

# **Inside-Out**

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## Spontaneous Combustion

He was absolutely and unquestionably drunk. It was a splendid affair, like sitting in a pool of warm mud—from the neck up.

Adam Golding, in umpteen ways at least—though probably more—was peculiar. He was like a left handed man who had been forced since boyhood to use his feet.

Adam was unemployed and, quite probably, unemployable. The Social Security office—a focus for his ubiquitous contempt—took care of his daily needs with no expectation of thanks. It was like the father he had never had. Adam was twenty-two and lacked ambition.

The walls of his flat were all painted black. The living room was separated from the outside world by dusty curtains, kept permanently drawn, while thirty watt bulbs, hidden behind unusually loud speakers, suggested illumination without actually providing it. In the corner, on the wine red carpet, an old black and white television sat in a permanent state of blankness. Close by, an agreeable steel string guitar leaned casually against the wall, with a vast record collection just beside. In the stead of a couch, two single mattresses lay one upon the other, covered with a pet blanket that copiously shed its hair. The remainder of the flat was Spartan, boasting of Adam's almost religious devotion to poverty; a Japanese stereo the exception that questioned the rule. He took good care of his questionable stereo, knew all its knobs and lights and needles, switches and buttons. He liked it and was sure it liked him.

Adam had painted strange murals about the place: a skull and cross-bones here, an atomic mushroom cloud there, a tremendous crack in the earth somewhere else. The death they suggested, gave life to the black walls.

It was 11:00 p.m. Adam took another passionate swig of his home-made lager. Although he lived in a council flat, Adam's brewing was extensive enough to meet the criteria of a cottage industry. He was not so much concerned with flavour and quality, as with specific gravity; and this one was a particularly grave batch.

Lying perfectly still on his couch, supping the lager with devotion, the room filled to the brim with the sound of music, Adam looked something like death warmed up. He was supping his way somewhere else—had just arrived, and was already lost. He was lost in the tangle of music, and the moving waves of inebriation. Lost in a wordless world.

Back in the living room, Adam took another swig, draining the glass. He stumbled into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator and found only one bottle remained.

"Poor old beer," he thought. "All by yourself. No one to talk to except a carton of eggs." He took the bottle, gently, lovingly, and saw his face reflected in the curving brown glass, all discoloured and distorted. "Poor beer," he thought, and decided to drink it quickly—for its own sake as much as his.

Walking back into the living room, Adam guzzled thoughtfully; finally slumping back into the couch.

It was a small park.

Adam's clothes were covered in holes, he had no shoes, and his feet were black with filth. He was spread out on the lawn, surrounded by a collection of old weather-worn alcoholics. He watched as they passed around a bottle of something that looked like water, and tasted like fire. The bottle did its rounds, and finally Adam took a long hot drink, closing his eyes to keep in the flames. Passing the bottle, he noticed two girls, walking by on the path outside, peering through the mesh of the fence as they trotted their female trot. Adam could read their lips. One

said: "Look at 'im in there, wiv all those tramps." The other answered, "Yeah, I know. I wonder 'ow 'e got like that?" Adam was good: not only could they read lips, he could read their accent too.

It seemed dreadfully romantic. And then the music from the questionable stereo infused itself into the drama, like sunlight sneaking through a cloud. Adam smiled.

It must be time for bed, he supposed. Adam switched off the questionable stereo, turned out the hidden lights and staggered away. He stripped and tumbled into bed.

So Tuesday—the best day, the day the Giro check arrived—was over. It was as unlikely as it was true. He sat around all day, doing anything he felt like doing—which was often nothing at all—and then Tuesday came around and thin money came falling through a hole in the door. Why would anyone even bother to work? The working class had failed the final exam: that was it. They were stupid and knew no better.

So Tuesday was over.

Suddenly his thoughts of Tuesday being over came to a sudden halt. Adam noticed things peculiar; things unpleasant. There were things abnormal going on. Firstly, the bed seemed about ten times harder than it really was. It was as hard as something not the least bit soft. There was no give to it. Secondly, the sheet and quilt seemed to be airborne: not flying about the room, or anything like that; they just seemed to float a few inches from his body. It was as if some force were busy pushing them away from his skin, holding them off. And then Adam noticed what it was. Heat. He could feel heat oozing out of his body. A terrific heat. An unusual heat centred around his penis and testicles, like hot spots on a radio active landscape. And yet he was not sweating: it was not that kind of heat. It was a deviant kind of heat. It was like the sun's heat, from the point of view of the

sun. Adam was not so much scared, as intrigued. Once, he had read in a magazine—dutifully stolen from the public library—about Spontaneous Combustion: people just bursting into flames as they zipped their zippers, or jogged themselves jogging. Maybe that was it. Maybe he was coming down with a case of Spontaneous Combustion. It surely felt that way. Perhaps these were the first symptoms.

He was walking in the street, the next morning, when suddenly he burst into flames—right in front of the fire station.

He was in a corner shop, buying smoked oysters. The cashier handed him his change and—puff, smoked Adam.

He was talking to a Catholic priest, when suddenly he became a burnt offering.

He was swimming. Whoof, hiss. Floating ash.

The heat was still there, constantly there; the sheets still refused to have anything to do with his skin; the bed still seemed ten times harder than it really was. Adam became increasingly convinced that this was the first stage of Spontaneous Combustion. He had definitely caught it; but was there a cure?

At length, Adam fell into a drunken slumber that was filled with spontaneous images of erotic combustion.

When Adam awoke next morning, the first thing he noticed was that the bed and covers were normal, and that the heat had gone.

Adam dressed and turned on the kettle. He scouted around for a piece of paper, and then sat himself down at the kitchen table.

Wednesday, October, 1990.

I think I've caught Spontaneous Combustion. I noticed last night in bed. I felt this strange heat coming out of my body. This morning I feel fine, except I have a bit of a headache.

Words, to Adam, were like soap: to be used sparingly.

The kettle whistled.

Adam made tea and toast for breakfast. He didn't really like tea, but it was cheaper than coffee—and in any case, he hated coffee. It was cold in the flat. He sat himself down again at the table, wrapping his hands around the steaming mug for warmth.

Adam was thin—the last thing he wanted to do was waste his money on food—and the single slice of toast made him full. He lit a cigarette and smoked, blowing rings into the cold kitchen air, still thinking about Spontaneous Combustion.

It was 11:00 a.m. Adam put on his coat and left the chilly flat. He lived on the ninth floor of a tower block. A large open hallway featured the lift, a rubbish shoot and staircase opposite, and the pale blue doors of the flats on each side. The lift was directly off-centre, and served as a kind of uneven border line. There were only two flats on Adam's side, and four on the other. Adam stood outside his door, peering through the meshed window at the world below. He could hear the faint and familiar sound of army band marching music, coming from his neighbour's flat and bouncing gently about the reflective hallway. Still he gazed outwards; and from where he stood, up on the ninth floor, the landscape seemed unreal. The up and down hills looked flat, like zigzags of chalk on a fallen blackboard. Dreary roads and drab houses: more childish scribble. It was raining, and the chalky images were all getting wet and smeared, blending together.

Rain raining. Rain falling. Falling all the way to the ground. He was falling shouting, falling down, falling down shouting. He looked into flat windows on the way down, glimpsed the naughty things people were doing, and then splatter, he hit the floor. He could feel all the other broken raindrops come to him and hug

him, and they all had wet broken sex together.

As Adam turned away, he noticed a shadow of movement behind the frosted window of his neighbour's door. It was the old soldier. Adam had never actually seen the old soldier, only his shadow behind the frosted glass, or the quivering of net curtains, the sense of an old soldier eye peering through the spy hole in the door. This time, Adam decided to knock. This was war. The old soldier lived on the wrong side of the border. It was supposed to be a nice girl living there, who liked to lend cups of sugar. He knocked. The curtain stirred again, as if the old soldier had been startled, and then nothing happened. He knocked again.

"Is someone there?" he called. His voice sounded silly, and its echo mocked him. He knocked again. "Come on Private Parts," he thought. "Open the damn door." Adam pushed open the letter box and gawked inside. The doors to all the rooms were closed, and all he saw—in a flat identical to his—was a gloomy passage with no carpet. Suddenly, two other eyes looked back at his. He jumped away and the letter box slammed shut with a metallic clatter.

"I'll get you for that!" he shouted. "You fuckin' bastard." Adam walked away, pressed the button for the lift, and thought about his strategy for revenge.

The bus took ages to arrive. Whenever it was raining, and it was almost always raining, the bus took ages to arrive. Adam went upstairs and sat at the front. It was nice and warm inside the bus, and he wore the warmth like a king might wear a robe.

Adam sat sideways in the seat, his legs up, feet dangling, watching the female passengers not with surreptitious looks—those casual accidentally on purpose whoops I didn't know you were there I'd better turn away again glances—but with arrant lack of shame.

The bus arrived in the city centre. As he strolled down the street, people turned and stared at him in the same way he stared at girls—though for entirely different reasons. There was some inexplicable and indefatigable quality about Adam that seemed to shout obscenities at the world.

As he walked, the rain rolled harmlessly off his greasy tangled hair.

First things first: he marched into a post office, joined the queue, and after ten minutes of shuffling, changed the thin money: the Giro cheque, into real fat money: pounds and pence.

He stepped into the Victorian market. With its domed roof and decorated pillars, it was like a cathedral, built in deference to the god of materialism. People came from all over, to strain their necks looking at the vaulted ceiling and all the fancy decoration. It was hard to steal anywhere else—the departments store detectives sniffed him out like blood hounds—but here, with the motley mass, he was less conspicuous.

He strolled into Stringers Books, quickly moving to the science fiction section. There was no time to waste. He dared not dilly. He dared not even dally. He picked up a book, pretended to read the back cover, glanced about, here and there, and then slipped it into a large pocket sewn into the inside of his coat. He took three more, then wandered about the shop, stopping just beside the shop keeper for several elongated seconds, to prove how wonderfully innocent he was. And then he made his way to the exit. He was almost out. This was where they nabbed you, when they nabbed you. He was almost out. Then, quite unexpectedly, a hand grasped his shoulder.

"I'm nabbed," he thought.

"Could you—" he heard. Adam, without looking back, decided he could not, dashed forward, and the hand found no grip. He ran, dodging in and out of the crowd of coats and boots. There was

shouting from behind. He knocked a fat woman over, who fell to the floor like a sack of potatoes. And all the coats and boots nearby went, "Tut, tut." It was a good thing, being thin: he could slip through places that suggested a good deal of unslipability.

At last, he was out of the market. The rain, still coming down, felt nice and cool and fresh on his face. He continued to run, turning up a narrow side street where he slowed to a casual walk, his heart beating like a drum drum drum. Adam, removing the price tickets from the books, glancing back now and again to make sure nobody followed, smiled to himself. It was fun. It was exciting. It was a game.

"I arrest you in the name of the law," the policeman said, gripping Adam in places that should not be gripped.

The judge was wearing a wig. He was also wearing a pair of knickers and a bra—but only Adam knew that.

The prison was like a working class holiday camp. There was good food, a ping-pong table, television, and it was heated.

Adam wandered towards the high street. The rain was beginning to stop, and the autumn sun peeped out from behind tired clouds. He sat on a bench, watched the girls go by, and smoked a cigarette, puff by puff.

"Fish cake and chips with scraps on, to eat now," he told a woman, who looked herself like a fish cake. He covered them generously with salt and vinegar, and sat on the town hall steps to eat. He watched all the suit and ties going up and down, busy busy busy. They eyed him condescendingly, wearing superiority like a mask; busy busy busy. There was no time like the present, and they were all thinking about the future. To those straight and narrow shirts and ties, ambitious with places to go shirts and ties, Adam, gaunt and lackadaisical, was like dirty

underwear.

It was an extravagance Adam allowed himself once a week: fish cake and chips. He savoured every hot bite, until there was nothing left to either savour or bite.

He stood, ready to attend to the business of the day, and walked in the loose direction of a famous frozen food shop that boasted, with great modesty, a mountain of the cheapest meat pies in town. Their contents guaranteed unguessable—or your money back—these were exceptional meat pies; a favourite with the unworking class; the staple of Adam's diet. Their nutritional value was rumoured equal to Kellogg's Corn Flakes, though inferior to the cardboard box they were packed in; and Adam's thin body, pale skin, sunken eyes and lack of muscle tone gave more sustenance to the rumour than the meat pies gave to him. But Adam had not seen himself for a long time. He could barely remember what he looked like, though he knew he had hair.

Adam bought sixteen meat pies.

The famous frozen food shop was located in an untidy and mucky pedestrian shopping centre, whose only distinguishing feature was a real life outside tree growing beneath its glass roof. The real life outside tree was distressed: the climate had gone mad; the seasons had been kidnapped. It was imprisoned in the peculiar heat of permanent summer. It was an outside tree forced to live inside.

Adam carried his frozen meat pies passed the wilting outside tree, and into the supermarket opposite. There he bought:

ten pounds of potatoes  
six cans of beans  
one pound of margarine  
a large loaf of bread  
a packet of tea  
eight packets of biscuits

one pound of rice

six eggs.

As usual, he stole a chunk of cheese.

Adam's shopping list, the result of year's experimentation, was the absolute minimum weekly provision for a thin human who had no desire to get thinner, and absolutely no chance of getting fatter

Adam, who had also purchased two cans of the strongest, cheapest lager he could find, sat himself down on the floor of the shopping centre, his back against the trunk of the suffering outside tree, and guzzled away. He was a creature of habit—and the habit was stronger than the creature. He guzzled. Adam drew strange looks from passers-by. It was a tremendous comfort to him. He guzzled, and smoked a friendly cigarette.

Adam sat on the bus, again in his usual forward seat on the upper deck, his obligatory Wednesday programme almost done. His only company was a young girl suffering from acute ugliness, so Adam looked out of the window at the tops of peoples heads.

"Oh god," she said. "Squeeze them."

"Phew," he thought, and squeezed.

"Oh yes. Oh yes!" she insisted. He moved up, kissing her stomach on the way, and they exchanged spit. She took hold of his erection, and waved it about like a magic wand. She put the magic wand in her mouth, rubbed it over her face, all the time whispering age old spells.

"Do you want to tie me up?" she asked again. "I don't normally ask men I just met," she explained. "But I think you're all right."

"In a bit," he said. She was too easy. He wanted to want. She wanted to give.

"Come on top of me," she said. "I like to be dominated."

"Phew," he thought.

They were complete strangers. She had called into The Red Bull on her way home from the Polytechnic, ordered half a pint of lager and lime, and then uncovered him in the corner, uncovering her. He turned away, embarrassed. When she came over towards him, his heart was already racing and his penis surging for the finish line.

"Oh god," she said, piously.

His fingers dug into her flesh, scratching for a fortune less durable than gold.

"Hit me," she begged.

"What's ya name?" he asked between gasps.

"Karen."

"You're a fuckin' nymph, Karen."

"I know."

He slapped her face. "D'ya like that?"

"Yes," she told him. And it was true.

There were no tower blocks about. This was a private estate, and the middle class liked to live close to the ground. The only panorama they knew was wall to wall fitted carpeting.

Ding-dong.

"How come the door was locked?" Adam asked.

"There was a strange looking fellow, out in the street earlier," his mother told him.

"Maybe it was me," Adam said dryly, and walked in. The back door led directly into the kitchen.

"Shall I put the kettle on?"

"Might as well."

Adam put his shopping bags down and went to the toilet.

"Is Kaz home yet?" he called. The prestigious house had a toilet on both floors. Adam's mother made no reply. She refused

to talk with people when they were in the toilet. The toilet flushed, and Adam reappeared.

"Did you wash your hands?"

"Yes. My feet as well."

"Your hair's getting awfully long, Adam."

"I know. Where's Kaz?" Adam walked into the living room, as if the answer was of no importance.

"Karen isn't back from the Polytechnic," she answered, bringing the tea to her son. "Why?"

"No reason. I've got your money." Adam took a handful of notes from his pocket.

"Thanks," she said, taking it and placing it under a ceramic cat on the mantle piece.

"You're not going to count it?"

"No," she answered.

"Does that mean," Adam began, with the voice of a small boy, "you trust me, mummy?"

"Mummy knows better than that."

They heard the door open.

"That must be Karen now." Adam's sister entered the living room, throwing her coat on the back of a chair.

"Can you hang it up, please?" their mother said.

"Hi, Kaz," Adam offered.

"Hi, Adam," she replied, laboriously picking up the coat and taking it into the hall.

"Where've you been?" Adam called.

"Adam, do you always have to shout at people from different rooms?"

Adam turned to his mother. "All right, you win. From now on, I'll only shout at people from the same room."

"I went to a friend's, after class," Karen said, returning to the living room.

"Lucky friend," Adam said, somewhat abstrusely

"Mmm. What's this?" Karen asked, seeing the money under the ceramic cat.

"It's Adam's."

"Oh."

"It's not mine. How can it be mine when I owe you it?"

It was certainly outside Adams philosophy, this sense of liability. It was even alien to his character. But this was family. Family was different.

"Do as you please," she said. "You know I don't want your money."

"And I don't want yours, either. In any case, we're almost quits."

"Listen," she changed the subject, "I've got to go to the supermarket. What would you like for dinner?"

"I don't mind—Oh Jesus, I forgot to put my frozen meat pies in the 'fridge." He ran his fingers through his greasy hair and wondered how to get someone else to put them away.

"I don't know, Adam. Why don't you spend your money on some decent food for a change? You need good food more than all that beer and cigarettes."

"Don't forget records," Adam added.

"Did you look at yourself lately?"

"No."

"Well you should. You're terribly thin. It's no good living the way you live."

"It's worse than you think," Adam said.

"What do you mean?"

"I think I've caught a serious case of Spontaneous Combustion."

"What are you talking about?" she said, shaking her head. "You get worse." And she prepared to be off, shop shop shopping.

"I'm going, then. I won't be long," their mother said, and the door slammed gently shut.

"I wasn't joking, you know," Adam said, turning to his sister.

"What about?"

"Spontaneous Combustion. I've got it—for real. When I went to bed last night, there was this strange heat. I could feel it oozing out of my body. I tell you, it was really weird."

"Were you drunk?"

"Well, yes." And they both smiled. "But that's got nothing to do with it." He took a drink of tea.

"Hey, Adam, your frozen meat pies."

"Oh, shit. Can you put them away for me?"

"Crippled are you?"

"No. I've told you. It's this Spontaneous Combustion: it makes me tired."

Karen smiled, and went to put away the meat pies.

When she returned, Adam was standing with his back to the gas fire, warming his posterior. He watched his sister slump into the couch. She was a good looking sister. She never wore a bra. She had always been a good looking sister, even when they were little kids.

"You think I'm joking, don't you?" There was something wrong about not wearing a bra.

"What're you looking at, Adam?" she asked, with a half concealed smile.

"Eh?" He moved his eyes to hers. "Nothing. Anyway, I know I have it. There's no mistaking Spontaneous Combustion. Once you have it, you know it. The heat—"

"Are you sure you didn't just work up a sweat wanking?"

"Funny," he said, offering a sarcastic smile. "I tell you, it was really weird. The heat was really weird."

"You've been deprived of sex too long—that's all."

"Unlike you," Adam retorted.

There were two lifts in the ground floor hallway, for the odd and even numbered floors; and, as usual, Adam had pushed the call buttons of both. Adam waited with his bags of food and a teenage girl, leaning against the tiled wall, looking her over. She was nice. Underneath all the make up—there to disguise her youth—she was nice. He bet himself a bottle of beer that she would not be taking the same lift.

Both lifts arrived at the same time. Adam took a step back, the girl took a step forward. He was in luck: he owed himself a bottle of beer.

"Which floor?" he asked.

"Seventh."

Adam pressed the button twice—the lift was old and needed encouragement. Adam put the plastic bags down, leaned into the front corner of the lift and stared at the girl. She glanced at him for a moment, and then turned to face the doors. Her flimsy coat was unfastened. She looked back at him.

"Do you always stare at people?"

"Just about," he answered. She turned back to the front without breathing another word.

When Adam arrived at the ninth floor, he glanced across at the old soldier's door; but there was no sign of him. Searching for his key, Adam again contemplated his revenge.

It was chilly inside. Adam turned up the electric heater and sat on it, waiting for the warmth.

There was perfect quiet. The flat was like a lost island, a sky island, and Adam saw himself romantically as a castaway. Visiting his mother and sister was like sailing down to the mainland; but it was cheating. Castaways were not supposed to go off sailing, visiting relatives. Adam, after those visits, felt

like a cheat. Sitting there, waiting for the heat, he felt like a cheat. He felt disturbed. He needed a drink. He walked into the kitchen and found the refrigerator had somehow managed to empty itself.

The spare room was an interesting place. There was a sign painted on the door that read: "Staff Only." Inside, the window was blacked out with cardboard and rubbish bags. The floor was uncovered, and on the left side sat rows and rows of bottles, ready to open. They looked, to Adam, like a crowd of little fat brown people, waiting for something profound to happen, to make all that waiting worthwhile. Opposite, under the blank window, were white plastic containers: buckets busy brewing. In the far right corner, more bottles, not yet ready to join in with the serious waiting. And on the walls, rough shelves sagged and tilted under the weight of beer books, tubes, tablets and assorted paraphernalia.

Adam picked up as many bottles as he could uncomfortably carry, and took them into the kitchen. It was thirsty work, all that work. When the refrigerator was finally bursting with beer, Adam took a bottle into the living room. The glass from the previous evening was laying conveniently on the floor, and Adam conveniently filled it. He turned on some music, set the volume high, stared for a moment at the black painted wall, perched himself back on the heater, and gulped down the beer.

Later, as the early hours crept around, Adam picked up the agreeable guitar. He had borrowed it from his old high school. One night, he had broken in through a skylight and wandered around through the spooky corridors, pretending he was a secret agent or something. Before discovering the guitar, he came upon some poster paint in the art room, and decided to paint messages on the walls. He named names: "Mr. Glenn Fucks Reptiles." He placed places. "In the mouth." He dated dates: "Every morning."

Adam also informed the school that the headmaster ate bubble gum all day long, and stayed behind after school to stick pieces under the desks of the girls he fancied, hoping it would be later discovered and the culprit sent to his office for a spank on the bum. It was the wordiest graffiti the school had ever known.

That night, in bed, it started again. The symptoms of Spontaneous Combustion had returned. The mattress was hard, the covers floating, the heat oozing. And this time Adam felt worried. Suddenly, exploding into flames did not seem quite so romantic. It was a long time before he fell asleep.

Thursday, October, 1990

I had it again last night. I think the heat was even hotter than before. What I can't figure out is, how the hell I got it in the first place? Maybe if I figured out how I got it, I could figure out how to get rid of it.

Adam ate his toast, drank his tea, then opened up a beer. He stared into the glass and thought about Spontaneous Combustion.

The sign read, "Westwood Public Library." Adam visited the library once or twice a week, during the cold months. Mainly it was to save on the electric bills—though he also visited the library several times a week during the warm months as well.

Three librarians worked inside. They were all women, and looked as if they had been reading too often.

"Do you know where I could find something about Spontaneous Combustion?"

"Spontaneous combustion?" the librarian repeated, looking over the top of her narrow eye glasses, wondering if he was drunk this time.

"Yes."

"Mm, let me think now." She was the oldest of the three, and the least likely to smile. Her nose was long and spindly, and all the children thought she was a witch. She came out from her witch's castle, and, without giving Adam a further glance, walked away. He followed uncertainly at her heels.

"Do you think you have something?" he asked the back of her neck.

"I'm not sure," she answered in mid witch stride, not bothering to turn.

"I've caught it, you see."

"What?"

"Spontaneous Combustion."

"Oh," she said, glancing back for a moment.

The witch arrived at a busy section of the library, her eyes darting expertly across the rows of books. She pulled one out.

"You can check in that one," she said coldly, handing it to him. Before Adam could read the title, she thrust another into his hands. "And that one," she said. Adam watched her witch movements, sharp movements, nervous movements, the stationary head and the moving eyes, the steering spindly nose.

"That's all I can see," she said. "There may be something in the Encyclopaedia." And then, to avoid Adam's eyes, she continued her search a few moments longer. Finally, with the shortest of narrow glances, she turned away.

"Thanks," Adam said, as she stepped her staccato step.

Adam looked down at the two books. He had the strangest feeling that they were exhibits in a trial that would eventually prove him guilty—of everything. Adam pulled a face. He had been expecting medical journals, but instead he had Unsolved Mysteries, and It's a Wonder.

Adam wandered into the reading room, where easy chairs offered

comfort to readers of hard words. He opened up *It's a Wonder*.

It was interesting. In return for scientific and technological knowledge, the American Government had sold its people to aliens. These aliens were superior to humans, except they had neither souls nor emotions, and were busy doing experiments to find out what they were missing.

There were pictures of these aliens, drawn, the book said, by eye-witnesses from all corners of the world. The similarities were quite astounding. The head was triangular, the eyes big, and the nose nonexistent. There was something very alien about the way those aliens looked. But most astounding of all, Adam realised, was the astounding coincidence that all the eye-witnesses could draw so well.

The book said the aliens were very dangerous.

For some reason, Adam had decided to go camping. He was inside his tent, wondering why, when the flying saucer landed. The creature that emerged had a triangular head, large eyes and a nonexistent nose. It was not easy: armed with only a can opener and a tooth brush, Adam somehow managed to capture the captain. He tied it to a tree with his shoe laces, and sat down opposite. And then he set to work, drawing carefully, line by careful line, that triangular head, those big eyes and nonexistent nose.

He skimmed fruitlessly through the remaining pages, and then turned to *Unsolved Mysteries*. Here he found chapters on: out of body experiences, Voodoo, hypnotism, witchcraft, mind reading, mind writing, telepathy, reincarnation, water divining, the Shroud of Turin, electric shock treatment, haunted houses, exorcism, the secret power of pebbles, channelling, changelings, mediums, the Bermuda Triangle, hallucinogens, black magic, white magic, green magic, astrology, and more still. There seemed to be something about everything, with the exception of Spontaneous Combustion.

Adam's last resort was The Encyclopaedia Britannica, which proved more forthcoming, though totally irrelevant. It described the oxidation of piles of coal and stacks of hay.

Sunday, October, 1990

It seemed quite interesting to have Spontaneous Combustion, but that was only when I didn't really believe I had it. It was the idea I liked.

I don't think Spontaneous Combustion is actually a disease. If it were something you could catch, like a cold or something, there would be epidemics of people bursting into flame. It's just not like that. And I don't think you can be born with it either, because that would mean it runs in the family, and nothing runs in my family. Things either sit down, or walk really slowly. None of my relatives ever had anything that ran. Certainly none of them ever breathed fire without meaning to.

Here's what I think it is. I think Spontaneous Combustion is something that other people make happen to you. Like when you're a kid, and just starting to be somebody real, if they squeeze you too much, if they try to shape you too much away from your real shape, well it starts to mess up your brain, and that's when you get it. It's all in the brain. It's like friction in the brain. Of course, I'm only guessing all this. It could be something really crazy that gives you it, like wearing the same socks for three weeks, or something.

Every night, since that first terrible night, Adam had climbed into bed with Spontaneous Combustion. Some nights were worse than others. Sometimes he would lie until the late hours of the early hours, feeling the hardness of the bed, feeling the dry heat, not feeling the covers as they floated, refusing to touch his skin; and wishing things would get back to normal.

Adam walked up the long hill, away from his tower block, towards Westwood. Familiar things spontaneous and combustible had been pushed to the back of his mind. Something had happened. Something had happened, and the only person he could tell was his sister.

As he plodded along, Adam realised that plodding seemed to provoke thought. The legs moved back and forth, automatically, the feet went plod, and there was nothing else to do but think. It was worth remembering, and he would try to sit down more often.

Adam pushed open the back door.

"Anyone in?"

"Hi, Adam." Karen's voice came from the living room.

"Hi, Kaz." She was alone, sitting at the table, with half a dozen books spread about. "Well look at the dedicated student. Who're you trying to fool?"

"Myself."

"Well that's good. If you can fool yourself, you can fool anyone."

"Are you drunk?"

"I refuse to answer, on the grounds that I might tell the truth."

"You don't need to worry about that, Adam: since when did you tell the truth?"

"Maybe I've made an old year's resolution."

"And pigs might fly."

"Only if they get pilot licenses."

"Clever Dick."

"Not just clever. Big."

"That's what they all say."

"You should know."

"Hey, be nice."

If Adam could not be nice, he could at least change the subject.

"Mother at the club?"

"As usual. You staying for dinner?"

"As usual."

"Good."

"Why good?" Adam was in a mood to be difficult.

"Why not?" Karen laboriously closed up the books, one by one.

"Guess what happened?"

"I give in."

"I think I killed someone."

"An assassination was it? Who'd you get, the Minister of Social Security."

"Ho ho. Don't you know girls aren't supposed to be funny?"

"What are they supposed to be?"

"Sexy."

"What about sexy and funny?"

"What about sardines and custard. They never appear in the same dish."

"You're clever today."

"I'm always clever. It's just that you're normally too dumb to realise."

"Anyhow, I am sexy."

"It was the fellow across the hall."

"What was?"

"The one I killed."

"The old soldier?"

"Yeah," Adam snorted a brief laugh. "He fought in his last battle."

"Why, what happened?"

"Well I decided to get my own back on him, for the other day."

"What other day?"

"You know. I told you, when he scared me with his eyes."

"Oh, yes. Poor baby. Did the old soldier scare you with his big eyes?"

"I told you, you're not supposed to be funny. Anyway, I decided to get him back, so I went to the shop and bought a packet of bangers."

"Good one Adam. Sausages. That'll teach him."

"Fireworks, Kaz. Will you be serious?" Karen tried to look serious. "I tied them all together and—"

"The sausages?"

"Yes. The sausages. I tied all the sausages together, and went across the landing, lit them all at once, knocked on his door and dropped them in through the letter box."

"You should grow up, Adam."

"It was only for fun."

"That's what I mean. That's what little kids do for fun. You're not a little kid anymore."

"So how come I still do pee-pee in my pants?"

"I thought you were serious?"

"Oh, yes. Anyway, I could hear the sound of the bangers fizzing, and then his footsteps, and then bang."

"What was it?"

"What?"

"The bang?"

"The bloody bangers. What do you think? It was really good. It echoed like mad. I went back into the flat, just in case he came out, and laughed my head off."

Karen stood up and sat opposite her brother, in an armchair that seemed to grab hold of her and not want to let go.

"I think he died of the shock," Adam concluded.

"Come on Adam. A few bangers going off . . . People don't die

like that."

"They do in books."

"This isn't a book."

"How do you know? The thing is though, I've been watching out for him ever since, and there's been no sign. Every time I leave the flat, I watch his door, like there might be a shadow, you know, through the glass, like usual."

"And?"

"Nothing. Not even the shadow of a shadow."

"Well maybe he's just decided to stop spying on you."

"That's what I thought. Anyway, I put a piece of cotton thread against his door, the other day, and it's still there. It hasn't moved. I've knocked a few times, as well."

"Maybe you killed him."

"That's what I said. What should I do though? He'll start to smell soon."

"You'd better call the police."

"I want to keep out of it."

"Keep out of it?" Karen shook her head. "You shouldn't have got into it."

"I told you, it was only for fun. It's not my fault. He's the one who did all the peeping, not me. I just don't want him stinking up the place, that's all."

"Don't you care about anyone?"

"What do you mean?"

"What I say."

"Of course I do."

"Who? Give me an example."

"I care about you, don't I?"

"Thanks, Adam," she said sarcastically. "I'm chuffed."

"And mother, I suppose, in my own way."

"Everything's in your own way."

"We're talking about what I'm supposed to do—not what I'm supposed to be."

Just then they heard the back door opening.

"Oh, hello Adam. What're you doing here?" It was their mother.

"Is that the way to greet your loving son? Don't I give meaning to your hum drum existence?"

"I suppose you want dinner?"

"Only if you insist. Thanks."

She hung up her coat in the hall, and returned with, "You sound drunk."

"How does drunk sound?"

"Like you," she said, somewhat cheerlessly.

On his way home, Adam decided to take Karen's advice. He called the local police from a public telephone, and, doing his best impersonation of someone with short hair, told them maybe something had happened at 134 Rothering Towers.

By the time he reached the bottom of the hill, a police car and ambulance were already parked outside the tower block. Up on the ninth floor, as the lift doors grumbled open, he was greeted by a deceptive silence, and thought perhaps something else had happened on another floor. He stood for a moment, still inside the lift, looking out at the blank wall ahead, with the staircase on one side and the rubbish shoot on the other. He listened. Nothing seemed to be happening. As he stepped out of the lift, he saw a policeman, standing outside the old soldier's open door.

"Can I help you?" the policeman asked.

"No. I live there," Adam pointed.

"Oh, you do, do you," he said, in that redundant policeman way. Without taking his eyes from Adam, he called, "Captain!"

The captain appeared. He was old and oval shaped.

"What is it?" he asked in an old oval shaped voice.

"This . . . gentleman . . . lives opposite." And he nodded at Adam's door, in case the captain had forgotten the meaning of opposite.

"You live there," he asked, redundantly.

"Yes. What's happened?" Adam was good at acting. He was a well practised pretender. He could play the fool, and this was just another fool's game.

"Could we go into you're flat for a few moments? There're a few questions I'd like to ask."

The captain was surprised at the blackness of the walls, the mushroominess of the atomic mushroom cloud, and the boniness of the skull and crossbones. But when he saw the tremendous crack in the earth, he seemed almost to have been expecting it.

"Now then, sir, I'd like your full name and address." The captain was armed with an official pencil and note pad.

"Adam Golding. Here."

"Here. That would be?" he asked, licking the tip of his pencil.

"That would be where we are now."

"Yes sir," the captain looked up. "Very droll. The actual address."

"133 Rothering Towers."

The captain scribbled. "Now then, what can you tell me about your neighbour?"

"Nothing. I've never even seen him. Why, what's up?"

"How long have you been living here?"

"About three years."

"And you never once set eyes on him?"

"Never. I don't think he goes out much."

"Do you know his name?"

"No, but I think I know his address."

"Have you heard anything strange in the last few days? Any loud noises or whatnot."

"From over there? No. No whatnot. Whynot? Couldnot. I play my records loud."

"Yes sir. Very amusing." Luckily, the captain was a captain, and not a mere constable. Captains don't like nose blood on their boots clean. Constables do. They believe it is good for the leather. "You didn't make a call to the police station, then," the clean booted captain asked.

"Me? Call the police. I don't think so."

"You see, we received an anonymous call telling us that something might have happened to Mr. Tanner."

"That's my neighbour?"

"Yes. We found him dead."

"Oh."

"He died of a heart attack. Someone threw some fireworks in his letter box."

"Must've been kids. They go play up on the roof."

"Do you know any of them?"

"No."

When Adam closed the door, he almost choked on a particularly sharp laugh bone. It became lodged in his throat, and only a long glug of lager could get rid of it.

Thursday, October, 1990

How long have I had this friction in my brain? I didn't even know I had it, but now I do, because everything is starting to make sense.

Whenever you think or want or do something that's wrong for you, the wrongness starts rubbing against the knowing that it's wrong. Even if you don't know it's wrong for you, you know really. Deep down, there's like a plan of how you are. You might

not know it, but you know it. This is how Spontaneous Combustion gets going.

It starts in school, when they fill your head with other people's ideas. Other people's ideas are fine for other people, but they don't belong in anyone's head except the one who thought them in the first place. A good idea is only good for the person who thought it. The moment you put it into someone else's head, it becomes wrong; and then it starts rubbing against the knowing that it's wrong.

How many of my secret thoughts are actually my secret thoughts? Not many. Most of them were given to me.

Adam checked the clock. It was 4:35 a.m. He was trying to cheat Spontaneous Combustion, had decided to stay up all night and sleep during the day. He was tired: his eyes from too much reading; his ears from too much music; his head from too much beer. Adam was not feeling like the life and soul of the party. Luckily, he had not invited anyone.

He pushed the curtains aside and looked out. The streets were dark and doomy quiet: roads barren, paths cracked and unwanted. It was as if the whole world were dead. Nothing had survived. Tinkle-tinkle. The whirr of an electric engine. Tinkle-tinkle. Nothing had survived except the tenacious milkman; that strange, shy and gentle creature, rarely seen during the day.

The window steamed up where his mouth kissed the glass, and he wiped it clear. Adam reached for the glass of beer, took a single sip and put it down again. It was starting to taste bad.

"It's a funny life," he said, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. The timbre of his voice seemed all wrong. "I don't sound like that," he said, in a voice that sounded like that, and was not his own.

Adam was sitting on the couch. Like so many other times, Adam

was in retreat: a pair of headphones having sex on his head, their orgasm music to his ears, and the effect of alcohol were floating, combining, forming a world of sensibility. The curtains had been pulled open and he sat, twisted towards the window. But there was no outside. There was only the sound of electric orgasm and the landscape of alcoholic stupor. It was better. Tears welled up, trickled down. Everything that was, was not, was not, was. Tears welled up, trickled down. The sense of touch had been reduced to the nonsense of touch. There was nothing to touch. There was nothing to hold. There was nothing to grab and grapple. Music. Only music. Ethereal real real realness, shifting and swirling like clouds of shifting swirling light.

As the silent sun appeared from behind distant hills, it seemed that he awoke from a dream. From a dream. Adam took off the headphones. Was it only a dream? Silence. Was it only a dream? No answer. Silence. It was dawn, and there was no answer. He could see his face reflected in the window. Was he:

in, looking out,  
or out, looking in?  
Silence. No answer.

The swelling music, the absence, the secret messenger bringing the semblance of wisdom.

The rising sun, the street, the public postman bringing the Giro cheque.

Where was the answer?

Friday, October, 1990

I've been up all night. I have a feeling something bad is going to happen. I don't know why. I feel depressed. I feel like a fool. I'm wondering about everything. Worst of all, I'm sure everything is wondering about me.

Just after 8:00 a.m., Adam stumbled into his bedroom, stripped and fell into bed. It felt hard as concrete. Fear grabbed him by the scruff of the neck, pulled him here and there, refused to let go. The bed had never felt so solid, so unyielding. He pulled the covers over his head, seeking comfort in the blackness, away from the silent rising sun; but the covers would not hide him, would not even touch him. And then the sudden surge of sudden heat, radiating from his body. Tears welled up again, only now they were terrible tears that ran bubbling, hissing, steaming down his cheeks.

Adam rolled over on his concrete bed.

There seemed to be a knocking, thousands of miles away. What? Adam opened his eyes. He was awake, yet something, some noise, some knocking still lingered, like the echoes of a bad knocking dream. Knock-knock. It was the door. The thin, naked, malnourished body climbed from bed. Out in the hall, the shiny floor tiles felt so cold they were hot, like coals on his fire-walking feet. Adam opened the door.

"Do you always answer the door naked?" It was Karen.

"Only when I'm not wearing clothes. Come in, quick. It's cold."

"Are you just getting up?"

Slam. The door banged closed.

"No. I'm just sleeping. What the hell's the time?"

"Three-thirty," she told him. And then, by way of an afterthought, added, "In the afternoon."

"I guessed."

"How come you're sleeping so late?" Karen was standing in the doorway to his bedroom, watching him pull on a pair of underpants. They were blue, with tiny yellow stitches that zigged almost as much as they zagged. "I mean, this is late

isn't it—even for you?"

"I didn't go to bed last night. I stayed up until this morning. Do you want to put the kettle on? I need a cuppa."

"You getting shy?"

Adam was trying to find a clean shirt. Actually, he was trying to find a dirty shirt that looked clean.

"No, just thirsty," he said.

Karen went into the kitchen, leaving Adam to dress alone. She stared at the kettle for a moment, lost in thought.

"Can I turn the heat up?" she called. "It's cold." She had wrapped herself up, her arms crossed in front, hands clutching bare arms, forming a mantle that forced up her small breasts.

"You don't need to shout," Adam said, grinning from the doorway.

"Spying on me?" she asked.

"Sure Kaz. It turns me on when you hold yourself like that."

"I thought so. Speaking of spying: what happened with the old soldier?"

"He lost the war. He's dead. Spiritually, constitutionally, and legally."

"He really died?"

"Yes. A heart attack."

"Because of your fireworks?"

"Seems like it. At least according to the Old Bill."

"So you called them, finally."

"Yeah. I pretended I was somebody else."

"You are somebody else."

"Only according to other people. Anyway, it's all over now."

"It is for the old man."

They sat at the table, drinking tea.

"Guess what?" Adam began.

"I give in."

"I've been thinking about getting a job."

"You? I thought work was a dirty word."

"So is fuck, but I still like to do it."

"What kind of work?"

"Pff," he said, "I don't know. I probably won't. I'm just toying with the idea."

"I'm sure you won't. Why are you even thinking about it though?"

"I don't know. Who knows why we think of things? We don't choose what we think about."

"Of course we do."

"I don't."

"Why don't you go back to school."

"What, and be just like you? Why is it everybody wants everybody else to be just like they are?"

"That's not what I mean."

"Anyway, my marks are too bad."

"Why, who's been beating you?"

"Funny girl."

"You were good in English."

"Goodish. Listen, I'm going to take a bath and try to wake up. I feel like I've been in a coma." He left the room, and shortly the sound of silence mixed with the sound of running water.

Adam reappeared in the kitchen, topless, and said, "What are you doing around here, anyway?"

"Do I need a reason to visit my big brother?"

"No, but I'm sure you have one."

"Actually I do. I decided to skip school for the afternoon, and I didn't have anywhere to go. You know what mother's like."

"That's why I live here. I think my bath's ready."

When she came into the bathroom, Adam was blowing bubbles through his nose.

"Want me to wash your back?" she asked, with a note of innocence.

By the time Adam sat up and said, "I don't think so," the soap was already in her hand.

"Don't be silly. Everybody likes to have their back washed," was what she said.

The bar of soap was small, and Adam could feel her hand rubbing against his skin, firstly between his shoulder blades, then his neck and down his back, and finally at the base of his spine.

"I don't think you should, Kaz." He could feel the lather, lathering.

"Do you remember when we were kids?" she asked. "We used to take baths together. Every Sunday evening."

"I remember." She started to wash his chest.

"I always had the feeling our mum didn't like it. But she was too used to giving in to us." Karen breathed a kind of laugh, laughed a kind of breath.

"You don't have a very hairy chest," she said. Adam was starting to feel aroused. His sister's hand slipped down to his stomach a few times. Adam wondered if she knew what she was doing.

"Kaz."

"I think I should get in with you. We could have a bath together, like we used to. Eh?" Adam looked up at her for the first time, into her eyes; and then her hand went all the way down.

"Kaz," he offered, aimlessly, and watched her undress. She climbed into the bath, tangled her legs in his, and lay at the opposite end, watching.

"Do you remember how we used to touch each other?" Karen moved her hand between his legs, took the soap in her other hand, slid

it across her breasts.

"Do you like them?"

The thermostat had been turned up full blast. They were on the couch, hot and bothered. Karen watched—she watched everything—what she did to Adam, what Adam did to her. Watching. Adam closed his eyes and disappeared. He used the sensations like alcohol. He escaped. The world, with all its millions of chalky images, had been wiped out with one erotic foul sweep. Karen used the knowledge. Adam escaped from it. Their bodies glistened with sweat.

As Adam reached orgasm, as it came spurting out like blood from a slashed artery, a strange incomprehensible feeling stirred, like a black beast in his soul. And then came the notion that the silent sun was again rising from behind distant hills.

"What did we do?" Adam asked, feeling heat in the pit of his stomach.

"It was only sex," she told him. There was silence.

"Listen, I'm going to get dressed."

"Already?"

Adam put on his clothes, went directly to the kitchen, put on the kettle. He looked out of the window. He could see people down there, walking about; rubbish, blowing about; roads tying themselves into knots; cars and busses—and policemen in tall hats. It wasn't all chalk. It didn't wipe away. It was always there, beneath everything. It looked nicer in the night, when everything seemed dead.

He turned around and saw Karen standing in the doorway, watching him.

"Are you getting dressed?" he asked.

"If you want." She turned and disappeared.

"Do you want some tea?" he called after her. It was funny, this tea business. People seemed to enjoy making it more than drinking it—and Adam knew why.

They sat sipping the hot drink. Adam lit up a cigarette.

"You look tired," she said. He wanted her to go, to leave him alone. He had things to sort out.

"I am," he said. It was hard to make the words come out. They wanted to stay inside.

"You never told me why you stayed up all night."

Adam wondered if he should bother telling her. All of a sudden, talking to her was a bother. It never had been, but now it was.

"I was trying to cheat Spontaneous Combustion," he bothered.

"How?"

"By cheating."

"Don't tell me then."

"There's nothing to tell. Every night, as soon as I get in bed, I have these weird symptoms. So I figured I'd try sleeping in the day instead." Karen tried not to smile.

"And?" she asked, trying not to smile.

"It didn't make any difference," he began, aware that she was trying not to smile. "As soon as I got in bed, it started to happen."

"Adam, you know there's no such thing as Spontaneous Combustion, don't you? It's all in your head."

"All right, Kaz." It was no use trying to explain.

"It's fine to be a bit crazy, but . . . I think you should go see someone. You need help."

"I should see someone? I need help? What about screwing your brother?"

"I said it's fine to be a bit crazy. You're mixing things up."

Friday, October, 1990

Maybe there's no such thing as Spontaneous Combustion. Maybe it's all just in my head. I think I need help. I don't feel crazy though. But they say crazy people never feel crazy. They always get you with those twisty ideas.

Anyway, I'm starting to think the only things that are real are the things we can touch and smell and bite. That already sounds like an improvement. Maybe I can cure myself.

Adam was sitting with his back against the outside tree that was forced to live inside. He had bought his famous frozen meat pies, his weekly ration of food, and was sipping on a can of beer. It was noon, and the shopping centre was exceptionally busy. Hardly anyone noticed Adam, with his back against the outside tree. Hardly anyone noticed until he suddenly gave a loud cry. Everyone stopped, turned, looked. It was not the kind of cry they were used to hearing. It was an unknown cry. Indefatigable. As the crowd stopped still in its tracks, watching and wondering, the cry finally faded to nothing. A solid silence hung in the air, people still stood, waiting, knowing something else would happen. And then came another terrible shriek. Those closest saw the skin on Adam's face and hands bubble like grilling cheese. And then, almost at once, Adam Golding exploded into flame. The gathering of people stood, too shocked to react.

The outside tree was ignited also, and long after Adam had been reduced to ashes, the crackling sound of its burning branches crackled on, and the flames reflected in hundreds of eyeballs.

## Cat's Whiskers

Jill Webster's bedroom was chock-a-block with stuffed animals and glassy eyed dolls. Jill was ten years old, and not particularly fond of stuffed animals and glassy eyed dolls, though her mother was.

Sitting on the floor, Jill reached under her bed and took out a small tin box decorated with a picture of the Queen. She opened the hinged lid. Inside, side by side, on a cushion of cotton wool, were seven cat's whiskers. She looked at them briefly and then added an eighth. Sunlight flooded through the window and the whiskers shone with all the secret colours of the rainbow. She touched them, one by one, from left to right, not counting so much as remembering. Jill closed the lid, well satisfied, and put the box back in its hiding place.

Downstairs, Jill found her parents spread out on a pile of cushions in the living room, sharing a joint of marijuana grown in their own back garden. They were a couple of aging hippies, dedicated still to the ideas of their youth.

"Have you seen Twinkles?" Jill asked.

"No," her mother answered, the word soaked up in a cloud of exhaled smoke.

The next day, Twinkles still was nowhere to be seen.

"I can't find Twinkles anywhere," she said to her mother, who was making a dress from a piece of cloth she had been given. "He's been gone since yesterday."

"Don't say you've lost another." Jill was good at losing her cats.

"It's not my fault," she said, and returned to her bedroom with its collection of stuffed animals and glassy eyed dolls.

She took out a drawing pad and a vast set of coloured pencils—Jill's parents encouraged artistic expression—and, laying on her bed, scribbled a flying black cat: a super cat, its front legs spread out like wings.

Later, Jill went back downstairs.

"Carol," she began, "can I get a new one?"

"A new what?" her mother asked, already irritated.

"A new cat."

"This one might come back." She never called a cat by its name—not that she had problems remembering, because Jill called them all Twinkles.

"He's gone. He's run away from home."

"I'll talk to Paul," she promised. Paul, her father, was up at the allotment, collecting the chicken's eggs and planting vegetables.

After school, the next day, Jill again brought up the subject.

"Did you ask Paul about the cat?"

"What?"

"Oh, yeah. You should take more care of them, you know."

"Can I get another?"

"On Saturday. Now go play out, or something."

So the answer was yes—Jill's parents were very keen on children having pets: it taught them to love animals—and she sang a happy song on the way back to her room.

It was three days until Saturday, though it seemed more like an eternity: every minute was an hour and every hour a day. Jill was still a small girl, and everything was bigger than her parents believed.

The house was nestled at the top end of the Big Woods. Jill closed the garden gate and walked down the street, with the

trees stretching away to her right. She had always been scared of the Big Woods: it was a shadowy go-anywhere kind of place. Next to her school, not far away, was the Little Woods. It was a much nicer place.

She was going to the R.S.P.C.A home all by herself—Jill's parents believed in fostering independence—and was imagining all the cats there and the one she would choose.

The new cat, like all his predecessors, was called Twinkles. Jill was on the carpet, watching it play with a ball of wool. She was looking at its whiskers, shining with all the secret colours of the rainbow.

The circus was in town. Jill had been watching them set up the big top on what was known as the Village Green, even though the village had become a suburb, and cottages had turned into blocks of flats.

She ran all the way home.

"There's a circus on the Green," she gasped. "Can we go to it?"

"A circus?" Her father looked up, busy sorting his marijuana onto racks to dry. "I don't think so."

"Why not?" Jill was ready to cry.

"A circus is like a zoo," he explained. "They keep animals like in a zoo."

"They don't just have that. They have all kinds of things."

"It doesn't make any difference."

Jill knew there was no use arguing—her parents were great advocates of animal rights—but she argued just the same, and then ran crying to her room.

When the circus opened, the following day, Jill was there on the Village Green, sitting on the grass close to the entrance, listening to the music, the roar of a lion, the people laughing

and gasping and applauding, imagining what was going on inside; and watching young boys lead the animals—two elephants, a camel, several llamas, horses and even some poodles wearing poodle clothes, but no lion—from tents at the side, into the big top.

After the show was over, Jill walked around the back. A large compound was fenced off, but she could see a cage in the middle, close to the back entrance, with the lion pacing about inside.

When she arrived home, well past tea-time, no-one asked where she had been—Jill's parents believed people should be allowed to do what they wanted to do, and what they wanted to do was their own business—or why she was so late.

That evening, Jill played with Twinkles, pretending he was a lion and she was a lion tamer, and all the stuffed animals and glassy eyed dolls were the audience.

Jill went to the circus every day; and on the third, with everyone inside, waiting for the show to start, the man at the front gate called her over.

"You back again, lass?"

"Yes, mister."

"Got no money?"

"No, mister."

"Want to see the show?"

Jill nodded her head, sadly.

"Come on with me, then," he said, taking her hand and leading her into the big top.

He took her down to the front row and said to a lady, "Move over a bit, love, let this nipper squeeze in will yer? She's all by her self." The lady moved over.

"Here's a special seat, just for you," he said to Jill, scrumpling up her hair as a parting gesture.

It was a wonderful show. Jill loved the trapeze. She loved

watching the men and ladies fly through the air. They were free to fly through the air, but they were always caught before it was too late. She loved the way they were caught, before it was too late.

And she loved the lion as well. He didn't seem to mind being in a cage, because he knew his trainer would take care of him.

After the show, Jill tried to find the man who had let her in, to thank him; but he was nowhere to be seen.

Twinkles was still a kitten, but he was much bigger. He was about ten, in cat years. Jill had found one of his whiskers on a cushion. She picked it up carefully and carried it up to her room. She reached under the bed, took the small tin box decorated with a picture of the Queen, opening its hinged lid. The whiskers shone with all the secret colours of the rainbow. She added the latest, and then gently touched them all, one by one.

Back downstairs, Jill picked up Twinkles and carried him outside. The sun was shining, and Jill's blond hair shone with all the secret colours of the rainbow. Up the street they went, along side the Big Woods; all the time stroking Twinkles and whispering in his ear.

At the bottom end of the Big Woods was a block of flats. Jill knew someone on the tenth floor. Forsaking the lift, she climbed the endless cold cement stairs, still stroking and whispering. Finally she reached the tenth floor. It was a nine story block, so Jill and Twinkles were actually on the roof. Washing was hanging out to dry, pulling on the clothes-line like a row of kites; pulling to be free. Jill walked to the wall at the edge of the roof.

"You're a nice cat, Twinkles," she whispered, tickling his chin. "You've been a good cat."

"Look over there," she said, lifting him level with the top of the wall. "Do you see the world? You can see all the world from here. Look, that's the Big Woods down there. See our house, next to it? And there's the Little Woods. See?" She kissed the cat.

"Bye-bye Twinkles," she said. "It's time for you to be free." And then she threw the young cat to freedom, over the wall, towards the Big Woods.

## Packed Lunch

Hans Jespersen, aged forty-four, had only one arm, though no one mentioned it, hoping that he had forgotten.

Hans was an early riser. The rest of the family were early risers too. At 6:45 a.m. precisely, the old brass alarm clock clanged loudly, shattering any dreams that might still be in progress, and in one easy flowing move that suggested one-armed poetry in motion, Hans shut off the noise and climbed from bed. Meanwhile, his wife stirred slightly and unenthusiastically. Hans pulled open one of the curtains and was greeted by a gloomy and leaky and oppressive gathering of clouds, hanging about with characteristic unwillingness to move along please.

Dressed in a dark blue flannel dressing gown, Hans walked purposefully onto the landing towards the bathroom, knocking once—and once only—on the bedroom doors of his two sons, calling, "Morning," sharply after each knock. This was the Monday to Friday routine. Saturday and Sunday were exactly alike.

He busied his one-armed self in the bathroom, accidentally seeing, in the mirror, a face that still held a hint of youth; but Hans knew otherwise: the hint of youth was really the past laughing at him.

He took his tooth brush from the rack, placed it carefully on the ledge beneath the mirror, gawkily removed the top from a tube of paste and carefully squeezed out the stripes. It was an awkward business; one of countless daily reminders that he was missing an arm—actually three-fifths: there was a stump of it still remaining. It was, if nothing else, a spectacular deformity.

Hans Jespersen was born in Silkeborg, Denmark. He had been, essentially—and especially according to his mother—a perfect baby, with all the right limbs and all the left limbs and all the required body pieces. As a child, people in the town had always remarked what a pretty boy he was, impressed, no doubt, by his complete collection of parts. When his mother took him out for walks, old ladies blocked their way, tugged his cheeks fondly and gave him five Øre from their purses, saying, "Er han ikke sød." What a cute fellow. And it happened to be the truth. And then Hans reached an age where the compliments—and money—dried up. Even frue Christensen, the old widow next door, stopped her flattery. It was the ensuing silence that suggested the potential power of his good looks.

By the time Hans had returned to the bedroom to dress, his wife had taken herself well and truly out of the way, downstairs, to begin her housewife work that was certainly no labour of love.

Hans, after the usual struggle to dress, appeared in the kitchen holding the morning paper in the only hand he had. He was wearing a black suit with crisp creases, a light grey shirt, a Christmas gift from one of his sons—though he could not recall which—and a thin black tie.

His wife was preparing breakfast.

"Are the boys not down yet?" Of course, the answer was self evident, and her silence was taken as a kind of reply.

Hans, sitting at the kitchen table, flicked one-handedly through the newspaper. When his wife silently served tea, Hans, rather than offering thanks—the words, after all, could easily provoke displeasure—recognised her effort by taking a sip.

John and Michael appeared and joined him at the table. They were no longer children: John was sixteen, Michael seventeen. They were strapping young men, both with a shock of blonde hair

and powerful features.

"Anything in the paper?" John asked. His mother brought them tea.

"Not really," he answered. Hans, a resident in England for almost a quarter of a century, had steeped himself in the national character like a tea bag in boiling water; and now it was not only appropriate, but second nature for him to live in the glory of the past; to avoid looking reality straight in the eye. So there was nothing in the newspaper: bad news was no news.

"I forgot to tell you," Hans said, looking reluctantly at his wife, who was now serving a greasy breakfast. "I won't have time to go out for lunch today. There's a lot on." John and Michael glanced at each other, surreptitiously.

"All right. Will cheese and tomato do?" Her tone suggested the question was actually a veiled threat.

"Lovely."

After a few minutes, his eyes left the inky pages of the newspaper and he turned to his two sons, who were talking about a certain girl they knew.

"How's the job hunting coming along, John?"

"Michael," Michael corrected him. "Not too well."

"I'm not surprised. Unskilled jobs are like gold dust these days. I told you that when you dropped out of school."

"Something'll turn up. Besides, I was thinking of going on Social Security—in the mean time."

Hans paused for a long moment, half shaking his head and half not shaking his head. What would the neighbours think? He never actually spoke to his neighbours, but if he did, what would they think?

"Are you sure you should? I mean, it sounds a bit . . . well a bit . . ."

"It's just an idea."

"What is?" It was the proximity that scared him, and Hans had quietly slipped away.

"The Social Security."

"Or yes." He pronounced "oh" like "or." It was a safer word. It was like admitting that he might be wrong, and so there was no need to argue. "It's just that it seems a bit . . . drastic."

"Like I said, it's just an idea."

"What do you think, Michael?" he asked, turning to John.

"John. I don't know. It's up to him."

Hans's wife returned to the room: "Do we have to have arguing at the breakfast table?"

No-one dared answer, and a fearful silence joined them like an unwelcomed guest.

If only—Hans did not think—there was a way out. But there was no way out. Even if his love was all used up, sapped away over the one armed years, there was no way out. Hans knew she still loved him. Madly, she still loved him. The quick-tempered words, scolding looks, the affection she never showed, they were all testament to her eternal-overwhelming-couldn't-live-without-it love. So there was no way out. For pity's sake, there was no way out.

Hans stood to leave.

"Your sandwiches are on the counter," his wife said. Hans was putting on his suit jacket. The left sleeve, like the left sleeves of all his clothes, was pinned back. He picked up his packed lunch and offered a well phrased, "I'll be off then," which renounced any obligation to reply. The door slammed and they heard the sqwunch sqwunch as he walked over the wet gravel of the drive. The two brothers looked at one another.

"Shall I check?" John asked.

"Better," Michael answered.

John stood and walked over to the bay window, lined with long trickles of rain. Outside, Hans had reached the car. He placed his packed lunch on the shiny white roof and fished in his pocket for the keys. He found them, opened the door, removed them and climbed inside. It was an awkward business. With a slam, the door was shut.

"He's forgot," John said, hurrying away from the window and out of the house.

"Dad!" he called. The car was beginning to pull away with the packed lunch still sitting on the roof. "Dad!"

It was a thirty minute drive from Edging Close to the office in St. John's Wood. Hans Jespersen was always the first to arrive. Normally, he checked and revised his agenda until his secretary arrived at 8:30. The British Swimming Federation employed five people and was headed by a one-armed foreigner who could not, for obvious one-armed reasons, swim. It was an open plan office, separated into different sections by portable screens that had never been moved. Hans's secretary appeared at the far end of the room.

Even before her coat was completely off she asked, "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Yes, please."

Agnes's secretarial skills were far from adequate, but she could brew a lovely cup of tea. Besides, she had other qualifications, and as she slipped out of her coat, Hans furtively appraised them.

Hans was soon busy, shuffling papers from one file to another, like a magician spellbound by his own familiar tricks; barely noticing as the others arrived, one by one, soaking wet and complaining about the rain.

When Hans looked up from a drug testing paper—an urgent case that required attention sometime that year—the office was empty.

He glanced at the clock on the wall, its second hand sweeping up time like the brush of a conscientious char-lady, and saw it was already after twelve. As usual, Hans had been left alone. He took out his packed lunch and thought about being left alone.

Hans could remember, if he wanted—which he did not—his first year in Odense University. His major was physical education, and all the girls showed keen interest in his athletic body. Several weeks passed before he began to realise the possibilities, the power of his looks; but then, like a cannibal suddenly and unexpectedly set free in a Christian town, half crazed with the flavour of female flesh, Hans began to gorge.

When the summer holidays came around, rather than return to Silkeborg, where his parents would certainly frown on his copious gobbling, Hans set out on a hiking tour of the Lake District. It was his first visit to England.

Hans wandered over hill and dale; an attraction in all the small villages. He was invited to spend the night in several houses, where cheerful farmer's wives tempted him with home cooking—and Hans never turned down a free meal. The young country girls, he found, made tasty deserts.

But there was one girl, from Windermere, who was not like the rest. For one thing she was actually good looking. She was an English rose called, strangely enough, Rose.

Hans chewed his cheese and tomato sandwich mechanically, hardly bothering to notice the flavour.

Agnes and a young man, whose name Hans could never remember, were the last to arrive from lunch. They were fifteen minutes late, yet still looked hungry. As they came in, Hans looked at his watch, making a certain expression involving special manipulations of the cheek muscles that was his own safe, silent

way of going, "Tut tut."

He knew they all laughed at him. Agnes and what's his name and him and the other. They were irritated by the sight of his one armed body, and made nasty jokes behind his back. Of course, he had never heard any of the nasty jokes behind his back, but he knew nevertheless. At least they pretended to be nice. They pretended to be nice and Hans pretended to be nice. The English were good at doing that, and he was one of them.

Hans could remember, if he wanted—which he did not—how he had been drawn back to England, like a criminal returning to the scene of the crime. He had found a job teaching physical education at St. Vincent's High School, in Brent Cross. Naturally enough, thoughts of Rose began to slip back into his mind, where they twisted and turned and showed a willingness to please. He decided to write to her. He had the paper, the pen, though his unbridled fantasies seemed to have robbed him of things to say.

It was summer. Hans took the train up to Windermere. It was late when he arrived, so he checked into a Bed and Breakfast, took a solitary drink in the local pub, and then retired to bed.

The next morning he awoke early and scampered out before breakfast. Rose lived in an old house with her parents, opposite the cemetery, and Hans crouched behind the headstone of Mr. M. Welks, who died in 1924 at the age of fifty-three. From there he was offered an uninterrupted view of her red front door.

It was after eight o'clock when he finally turned out the lights of the deserted office.

At home, his wife was watching television.

"Are the boys out?" he greeted her.

"Yes," she said. Hans left her to her soapy programmes and retired to the study to read.

At ten o'clock they went to their separate beds. Hans looked over in the half and half darkness and saw the space between their beds like an enormous chasm. Hans could remember, if he wanted—which he did not—the last time he had tried, for her sake, to bridge that yawning space. She had felt hard and unyielding—he did not recall—like an alabaster column lying on its side. Even then it was a pointless gesture. Ever since John had been born—the same year as the car crash, when Hans had lost his arm, when the surgeon had chopped away his symmetry—she had gone off sex. It was funny how having babies made them go off sex. So Hans watched her in the darkness, wishing she did not love him, wishing she could live without him, and then went to sleep.

Knocking once—and once only.

The next morning, at breakfast, Hans again informed his wife that he would be requiring a packed lunch.

"Will egg do?"

"You work too hard, dad," John said.

"I don't have any choice, Michael. The season starts in a few weeks."

"John," Michael corrected him with a sympathetic smile.

"Can't you ever get their names right?" Hans's wife stood and stomped off into the kitchen.

"What time did you two get in last night?" Hans asked, as if nothing had happened.

"Around twelve," Michael answered.

"Isn't that a tad late?" Hans loved words like "tad." Words like "tad" were what separated the English from the not English.

"No."

"Or. Fair enough."

"Besides, we were only at Linda's," John added.

"Linda?"

"Linda Watlin," Michael said.

"Linda Watlin," he repeated.

Linda Watlin had a certain reputation in the neighbourhood. Even Hans, who never deliberately spoke to anyone in the street, had heard of her antics.

"Or, yes. I know who you mean."

"She's nice." John said.

"I'm sure she is. She's quite a . . . lively girl, I think."

Hans's wife was listening from the kitchen. Both the boys were having sex with the local harlot, probably at the same time, and all he could say was, "She's quite a lively girl." She could forgive the boys, but not him. She was tormented by his presence. She could hardly bear to look at him. His incomplete body was like a dirty joke with no punch line. But it was not only his obscene one-armed body that repulsed her, but his obscene one-armed mind as well. Worst, she could see too much of him in John and Michael.

"She's a bit young, isn't she?" Hans offered.

"Who?"

"Linda"

"Not really. She's fifteen," Michael said.

"Or, really? I never knew." He saw them taking the same road he had taken at their age, and knew nothing short of amputation could change it.

"Any way. What do you have on for today, John?" Hans asked, turning to Michael.

Hans left for work. As he began to pull out of the drive the youngest of his sons appeared at the door and called out, "Dad! Dad! Your packed lunch is on the roof."

Agnes and what's his name arrived at the same time. Hans knew

they had spent the night together and felt a nostalgia laced with envy.

Late that afternoon, Hans telephoned home. Michael answered.

"Is your mother there?"

Just a minute." He called out.

"Yes?"

"It's me. I'll be working late tonight. I have some work to finish. I should be back around ten or so."

"Right." And they hung up.

Hans's wife sat at the table, smoking a cigarette. She was about to make up her mind twice and for all. It was a big joke, all this "working late." He was going off to visit his whore. She knew only a whore could stomach the sight of his deformed body, could feel his touch without wanting to vomit. He was going to pay money and the whore would do sex to him. She must be an ugly whore too. A desperate whore.

It was six o'clock and every one had left. The office was nice like that, Hans thought, with no eyes watching his incomplete body. There was a lot to be said for solitude. He closed up a folder, placing it neatly on his desk. He stood up, stretched his solitary arm, tired from too much sitting down. The left sleeve of his shirt had unfastened, hung down ridiculously, but there was no one around to laugh and so he seemed now like a tragic figure, like an aging clown with no audience.

Hans packed away his things, closed his briefcase and stood to leave. He paused by the door, making sure the office was in order before turning off the lights. Outside a fine drizzle fell through the darkness; the wet paths and roads reflected the lights of the world above.

When Hans came to park his car in Walnut rise, Islington—he always parked the car several houses up the street, to avoid

suspicion—the rain had stopped, though tiny drifting balls of moisture still hung in the air.

Hans, crouching behind the headstone, had been watching the red door for almost two hours. Finally, he admitted the secret vigil was futile and set to out to walk the lake shore for a while. Later, in *The Horse and Hounds*, which was Rose's local, he ordered a pint of Bitter.

"Ah, that's a nice drop of beer. I needed that," he said to the young bar man, wiping his mouth on his mouth.

"Aye," he agreed. "Aye, ya right there."

"Can I offer you one?"

"That's nice of ya. A'll just 'ave an 'arf though." The bar man pulled himself a glass.

"Cheers." They both took leisurely drinks. Besides Hans, there were only two old men in the pub, playing dominoes and drinking half-heartedly by the unlit fire.

"It's quiet in here."

"It'll liven up in a bit. Round about twelve."

"Oh, yes. I forgot how early it is. It's been a long morning."

"Ya've got quite an accent there." Actually, Hans had almost no accent. "Where ya from?"

"Denmark."

"Denmark? What the 'ell ya doin' up 'ere then?" We don't get many of your lot in these parts. Just a minute though, 'aven't a seen ya before. A few years ago, there was a fella 'ere from somewhere like that."

"Yes, that was me. I used to come in here with Rose Waterhouse."

"Aye, now a remember. That ya did. Ya were on an 'iking tour."

"That's right. Do you know if Rose is still around?"

"Rose? Nor round 'ere, that's fer sure. She slung 'er 'ook a

while back."

"Where to?" Hans felt his heart fall into his stomach.

"Ya got me on that 'n'. From what I 'eard, she 'ad a big row wiv 'er mam 'n' dad or summat, 'n' wnet wiv out tellin' any one where to."

"When was that?"

"A while back. Last year mebbe."

"And nobody knows where she is?"

"I don't fink so."

Hans stayed in Windermere for a few more days; finally, with admitted relief, climbing on board the train and heading back to London.

The next day, Hans found himself strolling sure footedly about Piccadilly, looking at the menu of passing girls. Hans not only had good looks on his side, but nationality and language too. When he picked up foreign girls, he pretended to be from North London, knowing that they wanted to sleep with an Englishman as a kind of souvenir. When they were natives, he presented himself as a Scandinavian, spoke with an accent, and sleeping with them was like giving them a free holiday abroad.

He saw a girl, French by the looks of her, struggling with an uncooperative map that had unfolded itself completely and seemed intent on withholding information.

"Are you lost?" Hans offered with a smile.

"I don't know," she said, "I t'ink so."

Summer drew on, and the failed trip to the Lake District receded into the mists of memory, until finally it disappeared completely. Meanwhile, Hans continued to stalk the streets, to guzzle and groan, obsessed.

Hans could remember, if he wanted—which he did not—the excitement of those early days, when life gasped, out of breath. His body was a temple, his cunning a god, with a world of

flickering long-lashed eyes watching, offering, praising him.

And then, just before the start of the new term, he did not recall, Hans found himself repeatedly, yes repeatedly sleeping with the same girl. He had found her working in a baker's shop and had offered, in no uncertain terms, to knead her dough.

"I bet you have a different girl here every day," she had said.

"No. I rest on Sundays."

And then they were married . . .

The damp air clung to Hans. He breathed a tremendous sigh, checked to see if he had his wallet, straightened his tie, glanced at the time, and knocked on the red door of number two Walnut Rise. When the door opened, he said, "Hello," and stepped inside.

"Hello," a woman answered, closing the door behind him. She was wearing a pink dressing gown, which hung loosely, revealing a large portion of her right breast.

Hans could remember, if he wanted—which he did not—the day before his wedding. It was a Friday, and the headmaster, "In view of the circumstances," he had said, offered Hans the day off.

With nothing else to do, Hans took the tube to the West End. He strolled around the familiar streets, enjoying the warmth of the autumn sun, his mind blank. He was in love, though far from certain he was ready to marry, and had decided the best thing to do was not think about it.

Sitting himself down on a bench beside Leicester Square, Hans began to notice the girls walking by, and wondered if he might have one last snack. He was, in fact, feeling exceedingly peckish. Coming towards him, dressed in a tight black skirt that

stopped above the knee, and white stockings and blouse, was a girl who's every movement seemed an invitation to gobble and devour, to guzzle and deflower, to ravish, masticate, consume. Hans had no choice.

"Excuse me," he said, standing as she came up. "Don't I know you?"

"Hans!" she said.

"Whoops," he thought. "I must've had her already."

"Flip in Ek," she said. "What a surprise."

And then he realised who she was: "Rose! Goodness me. Rose Waterhouse. I heard you were in London."

"You did? 'Ow's that then?"

"I was up at Windermere, early this summer. I tried to look you up."

"Ya saw mi mam 'n' dad?"

"No, no. The bar man in The Horse and Hounds told me."

"Ya 'ere on 'oliday then?"

"No, I live here. In Brent Cross."

"Ya don't! Flip!"

"Listen, are you in a hurry to go somewhere?"

"No."

"Good, let's go have a drink then."

They walked from Leicester Square towards Charring Cross Road and stopped into the first public house they saw, which happened to be the third along the way. As they walked through the doorway, Hans slipped his arm around her narrow waist for a moment, as if helping her step up onto the carpet.

"What would you like?"

"Just a bitter lemon."

"Nothing stronger?"

"No. It's still too early."

Hans ordered drinks and they sat themselves at a table. He was

wondering, during all this, if he should tell her about the marriage business. He wanted her and could not decide how to play it.

"Ya rEnglish is good."

"It was always good."

"A know. Ya sound more fancy now though."

"So what made you move down to London, Rose?"

"A should be asking you the same fing. Me, a just felt like it. When you went back ta Denmark, everything seemed borin'. Really borin'. So finally a got up the guts to leave. A'll tell ya somefin, a should've moved away years ago."

"How old are you? I've forgotten."

"Twenty-one."

"Mmm."

"What about you? How come ya live 'ere now."

"I don't know really. There was a job available, I applied, I got it, and here I am."

"Where ya working?"

"St. Vincent's, in Brent Cross."

"Fancy. You're really a P.E. teacher then?" Rose was clearly impressed.

"I missed you, you know."

"Me too."

"That's why I went back to Windermere, this summer."

"I fought about writing to you—in Denmark—about mi movin', but I never got round to it."

"Guess what?"

"What?"

"I'm getting married tomorrow." He was not smiling.

"You are?" She was not smiling.

"Maybe . . ."

"What?"

"I don't know." They took drinks of their drinks.

"Where do you live," Hans asked.

"Chelsea. I 'ave a nice flat there."

"Chelsea? You must have a nice job as well."

"Great. A'm modelling for this clothes fella. We go round ta all these snobby shops and a parade around for a bit, and that's it. All the old men, you know, in the shops, they all drool over me and say how nice the clothes look. Ha! The clothes! All along it's me they fink's nice." She laughed. "They wish they could buy me instead of the clothes."

"And? Do they?"

"Not yet." Rose smiled. "It's fun though. A feel like a've got all this power in me."

"You have."

"I know," she laughed. "And so do you."

"Listen, why don't we drink up, 'op in a taxi and go over to my place. I'd like ta show ya."

"I'm sure you would." Hans took the last drink of his drink eagerly, spilling half of it down his shirt.

By the time they reached Rose's expensive looking flat, Hans was starving to death.

"So you're getting married tomorrow?" Rose asked, as Hans pulled off her blouse.

"Yes," he mumbled, his mouth full.

It was like the last supper.

Outside number two Walnut Rise, the air was still burdened with droplets of water, hanging about and even dancing in the black chill.

Hans had removed the woman's pink dressing gown and was squeezing the cheeks of her bottom in his one-armed way, digging his five fingers into the flesh until she cried out.

"You're a whore," he said, and pushed his tongue into her mouth.

"I know," she groaned. "Let's go into the bedroom."

His clothes were pulled off. She began to kiss him, with tiny bird-like kisses, on the cheek, nose, chin, neck, chest, right shoulder, right arm, back over the chest, left shoulder, left stump.

"That's it, kiss it, Rose," he said. Rose Waterhouse began to kiss the stump and lick the stump as if it were an extra penis. After a while he pulled her head up and began to kiss her. They were lying side by side and Hans moved his arm down her back and squeezed her bottom.

Hans moved down, pushing the stump of his left arm between Rose's legs, and she groaned with pleasure.

"You should've stopped me you know." Hans said cryptically, when it was all over.

"What?"

"You remember the time we met up again? The day before my wedding. You should've said something."

"Like what?"

"Like, 'Don't do it.'"

"We were too young. Neither of us knew what we were doin'." She paused a moment. "Everything's like a dream when you're that age. Things just happen by themselves. It seems like a dream when we think back, 'cos it really was a dream."

"It's kind of ironic. When I married my wife, sex was everything. Sex was even love—I think. And now look. I haven't touched her for years."

"It's a dirty business," Rose said, distantly.

"What?"

"Sex. It's the most disgusting thing people do to each other. If there's no love there as well, to balance things off . . .

well it's nofing but dirt."

"I don't know what I'd do without you," Hans said.

"Leave her then."

"You know I can't."

Rose stroked his back gently and they gazed silently across the semi darkness, into each other's eyes. After the wedding they had avoided each other. For years they had avoided each other. But then, slowly at first, the affair began, and quiet soon they both knew it could never end.

At last he said, "It would kill her if I left. You don't know how she loves me."

"If that's love, then give me 'ate."

"She's just got in the habit of treating me badly, you know. That's all. Once you get into a habit, it's hard to get out."

"You're the one in a habit."

"What do you mean?"

"What I say. And you're fooling yourself if you think she loves you."

"You never even met her, Rose. You don't know anything about her."

"Maybe not, but I know a lot about you."

"I wish she didn't love me, but she does. What can I do?"

Hans moved his hand onto her right breast and caressed it gently. Rose no longer had a left breast. She too had been the victim of a surgeon who had taken away her symmetry.

It was eleven o'clock when Hans arrived home.

"Are you two still up?" Hans entered the living room and saw Michael and John sitting on the couch. The coal fire was lit and everything seemed warm and cosy.

"I love a real fire," he said, walking over and standing in front to warm himself.

"Something's happened," Michael said.

"What?" It certainly was warm and cosy and Hans was feeling in good spirits. Whatever had happened had happened and that was that; besides, nothing ever happened. Well, rarely. A cat had been squashed under the wheel of a passing juggernaut last month; and Mr. Crosby, down the street, had painted his fence pink; but mostly nothing happened—and a good thing too. The two boys were looking serious and Hans thought perhaps they had made a girl pregnant.

"Mother's left."

"Where's she gone?"

"She's left. She's not coming back."

"Or."

"She's gone for good."

"Yes, I get the point Michael. Did she say anything?"

"Yes, she gave us a big talk."

"What about."

"Just stuff."

"Come on Michael. What kind of stuff?" Michael looked down towards the carpet, unsure what to do. Hans turned to John.

"John?"

"She said she'd been waiting till we were grown up. She's been wanting to leave for years."

"For years?" Hans was astonished.

"Yes."

"What else?"

"She was babbling a lot."

"What else?"

"She was just going on about love and all that." John said, embarrassed. "She said she's never really loved you, and she only stayed for us."

"Never?"

"No."

"She never loved me," Hans repeated, over and over in his mind; but no matter how many times he said it, the feeling of utter flabbergastation remained.

"It was one-armed thinking, then," Hans thought, as soon as he had climbed into bed. "All those years, staying with her for nothing. It was just me and my one-armed thinking."

The next morning, Hans was the last one downstairs.

"You're late dad," Michael said, barely concealing his amazement.

"I thought I'd have a sleep in. Is there any tea in the pot?"

"Yes." Hans poured himself some and sat.

"Do you want breakfast?" John asked.

"No."

"It seems strange this morning," Michael resumed.

"Yes, I noticed the sun's decided to make an appearance." Hans said, sardonically.

"That's not what I meant."

"I know."

"Are you all right, dad?"

"Yes, why?"

"You don't seem yourself."

"No, no, I'm pretty sure this is me."

"Aren't you going to be late for work?"

"Probably. But I've heard it's the boss's prerogative."

"How come it's taken you all these years to figure that out?"

"I used to be a P.E. teacher. Were not known for our brains."

Hans took a slurp of his tea and they sat in silence for a few minutes.

"I made you a packed lunch," John said.

"You did? I supposed I'd better take it then."

"You don't seem very sad about mother going."

"Sad?" He paused for thought. "No, not really. I'm surprised though." He took a sip of the tea. "But that's life for you. There's always a few surprises waiting to jump out and say 'boo.' We all have so much purpose when we're young, but most things happen by chance.

"Any way, I think I might as well get going." He put on the jacket of his suit and collected his packed lunch from the kitchen. "I should be home around five. Bye."

"Bye," the boys said, and watched him go.

Outside, the spring sun was shining with what seemed a conditional promise of summer. Hans stood on the porch and looked out at the budding trees in the garden and down along the length of the street. He could see Mr. Crosby's pink fence, shouting out greetings to the sun and the blue sky, and they shouted back. Along the hedge, at the foot of the garden, yellow tulips nodded their heads at Hans, who now made his way to the car.

Inside the house Michael and John were watching from the bay window.

Hans placed the packed lunch on the shiny white roof and fished in his pocket for the keys. Hans found his keys and opened up the door and removed them from the lock and picked up the packed lunch and climbed inside. The car door slammed closed and the engine chugged and the wheels spun over the gravel and the vehicle and the father and the packed lunch all disappeared down the street.

## **Splick-Splock**

Charley knew he was awake when he heard the splick and the splock. He listened, without bothering to open his eyes, to the splick and the splock. It was a romantic and reassuring sound. It was an evocative sound, making him feel delightfully sorry for himself. So there he lay, in his ramshackle bed, eyes closed, listening to the splick and the splock.

Charley was penniless. He revelled in poverty—mainly because it was deliciously pitiful, but also because it gave him an excuse to complain to his friends; and there was nothing Charley like more than complaining to his friends. And all his friends were in the same boat, so they didn't mind his complaining, because it saved them the trouble of doing it themselves.

Charley, listening to the splick and the splock, was thinking about being poor.

### **Splick**

He liked the way it dribbled from his nose.

### **Splock**

He had been poor forever. When he left home, ten years earlier, he had stumbled into it, and never bothered to climb out—never even looked to see if there was a way out.

### **Splick**

He liked its simplicity. It was easy to understand. It dribbled over everything, covered everything with its sticky ooze, made his life a straightforward empty road paved with snot. There were no confusing twists and turns, forks; just a line of snot going nowhere.

### **Splock**

Charley financed his poverty by stealing. But he was a thief

with a conscience. He only stole from people he did not know.

### **Splick**

Charley was a creative thief, and the hard thing about being a creative thief was thinking up new capers. Tired of contemplating his poverty, though not particularly tired of feeling sorry for himself, Charley turned his attention to thinking up new capers.

### **Splock**

There was one in particular that seemed promising: Charley lived in a poor neighbourhood, and, as in most poor neighbourhoods, there was a great deal of money around. The first problem was to find it; the second was to take it. Charley had solved problem number one. He was particularly fond of fish and chips. He liked the way it was cheap to buy; the way it was cooked by somebody else; the way it slipped greasily down his throat; the way it didn't dirty plates. In other words, he liked everything about fish and chips. Not surprisingly, everyone else liked everything about fish and chips. Charley had sat on the door step of his squat, late one evening, watching the drunks stagger from the pub down the road over to the fish and chip shop opposite. It was after midnight, the fish and chips shop had been closed some time, though a light in the back room was still burning. Then the place fell into darkness and the owner came out of the front door and locked up. He was a particularly fat man, no doubt a fan of his own fish and chips, but right then he looked slightly fatter than usual. He gave a shifty glance up and down the street, and this, more than his extra fatness, caught Charley's attention. He walked away and, for some reason, Charley decided to follow. He scuttled from shadow to shadow, much like a shadow himself, close enough to see the extra-fat man, though far enough to avoid the odour of fried food.

The fat man crossed the road, and Charley realised where he was going: the Building Society was just ahead. Charley stood in the doorway of a sweet shop and watched the extra fat man slink over to the night deposit box, give another shifty look up and down the street, and then take an envelope from inside his buttoned jacket. He was only fat now, and the mouth in the wall gobbled up his extra pounds.

**Splick**

It would be like taking a toy from a baby.

**Splock**

He would have to disguise himself. A mask would do it. A clown mask would be good. He could hide behind the bank and wait for the extra fat man to come and lose weight.

**Splick**

The noise was starting to get on his nerves. Charley opened his eyes and looked up at the damp patch on the ceiling. Water dripped, with a splick and a splock, into a metal bucket on the floor.

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in," Charley called.

"Breakfast, sir," the butler said. He carried a silver tray over to Charley, who sat himself up in bed.

"What is it?" Charley asked.

"Kippers, sir," the butler answered, placing the tray on a bedside table, uncovering the main course. He poured coffee.

"Thank you, Wilson."

The butler left; Charley took a sip of coffee and examined the kipper. It was the nearest thing to fish and chips he would ever get.

"I wonder why things are the way they are?" he thought.

Charley climbed from bed, stretched, and walked over to the window. And then he said, "Ouch." And after that he mumbled,

"Fucking damn thing."

He had stubbed his toe on the metal bucket, and it was hurting like mad.

## Chippy

Susan Priestly was fifteen. She had no friends, and only one enemy.

It was August, the middle of the summer holiday, and Susan was sitting on a wall beside the neighbourhood sweet shop, eating an ice cream.

"Hi, Susan." A boy from school was walking towards her, down the path, with his hands in his pockets. Susan was an attractive girl, and the boy was busy taking a picture of her with his eyes, developing the image in his head, pasting it in a scrap book of raggedy well-fingered pages. She was slim, fragile, with large untouchable breasts. All the boys in school took a keen interest in their development, watched their every move, watched them incessantly, imagined themselves grabbing them.

Susan knew the boy's face, but not his name. He was in her class, and sat somewhere near the back.

"What's happening?" he asked.

"Nothing."

The boy sat on the wall beside her. Susan ate her ice cream as if she were still alone.

"You waiting for somebody?" He knew she was not, but what else could he say? He was already racking his brains thinking of the next thing to say, and then the next after that.

"No."

What else could he say? He was stumped.

"I haven't seen you around this summer." It was normal. Susan was never seen around—no matter what the season.

No answer.

"Have you been away?"

"No," she said. It was a nice ice cream.

"My mam 'n' dad are supposed to take us to Scarborough for a week."

It certainly was a nice ice cream.

Words, words, words. The boy was looking out for words, though clearly words were not looking out for him. He glanced at her large breasts. Where were the words? He needed words.

"Are you doing anything today?"

"Why?"

"I'm going into town, in a bit. Do you want to come?"

"I can't. I have to go somewhere."

"Oh. I'll see you later then," he said, self-consciously, easing himself down from the wall. There was something not quite normal about Susan, and the boy, as he walked away, was trying to figure out what it was and where it came from.

Susan quickly finished her ice cream: it was late, the morning almost over, and she had a long walk ahead.

When Susan arrived home, a semidetached council house on the edge of town, her mother's nerves were on edge.

"Where've you been all day?"

"Just walking," Susan said.

"You're always just walking. I've been worried sick."

"It's the first time I've been out all week." It was true. Susan rarely disappeared, though when she did it was a lengthy affair, from early morning until early evening.

"It's only Friday," her mother answered.

"Sorry."

"You should have more consideration."

"I said sorry."

Her mother walked into the kitchen, leaving the apology hanging in the air.

"What's for tea?" Susan called.

"Fish. What do you think?"

Susan's father had run away when she was born, and from then on her mother—never absolutely sure of herself—pretended to have lost interest in men. She had turned to the Catholic Church and was happy playing martyr.

It was early evening. Susan was lying on her bed on her stomach, her head resting in cupped hands, looking at the empty wall—her mother thought pictures and posters were messy—in front. She was thinking about the boy, going into town, asking her along. She was trying to think of his name. And then she heard a movement downstairs, saw her mother sitting alone, snuggled up to her Bible, and banished all thoughts of the boy with no name.

On Sunday morning, they walked two miles to the Catholic church for the morning Mass. The congregation was skimpy and sat well away from each other, like tiny lost birds perched on rows of fallen logs.

During the afternoon Susan said, "I'm going to the sweet shop."

"You seem to be going to the sweet shop a lot these days."

"No more than normal," she answered, already on her way out.

Susan again sat on the wall beside the sweet shop, glancing around here and there. She had been there ten minutes when, realising her mother would be anxious, she stood and walked home.

Towards the end of the week, Susan disappeared again. All day long her mother's nerves twisted and turned, not so much in concern for Susan's safety, but in anger at being left alone. When Susan arrived home, at tea time, her mother was ready.

"I nearly called the police," she said.

"I told you this morning I was going."

"Going where though?"

"Nowhere. I just walk. I like to be on my own sometimes."

A warning bell rang in her mother's head: "Have you got a boyfriend?"

"I told you, I was on my own."

"You'd better not be starting that boyfriend malarkey. You're much too young. Do you hear me?"

"When I think of the sacrifices I've made," she shook her head. "It hasn't been easy you know, bringing you up all by myself."

"Sorry," Susan mumbled, ashamed, looking down at her feet.

Susan stayed home. For days on end, Susan stayed at home. She helped her mother about the house, went to Mass with her every evening, spoke politely and did as she was told. It was no great effort: it was the least she could do to show respect; and all her life, Susan had been respectful.

One afternoon, while her mother took a nap, Susan went outside. There was an old wooden shed in the back garden, painted green, with a small window and a black weather-worn roof. She reached up, taking a brown key from a narrow shelf above the door. Nervously—Susan was not allowed in the shed—she opened the rusty lock. It was nice inside, with the door closed and the sunlight streaming through the small square window, through the dusty air. There was an old table with blankets underneath, where she had secretly played house as a small child; empty buckets; boxes of nails and screws; a fishing rod that had never been used—at least to Susan's knowledge; and a double-barrelled shotgun, strangely out of place, leaning in the far corner, with a plastic container of cartridges on a shelf

above. Susan took the gun and cradled in her arms. It felt friendly and familiar. She blew down one of the barrels, as if it were a flute, making it sing a single note, a low, breathy, comfortable note. Susan put the gun back exactly in its place; and then she crawled under the table, sat cross-legged on a blanket, rocked gently back and forth, almost as if she could hear music.

The next morning, with absolutely nothing else to do, Susan rummaged through her old toy cupboard and found a packet of plaster of Paris. She added some water and squished it into something that resembled a face. It resembled the face of a boy whose name was on the tip of her tongue. She took the face into the garden, setting it in the sun to dry, sitting on the front doorstep to wait. She sat, waiting, watching the out-of-reach world going distantly by.

The face was ready. She sat on the doorstep and painted the lips and the eyes and the hair. Her mother hummed a happy song: she liked to see Susan playing like that. She painted tears trickling down the cheeks. It was a good face. And then the sunlight seemed too light, and the face looked too real, and she smashed it on the path and went back to her bedroom.

On Sunday morning, they walked two miles to the Catholic church for the morning Mass.

And then, one day, the need to disappear was overpowering. She made sandwiches, hurriedly, afraid her mother would walk into the kitchen at any moment, packed them in a duffle-bag with a carton of juice, and sneaked out of the house.

The way took Susan beside an old people's residence. It was a large well kept house, with a large well kept garden, though not exactly a home. Empty faces peered through large windows, watching a world they could not touch. Susan walked past, averting her eyes, afraid to see the glass faces.

Susan was fast approaching the end of the town. Across the street, an old farmhouse with an attached barn had been converted into an Off Licence. The door opened and a boy walked out.

"Hi Susan." It was the boy with no name. Inexplicably, her heart began to race.

"Hi Alan." She had remembered his name. Alan Morton.

He hurried across the road to join her.

"What's up?"

"Nothing."

"Where you off?"

"Just down the road," she lied, "for a walk."

"Mind if I came along? I just bought a bottle of cider."

"Is that a bribe?"

"If that's what it takes," he smiled.

"All right then. Give me it, I'll put it in my bag."

This time, not only did Alan find his words, but Susan found her answers as well.

Meanwhile, Susan's mother had discovered her gone, and her nerves were being used in a tug of war.

With every step Susan took, it seemed more certain that the decision had decided for itself. She would take him and show him. It would be all right for some-one else to know. There would be no harm done. They would have fun. And yet, somehow, it sounded like a lie. But, then again, the decision had really decided. It had nothing to do with her. They walked on, and Susan felt like a criminal, as if she had stolen—from herself.

A few minutes later they passed the final row of houses. Now it was too late to turn back. She would take him there and show him and drink cider and have fun. A narrow beck—home to three old tires and a family of broken prams—was the barrier separating houses from fields. They jumped across the beck.

"Where are we going?" They walked along side the gurgling beck that held the houses at bay, following the edge of the field, where the wheat was young and green, and moved in fluid waves in the light breeze.

"There's a place I know, up this way." They came to a thick hedgerow, cutting in front, changed directions and followed a parallel path, up the far side of the field.

"What kind of place?"

"It's just a place I go to when I want to be alone. It's up by the quarry."

"You want to go to the quarry?" There was a barely concealed note of astonishment in his voice.

"Yes, why? Scared of Chippy or something?"

"No," he breathed a laugh. "It's a bit far, that's all."

Chippy was one part man, and nine parts myth. He lived in one of the old houses beside the abandoned quarry. He wandered about, a shot gun tucked under his arm, keeping children away. No-one knew if it was his job or his passion. Several children claimed to have been chased by Chippy, and some even said he had shot at them.

"Do you believe in him?"

"Don't be daft," Alan said.

"What about Rex?"

"Who the hell's Rex when he's at home?"

"The dog next door to me."

"Oh, that three legged one."

"Yeah. What about him?"

"What do you mean?"

"It was Chippy who did that."

"Sure," he said, stretching the word slightly, feigning disbelief.

"You don't know the story, then?"

"No—but I'm sure you'll tell me." He smiled and she smiled back.

"All right, I will.

"A few years ago some kids took him for a walk. They came up here and he ran off somewhere. He always liked to go off—when he had all his legs. So, any way, they were scared he'd get lost and started to shout for him; but he didn't come back. Then they heard this gunshot from up by the quarry. They were all too scared to go look, but after a while they saw him come limping along. His leg was all bloody."

"So that's what happened."

"Yeah. The kids carried him back. The vet said he'd been shot with a shotgun."

"It could've been a farmer."

"Why would a farmer shoot a dog? It's only corn up here."

"Why would Chippy shoot a dog?"

"Same reason he shoots at kids."

They reached the top end of the field and scrambled up the loose stones of a railway embankment. They paused for breath at the top, looking about them, at the fields on both sides, the houses beyond the beck, and two distant smokestacks in the direction of the quarry. No more trains passed by that way: the tracks had long since been removed, and the raised causeway was now a path from the past, going nowhere. Butterflies fluttered by, birds tweetled and insects rattled in the long grass. They walked on, feet crunching on the black cinders.

"You come up her often?"

"Now and then," Susan answered.

"You ever see Chippy?"

"No. Have you?"

"No. But I remember once when I was younger, I went up to the quarry to catch frogs with some of my mates. We put one kid on

guard, you know, to watch out for him, and after a few minutes he came down and shouted, 'Chippy.' We all scarpered, back to the embankment. We looked back, but there was no sign of him."

"We're almost there."

They clambered down the opposite side of the embankment, and soon were standing beside a small lake. They looked into the clear water.

"It's ages since I've been up here," Alan said. He looked up and saw the two smokestacks, rising up, on the other side of the lake, from behind a wall of trees.

"It's over there," she pointed.

"What, passed the chimneys?"

"Yeah."

"I don't think we should."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I just don't think we should."

"Not scared are you?"

"I told you: no."

"Come on then," she said.

The decision had already decided. It had nothing to do with her.

Susan led the way. It was a wild unexplored place, and they stayed close to the water's edge, where the vegetation was less dense. And it was mysterious as well. It was like being inside a church, after the service, with all the candles still burning, when the congregation was home breaking the commandments, and the priest was out, watching young boys in the park.

They reached the other side of the lake, climbed a slight incline, away from the water, up towards the trees, along a narrow trail towards the smokestacks beyond. There was an intangible presence in the air, swirling about them like wavering heat, holding still their tongues. They reached the end

of the trail.

"I don't think we should go there," Alan said. They could see the old abandoned buildings, their windows unbroken and black with dirt. Secretive. And still she walked in front, still led the way.

They approached a low long building between the two smokestacks. The door was unlocked. Susan pushed it open, and they walked inside. The long room was empty. It was not only empty, but seemed always to have been empty. There were no bits and pieces on the floor, no crooked shelves on the wall, nothing to suggest that the room had ever been used.

"I wonder what they used this place for?" Alan whispered. They walked back outside, leaving the door open, hanging to death on its rusty hinges. They crossed a large square of cracked concrete, riddled with dandelion clocks busy telling lies about the time, over towards a second building. Here the door was locked with a large rusty padlock. Susan pushed the door reluctantly, half heartedly, and the lock clanked solidly. Alan tried to show off, shoving it ineffectually with his shoulder.

"Let's look in the window," he said. But the windows, on the inside, were thick with dust.

"I can't see a thing," he said.

Susan was looking away, over towards the last building. It was a small house with a crooked chimney.

"That must be Chippy's house," Alan said, following her gaze. "I don't think we should go." But it was too late now. The decision had decided. Susan walked across the ill-timed square; Alan followed close behind.

The door was unlocked: Susan twisted the handle and it opened. They looked inside from where they stood, inside at the old sideboard with its collection of knick-knacks; the old couch, worn and weary; a wooden table surrounded by four wooden chairs;

a threadbare carpet, robbed of its colour by age.

"It reminds me of The Three Bears," Alan whispered.

"Which three bears?"

"You know, in the story. It looks like someone's just slipped out to let the porridge cool."

"Oh," she said.

Susan stepped into the room.

"We shouldn't. He might be in," he whispered.

"Don't be daft. No-one's been here for ages."

"How do you know?"

"I can tell," she said, walking into the kitchen. She washed the perspiration from her face, opened a cupboard beside the sink and took out a towel to dry herself.

"That's better," she said.

"Have you been here before?"

"No, why?"

"How did you know there was a towel in there?"

"What? I didn't. Let's go look upstairs." She walked back into the living room and up the bare wooden stairs.

"It's dark up here." There were no windows on the landing, and all the bedroom doors were closed. Susan realised Alan was still downstairs, and called to him.

"You coming up?"

He was looking at something: "In a minute."

When he finally arrived, Susan was in the main bedroom, spread out on the bed with her eyes closed.

"Look what I found," Alan said, suddenly uninterested in what he had found. Susan opened her eyes. It was a photograph. Her heart jumped. It was a photograph, faded and out of focus, of an old man standing beside a young girl.

"It must be Chippy," he said. Susan pretended to look.

"I wonder who the girl is? She looks like you—when you were

younger."

"Don't be daft."

"I think we should go," he said, uneasily.

"Where?"

"To the place you know. Where ever we're going."

"This is the place."

"This is the place?" He was astonished. "You were bringing me here?"

"Yes."

"So you have been here before."

Silence.

"Why didn't you tell me? Why did you pretend we were going somewhere else?"

"I don't know. I thought you wouldn't come—if you knew. Sit on the bed, I've got some sandwiches and juice in the bag."

"Is that you in the picture?"

"Me?" she breathed a laugh. "How could it be? Oh, and we've got your cider as well."

Susan took the things from the bag.

"Let's start on the cider," Alan said with a grin, finally realising he was sitting on a bed in an empty house with Susan Priestly and her breasts. He took a long swig and passed the bottle. He watched as she closed her eyes to drink, and the bottle touched her lips, and she gulped and swallowed, and her chest heaved. He moved closer on the bed, ostensibly to get his hands on a sandwich.

"What kind are they."

"Tongue."

"Tongue? Yak."

"Don't you like tongue?"

"Well, I suppose it depends on who's it is." He smiled and she smiled back. The decision had decided. He took one of the

anonymous tongue sandwiches and they ate in silence, passing the bottle of cider from one to the other.

"Do you come here a lot?"

"A bit."

"A bit lot?"

"Not really. My mother doesn't like me going out much."

"Not anywhere?"

"Not really."

"How often are you allowed out?"

"I don't know."

"Tell me. Once a week?"

"Well . . ."

"Once a week's reasonable."

"My mother doesn't have anything to do with reason. She has faith, instead."

"Who do you come with, normally?"

"Myself." She changed position, pushing her foot against his leg.

"All alone?"

She moved again. He took a gulp of cider and passed the bottle.

"Yes."

There was a moments' silence, and then Alan asked, "How come you never talk to anyone at school?"

"Why should I?"

"To have friends."

"I don't need friends."

"What about Chippy?"

"What?" she looked up.

"Did you ever see him?"

"Why do you keep asking? Never." She was thinking of Chippy: the old gentle man with his white Father Christmas hair and

beard. It was years since he had died; but she could still see his face and still feel his touch.

She put the bottle to her lips; felt the decision decide. Her heart began to race as the liquid slipped down her throat, her mind twisting and turning under the effects of alcohol. He was watching and she knew he was watching.

"Come here," she said without preamble, putting the bottle on the floor beside the bed. Alan moved up, closer; Susan lifted her head and kissed him. His lips, his young lips, felt strange. And then his hands moved to her breasts, squeezing, pushing and pulling, inside her shirt, inside her bra.

Soon their clothes were off. Susan was on her back, her legs apart; Alan was on top, clumsily trying to find the right place to penetrate. And then he was inside, thrusting, pushing into her, panting. All of a sudden it was over, like the fizzle of a dud firework.

Susan, naked, troubled, knew the secret was out. The secret was exposed. She had exposed it herself. Soon, everyone would know about everything. Chippy would be mad. His world would be invaded by an army of teenagers, going where they had no business going, touching things they had no business touching. They would destroy it all. Sooner or later they would destroy it all.

Susan closed the door behind them. They walked away from the quarry, through the fields, over the beck, up the streets in silence.

Back in the house, her mother was crying real tears. At least, they were really wet.

The following week, as Susan walked up the trail, everything seemed normal, silent, undisturbed. And then, as she reached the top, Susan stopped in her tracks. The building with the

permanently locked door was gone—replaced by the building with the permanently opened door. The padlock sat on the ground beside, broken. She stepped forward to look into the shadowy interior, but changed her mind and stopped again. She had never known what was inside, and decided she should never know. Instead, she walked towards the house. The door was closed, but it seemed, in some strange inexplicable way, to be not properly closed, not closed the way it was supposed to be closed. With a sense of misgiving, Susan pushed it open.

Standing straight ahead, facing her, was Chippy, his grey hair and beard gone wild, sticky and out of place. He looked like a man gone mad with shame.

"Chippy," she said, but no sound came from her lips. Chippy was holding a double barrelled shot gun. He raised it slowly, pointing it at Susan, closing one eye and staring down the barrel with the other.

"Chippy," she could not say.

"You shouldn't have," he mumbled. "You never shouldn't have."

Suddenly her vision seemed to telescope, the space between the two barrels becoming a long straight valley, barren and empty. She stared down the desolate valley, swallowing hard, trying to bring words to her mouth, to plead, to say it was not her fault, swallowing hard.

"You shouldn't have," he mumbled again. "You never shouldn't have."

Down the empty valley her eyes crawled, slowly and painfully and silently. And then, in the distance, she saw the sun, a dark eye of a sun, hanging in a red bloodshot sky; a dark eye of a setting sun.

## Rickety-Rack

Peter Thomas was in the middle of doing absolutely nothing. He lived in the basement of a townhouse in Clapham Junction, close to the railway line and the old station. Suddenly there was a broken buzz. He looked up and saw a shape, disguised by darkness, through the glass of the door. The broken buzz, buzzed again.

"Hi, Doreen," he said. A cruel wind was swirling down the outside stairs. "Come on in, quick." It was raining cats and dogs. Icy water spilled from the blocked gutter up on the roof, and fell into a noisy pool beside the doorway. "I wasn't sure you'd come." He closed the door behind her.

"I told you I'd come," she said, taking off her soaked coat with deliberate drama. A single look from Doreen could turn grapes into wine. If she was not the girl of Peter's dreams, she was certainly the girl in his dreams.

"What did David say?" David was Doreen's boyfriend—and Peter's best friend.

"Nothing." She hung up her coat and spread herself deliberately on the couch.

"Do you want a drink? I've got coffee, coffee, or coffee."

"I'm spoiled for choice."

"Come to think of it, I have dilute orange as well."

"I wouldn't mind water."

"Nobody drinks water. Don't you know the average cup of London water's been drank seven-thousand times."

"Is that a touch of Northern snobbery?"

"By the same person!"

"Well I never."

"Never? You have to—sometimes," he suggested, with what might have been a beguiling smile. "Everybody does."

Peter was shuffling between the living room and the adjoining kitchen.

"Now, why the hell am I standing up? Oh yes, a drink. What did you want?"

"Coffee," she smiled.

As Peter filled up the kettle, he looked over the red brick counter, separating the kitchen from the living room, secretly admiring Doreen's bosom. She was looking out of the window, pretending to watch the falling cats and dogs, knowing he would take the opportunity to look.

"Still living like a monk, then?" she asked, turning slowly towards him.

"You have something against monks?"

"No—but I'd like to."

"You're a pervert." They were both laughing, pretending something funny had been said.

"It takes one to know one," she replied.

"Actually you're right. My mind's a treasury of all the depravity known to man."

"Ooh, sounds interesting."

Peter brought in the coffee and sat himself down at the table, where the view was prospective.

"I see you got your best cups out for the occasion," Doreen said, taking a sip from a chipped mug with a worn picture of the Union Jack on its side.

"I always treat my guests well."

"I'll remember that, later on."

"I'm sure you will. So, what happened with David?"

"Nothing. I called him. I said I needed some time on my own."

"And?"

"I said I was coming over here."

Peter Thomas watched as she slurped the drink, losing himself in a world of fantasy. He wanted her, but there was a case of ownership involved. He felt the beginnings of an erection, and wondered where it would end.

She seemed to have been saying something.

". . . there's nothing there."

"Sorry, what did you say? I drifted away."

"Where to?"

"Heaven, I think. Or maybe it was hell; where ever they have the most fun. What was it you said?"

"I said I told him I was staying overnight. I mean, nothing will happen . . . will it?" It was an offer. There was no doubt.

"No it won't. It wouldn't be right—even if it would be fun." She looked towards him, into his eyes.

"You're not laughing. It was a joke. Look, the audience thinks I'm funny." He swept his hand royally about the room, showing the imaginary rows of compact people who were rolling on the floor, convulsed with mirth.

"I see," she lied.

They sat, slurping and talking an endless flow of words.

After a while she asked, "Do you have any shorts I can put on?"

"Ah? I don't think so. I think they're dirty." Doreen had come straight from work, and was still wearing her office clothes. "I'll check," he said. The bedroom was connected to the living room by a large opening, six feet across, in the wall. He rummaged through a cupboard.

"No," he called, "they must be in the wash."

"What about a T-shirt?" There were two. He took a large baggy one and shoved it behind some socks.

"There's this one," he said, holding it out for her to see,

"but it might be tight."

"That's fine," she said. He brought it through and she grabbed it and disappearing into the bathroom.

As Doreen changed, the thoughtful silence was accentuated by the sound of falling cats and dogs, and the distant rattle of a passing train.

"You don't mind if I sit in my knickers, do you?" she said, walking back through the kitchen, towards the living room.

"It depends where you sit." She did not answer. Doreen had taken off her bra and her wonderful firm breasts pushed against the stretched shirt. He tried not to look, but failed. Her nipples were hard, pointing at him, accusing him of something.

"You're not laughing again," he said. "It's a good job my audience is here." And he looked at all their smiling faces.

"Good job," she agreed, spreading herself back on the couch, looking at him steadily.

More slippery words: oily desire wrapped in slick humour. The fantasy was like a train, like a train careering through the big boundless black of night, of open space. Not yet there, not yet real, but sending its rickety-rack touch along the empty track, into the bright blinding electric light station.

Words, words and more words: rickety-rack, rickety-rack and more rickety-rack.

So it was: the evening flashed with sexual static. Fantasy rubbing fantasy, sending sparks flying through the room. Even when Doreen talked about David, everything revolved around their problems in bed.

"It's late," Peter said, finally. It was 1:30 a.m., as the crow flies.

"Do you want to go to bed?"

"In a bit. Are you sleeping on the couch?"

"Where else?"

"My bed, with me."

"Peter." She said his name like a warning.

"Just to sleep. You really have a dirty mind, you know. I was just thinking, it would be more comfortable than the couch."

"Sure."

"Don't you trust me?" Rickety-rack.

"No. I don't trust me either." Rickety-rack. They looked into each other's eyes and lost themselves in fantasy.

"It's been a strange evening." Peter broke the silence.

"I know. I never meant things to go like this—before I came, I mean. I really didn't." Nothing seemed as clear cut as it should. Nothing seemed totally understandable. Everything blended into everything else. The big boundless black of night, of open space, and the blinding electric light station were fixed together, shackled together by the empty track.

"I'm going to bed," he announced abruptly. "I'll get you some blankets."

The lights were out. The only sound was the sound of falling cats and dogs from outside, splashing into the big puddle. Then the rickety-rack began all over again.

"Are you asleep?" Doreen asked. Looking through the space in the wall, Peter was able to see the shape of Doreen, snuggled up on the couch.

"No. Why?" he answered.

"What are you thinking about?"

"You." He tried to make it sound like a joke, but again only the audience of compact people laughed.

"Sure. Do you want to talk?"

"Not from different rooms. I don't like raising my voice."

"Come in here then," she offered. It was still a game. No, it was like something before a game, and they both insisted the other make the first move.

"I'm naked. You come in here." Hearing the sounds of her arousal, he felt surprised and worried and hopeful. And then she appeared in the space connecting the two rooms, a supernatural vision clothed in darkness. She stood, laughing that laugh as if something funny had been said. From outside, a distant electric street light sneaked in through the bedroom window and drenched her in its silvery waves.

"Get in then." He moved the covers back and she climbed in.

"What now?"

"Talk." Rickety-rack.

The words came out and their bodies moved closer together. If there had ever been any doubt, it now seemed only a question of time before the train would actually arrive in the station.

Peter stroked her back and his erection ached.

"I think you should go back to the couch."

"If it wasn't for David . . ."

"I really want you," he said.

Doreen sat up.

"What are you doing?"

"Going to the couch."

"Why?"

"You just told me."

"Yes but . . ."

"Oh God."

"Oh God."

The wanting seemed like a delicious agony, and their hearts raced and perspiration poured, as if some tremendous exertion were taking place.

She climbed from bed and went back to the couch, leaving Peter feeling at once relieved and frustrated.

Everything seemed mixed up and inexplicable. Suddenly he suspected the train would never arrive. There was a red light on

the track, shining; he could almost see it shining. Perhaps some routes were never opened up. Perhaps this red light was permanent. There were millions of tracks, so who decided which would have red lights? At first it seemed like it was himself, but then he knew it was other people. Other people decided. As long as he was tied to other people, there would be red lights.

"You should come back. We'll just sleep."

"You know we won't. I wouldn't be able to resist kissing your back and smelling your skin." Peter lay in silence. Doreen went on, "I'd like to hold you and squeeze you; put my hand around your neck, and stroke you and play with your ears. I'd put my other hand on your chest and move it around slowly, squeezing now and then." She spoke slowly, every word coming from a far off place: that big boundless black of night, of open space.

"Doreen. Don't."

"Don't you like it?" No answer. She went on, "I'd pinch your nipples. Would you like that? I'd pinch them hard and then bite them. Then my hand would move down to your stomach and I'd keep stroking, slowly. I'd brush up against your cock, but I wouldn't take it. I'd tease you."

"Like now you mean."

"Yes."

"And I'd rub my tits against your chest and you'd feel my hard nipples against you, tickling you, and you'd try to grab hold of them, but I wouldn't let you. I'd go further down, massaging you with my tits all the time, and then push them against your cock. Then I'd grab hold of it. You'd be going mad for it, so I'd grab hold. I'd squeeze it hard and then let go. I'd pull back the covers and go down on you, but I'd only lick it, like a lollipop, holding it straight up with one hand. You'd be moving up and down, trying to get it into my mouth, but you wouldn't. I'd look up at you, into your eyes, and then, and then staring

at each other, I'd put it into my mouth. All the way in, sucking hard and watching you watch me.

"What would you do to me?" she asked.

"I'd put my tongue in your ear. I'd bite your neck." They were sharing the same big boundless blackness open space, and the separate rooms were gone. He went on, "Then I'd hold your breasts and push them together and lick both nipples at the same time."

"Oooh yes. And bite them. Bite them and pull me on top of you. I'd open my legs and slip down onto your cock." Doreen wanted to do the talking. She was good at it. She went on, "I'm getting wet just thinking about it. Moving up and down on you, up and down, up and down. I'd lean forward and you could suck on my nipples while we fuck. Up and down, harder and faster." Peter could hear the sound of her breathing, the sound of her moving, touching herself. She went on, "And then you'd cry out and I'd feel you come inside me."

The next morning Peter awoke and heard Doreen stirring.

"Are you awake?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Come in here. We'll talk." Rickety-rack.

"No." She went to the bath room, and when she returned was dressed in her own clothes. She stood in the doorway and they looked intently at each other.

"You're dressed."

"Yes."

"Are you in a hurry to go?"

"No. I just wanted to dress, that's all."

"Come here." She sat on the bed.

"I want you," he said.

"I know."

"No I mean, really. I want to go through the red light."

"What red light?"

"Never mind." He reached out, and with his hand around her neck, pulled her towards him and kissed her open mouthed. Almost immediately, they reached the point of no return. They passed the red light, and felt the intensity of changing dimensions.

The train, puffing and bellowing and steaming and toot toot tooting, came rushing into the bright blinding electric light station. There was something wrong though. The rickety-rack on the track had promised a brilliant and new and clean and shiny engine. But here it actually actually was, an unimpressive collection of used and grimy and paint peeling parts, held together with spit and wishful thinking.

## Cockeyed

All about the walls of Winston's living room were black and white photographs, leaning over in defiance of gravity, cockeyed, an insult to the perpendicular. Winston took a sip of his breakfast coffee, black, unsweetened, taking absolutely no notice of the cockeyed pictures. He took absolutely no notice of the church in shadow, its tall spindly steeple topped with a trident lightning rod; macro shots of mottled pebbles; a lamppost in half lamppost light; a well-framed paint-peeling window frame; an empty park swing in high graphic contrast; hills covered in black clouds; and a tomb stone, its inscription weathered away. The pictures were all old, relics of the past that refused to fade; lifeless images saturated and dripping with life, forming red pools on the linoleum.

And so, avoiding the slanted icons with unconscious expertise, Winston boringly drank his black unsweetened coffee.

Winston walked down a street with no name. It had once been called Lambeth Close, but hooligans had stolen the name and thrown it in a rubbish bin, and nobody really noticed, and those who noticed, didn't care. He knocked on a numberless door in the nameless street, kicking the step as he waited.

"Hi Winnie." A Negro man appeared.

"Hello Brown," Winston said, and walked into the gloomy house. There was a girl in the kitchen, putting on her shoes.

"I've got mice," Brown said.

"That's nice. Any coffee going?"

"I'm off then," the girl said. Winston poured himself a chipped mug of old coffee.

"All right," Brown said, hardly bothering to look at her.

"I put a trap down last night and caught one."

"I see that," Winston said, glancing in the direction of the parting girl. The door slammed shut.

"Funny," Brown smiled. "I really caught one. 'Orrible little t'ing it was."

"You mean killed one."

"You have to kill 'em to catch 'em," Brown said, with his usual backwards logic. "What else am I supposed to do?"

"Nothing." Winston gulped down a mouthful of the bitter coffee. The kitchen table was covered in old books and papers and broken pencils and loose change and dirty cups, so Winston nursed the cup in his hands. They sat in silence a moment, Brown busying himself rolling a joint.

"You not working today?" Brown asked.

"It's Saturday."

"Oh. So what's happening?"

"I don't know. I thought I'd just hang out. I'm in one of my moods."

"You always in one of your moods. What you need is a woman."

"There's no such animal."

Brown licked the length of the joint, ritualistically, and then handed it to Winston.

"No thanks."

"I roll it for you, man."

"Sure. Just smoke it, Brown."

He struck a match, lit the joint, and puffed away.

"You know," Brown began, with a trickle of smoke slipping from his mouth, "you need to learn how to relax."

"You mean by getting stoned."

"Yeah. Get away from it all."

"I can go to Blackpool for that."

The high street was just around the corner from the street with no name. They sat in a small nearby park and watched the girls go by.

"Look at this piece," Brown said, watching the piece go by.

"I have to be back at two," he went on.

"How come?"

"Fuck, look at the tits on that." Brown watched the tits bounce along. Winston glanced up at the girl, not shyly, but regretfully, like a hungry child rubbing his nose against the baker's window, knowing that was as close as he could get. It was torment, Winston knew, but it was the only way to authenticate his life.

"I haven't had dumplings like that for a while," Brown said, and then added: "She looks like Cathy." Cathy was Winston's estranged wife.

"Don't talk to me about her." Winston never talked about her.

"Hey, look at this one." Another girl had caught his eye.

"Who was that girl at your place?" Winston asked.

"Another nut case. She was freaking out all over the place last night. I don't know what she was on." Brown shook his head.

"You remember that girl who overdosed in your place?" Winston asked, distantly.

"So?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking."

"You t'ink too much."

"Maybe."

"I wonder what happened to she?" Brown asked, for want of something else to say.

"She died," Winston said.

"She dead? How you know dat?"

"I went to the hospital the next day."

"You never tol' me dat."

"You never asked."

"How come you went to de hospital?"

"I don't know. I felt kind of responsible—in a way."

"Da's why you're always so moody. You's feeling responsible for everything. Sometimes t'ings just happen."

They sat in silence.

"How come you've got to be back?"

"Back? Oh, a delivery."

"A delivery!" Winston laughed.

"What so funny?"

"Nothing. You sound like a big business man."

"I am. Import and export." They laughed.

"Oh man, look at dat behind," Brown said. Sometimes the torment was too much; and Winston looked down at his shoes, kicked a stone.

"You should get out of it," Winston suggested.

"I am. When dis deal go down."

"I've heard that before."

"I mean it dis time. I wan' go home."

"To Barbados?"

"Where else?"

Winston knew Brown would never go home. Home would remain forever unreachable, and Winston knew all about unreachability.

Brown left for his delivery; and Winston took a solitary walk around the town—there and back to see how far it was—watching the girls, finally arriving back at the park. A girl was sitting on a bench reading a book, and Winston plonked himself down on the grass opposite. She had the look of a gypsy: her dress and blouse sheer, faded and floating; her hair black as night; her lips full and sensual. She noticed him, looked up from her book and stared. Winston became uncomfortable, sensing that the gypsy

girl had some gypsy way of knowing. Not just knowing, but knowing why. Knowing why he could only look. He turned away from her eyes, embarrassed. Occasionally he glanced back, fancied himself holding her hand, touching her black-as-night hair. And occasionally she also glanced back, and Winston would turn away. Finally, the gypsy girl closed her book and left him alone.

It was worse. Winston knew it was worse. He should not even look. Once again the torment was too much.

Winston was a dustbin man. He took away other people's rubbish. It was easy to take away other people's rubbish. Sometimes he even kept some of it, took it home with him and added it to his own. All his photograph frames, for example, were other people's rubbish.

It had been a hard Monday. The crushing gear on his favourite wagon had conked out, and the depot mechanic—who liked new machines because they rarely broke down—decided that the whole vehicle wasn't worth the scrap it was worth. Whether the dustbin wagon would be carted away by another dustbin wagon—well, nobody was prepared to say. With all the stoppages, Winston's six hour shift had taken nine—instead of the usual four, and it was late when he finally arrived home and climbed into the bath. As he lay, relaxing in the hot water, Winston decided he would eat out.

He checked for his keys on the way out, glanced around the room without seeing the cockeyed photographs, and slammed the door shut.

It was summer, the evening air warm; and Winston strolled down the road, hands sunk in his pockets, walking in no particular direction, passing several bustling restaurants on the way. And then he came to an Indian place that was almost empty, stepped inside, looked about shyly and found a table that was not in a

corner, but at least well out of the way. He glanced over the menu and then suddenly lost his appetite. The waitress was coming. She had the look of a gypsy about her. It was terrible. It was fear. The terrible fear had sent his appetite packing. As she drew closer, Winston wondered if she would say something—after all, they were acquainted—desperately hoping she would not.

“Can I take your order?” she asked, offering a smile that possibly meant recognition.

“Er, I’ll take a half of lager first . . .” Winston watched her disappear.

After the curry, Winston walked down to the street with no name. He knocked on the door, kicked the step, knocked again and then took a key from his pocket and let himself in. The house was dead quiet. On the table he found a small plastic bag of grass. Winston sat, opened the bag and rolled a joint. As he licked along its length, he heard the back door open.

“Oh, Winnie.” Brown had a girl dangling from his arm. She was within spitting distance of being ugly.

“Hello.”

“Rolling a spliff? What happened?”

“Nothing. I just felt like smoking.” He struck a match as Brown and the girl joined him at the table. Winston had never seen the girl before, but he knew there would be no introductions. Winston, Brown and the girl were all glad there would be no introductions. Winston took a quick puff to get the joint burning properly and then another, long and melodramatic, leaning back on the chair, balancing on its back legs, the smoke in his lungs, spreading his arms like a bird in flight.

“How did your delivery go?” Winston asked. Brown, with a cryptic expression of warning, motioned towards the girl with his eyes.

"Fine," he said.

He knew it would happen: instead of getting out of himself, getting away from it all, the smoke dragged Winston into himself, towards it all. Towards the empty, wasted, bitter years since his separation: the still life, nicely framed and leaning over to one side.

They handed the joint back and forth, without the use of a safety net.

All week, Winston had a craving for Indian food. The closest he actually came to eating any though, was a walk along side an Indian restaurant he knew, and a quick glance through the window. When the weekend arrived, it seemed easier to go inside. It seemed a weekendy thing to do. He sat at the same table, and when a different waitress came to serve him, Winston felt relieved and watched the gypsy girl from a safe distance.

Winston always ate a large breakfast on Sunday mornings, and drank several cups of black unsweetened coffee. And all around him, the pictures hung, a silent slanted reminder of things gone by, a cockeyed and wordless epitaph to the past. For a change, Winston allowed his eyes to cross lightly their angled path.

He took a sip of the black unsweetened coffee. He turned his attention to the grains in the bottom of his coffee cup. Dead silence.

During the week, Winston's craving for Indian food grew; and every evening he walked past the restaurant. On Wednesday he even went inside, but the gypsy girl was nowhere to be seen. During the rest of the week, Winston became an expert on Indian delicacies. The gypsy girl never reappeared.

Winston climbed naked from his bed. He walked towards the window, pulled the net curtains apart and looked out. It was a

quiet street where nothing ever happened. There was an old fashioned lamppost, directly opposite the window, the kind with a cross bar near the top and a slender curving swanlike neck. During the night, rather than light, the bulb outside seemed to cast shadows into the bedroom.

As Winston walked down the street with no name, he knew he would never see the gypsy girl again. He knocked on the numberless door, kicked the step, thought about never seeing the gypsy girl again and finally offered a half hearted smile to Brown.

"Come in," Brown said, glancing up and down the street furtively. "I won't be a minute." Winston knew there was a deal going on, and followed him into the kitchen.

"Half an ounce, you said," Brown mumbled.

"Yeah." It was a new customer. She had the look of a gypsy about her. Brown disappeared off to his secret stash—under the floorboards of the bathroom—and the gypsy girl looked up and saw Winston.

"Hi," she said with a smile.

"Hello," he answered, distracted, sitting down at the kitchen table. Winston was busy telling himself that it would do no harm to be polite. "Still working at that Indian place?" He said it three times in his head before it came out of his mouth.

"Nah. The tips were terrible." Winston felt guilty, and tried to remember how much he had left.

Brown returned with a small package wrapped in tin foil. The gypsy girl pulled a handful of bank notes from her pocket and the exchange was made.

"Thanks," she said.

"Want to stay for coffee?" Brown asked.

"Maybe next time," she said. Winston was positive she could

see what Brown was like, with the girls. It was more of her gypsy magic. As she turned towards the door, her eyes met Winston's. "See you around," she said, with a sympathetic smile.

When Brown closed the door behind her, he asked, "You know her?"

"Me? No. Why do you ask?"

"The way she look at you."

"How?"

"You know what I mean . . ."

"What's her name?"

"Cathy," Brown said.

"Another Cathy," Winston said, wryly.

"She a nice looking piece. You see that behind? I wouldn't mind some of it."

Winston seemed to drink his coffee faster than usual, and when the cup was half empty he stood up.

"I've got to go. I'll see you later on."

He walked up the street with no name, towards the small park. "She won't be there," he thought, almost hoped, and quickened his pace. Winston was busy telling himself that it would do no harm to talk. Just to talk. It would be nice to have another friend. Just a friend. As he came along side the lush lawn, he slowed, tried to appear casual, tried to look around without being too pointed. The gypsy girl was sitting on her bench, staring into space, and Winston suddenly felt scared, his heart beating like a drum, echoing inside his head. He wanted to turn back, but his feet pushed him on, and then it was too late. The gypsy girl looked up.

"Hi," she said. She was smiling, a warm welcome of a smile, a gypsy magic smile.

"Hello," Winston said. He was still intent on being casual, even with the drum beating warning signals. He knew she knew. He

knew she knew why.

"Looking for me?"

Winston had no idea what to say; his feet shuffled on towards her.

"Sit down," she said, and patted the bench beside her. "I'm Cathy."

"Brown told me."

"You asked him?"

"No, he just told me." A pause.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"What's your name?"

"Winston."

"Shall we shake hands, Winston-like grown-ups?" She was holding out her hand. Winston took it and knew he never wanted to let go. He was dreaming a lifetime of hand holding.

The gypsy girl had invited herself back to his house. She was looking at the paint, peeling on the living room window frame, as Winston unlocked the door with a terrible sense of foreboding. He was afraid. He just wanted to be her friend; just to hold her hand. What if she wanted to make love? That was the question now.

"So you know Brown?" Winston said, pushing the door open.

"Not really. A friend told me about him." They walked inside. "Do you live with someone?" she asked.

"No. By myself."

"How come you have such a big house, all for yourself?"

"I don't know," he lied.

And then they arrived in the living room.

"Wow," she said.

"What?"

"Your photos need straightening."

What did she mean by "straightening"?

"Did you take them?"

"A long time ago."

She walked around the room, looking at the cockeyed pictures. Winston watched her, at last admitting to himself that he wanted her.

"There're no people" she said, still perusing the pictures.

"I know."

"Don't you like people?"

"People don't like me." She had crossed the room, from the picture of the gravestone with its faded inscription, to Winston. She took hold of his arm, squeezed, looked into his eyes and said:

"I like you, Winston." And then she kissed him.

Winston was terrified. Fear was leaking from the pores of his skin. He fell onto the bed. Catherine stood, watching him with her gypsy magic eyes, then unfastened the buttons on her flimsy blouse. There was a terrible noise in the room. A terrible drumming noise. As each piece of clothing, piece by piece, fell to the floor, the terrible drumming noise grew louder. He watched like a condemned man, counting the seconds before his execution; and louder and louder grew the terrible drumming noise. Then she was naked and joined him on the bed.

"I never . . ." he began. Winston knew he had to tell her. He knew he could not go through with it. He swallowed, tried to look away, to avoid her magic gypsy eyes, but she had tangled her gaze in his. It was all a terrible mistake, and it was all his own fault. "I never made love to anyone since . . ." He faltered.

"Since?"

"My ex-wife." There, it was out. It was out.

"You were married?"

"I suppose so." How could he escape?

"When was it?"

"What?"

"The last time—with her."

How could he tell her? How could he expose himself? She would laugh. What could he say? If only the drumming would stop.

"Three years ago," he said. It was the truth. She was weaving gypsy magic, pulling out secrets that, once exposed to the air, seemed to dissolve into insignificance.

"Poor baby. I'll help you," she whispered in his ear, whispered so the ghosts would never hear. "Everything will be all right." She took his clenched fist, opened it, lowered her head to kiss gently his palm.

"Do you know how to read palms?" Winston asked. He was distraught; his thinking was confused, slanted.

"No," she said, "I only know how to write them."

Winston and Brown were sitting in the small park.

"I see you de other night," Brown said.

"Where?"

"Walking down de street."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"You were busy, man"

And then it dawned on Winston, and he answered with silence.

"Was it dat Cathy girl?"

"Yes."

"So you giving it her," Brown smiled. "It's about time," he continued. "It's good for de health."

"Let's change the subject," he said.

It had been one more failure amassed with a lifetime's failure.

"I'm sorry," he had said, grateful for the shadows cast by the lamppost outside.

"Don't worry about it."

"What am I supposed to do?" With the voice of self pity whispering whispering whispering, the incident magnified until its proportions were overwhelming.

"Just relax."

"You don't know what it's like," Winston had answered.

Catherine was beginning to know what it was like. Each failure sowed the seeds for the next failure, until it seemed that the whole affair was a vast field of defeat.

"Why do you bother with me?" he asked. They were in bed, with Winston again taking refuge in the shadows.

"Maybe because I like you."

"Maybe you do, but—"

"It's not as serious as you think. Really."

Silence.

"A lot of men have the same problem—and it always goes away."

"So you keep saying."

"Because it's true."

Winston was crying.

Winston and Catherine had spent the evening at the local pub.

"I'm a bit tipsy," she said. "I need something to sober me up."

"Like what?"

"A kiss."

They were sitting together on the couch, surrounded by the lopsided icons of things gone by; Winston leaned over and offered a short-lived kiss.

"More than that."

They embraced in earnest, Winston finally gasping, "I don't want to start anything. You know what'll happen."

"Have you had this . . . problem . . . before?" Catherine asked, moving her lips to kiss his neck.

"What? Oh. I was only with . . . No."

"Your ex-wife was your first?" Catherine asked without intonation, but Winston knew she was surprised. And why was she asking about . . . It was over. It was ancient history.

"It's ancient history." Winston said. "Can we change the subject?"

"What's her name?"

"Same as yours."

"Really?" She seemed to find this amusing, giving a girlish giggle. "Is she like me?"

"I hope not."

Catherine lifted her feet up onto the couch, resting her head on his chest.

"How long were you married?"

"You writing a book?"

"No," she said, looking up with a mischievous smile. "You are."

"How long?" she insisted.

"Too long—by the look of it. That's the church there." He motioned with his eyes to the topsy-turvy photograph on the wall. She knew which one without looking up, had seen them all a hundred times.

"You were married in a church?"

"It was my mother's idea. She kind of took charge. I was young—I was only eighteen; and she has this sneaky way of taking over. By the time you realise what's going on, it's too late. We were supposed to get married at the registry office. I didn't want it turning into a big deal."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I thought there'd be more pressure, afterwards, you know, to make the marriage work, if we made it into an event. I didn't want anyone around. I even thought of asking someone out in the corridor, a cleaning lady or something, to be the witness. That was the plan, anyway, until my mother found out.

"First she started inviting people—people she thought were my friends; and the whole thing got to be like a circus."

There was a pause, and then Winston said, "She was pregnant."

"Your mother?"

Winston half smiled.

"She was pregnant?"

"Yeah."

"You have a kid?" Catherine sat up.

"Is it so hard to believe? A boy. He's five now." Winston was having trouble speaking, the muscles in his throat twisting tight, wringing out tears. "I haven't seen him since he was two. My wedding was a circus, and I turned out to be the clown."

Catherine was weaving her gypsy magic, and the terrible words tumbled out.

With the summer over, and all the children back in school, the park was almost empty. Winston and Catherine walked passed the flower beds, where roses threw their paling petals to the wind.

"We went on holiday, one year, when Glen was two. A regular family holiday."

They passed an empty swing, dangling down with nothing to do.

"Where to?"

"St. Ives (I used to bring him here, to play), there was this really nice pebble beach, just down the road a bit, with big high cliffs protecting all the pebbles. We stayed there for two weeks. It seemed like . . . I don't know . . . It was just

really, really nice. A few days after we got back, she left—with Glen. No note, no nothing. So what was it really? Not just the holiday. What was everything?" Winston paused. "That's the hardest part—it strangles you—trying to figure out what it was all about. What did it all mean?"

"You have to find your own answers, Winston."

"Only I can't."

What did it all mean?

"I'm scared," Winston said. They were back at the house, lying on the bed.

"Of what?"

Winston looked at his lovely and sweet and understanding gypsy girl.

"Falling in love with you."

"It's too late to be scared," she said.

"You know what I used to think?"

"What?"

"I used to think most of my future was in my past."

"That must've been before you met me," she smiled.

No dustbin man had kissed like that before. It was the kind of kiss women read about in cheap novels: strong, sensuous, with no mention of tongues. And then, before Winston really knew what was happening, they began to make slow uncertain love; and if there were no earthquakes, there was at least a promise of future convulsions.

When they went downstairs, the gypsy girl said, "Oooh," brightly, her voice sparkling with the fizz of a dazzled child. "It's funny I never noticed earlier."

"What?" Winston was only half listening.

There was no big answer, after all. What did it all mean? Even the question seemed futile, even vain. Catherine had been right:

he was writing a book. The question was like trying to guess the meaning of an unfinished manuscript from a single solitary chapter.

The gypsy girl was looking at all the photographs, hanging on the walls, hanging even and straightforward, properly aligned, a compliment to the perpendicular, doing everything that photographs were supposed to do—and nothing else.

“You’ve been straightening your photos.”

Winston looked at her.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

## The Melted Man

### I

The morning was already warm. The morning was already warm and the milkman was coming, his electric float floating noiselessly down the empty street, with the council houses, on both sides, still sleeping. The bottles on the back rattled musically as it came to a halt. The milkman climbed from the open cab, grabbing two bottles of gold top and a carton of double cream. He carried the bottles expertly between the fingers of his left hand, the double cream resting in his palm, the other hand free to push open the garden gate. As he walked down the path, he admired the pink and white concrete slabs on either side. It was much better than the grass that used to be there. A sparrow in an adjacent bush watched and gave a clever and contemptuous whistle. The milkman reached the back door, turned the handle and let himself in.

"Margaret!" he called, plonking his wares on the table. After a moment a woman appeared from upstairs.

"'Ello, Mat," she said, unenthusiastically. "Is it that time already?" Margaret was wearing a pink polyester dressing gown with green flowery things, and underneath, a pink nylon night dress. Her feet were decorated with slippers, each featuring a large white pompom on the instep.

"It's late for a milkman," Mat said, smiling. He liked being a milkman. He especially liked his milkman uniform.

"It's early for me," Margaret said, dryly.

"Come 'ere, my turtle. Don't be cross." But it was Mat who went to his turtle. He was several inches shorter than Margaret, and was forced to stretch his neck to give her a peck on her

turtle cheek.

"Mat!" she protested, "not in the kitchen. It's not proper." The countless double cream possibilities were like adult books to illiterate children. It was neither the time nor the place. The time was after dark, with all the lights closed, and the place was the bedroom.

It was like a strange graveyard, hidden inside a large concave bowl, formed by surrounding hills. The hills, crowding around on all sides, were like patient monster spectators, waiting for something to happen. No burials here. This was an above-ground graveyard. The corpses were left on the grass, to rot away, to have their body parts stolen.

The sun, creeping up in the sky—intent on making the already hot morning hotter—had just reached the rim of the bowl, a barren monster hill to the east, and was now pointing its sharp rays at a decrepit house in the very centre of the sunken land.

The door opened and the Melted Man stepped out. He squinted into the sun, spat on the extremely crazy pavement, looked around at the corpses of old cars and vans and even a truck, spread out on the sickly grass about the house. His extrasensory dog, chained to a dead tree beside the kitchen window, was busy looking at the Melted Man, wagging his tale and whining.

"Shurup, Mut," he said, spitting again.

The Melted Man's face was melted. It looked like a wax mask left beside a fire, left to bubble and boil, and then moved aside to set solid. The horrific distorted face seemed timeless, only his unkempt hair, thinning and turning grey, provided any hint of age. A huge belly pushed against his oil-stained T-shirt, spilled out over the waist of his loose jeans. His arms were thick rolls of coagulated fat and untidy muscle, scarred with faint lines, as if they had once been tattooed with a red

hot poker. With seven fingers, the Melted Man ruffled up what was left of his hair, gave a yawn and spat again.

He turned laboriously, back towards the house; and then he noticed his extrasensory dog suddenly come to attention—ears pricked up, eyes watching the hidden distance—and stopped in mid melted stride. The Melted Man stood, listening, facing the mysterious mongrel, and then turned around again. A dirt road ran from the house, through the above-ground graveyard, between the eroding corpses, weaving its half mad way up the slope on the eastern side of the bowl, into the rising sun, and then slipping down out of sight. The Melted Man, suddenly tense, strained his eyes, watching the point where the road crossed the ridge of the hill, listening to a faint sound coming from nowhere. It was a car, and finally it reached the top of the hill and slipped down into the Melted Man's sunken domain. The Melted Man seemed to relax as he recognised the vehicle, as it slowed, creeping down between those rusting shells of cars and vans and even a small truck.

The driver opened the door, climbed out.

"Morning, Bill," the Melted Man said. There was a smile in the Melted Man's voice, though his melted face was unable to join in. The extrasensory dog took a sniff, yawned and sat back in the dusty shade of the dead tree.

"Hi," Bill said, without much enthusiasm. Bill was a scrawny man in his late twenties, balding, dressed in clothes a size too big for his narrow body.

"It's a hot one today," the Melted Man said. Bill stood in silence.

"I'm just seeing to some breakfast. Want some?"

"No," Bill began, as if reluctantly deciding to speak. "It's not a social call."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm here about the van."

"Oh. Come on in," the Melted Man said, beginning a slow rotation towards the house. "I'm doing some sausages." Reluctantly, Bill followed him inside.

From the door, a dark passage led to the kitchen, with a closed door half way down to the right. The passage was decorated with a bizarre collection of imponderables: a coat stand, providing the support for a wired human skeleton; an elephant's foot umbrella stand, minus the umbrellas; dangling from the ceiling a dusty chandelier with no bulbs; an old desk on one side, with a large pile of books, an empty goldfish bowl, a tattered manuscript, a nature magazine with a chimpanzee on the cover, and an ancient empty bottle of wine; and guarding the way into the kitchen, a stuffed, moth-eaten gorilla.

Bill walked down the corridor, oblivious to them all. In the kitchen, the Melted Man was stabbing sizzling sausages.

"Are you sure you don't want some?"

"No," Bill said. "I told you, I've come about the van."

"What about it?" Sizzle.

"I came over yesterday. You were out."

"Oh."

"I took a look underneath."

"So?"

"The frame's rusted to hell."

"Fuck, I told you it need's some work." Sizzle.

"It doesn't need work. It needs scrapping."

"Shit Bill, I've seen it. It needs some work, that's all."

"Come out and look—"

"I don't need to. I've fucking well seen it."

"Come and look. Show me the work it needs." Bill had turned and was edging into the dingy corridor. "Come on."

"I've Jesusin' seen it."

"Come on, Wayne. Come on out." The Melted Man turned off the gas and trailed out after Bill, around the side of the house, to a grey Volkswagen van.

"Take a look," he said. He was kneeling on the sickly grass, pointing at the frame underneath.

"Shit, I don't need to take a fuckin' god damn look. I know what it's like."

"So why are you trying to sell me it?"

"'Ow many times? It need's some bastardin' work." The Melted Man shook his melted head.

"I thought we were friends, Wayne."

"What the fuck . . ."

"I thought we were friends—after all these years—and then you try to sell me this piece of junk . . ."

"All it needs is some weldin'. That's all it needs. Shit."

"You know I'm leaving next week. I need something reliable."

"You're really going?" There was nothing in the Melted Man's voice to suggest his sorrow.

"I told you."

"You fink fings'll be better in Nazi-land? You think it's better over there?"

Silence.

"You don't even speak the fucking lingo."

"I'm leaving next week, Wayne. I need a van that will get me there."

"Well you might as well try 'n' fuck yourself up the arse as go over there. It's worse. It's worse than 'ere."

"I want my money back, Wayne."

"I want my money back Wayne," he mimicked. "You want your money back? I tell you somefink, an' you don't listen. It just needs some work."

"It's rusted."

"You fink I don't know my job? Is that what you fink? Jees. I've been fixing fuckin' cars since before you were fuckin' born. You weren't even a twinkle when I was fixing fuckin' cars. But you fink you know better, don't you? Like the fuckin' rest. They come 'ere with their fuckin' 'eeps of junk an' expect me to fix 'em up for fun. They don't know their Jesusin' dipsticks from their fuckin' dicks. You fink I do this shit for fun?"

"I just want my money back."

"You can 'ave your fuckin' money back. Go buy yourself another fuckin' van. Go off to fuckin' Nazi-land and fuck yourself. Do what the fuck you want. You know they killed my dad, don't you?"

"Yes."

"We fought a war against those Jew bastards, and you want to go live there. Go fuck the Nazi Jews, Bill. See if I care." The Melted Man shook his head and spat on the ground.

"Can I have my money?"

"The whole fuckin' world's going down the fuckin' drain. You can't run away from it, you know. You might fink you can, but you can't. It's every-fuckin' where. It's the fuckin' god damn fuckin' missing link."

"I don't want to hear about your missing link, Wayne."

"Course you don't want to 'ear. Who want's to 'ear? Nobody want's to bastardin' 'ear. I read about it, you know. I read about the missin' link. Well, it isn't missin' no more. We're friggin' turnin' into it."

"Can I have my money, Wayne?"

The Melted Man spat, turned his heavy body and slowly, silently, sadly walked back into the black mouth of the open doorway. He returned holding a roll of bank notes, held together with a thick elastic band.

"Here's your money," he said. Bill took it.

"Thanks," he said.

It was too bad. The Melted Man had really wanted to fix up the van for his friend. He had thought they would do it together. It would have been a long job.

Bill held out his hand. The Melted Man reached out with his own three fingered hand. It was not so much a shake as a grasp.

"Take care," Bill said.

"You too," the Melted Man said. Bill climbed in his car without looking back, and soon he was heading up the dirt road. The Melted Man watched the car disappear over the horizon. His eyes welled up and a tear trickled down his melted cheek.

"I'll be off then," Mat said, giving Margaret a peck on the cheek.

"Don't dilly-dally," she said, instead of goodbye. After the door closed, Margaret saw Mat had not cleared away the tea cups, and gave a disapprobatory tut. She put them in the sink herself, though not without another tut—which made her feel a good deal better. And then she marched upstairs to dress, struggled into her garish clothes, pulling on ugliness and years. And then she plucked her eyebrows and plastered on makeup with something that looked like a trowel.

Margaret sat drinking tea, waiting, smoking cigarettes, waiting, drinking tea, smoking cigarettes and growing steadily more impatient. She went into the living room, took an envelope from the sideboard and returned to her seat in the kitchen. She opened the envelope and examined—without actually reading—its contents. Two airline tickets. Margaret had never taken an aeroplane, and she was excited just looking at the papers with the tiny print. She put the tickets down and smoked a cigarette to relax. Mat finally returned five minutes before usual.

"What took you so long?" Margaret asked. Mat looked at the clock on the kitchen wall and remained silent. If marriage had

taught him anything, it was the value of silence.

"You'd better go bring down the luggage," she said. Mat clambered up the stairs. When he came out of the bedroom, burdened with a large heavy suitcase in each hand, and a small heavy suitcase under his arm, Margaret was standing at the foot of the stairs, ready to supervise the decent.

"Careful of the wallpaper," she said. The wallpaper featured tacky flowers in full bloom, balanced on the top of leafy stems. As Mat stumbled downwards, one of the cases bumped, and a shower of tacky petals appeared to tumble to the carpet.

"I said be careful," she said. When Mat reached the kitchen, he plonked the suitcases on the floor. Margaret looked at the cases and then back at Mat. He knew he had plonked them too hard. He had endangered the linoleum.

"Don't be so rough," she said, and in the same breath, "you'd better turn off the gas and water." Mat disappeared.

"Are you ready then?" she asked.

"I 'aven't changed," Mat apologised. He was still wearing his milkman uniform.

"It doesn't matter. You can change at my mother's." Because Margaret had not seen her mother in over two weeks, and because she lived in almost the same direction as the airport, but mainly because Margaret said it was a good idea, they were to spend the night there, and drive on to take the aeroplane early the next morning. "You know how she likes you in your uniform," Margaret concluded. Before Mat had chance to answer, she asked:

"'ave you got the tickets?"

"No, I'll get 'em now," he said, moving towards the living room. And then Margaret saw them on the table, picked them up and put them in her handbag.

"They're not here," Mat called after a moment. "I'm sure I put them on the sideboard."

"It's all right. I 'ave 'em," Margaret said. "I couldn't trust you with 'em, any road." Mat returned to the kitchen.

"Let's get off then," Mat's wife said, motioning with her eyes towards the cases.

Outside, humidity, heat and a strange almost tropical haze were on the increase, the clear sky becoming increasingly less obvious. As Mat carried the cases out to the car, a stray king of the jungle cat crossed his path and gave out an extremely clever and contemptuous meow. Admiring the cat, Mat loaded the luggage into the boot.

Soon they reached an old country road heading north. Though it was quicker, Margaret did not like Mat taking the motorway, insisting it was dangerous with all the cars going so fast.

"Just think," Margaret ordered, "this time tomorrow we'll be in Majorca." They had been driving an hour, were more than half way to her mother's; and as Mat thought about the same time next day, the car began making a clanking sound.

"What's that?" Margaret asked.

"It sounds like somethin' clankin'," Mat said.

"I know that."

"In the engine," he clarified.

"I know that as well. You'd better stop and 'ave a look."

Mat pulled over. He climbed out, opened the bonnet and peered at the mass of greasy metal things.

"What is it?" Margaret called, still sitting in her place. She had taken a small mirror from her hand bag and was examining her make-up.

"I don't know. Can you start up the engine?"

"Me? I don't know 'ow it goes."

Mat returned to the open door and gave the ignition key a twist. Margaret made sure she was looking the other way, so that she would continue not knowing how it goes.

With the engine running, the clanking clanking, Mat peered in and scratched his head. Finally he closed the bonnet and climbed back into the car.

"Well?"

"I don't know what it is," Mat admitted. "We'd better drive to a garage."

"Maybe you should walk. It might make it worse."

"It might be miles," Mat said, with the merest hint of irony in his voice.

"You don't need to talk like that," she chelped. "Go on then. Drive."

And so they clanked along the road a few miles until they came to Uxminster, a large village too cautious ever to become a small town.

"I hope there's a garage," Mat said.

"It wasn't so far," Margaret answered.

They came towards a petrol station with a small garage on one side. An old man, with the lid to a car's petrol tank still in his hand, was sorting out a driver's change. He looked up at the clanking sound of the approaching car, and with his attention divided, accidentally gave the driver an extra fifty pence. The driver, a fat man wearing a wig, first looked at his change, then at the old man, still smiling at the clanking car, and took the opportunity to drive speedily away, with the booty of fifty pence tightly grasped in his clammy hand.

"Sounds like you've got a problem," the old man said, as Mat rolled down the window.

"I know. Is there someone can look at it?"

"Well there would be, normally, but he's not in."

"When will he be back."

"Two weeks. He's on holiday. Off to Italy." The old man seemed to find this half amusing.

"Can you take a look?"

"Don't need to," the old man answered. The next thing he said sounded—at least to Mat—like: "It's probably a broken ringleshanter."

"What did he say?" Margaret asked.

"'E said he thinks it's the ringleshanter." Mat turned back to the old man. "Is there another garage somewhere?"

"Well there's one the other side of town." He paused. "But it's closed."

"Is there one open somewhere?"

"Not around here. Your best bet'd be up at Jones's; he fixes up old bangers like yours. I'm sure he can sort you out."

"Whereabouts is it?"

"Take that road straight through town," the old man motioned with his chin, "keep goin' about three mile, till you see a billboard with no picture on it. You go down a dirt road on the right, just after."

The old man, still smiling, watched the old car as it clanked away, out of the petrol station. And then he realised, with no recollection of how or why, that he was still holding a petrol tank cover. The fat man wearing a wig had driven all the way home before he realised what had happened. He had pillaged fifty pence. It cost fifty-one pence to drive back and collect the missing part.

The Melted Man had sat quietly for a while, quietly in the gloom of his kitchen, quietly listening to the solitary pumping of his heart. The front door was still open and the emptiness of the outside world was drifting in on the invisible breeze. The Melted Man was troubled with a strange idea that the whole world had gone away and had no plans to come back. And then he began to fry his sausages again. He stood, pushing them about the pan,

stabbing them, watching the skins wrinkle and the fat sizzle out. An image suddenly jumped into his head. The Melted Man forced out the image, and again there was only sizzling silence—and a world gone away.

“Are you sure this is the right way?” Margaret asked.

“I think so,” Mat said. They had passed the billboard with no picture, turned off the main road and were driving along a dirt track with fields on either side. Several birds were sitting on a scarecrow, watching as the car clanked along the track.

“I don’t think so,” Margaret said.

Along the dusty road they clanked. When they reached a steep incline, Margaret did not think even more so.

Meanwhile, an extrasensory dog was beginning to stir. He stood up, stiff, facing the hidden distance, growling quietly, bearing his teeth, and then barked. The Melted Man appeared in the black doorway.

As the old car climbed the hill, the clanking grew louder, almost as if it knew what was on the other side.

“We should turn back,” Margaret said. “I told you we were going the wrong way.” And then they reached the summit, and were presented with a panoramic view of the sunken bowl of land, with its decaying car corpses and the tumble-down house at the heart. The dog ran forward a few steps and began a vain attempt to bark off his head. The Melted Man stood in the dark doorway, watching the car descend the hill with a clank clank and a clankety clank, and was actually smiling a smileless smile of relief. And then the Melted Man looked at the dog and seemed to realise what was happening.

The extrasensory dog almost never barked. He liked people. But there he was, trying to bark off his head. The Melted Man glanced up at the approaching car, and then back at his dog. He

was trying to remember the last time the dog had barked.

"There's a bad dog," Margaret said.

"Don't worry," Mat said, busy worrying enough for the two of them.

The last time the extrasensory dog had barked. Actually, the extrasensory dog had only barked once before, a long time ago, when a hairy Pakistani woman had driven up for spare parts. The extrasensory dog was never wrong.

As the car came to a halt, the Melted Man was already disgusted.

Mat turned off the engine and sat looking at the dog.

"Get out then," Margaret said.

"Let's wait until someone comes out," he said. Neither of them had seen the Melted Man, lurking in the shadowy doorway.

"What do you . . ." Margaret began, but the Melted Man stepped out and her words turned into spit and quickly fell back down her throat.

"Hello," Mat said, rolling down the window, trying to pretend that the Melted Man was not really melted. Being a milkman had taught him the value of politeness. "Is the dog safe?" he asked with a feigned smile. The extrasensory dog, meanwhile, was rolling his eyes, frothing at the mouth, frenzied in his effort to bark off his head.

"What do you want?" the Melted Man asked.

"There's something wrong with the car," Mat said. "I think it's the ringleshanter."

"The ringleshanter?" The Melted Man smiled another of his smiles that no one could see. The extrasensory dog was never wrong. Even if they were white—they could be white, he supposed—he was never wrong.

"You'd better get out and show me," the Melted Man teased. A bizarre plan had spread through his head like a parasitic

fungus, joining vague ideas with uncertain notions and sending him dizzy with certainty. Just then, unhealthy looking twisted black clouds appeared on the horizon, moving unnoticed, steadily towards the sunken bowl.

Mat glanced at the crazed beast, turned to the Melted Man, opening his mouth to say something, closed it again and slowly pushed open the door. And now the dog really lost control. He actually jumped in the air and did a somersault with a half twist, barking all the way around; then strained on the chain, which held him only a few paws from where Mat stood, until he almost choked himself. Mat edged himself along the side of the car and lifted up the bonnet.

"Shurup, Mut," the Melted Man said, and immediately the extrasensory dog stopped his romping rage and walked backwards to the shade of the dead tree. The Melted Man peered in at the engine and whistled.

"It's bad," he said. "Your ringlechanter's fucked. It's completely fucked."

"What can you do?" Mat asked.

"I'll 'ave to put in a new one." The Melted Man turned to the house and walked away. As soon as he was inside, Margaret rolled down her window and whispered, "Did you see his face? What did he say?"

"It needs a new ringlechanter," Mat said, walking to her side of the car.

"'Ow much will it cost?"

"I don't know."

"You didn't ask?" Margaret was ready to be mad, but the Melted Man suddenly appeared and she fell instead into an uncomfortable silence.

"Fucking ringlechanter!" he was saying, shaking his head with contentment. For a split second Margaret and Mat thought it was

a ringleshanter he carried, but once the split second had joined several other split seconds, forming a complete second, they both knew it was no ringleshanter.

"Get out a the car," the Melted Man said, pointing the double-barrelled shot gun casually towards Margaret.

"What's wrong?" Mat managed to say. The Melted Man let loose a shot, high, towards the deleterious clouds that were now entirely over head, like a cap on the sunken bowl. The milkman jumped. The milkman's wife jumped and then rolled up the window.

"I fuckin' well said get out." Margaret then seemed to realise that a closed window offered paltry protection against zooming balls of blasted metal. Displaying a walloping presence of mind, Margaret reached for her handbag before climbing out. Mat took half a step towards Margaret. Margaret took half a step towards Mat. The Melted Man took half a step towards them both. It was like a religious dance, performed by people afraid they might make the wrong move.

"Gerin the 'ouse," the Melted Man invited, pointing the way with the end of the gun. Arms wrapped around each other, they stumbled towards the house, as if in a three-legged race with no chance of winning. They were afraid to go inside, stopping at the threshold, visibly shaking. The Melted Man came up behind and they both reluctantly turned around to face him. Even with the black hole of a doorway gobbling up the light, even with the dark clouds blocking out the sun, Mat and Margaret saw the Melted Man's eyes with terrible blinding close-up clarity. They were a wonderful and incongruous blue-green, like a glinting secret tropical sea; like the eyes of God gazing out from the face of the Devil.

"In," the Melted Man said, again pointing the way with his weapon. And so they stepped into that dark corridor, passing the strung up skeleton and the rest, on to the closed door half way

down.

"Open the fuckin door."

Mat pushed open the door, expecting to see the remains of a dozen starved milkmen on the other side. He was convinced the fat Melted Man was a kidnapper of milkmen. If only he had changed his milkman uniform and worn civilian clothes; but Mat was already seeing himself as a milkman martyr. The room they stepped into, however, was an ordinary living room. Well, ordinary for the Melted Man. Like the corridor, it contained another collection of objects wrenched from their context and left indecently without rapport: a kitchen sink leaning against the far wall; on the sideboard a pile of plastic spoons, bound by a thick rubber band; three light bulbs; a thermos flask; a half-dead potted plant; an old wooden metronome, over wound and refusing ever again to tap out time; on the coffee table, a frying pan with a broken handle; an empty box of matches; a tin of pink paint; two odd socks. And more.

The Melted Man, turning the gun sideways, pushed them across the room, as if herding sheep, over to a stairway. The steps groaned beneath the Melted Man's flabby magnitude. Now it was Margaret's turn for a flight of fearful fancy. They were going upstairs, to the bedroom, where the Melted Man would do terrible things to her with his melted body. What those terrible things might be, she had no idea. She only knew they would be terrible. And melted.

The corridor at the top of the stairs was of bare boards (coated only with dust and grime), and it too suffered under the Melted Man's bulk. Walking, still hand-in-hand, followed by that sound of creaking wood, afraid to look back in case they should glimpse those terribly lovely eyes, they passed two closed doors along the right wall, finally coming to a third at the very end.

"Open the door," the Melted Man said, sounding more relaxed.

The room was dark, dank and musty. On the left hand wall a window, robbed of its glass, had been boarded up with tightly fitting planks. There was a hole in the ceiling and another directly above, in the roof, both about three feet across. All about the opening, the ceiling was stained from rain, and a pile of plaster rotted on the floor beneath. And then, no sooner had they stepped inside than the door slammed shut and a key rattled in the lock. They both turned around and found the Melted Man gone.

## II

"What does he want?" Margaret asked, pulling herself to Mat and forcing tears into the breast pocket of his milkman jacket.

"I don't know . . ." Mat muttered.

For some time they remained in this clutching position, Margaret stopping her tears almost as soon as they had begun, and then sank to the floor and sat with their backs to the wall.

"He's mad," Margaret said, opening her handbag. "He's a mad man," she said, taking out the aeroplane tickets.

"Do you think we'll miss the plane?" she asked.

There was a sudden flash, a roar of thunder overhead, and then began a deluge, rain tumbling through the hole in the roof, like a waterfall, splashing onto the rotten boards below. The milkman and his wife hurried to the furthest corner of the room and sat in gloomy silence.

"He should fix the roof," Mat said, and the thunder roared again.

The Melted Man was sitting in the living room, picking his teeth with a match stick and feeling quite chuffed with himself. It would be a grand experiment. But there was something nagging

away behind the whole idea, an uneasy notion that the purpose had not yet been found.

The track out of the above-ground graveyard was already a stream of sickly mud, tumbling down towards the metal corpses: yellow brown fingers stretching out towards the house. The Melted Man's old car lurched upwards, the sound of its engine swallowed by the booming thunder and rattling rain, and then disappeared over the top.

Mat and Margaret sat still in their empty corner, unaware that they were alone in the house, expecting the Melted Man to appear at any moment—to do things.

It was not so bad in Uxminster. Most of the people were used to seeing the Melted Man, and they made sure they gave him hardly a second glance. It was for their own sakes as much as his.

Mat pushed open a shop door, setting off a dingle-dangling bell. The shop keeper, a moustached man with short stand to attention hair, looked up.

"Hell of a storm," he said, glancing at the Melted Man and then elsewhere. "Used to 'ave storms like that in India." He was an old soldier, and everything that happened in his daily life—the sale of a tin of beans, the delivery of bread, the beer he drank every evening in the pub next door, the women he watched, even the Melted Man's melted face—reminded him of some escapade of his soldiering days. "It's jungle weather that is," he commented.

"I need to go to the toilet," Margaret said.

"Oh," Mat said. "Can't you wait?"

"How can I wait? If I need to go, I need to go."

"We'll 'ave to call 'im . . ." Mat observed.

"No. I'm scared. If he comes . . ."

There was another crash of thunder.

"Did you see 'is eyes?" Margaret asked.

"Yeah."

"I never saw eyes like that. The colour would look nice in our bathroom. Do you think they make paint that colour?"

"I doubt it."

"I really need to go to the toilet."

"Shall I call 'im?" The question though was academic: there was the sudden jingle-jangle of a key in the lock. The door swung open and the Melted Man stood, unbudging, like a painting of insanity framed in the doorway, clutching in one hand the gun, in the other a very large bunch of bananas. He tossed the very large bunch of bananas to the corner where the milkman and his wife were crouched. Before they could gather any sense from the scene, the door had slammed shut and the lock clanked.

"I need to go to the toilet," Margaret remembered.

"My wife needs to go to the toilet!" Mat called out in a whisper. But the agony of the hall floor boards, after a brief pause, could be heard, crying further and further away. And then there was only the sound of the rain bouncing down outside, and the splashing of the waterfall into the room.

"He didn't hear you," Margaret said, vexed.

"He doesn't care," Mat answered.

Actually the Melted Man was shocked. He had completely overlooked the sewage problem. His carefully constructed plan was clearly not as carefully constructed as he had imagined. It was, in a sense, full of shit. When he arrived downstairs, the Melted Man sank into the couch and pondered. For a terrible time he pondered. And then he seemed to recall that somewhere about the house there was a potty: an enamel potty featuring the picture of a small boy having a wee. But then, if he gave them a potty he would have to empty it himself. Where was it though?

"At least we know he's not gonna kill us," Mat said.

"'Ow do you make that out?"

"The bananas. He wouldn't be feeding us if he was gonna murder us."

"Maybe he would," Margaret contended.

Meanwhile, the Melted Man was searching high and low. Where was that potty with the little boy having a wee? And then he saw it, in a cupboard under the sink, hidden behind a pile of plastic bags. He took out the potty and, as he looked at the little boy having a wee, remembered it had been his own potty. The little boy was him. Having a wee before . . . before . . . it had happened. Vague memories grew clear, sparkled with tears of nostalgia, tears of regret, tears of if only. No. Certainly not. He could never let them use his little boy having a wee potty. He took it into the living room, set it on the coffee table, between the empty box of matches and tin of pink paint.

This time, when the door opened, the Melted Man held the gun and a plastic bucket. He tossed the bucket into the room and, without further ado, closed and locked the door.

"He's mad," Margaret said. "First bananas and then a bucket."

"I think it's for you."

"What do you mean?"

"To go to the toilet." Margaret, who had her arm around Mat's waist, quickly withdrew it, as if the very idea somehow made him dirty.

"That? How can I use that? It can't be." Margaret sat, looking at the bucket, lying on its side in the middle of the empty floor, shocked and disgusted and wishing the Melted Man was less melted.

"Well?" she said, disconcerted. The sound of the rain and falling water, and thinking about not using the bucket, were all making matters worse. And Mat was being too quiet. He was always

too quiet. He was never any help.

"We have no choice," he muttered.

"We? It's me who has no choice. Oooh, I'm proper burstin'," she said.

"You'll have to use the bucket, dear."

"Oh my God. It so . . . it's so humiliating." It was a big word, and Margaret was surprised to hear herself say it. "Go away," she said to Mat. "Go away and turn away."

"Where can I go?"

"In the corner, over there." Mat walked over, passed the boarded up window, and stood like an ill-behaved schoolboy sent to face the corner. He tried to ignore the sounds as Margaret got to her feet, collecting the bucket and carrying it to the opposite corner, rustling her dress up and knickers down; as the urine tumbled into the plastic bucket; as she put her clothes back in order. It was only when Margaret had returned to her original place that she said, "All right, you can turn around." As Mat went to join her, he tried not to notice her face, red with embarrassment.

The afternoon had turned into early evening. Still it rained, though now with less intensity, and the thunder had not thundered for several hours. Mat and Margaret had made themselves more comfortable, Mat removing his milkman's jacket—though not his milkman's tie—upon which they now sat, and Margaret her high healed shoes. They were busy eating bananas.

"Is that all he's gonna give us?" Margaret asked.

"I don't know."

"What about somethin' to drink? You should shout and ask for somethin' to drink. I'm dying of thirst."

"He might get mad," Mat said. Margaret paused for thought.

"You said he didn't mean to kill us," Margaret, thinking herself very clever, remembered.

"I know, but . . ."

"What?"

"He might get mad. Why don't we just wait?"

"We'll die of waiting," she said.

The Melted Man was also doing some eating, tucking into a large plate of fish and chips with a bottle of stout to wash it down. He was having a lovely time, washing it down. Everywhere the air was stagnant and stifling, creeping through the open doorway, down the corridor, clinging to the Melted Man, enveloping his fat melted body, drawing out sweat until his clothes were sodden.

Satiated, the Melted Man strolled out and plonked himself down on a shredded car seat, beneath the shelter of the porch, to watch the evening die. Rain. He spat, and the spittle joined the rain and fell to the ground. The Melted Man, taking a half smoked cigar from the pocket of his T-shirt, struck a match against the stone wall and puffed away. He turned towards the dog, huddled in his kennel, gnawing on the bony remains of his own meal. The animal looked up with wide extrasensory eyes and wagged his tail half heartedly. He was a good dog, the Melted Man thought.

The ground surrounding the house was becoming waterlogged. Puddles were beginning to form where normally no puddles would form; puddles in puddle places, turning into pools. Streams were beginning to trickle down the steep slopes of the bowl, making their muddy way towards the car corpses, forming new pools, closing in on the house. There was clearly a danger of flooding, though to this the Melted Man remained gloriously oblivious, taking pleasure in the force and longevity of the downpour.

The Melted Man picked out shreds of cigar from his mouth and flicked them away. He looked back at the dog, who now dropped the bone from his mouth, stood to stretch, and began lapping up

yellow rusty rain water from a puddle. Only now did the Melted Man realise his captives would also need something to drink. Leaving the door ajar, the Melted Man walked down the corridor and into the kitchen, where he found a large plastic bowl and filled it with water. He would have preferred to use a dog bowl, but the dog was using it.

When the Melted Man opened the door, Mat and Margaret had finished eating and had piled up the banana skins neatly in the corner, beside the bucket of urine. He placed the bowl brusquely on the floor and was gone again without a word. Mat stood and walked over to the bowl.

"What is it?" Margaret asked.

"Water."

"Water? Are we supposed to drink from that? Maybe it's for washing," she imagined.

"Well what do we drink then? You think he's gonna bring us some wine later?"

"Don't you answer me back like that!" Margaret snapped.

"Sorry . . ." Mat muttered, wondering if bananas required red, white or rosé.

"And why doesn't he speak?" Margaret asked, exasperated.

"What do you want him to say?"

"I want him to tell us what he's doing. Why he's keeping us here like this. What does he want?" Margaret was becoming hysterical. She needed tender words of hope. She needed lies.

"Maybe he wants to kill us." Mat had already forgotten his banana proof. "That's what I think." Margaret, who had also already forgotten, began to cry. Mat went back to sit beside her, and she pulled herself into his chest for comfort. Mat felt proud. He felt like a milkman. In control. Dependable. Essential.

"Do you want a drink," Mat asked, after the tear spilling was

over.

"Yes, please," Margaret said, with a final sob. Mat fetched the bowl over, spilling hardly drop until he reached his wife, when half of it splashed down her polyester dress.

"Bugger," Margaret blurted. Now there was a noteworthy word. A rare word. "Look at the state of me!" she continued. "I'm soaking wet; you clumsy oaf." But Mat was hardly listening, captivated by the sight of the wet dress, clinging to her body, revealing the outline of her brassière and the shape of her breasts. He was a milkman and was feeling milkman urges.

"What're you doing?" Margaret gasped. Mat had set about her, was grabbing her breasts and sinking his teeth into her neck. "Mat!" she cried. "Stop it. Stop it." Mat pressed on: a milkman lost in milkman fantasies. "Stop it!" she screamed, pushing him away with all her force. Mat fell back onto the floor. The connection between milkman and milkman fantasy was broken, and now a silent shame came creeping about.

"Sorry," he muttered. "It's just that . . ."

"What the hell were you doing?" she gasped, using another of those rare words. "Don't you ever do that again. What if he came?"

The last light was ebbing away, the evening's darkness beginning to tumble through the hole in the roof and fill up the empty room. Margaret, with her dress still wet, was squinting at the aeroplane tickets.

"Five o'clock tomorrow," she said, finally condescending to speak to her husband. "I hope we don't miss it."

The night was long. No bed, no covers, no pillows, no comfort: Mat and Margaret struggled to find sleep. Once, in the early hours, as the rain outside began to abate, Mat moved across the inches of space and pushed his body against Margaret's body. Margaret became rigid and he moved away again.

Morning light began to tumble into the room.

"I need some tea," Margaret said, sitting up with her back against the wall.

"There's water," Mat reminded her.

"I need tea."

And then there came a sound from outside the house. A hellish call, a cry of, "No", that seemed like the answer to something that was not a question.

"What was that?" Margaret asked, wrought with apprehension.

"Must be him," Mat said.

"It sounded like an animal."

At seven thirty, the Melted Man had climbed from his grimy bed, splashed his grimy melted face with cold water and put on the kettle. He took out a sack of dog food from the pantry, rummaged inside for a large morsel and plopped it into his mouth. Crunch crunch: he gobbled as he carried the sack to the door. Stepping out, the Melted Man glanced upwards to a sky still laden with low grimy hanging clouds, churning themselves inside-out. Humidity hung in the air like droplets of blood on a butcher's counter.

The Melted Man was surprised to see Mut still asleep.

"Come on, Mut. Wake up." The Melted Man filled up the bowl with dog food. Still Mut refused to move, stretched out inside his kennel, his eyes closed.

"Come on Mut," the Melted Man said, stroking the dog to wake him. "Breakfast time." Mut's body was stiff to the touch. Fear grew in the Melted Man's heart and was pumped down his veins to all four corners of his melted body.

"Wake up, Mut. Wake up." The Melted Man, falling to his knees, shook his pet. "Mut. Mut." The fear had reached his vocal cords and was twisting them, wringing out strange gasping sounds. The Melted Man, pushing his hand under the dog's muzzle, lifted the

lifeless head. Now there could be no doubt. With tears dripping down his melted cheeks, the Melted Man gave out a strangulated cry of, "No," which echoed about the concave land, bouncing from one hillside to another to another, until, dizzy, it disappeared into silence. The Melted Man gently lowered Mut's head. Dead.

To the Melted Man, it seemed as if the whole of Mut's life had been preparatory: the hairy Pakistani woman, years ago, had awakened his special power; and now, with one glorious barking-his-head-off act, it was used up. Mut had revealed the milkman and his wife. His task was done.

The Melted Man, with a shovel in one hand, lifted Mut and carried him behind the house, through puddles and mud, up the hill and out of the sunken enclave. Far away, beside a gurgling beck, he lay the dog to rest. Wiping the tears from his face with grimy hands, the Melted Man returned to his hidden domain.

It was almost lunch time. There were no bananas left. The Melted Man had not once shown his melted face.

"He's forgotten all about us," Margaret said, pacing back and forth. "And if he doesn't let us go now, we'll miss the plane for sure." Mat remained silent, sitting on the floor and picking his finger nails.

"Well?!"

"What?" Mat asked, apologetically.

"You'd better call 'im. Tell 'im we've got to go."

"Do you think I should?" he asked, obviously thinking he should not.

"Yes, I bloody well do." Margaret was becoming a habitual user of rare words.

Mat rose, walked to the door and called, "Hello." Silence. "Hello," he called again. "Hello, down there." And then the sound of heavy feet came stomping up the stairs, along the corridor. Mat, by this time, had moved away from the door and

was standing at the wall, beside the boarded up window. Clink. The door opened. The Melted Man was without his big gun, and Mat nursed hopeful expectations. But there he stood, framed in the doorway, silently staring at one and then the other.

"Hello," Mat said.

"Hello," Margaret said. Still, the Melted Man stood in silence.

"You see," Mat began, "we've got these plane tickets. We're going to Spain . . ." A short pause. ". . . and our plane leaves at five o'clock."

"Looks like you'll be missing the fuckin' thing, then," the Melted Man said, with no trace in his voice of the smile that was nowhere to be seen on his melted face.

"But what do you want?" Margaret asked.

"Want? What makes you think I want somefink?"

"Why are you keeping us here?"

"I'm helping you, aren't I. I'm like your god damn guidance counsellor. Get it? I'm finking of your future. Now shut the fuck up," he said, reaching for the door handle.

"We don't want help. We want to go!" Margaret called, as the door slammed closed. "And we need more bananas!" she called.

"What do you mean we need more bananas?" Mat asked his better half.

"Eh? I meant food. I meant we need more food." Again, a note of hysteria arose in her voice. Mat took her in his arms and said, "There, there."

Almost at once, with Mat still muttering the same "there, there," as if he really knew where, and was not just pretending, the door opened again. The Melted Man had changed his mind, after all. He was sorry. He didn't really want them to miss the aeroplane. They should hurry along. He'd already fixed the car. Mat and Margaret both looked up, eager to hear the good news.

The Melted Man threw another bunch of bananas onto the floor and closed the door.

"You're bananas," Mat said.

"It must be five," Margaret said. "About."

"Tea time already?"

"The aeroplane'll be taking off." She was clutching the tickets, crumpling them in her clenched fist, almost shaking with anger. "Well that's it. We've missed it. We've missed it 'aven't we? I could kill 'im. I could ruddy well throttle 'im." Margaret bared her teeth and growled. And then, in a more doleful voice: "All I wanted was to go on 'oliday." It was like Christmas morning, with all the presents stolen.

As they munched away on a banana each, the house, the whole world was in complete silence.

"I was thinking . . ." Mat began.

"What?"

"When it gets dark, maybe I could lift you up to the 'ole there."

"What for?" Margaret seemed hardly to be listening. The aeroplane had gone without them, and she had resigned herself to hopelessness.

"You could get out onto the roof, climb down the drain pipe and go get help."

"Climb down the drain pipe?" Now she was listening. "What do you think I am, a monkey?"

"It's our only chance."

"Why don't you do it?"

"You're not strong enough to lift me up."

"You mean you're too 'eavy. I told you ages ago you were gettin' fat, but you never listen. I don't know why I waste my breath." Mat chewed on his banana for a few moments.

"Do you want to try?" Mat asked, timidly.

"We'll see."

Gradually the darkness descended, through the hole and into the room.

"I wonder what he meant when he said he was our . . . what was it he said?"

"Guidance counsellor," Mat answered.

"That's it. I wonder what he meant?"

"He's crazy. He doesn't mean nothin'."

What time was it? The darkness had robbed them of any sense of interval, and there was no way of knowing. There was only empty, wordless, eventless existence.

And then, unexpectedly, the Melted Man came in, threw a blanket over to them, and was gone.

"I bet he's going to bed," Mat said.

Something that might be time, but seemed more like heavy chains, dragged silently on.

"He must be asleep now," Mat broke the monotony. Margaret looked up without answering.

"Do you want to try?"

"Try what?"

"Climbing out."

"I could fall."

"Do you want to try?"

"I could fall."

"Try to lift me up then."

They stood directly under the hole in the roof. Mat glanced up, and saw it was at least nine feet to the rafters.

"Cup your hands," Mat said.

"How?"

"Lock your fingers together—like this," he demonstrated. Mat put his foot in her hands and held onto her shoulders to

balance. "Are you ready?" he asked.

"I suppose," she grumbled. Again, Mat looked up at the hole and then pushed himself upwards, using her hands like a step. He was seven inches above the ground when her hands fell apart and he tumbled down.

"I can't do it," she snivelled. Mat breathed a lengthy sigh.

"Well do you want to try?" he asked.

"All right. All right, I'll try. Don't keep going on."

With Margaret's foot in his hands, Mat counted, "One two three," and hoisted her up. She reached for the exposed rafters and caught hold.

"Pull," he said, pushing upwards until half her body was inside the rent. Margaret kicked with her free foot and dealt him a blow to the nose. "Get your leg over the beam," he said. A moment later she was sitting astride the wooden rafter, her feet dangling down on either side.

"I can see outside," she whispered, managing to peep over the edge of the roof.

"Can you get onto the roof?"

"I don't know."

"Can you?"

Can you, can you, can you? He had no right asking her. This was his job: a man's job.

Margaret, tense with fear, took hold of the moss covered slates around the edge of the hole and carefully stood up on the wooden girder. The roof, sloping up and down from her waist, was steep, the black slates still shiny from the rain. A warm humid breeze touched her hair; and it seemed, as she looked out to the ground and into the night time distance, that freedom was far away. Margaret watched herself climb onto the roof, slip and tumble over the edge. Dead on the ground, her body broken.

"I can't do it," she said. "It's too 'ard."

Mat, going against a lifetime's tradition, had an idea.

"Wait a minute," he said, taking the blanket. "Catch this." Carefully, Margaret sat once again astride the beam. Mat threw the blanket and she caught hold.

"Tie it to the wood," Mat said.

"What for?"

"Just tie it," Mat answered, petulantly.

"Don't you answer me like that," Margaret said.

"If you tie it, I can climb up," he explained. That was better. Margaret tied the blanket.

"Is it tight?"

"It's as tight as I can do."

"Move over then," he said, and began to climb. Mat had always liked the ropes in his elementary school's gymnasium, and he ascended quickly, easily.

"I want to get down," Margaret said, as Mat came along side.

"Go on then," he answered. Margaret climbed down as if she also had liked the ropes in her elementary school's gymnasium.

And now Mat stood up and looked at the lightless outside world. It was true: the roof was steep. But there was no turning back—not with Margaret down there, watching, expecting him to do his milkman duty: to aid a damsel in distress. So Mat struggled to climb out, sending down, as he did so, a shower of broken slates from about the edge of the hole.

"Be careful," Margaret chelped, "you nearly 'it me."

Mat though had already escaped her admonishment, out on the roof, where the only sound was a whispering wind. Carefully, Mat sat and slithered down the roof on his hind quarters, bracing himself with the flat of his hands on the slimy slates; his misgivings increasing as he reached the gutter along the edge of the roof. From there he could see the ground, which looked like normal ground, except it was much further away. Slowly he moved,

sideways, his feet resting on the very edge of the roof, towards the corner and the drainpipe, with its elegant twisted neck. And then, only a few slithers away from his goal, a slate was pushed from its position by Mat's size eight shoe. It fell to the floor, crashing into at least five pieces on the crazy pavement. Mat stopped dead still, his heart pumping madly, and then moved away from the edge of the roof and lay backwards, trying his best to be something thin and unnoticeable.

Certainly for more than five minutes, probably for less than one hour, Mat maintained his thin unnoticeable position, listening for any indication that the Melted Man had been disturbed. Nothing happened. Very slowly, with great attention to detail, nothing happened. It was time to move again.

There it was: the drainpipe with the elegant twisted neck. Mat lined himself up, turned onto his stomach and moved down the roof. His feet dangled, his legs dangled, over the edge he dangled. There soon came a decisive moment. It was impossible to wrap his feet around the drainpipe without dangling over a few more inches, but to dangle further seemed to mean leaving the roof behind. Dangle he did, and at the moment Mat felt himself lose the roof, his feet found the pipe and guided his fall. His hands grabbed the edge of the gutter, which moaned and shuddered under his weight. Next he was holding the drainpipe, gradually lowering himself to the ground.

Mat was smiling during the last two feet of the decent.

So was the Melted Man. He had heard the slate fall, sneaked out and watched the whole thing from behind Mat's car.

"That was very good," the Melted Man said. Mat span around—almost spinning too far in his shock—and saw the Melted Man standing casually with the shot gun hanging limply under his arm. "I should've known you'd be a good climber." Mat, of course, could not see the smile on the Melted Man's melted face,

though the amusement in his voice was clear. "I'll make a monkey of you yet."

### III

"What do you mean?" Mat babbled. "Why won't you let us go?"

The Melted Man came out from behind the car; his melted face made less appalling by the mask of darkness.

"Let you go? I'd rather let go of my fuckin' sanity," he quipped.

"But what do you want?"

"You don't know?" The Melted Man seemed genuinely surprised. "I want to watch you change. What the fuck else?"

"Change into what?"

"Into what?" And now the Melted Man actually began to laugh, a strange quiet short lived laugh, as if he was not really sure how it was done. "I should've known you'd be a bit bleedin' slow.

"You remember my dog?"

"Yes," Mat said, involuntarily looking around for the beast.

"Don't worry. 'E's dead."

"Oh."

"'E 'ad this special power, that dog did. 'E could

spot your kind like mad. 'E was the one that found you out see? 'E knew what you was. An' then 'e died."

"What are we?"

The Melted Man breathed another short laugh and shook his head. "You're the god damn mother fuckin' missin' link, that's what you are. I'm gonna watch you change into monkeys, an' then I'll keep you for pets." And now, as the words tumbled from his mouth, as his intentions were for the first time verbalised, the whole plan became well defined: the boundaries sharpened, the vagueness vanished, everything seemed to make perfect purposeful sense.

"Now get into the 'ouse," he said, raising the gun and pointing it towards the door.

"'E said 'e wants to watch us turn into monkeys," Mat explained to Margaret. The Melted Man had cut the blanket down from the rafter and taken it away.

"'E's mad."

"'E said we're the missing link."

"What's that when it's at home?"

"I don't know."

The next morning, Mat and Margaret heard strange clinking clanking sounds, coming from outside and downstairs.

"What do you think 'e's doin'?" Margaret asked.

"I don't know."

Clink. Clank.

"I need to do a wee," Margaret said. Mat knew the ritual. He walked to the far corner of the room and stood facing the wall.

There were plenty of bananas and water.

Clink. Clank.

The metallic clinking clanking noise continued all through the afternoon, like the ticking of a deranged mechanical clock, sometimes stopping for lengthy periods, then clinking clanking rapidly as if to make up for lost time.

Later the timeless silence returned: the chains dragging along the featureless floor of unchanging existence, moving slowly, imperceptibly from nowhere to nowhere else.

"How many words can you think of that mean 'mad'?" Mat asked.

"Eh?"

"Like crazy," Mat said. They both sat, trying for a few moments to think of other words.

"I hate those kind a games," Margaret said.

"Me too," Mat agreed.

Darkness began to seep into the room.

"I'm sick of bananas," Margaret said. "Even monkeys don't just eat bananas. We should tell 'im. Even monkeys don't just eat bananas."

When the Melted Man arrived, the following morning, to empty the toilet bucket and bring them more bananas

and water, Margaret nudged her husband.

"We can't live on bananas," Mat said.

"Oh no?" the Melted Man asked, surprised.

"Even monkeys don't just eat bananas," Margaret said.

And then the Melted Man was gone.

Soon after, from downstairs, came the growling of an engine.

"What the devil's that?" Margaret asked.

"It's an engine," Mat said.

It growled on; and then a new sound was added: a high pitched hiss hiss hissing, as if the machine beast was spitting sparks.

All day long, interspersed with clink clanking, the growling and hissing growled and hissed. The Melted Man was up to no good. Mat and Margaret were sure he was up to no good.

The humidity dwindled, and in the early evening a sudden shaft of sunlight tumbled through the hole like a streak of lead.

The Melted Man was sitting outside on the shredded car seat, smoking his cigar and watching the clouds drifting away. From the floor, beside the shredded car seat, he took a nature magazine with a chimpanzee on the cover. He flicked through the pages, passing a short article concerning the missing link—the source of his own melted theory—found his place and began to read. It was hard work. The Melted Man was no good at

reading, and reading was not good at the Melted Man. It was not something he liked to do too often. But there it was. Incredulous, the Melted Man gazed upon a paragraph which clearly stated that chimpanzees do not eat only bananas. Well, what about that. A revelation. And it all made sense. Even so, he would leave them on bananas for a while longer.

During what might have been the afternoon of the next day, the Melted Man came into the room.

"Come on out," the Melted Man said, motioning towards the corridor. Mat and Margaret stood up and walked through the door way.

"What do you want?" Mat asked, afraid to believe that they were to be set free.

"You'll bleedin' see," he said, in a friendly tone.

Down the corridor, down the steps and into the living room. The Melted Man had been doing some decorating. All the furniture had been moved arbitrarily to the edges of the room. In its centre now stood a large cage, eight feet tall, welded from odd scraps of car metal, a few fence railings, a great number of car exhaust pipes and enclosed on top with steel cable, strung crisscrossing one another. One side of the cage featured the frame and door of an oven, with a chain passing through the handle, twisted about one of the bars and fixed with a padlock. Another side was not finished: a space remained at the corner.

"Get on in," the Melted Man said, pointing to the gap with the barrel of his gun. As Mat and Margaret squeezed in, the Melted Man turned on an electric welding torch. The motor growled and the nozzle began to spit hissing sparks as the last two exhaust pipes were fixed in place.

"It's your new home," the Melted Man said, turning off the device. "Do you like it?"

#### IV

Now that Mat and Margaret were downstairs, the chains dragged more easily, though the possibility of release seemed, like anything far away, hardly to exist. The couple amused themselves watching the comings and goings of the Melted Man, and listened to the tinkering sounds of his tinkering with the cars outside.

"Pass me the fuckin' bucket," the Melted Man said. He unlocked the padlock on the cage, removed the chain and pulled open the oven door, which served as a hatchway. Mat passed the bucket through.

"You do some fuckin' stinkin' shit. Jesus," The Melted Man said, taking the bucket. "Just fuckin' look at it, you mother fuckin' animals."

There was something wrong. Not the swearing. Swearing was like breathing to the Melted Man; but there was a tenseness to his voice that they had never heard before.

"I don't know why the fuck I keep you, I really fuckin' don't." He turned away with the bucket, muttering, "Fuckin' shit. Holy fuckin' shit."

"What's wrong with 'im?" Margaret said.

"I don't know."

When the Melted Man returned with the emptied bucket, rather than pass it to them, as he usually did, he pulled open the hatchway and threw it inside. The chain clanked as he wound it back in place.

"They murdered my father you know," the Melted Man said; clicking shut the padlock. "The German Jew bastards. Do you know that? The fuckin' Nazi Jew bastards."

"Sorry," Margaret said.

"Don't give me none of your sorry bullshit. I don't need your sorry bullshit."

When the Melted Man had left the room, Margaret whispered, "What's 'e on about?" And then they heard a car engine start up.

"He's gone," Mat said, the sound receding until only silence remained.

"I hope 'e's gone to get some food. I'm sick to death of bananas."

But Mat was not thinking of bananas. Placing his arm about his wife's shoulder, he pushed his lips to hers.

"He might come back," Margaret said, weakly.

"You know he won't," Mat whispered, pushing his tongue into her mouth.

As Margaret shed her clothes, dropping them untidily to the floor, years fell with them. So there she stood: naked, pathetically covering her pubic hairs, waiting for Mat to take off his soiled uniform. As a concession to modesty, he kept his socks.

They were both more excited than usual; even so, it was almost as if they made love without actually having sex. Once, Margaret almost said, "Ooh," but managed to stop herself before it came out.

The city was ten miles beyond Uxminster. Normally, the Melted Man went into the city with Bill. For years they had always gone together; but now, with a sense of loathing and even fear, he drove alone. The Melted Man had spent the last week repairing Mat's car, had changed the licence plate, and was now towing it to an unscrupulous dealer who was by no means a friend, but was at least used to his melted face.

The Melted Man pulled over into the dealer's lot. He opened the door and climbed out. As he walked over to the office, he knew passers by were staring at him, pointing at him, turning away from him, pointing, hurrying away, pointing, hurrying away pointing, pointing. All eyes were on him or off him. The Melted Man walked as quickly as he could, but quickly was never quite quick enough. The Melted Man felt like a child molester being judged by a jury of parents.

Finally he entered the hut-like office.

A shifty fellow, with a bulging eyes that looked in two directions at the same time, glanced up from a pile of papers on his desk: "Hello, Wayne."

"Yeah," the Melted Man answered.

"Where's Bill?"

"He's not here. He's off in Germany."

"Germany eh?" he said, trying to sound interested.

"Got somethin' for me?"

"What the fuck else would I be doin' 'ere?" the Melted Man chelped.

"Right. Let's see it then." He stood and they walked together, out into the world of eyes and fingers.

"Is it 'ot?"

"Yeah. It's 'ot."

"'Ow's the engine?"

"You know I don't bring you no shit. It's all fixed up."

The dealer kicked the front tyre in time tested ceremony. "I can give you a thou'." He knew there was no dealing with the Melted Man. Either he offered a reasonable price straight away, or there would be no sale.

"Okay," the Melted Man said.

"I need a change of clothes," Margaret said as she dressed. "These are startin' to smell. You should ask 'im."

"Why me?"

Margaret turned and stared at Mat. He was about to acquiesce, but seemed to think the worse of it, and instead returned her stare.

"Don't you look at me like that," she said. But Mat did look at her like that.

"If you want something, you damn well ask," Mat said. Margaret was shocked. It was not like Mat to stare and answer back. She turned away and continued to dress, finally saying:

"In any case, he wouldn't give me any."

It was evening, and the Melted Man was sitting in his faded armchair. He had left his bad humour in the city, and was back to his usual self. Margaret, sensing the return to normality, collected her courage and said:

"We need some clean clothes."

"That's a good one," he said, looking up and almost laughing. "Monkeys don't need no clean clothes. Monkeys don't need any kind a clothes."

"We're not monkeys," Margaret said.

"Not yet you ain't," the Melted Man answered.

He was remembering the hairy Pakistani woman, imagining the gradual change: dragging humankind back to another kind. By now she had probably reverted to her natural form. Her family probably kept her locked indoors, so the neighbours would never

know.

The Melted Man had retired to bed. Mat and Margaret were lying on the carpeted floor of their cage, moonlight bleeding through the window.

"'E really thinks we're gonna change into monkeys or somethin'."

"I know," Mat said, scratching his half grown beard.

Mat and Margaret were becoming emaciated. Their eyes were sunk in great brown ringed pits; their limbs dangled like knotted string. The monotonous diet of bananas and water was taking its toll, sapping their strength, draining their will to live.

"I've brought you a special treat for tea," the Melted man said, brandishing a plastic margarine container with its lid in place. He unlocked the hatchway. "Here," he said, passing the container to Margaret, who forced herself to her knees and reached out to take it. She looked at the container, blankly, as if not quite understanding its meaning.

"Food," Mat said. Their bodies had rejected bananas, refused to have anything more to do with bananas, and it had been several days since they had eaten.

And now, the idea of "food" returned like a lost memory, saliva gushed about their mouths like a flooding Niagara Falls of anticipation. "Yum, yum," they both thought. When Margaret opened the lid, she screamed and dropped the container to the floor. Its contents spilled out.

"You're mad," Mat said to the Melted Man, using his last reserves of strength to move and console his wife. "We can't eat that."

"Humph," breathed the Melted Man. "Please yourselves." And out he walked.

Margaret was sobbing. She had moved over to the corner of the

cage, as far away as possible from the creeping and crawling contents of the margarine container.

"Get rid of them," Margaret cried. Kneeling down, Mat began to pick up the assortment of tangled worms and caterpillars, carefully placing them back in the container, and noticing how juicy some of the worms looked.

"He's washed them," Mat said.

Margaret often dozed in the afternoon. When he was certain she slept, Mat opened the plastic tub and looked indecisively at the creepy-crawlers. He picked up the nicest looking worm, felt it wriggle between his fingers, felt the texture of its crease-ringed skin, and quickly—giving himself no time for thought—popped it into his mouth, chewed at double speed and swallowed. The taste hung in his mouth. Actually, it was not too bad. Actually, it was very good. But what about the caterpillars? What about the yummy looking caterpillars? Mat took one in the palm of his hand, closed the hand, making a fist, squashing the creature to death, and then popped it into his mouth. This time his mastication was less hurried, allowing the sweet flavour to fill his mouth before swallowing.

Margaret awoke and saw mat popping creepy-crawlers like other people pop popcorn, munching away happily.

"Mat!" she gasped. He looked at her guiltily.

"I was just . . . They're not too bad," he apologised

"'Ow can you?"

"We have to eat, Margaret."

"I know, but . . ."

"Try one. Just one. The caterpillars are nice. They taste like sweet meat."

"Meat's not supposed to be sweet."

"Try one."

"Never."

Another day passed before Margaret dared to eat. Mat had been right: the caterpillars did taste like sweet meat; and the worms were like raw bacon. The Melted Man was overjoyed with their progress, and made it a habit to sit in the armchair and watch while they ate. And as time passed, as the Melted Man grew fond of his pets, adding a variety of fruits, nuts and raw vegetables to the diet, their strength returned.

The Melted Man had driven away. Mat and Margaret were spread out on the floor, naked, the passion of their desire satiated. Mat stroked his wife, gently, running his hand up her hairy legs, pausing on her foresty pubes, following the path of hair to her navel, drawing rings on her stomach with the tips of his fingers. After the violence of sex, it was time to be gentle.

Margaret opened her eyes.

"I need to do a wee," she said.

"Go on then," Mat said. Margaret took this to mean he would move to the far corner of the cage and turn away; but as she stood astride the bucket, she saw he was not inclined to move.

"Turn away, then."

"What's the point?"

"What do you mean?"

"What's the point?" he repeated.

"Please yourself," she said, and began to urinate.

"I wonder what it'd be like—if we turned into monkeys?" Mat pondered, using the back of his hand to wipe away the sweat of his brow.

"Like nothing," Margaret said, shaking away the last drops. "I don't know."

The summer was over. The Melted Man used pirated electricity, redirected to his house from an underground cable half a mile away; so the free heat, once on, was permanent, regulated only

by the occasional opening of a door or window.

The Melted Man had driven his car out of the sunken land and parked it a few hundred yards down the lane. Now he walked slowly, stealthily back to the house, crept passed the door and around the side to the window. He peeped in and saw Mat and Margaret, naked, their foul clothes in a pile on the floor, busy doing monkey copulation with great monkey fervour. He watched with detached interest for a few minutes, then walked quietly back around the house, inside, down the corridor, pushed open the living room door and entered. They were definitely going at it like animals, and the Melted Man was beside the cage, reaching in through the bars, before they even noticed his presence.

"Don't mind me," he said, grabbing the pile of clothes. "I'm just gonna wash 'em."

Mat was still inside Margaret, and as soon as the Melted Man was out of the room, he began again to thrust away, as if nothing had happened.

"We've got nothing to wear," Margaret said, afterwards.

"'E's just washin' 'em." Mat said.

"'E's gonna see us."

"'E already did," Mat answered, delicately moulding her breasts in his hand, feeling the brush of hairs around her nipples.

Later, when the Melted Man brought in their tea, Margaret turned away, hiding her nudity with her hands.

"Where's our clothes?" she asked.

"I 'ad to frow 'em away," the Melted Man answered. "They were fallin' apart with all the muck."

"You can't do that. I need some new ones," she cried.

"I told yer, monkeys don't need clothes," he said, sitting himself down to watch them eat.

Margaret began to weep, "You can't: it's not fair."

The Melted Man stood and left the room. If there was one thing he hated, it was the sound of a monkey crying.

As a consolation for their loss of clothes, the Melted Man gave them some thick knotted ropes and instructed them to tie them to the cabled roof of the cage, hoping they would use them to swing and climb and to generally frolic in monkey-like ways. Unfortunately, his pets showed no interest, and the ropes dangled like flaccid symbols of an impotent plan.

One evening, in February, the Melted Man was in extremely good spirits. He had drunk half a bottle of whiskey, and even given his monkeys a sip each.

"I wasn't born like this," he began.

"Like what?" Mat asked. It was strange to hear his own voice. It had been several days since he had last spoken. There was nothing to say to Margaret anymore, no milk rounds to talk over, no T.V. shows to discuss, and the Melted Man hardly ever said anything. There were only endless days of lying around, scratching, listening to the silence, and copulation.

"Like this," the Melted Man said. "You fought I was some kind of fuckin' freak I bet. Admit it. Like the two of you." He took another swig of the whiskey. "No no no. I was normal once, like every-fuckin'-body else. I was a normal, a normal bloody kid, like all the others. I used to look up girls' dresses, you know. You know that? They liked me, the girls did. They liked my eyes! What the fuck . . . We used to go down into the woods over there and play 'iddy till it got dark. Before they killed my dad, that was, when the war broke out, an' 'e went, an' 'e never came back.

"I was playin' in an old car out back. My dad used to fix up cars like me, you know. I'd pinched these fuckin' matches from the kitchen, an' I was larkin' around with 'em—in the car—with

these bits a newspaper." The Melted Man took another drink.

"So there I was, like a right prick, layin' on the back seat, daydreamin'. You know what I was day dreamin' about? I remember, see? I remember everything like it was fuckin' yesterday. It's burned in my brain, see? That's why. It's burned right in my fuckin' brain. It's all right for you monkeys: I bet you don't even remember what 'appened this mornin'. Go on, tell me: what the fuck 'appened this mornin'?" It was true: neither Mat nor Margaret had any idea what had happened during the morning. But they were not really trying. "Just like I said. Fuckin' monkeys." The Melted Man shook his head, a shake of resentment, a shake of envy, that the monkeys could not remember, and that he could.

"So there I was, lounging around finking about bein' like my dad, fixing cars, fixing cars with 'im when 'e came back from the war. It was like a big fuckin' dream. What do yer call it? A bastardin' ambition, it was. To fix cars." The Melted Man made a noise like a laugh.

"I don't know if I fell asleep. I must've. I must've, cos the next thing I knew, the fuckin' car was burnin' up. There were fuckin' flames, like all over the place. I started to scream—the flames was licking my face—crying out, 'Mammy mammy mammy.' I could feel my face, like meltin' or somethin'. I screamed and I screamed, an' I was burnin, an' then the door opened an' I saw my mam. She pulled me out. It was 'er fault." The Melted Man took another drink, handed the bottle to Mat, and then left the room.

The next morning, as he brought them more worms and a banana each—they were fond again of bananas, now that their diet was more varied—the Melted Man showed no signs embarrassment or regret. Why should he? He had exposed himself, certainly, but they were, after all, just a couple of monkeys. Indeed, he was

still in high spirits.

"I'm gonna show you both a trick," he said. "See this egg? Look." Using the point of a penknife, the Melted Man pierced a hole in the top and bottom of the egg. Next he pushed one of the holes to his left nostril, and proceeded to sniff with what seemed the power of an industrial vacuum cleaner. Besides the sniffing, a strange gooey sound could be heard, as the contents of the egg began to travel up his nose. And now, the Melted Man opened his mouth, and, as he continued to sniff, first the white, then the broken yoke appeared, and dribbled from his lip onto the floor.

"Not bad, eh? Not fuckin' bad," the Melted Man said, with a short laugh. Not bad at all. Mat and Margaret were impressed. They were also eying the broken egg on the floor with a certain desire. It had been a long time since they had eaten egg.

That night, as the Melted Man lay in bed, he heard them downstairs. They were going at it like animals again. They were always going at it like animals. Sometimes they did not even stop when he walked into the room. The Melted Man listened, intrigued.

"Come on, you great big ape. Give it to me," Margaret cried. "Oh, oh, oh."

The winter was almost over. The Melted Man was sitting in the armchair smoking a used cigar. The male was lying on his side, idly scratching his testicles. The female was squatting over the bucket, straining away as excrement dropped out. And then, as she sat on the floor and gazed into space, there was complete silence, like an encyclopaedia of blank pages. Volume after volume of silence. All things known to man, reduced to silence.

## V

It was sometime in late spring that the Melted Man realised Mat and Margaret really were the missing link. They had almost become what they were.

He had just returned from Uxminster, where he had purchased a large supply of worms from the fishing tackle shop, as well several bunches of bananas, and, as he came into the living room, saw his pets finally, after months and months, clambering about on the ropes. Oh how they clambered. It was wonderful to see. Margaret, accustomed now to her nudity—and the house, after all, was extremely warm—seemed particularly to enjoy sitting with a large knot between her legs and swinging gently back and forth.

"Well I'll be a monkey's uncle," he said, astounded and rapturous at the sight. "Well I'll be a fuckin' monkey's uncle."

Just then, there was a sound where there should be no sound. There should be no sound anywhere. There should be volume after volume of silence. Out in the corridor. Footsteps. Foot foot footsteps. Footing footsteps. In a sudden panic, the Melted Man rushed to close the door; but he was too late, and as he took hold of the handle, the footsteps arrived.

"Hi Wayne."

"Bill!" said the Melted Man.

A fraction of a second passed before Bill noticed the exhaust pipe cage and the creatures inside. "What the hell . . ."

"Bill. What the fuck you doin' 'ere?" The Melted Man tried to force Bill back into the corridor.

"Never mind what I'm doing," Bill answered, standing his ground. "What the hell are you doing? Have you gone mad, or what? What's going on?"

"It's nothin' to fuckin' do with you."

Bill walked passed the Melted Man towards the cage.

"Who are you?"

The two creatures looked up with forgotten eyes.

"Who are you? What's going on?"

"It's nothin' Bill," the Melted Man broke in. "They're just a couple of monkeys. They're the fuckin' missin' fuckin' link. Like I always said."

"Don't give me any of that--"

"I tell you they are. Look at 'em."

"How long they been here, Wayne?"

"I don't know. Jeess, what the fuck difference does it make?"

"How long?"

"I told yer, I don't friggin' know. About since when you left."

"You can't do this to people." Bill looked back towards the couple in the cage, who were still spread out on the floor as if nothing was going on. "Have you gone mad, or what? You can't do it, Wayne."

"They not people," the Melted Man growled, his jaw tense, his mouth almost closed.

"Let them go, Wayne."

"It's nothin' to do with you," he growled.

"Let them go, or I'll go to the police. I'm not joking."

Suddenly, the Melted Man turned on his heels and hurried out of the room. A few moments later he returned with the shotgun.

"Get out, Bill," the Melted Man shouted. "Get the fuck out, before I do somefink, you fuckin' meddlin' fucking bastard. Go on, fucking shit head. I'm not fuckin' jokin' either. Get the fuck out." And then, as loud as he could, the Melted Man shouted, "Now!" The cage rattled with the force of the sound.

Bill walked slowly towards the door. Once in the corridor, he

turned and said, "I'll give you till tomorrow. I'll be back tomorrow."

The Melted Man sat in the armchair. His heart was thumping away; sweat dribbled down his face. "Jesus. Jesus fuckin' Jesus," he muttered, shaking his melted head.

## VI

The Melted Man watched as the two naked bodies scampered away from the house, over the hill and disappeared. He had no choice. He walked, dejected, shoulders down, arms hanging low, limp, back to the living room. Two of the exhaust pipe bars lay across the floor. The cage was empty. He had no choice. He stared at the cage. It looked all wrong: all empty, like a car without an owner. The Melted Man stumbled over to the cage, turned sideways and squeezed in through the space. All kinds of monkey memories came flooding through his mind, climbing and swinging, monkey business. He fell to the ground and sat with his back to the bars. The memories fled, replaced by a blank page, two, three, a volume, volume after volume.

The Melted Man picked up a banana from the untidy floor. The Melted Man peeled the banana. The Melted Man shoved the banana into his mouth, whole, and began silently to chew.