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Selected by CLARENCE PAGET



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Chris Barnham

On the fisherman's path

I had a friend once who couldn't say the word 'deteriorated'. He knew the word but just couldn't seem to get his mouth around it. Once, I remember, we were walking without aim through Brackenhams old town and he said:

'That cinema has really deteriated.'

'What?' I stopped and looked at him. He didn't immediately realize the trap he was about to fall into. He pointed across the road at the crumbling Ritzy.

'I said that cinema . . .'

'Do you mean "deteriorated"?' I asked him, placing heavy and sarcastic stress on every syllable of the word.

He never could get it right and in the end I felt sad that I and other friends mocked him so much that he gave up trying. Henceforth matters declined and things broke down, went on the slide, drooped, wilted, fell apart or simply got worse. He became a minor thesaurus on the topic.

But nothing ever 'deteriated' again.

And that's sad, because sometimes it's bad not to be able to say the things you want to say. To say sometimes what needs to be said.

I feel this now because I suppose you could say things have deteriorated for me lately and being able to say what happened is the only comfort. The only therapy. Sometimes it's all you've got and if you can't get the words right you betray the truth of your experience. This is my only comfort now in my empty time of waiting. To tell the story. To write it down.

I would have to say that it began in Germany although the nature of fate is that it stalks you for a long time before you see it. A speeding car collides on a dark road with another car. Only for a very brief time are they close together before the tragedy, but the car travelling at speed has for many miles been racing up out of the night to meet the other.

Of course that sort of accident is not planned in advance. I now believe that what happened to me was. It didn't seem that way at the time and I suppose I must relate events as they happened. Let hindsight remain behind.

At the end of my second year at college I decided that it would be a 'fine thing' to travel for most of the summer. My reasoning was that this was probably the last very long break that I'd have before starting work, though what the nature of that work would be was something I had yet to consider. Perhaps, I thought, a bit of solo travel in Europe, living only for the day immersed in foreign culture, would build my character and give me a clearer idea of where I wanted to go once I had my degree.

So I worked for four weeks in a dairy factory. Ten and twelve hour shifts removing packs of yogurt from a conveyor belt and stacking them on a square wooden pallet which, when it groaned under fifty packs, was quickly removed by a fork-lift truck and replaced with another. My hands grew callous, my conversation callous and I ended each day with my white cotton suit yogurt-stained and yogurt-smelling. I have never eaten one of those yogurts since.

But it was money in the bank, and enough money in a month for me to chuck in the job and go. With only a rucksack containing some basic clothes, a small gas stove, sleeping and survival bags and a borrowed copy of 'Get By in Six Languages', I didn't much care where I went. Just go. This is life, I thought, this is youth. Go.

I left Brackenhams in mid-July with no restrictions other than money and the need to return to college in late September. Neither restriction worried me much. The details of much of my travelling are unimportant. I did what so many young Europeans do every summer. Hitchhiked mostly, used buses and trains where I needed to. Went with the flow of the traffic and stopped wherever I felt comfortable. Usually I slept rough. If I was hitching and hadn't reached my destination by dark I would often roll up in the survival bag by the side of the road and resume the journey in the morning, stiff and damp in the summer's dew.

In towns I sometimes booked into campsites, not because I needed the space – I had, after all, no tent – but because I felt that the use of showers, toilets, shops and bars was occasionally worth the extra cost. It was nice to take things a bit easier, sit in a campsite bar and swap stories with other travellers, share some cheap wine out in

the open. To sit silent in company and watch tail-lights wink in the deep curtain of warm night. Very occasionally I felt wealthy enough, and in enough need of comfort, to book into a guest house or cheap hotel. I did this more towards the end of my travels partly through weariness and partly, as you will see, because there were things more important to me by then than saving money.

At times I wanted only to travel on my own and free, hardly caring where I was, on a rigorous line between a point of departure already memory and a destination only letters on a map. Other times I stayed a week or more in one town, explored bars and shops, played the tourist. From Belgium I travelled up through Holland, pausing for a few days in Amsterdam, and on into northern Germany to Hamburg for another longer stay. I made a brief visit to Denmark and Copenhagen before doubling back into Germany and catching one of my few train rides over the border and to West Berlin.

You will know when this took place. That time when the press in several countries got hold of some bizarre murder cases and tried to link them together. I knew little about the story at first because the only papers I read were an occasional *Herald Tribune* borrowed from Americans travelling the same way as I, and from time to time a few English newspapers which I might glance through in a store. I understood little of any foreign language and so the story made little impact on me until it began to hit the front pages of the international press in quite an obvious way.

The British press treated the murders at first in a 'silly-season-look-what-daft-ideas-the-foreign-police-come-up-with' sort of way. When the Belgian and Dutch police began to speculate upon a link between the death of a young Brussels banker and those of two Amsterdam brothers the newspapers, if they bothered with the story at all, played upon the bafflement of the police and their inability to account for the deaths. What linked them – or seemed to link them – was the condition of the bodies. The banker was found terribly mutilated in the street near his home. 'Some sort of animal, perhaps a dog', was the first explanation for the state of the body, mercifully not described at length. In Amsterdam the police thought the two brothers, found in a canal near the port, had tangled with a ship's propeller. Later they admitted that this was not likely and the first link with the 'Brussels wild dog' was suggested. This was strengthened, and the dog element dropped when another body in similar

condition turned up in Bremen, northern West Germany. For the first time the possibility that human agency was responsible for the deaths began to be treated seriously. *The Sun* newspaper in England wrote of a 'Euro-Ripper'. Unfortunately, the name stuck.

For me the main interest in the story, such interest that I had at that time, was the realization that the deaths formed a chain along the route I'd taken earlier in the summer. It seemed an odd coincidence that the first death should take place in Brussels three weeks after I left it; that the two brothers should die in Amsterdam sixteen days after my own visit and that the apparent murder in Bremen should occur eleven days after I'd passed through the town on the way to Hamburg.

The coincidence thickened and nagged a little in the back of my mind when the fifth murder in the sequence – for the papers spoke of murders by then – was committed in Berlin the week after I left there to return to West Germany. By the time I read about it, however, I had temporarily lost interest in the story. By then I had met Julie.

I was in Cologne. By now it was late into August and I was enjoying what felt like the last of the sun's true heat for the summer. I sat in a square about fifty yards away from the vast, flat space dominated by the city's cathedral, a huge Gothic pile partly intact and partly restored since the war. I had spent the morning wandering around the cool immensity of the building and now I was resting in the nearby square, writing a letter home.

The square was filled mainly with metal tables and red plastic chairs, occupied by foreign tourists. I lingered a long while over a coffee and a delicious cake, crammed with apple and fresh cream, which I had bought from the huge and clearly popular bakery on the north side of the square. Newly arrived in the city, I had treated myself to a couple of nights in a small boarding house and I was enjoying the relief of shedding the rucksack to enable me to wander more freely around the town.

I had just finished the letter and, after a brief struggle between my stomach and my conscience which my conscience lost on points, I ordered another coffee and cake. I became aware that someone was looking at me. I turned to my right just in time to see the girl quickly shift her gaze elsewhere. She sat about ten feet away at a neighbour-

ing table. My first impression of her, and the one which lingers longest, was of shadow. She sat openly in the sun and yet seems still to my memory to be in shade, as if a cloud hung invisibly over her alone. I couldn't describe her as beautiful because hers was not a face to win contests, but she tugged at your vision and the sight of her kept your interest where the typical cover-girl beauty would begin to bore. She was slim, wearing bright new jeans and a T-shirt. What caught my attention first was her hair: more than shoulder length and thick and straight and black, it framed her face like a painting.

She looked again at me and I was hooked. Her eyes were deepest brown, almost black, in colour and conveyed an intelligence far wiser than her years. She seemed about twenty-five but, and this was always what fascinated me in her, she combined a cool and apparently innocent reserve with an impression of wisdom. In truth she could have passed for eighteen or for thirty-five. At times over the next few weeks I felt that she was weighing me up as a jeweller evaluates a gem, turning me over in her mind, deciding what to do with me. Innocence and knowingness – a killer combination, I thought.

In cheap novels characters lock gazes and an electric current passes between them. That's not quite how I would describe our meeting but as her eyes met and held mine I felt that she saw far more of me than I did of her. Those eyes seemed to look right down into me and I felt a momentary shiver of unease. I was a book torn open, my pages riffled through by a cold hand.

Those feelings were swept away by the smile she gave, and the rush of heat to my head was hardly staunch ed at all by the banality of our first conversation.

'Hi,' I said, my mind already racing to follow up this opening. She smiled again and I felt that my grin would stretch completely around my head causing the skull above my jaw to fall off. She said:

'Hi.'

'Uh, are you English?'

'Yes, like you. What's your name?'

'Chris,' I told her, my name suddenly sounding totally inadequate between my lips, 'and yours?'

'Julie. Julie Kenmare.'

Thus it began. I joined her at her table and the second coffee led into the third and the third led to a short walk to a bar where we

drank the small, sharp German beers, condensation pearling the glass, foam soaking the beer-mat. We talked in the way that strangers do but with an added intensity born of the desire not to part as strangers. I told her about my travelling, about college and my thesis, about music and books and food. She told me that her unusual surname derived from a distant ancestor in Ireland, and that the Kenmares were a regular Irish colony in South London. She told me she was here with friends although she was vague about who they were or where they were staying.

It's easy to see now that she was vague about a lot of things but at the time I was too keen to make a good impression and too eager to please. I didn't want to risk pushing hard or asking again when she side-stepped my questions.

So we passed a golden afternoon in chat and drink and, around six, as the sun puffed up lower in the hazy sky and the pigeons grew raucous around the Cathedral Platz, we shared schnitzels and wine in a café by the Rhine. We swapped addresses. I told her I'd get in touch when we were back in England. She said to do that. As she walked away up the Rhine embankment, not turning to look back at me though I still felt the touch of her cool scrutiny, I leaned on the wall and watched a barge push its way upstream. It disturbed a group of sullen gulls in its languid wake. I would contact her, I told myself. I would see her again. I punched myself on the thigh but didn't wake up. I think even then I was in love with her.

However, I put such thoughts aside. I wanted to see her again but I had let her go without discovering her address in Cologne. I had no choice but to continue on my way and then jack up the courage to write to her in September. I spent one more day in the city but found it painful now to be there. I continually watched the passing crowds and hung around too long near the Cathedral. Obviously this was wasting my time so I sent a postcard to her London address, to remind her of me whenever she reached home, and I decided to move on.

To Italy then, now that the weather was cooling towards the German September. I wanted to plunge myself into a warm and more alien culture, having so far kept to Northern Europe. The Mediterranean beckoned. I went a fairly long way round. I left Cologne and hitched up the beautiful Mosel valley and into France. Easing around Paris I

travelled down the Rhône valley to the South. I didn't stop there, although I travelled at a leisurely pace, but followed the coast into Italy. I intended to make for Rome but, on reaching the city, I found it too hot and dusty and crowded. So I kept moving South, reached Naples and from there followed a whim and travelled the whole length of the circumvesuviana railway. I fetched up in Sorrento.

It was a pretty and self-contained town. Viewed from the sea its buildings seemed thrust up from the tops of grey cliffs which rose sheer from the black volcanic sand of the thin beaches. The houses were typical of southern Italy; square, their plaster largely white-washed. Or perhaps pale red or green, much of the colour rinsed by the strength of the sun. So different in character to an English town, bricks were rare and much of the plasterwork still showed the cracks and scars from an earthquake several years before. I stood for an hour on a terrace over the sea when I first arrived. My eyes drank thirstily of the view across the Bay of Naples. In that season a gentle haze usually settled on the bay early in the morning and thickened during the day. My first view, though, I will never forget.

Boats danced at anchor on the blue deep of the sea. Above this the sky pressed down to squeeze the horizon close to the water. I could see the broad flattened cone of Vesuvius. Tiny scatterings of buildings crept up the first swellings of the volcano which stood regular and erect on the otherwise level coastal plain. Although not very high the volcano rose from sea level and, standing alone at the hinge of the bay, it dominated the landscape. A few clouds, the only ones visible, caressed the top of the cone. In the haze the eye could easily mistake the cloud for part of the volcano, in delicious deception it could take the volcano for cloud.

I loved the town instantly. Its atmosphere of crowded yet relaxed intensity and the sense of suspension between infinite depth of sky above and sea below. In my memories I cannot see those streets without imagining myself in them. With me, of course, was Julie.

I had never experienced such a dazzling coincidence. It isn't the thin laughter of the wind beyond my window which makes me shiver as I think back now to the heat of that day. Something touched me then, plucked weakly at my clothes and hair before moving on to cause disaster elsewhere. At the time, however, I felt only delight and amazement.

I had just bought some oranges from a stall in the narrow labyrinth of the old town. It was my second day in Sorrento. I peeled an orange and began to chew into the crunchy heaven of the fruit, fresh-picked from the town's groves. Suddenly I was cold as if a cloud had passed in front of the sun. I looked up from the orange and saw her. Julie stood about twenty yards ahead of me in the street. That impression of darkness brushed me again. She looked at me oddly for the briefest of moments, almost as if she didn't recognize me. At least that's how it seemed at the time but now I wonder as I re-run that flickering film of memory. It was a blank look, it gave nothing away of her own feelings and yet it expressed interest. She was interested in me in some way that I couldn't quite grasp and I had caught her watching me to see how I acted.

This is hindsight of course and I have promised to avoid it. Instantly she smiled and I realized like an idiot that I was grinning so widely that orange juice had dripped down the front of my shirt.

'Julie . . . ? What are you doing here?'

'Small world isn't it?'

That was almost as near to an explanation as I ever got. I had not told her I was going to Italy, and I hadn't known myself that I would end up in Sorrento. She told me that she had come down here, as I had, simply on a whim because a friend had recommended the area and because Julie knew a little Italian and wanted some practice. Explanations, however, were not my concern. Having pushed thoughts of her out of my mind I had no defence and quickly found myself totally infatuated. Her sudden appearance was a spark to ignite the dry powder laid down by our meeting in Cologne. I wanted only to spend every waking moment with her. As for moments when I wasn't awake, well of course I had my ambitions there too.

How to describe the next two weeks? Where to find words for what I felt was plainly the best time of my life? Those words will have to do for a fortnight which shines still in my mind as brightest, fiercest day. Followed by deepest night.

That evening we ate in the heart of old Sorrento, at a garden restaurant above street level where a man sang and played on his guitar and the atmosphere was busy and happy. We sat in a corner of the garden, under a lime tree and near to a large fish tank which was

visited from time to time by the chef who scooped out plates-full of shellfish before disappearing back into the kitchens.

We sat and talked, and ate anchovies marinated in oil and garlic; spaghetti covered with clams and tomato sauce; huge grilled prawns, the length of the plate, with fried courgettes and crisp, oily salad. We drank a chilled white wine which cut through the food like the prow of a boat. All the time we looked at each other and occasionally would fall silent and just stare until one of us would smile and we'd both start to laugh.

As we walked through town after the meal, hand in hand by now, we came by chance upon a small square where a band played loudly and joyfully. Dressed all in black, some of them played the strangest instruments: small metal bins on which the lids crashed a rhythm; three long wooden sticks which knocked almost inaudibly together above us. A stall in the corner of the square was staffed by a group of people handing out huge free slices of water-melon. I never found out why it was free but it seemed that everyone gorged themselves on the fruit. Julie and I stood, bent slightly forward so that the juice dropped from our wet lips into the road, and ate the largest slices of melon I'd ever seen.

We walked back to Julie's hotel along the old fisherman's path down the cliff. Half path and half steps, it wriggled down from the town passing small shrines to the Madonna set back into the cliff, bathed in electric light.

We walked in silence. Around the occasional lamp bats flapped and squeaked in and out of the globes of light. From the lower end of the path we saw the hotel at the far end of the harbour. It was a scene so unnaturally real in the deep night that it seemed almost a film-set reconstruction of a fishing village. By starlight and the faint glow from the lights up on the cliff the boats rested uneasily on the black sand while the waves chuckled, and caressed the quays.

At midnight we sat on the balcony of Julie's room and sipped at glasses of the local wine, *Lacrima Christi* ('It means "Tears of Christ";' she told me) and watched the boats rock like ghosts on the table of darkness which was the sea. That deeper darkness was the only way to distinguish the water from the speckled velvet curtain of night above. Sound travels well over water, in summer, or at night, and the distant sounds of music did all three, floating through the open balcony doors as we lay, finally, on the bed. Julie's skin felt

cold and dry and I suppressed a shiver as I removed my shirt and drew the curtains to keep out the breeze.

Below the window the water rustled as a local boy hooked a fish. In the room the crisp sheets rustled under our nakedness. I too was hooked.

Two weeks, I said. Two weeks as sharp and clear as the driest wine. Two weeks in which my life dwindled and focussed around one person. I forgot to write home, I spent the rest of my money far earlier than intended. Our passion was desperate. Or rather mine was desperate while Julie's was more controlled. In love and in life, indeed in all the things we did in those weeks, she never lost her air of composure. I still questioned her about her past and her home life, now more out of a love-struck desire to know her totally rather than mere curiosity, but she never revealed much of herself and, when she did talk about her life elsewhere, she seemed almost to be talking about someone else or describing characters in a book she'd read. I felt very early that she could lie to me and I would never be able to tell. If she chose to she could tell me any fantastic invention and I would fail to pierce her cool serenity to detect the truth. So I didn't try. I gave myself up completely to this period of fantasy. I offered no resistance.

The impressions are sharp in my memory, sharp as the lemons on the trees of Sorrento which pinched our tongues as we bit into them. However, all the impressions are now mixed up in my mind. How did we spend those weeks?

We travelled by train to nearby Castellamare and took a soaring cable-car to the top of its mountain. Surrounded by thick woods at the very summit we sunbathed naked and bit into the massive crunchy oranges of the region. We spent siestas in the palms' shade, shared anonymous bottles of local wine. We took a boat to the Isle of Capri and walked up the devious mountain roads, higher and higher yet, into the island's interior, there to swing by chair-lift up the slopes of Monte Solaro and gaze from the top down on to the decadent vegetation of the island, the infinitely deep and plunging blue of the Mediterranean, the creamy cliffs of the mainland and the distant austere arc of the bay, melting into the embracing haze. We walked the uneven sad streets of dead Pompeii. We walked. We loved. Two weeks quickly evaporated.

As a bat's wing flaps briefly across the streetlamp and as a swift cloud obscures the sun, I seemed to awaken from my dream. Real life slipped back in almost unnoticed. I had begun to tire from the exultant hedonism of our time together and we stayed more frequently in town, to wander the streets together. Julie, in contrast to me, bloomed in our time together and seemed to shine more brightly than she had before. I felt strangely drained, physically and also mentally, though I couldn't think why.

As we walked, that twelfth afternoon together in Italy, we passed a newspaper store which stocked foreign journals. I caught sight of the British *Guardian*. On the front page a large headline read, 'Death Tour' continues. Body in Cologne is victim no.6'.

The temperature seemed to drop.

I rubbed my bare forearms, covered suddenly in goose-bumps. Summer was ending.

'Hang on, Julie,' I stopped outside the shop, 'I want to have a look at this paper.'

She said nothing and I went into the shop. The newspaper was two days old and, in my brief glance at it, I saw that the sixth in the sequence of strange murders had occurred in Cologne. The police, of course, would not say exactly what was so strange about them because they wanted to avoid the risk of what the newspaper described as 'copy-cat killings', but they had little doubt that the Belgian, Dutch and German deaths were all connected. I started to skim quickly through the story in order to discover when the murder had taken place. I happened to glance up at the doorway out into the street.

Julie had gone.

She had remained outside when I entered the shop and now was nowhere in sight. I stuffed the newspaper back into the rack and went outside. She was nowhere in the street. I ran to the nearest corner and looked down the side-street without catching sight of her. I ran to the next turning with the same result. My mind had been swept of all thought and I found myself hurrying from one side-street to the next with nothing in my head but the blind desire to see her again and return to the life we had been living until that headline intruded. It was as if suddenly a boat had capsized and the water around, previously so calm and friendly, had begun to look

menacing, the shore much further away than it had seemed. I felt the damp touch of panic but I didn't understand why. Eventually I returned to the newspaper shop. Still seeing nothing of her, I decided that Julie, for reasons which I couldn't begin to consider, must have gone back to the hotel. Had I offended her in some way? I had no idea, and I began to realize just how little I really knew this girl I had allowed to get such a grip on me. I had swum at ease but now I felt that the sea-bed had slipped darkly away. This water was deep.

I walked down to the hotel. A chill draught of unease blew through me but I couldn't pinpoint its origin. The hotel was the obvious place to look next, so that was where I had to go. After that . . . Well I supposed that I would have to go to the police and report a disappearance. How quickly we can be thrown off-balance, pitched without transition from normality into fear. How soon my mind raced to the possibility of police involvement.

Down at Julie's hotel I went straight to her room. I knocked and received no answer. I enquired about her down at the reception. The girl there had little English but what she could say was enough.

'Kenmare? No sir, she left.'

'Left? You mean checked out? When?'

'This morning, sir, yes. Checked out.'

We went through at least three variations of this brief conversation but she was adamant. Julie had checked out at least six hours earlier; three hours before she met me that lunchtime. I couldn't believe it. I found out from the receptionist that the manager, who spoke better English, would be there in half an hour and I passed the time racing again around the town. I tried to keep moving in the hope that my thoughts would be left behind. Of course it didn't work, I was in torment. Why hadn't she told me? Why did she disappear so suddenly? What was she doing? I took out the scrap of paper on which she had written her home address that day in Cologne. I stared at it. Was that false?

I was sitting impatiently in the hotel's reception when the manager appeared. A short and rather bull-headed man, he looked me over suspiciously when I asked him about Julie's departure.

'Did she leave a new address?'

'No sir,' small beads of sweat sparkled on his balding head. I felt a headache begin to clamp itself to the backs of my eyes.

'But didn't she explain why she was leaving so suddenly?'

He looked at me with even more distrust, reached for the register and searched quickly through the columns.

'Sir, when she came here, she booked only until today.'

So I had been deceived. I felt trapped, my mind beat helplessly against the bars which had suddenly appeared all around it. She had known all along she would leave that day. She had said nothing. Who was she?

'Uh, thanks.'

I was at the door when he called me back.

'Sir, what is your name?'

I told him and for the first time he smiled. He reached below the counter and picked up an envelope. He said:

'This is for you.'

I almost snatched it from him. I left the hotel and walked back along the beach. The note was short:

Sorry to spring a surprise on you like this.

I'll explain everything. Meet me tonight in the alley opposite the green shrine at 10.

See you. Julie

Relief washed through me. At least it seemed now that she was safe. I had no idea what she was up to but I could forget about running to the police. I knew the place, the shrine was about half-way up the Fisherman's Path. Its green light was visible at night from both the hotel and the beach and gave a ghostly light to the figures of the Madonna and a single worshipper half-kneeling before her. Opposite the shrine was a narrow cobbled alleyway, unlit by streetlights, which led to a dead end about thirty yards from the slope of the path. A dispiriting and ugly corner, I had no idea why Julie should want to meet there but I certainly intended to let her know exactly what I thought about her tricks of that day. I would meet her there all right, and she had some explanations to deliver.

I had five hours to kill until ten. Things went wrong. The details are unimportant but I was late for our meeting. I went originally back to the small *pensione* on the edge of town where my stuff had remained. Despite the fact that I had spent over half of the previous eleven nights in Julie's room she had been quite firm that I must remain officially resident back at my own place. I lay there on the

bed to rest, confident that I couldn't possibly sleep in such an agitated condition.

I did fall asleep. When I awoke the room was dark. I lunged for the light switch and peered at my watch. I blinked in the sudden brightness. It was nine thirty and I had to hurry.

I would have made it on time too, if I hadn't chanced to be a witness to a road accident. As I crossed the main square of town a scooter raced out of a side street, swerved to avoid a parked car, and collided with, of all things, a police car. The police, of course, had to do things by the book and they requested, politely but very firmly, that I hang around and give a statement as a witness to the accident. Eventually I managed to persuade them that a statement in English was not needed when they had four other perfectly acceptable Italian witnesses. They let me go but it was by then twenty past ten.

I sprinted through the centre of town and raced down the cliff road which led to the Fisherman's Path. I slowed down as I reached the top of the steps. The top half of the path ran down a narrow cutting between a cliff wall on the right and cramped houses to the left. The path was extremely narrow and poorly lit. The cliff leaned over and in places almost met the crumbling balconies which overhung the path from the houses.

I stopped momentarily at the top of the path. I had left behind the noise and light of the town and very suddenly I became aware of a deep silence. I fought to control my ragged breathing and listened. It was unnaturally quiet as though the surrounding streets and buildings held their breath with me. I stood on the first step and the path dipped away in front of me, empty of people, crowded with shadows. It turned so sharply and often all the way down, that it was never possible to see much more than twenty yards either forward or back. I listened. There was no sound. No birds and no wind, no voices.

I began to descend. Quickly I left behind the top of the path and still was unable to see ahead. I was confined completely in a narrow tunnel of darkness. From the balconies above people had hung washing to dry. Occasionally a shirt or towel flapped like a frightened ghost although there still seemed to be no wind. The only sounds were my feet as they scraped on the stones, my tight breathing and, sounding miles away, the whisper of the waves confiding in the dark beach down out of sight at the end of the path.

I reached the final corner of the path before the shrine. Green light leaked around the bend in the path. I stopped again. Something about that glow bothered me. I didn't remember it being so bright. As I watched, the brightness grew and the whole of the path ahead of me was washed in a ghostly brilliance. Shadows fled away behind me up the path. The air around me grew thick and hot, tense as if gathering itself to move.

I stood there dipped in liquid fear for several seconds until, suddenly, the scene shifted. The light snapped off and a fetid blast of hot air swept around the corner and past me. The silence was punctured by a high-pitched whine as if a lorry was braking in the distance, and by the thump of something heavy and loose hitting the ground beyond the bend in the path. In the resurgent darkness I stepped forward.

As I came around the corner I saw the mouth of the alleyway to the left. It gaped blackly. The shrine to the right was dark. Perhaps the unnatural light had been the bulb blowing. The shadows in the alley before me shifted and I saw a shape detach itself and slip away down the path to disappear around the next corner. I seemed to see, for the briefest moment two bright eyes in that shape. They turned towards me from the corner, paused, and were gone.

I still remembered enough of my purpose in being there to go to the opening of the alley.

'Julie?'

Silence.

'Julie, are you here?'

I took two steps forward and stopped as my foot slid in an unseen puddle and then kicked against an obstacle at once yielding and heavy. I looked down.

My first thought was that it was Julie. But it wasn't. A man lay crumpled at the foot of the alley's right-hand wall. In the darkness a wet pool of shadow surrounded the body. I seemed to see everything suddenly in aching and terrible detail, despite the poor light. The torn clothing, the hands drawn up before the chest, the frozen rictus of terror on the pale face and the deep dark stripes cut into the exposed chest. The warm, animal smell of blood clawed at my nostrils and poured down my throat.

And then I was stumbling away towards the path to vomit under the desecrated shrine. As I looked up, wiping my mouth on my sleeve, I saw that the Madonna's head had been singed and melted.

Its features had run and twisted and now it grinned miserably down at me.

There I suppose is where the story ends. No neat endings, no twist and no explanations. I called for help, people came, the police came. It looked bad for me for a while but eventually the police had to let me go when it was proved that the man had almost certainly been killed in the same mysteriously brutal way as the others throughout Europe that summer. Thanks to my collector's habit of asking for my passport to be stamped at border crossings I was able to prove that I couldn't have had any involvement with the previous murders. I said little to the police about my movements, I answered questions as sullenly and briefly as possible. I felt drained of emotion as though far more than the contents of my stomach had splashed on the cobbles below the ruined Madonna. I didn't know the victim, I said, I just happened to be on the path at that time, I saw nothing suspicious before finding the body. I said nothing about Julie, whom I have not seen since, of course. The police let me go but it was clear they were not at all happy about the strange way in which murder had seemed to follow me that summer.

Nor was I. I returned to England. I looked up the address Julie had given me. As I expected by then, it didn't exist. Nor were there any Kenmares in the London telephone directory. Baffled and defeated, I gave up.

There matters would have rested. But two newspaper reports lie on the table before me. The bitter autumn wind cries outside and the paper rustles as a draught whistles around the window. One report is a photo-copy of a front page item from a *Guardian* of last September. Out of curiosity I obtained it from the college library. It is of course the report I was reading when Julie disappeared. When I first read it in full, my stomach was gripped as by a cold hand and I got up to chain the front door.

That day in Sorrento as I hastily scanned the newspaper I didn't read the victim's name. Now I know that Julie lied to me from the start. When we first met she borrowed the name of a man about to die. I wonder what went through her mind as she watched me read that paper, knowing what I would see if I wasn't stopped.

What I didn't see then was that the Cologne murder victim, number six in the crassly named 'Death Tour', was not a German but a British holidaymaker. His name was Brendon Kenmare. He

died the day after I left Cologne. He was last seen alive in the company of a 'slim, dark-haired woman of between 22 and 30'. 'German police,' the *Guardian* continues, 'would like to interview her.' Somehow I feel that if they knew what I know they probably wouldn't want to interview her at all.

It's now November and the girl has not been found. The second newspaper report in front of me I tore roughly from yesterday's paper. On the front page is the headline 'Has Euro-Ripper come to Britain?' and the story below concerns the mysterious and violent death in Reading of a middle-aged man. The 'trademarks' of the continental killings were all present, the paper tells me, and police are keen to trace a dark-haired woman seen leaving the pub with the victim on the night of his death. I know Reading very well. In fact I was there that day.

I have eschewed hindsight but it keeps pushing its way back in and now I haven't the will to shove it away again. I feel I've been on that motorway as the driverless car of Fate swept up behind me and raced past, so close that it all but scratched the paintwork. Or was that a driver visible behind the wheel as it dwindled into the night ahead? With hindsight perhaps it was, although the sight was too grim for my eyes to accept at the time. With hindsight perhaps I can now accept what I rejected at the time. I've told no one about the figure I saw leaving the alley that night in Sorrento. Why do that, I wonder? Why not divert police suspicion away from myself?

I woke up last night from a sour sleep stirred by fractured and unremembered dreams. I stared at the ceiling and my fears and memories swirled in my mind before crystallizing into the cold knowledge which hangs before me still. I sit now at my table and watch light drain from a day fast dying. I am careful not to stare too long at the shadows which crouch out there. But I turn the events of that awful September night over in the thin light of memory and I see that the two things I hid from the police – the figure I saw flee from the grim alley and Julie – were but one thing.

She was there that night. She was waiting for me.

And I was late.

Ms Rita and the professor

My first reaction on meeting Ms Rita was to be both repelled and fascinated in equal part. Such a contradiction of emotions faintly annoyed me as I pride myself upon my cool and analytical nature. She was, however, a remarkable woman. I can vividly recall that initial, stunning vision that she presented at the Belgravia mansion of Ramon Da Costa, the Spanish Ambassador to the court of St James. I had arrived late from my Fleet Street office and the party was well under way. Ms Rita, a celebrated feminist and fighter of causes, had just emerged from a sabbatical in Spain where, as a guest of the Spanish government, she had written her staggering tome, 'Women Forward to the Twenty-First Century'.

She had chosen Spain, she said, as it was a country that would remind her constantly of how much work was still to be undertaken in the struggle for women's rights. Curiously, the Spanish had found her presence fascinating even though their tradition of male domination struck a jarring note against her own limitless and militant ambition.

Now, surrounded by a glittering throng of eager literary journalists, photographers and assorted cognoscenti, she dispensed comment and rebuke, quip and anecdote with the smooth facility of a politician, which in part I suppose she was.

She stood a hand's span short of six feet and her taut body had the grace of a cat. Her head was large and maned in black, 'an explosion of hair', some journalists had once written of it.

The face was pale ivory and strangely unlined, even though I knew her to be a couple of years close to forty. It was a handsome rather than beautiful face, dominated by ferocious eyes and dense jet brows. Her mouth was wide and thick-lipped, a wet, ever-moving red slash that could smile like a street whore or purse like a duchess.

Her sexuality was palpable. I was instantly stirred by her, and the force of this magnetism took my breath away.

But there was evil there too, a brooding, menacing nastiness coiled tight beneath the ivory skin. High, bony cheeks and an almost oriental forehead completed the portrait of a dangerous, brilliant she-animal.

As I pushed my way through the jostling horde to get close to her, she fixed me with a short, penetrating glance and her face clouded. At first I assumed it was instant disapproval of my late entrance, but as I wriggled alongside my frontline colleagues I realized she was listening to a somewhat patronizing and long-winded question from a hack on one of the tabloids.

She dealt with this in a peremptory fashion, as one might casually swat a fly, and turned to the small, wiry man standing next to her. I took him for her literary agent, but later discovered that she had no time for agents – or ‘middlemen’ as she called them.

Her companion was in his early sixties, white-haired and courtly – an academic looking fellow with spectacles and a heavy tweed jacket.

He also had his right arm missing from the elbow. A stump was clearly evident beneath the carefully tucked jacket sleeve.

‘Professor Deighton and I are very tired,’ she said, ‘and we haven’t eaten since we left Malaga this morning. Apart from which, it would be discourteous not to do justice to the Ambassador’s excellent cold table.’

With that she shouldered her way past the throng of journalists towards the long tables of food that were situated at the far end of the high-ceilinged room. I took a glass of Rioja from a passing waiter and followed the crowd, wondering vaguely why my editor had sent me along to such a party.

I wrote an irregular column for one of London’s middle-brow dailies, specializing in human interest stories, particularly when they involved the rich and famous. Ms Rita, I knew, was an ardent campaigner for women’s causes and her book was a ferocious denunciation of ‘The Male Oligarchy’. That she appeared to have a male friend at all, let alone a professor, was perhaps the germ of interest that had spurred my editor to suggest the assignment.

Being naturally indolent I hung around for an hour or so, sipping the Spanish Ambassador’s excellent wine and listening to the gossip of my contemporaries from Fleet Street.

It was largely malicious. Ms Rita, they whispered, secretly wanted to establish a sort of literary respectability through her association

with the professor so that she could hype her book sales still further.

Others hinted at a sexual relationship with the crippled academic that allowed her fantasies of dominating a physically weak male to bear fruit.

Eventually, bored with the proceedings, I caught a taxi home to my flat in Putney and settled down to re-read the vast opus Ms Rita had provided.

It was even more vitriolic the second time around, packed with revolutionary exhortation and, quite frankly, pornographic references to the male in general and to some public figures in particular. I was struck by Ms Rita's venom and unvarnished hate for the male sex. 'Odd indeed,' I mused, as, at gone one in the morning and still only a sixth of the way through the book, I closed it and went to bed.

Why had she chosen a professor of physics to be her companion in London? Why not a woman of similar views to her own?

By the next morning I had put both Ms Rita and Professor Deighton out of my mind completely, and was determined to tell my editor that I could weave no useful tapestry from such frail threads.

It was, however, nearly three months later that my interest in Ms Rita and her Professor was rekindled. I happened to be walking my dog on Putney Heath – a regular early morning habit – when, to my utter surprise, I saw the pair of them sauntering alongside the bridle path towards the windmill, a popular venue for Londoners, especially in summer.

Ms Rita was in stout walking-boots, woollen stockings, corduroys and a bright red shirt. Patches of sweat showed through the shirt against which her hard, small breasts were clearly outlined. Once again I was smitten by her animal magnetism. The Professor, by way of contrast, was wearing ordinary suede shoes, baggy grey trousers and a checked sports shirt.

As they drew level with me I couldn't help noticing that the empty sleeve containing the Professor's arm-stump, was tucked tightly into his trouser pocket. At first this did not strike me as unusual. It was standard practice amongst those few limbless people I have encountered.

They swept past me without so much as a sidelong glance and I continued on my way, picking up sticks for my dog to chase and

trying to get my pipe to light in the stiff breeze.

It was only much later that day, when I was at my desk reading Ms Rita's chapter on how women must strengthen their resolve and improve their intellectual powers, that the image of the Professor as I had seen him on the heath, suddenly returned to me.

His arm was missing from the shoulder. The empty shirt sleeve had been pressed flat against his body all the way down to where it disappeared into his trouser pocket. And yet when I had first seen him at the Spanish Ambassador's party he had clearly possessed *most* of the arm – certainly to six inches *below* the elbow.

I don't know why this fact should have intrigued me so, but it did. I pondered on it for a while and then cooked myself a supper of cheese-and-tomato omelette.

A further two months passed and the country began to enjoy what promised to be a long and unusually hot summer. I continued to file stories to my newspaper and draw a comfortable retainer. I also returned again and again to Ms Rita's book.

She had written entirely in Spain, isolating herself in a small farmhouse a few miles inland from the Costa Del Sol.

Men, she maintained in chapter thirty-eight, had for so many centuries sapped women's confidence that only a revolution would tilt the balance. That and women's determination to acquire more knowledge than their male counterparts. She waxed eloquent on this theme, insisting that it might even be necessary to deliberately stunt boys' educational opportunities for a few decades to give the 'sisters' time to establish an intellectual female dictatorship over men, and to redress the sexist stranglehold that they had imposed on women.

It was mid-August when I saw Ms Rita again. This time it was only part coincidence. I had discovered that she had set up home in a 'collective' with several other women, and lived in a big, rambling Victorian house on the south side of Wimbledon Common. I also knew that Professor Deighton was the only non-female in the house, apart from a couple of small children. Ms Rita had appeared on chat shows and written the occasional, explosive piece for *Time Out* and *Spare Rib* but she made no mention of the Professor at all. On television she had developed a thrusting, combative style and her sallow looks came across as sexually potent and magnetic.

I was determined to try and interview her. I phoned several times

but was politely refused the opportunity to speak with her.

Eventually, dredging up courage half-forgotten from my days as a cub reporter on the old *Fulham Chronicle*, I decided to arrange a 'coincidental' meeting on the common, where I guessed she must occasionally walk. Three times I positioned myself on a rusty iron bench close to her house and waited, patiently smoking my pipe. My tenacity was not rewarded until the fourth occasion, and I felt my pulses race as she approached. She wore a loose-fitting shift in some sort of Hessian material, and thonged sandals. Her hair was pinned back in a single Indian-style plait and she was smoking a thin cheroot. Professor Deighton was at her side and holding her elbow with his one good arm.

I noticed immediately, with a stab of horror, that his left foot was missing. A metal brace was attached to his calf and provided a flat, rubber-tipped plate that enabled him to walk – or rather hobble.

I felt that if I didn't attempt to talk with them at once the moment – and my courage – would be lost. I stepped boldly in their path and removed the pipe from my mouth.

'Ms Rita,' I said politely, 'forgive me, but this is a most propitious coincidence. I am Stewart McAlpine of the *Morning Record*, I've been telephoning your home for the past week or so—'

Ms Rita's finely chiselled features grew thunderous. 'Look mister,' she said, in a low menacing voice, 'I don't give interviews on Wimbledon Common.'

'Of course you don't,' I countered, standing my ground. 'But perhaps we could fix a definite appointment?'

'Why?' said Ms Rita. The Professor remained silent with his head bowed. I tried to catch his eye, but he was apparently determined to stay neutral.

'Why?' I repeated. 'I am a journalist Ms Rita, and I am possessed of the usual professional curiosity.'

'I've said all I have to say to the Press,' she snapped, 'and your paper is a bourgeois rag.'

'Very possibly,' I replied, forcing myself to smile. 'But our readers are extremely interested in you – and Professor Deighton. They write letters asking about you both – in quite remarkably large numbers.' I paused here, surprised at the boldness of my lie. Ms Rita's eyes glittered and she ran her tongue over her lips.

'Oh do they?' she said, it was more of a statement than a question.

'Yes,' I continued blithely. 'Only last week a woman in Penge wrote enquiring after Professor Deighton's health.'

Ms Rita stiffened and for a split-second I saw a glint of vulnerability in her expression.

'He is ill isn't he?' I said softly. 'Very ill?'

She ran her long, bony fingers across her forehead and then took a hard pull at her cheroot. 'The Professor is in good hands,' she said flatly.

'Oh really? In a house full of revolutionary feminists?! That's the sort of human interest oddity that my readers find fascinating – poor bourgeois souls that they are.'

A full half-minute passed before she spoke again, and this time her voice cracked like a whip.

'What exactly do you want Mr McAlpine?'

'A good story. One where we can make the trivial nonsense that has so far been written about you pale into insignificance.'

'Are you an anti-feminist?' she asked suddenly, blowing twin jets of smoke from her arched nostrils.

'I am a journalist,' I said. 'I record events.' To my surprise she smiled, showing teeth like a young horse.

'That's dodging the question mister,' she said.

I nodded. 'Probably. Habit of a lifetime. We hacks are so used to being the inquisitors. To tell you the truth I am not unsympathetic to your cause.' And I wasn't.

She considered this for a moment and took another pull on the cheroot.

'Come round on Tuesday. Ten-thirty in the evening. I'll give you the story of your lifetime,' and with that she seized the Professor's good arm and pushed past me.

I watched them moving over the scrub and heather towards Roehampton, marvelling at what a bizarre duo they made.

I will confess that I could hardly wait the four days for Tuesday to arrive. I read and re-read Ms Rita's book – or as much of it as I could cram in – and sent for back numbers of various magazines in which she had set out her credo.

Tuesday turned out to be a filthy night: muggy, sticky and dark with threatening thunderclouds. I caught a cab the three miles to Ms Rita's house and, as I climbed out to pay, the heavens opened and

sheets of torrential rain began to fall from the blackened sky.

The house was a big, shabby Victorian villa with a gabled front and a small tower at the east corner. I imagined it had been built in the second half of the last century for a city gentleman and his large family. Most of the original garden had obviously been sold off, as modern flats now loomed all around, giving the house a trapped, embattled appearance. I ran over the weed-choked gravel to the porch and rang the doorbell. Almost at once a light came on in the hall, and I heard the slap of loosely slipped feet on the other side. The door was opened by a small, plump girl in trousers and a roll-neck sweater. She held a rather unfriendly looking Alsatian on a short chain.

'McAlpine,' I said. 'Ms Rita is expecting me.'

The girl nodded and shuffled aside to let me enter, which I did, carefully giving the brute of a dog the widest berth possible. The hall was large and bare. A broken chandelier of particularly hideous design hung from a dark cupola, and I noticed a pin-board on one of the walls covered with notes, postcards and what appeared to be lists.

'Upstairs,' said the girl. 'First landing. Watch your step, the lino's slippery.'

I climbed the wide, uncarpeted staircase with its elaborately carved wooden banisters, past a huge, mock stained-glass window, and found myself at the head of a gloomy corridor.

On the left a door was ajar, from which a shaft of light appeared. As we rounded the curve of the staircase I fancied I heard a metallic sliding sound – not unlike that of a bolt being driven across its runners to secure a door. For some inexplicable reason the noise caused the hairs on the nape of my neck to stand erect.

Situated at the end of the corridor were a pair of louvred doors and I felt certain I would find Ms Rita behind them. I knocked gently, twice, and heard a voice bid me enter.

The room was large and high-ceilinged and, unlike what I had seen of the rest of the house, it was well-furnished and crammed with pictures and books. Ms Rita, in a beige kaftan, sat languorously across an over-stuffed sofa, smoking a cigarette from a long, ivory holder. She made no attempt to rise as I entered.

'There's whisky or gin on the table,' she said, waving a hand, 'and some cigarettes if you'd like one.'

I shook my head and sat down in a small armchair covered in faded regency stripes. There were no further preliminaries. Ms Rita crushed out her cigarette and looked directly at me. Her face was clouded and displeased.

'You know I think your newspaper is full of shit,' she said, holding my eyes unblinkingly.

I nodded; there seemed little point in provoking a denial so early on in the meeting. 'Yes, I know you do, Ms Rita.'

She crammed a fresh cigarette in her holder and lit it as if it were a personal enemy. 'And you are here, mister,' she continued, inhaling deeply, 'because you're sniffing around for a story that will discredit me in the eight million eyes of your bourgeois readers – correct?'

I took out my pipe and pouch and began slowly filling the pipe bowl with tobacco – a deliberate delaying gesture that allowed my anger to subside. After a few moments of silence she grinned wolfishly at me, and I felt the sexual heat of her personality like a wave coming across the room.

'Cool as piss, aren't you?' she said, cocking her head to one side.

'Look Ms Rita,' I said slowly, 'I've already told you that I have a certain sympathy with your cause. But I am a journalist. I survive on stories. I'd like to know what your relationship is with the Professor – and why.'

She tapped her teeth with the cigarette holder and sighed. 'He is one of the world's most brilliant psychiatrists.'

I nodded. 'And so?'

'I prefer the company of intelligent human-beings, mister. I hope you're writing this down.'

I managed a smile. 'My memory serves me well enough.'

'OK,' she said, 'do you want to know if we're having a sexual relationship? He is nearly seventy, you know.'

'It wasn't uppermost in my mind,' I replied, and lit my pipe.

Ms Rita stood up and I was again struck with how tall and imposing she was. 'Right, next question,' she said.

I took a long puff at my pipe and fixed her with what I hoped was a cool stare.

'Is the Professor suffering from leprosy?' I asked.

The silence that followed this question was like the deafening calm that fills the vacuum of space after an explosion. Ms Rita stood quite motionless for several seconds.

'Leprosy?' she repeated, as if toying with the word, 'Here in South London?'

'Well gangrene perhaps, or some other disease that rots the flesh?'

Ms Rita turned away and walked to the window. When she next spoke I had to strain my ears to catch her words.

'What a keen eye you must have, mister,' she whispered. 'You noticed his foot, of course.'

'And his arm,' I replied.

She turned back towards me and smiled an awful smile. 'No. No disease. None whatsoever. The Professor is remarkably healthy for a man of his age.'

I felt my control ebbing, but forced myself to remain calm.

'Then what in God's name are you doing to him?' I demanded. Ms Rita threw her cigarette, holder and all, into the empty fireplace.

'You impertinent bastard,' she whispered. 'You long-nosed streak of yellow journalism. You lackey of masculine oppression. I doubt if you or your contemptible readers would even begin to . . .'
I stopped her by raising my hand – and this surprised me.

'Why are you mutilating this old man?' I said, my voice rising. 'What perverse pleasure do you and your sick sisters obtain by butchering a respected academic?'

Ms Rita's eyes flashed like fire. 'Sympathetic to my cause are you?' she cried. 'Why you are no more than . . .' She shook her head, but the gesture reminded me of a tormented bull goaded by the stab of a picador.

'You challenge me here in my home, under the thin guise of investigative journalism. You, a paid hack on one of the newspapers that has – oh so subtly – denigrated and abused women for decades, you and your kind can never be persuaded by logic or argument – only the sheer, unstoppable tide of revolution will do that.'

'And is part of that revolution an act of disgusting mutilation? I don't know how you've persuaded the Professor to co-operate, but I promise you I intend to expose you and your sisters to the readers of my newspaper – yes, those same bourgeois millions that you so despise!'

Ms Rita took a pace towards me and the gesture was loaded with menace. 'Before you threaten me, mister,' she snarled, 'you'd better

take a good look around – you don't think I'm that much of a fool do you?'

With growing unease I turned and glanced behind me. The double doors had been opened during our heated exchange and two formidable women in khaki drill dungarees were framed in the aperture. One of them held a muzzled Alsatian on a short thong.

Ms Rita grinned mirthlessly at me and waved an arm in the direction of this unlovely duo. 'Mister McAlpine is going to have a tour of our facilities. I'd like him to see the Virago Laboratory first. I'm sure he'll find it an illuminating experience!'

The wave of foreboding I had sensed on entering the house now overwhelmed me with the force of a physical blow. I felt my blood run to ice in my veins and the naked claw of terror jabbing at my heart.

I knew that protest or escape was futile – I was now a prisoner – even a plaything – of Ms Rita and her zealous cohort.

The harridan with the dog took charge by pushing me roughly ahead of her through the open doors. Outside in the long corridor six other women had gathered, all wearing combat dungarees and all of them exuding a palpable hostility. I was hustled along to the far end of the corridor and through a pair of swing doors with oval panes of opaque, milky glass. Beyond, illuminated from above with fierce strip lights, was a long, narrow room with a scrubbed white-tile floor and a series of hospital beds. All were empty save one which contained an emaciated naked man, apparently asleep on top of the covers.

As we drew closer I observed with a gasp of horror that he bore a series of terrible surgical scars across his belly and chest. The marks of recently removed stitching were plain to see. His arms and legs were secured to the metal bed frame by stout straps.

'What the devil — ?' I began, but was cut short by a stinging pain across my shoulders.

One of my guardians had lashed at me with a horsewhip. 'Keep your mouth shut, pig!' she cried, and her chin was flecked with foam.

At first the naked man appeared to be unconscious, but as we drew level with him he opened his eyes and rolled them fearfully.

He was young, no more than twenty-five I imagined, but his ribs

stood out like a xylophone through the pale, stretched skin of his chest.

He stared sightlessly in my direction and a soft groan issued from his lips.

'Look well, mister, and listen carefully!' It was Ms Rita's voice, amplified many times, that came booming into that ghastly room from some hidden microphone in the eaves.

'What we have here are the pathetic remains of a man who once boasted of his athletic prowess in three continents – a man who reviled his women compatriots and scorned the legitimacy of our movement. Do you recognize him, mister?'

I looked into the staring eyes of that living corpse and felt a jolt of recognition. It was – my God, it *definitely* was – Roger Mather, one of Britain's top marathon runners who had been reported missing, believed dead after a terrible plane crash in South America. That must have been two years earlier. I recalled how he had been hailed by the British press as an Olympic hope – a real gold medallist in the making. But he had a rough tongue and an ebullient nature, often giving off-the-cuff interviews with television reporters and making heavy-handed, sexist jokes about women competitors. He also had the reputation, not uncommon among young male athletes, of being something of a womanizer, and aggressively macho in his philosophy of life.

'This man's only assets were his heart, lungs and penis,' – Ms Rita's voice quivered with hatred – 'and so, mister – we separated him from his assets, and replaced them with organs taken from a much lesser mortal. Go on – take a look!'

I felt a wave of nausea sweep over me as I forced myself to look at the poor wretch's body.

It shivered and twitched like a trussed beast and the women in dungarees hooted with laughter.

Ms Rita's voice boomed out again. 'Just in case you are wondering *how*, mister – we have no less than three qualified women transplant surgeons living in our collective here, *and* a fully equipped operating theatre.

'This pathetic chauvinistic wreck is dying slowly because his body is rejecting the organs we have introduced to him. Not surprising really – they were taken from a prize saddleback. It's only anti-rejection drugs that have kept him alive this long.'

The full horror of Ms Rita's words made my knees buckle, but I

felt steely-hard fingers grip my arm and hold me upright.

'But this, mister – is no more than a curtain raiser. You're an investigative journalist – always questing for some fresh story, some new angle. Haven't you asked yourself why I chose sunny Spain for my sabbatical? Doesn't that particular choice of country intrigue you?'

I drew a deep breath, fighting back the nausea that threatened to engulf me.

'I . . . I . . . don't know – I assumed it must have been cheap living costs . . . weather . . . I . . . ' my voice trailed off pathetically.

'You fool,' screamed Ms Rita. 'You dumb fool. Call yourself a journalist? OK I'll jog your sluggish memory. Spain was not only notorious for the Spanish inquisition – so beloved of historians and schoolboys alike – but much earlier, in the Dark Ages, those Moorish tribes who roamed Andalusia pillaging and raping developed another extraordinary tradition. They believed, quite simply, that if you ate the flesh of your rivals you would absorb their strength into your own body.

'Of course, such barbarous practices were not only condemned but any references to them were all but expunged from Spanish history books.

'Not simply because they were deemed to be beyond human comprehension but, mister – and think on this – because such acts of cannibalism, if coupled with a *spiritual will* to take on the qualities both physical and intellectual of the victim, would make the metamorphosis complete. There are countless examples of holy men who, though suffering from disease, grew whole again after consuming organs of a healthy donor.'

I could restrain myself no longer and, tearing free from the two women guards, I ran crazily towards the door. Ms Rita was criminally insane, of that I had no doubt, and my one instinct was to flee from her house of horror. My attempt was futile, however. One of the women in dungarees uncoiled her whip and with a deft flick of the wrist sent it snaking around my ankles and I crashed, heaving, to the floor.

There, below me, was a vision of hell. I felt revulsion rise like an awful tide in my throat but I could not tear my eyes away from the tableau of horror as it burned itself forever into my consciousness.

The room was oval-shaped and the stone floor scattered with

straw like a stable or animal pen. A dozen naked women sat cross-legged in a circle facing inwards towards a huge brass pot. It was brim-full of some bubbling liquid that gave off a malodorous steam. The women's hair was wild and matted and their bodies glistened with sweat. They were eating great scraps of meat, gnawing at long, wet bones, sucking and mewling, their faces creased with ecstasy.

One of them, a muscular young girl of about eighteen, turned and saw me and nudged one of her companions. They both cackled with laughter, juice and saliva running over their chins and splashing on to gleaming, rounded breasts.

An older woman with grey hair plunged her arm into the steaming cauldron and rooted about as if searching for some new morsel.

When she withdrew her arm I nearly collapsed with shock for, dangling from her fingers, was the severed head of Professor Deighton.

The old woman tossed it, as casually as if it were a football, to the younger girl who caught it in both hands and then – without taking her eyes from me – proceeded to gnaw at the cheekbones, tearing off strips of meat and gobbling them down like a starving dog.

Another woman snatched the head away and, twirling it by the hair, smashed the skull against the stone floor. The poor old man's thin cranium split open spilling brain and steaming tissue and the women jostled and fought to scrape up fragments and stuff them into their mouths.

I wrenched myself free from my guard's tight grip and turned to blot out the awful vision, but found myself face-to-face with Ms Rita.

'No stomach for it eh, pig?' she hissed, her eyes wild and staring. 'He died happy enough. We hypnotized him and persuaded his brilliant, well-disciplined brain to accept that by sacrificing his life to the cause he would be performing a noble and historical act for the glory of womankind! Oh yes. We dismembered him piece by piece like a trussed beast – and he achieved a kind of ecstasy when he lay naked on the slab, his old body shot full of morphine. He actually became sexually aroused when Sister Fran sawed off his foot. Amazing what can happen to a man when you have implanted a powerful idea in his head!'

I cannot recall how I managed to sum up such reserves of strength and courage but something exploded in my own head and I seized Ms Rita by the throat, forcing her back against the wall. The attack

took her completely off-guard and I began to smash her head against the brickwork.

One of the guards tried to tear me away but I swung back my left foot and kicked her full in the belly.

Ms Rita's eyes bulged and her tongue protruded between her lips as I tightened my grip.

'You bitch,' I was screaming, 'you insane, murdering bitch.'

Suddenly I felt a searing jab in my right bicep as Sister Fran plunged a knife hilt-deep into the flesh.

Then we were all rolling down the steps towards the straw-covered well, screaming and biting like crazed animals.

The cauldron was standing on a small raised grid-iron beneath which burned a wood-fire and, as we tussled and fought, my kicking legs caught the pot and sent it crashing over. I wrenched an arm free and grabbed a piece of burning wood which I then wielded like a bludgeon ignoring the fact that it was red hot and burning into my hand.

Sparks flew and I heard screams and the hiss of scorched flesh as I lashed and jabbed at my tormentors.

There was a sudden 'whoosh' of flame as one of the sparks ignited the dry straw and, all at once, the room was an inferno of smoke and fire as the hot fat from the human meat caught the licking flames and spread to the walls and wooden window frames.

I managed to stagger to my feet in the smoke and confusion and make a rush for the steps.

A screaming harridan rushed at me with a whip but I struck her a solid punch with my good arm and crashed through the doors into the corridor. The increased rush of air into the chamber caused the fire to roar into even more ferocious life and I felt a scalding heat on my back and legs as I lurched down the corridor.

I heard awful shrieks and the explosion of glass as windows burst from their frames as, almost blinded by smoke, I reached the top of the great staircase.

I was conscious of the hairs on my neck frizzling with the soaring explosion of heat, and my throat stung as the smoke grew thick and acrid.

Behind me in the charnel-house a symphony of terrible sounds emerged; the split of timber, the crack of glass, screams, moans and animalistic grunts as the coruscating flames sought out and destroyed everything in their path.

I half-slid, half-stumbled down the wide staircase and as I collapsed on my knees in the hall the tongues of flame seized the stairs and sent a sheet of fire blistering along the banister rails. My lungs tightened and I gasped desperately for breath as the smoke billowed about me. Now I could see nothing, and I dragged myself in the direction of the front door. As my fingers clawed at the brass locks the skin was seared off by the intense heat but I persevered, screaming and gulping at the foul air, until the great oak door swung open. As the outside air hit the furnace-like atmosphere of the hall there was another explosive 'whoosh', and I hurled myself forward on to the gravel path.

Every fibre of me wanted to slip into the oblivion of unconsciousness but I knew that I was still not safe until I moved well away from the house. Summoning last reserves of strength, I crawled on all fours to the sanctuary of a rhododendron bush that grew at the perimeter fence and rolled underneath its cool, damp leaves.

Before passing out I recall that last image of the house – a skeleton of collapsing timbers and fierce, orange glazes.

Months later, as I write these words, the scars on the backs of my hands are almost healed and the scorched hair on the back of my head is re-growing nicely.

The press found it hard to accept my description of what I discovered in Ms Rita's house – and even my own editor was sceptical. Forensic experts raked through the remains in the vain hope of piecing together some explanation, but came up with no definite conclusions.

For my part, I live quietly now, working on 'low priority' assignments and, aside from recurring dreams of blood and smoke, I am, I suppose, reasonably content.

This account may never be accepted by the cynics, but I have set it out, nevertheless, as my sincere version of a true record.

Medium rare

When they came for him in the morning, Jose was only half awake. The clang of the cell door brought him back to the grim reality of his situation.

His stomach cringed, but he forced his face to retain that calm passivity which had driven the Captain almost crazy with frustration and rage the day before.

They had tried everything during the preceding week, from the lighted matches under the fingernails to the cigarette burns on the scrotum. But Jose had not talked. Through hours of agony he had repeated to himself the words of *La Passionara*, prophetess of the revolution, 'Better to die on our feet than live on our knees'.

Spain was at war. War of the worst kind. Civil war. To be Basque at this time was bad enough, when one was suspected of being a Communist as well then one could expect little quarter from the Fascist Guardia Civil. Their methods were crude but effective – generally. Jose wondered what they would try today. Whatever it was, he must endure it. They would never learn the names from him.

The Captain was turned out as if for a parade. No speck of dust sullied the sludge-green uniform and his black patent cap glistened like a satanic mirror.

'Ah, Snr. Ferrara,' he said. 'A thousand apologies. There has been a regrettable mistake. You are free to go.'

'Free?' Jose couldn't believe his ears.

'Exactamente. One of my men will drive you home.'

The Captain assisted Jose to his feet, wrinkling his nose involuntarily at the smell of stale vomit.

'And before you go,' he added oilily, 'just to show there are no hard feelings, perhaps you would care to breakfast with me?'

Relief and suspicion vied for a place in Jose's pain-addled mind. He squinted at the Captain through his one good eye, restraining himself with difficulty from spitting in that hated face.

The Captain continued to chat amiably as he led Jose out of the pokey cell.

'I have taken the liberty of ordering you a steak. It is what I usually eat myself in the mornings. Medium rare, with *patata fritas*. A man must keep his strength up, no?'

The real meal had been laid out on a scrubbed table in the guardroom. As well as steak and chips there was a basket of hot bread and a litre of strong, red wine. Jose was famished. He had not been fed since they brought him in for questioning.

He ate ravenously, shovelling the food into his mouth in great gobbets.

In contrast, the Captain picked at his plate, smiling, lynx-eyed as Jose consumed his breakfast. Finally he finished, mopping the bloody juices from his plate with the last piece of bread.

'Did you enjoy your meal, Snr. Ferrara?' enquired the Captain, excavating his gold fillings with a small ivory toothpick. 'We could have many such breakfasts together you and I . . . unless . . .'

An icy vice clutched at Jose's heart.

'Unless what . . .?' he mumbled.

The Captain grinned unpleasantly.

'Bring in the boy,' he barked.

Two guards appeared in the doorway, half leading, half supporting Jose's nine year old son, Manolo. The boy's face was white with pain, his eyes wide around shock-dilated pupils. When he saw his father he began to whimper.

'Show Snr. Ferrara what I mean,' directed the Captain.

The guards turned Manolo so that he faced away from his father. One of them undid the boy's waistband and the ragged shorts fell around his knees. A bloodstained bandage covered the part of his anatomy where the left buttock had been.

The Captain leaned across the table and leered into Jose's nauseated face.

'Now, Snr. Ferrara,' he purred. 'About those names . . .'

Spiders

Marvin Tesich's foot trapped the spider tightly against the rough concrete driveway. For a single split-second the spider's carapace bore Marvin's full weight, then collapsed. Like a grape crushed by an elephant, the spider's vital organs burst assunder.

Marvin ground his foot atop the spider, shredding it. Its leg-span was less than half an inch. Marvin was five foot two.

Scraping his foot first on a clean stretch of pavement, then on the grass, and finally on the rubber welcome mat outside his front door, Marvin shuddered with revulsion. Damn spiders. Why did God make them?

Nibbling nervously at the small scar on his lip, Marvin slipped off his shoes. He carried them gingerly to the kitchen where he set them on a neatly folded old newspaper. Gotta clean those shoes, get that spider juice off, he thought.

Marvin Tesich loathed spiders. He bought his house to get away from slovenly apartment landladies. How could anybody live in the same building as spiders?

He checked his mail (all addressed 'occupant') and answering machine (a blank hum) before stripping for a shower. He stood before his mirror, lying to himself, seeing a tall, tough, muscular jock in place of the scrawny thirty-six year old accountant with thinning hair and a pathetic moustache.

Ought to call Jenny, he realized. Afternoon shift at K-Mart is getting off now.

Pulling on a bathrobe (even in his own house he never felt comfortable nude), he dialled her number. 'Six months it's been,' he told himself. 'If she doesn't start putting out soon, I'll dump her and look for a new chick.'

That lie was as big as his performance before the mirror.

Jenny finally answered the phone, her voice edgy with tension and fatigue. 'Marvin, is that you?'

'Yeah, sweetie. How did you know?'

'Oh come *on*, Marvin! Every day you call to ask where I want to go.'

'OK, so where do you want to go?'

Jenny sighed. 'Marvin, no matter where *I* want to go, we always end up going where *you* want to go. A hamburger then a movie then a cup of coffee then you take me home.'

Marvin smirked. 'So do something different. Invite me in. Or come over here.'

'Geeze, Marvin, were you born with a one-track mind or what? I'm not that kind of girl. I'm not going to bed unless I'm married or really, really in love with somebody.'

Hopes temporarily dashed, Marvin didn't press the matter. Jenny's morals were as firm and as lower-middle class as she was. 'OK, OK,' he said. Then, 'So where *do* you want to go tonight?'

Jenny sighed. 'I suppose we could go out for a hamburger then see a movie then have a cup of coffee.'

'Terrific. See you at seven. Bye, honey.'

'Yeah, sure,' Jenny mumbled as he hung up.

Marvin stripped off his robe. He opened the shower door then shrank back in horror.

There, scuttling about on the gleaming white tile-basin, was a small black spider.

Marvin didn't know if it was a black widow or not. Certainly *looked* like one! He wadded up a yard of toilet paper, carefully tracked the spider, then smashed it with as much force as his thin arm could muster. The spider's body popped under the impact. Just like an acne pimple, he thought with a grin and a shudder.

'To hell with you!' he muttered, biting the scar on his lip. 'Pretty funny when I was a kid, huh? Gotcha now, gotcha now!'

He flushed the tissue and the mangled spider down the toilet. Pulling his robe on again (shaking it vigorously to make sure no spiders had crawled in it), he rushed to the kitchen for scouring powder. He scrubbed the tile-basin until every last atom, every last iota of spider juice was gone.

By then it was too late for a shower before the date. Pulling on clean clothes, Marvin sniffed his underarms carefully, then generously splashed manly cologne on himself to mask his weak odour.

'Mustn't be dirty,' he chided himself. 'Dirt draws flies, flies

attract spiders. Can't have that, no.'

The date, like all their dates, flirted with disaster. While neither Marvin nor Jenny had a *bad* time, neither had a *good* time, either.

Jenny dawdled over her second cup of coffee, yawning as Marvin pontificated on the film they'd just seen. Jenny was a big girl, almost plump, with stringy blonde hair and a peasant's face. She stirred her coffee listlessly.

'Always movies,' she complained. 'Why don't you talk about something else?'

Marvin stopped in mid-sentence. 'We go to movies so it only follows I talk about 'em!'

'Yeah, but do we *have* to go to the movies? Every night?'

Marvin shrugged. 'Where do you want to go?'

Now Jenny shrugged. Her job didn't call for much imagination. With Marvin, neither did her social life. 'I dunno. Maybe dancing . . .?'

'Music's too loud.'

'Some places have big band dances.'

'And hang around a bunch of old farts? No thanks.'

'Walking in the park?'

Marvin shuddered. There were spiders in the park. The thought of them brought back horrifying childhood memories. 'No,' he said through gritted teeth.

Jenny shrugged, sighed, and finished her coffee. She stubbed out her cigarette on the saucer. 'OK, so what do you want to do?'

Marvin shrugged. 'It's up to you, Jenny. What do you want to do tomorrow?'

She shook her head. He always steered them back to the same old thing. 'Well . . . I guess we could have a hamburger . . . then go to a movie . . . then have a cup of coffee . . .'

Marvin drove home jauntily, smirking to himself. Almost tonight, he thought. Yessir, almost tonight.

He had driven Jenny home and parked in front of her apartment house. They'd kissed for a few minutes, Jenny letting him fondle her breasts over her bra and blouse. Then Marvin had gently slid one hand up her inner thigh to touch her panties. She'd let it stay there for a few moments. When he had tried to rub her she pulled away,

'No. Not that.' Then she had got out of the car and gone inside.

Almost tonight, Marvin thought, walking up his drive-way with a lively spring in his step. Just another couple of months and I'll have her in the sack.

He bounded up his steps then recoiled in shock. Something had brushed against his face – something thin, tough, and sticky.

A single strand of spider's web.

Marvin's bowels contracted. He sucked in his breath as he fought for control, gingerly nearing his porch, looking for the spider in the pale door-light. 'Son of a bitch. Dirty little eight legged son of a bitch. Where *are* you?'

A tiny flicker of motion caught his eye. A small black spider, almost as black as anthracite, scurried down a post on the front porch. Marvin kicked at it, missing the first time, smashing it the second. Still, he kept kicking it and kicking it, smashing it beyond recognition.

'Damn spider,' he said, his voice almost a sob. He rubbed his shoes on the porch, then on the rubber mat, then slipped them off as he stepped inside.

I hate spiders, he told himself as he took off his shoes to join the other pair on the newspaper. He flipped on the kitchen light and jumped back half a step.

A small black spider perched on the tongue of the first pair of shoes.

'Shit!' said Marvin. 'The house is infested!'

I can't stay here, not with those damn spiders. Gotta get some clothes, stay in a motel tonight. But what if they're in the closet? Lurking, waiting for me to step in so they can drop on me from the moulding?

His first memory returned unbidden: running into a spider's web when he was three.

He hastily left in his stocking feet. Gotta do something! The house lights blazed as he drove away.

Jenny's voice was sleepy but irritated as he rang her bell again and again. 'Yes? What? Who is it?'

'Marvin.'

'Marvin? It's after midnight!'

'I've got to see you.'

A pause, then suspiciously, 'Why?'

Marvin nibbled on his scar. How much do I tell her? She knows I don't like spiders, but if she knew how deep that loathing runs, would she think of me in sympathy or as being weak or crazy?

'I got bugs in my house,' he said at last.

'Bugs? Everybody's got bugs.'

Marvin swallowed drily. 'A whole lot of bugs, Jenny.'

'Call an exterminator.'

'I will . . . tomorrow. I need a place to sleep tonight.'

'Well . . . I don't know. How many bugs?'

Before he could check himself, he blurted out, 'A couple of spiders, at least.'

Jenny's voice was icy when she spoke again. 'Two spiders? You woke me at one in the morning to complain about *two* spiders? You really take the cake, Marvin. Go to a motel. Call an exterminator in the morning. Don't bother me again. Good night!'

She clicked off. Marvin buzzed her several times. No response. Dejected, he went back to his car.

The next morning, after several calls and much wheedling, Marvin found an extermination company that would come out immediately. Their truck was a battered white pick-up, with pipes and hoses and accoutrements of their trade hanging from it like a refugee family's belongings. The two exterminators were a father and son team, Old Mike and Young Mike, the Poulakais.

Marvin nervously paced his driveway while Old Mike inspected the crawlspace under the house. Young Mike, a human ox crammed into a faded green football jersey, sat on the fender of their truck, sipping an Orange Nehi and looking at Marvin disdainfully. Probably thinks I'm a wimp, Marvin thought. As if to answer telepathically, Young Mike smiled, then looked away.

Old Mike crawled out, knocking dust from his dirty grey overalls. Bits of spider-web clung to his patchy white hair. Marvin shuddered but Old Mike didn't seem to mind. He grinned a blackened, gap-toothed smile while calculating on the back of a grimy envelope.

'Yes, sir, spiders you got,' he said, not stopping his frantic scribbling for a moment. 'Lots of spiders. Other bugs, too. Maybe even termites.'

'I'm not concerned with the other bugs,' said Marvin. 'Only the

spiders. How much to get rid of them?

Old Mike grinned inanely and went back to calculating. 'We fumigate, maybe eight hundred . . . nine hundred bucks.'

Marvin bit the scar on his lip. 'Is there a cheaper way?'

'Hell, yeah . . . bash 'em one by one when they crawl out!' Old Mike laughed uproariously at his own joke. Even Young Mike laughed; his voice a dull, soulless guffaw.

Marvin fumed. 'Six hundred,' he said. 'No more.'

Old Mike shrugged. 'When you ready to talk the business, you call. My number you got. By the way, that one hundred and thirty-six dollars for inspection. Unless, of course, you apply against fumigation.'

Marvin felt trapped. I gotta get rid of those spiders, but I can't afford the Poulakais' rates.

Jenny drove up in her beige Datsun. The fair damsel riding to the rescue of the beleaguered knight, Marvin thought wryly.

As she got out, Young Mike and Jenny saw each other at the same time. Young Mike leered slightly. Marvin hurried over to Jenny, putting his arms around her and kissing her. He chose to ignore her long, appraising look at Young Mike.

'Not now, Marvin,' she said. 'People are watching. What was that scene last night at my place?'

Marvin blushed. Young Mike smirked at his discomfort. 'Spiders,' Marvin said. 'My house is infested with spiders. Can you lend me three hundred bucks?'

'Three hundred? Are you out of your tree, Marvin?'

'Lower your voice, Jenny. I need it for fumigation, Jenny. I can put up most of the money, but I'm three hundred short.'

'I don't know, Marvin . . .'

'I'll pay you back.'

'Three hundred bucks is an awful lot . . .'

'I'll give you interest, just lend me the money, okay?'

Jenny shifted her ample weight from one foot to the other, clearly reluctant. 'Well . . . OK . . . but nothing better happen to my dough, hear? Geeze, I don't know why I'm doing this . . . I'd better not get stiffed.'

'You won't, you won't,' said Marvin. 'Let me deal with this old pirate while you write a cheque, OK?'

Jenny eyed him petulantly. 'I'm gonna regret this, but, OK. My cheque book is in the car.'

Marvin turned to Old Mike, who already had the contract out and ready to sign. As Marvin inked his name, he watched Jenny go to her car. As she passed Young Mike, the big lout winked at her. Jenny winked back.

Marvin spent the night in a cheap motel, *sans* Jenny. Before going there, he entered his house as Old Mike and Young Mike were hanging a tattered fumigation tent over it. He checked scrupulously for spiders in his chest of drawers and closet, then in his personal toiletry items.

Seeing they were all untouched, he quickly packed, then headed for the motel.

Old Mike waved to him as he drove off. 'You back tomorrow, they be all dead. This good for whole year, you bet. No more problems.'

'I hope not,' Marvin muttered. Then he drove off.

A month later, Marvin was satisfied with the Poulakais' work, if not their prices. There was not a spider, bug, insect, or creepy-crawly anywhere. After the fumigation, Marvin had gingerly searched every square inch of the house before finally relaxing.

He was spending more time at home. Jenny didn't want to go out as often as they used to. 'Save your money so you can pay me back,' she said pointedly on their last date.

Fine, he thought. Tonight I'll drop back in my easy chair, sip Oolong tea, and listen to the Osmonds.

The spider dropped right on his glasses.

Marvin shrieked and threw his bifocals off, diving off his chair in the opposite direction. He braced himself against the wall, trying to force his breathing to slow down. The shock made his heart pound in his chest like a caged beast trying to break its bars.

When he finally calmed himself, he groped blindly for his glasses, cursing the Poulakais under his breath. 'Some year-long warranty,' he muttered.

He picked up his glasses, peering at them shortsightedly. He almost dropped them again when he saw a thin white line running across a lense – a web strand.

He washed them under scalding hot water with soap in the kitchen. He put them on and went looking for the spider with a rolled up newspaper.

He couldn't find it.

Frustrated, he took out the Poulakais' card and called them. They were closed for the night. He searched the phone book and found their home number.

Young Mike answered the phone, his tongue thick and uncultured. 'Yeah? Whaddya want?'

'This is Mr Tesich,' Marvin said. 'You sprayed my house for spiders a month ago.'

There was no response. Marvin thought the line was dead. 'Hello?' he asked.

'Yeah?'

'I said, you sprayed my house for spiders and told me I had a year-long warranty. Well, I found a spider just now.'

Another long pause. Marvin was about to speak again when Young Mike said, 'So?'

'So I want you to honour your contract,' Marvin said, his voice driven by fear of the spiders and anger at the Poulakais. 'I want you out here tomorrow to spray the place again.'

Several moments passed before Young Mike said, 'Can't do that.'

'Why not?'

'Got other houses to do.'

'You'd better find time to do my house! I'll be waiting for you first thing in the morning - if you're not here I'll take you to the small claims court.'

Young Mike laughed, his hoarse chuckle saying 'So what?' much more eloquently than words. Before Marvin could speak again he hung up.

Marvin spent a sleepless night, waiting for the spider to return. It didn't. He fixed breakfast at dawn and waited impatiently for the Poulakais. It was nearly noon when Old Mike drove up.

'My son say you got bug problems.'

'Spider problems. I found one last night.'

'Well, one spider ain't so—'

'I have a one year warranty on this fumigation. Live up to your contract!'

Old Mike looked at him resentfully but didn't argue. With a shrug he pulled on his overalls and crawled under the house.

He came out a few minutes later. 'Mister, you got bugs on the brain. Ain't no spiders down there – no nothing.'

Marvin sucked in his breath then said, 'A spider dropped on me last night – scared me half to death.'

'One teensy spider—'

'That's not the point! You said no spiders for a whole year! Now do something about it or I'll see you in court!'

Old Mike glared at Marvin as if he was a bug in dire need of stepping on, then turned away. 'OK. I'll spray.'

Two days later, Marvin reached for his toothbrush to brush his teeth before going to bed. He picked it up and noticed the glossy black spider sitting on the bristles like a wart. It jumped on his knuckles, ran across his wrist, and up his arm.

Marvin screamed, dropping the toothpaste tube. As he frantically tried to brush the spider from his arm, Marvin stepped on the tube, squirting paste across the bathroom floor. The air filled with the smell of peppermint. The big black arachnid almost reached Marvin's face before he knocked it away.

It scampered across the floor, dashing towards the toilet. Gulping air, Marvin chased it, smashing at it with his heel. It zig-zagged through the toothpaste, dodging Marvin's repeated blows. Marvin's foot slipped on the toothpaste. He went down with a crash. The spider dashed into a tiny crevice at the base of the toilet and disappeared under the house.

This time Old Mike answered the phone. 'Those damn spiders are back!' Marvin said, his voice cracking. He struggled to control himself.

'Oh, it's you, Mr Tesich.'

'Damn right it's me! What are you going to do about those spiders?'

Old Mike was silent. When he spoke it was slowly and deliberately, his tone of voice daring Marvin to do anything about it. 'Seems to me that the last time I go there I see no spiders.'

'One just jumped out at me!'

'First of all, Tesich, spiders are timid. Scared of people. Second, I think you try run up bill on Old Mike. Last time I there, no spiders,

I spray anyway. You ain't got no spiders—'

'Then what the hell ran up my arm?'

'Maybe cockroach—'

'A cockroach? Your spraying was supposed to rid my house of *all* pests! Besides, when have cockroaches had eight legs? I . . . hello?'

There was nothing but a dial tone on the other end of the line; Old Mike had hung up.

Cursing to himself, Marvin slammed the receiver down. I can't call Jenny. She won't let me spend the night with her, especially since I still owe her the three hundred.

I can't afford another exterminator. There is, he realized, only one thing to do. Crawl under the damn house, find the nest of spiders, kill them, then sue those damn Poulakais.

His anger and hate of the Poulakais drove him, greater than his loathing of spiders. Damn those obscene little bastards, he thought, steeling himself up. They're not going to chase me out of my house.

He went to an all-night convenience store and bought all their bug sprays and a powerful flashlight. He went to the wire grating covering the crawlspace entrance and breathed deeply, trying to build up his nerve. If I don't go now, I'll never go.

His earliest memory came back to him, and he shuddered. He was only three. He was running down a sidewalk one late evening. He didn't see the large spider web strung across the pavement. He ran right into it, the sticky strands adhering to his face, the big black garden spider trapped between the web and his skin. He screamed and the spider scrambled into his mouth. He bit down on it, bitter ichor filling his mouth, squirming legs kicking at his tongue.

And the spider bit back, sinking its venomous fangs deep into his soft, tender lip, leaving a bite that swelled up and later burst into a festering sore.

Gingerly, Marvin touched the tiny scar on his lip. He almost changed his mind, but to run from the spiders would be to surrender to them. I'll go after them, face them, kill them.

Pulling free the wire grating, he turned on his light and crawled under the house.

It's not like I imagined at all, Marvin realized. It's dry and dusty. I thought it would be as muddy as a pig-pen.

Shining the light along the dusty ground, Marvin followed the trail left by Old Mike when he checked the house. There were no signs of any insects or spiders. Doesn't make me feel any better, he thought.

Then he noticed the circles.

There were arranged in a haphazard pattern, small circles about as wide as a dime clustered about a larger, cup-sized circle.

Old Mike crawled past them lots of times, thought Marvin, but had never noticed them.

Holding the flashlight in one hand and a can of bug spray in the other, he edged nearer to the circles. What *are* they? he wondered.

Then he found out.

First one, then another, then two more, then six, then a dozen, then two dozen, then all of them popped open. Like soldiers who dug themselves into foxholes and pulled the dirt over them, the black widow colony had fashioned air tight burrows to protect themselves from the Poulakais' spray.

Marvin was paralysed with fear. The spiders hesitated on the edge of their burrows. His hand went limp, dropping the bug spray. The large, cup-sized burrow cover quivered as whatever was beneath it struggled to get out. Marvin's bladder emptied itself involuntarily, forming a wet puddle around him.

The spiders charged.

Like a wave of hard black pebbles, the black widows ran straight towards him. Marvin screamed in terror and dropped his light. He crawled frantically to the grating, his mind oblivious to everything except escape from the horde of spiders. He scraped his back against wooden beams and jagged, rusty nails, but didn't care.

He hurled himself out of the entrance, leaving shreds of clothes and skin behind. He grabbed two cans of bug spray and whirled to plaster the entrance with death-dealing chemicals.

No spiders followed him out.

His back stung from a dozen cuts and scrapes. Marvin shuddered, thinking of the horror beneath his house.

He went inside, stripping off his clothes and leaving them in careless, muddled heaps on the floor. He opened his chest of drawers and carefully selected new clothes, making sure no spiders lurked in them.

I can't stay in this house, he realized. I gotta get out. But first I'm

gonna handle those damn Poulakais. Still trembling with fear, his voice edged with hysteria, he called Old Mike.

Old Mike had been drinking when he finally answered the phone. 'Yeah?'

'You gotta come . . . they're under my house . . . thousands of them! Black widow spiders . . .'

'What? Who is this? Tesich? What the hell you bothering me for, anyway?'

'Damn it, man, my house is infested with spiders! Thousands of them!'

Old Mike took a long draught on his end then said, 'You drink too much. Lie down and go to bed.'

'No! Come here, right now! You gotta kill 'em!'

'Listen, Tesich, I'm telling you, there ain't no spiders—'

'They live in burrows, you moron! The gas never reached them! There's a whole colony down there!' Old Mike said nothing. This made Marvin even more angry. 'If you don't come out here right now, I'll see you're closed down, by God! I'll sue! I'll sue for damages! I'll run you out of business! I'll call the Better Business Bureau and—'

'OK! OK! Geeze!' Old Mike muttered some angry and bitter words in his native language then said, 'Hold on to your damn shirt, Tesich. I come there.'

It took Old Mike an hour to show up. Marvin packed some belongings in a suitcase while waiting. Finally the battered white truck rolled up in Marvin's drive-way, blocking his car. Old Mike stepped from the cab, pulling his overalls on, barely sober enough to stand. 'OK, where these damn bugs?'

Marvin told him. Old Mike snorted and waved his hand at Marvin. 'Nothing but sissy. Spiders ain't never hurt nobody.'

He pulled loose the grating. 'I better find spiders,' he said, 'or I be pretty pissed coming out here in middle of night.'

'They're down there,' Marvin said.

Old Mike burped and crawled under the house. He was silent, then he said, 'Can't see a thing.' Then, 'OK, so I found the burrows. They ain't black widows. Just trapdoor spiders. Harmless.' Then, 'Hey . . . wait . . . they *are* black widows! Black widows don't burrow!' Then, 'My God! Look at the size of *that* one!' Then a sharp cry in his native language. Then, a scream. Then, silence.

He's just trying to scare me, Marvin told himself again and again. He's trying to pull my leg, get revenge for being dragged out in the middle of the night. 'It's not funny!' he called down to Old Mike. 'I'm not falling for your joke!'

There wasn't a sound from under the house. He's pulling my leg, Marvin kept telling himself as he screwed up his courage to take a look.

Both his flashlight and Old Mike's were lying in the dirt, providing indirect illumination. There was a large mound of tiny jet black glass beads several feet away from the entrance. Then the beads parted and Marvin saw Old Mike's body wrapped in a cocoon. The beads were black widow spiders and they were heading for him.

Marvin sprayed the entrance again and ran. He jumped in his car and roared away, cutting across his neatly manicured lawn to escape his house. He drove hard and fast, zooming through traffic signs without even stopping.

He drove several miles before the panic left him and he began breathing normally again. Gotta do something, go somewhere. Gotta think, decide what to do.

Pulling over at a pay phone, he called Jenny. She answered sleepily.

'It's me,' he said.

'Marvin?' Her voice was foggy with sleep. 'It's almost midnight! Why are you bothering me?'

'I . . . I've got to see you, Jenny. I need a place to stay.'

Now Jenny was fully awake. 'No. You can't come here. Not tonight. Not now.'

'But, Jenny, I have to!'

'Why?'

Marvin bit at the scar on his lip. How much dare I tell her over the phone? 'I . . . I can't explain,' he said. 'If I could see you face to face—'

Jenny started to say something, but Marvin never heard the words. Instead, he heard a second voice in the background. A dull, deep, masculine voice, a voice that laughed at him.

Young Mike's voice.

Marvin reeled at this. 'What's he doing there?'

Guilty silence, a hand over the receiver. Then Jenny asked meekly, 'Who?'

Angry, cursing, Marvin slammed the phone down. He returned to his car, completely shaken.

I can't focus my thoughts. The spiders . . . Old Mike . . . Jenny . . . need time to think, time to reason.

He drove to the same cheap, seedy motel he stayed at before. He took his single suitcase inside and plopped it on the bed, opening it to remove a clean set of underwear. I'll shower, wash off the fear and filth. Then I'll call the cops and tell 'em about Old Mike. Let them handle it.

He stripped and entered the grimy shower stall, oblivious to its filth. He scrubbed himself from head to toe with cheap green motel soap. Stark naked, reeking of pine scent, he padded to the towel rack where he hung his underwear.

He pulled on his jockey shorts, then stopped. Something moved between the fabric and his skin, something small and tiny – like a spider.

He frantically tore off the shorts and threw them aside. Moaning, he reached for his glasses on the sink.

His hand brushed into a spider web. A black widow jumped on his forearm.

Crying out, he brushed the spider off. Bending over, Marvin peered at his glasses. They were surrounded by a spider web. Dozens of spiders ran up and down the web. He reached for his glasses, but held his hand back. I can't, he realized. I can't get to them.

He backed into the bedroom. He reached for the open suitcase on the bed. He took out a pair of slacks. Hundreds of black widows crawled out of the lining. He dropped the slacks and staggered back. He ran to the door, reaching for the knob, when he heard an angry hiss.

Perched on the doorknob, like an angry ebony skull the size of a tennis ball, was the matriarch of the colony, a huge black widow spider with legs six inches long. The legs scratched at his hand as he tried to reach the knob.

'What do you want?' Marvin sobbed. 'Why me?' Though his vision was blurry, he saw a sea of moving black shapes, tiny and glossy in the dim motel room light, swarming towards him. There was no chance to reach the phone.

They must have somehow crawled into my suitcase back at the

house, Marvin realized. They're something new . . . a dangerous mutant that's selected me as a victim. I'm much bigger than they are . . . I could crush that giant mother spider and make a break for it.

But his fear was bigger than he was.

Naked, afraid, he retreated, brushing into strands of web as spiders dangled from the ceiling. He huddled in the corner as the spiders surrounded him.

Though they never touched him, they hemmed him in with a fine silk web, a net of sticky strands that he could have easily broken through, if he only had the courage.

Instead he cowered, waiting for the spiders to crawl under the cocoon and feast.

And soon enough, they did.

A weird day for Agro

Someone nudged my elbow. I turned to see the short figure of Agro, a half-pint of lager already in his hand.

'All right, John?' he greeted me, sipping his drink and grinning. He glanced furtively round the slowly filling bar. 'Oy,' he began excitedly, 'it was really weird today, right.'

Then he suddenly paused, pensive and doubtful.

'What was?'

'Aw,' he said, shaking his head, 'don't know, mate.'

'Go on,' I pressed him, 'tell me.'

'Well,' he resumed, 'you know the old geezer that lives in our ouse?'

'No,' I replied, 'I thought it was just you lot and some other kids.'

'No, 'e lives downstairs, right, but 'e's only there about once a month or somefin'. 'E's the only old bloke in a house full of young people, right, and 'e's always moanin' about the noise.'

I nodded, borrowing his drink.

'Cos I was playin' my guitar today, right, and it weren't even very loud, an' he came in my room an' started 'avin' a go at me.'

'How did he get in?'

'Well, I didn't 'ave my door locked or nuffin',' he explained. 'Anyway, 'e burst in, right, and says, "Please turn that racket down! Why must you people be so noisy?" ' he mimicked.

I laughed.

'It really made me jump, right, him comin' in like that, so I said, "Piss off, you stupid bastard," right, and I just carried on playin', finkin' he'd go, like. But 'e just stood there, right, an' 'e was shakin' an' all red in the face, an' I fought 'e was gonna cry or somefin', he giggled, 'cos 'e's a real weedy-lookin' old bloke an' that. Then 'e says 'e's got an allergy to loud noise, right, an' 'e's bin in hospital for it, an' that I'd 'ave to stop or it'd bring on an allergic reaction in 'im or

somefin', 'is doctor said.'

I frowned in consternation. 'What's he talkin' about?' I said. 'There's no such thing, surely.'

'Yeah, yeah; that's what I fought,' Agro agreed, taking a packet of ten Benson and Hedges from a pocket of his scuffed leather jacket. He paused to light one, and took only a small drag before continuing.

'Yeah, so I said, "Bollocks," right, and carried on playin'. Then 'e starts screamin', right, "It makes me mad, it makes me mad," like that, gettin' really hysterical. An' I fought 'e was just tryin' to scare me, right, so I ignored 'im. Then 'e got really out of order. 'E started kickin' things and knockin' stuff over in my room; my other guitar an' the chair an' that. An' 'e kicked the glass case wiv Dan's lizards in, right; smashes all the glass, an' stamps on the little ones, right; squashes 'em. Then he picked up the new one, you know, the big one, and bits its 'ead off!'

'Oh no,' I gasped, incredulous, 'Really?'

'Yeah,' he laughed, 'bit its 'ead right off!'

'Christ!'

'Then 'e says that it's my fault for makin' such a noise, right. I was gonna hit 'im then, but 'e tried to make a dive for my amp, right, to turn it off, like. But I got there first, and pushed 'im away, like, and turned it up full volume. An' it was *really* loud, right. The window was all rattlin' an' the light was shakin'; there was tons of feedback, an' it was really deafenin'. And then . . . aww, I don't know . . . ' he faltered.

'What?' I said impatiently.

'It was really weird, right . . . '

'Go on,' I encouraged him.

'Well, 'e was standin' there shoutin' about 'is allergy to noise, right; then 'e goes all purple, and foam starts comin' out of 'is mouth an' 'is nose starts bleedin'.' Agro spoke slowly, carefully; measuring his words. His shiny green eyes were averted in concentration. 'An' 'e was still shakin' an' that. Then 'e fell over, right, and, aww . . . ' He shook his head again. 'It was weird, John . . . His 'ead an' 'is face started goin' all mushy an' like a blancmange or somefin'. An' 'e was screamin' an' that . . . then 'is whole body starts to collapse and sort of . . . shrivel up, witherin' away like a burst balloon. An' it

smelt 'orrible; like rotten vegetables or somefin' . . . an', I dunno . . . it 'appened so quickly, like . . . 'e just sort of dis-integrated.'

Agro ground his cigarette into the ashtray and reached for another. 'It really freaked me out, actually,' he finished.

'Jesus,' I mumbled. 'So what did you do then?'

'Well, I just fought: "Aww, no!" ' He clapped his hand to his forehead in an imitation of his own despair. "'What's the matter wiv you, mate?" An' I didn't know what to do, right, so I just scooped up this bloke – or what was left of 'im – into a dustbin liner an' left 'im in 'is own room.'

'You didn't!' I guffawed.

'Yeah . . . Well, what else could I do?' he said reasonably. 'Then there's the lizards; Dan doesn't know yet. An' that new one cost 'im nine quid, didn't it? What am I gonna tell 'im, John?' Agro looked at me hopefully, a helpless bemused smile on his small face.

I shrugged. 'I dunno,' I admitted.

'I can't really tell 'im the truth about that bloke comin' in treadin' on 'em an' eatin' one of 'em an' that, can I? It's a bit too weird, really, innit?'

He puffed on his cigarette. 'Aww,' he groaned at length. 'I'll have to buy him some more, I s'pose. Bad one, eh?'

Pebbledene

At two o'clock Danny Lamb presented himself at the office of the rehabilitation officer. He paused at the door to straighten his prison shirt and trousers, ran a hand through his short dark hair, and knocked firmly.

An equally firm voice said, 'Come in.'

Danny entered the office, which was neat and comfortably large for one woman, and closed the door behind him.

Miss Savidge, the chief rehabilitation officer at Ravenhurst Prison, was a woman of about fifty. Her face was brown, behind rimless spectacles her eyes were iron-grey. Hair of the same colour was cropped sternly to the nape of her neck.

'Ah, Lamb.' She surveyed the prisoner whose documents lay before her. Danny stood to attention midway between her large desk and the door. He was a fine figure, clear-eyed, a young moustache.

'Due out on Thursday – September the sixth. That right?'

'Yes, Miss.'

'Got anything fixed up yet? Know where you're going to stay?'

'No, Miss.'

'What about your family? Your mother's still alive, isn't she? And you've got a sister.'

'We don't exactly see eye to eye.' He recalled the stormy scenes. 'I haven't seen either of them for a couple of years now.'

'One of which you've spent in here for,' she consulted his documents, 'burglary, persistent theft, taking and driving away cars which you afterwards sold.'

Danny blinked but did not reply.

'You're twenty-four years old and have a known criminal record stretching back to the age of thirteen, when you were first placed in a children's remand home.' She turned back a page and refreshed her memory. 'Keen swimmer' . . . started training as a draughtsman but gave it up . . . various jobs, last as a vegetable porter in the

market.' She pursed her lips and adjusted her spectacles with a long finger.

Still the prisoner did not speak.

'So, three days to go, and when you walk out the gate of this prison you have no job and no place to go – and if your past record is anything to go by, what friends you've got aren't exactly qualified to keep you on the straight and narrow. That a fair summary of the situation?'

'Yes, Miss.' Danny spoke the words with hostility.

'Well.' The officer paused for several seconds, considering. 'Have you ever thought of farming?'

'Farming!' Danny was taken aback.

'Yes, farming. How does that strike you? I know some people, I might be able to put a word in for you. Even if you don't like it, it's a job, free lodgings, a roof over your head. Give you a month or so to find your feet, earn a bit of money.'

'Farming! Well, I . . . ' He shrugged.

'Not frightened of a bit of hard work, are you?'

'No, Miss!'

'Well, it's a chance. What do you say? Take it or leave it, but I'd like an answer now. If they take you, it's as a favour to me. Not long to go, I need to ring up and see how they're fixed.' She regarded him and wrinkled her brow. 'Better than nothing.'

Danny thought. 'OK,' he said. 'I'll give it a go.'

'Good.' Miss Savidge smiled and rose. 'If you'll just strip down to your pants for a minute. See what sort of shape you're in.'

'What for?' Danny took a step backwards and eyed the woman suspiciously. 'You're not the medic. No way!'

'All right.' She shrugged and returned round the end of the desk. 'You can forget the farm, then. If you go, it's on my personal recommendation. I don't put my reputation on the line for every Tom, Dick and Harry. If you're only there for a month you're not much good if prison's made you all soft and flabby. They want men who can tackle a day's work.'

The young prisoner was stung. 'There's nothing wrong with me. I'm as fit as the next man.'

'So you say. I didn't ask you to strip naked, just down to your underpants.'

Danny grunted. After a moment he began reluctantly to unbutton his shirt. His prison trousers fell to the carpet. He felt self-conscious in that furnished office.

He was a fine figure: muscular shoulders, trim waist, strong legs. 'Turn round,' said the rehabilitation officer.

Danny did so. Slowly she walked round him. With a long hand she squeezed the hard muscle of his arm, his back, his thigh.

'All right. You'll do. Put your clothes on again.'

She returned to her seat and in a few minutes Danny stood before her once more. As if in response to the event which had just taken place he no longer stood to attention. His shoulders slouched, one thumb was hooked in a pocket.

'Straighten up, Lamb!' the officer snapped. 'Remember where you are!'

Trained by twelve months imprisonment, his head jerked back, his legs clipped together.

'That's more like it.' The bright spectacles flashed. 'Well, you can leave it to me. Unless you hear to the contrary, there'll be a Land Rover waiting at the prison gates at eight o'clock on Thursday morning. I'll be there to see you off. Any questions?'

'No, Miss. Not that I can think of right now.'

'Right. And, er, don't say too much about this to the other prisoners. I can't find places for you all.'

Danny nodded.

'Good. Right, then, Lamb. Off you go.'

'Thank you, Miss.'

The prisoner swung on his heel and left the office. The door clicked shut behind him.

A woman drove the Land Rover. Miss Savidge introduced her as Rowena. She too was about fifty, and greeted Danny with a smile. Long hair, streaked with silver, was drawn back into a chignon; her make-up was perfect, her eyes blue as speedwells. She wore slacks and an expensive country shirt, with an anorak on top. Like the prisoner officer, she had style and would have been good-looking, save that her right eyelid drooped.

Danny wore denims and a leather jacket. He slung a cheap holdall, containing his few worldly goods, into the back of the Land

Rover and climbed into the passenger seat as he was instructed. A few yards off the two women talked beneath the towering prison walls.

Rowena returned to the driving seat and strapped herself in, then switched on the ignition. The Land Rover shuddered into life.

'Well, good luck, Lamb.' Miss Savage held out a thin hand. 'I hope all goes well.'

'Yeah, thanks.'

Danny watched as she returned briskly to the massive black gates, and the door within a door shut firmly behind her. Briefly he pictured the grim structures beyond, the cells and bars, the sarcastic officers and sullen male society of which he had so recently been a part. For them it was the start of yet another empty day. He turned away and set his eyes resolutely in the other direction.

Rowena was pleasant but they were from totally different backgrounds and spoke little as the miles spun out behind them. They drove along country roads, narrower and narrower as the city was left behind and forest-clad hills rose ahead. After his confinement Danny gazed with delight and a shiver of release at the rivers and wind-blown fields. There could hardly have been a more dramatic change in his circumstances: instead of the workshop roof the cloudy sky above him, instead of a prison officer a smart woman at his side. Although she was twice Danny's age he caught himself glancing at her neck, her hidden breasts. He eased his legs and looked away.

An hour brought them to the farm. It was remote, set in a secluded valley. Access was by an unmetalled road which descended from a pass. On every side private woodland and forestry rose to rocky summits. A cattle grid lay between lichenized gateposts. A plain notice proclaimed:

PEBBLEDENE FARM

Private Property

Area patrolled by guard dogs

Despite its remote location the farm was attractive: green and bleached yellow fields in the valley below, divided by immaculate stone dykes and lines of hedgerow. Cattle, sheep and horses grazed in the meadows.

The farmhouse, more like a mansion, was terraced and of golden

sandstone. Before it lay fine lawns and gardens. The farm buildings – neat dairy and barns, byres and sheds – were set a hundred yards beyond a walled orchard. Danny was impressed, Pebbledene had class. With some embarrassment he glanced down at his jeans and scuffed shoes.

The Land Rover rattled across another cattle grid, crunched up a gravelled drive and swept to a halt by the farmhouse. As Danny climbed down, three girls, holding brooms and dusters, emerged from the front door and stood watching.

‘Well, Danny,’ said Rowena. ‘You don’t mind if I call you Danny? We don’t use surnames here at Pebbledene. Grab your holdall and I’ll show you to your room. Give you an hour or so to get settled in, then I’ll introduce you to the other workers.’

Danny’s eyes were wide. Never in his life – save occasionally at hotels when he was in funds – had he stayed in a place so grand. The three girls stood aside and followed as they passed through the entrance into a beautiful hall. It was spacious, white plaster rose above oak panels. Winking brass and good pictures hung on the walls, valuable ornaments stood on ledges and an urn of fresh flowers was placed at the foot of a broad, curving staircase. As they mounted, their footsteps were silent on the deep pile of the carpet.

A little girl, clutching the hand of a woman about Danny’s age, passed them in the upper corridor. The woman met his eyes and smiled. She had large eyes, perfect white teeth, the figure of a gazelle. He turned and watched as she retreated and turned a corner on to the landing.

Danny’s room was large and airy. Bright windows looked out on the gardens and farm beyond. Forests rose high up the mountain slopes. A double bed was spread with a continental quilt in a pretty cover. Towels and a set of worn but freshly-laundered blue overalls lay on a chair by the dressing-table. A towelling bathrobe hung in the wardrobe.

Rowena eyed his holdall. ‘Maybe you could do with a change of clothes?’

He moved his half-empty bag and dropped it on the floor.

‘You don’t mind me saying?’ she said. ‘Perhaps the rest of your clothes are waiting somewhere?’

‘No. I did have some, like. I was staying with a friend, see.’ He thrust his fingers into his pockets and slid a toe across the carpet.

'But she - well, she slung them out when I went inside.'

'It's all right, Danny.' She laid a hand on his arm. Her eye drooped. 'We're used to that sort of thing. Just tell me your sizes and we'll see what we can rustle up.'

She hunted in her bag and pulled out an old envelope and pen. Briskly, displaying familiarity with men's measurements, she jotted down the figures as he gave them to her.

'Height - six feet exactly; chest - forty-two; waist - thirty-two; inside leg - thirty-two; neck - sixteen. Shoes - size nine. Normally Ilsa, that's Miss Savidge, would have sent them on, but she must have forgotten.' She tucked the envelope away. 'Right, I'll look something out and have one of the girls bring it up in a few minutes. Anything else you need? Toothbrush? Shaving gear?'

He shook his head. 'I don't think so.'

'Good. Well, I'll leave you alone to settle in. If you come down in half an hour or so, there'll be a cup of coffee and I'll introduce you to the others. Perhaps you could put on the overalls, then you'll be ready to go off with the men. See what work's been organized for you.'

The door closed. Again the change in Danny's circumstances was so complete that for a full minute he did not move. Then, with a sudden access of high spirits, he ran three steps across the carpet and flung himself upon the bed with a whoop. The springs bounced once and were still. He kicked his shoes off. Ankles crossed, hands behind his head, he lay back and gazed about the room.

'Danny, boy,' he said aloud, 'you've landed on your feet this time and no mistake.'

As if to confirm his feelings a shaft of sunlight moved across the front of the house and struck through his window, forming a brilliant pool on a cream and scarlet rug.

To unpack his razor and clean underclothes, socks and few possessions, was the work of a minute. While he was busy there was a knock at the door. A girl of sixteen or so stood at the entrance holding a pile of clothes.

'Rowena sent me up with these,' she said.

Danny took them from her. As she lowered her arms her breasts moved beneath a light sweater. Her eyes were etched with fair lashes, her cheeks downy with youth.

'Coffee will be five minutes,' she said, and turned away.

Danny watched the modest but tantalizing swing of her hips as she walked along the corridor.

'What's your name?' he called after the retreating back.

'Never mind,' came the reply. She did not look round and in a moment was gone.

'Oh, Danny!' Shivering at a flush of desire, he retreated into his room.

There must have been a considerable supply of clothes for they all fitted more or less neatly. There were cord jeans and black terylene trousers, two shirts, a sweater, a light jacket, leather shoes and trainers. None were new, some were quite worn, but all were spotlessly clean and acceptable. Danny stowed them away in his wardrobe and drawers. Stripping to underpants and T-shirt, he pulled on the overalls. They fitted well enough. Running a comb through his short, dark hair and moustache, Danny let himself from the room and descended to the hall.

Coffee and cakes were served in the large farmhouse kitchen. At some time this had been a dining-room and was now filled with scrubbed pinewood tables and benches. A massive Welsh dresser, set with blue willow-pattern, stood against one wall. This was not the room in which the cooking was done. A half-door and hatch led into the kitchen proper, where large cookers and a deep-freeze, sinks and scrubbed worktops, stood about a red-tiled floor.

It was not upon the rooms, however, that Danny's eyes rested, but upon its occupants. For the benches were crowded with women and girls. They had been working but all were neat, their eyes were alive. Two were elderly, seventy or eighty years old with scraggy necks, and several appeared to be about fifty. Most, however, were considerably younger, from little girls to beauties of twenty-five or thirty.

As Danny entered the room several of the girls turned to regard him. Some smiled in greeting. He was overwhelmed and looked around for a sign of any other men.

There were two, and to his astonishment he knew them both. They were two prisoners, Bluey and Norman, who had been discharged a fortnight before himself.

They were a pair, inseparable friends, arrested on the same charge of warehouse breaking. Bluey was about the same age as Danny, fair-headed and lightly bearded. He had been a deep-sea fisherman

and still looked it, with an open face and innocent blue eyes. Norman was just nineteen, little more than a boy, stockily built and with the cropped brown curls, snub nose and furrowed brow that make some boys look like young bulls. Both, like Danny, were dressed in worn blue overalls. They had been working, their hands were grubby, dust clung to their shoulders.

'Hey, there, Danny!' Norman raised a hand and Danny crossed to join them.

Bluey slung a powerful arm around his shoulders. 'Good to see you, share some of the load! Hey, Maureen!' He hailed a girl with auburn hair. 'What about a cup of coffee for my mate Danny here?'

'Just a minute, Maureen.' Rowena rose and clapped her hands for attention. She had changed into a pretty but practical cotton dress and cardigan. Gradually the hubbub was stilled. 'We've got a new man today, everybody. A new labourer. His name's Danny Lamb. Stand up, Danny.'

Sheepishly Danny did so, aware of forty or more pairs of eyes upon him.

'He'll be with us for a month or so. Ilsa's recommended him, of course, so we know he's a good man. Strong back, hard worker. This means we're back to full strength again. Bluey, Norman and now Danny. I hope you'll enjoy your time with us, Danny.' She smiled. 'All right, girls.'

The eyes turned away and Danny sat down. The girl called Maureen fetched him a cup of coffee. Bluey pushed forward a plate of cakes and buns.

'What is this place?' Danny whispered as soon as he could speak without being overheard.

Bluey laughed. 'The best berth you're ever likely to get, boy. The moon's turned blue.' He looked around the enormous kitchen. 'Great lodgings, smashing grub, a house full of women.'

'Yes, but who are they all? Where are all the men?'

'Search me.' Bluey grinned.

'Who cares, eh, Bluey?' Norman gave a short upward jerk of the forearm, fist clenched, indicative of sexual vigour.

Such boasts and fantasies were common in Ravenhurst. Briefly, Danny's eyes roved the crowded benches, indulging his own imagination.

A group of about twenty children of school age, all girls, sat at the

wall with biscuits and glasses of orange or milk. As they finished they filed out, chattering like linnets.

Danny changed the subject. 'What did she mean about being back to full strength?'

'There was a chap here before you. Pushed off a couple of days ago. He was in Ravenhurst too. You probably knew him. Kevir Mackenzie, a big sandy-haired Scotty, twenty-eight or thirty.'

Danny remembered him well.

'Came a couple of weeks before us,' Bluey went on. 'Got a bit fed up with it by all accounts. He told us he felt shut-in, like.'

'Well it wouldn't suit him out here,' Danny said. 'He was a lush, wasn't he?'

'Yeah, that's what he was inside for,' Norman said. 'G.B.H. under the influence. Stupid Scotch git!'

'He told us he'd kicked it,' Bluey said.

'What happened to him?'

'Pushed off by himself one night to have a few jars. Got fighting drunk and they wouldn't have him back. Apparently there was a hell of a scene. Rowena set the dogs on him, slung his bag out the gate.'

'Where in God's name did he find a pub round here? There's nothing but mountains and forests.'

'Back over the pass, about five miles. A small village. That's what they say.'

Danny munched a currant bun and took a mouthful of coffee. 'What's the work like?'

'OK, so long as you don't mind a bit of hard graft,' Norman said. 'Ploughing, hedging, a bit of dyke-building.'

'Great after being stuck behind four walls,' Bluey said, 'that's for sure.'

A few minutes later Danny followed them out of the house. The girls, too, were returning to work. Some remained in the kitchen. Others collected wash-leathers and tins of polish, or pulled on cotton gloves for gardening. Four drove off in the Land Rover to continue a job on the far side of the farm. The three men walked round the orchard wall to the farm buildings. Bluey and Norman were repairing a stone dyke that had been toppled by cows on their way to the milking parlour.

'Can you drive a tractor?' A thick-set, mannish woman in farm clothes and rubber boots addressed Danny. Her face was square, her

wiry grey hair was cropped short and brushed up from the brow. A wart or mole sprouted hairs on her upper lip. She was the foreman and her name, to Danny's amusement, was George.

'Yes,' he answered.

'You've done it before?'

He nodded.

'Have you ever handled a plough?'

'Yeah, I have, as a matter of fact.'

Though he was a city boy, in his late teens Danny had spent several months at a country reformatory, where it was believed that healthy outdoor work might turn potential criminals from their felonious ways. In Danny's case, at least, it had not worked.

'All right,' George said. 'Take that red Fordson and follow me. Show me what you can do.'

Danny climbed into the cab and examined the gears and instruments. He turned the key. With a shudder the tractor sprang into life. He lifted the plough from the concrete floor and drove carefully from the shed.

When she saw that, so far at least, he had spoken the truth, George stepped into an old blue van and rattled from the yard along a rutted farm track. Danny followed.

'Right.' They had stopped inside the gateway of a harvested cornfield. Bleached stubble spread before them. 'Let's see you plough a couple of furrows.'

Danny moved into position and took his bearings, dropped the plough and moved off down the field. The tractor bumped over the uneven ground, the silver blades tore red-brown streaks in the earth.

Allowing for the fact that he had not handled a plough for seven years, or any vehicle at all for twelve months, he ploughed a creditable furrow.

'Switch off!' George called as he returned to the top of the field.

He did so and she pulled open the cab door.

'You'll do.' She nodded in brief approval. Reaching up with her man's hand she rested it casually upon his thigh. If her name and butch-lesbian appearance had not made it so unlikely, Danny would have thought she was making a pass at him.

'You see that hawthorn?' With her other hand George pointed to a solitary tree on the far side of the field. 'I expect you to plough down as far as that by lunchtime. Then bring the tractor back and leave it

in the yard. All right?’

Clapping his leg once she backed away and slammed the cab door shut. The blue van drove off along the track.

To a man who, three hours before, had been a prison inmate, whose only view of the sky in twelve months had been from a walled yard or barred window, few jobs could have been so congenial. Ignoring the roar of the engine, Danny threw open the cab window to smell the countryside. The clouds were breaking, acres of sunlight moved across the hills. A flock of gulls with a few rooks and jackdaws followed behind the plough. Happier than he had been for a long time he sang aloud and beat time with his fingers against the steering wheel.

Bluey had not exaggerated when he spoke of the excellent meals. Lunch, which they also ate in the kitchen, was roast meat with jacket potatoes and fresh vegetables from the kitchen-garden. Danny’s appetite, so jaded in prison, had returned with the exercise and broadening horizons. The girls also, he saw, ate well. The mountain air made everyone hungry. Clean plates were passed to the ends of the tables and gathered away through the hatch. Afterwards there was farm-cheese with oatcakes, and time to relax before they returned to work.

Throughout the afternoon Danny continued ploughing. Acre after acre the field turned red-brown behind him. It was a long day; work did not finish until six. Danny parked the tractor in the shed. Side by side the three men trudged back from the farm buildings to the house.

The children were being educated at home. Freed from the school-room, a dozen little girls, laughing and calling, scampered past them and down the path towards the rose garden. Fair-bearded like a giant, Bluey roared in game and chased after them. Screaming they fled and he returned grinning to his companions.

A little way across the fields, their work finished for the day, some of the girls were riding. They wore no helmets, their hair blew in the September wind.

The sight made Danny restless. A swimming-pool, ringed by trees and a wicker fence, stood by two tennis courts a little way from the house. It was unheated, and at that time unoccupied. A few leaves lay golden on the surface and formed light drifts on the

bottom. Bluey and Norman watched as Danny stripped to his underpants and dived in. The water was bitter but refreshing as he doubled and duck-dived, washing off the memory of Ravenhurst, then swam ten lengths in a swift crawl. Like a seal he hauled himself to the side and brushed the water from his body with the flat of his hands.

'Hey, you're some swimmer,' Norman said.

'Yeah, I like swimming,' Danny said.

Seeing that he was unobserved, he stripped quickly and pulled the overalls over his wet skin. Together the three companions walked back to the house.

After he had showered Danny dressed in some of the clothes that had been provided and set his own aside for washing. Though they were clean, he felt the sheen of prison upon them. It was an unfamiliar sensation, different from prison uniform, buttoning the shirt of an unknown man across his chest and zipping up his trousers. Conscious of the girls and women who apparently made up the entire household, he smoothed his brief moustache and patted his cheeks with aftershave.

Norman and Bluey, similarly showered and changed, were lounging in armchairs. Danny joined them and looked around the enormous sitting-room. A dozen girls, apparently oblivious of the three young men, sat with books and magazines, occasionally murmuring in conversation. Danny was surprised to see that some sat hand-in-hand, one with an arm around her companion's neck. He had noticed the same thing in the kitchen.

A little girl, either black or of mixed race, ran into the room and then out again. A moment later she returned with two friends, one a merry redhead, the other whose hair was blonde as flax and tied prettily in bunches. Giggling, they went on their knees to play some game on the carpet.

Norman stretched his legs and arched his back, yawning. 'Roll on bed-time, eh, Bluey?' He grinned.

'Sex-mad, that boy,' Bluey said to Danny.

'Who isn't?' Danny answered. 'Specially in a place like this.' He lowered his voice and glanced towards the girls who were embracing. 'Anyway, what's going on? Look at that pair – and those over there holding hands.'

Bluey shrugged. 'Search me, we can't make it out. Look like a load of lesbo's – but they're not all, are they, Norman?'

Danny's eyes sharpened. 'What do you mean, has he got something lined up?'

'Ah, that would be telling!' Norman laid a finger against the side of his nose.

Bluey winked and the pair burst out laughing.

At that moment Danny was prevented from further questions and speculation by a well-remembered voice at his shoulder.

'Ah, Daniel – or Danny, is it? How are you settling in?'

He sprang to his feet and turned to face the prison rehabilitation officer. His face flushed scarlet.

'Fine, thanks, Miss – er – Savidge.'

She smiled, friendliness replacing the past formality. 'First names here, Danny. I thought they would have told you.' She held out a long hand. 'My name's Ilsa.'

She had changed her prison suit for a soft blouse and skirt, the iron-grey hair was no longer set so sternly to the nape of her neck. As Danny recovered from the initial shock he saw that she was a different person.

'I won't keep you from your friends,' she said. 'Hello, Bluey, Norman. All going all right?'

'First-rate,' Norman said.

'Top-hole!' Bluey gave her a cheery thumbs-up. 'Couldn't be better.'

'Good.' She smiled and drifted away to join some girls.

Danny subsided into his seat. 'What's she doing here?' he said.

'She lives here.' Bluey was eying a girl across the room. She wore a neat jersey, slim legs were crossed, an ankle swung. He looked back to his companions. 'It's her home.'

'But I thought—'

'So did we. Don't ask me to explain it.'

'I reckon it's a way of getting cheap labour,' Norman said. 'Straight out of Ravenhurst, all young and strong, used to taking orders, no place to go.'

'You're spoiled, that's your trouble,' Bluey said. 'Don't know when you're well off. Fist full of fivers, paid on the nail every Saturday. Terrific meals, a great big house like this, not to mention all the other home comforts. Funny idea of cheap labour.'

A gong sounded softly. As they talked the sitting-room had been filling. The assembled company rose and filtered through the panelled hall into the main dining-room. The children had gone, some to bed, some to another part of the house. The women had tidied themselves for the evening meal. Skirts rustled, hair shone, soft odours of make-up and heady perfume hung in the air. Danny had previously wondered if one or two of the girls might be pregnant. Now he saw that this indeed was the case. Dresses stretched above softly-rounded stomachs. One girl walked on her heels, shoulders back, so heavily pregnant that the birth of her child could only be a matter of days away.

They entered an airy dining-room with beautiful refectory tables, dark and solid. Silver shone on the waxed wood. The three men were separated, one to each of the long tables. They stood behind their chairs until all had arrived. Rowena, at high table, gazed around the room then lowered her head. The rest did likewise.

'Benedictus benedicat,' she intoned, *'per Jesum Christum dominum nostrum.'*

'Amen,' came the murmur of female voices.

Immediately there was a loud scraping of chairs and chatter of interrupted conversation. Jugs of iced squash, freshly made, chinked against glasses.

Dinner was a social occasion and they ate well. First there was dark soup and rolls. Then plates and vegetable dishes were carried from the kitchen, piping-hot. At the head of each table one of the senior women carved from a large joint, golden with crackling. Generous platefuls were passed from hand to hand. Slim arms reached for potatoes, broccoli, gravy, and sauce-boats.

On either side of Danny the girls talked vivaciously. Though they had eaten substantial lunches their appetites had clearly returned. With gusto they attacked their piled plates. With feelings of slight disgust he watched one of the octogenarians at high table.

'Very tasty,' said the girl opposite through a mouthful of meat and gravy.

'Do you have dinner like this every night?' Danny said, though she had not been addressing him.

'What? Oh, yes,' she answered briefly but politely, then turned away again, dividing her attention between her plate and her companion.

Though Danny was the only man at the table, and from past experience knew that he was not unattractive to women, to the girls who sat on every side he was clearly of no interest whatever.

He counted the length of a row and did a rough sum in his head. Seventy or eighty women sat in the dining-room. A little distance away he saw the girl who had brought the spare clothes to his room. She had tied her hair with a white ribbon, her dusky throat sank into a froth of broderie anglaise. Danny found her absolutely ravishing.

'Anyone for seconds?' came the word. 'Pass up your plates.'

The girl's cheeks were plump as a peach. Plainly she was enjoying the meal, her lips shone with grease. She dabbed them with a napkin, set the knife and fork neatly to one side, and handed her plate to the girl who sat beside her.

At length everyone was satisfied, the main course was cleared away. Afterwards, almost as if the sweet was an afterthought, there were small dishes of raspberries and sorbet to tickle and delight their palates.

They stood behind their chairs for the concluding blessing.

'Gratias aginus tibi domine . . .'

'They've got *some* appetite, these girls,' Danny said to Norman as they filed from the dining-room towards the lounge, where coffee was to be served.

'You want to tuck in, mate,' Norman told him. 'Plenty of meat, keep up your strength. You'll need it. They know what they're about.'

Darkness had fallen. Long curtains were drawn against the September night.

There was no shortage of activities with which to pass the evening happily. In both the lounge and kitchen there was a television set. There were cards and board games and a library. A comfortable snooker-room, and a full-sized table-tennis table in the basement. Some of the girls embroidered, some played Scrabble, others donned aprons and retired to a joinery room where they were making small items of furniture for the house, and pictures in marquetry.

Bluey and Danny were halfway through a game of cribbage when Norman approached. A paperback was doubled open in his hand.

'Well, that's me, boys. I'm for bed.' He grinned. 'See you in the morning.'

Surprised, Danny consulted his watch and saw that it was only half-past nine.

'OK, Norman.' Bluey looked up. 'Sweet dreams. I'll finish this game, then I'm going up myself.'

'A bit early, isn't it?' Danny watched Norman cross the room and disappear into the hall.

'They like us in bed by ten,' Bluey said. 'Suits me fine.' With strong, fair hands he shuffled the cards and dealt.

Fifteen minutes later Danny sat alone in the big lounge – alone, save for three girls and two of the older women. He put the crib-board in a cupboard and stretched his legs. No one took any notice, he might have been the invisible man. Slightly ruffled by such disregard, he wandered from the room. Briefly he explored the ground-floor. A slow-ticking grandfather clock in the hall showed eight minutes to ten. Collecting a lively sea-adventure from the library, Danny mounted the stairs to his room.

Though the night was chill his bedroom, like the rest of the house, was pleasantly warm. Danny kicked off his shoes. Without undressing he lay on the bed and abandoned himself to day-dreams. It had been, in many ways, the most remarkable fourteen hours of his life. Inevitably, after a year in prison, his thoughts turned to the houseful of utterly desirable girls and young women. Murmuring he stretched and clasped his hands behind his head.

Abruptly, with no click, his light was extinguished. The bulb appeared to have gone, the room was plunged into darkness. As his eyes accustomed themselves, he saw a chink of light beneath the door. He rolled over and pressed the button of his bedside lamp. A soft glow illuminated the fringed shade. The bulb was weak; even if he leaned close the orange light would scarcely be enough to read by. Danny tapped it and clicked the switch repeatedly, but it produced no brightening.

He did not mind. In Ravenhurst they had been locked in their cells long before that hour. For months he had lain on his bunk and read paperbacks as daylight faded beyond the barred window, and the hard lights of the streets and prison stabbed the comforting darkness outside. Rolling from the bed Danny stripped to under-pants, his usual sleeping attire, and padded across the room to scrub his teeth at the washbasin in one corner. The warm pile of the carpet was unfamiliar beneath his bare feet.

Soon he was snug in bed. The fresh quilt settled comfortably about his legs and shoulders. His breathing deepened. Languorous thoughts coiled about him. In less than a minute he would have been asleep.

A soft noise penetrated his consciousness, a brief light touched his eyelids. Immediately alert, he sat up. Someone was in the room. He reached for the bedside light and pressed the switch.

A girl stood at the side of the bed. There had been so many downstairs, in the dim light he did not recognise her. She was undressing and had the figure of an angel. A loose garment floated to the floor, she shook her hair free.

‘What is your name again?’

‘Danny,’ he said.

With no ceremony she lifted a corner of the quilt and slipped into bed beside him.

‘Hello, Danny,’ she said.

She was a demanding creature who cried aloud, with no apparent fear of being overheard, and gripped him tight and dug her nails into his shoulder. Danny did not complain.

‘Who are you?’ he said at length. ‘What’s your name?’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ she said.

For a time they lay still. Then, with as little ceremony as her arrival, she slipped from the bed and began to dress.

‘Come on,’ he coaxed, feeling his excitement rising again. ‘Don’t go yet. Stay a while longer.’

‘No.’ She shook her head simply. ‘Goodbye.’

Her slippers, if she wore them, made no sound on the carpet. The door opened, briefly she was silhouetted in the entrance. With a light rattle she unhooked a small white tag, like a bracelet, from the outer handle. The door closed. She was gone.

Danny lay back. Slowly his heart steadied. Norman wasn’t the only one who got lucky. He grinned and wished he could be back in Ravenhurst, just for half an hour, to tell his prison-mates about it. They were sex-mad in there, they would all go crazy.

Cat-like he stretched, restless in the limbo of whetted desire. He slipped below the cover, rescued a pillow and punched it into shape. The odours of the girl clung about him. Beneath the brief moustache his lips were set in a small smile as he settled again to sleep.

He did not hear the door open, but through closed eyelids saw the

brief flood of light that illuminated the room. He sat up. Apparently the girl had returned. Dimly he saw her at the foot of the bed. He reached across and pressed the light switch. An orange glow lit the rumpled quilt. Danny stared. It was not the same girl. This girl had dark hair tied with a white ribbon. It was the girl who had brought his change of clothes, sixteen years old and downy as a peach.

'Ohhh!' He sighed at a flush of desire and sank back upon the pillows.

Light glinted upon perfect teeth. Momentarily, by a trick of shadow, it appeared as if she battled with revulsion. Her breasts were released. She stepped from her underskirt.

Danny rolled from the bed and moved to her side. 'Oh, girl!' He crushed her against him, his lips sought her ear and neck and shoulder. She twisted her head aside, then her arms went about him. Together they fell on top of the bed.

'Oh, you pig!' she cried two or three minutes later, as their excitement mounted. 'Pig! Pig! Pig!' Yielding and resisting, her fists hammered against his shoulders, but Danny was lost in his passion.

They fell limp, but only for a moment. Wildly she scrambled from beneath him and hunted for her clothes on the floor.

'Oh, how disgusting! You animal! I shouldn't have come! I knew I shouldn't have come! I thought you would be different! Oh!' Only half-dressed she stumbled from the room, wrenched her tab from the handle and slammed the door behind her. Running footsteps faded along the corridor.

Danny lay uncaring. He was overwhelmed. After several minutes he rose and tidied the bed, then climbed beneath the coverlet. His hair was damp. Slowly he calmed. The simple comfort of the bed, reminiscent of childhood, compounded his swollen happiness. He understood now how Bluey and Norman had teased him with their secret, why Norman grinned like the cat that had stolen the cream. As Bluey had told him truthfully, the moon had turned blue, he would never get another berth like this. A girl's cry, faint as a gnat, reached his ears. With a responsive smile he turned on the pillow and tugged the quilt about his face.

'Hello, new boy.'

In the first minutes of sleep Danny started and struck his head against the bed-board. She had switched on the light and stood above him, a tall girl in blouse and denims, honey-blond hair

cropped at the shoulders. Danny stared up, black-eyed in the lamp-light.

'You're a good-looking one,' she said, and reached for the coverlet.

In modesty Danny gripped it to his throat.

'Let go,' she said simply. 'Let go.'

Slowly he did so. The girl pulled the quilt to his ankles. Covering himself with his hands Danny lay still.

The girl liked what she saw. 'Oh, yes!' she said softly and bit her bottom lip. Her eyes devoured his chest and sturdy limbs. 'Oh, yes!'

Kicking off her shoes she half lay on the bed and began kissing his neck and shoulders. Her tongue caressed his skin, teeth tugged gently at his ear. Danny reached up to embrace her, but his caresses were ignored. The girl's mouth travelled down his arms and across the silky-haired muscles of his chest. She devoured his waist and hips. Snail-like tracks from her lips and tongue glinted in the lamplight. On tenterhooks Danny waited, but his sex was at best of passing interest as she moved down to his strong thighs and knees and feet.

'Mmm!' Her eyes would scarcely focus. With urgent hands she gripped the muscle beneath his arms and pressed herself against him. 'Turn over.'

Almost conquered by desire Danny did so. With murmurs and sighs of pleasure the girl commenced a thorough examination of his shoulders and back and legs.

Danny could stand no more. Turning, he caught her by the arms and pulled her to the bed. His mouth was upon her blouse, his hands ran over her denimed thighs. Roughly he fumbled with buttons. Strength answering strength she pulled away and delivered a stinging blow across his bare buttocks. Danny was startled and looked up angrily.

'Now be a good boy!' she said like an affectionate schoolmistress.

'What the bloody hell did you do that for?'

'Ssshhh!' She lowered her head again. Mollified by the caresses of her mouth and soon again strung to bursting point, Danny lay and let her do as she desired. Several minutes later her breathing quickened. Her teeth fastened painfully on muscle at the back of his shoulder. With a series of gasps and bites and quick spasms she clutched him close.

Danny turned to embrace her. She lay uncaring. Again his caresses aroused no response and a minute or two later she rose from the bed. Her blouse was scarcely ruffled, her hair hung in a smooth cascade. As she stepped into her shoes she trailed slim fingers over his chest and thigh.

'Beautiful!' She smiled slowly and turned away.

For the third time that night the corridor light appeared in the doorway, a white tag rattled against the handle. Then she was gone.

Danny fell asleep, his lust unsatisfied. But some time in the middle of the night, he did not know when, a rocking of the mattress and a slim hand on his hip roused him into half-consciousness.

'Mm,' said a voice. A smell of perfume was in his nostrils, a young shape snuggled against his chest.

Without completely waking Danny folded her in his arms. Easily, drowsily, he made love to her, then fell asleep again.

The room was dark, he never even saw the girl, and when he woke in the morning she was gone.

Each dressed in blue overalls, the three young men met at breakfast. The girls were all about them and they did not feel free to talk. Danny gazed around the kitchen and saw two of his visitors from the night before. For all the notice they took of him the events might never have occurred. He looked down and gave his attention to the cereals, bacon and black pudding, toast and marmalade, which constituted breakfast in that household.

As they walked to the farm buildings the three men exchanged reminiscences of the night. A shadow was beneath Norman's eyes. He yawned and grinned.

'Great, eh! That redhead with the bristols! Have you had that redhead, Bluey? I thought she was going to eat me alive! What a raver!' Nineteen years old, his enthusiasm was unflagging.

'Yeah, a couple of days ago.' Bluey jumped a puddle. 'Last night it was that thirty-year-old with funny tastes – you know, curly hair and legs up to her armpits – then a couple of teenagers.' He jumped another puddle and didn't quite make it. His companions were splashed. 'I tell you, much more of this and I'll be walking bow-legged.'

'Go on, you're just an old man,' Norman teased him. 'Eh, Danny?'

'Suits me,' Danny said. 'Twelve months in Ravenhurst and I'd put a tail on an ostrich.' He considered for a moment. 'I don't know what goes on here, but I couldn't make head nor tail of a couple last night.' He told them what had happened.

Bluey laughed. 'It's just the same with Norman and me. Half of them you can't tell if they're mad for you or they hate you. One minute they're shouting out for more, the next they're pushing you off as if you've got leprosy or syph. Can't make their minds up. What do they come for if they don't want a bit of the big feller?'

George was waiting for them in the farmyard. As he approached, Danny suddenly realized that although he found the foreman comic, there was something slightly menacing, something indefinably sinister about that square and masculine figure. It was nothing she had said or done, she wore plain, working clothes, her manner was bluff as always. He could not put his finger on it.

Bluey and Norman had finished repairing the wall the previous afternoon. Now they were split up, one to sweep out a store, the other to clear branches and turfs from a blocked drain across the fields. Danny was sent off on the tractor to resume his ploughing. Brambles grew in the hedges, the strengthening sun drove early mist from the hollows. As he drove to the field he saw small groups of women working about the farm and gardens.

And so commenced the most remarkable and happy weeks of Danny's life. His eyes and cheeks glowed from the fresh air and exercise. The house was well-ordered and comfortable. He had good friends. Each night was filled with adventures that called on all the reserves of his young manhood.

Only rarely did one of the older women seek male companionship – and never, to his relief, the eighty-year-olds. The thought gave him goose-pimples. But night after night, as they hung their white tags on his door, he was visited by the younger women and girls – some, he estimated, little more than fifteen years old. For a spirited young man, particularly one who had spent some months in prison, it was a fantasy come true and Danny was idyllically happy. His only anxiety – almost comical – was that when such unaccustomed demands were made his strength might fail. Following Norman's advice he tucked into the sustaining and body-building diet with which they so practically provided them.

Danny wondered if the girls and young women who visited their rooms were on the pill, or taking other contraceptive precautions. The number of pregnant girls prompted him to think that they were not, or not all. The thought gave a new dimension to his coupling, and so far as Danny was concerned a deeper delight. He already had an illegitimate child. The thought of his swarming semen creating new life in these girls, added to his understandable young arrogance and pride.

When Danny had been five days on the farm, the seed which some other man had planted was brought to fruition. As they sat in the lounge before dinner, the girl who was so heavily pregnant gave a little cry and held a hand to her enormous stomach. Her name was Sophie and she was beautiful, a thin face and halo of soft hair. Though they sat half-way across the room the three men heard her whispered words.

‘I think it’s started.’

Amid a small flurry, friends supported her from the room.

‘I wonder who that poor bastard’s dad was, eh?’ said Bluey.

‘Nine months from now there’ll be a few with snub-noses and curly brown hair, I can tell you that.’ Norman laughed. ‘And I’m just in the mood for another half-dozen. Roll on bed-time. Eh, boys?’

The labour did not last long. Danny heard nothing, but in his room at the end of the corridor Bluey was disturbed by a series of distant shrieks, then the loud, unmistakable wail of a baby. He was not alone and it did not occur to him to check the hour, but afterwards he estimated it would have been some time around eleven or midnight.

At breakfast the matter was not mentioned.

‘The kiddie last night,’ Bluey called to a group at the next table, ‘is it a boy or a girl?’

‘A boy,’ one answered shortly.

‘How are they?’ Danny said. ‘Everything go all right?’

There was a momentary pause.

‘No,’ another girl answered. ‘I’m afraid not. The child wasn’t strong.’

Bluey’s eyes expressed surprise. ‘Sounded pretty healthy to me,’ he said. ‘Pair of lungs on him like a factory siren.’

'I think you must be mistaken,' the girl said. 'I don't know about crying – he wasn't strong, anyway. The nurse had to rush him off to hospital.'

'You'll be right.' Bluey scratched through his fair beard. 'Sorry to hear that. How's his mother?'

'Sophie's fine, thank you. Not very happy, as you'd expect, but it was an easy birth. She'll be out and about in no time.'

The girls resumed their interrupted breakfast and shortly afterwards the three men set off for their work.

As far as possible the farm was run on the lines of self-sufficiency. They grew their own vegetables. Old cabbage stalks and tomato plants were flung on the compost heap. Milk, butter and cheese were produced from their own herd. Slurry grew fine grass and silage. Potato peelings and whey went to feed the pigs. They raised their own calves and porkers. The innards went to the Alsations and Doberman pinschers which roamed the farm. Bones were crushed to make meal which enriched the soil and grew the splendid vegetables in the kitchen garden, and roses which clambered about the front of the house. They even grew wheat and ground their own flour in a stone mill on a stream that ran down the hills.

Three or four days later Sophie rejoined the lively society of Pebbledene. She was a little pale and sad, which was not to be wondered at, for the men learned that her baby had died in hospital. They did not like to speak of it and were pleased to see that soon her spirits revived. In fact they were a little surprised, for so complete was her recovery that a week after the birth it was impossible to detect any difference between Sophie and the other young women of the farm. Her eyes were clear, her cheeks glowed, her hair was set prettily. Gaily she laughed and hung an arm around the neck of a companion. Superficially, at least, the tragedy might never have occurred.

A few mornings later Danny sat with Bluey and Norman in a corner of the barn. Rain lashed the yard outside.

'It's great this place,' Bluey said. 'But Norman and me have been here for a month now. We haven't seen a soul from outside, not to speak to. The idea was supposed to be rehabilitation, getting back into the swing of things. But looking at it one way, all we've done is exchange one prison for another.'

'I'd rather have this place than Ravenhurst,' Norman said.

'Of course, who wouldn't. But aren't you getting to feel a bit shut in, cut off from the rest of the world. I mean, they don't take any notice of us here, not most of the time. Don't get me wrong, there's nobody likes a good fuck better than me, and all these women around – but that's all I am here, nothing but a fucking machine!'

Norman laughed. 'And you're complaining!'

'Yeah! You know what I feel like – a toy. A cock and a pair of hands for working on the farm. I mean, wouldn't you like a game of football, a drink with the boys, buy yourself a few new togs and go to the pictures?'

'And go back to crummy lodgings,' Norman said, 'and no family, and no job, and sign on at the employment office, and hang about the streets, and get into trouble again?'

'You're looking on the black side,' Bluey said. 'It wasn't so bad, we usually managed to pick up a few honest bob. We went to the gym, picked up a couple of judies at the dance. Wouldn't you like to see their faces, have a laugh and a couple of jars before you get them into the sack?'

'I'm not fussy,' Norman said. 'I reckon nobody's ever had a better month's screwing in the history of the world.' He grunted, 'Oo-oo!' raising his forearms and jerking his chest in a manner to represent hard copulation. 'That's me, my ambition in life – a great big fucking machine!'

Danny laughed.

'Well, I'm going to see Ilsa tonight,' Bluey said. 'See if we can't get a couple of days away and then come back. Bit of a refresher.'

The rainstorm had passed. George called them from the door of the barn. The three men rose and returned to their interrupted tasks.

That evening, before dinner, Bluey and Norman – for where one led the other would follow – approached Miss Savidge, and for a time were engaged in conversation.

'She thinks something might be worked out,' Bluey said as they returned and dropped into a chair and settee at Danny's side. 'She's got an address in the city. Go off for a few days and if things don't work out we can come back again.'

'Hope it's not too soon, that's all,' said Norman. He nodded to

indicate a girl who sat across the room. 'See that black-haired one. I had her last night. Cor! I hope she comes again tonight.' He was cheery and eager. With his wrinkled brow and cropped brown curls he reminded Danny again of a young bullock. 'Roll on bed-time. Eh, boys? Get in, there!'

As usual he went upstairs a while before the others. Danny and Bluey followed a little before ten. At Danny's door they paused.

'Ah, well, here we go. Wonder what the night's going to bring.'

'I can tell you what I fancy,' Bluey said. Fair-bearded and blue-eyed he paused to get it right. 'A few jars, a game of cards with the boys, a tune on the old squeeze-box – and then just one, seventeen-year-old with dark hair.'

'Like the old trawling days.'

'On a good night, yeah.' Bluey hitched his trousers. 'Not that I'm complaining, mind. Better than a slap in the face with a wet cod.'

'You could say. I'm in the mood tonight.'

Bluey laughed and punched him in the chest. 'Dirty old man, you're as bad as Norman! See you, Danny.'

'Yeah, see you.' Danny watched his companion walk along the corridor, then turned into his room.

In the fortnight he had been at Pebbledene, Danny had found that his desire came in waves. Some nights, until the first girl arrived and he smelled her hair and felt her warmth, he did not particularly care. Other nights he could scarcely wait.

This evening, as he had said, was one of the latter and soon he was tumbling with a red-haired girl of about twenty, who at first refused his advances, then wrapped her limbs about him, then fought him off like a wildcat. Afterwards, however, she was affectionate, and in time was followed by a second girl, and then a third, soft-spoken and barely sixteen. By one o'clock he lay alone, and sank into an innocent sleep that lasted until morning.

As he sat at breakfast in clean overalls – for their rooms were kept immaculate, their laundry was washed regularly – Danny was surprised by the non-appearance of Bluey and Norman.

'I think they went off,' a young woman told him. 'I'm not sure. Ask Ilsa.'

He had no need to do so, for Miss Savidge sought him out. She wore her formal prison suit, hair set sternly to the nape of her neck. Bright spectacles flashed as she set down a cup of coffee.

'They spoke to me last night,' she said. 'They probably told you. Bluey was a bit restless, it's understandable. Rowena had to take some of the girls into town early, so they took the chance of a lift.'

'Will they be staying at that place you told them about?' Danny said.

'That's right. We don't usually have people here for more than a month or so. Gives them a chance to earn a bit of money. The girls like it.' She smiled. 'The boys too, I think.'

'They won't be coming back?' Danny said.

'I hope not. That's the name of the game, rehabilitation. Two or three hundred pounds in their pockets, a place to stay, time to look around. We do what we can to help them find jobs.' She pursed her lips and took a mouthful of coffee. 'They were sorry to miss you – sent their best wishes! What was it Bluey said – "Tell him to look us up in the Fox and Sickle." Would that be right?'

'The Fox and Sickle, yeah.' Danny nodded. 'Thanks.'

She returned to her breakfast companions. Danny's appetite had gone. He pushed away the last of his bacon and black-pudding and picked listlessly at a slice of toast. In prison he had been used to people coming and going. In his private life, too, friends had drifted in and out – drinking companions, women, men with whom he shared digs. But with Bluey and Norman it had been different. They had shared an adventure together. Even though the pair were inseparable friends they were a trio, three men among all these women, three of a kind, all young and fit, well-built and cock-happy, swapping stories, living and eating and working together. Now they had gone and he felt desolate, very alone. After two or three minutes Danny rose, his breakfast unfinished. It was raining. He pulled up the hood of his jacket and wandered away past the orchard to begin his morning's work.

The next two nights brought little pleasure. The girls came as always. The fact that he was now the only man among eighty or a hundred females brought no impossible influx. But alone – with no Bluey and Norman along the corridor, no one with whom to laugh and swap ribald experiences in the morning – his enthusiasm waned. The girls arrived, he enjoyed them passingly, they went away again. Midnight came, and one o'clock. Faintly, every fifteen minutes, he heard chimes from the grandfather clock in the hall. For no reason to

which he could put a name, Danny lay unsleeping.

On the third night he decided to go downstairs and make a cup of tea, see if he could find a bun or a biscuit in one of the tins in the kitchen. Pulling on a pair of jeans he let himself from the room. The lights had been switched off. In the darkness he descended the grand staircase to the hall. Pulling shut the door of the breakfast room behind him, he switched on the light.

The scrubbed tables were laid for breakfast. He made his way between them and turned the handle of the kitchen door. To his surprise it was locked. He tugged it briefly and rattled the lock. There was no doubt. Still, where there was a lock there would doubtless be a key. He felt the ledges and looked around the room for a likely hiding-place. The shelves of the Welsh dresser were not forthcoming, nor were the drawers. Several minutes produced no key. Danny stopped searching and hesitated for a moment, then returned to a bundle of kebab skewers that lay in one of the drawers. He tugged one out and examined it, thin and of stainless steel, with a ring at one end. As a tool it was not ideal but it would do. He bent it into shape. The lock was simple and though he was far from an expert cracksman Danny thought he would be able to open it and lock the door behind him again once he had made the cup of tea. He had just started, however, the steel point scratching against the brass tumblers, when the door behind him opened.

'Oh, it's you, Danny. Whatever are you doing?'

Barefoot and bare-chested he turned guiltily. It was one of the more mature women, aged perhaps thirty-five or forty. He did not know her name and to the best of his knowledge she had not visited his room. She wore a light dressing-gown above a filmy nightdress, loosened brown hair hung on her shoulders. In one hand she carried a weapon, a thick club, like a truncated baseball bat. An alert Doberman pinscher trotted past and sniffed at Danny's legs.

'I couldn't sleep.' He hid the skewer behind his back. 'I was going to make a cup of tea but the door's locked.'

'You should have let one of us know.' She laid the club aside on a table. 'I thought it was an intruder.' She retreated into some room beyond the hall and returned carrying a key. 'You go back upstairs and I'll bring you a cup.'

She let herself into the large kitchen and set a kettle beneath the tap. Danny doubled the skewer in half and tucked it from sight into

his tight back pocket, and followed. Cookers and scrubbed work-tops stood about the red-tiled floor. Unlike the rest of the house the room was not centrally heated. The September night made the air chill.

‘What do you keep the door locked for?’

She busied herself with the teapot and lifted a milk jug from the fridge. ‘We had a break-in once,’ she said. ‘Through these windows here. Before we got the dogs. Rowena’s a bit sensitive about it.’

Danny shivered and rubbed his shoulders. The tiles were icy beneath his feet.

‘Go on,’ she repeated. ‘You go back upstairs and I’ll bring it to you. It’s no trouble. Do you want something to eat?’

‘Yeah, I wouldn’t mind a biscuit or one of those morning buns,’ he said.

‘I’ll speak to one of the girls tomorrow,’ she said. ‘Get them to leave a kettle and tray in your room.’

‘Would that be OK?’

‘Of course.’ She smiled. ‘Have to look after the men. Now go on. I’ll be up in a minute.’

Danny padded back upstairs, pulled off his jeans and climbed into bed. Soon he was warm. In less than five minutes the woman arrived with a steaming mug of tea and a plate of assorted biscuits. She moved a chair to the side of the bed and set them down. As she did so the weight of her breasts hung against the thin material of her nightdress. The sight and brief relationship awoke in Danny a spasm of desire that he had not felt since his friends departed.

‘Do you fancy—’ He stirred and glanced at the bed beside him. In the half-light he was handsome. His dark eyes glinted above the short moustache, the soft quilt nestled against muscular shoulders. Temptingly he raised a corner. ‘Come on.’

Her smile froze. ‘Thank you for the invitation,’ she said. ‘I’m flattered, but no. That sort of thing doesn’t appeal to me at all.’ She retreated to the door. ‘Enjoy your tea. Goodnight.’

Danny was left flushing. After all, he thought, it was one thing to have a good time with a girl who climbed into bed with you – even though she rejected your advances. It was something quite different to say to a kindly woman a dozen years older than yourself, whom you had known for five minutes, ‘Hey, I feel randy, how about

coming into bed so I can . . .' He grinned wryly and reached for the mug of tea.

The following day, when Danny returned to the house for morning coffee, he was delighted to discover that he was no longer the only man on the farm. A young prisoner, again a man he knew slightly, sat at a table in worn blue overalls. His name was Sam Byker, a Geordie, with a cheery grin and a shock of sandy hair. He was a couple of years younger than Danny, a strong lad with a muscular neck and hands like hams. Strong as the rest of them, Danny thought, for the work they expected out of him.

Sam's eyes lit up and he reached forward to grip Danny's hand in both of his own.

'Hey, man!' he exclaimed in a whisper, when it would not be overheard. 'What a place!' Prison-starved eyes roved over the room full of young women. 'All these skirts. Look at that one over there – what a bramah, eh! What's the score, like?'

'I'll tell you after.' Danny looked up as a girl with downy cheeks set a mug of coffee before him and filled up the plate of buns. 'Thanks.' He remembered her brief passion then cry of 'pig, pig, pig' as he forced it to a conclusion. She ignored him, her eyes were for Sam.

The sandy-haired lad watched as she walked away. 'Cor, I'll come my load if I have to sit here much longer,' he said.

'Just wait,' Danny said. 'I'll tell you on the way to work.'

Rowena rose and clapped her hands for silence. 'Girls!' Eye hooded and hair coiled immaculately, she looked around. Slowly the hubbub was stilled. 'You see we have a new young man with us today. One of Ilsa's finds. He'll be staying with us and working on the farm for a month or so. His name's Sam Byker.' She looked across. 'Stand up, Sam.'

Awkwardly he did so. Forty pairs of eyes looked him over.

'A strong young man, as you see, like Danny there – who I understand is a great success. There may be someone else coming in a couple of days to bring us back to strength, we're not quite sure yet. Thank you, Sam. I hope you'll have a happy time with us here at Pebbledene.' She nodded to indicate he might sit down again. 'All right, girls.'

Slowly conversation was resumed. Danny and Sam, ignored by the women, tucked into their cakes and morning coffee.

'Hey, man, you're joking!' Sam stopped by the orchard wall and looked at Danny with disbelieving eyes. 'Every night?'

Danny had not, like Bluey and Norman, kept the new arrival in suspense. He nodded. 'Always two, usually three. My first night it was four.'

'And all you have to do is lie there and wait for them to climb in beside you?'

'Well,' Danny grinned. 'I think they're looking for a bit more than that.'

'Bloody right!' Sam stared into his face. 'Go on, I don't believe you!'

'Tenner on if it you like.' Danny looked towards the farm buildings but George was not to be seen. 'I'll tell you what you will find, though. They're not the same as the judies you shagged up there in Newcastle.'

'How's that, then?'

'You'll find out for yourself. I promise you this, though.' Danny clapped him on the back. 'You want your oats, you've come to the right place. You look a likely lad. Tell me what you think in the morning.'

That afternoon they were loading bullocks for the market. Danny and Sam helped to drive the skittish animals from field to field, and finally into pens from where they were driven up a ramp into a large cattle truck. The back was secured, with a roar the huge vehicle moved off down the uneven track.

'Well, that's another lot away.' George wiped strong hands on the seat of her trousers and sniffed hard. Danny looked into the square, butch face and saw a glimmer of tears.

'You like the animals,' he said.

'Eh? No.' She denied it. 'They're just cows.'

'Go on, I've seen you talking to them over the gate.'

'Well,' with work-roughened hands she felt in her pockets. 'Maybe you get a bit fond of them sometimes.'

'What about the slaughtering, then?' Danny said. 'For the house, like. Do you do it yourself or do you get someone in?'

'We don't do any slaughtering here.' She blew her nose vigorously.

'But I thought it was all your own meat – pigs and veal, chickens. You know, self-sufficiency.'

'Oh, yes.' She examined her handkerchief and tucked it away. 'Well, it is. But we don't do the killing. It's not legal. They do that at the abattoir and bring the meat back.'

'What, bones and guts and all?'

'Well, they're ours, aren't they. No point in letting someone else have them.' She kicked her boot against the gatepost to rid it of muck. 'Good nourishment for the dogs and pigs. Calcium for the cattle feed, fertiliser for the garden.'

The truck turned a distant corner and was lost in the encircling woodland. The breeze carried the noise of the engine to their ears as the driver changed down to climb the hill to the pass.

Danny and Sam followed George back to the farm buildings. Twenty-two years old and six months in prison, Sam could not get Danny's promise of the night out of his thoughts.

'Is that right?' he said. 'You're not kidding, are you?'

'No.' Danny looked into the frank young face. 'I'm not kidding.'

And by ten-thirty that night, as his door closed for the second time, the perspiring young Geordie knew that he had not been telling a lie.

Two days later, as Rowena had forecast, they were joined by a third prisoner from Ravenhurst. He was called Brendon, the twenty-year-old son of a travelling family. He was slimmer than the other men, with dusky skin and crow-black gypsy curls. While he was in prison his family had been wiped out in a hideous crash at a railway crossing.

Together the three young men formed a trio, as Danny had done in his early days with Bluey and Norman. Yet it was not quite the same, for then everything was new and dew-fresh. He was the new arrival and friends had welcomed him into the adventure. Now, only twenty-four years old, he was the most experienced of the trio. As Sam and Brendon exclaimed each morning over the pleasures and plungings, struggles and scratchings of the night, he felt he had heard it all before. Still the girls' visits brought heady delights, but he began to feel stale. After the first visitor had gone he found himself hoping there would be no more, that he would be left alone to sleep and form some plan of what he would do when the time came

for him to leave the farm. Like Bluey, he began to feel hemmed-in and claustrophobic. Though it was a delightful trap, he began to think longingly of normal friendships and a few glasses of beer, a walk along the High Street on Saturday morning, and as the last nights of his month arrived Danny roused himself and forced his body and mind to the furthest extremes of sensual pleasure of which they were capable. As if they understood or were still more deeply aroused by his actions, the girls responded. Until two or three o'clock each morning his room was occupied. Danny was determined that when he came to leave Pebbledene he would not look back for the rest of his life and curse himself for a lost opportunity.

One morning at breakfast his eyes were smudged with tiredness.

'Christ, what were you up to last night?' Sam laughed.

'Same as you and Brendon, I imagine,' Danny said and smiled slowly.

One of the girls who had been with him in the early hours served coffee. For the first time she appeared to acknowledge what had occurred between them, or at least she looked pointedly into his face and ran slow eyes over his limbs. Being unobserved, Danny ran a familiar hand over her seat and down the back of her thigh. Sharply the girl stepped back, slopping the coffee jug, and moved away down the table. Danny made a wry face and watched her go.

Before dinner that evening Ilsa took him aside to an empty settee in the lounge. She wore a dress of silky material and a cardigan. The room was filling with girls dressed for dinner. Tidy in borrowed clothes, Sam and Brendon sat by the curtained window, idly turning through the day's papers and waiting.

'Well,' Ilsa said, 'You've been with us a month now, Danny. How do you feel about it?'

'Have I enjoyed it, do you mean?' He looked down at his knees, uneasy at discussing such a matter with a woman old enough to be his mother. 'Yes, it's been great.'

'And do you feel ready now to set off back to the city?'

'Well, I . . .' he shrugged uncertainly. Ahead everything was a void. 'I wouldn't mind staying a few days longer.'

'I'd have to see Rowena about that. I'm not too sure. Anyway, you've got the prison out of your system and some money in your pocket. That should help a bit.'

'Yeah.' He nodded.

'But you still haven't got anywhere to stay. I have a few addresses in the city. How would you like it if I fixed up some place in the meantime. Give you a roof over your head while you have time to look around.'

'That would be great.'

'I can't guarantee it would be the same place as I sent your friends - Bluey and Frank, was it?'

'Bluey and Norman.'

'Norman - that's right.' She paused reminiscently. 'So is that fixed, then? I'll do some phoning around and let you know what I come up with.' She rose and smiled, spectacles flashing. 'See if we can't arrange for you to stay a few days longer. I know the girls would like that.'

Danny flushed with pleasure. As he rejoined Sam and Brendon he told them what had been arranged.

'I hope you can stay on a bit, kidder,' Sam said.

'Yeah, it's great,' Brendon said. 'Like the three musketeers.'

'Plenty of ammunition?' Danny said.

'Aye, plenty of musket an' all,' Sam boasted. 'Hey, you see that redhead over there—'

His reminiscence was interrupted by a soft beating of the gong in the hall. The lamps were lit, the September dusk gathered across the farm.

No more was said of his departure that evening and a little before ten o'clock, as for the past thirty days in Danny's case, the three young friends climbed the broad stairs to their rooms.

Dinner had been substantial. Brendon belched freely and picked a strand of meat from his teeth. 'I'm not used to all this grub,' he said.

'You want to tuck in, boy,' Sam said. 'Gives you the urge. Me, anyroad. I've almost got a hard-on before we start.'

'Mucky beggar!' The gypsy eyes danced. 'Still, no need for boxing-gloves in this place, eh!'

They had stopped outside Danny's door. Their words reminded him of Norman.

'See you, kidder.' The bull-necked and sandy-headed young Geordie grinned cheerfully. 'If any of the bastards give you trouble just flick 'em over your shoulder and get stuck into the next one.'

Danny laughed. 'Yes, see you, boys.' He let himself into his bedroom and his two companions continued along the thick carpet to their own rooms further along the corridor.

At ten o'clock, as always, the light suddenly went out. It took a moment for his eyes to accustom themselves to the glow of the bedside lamp. Danny brushed his teeth, undressed and climbed into bed.

Eagerly he awaited his first visitor. His vigorous youth – added to the easy male companionship of Sam and Brendon, a day's recuperation, and the fact that this could be his last night on the farm – promised an evening of delight. Hot beneath the quilt he watched the door and waited.

It opened. Two girls entered, slim as dreams. Their hair shone in the corridor lights. The door closed. Danny shivered with expectation. Two of them! At the side of his bed they stopped.

'Hello, Danny.' He knew the voice well. 'We thought we'd make it a party. You don't mind, do you?'

Feminine clothes fell silkily to the floor.

'No.' His voice caught in his throat. 'No, not at all.'

'After all,' the first girl slipped in beside him, 'you're special.'

His knees melted as a soft hand caressed him.

The second girl moved round to the far side of the bed. Danny turned to welcome her. She was naked, a sylph in the dimness. Momentarily he could not make out what was happening. The girl appeared to be stretching up. By the time he saw the club in her hand, a club like a truncated baseball bat, it was too late. With a splitting crack and an explosion of red and white and black it struck him on the side of the head. For a dizzy, fragmentary moment he felt himself whirling down an endless tunnel – then he knew no more.

When Danny's eyes flickered open again it was to find himself sprawled naked on a cold red floor. He felt so sick that he could scarcely move. His ankles were bound, his hands tied behind him. A ball of some material had been thrust into his mouth and gagged there with a strip of cloth. He felt himself half-choking and snorted for air through his nose.

As his eyes focussed he realized that he lay in the farmhouse kitchen. All around him, forming a circle a couple of metres back, was a mass of girls. Some curled on cushions to keep their legs from

the chill floor, some stood, others had climbed on tables to see from the back. Many had received his lovemaking. They were excited and chatted briefly like birds. Their eyes were bright. Some wore night-dresses and stood with arms about each other. One had untied the ribbons of her friend's bosom and rested her hand on the soft breasts within.

George, the farm foreman, stood near the front. She wore a plain corduroy skirt with a shirt and tie. With lined, dispassionate eyes she regarded Danny. Nearby, the two old women sat on chairs. One, her hair braided for the night, mumbled at a cake. The other grinned with false teeth and dipped her head towards Danny like a scraggy bird of prey.

At the back of the crowd Ilsa had thrown up the long lid of the deep-freeze and was poking inside.

'We're getting a bit low,' she called.

'How low?' Rowena was still dressed for dinner. She looked up with one bright blue eye and smiled. At the end of the day her make-up was slightly smudged, her right eyelid drooped heavily.

Some of the girls stood aside.

'Well, not too bad,' Ilsa said. 'We're almost out of black and white puddings. But we've got a couple of haunches of,' she consulted the labels, 'Bluey. They'd be nice on Sunday.'

'I was keeping them for that,' one of the cooks interposed.

'And some shoulders and forearms. Two or three rounds of leg – Kevin.'

'Who was Kevin?' someone called.

'You've got a short memory. Kevin Mackenzie, that big Scotschap.'

'What thighs he had on him,' Ilsa said. 'Do you remember – look!' She lifted a joint and clapped it, a heavy round of meat silvered with frost. A bone ran through the centre, a circle of skin bound it together. 'Solid Scotch beef! Beautiful!' She bent again into the smoking cold. 'A side of ribs – Norman. Half of Sophie's brat.' She tumbled the hard-frozen meat aside. 'Plenty of livers, though. Four hearts – haven't had braised heart for a time, cookie.' She shut the lid and returned to the circle of girls.

Danny caught enough of the conversation to understand its import. Weakly he buckled and looked around with terrified eyes.

From the floor he could not see the bright cleavers and assorted

plastic bags that lay on a scrubbed worktop.

Two children, little girls, were brought before him. Danny stared up into their sweet faces. Rowena bent to talk to them.

'This is a man, darlings,' she said. 'You know what a man is.'

Bright eyes regarded him, fascinated by his face and size and the difference from themselves. The little girls nodded.

'Well, they have their uses, but in the end they're no better than pigs. And you know what happens to pigs.'

'They get made into bacon,' said one little girl.

'That's right. And what do men get made into?'

'Meat,' said the little girl.

'And black puddings,' said her companion.

'Good.' Rowena smiled affectionately and patted her on the head.

'I like men,' said the first little girl. 'Do we have to make him into meat?'

'Yes, darling. He's served his purpose, you see. He's no longer any use to us. And if we let him go he would just go about the place telling lies about us all. Then nasty people would come and start asking questions. Anyway, you like meat, don't you?'

'Yes. With Yorkshire pudding.'

'And roast potatoes.'

The innocent eyes shone.

The children were ushered back to their mothers.

Danny made noises behind his gag and writhed on the kitchen floor, rolling from side to side. A murmur of appreciation rose from the watching girls. A hook was thrust through the cords that bound his feet. By means of a small block and tackle he was hoisted to a U-bolt in the ceiling. His long, powerful, swimmer's body hung in the air. Still he kicked and swung like a pendulum. A white enamel bucket was set beneath. Two girls seized his shoulders and held him still. Another grasped a handful of hair and tugged back his head. His throat was stretched tight. The watchers had fallen silent. Dark-eyed and moustached, looking even younger than his years, Danny Lamb saw the bottom half of a figure approaching. There was no mistaking those sturdy legs and workman's gait. It was George, the farm foreman. She had put on a striped blue apron. In her hand she carried a long butcher's knife, the blade worn concave with years of whetting.

Wanted: dead or alive

Mother-in-law has been with us now for close on five years. Her original stay was scheduled to last for a week, two at the outside. Odd thing, really: she came here just after her husband – Ann's father – died in the most embarrassing circumstances. Far be it from me to rake up ancient muck, but for the sake of narrative exactitude, it must be reported that he did have a heart attack whilst in bed with some teenage strumpet. It's not hard to guess what sort of a fright the poor wee lass had, when she realized she was copulating with a corpse; but she did at least have the presence of mind to call for an ambulance. And that was how she was found: sobbing hysterically, wearing nought but a pretty hair-ribbon, and with Dead Dad on 't'bed'.

That was the way the story went, anyhow, and if it isn't true, then at least it's juicy enough for the neighbours to tattle over as they jog round the supermarkets or squat over a lunchtime pint. So that it was only natural for Marie – Ann's old lady – to flee the locality post haste, and to spend a few days with us, maybe till she could find alternative accommodation nearby, or even look for a place out of town somewhere: you know the kind of thing, start a new life or whatever. Not that matters worked out quite that way; but I'm not taking the whole hundred per cent blame for that.

See, first of all there was Marie herself. Now you don't have to tell me about the mental picture most folk conjure up when one of these music-hall comics starts his mother-in-law routine. The universal impression seems to be that of a great, gross, overblown ugly old ratbag, straddling a broomstick and winging through the skies breathing fire and shrieking out songs of damnation . . . yes of course it's silly, and in my own case, doubly so, because at the time, Marie was just thirty-five. That's right! Imagine it! The wife's mother, less than three years my senior!

And you can take my word for it, she was – still is – a very

handsome woman indeed. At first, I naturally didn't take a lot of notice of her, not in the physical sense – there was too much for me to arrange, what with the funeral and the fuss and the general upheaval in our house. But when the first week had slid by, and life was beginning to sag back into its monotonous groove, it occurred to me that I had seen many, many women with less voluptuous bodies and not even half as pretty. Maybe pretty is the wrong word: I don't want to give the impression that she's the chocolate-box model-girl type. She has this long hair, past shoulder-length, that glistens in artificial light. I suppose you'd call it ash blonde, but the light brings out these scintillating streaks of red: quite beautiful really! Her eyes are hazel, and wide – oh so wide . . . And with these long eyelashes that owe absolutely nothing to artifice. The mouth is large – there is simply no other word for it, it's just plain large, and that happens to suit me, because I like women with great wide lips and big white gleaming teeth. Like Marie.

Talking of gorgeous women, just a few words on the subject of her body. Not that she's blessed with *Vogue Magazine* proportions; but that too suits me fine. Skinny birds turn me right off. But in its sheer animal allure, Marie's figure needs a lot of beating . . . Oh those firm but yielding breasts of hers! That thick waistline, those solid hips! And the strong legs – the cruelly delightful strong legs – the pleasurable pressure of her excellent thighs—

But I could rhapsodise ad infinitum – what I must stress is that here is a woman of my own generation, mother to my ailing young wife, and a much, much better sexual proposition. Not, I hasten to add, that either of us propositioned the other. That was not the case at all, I assure you. Thinking back, it was a sort of mutual acquiescence, a tacit acceptance of the carnal attraction we had for each other. She'd been with us for – what? – around six weeks, and we were sat one night watching some indifferent programme on television. Ann, of course, was in bed as usual, that maddening expression of saintliness on her thin, white face, and looking twelve rather than seventeen . . . Anyhow, the evening's trash came to an end, and Marie and I got out of our chairs and – d'you know, it was the strangest thing! – we just kind of reached for each other. Eerie, you might say: for neither of us spoke so much as a syllable. But we embraced in a kiss that seemed to search out each and every one of my nerve-endings; her tongue speared between my lips and past my

teeth in endless hot thrusts, heightening my desire for her until self-control was absolutely out of the question; and suddenly we were pulling at each other's clothing in the darkened, stuffy little room . . .

But why go on? That is how it happened, so-help-me; and thus it continued for several months. I was totally and inextricably enslaved by that erotic body of hers, by those accommodating lips so wetly-red, so passionate, so demanding. I would tuck Ann in each evening, exhort her to get better soon, and leave her lying palely there between the sheets. Then I would hurry down to her mother, who would wait for me with that look in her wide, wide eyes, a look that minced my reason into milk and mush. She became the very motive for my existence: I found myself wishing away the daylight hours so that I could return home and possess, and be possessed by Marie's wanton body.

During those months, I began to form plans: for it became clear that Ann had to die. But her passing must not cause any suspicion, nor any shadow of misgiving in legal quarters. Ann's father had left several hundred thousand pounds in trust for her – and incidentally nothing for Marie – but nobody could touch the cash till Ann turned twenty-five.

Unless she died; whereupon the money would come automatically to me.

To us. I would take the fortune, and I would take Marie, and we would whisk away to some tropical playground, and we would enjoy each other's fleshly whims for ever and ever.

Nearly a year passed before I decided to confide in Marie. And she was all for it, believe me. The only problem was the demise of Ann: how to arrange same. And as it turned out, it was an academic problem, because Ann didn't die, Ann is still alive; still virtually bed-ridden – but alive. You see, Marie and I had a disagreement: she had, she informed me, tired of me. Just like that – no alleviation of the blow, no subtleties, nothing. More: she said I was a bore. A 'crashing bore' was the expression she used. I had, it seemed, turned into a groveller, a sycophantic and pathetic cipher who now meant less to her than something she scraped off her shoe.

That's the way she chose to speak to me that evening; nor did she stop at that. I listened open-mouthed, stunned: she was going to

inform Ann of our mutual plans. She must have been mad to listen to me, to even think of murdering her own daughter. But she'd soon put a spoke in my homicidal wheel, she informed me. That was the crummy way she spoke to me: she'd put a spoke in my homicidal wheel. Imagine my feelings right about then! Picture if you can the turmoil in my breast! Here was this woman, this Marie, breaking away from me, physically and emotionally, after all we had been together; and threatening to tell her daughter of our liaison and of my greed for the many thousands of pounds that lay dormant in some trust fund. Even if Ann tried to reject what her mother told her – even if she wanted to believe me implicitly – was it not conceivable that she would experience at least some doubt? A doubt that could well give rise to her consulting legal bigwigs? And might they not in turn advise her to transfer the cash beyond my reach?

All this passed through my mind in those brief seconds as Marie yelled at me; and it was more to quieten her that I hit her across the face. I couldn't be sure whether Ann could hear . . . Marie gasped with pain, and opened her mouth to scream; and I hit her again, really hard this time, and she spun round and shot away from me, cracking her head hard against the corner of the television set as she fell.

I knew before I touched her that she was stone cold dead: blood coursed down the back of her skull, a thin trickle of it issued from the corner of her mouth; her eyes looked at me and through me and beyond me in that vacant stare which none but the dead possess. I sat down in an armchair, and hugged myself tightly; for suddenly I was cold, ice cold: a wave of something like panic splashed over me as I huddled there in the gloom. And as well as panic there was despair: I had killed Marie, had silenced forever that warm and violent woman, had stilled her magnificent limbs for all time.

How long I sat there I did not know, and do not know to this day. But as the cold night hours lengthened and gave way to the first sickly glimmer of dawn, a solution to my problem occurred to me. It seemed that, after all, I need not lose the fortune I had craved for so long; nor would it be necessary to murder Ann. Plus – not the least consideration by any means – I would not have to live through endless days and empty meaningless nights without the woman for whom I craved, whose bodily delights were still there for me to savour.

I spent an hour with Ann the following day. I sat there at her bedside and talked earnestly about her mother: how Marie had stomped off in great rage following a slanging match with me. I spoke too of how bitter Marie had been at receiving nothing in her husband's will, of how she had said she was leaving because there was nothing and no one here for her any more, and she didn't really know why she'd hung around *this* long . . . And so on; I piled it on good and thick. I sat and I talked and I stared down at Ann's plaintive, colourless features, and I wondered just how long she could live anyway, wasting away there in the bedroom with just the four walls for company while I was out at business. And d'you know something, I don't believe she even listened to me properly – just nodded listlessly now and again or gave a careless shrug of her narrow shoulders. I looked at her and speculated for a moment what I would have done if I had had to rely on her for the sexual gratification I so sorely needed.

Fortunately the problem never arose.

That same evening I brought old Michael to the house, gave him one hundred pounds in tenners, and assisted him in his eventually successful efforts to down a pint of whisky and several beers. Later on, I helped him to negotiate the stairs leading to my bedroom, where Marie – now cleansed of blood, and wearing a short night-dress in vivid pink – lay on the bed. Somehow the nightie had ridden up her legs, perhaps by force of gravity, I don't really know or care; but the exposed thighs, and the hard swell of her breasts against the thin fabric, set my heart racing in a strange and turbulent excitement.

But first of all there was work for old Michael to do, and in a dazed and bleary stupor he set about his duties. Intoxication seemed to mean nothing to him: his work, intricate and demanding, resulted in the same flawless perfection one could see in the countless dogs, cats, owls, budgerigars and God-only-knows-what-else, brought to him daily in a continuous stream of mourning pet-lovers.

Poor Michael! I genuinely regretted the necessity for killing him. But, once sober, his memory of this night's work might well have proved troublesome for me. And it was such a messy job, getting rid of him: he was such an old chap, and his skull seemed paper-thin, and his blood so pink and watery and endlessly flowing. But eventually I had mopped up every trace of it and had driven him to the

river; and soon his corpse was sliding away into the murky waters.

Then of course it was home again, back to Marie, in the privacy of my own room, where I could comfortably taste the sweetness of her, whence my days at work were mere punctuations in a life of pure and unalloyed lovemaking.

Naturally there are drawbacks: not the least of which is that three years still remain before Ann has the rightful ownership of the thousands of gorgeous greenbacks on which I have set my heart. Of course, she must not die, not by my hand anyway. I will just have to be patient, and act tender and loving with her, and surely I, a man of my talents, should be able to con her out of a fair proportion of her legacy, and by legitimate means . . . The dense, dumb dummy, her crass stupidity inflames me sometimes!

Finally, there is the bother, the general inconvenience, of heating Marie's body every night, so that my enjoyment of her flesh is in no way blunted. But with that warm and supple and bounteous body lying docilely beneath my own, there can be nothing else left in life worth craving, beyond the passing of the interminable day before it darkens into twilight.

Stephen King

I know what you need

'I know what you need.'

Elizabeth looked up from her sociology text, startled, and saw a rather nondescript young man in a green fatigue jacket. For a moment she thought he looked familiar, as if she had known him before; the feeling was close to *déjà vu*. Then it was gone. He was about her height, skinny, and . . . twitchy. That was the word. He wasn't moving, but he seemed to be twitching inside his skin, just out of sight. His hair was black and unkempt. He wore thick horn-rimmed glasses that magnified his dark brown eyes, and the lenses looked dirty. No, she was quite sure she had never seen him before.

'You know,' she said, 'I doubt that.'

'You need a strawberry double-dip cone. Right?'

She blinked at him, frankly startled. Somewhere in the back of her mind she *had* been thinking about breaking for an ice cream. She was studying for finals in one of the third-floor carrels of the Student Union, and there was still a woefully long way to go.

'Right?' he persisted, and smiled. It transformed his face from something over-intense and nearly ugly into something else that was oddly appealing. The word 'cute' occurred to her, and that wasn't a good word to afflict a boy with, but this one was when he smiled. She smiled back before she could roadblock it behind her lips. This she didn't need, to have to waste time brushing off some weirdo who had decided to pick the worst time of the year to try and make an impression. She still had sixteen chapters of *Introduction to Sociology* to wade through.

'No thanks,' she said.

'Come on, if you hit them any harder you'll give yourself a headache. You've been at it two hours without a break.'

'How would you know that?'

'I've been watching you,' he said promptly, but this time his

gamin grin was lost on her. She already had a headache.

'Well, you can stop,' she said, more sharply than she had intended. 'I don't like people staring at me.'

'I'm sorry.' She felt a little sorry for him, the way she sometimes felt sorry for stray dogs. He seemed to float in the green fatigue jacket and . . . yes, he had on mismatched socks. One black, one brown. She felt herself getting ready to smile again and held it back.

'I've got these finals,' she said gently.

'Sure,' he said. 'OK.'

She looked after him for a moment pensively. Then she lowered her gaze to her book, but an after-image of the encounter remained: *strawberry double-dip*.

When she got back to the dorm it was 11.15 p.m. and Alice was stretched out on her bed, listening to Neil Diamond and reading *The Story of O*.

'I didn't know they assigned that in Eh-17,' Elizabeth said.

Alice sat up. 'Broadening my horizons, darling. Spreading my intellectual winds. Raising my . . . Liz?'

'Hmmm?'

'Did you hear what I said?'

'No, sorry, I—'

'You look like somebody conked you one, kid.'

'I met a guy tonight. Sort of a funny guy, at that.'

'Oh? He must be something if he can separate the great Rogan from her beloved texts.'

'His name is Edward Jackson Hamner Junior, no less. Short. Skinny. Looks like he washed his hair around Washington's birthday. Oh, and mismatched socks. One black, one brown.'

'I thought you were more the fraternity type.'

'It's nothing like that, Alice. I was studying at the Union on the third floor – the Think Tank – and he invited me down to the Grinder for an ice-cream cone. I told him no and he sort of slunk off. But once he started me thinking about ice-cream, I couldn't stop. I'd just decided to give up and take a break and there he was, holding a big, drippy strawberry, double-dip in each hand.'

'I tremble to hear the denouement.'

Elizabeth snorted. 'Well, I couldn't really say no. So he sat down, and it turns out he had sociology with Professor Branner last year.'

'Will wonders never cease, lawd a mercy. Goshen to Christmas—'

'Listen, this is really amazing. You know the way I've been sweating that course?'

'Yes. You talk about it in your sleep, practically.'

'I've got a seventy-eight average. I've got to have an eighty to keep my scholarship, and that means I need at least an eighty-four on the final. Well, this Ed Hamner says Branner uses almost the same final every year. And Ed's eidetic.'

'You mean he's got a whatzit . . . photographic memory?'

'Yes. Look at this.' She opened her sociology book and took out three sheets of notebook paper covered with writing.

Alice took them. 'This looks like multiple-choice stuff.'

'It is. Ed says it's Branner's last year's final *word for word*.'

Alice said flatly, 'I don't believe it.'

'But it covers all the material!'

'Still don't believe it.' She handed the sheets back. 'Just because this spook—'

'He isn't a spook. Don't call him that.'

'OK. This little *guy* hasn't got you bamboozled into just memorizing this and not studying at all, has he?'

'Of course not,' she said uneasily.

'And even if this is like the exam, do you think it's exactly ethical?'

Anger surprised her and ran away with her tongue before she could hold it. 'That's great for you, sure. Dean's List every semester and your folks paying your way. You aren't . . . Hey, I'm sorry. There was no call for that.'

Alice shrugged and opened *O* again, her face carefully neutral. 'No, you're right. Not my business. But why don't you study the book, too . . . just to be safe?'

'Of course I will.'

But mostly she studied the exam notes provided by Edward Jackson Hamner, Jr.

When she came out of the lecture hall after the exam he was sitting in the lobby, floating in his green army fatigue coat. He smiled tentatively at her and stood up. 'How'd it go?'

Impulsively, she kissed his cheek. She could not remember such a blessed feeling of relief. 'I think I aced it.'

'Really? That's great. Like a burger?'

'Love one,' she said absently. Her mind was still on the exam. It

was the one Ed had given her, almost word for word, and she had sailed through.

Over hamburgers, she asked him how his own finals were going.

'Don't have any. I'm in Honours, and you don't take them unless you want to. I was doing OK, so I didn't.'

'Then why are you still here?'

'I had to see how you did, didn't I?'

'Ed, you didn't. That's sweet, but—' The naked look in his eyes troubled her. She had seen it before. She was a pretty girl.

'Yes,' he said softly. 'Yes, I did.'

'Ed, I'm grateful. I think you saved my scholarship. I really do. But I have a boy-friend, you know.'

'Serious?' he asked, with a poor attempt to speak lightly.

'Very,' she said, matching his tone. 'Almost engaged.'

'Does he know he's lucky? Does he know how lucky?'

'I'm lucky, too,' she said, thinking of Tony Lombard.

'Beth,' he said suddenly.

'What?' she asked, startled.

'Nobody calls you that, do they?'

'Why . . . no. No, they don't.'

'Not even this guy?'

'No—' Tony called her Liz. Sometimes Lizzie, which was even worse.

He leaned forward. 'But Beth is what you like best, isn't it?'

She laughed to cover her confusion. 'Whatever in the world—'

'Never mind.' He grinned his gamin grin. 'I'll call you Beth. That's better. Now eat your hamburger.'

—

Then her junior year was over, and she was saying goodbye to Alice. They were a little stiff together, and Elizabeth was sorry. She supposed it was her own fault; she *had* crowed a little loudly about her sociology final when grades were posted. She had scored a ninety-seven – highest in the division.

Well, she told herself as she waited at the airport for her flight to be called, it wasn't any more unethical than the cramming she had been resigned to in that third-floor carrel. Cramming wasn't real studying at all; just rote memorization that faded away to nothing as soon as the exam was over.

She fingered the envelope that poked out of her purse. Notice of

her scholarship-loan package for her senior year – two thousand dollars. She and Tony would be working together in Boothbay, Maine, this summer, and the money she would earn there would put her over the top. And thanks to Ed Hamner, it was going to be a beautiful summer. Clear sailing all the way.

But it was the most miserable summer of her life.

June was rainy, the gas shortage depressed the tourist trade, and her tips at the Boothbay Inn were mediocre. Even worse, Tony was pressing her on the subject of marriage. He could get a job on or near campus, he said, and with her Student Aid grant, she could get her degree in style. She was surprised to find that the idea scared rather than pleased her.

Something was *wrong*.

She didn't know what, but something was missing, out of whack, out of kilter. One night late in July she frightened herself by going on a hysterical crying jag in her apartment. The only good thing about it was that her room-mate, a mousy little girl named Sandra Ackerman, was out on a date.

The nightmare came in early August. She was lying in the bottom of an open grave, unable to move. Rain fell from a white sky on to her upturned face. Then Tony was standing over her, wearing his yellow high-impact construction helmet.

'Marry me, Liz,' he said, looking down at her expressionlessly. 'Marry me or else.'

She tried to speak, to agree; she would do anything if only he would take her out of this dreadful muddy hole. But she was paralysed.

'All right,' he said. 'It's or else, then.'

He went away. She struggled to break out of her paralysis and couldn't.

Then she heard the bulldozer.

A moment later she saw it, a high yellow monster, pushing a mound of wet earth in front of the blade. Tony's merciless face looked down from the open cab.

He was going to bury her alive.

Trapped in her motionless, voiceless body, she could only watch in dumb horror. Trickle of dirt began to run down the sides of the hole—

A familiar voice cried, 'Go! Leave her now! Go!'

Tony stumbled down from the bulldozer and ran.

Huge relief swept her. She would have cried had she been able. And her saviour appeared, standing at the foot of the open grave like a sexton. It was Ed Hamner, floating in his green fatigue jacket, his hair awry, his horn-rims slipped down to the small bulge at the end of his nose. He held his hand out to her.

'Get up,' he said gently. 'I know what you need. Get up, Beth.'

And she could get up. She sobbed with relief. She tried to thank him; her words spilled out on top of each other. And Ed only smiled gently and nodded. She took his hand and looked down to see her footing. And when she looked up again, she was holding the paw of a huge, slavering timber wolf with red hurricane-lantern eyes and thick, spiked teeth open to bite.

She woke up sitting bolt upright in bed, her nightgown drenched with sweat. Her body was shaking uncontrollably. And even after a warm shower and a glass of milk, she could not reconcile herself to the dark. She slept with the light on.

A week later Tony was dead.

She opened the door in her robe, expecting to see Tony, but it was Danny Kilmer, one of the fellows he worked with. Danny was a fun guy; she and Tony had doubled with him and his girl a couple of times. But standing in the doorway of her second-floor apartment, Danny looked not only serious but ill.

'Danny?' she said. 'What—'

'Liz,' he said. 'Liz, you've got to hold on to yourself. You've . . . *ah, God!*' He pounded the jamb of the door with one big-knuckled, dirty hand, and she saw he was crying.

'Danny, is it Tony? Is something . . . '

'Tony's dead,' Danny said. 'He was—' But he was talking to air. She had fainted.

The next week passed in a kind of dream. The story pieced itself together from the woefully brief newspaper account and from what Danny told her over a beer in the Harbor Inn.

They had been repairing drainage culverts on Route 16. Part of the road was torn up, and Tony was flagging traffic. A kid driving a

red Fiat had been coming down the hill. Tony had flagged him, but the kid never even slowed. Tony had been standing next to a dump truck, and there was no place to jump back. The kid in the Fiat had sustained head lacerations and a broken arm; he was hysterical and also cold sober. The police found several holes in his brake lines, as if they had overheated and then melted through. His driving record was A-1; he had simply been unable to stop. Her Tony had been a victim of that rarest of automobile mishaps: an honest accident.

Her shock and depression were increased by guilt. The fates had taken out of her hands the decision on what to do about Tony. And a sick, secret part of her was glad it was so. Because she hadn't wanted to marry Tony . . . not since the night of her dream.

She broke down the day before she went home.

She was sitting on a rock outcropping by herself, and after an hour or so the tears came. They surprised her with their fury. She cried until her stomach hurt and her head ached, and when the tears passed she felt not better but at least drained and empty.

And that was when Ed Hamner said, 'Beth?'

She jerked around, her mouth filled with the copper taste of fear, half expecting to see the snarling wolf of her dream. But it was only Ed Hamner, looking sunburned and strangely defenceless without his fatigue jacket and blue jeans. He was wearing red shorts that stopped just ahead of his bony knees, a white T-shirt that billowed on his thin chest like a loose sail in the ocean breeze, and rubber thongs. He wasn't smiling and the fierce sun glitter on his glasses made it impossible to see his eyes.

'Ed?' she said, tentatively, half convinced that this was some grief-induced hallucination. 'Is that really—'

'Yes, it's me.'

'How—'

'I've been working at the Lakewood Theatre in Skowhegan. I ran into your room-mate . . . Alice, is that her name?'

'Yes.'

'She told me what happened. I came right away. Poor Beth.' He moved his head, only a degree or so, but the sun glare slid off his glasses and she saw nothing wolfish, nothing predatory, but only a calm, warm sympathy.

She began to weep again, and staggered a little with the unexpected force of it. Then he was holding her and then it was all right.

They had dinner at the Silent Woman in Waterville, which was twenty-five miles away; maybe exactly the distance she needed. They went in Ed's car, a new Corvette, and he drove well – neither showily nor fussily, as she guessed he might. She didn't want to talk and she didn't want to be cheered up. He seemed to know it, and played quiet music on the radio.

And he ordered without consulting her – seafood. She thought she wasn't hungry, but when the food came she fell to ravenously.

When she looked up again her plate was empty and she laughed nervously. Ed was smoking a cigarette and watching her.

'The grieving damsel ate a hearty meal,' she said. 'You must think I'm awful.'

'No,' he said. 'You've been through a lot and you need to get your strength back. It's like being sick, isn't it?'

'Yes. Just like that.'

He took her hand across the table, squeezed it briefly, then let it go. 'But now it's recuperation time, Beth.'

'Is it? Is it really?'

'Yes,' he said. 'So tell me. What are your plans?'

'I'm going home tomorrow. After that, I don't know.'

'You're going back to school, aren't you?'

'I just don't know. After this, it seems so . . . so trivial. A lot of the purpose seems to have gone out of it. And all the fun.'

'It'll come back. That's hard for you to believe now, but it's true. Try it for six weeks and see. You've got nothing better to do.' The last seemed a question.

'That's true, I guess. But . . . Can I have a cigarette?'

'Sure. They're menthol, though. Sorry.'

She took one. 'How did you know I didn't like menthol cigarettes?'

He shrugged. 'You just don't look like one of those, I guess.'

She smiled. 'You're funny, do you know that?'

He smiled neutrally.

'No, really. For you of all people to turn up . . . I thought I didn't want to see anyone. But I'm really glad it was you, Ed.'

'Sometimes it's nice to be with someone you're not involved with.'

'That's it, I guess.' She paused. 'Who are you, Ed, besides my fairy godfather? Who are you really?' It was suddenly important to her that she know.

He shrugged. 'Nobody much. Just one of the sort of funny-looking guys you see creeping around campus with a load of books under one arm—'

'Ed, you're not funny-looking.'

'Sure I am,' he said, and smiled. 'Never grew all the way out of my high-school acne, never got rushed by a big frat, never made any kind of splash in the social whirl. Just a dorm rat making grades, that's all. When the big corporations interview on campus next spring, I'll probably sign on with one of them and Ed Hamner will disappear for ever.'

'That would be a great shame,' she said softly.

He smiled, and it was a very peculiar smile. Almost bitter.

'What about your folks?' she asked. 'Where you live, what you like to do—'

'Another time,' he said. 'I want to get you back. You've got a long plane ride tomorrow, and a lot of hassles.'

The evening left her relaxed for the first time since Tony's death, without that feeling that somewhere inside a mainspring was being wound and wound to the breaking point. She thought sleep would come easily, but it did not.

Little questions nagged.

Alice told me . . . poor Beth.

But Alice was summering in Kittery, eighty miles from Skowhegan. She must have been at Lakewood for a play.

The Corvette, this year's model. Expensive. A backstage job at Lakewood hadn't paid for that. Were his parents rich?

He had ordered just what she would have ordered herself. Maybe the only thing on the menu she would have eaten enough of to discover that she was hungry.

The menthol cigarettes, the way he had kissed her good night, exactly as she had wanted to be kissed. And—

You've got a long plane ride tomorrow.

He knew she was going home because she had told him. But how had he known she was going by plane? Or that it was a long ride?

It bothered her. It bothered her because she was half-way to being in love with Ed Hamner.

I know what you need.

Like the voice of a submarine captain tolling off fathoms, the words he had greeted her with followed her down to sleep.

He didn't come to the tiny Augusta airport to see her off, and waiting for the plane, she was surprised by her own disappointment. She was thinking about how quietly you could grow to depend on a person, almost like a junkie with a habit. The hype fools himself that he can take this stuff or leave it, when really—

'Elizabeth Rogan,' the PA blared. 'Please pick up the white courtesy phone.'

She hurried to it. And Ed's voice said, 'Beth?'

'Ed! It's good to hear you. I thought maybe . . .'

'That'd I'd meet you?' He laughed. 'You don't need me for that. You're a big strong girl. Beautiful, too. You can handle this. Will I see you at school?'

'I . . . yes, I think so.'

'Good.' There was a moment of silence. Then he said, 'Because I love you. I have from the first time I saw you.'

Her tongue was locked. She couldn't speak. A thousand thoughts whirled through her mind.

He laughed again, gently. 'No, don't say anything. Not now. I'll see you. There'll be time then. All the time in the world. Good trip, Beth. Goodbye.'

And he was gone, leaving her with a white phone in her hand and her own chaotic thoughts and questions.

September.

Elizabeth picked up the old pattern of school and classes like a woman who has been interrupted at knitting. She was rooming with Alice again, of course; they had been roomies since freshman year, when they had been thrown together by the housing-department computer. They had always got along well, despite differing interests and personalities. Alice was the studious one, a chemistry major with a 3.6 average. Elizabeth was more social, less bookish, with a split major in education and maths.

They still got on well, but a faint coolness seemed to have grown

up between them over the summer. Elizabeth chalked it up to the difference of opinion over the sociology final, and didn't mention it.

The events of the summer began to seem dreamlike. In a funny way it sometimes seemed that Tony might have been a boy she had known in high school. It still hurt to think about him, and she avoided the subject with Alice, but the hurt was an old-bruise throb and not the bright pain of an open wound.

What hurt more was Ed Hamner's failure to call.

A week passed, then two, then it was October. She got a student directory from the Union and looked up his name. It was no help; after his name were only the words 'Mill St'. And Mill was a very long street indeed. And so she waited, and when she was called for dates – which was often – she turned them down. Alice raised her eyebrows but said nothing; she was buried alive in a six-week biochem project and spent most of her evenings at the library. Elizabeth noticed the long white envelopes that her room-mate was receiving once or twice a week in the mail – since she was usually back from class first but thought nothing of them. The private detective agency was discreet; it did not print its return address on its envelopes.

When the intercom buzzed, Alice was studying. 'You get it, Liz. Probably for you anyway.'

Elizabeth went to the intercom. 'Yes?'

'Gentleman door-caller, Liz.'

Oh, Lord.

'Who is it?' she asked, annoyed, and ran through her tattered stack of excuses. Migraine headache. She hadn't used that one this week.

The desk girl said, amused, 'His name is Edward Jackson Hamner, *Junior*, no less.' Her voice lowered. 'His socks don't match.'

Elizabeth's hands flew to the collar of her robe. 'Oh, God. Tell him I'll be right down. No, tell him it will be just a minute. No, a couple of minutes, OK?'

'Sure,' the voice said dubiously. 'Don't have a haemorrhage.'

Elizabeth took a pair of slacks out of her closet. Took out a short denim skirt. Felt the curlers in her hair and groaned. Began to yank them out.

Alice watched all this calmly, without speaking, but she looked speculatively at the door for a long time after Elizabeth had left.

He looked just the same; he hadn't changed at all. He was wearing his green fatigue jacket, and it still looked at least two sizes too big. One of the bows of his horn-rimmed glasses had been mended with electrician's tape. His jeans looked new and stiff, miles from the soft and faded 'in' look that Tony had achieved effortlessly. He was wearing one green sock, one brown sock.

And she knew she loved him.

'Why didn't you call before?' she asked, going to him.

He stuck his hands in the pockets of his jacket and grinned shyly. 'I thought I'd give you some time to date around. Meet some guys. Figure out what you want.'

'I think I know that.'

'Good. Would you like to go to a movie?'

'Anything,' she said. 'Anything at all.'

As the days passed it occurred to her that she had never met anyone, male or female, that seemed to understand her moods and needs so completely or so wordlessly. Their tastes coincided. While Tony had enjoyed violent movies of the *Godfather* type, Ed seemed more into comedy or non-violent dramas. He took her to the circus one night when she was feeling low and they had a hilariously wonderful time. Study dates were real study dates, not just an excuse to grope on the third floor of the Union. He took her to dances and seemed especially good at the old ones, which she loved. They won a fifties Stroll trophy at a Homecoming Nostalgia Dance. More important, he seemed to understand when she wanted to be passionate. He didn't force her or hurry her; she never got the feeling that she had with some of the other boys she had gone out with – that there was an inner timetable for sex, beginning with a kiss good night on Date One and ending with a night in some friend's borrowed apartment on Date Ten. The Mill Street apartment was Ed's exclusively, a third-floor walk-up. They went there often, and Elizabeth went without the feeling that she was walking into some minor-league Don Juan's passion pit. He didn't push. He honestly seemed to want what she wanted, when she wanted it. And things progressed.

When school reconvened following the semester break, Alice seemed strangely preoccupied. Several times that afternoon before Ed came to pick her up – they were going out to dinner – Elizabeth looked up to see her room-mate frowning down at a large manila envelope on her desk. Once Elizabeth almost asked about it, then decided not to. Some new project probably.

It was snowing hard when Ed brought her back to the dorm.

‘Tomorrow?’ he asked. ‘My place?’

‘Sure. I’ll make some popcorn.’

‘Great,’ he said, and kissed her. ‘I love you, Beth.’

‘Love you, too.’

‘Would you like to stay over?’ Ed asked evenly. ‘Tomorrow night?’

‘All right, Ed.’ She looked into his eyes. ‘Whatever you want.’

‘Good,’ he said quietly. ‘Sleep well, kid.’

‘You, too.’

She expected that Alice would be asleep and entered the room quietly, but Alice was up and sitting at her desk.

‘Alice, are you OK?’

‘I have to talk to you, Liz. About Ed.’

‘What about him?’

Alice said carefully, ‘I think that when I finish talking to you we’re not going to be friends any more. For me, that’s giving up a lot. So I want you to listen carefully.’

‘Then maybe you better not say anything.’

‘I have to try.’

Elizabeth felt her initial curiosity kindle into anger. ‘Have you been snooping around Ed?’

Alice only looked at her.

‘Were you jealous of us?’

‘No. If I’d been jealous of you and your dates, I would have moved out two years ago.’

Elizabeth looked at her, perplexed. She knew what Alice said was the truth. And she suddenly felt afraid.

‘Two things made me wonder about Ed Hamner,’ Alice said. ‘First, you wrote me about Tony’s death and said how lucky it was that I’d seen Ed at the Lakewood Theatre . . . how he came right over to Boothbay and really helped you out. But I never saw him,

Liz. I was never near the Lakewood Theatre last summer.'

'But . . .'

'But how did he know Tony was dead? I have no idea. I only know he didn't get it from me. The other thing was that eidetic-memory business. My God, Liz, he can't even remember which socks he's got on!'

'That's a different thing altogether,' Liz said stiffly. 'It—'

'Ed Hamner was in Las Vegas last summer,' Alice said softly. 'He came back in mid-July and took a motel room in Pemaquid. That's just across the Boothbay Harbour town line. Almost as if he were waiting for you to need him.'

'That's crazy! And how would you know Ed was in Las Vegas?'

'I ran into Shirley D'Antonio just before school started. She worked in the Pines Restaurant, which is just across from the playhouse. She said she never saw anybody who looked like Ed Hamner. So I've known he's been lying to you about several things. And so I went to my father and laid it out and he gave me the go-ahead.'

'To do what?' Elizabeth asked, bewildered.

'To hire a private detective agency.'

Elizabeth was on her feet. 'No more, Alice. That's it.' She would catch the bus into town, spend tonight at Ed's apartment. She had only been waiting for him to ask her, anyway.

'At least *know*,' Alice said. 'Then make your own decision.'

'I don't have to know anything except he's kind and good and—'

'Love is blind, huh?' Alice said, and smiled bitterly. 'Well, maybe I happen to love you a little, Liz. Have you ever thought of that?'

Elizabeth turned and looked at her for a long moment. 'If you do, you've got a funny way of showing it,' she said. 'Go on, then. Maybe you're right. Maybe I owe you that much. Go on.'

'You knew him a long time ago,' Alice said quietly.

'I . . . what?'

'P.S. 119, Bridgeport, Connecticut.'

Elizabeth was struck dumb. She and her parents had lived in Bridgeport for six years, moving to their present home the year after she had finished the second grade. She *had* gone to P.S. 119, but—

'Alice, are you sure?'

'Do you remember him?'

'No, of course not!' But she *did* remember the feeling she'd had the first time she had seen Ed – the feeling of déjà vu.

'The pretty ones never remember the ugly ducklings, I guess. Maybe he had a crush on you. You were in the first grade with him, Liz. Maybe he sat in the back of the room and just . . . watched you. Or on the playground. Just a little nothing kid who already wore glasses and probably braces and you couldn't even remember him, but I'll bet he remembers you.'

Elizabeth said, 'What else?'

'The agency traced him from school fingerprints. After that it was just a matter of finding people and talking to them. The operative assigned to the case said he couldn't understand some of what he was getting. Neither do I. Some of it's scary.'

'It better be,' Elizabeth said primly.

'Ed Hamner, Sr., was a compulsive gambler. He worked for a top-line advertising agency in New York and then moved to Bridgeport sort of on the run. The operative says that almost every big-money poker game and high-priced book in the city was holding his markers.'

Elizabeth closed her eyes. 'These people really saw you got a full measure of dirt for your dollar, didn't they?'

'Maybe. Anyway, Ed's father got in another jam in Bridgeport. It was gambling again, but this time he got mixed up with a big-time loan shark. He got a broken leg and a broken arm somehow. The operative says he doubts it was an accident.'

'Anything else?' Elizabeth asked. 'Child beating? Embezzlement?'

'He landed a job with a two-bit Los Angeles ad agency in 1961. That was a little too close to Las Vegas. He started to spend his weekends there, gambling heavily . . . and losing. Then he started taking Ed Junior with him. And he started to win.'

'You're making all of this up. You must be.'

Alice tapped the report in front of her. 'It's all here, Liz. Some of it wouldn't stand up in court, but the operative says none of the people he talked with would have a reason to lie. Ed's father called Ed his "good luck charm". At first, nobody objected to the boy even though it was illegal for him to be in the casinos. His father was a prize fish. But then the father started sticking just to roulette,

playing only odd-even and red-black. By the end of the year the boy was off-limits in every casino on the strip. And his father took up a new kind of gambling.'

'What?'

'The stock market. When the Hamners moved to L.A. in the middle of 1961, they were living in a ninety-dollar-a-month cheese box and Mr Hamner was driving a '52 Chevrolet. At the end of 1962, just sixteen months later, he had quit his job and they were living in their own home in San Jose. Mr Hamner was driving a brand-new Thunderbird and Mrs Hamner had a Volkswagen. You see, it's against the law for a small boy to be in the Nevada casinos, but no one could take the stock-market page away from him.'

'Are you implying that Ed . . . that he could . . . Alice, you're crazy!'

'I'm not implying anything. Unless maybe just that he knew what his daddy needed.'

I know what you need.

It was almost as if the words had been spoken into her ear, and she shuddered.

'Mrs Hamner spent the next six years in and out of various mental institutions. Supposedly for nervous disorders, but the operative talked to an orderly who said she was pretty close to psychotic. She claimed her son was the devil's henchman. She stabbed him with a pair of scissors in 1964. Tried to kill him. She . . . Liz? Liz, what is it?'

'The scar,' she muttered. 'We went swimming at the University pool on an open night about a month ago. He's got a deep, dimpled scar on his shoulder . . . here.' She put her hand just above her left breast. 'He said . . .' A wave of nausea tried to climb up her throat and she had to wait for it to recede before she could go on. 'He said he fell on a picket fence when he was a little boy.'

'Shall I go on?'

'Finish, why not? What can it hurt now?'

'His mother was released from a very plush mental institution in the San Joaquin Valley in 1968. The three of them went on a vacation. They stopped at a picnic spot on Route 101. The boy was collecting firewood when she drove the car right over the edge of the drop-off above the ocean with both her and her husband in it. It might have been an attempt to run Ed down. By then he was nearly

eighteen. His father left him a million-dollar stock portfolio. Ed came east a year and a half later and enrolled here. And that's the end.'

'No more skeletons in the closet?'

'Liz, aren't there enough?'

She got up. 'No wonder he never wants to mention his family. But you had to dig up the corpse, didn't you?'

'You're blind,' Alice said. Elizabeth was putting on her coat. 'I suppose you're going to him.'

'Right.'

'Because you love him.'

'Right.'

Alice crossed the room and grabbed her arm. 'Will you get that sulky, petulant look off your face for a second and *think*! Ed Hamner is able to do things the rest of us only dream about. He got his father a stake at roulette and made him rich playing the stock market. He seems to be able to will winning. Maybe he's some kind of low-grade psychic. Maybe he's got precognition. I don't know. There are people who seem to have a dose of that. Liz, hasn't it ever occurred to you that he's forced you to love him?'

Liz turned to her slowly. 'I've never heard anything so ridiculous in my life.'

'Is it? He gave you that sociology test the same way he gave his father the right side of the roulette board! He was never enrolled in any sociology course! I checked. He did it because it was the only way he could make you take him seriously!'

'Stop it!' Liz cried. She clapped her hands over her ears.

'He knew the test, and he knew when Tony was killed, and he knew you were going home on a plane! He even knew just the right psychological moment to step back into your life last October.'

Elizabeth pulled away from her and opened the door.

'Please,' Alice said. 'Please, Liz, listen. I don't know how he can do those things. I doubt if even *he* knows for sure. He might not mean to do you any harm, but he already is. He's made you love him by knowing every secret thing you want and need, and that's not love at all. That's rape.'

Elizabeth slammed the door and ran down the stairs.

She caught the last bus of the evening into town. It was snowing

more heavily than ever, and the bus lumbered through the drifts that had blown across the road like a crippled beetle. Elizabeth sat in the back, one of only six or seven passengers, a thousand thoughts in her mind.

Menthol cigarettes. The stock exchange. The way he had known her mother's nickname was Deedee. A little boy sitting at the back of a first-grade classroom, making sheep's eyes at a vivacious little girl too young to understand that—

I know what you need.

No. No. No. I do love him!

Did she? Or was she simply delighted at being with someone who always ordered the right thing, took her to the right movie, and did not want to go anywhere or do anything she didn't? Was he just a kind of psychic mirror, showing her only what she wanted to see? The presents he gave were always the right presents. When the weather had turned suddenly cold and she had been longing for a hair-dryer, who gave her one? Ed Hamner, of course. Just happened to see one on sale in Day's, he had said. She, of course, had been delighted.

That's not love at all. That's rape.

The wind clawed at her face as she stepped out on the corner of Main and Mill, and she winced against it as the bus drew away with a smooth diesel growl. Its tail-lights twinkled briefly in the snowy night for a moment and were gone.

She had never felt so lonely in her life.

He wasn't home.

She stood outside his door after five minutes of knocking, non-plussed. It occurred to her that she had no idea what Ed did or whom he saw when he wasn't with her. The subject had never come up.

Maybe he's raising the price of another hair-dryer in a poker game.

With sudden decision she stood on her toes and felt along the top of the door-jamb for the spare key she knew he kept there. Her fingers stumbled over it and it fell to the hall floor with a clink.

She picked it up and used it in the lock.

The apartment looked different with Ed gone — artificial, like a stage set. It had often amused her that someone who cared so little about his personal appearance should have such a neat, picture-book domicile. Almost as if he had decorated it for her and not

himself. But of course that was crazy. Wasn't it?

It occurred to her again, as if for the first time, how much she liked the chair she sat in when they studied or watched TV. It was just right, the way Baby Bear's chair had been for Goldilocks. Not too hard, not too soft. Just right. Like everything else she associated with Ed.

There were two doors opening off the living room. One went to the kitchenette, the other to his bedroom.

The wind whistled outside, making the old apartment building creak and settle.

In the bedroom, she stared at the brass bed. It looked neither too hard nor too soft, but just right. An insidious voice smirked: *It's almost too perfect, isn't it?*

She went to the bookcase and ran her eye aimlessly over the titles. One jumped at her eyes and she pulled it out: *Dance Crazes of the Fifties*. The book opened cleanly to a point some three-quarters through. A section titled 'The Stroll' had been circled heavily in red grease pencil and in the margin the word BETH had been written in large, almost accusatory letters.

I ought to go now, she told herself. I can still save something. If he came back now I could never look him in the face again and Alice would win. Then she'd really get her money's worth.

But she couldn't stop, and knew it. Things had gone too far.

She went to the closet and turned the knob, but it didn't give. Locked.

On the off chance, she stood on tiptoe again and felt along the top of the door. And her fingers felt a key. She took it down and somewhere inside a voice said very clearly: *Don't do this*. She thought of Bluebeard's wife and what she had found when she opened the wrong door. But it was indeed too late; if she didn't proceed now she would always wonder. She opened the closet.

And had the strangest feeling that this was where the real Ed Hamner, Jr. had been hiding all the time.

The closet was a mess – a jumbled rickrack of clothes, books, an unstrung tennis racket, a pair of tattered tennis shoes, old prelims and reports tossed helter-skelter, a spilled pouch of Borkum Riff pipe tobacco. His green fatigue jacket had been flung in the far corner.

She picked up one of the books and blinked at the title. *The*

Golden Bough. Another. *Ancient Rites, Modern Mysteries*. Another. *Haitian Voodoo*. And a last one, bound in old, cracked leather, the title almost rubbed off the binding by much handling, smelling vaguely like rotted fish: *Necronomicon*. She opened it at random, gasped, and flung it away, the obscenity still hanging before her eyes.

More to regain her composure than anything else, she reached for the green fatigue jacket, not admitting to herself that she meant to go through its pockets. But as she lifted it she saw something else. A small tin box . . .

Curiously, she picked it up and turned it over in her hands, hearing things rattle inside. It was the kind of box a young boy might choose to keep his treasures in. Stamped in raised letters on the tin bottom were the words 'Bridgeport Candy Co.' She opened it.

The doll was on top. The Elizabeth doll.

She looked at it and began to shudder.

The doll was dressed in a scrap of red nylon, part of a scarf she had lost two or three months back. At a movie with Ed. The arms were pipe cleaners that had been draped in stuff that looked like blue moss. Graveyard moss, perhaps. There was hair on the doll's head, but that was wrong. It was fine white flax, taped to the doll's pink gum-eraser head. Her own hair was sandy blond and coarser than this. This was more the way her hair had been—

When she had been a little girl.

She swallowed and there was a clicking in her throat. Hadn't they all been issued scissors in the first grade, tiny scissors with rounded blades, just right for a child's hand? Had that long-ago little boy crept up behind her, perhaps at nap time, and—

Elizabeth put the doll aside and looked in the box again. There was a blue poker chip with a strange six-sided pattern drawn on it in red ink. A tattered newspaper obituary — Mr and Mrs Edward Hamner. The two of them smiled meaninglessly out of the accompanying photo, and she saw that the same six-sided pattern had been drawn across their faces, this time in black ink, like a pall. Two more dolls, one male, one female. The similarity to the faces in the obituary photographs was hideous, unmistakable.

And something else.

She fumbled it out, and her fingers shook so badly she almost dropped it. A tiny sound escaped her.

It was a model car, the sort small boys buy in drugstores and hobby shops and then assemble with airplane glue. This one was a Fiat. It had been painted red. And a piece of what looked like one of Tony's shirts had been taped to the front.

She turned the model car upside down. Someone had hammered the underside to fragments.

'So you found it, you ungrateful bitch.'

She screamed and dropped the car and the box. His foul treasures sprayed across the floor.

He was standing in the doorway, looking at her. She had never seen such a look of hate on a human face.

She said, 'You killed Tony.'

He grinned unpleasantly. 'Do you think you could prove it?'

'It doesn't matter,' she said, surprised at the steadiness of her own voice. 'I know. And I never want to see you again. Ever. And if you do . . . anything . . . to anyone else, I'll know. And I'll fix you. Somehow.'

His face twisted. 'That's the thanks I get. I gave you everything you ever wanted. Things no other man could have. Admit it. I made you perfectly happy.'

'*You killed Tony!*' She screamed it at him.

He took another step into the room. 'Yes, and I did it for you. And what are you, Beth? You don't know what love is. I loved you from the first time I saw you, over seventeen years ago. Could Tony say that? It's never been hard for you. You're *pretty*. You never had to think about wanting or needing or about being lonely. You never had to find . . . other ways to get the things you had to have. There was always a Tony to give them to you. All you ever had to do was smile and say please.' His voice rose a note. 'I could never get what I wanted that way. Don't you think I tried? It didn't work with my father. He just wanted more and more. He never even kissed me good night or gave me a hug until I made him rich. And my mother was the same way. I gave her her marriage back, but was that enough for her? She hated me! She wouldn't come near me! She said I was unnatural! I gave her nice things but . . . Beth, don't do that! Don't . . . *doon't*—

She stepped on the Elizabeth doll and crushed it, turning her heel on it. Something inside her flared in agony, and then was gone. She wasn't afraid of him now. He was just a small, shrunken boy in a

young man's body. And his socks didn't match.

'I don't think you can do anything to me now, Ed,' she told him. 'Not now. Am I wrong?'

He turned from her. 'Go on,' he said weakly. 'Get out. But leave my box. At least do that.'

'I'll leave the box. But not the things in it.' She walked past him. His shoulders twitched, as if he might turn and try to grab her, but then they slumped.

As she reached the second-floor landing, he came to the top of the stairs and called shrilly after her: 'Go on then! But you'll never be satisfied with any man after me! And when your looks go and men stop trying to give you anything you want, you'll wish for me! You'll think of what you threw away!'

She went down the stairs and out into the snow. Its coldness felt good against her face. It was a two-mile walk back to the campus, but she didn't care. She wanted the walk, wanted the cold. She wanted it to make her clean.

In a queer, twisted way she felt sorry for him – a little boy with a huge power crammed inside a dwarfed spirit. A little boy who tried to make humans behave like toy soldiers and then stamped on them in a fit of temper when they wouldn't or when they found out.

And what was she? Blessed with all the things he was not, through no fault of his or effort of her own? She remembered the way she had reacted to Alice, trying blindly and jealously to hold on to something that was easy rather than good, not caring, not caring.

When your looks go and men stop trying to give you anything you want, you'll wish for me! . . . I know what you need.

But was she so small that she actually needed so little?

Please, dear God, no.

On the bridge between the campus and town she paused and threw Ed Hamner's scraps of magic over the side, piece by piece. The red-painted model Fiat went last, falling end over end into the driven snow until it was lost from sight. Then she walked on.

Red recipe

Sharon Taylor wiped her forehead with a handkerchief that was already damp with sweat. She had to have a rest before continuing along the winding path that seemed to drag on for miles through the valley. The path followed alongside a stream, which was bridged here and there with clapper stones of Roman origin. The waters of the stream, which bubbled and swirled as it met small obstructions below the surface, glistened in the hot sunshine.

Sharon sat on a warm, flat stone that appeared to be intended as a seat, and dangled her feet in the cool water, moving them to and fro as she studied a map she had taken from her small haversack. She knew she should have looked at the map more carefully before setting out on her hiking holiday, but she had been too impatient to get to Dingledale before having dinner at the Rosewood Hotel which lay in the centre of the village.

Her mother had pleaded with her not to go alone, but her dad had said Sharon was quite able to look after herself. There had been some concern in the morning papers as to the whereabouts and safety of two girls, missing from the remand home in Lower Dingleton which was, of course, the reason for her mother's objection.

Somewhere along the path she had turned off in the wrong direction. She wished now she hadn't followed the stream, although it did lead to Dingledale eventually. According to her map, there should be signs of another path leading away from the stream where she was resting. If there was a path, it could not be far away. It probably led to the cottage or farmhouse she could see on the left.

She wiped her feet before attempting to rise from the warm stone, and rolled the towel up neatly before replacing it in her haversack. It was only when she was standing that she noticed some writing chiselled on one side of the stone, and an arrow pointing in the direction of the farm – for farm it was.

Greendale Farm. Bed and breakfast.

What a funny way to advertise, thought Sharon. Surely a board would have been much better. Still, it would be a good idea if she could stay there for a night, then continue her journey in the morning. The writing said bed and breakfast, but the occupants would probably provide dinner if payment was offered.

Sharon found the grass covered path after she had walked a few yards in the direction of the farm, and, as the evening was still young, she strolled along with a sense of relief for having found somewhere to stay the night.

She could hear the grunting and squealing of pigs as she approached the gate leading from the farmhouse to the fields. A long, white van was parked alongside the double doors of a brick and stone shed, its roof of cracked and weed-covered red tiles. Steam rose and drifted in small clouds from a hidden chimney. Red lettering on the side of the van made it pretty clear as to what kind of farm it was:

Greendale Pork Sausages and Pies – Best in the World

Obviously a pig farm.

Sharon lifted the drop-over catch of the rickety gate, making sure first that there was no dog about that might attack her. A cobbled and slippery path, greasy and smelly, led from the barn to a corner of the house, causing Sharon to squeeze her nose in disgust.

She heard the faint squeak of a tap being turned on, then the splash of water as she turned a corner. A woman of about fifty was filling a bucket, one bare knee resting on the cobbled stones. A red-stained and grubby sackcloth, utilised as an overall, covered a short flower-patterned pinafore; a chiffon headscarf covered her blonde and greying hair. She looked up and brushed aside the scarf from one ear with a wet hand, a little surprised at Sharon's sudden appearance.

'Where did you come from? What do you want?' The handle of the heavy bucket clattered loudly as the woman let go. 'You didn't come down from the main road did you?' The surprised look on her face changed to one of scared dismay, as if being caught doing something she didn't want Sharon to see.

'I came from across the field. The stone by the stream said bed and breakfast,' said Sharon. That answered all three questions at one go, but why did the woman look so scared?

'No one saw you then?'

What did it matter if someone did? thought Sharon. 'No. Not that I know of.'

The woman gave a loud sigh of relief. 'That's good. Harry! We have a visitor!'

The door of the barn creaked open, then slammed shut, causing it's hasp and staple to rattle loudly.

'Harry's my husband,' said the woman, as if apologizing for something she had done wrong. 'I'm Mrs Trady. Doris.'

'Where's her come from? Her ay come from the main road as her?' Sharon couldn't see the speaker. 'Tek her in an gi' her a cup a tay.'

'He'll be out in a minute,' said Mrs Trady. 'Get yourself into the kitchen.'

She left the bucket under the tap, and Sharon dutifully followed her bent figure to the kitchen.

'He's seen you all right. There's a 'ole in the door he peeps through,' said Mrs Trady. She dropped her dirty overall to the floor and kicked off her rubber shoes. 'We don't do bed and breakfast really. It's Harry. He marked the stone. It comes in handy when we're short of meat.' Her face flushed quickly and she put a hand over her mouth, 'I wish you hadn't have come here.'

Sharon was puzzled. What did Mrs Trady mean? Why should they advertise bed and breakfast for no reason, except being short of meat? What had being short of meat got to do with bed and breakfast?

'I think I had better go if you don't do bed and breakfast,' said Sharon. She stood up and slipped her haversack straps over her shoulders ready to leave.

'Oh no!' said Mrs Trady. 'Stay and have a cup of tea. Wait till Harry comes in.' She rubbed one hand over the other, as if in doubt. 'You will stay, won't you?'

'A cup of tea would be very welcome, if it's not too much trouble,' said Sharon.

Mrs Trady looked relieved. 'No trouble at all. Harry's been doing a bit of killin' in the old shed. Used to be a barn once. We might put

you up for the night. I'll see what Harry says.' She placed a smoke-stained kettle on the open coal fire, and cups – no saucers – on a grimy, cloth covered table.

'Hurry up wi' that blasted werta Doris,' bawled Mr Trady. 'Never mind about 'er yet.'

Mrs Trady's face paled a little. 'I'll have to leave you, love. You make the tea. You'll find all the stuff in the cupboard.' She pointed to the cupboard and wiped a dirty hand on a stained tea-cloth. 'He gets awful mad if I don't hurry.'

Sharon did as she was asked, taking the opportunity to clean out the half-full teapot, and the stained cups. The tea was made and ready to serve when Mrs Trady returned.

Sharon watched as Mrs Trady dropped her apron to the floor. She removed her shoes from bare feet, then threw shoes and apron to a corner of the kitchen for the second time. A shadow spread half way across the room from the open doorway, causing Sharon to turn quickly.

A broad-shouldered man stood in the opening; half shaven, partly bald, he too was wearing a sack apron.

He looked Sharon up and down; his dark blue eyes questioning, examining and searching. 'Come across the field did yer? Yer dain't meet anybody did yer?' he asked.

Sharon felt very uncomfortable under his scrutinizing gaze. He was looking at her like a butcher about to cut up a freshly killed pig.

'I saw the stone,' said Sharon.

'Comes in handy now and then,' said Mr Trady. He looked at his wife. 'Med the tay?'

Mrs Trady seemed afraid to answer. She wiped her hands again on the tea-towel. 'The girl made it while I was bringing you the water.'

'Pour one then.' He slung his apron and Wellingtons into the corner then went to the sink to wash.

'Yer want ter stop the night?' His face was covered in a creamy lather, and, with his eyes closed, he reached for the towel. 'I heard Doris say. Her will put yer a dinner.'

Sharon stared at the man in disgust. It seemed the tea-towel was used for every purpose, and she had wiped the cups with it.

'You 'ave never tasted sausages like ours. My own recipe.' He spoke proudly. 'Best in the world.'

Sharon laughed. 'I'll believe that when I've tasted them.' But she

really didn't fancy a meal after having noticed the untidy and dirty state of the kitchen.

Mr Trady looked at Sharon through half-closed eyes, the towel still in his hands. 'You will see. Yer might even be of 'elp makin' it – after dinner.'

Mrs Trady's face paled, and Sharon heard the splash of the tea in her cup as her hand shook.

'Clumsy cat. Put the blasted dinner on,' said Mr Trady. He hung the tea-towel on a plastic hook attached to the side of the sink.

Much to Sharon's surprise the dinner was excellent. She could understand Mr Trady's reason for boasting. When asked if she wanted more, she couldn't refuse. She hoped that Mr and Mrs Trady would tell what the dinner and the night's lodging would cost before she left the table. She intended to pay for the extra meal, of course.

After another cup of tea Sharon felt drowsy, and could only keep her eyes open with difficulty. She offered to wipe the dishes, but Mrs Trady gave a blunt refusal.

Mr Trady sat watching her from the other side of the table, as if waiting for something to happen. His eyes looked into hers and seemed to hypnotize. She wanted to ask him if she could make a phone call, but her vocal chords refused to function. Her body drooped forward and she cushioned her head on folded arms.

The sound of machinery, and the flap, flapping of a slack dynamo belt roused Sharon from a nightmarish dream. There was a nauseating stench, that was not all from pigs. She could hear the bubbling of boiling water and the gentle hissing of escaping steam. She tried to rise from what she imagined to be a flat table, but her arms were fastened down tightly with leather straps. The barn was dimly lit with an old-fashioned oil-lamp hanging from a beam in the centre of the high roof. Rough sacking, which served as a pillow, rubbed her neck as she tried to turn her head. A long trestle-table, laden with white enamelled bowls – steaming with contents she could not see – was placed against one wall. A milk-churn, apparently used as a container for discarded and unwanted pork bones and such like, was placed close by.

A sharp, throbbing pain just below her right knee, which

increased like fire in intensity, caused her to scream out loud. She tried to raise her head and look down to her feet. Her naked body was covered with a single sheet, the bottom half, which covered her legs, was soaked with blood.

Pain like a thousand red-hot needles attacked Sharon's right knee again. She could feel the dampness of the sheet on her left leg but nothing on her right. She tried to cross her legs but could only move the one. She screamed out loud; a piercing scream which echoed round the walls of the old barn. A rat scurried across the greasy floor, and there was the flutter of wings from nesting pigeons in the rafters as they were disturbed by Sharon's scream.

The barn door creaked open on rusting hinges. Moonlight sent a black, moving shadow across the wet straw-covered concrete as Mr Trady carried a shallow and steaming enamel tray over to the trestle table. Sharon watched through bleary and pain-filled eyes as he lifted the tray and placed it on the centre of the table.

'Come thee on Doris,' he called as another shadow filled the doorway and stopped. 'Her ay gonna bite thee. We 'ay got all night.'

Mrs Trady placed a heavy bucket on the table alongside the tray. She kept her head turned away from Sharon's direction, as if afraid of what she might see.

'Close the bloody door and tek 'er leg from the boiler and get cuttin'. And chuck the bones along with the kids into the 'ole and bury 'em when thees't done.'

Mrs Trady did as he ordered, and closed the door with a bang. 'Nobody's going to come this time of the night.'

Mr Trady walked over to where Sharon was lying, leaving his wife to carry on with the task of stripping meat from bone. 'We should have taken your tongue out first,' he said as he placed a wet hand over her mouth. 'Any more of yer screamin' and cryin' and I'll do just that.'

Sharon could feel the roughness of his skin as he moved his hand from her mouth and lifted the bottom of the wet sheet.

'We likes the meat fresh,' he said, then in an apologetic tone, 'that's why we 'as to 'ave the blood in it. Makes the pies tasty.' He patted Sharon's remaining leg, causing her to wince. 'We'll want that one later. Sorry we ain't got no more anaesthetic though.'

Sharon could see Mrs Trady cutting the steaming flesh from a long bone as he moved away.

'Taint yours,' he said as he saw the horror in Sharon's eyes. He walked back to his tray. 'It's one of the little wenches.'

'Couldn't I give her a glass of water?' Mrs Trady asked.

'Taint goin' to do 'er any good, but yer con if yer wants to.'

Sharon thought she saw tears in Mrs Trady's eyes, or was it steam?

'You can put a piece o' rag on her leg as well if yer like,' said Mr Trady. He laughed out loud. 'You'm a bloody fool Doris.'

Mrs Trady ignored the jibe and moved quickly away from the table and walked over to the milk-churn. She picked up a cardboard box which had been hidden from Sharon's view and carried it over to where Sharon was lying.

'I'll do your leg first,' she said as she tipped the contents on to the blood-stained sheet.

Sharon looked at her with tear-filled eyes. She tried to speak but Mrs Trady put a warning finger to her lips.

'You don't want to lose your tongue do you,' she whispered. 'He isn't one to show any mercy if you do.'

She picked out a girl's blue frock from the pile of children's clothing and tore it into squares after removing the sleeve. Sharon guessed as to who had been the previous wearer of the dress. She could see a small pair of grey sandals and items of underclothes which only a child would wear, and a cheap-looking chain with a cross, all mixed in with clothes she knew to be her own. That accounted for the one missing girl, but there had been two.

'What happened to the other girl?' Sharon asked, finding her voice at last.

Mr Trady overheard her question. 'Hers in the boiler if yer want to know, and her clothes am keepin' it goin'. You 'ad a bit of 'er with yer dinner. In the sausage. Nice wasn't it?'

Mrs Trady pushed the clothing and sandals to the greasy floor and lifted up the sheet. 'It's hardly worth putting anything on,' she said, as she prodded round Sharon's thigh. 'T'other will be off before morning.'

Sharon could hear herself screaming as agonizing shooting pains shook her body with each touch of Mrs Trady's fingers.

Mr Trady banged down the now empty tray on the wet table and wiped his knife on his sack-apron. 'Drat it! Couldn't yer keep 'er quiet Doris? Somebody might 'ear 'er from the road.' He waved the knife so that Sharon could see. 'Might as well finish 'er off. I likes the

tongue for myself. It goes down well with bacon.' He turned to his wife. 'Thee hold 'er 'ead tight while I get cuttin'. And her nose, 'ers got to open 'er chops then.'

Mrs Trady pulled down hard on Sharon's hair and squeezed her nose tightly between finger and thumb. Sharon let out one last soul-rending scream of despair as the knife bit into her mouth.

'That's shut her up,' said Mrs Trady as she released her hold on Sharon's nose.

'Ah,' said her husband as he held out Sharon's dripping tongue. 'Be careful with that. I want it with my breakfast in the mornin'. Now 'old 'er down while I tek her other leg off.'

Sharon felt the blood flooding her throat as she tried to swallow. She kicked out with her remaining leg as Mrs Trady tried to get a tight grip on her foot.

The pigs could be heard squealing and grunting loudly as Sharon felt the sharp knife cut deep into her thigh.

'Pull on 'er blasted leg Doris,' said Mr Trady as he weighed down with one hand on Sharon's stomach. 'Her keeps liftin' a knee up.'

He cut through bone and tissue as Sharon beat the air with her two hands, the leather straps rubbing her arms as she struggled in vain.

'That will do for tonight. We'll have 'er arms in the mornin',' said Mr Trady. 'Drop 'er leg in the boiler while the blood's still in it.'

'Couldn't you finish her off now,' Mrs Trady asked. 'Put her out of her misery?'

'Her will go 'erself won't 'er,' Mr Trady replied. 'Clean the knives an' I'll turn the motor off.'

The flapping of the dynamo belt ceased, and Mr Trady turned down the smoking wick of the oil-lamp. 'You get yerself in the 'ouse Doris. I'll close the door an' lock up.'

Sharon didn't hear the door close, or hear the drip, drip of blood as it dropped from the table to the red straw. Nor did she feel the gnawing of a rat's teeth on her lips.

Or the knife, as Mr Trady cut through her arms the next morning.

Joint family

Amitaba Bhattacharyya decided he had to act. For the sake of the family. He had tried persuasion, but it had fallen on deaf ears. He had threatened, but it did not intimidate. Now, he could not just sit back and do nothing, and let the family be destroyed. The joint family was the way of life in Bengal. It had been sanctified by the usage of generations, assured a unity of religious life, and fostered responsibility in each member of the family to every other member. Yes, as head of the family he had a clear duty, and that duty was to protect the family from the waywardness of one of them.

It was reading the book, or rather, the postscript to the book, that had given him the idea. If he did it with circumspection, no one need know. A painful solution, perhaps. Painful that is, for the erring one: his father's own brother's son. Painful, yes; but he, Amitaba, had to think of the twenty-six other members of the family.

The Bhattacharyyas were very well-off by Calcutta standards. They had a two storey house in Mohunbagan Street in the north of the city, which was the oldest part. It was a very crowded part, and the density of people living there was the highest in a city where there was more crowding than in any other big city in the world.

Most of the people were, of course, poor; indeed, very poor. They lived a precarious existence. The Bhattacharyyas were used to seeing poverty. They were hardened to its sights. Not because they were less sensitive than people elsewhere, but because the constant sight of, and nearness to, extreme poverty had bred an indifference. In this they were like other families who had similar houses of their own on Mohunbagan Street and other streets in the district. These streets were residential, or at least built to be in better days, with houses and wide pavements on either side.

From the outside, the Bhattacharyyas' house looked dingy. The family had given up trying to keep the frontage of the house in good

shape. It was all they could do to prevent bamboo lean-tos and burlap shacks being built against the wall and the windows, and keep the pavement in front of the house free of sacred bulls, dung, sherbet sellers, hawkers, prostrate bodies with bundles, bootblacks, and goats. Law enforcement was practically non-existent, and anyway it was not a good thing to go to the police. Nor was it advisable to remonstrate with the hawkers and vendors. Either action brought quick retribution in the form of rowdies to the scene, shouting communist slogans. These rowdies appeared from nowhere and in very little time, and immediately took the side of the hawkers and vendors. Violence was then never far away. Shouts of 'capitalist oppressors' would precede a lot of broken windows. There was even a case or two of members of the family being beaten up, in unlikely places, after incidents of this kind. So, the Bhattacharyyas generally put up with the constantly changing scene in front of their house. But the Bengalis are a volatile people. Ebullient and charming, they are easily roused to anger. So, not all the Bhattacharyyas submitted to the irritation all the time. Sometimes, there were fights still, and, by and large, compared with the state of the frontage to their neighbours' houses, the Bhattacharyyas could be said to be defending their territory well in the circumstances.

Strictly, not all of the family were Bhattacharyyas. There were Bhattacharyya daughters of different generations who had married and left, only to return as widows or with their husbands, and the broods they had raised themselves because the husbands could not make a living. There was, at least, a roof over their heads in the Bhattacharyya family home, even if it meant sacrifice of a good deal of pride and personal freedom. But it was a straight choice between these and a roof. Once accepted, both the returned daughter and her family were treated by Amitaba as Bhattacharyyas, and his authority over them was absolute.

A modest front door to the house hid a fairly prosperous interior. A short corridor opened into a spacious, square courtyard. Round the courtyard was a raised verandah, and beyond it were the living rooms. There was a replica of this arrangement on the first and second floors. At the far side of the courtyard was another short corridor which opened into a second, but much smaller, courtyard. The plan of rooms round it was the same, but the rooms were small. Here were the kitchens, the baths, and the rooms of the servants

who lived in. There were no top storeys in the back half of the house.

The Bhattacharyyas had seen better days. Times, in spite of repeated promises by governments of different hues, were not getting better. Quite the opposite, in fact, for the middle classes. The house had not been painted inside or outside for years. The furniture and the furnishings, good in their day, looked worn, and in the rooms of the lesser members of the family, even threadbare. The family lived two or three or more to a room; husbands, wives, and their children together of course, and two or more widower uncles or widow aunts to a room. Sometimes these rooms were more than rooms, small suites of rooms one might say, and were allotted to those who ranked higher in the family. There were subtle distinctions of rank, and Amitaba was the judge, and no one questioned or argued about such things. No one spoke, either, of leaving, for the joint family was the traditional way of life. No one spoke, that is, until this cousin, Amitaba's father's own brother's son.

Amitaba was sure he had the answer now. He had to be careful, go about it in a methodical way. As head of the family, it was up to him and nobody else to see that the unity of the family was preserved. He had a high sense of duty where it concerned the family. The end justified the means, for Amitaba. He was confident, now, that he would be able to do it. But he couldn't hurry, of course. Strength, patience, and planning were essential to back his resolve.

He would not confide even in his widowed sister, Shantamoy, whom he let run the daily household. She did that with great firmness. Brought up in the highly orthodox surroundings of the Bhattacharyya family, married at fourteen to an inconsiderate young man who rapidly grew worse with the years, and widowed some years later, she had become a hard, unyielding, and tyrannical woman, to whom authority in the house, to the extent Amitaba allowed it, made up, somewhat, for the lost years of happiness. Shantamoy was always dressed in spotless white, as befitted a widow. The most impressive mark of the authority delegated to her was the immense bunch of keys that was hooked to her sari at the waist. The silver hook itself was invisible in the big roll of brown flesh which protruded between the bottom line of her *choli* and the sari tied at the waist. The keys jingled and jangled as she waddled about the house issuing orders, chiding the children, and scolding

the servants in her strident voice. No one else had access to the food or other stores, and it was she who counted out or measured items for issue as each need arose. But, of course, those who could afford to do so kept little stores of things in their own rooms, but these they did not share with the others.

Amitaba made some money in buying and selling scrap materials, but his steady source of income was the rent from seventeen *busti* houses he owned. Some three hundred tenants lived there. They included sub-tenants of tenants who let out space. It was a tough business collecting rent from the *busti* dwellers, and he employed two *goondas* to do it for him. As they thought necessary, the *goondas* beat up the tenants if they were behind with the rent or obstructive. Sometimes they kept back some of the money for themselves, although Amitaba paid them a good commission for their job. Amitaba knew very well what they did, but said nothing when they explained the shortage was due to money spent on repairs, which was untrue, or paid as *baksheesh* to the *busti* inspector, which was sometimes true. They behaved obsequiously towards Amitaba; but he was not deceived. He knew very well that they were capable of doing anything they set their mind to. It was known, not only to him, but also to the *busti* dwellers, that they had several murders to their credit.

Only five out of the twenty-seven in the family, not counting Amitaba, earned. There was his cousin, the one who was giving him trouble. He was a building contractor, and Amitaba knew he made a great deal of money. His contribution to the family treasury, however, did not match his earning. But the jewellery his wife wore and his seventeen-year-old daughter, Mila, was being given to wear, did. Mila, in the eyes of Amitaba, was a delectable girl. Well, if his plan went well . . . after all, such things happened in a joint family. None of the others, certainly not her mother, need know. He was confident of his powers of persuasion. She could be married off later, there would be no problem there. There were any number of good families who would be honoured by an alliance with the Bhattacharyya family.

Amitaba had become the natural head of the family when his father died. That was seven years ago, and he was now a mature forty-five. He had never married. He would say he was a just head, treating

everyone in the family alike, to the extent that their situation and contribution to the family finances and obedience to the just behests of its head deserved. By and large, the elderly uncles and aunts, the ones without prospects or hopes, were docile enough. They sometimes quarrelled pettily amongst themselves. But as long as they had their regular meals, they whiled away their time niggling, chewing *pan*, resting, fanning themselves in the heat and the humidity, scolding the very young, sleeping, snoring, gossiping, praying, being very rude to the servants, and walking out of evenings to the *maidan*. There they met cronies who were like themselves in other families, to whom they could complain of Amitaba and Shantamoy, and they spied on young couples cuddling on the park benches which they condemned as the surest way to everlasting damnation. Very rarely, one or other of them made a minor stand against Shantamoy, pretending their seniority in age entitled them to speak their mind. For this privilege, Shantamoy had an easy answer. She issued orders that the free-speaking uncle or aunt would go without food till he or she returned to a state of reasonableness. The orders were scrupulously obeyed by the delighted servants. If a younger member of the family sneaked food to the erring elder, as occasionally happened, the matter reached Amitaba, and he demonstrated what varieties of correction were available to the perpetrators of the kindness. When the recalcitrant eventually recanted, he or she was allowed to resume the old place in the pecking order as if nothing had happened.

The very young were no problem, because Amitaba held their parents responsible for their good behaviour. Correctives could be so easily applied to the parents. As for the teenagers, who could cause trouble, Amitaba ruled them with a rod of iron. At the smallest hint of anything brewing, he acted. He had built up an intricate system of gathering information, and nothing of any account ever happened in that house without a full report of it reaching his ears within a very short time. Amitaba believed that the head of the family ought to be fully informed, and rewarded those who brought him information. To the outside world, the family tensions would not have been apparent. The Bhattacharyyas were regarded as a united and happy family; a model for other joint families.

But, now, Amitaba had an entirely different kind of problem on his hands. The erring member was not an old uncle or a teenager

who could be brought to heal. It was his father's own brother's son, Sisir Kumar, who was only five years younger than him and the second most important member of the family. Sisir wanted to leave the family and take his share of the family assets. Amitaba had not believed, at first, that Sisir could be in earnest. But Sisir was. If he went, the family assets would be cut in two, for, as the only son of his father who had been the most successful Bhattacharyya in living memory, he could lay claim to a great deal. It might even mean selling the family house and finding a smaller place. An age-old tradition would have been broken, and the disintegration of the Bhattacharyya joint family would have begun. If Sisir went, there was no way in which he could be denied his claim. Amitaba could go to court on this issue, and although civil cases took a very long time to be decided, they were also very expensive and there could be no doubt about the outcome. There was only one solution to the problem, and Amitaba was confident he had it now.

The four other wage earners in the family made only a pittance each. One was a storekeeper in a Marwari firm of importers, another a clerk in an insurance firm, a third a typist in a law firm, and the fourth earned meagre money writing petitions for litigants and could be seen on any day of the week, if it did not rain, established on a stool on the pavement outside the High Court. Each dutifully handed over the bulk of his earnings to Amitaba, who put it into the family strong-box. If any of them was not content with the arrangement, he said nothing. Amitaba's and their earnings would keep the family without Sisir from day to day, but if Sisir took half the family assets, the family would be ruined. Amitaba, certainly, would have to eschew his luxuries, the expensive cigars and the whisky, to which he felt he was entitled for shouldering the cares of the family.

By repeating to himself that he would have to be very circumspect, his confidence grew. He would have to have the co-operation of his friend, the doctor at the Institute of Research on Oriental Diseases. Here he burst out laughing as he sat in his comfortable sofa-chair chewing betel and smoking a large cigar . . . no, not co-operation . . . fancy old Nandogopal co-operating in . . . no, not co-operation, he simply wanted his acquiescence . . . Amitaba laughed even louder . . . no, not that either . . . his mind seemed to be playing him up, picking the wrong words. He had to persuade

Nandogopal to show him round his laboratory . . . when it was empty of other staff . . . that perhaps would not be too difficult . . . and then it was up to him to make full use of the situation.

Suddenly, he felt quite capable. The family depended on the success of what he was about to do. Rising, he spat a large volume of betel juice into a spittoon, extinguished his cigar, reached for his *chappals*, and strapped them on. He would telephone Nandogopal now. Perhaps they could meet this evening, if he was free. At the Coffee Bar. Nando didn't drink, otherwise they could go to the Olympia Bar, where it was more relaxing. It was a favourite haunt of Amitaba; there were plenty of Anglo-Indian girls of an evening and they were less inhibited than the Indian girls and gave better value for money. But they wouldn't do for Nando. He would be horrified. There was a side to Amitaba about which his friends knew nothing.

He walked to the corner of Mohunbagan and Chitralekha Streets, to the chemist's shop where there was a telephone. As an important and respectable customer, he was allowed to use the phone, and was expected to drop fifteen paise in the box kept next to it, but this Amitaba never did. He nodded to the chemist's two young assistants behind the counter, and went straight to the phone. He dialled the doctor's number at the Institute.

'Hullo, is it you, Nando? Amita here. Where have you been, I haven't seen . . .'

'Hullo, Amita,' returned the doctor, 'I went off on an impulse to Digha for a couple of weeks. For a change, you know. I was feeling . . .'

'Yes, yes, you did the right thing. You have been working too hard. Did you enjoy yourself?'

'If resting is enjoying, I enjoyed it very much. You should go and see. Good beach and very quiet. I . . .'

'Oh, is it? Yes, I would like to go. But you know how it is with me . . . so many family problems . . . very difficult for me . . .'

'Amita, you take your family responsibilities too hard. You must think of yourself also. As a doctor, I might even prescribe a rest if you go on like this,' bantered Nando. 'If anything happens to you, what then? After all, Sisir can look after them if you go away for a few days.'

'Oh yes, Sisir will do that; he is very conscientious too, Nando, just like me. He is devoted to the family, and to me, and that's why

there's nothing I won't do for him . . . '

'That's your trouble. Always thinking of others, never about yourself . . . '

'I am too old to change, Nando . . . '

'Glad you phoned, Amita, but I must go now. I have some slides under the microscope.'

'Yes, yes, but why don't we have some coffee this evening . . . the usual place . . . at six, if that suits you?'

'That will be nice, I will be there at six, see you then,' said Dr Nandogopal Chatterjee, and rang off.

Amitaba was satisfied. He had taken the first step. And he would take the second in the evening when he met the doctor.

He was at the Coffee Bar a few minutes before six. It was a vast hall crowded with rows of small circular tables, and four chairs to a table. All manner of people gathered there, mainly in the lunch hour and in the evenings after work. The main topics of discussion, as in any large gathering of Indians, never varied: politics, the cinema, and cricket contributed in equal proportions to the deafening noise. Amitaba thought that perhaps they should have met at the Olympia Bar after all. The doctor could have drunk lemonade or ginger beer.

He took a table by a window. He moved two of the four chairs to a nearby table making six chairs round it. Then he took out his cigar wallet from one of the capacious pockets of his *jibba* and placed it on one of the two remaining chairs to show it was reserved. No one came near him, however. The hall was as yet only half full, but people from the offices were beginning to pour in.

The doctor was a few minutes late. Amitaba had been watching the entrance, and he now stood up and waved his arms. The doctor, who was looking round, saw him and came.

It was not too easy to attract a waiter's attention. There were too few waiters for such a large place. Some waiters saw Amitaba's beckoning fingers, but did not respond. At last one did, and took Amitaba's order for two cups of coffee with milk. He was soon back with two steaming cups on a tray. He picked up the cups one by one and banged them on the table spilling some of the coffee, threw the bill on the spilt coffee, blew his nose on the dirty white napkin he carried on his arm, and went off.

'No manners, these waiters,' said Amitaba. 'I've a good mind to complain to the manager.'

'Nothing will come of it,' said the doctor, 'it is a sign of the times, Amita. If we don't like it, we should drink our coffee at home. Nobody cares, and if you complain to the manager, the chances are he will be just as rude.'

'I suppose so. Let's not think about such things. Tell me about Digha, Nando. Who knows, I might take your advice and be on that train tomorrow night,' said Amitaba, with a pretence at lightness.

'That's the way, Amita, I wish you would. To whet your appetite, I will now describe Digha's charms, they are real enough.'

The doctor began to talk enthusiastically about his holiday. Amitaba's mind was really on the other matter, but he let the doctor talk till he seemed to have nothing more to say in praise of Digha.

'Well, that was splendid. I am so glad you had a restful time. You are looking very well, you know, Nando. You'd better be careful, or one of those unattached females in your Institute might gobble you up.'

'Ha, ha, not me! I am a single-minded person, Amita. Why don't you take a trip, seriously? It will do you no end of good. I will give you the address of the boarding house where I stayed. It was a good place . . .'

'Thank you, Nando, but I can't just now. There are family problems . . . Besides, I am short of money . . . every rupee I make goes to the keeping of the family . . . I don't even have enough to buy myself the occasional book. You know my only recreation is . . . reading. I go to the National Library every Saturday . . . I read a *very* interesting book the other day.'

'What was it?' asked the doctor, with no particular interest. His reading was limited to medical journals.

'Oh, let me think . . . now what was the title . . . oh yes, it was called "The Great Plagues of the Middle Ages" and it was by . . . oh dear, I have forgotten the name. It was all about the plagues they used to have in Europe. Good heavens! How ignorant they were – they thought the disease was caused by all sorts of things. And their cures were even more ridiculous. Some were quite inhuman. They sealed up the houses where there were plague cases, and those who were ill and those who were well all died of starvation. It was when I

read the postscript that I myself fully understood how it was caused.'

'Oh, yes,' said the doctor, 'it is all simple enough now. We know . . .'

'Exactly,' interrupted Amitaba, 'it is a bacillus. Is it not called, let me see . . .?'

'*Pasteurella pestis*,' completed the doctor. 'Simple enough when you know it. We have cultures of it in the Institute.'

Amitaba pretended to be startled. The doctor had volunteered the vital information.

'Oh, I would be frightened to have them near me,' he said.

'Oh, they are perfectly safe. You can see them under the microscope. Would you like to see them?'

It seemed to Amitaba that someone up high had given his blessings to his plan. That someone must have thought the Bhattacharyya family worth saving; the family was bigger than the individual. He was greatly encouraged.

He laughed lightly. 'I would, but I might be frightened,' he said again, 'you know, seeing all those things. Anyway, I thought there was strict security in the Institute, and visitors were not allowed.'

'That's true, visitors are not encouraged. There are grave risks, obviously. But I can take an occasional visitor. The Head trusts me to take care. So, if you would like to come . . . say, tomorrow . . . late afternoon is the best time. The staff start leaving from five, and we can have some time to ourselves and won't be in anybody's way. I will show you those minute villains who cause so much trouble,' ended the doctor.

Amitaba could hardly believe his luck. The doctor seemed to be doing half the job for him. He quickly accepted the offer. Lest his friend had a change of heart, he steered the conversation to other things, returning to it only as they were about to leave, to confirm the arrangement.

The Institute was an unpainted, two storey stone building with a rash of advertising signs on hoardings all round the perimeter of its compound. The compound was neat but barren as if there were no money to lay out lawns and flower beds. Amitaba was expected at the security check at the main entrance. The doctor had arranged for him to be let in without fuss. He was shown into the waiting room,

and a uniformed attendant was sent off to find Dr Nandogopal Chatterjee.

Amitaba looked round. It was an odd sort of waiting room. There were shelves and steel cupboards along the walls, all crammed with ledgers and old files of papers tied with faded red tape. Lack of space, he supposed. Nando had told him that all the money they received from government was spent on research, and there was none left to extend the building for much-needed space. The centre of the room was occupied by a long, rectangular table around which were set a number of chairs. Old magazines, most of them medical, cluttered the surface.

Amitaba sat in one of the chairs wondering what was in those magazines. Perhaps there were better methods than the one he had thought up. If only he had more time . . . His ruminations were cut short by the return of the attendant, who asked him to follow him. They walked along long tunnels of corridor passing many doors, all of which were shut. Now and again, a white-coated figure opened a door and emerged furtively, or so it seemed to Amitaba, closing the door behind him, giving a glimpse of what was within. The insides all looked alike. They could be so many replicas of the chemistry laboratory in his own college where he had studied commerce. Bottles, flasks, test-tubes, Bunsens, work-benches, stools, more white-coated people, seemed to make up all that was there.

Arriving at the very end of a corridor, the attendant stopped and knocked on the door in front. Presently, the door opened and Dr Chatterjee emerged with a smile, greeted Amitaba, dismissed the attendant, and, taking Amitaba inside, shut the door.

Amitaba was awed by his surroundings. He suddenly felt weak, and was assailed by doubt: had he the courage to do what he had come to do?

He was there for just over an hour. He saw the most deadly organisms under the microscope. As the minutes passed and he saw the doctor handle the dishes and the slides nonchalantly, his courage began slowly to return. Soon, he was ready. He contrived to be alone for a very few minutes when they had arrived to the object of his quest. With skill, he transferred a little of what he wanted to the carefully prepared receptacle which he produced from an inside

pocket of his *jibba*. Sealing it, he returned it to the pocket. When the doctor returned, he was looking at a slide through a microscope.

There was more to see. Amitaba, however, pleaded a headache and said he would like to leave the rest for another day. The doctor had paper work to do before he could go, and didn't protest. Amitaba thanked him for an enjoyable and – he couldn't resist adding – profitable visit, and left.

That evening, after the family had finished their evening meal, Amitaba took Sisir aside.

'Sisir, I have been thinking. Perhaps I have been harsh. I think I am now beginning to see your point of view. If you want to leave, I shall not stand in your way. Mind you, I can't wholly approve; but the world is changing. Perhaps I am too old to change. But come with me, let's have another talk.'

Sisir, of course, was very surprised. Amitaba had consistently, and often rudely, refused even to consider his request. And here he was, amiable and prepared to let him go.

'Oh, Amita, I knew you had a big heart. Our going away would not mean a break-up of the family, we will come and see you as often as we can, and all of you must come and see us. Thank you, brother, and I will be glad to listen to anything you want to say.'

They went to Amitaba's room. There they sat and talked for a long time. Sisir had never before found Amitaba to be so understanding.

When all was agreed, Amitaba called out for a servant.

'Give me a week or two to sort things out,' he said to Sisir, as the servant appeared, 'but let us now eat some *sandesh* and *rossogollas* and drink a few cups of hot tea.'

He nodded to the servant, who understood the order. Soon he returned with the sweetmeats and the tea, neatly placed on a large, ornate tray, and put them on Amitaba's bedside table.

The two men did full justice to what was before them although they had eaten a large meal earlier in the evening. At last, Amitaba got up from his chair, stretched, and made as if to go to a partly open cupboard near the wall. As he stepped past his bedside table, he stumbled, and his *jibba* brushed against a dish of pins and clips that lay near the edge. The dish tumbled to the floor, scattering the contents far and wide. Amitaba let out an exclamation and got down

on his hands and knees to pick up what had fallen. Sisir too got down to the floor to help.

Now, Amitaba had the most difficult part of his plan to execute. He had pondered this moment many times over. At times, a terror had come over him that he might botch it. Prick himself, instead of Sisir, for example. At other times he had been utterly composed, surprised at the simplicity of his plan and the ease with which the final act could be accomplished. But through it all ran an underlying sense of conviction that he was doing right. That, after all, was most important. With right on his side, he couldn't blunder it.

And now, when the moment came, he did it with élan. Swift and smooth as a snake, he struck. Sisir let out a loud 'Ouch!' and looked at the calf of his leg which his *dhoti*, riding up his legs as he squatted, had exposed. Blood was oozing from a tiny puncture in the skin. Amitaba could not apologise enough. In turning, he explained he must have inadvertently stuck a large pin into Sisir's leg. Sisir laughed, said it was nothing, wiped the blood with his handkerchief, rubbed the spot, and went on with collecting the pins and clips. When all of them had been put back into the dish, Sisir left. Amitaba looked at the retreating Sisir, sighed deeply, recovered the specially prepared needle he had pushed under the bed after the deed, burnt the place where it had been lying with a succession of lighted matches, and, pushing the needle into a polythene bag, placed it carefully on the table for disposal later. Then he sat down, and picking up the last *sandesh* from the tray, put it thoughtfully into his mouth.

He had a very good night's sleep.

It was now Sunday, four days after the incident. Sisir did not appear for the evening meal, which all the family ate together. Amitaba had been watching Sisir closely in those four days. Now, he wondered.

The meal started, and still Sisir didn't come. Amitaba asked his wife, kindly, if he wasn't coming. She replied that Mila's father, as she always referred to her husband, like a good Hindu wife, had not been feeling very well, and was feverish with a headache. He had decided to go to bed early, and she would be taking him a cup of hot milk as soon as she had eaten. Amitaba thought, ah . . . He said, even more kindly, that it was best for Sisir to rest and he should be well by the morning. Amitaba was satisfied.

The meal over, the family retired to their several rooms, and the servants began to clear the things away. Amitaba got into bed early to read a pornographic novel he had picked from one of the pavement book-sellers who squatted outside the Grand Hotel on Chowringhee Street. About eleven o'clock, as he was deeply engrossed in the incredible performances of the heroine with her succession of lovers, there was a gentle knock on the door. Amitaba quickly hid the book under his pillow, got up and out of bed, and opened the door. It was Sisir's wife.

'Elder brother,' she said, 'Mila's father is not feeling well at all. He is very hot and has a headache and pains all over. Do you think we should send for the doctor, elder brother?'

'Oh, I am sorry he isn't feeling well,' said Amitaba with concern in his voice. 'I'm sure it is just a cold, or perhaps it is flu. With this change of weather, I have been hearing that there is a lot of flu about. I will give you something for him to take. He should feel better by the morning.'

He went to a cupboard, picked a bottle, poured out some pills, and gave them to Sisir's wife.

'I'm sure these will get rid of his pains and headache. Give him two now, in warm water, and two later in the night. But if he is asleep, don't wake him. Sleep will do him more good than pills.'

Sisir's wife took the pills and went. Amitaba returned to his reading. He read late into the night, and when he turned off the light he had finished the book. He decided he would try a few things which had so excited him when he next picked up an Anglo-Indian girl at the Olympia Bar.

He slept well and next morning he was up a little earlier than usual. Finishing his ablutions, he began to pace up and down the room waiting for that knock on the door which he knew would come.

A servant brought the tea. Scarcely had he shut the door, when the second knock came. Sisir's wife looked haggard and worn, and it was clear that she had not slept during the night at all.

'Elder brother, Mila's father is feeling worse. He had diarrhoea during the night and vomited several times. He is very, very hot and his eyes are bloodshot. May I please send for Dr Mukhopadhyaya, elder brother, please? I sat by his bedside all night and am very worried.'

'That you shouldn't be, sister, but to stop you from worrying, I

will send for the doctor right away. I'm sure it's just a severe gastric flu. All the symptoms point that way. But I will let the doctor tell you that. Tell Sisir I will come and see him as soon as I have written a note for the doctor and sent it off with one of the servants. Now go and stay with him, but don't let Mila or any of the others go into the room. Mila can go and stay a couple of days with one of her aunts. And keep a set of utensils just for Sisir. No one else, not even you, should use them till he is better and they are disinfected. I don't want the whole family to come down with gastric flu.'

Sisir's wife looked a little relieved; comforted by Amitaba's assurance that it was only flu Mila's father had and the doctor was being sent for. One could rely on Dr Mukhopadhyaya. Everyone said, and she knew, that his very presence radiated confidence in his patients.

Amitaba called Suren, his most trusted servant, took him into the room, and shut the door. He told him that Sisir Babu was not feeling well, and his wife was making a big fuss and calling for the doctor, which was of course quite right for a good wife to do. But it was just a severe cold in the stomach, and the doctor did not like to be called out for trivial complaints. He himself had medicines enough for the patient. He was sending him, Suren, out as if to the doctor to satisfy Sisir Babu's wife. But he was not to go to the doctor, just stay away for an hour and return with the message that the doctor was out on an urgent case and would be given Amitaba's note on his return. He was not to talk to anyone about the matter.

Suren understood. He always did as he was told, and never asked questions. Amitaba looked after him as no other master would.

Amitaba told Shantamoy briefly that Sisir was not feeling well, and he had sent for the doctor.

He didn't go to see Sisir. He was beginning to get worried about keeping Sisir in the house. Sisir's complaint could spread. The postscript in the book had said it was highly infectious. He didn't honestly want anyone else in the family to fall ill. He knew he would have to send for Dr Mukhopadhyaya sooner or later, because the doctor would have to arrange to get Sisir into the Infectious Diseases Hospital. But he didn't want the doctor too soon. Once Sisir went into the hospital, events would take their natural course.

He wasn't going to stay all of that day in the house. Sisir's wife would pester him, and in any case there was no point in running unnecessary risks. So, leaving word with Shantamoy that he had

urgent business to attend, and promising to be back early to hear what the doctor had to say about Sisir, he left. Not, however, without a final admonition that no one, neither the family nor the servants, was to go into Sisir's room, nor was anyone to send a servant to the doctor again, for that would simply annoy him.

Amitaba returned home late that evening. He had spent several hours, most of them alone, in the Olympia Bar. He had left it briefly with an Anglo-Indian girl who had taken him to her poky little flat but who, however, would not let him try out his newly acquired knowledge from last night. He had returned to the bar in a temper, and had drunk steadily till he had no more money. When he returned home, he didn't want to talk about Sisir or anyone else, nor did he want to eat, he just wanted to go to bed.

But Sisir's wife was waiting. She looked dishevelled, and had been crying.

'Elder brother, the doctor hasn't come,' she said tearfully, 'perhaps he is not well. This is not like Dr Mukhopadhyaya. Could you not send, please, for another doctor? Mila's father is worse. He has been asking for you. He has severe pains in the armpits, the neck, and the groin, and there are swellings . . .'

Amitaba felt an intense irritation. What a fuss she was making of a childish ailment, he thought, and suddenly realized it was not a childish ailment at all. He quickly drew away from Sisir's wife, and spoke sternly.

'Sister, control yourself. I have just returned after a long day's work, and here you are complaining the moment I have set foot in the house. Sisir gets a headache and you behave like a schoolgirl. All right, if he is not better by the morning, I shall myself go and fetch Dr Mukhopadhyaya. Now, take the pills which I shall give you, and then I would like to go to bed. I am very tired.'

Sisir's wife had smelt the drink in Amitaba's breath. She hated that smell. But it was not for her to say what Amitaba should do. He was, after all, the head of the family. But he had never before spoken harshly to her like that. She hung her head and remained silent.

Amitaba went to his room and returned with more of the white pills. Sisir's wife held out her hands submissively, and he dropped the pills into them. Without saying another word, he turned away.

In his room, he undressed quickly. Swallowing a couple of the

same pills himself with the hot tea a servant had just put on his bedside table, he got into bed and was soon fast asleep.

Next morning, just as he was coming awake, there came the inevitable knock on the door. Sisir's wife stood there in a state of near collapse.

'Elder brother, oh elder brother, Mila's father is going,' she sobbed, 'and there isn't even a doctor to see him. Oh, elder brother, please bring a doctor, or at least permit me to go to Dr Mukhopadhyaya. I will run for him this minute. Oh, elder brother, save him, save my husband.'

In her agony, she had referred to Sisir as her husband for the first time in her married life.

Amitaba spoke kindly. 'Sister, I will go immediately to Dr Mukhopadhyaya. I am sorry I spoke harshly to you last night, but I was tired. I am surprised Sisir isn't better after the tablets I gave you. But no matter, Dr Mukhopadhyaya will soon put him right. I will wash and go. Please don't upset yourself, everything will be all right.'

Amitaba knew he couldn't keep Sisir in the house any longer without the gravest risk of the infection spreading. It was too dangerous. He thought of Mila . . . no, he couldn't afford to wait any longer.

He washed quickly, swallowed two cups of hot tea, dressed, and left the house. Dr Mukhopadhyaya's consulting rooms were about a mile away, but as the morning was cool, he decided he would walk. It was all such a nuisance, this thing he had to do to save the family. Why couldn't people behave themselves? Why couldn't things which were good enough for their fathers and grandfathers be good for them? He had a momentary sense of guilt when he thought of the money he spent on whisky and cigars and Anglo-Indian girls, but it passed. After all, he had no wife to minister to his needs. He had to relax sometimes from the cares of the family. And what he did was his own business; it didn't hurt other members. But this thing *would*; no, not what he was doing to Sisir, but what Sisir intended to do to all of them. That was why he had to do something. If people were reasonable, there would be no trouble then.

The doctor wasn't there when he arrived. He had to wait for a quarter of an hour, but he was at the head of the queue, so when the

doctor finally did arrive, he was the first to be called in.

Amitaba described the situation. He said he was very concerned about the symptoms, and if they meant what he feared, Sisir would have to be removed to the Infectious Diseases Hospital. Dr Mukhopadhyaya agreed he was right to have come to him so promptly, but he would be very surprised if the illness was that, because there were no reports at all anywhere in the city or the countryside. It could be a very serious matter, however, if it was, as it was a notifiable disease. He would be at the house within the hour. Amitaba thanked him and left, well satisfied.

Dr Mukopadhyaya came as promised. He was with the patient for a bare five minutes. When he came out of the sick-room, he looked extremely grave. Taking Amitaba aside, he said he was sorry, very sorry, but his worst fears had been confirmed. Sisir's condition was serious, there was haemorrhagic enlargement of the glands, prostration, and signs of delirium. Absolute isolation was essential, and he would telephone the Infectious Diseases Hospital at once for an ambulance. He would also speak to the health officer of the Corporation and get him to send a fumigation team to the house. In the meantime, no one was to go anywhere near the sick-room. After Sisir was taken away, all the family were to have inoculations, and the servants were to use the various disinfectants he would prescribe for the next few days while cleaning the rooms. If anyone in the family showed any sign of fever or otherwise felt unwell, he was to be informed immediately. He then left in a hurry.

Things don't happen quickly in Calcutta. It was afternoon before the ambulance came. The fumigation team came in the evening. When they had finished, the house smelt several times more strongly than a hospital, and the odour carried well into the street. In a matter of minutes all the neighbourhood knew, particularly as the men in the fumigation team talked freely once they were out of the house, enjoying the attention they got from the gathering crowd. But the mob did not come very close to the house. Some stones were thrown.

As Amitaba had thought, things took their natural course from then on, but they didn't stop there, which he had not bargained for. Each day, the news from the hospital grew worse, and Sisir was not

responding to treatment. The swellings on his body began to suppurate, and his temperature stayed at a terrifyingly high level. On the eighth day after being taken ill, he died.

The family mourned the loss in varying degrees. Sisir's wife suffered a total collapse, from which she never completely recovered. Mila feared for the life of her mother, before that stage passed and apathy took its place. Some of the distant uncles and aunts were only mildly stricken. Amitaba seemed broken-hearted.

Things did not end there. On the third day after Sisir's death, two of the aunts became ill. On the following days, there was more sickness, and Mila too became ill. Seven out of the sick died; six were members of the family and one was a servant. Mila miraculously recovered.

The deaths of the uncles and aunts didn't move Amitaba very much. He spoke of God's will. But he was very, very frightened. Several times every day, he examined himself minutely before a full-length mirror in the secret of his room, for tell-tale marks on his body. It wasn't until many days had passed and the sicknesses ceased that he stopped these examinations.

His good humour began to return, slowly. He felt he had successfully completed a difficult mission, although he wished there had not been so many casualties on his road to success. But he had kept the family, what was left of it, intact. The old family of the Bhattacharyyas was still a joint family, and would remain so till the end of time. News of his courage and devotion to the family spread, and some people, who hoped for personal gain by doing so, wanted to propose him for Mayor for the next term.

The immediate neighbours, however, would not come near the house for months afterwards. Even the hawkers, the vendors, and the sherbet-sellers kept away. There were no lean-tos or shacks against the windows. The pavement in front of the house remained clear, except for the sacred bulls which persisted in ambling past and dropping their dung. People avoided the house like the plague.

As the stricken Bhattacharyyas had been dying, a leading city daily carried the following news item one morning:

The deaths from bubonic plague of a number of people in north Calcutta have been reported. Plague is conveyed to man by

the rat flea which has lived on plague infected rats. There has been no reports of rat falls in the city and the sudden deaths are a mystery. Investigations in the area have failed to discover any dead rats. There is considerable alarm among residents of the area, and we fear it may turn to panic in the absence of any statement from the Corporation.

The Corporation health officer became very agitated when he read it. He took it to his superior, who telephoned the Health Minister's office in Writers' Buildings. The Minister was told a little after his arrival in his office soon after midday. He issued orders that the paper was to kill further news on the outbreak in the interests of public security. The elections were round the corner, and he wanted no panic in the city. 'What's a few more or less in this city? We must win the elections for the sake of the country,' he said to his secretary. The secretary agreed, submissively. There was no further report in that or any other paper.

Two months after Sisir's death, Amitaba met with an accident. He was knocked down by a lorry as he stepped off the pavement into Chowringhee Street. He had just deposited in his personal account the cash from the sale of most Sisir's wife's jewellery which he had confiscated, justifiably he thought, as reparation for the loss of Sisir's contribution to the family finances. He lived for several hours with fleeting periods of consciousness. Two pictures repeatedly appeared before him. One was of a statue of him in marble at the crossing of Mohunbagan and Chitrlekha Streets, and on the pedestal were the words in gold 'AMITABA BHATTACHARYYA' and below it 'PROTECTOR OF BENGALI TRADITION'. The other was of Sisir writhing in agony in the hospital, with one finger pointing at him and struggling to say something which never got beyond 'You m . . .' Amitaba knew what he was trying to say. He died in the small hours of the following morning.

Dr Nandogopal Chatterjee was browsing through the shelves of medical books in the National Library. There was a popular section, books on medical things for the layman. He took a book out of a shelf. *The Great Plagues of the Middle Ages* by Robert Allardyce, it said, published in London. He suddenly remembered. This was the

book poor Amita had talked about. Yes . . . the postscript. Ah, here . . . nothing especially interesting . . .

The bacilli circulating in the blood of the infected rat are picked up, mixed with blood, when the flea bites and feeds. In some of the now infected fleas, the bacilli multiply in such a way that they produce blockage of the gullet. The flea can no longer suck properly, but tends to vomit when it has drawn only a little blood from a human or animal victim. This regurgitated blood, with bacilli from the flea's gullet, may thus be injected into the person or animal being bitten. Unless there is immunity, the bacilli then increase in number and symptoms of plague follow. The 'blocked' flea is probably the usual source of infection, but the faeces of an infected flea or matter from a crushed infected flea containing the bacilli may be scratched into the skin and cause infection.

He put the book back into the shelf. Scratched into the skin? How terrible! His friend, Dr Mukhopadhyaya had been mystified by the isolated outbreak. Was it possible? But, why? He stood there for a minute or two, and shivered. He decided it was none of his business. But, in the days that followed, he was unable to shake off a sense of guilt and participation.

The house that remembered

To the south of Kilkenny, the countryside is intimate, as only the countryside of Ireland can be. Little fields, surrounded by walls of stone, climb the hillsides and nestle beside the roads. The thatch on the whitewashed cottages is green with moss. The land, though penny poor, has a gentleness about it.

It was June, and the roadside verges were heavy with campion and cow parsley. The young man at the wheel of the rented Hertz car felt as though he was driving along a farm track. The girl beside him sniffed the warm country air, and smiled, thinking how little had changed here for centuries past. The tarmac on the wandering road, and the bright metalwork of the car, were intrusions on the timelessness of the place.

'It's beautiful, Toby,' she murmured. 'God, it's so peaceful. We could live here, and grow things, and raise children – it would be like Heaven!'

Her companion laughed. 'You're an incurable romantic, Fran. Think of it in winter, when it rains for days on end. You would die of boredom. No, my love, if we can fix the old place up, or build something on the site, we'll keep it as a weekend retreat. Dublin's the only place to live and work – if you have to live and work in Ireland.'

'Oh, darling,' she pouted. 'You're so damn practical. Can't I dream my dreams?'

They turned a corner, and as happens so often in Ireland, the landscape suddenly changed. A hill, bleak and uncluttered with stone walls rose on their right. Before them was a valley, marshy and ill-kempt, with a boggy stream meandering through it. To the left, the land climbed, ridge upon ridge, to the purple slopes of the Blackstairs Mountains.

Upon the hill, silhouetted against the westering sun, a ruined

house, roofless, with windows like empty eye sockets, brooded over this tranquil scene.

Toby stopped the car, and got out, shading his eyes against the setting sun.

'That must be it!' he declared, in a voice gruff with emotion. 'Isn't it superb?' He opened the car door for his wife of seven days, and took her hand in his own. Following his gaze, Frances shuddered, without knowing why.

As they stood there, they became aware of a curious creaking and wheezing, which, as it came nearer, was accompanied by the frying sound of flat tyres on small stones. Around the corner, pedalling so slowly that he wobbled in a quite alarming fashion, came a be-whiskered old man on a bicycle. Seeing them, he dismounted, nearly overbalancing as he did so.

'I suspect we are going to get an earful of the local blarney,' said Toby, out of the corner of his mouth.

'Shhh! He might be one of your tenants,' chuckled Frances, and then, with a wide smile, she bade the old man good day.

Off his bicycle he was very small. His face, beneath a shapeless hat, many sizes too large for him, was gnome-like, his mouth a toothless gash between a nose and a chin which almost met at their tips. However, he was affable enough.

'Isn't it altogether a beautiful evenin' for enjoying the peace of the countryside?' he declared. He searched his pockets as he spoke, and produced a cigarette packet. When he discovered it was empty, he raised his eyebrows in astonishment, and threw it into the hedge. Toby took the hint, and offered a packet of Chesterfields.

'American,' said the ancient. 'And isn't that a wonderful country. If I wasn't a man that loved his own homeland more than life itself, that's where I'd be today.'

'We were just going to walk up to the old house,' said Toby, not anxious to become involved in the old fellow's romantic notions.

'Aye . . . well, don't linger after sundown if ye go up yonder.' His watery blue eyes stared balefully from under his straggly eyebrows.

'It sounds as though the place has a history,' chuckled Toby.

'To be sure, it has. Didn't the Fellmartins live in that very house for centuries? For centuries, bad cess on 'em, until one night our brave lads from the village went up there and put a match to it. Aye,

burnt it, and sent the godless tyrants helter skelter to Dublin, beggin' for the military to be sent to save what was left of their demesne.'

'That would be in the famine years?' enquired the young American.

'Indeed it was. The years of the potato famine. The hard times. Fellmartin living up there like a lord, and the villagers sufferin' agonies of hunger. But they killed Fellmartin's son ye know, and I for one don't blame them. A wicked family, an evil house. No one goes up there nowadays. No one even knows who owns it.'

'I do,' said the young man. The girl on his arm giggled nervously.

'Why then, you know more than one who has lived here these seventy years. Who is it then?'

'Me. My name is Tobias Fellmartin!'

The old man made gobbling noises, and into his eyes came the look of a rabbit confronted by a stoat.

'May the Holy Saints preserve us all,' he stuttered. 'Who am I to open my big mouth and criticize a family I never met at all, passing on old gossip like it was fresh from the front page of the *Cork Examiner*.'

As the words came tumbling out, the old fellow was anxiously increasing the distance between him and the smiling couple as though he feared physical assault at any moment.

'Hey!' laughed Toby. 'Don't let it bug you. My great granddaddy was probably a bit of a bastard, and had it coming to him!'

'Ah, well sor,' babbled the ancient one. 'They was hard times. Hard times indeed.' He swallowed, and glanced at the gaunt walls on the hillside above. 'Have ye – beggin' yer pardon – by any chance come to repossess the estate?'

'Something like that. I've seen the lawyers in Dublin, and I have the deeds to the house in my car. What we should like is some accommodation in the village, whilst we look around.'

'Then it's Pat Mulcahy's ye'll be wanting,' said the old man, glad to change the subject. 'There's no better place in the whole village. In fact, to tell the truth, there's no other place. We don't have a lot of tourists in Ballymeelin.'

'Is it a . . . hotel?' asked the girl.

'Well now, not exactly. More of an inn, you might say. For the

anglers, and suchlike. Still an' all, Pat's a grand warm-hearted feller, even when he's sober.'

'Thank you for your advice,' said Toby. 'I'm sure we shall be meeting again.'

The old man took the hint, swung a creaky leg over the saddle of his bicycle, and wobbled away. Tobias and his young bride were left alone in the soft glow of an Irish summer's evening.

'Come on!' cried Toby, grinning. 'Let's take a look at the family heritage.'

A few yards from where they had parked the car, stood two forlorn pillars of stone, upon which had once hung the gates of the Fellmartin house. The rusty hinge pins were still there, and on one pillar, a weather-beaten griffon yet stood guard, his blank eyes fixed upon the distant hills. What had been a carriage drive was now a grassy track, curving around the shoulder of the hill on which the ruins stood.

The hillside, close cropped by sheep, was green with that luminosity you only see in Ireland. The broken walls of the house were painted with brown and yellow lichens, and softened by clumps of purple toadflax and delicate spleenwort ferns, rooted in the old mortar.

'It's beautiful!' exclaimed Frances. 'The colours are so rich. You could build such a wonderful place here, and you've all those lovely old stones to begin with.'

Her husband laughed.

'Perhaps we'll build a house here, but it'll be a modern one, with big windows, and a studio facing north, so I can bring some work down, and have long weekends.'

'Well,' said Frances, rather disconsolately. 'I'm sure you are the best architect in all Ireland, not to mention New York, so I know you won't desecrate the place.'

They had ascended the curving path as they chatted, and now they passed between the columns of the portico, massive and grey, and stained with green slime where the rains of a hundred winters had trickled down the roofless walls. Frances shivered as they entered the ruin, for the temperature seemed to fall several degrees, and an unpleasant odour of decay rose to their nostrils. The floor was a mound of masonry and broken tiles, thickly coated with moss. A

rook, startled by their intrusion, rose on clattering wings, and its raucous cry echoed between the crumbling walls.

'My God,' muttered Frances nervously. 'Isn't this just a creepy place.' It was a statement, not a question. By way of reply, Toby did a strange thing.

'Fellmartin!' he shouted, and louder still, 'Tobias Fellmartin!'

As the reverberations of his wild cry died away, they felt a sudden chill, and the silence pressed in upon them. Then the wall of the chimney breast above them trembled, and groaned, and began to sag, the stonework opening into jagged cracks as it broke away.

'Look out!' screamed Frances, and seizing her husband's arm, she dragged him back towards the entrance. The dust of old mortar followed them in a rolling cloud out on to the friendly hillside.

'That place isn't safe,' said Tobias, shakily. 'Fancy the sound of my voice bringing all that rubbish down. Quite uncanny!'

'Something in the house doesn't like you,' said Frances, clutching his arm. 'Didn't you feel it, the moment we went in? There's something evil in there, something just like you said, uncanny.'

Toby snorted.

'Oh, come on Fran! Everybody knows that soundwaves can start avalanches. It was just stupid of me, that's all. You've been influenced by that whiskery old idiot we met on the road.'

'But why did you shout your name so – so defiantly?' asked Frances. He didn't answer, and they walked back to the car in silence.

'P. E. Mulcahy, licensed to sell beer, spirits and tobacco', was the legend above the door of Ballymeelin's most prominent building. In one window a yellowing card advertised accommodation. They registered, the proprietor almost climbing over Toby's shoulder to have a first glance at his signature.

'We met a little old man on a bicycle who recommended you to us,' explained Toby, smiling.

'Sure, and that would be Huey Maginnitty, the owd rascal,' replied Mulcahy. 'A grand wee feller, except that he lives in the past a bit too much, particularly where payin' for his drinks is concerned.'

Frances and Toby were shown up to a pleasant room on the first floor, where they cleaned off the dust of their journey, and passed

away an hour in the manner of newly-weds the world over.

Mulcahy's Select Lounge was a tiny room leading off from the bare, Guinness-smelling public bar of his hostelry. Into this little parlour, with its fireplace and carpeted floor, Toby and Fran were ushered when they came downstairs for a drink, before their evening meal.

'Ah, now then! You and your lady wouldn't want to be drinking in a grim owld place like my public!' cried Mulcahy, taking each by an arm. 'Isn't this the cosiest little snug you ever set your eyes on, and television too, if you want it.'

'Well, thanks,' said Toby. 'But to be honest, I'd sooner stand and drink in the bar with the locals. Perhaps hear a bit about what the place was like in the old days.'

Despite Mr Mulcahy's protestations, Toby insisted, and they joined the half dozen or so early regulars, who already had their stout on the bar counter. The landlord drew a pint of draught for Toby, and poured a bottle of McCardle's light ale for Fran. She felt a degree of hostility in the room, but said nothing to her husband. A tall, gaunt man, with high cheekbones, put his glass on the bar noisily, and broke the silence.

'Ladies don't usually stand up to the bar hereabouts,' he drawled, in a voice that was none too friendly. 'Nor Fellmartins, neither!'

'That's no way to be talking to a visitor Peadher, indeed it's not!' snapped Mulcahy, shocked.

'Sure, old man. Them days was long ago,' said another customer, a middle-aged farmer, with stubble on his chin, and a flat cap pulled down hard over his eyes.

Toby smiled evenly at the gaunt one.

'You say Fellmartins don't come here and stand up to the bar. When did you last see a man of my name in Ballymeelin? I thought my family left this place a hundred years ago.'

'Aye, so they did. Them that could. But there's a few of your kinsmen about. They call themselves by other names, but the Fellmartin blood is in them.'

'And you still hate them?'

'My name is O'Mallan,' said the man dryly, and picked up his hat, and walked out of the bar.

'I think we'll take our drinks through to the snug,' said Toby, embarrassed by the turn of events.

Mulcahy smiled unhappily.

'Don't think everybody here is like O'Mallan,' he whispered. 'I'll see the girl has your supper ready in a few minutes.'

After breakfast the following morning, Toby sought out Mr Mulcahy, who was cleaning up the bar.

'Tell me, Mr Mulcahy, who are these kinsmen of mine that Mr O'Mallan spoke of last night, and where might I find them?'

'I don't know, and that's the truth,' he declared, leaning on the handle of his broom. 'Oh, of course I've heard some gossip, but you hear all sorts of strange tales in an out-of-the-way place like this. Now, as for passing on bar-talk to a stranger such as yourself - well, I don't believe I should, for there's no knowing what trouble I might be stirring up.'

'No trouble, Mr Mulcahy,' said Tobias mildly. 'I assure you I have undisputed possession of the Fellmartin property. The Dublin lawyers have been very thorough. It is just that I want to give no cause for rancour in the community if I choose to come and live here.'

'Live here?' exclaimed the landlord, and his eyebrows shot up. 'You mean rebuild the old house?'

'No, no. Pull it down, and build a new one.'

'Then take care. I'm not a local man, you understand, but I've heard some nasty things have happened up there since the house was burnt.'

'Such as?'

'Ach, people meeting with accidents when they've tried to take away a few stones, and a young laddie falling down the well-shaft. Things like that. The villagers say it's an evil place.'

'Who, in particular, says it's an evil place?'

'I can see you are a persistent man, Mr Fellmartin. Then go out of here, and up the road a little way, towards the house. Where it turns to the right, you'll see a lane, a track, no more. At the end of that track is Kate Cormac's cottage. Take a half bottle of gin with you.'

Toby parked the car at the entrance to the lane, which was overgrown with brambles. He and Frances picked their way carefully along the muddy path to the front door. The cottage was a tiny, one storey building. The thatched roof had mouldered to a dull grey

colour, and sprouted thin blades of grass in places. The door hung slightly askew on its hinges.

They knocked and waited. Footsteps shuffled slowly towards them, and at last the door creaked open. They were confronted by an extraordinary creature, grotesquely fat, and clothed in a sack-like garment that reached to the floor. Over her straggly silver hair she wore a black shawl, which she clutched together at her throat with fingers like small sausage rolls. Her face was expressionless, except for two glittering black eyes, set deep into the puckered flesh.

'Can we come in and talk to you?' asked Toby, giving her a friendly smile.

She quizzed them suspiciously, her eyes flickering from one to the other. The folds in the lower part of her cottage-loaf face parted to reveal a scattering of broken yellow teeth, like the tusks of some aged animal.

'What would ye be wanting to talk about?' she croaked, making no effort to open the door wider.

'About old times. Do you know who I am?'

'Turn your head, sure, yer face is in the shadow, and me eyes are not as keen as they used to be . . . Mother of God, ye're a Fellmartin are ye not?'

'I am. Tobias Fellmartin, a direct descendant of the man by that name who once owned the big house.'

'Tobias Fellmartin! Ay, the nose and the eyes are right. So ye've come back to haunt us, eh?' She chuckled and, just for a fleeting moment, Fran heard a young woman laugh. 'The past will have to give up its secrets now there's a Fellmartin back in the village.'

She peered more closely into Toby's eyes, thoughtfully.

'It's not revenge you're after, is it? The time is past for that. If it is, I'll not speak with ye; for the evil that was done, was done long ago, and some things are best forgotten.'

'Revenge?' Toby laughed aloud. 'Revenge because the peasants got mad at my ancestor, and burned his house? No, I don't want revenge, just what is rightfully mine.'

He lifted the bottle of gin from his pocket, and the old crone twisted her face into what might have been an ingratiating smile.

'Ye had best come inside. The fire will blow out of me grate if I keep this door open much longer.'

The living-room of the cottage was small and dark, heavily scented by the smoke of a peat fire. A blackened kettle hissed gently on the hob, and the old woman produced a large brown teapot, and three chipped mugs from a cupboard beside the fireplace. Fran and Toby perched themselves on a battered oak settle whilst the tea was made. Old Kate sank into her moth-eaten armchair and, having slurped a noisy mouthful, peered conspiratorially over the rim of her cup.

'I have the Power, ye know. Do ye believe that? Sometimes I see the little people – not to speak to, but I see them all right. And I've heard the Banshee.' Suddenly her small bright eyes took on a fearful look, as if the recollection brought back a sudden terror. 'Aye, the Banshee. There's few that can say that, and fewer that will talk about it . . .' She poured a generous measure of gin into her tea, and sipped it thoughtfully. 'But what do ye want of me? You've not come just to pass the time of day with a foolish old woman.'

Toby smiled.

'Mister Mulcahy didn't seem to want to talk too much about the Fellmartin family and the history of the old house. He said you knew more than most. I was hoping you might be able to tell us a bit about the old days.'

'I could,' said the old woman slowly, 'but will I? That's the question. Some things are best left buried and forgotten.'

'Oh, come on, Kate,' cried Frances, enthusiastically, 'Toby and I will soon sort out those old grudges, I mean, nothing you tell us about the old days will change our way with people – we want to be friends, and good neighbours!'

A puff of smoke blew out of the fireplace, and a flurry of raindrops pattered against the windowpane. Kate took another swig of the gin-laced tea, and drew her shawl more tightly round her shoulders.

'There's some things ye'd best hear from me, I suppose, but if ye've come after the gold, forget it.'

Tobias folded his arms, and said nothing, but the disclosure was too much for Fran.

'Gold?' she squeaked. 'Do you mean there's some hidden treasure? How exciting!'

'Some say there is,' said Kate. 'You see, the house was burned in the famine years. When the people was gatherin', old Joshua Fellmartin, 'tis said, hid the family plate, and ran away with his wife and

youngest son to Dublin. Oh, to be sure, he made a pretence of having business to attend to, but he had a good idea what might happen, because he was a hard man, and well hated. The older boy, Tobias, stayed behind. He had a tryst with a girl from the village – besides, he thought the people wouldn't harm him, for it wasn't he who had oppressed them.' Kate laughed grimly. 'How wrong he was, poor soul. They came, and they burnt the house, and his bones were found in the blackened ruins. Their leader was a woman. Some say she tortured Tobias to make him tell where the treasure was hid. When old Joshua heard what had befallen his house, and his son, he had a stroke and died, so the gold was never found.'

'So it might still be there amongst the ruins,' gasped Fran.

'So it might, but it's a brave fellow, and some would say a foolhardy one, that goes lookin' for it, as time has proved. You see, the woman who provoked the risin' died there too, and they say she haunts the ruins yet.'

'Do you believe that?'

The old woman hooded her face with her shawl.

'Yes,' she replied. 'I believe there are souls unable to rest on that hilltop. I've heard them, and sometimes I think I've seen them, but dimly, thank God. But,' she added, pointing a pudgy finger at Tobias, 'your husband is a Fellmartin, and whatever is there belongs to him. You may be given a sign, young man, but if you are, take care, for the manner of it may not be to your liking.'

Kate would not be drawn any further, and began to protest she had said too much already, so Fran and Toby took their leave of her.

'I've a feeling,' said Fran, as the cottage door closed behind them, 'that Kate Cormac could tell us much more than she did.'

Toby smiled.

'Well, she's certainly whetted my appetite. I think I'll have a poke around up there this afternoon.'

Frances took his hand.

'Darling, I know it sounds silly, but I think the old woman is right about the ruin. I could feel the evil in that house yesterday . . .'

'And you believe the ghost of that lady who tortured my ancestor tried to push the chimney on us?'

'Maybe. You acted strangely yourself, you know.'

Tobias snorted angrily.

'Well, I'm still going. We're talking like a couple of superstitious

peasants. If ghosts exist, they certainly don't walk in broad daylight.'

'Look, Toby, why not just call in a firm of contractors, and have the whole place levelled? If there really is a treasure, presumably it'll be turned up. In any case the site will be clear if you want to build on it.'

'If I want to build? Yesterday you thought it was the most beautiful place in the world. We were going to put our dream house there, remember? Now it's *if* we want to build – and *me* that's doing the building. Another point you seem to have overlooked. If one of the contractor's men turns up something valuable, it'll be off the site, and away to Dublin, or London, or even New York, and we'll be none the wiser.'

Frances pouted.

'You're being unreasonable, Toby. Go and search if you must, but take care. While you are "poking about" as you put it, I'll borrow the car and drive down to Waterford. I'll spend the cheque Daddy gave us on some glassware for the flat.'

'All right,' said Toby, gruffly. 'I'll go back to Mulcahy's and get a snack lunch. Then I'll buy a shovel and a crowbar in the village. What time will you be back?'

'About six, I should think.'

'We'll meet in the pub then. Six o'clock.'

They were both a little edgy still, and parted without a kiss for the first time in their brief married life.

Despite its magnificent situation on the broad tidal reaches of the River Suir, Waterford is a rather shabby town. Yet it has some quaint and picturesque side streets, and it was in one of these that Frances found the second-hand book shop. She had purchased her glass, and some other things besides, and was just exploring in a casual sort of way. She wandered through the open doorway, and began perusing the bindings of the volumes on display in a vast oak bookcase, itself a museum piece. Many of them were concerned with theology, some with Irish politics, and some were just solid Victorian novels.

A title caught her eye, and she pulled it down to skim through it. It was called *Legends and Tales from the Province of Leinster*, and had

been published at the turn of the century by a Church of Ireland clergyman, Robert Fitzstephen.

As she held it in her hands, it fell open at the title page of the last chapter. Her heart jumped as her eyes took in the heading, 'FELLMARTIN – the Sorry Tale of a Family Doomed to Disaster'.

'I'll take this,' she gabbled to the assistant, a pale girl, with dark hair and glasses, who had materialized at her elbow. 'How much is it?'

'A lovely book, isn't it,' said the girl. 'Just come in from a sale. The price should be inside the cover, yes, here it is, five pounds.'

'Five pounds?' squeaked Frances, rummaging in her handbag. The girl mistook her excitement for consternation at the price.

'It's beautifully bound. Quite old too. A real collector's book . . . Oh, thank you madam. Shall I wrap it?'

'No thanks,' replied Frances. 'I'll take it as it is.'

And so, after she had ordered tea, in a little café looking out on the river, Frances began to read the Reverend Fitzstephen's account of the disasters which overwhelmed the Fellmartin family so many years ago.

The Fellmartins, according to Fitzstephen, had come to Ireland with Oliver Cromwell, who crushed with an iron fist any Catholic resistance to the rule of the Puritan Parliament in Westminster. He had given land, or rather redistributed the land of those bold enough to oppose him, to men he trusted to keep the Catholic peasantry in order. Jacob Fellmartin, a rugged East Anglian of yeoman stock, was the kind of man he chose. However, they were not just the lackeys of the Lord Protector, these Anglo-Irish. When the Stuarts returned to the throne, they were strong enough to hold what they had been given, and when William of Orange defeated King James at the Boyne, they became undisputed masters in their new realm. The villagers of Ballymeelin were glad to take Fellmartin's coin for quarrying and hauling the stones for the great house that Jacob began, and his heirs completed.

The halcyon times of the Fellmartin family were the years of the Napoleonic wars, and the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The estate prospered, and with it the village, for the breeding of

horses for the armies of Europe proved vastly profitable.

But then, perhaps because the Fellmartins chose their spouses less carefully than their horses' mates, the vigour of the family stock declined. Daughters outnumbered sons. The physical characteristics of the Fellmartins – big bones, broad shoulders, solid frames – deteriorated towards paunchiness and a tendency to diseases of the heart and kidneys.

The local populace, who had come almost to respect the family in their palmy days when a Fellmartin could hunt, and shoot, and crack a bottle with any other in Ireland, now began to resent the foppish manners and soft lives of the owners of the 'Big House' as it was known. Joshua, when he inherited the demesne in 1833, spent more time in Dublin and London than he did on the Estate, so absenteeism was added to his sins. Only his elder son, Tobias, seemed to have the old Fellmartin spirit, and rode with the Kilkenny hounds, and tipped a gallant cap to the colleens.

In 1845, the potato crop failed, and potatoes had become the staple food of the Irish peasantry. In 1846, it failed again, and famine stalked the land. The old and the weak starved. Bolder and more vigorous spirits took themselves off to America, to build a new life, in a new world. Amongst those who could not, or would not leave, resentment against the landed gentry smouldered until, in some districts, it broke out into active rebellion. One such district was the Parish of Ballymeelin.

Having read so far, Frances was interrupted by the proprietor of the café asking if she would like anything else. She realized with embarrassment that her tea was stone cold, and she had not drunk a drop.

'Sure, that must be a terrible interestin' old book,' chuckled the owner, as he brought her a fresh pot. 'Shall I be pouring this one for you meself, now?'

She nodded, and smiled, and went back to her reading:

One evening, in the Autumn of 1847, [wrote the reverend gentleman there was a meeting of the Young Ireland movement in Ballymeelin, and rebellion was openly preached. Afterwards, when the speakers had taken the road to Kilkenny, a woman's voice rallied the sullen, but leaderless villagers to action. Clambering on to a wagon in the village street, which the Young

Ireland revolutionaries had just vacated, Bridget O'Mallan, a woman known, as a magistrate subsequently put it, 'For her strident tongue, and disregard of any authority,' drew the crowd around her.

'Our children starve,' she screamed, 'whilst Fellmartin feeds fresh meat to his dogs! My own darlin' husband lies in Cork prison, awaiting transportation, because he stole a bag of corn from Fellmartin's stables! We live in poverty because of the rent he charges for land that is rightfully ours! Yes, and ask my cousin, Patrick Hagardy, what happens if ye cannot pay. Ask him what has befallen his poor wife since she was evicted by Fellmartin's bailiffs, God rest her soul.'

The crowd muttered angrily, for Mrs Hagardy had just died of consumption in a cold out-house belonging to a neighbour.

'In that wicked house,' she continued, 'there is gold and silver enough to see us all through to the next harvest. It is our gold, taken from us by Cromwell's lackeys for two whole centuries. Let us take back what is ours, and destroy what is theirs!'

A young man with tousled black hair, and eyes that burned with righteous indignation, leapt up beside her.

'Bridget O'Mallan is right!' he roared. 'Go to your homes, and prepare what weapons ye have. At midnight, the moon will be up, and we'll march against the tyrant, and burn his house, and put the fear of God into him, so that he never dares show his face in Ballymeelin again!'

'Death to Fellmartin!' cried a drunken voice in the crowd. 'Let's see the devil gets his due!'

A roar of approval went up from a hundred throats. Then Bridget O'Mallan spread her bony arms, and waited for silence.

'You've made up your minds,' she told them in a voice, which, though it was little more than a whisper, was heard by every man and woman in that throng. 'I see all your faces. Don't any one of ye fail to be back here at midnight, for the man, or woman, who betrays Sean Clancy has me for an enemy to the grave, and beyond!'

As she spoke, a young woman on the edge of the gathering slipped silently away. She went to her grandmother's cottage, for that night it was her turn to look after the old lady. After she had made her a supper of thin broth, she sat before the fire, wonder-

ing what she should do. Her name was Siobhan McKenna, and she was carrying Tobias Fellmartin's child.

Eventually, as the moon, dusky red and huge, crept above the distant hills, she left the cottage silently, and made her way up the slope towards the Big House.

What exactly happened after that, [the narration continued] we may never know. Sean Clancy and the villagers went up to the house right enough, and the house was burned. Yet there were dark deeds done besides, or so it would seem. Clancy, at his trial, swore that the house was afire even as he reached the door, that Bridget O'Mallan was there before him with a stranger, but that the man ran away, and she was killed by the McKenna girl who ran out of the flames and plunged a dagger into her heart.

He said he knew nothing of Tobias Fellmartin's death, (the remains of that unfortunate young man were found in the smouldering embers), but he was hanged for arson and murder none the less. Seven other villagers, identified by an informer, tried to verify his story, but were given short shrift by the judge, and sentenced to long terms of imprisonment. The rest of the villagers lay low (for who would admit to complicity in the crimes of arson and murder?) and their guilty secrets died with them.

'Died with them,' mused Frances, putting down the book at last. 'Officially perhaps, but not in the folk-memory of the people, I'll be bound. I'd wager every detail of that horrible night has been told and retold down the generations in the village of Ballymeelin.'

She paid her bill, and left the café. Now that she had knowledge of the facts concerning that grim occasion more than a century ago, she felt she could perhaps persuade Kate Cormac to talk more freely. She also had a growing disquiet; a fear for her husband's safety. The afternoon was drawing to its close, and the frightful malevolence of those dark grey stones on the hilltop haunted her imagination. She pointed the Hertz car in the direction of Ballymeelin, and drove at a speed that sent hens clucking into the roadside hedges, and caused farmers' wives to call on all the Saints to witness this madness, and the driver a slip of a girl, no more!

After he and Frances had parted that morning, Toby walked down to the ironmonger's shop in the village. An old-fashioned bell

tinkled as he opened the door. It was gloomy inside, and there was scarcely room to walk between high racks of shelving containing kitchen utensils, cans of paint, and boxes of nails, to reach the counter at the back of the store. A young, and not unattractive girl greeted him with a friendly 'good morning'.

'Hello,' said Toby. 'I want to buy a spade, and a good strong crowbar. Oh, and I'd better take a pair of those rubber boots – size nine, I think.'

'You're Mr Fellmartin, aren't you?' said the girl, a wary look in her eyes.

'I am,' admitted Tobias. 'And you?'

'Maire O'Mallan. I think you met my uncle yesterday.'

'I did. I'm afraid he wasn't too friendly.'

She laughed shyly.

'He lives in the past. Some people around here are like that. Even my father, though he's not as bad as uncle Peadher.'

'And you?' enquired Toby.

'They bore me with their old stories. I'm glad you've come. I hope you knock that crummy ruin, and build a nice house there. It gives me the creeps.'

'I'll knock it down, all right. Now how much do I owe you for this little lot?'

'Wait now, I make it twenty-four pounds and fifty pence – is that right?' She turned the slip of paper on which she had done the additions in pencil towards him, and almost rested her head on his shoulder.

'Just about,' he said opening his wallet with a smile. 'Here you are, then, twenty-five pounds.'

She rang up the sale on an old-fashioned cash register, took out a fifty pence coin, and placed it in the palm of his hand. Then she looked at him with troubled eyes.

'I expect I could find someone to help you, if you were thinking of going up to the old house today. Not that it's any business of mine, but perhaps the work may be heavy for a gentleman like yourself, I'm thinking.'

'Thank you,' said Tobias gravely, 'but I won't strain myself. I'll just poke about a bit to begin with.'

'Take care then,' said the girl. 'And don't stay . . . too long.'

'You were going to say "after dark", weren't you?'

She tossed her head.

'I expect you think we are just a bunch of superstitious peasants, Mr Fellmartin, and maybe some of us are, but there is something wrong up there – something evil.' She broke off, embarrassed because her voice had risen half an octave, and she was staring very directly at the young, and quite good-looking stranger.

'OK miss,' said Toby, grinning. 'I'll bear in mind what you say – and thank you for your help.' He picked up his purchases, and left the shop.

The walk up the hillside to the old house, carrying the goods he had bought, left him uncomfortably hot and somewhat out of breath. A moist wind was pushing great grey elephants of cloud across the sky, and although it was only mid-afternoon, the shadow of the approaching night seemed to hang over the land. Something caught his eye as he approached the thicket of hawthorn and elder bushes that grew in what had once been the kitchen garden of the house. It was a human form, draped in a cloak and shawl. After a moment's hesitation, he strode purposefully towards the sombre apparition. As he came closer, he realized that the figure was that of Kate Cormac, and when he was a few yards from her, she parted her shawl, and spoke.

'Go back, Tobias Fellmartin. Death waits for ye here.'

Toby leant on his newly purchased shovel, and stared at her bleakly. The sight of that lonely, shrouded figure had frightened him a little, before he recognized who it was, and now he was angry.

'Widow Cormac, I've already seen how easily these walls crumble, so I'll take care. Now, I'll be about my business, and you be about yours.'

'I'm not speaking of tumbling stones, or bruised shins, or even cracked heads. There is death in this place. Even now I hear the voices.'

'Voices?' Toby snapped. 'What voices?'

Oddly enough, his ears did seem to catch, at that moment, a distant echo of babbling and weeping, though he dismissed it instantly as the wind in the chimney stacks, or the birds in the ivy.

'Voices from distant times,' muttered the old woman, darkly. 'The voices of people long dead, but unable to rest. Ach, Fellmartin, ye could hear them yourself, if ye'd open your mind.'

'You are on my property, old woman,' said Toby, icily. 'Your peculiar superstitions do not interest me. Now, kindly clear off, and don't interfere with things that don't concern you.'

'Concern me?' she shrilled, showing her broken teeth in a kind of snarl. 'All that happens in this place concerns me! My great-grandmother saw things here that sent her mad and made her commit murder. The spirits that haunt these ruins have cursed my family ever since. Don't you understand, Fellmartin, I am trying to help you!'

'You can best help me by wasting no more of my time.'

The animation left her face. Once more her eyes became little black pebbles, and only the flecks of spittle on her colourless lips told of her excitement. Her voice was harsh when she spoke again, and she paused to give each word its due weight.

'There is one more thing I will tell you before I go, and then my duty is done, and whatever torments you suffer will be no fault of mine. Last night from my bed, I heard the wailing of the Banshees up here. Oh, it is a sound to turn your blood to ice, and send your fingers scrabbling for the crucifix. It is the sound of damned souls seeking vengeance, the most terrible sound in all the world. It is the harbinger of death!'

She turned, and hobbled slowly away down the hill, supporting herself with a crooked stick. Tobias shouldered his spade, and entered the ruin. A thin wind whispered through the empty window frames. No birds perched on the crumbling walls. If he had not been so peremptory with the old crone, he would have returned to the village. As it was, he decided to shift some of the loose rubble, and see what he could find.

To take his mind off the morbid conversation he had had with Kate Cormac, he worked energetically, and in an hour or so he had uncovered a flight of steps, which evidently led down into a cellar. They were covered with green slime, and he descended cautiously, moving debris as he went, his eyes gradually becoming accustomed to the gloom. The walls were pitted with deep cavities, in which, no doubt, wine racks once stood. A low, stone table, the top of which was fashioned from a single large slab of limestone, occupied the centre of the floor. With his spade, he scraped away the dust and rubbish which lay on it, intending to sit down for a moment. Curious dark stains disfigured the top, and ran down the sides. Tobias

shuddered, becoming aware, now that he had ceased his exertions, of a dank chill that seemed to issue from the very stones of the place, and a tomb-like smell, an odour of decay, of evil, and of death.

Frances pulled up sharply outside Kate Cormac's cottage, and hurried along the overgrown path. She smiled a worried little smile when the old lady answered the door.

'Can I come in for a minute? I'd like to talk to you.'

'About that fool husband of yours, I suppose,' grumbled Kate. 'Well, I've warned him. No one can say I haven't warned him.'

'About the house, you mean?'

'Ach, yes. About the house. About the evil that was done there. Aye, and the evil that yet remains.'

'That's what I wanted to ask you about. You see, I've learned much more about the burning since we last met. About the rebellion, and Sean Clancy being hanged, and young Fellmartin's body being found in the rubble. His . . . his name was Tobias, wasn't it?'

Sadness clouded the old woman's eyes.

'Yes, Tobias was his name, and the girl who killed Bridget O'Mallan, her name was Siobhan – a beautiful name, and a beautiful girl, so they said, before that awful night.'

'Was she related to you?' asked Frances, on a sudden inspiration.

'She was,' said old Kate softly. 'She was my great-grandmother.'

'Tell me what really happened,' begged Frances, 'after Bridget O'Mallan stirred up the rising.'

'Ah, she was a wild, wicked woman, that Bridget O'Mallan. She hated the English, for her husband lay in an English prison. She hated the Fellmartins for putting him there. She was near destitute, for how could a jailbird's woman survive, with no land, and a child to feed? She had a plan to steal Fellmartin's gold, if she could find it, and an ally in a tinker named McFee. They crept up to the Big House before the mob, and took young Tobias by surprise. They captured him, and bound him to a stone table in the cellar. Whilst McFee kept watch, Bridget went to work. Do you want me to go on?'

'Yes,' whispered Frances. 'It's a terrible story, but go on.'

'Imagine that scene.' The old woman's eyes reflected the flickering flames from the hearth. 'The mob marching up the road with

flaring torches, singin' the old Fenian songs to keep their spirit strong. They are almost up to the great oak doors, when from within comes a terrible cry – so terrible it chills the blood in their veins. It is the last cry of a man dying in agony!

'Some turn and run in terror. Some steal fearfully away, wanting no more of that night's business. Only a handful stand before the doors when they are thrown open, and Bridget O'Mallan confronts them, a long bodkin in her hand, crimson with blood.

'“What are you waiting for?” she cries. “Burn the house of the accursed tyrants! Are you Irishmen, or are you cockroaches, waiting for Fellmartin to come back and grind you under the heel of his boot? Burn it! Burn it! Burn it!”

'Some say there were already flames behind her, but the men who remain surge into the house, and cast their fiery torches into the rooms on either side of the hall. The fine curtains and tapestries are pillars of fire in an instant. The grand furniture crackles and smokes as the heat gets to it. No one sees the slight figure of a girl run deep into the house, heedless of the flames that leap around her.'

Kate Cormac's voice sank to a fierce whisper. Her wrinkles seemed to have multiplied, but her eyes were hard behind their barriers of flesh.

'Then,' she hissed, 'when the flames are roaring from the windows, and the mob stand wondering in silence at what they have done, a ghastly figure appears in the doorway, its clothes afire, its hair burned away, its face blistering in the heat. It holds in its hand, a dagger. It lurches towards Bridget, who stands as if rooted to the ground. The blade glints briefly in the light of the fire, and Bridget sinks to the earth, the blade buried in her breast.

'That apparition was the girl who had entered the house unobserved, Siobhan McKenna. She never had the features of a young woman again. Her hand, the one that held the dagger, was for ever a shrivelled claw, and her mind was destroyed entirely by the horror of that night. Oh, she gave birth to Fellmartin's child all right, in the poorhouse at Clonmel, but the child, a girl, had to be taken away from her and brought back to her relatives in the village.'

'What . . . had she seen?' stammered Frances, half knowing the answer before it came.

'Having told ye so much, I might as well tell ye all,' said the old

woman, a weariness in her voice. 'But take that crucifix from your neck, and hold it in your hand, and swear you will tell no one what I am about to tell ye.'

Frances did as the old woman bade her.

'Siobhan had a few lucid moments as the years went by. A nun, who looked after her in the poorhouse, pieced together the story. She crept up to the Fellmartin mansion that night to warn Tobias that the mob was coming, but he sent her away. He told her he would reason with them, and persuade them to leave peacefully. Perhaps he believed he could. Alas, neither knew of Bridget O'Mallan's evil intentions.

'Siobhan returned, lagging a little way behind the rioters. Then she heard her lover's last agonized cry, and rushed forward, just as the doors were flung open. She found him in the cellar. His body had been pierced many times by a thin steel blade. Even in death, his lips were drawn back from his teeth in agony and, the greatest horror of all, the eyes, which she had gazed into with adoration just an hour before, were pools of congealed blood.

'From his breast protruded the hilt of a dagger. With all her strength she drew it from her lover's corpse.'

Tears glistened on the old woman's cheeks as she continued the narrative.

'Imagine the pain that seared that poor girl's heart. Only one thing mattered to her now, vengeance! The columns of fire that were consuming that once-proud house, parted to let her through. She felt not the burning, heard not the roar of the flames, or the crackle of the charring timbers. She ran through that inferno, carrying the dagger that yet dripped her lover's blood . . . and the rest ye know.'

'How awful,' croaked Frances. 'I think I can understand now why the house does not rest, why the people are so afraid of it. Do you know if . . . if Tobias revealed the hiding place of the family treasures?'

Kate Cormac shrugged.

'If the O'Mallan woman knew, she didn't tell the tinker, for he ran away and I've heard tell he died in Tipperary, a poor man all his life.'

Frances looked out of the window. It was getting dark.

'Kate, have you seen my husband today?'

'Aye dearie, he was up at the ruins with a pick and a shovel, but I

warned him to be away before dark. The house is unquiet just now.'

Frances took her leave hurriedly, and drove down to the hotel. Her worst fears were realized. Mr Mulcahy hadn't seen Toby all day. She asked if she could borrow a torch. Mulcahy looked uncomfortable.

'If ye think yer husband's up at the house, I'll bring one, and come up wid ye,' he declared. 'I don't like the place, but I wouldn't see a woman go up there at dusk, alone.'

Frances and Mulcahy left the car and climbed the grassy slope under the loom of the ruined walls. An orange glow along the western horizon was all that remained of the day, and the fitful wind flattened the grass along the hillside, and sighed mournfully through the broken stones.

Suddenly, Fran's heart missed a beat as another sound intruded above the sougning of the wind; a sound so chilling that she almost ran in terror. It began as a series of yelps and sobs and then merged into an ullulating scream, as of a soul in torment. Slowly, it ebbed, and became a hopeless groan of pain unendurable, and then rose to a crescendo again . . . and again.

Mulcahy was on his haunches, his hands clasped tightly over his ears to obliterate those unearthly sounds. Fran's knees shook with terror as she forced herself to reject the instinct to run. Suppose those cries were from a human throat? Suppose . . . ? She picked up the torch from where it had fallen from Mulcahy's trembling fingers, and stumbled into the ruins. The cries echoed from the shadowed walls, louder, and more frightening than ever.

Frances could not have told you what she expected to see as she stood above the shaft Toby had excavated to clear the cellar steps. What she did see, as she directed the beam of the torch downwards, made her eyes widen in disbelief, and her scalp prickle as if charged with electricity. Toby lay on the stone table he had cleared of rubble, his body rigid, his hands at his sides, his feet together as if tied with rope. His head was arched back, and the muscles of his face and neck were horribly contorted. He writhed convulsively, like a man near to death from a violent poison. His eyes were wide with pain and fear, and from his throat, hoarser now and weaker, came those

terrible sounds that had been carried to Fran on the wind.

'Toby!' she cried. 'Toby! For God's sake stop! It's me, Fran. I'm here to help you!'

He did not hear her. His eyes, bright with terror, seemed fixed upon a point a few inches above his face, and suddenly Francis understood. A mist seemed to gather in the cellar, a mist and a darker shape within it. The shape took a human form, and it held a long thin bodkin close to her husband's face, and a shrill, cruel voice spoke from the mist, a woman's voice . . .

'Come along, me darling,' it said. 'Sure, hasn't it just been a few little pinpricks so far, but now time is short, an' I'll have to start work on them lovely brown eyes of yours if you won't tell me where your daddy hid his gold!'

'It is here! Beneath this stone I lie on,' croaked Toby. 'Now, in the name of Jesus, have mercy on me.'

The answer was a hysterical cackle.

'English bastard!' hissed the woman's voice. 'What I would have done for gain, I'll do now for pleasure!' The point of the bodkin descended to within an inch of her victim's eyes.

With an effort of will, Frances broke the trance this ghastly vision had induced in her. Wrenching the small silver cross from her throat, she flung it down on the wretched figure below.

'May the Devil take you, Bridget O'Mallan!' she cried and, heedless of the drop, plunged down after it, sprawling amongst the rubble and dust, bruising her knees and cutting her hands on the sharp stones. As she picked herself up, she saw her husband shake his head, and roll over on to one elbow, like a man waking abruptly from deep slumber. The crucifix slid from his chest to the floor with a tiny chink. She hastily gathered it up.

'What's happened?' mumbled Toby. 'God, I feel awful. I've had some sort of a terrible dream. Where are we?'

'We're in the old house. Come on Toby, we must get out. It's almost pitch black.'

Tobias rose stiffly to his feet.

'I think I know where it is – the family plate, I mean. It came to me in my dream. I was being tortured by some ghastly woman. In the end I told her, but it made no difference, she was going to kill me anyway.'

'I know,' said Frances, gently. 'I was there too. Now come on, before anything else happens!'

Mr Mulcahy, who had arrived belatedly and fearfully on the scene, helped them out of the ruin and they blundered down the dark hillside to Kate Cormac's cottage. The old woman made them tea and dabbed Fran's grazes with warm water and tincture of iodine, whilst she listened to the girl's halting account of what had happened.

'It may be that the ghosts are laid now,' she said, 'but here's my advice, and ye'd be wise to take it.'

They did. Next day a demolition contractor from Cork moved in. Firstly, under the supervision of Toby and Fran, they lifted the great stone slab, and recovered from beneath it a fine gilt and silver dinner service, some other silver-ware of choice quality, and four magnificent gold candlesticks. Then the bulldozer was started up, lorries came to cart away the useable stone, and the rest of the ruin was buried beneath a goodly later of topsoil, and seeded with meadow grass.

But Frances and Tobias never built a dream house in Ballymeelin. Dreams, as they so frighteningly discovered, can unexpectedly become nightmares. The land was sold. Cattle graze on the lumpy turf where the house once stood, but though old Kate says the hill is quiet now, no villager will set foot on it once daylight begins to fade.

Rothschild's revenge

Hugh Rothschild, to his fairly certain knowledge, hadn't the remotest connection with the illustrious millionaire family. He was just an ordinary, hard working, hard-up sort of chap, with a tendency to take life seriously. By the age of thirty-eight, he had progressed by slow degrees into a responsible job with a reasonable salary, and lived alone in a small, tastefully furnished flat in Wimbledon. The upkeep of his flat, his daily bus fares into the City and his modest needs, left little over for riotous living, but he considered that he did a fair day's work for a fair day's pay and, other than a secret longing to be a millionaire and a quiet resentment against those who were, neither was he wildly ambitious. He just expected a certain degree of fairness out of life in exchange for what he put into it, which was why on this particular morning he was not entirely satisfied and had the feeling that he was being short-changed.

Endeavouring to open a new carton of orange juice, he had, in the struggle, slopped a good deal on to the kitchen floor and work-top and down the front of his dressing gown. Before pouring himself a glass, he had already lost a quarter of the contents and regarded the offending carton with disapproval. Sixty-eight pence for a litre of orange juice and seventeen pence of that wasted through badly designed packaging.

Nibbling his toast he took pencil and paper and made some calculations. Seventeen pence a week came to £8.84 a year. Assuming he survived his allotted three score and then, he would in future mop up another £282.88 of spilt orange juice instead of drinking it. And supposing half the population of Great Britain shared his habit, then the producers were defrauding an unsuspecting public of more than £265 million a year. It was a staggering amount, it was outrageous, and with that kind of money at stake he didn't doubt that the containers were being deliberately designed badly. He immedi-

ately set about composing a letter to the manufacturer stating his grievance on behalf of the nation's thirty million orange-juice drinkers.

The tip of the iceberg. There must be thousands of similar ways in which the innocent public are being ripped off, he mused thoughtfully as he took a shower, and decided, from now on I intend to keep my eyes peeled for other examples of such blatant fraud.

Hugh didn't have far to look. Until now, a problem which had been no more than a minor but frequent irritation to him, highlighted how necessary it was that he should take a serious stand against inferior quality and bad design. He had started to clean his teeth with his battery operated toothbrush, which in most respects was a very useful piece of equipment. He applied toothpaste to his brush and in the process of screwing the cap back onto the tube with the hand that held the toothbrush, he inadvertently caught the switch, setting the gadget in motion. Half an inch of toothpaste flicked into the sink and was instantly flushed down the plug hole by the running tap.

He applied a second squeeze and, brushing his teeth with less than his usual thoroughness, he calculated that in the past six months he had probably lost the equivalent of a whole tube in this manner. Two tubes a year literally down the drain! At a cost of more than a pound a year (and assuming that his teeth didn't go before he did) he was going to waste another £32 worth of toothpaste during his lifetime, and that was without taking inflation into account. Completing his ablutions without further incident, he then wrote his second letter of the morning.

Not surprisingly, the number of incidents rapidly escalated once he started focusing his attention on them. For example, it was his habit, when making tea for himself, to brew up in a mug using a tea bag. But, prodded with a spoon to extract the full strength of the tea, the flimsy bags frequently burst, resulting in a mug of undrinkable tea leaves. Being a somewhat finicky and meticulous fellow, as is often the way with accountants, (which also explains his obsession with calculations) he estimated that about half a dozen tea bags in every box were similarly wasted. So, multiply this by the number of tea drinkers in the country . . . Never mind the details though, suffice it to know that Hugh worked it out to the nearest penny.

When the envelopes in which he sent his letters of complaint did

not stick properly, that company was duly sent a letter also. Over the next two weeks, Hugh Rothschild as a one man, consumer vigilante group, sent off thirty-five such letters. To glue manufacturers who produced tubes of glue which solidified before the contents were half used; to garment makers who supplied indecipherable washing instructions, thereby causing him to shrink a sweater badly; to the ball-point company, whose pen dried up a couple of weeks after he had bought it, but nevertheless leaked into his jacket pocket leaving him with the expense of a dry-cleaning bill. There were others besides, and it was an absorbing exercise for Hugh who eagerly awaited their replies.

The result however, was most disappointing. A few promised to look into his complaints but made no offer of recompense. Most were not even acknowledged, while others responded with comments that were an insult to his intelligence. The toothbrush manufacturer suggested that he either re-capped his toothpaste after cleaning his teeth and put the brush down while doing so; or turned off the tap, so that in the event of the toothpaste dropping off his brush he would have no problem retrieving it. The blackcurrant-drink company also showed a tendency to sarcasm, pointing out that it is the nature of the fruit to produce a dark red juice which has a tendency to stain when spilled. As did the potato grower who insisted that it was not the fault of their product that he had sliced his finger while making chips, and advised him to take it up with the knife manufacturer instead, ignoring his point that if their potatoes had been of better quality he would not have needed to hack at them.

Believing that he was being put off by menials and underlings, he researched the names of those at the top of these organizations, intending in future to deal only with them. In the process of digging for this information he uncovered some very disturbing facts. It had to be more than coincidence that the company making the blackcurrant drink was a subsidiary of a group that also produced detergents, and that the manufacturer of his leaking ball-point was part of an organization that marketed dry-cleaning chemicals. Though he was unable to find a conclusive link between the potato, knife or sticking-plaster companies, he knew there had to be one. The final straw came with the discovery that his toothbrush company was also selling toothpaste.

As he uncovered more and more examples it suddenly started to

make a great deal of sense to Hugh. It was obviously a government-controlled conspiracy on a mind boggling scale, which permitted organizations to poison us with nicotine, alcohol, additives and insecticides. And why should they care when the same people are behind drug companies, taking our money as they poison us and again when they sell us the cure.

Conscientiously Hugh also took a closer look at the company he worked for: a printing firm producing expensive, so-called educational books. An innocuous business on the face of it until he considered their specialization: nature, conservation, environmental pollution, gardening, preservation, wildlife and the rest; yet at the same time responsible for the murder of millions of trees to feed their printing presses with paper. They were all hypocrites and Hugh was incensed that in his ignorance he was guilty of aiding and abetting them. It was as if the scales had fallen from his eyes and he could see all with a new vision and understanding. The next question, of course, was: what could he do as a single individual against giants of industry and commerce who were far more concerned with profits than people?

The answer came to him the next time he watched his toothpaste disappear down the plug hole. He had been particularly irritated by this company's facetious reply to his letter, so he intended to start there.

Reginald Gibb-Morgan lived in a large secluded house in Harrow. He was elderly, overweight and looked appropriately unfit on his expense-account diet. The man indulged in few social activities and seemed content of an evening to settle down in his study with brandy and cigars at his elbow and a pile of paperwork extracted from his briefcase. An elderly, colourless woman, presumably cook or housekeeper, left the house just after eight each evening and there didn't appear to be any other staff living in. Gibb-Morgan's wife, large, blue-haired and matronly, left him to his solitude three evenings a week for her bridge club, and never returned before eleven. Hugh had spied unobserved by concealing himself in the shrubbery and shadow of the wall which hid the house from the road. After three weeks of surveillance Hugh felt confident of the household routine and was ready to make his move. On mild evenings a window in the conservatory was always left slightly open for ventilation; an

enthusiasm for begonias seemed to be Gibb-Morgan's only recreation, so gaining entrance to the building was surprisingly easy.

The conservatory led into a laundry room then through into the kitchen. Hugh silently worked his way around the ground floor until he identified the study by the muffled rustling of paper behind the closed door. Gibb-Morgan, engrossed in his work, was totally unaware of the intrusion until the study door flew open, crashing against a bookcase. Hugh covered the few yards between door and desk in an instant and he was on him before he knew what was happening. As he had rightly guessed, there was no strength in Gibb-Morgan's flaccid bulk and Hugh overpowered him without a struggle. He took the added precaution of hitting him on the head with a Caithness glass paperweight taken from the desk. Not too hard; he only intended to stun him and remove any ideas he might have of putting up any resistance. He also wanted his prisoner in full possession of his wits in order that he might understand the seriousness of his crime.

Hugh was thankful for his boy scout training enabling him to secure his captive with escape proof, regular stopper hitches. As he tightened the knots, Gibb-Morgan slowly regained his senses.

'What do you want? How did you get in?' Gibb-Morgan stuttered, quickly adding, 'there's no money in the house so you're wasting your time.'

Hugh raised the paperweight in a threatening gesture which effectively silenced Gibb-Morgan. 'I'm not after your money, though heaven knows you owe me enough and if you must know, I got in through the conservatory window.'

'Damn it, who are you?' Gibb-Morgan blustered indignantly and would have gone on to say more had he not been abruptly cut off by a wide strip of sticking plaster over his mouth, Hugh having decided that he'd asked his full allowance of questions.

'Rothschild is the name, and though you chose to ignore my letter you will not be able to disregard my retribution so easily.'

Above the sticking plaster the man's eyes reflected his fear in being faced with an apparent lunatic who as yet had given no clue as to the reason for his visit. But Hugh did not leave him in ignorance for long. Extracting his toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste from his pocket he launched into a long and furious diatribe about the product, his fight against the great consumer conspiracy, and his

intention of executing the conspirators in an appropriate manner. Waving the brush and tube in front of Gibb-Morgan's blanched face, wordless grunts of protest issued behind the sticking plaster. Not until Hugh had said his piece did he viciously rip it off, producing an agonized squeal from his prisoner.

'You can have your money back . . . for the toothpaste as well. You can have some free samples, plenty of free samples . . . a lifetime's supply of free samples. You'll never have to buy any toothpaste again,' gabbled Gibb-Morgan frantically, trying to bargain a way out of his predicament. His voice rose to a squeaky pitch of panic as his hair was grabbed and his head yanked back painfully forcing his mouth wide open.

Hugh efficiently inserted the nozzle of the toothpaste tube into each nostril in turn and squeezed out a very generous amount, without the slightest regard for expense. This effectively blocked Gibb-Morgan's nasal passages, immediately distracting his inclination to further conversation while he concentrated his full attention on breathing. Then, taking the toothbrush (which he'd had the forethought to recharge before leaving home) Hugh inserted it, bristles first, deep into the gasping throat, in the process dislodging a dental plate with five teeth which stuck out of Gibb-Morgan's mouth at a lopsided angle introducing a bizarre leer to the shocked countenance. Switching on the toothbrush, Hugh listened to the buzz of the oscillating brush as it mingled with choking grunts. It was a while before the desperate struggles became feeble twitches then gradually ceased altogether till the only sound was the buzzing toothbrush. Taking a step backward Hugh studied the purple face and bulging eyes and decided to leave the toothbrush where it was. It did mean reverting to the use of an ordinary brush again, but it was certainly a much more economical way of cleaning his teeth.

By the time the murder had ceased to be front page news, Hugh was already working on the plan of his next execution, having decided that the president of the blackcurrant drink/detergent company was the next most deserving case for elimination. Having identified and tracked down the culprit he found him to be a younger, fitter man probably in his mid-forties and always on the move. Patient vigilance taught Hugh that the most opportune time would come when the man stayed at a flat in the city where he spent Wednesday

evenings with his mistress. She always arrived at seven thirty, disappeared into a taxi around midnight and, when she had gone, Gordon Wiseacre spent the rest of the night alone.

It was an anonymous looking block of perhaps twenty flats and no names listed on the front door of the building. From Hugh's preliminary reconnoitre, none of the individual doors bore the name of Wiseacre so it was either a borrowed flat or, seeing as he was married, he was quite probably using a false name. His mistress was also married but that was of no consequence to Hugh; she was useful only in that he could follow her, share the lift to the same floor and make a pretence of fumbling for his keys outside one of the other flats while he observed which door she entered.

He allowed another two weeks to elapse before taking any action. Positioning himself outside the building twenty minutes before midnight, he stayed out of sight till he saw her climb into the taxi. Tightly clutching a bulky holdall he took the stairs two at a time until he reached the right floor. All was quiet, he paused a few minutes on the landing to get his breath back then, removing a knife and a Caithness paperweight from the holdall, he rang the bell.

A voice behind the door enquired, 'Is that you Caroline?' By way of reply he impatiently rang the door bell twice, hoping that Wiseacre would presume that his girlfriend had forgotten something. He heard the clatter of sliding bolts and the door opened. Holding the knife at the level of Wiseacre's face, Hugh stepped inside the flat and pushed him against the wall, the point resting against his throat. Swiftly he struck him on the temple with the paperweight using sufficient force to knock him to the floor and draw blood. Because of the suddenness and force of the invasion, Wiseacre was taken by surprise and put up no fight. Hugh hit him again to ensure that he stayed unconscious while he laboured to drag him into the living room and tie him to a chair.

Fifteen minutes later Wiseacre started to come round. By then he was securely tied with sticking plaster across his mouth. Hugh gave him plenty of time to recover his wits before explaining at length the purpose of his visit. He was fascinated to see the look of angry incomprehension on his face replaced by the dawning of fear. Wiseacre struggled, violently shaking his head in a futile attempt to prevent it from being covered by a large polythene bag. Hugh let him panic for a minute as he applied tape round the neck to make it

air tight. In Wiseacre's frantic attempts to shake it off he used up much of his limited air supply and the bag clung to his mouth and nose, sticking to his sweat-slicked skin. His eyes widened with ever mounting terror as he snorted with the effort of breathing. His face had taken on an unhealthy waxy pallor before Hugh cut off a corner of the polythene bag which allowed air to enter, offering a short stay of execution. Wiseacre could only watch and wait with curious dread while Hugh removed a giant economy-sized packet of detergent from his holdall.

'What could be more appropriate for a clean-up operation than a little biological action,' sneered Hugh facetiously, 'with added enzymes, to produce a whiter than white finish?' He laughed loudly at the joke which subsided into a look of subdued disappointment that Wiseacre did not appreciate his wit.

Extracting a large plastic funnel from his holdall he inserted it into the cut-off corner of the polythene bag. Standing behind Wiseacre as he did this, the man nervously twitched his head in an effort to see what was happening. He was confused by the steady stream of soap powder trickling through his hair, down his face to settle round his neck. By the time the bag had filled to the level of where his mouth would have been had it not been covered by sticking plaster, he was beginning to get an idea of what was to happen. His anguish was apparent as the level of powder crept up his face and compacted round his neck and chin making it impossible for him to raise his nose clear of the steadily rising tide. It tickled as it trickled and made him sneeze. His head jerked, and a flurry of powder created a blue snowstorm inside the bag. When the blizzard settled, grains of powder adhered to and covered his perspiring face, badly irritating his eyes and nose. His head and body made desperate, frantic jerks, almost overturning the chair as his nostrils submerged. As the level approached his eyes they were already starting to glaze and by the time the brown curly crown of his head was covered he was quite still.

Hugh poured in the last of the soap powder, enough to fill the bag, and put a piece of tape over the corner to reseal it. He dusted grains of powder from the front of his jacket as he surveyed the rigid, upright body with its engorged and featureless blue head. He nodded in satisfaction. Quickly gathering his belongings he quietly let himself out of the flat and escaped down the stairs without

meeting anyone. Hurrying through the streets his luck stayed with him; he disappeared into the underground and, with a few minutes to spare, caught the last train back to Wimbledon.

Over a week passed before the papers reported Wiseacre's murder. Hugh wondered whether he had gone undiscovered until his mistress had returned to the flat for their weekly assignation. By then much of the interest had gone out of it for Hugh. He was already following his next potential victim and was developing a taste for his missions of revenge which were proving a fascinating diversion from the humdrum routine of his day job. It brought a new dimension into his life that he realized had been lacking before.

Colonel Warrender, the Chairman of 'Froojos', was, as his rank might suggest, a man of military bearing, of stocky build and sported a short, bristling moustache beneath a large purple nose. He issued instructions as if he was barking orders across a parade ground. The Colonel had a large and busy household, so Hugh quickly abandoned the idea of dealing with him on his own ground. At work he was always surrounded by lots of company personnel, and when he wasn't at his office, or home, he was at his club or some function where there were always other people around. The only time Hugh ever observed him unaccompanied was in his new, silver-grey Mercedes when he commuted between his company and his large Sussex estate.

Hugh carefully chose the spot where he intended to waylay the Colonel. Along one of the winding roads about five miles from his estate was a large densely-wooded area bordering the road. Pedalling his trusty bicycle, which he resorted to whenever he felt the occasional urge to take to the open road and leave the city behind him, Hugh arrived at the place allowing himself plenty of time. Concealing his bike in the woods he lurked among the trees for nearly an hour before the Mercedes rounded the bend and came into view. He rushed into the middle of the road and flagged down the car. It swerved into the lay-by missing him by inches and screeched to a halt.

'What the devil are you doing man? You could have caused an accident,' bawled the Colonel.

'There's a girl lying in the woods; I don't know whether she is ill or if she's dead.'

'Lead the way, man,' ordered the Colonel, taking command.

Hugh led him into the woods, well away from sight or sound of the road. He stopped and pointed to a mass of thicket. 'In there.'

As though leading troops into action the Colonel barged in, crashing noisily through the branches.

'Where? Where is she?' he demanded, backing out. The thud of a paperweight on the side of his head rendered him senseless before he could demand an explanation, and he slumped heavily into the bushes.

When he came round, he was on his back, spread-eagled, with each limb tethered to a tree. He was restrained so tightly there was no chance of wrenching himself free. Neither was he able to raise any objection about the discomfort and indignity of his position, owing to a larve navel orange wedged firmly between his jaws which were so widely distended that they ached painfully. His face became redder and his eyes more bloodshot as he grunted to make his fury known.

Hugh tapped him firmly with the paperweight to indicate that he required his silence. Having achieved it he launched into his well-rehearsed and lengthy monologue about the 'great conspiracy'. The Colonel was at first bemused, and then outraged at being forced to listen to the rantings of a maniac. He was infuriated even more by the realization that he was being threatened with violence and his face took on the colour and expression of a man suffering from apoplexy. Unable to dislodge the obstructing orange which prevented him from being more articulate, he subjected it to a great deal of abuse with his teeth, which it withstood remarkably well. Having said his piece, Hugh tolerantly allowed the Colonel to vent his impotent rage until exhaustion restrained his thrashing body and snorting anger.

He watched with undisguised belligerence as Hugh removed from his holdall a large quantity of oranges which he proceeded to cut into halves. When more than twenty orange halves lay on the ground by his head, he listened impatiently while Hugh held forth.

'I am now of the belief that the finest packaging of fruit juice is the wrapping designed by nature itself. It is therefore my intention to cease using your convenience products and take my juice fresh from

the orange by use of a juice extractor. A simple gadget, not at all like your company's sophisticated machinery, but it serves its purpose well. I'm sure you know the kind I mean; a simple glass dish with a hump in the middle on to which you press orange or lemon halves to extract the juice. Rather like this.'

He demonstrated his point using the Colonel's bulbous nose. Pushing the orange firmly on to the end of the purple promontory he squeezed hard, giving it a sharp twist in the process. The resulting juice filled the Colonel's nostrils and streamed down his face. He choked and snorted in an effort to clear his nose, which was very difficult while Hugh was sitting on his chest and compressing the orange firmly. The pressure was very suddenly released when Hugh realized that the piece of orange had given up all its juice. But the Colonel had hardly chance to gasp some air before it was quickly replaced by another, with many more to go when that was used. The Colonel didn't go down easily and Hugh was on the penultimate piece of orange before he finally succumbed. Asphyxiated by orange juice – or it may have been a stroke, judging by the colour of his face. Either way it was an ignominious end for the Colonel who had anticipated all manner of horrible deaths on the battlefield, but never in his worst nightmares had he expected to go in such humiliating circumstances.

The body was found later that evening after a search had been mounted when he failed to return home, but by then Hugh was back in London. It had been a sticky operation and his clothes and hands reeked of oranges. The spattered juice had dried pungent and tacky. The ride back was long and thirsty but he had lost his appetite for orange juice and put the kettle on for tea instead while he undressed and turned on the shower. Vigorously prodding the tea bag till it burst he made a mental note to start work on the tea company the following day. Settling for a glass of milk, which to date he still obtained in trouble-free bottles, he carried it into the bathroom and tested the temperature of the shower. It was just what he needed to help him relax and rid himself of the lingering smell of oranges.

It will ever remain one of life's little ironies that, while energetically shampooing his hair, the 'soap on a rope' around his neck broke and, unnoticed, slid to the bottom of the bath. Stepping back to rinse his hair under the shower jet, Rothschild stood on the soap

which skidded under him and hurled him backwards, smashing his neck against the protruding taps. His unconscious body slid down blocking the plug hole with his shoulder. The shower water slowly filled the bath and thin rivulets of blood flowed down his body forming pink eddies below the surface of the water. It didn't take long for the level of the water to rise and enter his nose helping to restore him to confused consciousness.

He tried to raise his nose above the water line without success. His chin was pushed into his chest and his neck firmly wedged against the end of the bath. The slightest movement caused agonizing pain in his neck and head and when he tried to use his elbows and heels to lever himself up they failed to respond to his brain signals. He was paralysed, he couldn't move, he opened his mouth to shout for help and the water rushed into his throat. It had to be a nightmare, but the water felt alarmingly real, as did the undulating backwash that flooded his nostrils with the irregular rise and fall of his chest. While the water rose slowly but unremittingly up his face, he was beginning to doubt that it was a nightmare and wanted to panic, but there was no surge of adrenalin to stir his body into action while he watched and waited to die.

In his final moments he experienced some insight into what his victims had endured as he tortured them; but neither guilt nor remorse accompanied this understanding. It served only to make him feel thwarted at having been deprived of the opportunity to dispense justice upon the 'soap on a rope' manufacturer and the others that would now escape his retribution.

André Launay **The Harlequin's Son £2.50**

Alexander was pretty much like any other thirteen-year-old schoolboy. He lived in a mixed up world of make believe and he got on his mother's nerves. Mostly because he kept demanding to know who his father was.

The day he saw the photograph of the young boy in the Harlequin's costume, Alexander at last realised the sinister secret of his birth. It should have terrified him, for like father, like son. But Alexander was content. He knew now what he must do . . .

Ed McBain **Ghosts £1.95**

The dead woman on the snowy sidewalk was a little early for a Christmas Eve suicide. She wasn't a suicide, she was a murder victim – and so was the ghost-story writer who died of nineteen stab wounds only minutes later. This Precinct-murder hunt, taking in mediums and haunted houses, was one set to give Steve Carella the biggest scare of his life.

'In *Ghosts* the maestro is near the top of his form' **CURRENT CRIME**

Sadie When She Died £1.95

The police photographer made sure Sarah Fletcher looked as good as any lady *can* look with her belly slashed open and her guts on the bedroom rug. Gerald Fletcher called his wife a no-good bitch. Why was he so glad someone had murdered his wife?

Detectives Kling and Carella found the answer in Sarah's little black book – the amatory exploits of Sadie Collins . . .

'Reveals McBain as a transatlantic Simenon' GUARDIAN

Heat £2.50

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