Oo-*ooh*!' she squealed, shimmying her colossal buttocks. 'Don't be so im*pa*tient!'

The significance of the word was lost on me for I was already engrossed in lifting my elephant feet over the entwined legs of the couple who were blocking the path. They sat there sucking at each other like a couple of leeches, blind to the world. I squeezed myself past somehow, and Fatty reached down, caught me by the arm, and heaved me on to the landing. 'I don't think he'll be up here,' I said.

'You never know,' she assured me, and pushing open a door called: 'Boyo? Boyo Farson?'

'Not here,' came a muffled voice. 'Try Bow Street.'

We moved along the landing, trying various doors with no success at all. The last door turned out to be the bathroom. 'I want a pee,' I said, and stumbled in.

I propped my shins against the lavatory pan and, as I manoeuvred old John into position, I heard the bolt click behind me. I slowly squinted round and there was Fatty, balanc-

ing herself like a sea-cow on the edge of the bath and screwing the cork out of my bottle—Boyo's bottle! Ah, well, what did it matter? What did anything matter? The whole bloody world was panting up and down like a gasping jelly fish. I closed my eyes, felt myself rock forwards, and fumbled ineffectually for my zip. 'Hey,' I said, turning to her. 'Lea' me some of that!'

She lowered the bottle and held it out to me. At the second try I succeeded in getting my fingers round its neck, set it to my lips and tilted back my head. A few moments later, as though it were a message being telephoned from Australia, I felt my old warrior being tickled up to a salute. I let the last dribbles slide safely down my throat, then unplugged the bottle and peered foggily down.

Fatty's glasses twinkled up at me. 'Isn't he the *sweetest* little pie?' she giggled.

'Pie?' I grunted. 'Wha' pie?'

She chucked him under his chin. 'Greedy Sue'll gobble you right up, won't she, saucy?'

The world swung right over and emptied itself on top of me. 'Sue?' I gulped. 'Sue? Where's Sue?'

'She's here, lovely. She's all ready now. Just you stand still, lovely.'

I had an insane vision of an illustration from a 'Babar' book of Mandy's—an enormous, elephantine backside was bearing down on me and a hand like a bunch of chippolatas was reaching up between colossal thighs and I was being coaxed forwards, sucked in like water down a plug hole. Panic stricken I threshed around wildly in the vortex of the nightmare. 'Sue,' I wailed. 'Sue,' and back came the inevitable sea-cow grunt of assurance: 'Sue's here, lovely. Sue's here. Sue's got you tight. *Push,* lovely! *Harder!* Push! Push! *Push!*'

In the end I went berserk. Letting go of my empty bottle I flung myself at her like a battering ram. I leant over and grabbed a fistful of each of those huge swollen boobies of hers

and heaved on them till my fingers ached. But even so I couldn't reach her. She must have had the internal architecture of a hippopotamus. It took me about six weeks to reach the summit and the moment she felt it she came. 'Ah-ah-ah-ah!' she hooted and heaved herself backwards. It was as though St Paul's had collapsed on top of me. I somersaulted back, hit my head against the lavatory seat and passed out cold.

I came to to find her mopping my forehead with a rubber sponge. 'Are you all right, sweetie?' she was saying. 'You look simply *aw*ful.'

I blinked up at her and knew I was about to be sick. I just managed to get my face over the pan before my stomach boiled over. I clung there, retching like an engine, while she hovered anxiously over me.

At last I beckoned for the sponge and wiped my face.

'You've got a horrible bump on the back of your head,' she clucked. 'Do you think you ought to see a doctor?'

'See if there's some aspirin in that cupboard,' I muttered.

'Alza-Seltzer,' she announced. 'Will that do?'

'Three,' I said. 'Warm water's quicker.'

She filled a glass and dropped the tablets into it. 'I feel simply terrible about this, lovely.'

'Me too,' I groaned.

'I don't very often reach my orgasm,' she explained, 'and when I do I rather tend to lose control.'

Incredibly, I heard myself give a ghoulish chuckle. 'So that's what it was,' I croaked. 'I thought the H-Bomb had dropped.'

'Was it good for you, too lovely?' she asked.

I squinnied up at her sideways. Her eyes blinked at me pathetically as she gently swirled the decaying tablets round and round the glass. 'It was *wonderful,*' I said, and pressed the cool sponge to my eyes. 'I've never had it so good.'

Her vast face beamed down on me like a harvest moon. 'Oh, I'm *glad,*' she said. 'I'm *so* glad.'

I reached up for the glass. 'You're a nice girl,' I said, 'even though you are a bit big.'

The door rattled and a voice called: 'For Christ's sake get a move on in there!'

I raised the glass to my mouth, drank it off without stopping, and handed it back to her. Then I climbed shakily to my feet, pulled my clothes straight, and flushed the lavatory. 'OK,' I belched. 'Let's go.'

She led the way out on to the landing, carrying my picture, and the person who had been waiting shouldered desperately past and slammed the door. I suddenly remembered the original purpose of my being there. 'Sue,' I said. 'Can you put me up for the night?'

'I'd simply *adore* to, lovely,' she lamented. 'But it's absolutely *imposs*. You see Mumsie's awfully old fashioned and I'm afraid she just wouldn't understand.'

She sounded so genuinely distressed that I patted her enormous arm to comfort her. 'Don't take it to heart,' I said. 'I'll find a corner somewhere.'

'Why don't you go to the baths?' she said. 'Roger often does when *he's* stumped.'

'Baths?' I repeated. 'What "baths"?'

'The turkish baths. They're only just round the corner from here.'

I wasn't in any condition to think of a better solution. 'I'll hang on till my head's settled down a bit,' I said. 'Then will you show me where it is?'

'Of course I will, lovely. This rout's just about had it as far as I'm concerned. Shall we have a last look for Boyo?'

'Forget it,' I sighed. 'He isn't here. He never was here. He'd have had more sense.'

'You never know,' she said.

The same couple were there at the top of the stairs. I don't think they'd moved an inch. As I squeezed past I couldn't resist leaning over and peering at them and, Christ! It was two *girls*! One of them—the one who was *dressed* like a girl—

even looked a bit like Sue had when I'd first met her. As I goggled down at her she opened one eye and surveyed me coldly. 'Sorry,' I muttered, 'thought you were someone else.' But the eyelid had dropped shut before I'd got even the first word out. It was like speaking to a waxwork.

I continued carefully on my way. My friendly hippopotamus had already vanished, presumably in quest of the phantom Boyo, and my head was splitting. I sighted an alcove with a chair in it, sank down and nursed my throbbing temples in my hands. Judging by the noise from along the hall the party had far from had it.

Twenty minutes or so later I was still sitting there, cradling my skull as if it were a Ming vase. My headache was already much less acute and I was just wondering whether to go and look for Hippo when a pair of feet shuffled into my circle of vision and paused. 'Hello, sot,' said Ken's unlovely voice. 'Metropolitan high life proved too much for you?'

'Go away,' I muttered.

He'd obviously drunk too much to catch any subtleties of intonation, or maybe he just felt I needed him. He took a step forward and poked me with his toe. 'What was that crack you made about me in the car?' he said.

'Please,' I said wearily. 'I'm not in the mood. Why don't you go and find Pamela? She talks your kind of language.'

'Yes, that another thing,' he went on, again prodding my shin for emphasis. 'She's in a fine state this evening. What have you been saying to her?'

'Why don't you ask her yourself?'

'Because I'd rather *you* told me, sot,' he said, and to underline it he gave me a definite kick.

I felt my toes clench themselves. Reinforcements of cold anger sprinted along my veins and my lethargy fled twittering. I looked up. 'Listen, arse ache,' I said slowly. 'If you do that *once* more . . .' and left the rest to his imagination.

I honestly don't think he intended it—probably his balance wasn't so hot by that time—but the fact is his toe touched me

again, and, unfortunately, we both knew it had. I didn't wait for him to explain that it was all a mistake, I just grabbed his knee and yanked it upwards as hard as I could. He collapsed like an ironing-board. His glasses flew off, and before he had a chance to move I jumped with both feet on to his stomach —*into* his stomach would be more accurate. Then I picked myself up, returned to my seat, and observed him curiously.

His colour was extraordinary—*eau-de-nil* shading off into saffron—and enormous beads of sweat were bubbling out across his forehead like water blisters. One or two other passers-by paused and stared down at him. 'Is he all right?' a girl asked.

'It's a sort of fit,' I explained. 'He's had them since he was a child. They aren't anything to worry about.'

'He looks *grisly*,' she said with a shudder.

'He does, doesn't he?' I agreed and leant forwards solicitously. 'Feeling better, old chap?'

'Ugh—uouh,' gurgled Ken. 'Oouh—ugh.'

'Are these his?' she asked, holding up his spectacles.

'Thanks,' I said. 'I'll look after them for him.'

She handed them over and I slipped them into my pocket. 'Would you mind giving me a hand to move him to one side?' I said. 'He seems to be holding up the traffic a bit.'

Between us we contrived to drag him into the alcove and I thanked her for her assistance. 'You're *sure* he'll be all right?' she asked doubtfully. 'He *looks* simply ghastly.'

'That's not altogether his fault,' I murmured, and spread my hands.

'Well, if you're sure . . .'

'You trot along,' I told her confidently. 'You've been a real Good Samaritan.'

She smiled at me gratefully and, with a last grimace at Ken, moved away.

A moment later he rolled over, and after two fruitless attempts succeeded in raising himself on to his hands and knees. The sounds he made as he fought to regain his breath

are beyond the limits of even phonetic transcription. I poked him gently with my toe. 'I warned you,' I said sorrowfully. 'You've only yourself to blame.'

'Glasses,' he gasped. 'Where're my glasses? Can't see.'

'I expect they're around here somewhere,' I said. 'Where did you put them?'

He began fumbling round on the carpet, pausing now and then to give birth to yet another hideously deformed groan. 'Well,' I said cheerfuly, 'I'll look forward to reading your account of this experience.'

At that moment Hippo, now wearing a coat, advanced down the passage bearing my picture before her like a shield. I stood up. 'OK,' I called. 'All set?'

'How's the head?' she asked, glancing from me down to Ken who was now pawing myopically along the wainscot.

'Much better,' I said, and it was too.

'What's *he* doing?' she asked.

'Looking for a friend, I think.'

She laughed. 'Funny sort of friends he must have.'

'Oh, I don't know,' I said tolerantly. 'He's a pretty low type himself.'

As we went out of the door I took his glasses out of my pocket and dropped them well out of sight behind a convenient rubber plant.

* * *

My exhilaration lasted until I reached the pavement and then evaporated. It might have been a side effect of the fresh air or simply that the adrenalin had succumbed to a counter-attack but I suddenly felt absolutely lousy—not *sick,* just utterly wrung out and exhausted. If it hadn't been for Hippo, ten to one I'd have measured my length in the gutter. Her arm went round me like a boa constrictor. 'It's not far, lovely,' she murmured. 'Sue'll get you there all right.'

Maybe if she hadn't spoken the name I'd have pulled

through somehow, but after she had I couldn't help myself. 'Sue,' I muttered, 'Oh, *Sue*,' and the tears I'd sworn I'd never shed again rushed up through me like oil from a gusher. I clung to her, blubbering, while she clutched me to that vast alp of a bosom and murmured wonderingly: 'What is it, lovely? What's the matter? Can't you tell Sue what's the matter?'

How *could* I? What words were there left to span the gulf that separated my world from hers. I had nothing, no tongue at all, less than a child's sob—a mere, shuddering, inarticulate grief.

But no tempest lasts for ever. This one too, passed and left me twitching like a stranded starfish on her shore. Gently she loosed me and, as though I were a child, produced a handkerchief from somewhere and wiped my eyes and nose. 'Feeling better now, lovely?' she whispered.

I drew a deep gasping breath and nodded. 'Christ,' I groaned, 'I'm sorry.'

'Can't you tell me?'

I shook my head. 'I'm a bit sick,' I said. 'Soul-sick. That's all.'

'Why did you want Boyo?' she asked.

'To give him that.' I gestured to where the picture now stood propped against some railings, gleaming in the lamplight. 'But it's nothing to do with Boyo. It's something in me.'

'Wouldn't it help to tell me?' she said, tucking the damp handkerchief away into her pocket.

'You're a nice girl,' I said. 'Honestly, you're far and away the nicest big girl I've ever met. But I can't.'

She sighed like a love-sick fog horn. 'I know how it is,' she said. 'Some things are like that. Even if you tell them they're still there. Telling doesn't help at all. I know.'

I picked up the picture. Some other people came down the steps from Martie's screeching like macaws. 'Come on,' I said to her. 'Lead kindly light. Lead thou me on.'

'Look,' she said, 'maybe if I rang up Mumsie and ex*plain*ed.'

I took hold of her biceps and my fingers went just half the way round. 'No,' I said firmly, 'it wouldn't be fair on her. There are some things you just can't explain to Mumsies. Let's face it. Tonight's bath night.' And I urged her forward.

'But she *might*,' she said with a troubled frown. 'I think I ought to try.' She loosened her arm from the grip of my fingers and put it round my waist. 'Besides,' she breathed into my ear, 'I'd *so* like to have you at home, lovely.'

'I wouldn't be any use to you, honey,' I said faintly. 'I'm all beat up. I'll just toddle in, have my bath and *kaput*—out cold. Some other time, maybe.'

'You know, lovely,' she said wistfully, 'I've never *slept* with a man. It's always been like it was tonight—only not such utter *heaven,* of course. It *was* heaven for you too, wasn't it? You weren't just *saying* that?'

I snuggled her closer and assured her it had been heaven for me too.

'You do it so *wonderfully*,' she murmured. 'Have you had lots of women?'

'Not like you,' I said.

'Was I different, lovely? How was I different? Tell me about me.'

I discovered what they mean when they say 'his mind boggled'. 'Christ,' I said helplessly, 'I don't know, honey. You tell *me*.'

She gave a shiver of reminiscence that made my teeth rattle. 'Oh, it was simply *yum*,' she sighed ecstatically. 'The most, the *ab*solutest *yum*!'

'It was like that for me too,' I said. '*Exactly.* In fact maybe even more so.'

We passed out of the end of the crescent and down another street. Then we crossed over and halted at the entrance to an alley. Half-way along it a red neon sign spelt out the unlikely

message: 'URK SH ATHS' above a shyly flickering green arrow. 'There it is, lovely,' she sighed.

We stood together, looking at it, then I raised myself on my toes and kissed her on the cheek. 'Goodbye, Sue,' I said.

She gave me a brave smile, folded me in her arms and pressed me against her. It was just like being hugged by a woolly Michelin man. 'Don't be sad any more,' she said. 'Not like you were before. Promise?'

'Promise,' I said and I'll swear the tears were all ready to swim again. She was all the sisters in the world rolled into one. But, by God, she was *big*!

I felt for my wallet, located it, and took a firm hold on my picture again. 'Well,' I said, 'this is really it,' and I walked away from her.

When I reached the entrance to the baths I looked back. She was still standing there, gazing mournfully after me, like some enormous friendly herbivore. I lifted my hand in salute, and the word I was seeking—the only word I knew that would help to heal the wound of our parting—floated back to her. 'Yum,' I called. 'Yum, Sue. *Yum!*'

Her moon face glowed faint pink in the light from the distant neon and the lenses of her spectacles were suddenly jiggling sparks. 'Yes!' she cried. 'Oh, *yummy* yum!' and the whisper of that final 'yum' followed me in and dogged my lonely footsteps all up the echoing, tiled stairs.

* * *

I plodded up to the ticket office feeling as if I was part of a dream sequence in an Orson Welles film, and the little old gnome who handed me a key and a towel did nothing to dispel my sense of unreality. I handed over my picture for safe keeping and he glanced at it and chuckled. 'Can't 'ave nood females in 'ere,' he wheezed. 'That wouldn't do at all.'

He told me where to go and asked if I'd like to be woken

with a cup of tea. 'Yer gets it frone in wiv the all night ticket,' he explained. 'Might as well, eh?'

I nodded listlessly. 'What time will it be?'

'Six firty ack emma. D'yer take sugar?'

Again I nodded.

He took a piece of chalk from his pocket and laboured a cross against a number on a blackboard. 'You'll be 'avin' a massige, sir?'

I regarded him doubtfully.

'Gow orn!' he urged with a chuckle. 'You 'ave one. Feel a noo man, you will. 'E's an artiss is Kurt.'

'All right,' I said.

He rubbed his hands briskly and then beckoned me close. 'You'll 'ave to tip 'im *sep'rit,*' he said. ''Alf a crown, when 'e brings rahnd yer cuppa.'

I took out my wallet and extracted a note.

'Now less see,' he said, sucking his lips. 'One all night ticket —ten bob; massige—five bob; makes fifteen bob altogether. Right? Now if I give yer—two 'alf crowns, that'll look arter Kurt, won't it?'

I picked up the coins and was just about to turn away when he beckoned me back again. 'You kin look arter yerself, can't yer?'

I eyed him opaquely.

'Course yer can!' he chuckled. Then he dropped his voice to a hoarse whisper. 'Watch aht in the steamer, eh? Don't drop off.'

'All right,' I said. 'Why?'

He leant forward and poked me on the shoulder. 'Fer yer own peace of mind!' he cackled, and contorted his face into a parody of a conspiratorial wink.

I felt so milked out by this time it seemed doubtful whether I'd ever *get* to the steamer, but I thanked him for his tip and set off in search of my cubicle.

By the time I'd stripped off and draped myself in the towel I had found a second wind. My sense of unreality was no less

acute but at least it wasn't such an effort to move. I locked the cubicle behind me, slipped my hand through the rubber band which was attached to the key, and followed the pointing sign. On either side of me cubicles vibrated with the sounds of heavy breathing but I still hadn't actually *seen* anyone except the garrulous gnome.

I reached the end of the passage and found myself confronted by a pair of swing doors. Over the lintel was printed 'BATHS' and under this someone had scrawled in pencil *'Abandon Soap All Ye Who Enter Here'*. I was just about to thrust through when another message caught my eye. It was written so small it was all but invisible. Peering close I read: *'Angus McLorkey is a soddermite'*.

Was the message intended as a warning or an invitation? I was still undecided when I pushed open the doors and stepped through.

I found myself standing at the top of a flight of stairs that led down to a divided swimming pool. The air everywhere was damp and faintly steamy so that the electric bulbs hung like luminous dew drops, each surrounded by a misty halo. There was a faint but pervasive murmur of conversation and, from somewhere, a sound like wet floor cloths being slapped down by an army of energetic chars. Along both sides of the pool brown, pink, and whitey-grey bodies were stretched out in deck chairs. A few appeared to be reading but most seemed asleep. No one was in the water.

When I reached the bottom step a man in blue cotton shorts and a white singlet came over to me. Across his chest the word 'ATTENDANT' was printed in blue letters. 'Your first time?' he asked.

I nodded.

'It's dead simple,' he said, pointing. 'Rooms one, two, three, and the steam room up the end. Give yourself five minutes in one; ten in two; fifteen in three and as long as you fancy in the pressure cooker.'

'And then?' I asked.

'Into the bottom bath—over the barrier—and up to this end. Doesn't matter if you swim like a brick—it's only three foot six. Are you for a massage? Well, Kurt'll be there to look after you. OK?'

'What about my towel?' I said. 'In the bath, I mean.'

'Give it here,' he said. 'I'll take it over to Kurt.'

Feeling, idiotically, as bashful as a young girl at the onset of puberty, I peeled off my towel and handed it to him.

He glanced down at me critically; sucked a tooth; sniffed; and sauntered off.

The electric clock on the wall was pointing to 11.25 as I stepped, shy, pink and naked into Room One and lowered myself into a deck chair. I was the only occupant. Warm air gusted up through an iron grille in the floor and stirred the hairs on my legs. As though it were a bird leashed on a thread I let my memory flutter back over the events of the past few hours, but I was too unsure of myself to allow it full freedom. It pecked at random, turning up odd, seemingly unrelated scenes—Hippo's neon-pink face; Ken's toe prodding at my shin; Pamela's tense, pearl-pale knuckles—but I was prompt to jerk it back if it appeared to be straying too near the danger zone. Meanwhile, imperceptibly I was relaxing; letting myself sink into a kind of alcoholic afterglow on the borders of sleep; and I daresay I would have dropped off completely had not a loud splash sent echoes slapping each other back and forth across the water. I listened to the panting, seal-like grunts of some invisible swimmer churning his way up the bath and then, remembering the clock, heaved myself to my feet and padded through into Room Two.

This one I didn't have to myself. Two people were playing chess and a third—a pale, elderly, hairy little man, wearing pince-nez—was reading *The Tablet*. He had his towel draped discreetly across his loins and, as I took my place, he lifted one very bony foot and scratched the back of his calf with a horny trowel of toe nail. As I settled back in my chair he lowered his head and surveyed me over the tops of his lenses.

I nodded, and after about thirty seconds of impassive scrutiny he returned my nod. I essayed a hesitant smile, but at that he frowned and quickly raised his paper. I shrugged and closed my eyes, but the sleepiness I'd experienced in the first room resisted all my efforts to recapture it. For one thing I had the uncomfortable, prickly sensation that the little man was peeping at me covertly. Once or twice I opened my eyes quickly, hoping to catch him at it, but his face was obscured behind his newspaper. Nevertheless, after five minutes I'd had enough. Somehow that room hadn't seemed any warmer than the first even though the thermometer on the wall indicated a rise of some fifteen degrees. Perhaps he had something to do with it.

Room Three on the other hand was a proper oven. I'd no sooner crossed the threshold than I felt the sweat breaking out all over me. I rubbed my palm across my forehead and the moisture dripped from it. 'Been on the razzle, old scout?' enquired a drawly voice.

I looked round and saw a tubby little fellow lying on the floor with his paws locked over his tummy. His bush was bright ginger—the only time I'd seen such a colour down there—and so was his hair and his moustache. 'In a manner of speaking,' I said.

'You've come to the right place then.'

I put my foot on the iron grille and hastily withdrew it. 'Christ!' I exclaimed. 'It's red hot!'

'Nothing to it, old scout. Home from home after Aden. Take a pew.'

Every word he spoke was completely devoid of expression, as though he'd decided, long ago, never to devote more than one per cent of his vital energies to speech.

I lowered myself into a chair and felt the sweat trickle in rivulets down my back and belly. 'It's the first time I've been here,' I told him.

'Nothing like it, old scout. Opens the pores. You a homo?'

The question coming as it did in a flat, incurious monotone,

was oddly disconcerting. 'No,' I said firmly and, lest there should be any misunderstanding, added: 'Far from it.'

'Ten a penny in this place,' he said, and yawned.

'Are you one?' I asked.

'That's a bloody offensive question.'

'Sorry,' I apologized. 'I just wanted to know how things stood.'

'As a matter of fact I am.'

'Oh,' I said.

'Nothing wrong in that is there?'

'No, nothing,' I agreed swiftly.

'Well then?'

'Look,' I said, flushing, 'you can be whatever you bloody well like, just so long as you leave me out of it.'

A weird sound came up from the floor, like a match being drawn slowly backwards and forwards against the box. It took me some time to realise he was laughing. I grinned rather awkwardly.

At this point we were joined by the man with *The Tablet*. He ghosted in; folded himself bonily; went through the identical process of regarding me over the tops of his glasses; and then put up the shutters again.

'Hello, Padre,' drawled George. 'Had any good choir boys lately?'

The Tablet was lowered. 'Wilkinson?' enquired a voice like tissue paper.

'Down here, old boy, cooking it up for you. Medium rare about right?'

The newcomer gave a prim little smile and surveyed me with renewed interest. 'I had not realized our friend was of the fraternity.'

'I'm not,' I said, perhaps a little too quickly. 'But if you boys want to enjoy yourselves, go right head. Don't mind me.'

'You're just a bloody pervert,' said Ginger affably. 'That's what you are, old scout. A voyeur! A bloody Peeping Tom!'

'All right,' I shrugged wearily. 'Don't then.'

'Prude,' drawled Ginger. 'Spoil sport.'

The joke was on me, I could see that, but I can't pretend I was enjoying it. I turned to the Padre: 'Your name wouldn't happen to be McLorkey by any chance?'

The question evoked a high-pitched whinney of amusement. The damp leaves of *The Tablet* quivered; the pince-nez trembled. Even Ginger guffawed.

'Well, let's have it,' I said irritably. 'Who *is* this type?'

'You are now, old scout.'

'Hah, hah,' I intoned flatly.

'Indeed yes,' sniggered the Padre. 'Indubitably.'

'I don't get it.'

'Never heard of Kilroy?' asked Ginger.

'Vaguely,' I admitted.

' "Kilroy was here" ?'

'What about it?'

'Well, old scout, McLorkey is Kilroy's brother.'

'I still don't get it,' I said. 'And anyway I'm not a sodomite.'

'Did you hear *that,* Wilkinson?' hissed the Padre gleefully. '*Really*! Such *lan*guage! He'll be saying *bugger* next!'

This sally amused them both so much they might have been having hysterics. 'Oh, to hell with it!' I said disgustedly, and without waiting to complete my fifteen minutes, I stood up and headed for the steam room. As I went past the Padre goosed me playfully and I shied so violently I nearly skidded into the pool.

I once read somewhere that every man has an element of the queer in him and I suspect that the writer knew well enough what he was talking about. The trouble is there are queers *and* queers, if you get me. In the last ten years I must have met hundreds and I'd always got on well enough with them—live and let live—if only because we'd always met on my terms. Up till *then,* that is!

But there's all the difference in the world between sitting

here scribbling this and feeling my skin crawl as I slithered on the edge of that swimming pool. However rational you are *afterwards*—or even at the time—it's not much help unless you're firmly convinced everyone else is going to be rational too. I told myself I was behaving like a bloody idiot—and I *knew* I was—but even so it was astonishingly difficult to reassure myself to the point where I could push aside those damp canvas curtains and sidle into the steam room. Still, I did it—*I had to* somehow—even though I suppose I could have called it a day and dived into the bath there and then. Maybe that type who decided that every man has a streak of the queer in him had *me* under his microscope.

After that preamble I'm almost ashamed to confess that the steam-room was a complete let down—well, more or less. I suppose I was mentally prepared to be leapt upon by a horde of rampant sods, flung down, and brutally ravished—'Quiet Flows the Don' style, only with me playing the part of the servant girl. When they'd all done their stuff I'd lie there moaning and twitching, until finally, brokenly, I crawled away and flopped weeping into the pool.

Well it wasn't like that at all. As a matter of fact the first human contact I made was when I trod on someone. You couldn't see a yard in front of your face in that place. It was like a real pea-souper on an Autumn afternoon. I apologized in a tremulous quaver.

'That's all right, old chap,' said a tolerant voice which flew Eton, Balliol, Brigade of Guards, like fluttering signals at a mast head. 'Black Hole of Calcutta this is.'

'What a vulgar old beastie you are, Oliver,' chuckled another invisible. 'Black Hole, in*deed*!'

I squatted down gingerly and tried to make out where my victim ended. Cloud ceiling was zero-minus but at about eighteen inches I made weak visual contact with a pair of brown knees. I was just estimating where the head might reasonably be expected to be when I was startled by the sound of a loud slap from somewhere roughly West by North-West

and a thunderous voice boomed out: 'Keep your filthy paws to yourself you flaming pansy!'

It's an indication of my state of mind when I say that those words fell on my ears like the halloo of a lifeboat coxswain. I let out my breath in a slow sigh and, sinking down on my hands and knees, crawled off in the direction from which it had come.

My progress was necessarily slow. I didn't dare *feel* my way lest the touch of my groping fingers be misinterpreted, and consequently I was reduced to snuffling my way along like a purblind basset hound. Supine torsos loomed out of the mist like islands of pink blancmange and I had counted no fewer than eleven before I came across my first deck chair. Incredibly, it was unoccupied, and alerting my senses, I settled down to a watchful session in No-Man's-Land.

I hadn't been there more than a few minutes when I heard the door curtain rattle and Ginger's familiar drawl enquired: 'McLorkey here?'

I lay low and said nothing, but the question evoked its due quota of chuckles from the outer fogbanks and someone called: 'Bernard, *dar*ling!' in accents so extraordinarily feminine it was difficult to believe it really wasn't a girl.

This was the signal for half a dozen conversations to start up and there was a general scrambling and shifting about. Then, right in my ear it seemed, that enormous bull voice bellowed: 'You bloody brown-hatting swab!'

There was the sound of a solid blow followed, instantaneously, by a shock-wave *oof!* of anguish, and a small shape whizzed out of the mist and dropped like a slippery fish slap on top of me.

It had happened so quickly I was caught unprepared. The place erupted in a pandemonium of girlish shrieks and manly guffaws, while riding atop the tumult like a storm-tossed Poseidon came the breast-beating query: 'Where's the swab got to? I'll have his knackers for a necklace!'

The youth I was so unwillingly nursing, clung to me and

snivelled. Just as I was managing to wriggle myself free of his terrified embrace, a hand like a leg of beef clamped down beside my ear and an enormous bearded face descended through the clouds like a hairy airship. 'Got you, swab!' it snarled hungrily, and seized one of the arms which was clamped to me.

'No, Graham, no! I didn't mean it! Ow! Ooh!' It was exactly like being back in the changing room at school.

'Gently, Graham, old boy,' laughed the Eton Balliol voice. 'He's only a tiddler.'

'I'll tiddle him,' growled the beard. 'Let go, pustule!'

Atlas-like he lunged down, grabbed the whimpering limpet, and heaved. I found myself the hapless anchor of a tug-of-war. 'Hey,' I protested feebly, 'leave me out of this.'

'By your leave, friend,' boomed the shaggy Titan. 'Needs must,' and with a spectacular wrench he succeeded in detaching his prey, bore it triumphantly aloft and departed—presumably in the direction of the pool.

I say 'presumably' because in the final seconds of the struggle my deck chair collapsed. The wooden bar along the top found the still-tender hillock at the base of my skull and the curtain came down. It can't have stayed down for more than a moment because I distinctly remember hearing an almighty splash and a chorus of blood-curdling cheers, but my interest in the proceedings was, understandably, minimal.

I was finally aroused from my stupor by a sensation as of small fish nibbling the insides of my splayed thighs. To start with I was too dazed to realize what was going on, but when the phantom flippers began browsing gently around my genitals, the penny dropped. All in one movement I rolled over and lashed out. My left shin bone met the bridge of a beaky nose and the sharp clasp of a pair of pince-nez dug into my skin. 'Christ!' I exclaimed. 'It's you, Padre!'

Doubled up, hands pressed to his face in an attitude of intense prayer, he might have been in the Realm of the Seventh

Beatitude for all the response he made. It suddenly struck me what a pathetic and ridiculous creature he was. 'Sorry if I hurt you,' I said.

He flinched and muttered something blasphemous so I shrugged and left him to it. I no longer cared a damn who I trod on, but, such is the way of those things, I emerged into the open air without having touched another soul.

I palmed the damp hair back from my dripping forehead and looked about me. The only sign of the recent battle was a faint ripple on the surface of the water. Contestants and spectators alike had disappeared. I lowered myself into the steaming pool.

God knows what the temperature was, but it *felt* about one degree off boiling. By the time I reached the barrier which separated the two halves of the bath my body was bright shocking pink. I heaved myself up the steps of the intersection, stood gasping at the top for a moment, and then dived into the other half.

I don't know what I'd expected it to be—more or less the same as the other, I suppose—but it wasn't. It was freezing! Why there wasn't a foot of ice on the top I can't imagine. By the time I reached the steps at the far end I was so rigid I might have been starched, and if a blond, crew-cut Hercules hadn't leant down and hauled me out I'd probably be there today like one of those Siberian mammoths preserved in the Permafrost. Nor was it much consolation to hear him call me 'a brave mans' since I gathered that most of his experienced customers settled for having a shower with the chill off. 'But barss iss *goot*,' he assured me. 'Marsh bedder zan shower. Shower iss liddle doks pittle.'

He hoisted me, stiff as a bit of driftwood, on to his operating table and set to work dislocating my bones. Then he joined them together again and tobogganed the point of his elbow down the full Cresta Run of my spine from neck to tail. 'Iss goot, eh?' he laughed. 'Iss real sing, eh?' and proceeded to pummel me with his clubbed fists as though I were

a tom-tom on which he'd elected to despatch greetings to his folks in Oslo.

No sooner was this done than he gripped my ankles in one enormous paw and had me bent over backwards like a horse shoe. And with each new excruciation he chuckled: 'Iss Goot, eh? Iss goot?' The feeble grin which was all I could offer was apparently quite enough to satisfy him.

He rolled me over, plucked up a handful of loose flesh from my stomach and used it as a flannel for washing his hands. Then he dried them by rubbing them up and down my calves and thighs. By the time he'd finished I felt as if my skin was hanging on me like a kimono. At last, when he couldn't think of a single further indignity, he snatched up a vast plastic drum of powder and floured me all over. 'Like?' he demanded, lifting me bodily from the table and shaking me playfully. 'You like?'

'Fine,' I whispered. 'Just fine.'

'Iss goot, eh?'

'Very good,' I murmured.

He gave me a comradely thump on the shoulder which all but sent me reeling into the pool again and bandaged me tenderly in my towel. 'Muss kip fit,' he said seriously, and then, with a blue-eyed wink which was so innocent it was devastatingly beautiful, added in a whisper: 'For ze ladies, eh?'

'What!' I retorted, stung out of my coma. 'In *this* place?'

He flashed his teeth at me in a gleaming grin. 'You a *man*!' he said, patting my arm. 'Like Captain Graham. I, Kurt, *know* ziss.'

'How do you know?' I asked.

But he just shrugged and grinned, and, doubtful to the last whether I'd make it, I tottered off up the stairs to my cubicle and collapsed on the bed.

FOUR

AWAKENING

I WAS asleep before my head touched the pillow, and if I dreamt I've forgotten it. In fact it doesn't seem possible that I'd had *time* to dream before a hand shook me by the elbow. I opened my eyes and there was Kurt beaming down on me. 'Sorry iss not *schnapps*', he grinned, and put the cup down beside the bed. 'Iss yours?'

I nodded at the picture he was holding up enquiringly. 'Thanks,' I said and then remembered his tip.

I sat up, reached for my trousers, and handed him five bob. He smiled and shook his head. 'Iss *wan* half-crown,' he said and held up a finger the size of a small lighthouse.

'Go on,' I urged. 'Take it. Please.'

He blushed coral pink. 'Iss ver' kind,' he muttered, lowering silver eyelashes. Then he raised them again. 'Iss *beautiful.*' He unwrapped the word like a treasured heirloom. 'Iss *mos'* beautiful.'

For a moment I thought he was referring to my generosity but then I realized he meant the picture. My heart went out to him. 'You like it?'

'*Ver'* mosh. Iss *ver', ver'* goot. Iss—' and then, giving up the struggle, he broke into his own language, full of throbbing gutturals and strange alarming grunts.

I sat there grinning and nodding and looking at the picture. 'It's of my wife,' I said.

'Ah, iss *so*?' He nodded, frowned, nodded again, and then sighed. 'I sink iss *all* wifes,' he said slowly. '*All.* Yes?'

It socked me right over the heart. I could have kissed him.

Beside it even Boyo's 'seer' dwindled to a handclap. 'Kurt,' I said, 'that's the *nicest, truest* thing anyone's ever said about it. Put it there.'

We grinned hugely at each other and pumped hands and then he padded out leaving the picture propped up at the foot of the cot.

I bunched up my pillow into a backrest, and then picked up my cup of tea and stirred it slowly. 'Iss *all* wifes,' I repeated softly to myself. 'Yes, by God, Kurt, you've hit it. That's just what she is. No wonder the cretin critics couldn't see it. They wouldn't know what a wife is.' I tasted my tea and, finding it was already nearly cold, drank it off. Then I put the cup down, thatched my fingers behind my neck and thought—for the first time since it had happened—of just what exactly *had* happened.

Sue and Mandy were gone. For good. I held the knowledge in my mind's hands like a heavy, round crystal for a long time and, gradually, as I peered deeper and deeper into it, I began to learn its full, true weight. Several times my grip all but slipped, my mind lurching dizzily over the abyss, but in the end I knew I had it safe and that somehow I'd managed to contain it and to accept it for what it was; namely, an historical fact; something which *had* happened and could not *un*happen—ever.

Then, when I was sure *that* was safe, I reached out tentatively for the next one. This was *myself,* my own predicament, what I was going to do now. To my surprise I found it infinitely smaller and lighter than I'd expected. As I recalled that astonishing moment when it had occurred to me that I could kill myself, it was almost as though a mannikin who had been waiting in the wings for his cue, capered into the centre of the stage and displayed himself. I regarded him curiously. Odd how small and *unconvincing* he had become —*sham* somehow—and yet he was *dressed* like me and to all intents and purposes obviously *was* me. 'Was' is the point. I realized those clothes would no longer fit: I'd grown out of

them, or *beyond* them, in some way I couldn't explain. It wasn't that I was *afraid* of killing myself—I simply couldn't see any real point in doing it, and I was just drawing in a mental breath intending to puff the little poseur into dust when there was a stacatto *rap-rap-rap* on the door of the cubicle and a voice piped: 'Out in fifteen minutes, Sir, *if* you please!'

I unlocked my fingers, eased my legs off the bed, and stood up. Then I fished the electric razor out of its pigeon hole, plugged it in and began buzzing off my beard. It suddenly occurred to me that I was famished. A vision of bacon and grilled tomatoes quivered like a succulent mirage in the mirror before me and my mouth became awash with saliva. And *after* breakfast? I swallowed, and some of the appetizing aroma of that phantom bacon seemed to fade. My half-shaved reflection eyed me critically. 'The D's,' I murmured. 'Get it over.' And though I hadn't a notion *how* I'd set about breaking it to them, at least I knew I *would*—somehow.

I blew my whiskers out of the razor and put it back in its box. Then I began to dress myself. My clothes still smelt a bit of stale spirits but that was the only obvious trace of the night's adventures. Even the bump on the back of my head had sunk to a tenderness. And I felt fitter than I had for months—for years maybe. As I bent to lace up my shoes I heard someone whistling my favourite theme from the *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*—it was me!

I caught a bus to Piccadilly, walked into the Corner House and ordered myself the breakfast I'd been dreaming about. By the time I'd finished eating, my watch showed a quarter to nine. I knew the D's would both be at home on a Saturday morning but I also knew that they got up late at the weekends, so I decided to arrive there at around ten thirty and at least let them finish their breakfast in peace. That left me with the better part of a couple of hours to kill. I smoked a cigarette; toyed with the idea of collecting my suitcase from Pamela's and, finally, rejected it. Time for that after I'd done

with the D's. I leant forward to ditch my ash, and dislodged the picture which I'd propped against my chair. It fell with a soft *whump* face up on the carpet. As I bent down to retrieve it, I recalled Kurt's 'Iss *all* wifes' and smiled wryly. The trouble was, of course, that it *wasn't* 'all wifes', it was just a painting. Still it was better than nothing and it might help.

I stubbed out my cigarette, gathered up my picture and paid the bill. Then I walked up to the Circus and stood for a while watching the swirling traffic. When this palled I made my way into Regent Street and boarded a Number 13 bus. My original intention had been to go as far as the Finchley Road, but when the conductor approached I found myself asking for Regent's Park instead, and I spent the next ten minutes wondering what had made me change my mind.

No sooner was I inside the gates than I realized I'd done the right thing. There's something about walking on pavements that bruises the soul—you're made aware of yourself with every step you take. Grass, even the threadbare London grass, is different. It accepts you—in a resigned sort of way, maybe—but at least it seems prepared to acknowledge that you and it are both in this thing together. Besides, in the streets you're usually walking to get somewhere and part of your mind is always running on ahead of you, but once inside the Park you've *arrived*; your aim is to be nowhere else but where you are. So although I started off trying to evolve some plan for my interview with Sue's parents I soon gave it up and watched the ducks instead.

While I was standing there an old woman tottered up with a paper bag of crusts and began tossing them into the water. She was dressed in beetle black and her face had a curious bluish tint as though she'd rinsed it in meths. It was obvious that this was her big moment in the day and that she was making the most of it. She waited until each crust had been swallowed and the ducks were on the point of dispersing again

before she threw them the next. And all the time she kept up a sort of chuckling conversation with them, or with herself, in some middle-European language.

When the last crust was gone she fumbled the bag inside out and shook out the crumbs. At this all the ducks began quacking like mad. The old girl's face broke into a delighted grin, and turning to me she said: 'You see! Zey are saying—Sank you!'

'They must know you well,' I said.

'Zey know me, yes,' she nodded. 'But von day I vill not com 'ere. Zen zey vill say—Ze old voman is not com for to feed us. And zen zey vill forget.'

I stared down at the ducks which were still cruising round hopefully and letting off the odd quack. They looked a pretty shifty-eyed bunch of scavengers to me. And suddenly I realized why I had come here instead of going straight on to the D's. Mandy! I felt my heart shrink and a sick, reeling sense of loss. I fumbled for a cigarette; fighting down my panic; wondering if it was always going to be like this, lying in wait for me, pouncing when I was least prepared for it.

The old lady smiled and nodded and pottered off, looking like the frail shadow of a question mark. One or two of the ducks paddled after her for a few yards and then gave it up as a bad job. I moved along to a vacant bench and sat down. The earlier moment when I felt I had succeeded in coming to terms with what had happened seemed as remote and unreal as a dream. The prospect of living without Mandy and without Sue stretched out before me like a metallic ribbon, winding on and on for ever over a flat, featureless, slag-grey plain of unimaginable days. At that instant I would have given not only my whole life, but everything I'd ever done or hoped for, just to have my daughter alive in my arms for one minute. I struggled against tears as though they were a physical adversary and in the end I won. Climbing to my feet I set off slowly in the direction of the children's playground.

I was, I suppose, making a sort of forlorn pilgrimage to the

places where we'd taken Mandy. For her, London had really only been three things—the zoo, the ducks, and the playground. She never seemed to want a change, and on the one occasion when we took her to see the Changing of the Guard she'd insisted on stopping off to visit the ducks on the way back. You might have thought she'd get bored with the same old routine but she never did. After all, as she herself explained, you could never be quite sure it was the *same* ducks each time.

It was like that with the playground too. Routine. You started with the swings, moved on to the roundabout and ended up with the see-saw. It always had to be in that order even if it meant waiting for a swing. Heaven knows what might have happened if she'd got the order mixed—probably the world would have come to an end or something. Anyway she never gave us the chance to find out.

I didn't actually go *into* the playground this time. I found myself a place on the railings where I could prop up my picture, and then lit another cigarette and simply watched. Sometimes I think that's the only thing you *can* do with kids—even your own. There weren't many there, and those that were weren't doing anything out of the ordinary, but as I watched them I felt my heart thaw out and begin to beat again. I needed those kids for the same reason that the old girl needed her ducks, to convince me that I hadn't lost touch altogether. Watching them was like plugging myself into life and recharging my exhausted battery. For life was there all right, an everlasting fountain of it, and I just hung out my parched tongue and lapped it up. When I'd drunk my fill I looked at my watch and saw I was already late, so I picked up my picture and went to look for a taxi.

* * *

At ten minutes to eleven the cab drew up outside Trafalgar Court. As I paid it off I took a quick scan round for the D's

car, but the fact that I couldn't see it didn't mean much since I knew they rented one of the lock-up garages at the back of the block. A curious, fatalistic numbness came over me. I watched the taxi execute a neat U-turn and drone off down the hill. When it had vanished round a distant corner I drew in a halting breath and walked, neither quickly nor slowly, in through the front door, along the hall, and up the four short flights of stairs.

The door of the flat was opened by their daily. She looked considerably more spruced up than when I'd last seen her. 'Hello, Mrs Scott,' I said. 'Are they in?'

'Mrs is,' she said, standing back to let me in. 'It's her coffee Saturday.'

'Her what?'

She clicked the door shut. 'You know—*poller-ticks*.'

It was then that I noticed the sides of the hall were stacked with an extraordinary assortment of junk. Lamps, tea trays, flower vases, odd bits of furniture, picture frames, toys—God knows what there wasn't there. 'Are you spring-cleaning?' I asked.

'Not 'alf,' she said heavily. 'That's some of the jumble, that is. They're pricing it now. In the lounge.'

'Is Mr Dolfuss there?'

She grinned. 'What d'you think? 'E's orf playing golf at Wimbledon. Well out of it if you ask me.'

'Do you know when he'll be back?'

She shook her head. 'Not till this lot's out of the way. Would you like me to fix you a cuppa?'

'I'd better have a word with Mrs D first,' I said.

'Shall I tell 'er you're here?'

'Would you? Just say I'd like a word with her. I'll wait here.'

I put my picture down and felt in my pocket for a comb. Mrs Scott smoothed the front of her overall, patted her crisply permed hair; set her face; and then tapped briskly on the sitting-room door and went in. Within half a minute she was

back. 'She says for you to go in,' she announced in a hoarse whisper.

'OK,' I shrugged. 'Thanks.'

'I'll put out an extra coffee for you,' she said. 'Four lumps.'

I smiled. 'You've got a good memory.'

She snorted with pleasure. 'Ah, what d'you take me for? It's four for you an' two for Miss Susan. Right?'

I felt my heart give a double beat. 'Yes,' I said. 'Exactly right.'

She grinned complacently and trotted off to the kitchen. I closed my eyes, breathed a silent prayer for guidance, and quietly opened the sitting-room door.

There must have been over a dozen women in there, and *what* women! 'Females' would seem a more precise word. It wasn't that they were sexless exactly—any one of those armour-plated busts looked physically capable of suckling an entire orphanage—but they were somehow belligerently neuter, warriors for a sacred cause, dedicated to Artemis. As I entered they looked up and I knew they had me mentally graded, priced, and chucked into the box labelled 'Bran Tub' before I'd closed the door behind me.

From behind a pile of folk-weave cushions Mrs D fluttered a hand at me and announced with a gay laugh: 'My son-in-law—Tony.'

I contrived a smile and one or two of the closer ones nodded back. The rest simply returned their attention to what they'd been doing before I interrupted. I squeezed my way among the loaded tables and approached my mother-in-law, but before I was within confidence range she called out in the kind of accents you usually hear only on the amateur stage: '*Do* be an absolute *dear,* Tony, and give Mrs Hopkinson a hand with the pictures.'

'Could I just have a . . .?' The request petered out on my lips. I could see it was useless. Later there would be a time. Her eyes, faintly hostile, met mine and flicked away. She

waved her hand across the operations room and indicated a junior officer. 'Florence!' she called.

In a far corner of the room a woman looked up, frowned, and beckoned me to her with an impatient jerk of her blue-rinsed head.

'If I could just—' I muttered submissively.

'You'll be such a help,' beamed Mrs D, dismissing me and turning away to consult with the commander of the Fancy Goods stall.

I saluted mentally, shambled away, and presented myself before Mrs Hopkinson, but it was quite five seconds before she looked up and acknowledged me. 'Do you *know* anything about art?' she enquired coldly and I sensed the words 'young man' tagging inaudibly to the end of the query.

'Well,' I said, 'I *am* a painter, actually.'

Severe grey eyes drilled into mine for a moment. 'Oh,' she said. 'I didn't know.' The way she said it made me feel she was very glad she'd hitherto been spared such an unsavoury revelation.

'But I'm not very up in prices,' I apologized. 'That's really a dealer's job.'

'Oh,' she said again. 'Is it? Well, I've done those ones there if you want to have a look.'

'I'm sure they're fine,' I said hastily. 'I wouldn't dream—'

'Nonsense. *I* don't know anything about it either. I've been going more or less by size.'

I nodded. 'How much are you charging per inch?'

'No, no,' she frowned. 'I'm simply asking five shillings for the little ones; ten shillings for the medium; and—'

'Don't tell me,' I said. 'Fifteen shillings for the large?'

'Yes,' she said frostily. 'I don't think that's excessive.'

'Extremely generous,' I agreed. 'After all, think of Haydon.'

'Haydon?'

'A painter,' I said. 'He painted large pictures. He's dead now.'

Sensibly she decided to ignore this. 'Well, you'd better

look through them,' she said. 'I might have missed one.'

I sat down and began leafing through the stack of pictures she had piled on to the sofa. I wasn't really *looking* at them at all, but even so my professional eye was caught by a little Victorian coast scene. I pulled it clear and held it up to the light. I hadn't made a mistake. 'This is worth something,' I said.

She took it from me and glanced at it. 'I remember,' she said. 'But it's very dirty, isn't it?'

'It's a Copley-Fielding.'

The name obviously meant nothing to her. She probably thought 'copley fielding' was a painter's term for a special sort of landscape. 'Well,' she said, handing it back to me, 'what do you think it's worth?'

I shrugged. 'It's hard to say. Fifteen? Twenty? Maybe even more.'

'Twenty? Well, since I made it five, shall we settle for fifteen?'

'I mean *pounds*,' I said.

'Pounds!' It was a tiny scream really. 'Did you say *pounds*?'

'Yes,' I said. 'But I don't *know*. It's a Copley-Fielding all right, though. And a good one too. Look at that sky.'

'You're quite *sure*?' Her voice had dropped to an intense whisper.

'I don't suppose anyone's ever bothered to forge him,' I pointed out, and turning the picture over I stripped off some of the grey sealing paper at the back of the frame. Sure enough there was a label inscribed in a flowing Victorian hand: 'The Harbour. Littlehampton. Sept 1852'.

Mrs Hopkinson almost snatched it from me. 'Fancy that,' she murmured, devouring the evidence with her eyes. Then, having come to some private decision, she pursed up her lips, tapped her Biro on the table and turned to me with a brisk smile. 'We'll have to see about it later. There are all these for you to go through yet. I'll go and get the rest.'

She hurried out of the room, with the picture tucked firmly under her arm, leaving me listlessly turning over my sixth Edwardian water-colour of Windermere. Before she returned, Mrs D made a rapid tour of inspection along her front line. 'Getting along all right? Splendid! We'll be having our coffee in a moment.' And she was away again before I'd had a chance to collect my thoughts.

I'd completed my task and was sitting gazing out of the window at nothing when Mrs Scott came in carrying a tinkling trayful of cups. Mrs D clapped her hands. 'All right, everyone! Break for coffee now!'

There was a general sigh and a buzz of conversation. I lit a cigarette and accepted the cup which Mrs Scott handed to me. 'Four lumps,' she whispered to me. 'You see.'

I smiled at her abstractedly and prodded the crumbling sugar with my spoon. One by one the bubbles pricked the surface and huddled together for protection. At that moment the thread which tethered me to the world about me seemed to have drawn out very fine indeed, and I was just beginning to wonder if it would snap altogether when I heard Mrs D saying: 'Well, Tony, and what are you doing up in Town?'

I looked up. The impossibility of telling her here and now overwhelmed me. 'I'm afraid I—'

'And how are Susan and dear little Mandy?' As she cut across me with her question she was already turning her head away and calling out: 'No, Belinda, the tinned fruit *must* go in with the Home Produce. And this time *do* remember to stick the price labels *over* the bit where it says "South Africa".'

'Mrs Dolfuss,' I murmured, and pushed back my chair.

She turned back to me and sighed hugely. 'My *dear,* isn't this *ab*solute *chaos*?'

'Please,' I whispered desperately. 'I've *got* to speak to you alone for a moment.'

She frowned and clicked her tongue. 'Can't it wait just half an hour, Tony? I'm really *ab*solutely snowed—'

'No,' I said. 'Now.'

Something in my tone finally broke through to her. Her eyes narrowed. 'Is anything the matter?'

I nodded. 'Can we go into the bedroom?'

'All right,' she agreed reluctantly. 'I'll be with you in a minute.'

She joined me five minutes later. Closing the bedroom door briskly behind her she said: 'Now what's all this mystery about?'

The phrases I'd been rehearsing were wiped from my mind the instant she spoke. All I had left was an echo of the police sergeant's formal statement to me. The horror of what I was about to do seemed to have paralyzed my tongue.

'Well, don't be shy,' she prompted. 'What is it?'

I looked down at her shoes. 'Sue and Mandy,' I muttered.

'Yes?'

'They're dead.'

I know it seems incredible, but her first reaction was to laugh. It was purely nervous but it jerked me out of my trance as nothing else could have done. 'Oh, *God*,' I breathed. 'Why did it have to be like this?'

'Did you say "dead"?' she stuttered. *'Dead?'*

I nodded. 'A car accident.'

'No,' she said. 'No. No. No,' and shook her head at each repetition.

I hurried over to her and took her by the arm. 'Oh God, I'm sorry. I should have tried to break it to you gently. Do you want me to phone for Charles?'

She just stared at me as though I were Eichmann or someone. 'You're lying,' she whispered. 'I *know* you're lying. *Tell . . . me . . . you're . . lying!'* The last four words came out like an escape of scalding steam. She grabbed hold of my arms and shook me like a mop.

In a gust of futile anger I wrenched myself free. 'Why should I lie?' I retorted, breathing hard. 'I've seen them. And now I've told you. Would you have preferred the police?'

Her mouth trembled; her whole face seemed to crumple up. 'The police?' she whispered pathetically.

'They told *me*,' I said. 'I didn't want you to hear about it the way I heard yesterday.'

She clutched the word out of the air. *'Yesterday?* You *mean—'*

'Yes,' I muttered. 'Yesterday morning. I meant to come last night but—'

'You meant to come last night!'

'I know,' I said. 'But I just *couldn't*. It pretty well knocked me out.'

'You mean they've been . . .? All this . . .?'

I couldn't meet her eyes. 'I didn't want you to hear from some stranger,' I explained weakly. 'Maybe I was wrong.'

Her scarlet tipped fingers scuttled forlornly up and down her heaving chest like the legs of little pink crabs. 'Oh God,' she mourned. 'Oh God. Poor Charles.'

I stepped forward and put my arm about her shoulders. I wished she would cry. 'I'll tell the women to go away,' I murmured gently. 'You stay here.'

'No!' The word was needle sharp. 'You'll do nothing of the kind.'

'Then let me get in touch with Charles.'

She shook her head. 'You've done all you had to,' she said flatly. 'Now will you leave me alone for a few minutes?'

I felt as though I had been condemned without even the formality of a hearing. 'But I *can't* just leave you,' I protested. 'It's not right.'

'You needn't be afraid,' she said. 'I won't do anything silly.'

As I heard her say this it slowly dawned on me that in some incredible way she must have managed to come to terms with what had happened. It was almost as though she'd had envelopes already waiting, stamped and addressed for just this contingency. How else can I explain how she'd seemingly been able to achieve in two minutes flat what had taken me the better part of twenty-four hours to accomplish? 'It's not

that,' I said lamely. 'It's just . . .' but I couldn't explain *what* it was that troubled me so deeply.

She shrugged my arm away as though it were a presumptuous fly, then walked across to the bed on which I'd been sitting before she came in and began pulling the counterpane straight with little sharp vindictive tugs. 'Well, aren't you going to tell me what happened?' she demanded. 'Surely I have a right to know?'

I told her what the Sergeant had told me and what I'd told Pamela. 'It wasn't anyone's fault,' I concluded. 'It just happened.'

'Nothing "just happens",' she observed coldly. 'You'll prosecute of course.'

'Prosecute?'

'The petrol company.'

I just stared at her.

'Well?' she demanded.

'But you don't understand,' I said. 'They're *dead*. Sue and Mandy. What good would prosecuting anyone do?'

'Someone must be punished.'

I shook my head. The whole thing was spinning out of gear. And she wasn't even *crying*! 'Didn't you love her?' I asked incredulously.

The muscle quivered along her jaw. 'How *dare* you say that! Susan was *my* child! *Mine*!'

I suppose it was the way she said that 'mine' which told me I'd been a fool to imagine there was any common ground on which we could meet. Even so I made one final effort. 'I can't tell you how sorry I am,' I said. 'I know I've said everything all wrong and it's been a most terrible shock for you.'

She regarded me with cool distaste.

'I know what you must be thinking,' I floundered on desperately, 'and I daresay in a way you're right. Maybe if she'd married someone else this would never have happened and she'd be alive now. Don't think I haven't gone over all that a

thousand times. But what's the use? They *are* dead. *I* can't bring them back to life. No one can. But I've brought you that picture I did of them—the one I exhibited—which used to hang in our bedroom. I want you to have it. I know it's far and away the best thing I've ever done and it's got some—'

'I don't want it, thank you.'

It was exactly as if she'd waited until I was completely disarmed and then slapped me across the face. I felt the sting of it in my eyes. 'But maybe Charles . . .' I muttered.

It was the turn of the other hand. 'He loathes *all* your paintings.'

There was nothing more for me to say. I felt too wretched even to swear. I knew I'd never understand her, no not in a million years, and I honestly didn't want to. All I asked now was to be allowed to crawl quietly away and lick my wounds. And, God knows, maybe she did too. Maybe she'd seized on the only way she could see to get rid of me. 'I'll phone you later,' I muttered, 'and let you know what's happening.'

She didn't attempt to stop me. I let myself out into the hall and closed the bedroom door behind me. When I came to where I'd left my picture I found it had gone. For a moment I was too bemused to think straight, then I remembered Mrs. Hopkinson and turned towards the sitting-room.

The warriors of Artemis seemed to be functioning just as energetically without their C in C. Unacknowledged I plodded across to the sofa and, exactly as I'd expected, there was my picture with a '10/-' sign chalked across Sue's right arm. Not even a '15/-'! I picked it up, licked my fingers, and erased the figure. 'This is mine,' I said.

Mrs Hopkinson bared her teeth at me. 'But you'll have to pay *some*thing. I did for mine.'

I stared at her. I hadn't a clue what she was talking about.

'After all,' she breezed on, 'we helpers *are* on our honour, aren't we? We can't take advantage of the Party. Mrs Donnat's our Hon Treasurer. That's her over there in the corner—the lady in the yellow dress.'

I looked down at my picture, then round the room at the heads bobbing like wind-tossed chrysanthemums. I took in the Britannia bosoms, the pearls, the tweeds and the twin-sets. Finally I turned back to Mrs Hopkinson. Leaning down confidentially till my lips were only inches from her ear I whispered lethally: 'Fuck the Party! Fuck your Hon Treasurer! And fuck you too!' Then, without waiting to register her reaction, I barged my way out.

I don't feel in the least proud of that exit, and still less of the way I'd handled that gruesome five minutes with Mrs Dolfuss. I can see now that I'd been too much on the defensive right from the start, knowing she didn't like me and that she'd do her best to find some way of pinning it on to me, and knowing too all she *didn't* know about me and Pamela. Nevertheless, as I walked down the stairs and out into the noon sun I felt a genuine, knee-trembling sense of relief. I had come through. Somehow, somewhere, I'd managed to find a tiny crack and had squeezed myself through it. As I set off down the hill I tried to retrace my tracks and find out where it had been. Was it in the playground? Or with Kurt? Or Hippo? Or Ken? Or Pamela? Or those two little kids in the train? Or their mother? Or none of them? Or all of them? Or was it Sue herself?

I halted in my stride and looked down at the one picture of mine which I knew better than I know my own face. 'All wifes.' I felt the skin along my arms and my shoulders and my back begin to prick and crawl. I lifted my head and gazed out across the petrified sea of roofs that was London and the knowledge of what I must do kicked like a foetus in the womb of my mind. Dip a pen in your heart and write! I'd go back and try to live it through again and then, maybe, if I really *did* manage to tell the truth to myself, then I'd *know* how I'd

managed to escape. And if I only wrote down a tiny bit of Sue and Mandy—just *something,* no more than a dim little word-shadow of that picture which was itself only a shadow of what they *really* were—then at least I'd have proved to myself that I'd been speaking the truth when I'd told Pamela that they *are* still alive—*in me now*! And that must mean I'm alive too, mustn't it?

RICHARD COWPER
BREAKTHROUGH

When Jimmy Haverill, an assistant lecturer at Hampton University, meets Dr. Dumpkenhoffer, Head of the newly-founded Parapsychology Research Department, he is unaware that the meeting is to divert the whole course of his life. Haverill's involvement in the Doctor's experiments follows so naturally, so casually that it seems impossible for him to conceive that the matter might have been, in some inexplicable manner, pre-ordained. But as he becomes more deeply involved with the Doctor and with the psychic prodigy Rachel Bernstein, he finds the university becoming ever less substantial and himself "moving about in worlds not realized", an unwitting focal point of forces beamed into the future from beyond the dawn of history. As those forces threaten to break loose and engulf him, dream metamorphoses into nightmare and the protagonists discover themselves to be the pawns in a game of destiny played out a million years ago.

Of this book, the critics said:

"ESP is one of the magnets that draw writers to try their hands at SF. I am delighted that it has drawn Richard Cowper (otherwise Colin Murry) to write *Breakthrough*. This story . . . has style, pace and wit. It also has good characterisation, and though the denouement is not as satisfying as the rest of the book this remains a thoroughly absorbing novel." *Sunday Times*

". . . Accepted ESP theories cunningly blended with a suggestion of high romance. Good start by a newcomer to the SF field."

Punch

PHOENIX

"A misfit, a throwback, a genuine freak. The last Romantic"—thus the eighteen year old Bard describes himself and his attitude towards the 24th Century technical Utopia in which he lives. Threatened with psychological "re-adjustment" he schemes to buy himself a term of Suspended Animation in "The Caves of Sleep". After three years of Anabiosis he will have reached his majority and can inherit the fortune that goes with it. Simple and audacious in its conception, the plan seems bound to succeed, but. . . . It is around that "but" that Richard Cowper has woven an enthralling story of the future and has created a world that is as strange as it is terrifyingly credible.

DOMINO

That the present contains the future in embryo has long been a fruitful theme for science fiction, but rarely can it have been more brilliantly or topically exploited than it is in Richard Cowper's third novel *Domino*. From the moment when young Christopher Blackburn is prevailed upon to attend a seance at The Seekers' Temple a series of seemingly inexplicable and increasingly terrifying experiences gradually convinces him that he has been singled out by some unknown power, bent on destruction.