

OXYGEN

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Freshly Cut Grass

The air sings with the fragrance of freshly cut grass. As a backdrop to other things, children are at play, swinging too and fro, running and skipping; there are toddlers who toddle and mindful mothers who watch on in painful and patient distraction. The sun is everywhere: in the corners of the pavilion, bearing down on the tennis courts, caressing the flower beds, the convection of its heat pulling at the carpet-like lawns, dragging out bodily its scent.

Meanwhile the park keeper potters about, the days' work done, reluctant to leave his eternal garden with its endless memories.

Standing in the shade of elm he drifts away, and almost never comes back. He half-watches half-feels the bumble bees bumble from flower to flower. Else where, there is great inactivity, and everyone is busy doing it to a degree close to perfection.

The park keeper, a simple man in blue overalls, T-shirt, straw hat, blue pumps and pockets full of silence, seeks out the cool of deeper shadow, retiring to the hidden security of his tool shed, where he sits in the stripy curve of a well worn deck chair. Door ajar, pipe smouldering, gazing out into the summery world through eyes bright with the light of nearly wisdom, he surveys his universe with unhurried care.

A days grass cutting concluded, the park keeper presently plays part of an extra, superfluous to the tale's needs, and knowing this, he fades from focus.

Over a ways, cross legged, mounted on a blanket and hiding on the inside of a book, sits the person of Doris, who, like her name, is of another age. On display, for the world to see, like a dusty exhibit in the quiet, unvisited

corner of a dead museum, she awaits the attention of an appreciative visitor. She will wait all summer if needs be. Needs be.

These days, on those rare occasions, during those hot, sticky, sweat-filled interludes, she has a strange feeling the men she sleeps with are simply having sex with themselves. She feels like an incidental, an accidental, an irrelevance. It seems, to her, a solitary sport.

Thirty one years old, she wears shoulder length hair of a blondish tone, which is to say, muddy. Doris uses expensive "Botanical Formula" hair conditioner, imported from Sweden, which makes the blonde streaks shine and sparkle like golden rays of summer sunshine- or so it says on the bottle. Like her age she is not fooled by it, but buys the stuff, and in quantity, anyway, anyway.

It is Friday afternoon. All of it. Doris nibbles half heartedly on a cucumber sandwich, its crust removed, and sips hot black coffee from a thermos with similar lack of will. She inhales the fragrance of freshly cut grass, and feels the force of its intoxication take hold. Thus, inebriated, it pulls her back through time, through a life time of parks and cucumber sandwiches, to a place where the pain and the wanting bleeds from her mind, draining the life force in its scarlet stream. To a place where her emotional demise first shook her by the hand, and would not let go. Through the years she tumbles, and, seeing the ground coming up fast, she gives out a cry, for she has reached a time when she knew life, felt life.

Even in those days she was not the prettiest of girls. Not quite ugly, she possessed an air of plainness that others found difficult to breath. It was the nineteenth of July. Doris was twenty years old. She checked her watch distractedly. She was feeling ill, physically sick, needing to vomit. The park keeper was busy cutting the rich green

grass of summer England. Filling the air with its sweetness, its foul smelling sweetness, the strands of grass fell in a parody of mutilation. She hardly saw any of this. Him. Her eyes were focused somewhere distant, where no one else could see. Perhaps she had glimpsed her future. Doris, impatient, wandered over to the park shop where she bought a cup of Styrofoam coffee. She sipped its sweet bitter flavour. She was sad, mindlessly sad. Worried, mindlessly worried. She needed to cry, but there was no one to see her tears, so she held them back. How long would he be? She had said eleven o'clock, and it was already ten past. Maybe he wasn't coming. Maybe he didn't care. Maybe he wasn't coming. Maybe he didn't care. Maybe he wasn't coming. Maybe he didn't care. Then she saw him, walking beside the rose beds with hands lost in his pockets. Doris calmed to a state of panic.

"Hello Jeff."

(At last).

"Hi," he told her. "What's wrong?"

"Sit down," she said.

(Calm down, Doris. Take it easy. Do it properly).

He sat.

"How are you?"

(Delay the moment. Beat about the bush).

"I'm okay. What's it all about?"

"It's nice today. They're cutting the lawns."

(I wonder if he can see it in my eyes? If the fear is written on my face?).

It was, but Jeff could not read.

"I don't have too long you know. They'll miss me at work."

"Oh."

(You hate the place anyway).

"What's wrong?" He was eager to get on his way. He was not a park person, like Doris, though she pretended he was.

"I have some bad news."

(Bad news! That's a good one. Bad news: it will rain tomorrow. Bad news: my mother's ill).

"What?"

She took out a cigarette.

"Want one?"

(Take one, please. I need more time. I don't know how).

Just then the park keeper walked by, and even then he looked as old as time, and almost half as forgetful. He offered a warm smile to Doris, who grabbed it with an eagerness born of need.

(Thank you).

"Thanks," Jeff took one. She made great labour of lighting up.

"Your hand's shaking."

"Yes."

(Out with it. Just say it. Tell him).

"I'm pregnant."

(I did it. Maybe he doesn't care).

"You sure?"

"Yes."

(Of course I'm sure. He doesn't care).

"Jesus Christ."

(He doesn't care).

"Jesus fucking Christ."

They sat in silence for a moment.

(He doesn't care. Why doesn't he say something?)

"Don't you take precautions, for God's sake?"

" "

()

"So what you going to do?"

(Me? Us. What are we going to do?)

"I don't know."

"You'll have to get rid of it." The need to vomit became unbearable. Doris hurried over to the ladies toilet,

where it came burning up her throat. In that moment, she lived and died forever. She walked back to the bench where Jeff stood waiting.

"Listen, I've got to go. They'll miss me. Call me. Okay?" She looked down to her feet.

(Oh God oh God oh god oh god.).

"Okay?" Doris glanced up to his cold dark eyes for the briefest of moments. They were like pit shafts descending into the bowels of the earth. Black and dirty. Dirty. As she looked into them some of the filth came off, was blown by the breeze onto her pale white skin.

"Okay?" he insisted.

She said, " Okay." It was the hardest word she had ever been forced to say. With it, she knew he had been set free. The worm had wriggled free.

She never saw him again. She saw him everyday for the rest of her life.

It was all so long ago, akin to a dream. It had been real enough though, and she is strangely thankful for it. Thankful to have known existence, and felt the terrible pain of it. She can almost feel the echo of its sorrow.

Doris is all but dead, and she all but knows it. The fire of her life is fuelled by a few remaining drops of hope, but even they will soon be exhausted. She stands to leave. Walking by the park keeper in his hide-away, he gives a smile of recognition.

Of his routine, she knows it well. Next Friday he will once again mow the lawns, releasing their fragrance into the air, to fill the world with sweet perfume. Doris will be there, to breathe it deeply, gasping for more, until it fills her mind, until she becomes drunk, once again, with that smell of freshly cut grass.

The Lady in Waiting

Tick.

Doris lives in a squalid flat in darkest Clapham. There she lives out her dreams and masturbates from reality.

It is ten A.M. Doris awakens to the sound of autumn rain splashing in her head. It is a sound she finds comforting. She climbs from bed and makes over to the gas fire, taking the ankle length flannel night-dress with her for company. Striking of match and twisting of knob bring warmth and light to her world. Doris huddles to it, arms out, hands spread like the tails of two ageing peacocks, soaking up its energy. Warmed, she takes to the kitchen, where egg is boiled, bread toasted, and crusts removed; kettle is filled, teapot fed, and table set. She turns on the radio, twiddles the dial to a favourite station, which she never listens to, and finds a love song is playing. One she does not like.

The desert of sand has fallen through distorted test-tube and the egg is ready. Extra toast leaps from the cage of burning bars and falls dead to the counter top. The kettle whistles, screams and cries. It is a familiar nightmare to Doris, and as the tea seeps in boiling water, she herself seeps in a bubbling caldron of scolding loneliness. On this day though, with rain bouncing down outside, she is partially reprieved. Doris has hope for company. Her sorrow has been sent on holiday, and the nightmare, surrounding her, cannot for now get inside.

Tock.

Doris eats breakfast as formality would have it, slurps tea as required by the Queen. Bringing cup to lips her little finger sticks out in forty-five degrees of phallic rigidity. Meanwhile the rain, thousands of miles away, beats down on the street outside, hammering the heads of Red Indian post boxes, knocking the sense from forgotten garden gnomes.

Doris dresses, looks through the tear stained window pain and sees herself, reflected in transparency.

Doris works in the evenings, serving fish and chips to people she would like to know.

Doris' life stretches ahead like a dark road going nowhere. A cul-de-sac of unevents.

Tick

The morning slips on. She becomes a supermarket trolley woman, trudging along, humming tunelessly to herself.

"Hello, dear." The till lady greets Doris. They are of a kind. There is a feeling of camaraderie between them. Their fading dreams share the same bed.

"Hello." Pork chops, one pound seventy-nine.

"How are you?" Mince meat, one pound fifty.

"I'm fine. On top of the world really," Doris answers. Cabbage, forty-five pence.

"You working tonight?" The fish and chip shop is two doors away, down the parade, next to the Dog and Gun. Tomatoes, seventy-four pence.

"No. I've got the night off." Biscuits, thirty-five pence.

"That's nice. We could all do with a break." Eggs, forty pence.

"Yes." The black road begins to carry food to its end, where it piles up like a scrap yard of dead cars, awaiting some kind of purpose. Wine, three pounds eighty-two. The

till lady's eyes register the bottle. It is not something Doris would normally buy.

"Going to a party, are we?" Her fingers pause on the till's insecure buttons, buttons that need the constant attention of their keeper, buttons with an insatiable desire to be touched and fondled.

"Something like that." Doris holds the secret to her like a sick child.

Tock.

Walking home, the rain continues to pour, but she remains dry, protected by an umbrella of brightly coloured expectation. Her plastic bag is overflowing with booty: packets of dream, cans of hope, for this is no ordinary time: Doris has been shopping with purpose, buying with reason, and even if the vegetables remind her of herself, perhaps she will turn out, by the end of the story, to be a succulent strawberry, and not simply a bland radish. There is meaning and direction to her stride, and Doris scales the staircase to the third floor flat with the agile, sure-footed movements of a confident and seasoned rock climber. Coat removed, her breasts have renewed buoyancy; she is alive with the demands of regained youth.

Doris, singing, looks almost pretty.

Tick.

The flat sighs with age, its walls groan with fatherly concern. It has seen all of this before. Will see all of this again. It has seen sorrow and pain and laughter and joy. Has heard rusty bed springs tapping out the rhythms of frantic lovers, heard the discordant cries of orgasm. It watches Doris through wallpaper eyes of fading roses, listens to her breath with its threadbare furnishings. And in the dark of night, when Doris gives comfort to herself,

it turns away. Some things are too much even for a wise and elderly flat to bear.

Tock.

The morning is years away. Doris puts away the provisions in orderly rows. The cans stand to attention in her presence, but who knows what they do when the cupboard door is shut. Doris makes coffee, strong and dark and dependable.

The armchair takes her in its dying arms. The life remaining it would gladly give to her, if only she could take it. Offering what comfort it can, it moulds itself to Doris' tired frame. Sipping drink, gazing out of the window.

There is silence in the flat. A ticking clock divides that silence into neat segments, just as Doris likes it. Orderly. Out of the window, the rain has stopped. Doris places the empty cup on the coffee table and takes in a room full of air; her breasts strain to escape the constraints of dress and circumstance. Meanwhile, Doris herself decides to escape, into the outside world for a while, to walk, to see what can be seen, while the light is good, while the mood is positive.

Tick.

Doris moves down the hall, down the staircase, leaving tracks of creaking steps as she goes. As she descends the final flight, the landlady appears from her secret chambers. A narrow lady, dark haired, fighting off forty-winning the battle, yet losing the war. She is a caretaker of sorts. The house is not hers. She has never owned anything in all her years, except a few toys when she was child. There is a black man who knows it is his, who paid money to the bank, signed papers of transfer. A black man

who visits his caretaker by night, to rattle her bones, to play music on her xylophone ribs, to own another property.

Tock

"Hello, Doris."

"Hello."

"Shocking weather we're having."

"Terrible," Doris agrees.

"Shocking weather we're having."

"Terrible."

"Shocking weather we're having."

"Terrible."

"Shocking weather we're having."

"Terrible."

"Be seeing you."

"Yes, by the by." They are both adrift, on different oceans with no common points of reference. The owned and the ownerless.

Tick.

The sun shines with withered autumn strength. The avenue is covered by a kaleidoscope of rich leaf canopy, of multicoloured foliage, of protective tree hands, outstretched in transparent salutation. A bright light flashes. Doris closes her eyes and sees the after-image of Sorrow hang its head in shame. An old friend. She is comforted. This day is no run of the mill day: it is laced with prospect, chilled with the unknown, though sometimes, of course, it is nice to return to the warmth of things we know, no matter what they might be, and she offers Sorrow a half-hearted smile. Doris walks into the local park, along a mosaic foot path of sodden leaf.

Tock.

Evening comes on silent feet. The sun dies another death. The black man plays his percussive music. The caretaker takes good care of her obscure desires.

Tick.

The time is nigh.

Tock.

Doris prepares a meal fit for a king.

Tick.

It is seven fifteen. Yesterday, she had met a man in the park. He was called Harry. He was a few moments older than she.

Tock.

They had retired to a public house where they nestled in a corner.

Tick.

Doris manoeuvred her knee against his leg. Felt her heart b b b b b beat. Felt her loins moisten.

Tock.

He was charming. He was divorced. He was charming. He was divorced. She could feel the warmth of his breath tickle her ears with the sweetness of whispers.

Tick.

She heard herself ask him over, during a pause in laughter, tomorrow, for dinner. She heard him smile, glance down momentarily at her breasts, accept, with seeming pleasure.

Tock.

It is seven thirty. Food is cooking itself, and Doris retires to her bed chamber to dress. The smoothness of silk, holding her gently in its cupped hands, is telling her she is desirable. And the funny thing is, there is a certain truth to it. Doris, at this moment, is desirable.

It is seven forty-five. Doris uses make-up sparingly. Doris is ready.

She returns to the living room to sit. To wait. He is to arrive at eight o'clock. There is nervous silence about the place now, only the ticking clock seems calm. Deceptively at ease.

She pours herself a cup of coffee from the drip-drop machine to pass away the time. Sip, sip. How nice.

Tick

Not much longer, she thinks, and begins to prepare her script. What she will say and what he will answer. What she will think and what he will do. She plays this game like hop scotch, bouncing from one idea to another. Doris dares not look up to see the time, though she knows it is passing.

What he will think and she will do.

It must be almost time.

What he will want and she will offer.

Maybe it is past time. Maybe he got held up. Maybe he will be just a little late.

Forever has gone. There is silence. The moment is endless. She knows it is passing. She knows it is his passing.

Sip, sip. The coffee , with the passage of too much time, becomes sickly, almost putrid.

A plainness begins to cover Doris from head to foot. A cold creeping plainness. She stops playing and listens. There is something odd, but hard to place. She examines the air, searches out the enigma. Searching, she does not find. Seeing, she does not see. There is a stillness, like the afterbirth of a passing storm, the clouds gone, the woods silent, something missing, that was there but now is gone.

With blood curdling horror, Doris discovers what it is. Doris realises the silence is all there is.

Doris listens, hard.

There is no sound.

The clock has stopped.

Doris looks up.

Its hands are still.

The clock has stopped its hands are still.

The Lady in Waiting breathes horror.

The End

Doris has found herself living yet another winter. Outside, the world is cleansed by the soft tread of snow which staggers and falls. Naked virgin feet, yet. She pulls on her boots, climbs inside her cuddly coat, and tumbles down the stairs towards a fairy tale world.

Ice crystal has transformed the squalid street and its deformed buildings into a Christmas card avenue, a facsimile of childhood memories. Doris, repulsed from the house, pauses to watch the flakes fall from the sky like silver coin and silver coin, wishing she could spend even a few of them, and buy a modicum of happiness. Doris, it seems, is finally doomed. She received a letter marked occupant, telling her so.

Up the street she falters, a thin line of grey on a sheet of fresh white paper. People lacking identity queue politely, awaiting the bus with its polite conductor, who will issue tickets with a polite smile. She joins the queue, merging with it, fixing to it. The bus arrives, sneakily, hushed by the snow. Like some strange unmythical beast, the line of people move as one, are eaten by the larger beast, disappear into its sideways mouth. Onward it goes, on well-worn tracks, stopping to vomit now and then, now and then.

Doris pays no attention to her fellow passengers. Once, not too long ago, she would survey the bus with hungry eyes, resting on just the right man to devour, to gorge. Her appetite now lost, she stares vacantly out the window, watching children and old people. She is content. She is alone. Content and alone. Sadness has become a consummate controller whom she welcomes with arms agape,

who shares her bed and offers her a certain life. Who cracks the whip- yet with a smile. The others pay no heed of Doris either, avoiding her with concentrated effort: She is the lady we have seen through a restaurant window, as we saunter on by. The lady reflected into herself. Sitting alone. Eating alone. The lady who stays with us, refuses to leave, holds on and will not let go, to haunt our happy moments.

The bus comes to a halt and Doris alights. Clapham has become Wimbledon, with its winter Common stretching out beside her, away from her, like a toy wilderness in a toy town. Somewhere out there, imaginary Wombles sleep in their imaginary warren, snug, hiding from the winter. Doris herself has retired to the black of eternal solitude where she too feels at home, warmed by its familiarity, comforted by acceptance, that this is all there can ever be, that there is no more need to venture forth into that outside snow-bound world of fleeting image and confrontation. With the dirt of Clapham still running through her veins, Wimbledon begins to transfuse a certain feeling of calmness. She feels the needle prick of a place where being alone evokes no introspective visions of great embarrassment, where solitude is in its element. She walks beside the Common, for once feeling a great comfort in her own company. The doomed lady begins to whistle a happy song.

The walk is long and soon the cold is seeping in, urging her to make haste, though Doris is of no mind to hurry; is impelled to dilly-dally, and wanders about in that chasm of bleak thought, loving every minute of it. Despite all her efforts, the moment does arrive. She finally enters enemy territory. Swinging the gate open with care, Doris avoids unnecessary noise, knowing that just ahead the foe may lay in ambush. As doorbell is pushed, all

vestige of happiness is reduced to a slimy sediment, pushed down to the depths of her soul. Inside she hears a shrill ring, and footsteps bubble and boil. The door swings open.

"Hello mother," she says.

"Doris, come on in. You look freezing."

"I am." Her parents were divorced when Doris was eight, were divorced to the sound of a solitary bell ringing in her young mind, offering the first hint of the gothic misery that lie ahead. She has not seen her father since then, though she still hears the bell from time to time to time, as it swings in the icy breeze of things passed. What a strange one he must be, though she remembers him as being quite nice, really.

"Come into the kitchen, I'm just making tea."

"I'd rather have coffee, if you have it."

"Oh, yes; I forgot." Doris removes her coat and hangs it by the neck on the stand in the hall.

"Now then, sit yourself down and get warmed up. It really is shocking, the weather out there." She now goes on to explain precisely how shocking it is.

"Yes," Doris agrees.

"I don't see you much these days. Are you still working in that horrid Fish 'n' Chip shop?"

"Yes, but....."

"I don't know, I really don't. Why. Why do you put yourself through such stuff 'n' nonsense." She was talking to herself, her remarks rhetorical. "You know you don't need to."

"I like it. The people are nice," she said quietly, looking away.

"People," she scorned. "What do you know about people? Why don't you let me have Roger find you a nice job in one of his shops? You'd get much more money too. I keep telling you but you never listen."

"I..."

"I'm only thinking of you, Doris."

" I'm fine."

"I'd hardly call working in a Chip shop 'fine'."

The kettle calls out the end of round one. Mother busies herself pouring and stirring.

"You like it strong, don't you?"

"Yes please."

"And black?"

Silence says, and with great sarcasm, "Yes mother, I like it strong and black." Doris herself though merely offers a weak "Yes," and leaves it at that.

"There we are." Doris, doomed and distant, takes the cup, stares into the pool of despondency, and swallow its essence. In its darkness she sees her future, painted in water colours of contrasting shades of black.

"Tell me, are you still seeing, er, what's his name? Everard is it?"

"Yes, I am. We're just friends though, mother. Don't jump to the wrong conclusions."

And then the silence said, "Like you do Doris," but no one answered.

"Oh." Everard is a nice man she met in a bed of autumn leaves. He is shy, but not the way Doris is, outside, with words, with people, but inside. At first glance, he seems extrovert, chatting easily with people, though there are certain traces, mannerisms, which give hint of his deeper nature. Perhaps he has something to be shy about. In his head there is a great timidity. He looks nice, he looks wantable, but fate, with four aces and two up his sleeve, will not play fair. Their relationship is platonic, without hint of desire on his part. He is another name in a short list of distant friends, who live too far to be ever close. Forlorn, Doris is at last finding rescue in a lifeboat of acceptance. In the last few weeks this feeling has become deep rooted, has changed the way she signs her name.

"It's a funny sort of name." But Doris continues to look into her cup. "What does he do, this Everard of yours?"

"He's not mine, mother, and he's a teacher. He teaches English."

"A teacher? What ever can he see in you? Working in a Fish 'n' Chip shop and all." For once, Doris agrees with her mother. It is another nail in her coffin. He is educated. He can see her for the fool she thinks she is. Doris stands, floats over to the counter for more sugar, and sees her reflection in a mirror. A death mask looks back. Doris is dying, and the strange thing is, it feels nice, all warm and cosy.

The snow is dirty now, slush returning Clapham to its normal state of bleak submission. The sun is slipping into its midwinter bed, and blankets of thick cloud hang over the city landscape of working class squalor. A world of forgotten desires, streets piled high with the corpses of dead ambition.

Doris arrives home. It is cold, drab. Cold and drab. The gas is turned on, and she huddles forever to its pitiful heat. The door comes to life. There is a knock knock knocking.

"Who can it be?" the silence mocks her.

"Who can it be?" Doris wonders. Doris glances quickly about, making sure the dust is all in place, and the damp patch on the wall is in order. Sometimes it moves, during the night, comes and cries its damp tears on her body; but always, by morning, it is back. Doris does not like this knock knock knocking on her door. It is her night off from work, and the world should not intrude without several years advance notice. The doomed lady, the lady without future, makes to the door. She will open it. Maybe it will

be the Devil himself, come a calling, with an offer she cannot refuse. She will open it, and ask him in.

Doris opens the door.

"Hello, Everard." Doris is unsure whether to feel happy or sad. She looks to his hands, looking to see if he brings a hammer on this dark night visit, wondering if he comes to bang the final nail in her coffin.

"He is empty handed," the silence says. "You must bide your time. Death comes slowly to those who wait."

"Hello, Doris. Can I come in?" and he offers a deceptive smile.

"Yes, yes. I'm sorry, I was miles away."

"Where?" he enters, removes his coat.

"Miles away. I've been to my mother's."

"Oh."

"I was just about to make coffee. Would you like some?" He is the hang man, she knows it now, the executioner, and she will give him refreshment. It must be thirsty work, all that killing. Ah well, she is all but dead anyway. She will, probably, barely even notice the noose around her neck; and when it pulls tight, she will smile, for there will be no more pain.

"Yes, I'd love some." Everard is two years her senior. A man of words who rarely speaks. He's so nice too, she decides, but then that just makes the big fat joke that much bigger and that much fatter. They retire to the kitchen. Doris lights the oven and leaves the door open to warm the room. Soon, too soon, it becomes hot.

"Coffee is served," Doris says, feigning waitress.

"Thank you."

"I wasn't expecting you tonight. There's nothing wrong I hope."

"No, no. Actually I wanted to have a word with you."

"Only one?" Doris finds humour someplace she never knew existed.

"More than one," and he gives that deceptive half-hearted smile again. Doris knows what they will be. She has heard those words before. Knows them by heart. The executor will execute all chance of love, and only the lie of friendship will remain, rotting like a putrid carcass. There is silence.

"Well, it's rather delicate. I hardly know where to start."

"You'll manage." Doris feels the cold wind of endless winter blow in through her mouth. Everard fidgets. He has ten fingers too many, and hardly knows what to do with them. She watches him stand, preparing to make the final move.

"Actually, I wanted to ask you to marry me. I love you. Will you marry me?" And he looks into her lovely blue eyes.

"Yes, yes, yes," she thinks, her heart beating a primeval beat. But what will she say? "Yes, yes, yes," she thinks. But what will she do? Can she now free herself from Sorrow, who has commanded her every move of her every day since since. Can she leave him and the home they have made, together, together, always together. "Yes, yes, yes," she thinks. But will she, can she, will she, can she, will she, will she, will she?

"Yes, I will," she says, and breathes life.

In Conclusion

And so Doris is with husband, happy at last, knowing all the years of loneliness have finally amounted to something tangible, something she can take home and keep for her own. Something she can sleep with. He is not perfect, but she will forgive him his weaknesses as he will forgive hers. She will search in her heart and find him there, forever, such is the essence of her love, whose meaning she can now understand as an assurance never more to be alone. No matter what.

Christmas

1957

There was an unusual crisp chill to the air which England could barely understand: the sky shouted out a deep shade of blue, sun hung like a frozen ball of yellow wax, and the breath of man became as words on a paper, for all to see, a page of misty white lies. It was a transitory state, however, soon to be replaced by the normal damp dampness of every other day; but, for now at least, talk in the street is of its brilliance: "Brisk," some said, "Fresh," suggested others; but no matter what words they employed there was a feeling of disconcerted gratitude, as if it was a gift none truly deserved, that had been given them perhaps in error. A Christmas gift, for it was the twenty-fourth of December.

A young man, richly dressed, stood looking out on the day from the door-way of Lewis's, a department store for the well-to-do. Lean, clean-cut, with a firmness of face devoid of soft line, he awaited the arrival of his equally young wife. He stamped his feet to keep out the cold and checked his watch, a gold thing with spingles and spangles, every fifty-four seconds: that, you see, was the length of his minutes. So there he stood a-stamping, not knowing where his wife might be, nor what might be keeping her- and no more concerned with the beauty of the day than it was with him. In fact, his wife was not far away, very close even, inside that monolithic Cathedral of God the Capitalist, gazing at a display of plastic offerings: toys for Christmas; toys she would not buy. Toys she would probably never buy.

His petulance was something rather new, which he still found strange, uncomfortable, difficult to confront, that came from he knew not where, nor why, nor when. He only knew that it was new. It was always with him, would not

leave him go, though it tormented him most at home; made him say things that should not be said, held hostage his mouth, put words into it and forced them out using his voice. It sat in his brain smoking stale cigarettes, feeling quite at home, thank you very much, and seeming to have no intention towards leaving. It did not sit alone either. There was something else living inside. A dark monster. Petulance and the dark monster were chums. And so it was now. "Where the hell is she," it made him think, and he glanced at that audacious watch for the thirteenth time. He took stock of the girls who walked by, hidden in layers of cloth, making do with faces.

Men walked by too.

The street was alive with Christmas shoppers rushing too and fro, skipping and dancing in and out, between one another, suffering with reluctant joy the burden of their packages. On the corner a Salvation Army soldier of dubious rank jingled bells, calling for generosity, calling for the Christmas spirit. The bells were cheap and made in Taiwan.

And so there you have it, the scene is set, but what happens next?

"Oh, sorry Tom," a voice said from behind, revolving out from a revolving door. He turned and saw his young wife make her circular entrance. "Have you been waiting long?"

"Yes, I have. Where the hell you been? What were you doing in there anyway?" He had been caught off balance: she had arrived from the wrong direction, and the facial expression he had planned to use must now go to waste.

"I was just checking the, er, perfume. I thought we might get your mother some perfume."

"Hello. Have you gone off your rocker, or what?" Mother was very particular about her perfume. He shook his head, like a teacher confronted with the untidy work of a stupid child, and took another look at his watch. "Shall we get started then?"

"Yes," she said, but he had already turned and turned some more, into the spinning door and out of sight. I think now may be a good time to introduce the wife, whose charm and good nature had been much stifled of late; who sheds more than the odd tear, odd, when alone, and tries often to remember the "nice lad" she had married. Where was he now? What had become of him? Yes, she must be introduced, for if we wait on Tom we shall perhaps wait some considerable time. Susan was her name, and her attractiveness came from inside, from the same place as her tears.

And so the Christmas shopping was about to get under way, though it all seemed to Tom a precious waste of time, whatever that might mean.

"We should get my father's dressing gown first," Susan said.

"I suppose so. Where are they?"

"First floor, I think."

"Come on then." Up the magic steps they went, finding themselves in the wrong place, where rows of blind T.V. screens gazed out foolishly at rows of blind foolish people gazing in.

"Hello. I thought you said the dressing gowns were here?" There was anger in his voice, though the tone was so familiar that Susan barely noticed. Barely, but not quite.

"I thought they were. I'll ask someone." A salesman stood nearby, neat, shirt and tie, proper. Susan walked over and Tom wandered along behind, trying to appear casual, watching the shirt and tie man.

"Dressing gowns? Yes, down in the basement Madame."

"Oh, thank you."

"My pleasure," and he smiled at them both. Tom looked down as they walked away, glanced back and looked down some more.

"My pleasure," he mimicked sarcastically. "Jesus Christ."

"What's wrong?"

"That fellow, he's as gay as a sunny Sunday afternoon. My pleasure!" and he shook his head with exaggerated disapproval. "Bleeding puff."

"Why do you say that?"

"I can tell. I can always tell."

And so the trivial business of Christmas shopping went on, and I think that I, like Tom, have had enough, though our respective reasons share no similar feature.

As they drove from town, in a car of such strange configuration that its entirety was lent a decidedly comic aspect, whose boot and back seat were filled with the chattels that typified pretentious good will and counterfeit joy to all men, a dribbling of rain began to fall from a now sombre sky. That glorious morning was gone, had probably never been, was perhaps nothing more than a stream of fervid half-truths. This gloom, this greyness did not help. The wishy-washy wipers began to do their stuff, and the path ahead was cleared, though neither Susan nor Tom knew really in which direction it was bound. The road was more or less empty and the car drew a straight line, unhindered as it went; passed a crowded double decker bus. The bus was filled with swear words, who clutched those Christmas parcels against their hearts for all they were worth. Faithful followers of a new prophet, who drinks their blood fresh from the vein, slobbering and talking gibberish. A Multi National Son of God. A mass of almost liquid fat tattooed with pin stripes. People and bought stuff then- though which was which is hard to tell.

And so the car sped on into the solitary distance.

As they turned into Oak Wood Drive, a pleasant little street, a pack of children were at play on the curb side, jumping into puddles, flopping about in over-sized Wellington boots. Susan looked over at them, their tiny,

smiling faces surrounded by the hoods of anoraks, watching their antics with a certain smile: a longing smile, a sad smile, a troubled smile. She turned her head as they drove on by, reluctant to leave them be. Tom, from the corner of his eye, saw the smile, knew what it meant, quickly returned his attention to the road without breathing a word. The children were gone. They would never be.

The house welcomed them with a resolute silence. They carried their parcels to the door where Susan fished beneath an empty flower pot for the key. Inside, the offerings were put down, the gas fire turned on and coats hung neatly on the stand.

Tom opened the television, put up his feet, and listened to a thirty second sermon articulated with great fervour by a faceless man who preached the ethos of consumer commerce, a throw-away philosophy that all must buy- or be damned. It was all black and white, remember.

And so the afternoon drifted on, and if you should think by now that nothing is likely to happen, allow me to mention that you are quite right, and also completely wrong. For now though, we must settle for the mundane, dull though it is, for it is the very fabric of life, and only when it tears open do we come to contemplate how it should really have been.

Susan sat down in the easy chair, and staring into the flickering flames of unnatural fire, she drifted away.

They began to meet out of school, to take secret walks together, to feel the vivid emotions of youth, to steal kisses and laugh- for they would never have to pay back. Together, the two criminals at large fell in so much love that it covered them from head to foot, left them smelling of its innocent perfume, and everything was so bright, so strong, so felt. The love was the marvellous love of youth: painful, aching, enchanting, mysterious, ambivalent, all knowing, intoxicating, larger than life more wonderful than

wonder. It was all that and more. One fine summer's evening, after dark, they made awkward love in a stack of hay. It was all fumbles and falls though it was the most poetic moment the universe had ever seen. How might I describe the opening of a flower by moonlight? the dance of silver shadows on naked and innocent skin? the atomic powers feeling feeling felt? How might I whisper to the deaf of these untold secrets?

Susan was sterile. Her youth had all dried up and her womanhood failed to flower. She could never have a child. There seemed little left. The romance, or at least the perception of romance, was long gone, and nothing remained but those flickering flames of artificial fire.

"I suppose we should be going now."

"Wait till this has finished," he said, without turning from the show.

Outside children arrived at the door and began singing Christmas carols.

"Oooh, listen," Susan smiled. "Have you got some change for them?" Tom reached into his pocket, took out a few coppers and put them on the arm of the chair. Susan grabbed them and went over to the door where she listened quietly, still smiling, to the squeaky voices without.

"God rest you merry gentlemen may nothing you dismay.

Our christ the lord and saviour was born on christmas day....."

The children concluded their short repertoire and knocked little hand knocks on the door, which Susan opened at once.

"That was very nice," she told them.

"Thank you," a couple of them mumbled, looking to her hand, guessing how much she would give.

"There we are," and the deal was made. The children, already true believers in the new God, went away down the garden path counting and whispering, "How much? How much?"

Susan closed the door. The rain had stopped, though the sky was still heavy with cloud.

Susan and Tom, who drove on towards his parents for the annual visit, passed by The Squinting Cat, a middle class pub for working class people. Tom watched it go by like his spent youth, and thought of the happy hours he had lost there with his father, after work, listening to the talk of men: Hard talk, opinionated talk, keep-it-in-your-pocket-and-use-as-your-own talk. He had enjoyed the company of those working muscle men.

With the pub slipping further into the distance, Tom felt a sudden guilt, and the guilt brought a new guilt. After five years of marriage, he was sure Susan suspected. She was approaching the truth- head-on. She surely knew that something was less than above board, that a beast within him was no longer dormant.

No longer dormant, that dark deep something, dark deep inside- whose identity only Tom had inkling of- that beast of sorts, whose nature was obscure even to him, gave a shallow, though pungent, breath, red hot. Tom felt the sudden flush and pushed his foot down on the accelerator.

They pulled up, in their funny looking car, in front of another house. The air outside, with early winter darkness beginning to creep up on the light, was unusually cold and they hurried inward, where Christmas greetings were grudgingly exchanged. There was polite contrived conversation, cups of tea, everything was very nice. Tom had decided an hour and a half would be a polite time to stay, and kept glancing at his watch slyly until it was up.

Next they were to call at Susan's parents where they would have supper and show again how happy they were and how delightful was Christmas. They never arrived for a miracle was about to pounce on them and cover them with kisses. A Christmas miracle. It began almost at once:

"Look Tom, look. It's starting to snow." A white Christmas in southern England was more than even the most ardent and foolish of optimists would have dared hope for, and perhaps it should there and then have been recognised as a symbol of something wondrous, have suggested that some great change was afoot.

"It's only snow," Tom said soberly.

"Yes, I know, but on Christmas Eve and everything...." Only the English can appreciate how Susan must have felt, the pleasure that ran through to her core; and only the dead, Tom. All around Surrey, children were chanting:

"Snow snow faster,
alley alley aster.

"Snow snow faster..." And the spell began to work. Large flakes began to tumble from the sky like feathers from a thousand shot geese, tumbled in a very hap-hazard kind of way, unhurried, as if gravity merely suggested that they come to earth. It was all like a dream, though it had barely begun.

They turned onto the red line of a map and were met by a strange sight: A young woman, perhaps only a girl, stood beside the road, hitch-hiking, a small suitcase at her feet.

"Look, there's a girl thumbing it."

"Mmm."

"She must be freezing out there; let's stop."

"Hello, are you mad or what?" She seemed to carry a bundle of something in her arms. Quickly she was passed.

"No. Stop." Susan's voice was not raised, but had in it a thing, a tone, a quality that made Tom look to her. He saw the same in her eyes. The thing was good conquering evil. He put his foot to the brake. As they reversed back to the girl Tom peered into the mirror to her, and so it was he who saw first what indeed that bundle she carried was.

"She's got a baby," he said.

"Where are you going?" Susan asked the lost soul as she climbed into the back of the car.

"I don't know. I was cold." She gazed blindly out of the side window and they knew at once, by the voice, by the words, by the dazed look, that she was not quite right. Tom breathed a sigh. What had Susan involved them in now?

"Well where do you live?"

"I don't..." she looked up to Susan who was turned twisted in her seat and seemed almost to focus her eyes. "I'm okay, just drop me in town."

"But where do you live? Your baby, is it all right?" The girl looked down at the small thing in her arms and tucked the blanket in around its face. She touched its soft skin and then drew back her hand quickly as if burned, resumed her outward gaze.

"Yes, it's fine." A terrible idea came to Susan and she felt the chill of eternal winter rip off her clothes and leave her shivering with a terrible foreboding. What if the baby was dead? She looked at the lump and it did not move.

"Where do you live?" she asked again, urgently.

"Elephant and Castle...but I had to....."

"What?"

"I had to leave."

"Do you have some where to stay, dear?"

"What?" she turned to Susan.

"Do you have somewhere to stay?"

"I...I...." she seemed to think.

"Don't worry, we'll take you home." Tom looked around with a certain expression that I will leave you to guess at.

"I'm cold."

"You'll soon be warm," and she turned to her young husband. "Let's take her home."

"Maybe we should call the police," he whispered.

"We'll see at home." The terrible thought of the baby being dead held fast. It had grabbed Susan by the neck and was throttling her, kept her silent, choking. As long as she just sat there though, sat there and did not ask, there was a chance that it lived, was alive, so she just sat there.

The sound of the engine began to hypnotise and they went on without further word, back the way they had come, into town where the shops had all shut, where the streets lay mostly empty, made ghostly by the covering of snow; windows blackened, except those of the public houses from which a warm glow radiated outward, kept company by the ubiquitous Christmas cheer that sang its merry song, but went on unheard inside that funny car with the lifeless baby.

They turned into Oak Wood Drive, where an impossible sight met their eyes. So impossible it was rejected by brain one and all, so, though it was plain as plain is plain, it may as well have been invisible, for it was not seen nor ever would be. Above Susan and Tom's home, in the black ink of sky from which white flakes of Christmas still fell, a bright star, a Christmas star, had appeared, and the shadows it cast stretched long and thin, elongated and distorted like a Lawry, painted with naive brush strokes; into the future, beyond this story, to the very end of the book. And perhaps further. The star was odd, but odder than that, for it refused to twinkle as stars are wont to do. It refused. Perhaps it was not a star, perhaps it was Mars bent on something despicable, out there roaming in the heavens and up to no good.

As they walked down the garden path Susan stayed beside the mother, trying to see if there was indeed any life in the bundle she carried. It seemed as inanimate as a rag doll and suddenly the snow seemed to fall black as coal.

"Sit down dear, it'll soon be warm, here beside the fire." The gas was turned on and the curtains closed. "Go make some tea, Tom, or cocoa. Would you prefer hot cocoa?" The girl, a mere scratch of a thing, looked up.

"Yes. Yes please," she said. Tom went off. Susan stood by the fire, warming her hands and looking at the infant.

"You have a boy then?"

The mother glanced down at the dead thing she held. "A boy," she said.

"Oh. How old?"

"Just...just a few days, I suppose. Just a few days."

"What's his name?" Susan moved her hand slowly to the small face and touched gently. It seemed corpse-like, and she felt about to cry: a volcano of sadness began to erupt inside.

The mother stared at the carpet. "It doesn't have a name."

"He doesn't have a name." Susan repeated.

"Yes. I mean no." It was all starting to be like a nightmare, but the terrible thing was, everyone really was awake.

"Oh.....Oh. Shouldn't we give him one?" There was only silence. "Let's give him one."

"What?"

"A name."

"If you want."

"Everard's nice. Do you like Everard? Let's call him Everard." The dead baby had been given a name, his star was outside, and with that he began to cry. It was the happiest sound Susan had ever heard. She too began to cry, silent, dry tears. "Can I hold him?"

The snow still fell outside and three wise men walked by the house on their way to the pub, leaving a trail of wise white foot prints as they went. The way was lit by the

heavenly body and their pin men shadows mocked them from behind, pointing string fingers and skipping about in a mad dance, laughing and yelling without sound, while the three men continued on soberly.

Inside, the living room was warm. The baby had been fed and lay on the couch sleeping.

"Drink your drink, dear. We'll have supper soon. Are you hungry?"

"Yes."

"Drink your drink." Susan was at the girl's feet, on the rug in front of the fire, and from there she turned to Tom, who sat stiffly at the large dining table. "Could you start seeing to the food? We'll have the pork I bought for tomorrow."

"All right," he said with a gentle smile, which seemed completely out of place on that usually stony face.

"I don't even know your name," Susan realised. "What are you called?" Could it have been Mary do you think? How splendid, how silly if it was. Mary, then?

"Irene," she said.

"I'm Susan." The two looked at each other, looked at each other, looked to each other. "How old are you, Irene?"

"Sixteen," and her eyes fell, crying out on the way down until they hit the ground with a dull thud. They sat in silence for a long time.

"What happened, Irene? Why were you out like that in the snow?"

"I don't know."

"You must know."

"I do."

"What?"

"I had the baby. I had the baby. It wasn't nice you know. Every one, all the others had visitors. Every day they came with flowers and fruit and chocolates and took pictures. They were so happy. It wasn't nice. Sometimes they looked at me."

"Oh."

"Then I had to leave, I knew I would, I was glad, but I had no place to go."

"When was that?"

"Just now."

"What about your parents? Do they know?"

"Do they know?"

"Yes."

"Yes."

"They didn't visit?"

"No. They threw me out when I told them. He said I was a slut and she said it too. He shouted at me and hit me and she let him." Tears grew in her eyes and spilled out, though she made no sound.

"When?"

"Ages ago. I lived on my own."

"But you don't have a place any more?"

"No . It was just a bed- sit, anyway. It was cold. I didn't have any money for the gas. I suppose someone else is there now, I suppose."

"Oh."

"Maybe they don't have money for the gas either." A dog barked next door and the silence which followed was deafening. Susan looked up at the young girl and breathed a heavy sigh. "Maybe you should call on your parents. Let them know."

"No."

Tom came in, opened the curtain Susan had closed, sat down at the table to watch the storm outside. He had been listening from the kitchen. He glanced over at Irene and saw a stupid girl nestling the cup of Cocoa in her tiny stupid hands.

The next morning the guest slept late. They had heard her in the night, feeding the baby, changing his nappy , or

rather the towel which served as one, for want of the genuine article, both laying awake wondering.

"Thank you for letting me stay," Irene said when she came down.

"That's all right my dear. Sit down and have some breakfast. Tom, would you mind making some more..."

"Hello, what did your last servant die of?"

"You're right, I'll do it."

"Sit down," Tom said to the girl. She sat herself at the table and stared out into the garden.

"There's a lot of snow," she said.

"Yes, it must have kept going all night." Stared out in silence. "Did you think about what you're going to do? Maybe you should go back home." Tom said at length.

"Maybe that would be best," she said, distantly.

"You can't go home. Tom, you know she can't." Susan arrived back, bringing the breakfast, glaring at her husband, the nice lad no more.

"Hello," he said, returning her look with a cold stare.

"I don't know."

"Don't be silly dear. Stay with us and we'll help you find a place to live next week. I'm sure you could find a job in no time. There's lots of work in London. Everything will be fine."

Irene turned from the white world outside, tried to smile, but was unable.

"I couldn't impose like that. It wouldn't be right."

"I insist. You stay here for a while and we'll help you get settled in town."

"But what about the baby?"

"Well...."

"Would you like to keep it?"

"Don't be silly, Irene."

"Would you?"

"You're upset. You don't know what you're saying."

"I do. I really do."

"No. How could we?"

"You could. It would have a real life with you. You could buy it things."

"But.."

"Don't you want a baby?"

"I'd love one, it's just that..."

"Then why not?" Susan turned away, gazed out side. Tom looked at Irene. Irene looked at her breakfast. No one dared speak.

"Suppose we agree, Irene," Tom began finally, "and we keep the baby. We keep the baby and then one day some time you decide that you want him back. What then?"

"But I won't"

"How do you know?"

"I don't know."

"Hello."

"I just know. You could buy it things. Love it. We can do it all legal like. We can do it like that."

A cry came from upstairs, a cry that grates at the heart and thus cannot be ignored.

"Everard is crying," Susan said. "I'll go fetch him." She walked to the door of the staircase and went running upwards, yelling inside with something much greater than joy, calling to the world that it was Christmas Christmas Christmas. Everard joined her chorus. His bed was made from a large empty drawer with masses of soft blankets spread within. His eyes were wide open.

Susan picked up the baby, held it close, gazed into his bright eyes, smiled, cried, smiled, cried, cried cried cried, dreamed, laughed, whispered gently words with out meaning, kissed his little cheek, his velvet smooth chubby little cheek.

And then she took her son downstairs.

The Closet

It was the second of June, and all seemed well. The day got off to a good start with the distant clanging of the church clock, whose bells rang out in metallic mirth, and the smell of a new summer hanging thick in the air. Susan Swain climbed from bed quietly, careful not to waken the man beside her, smiling to herself at the innocence of his sleep, slipped into her dressing gown and out of the room. It was only 6 a.m., and most of England still dreamed of former glories, pints of beer and Fish and Chips- and well they should. Downstairs, Susan opened the curtains and the sun streaked in, a soft warm benevolent light of early morning that meant harm to no one. The garden without was still, wind holding its breath as if afraid to upset the peace, and a solitary black bird hopped about on the lawn, digging with its yellow beak in search of worms.

In the kitchen, the coffee began to drip drip drip into the decanter, toast turned a golden brown and was smothered in a thick layer of raspberry jam. Susan sat in the dining room to feast and watch the world, with its air of confident restraint, oblivious to the truth of its intent, of the sad joke it secretly cradled to an ever youthful breast. For now though, there were no tears in sight, the sky was clear.

The silence was. The black bird flew away and the garden became as a still life, of delicate brush strokes and famous plays of light. It seemed like it should last forever, though she knew, of course, that it would not.

Susan opened the back door and stepped out into the day, which welcomed her, invited her to partake of its riches, its bounty, and silently became her eternal friend. She was bare foot, and the grass, still laden with sparkling dew, felt cool, necessary, found its way between her toes, tickled her and made her smile. As she stood,

quietly, listening to the nature's secret breath, the black bird came back and perched upon the fence at the foot of the garden, watching her and twitching its tail, twitching its tail as if nervous of something, twitching its tail. Susan, happy to see the bird back, remained still, wondering why it watched her so, waiting for it to fly off, to take to the sky. But it would not. Could not. She turned and walked slowly back to the house, glanced from the doorway to see it still there, twitching, watching.

The moment, out there on the grass, with the cool damp under foot, with the black bird, had been brief, like a fleeting, improvised melody, a unique refrain that can be played but once; was special because of that, because it was a moment, and to have continued it would have been to destroy it; worse, to have mocked its ever existence.

And so she left it and returned in doors, took a cigarette from a pack which had laid untouched for two days or more and sat smoking, her feet up on the couch, smoking.

Tom, the husband of sorts, climbed from bed just after nine. It was Saturday and the day was still unspoiled. Within a few minutes their son Everard showed his tiny face as well.

"What's for breakfast, mum?"

"What do you want?"

"I want snack cackle pop."

"All right, go get washed and brush your teeth while I do it."

"Okay," he sighed and turned on his heels.

"Hello, don't you say good morning to your old dad then Ev'?"

"Morning daddy," the boy exaggerated, glancing back on his way out. Tom turned back to his newspaper.

"I don't know, that lad's a real scally-wag," Susan said, smiling. "Want some coffee, Tom?"

"Wouldn't mind."

"It's a lovely day. I've been up a couple of hours already."

"Mm."

"I woke up and saw the sun was shining."

"It would have waited for you, you know," he offered from behind the page.

"I know, but I couldn't wait for it."

Tom and Susan, despite all things being equal, have called a truce. Years of opposition are done with. The barbed wire has been locked away in a large dark closet, where it gathers dust, though the spikes stay sharp.

Perhaps it is the circumstance which has changed, and if indeed we are all products of that pedantic force, then who can tell, Susan and Tom may not be as before, may have learned to be otherwise, became something utterly different and seemingly idyllic. But I think not.

Nothing much happened during that day, but with the fall of late afternoon, with Everard out and about, playing with his friends in that incredible world of childhood summer, Susan and Tom set about doing what married couples do, only they didn't. The light in the room, diffused by the thin cotton curtains of rose and leaf, lent a deceptively romantic quality to the proceedings, which were called into order by Tom, who, as they continued, watched himself in the large dressing table mirror. It was like watching some one else, like watching another man have sex with Susan. It was, he thought, a fine sight. He studied his acting abilities, gave himself an Oscar. There she lay, penetrated by a stranger, some one she never knew, submissive to his will, doing all the things he desired; but it was the man he most liked to watch, was fascinated by, the man with the muscles and the power and the penis. The big penis.

When all was done they lay together, watching time slip by. The silence was long, but came, as it must, to a sudden end.

"I love you," she said, her head against his chest, speaking into the flesh.

Tom closed his eyes.

Early evening came.

"Hurry, the baby sitter will be here soon."

"Hello, am I the one we always have to wait for?"

"I'm almost ready, me."

"Good, so am I." Tom left the room and went into the downstairs bathroom to shave. He heard the door bell ring and muffled voices in the hall.

"Tom," Susan called. "Are you coming? It's almost eight. Diane's here."

"Yes." He spat into the sink.

"Help yourself to the food or whatever." Susan offered.

"Thanks, I will."

"Now listen, Everard," Susan said turning to the boy. "Bed at nine. You can keep your light on and read for a while, but not too long. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, mother."

"And be good. If Diane tells me anything bad, the whole world will be in trouble tomorrow."

"The whole world?"

"Yes, and you'll be the one in the middle of it all." Tom came in and she turned to him. "Are we off then?"

"I suppose so."

"All right. Bye Diane."

"Bye." Susan nudged her husband on the way out.

"Bye," he said, and they were gone.

"Do you want to play with me?" the boy asked.

"What do you want to play?"

"I don't know. Will you play with me?"

"What?"

"I don't know."

"I've got a teacher at school," Diane began. "Do you know what he does?"

"What?"

"When there's a test he makes me make up my own questions. And do you know what?"

"What?"

"That's the hardest part. Just answering questions is easy, but when you have to make them up for yourself, well that's tricky."

"So?"

"So, if you want to play, you have to make up the game."

"I don't know."

"Think."

"I don't know." Everard began to whimper. Diane's desire to teach the boy to think for himself was a lesser one than her want of a trouble free, a cry free evening.

"We could go into the garden and play football," she suggested.

"That's a boy's game," he told her scornfully.

"Who told you that?"

"My daddy."

"Well go up and get one of your games. Find some thing you like."

"All right," he said, and went up the stairs.

Curiosity must indeed be a synonym for intelligence, for the baby sitter of that eve was both intellectual and intensely curious. When the clock struck ten, and nothing on T.V. interested her, she allowed herself the liberty to wonder about the house in search of the searchable. Perhaps you find her actions deplorable, rooting through drawers, delving in cupboards, leafing through private papers, though I would have you know there was no malicious intent; no, nothing more than a desire to seek out the unknown, to

learn, to understand. Diane was a girl captured by the intensity of youth, possessed by its harmless chant, who has been granted the gift of wisdom that we pretend is the sole province of the elderly.

She pulled open the sideboard drawers, found a photo album and glanced through it. Letters, she read. There was nothing of great interest, though the interest was more in the looking, and not the finding. Diane wandered into the kitchen, opened up the refrigerator and took out some ice cream.

"Mmm", she thought, and ate greedily.

Upstairs, she glanced in on Everard, who was nestled in his bunk, sleeping innocently, as surely only the very young can do. Diane slipped quietly into the main bedroom where she opened drawers and searched carefully through the underpants and clothing, slowly, patiently, drawing out the pleasure of the search, careful to leave no signs of her activities. It was not right to pry, she knew, but it was unavoidable.

Inside the built-in wardrobe, beneath the rows of dresses hanging about, waiting to be worn, three suitcases stood, side by side by side in the corner. Ahead of them a cardboard box with its upward mouth shut. Inside she found Christmas decorations, plastic holly, glass balls, fragile and frosty, trimmings, twisted and torn, shreds of wrapping paper. It was strange to look at, in the middle of July, for it all seemed like a peculiar lie. She closed the lid and pulled one of the suitcases out. By its lack of weight she knew it was empty. The second proved likewise. The third promised otherwise. Its zip insisted on loudness, seemed to have decided, arbitrarily, that it should be the loudest zip alive, louder than any zip should naturally desire, and she feared, as she pulled, that it might cry out and alert Everard and he would come in and catch her, red-handed. The loudness of that zip was magnified by guilt, giving its rasping sound a sinister malevolent bent.

The zip then, raspingly loud, was of a bag, both blue and flimsy. This, as it turned out, was most appropriate.

"Oh my God," she thought, and pulled out the contents hurriedly. A stack of magazines. That she could at the moment see only the top one was of no matter: she knew they should all prove similar. A young man looked up at her, handsome, muscular, well groomed, offering his glossy penis to the world.

"Mrs. Swain," she thought. "Mrs. Swain, I never would.." What she "never would" I cannot say, though it was, in any case, not quite as true as she believed it to be. She turned the pages slowly and found more young men looking up at her with their inky eyes. Some held onto their erect organs as if they might drop off, smiling foolishly, others seemed fond of themselves, others still, proud. Was she shocked do you wonder? Did she find the images in bad taste, abusive, dirty? No, she was intrigued, interested by their very strangeness, though she knew that, like the Christmas decorations, they were nothing more than cleverly told lies.

Diane was watching T.V. when she heard the car pull up in the drive.

"How was Everard?" Susan asked coming around the door.

"Good as gold."

"That's good. Off to sleep all right?"

"Yes, fine." Diane looked up seeing Mrs. Swain now in a new light, knowing what she knew, seeing what she had seen. She imagined her leafing through her books when Mr. Swain was out, looking at all the young men that she could never touch. Wanting. It did not seem right, and of course it was not.

The very next day, during the quiet of a Sunday evening, the truth presented itself. Susan and Tom lay in bed together, laying apart in the aftermath of sex, each

lost in the silence of the moment. There was nothing to say, and they both said it, a constant stream of emptiness filling the room for half an hour or more. He began to toy with her breast, to wind it up and watch it go.

"Mmmmm," she offered, feeling excitement return. Susan, her eyes closed, began to fondle his half hearted erection, moved down on him and slipped it into her mouth. He watched her for a moment, but his will proved insufficient, closed his eyes and imagined. Now it was another he saw, someone else altogether. The lips were those of a man, two men together, he and another, the hardness became harder, the desire more desirable. The man was glossy, shiny, like those in his magazines.

It was not easy to face the truth. Tom had worked hard at the lie, living it daily, and even now there was a definite guilt laying about the place when he confronted it. Perhaps he was not quite so detestable as I would have him be, though beside the Angel of Susan first impressions suggested that his soul had been plucked out at birth.

Orgasm came and the strange man went away, to come back another day. Who he was is beside the point, though his features were familiar to all.

Did Tom love his wife? or was it more habit, familiarity? Was it like his sex: pretend? At any rate, he felt imprisoned by this thing inside, this dark beast, and making love to her seemed like incest- though he did it anyway.

Impact

"Where've you been, Tom?"

"Hello."

"Where've you been? Its past ten."

"I went out for a drink after work. Is there a law against it?"

"No, but you could call and let me know."

"I didn't think."

"You never do."

"What's for supper?"

"What's for supper!"

"Yes."

"Your supper's been in the oven for three hours."

"It's no good, it's ruined."

"What do you expect?"

"I'm starving."

"Make something then."

"I'm tired. I had a hard day at work."

"You weren't too tired to go off drinking, were you."

"Hello."

"Don't 'hello' me."

"Will you make me something or what?"

"No."

"You sit here all day and you can't even make me..."

"Sit here all day do I? I suppose Everard takes care of himself; and the house, and the shopping and cooking..."

"Yes, you're very good."

"I know I'm good. What would you do if I died?"

"Go to the funeral."

The next day she died. Hit by a truck.

The monster smiled.

Imagine black.

The Branding

Tom was driving south, turning onto the M1, with Everard sitting in the back looking through a pile of books, quiet, doing as he was told. On the motorway ramp Tom saw a row of hitch-hikers, begging for rides. A long ago memory whispered to him and he pulled over. The middle part of some one appeared at the window, was framed by it, and the door swung open. A girl climbed in, smiling.

"Hi," she said. "Where you going?"

"Down to London." The car pulled away in a puff of sporty pollution.

"Great."

"You?"

"Dartmouth." She said, raising her eyebrows.

"Where's Dartmouth?" Everard asked. The girl twisted around in her seat to face him. "Its a long way. It's right at the bottom of England."

"Why do you want to go there?"

"Just for fun, to see some friends."

"Is it at the sea side?"

"All right. Read your book, Ev'." The girl offered an understanding smile to the boy, and turned back in her seat.

"Dartmouth, eh?"

"Yeah, I kind of got a late start. I was planning on leaving early this morning. You know how it goes."

"Yes," he said, but did not. They moved into the fast lane and the road streaked into them, passed through them, and away behind them.

"Do you live in London?" Talk was cheap, she gave it away constantly, to all the drivers, and her ease and abundance of word was often played to great advantage.

"We live in Richmond," Everard said.

"That's nice," she said turning again. "I've been there."

"Only I don't live there all the time."

"How old are you?"

"Nine."

"Oooh. That's pretty old."

"How old are you?"

"Ev'. Read your book."

"You're married then," she said, turning again to face forward.

"I was. My wife died three years ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"That's all right. Time heals, as they say."

"Or we forget," she said distantly.

They drove onward.

"What's happening in Dartmouth, anyway?"

"Nothing really. Like I said, I'm just going to visit some friends for a few weeks."

"Don't you work?"

"No. I don't like it. I tried it once and it didn't agree with me."

"Daddy doesn't work either," Everard said from his corner.

"Actually I have my own business, but it mostly takes care of itself."

"You mean other people take care of it."

"Yes," he laughed. "I suppose I do. I travel a lot anyway- since his mother died."

"How much is a lot?"

He offered a face which suggested an approximation, "Six months out of the year."

"Who looks after your son?"

"I go to a boarding school," Everard said. "That's why I don't live in Richmond all the time. And it's a horrible school."

"Well it costs enough, Ev'. And I've told yo to read your book."

"Your business must be doing well."

"It's doing okay. The thing is, his mother had life insurance."

"Oh. How much?" The girl was more forthright than common sense deemed suitable, but Tom was taking a definite liking to her. She reminded him of a young man he once knew, who was an absolute foreigner to inhibition.

"Four thousand pounds, every three months."

"Wow. Multiply it by one and it's still a lot."

"Yes."

"Was he happy she died?" the girl wondered to her self. "How much is a wife worth anyway?"

"How did she die, anyway?"

"A road accident. She was crossing the street one morning."

"That's terrible," she said.

Just ahead a sign indicated a Service Station. "I think we'll call in at the services there."

"I could do with a bite myself."

It was a classic Summers day: A slight drizzle fell and a tyrannical breeze flung it into their faces.

"It's not much of a day for hitch-hiking," Tom said, slamming the car door closed, hunching his shoulders protectively against the chill and hastily making towards the service building. Everard ran along behind, trying to catch up to them.

"You can say that again." And was there a hint of surprise in her voice?

"So why do it?"

"It makes me feel alive. What makes you feel alive?"

"I don't know," he said. "Sex," he thought. "Wild unbridled sex," and he smiled an unseen smile.

They climbed the staircase and entered the secluded world of the motorway restaurant.

"What do you feel like?" Tom asked. "It's on me."

"No, I couldn't."

"I insist. What would you like?"

"Me, I want hamburger and chips and pop," Everard said.

Back on the road, talk was returned for the gift of food: thousands and thousands of utterances. Enough chat to fill volumes. Page after page of aching words, tired words, meaningless words, happy words, sombre words, ridiculous words, giddy words, hasty words, living words, stupid and clever words, distant words, whispered words. Whispered words.

"London, forty-five miles," the girl read a sign.

"How far's forty-five miles?" Everard asked.

"Not far," the girl told him. "You'll be home soon."

The prospect of leaving the girl for some reason was not a glad one, and without realising it, Tom eased his foot off the accelerator.

"Do you think you'll make it to Dartmouth by tonight?"

"No. I have my sleeping bag though. I'll find some place to crash."

"Hello."

"I'll be fine."

"I don't know how you can do it. Doesn't it worry you, sleeping out like that? Hitch-hiking by your self? What if some maniac gave you a ride?"

"What if I was hit by lightning? And anyway, most people are nice."

"They might seem nice."

"No, they are."

"What's your name, anyway?"

"Susan," she said.

"Susan?" It was like an electric shock. Treatment.

"What's wrong?"

"That was his mother's name."

"Oh. How long were you married?"

" I don't know. A few years I guess. We met in school. She was the first girl I ever knew. I tell you it's funny how things happen, how they work out. I sometimes wonder how much free choice we actually have. It seems like we do one small thing, maybe even without thinking, and it changes the rest of our lives. By the time you realise what's going on, it's too late."

"Does she know what I'm talking about?" he thought. "Has she guessed what I am?"

The problem with people like Tom, who have something to hide, who know something of themselves that they wish to conceal, is the paranoia that they are transparent, that all may look and see within. There comes a time too, when the need to confess grows stronger than the desire to suppress. This was one of those times.

"I don't normally tell people, but I'm homosexual."

"Oh." The girl, Susan, thought of Everard sitting in the back. "So why tell me?"

"I don't know."

"It looks like the rains stopping," she said.

"Yes. Anyway, it was hard for me. I married young and I didn't realise for quite a while. And when I did, well I couldn't leave her. I wouldn't leave her, so I tried my best."

"And then she died and then he was free," she thought, but remained silent.

"Life is full of pretending, isn't it," he said. "I don't have to pretend any more, but I still do. I suppose you get so used to something, no matter what it is, that you just can't let go. I tell you it's funny to be gay. I'm still not used to it."

"Why's he saying all this in front of the boy?" she wondered, "if he likes to hide the truth and pretend."

"Look at the cows," she said, turning to Everard and pointing towards a field.

"I was in New York last year," Tom said, unable to halt the unburdening. "It's really different over there. I came across this gay bar one day; you should have seen it: it was huge. Not hidden either. There was a big sign outside. On the first floor people just drink- guys of course. On the second floor they have these telephones at the tables. When you see someone you like you call him up and say stuff. If you just want to masturbate together you stay there, but if you want to do other things you go to the second floor where they have mattresses spread about the place. It's pretty odd the first time you see it."

The girl, Susan, sat listening, thinking of Everard in the back, feeling increasingly uncomfortable and wishing they would arrive.

"There's a room in the basement for orgies. The entire floor is made from those plastic gymnasium mats. There are naked bodies spread out all over the place. It's odd- the first time you see it."

"So that's what he does with his freedom- fucks it," she thought. "I wish we'd arrive."

When the girl, Susan, left the car in London, the young boy in the back seat waved to her and called good bye. She was filled with a strange and uneasy feeling of emptiness, almost foreboding.

During the evening, with Everard safely out of the way in bed, Tom called a friend to come on over. They drank Vodka and orange and soon were kissing, two men, alcohol lips, and exchanging gifts of alcohol spit. Soon they were spread out on the rug before the fire, doing unspeakable things to one another.

Everard awoke, looked about the shadow room and felt the gentle touch of fear against his boy face. He climbed from bed and quietly made his way down the stairs, hearing strange animal sounds as he went. He stopped, listened,

tried to understand, tried to fathom what was going on, continued on with painstaking caution, step by eternal stilly step, along towards the living room doorway. Everard poked his head in, unnoticed. He saw his father doing things with another man. He saw the another man doing things with his father. He saw the another man and his father doing things together. Everard hurried on back to his room, hurried on back to his room with that red hot image, that red hot image forever branded to his eye balls.

Raw Meat

The park was not feeling itself. A high fever ravaged its grassy body, and the trees standing in silent groups, whispered notes of sympathy in the gentle breeze. An army of marching feet had invaded, and for two days now the occupation had wrought its toll.

From a distance it looked like fun: a mirage of colour and movement, but the park knew better. A Ferris wheel turned in an unending journey, taking people nowhere and back again, nowhere and back again, and they all laughed. Strange, multi-limbed metal monsters moved their arms in absurd frenzy, clutching tiny people in their grip, flinging them first this way then that. Half-crazed tracks, twisting themselves into knots, cajoled midget trains filled with midget people to go follow their way, round and round and upside down even. Further on, Ping pong balls bounced through rows of empty goldfish bowls, whose oval mouths yawned at the clouds, while children looked at the prizes they could win if only one would fall in. Machine guns, in the hands of boy soldiers, fired a constant spray of pellets with a rat a tat a tat, and battle-weary eyes watched red stars on white paper shred and mutilate. And they all laughed.

In the middle of all this stood a nice young man: Everard Swain. A nice young man who has left boyhood behind in the rubbish bin, with the rest of his toys. For the moment, however, he is intent on avoiding our scrutiny, and so we must concentrate on other matters.

The afternoon was drawing to a close. It was five thirty, and the first wave of people were beginning to straggle back through the gates and home for tea. Going

against the flow, though, were two and a half people. There was a father, a mother, and a son.

"What do you want to go on first?"

"That one over there," the boy said in a voice that sounded like a small bird pecking on a window pane, pointing at the wildest and most deranged looking ride in sight.

"I don't know," father said doubtfully. "It looks rather big, eh?"

"I want to."

"Let's go over and take a look," mother decided.

The ride consisted of a bendy looking thing, attached to which were some swivel type devices just big enough to seat two people. The fun was to be swivelled like you had never been swivelled before.

"I don't know..." father said.

"Please."

"It looks like it's just for big kids."

"I am a big kid."

"Yes but...."

"Go on, take him on it. He'll be fine," mother ordered, in an un-orderly way.

"Yes, but what about me?" he pleaded, and the two, the small and the big, giggled. Father liked it when they giggled together. They joined the queue and soon were busy strapping themselves into the unlikely looking capsule.

"I don't like the look of this."

"It's all right, you're with me," the boy teased, and giggled some more. All of a sudden things began to happen, and they were things father could well do without.

"It's starting!" excitement spoke up loud and clear. They were then rolled up, chewed on, and spit out by a machine that seemed to have no taste for people.

"Oh God."

"Weeeeeeeee," the son told him. Father saw mother's face appear before them for the briefest of moments, and

then they were taken else where. It was at that moment he realised to be swivelled was to be made a fool of; and then he was swivelled some more.

"Oh no."

"Weeeeeeeeeeeeeee. Weeeeeeeee weeeeeeeeeee." Father knew that by "we", the boy meant the two of them, and the game went on.

It did not last forever. With feet planted once more on terra firma, he glanced down and felt a fleeting hint of sorrow for the crumpled grass. It did not last forever.

Meanwhile Everard Swain was still some distance away, still hiding from the story, still hoping to be overlooked, though in time we must seek him out proper, gaze into his dark eyes and say, "Hello."

They had been tossed about, span, twisted, bumped and fondled by a vast array of freakish machines. By seven p.m. father had perfected the art of grumbling and mastered the subtleties of pretended fear. He had been told not to act like a baby nineteen times, and the boy had smacked his bum more than once. The family made over to the food section of the fair, sat themselves down for some moments, and wondered what they should eat. They settled upon several sticky things of questionable origin.

The two big ones sat smoking whilst the boy ran hither and dither, chasing shadows like a dog chases his tail. Soon, the sun sank from view, and an unnecessary chill descended on the park. In the half light more people arrived: The other ones.

"Come, put your coat on." The boy scampered back almost at once. With time the darkness became more severe, the noise from the machines and generators and people became at once tangible, forcing the boy to hang close to his parents. He was not yet played out though, and begged

more fun and more rides. Father tossed the beggar boy a few favours. They were small rides, and he rode them alone.

"Can we go on just one more big one?"

"I don't know. We've all just had supper," mother said.

"So?"

"So it can make you sick."

"But it won't. Honest. Please, just one big one."

"It's no good asking me anyway. Ask your dad, he's the one that takes you on the big ones."

"Dad?"

"Okay, but then it's time to go home."

"Yeaah," cheered the boy. And so they stumbled about the place, finding way through the crowds of dark people who blocked their passage at every turn.

"That one looks fun," father lied.

"It's not so big though."

"It's big enough." And it was. They joined the queue. It was something like a Ferris wheel only it took you faster and appeared less likely to be your friend. The seats were two by two, and above each was a plastic parasol with flowers painted about its edge. The course it took was slightly off the perpendicular, and reached a height beyond which most people would wish to go.

One by one, the seats were emptied, and the line of people shortened correspondingly.

"We should get on this time," father said, estimating the number of places remaining. And soon they were the next to be boarded. And soon they were face to face with Everard Swain, for this ride was in his charge- which is all very nice for us.

"That's all," said Everard, and placed a chain across the gateway.

"Why do these things always happen to me?" father said, some what disgruntled.

"They don't," Everard replied, pushing a button which sent the ride in motion. "They always happen to me." And the two of them laughed.

"It's cold, eh?"

"If you're cold now wait 'till you get on the ride," Everard warned, grinning.

"I can imagine. The things we do for kids."

"Yeah, but I was a kid once myself, you know."

"Really? When was that?"

"When I was younger." They both laughed, and father could not help but think how pleasant this fellow seemed to be. Such a nice young man.

Everard wondered off to check the ride's control board.

"He seems nice, eh?" he remarked, and the mother murmured something which lost itself in the noise of the electric generator, supplying power to the smiles of two dozen people who were lifted high and low in the circular motion of the machine.

"Yes, very nice," she said a moment later, her stare fixed on Everard as he came back towards them. Her eyes trawled down his body. He wore a pair of thread bare jeans, off-white pumps, a thick sweater and a blue anorak.

"Do you like going on the rides?" Everard asked the boy, bending down first to his level. He nodded shyly.

"Are you having fun?" He bobbed his head once again, like a plastic float adrift on an unknown sea, and then looked down at his feet to see if they were still there. "He's a shy one," Everard said, drawing himself upright.

"He is rather. I suppose he'll grow out of it though."

"Or into it," smiled the fair-ground worker.

"Such a nice young man," father thought. "And clever too."

The ride came to a halt and the first two took exit. Mother stood to one side.

"Are you not going on," Everard asked her. "There's room."

"I don't know." She had assumed only two were allowed.

"It's safe as houses, you know."

"All right then." The two big ones and the little one went over to take their place. Everard made sure they were secured in the seat.

"You can borrow my coat if you want. It gets pretty chilly up there."

"No, no, I'll be fine," mother said half shyly, but he was already removing it.

"Here, take it. I tell you, its cold up there."

"Thanks," she took it from him.

"Now then, are you okay?" Everard looked to the boy, who once again offered a brief nod.

"Good."

The machine made a slight rotation and the next people, now below them, were helped out, and another couple locked in. Mother and father listened to the nice young man's friendly banter with everyone.

"He's nice, eh?"

"Yes, he is."

"So friendly and helpful, eh?"

"Yes."

"We're going upper and upper." the boy breathed, though now there was a note of distress in his voice. A note that went unheard.

"Mmm." Upper and upper until they reached the crest and began to descend the other side. The boy fell silent. The darkness had whispered something in his ear, and the unperturbed manner in which he had ridden a host of bedraggled machine monsters during the day, beasties lost in frenzied fits of epilepsy and lust, was now less than a boyish memory of imagined heroism. Darkness made machine growls louder.

The seats had been filled with fresh victims and the ride began its slanted circular course.

"Look how far you can see," mother said pointing, but by the time the words had been spoken they were back at ground level. "Watch when we get back up."

They had gone around and back up perhaps a dozen times when the boy began to whimper.

"What's wrong?" mother asked, leaning around to see tears fill his eyes.

"I don't like it."

"Why not?"

"I just don't."

"Stop acting like a little kid. You've been on bigger rides than this today."

"Yes, but now its dark."

"So?"

"Everyone's a monster in the dark."

"Don't be stupid. Anyway, the ride will be over in a few more minutes. You'll be fine. It's safe." In the meantime, Everard had noticed something was amiss, and as they reached ground level he brought the machine to a halt. He came running over.

"Is something wrong?"

"Yes, he's scared." Everard opened the lock and helped the boy out.

"There we are," he said, planting him on the ground.

"It's funny, he's been on big rides all day long."

"Nothing to worry about now," Everard ruffled up the boy's hair and presented him with a cheery smile. He did not smile back. Everard moved over to the control board, restarted the ride, and joined them at the exit gate. The mother took off the anorak and handed it back.

"Thank you."

"No problem. Here," he fished in his pocket, took out a tube of Smarties and offered it to the boy, who looked down to his feet.

"Don't you like Smarties?" The boy rocked back and forth, from heel to toe, with out saying a word.

"Don't be rude," mother told him, but he continued the careful study of his shoe laces.

"He's like that some times. Shy. Takes after his mother."

"Really!"

Everard looked to the mother who blushed, her head inclined slightly downwards, snatching the occasional furtive look at his strong young face.

"Ah well, thanks for stopping the ride."

"That's all right. Have a nice evening now."

"You too," father said.

"Bye," mother added, taking the boy by the hand and leading him away. Once they were back in the crowds, father said, "He was nice, eh?"

"Yes. It's a pity every one's not like that."

"He was nice, eh?" he said to the boy, who replied:

"Are we going home now, are we?"

As they drove back, father mentioned what a nice fellow he had been, and how good he was to stop the ride for them. The mother said yes, he was very friendly. He was very nice.

One by one, or in long rows, the lights were closing their eyes. The machines were at rest and their attendants straggling off towards home. Many travelled with the fair all year round, and had only a short walk to the pack of grimy caravans huddled beneath a circle of elm. Others were locals living in the town, out to make some extra pocket money.

There was a deadly silence about the place now, and the chill hung bodily in the air, thick in the air. It was twelve thirty, the pubs had been closed a good two hours, and the streets down which the shadowy figure of Everard

wandered were lost to themselves. Nothing moved. There was not a breath of wind.

The noise of the day made the silence hurt. He walked in agony.

There was no need to smile any longer. There was no need to speak. There was no need to listen. He was almost home. The nice young man who helped children from scary rides was almost home.

The bed-sit was more silent than the street in which it lived.

Everard closed the door behind him. His face was long. There was no inclination towards expression. There was no one around for miles. For thousands and thousands of miles.

He glanced about the dead room and sighed. He walked over to a rejected looking refrigerator. There was no magic light inside, and when he opened the door the room itself grew darker.

Everard took out a limp parcel and placed it on the table beside an unopened envelope. The letter was from his father and would never be read. He searched out a knife and fork from a dirty pile in the dirty sink and sat himself down, opening up the damp paper parcel and spreading it out. Cradled in the folds lay a large piece of raw of meat. Cutting into that large piece of raw meat, blood ran out onto the table, onto the letter. He cut again, stabbing and hacking, stabbing and hacking, spearing a piece with the fork and pushing it greedily into his mouth. He chewed.

The nice young man ate raw meat.

It was very good.

The Bag Man

Summer is gasping its last breath.

he meets the morning of Saturday, September third, with a large erection. Beside lays the still sleeping object loosely referred to as wife, who's dreams have all come true. The wife. And.

The end justifies the means, by which all manner of peculiar delights are forever within his eager grasp. A grasp firm and unyielding. A holding of vengeance.

A clock, glowing in the room's half light, taps out its mechanical secrets in coded click and coded clack, of future insult and shame, horror and pain, of disaster, to those of a mind to listen; but, for him at least, there is an over abundance of noise in the room, in the world, and neither word nor hint of word is heard. A thick, sticky, and very personal layer of loud confusion covers his mind, and there is no exit. It is eight ten a.m.

The arm moves across, and he begins to fondle a fist full of breast. Even though the body sleeps the nipple becomes erect, hard to the touch. Even though.

The minor pain of over zealousness brings the other body to life. There will be little competition in this game: the result forecast by ten score victories previous.

"What time is it?" murmurs a soft female voice. The wife, still in a state of semi-slumber, turns towards the other, who chooses silence as response, and begins to pull and twist on her nipples, in a distorted tug of war. he imagines his erection beneath the covers, in a three dimensional image of passion and want, of strength and weakness, of dominance, and pushes his snout between her breasts. Of dominance he bites, and she cries out, believing that this is love, and pain is pleasure.

The sun struggles behind clouds of gloom. Struggles to give its warmth to the tangled mass of fools who cluster about bus and train and car, clinging tightly to imagined walls of sanity, adhered to misconceptions of self importance, like small crustaceans fixed to a universal rock. Within each shell a world unto itself. England, with its traditional lack of will, is beginning to stretch and come alive- for all that it's worth.

Meanwhile, the animal grunts have subsided. There is an empty tranquillity in the room. There is a comfortable feeling of satiation. The two bodies lie as if in death, unmoving, entombed in their own strange thoughts, mummified by certain perpetual wants.

With the passage of time, she leaves their bed of nails, and dresses quickly. A woman of leisure- working hard on happiness- she glances back at her man on the way out, and is undaunted by the prospect of perpetual toil. The kettle is filled, toaster fed, table set, and all seems well in love or war. On the counter sits a brown paper bag, tall and erect; a supermarket bag with a blank expression. She wonders what might lie within, and peers down its wide open mouth to see it is empty, hallow, void of substance, greatly lacking in content.

The kettle begins to puff and pant. Steam. Shriek in agony.

"Tea's ready, darling," she calls. Clad in a bathrobe, he makes his entrance.

"It looks like a rotten day out there," he says, staring out of the window at the rotten day out there.

"Yes. You have any plans?"

"Why?"

"No reason."

"In that case, there's no reason to answer."

And it went on:

" " "And pigs might fly."

" " "It would to you."

" " "What difference does it make?"

" " "And you really mean it!"

They are all accusations. She has no defence. Her words are never heard.

"By the way," she begins, feigning indifference. "Where's that bag come from?" It is a singularly unimportant object, as is its presence, though to the Housewife Queen, in her bleak realm of sterility, a captive in her own domain, the smallest of change provides opportunity for wonder. It is magnified through the lens of her mind, and the mystery becomes worthy of investigation. The one that she is not, indeed, that he himself should never be, feels a flush take hold, and for several seconds it refuses to let him go. A warm wind of guilt blows out through the open windows of his eyes. The hairs on the back of his neck stand up like untidy rows of thin soldiers, toy soldiers, for they can do no real harm. The legs move nervously beneath the table, hidden from scrutiny, and he glances over to the counter and brown bag, pulling on an expression of perplexity. The shoulders offer a shrug. The offer is refused.

"i don't know," he lies. The lie comes easily. Lying is easy. Truth is hard. She knows he is lying. Bags do not appear of their own accord.

"Has the morning paper come yet?" It is a new paragraph, indeed a new page.

"I suppose so. I'll go get it for you." She leaves, returns with The Times, hands it to him, and sits herself

back down to watch him read. The funny thing is, she loves him. he may not be perfect, but who is? It is funny, and yet no one laughs.

he reads in silence, slurps on the hot, sweet drink, and munches on toast. It is perhaps some thirty minutes later that words once again break surface. During this time, breakfast things have been cleared away, and the kitchen has once again taken on its antiseptic hue.

"I have to go shopping soon."

"Oh," he offers.

"I'm supposed to meet my mother at eleven." She leaves the rooms and prepares for the outing.

"What have you decided to do then?" She is ready for the off, wearing a grey raincoat which does not stand out in a crowd.

" i don't know. i guess i'll take a walk or something."

"See you later then." The two kiss, and off she goes, humming a tuneless melody, and leaving the faint feminine scent of her subservience lingering in the room. The moment she is gone, he throws the paper to the table and dresses hurriedly.

Ready, just before going on his private way, he glances at somebody in the bedroom mirror. he does not like what who he sees.

There is a certain prospect which fills him with a certain anticipation which causes perspiration to bleed from his pores. The steering wheel grows slippery. Soon the nice neighbourhood has shifted, and the town centre is within sight.

he finds a parking space in the darker side of town. It is almost noon.

he walks, watching the girls with sly eyes, turning away quickly when they look back, looking back when they

turn away. he walks over the shadows they cast, treading them underfoot, into the dirt. The sky is half insane, with a conspiracy of clouds holding the sun to ransom, a serious and deadly game of cache cache in which only the people below can ultimately lose.

There is a deceptive air of prosperity about the place, a smell which pervades throughout the town; indeed, the country. The working class is not fooled, the middle class is fooled, the ruling class are fools. And so, with the sun doing its utter most to avoid that dank smattering of mean clouds, he goes on that solitary way.

Strangeness of mind leads him into a dingy side street. There are few people about, and he begins to relax. Why do they always stare at him? Especially the girls. They always stare.

On the corner is a Turf Accountant, whose door is ajar. Through it he can see the dark irony within, where strangely shaped men fall pray to their own strangely shaped weakness'. It is a windowless world of poverty and shame, of middle age disappointment. On the floor lies a mass of paper, betting slips tossed down with contempt, the messages of love and promise they bear no longer of any worth. It is a moment between races and the loud speaker hangs in silence. The only sound is the deep rumble of gruff punter voice and the feminine whisper of chance. he walks on.

Next door, from within, comes the harsh cry of laser gun and the thunder of exploding space craft, the laughter of teen and the clank of money. Space invaders march on, are cut down in their thousands, worlds collide, and the black fabric of the video universe is torn by vessels travelling at the speed of light, captained by punk rockers.

he crosses a small street, a mere alley running away to his right, reaches the other side in five small steps,

and glances in at the Pawn Broker's display, where other people's things are for sale. The exterior of the shop is grubby, with ten years of filth giving cover to ten more years of filth. There is no reason to make change. Desperation drives them there. People with empty stomachs care little for aesthetics.

Just next door, part of the same sad building, is a small door. Above that door hangs an unobtrusive sign which reads "Gallery", and nothing more. he opens it and is met by the smell of damp age and decay from a building long dead. A narrow stair case climbs steeply upward, inward, towards the dank black chest cavity of the corpse edifice, and as he climbs, the door behind swings shut. The darkness is teased by a dim red light on the landing above, where a plump woman sits, behind a counter, straining her eyes to read The Mirror. She looks up with a smile.

"'ello. "

"Afternoon" he says, fishing in his pockets.

"'ow's things been goin' with you then?"

"Quite nicely. Musn't complain- as they say."

"You're dead right there. I've just bin readin' the paper- it's shockin' some of the things goin' on. Shockin'."

"Mmm."

"What's the world comin' to? That's what I want to know. What's it comin' to? I've just been looking at the new budget as well. It says 'ere they're gonna put five pence extra on a packet of fags. That's a shillin' you know." he notices an ash tray full of butts, discoloured by lipstick.

"Yes, i had heard," he answers, removing some money from his wallet.

"It's shockin'. Really shockin'. Two pound fifty, please." he gives her the money. She hands him a pink ticket with her fat, pink-pudding hand, and he strolls away from the inconvenience of people.

he enters a room which is so dark he sees white spots dance before his eyes. The only light lies at the front of the room, oblong, and the size of a wall, though its moving incandescence has no effect at the rear where he stands. The eyes are closed, and he stands unmoving, allowing them time to adjust to the blackness. he opens them up like attic windows on a sloping roof, windows to a despicable room that would best be abandoned, and can now see the rows of empty seats facing front. Sideways, crab like, he makes his way down a destitute isle and takes his place.

It is warm, though he does not remove his coat.

he is bombarded by images of naked bodies writhing in artificial lust. Pasted to the screen like paper dolls somehow able to move, the girls cry in frantic orgasm, the boys grunt, gyrate and explode. he watches, spellbound, hypnotised, lost in a strange world of dark and distant conception.

The next morning comes around. It is saturday, as he likes to call it, though nothing happens.

The next morning comes around too. he is dressed and ready by seven fifteen. The wife makes breakfast and sees him off. he drives away, down a ribbon of asphalt, which twists and turns through quiet groves of suburban opulence, and more.

The car park is still empty. he is the first to arrive.

Inside, the main corridor is still sleeping. his footsteps, tip-tapping as he goes, echo faintly into its distant dream and die away. Nothing has changed. Soon the children will come, stomping and screaming, to awaken the corridor from its summer time slumber, to see that peace shall be no more, and to prove to its glossy tiles that innocence is a transient thing, way-ward, apt to "do a

bunk" at the slightest opportunity- and leave a dirty trail as it goes.

he is home, eating supper, answering the questions of a wife eager to learn of his day. The set lighting shows a harshness to his features that was previously beneath the surface, that was covered by a mask of delusion, enveloped in a desire to be something other than that which destiny has planned for him. During the day he, has, discovered, some, strange, kind, of, truth, which took him by the scruff of the neck and dragged him to a world he had only before suspected vaguely to be there. Recognising that world now as real, he finally has been introduced to himself, shook hands politely, and wiped the grime away secretively onto his trousers.

The trees of a local park still bare witness to the splendour of summer past. It is another Saturday, and there is a warmth in the air that does not want to be there. The ground is still muddy from a recent spell of rain. Near by, old men are busy playing bowls, and the clank of wood on wood can be heard in all corners of the park. There are children feeding ducks beside a distant pond, and there is something else too. Soggy leaves squelch beneath feet, and suddenly there is an explosion of sound as several flocks of birds, nearby, take simultaneously to flight.

"Where've you been all day?"

"Just out walking," he says, looking to his shoes shyly, and at once turning hurriedly, guiltily away.

"Look at your shoes! They're covered in mud. Where've you been?"

"Nowhere. i suppose i stood in some mud- that's all."

"Well take them off and wash up. Tea's almost ready."

"You mean dinner."

"I suppose I do. Anyway, you're all dirty. You need to wash."

"i suppose i do." And he leaves the room. She is not suspicious by nature, but since several weeks it is all she has. Suspicion tells her she breathes.

Meanwhile, in the bathroom, the other one washes vigorously, but no matter how hard he scrubs, nor how much soap he wastes, it will not come off.

Another week has passed. It is Saturday again. Breakfast has been consumed and the morning paper read. Errands have been run and the afternoon stretches ahead like a long bleak tunnel. he feels need to escape, out into the sunshine, to release a strange feeling pent up inside, which is growing by the minute and feels ready to burst him, wide open, like a red balloon filled with vomit.

"i'm going to take a walk."

"Where to?"

"i don't know. Just around."

"Shall I come with you?"

The answer is in his mouth at once, but he chews on it for a while before spitting it out. "No, it's all right. i feel like being on my own for a while."

The door slams shut with a bang of frightening finality, leaving a gothic silence in its aftermath. That the wife knows her husband is going for something more than a walk is not suspect, she has seen it in the tea leaves at the bottom of his cup; but they cannot foretell all, and they have left her in a dark cloud of confusion and desperation. Since sometime now he has not been himself. There is something showing of him that she can not fathom, and, less, wants to see. Where is her happiness now? This is not the way things were intended to go; her copy of the story reads quite differently. Something very, very strange is going on. A fast one has been pulled. She knows it,

though she cannot understand it. All is beyond her scope of reference, for she is like a tiny ant victimised by a playful boy who will soon crush her into the dirt with an outstretched thumb. Then, through the soot-laden mist, comes a partial explanation that seems to fit that seems to fit that she insists will fit- even if it must be forced. So she sits at the kitchen table fidgeting, counting the moments, lost in wild imaginings of her husband in the bed of another, fucking away her happiness. Fucking hard until it is all gone, for that must be it: he has found a mistress. And so it all seems at last to make sense, and yet it does not, for this is not the way that things were supposed to be. She is thrown of balance by this warping of reality, unaware that all the players have been given an entirely different script, that the ending for one is not the ending for another.

She puts on her hat and coat and rushes out, to follow, to find out why things are all twisted and deformed, running along in his wake. A slight fog wafts in the air, like scribble through a line of words; words though which can still be seen which can still be read. Out the gate she sees him at once, distant, down the avenue, a ghost shrouded in mystery, unnatural, walking who knows where. he turns around the bend, has gone around the bend, out of sight. She hastens onward.

Now she is closer, hides behind tree after tree, feeling foolish. Who might the woman be? Someone from work, someone she has never seen, someone she hates with such absolute abandon it hurts. Terribly. She is probably waiting for him right now, naked, ready for him.

She sees the back of him turn into the park, follows, along a sloping wooded path, a tunnel formed by branch, whose leaves hang mournfully, knowing their time is almost done. he sinks from view, descending into the valley, into the thin mist, down the steep hill towards the duck pond, leaving her alone in the woods, in the woods alone. There

is daylight at the end of that branchy tunnel, and she walks slowly now, finding herself possessed by that empty space, that murky piece of sky, looking forward to it like a blinkered horse. With each step though, her perspective is changed, and soon she has hint of the valley below, the terrible and eternal torment of the valley below.

The wife comes to a halt. She is arrived. The park stretches out its damp body ahead of her, below her, at her feet.

She can see her husband, scampering down the slope like a boy running to join his friends, and wonders what he is doing and what she is doing, and that perhaps he did just want to walk. Perhaps. She walks over to the ruinous remains of a small castle to her left; a castle which guards by day and by night, its blind window eyes seeing all. She stands, leaning back against its tumble down wall, watching. An enigma hangs in the air, dangling on a gossamer thread. Over a-ways, a black raven lands on the head of a weather beaten statue and does a bird shit down its face.

The wife, hands sunk deeply, a thousand fathoms deeply, into her pockets, sees him arrive at the bottom and walk out over the grass towards the ducks and the reflection of ducks, begins to believe that this is just after all an innocent traipse through the afternoon. his gait is unhurried, though stiff. Stiff though unhurried. Soon he is beyond, slips into the woods opposite, which climb, gently at first, up to the golf course.

She begins to breath easily, but then a new character enters: A young girl, appearing from the café at the western extreme of the park, walking towards the pond, unaware that her every move is checked, checked and double double checked. The wife at first does not take heed of the insidious wink of implication, but suspicion is running through her veins, running against the current, and she soon notices that the object of her now keen scrutiny

follows the same path as her husband: a path that must surely lead to nowhere, and she feels the comfort drain from her and a familiar cold chill takes its place. Her heart sinks as the girl too slips into those awkward bushes, is yet out of view, sinks like a lead weight, pulling her down into a pool of black death. She feels about to vomit, so acute is her feeling of end, of redundancy, of solitude. It all seems so much worse. The girl, so young, no doubt one of his students, she feels herself betrayed and her age too. This is more terrible than terrible. She is frozen in time, unable to move, and yet the directions say she must and so she must. The first step is the hardest, with such inert lack of will to overcome, but then the momentum of action- which pretends at purpose- takes hold, and she feels herself moved like a puppet by invisible strings down the hill, by the water and on. She is so young. How could he? he must look at her all day in school, watch her youth heave with every breath she takes. How could he?

Meanwhile, the pristine one is not in the best of moods; has decided life has turned on her and means her no good. The poor girl, though she plays her part well, knows nothing well of the part she plays. And such is the way of most.

he is waiting. In the bushes. In the bushes he is waiting. he sees the girl through jagged holes and smiles to himself. The girl is innocent, though the eyes are not.

"She has come," he thinks, smiles some more, watching through the spider's web of branch and leaf. The girl does not see him yet, stairs down at her feet, watching them move back and forth, back and forth, the path slipping by beneath their dainty tread. Suddenly, an arm is extended, appears there all alone, as if amputated, grabs her by the neck and more and more and more. The girl disappears into the bush.

The waiting is over. he is soon lost within himself, though he is about to be found out.

Wife, in the interim, has found her way along the path which leads to nowhere, and the worst is, she has arrived. She heard a certain cry, she heard a certain voice, though as yet they have no meaning. But now she can see through the tangle of branches and stops dead in her tracks, halted by a truth which can only be a lie, unwilling. Stops and stares through that nasty mess of brush, ready at once to flee, to return home and watch T.V. There are no words in her head now, she has slipped back to a primeval state of instinct and non-verbal process, where there is no thought in any normal sense of the word. She can see a man, who wears a brown bag over his head. he wears a brown bag over his head. The brown bag. Two holes have been bored through the rough paper, through which the eyes peep out. The girl is there, but at this point, with this partial image in mind, we must close our eyes and listen, listen to the depravity, the contamination, for the sight of it would surely lead to everlasting blindness.

he has not noticed the sound of another's arrival, for there is, inside his head, the sound of an exploding atomic bomb.

"Ahh," he says, gasping, loving. "Ahhh." And with it, several things begin to collide: Firstly he reaches orgasm, we hear its groan; secondly the wife, who can fool herself not a moment longer, admits to his identity. Taking a step forward, leaves squelch beneath her tread. She knows who that bag man is. She calls out his name. Lastly he looks up and sees his conscience has arrived.

"Everard!" she calls.

"Doris!" he answers.

In Conclusion

And so Doris is with husband, happy at last, knowing all the years of loneliness have finally amounted to something tangible, something she can take home and keep for her own. Something she can sleep with. He is not perfect, but she will forgive him his weaknesses as he will forgive hers. She will search in her heart and find him there, forever. Such is the essence of her love, whose meaning she can now understand as an assurance never more to be alone. No matter what.