

i think...

Vonny Thenasten

*The only world we know is the picture-show the cerebral cortex
puts together from sensory data. Whether there's anything else
nobody can say...if reality had a stage door I'd hang around
there to see what comes out after the show*

—Russell Hoban

*What is the purpose of life?
To be the eyes and ears and conscience of the Creator of the
Universe, you fool.*

— Kurt Vonnegut

*If I am a collection of habits and observations, said Alice, then
you are so much more so*

—Anon

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This novel is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental

Acknowledgements

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From Morse, Sydney and Curtis, Isabel Gordon: *Household Discoveries and Mrs. Curtis' Cook Book*. NY: The Success Co., 1909

i think...

...people lie too much

Chère Madame,

You do not know me, I am a foreigner, an Englishman. Perhaps that, and my ignorance of your ways, alone may justify this request, which may seem to you odd and, though I hope not, impolite.

I read of your sad bereavement on a recent visit. I was struck by your unlucky situation, since it evokes in all people of feeling an equal sense of the hopeless and perverse conditions which surround life in this godless world.

By chance, I was walking through the graveyard in St Benoit when your husband's cortège arrived. I spoke to the guardian and he pointed you out to me. Of course, it was not necessary, I could see by a glance at the resignation and yet purposefulness of your demeanour that indeed it was you, the widow. I could not help but admire your evident determination to remain in control of yourself at what must be a most distressing and anxious time.

So, I know you, if only by sight and reputation (for I spoke a little longer to the guardian—M Severin) who told me a little about you. Your husband was a good man by all accounts, and must be a sore loss. While I appreciate that this is very likely not the time, yet I believe it may be not inopportune to ask you to consider something that you will in all probability find strange. Forgive me: it is prompted by our chance meeting, which I cannot help but find somewhat fateful, and my own circumstances, which, if I may, I will say something of if you find that you can reply to this rather frank letter.

Madame Delacroix, I am not a rich man, nor learned, but I am skilled in many things. My life thus far, alas, I must admit has not been one of fulfilment, but rather a consciousness that I waste much of what talents God gave me. I wish to rectify this, and for some time have sought for some sign of a new road to take. I am serious, Madame, when I say that I believe our meeting to be that sign.

I do not hope for a reply. I confess I am used to disappointment, and can imagine the alarm and discomfort you must feel at reading this. However, please be calm, I will not trouble you nor pursue this matter further if you find yourself unable or unwilling to reply. Yet perhaps you will reply. In all things, we seem to have no part in their success or failure, but must wait patiently for the course of things to reveal itself.

You must be aware of the delicacy with which I strive to breach my, what shall I say, importunity. But my object is simply to say this: that I should like to help you. Not out of pity, for while I am of a certain faith, I do not pretend to be other than an ordinary, rather selfish man. But out of a conviction that the offer of work that I make to you will ultimately, in as-yet-unknown ways, be also of benefit to me and perhaps to others. It will in any case, allow me to consider at least one act of my life to contain a grace and purpose that the rest often seems to lack.

I will not prolong this letter unnecessarily. I offer to work for you for no payment, except perhaps the components of a meal or two per week. If you should find yourself replying, we need discuss this arrangement no further, I will simply do what has to be done, under your direction. There is no obligation on you to do anything whatsoever: neither to accept, nor even to reply, for I am conscious how strange this letter must seem to you. Nevertheless, failing hope, I shall simply remain

*faithful to my offer should you care to take me up on it
while I have the means to fulfil it.*

Yours etc.

... it's all about money

'Good morning Sarah. Hi Dave. Anything for me Toni?'

Toni, the PA, came back from the coffee machine where she'd been laughing at one of Dave's jokes, looking slightly flustered. Zoë was curious: Dave had figured significantly in one of her more interesting dreams. She studied him reflectively as Toni checked the diary.

'Two things. At ten you're meeting the art2go people to discuss the Katchnov gallery. At... Oh god, er, at ten also, you're meeting Paul to prepare for the Plastikon meeting at twelve. I'm sorry Zoë, I guess someone else must have taken the message. Shall I try to reschedule Paul?'

Zoë considered. She'd been wondering whether Paul might be able to help on this gallery business. She made a decision. 'No, but fax him the art2go file and say that I'd like him to sit in. Tell him that he'll have to brief me on Plastikon before we go. Oh, and tell him not to dress too smartly. OK, anything else?'

'No, that's it.'

Zoë's lips were tight, her eyes bright already. Today was going to be good.

'Can you get me some toast and coffee? Thanks.' She walked with her slightly stumpy stride into her office, leaving the door open. By nine thirty she would be prepared, and art2go would be hers.

There are better things to do than eat hot toast and coffee when you're cold, but no easier ways of comforting yourself. Zoë sat down at her desk. She opened letters and put them aside, looked at reports and read some Plastikon background that she found in the files. Crumbs littered the desk. She sipped at the hot sugarless coffee.

Plastikon, who were they? They were in leisure, yes. Leisure, leisurely, leisured. She wasn't sure she knew what it meant. She read some more of the files, skimming the lines deftly, looking for clues. She was sure she'd heard of them somewhere. She called through the open door.

'Toni, have we got anything else on Plastikon? Do you know anything about them?'

'Sorry, can't help you Zoë. Do you want me to ask around? One of them's really cute though.'

'Will you do that for me? Thanks, Toni. Which one's that?'

'Luc, big guy, blue eyes. Not my type though, too full of himself. Could be fun though,' she grinned.

Zoë turned back to the file, musing, lips pouting. What do I do for fun? she asked herself. Not a lot.

Leisure is what, exactly? Games machines? An activity, a period of time? Does it have to be fun? She mused on what she did for fun. That wasn't difficult: sex, drugs and rock and roll—not a bad description really, though she seemed to remember that “rock and roll” actually meant sex, and drugs without sex are not as much fun.

So it seems sex is leisure. What else? Travel, eat, play, watch, partake. Where would a robot fit in? A leisure toy, they'd said: it helps you watch or do, that's all. If doing fun, then you don't want help—unless it's human help. So, watching. OK, there's an idea: a commentator.

Or, maybe, for the women, an angel. You could keep it around to tell you what was really going on. But how would it know? The press releases she had just been looking at talked it up, seemed to give it quasi-human senses, even thoughts. She wondered about that, it sounded too good to be true. It would have to be conscious for a start...She'd have to talk to someone who knew about this stuff, Denbigh maybe.

She tried to imagine herself made of dead stuff, bits that you could just throw away or replace if they got broken. *You* could just throw them away, or *you* could change something for a better model. But surely that's essentially human, aspirational? The same as godlike, really. She wondered if there would be shops, or places where the robots could hang out together, and chat about accessories. Or would they be happy to mix in, wait in line with the rest of us?

She read more and found that, yes, that was what they were suggesting: sentience, consciousness. She felt a black wall looming. And dreams, they had dreams! No, she read it again, that was stupid, only people have dreams. Well, and dogs, maybe chimps and such like. She turned the page. Ah, no self-determination though. It would do just what it was told, so they said. Good doggy. But she wondered how they would manage that, wasn't *that* a bit godlike, in the circumstances? How could Plastikon be so confident that they could control something they suggested would be almost indistinguishable from humans? They said it would walk and talk and look human, anyway, and who knew what a human thought was?

It might think like a man, thought Zoë, but no way could it pretend to be a woman. Women weren't robots. And feelings? They didn't talk about that. How weird it would be, to respond always in the same way, without the problems of emotion and desire, even without an objective. How could it know how to respond? Responses depend on personality, learned experience, emotions, moods, what's currently cluttering your head. You don't tell a child stuff it can't understand. You don't tell people things

they don't want to hear. In fact, the whole knowledge thing...she'd *definitely* have to talk to Denbigh. Even the basic things were too hard for her to contemplate: autonomy, appropriate action. But these are learned things—would the robot learn them as it went along? Would it socialise?

Even more difficult, to build an attitude, a personality. What colour do you want your robot? What colour would the robot want to be? She would have to take their word that Plastikon knew what they were doing. He'd have to be clever, this robot, accomplished even, well-read, cultured, persuasive. An art critic perhaps? She laughed out loud—it's about time we had a good one. Amusing, yes. Strange? Impossible. Nothing is stranger than people.

She put the idea aside. Perhaps in time...for now we'll forget the details, it was a game she played with herself. Concentrate on the fact. Mechanical, useful, get it to the point when it's as useful as a car or wristwatch and we're there. As useful as a Hoover or spindrier even. But that's far too basic, A general-purpose thing—but so many problems with that. It will have to arrive complete, ready set up, just press the button and go. She saw trouble, and shook her head.

She breathed out. Anyway, Plastikon, according to its own press, was a leisure industry in its own right, a defence industry...after all, is leisure not a defence against toil and death? And now they are targeting ordinary people. Well, ordinary. Do ordinary people buy robots? Not long ago you could have asked the same thing about computers. Games. What do they want from it? The alienness of it fazed her a little. She wished Paul was the account director. But it was big and if it came off then she would get her directorship, no problem.

She had her own plans—but she carefully put away the pleasurable speculation. For now, trying to understand these people was her main concern. After a little more reading she put the papers down. These are people to avoid, she counselled herself, these are people to offload as soon as possible. She sat and considered how she could keep the required distance without them noticing. James wouldn't care what she did, as long as they were happy.

At half past nine her watch beeped. In half an hour she would be at the meeting, sweating slightly, trying to relax her shoulders and keep sitting straight, and listening to strange people tell her things she didn't need to know. But for now, munching toast, she was relaxed enough not to think about keeping her neck free.

Odd phrase, "keep your neck free". She knew what it meant, and did it, as the Alexander teacher had shown her, and it helped. But she always heard herself say 'keep Tuesday free' in the background; just as she said 'early

grease' when she was offered Earl Grey. She knew nothing about how habits were formed, and wished she did, so she could feel she had some control. Habits like going to bed at a certain time made you feel that every day at least one good thing will happen, and at a time so thoroughly under control that, like breathing, you need do nothing to help or hinder. Habits like repeating stupid phrases under her breath she could do without.

Alexander lessons helped, but how can you practice stopping something you are about to do, and want to do? It may be that doing only things you didn't want to do is the answer, and would give you sufficient detachment: it seemed that a lot of people try that. For detachment, looseness, conservation of energy is the key to good posture and smooth skin. These are the important things—forget the big words. She glanced at herself in the mirror she had had placed on the wall opposite her big desk. Only for a moment: she often didn't like what she saw. She studied herself: she'd do, for now.

She hoped that calling in Paul was a good idea. He was intelligent, presentable and serious. But sometimes not tactful. Sometimes, if he wanted to, he could seriously upset people. She wondered if he thought it was his duty. Yes, he was serious, and sometimes a bit scary. He worked things out, set them down, filled them out. It was like he had this script in his head—*Scratch*, it said, *scratch things till they bleed. Even though you don't like blood, scratch away*. What's inside? Whatever it was, he noted it, sorted it, fixed it. No blood on him.

Zoë began to worry, and picked up the phone. In the mirror again, she smoothed an eyebrow.

'Get me Paul, he's at home.'

She poured herself some more coffee. She would have to be tactful with him. Making a rabbit-face, she dabbed at her teeth. Paul liked her. She liked him. She smiled at the wall, waiting.

After the call she felt less tense. At nine forty-five, give or take, she went out into the fog in her car to the meeting. Ten minutes later she was there. People noticed how relaxed she was, how smooth her forehead, how bright her eyes—the meeting went well.

...it's curtains

Paul was at home when the fax arrived. The call from Zoë had been pleasant. He liked hearing her voice, slightly husky in his imagination. But he didn't like the sound of Plastikon, on top of his other projects. It wasn't like her to mess up on meetings, it wasn't a good start. And he didn't know how he could help—not his scene at all this kind of crap. She'd made a joke, though she'd been forced to explain it to him.

'You know the old joke, what's in it for me? Silicon!'

She waited for what seemed like a long time, disappointed again. He didn't have much of a sense of humour.

Paul thought of Zoë as his personal life director and stage manager. She often let him take the credit for things when he felt he was just following her script. He definitely liked her, she was warm, a human among goblins and trolls. He thought of himself as one of her masks, as though she could slice up the fruits of her talents and give them to others to exhibit; apparently autonomous, they all knew she was vital to their success and depended on her for their lifeblood. But it didn't bother him being a golem. His script was in a clear and rounded hand, and he felt it made best use of his talents.

Zoë's message flashed on his screen and he turned to watch the paper squeeze out—like a smug piece of shit, he thought. He reached across to the coffee table and ripped off the shiny white paper. He went still as he read it. Katchnov? He tried to remember where he'd heard the name. A news article, he decided, a new art gallery. Pop-art, and other low-grade stuff. Paul had read that advertising and art went well together, just different types of showbusiness. It made things easy when there was no confusion of purpose.

But this stuff was unusual. An art gallery looking for a critic? He sat back and let the thought sink in. Holding a mirror up to bad art? How could that work? Intriguing though. 'My lords, ladies and gentlemen, I give you glee and sarcasm, let's rip!' he'd laughed to Zoë on the phone.

'No, Paul, be serious,' she'd replied, enthusiastic. Enthusiasm, attention, engagement...it was one way of finessing the customers, moneyed and desperate. They know the kudos that accrue to those appearing sensitive, perceptive. It was otherworldly. It diverted attention from the nasty business of consumption, of growing fat. Once, when a population was ravaged and raped, the ravagers and rapers knew that the next time they might be the victims. But now the winners and losers are entrenched, the

force of habit strong, so that looter and looted are fixed in their roles. Panem et circenses, obedient and dull, the dull grind.

Zoë had explained. 'It's a kind of warts-and-all glamour, Paul. Pre-empt the delicate and refined, show them they do not own the label 'art'. art2go want a rough and vicious bastard on their side, someone who can sell garbage as garbage. But it's hard, the practicalities mean that this person cannot have a reputation or known prejudices, a bit of previous. No, this person must be clean, new, unknown, but *nasty*. And be capable of bursting exuberantly and defiantly out.'

She paused. 'Well maybe not *burst*, but anyway, you get the picture.'

Another pause. 'And actually, I'm starting to get an idea... Paul, what can you tell me about this other thing, this robot? Is it for real? Listen, we need to talk: but first think. Yes. Yes.'

She hung up.

Paul had his own ideas. He thought clients confused when they wouldn't admit that what they were doing was largely mythical, ephemeral. Sometimes they insisted, and of course he went along with it. But art! So nice to do business with arty types. He liked them, their edginess, their anti-business attitudes, and their greed. They didn't prevaricate, on the whole. Not that that meant they talked sense—a degree's difference.

Paul's thoughts turned to Zoë again. He liked working with her, he liked looking at her, her black eyes, direct gaze, black hair, her smooth look. He knew she thought him, not dull, but cold.

He wondered about that. He would have liked very much to follow her thought-processes, to travel down the wires as things sparked and opened, pitted and closed. He wanted to get inside her head, to feel as she felt going about her business. He knew so little about her. It intrigued him to watch her at work. He doubted her knowledge but admired her jumps of fancy. She thought herself sharp, but she was as open to him as a frog pond—he watched and delighted in the stillness and play, and was always surprised by the leaps, dangerous but vital. She in turn showed him his own shortcomings: lack of imagination, concentration on the ordinary, impatience with woollyness. Woolly sometimes worked, he knew, but he didn't understand how.

Not that he felt dull, or ordinary or impatient, but this was clearly how others saw him, he read the signs, over and over again. It's what would hold him back. Not that he felt ambition either, but he knew it was required. Left to himself he would never get anywhere, he'd simply be a resource, a library of techniques, successful but directionless. He knew he was riding on her coattails, as she did, and it didn't depress or irk him, for

that was the way it had to be. His little secret would always prevent him from being the kind of success his employers always seemed to expect. He lacked that striving for engagement that allows friendship and rivalry to power the slant of ambition. He was happy to help.

He turned back to his screen. He needed a few more minutes to get his thoughts in order. He'd been making notes for several hours, and now he had to arrange them into an argument.

What did Plastikon want to hear? Innovative, leading edge, new direction, mainstream but slightly quirky, profitable. They wanted to hear that they were taking big risks, smug in their own belief that they were safe. Others would take the real risks, including this agency, whose contract could be interpreted as requiring success before payment.

Rapidly, he rearranged the text of the notes until it had continuity. He made bits he couldn't fit into footnotes, and then considered the result. It wasn't reassuring. The thing grated, and he couldn't see a plan coming together. He sighed, this was where the real work began. Basically, fundamentally, this robotnik was not a good candidate for anything, and he guessed they knew it. Whatever he came up with, they'd be sceptical and would take a lot of convincing, which was where Zoë came in. She was good at her job. He smiled. The usual routine. But where would the idea come from? He thought Zoë couldn't be much help here. Nevertheless, he looked forward to working with her. He could never be sure.

He sat back. He'd have to talk to some of the creatives. 'God help me,' he moaned as the phone rang.

'Yes, Paul here. Hello again Zoë, what can I do for you?'

When she had finished he returned to his desk and considered. Zoë seemed worried, and her concerns had leaked over him: sex, power, novelty, play, resolution. Usefulness. But that wasn't how he saw it: leisure time for Paul was just switching off, even though he couldn't do it.

He turned back to the job. Plastikon were in leisure, and Zoë had asked him to make a list of leisure pursuits. Talking to her, it was obvious she equated leisure with pleasure. So he tried: of them all he found the love of novelty and play disturbing, and the concept of resolution hard to grasp. To be useful, yes, that's easy: you reduce the effort involved in getting things done. Sex: well, yes. Power: of course. To be ordered among the chaotic, the bringing of sense where there was hope or fear, or both, the bringing of knowledge of what is to come. The sense of cause and effect, of predictability. But how to externalise it, advertise it, present it? Displays

must attract the right sort of attention. Novelty displays, distractions—he thought of conjurors.

These things pleased him. If he knew pleasure, it was here among the ordering of his thoughts, the satisfaction of the organism in sculpting its world. In his head he saw blue lines, moving, shaking around the cups of knowledge waiting for the little balls, the little balls to fall in the cups. When the balls fell, when the cups were full, the lines calmed and stopped, the momentary stillness echoed in his body, he became still and dead. Dead was good.

Until the lines moved, until the faces moved among the lines, until the data stilled he didn't rest, had no desires unless it was to rest again. The dance of light stimulated him, that's all, there was no thrill there, just absorption and order. This was his world, no world. He speaks to Zoë while the lines move, signal and response, pulse and glow, pulse and glow. But when the glow fades, when the pulse dims, then he is at his best. He only awkwardly speaks, so he thinks, yet no-one knows, no-one knows it is awkward, synthetic, unfelt. You might say he played a good game, but he never played.

Zoë, the delightful Zoë, got through to him with her directness and enthusiasm, things he didn't know himself. He never contemplated life or death or dreams or joy, not one, not ever. His world was dark and calm, stillness and cool attention.

*I'm crossing the road when the faceless man opens fire.
He follows me as I duck behind a postbox, and keeps
shooting. The noise makes me frantic and I feel the
bullets hitting me as I throw myself around on the
ground, trying to get away.*

*You look at the wounds and turn away to light a
cigarette, then you start walking to the car. I struggle to
my feet and follow. We arrive at a doctor's surgery. He's
dark and square, with white hair and rough hands.*

*He puts me on a couch and starts to cut me open. In
horrible pain, I watch as he drags out my stomach and
puts in on a tray in front of me. It's rotten, and filled
with silver shards. I pass out, happy that the doctor is
taking care of me. I feel my stomach being roughly
pushed back in, it's mangled and bleeding.*

I walk home, faint and mortally pale.

...hope is lost at the start

Monique took the letter from her box. She wasn't expecting correspondence, and looked mistrustfully at the strange writing, the foreign hand. She wanted someone with her as she opened it, someone who would if necessary read it to her. Not Stephanie, no. Perhaps Isabel at the café. Isabel, matter of fact, a little gloomy, but what could she expect? She makes no effort to welcome her clients, but radiates the same despondency day after day, her boy by turns whining and shouting, exciting the dogs.

Monique looked at the clock: already she had wasted the morning. There was no bread, coffee was low, and the washing up was all that waited for her. She felt tired, and on top of all this, the letter.

Christian, the postman, had chatted for a few moments and tried to cajole her into opening it there and then, but she had resisted, turning to the weather, the terrible hot summer that had killed half the chickens and some of the trees. They talked of the thousands of old people dying in Paris, the news was full of it. But old people: one day she and Christian, they too would be old, and she wasn't sure she would try to hang on as so many seemed to do.

Christian returned to his yellow Citroen van and drove off. Monique stroked the letter as she made her way to the house. She stared sadly at her garden, which was a mess. Her once-beautiful garden, with its figs and lawns, dahlias and arbours. Where would she get help with it now? It was beyond her aching fingers. The weeds? The moles—God knows, she'd squatted enough, to no avail—and the unpruned apple trees that straggled up to the clouds? The weedy grass and dead, brown vines?

François the knowledgeable, yes he promised, he always promised, but never came. He was too concerned with his sheep, his cows, his land and fiercely holding on to those things that were his. Even his wife, Clemente. Of course Clemente suspected Monique of trying to seduce him, and Clemente's hard look on her thin lined face—well, Monique got the message. But François the irritable, François the displeased? Never. His reputation well and truly established in the villages around, François could not be attractive to a warm-hearted woman. His difficult stance, his rudeness, his carelessness with the sheep—no, he is not a gentleman. He does not keep his promises. Careless with his seductions too, as with his sheep.

Her little potager, untended. Where before had been precise and firm paths, clean tilth, summery lines of salad and picnic delicacies, sweet

fruits, deep beds of burgeoning roots and stomach-warming soup-stuff, now were clumped earth and couch grass, stones and soul-shrinking emptiness. A dreary place of penitential aches and pains. She tried, sporadically and randomly, to keep up the asparagus beds and the haricots, the carrots and courgettes, the odd lettuce, but without energy or will.

Monique sighed for herself. No Romeo is about to charge up the moonlit path to her, no Caruso sing to her, no gentil knyght lay her down gently in a sea of mist. Her lot is that of the middle-aged and forgotten, the weary and lost. Did she bring it on herself? Who can say? Her late husband Albert had treated her gently but distantly, there was no flame there. He gave her gifts when prompted, bought a comfortable bed, gave her Stephanie and Paul, and smoked in front of the fire, exasperated at her rare and hesitant requests to invite friends, anyone, for a meal, for a new conversation.

She missed Albert, she missed holding him. She missed his bulk in the house, his presence, his smell. She missed how he just fixed things.

Cautiously she placed the letter on the mantelpiece, making a space behind the Limoges figurines, then turned and put another log in the stove—soup for dinner, Albert's favourite, leek and onion. She smiled wanly.

Stephanie looked up, hard faced. How typical of her mother to hoard the letter like this, how typical of her to find something so preposterous *sweet*, and then to let the sweetness fade to familiarity before trusting herself to embrace it. Monique sighed.

Stephanie stared at her. *Maman likes the familiar, she thought, she fears the strange and unusual—don't we all? Let such letters be strange, they are strange.*

'Maman, it is an insult, I will throw it away, foolish man. But that's men for you, isn't it? Where do they get these ideas? As if you would reply! Of course, Pepe might write something like this to his mistress—if he could manage it.' She laughed. "Start slow, intrigue her"—that would be his line of thought. But we are not so stupid, eh Maman? Not so easily taken in. But I wonder what he wants, all the same. There must be something behind it. Who would want to come and live here? There's nothing, the town is dying, the houses are falling down, the river goes brown, the children leave. Only the stupid English would willingly choose a place like this. But perhaps there is a little money to be made from this...?' She stared at her mother. 'Or perhaps it is a joke after all. Perhaps it is François? No, he has not the brains.'

But he is sly, she thought, and he would like to get his hands on our land, even so neglected. It was only a few hectares, but good land. Her father had struggled to make it pay, fending off the neighbouring farmer who had bought by harassment all the land around. A nasty man: salaud!

She scowled inwardly at the voracious Dutchman, an immoral man, a peasant in his greed, a peasant, yes, like them. Greed and poverty are a good combination, it is necessary, but greed and wealth, that was certainly wrong. Do the rich have dirt in their fingernails? Some, yes, one must admit, and some are kind in their own way. But the Dutchman is mean, it showed through his charm.

But then they say he is wrong in the head, and who wouldn't be, alone in that crumbling heap, and so proud of it? They also say he is not so rich, that it is his wife who holds the purse-strings. Ach, who is to know, or to care? I know only that his animals, even the horses, are starved and neglected. Even his dog! And what does he do with all that land except neglect and ruin it? As would François ours, the lazy bastard.

She looked up: Monique was asleep.

Later, François, sitting at the table on one of his all-too-brief and vaguely dispiriting visits, was direct.

'Who is this person? Do you know him? He has no right to address you like this. You can rely on me to...' He stopped, wrinkling his brow. 'I know these English, they talk in such ways your head cannot understand. They speak, but nothing comes out but noise. What do they say? More important, what do they mean? You have my word Monique, I shall watch him. I shall understand him.'

François sipped his coffee from the plain mug with little grunts of satisfaction: good coffee, made well, to his liking. Monique seemed to him today a little old—but he couldn't remember her being young.

'When Albert took you off to his farm to begin married life, I looked around me and saw I was alone. I wanted to take you to my farm, but I had neither a farm nor your love.

'And so we become old in our hearts,' he sighed. 'We remain while others go forth. It's not a life to share, this one. Of course in time one finds a job, maybe even a good job, and one works and rises and becomes well off, but without heart. Then one finds a woman and marries and has children. One begets and thrives, but still one works and works until it becomes too much. Without heart one can endure many things, one can endure the wrong woman...' He stopped.

François wore a perpetual frown, he looked constantly vexed. Monique didn't know why he'd stopped. She didn't believe him lost in thought—he

spoke what he thought, sometimes before he thought. He was a recreational thinker only. She knew him.

'François, perhaps you could help me today? My garden is so sad, and nothing grows there now. I'd like to plant a row or two of something again, a few beans and potatoes—do you think you could find the time?'

'I'm sorry, chérie, I really have so much to do, so much paperwork...'

'But you always say that.'

'But it's always true! Papers for this, permissions for that, rules to follow, inspections to arrange...' An active man, he found the business of farming intensely disagreeable. It made him neglect his animals. Lambs died—they always had, but not so many as now. They took so much time, they needed so much care. Poorly constructed biological machinery, like a Chinese tractor, a poor copy of the hardy picturesque beast he wished for.

Monique sighed. It would be so nice to have help once in a while. She felt old and tired, but was yet young, barely fifty—her life had not been easy. She watched François go off in his new Citroen, and returned to the dishes.

Some days later another letter appeared, written in the same hand. This time Stephanie took it on herself to open it without telling Monique it had arrived.

Chère Madame,

I cannot say how distressed I was to realise that I possibly had not made clear the nature of my offer. I break my promise not to inconvenience you, but I must be sure that you understand my offer is to help you in the labour of the farm, unconditionally. I would make my own arrangements that would leave you free of any extra burden. I am a plain and careful man, and you must forgive this oversight.

Yours etc.

... nobody really cares

'Look, we'll try to order this somehow.' Paul had made a to-do and to-consider list, and passed it round. He didn't like the look of these new clients. There were four of them, and from his expression, their leader—Luc, apparently—didn't like him either. There was a nervousness about them, a desperation almost, very odd, but Paul thought he understood. He stayed calm among these foreigners.

'What's this?' said Luc, a tall, intense blond, 'I don't understand. We have one year to make a success of this. It's that easy. All we want from you is selling ideas.'

'If we don't know what it is...'

'Well, that's your problem. We give you money, you do a job. I was told you were good.'

Paul stood and lined up some papers on the table in front of him, shifting them about.

'I understand that you have already carried out something of a marketing exercise internally? The results were not conclusive, and I think that's when you decided that outside advice was ... advisable. As you know, I have been briefed by your own people. You also gave me permission to discuss your development, in general terms, with some academics working in the same area. Transcripts of the complete telephone conversations will be ready for you after this meeting.' He glanced at each of them, a few seconds, a little attention.

'Forgive me for taking you through this.' Now he addressed himself directly to the blond. 'I'm anxious for you to understand how we work. To show you we are almost as tightly run as your own organisation. I want you to feel you can trust us, and me in particular, since I'll be your primary contact.' He smiled.

A redhead next to the blond frowned and Paul turned to him immediately, showing a serious face.

'Our directors of course will be in overall control, and you are free to discuss strategy or detail with them.' Paul watched the redhead relax slightly. 'I just meant to suggest that I will be running the mechanics of the campaign.' He looked at Zoë. 'Under the direction of Zoë, of course.'

Now he'd taken care of everyone. The entire organisation was continuously at their disposal. They could shoot the art director and insist on Donald Duck if they liked. He could see the message widening their

mouths. Some were salivating, staring at Zoë. Paul paused for a brief moment, fighting an urge to reprimand them as if they were children.

Luc, the blond, the decision-maker here, made a sign. He wanted more attention.

‘Zoë, Paul: first things first. We’re here to talk about what Plastikon is about. How we do things, what we’re trying to achieve.’ Another pause. He closed his eyes.

‘Our aim is to increase human happiness. It’s a challenge, but that’s what we try to do. The company of course also exists to make money, yes, and to give people work... Maybe you didn’t know that most of us were at college together? A long time ago, but we were, and we had ideals. Some of those ideals have gone a bit mouldy, and some have committed suicide faced with the big bad world, but their corpses don’t stink, they’re preserved, cold maybe, but some of us visit them now and again, and pay our respects.

‘But our aim is still, at the very least, not to foist unhappiness on our customers. When you go over the reports you’ll see we have a good, an excellent, relationship with our customers. Whatever you think of our products—and believe me I have personal doubts about a few of them—they sell because they make our customers happy, mostly.’

‘Do you have much feedback?’ asked Paul. ‘I mean, how do you know? I’m not doubting you, I’d just like to be sure we are clear on the channels we have available. Genuine access to clients can be a great help to us.’

‘You’ll have the details, though how much good it will do I don’t know. What we’re dealing with here is different, and bigger than anything we’ve handled before, which is the main reason we’re sitting round this table.’

Paul knew Luc was not telling the whole truth, only the public truth. The company had grown by buying in expertise, which was expensive. Luc was not, as far as Paul knew, a founder, as he claimed. Paul put it down to enthusiasm.

‘But to continue. We’re known as a company that satisfies. We don’t peddle stuff, we react to demand. Now you’re asking yourself what sort of demand is there for such a thing as this? What sort of crap is he talking? Well, we’re here, me and the gang, asking what to do about one of our own products. What kind of market sensitivity is that? We’re letting you in on a secret and we come over hard. Well, that’s correct, let it be so. We’re out on a limb with this one—I should have said “Let’s be honest” or something there, but what the hell, you’ll find out that we are both frank and honest, and that frankness and honesty is a prerequisite in the people and organisations we deal with.

‘But anyway: we like our customers, and as far as we can tell, they like us. We don’t want to disappoint anyone with this.’

He waved vaguely at the sketch he’d pinned on the wall.

‘We’re doing this as an experiment, a very expensive experiment, and, just so you know: we’re not completely sure we’ve made the right move in coming to you, to anyone outside the company. It’s a cultural thing, nothing personal. So, anyway, yes...’ He gathered his thoughts. ‘Plastikon wants to make money making people happy. It’s why we’re in leisure. We don’t want to alleviate suffering or any of that crap, we just want to find people with a demonstrable capacity for joy and happiness—and give them something that helps them realise some of that capacity.’

Zoë suppressed a giggle: he was serious. What he meant was *make people want this*.

‘This is important: when we ask you for your opinion, it means we can’t do it ourselves. We’ve tried, but it’s beyond us. We need your help. Now...’

Again he waved at the sketch.

‘What we have here is a dream. It’s personal, physical, touchable, but it’s a dream. We need someone who has good dreams to tell us how this one should go.’

He stopped, and glanced at Zoë who was staring blankly, a little frightened. She usually had *bad* dreams.

Going through the door, am I doing this right? Who’s there? Those ugly faces, it’s the stunted, stupid, people. My people. Moving slowly in circles, in habits, in chains. Nobody knows, none of us, we’re not free, we just don’t know. We don’t know each other. Where are the others?

But Paul was nodding:

‘Yes, we can do this for you. We revel in dreams, we live by dream management.’ He smiled. ‘Dreams happen here. Nightmares too: they can be educational, but we keep them to ourselves. Dreams, we tell everyone. We have good dreams.’

Paul wasn’t happy. This was serious, he didn’t enjoy serious when it was not under his control—he was supposed to be the serious one. He looked across at Zoë. She was still sitting blankly, like nothing had gone in.

‘Zoë, I like this,’ he said. ‘We have real scope here for your creative gifts.’ He meant *please find something in this that someone will want*.

At her name, Zoë started and sighed, and came back, though she was subdued through the rest of the meeting. Paul had never seen her quite like this before, with clients. She was always the lively one, the quick smile and pleasing giver of attention. He hoped she wasn’t ill. She was the persuasive one.

But Zoë was used to it, this, the fear, she could handle it. Powerful people, she thought, glancing at Luc, and still they spend all day like workmen, undressing all the women they see and wanking in toilets. She flushed faintly, easing in her seat, her loose shirt settling more firmly on her breasts.

So, this robot. She’d seen one once, a prototype. She could only call its movements effortful. It made her wince watching it attempt to pour some sugar into a cup. It looked like a large spider or octopus with different bits attached to the end of its arms, just as in old SF movies, but shinier, rounder, in many ways more sinister. Maybe they could do better now. Rubbish bins with tentacles and all that was long past, neolithic, but was it? Aren’t people still anxious for their souls, and desperate to be superior? But they’d suggested it might be mistaken for human. Did they just mean it could speak or what? Did it really look human? The thought scared her.

She didn’t know what to say now. The speech had surprised her. More than surprised. She needed time to think. She concentrated for a few seconds.

‘A short break, gentlemen?’

‘Hey, why not? A hot totty goes down well,’ said the blond, Luc.

He smirked, she thought, like he knew he could hit the spot. She was drawn to him. Let him try! She looked round and saw the others’ disdain. What did they know? Useless little pricks. She decided that she’d like him to... Let him try! She glanced at his crotch as they rose—a certain bulge there, a certainty. She stooped to look in her bag, letting her shirt hang a little. He’d like that, a little display.

The rest of the afternoon passed. Details were filled in. He smiled at her when possible, and she did her best to make those small noises with her tights when he looked.

What is this word *leisure*? she wondered again. What is it? Is it play, or is it another vague item on the lifelong agenda? Not that play wasn’t on the agenda too...but anyway, leisure, providers of pleasure for the leisured. Not the leisurely though, no, these products needed intervention and

input. They made you work at it—perhaps. That's right, nothing comes easy.

She looked at the faces around the table, at the animal faces, tongues lolling, yellow eyes seeking her out. She was spread-eagled before them, she offered herself shaking with the fear and joy of being taken and mauled. Carnivorous and cruel, the creatures of the world in which the body lived would never be satisfied until she was utterly consumed, destroyed. This was her savage world.

Well, then she would show them. She felt pressure in her stomach as the animal spirits invaded her, as her eyes and ears sought to know their world. She drew a breath, inhaling the essence and form of their desires, hearing the voices of the whispering world grow louder. Light flooded the room and her eyes grew hard; her fur bristled. She sat on her haunches and waited, her head clear, her smile ready. Now, naked and strong, she was the queen of her world, she could scratch and bite with the best of them.

So, little robot, what can I do with you, do for you to justify me buying you? Can I brag about you to my enemies or proudly present you to my friends? Yes, it must be presentable, a present, a seeming gift. What is the best gift to receive? Bodily pleasure, and, at the other end of the scale, release from boredom: mental relief, emotional support—is it like a dog, or a fire engine? Not a computer, not that. A psychoanalyst would be good, a keen listener, a brief talker, a rooting best friend, and obedient dog. But we have those. A charming friend? Too complicated. A life recorder, a life storer, transmitter, a diary, a mobile notepad, a clean unwritten sheet, an open book? Yes.

Yes, leisure, not work. What's work? Work satisfies primal instincts—I live, I have, I live well, I have more: that's what it reduces to. You work to eat, to be warm, and to impress or dominate. The rest is leisure. So many people don't have leisure—they have free time, but they're always denied: denied a home-place, denied love and comfort, denied wellbeing. Those people have no leisure, they always work. No fun for them. A cloud, a dark sky, a table in the corner or in the limelight, no matter—all is work, all is serious.

So then, leisure products? Fun products: aeroplanes, dildoes, whatever. No. This is very definitely not a leisure product. This is a work associate, subordinate. What will it do to help me eat, be warm, impress or fornicate? It provides comfort-warmth. I have it, they don't. Result: I can afford this expensive aid, which makes me feel good. Like an expensive car or house.

I wish it didn't always come down to that, but it does. Money, influence, power. The three pillars of civilisation. What sort of comfort-warmth? A flatterer, priceless...but no, kisses don't last.

At last the meeting ended, but Luc was shy with her, and moved to the other side of the lift as they entered. She stayed at the front, and faced them, him.

'Where are you staying? If you're here tonight, maybe you'd like to eat something new?'

How could she be so crude? she wondered, moistening her lips. She smiled and moved closer. She smiled around them, but started with him, the blond, Luc. He was trying to hide a grin that cut his face in half.

'If you like, I'm free at eight, she said. We can work some details out.'

The others were keen, but Luc reminded them of their booked table. 'Some other time,' he said. And then made sure to call after her outside.

'Hey wait!' He came quickly up. 'If the offer's still on, I've changed my mind. Would you mind if it were just me?'

'That would be delightful Luc,' she smiled. 'Where shall we meet?'

He spoke softly, out of earshot of the others. 'We're staying near the Lord Nelson.'

'Great, I'll pick you up outside the Lord Nelson at eight-thirty. See you later.'

She turned to find Paul looking at her. He looked pained, a little jittery, not like himself. 'I was about to make my own pitch, but I see I'm late on the street. That was quite a performance. I don't suppose you fancy a quick one to keep you going?' Although he said it only to himself, he was surprised even at this—he hadn't realised he had acquired sarcasm. He didn't like it, but it might be useful.

Zoë couldn't decide what he meant, and turned back to her car, a little deflated.

Paul also was deflated: an odd feeling, he decided. He knew himself to be a bit on the cool side, not really moved, just moving. Cool—how could this fundamentally unengaging, unattractive trait be found otherwise? But

he easily dropped the thought, comforting himself with practising deflation and sarcasm on those faces that stood out from the crowd. In his head he pierced and punctured the ones he saw as gross, or too self-assured, or too eager, or too dim. The sarcasm he reserved for the thin, shy and bright. Such churning wit.

Paul mused on the problems as he drove home. What problems? Well, first we have this robot, OK, machine. A playfriend, a dog, a mad uncle? No. He wanted it to be serious, a serious effort. Paul is a serious person.

What had Zoë said? A helper, a flatterer, your dearest friend. But also a critic—but not your critic. Let's not waste this. What could this thing do? They said it could think, and he knew it could. He'd talk to it then, and find out. He'd visit and decide. Zoë could come, he'd like her to come. He liked her around: her soft presence, he was surprised to discover, soothed him. Also irritated, but such small clashes as they had she didn't acknowledge. It should make a big splash, it should be a big deal, it would need coaching. Paul could do that. He had the art.

The art! He should have laughed out loud, but couldn't. The metal man would be a critic, a reviewer, a watcher, participant and judge. It sounded unlikely, but Paul had faith, faith in Zoë, faith in the workings of the great machine, in its components and energy, in its compulsion. It was all he knew. If it failed he would help to repair it. It was all there was, the framework for whatever else.

But he would need help, someone engaged in the day to day, but an outsider, an engineer. It wasn't hard to decide. He picked up the phone.

'Denbigh my friend, I need your help.'

'Friend, eh?'

'Yes, friend. You know I rely on you...'

... Volvo drivers are the worst

Esme was sharp. She'd been thinking it over, and it was time for a change. Really, people just took advantage. Nicole was a pleasant girl, but she must know that there were rules, unwritten and unstated to be sure, but rules that everyone knew. Obvious things about tidiness and politeness, normal ones about what working for someone meant. Mainly it meant doing what you were told to do, no, asked to do, or were likely to be asked to do, without complaining.

The girl was French, and complained all the time, not to Esme's face of course, but she'd heard her on the phone, and once when a customer came back with some tiny problem, she'd apologised—a good start—but had been too easy with Esme's stock, and offered to replace them. The customer wasn't even a regular, and Esme had to step in before things got out of hand. It was a business after all, and anyway most people would never have noticed. It was after that, the next day, some other little thing, when she detected something offensive about Nicole's manner. She couldn't quite work out what it was, but obviously Nicole was a schemer. She watched her then, and while Nicole was always polite, it wasn't easy for Esme to work with someone who wasn't up to it.

And it was George, wasn't it, who had said she should hire one of the foreigners that turned up looking for work? Yes, and she knew he liked the look of the French girls, so she waited for one of the ugly, miserable ones.

Not that Esme was looking for an excuse, no, quite the opposite, she always had been forgiving, and knew that some people would respond appropriately, and recognise how magnanimous she was. Of course, some wouldn't, and those had to go. And it seemed that Nicole was one. Taking advantage. She sighed. What a world, when you couldn't trust anyone for more than five minutes.

Take George, he was always complaining too—when he wasn't comatose. No go in him, except when he got at her. Well, maybe that's not entirely fair, he did things about the house, but only when she pointed them out. He used to like it, pottering about, decorating, mending things. But as he got older, she had more trouble making him see that things had to be done.

He complained about his job, when he could bothered talking to her at all. And after all the effort she made to tell him things, keep him up to date with her problems, the shop, how hard it was to keep things running smoothly, how much work it all was...

Yes, she had the shop, but it was so tiring. She was just too worn out by it all. George was like a child, always needing to be told, forgetting to do important things—though she suspected that it was deliberate sometimes—and relying on her all the time. Since he'd got that job in London she even had to do the shopping and he knew how much she hated standing around in queues. And he always left something off the list that he knew they needed. Well, so be it, nobody said life was easy, and she'd taken that in even before she settled for George and his regular ways.

So it was a surprise last year when he told her he'd been offered a transfer to the London office. So unexpected, she thought for a moment he'd actually lost his job. No, really, the things men get up to when things go wrong. They don't come right out with it, and you hear tales all the time of people pretending to go to work, and just sitting around in libraries reading the papers until their savings run out. So it wasn't so stupid.

Of course, George couldn't waste their savings, but still. She'd kept her money separate since the beginning. It was a bit hard on George, yes, but then if she hadn't asked him to have a little put by for her every month, in her own account, she'd have been virtually a slave. She'd got used to having her own money, and George was a little bit lazy, so, even though she'd been working for years now, the standing order was still there. He could afford it, he didn't need much for his quiet life, and of course she bought everything for the house, so it was right that she shouldn't have to ask. Almost satisfactory in fact. Of course, George would die before she did, and a nice little nest-egg that would be. With the insurance, she could rest a bit. He didn't understand how *tired* she got.

The phone rang, it was George.

'Hello Em? How are you feeling? Just to say I'm meeting Tim after work, so I'll be a bit late home.'

'But you were going to...'

'I know, I know, I'll do it tomorrow. I haven't seen Tim for months and he's only here for the evening, then he's flying back to Rome. He *is* my brother, Em. Look, I'll do it in my lunch hour tomorrow. I won't forget. See you later.'

She heard the line go dead. Typical.

Tim, now there's a man. Got his own business, nice house, bitch of a wife of course, but you can't have everything. I suppose they'll just go to the pub. She looked for Nicole, busy serving a customer, then picked up the phone again and walked into the back.

George put the phone down and looked at his desk: notes, papers, jottings, mess. Well, everything would soon be sorted out. No more pandering, no more posing. Soon he'd be rid of the demon dirt under his nails, the dirt of the demonic job. He'd come to think of it in that way—human/demon, the great divide. Only it wasn't clear where the divide was, it moved. Sometimes the demons suborned a human—Paul for example—and made him their own. Paul, glacial, sleek, unblemished. George was in the graceless acne'd camp, had been all his life, and glad of it. Although sometimes the perverseness of humans got him down, and he turned with relief to the random obtuseness of the mechanical world. Not really mechanical when it was interesting, not really. It was all supposed to be predictable there, but in his experience it wasn't always so.

Take the latest project, some odd things happening there, odd, strange. Though not unbelievable. The kind of things that once excited him, even moved him. Of course it was his job to be excited and grin with complicit awe, wide-eyed at unexpected leaps of understanding: at least, presumed understanding, the joy of discovery, the new twist. Recently he found himself grimacing instead, a thick bile rising in his throat at the hopelessness of understanding. Understanding what? Embracing what? Ameliorating what? What? Mechanical and mechanistic hell, the black chute to consciousness. George was conscious, but what good did it do him? He could envisage a desire for blankness and ice and the clickety clickety click of unknowing. Sometimes, with Esme, it seemed preferable.

He glanced at the computer screen, reaching for his glasses. The bold cleverness of the planner touched him somehow. It was so clever, and such a waste of time. Nothing connected to the actuality. Here, it said, is the base platform, the hardware. And here, the base software, the operating system. The base system, the system that simply was (but actually, at the moment, would be). Here they touched, at this dotted line. Here they connected and interacted. Everything here, at this point, must be knowable, traceable, discoverable, every action and reaction. Only it wasn't, it didn't, or wouldn't.

Craziness. Well, yes, crazy could be built and sold, no problem, as long as it wasn't marketed as crazy. Crazy was the preserve of humans, it *was* humanity: faith, resolve, the stratification of conflict, the resolution of doubt, the means to act without certainty, the means to think without issue. Human! And this pleasure he wished to give to the erstwhile inanimate, to mechanical kind. Crazy.

...some people are human robots

Zoë always knew when it was coming. It made her feel ill. She hated being lectured all the time. It was the worst part of the job. Clients endlessly telling her the importance and significance and general wonderfulness of their product and expecting her to enthuse. Going into vast detail, sending managers and designers to her so that she gets a good grasp of it all. But she doesn't care. She understands, but she isn't interested.

She's happy to have ten minutes with the client, and then be left to get on with it. That's her job—to create the demand and then fulfil it. Very sleazy and satisfying. Slimier than wet sex.

She talks a lot about ethics to the clients. No-one gives a damn about ethics, so you can say what you like. She liked this yappy side of the job, it was what brought in the money.

She likes being with Paul, he's a comfortable feeling, she doesn't have to watch her back so much. The clients like him. He doesn't seem so clever that they feel let down by what they're trying to do. He won't put them down. He's smart enough to meet at them at their level, whatever that level is.

'I don't want to have an affair with him. God! That'd ruin the business. No. what I want...' she contemplated, and picked up the cup of cold tea.

'What you want is to make him believe that it was once possible, but no longer,' said Maureen, who was sharing a flat with Zoë that year. 'That way you have all the pleasures of ex-lovers—intimate conversations and cosy meals, knowing smiles and risqué jokes—without having to go through the hassle of the actual affair.' Maureen laughed. 'Me too! But do you think he's good in bed? He's terribly good-looking, they're often too self-absorbed.' She spoke like it would be good to get some experimental evidence. 'And he likes you.'

'I know.'

'And he's so strong and efficient, a bit like Denbigh.' Maureen was teasing.

Work, work, work—my eyes are fucking knackered, can't focus. Thank god for music, calm, solace. The walk back is good, saunter, meander, stride (keeping the knees straight) over the crunchy snow, the fear of being taken from behind by bicycles. Not the riders, too serious, intent. I know too much about bicycles now, being strained by engineers and bike

builders, brazing and welding and silver-soldering, tubes and sockets, trailing angles and driven gears. And so to sleep.

‘Want more tea?’

Maureen took another cup from the shelf and wiped it on the hem of her T-shirt. She sat down on the chair and held her hair out of her face while she poured. The glasses made her face round, her eyes plates.

Zoë frowned. ‘I really need some help, Maureen. I love Henrik deep, deep, deep, but I can’t trust him to be sensible. He went really wild last week. I want our children to be safe. She laughed. ‘Now don’t eel goal owt wivout tool oral coatal’, ‘an get they to clean cloutals.’ My mum would have told him.’ She changed tack. ‘So what have you been up to?’

‘Well, I suppose I’m having a good time really. Denbigh’s being a bit of a bastard, but work’s going really well. There’s something new coming, some robot project that I hope they’ll give me. There’s a good chance because of the research I did for my MSc. Of course it’s bound to be defence, but what the hell.’ She didn’t like the thought of defence work, but her scruples always gave way to the thousand other forces immediately at work on her.

‘What’ll you be doing?’

‘Oh, project leader, maybe even promotion. I think Denbigh’s first in line, but he’s lost interest in things. He just likes the organisational side these days. I think they’d rather have someone with a bit of enthusiasm. Maybe he’ll be business co-ordinator, or project director—something a bit more remote.

‘Actually, I’m getting a bit worried about him. Well, not exactly worried: OK, yes, I guess I am worried, I do like him a lot.’ She sighed and sipped the tea. ‘When is he going to wake up? He’s a great guy but I can’t get through to him. We have these great discussions about work and then when I try to get him into bed he sort of veers off. You can see the shades coming down as soon as I stop talking about work.’

‘Maybe you should be more subtle...what happened last time?’

‘Maybe. We were working late at a site in Stoke. There’d been a communications problem it’d taken us three days to sort out. A bit of a ball-wrinkler.’ She wrinkled her nose at the phrase. ‘Lots of pressure from the plod. Anyway, we’d fixed it mostly, and I thought it was time to relax. I did everything you told me to. I smiled, I spoke very gently. I tried to make it easy for him.’

‘What did you say?’

‘Well, the room was quite dark with just the light from the screens and the passage outside. You know he prefers to work in the twilight. I was about twenty feet away on the other side of the room so I stood up and come over to his desk. It was very quiet, just the hum of the machines. I spoke as quietly as I could: “Are you tired? Let me massage your neck”. And when he didn't respond I said “Look, I'm buggered, let's go to bed now.” Maureen laughed. ‘Maybe not subtle by your standards, but for me that's sensitive! I mean, what else can you say? Come back to my place? What are you doing after work? How about a bit of hanky-panky? I was a bit pissed off. Of course he just shrugged and looked thoughtful. So I left him to it and went back by myself.’ She laughed again. It was habit-forming. ‘I bet Henrik never ignores you.’

‘No, you're right. We're always talking, he always listens,’ Zoë lied. ‘He's very good. We talk about everything. I know that's what everyone says, but I genuinely feel we are on the same wavelength. It's lovely not having to choose your words. He never takes offence.’ She hesitated. ‘It's really easy. But the problem isn't talking, it's doing. I just wish he'd act more, more...’

‘Responsibly?’

‘He's determined to have a good time. So am I really. And it's not that he's stupid, but he ignores risks that I couldn't take, and I feel nervous when he goes out. Did he ever take you on a tour of his rollovers? You know, the places he's rolled cars? It's horrific. You come to a bend in the road and he says “Just over there, in those bushes” or “See that ditch”... Sometimes he was a passenger but it must have happened so often. And some of his friends were killed.

‘And there's also that time at the coast, has he told you? Four of them got drunk and decided to row out to his boat. It was midnight and they were so drunk the dinghy overturned and there were only two lifebelts. The two girls couldn't swim and Henrik and James started dragging them to the shore by their hair. After about fifteen minutes they were exhausted, so James stayed to keep the girls afloat while Henrik swam to the shore for help. When he got there he had to cross these ploughed fields to the nearest house and he collapsed after ringing the bell.’ She paused. ‘They were all OK but it scares me how he could be so careless.’

‘Bloody hell, it would me too. Like that stupid bastard climbed up the side of that block of flats when we locked all the doors. You remember? Those sixties brick flats with the vertical panels with the windows in. About a brick in to the panels. That wide, and this fucking idiot wanted to show off by doing that thing in the panels where you stick one foot behind and one in front against the sides of the brick—chimney is it?

Anyway, he shimmied up to the fifth floor. Easy die from that, slip, eek, on to the pavement, blood, broken bits sticking out. But it was easy for him I suppose, habit-forming showing off. He'd rather die than not do it. Although I don't suppose he even thought. Men don't, do they? Easier to do that than nothing, than wait, at that point. Bloody gets me, that—only about the ones I like, naturally. They just can't wait—stick 'em up, bud, stick it in, stick it out—except they can't stick it out...'

Glumly, she lifted the glass slowly and drank the dregs.

'Sorry, it's time for badminton. See you later.'

She cupped her breasts and made to throw them over her shoulders, sighed, and went over to her bag. Unzipping it, she fished out the old pants and socks and went to get fresh ones. While she changed, Zoë curled her legs up and put on the TV. Reading could no longer hold her attention. Tilting her head, she wondered if she really liked it that Maureen was so blunt. You didn't get tangled up in her conversations, that was for sure, but you did feel like a bit of an audience at a speech day. Where, of course, the speaker's thinking about washing his socks or picking up that smart tart in the third row more than he is what he's saying, what you're having to listen to.

Maureen came back in. 'Stay up and we'll talk some more if you like. I'll pick up some more lagers.' So she went, sailing out on the busy waves to throw herself about some more.

Zoë looked down at her own breasts and hefted them a little, feeling their weight. Not bad. Not pointy and firm like Toni's, but not bad. Soft, strokeable. She stroked them a little. A little comfort, a little TV, a little of that, it's all moderately habit-forming. Henrik too, a habit. Her too, a habit. She pictured herself as a nun running, habit-high, towards the spot where he died. A tear started as she picked up her half-empty glass. Maybe she should buy some new clothes, get her hair done, or just henna it again. She studied the ends, and wondered if she had enough money to go the next day.

She closed her eyes and imagined herself under a warm shower, outside, on the verandah of a wooden shack backing on to sunlit woods. She felt the sun, and soon, above her in a cool tree, she heard her bird sing. After long days of silence, out of the wood her bird revealed itself in tiny syllables.

Zoë heard and emptied her mind, listening. At last she pressed her lips together in a sort of smile, but more puffy, needing more force, and opening her eyes, looked towards the clock. She put her hand over her breast lightly, and drew her nails lightly round her small nipple. It

tightened and pushed lightly against the soft material, slowly rising, an island in a milky lake. She rested her other hand lightly on her bush, springing gently on the flimsy skirt. The floor exercises helped her move without effort as her hand dropped gently down to her thigh, sliding over the thin cotton, and gathering it up. The breath of her nail stroked over the very small damp dip she found, breathing along until it was like a sponge, soft. She slid her hand up to her stomach, feeling its warmth and silky roundness, then down again, inside, through the wet parting and into the gently swollen lips. She increased the tempo as she traced the inside of the slit, the soft and floating slot that just now needed this sweet key. She turned and turned the key, seeking the sweet fit, and slowly, revolution by sweet revolution, she moulded it just so the cortical thread of it broke sweet and easy, sweet and flimsily, fleet and flow. A small sigh signalled itself satisfied.

Maureen returned as good as her word, sweaty and tired but ready to go on. She opened a can of lager and poured a third of it into a glass for Zoë. Ally McBeal was on the TV. She was pouting in the toilet. Why are they all so civilised about the embarrassment of watching people they don't like? Human robots they are, ignorant of place except its dimensions and obstacles. And she bumps into things. But never curses, or learns. The legs don't join up, they finish below the thighs, stuck on with superglue to a grey plastic body. All plastic under the sheets, under the blouse, up the skirt. It's funny, is she *supposed* to be human, to the audience? Or superhuman or subhuman? Is she supposed to be recognisable? The plot-wrenching that makes her tag along with the other robots instead of the humans outside. Sure, there's no outside. There don't appear to be humans in this plot. Funny caricatures that sometimes get it almost right. And that odd Fish, what's he about? Funny for sure, funny as hell. Makes a good point, but a clown. Lots of straight men for him. Why are the powerful people here clowns? Why are the loopy ones straight men? Zoë picked up the glass absentmindedly as Ally and her soulfood apartment-sharer ride together in the car like dummies, hair blowing or still, as appropriate.

Maureen was flaked out on the sofa, breasts dangling inside her loose shirt, holding the can to her face, feeling the cold against her hot cheek.

'We went away for the weekend to meet some friends,' Zoë began. 'I was a bit broody I suppose, but there was a long time in the car while we were going along when I just brooded. It's been getting to me that far from getting Henrik to act more responsibly, I've lost myself in him, quite literally. Somehow I've abandoned the qualities I *know* I possessed and I thought were unalterable—you know, the boring things people laugh at

me for—punctuality, cleanliness, consideration, tidiness, that sort of stuff: but it's what I'm like! And now I'm starting to be like him, losing things, sometimes never arriving, not making excuses...even down to wearing the same clothes. I've had these habits a long time and feel strange about losing them unwillingly, but I'm not that bothered. You can expect to be influenced by someone you love. I love him a lot: so I change. But I also know he loves me. There are things about him that have changed too, but more subtle things, people don't notice. I do. He *is* generous and easy-going; but he's always been so sure of himself, those solid, middle-class Rights. He's not so cocky now, I don't think. Don't get me wrong, it's not what they say, it's not a she-woman-she-shape-her-man type thing. I'm not taking credit for changing him, I'm only saying that our relationship is more equal than it might appear.' There was a pause. 'To me anyway!'

She laughed a short and guttural laugh, no music there. Poetry maybe, sad or perhaps glorious, baring or suffusing momentarily her soul, her she-soul. She didn't know what to think, she didn't know if or what she was thinking right now. It was all a jumble, circuits confused. Maureen carefully hid her lack of surprise.

'You wouldn't guess it though, he really upsets me. We had a real scene in one restaurant when he was with some of his mates. Old school chums.' She put on a nasty sly accent. 'The usual snotty kid stuff with the waiter. I hate those scenes. It's more his friends, but you can see he's with them in spirit. After the meal we went to a pub. He drinks—we drink—too much. If I didn't know him it'd be horrible in the pubs he goes to, just like slumming. He doesn't know anyone, and in minutes he's having a two-minute earnest with some bloke or other, when really he's not there. It's just word strings, just chat, but he likes it, it gives him a warm feeling.'

She sighed, and sat back. She reached for tobacco and rolled a joint, taking the first drag deep into her lungs.

Maureen was deep in the armchair, sympathetic but amazed at Zoë's summary. She knew Henrik as great company and a much-admired casual fornicator. She herself had enjoyed the delights of his sexual skill. She reached over and took the joint.

'Zoë, *he* is a warm feeling. He's a fucking machine, I mean a machine tuned to fuck...and fuck like a fucking machine should fuck.' She was getting into the subject with warmth now, 'and he's a sweet guy,' she lied, 'but not your pal or Paul Newman. I realise you're in this for keeps, and maybe he is too, but you are talking lassoing a fucking snake.'

'What!'

‘Sorry, no, I didn't mean he's a fucking snake, I mean a snake, I mean... I just mean that you're never going to get his co-operation in the way you want. He's never going to be a safe bet, a winter coat. He's giving you all he can right now, and it's obviously a lot—I fucking well know it's a lot, you noisy cow! It's probably more than he thought he could give. It's more than he gave... Sorry, that's supposed to be funny, I'll stop for a bit.’ It was hard being supportive, it didn't come naturally.

‘He does love you,’ she continued after a gulp of beer, slowly and earnestly, ‘and you're happy. It's only having children that makes you want something else.’ Maureen's tone had changed, she was serious. ‘Something else like servants and nannies, darling. But getting back to habits. You know habits, we all have them. Henrik's a habit. You can't just change it. Who's that bloke, you know, the Alexander Technique, famous? He has a lot to say about habits. They're unbreakable, ordinarily. I wish he'd get into fucking tights. Oops, but not mine dear. Did you ever see such a ramrod bloody starched-arse straight man? Jesus. Anyway, you have to live on your toes, and not your back.’ She paused and shook her head. ‘Sorry again. Be prepared, be alert, don't get drawn in, and then maybe you can gauge the strength of your habit. But knowing is not the same as breaking. Except for us lucky ones.’ Now she'd forgotten what came next, even which bit of the conversation she was in, or following.

Zoë started, expecting more, but there was only a begging silence. ‘That's maybe true. I know a bit about Alexander, about habits and things like that,’ and then stopped. She was thinking of the times she had sat happily next to Henrik in the old Rover. She knew how serious she looked ordinarily, but she really enjoyed this extra closeness in the car, sharing joints and beers and just cruising along. He was her pal. Her face was quite different then, and only he saw it. It was a squarer face, fairer, completely symmetrical, perfectly weighted. Not her face now, even though she was thinking of that particular journey, the place wasn't far, she wished it was farther. He was different alone, like that, than when they were with other people. It wasn't so much that she could say “That's it, right there. That's something you wouldn't do when it's just us together”.

Not so much, only that she felt more tense, especially when they were with people Henrik didn't know. That happened a lot. They would go to a pub and somehow end up in a group of strangers. Everyone liked him. The people in the pub would talk to him as though their hearts depended on it. She just listened to the talk. Sometimes she found herself joining in, but she wasn't joined in like he was. She never felt that she was on the same wavelength, and got involved in cleverness that she couldn't sustain for long—not her fault, she didn't feel bad about it, the conversations just petered out.

It was good when they were with friends like Charlie, who did all the talking. She knew everyone liked Henrik and wanted to be with him, and she also knew that sometimes she was included only because she was part of Henrik. It rarely made her uneasy that she was giving herself to him like this. She knew that habits came and went and that his influence over her would fade. She too was strong.

But now she was tired. She glanced at Maureen asleep on the couch, legs apart in her jeans, shirt half open, loose, still pinpointing her large nipples, even in sleep. She had to be careful where she pointed them.

Back at home, Zoë took her psychology book to bed. The talk with Maureen didn't reassure her. She knew there was no easy answer, but she thought she could rephrase the question so that she got the answer she wanted, even if it was hard.

Suddenly he was numb. He had lost the rich fantasy she had sustained in him. That's how it was. Once the passion was gone, and she made sure it went, everything was just ordinary again. How else can I put it? The life and spark had left me. I remembered what it was like, partially, and I had flashbacks, as though to a drugged episode, but I couldn't stop the calm floating over it, or should I say the cool. I looked at her and she was still lovely, but she no longer broadcast the message. She was someone else. That beautiful desire that made her eyes glow, and reshaped her face, was gone.

She said, "I won't forget you. We can still play footsie under the table", and I could see she was preparing for age: she was hoarding memories. The current in me died then. I was still looking: the fantasy was necessary, the sex was necessary, the touching, smelling and tasting was necessary. With a part of it gone, it was all gone. I smiled at her. I was polite.

... if someone wants to, don't let them

'Just fucking will do it. Oh, God, Yes! Yes! Yes! Read Nietzsche, read...Who's that other guy? Schopenhauer? Well, who cares. "What doesn't kill me makes me stronger." What a thinker! Fuckers born of fuckers, that's what kids are. How else? Will they kill me? They might, they'll try. No compromise! No prisoners! I was told once, don't keep your kid a prisoner. As if people wouldn't kick them out as soon as look at them. Little bastards. Remember, we're not talking about real people here! Not big people! The little swine shoot first and ask no questions ever. They'd as soon kick your arse as kick a ball. And piss on your shoes afterwards. Then what? What do they become? First, munchies for old perverts to toss themselves off to, then old perverts themselves. Munchies and perverts—and some get old and don't grow up, forever munchies. But we have a plan, don't we, to munch more? Munch or die trying! What a plan! What a party that would be!'

His tirade ended, Henrik laughed and relaxed in the chair, smoothing back the yellow hair on his head, then turning and seeing the sour look on Zoë's face, his mother's face now. Bad taste there.

He took half a cigarette from the tin and lit it with absorption, then reached for a beer and popped it. He didn't like this, her determination. Wasn't he the one who was being courted? Shouldn't she be generous and kind to get her own way? What was this with the dirty looks?

The months before their separation came back to him, the fights and the moods—his moods—and the bitterness that had slowly worked its way into him. He didn't like it, didn't want it. She should be fair, she shouldn't be so remorseless, so unyielding. He didn't like it, and he sulked. They'd been together years, and he still needed her.

'Not my plan, so far.' He already heard the screams and shouts of children in the garden, in his head: their wailing and whining, continuous demands for food, help, sympathy and sweets. He heard them drowning the birds and bees on each delightful summer's day. He heard them demanding that he play with them at five o'clock in the morning. He heard them transforming country walks into courses in self-control.

'Not my plan, but it'll soon become mine, it looks like.' This was the reality. He didn't know how Zoë heard them. He thought she imagined them quietly playing little girls games. She would learn. And girls, he knew they would be girls.

Zoë didn't know her own face at home. At work it was different, she knew what was where and at what angle to anyone. But here she never knew. She only saw Henrik enthusiastic, incoherent. Zoë was happy to see him like this, it made her life easier when he was happy, distracted. But this time it should have been different, he was saying the wrong words, he was beating her with rods. They got back together because they agreed. That was the only reason, because while she loved him, she wanted babies more than she wanted him. So she had decided. And now to hear this, when it was all agreed. At six she was home, to be there when he arrived, to be grateful and sweet to him because he seemed to be a bit down. She thought he must be shaping himself—she knew it was hard for him to grow up. But grow up he must, at some point: now. She'd given him so much time, and patience did not come easy to her.

And then he smiled, but what were these terrible things he said? At first she didn't listen, but still quickly became apprehensive and then angry. They'd separated for 18 months over the question of babies. He'd moved out, lived with friends, no doubt slept around, and slept with her at weekends. She never meant the separation to be final, which sometimes she thought was an ill-advised move on her part.

She listened closer, but Henrik had changed tack, he was talking about the party now, the party to celebrate them getting together again. It was going to be good, a good loud bash, Henrik had decided. He leaned back in the old chair, hands behind his head, knees spread, lips pursed. He was looking forward to it.

'We can get thirty in the houseboat. I know I can get most of our old friends. They'll come. Charlie, Philip, Angela, Maureen... all the others. But it'll have to be interesting. We're always going out to restaurants for fuck's sake.' He looked at her sourly. 'And this time we're paying. A riverboat would be really good...' He brightened. 'In the dark, on the water, smoking and drinking, chatting to old mates.'

Zoë wasn't impressed. She had mates too, but he meant *his* old mates. 'Don't give me that chummy crap, Henrik. You'll be feeling up the women and charming them stupid. I know. It's a lousy idea. We can't afford it. Who's going to clear up? It'll be hell. We won't be able to see out. At night the water will be invisible and the embankment'll be crawling with traffic. It'll be hell. Everyone will be sick. Let's go to VissenBlitz's where we had our wedding breakfast. It'll be super. I remember, everyone loved it, they all said. Come on Henrik, no-one will mind paying, it's enough to organise. Why don't I phone VissenBlitz's now? Or I can get Daddy to, he's sure to be able to get that room again at a good rate. They know him. He's a good customer.'

They continued for a while. Zoë was vehement, she pushed, she dug in, she needled him: relentless. But Henrik was calming down now, turning off, the idea just bubbling around in his head. He pushed it and squeezed it, it evaporated. He rolled another joint, leaning forward, hunched and concentrating. Tobacco dropped from his fingers onto the table. He lit the joint and took a first long drag. He wondered why he would lose. He thought of his mother, his father. He started nodding to some internal music. After a while Zoë came and tried to take the joint out of his hands. He held her off, straight-armed, frowning, his brow dark, and took another deep toke. Zoë slapped his arm and began to roll another.

When she was finished she took her shoes off and put her feet up on the chair. She wanted him to like what she wanted to do. She thought about how she could wrap it up for him. But he wasn't like other people, she didn't know what he wanted, so she just kept pushing.

'Two babies then,' said Zoë, 'no question. Two—or more. They keep each other company. And people keep telling me it's cruel to have one. Who would it fight with? And if you think I'm going to spend all my time with a bored kid, you've got another think coming. It's got to be two, and we'd better start soon.'

She couldn't believe she was saying these words. It was like fiction... it was like when they first met. One day, chatting him up at an ordinary party in London and then two weeks later walking off a plane in Cape Town. And there he was, waiting. Unreal. And now, after resisting babies for so long, nearly breaking them up, here he was talking about how many. They had talked about it many times—she wasn't desperate but she needed to know that kids were possible. And until now they hadn't been. Stories like that.

Henrik couldn't handle the way choices turned into necessities once you had kids. He didn't want kids, not yet. He excused his simple not-wanting with soulful stories. He didn't want kids yet, he said, because he'd seen the resentment in his father's face as he turned down jobs and promotions that would mean moving so they would have stability, so Henrik would be sure he was loved. It made his father hard and fierce. There was no comfort while he was at home.

'Suits me,' said Henrik. 'Who's that woman, Sharon? We can afford her, a nanny. I talked to her last week, we went to the pub. She'll come in every day. We can afford it. I'll give up the analysis, it's not getting anywhere, I don't need it.' He paused. 'We can get a houseboat through Charlie. He used to live at the boatyard. It'd be far out.'

'Henrik, who's going to organise it? You'll be off working in some fucking place and I'll be here, phoning and writing and being hassled by the agency.'

Henrik took another long toke, leaned forward over the table and began beating time to the music, his head nodding. 'I'm seeing Charlie tomorrow, I'll ask him.'

'Like fuck you will, Henrik. Listen, if you do this, you do it on your own. I'm having no part of it. Why do you always want to do things the hard way? We're supposed to be getting together. This is a celebration. I want it to be easy, you shit.'

But Henrik had turned her off. He quickly glanced at the TV.

"... but after a couple of days the aborigines got bored with the contest and went for a smoke in the woods. No-one saw them again for two years." The camera panned over a large red desert in the Northern Territory. There were specks in it, a tree, a hill, but no signs of life.

'The army team almost killed themselves to win. One was dragged back on two poles strung together.' A picture of exhausted men, battered by sand-laden wind. 'The organisers were disgusted when the aborigines didn't turn up.'

Henrik was impressed. He remembered *disgust*. At school, he was a good runner, and he and Charlie were together when they came out of the bend. Henrik was running fast but his feet were flying, he couldn't get any weight onto the ground. He tried to force his feet down harder. He struggled briefly, he felt strong, he could win. But it was no good, his stupid feet were floating, they couldn't get traction on the ground: he couldn't go any faster. He'd slowed down and looked round. The boy in third place was a long way behind. Henrik had watched as Charlie raced towards the line, and had followed him at a canter. *Disgust*, that was the look on his housemaster's face. Henrik fancied he'd said it. *Disgusting not to try!*

Just like teachers, the army, bunch of schoolkids, he thought. Disgust! Who would claim the moral heights here? He admired those aborigines so much for braving that disgust. Disgust is such a powerful feeling in the puny. But now he was up for a fight: he'd lose, though, she was too clever for him. He'd get her later.

Grinning: 'It's just a different attitude, man. Hey, Zoë, c'mon man. You liked the weekend we got everyone to come camping.'

But now Zoë had turned off, and with her face set she tried to iron the creases out of an old pleated skirt she'd already given up on. The iron was cold, but it didn't matter. She stabbed at the skirt for a couple of minutes then stood still for a moment, her efforts to turn aside her violence into something trivial visibly not working. She'd try another way. She looked at the curtains and decided to take them down.

Then she headed for the kitchen. 'I'm tired, I don't want a fight, I'm going to bed,' she said.

Henrik frowned, turned to open his satchel, and started looking at some papers while she went to the bathroom. He knew she would stop him, the cow. He knew it was a stupid idea. It would be hard work making it really enjoyable, but he *wanted* it. Fuck it, he'd definitely get Zoë to pay for the booze.

Later she fought a bedlam fight from the pillows, screaming and kicking, salivating and farting. Livid, she didn't know what to do. He held her down. She pushed hard. She couldn't shake out his dick, she felt her stomach tying up, her legs losing their strength. She could feel his body getting tougher, he was losing control of his own legs and shaking. She swallowed and the music started to come through again. She was exhausted, and stopped, overcome. Henrik pushed with the beat and soon he came. She was just lost and kept moving until she couldn't keep the glow going any more.

'I think I was made just for this,' she mumbled, and lay completely still, her eyes closed, her head clear, her body light.

She never knew how it happened, she only knew that sex with Henrik was the one never-failing pleasure. No dreams tonight.

...he's a Martian

George had always thought his brother was a bit clumsy and slow on the uptake, and he wondered how he did so well. Nice wife, a bit sharp sometimes, but friendly and cheerful. She seemed to like George, and they had had some pleasant evenings together in Tim's house in Haslemere. George liked going there, it was quiet, quite different from his own place, but Esme wasn't so keen. The two women didn't seem to hit it off, and the last time Esme'd gone home early with a headache, leaving the three of them to chat outside till it was quite dark, and they'd lit a couple of lemon-scented candles.

Tim had been fairly distant most of his life, and he and George had only really got friendly in the last couple of years, after Tim's little company had been bought by a competitor and he'd moved into the country. George had been surprised when he heard: he always thought Tim was a city boy, but he obviously loved it out here. His house wasn't huge, but it had a big garden and a big shed where Tim made model aircraft, very intricate ones with tiny engines that Tim made himself, even designing and making the intricate engine parts, the cogs and wheels. It was the sort of thing that George sometimes thought he wished he could do, but not really, it called for more patience than he knew he had.

He got a lot of pleasure from Tim's description of the process though, and helped him take the finished planes to the heath for testing. They often didn't fly too well at first, and then Tim would get them looked at by some people who worked for him, and they'd sort out the problems. George envied him that. Where *he* worked, no-one wanted to know about your problems, much less offer help. He felt that in a crisis they'd all stay off sick rather than help out. Not just him, he wasn't paranoid, no, anyone. No camaraderie. He supposed it helped Tim being the boss, but then he didn't think Tim would run a company where everyone kowtowed, he was too blunt, and liked others to be blunt. But he was funny, too. George never had the gift.

Tim looked a bit weary tonight, and was late, not like him, and George had finished his first pint before he arrived.

'Hi George, sorry, I got caught up in the mess that is corporate life.' He was joking—any meeting with more than two people was a curse and a nuisance. Patting George on the shoulder, he ordered two more beers and suggested they move away from the bar. 'Too many ears,' he said, 'although it's not the ears I care about, it's the bloody mouths attached to them.' He smiled.

'It's been a while since we met hasn't it. A year? I know I should have been in touch, but you know how things go. Did you know Helen's left me?' He paused, expecting me to say something, but what could I say?

'I suppose I can't blame her, for the good reason that I'd been having an affair. I wouldn't have said anything, but Zita called me—Zita's the, er, what do you say, concubine, lover? Anyway, she called me once when I was out. We agreed she'd never do that, but, well, she was a bit drunk and... Anyway, Helen answered and Zita didn't know what to do and just put the phone down. Helen of course got the caller's number and found herself talking to someone called Zoltan, who didn't recognise her and passed her over to his sister. Zita said *she* hadn't called, A wrong number? But Helen put two and two together, went through the old phone bills, and found that the number appeared regularly. Then, as luck would have it, she checked the answerphone. Stupid of me, but I'd forgotten to turn it off one night when Helen had gone to her Bridge club, and hadn't noticed that it had recorded us arranging a weekend away.'

'No need to go into the details,' I said, 'I get the picture. So...Zita is it? So who's Zita?'

'Rumanian. Met her at a party—she was a waitress. Asylum seeker, living with her brother. That's how it started, she was asking everyone on the spot if they had a job for her brother, an engineer. As it happened I was looking, so we arranged to meet, and Bob's yer uncle. Zoltan, her brother, was well-qualified, sharp, bright, and happy to work, so I took him on, semi-officially, and Zita showed me her gratitude, and we sort of got to like each other. She's a lot of fun, and, well, I was flattered at first that she seemed to find me interesting, and then, I don't know, something happened and I suppose I got a bit careless—and I think I wanted Helen to find out. So anyway, Helen and I went our separate ways.'

'Tim, weren't you unhappy at all? I mean, you've been together for bloody ages, isn't it difficult? What about the finances and everything? Presumably Helen's still in the house? Where are you staying?'

The questions poured out: you see I was interested in the consequences. I could never do anything without agonising over the inevitable mess. And I couldn't condone the affair. No, it wasn't for me, that kind of thing. But splitting up.... For several seconds I sat there wondering how it might work for me. Really, it had never seemed an option, but as Tim went on to the details, the lawyer and everything, it appeared quite straightforward. I don't like mess. Everyone involved, it seemed, as never advertised, was being civilised and even kind, trying hard to be fair. It had never seemed possible. Esme, I'm sure couldn't be civilised. She didn't know what fair meant, only its opposite. It was unfair, for example, that everyone else

went skiing. Never mind that they saved and went to the gym and liked a bit of adventure, whereas she, she's never done anything remotely physical, and would probably get there and demand to go shopping. So *fair*, no, it didn't fit in with her.

'All that was last year,' Tim continued. 'We got a quickie divorce, and I'm living with Zita in Fulham. Actually, that's why I wanted to see you: I'd like you to be best man at our wedding.'

'Good God! You must be crazy. No, never, I'm not your man, couldn't do it.' I paused. 'No, not even if your life depended on it.'

A look of relief passed over Tim's face. 'That makes it easier then. Because, while I would have liked my big brother to be best man, Zita wanted Zoltan. I didn't think you would, though. So that's OK.' He got up and went to the bar.

Odd isn't it? Every time you think you know someone, they do something unexpected. You can't even, as they say, expect the unexpected, because, well, because you can't. People aren't built like that. Some people, and I'm talking Esme here, think they know everything about how other people work, and they're never surprised, because they just fit them in. They've got a big box labelled "miscellaneous" and if they can't explain it any other way, what happens goes in that box, along with a shake of the head and a "you could see she'd end up doing something like that". That Tim and Helen would split up without some appalling catastrophe didn't seem possible. They're both so sensible. Maybe Tim's not letting on, maybe Helen had a reason for forcing the issue. It does all seem rather too easy.

Tim returned. I wouldn't usually ask, but somehow the words came out. 'Was Helen happy with you? I mean it seems so easy. It's not for me to ask, of course, but, well, it seems odd that she should take it so calmly.'

He looked at me. 'Well spotted, George. Yes, she was looking for an excuse. She'd met this lawyer—the one that handled the divorce in fact—and although she says nothing happened, you know, nothing physical, she wanted him and, just like that, she had her chance. I didn't believe her, about the physical. I came back from a long business trip and that night she was so amorous. I mean, without going into details, she was doing things that she'd never done before, and was definitely enjoying it. I don't mean to say that we'd hadn't had good sex, but this was different. It was like when we met, but more. Because, you know, over the years you tend to settle into a sort of routine. She'd either been boning up in the women's magazines, or—well, what she had been doing, which was screwing this lawyer. Very nice it was too. A bit of passion definitely does it for me. They're happy, as far as I know, although of course I haven't spoken to her for several months.' He stopped for a few seconds,

evidently trying to organise some kind of reaction, but not coming up with anything.

‘It was odd when she told me. Very calm. She even asked me what I wanted to know, and of course I wanted to know if she’d slept with him and all that, and if anyone knew—the usual things I guess. I think she was honest about most of it. And I didn’t get angry, which I thought I might. In fact in a curious way, it made me want to be nice to her.

‘Then I told her about Zita and she absolutely hit the bloody roof. Pots, pans, screaming, kids, oh bloody everything. I think she felt cheated. Anyway, there was no going back then. I knew I’d lose the house though, and that made me sad, in a way.’

Again, there was the pause while he relived the moment. Maybe rerunning the scene helped, or maybe he was trying to make sense of it. Personally I don’t think you can make sense of it. People are not machines and what happens doesn’t get a permanent place in an hierarchy of sense, It’s more a mass of stuff and each time you rerun it you pick a different thread to unravel and it never gets completely unwound, some more bits just get lost.

He surfaced after a while. ‘Look, I want to ask you a favour.’

‘Go on.’

‘It’s the wedding. Zita wants her family over and there’s a bit of a difficulty. Especially with her sister. She needs a sponsor; there’s nothing to it, you just have to officially invite her. There’s a section in the British Embassy in Bucharest.’

‘Hold on, you want me to do what?’

‘I’ve run out of friends. Anyway friends that could do this. They need bank statements, and a covering letter...I did it for Zoltan, it’s nothing. Zita’s sister—’

‘But Zoltan buggered off once he was here!’

‘Yes. It’s no hassle, though. Will you help?’

There was a pause. ‘I guess so.’

‘Great. I’ll get Zita to send you a letter you can copy. We need it quickly, so if you can get your bank statements ready.’

‘Bank statements?’ George paused, then gave in. ‘OK, OK, I’ll do it tomorrow.’

‘Great, thanks. Look, I have to go now. I’ll call you tomorrow.’

‘OK. See you.’

Tim smiled and waved as he went out. Hello brother, hi sucker. Well I won't stand for it. That's the last time I help him out. What does he do for me? Gives me something from his vast fund of bloody excuses to avoid doing anything if I ever ask him.

I ordered another beer.

Look at that bloody weather. He'd got soaked coming—nasty east wind too. Then the rain had turned to snow and blown in his face. At least he could do something about that. Choose a climate, any climate. France wasn't ideal, Italy for example—Italians love Italy and holiday at home, most of them. Wouldn't get them saving half their earnings to spend a couple of weeks in bloody Droitwich. And they all have weekend retreats. What did Tim say? That mate of his—Gino?—invited him to his parents' place one weekend. An hour's drive and they were in some Mediterranean Acapulco. Some of them don't mind a bit of peace though.

And anyway, the weather. Great for lazing around, but you get dozy. France, yes, a bit of bracing wind in the south, but space, quiet, and sun. He should do it. Just what *was* he waiting for? And of course the answer was money. It's one thing drifting into a job and house here, in England, where everything is familiar, but in France? He didn't know the first thing about anything. Wouldn't know where to look either. But maybe that didn't matter so much there—not so state-oriented. Of course, the state was more interfering, but by all accounts you just learned to side-step it all. Carte d'identité, permit de séjour and all that, he supposed you got used to it. Can get used to anything.

But the fact remained, he'd need a job. Never mind that he could buy a place to live, what would he *do*? No point carrying on with this stuff, he'd have to make a clean break. The romantic in him saw a bit of land with some vegetables, fruit trees, goats or sheep, but would it pay? Anyway, he was too old and knackered for real labour. He could help someone out though. Go over there and find some Brits who'd bitten off more than they could chew. 'Brits', stupid word: no, he couldn't do that—what's the point in going somewhere else if you take all your baggage, and fellow-countrymen are baggage.

Avoid. Yes, find someone who needs help, a Frenchman, earn a crust. have to make damn sure I go to the right place though. No money, hate the place—nasty prospect. Never be able to afford to come back either. Maybe even have to get a French passport—how does that work? I'm so ignorant. Better take a chance than just rot here, though.

To cap it all, Tim had changed his mind, and called him. He'd found someone else to sponsor the sister.

'Sorry to get you all excited, George. I ran into an old mate yesterday after I'd left. Old times and all that, and he mentioned he was doing well, and one thing led to another. He's done it before, and wanted to help—even had some useful contacts. So I got you off the hook.'

Off the hook? Bloody hell, Tim didn't even trust him to do that. Suddenly, maybe it was Tim, maybe it was just the beer last night, he found himself remembering the night Zoë left him. As she'd driven away, tears came to his eyes. There is a word: heart-wrenching. He sat for a few minutes, not moving, sitting. It was the return to the blandness of life. The total bloody heart-wrenching loneliness of it. George sat and smelled her, felt her breasts, examined her eyes. But already he had to think hard to remember the details. He let go before he cried. He started remembering the few times they met afterwards.

'Why are you avoiding me?'

He looked at her. She was beautiful, but, when she widened her eyes, nothing moved in him. The coldness had worked its way to his heart.

'I'm not avoiding you.'

One day you're up then, later, down. Day to day, hour to hour. This morning, in the market I began to wonder how I could manage to stay here now I've been so arsey about the problems I'm having finding somewhere to live—and the Tippex on the map, wiping out the place entirely, it appeared—but the problems are real, and the solution isn't apparent. No-one comes up to you and offers their life, that is, offers for you to blend into their friends and acquaintances. You're a sweet corner, certainly, but that's all, a sweet corner, a chewable, brief sweet taste. But they all retreat then, the stuff needs to be replenished, the stuff that propels them in the beginning, to start the adventure. But adventures apparently need planning, and crux: not real adventures at all then, just a way, a sweet way, of filling in the time, of boarding a few memories. There's no real give and take in it—a bit, but not much—a little give, a little take. They're not screwing you as they might, just venturing, adventuring out a little bit, retreating to the safe place, the safe feelings. Hard to let your self go when you should, especially when you should. Even when you must, the omens need to be right. No, that's bollocks, omens, it's crap. It's just got to be easy. You need to be offered the adventures and simply succumb, accept it, too much at stake if you show desire. It's ok to show willing, to be led easily, we all like being led easily. So that's what it comes down to: two people, an agreed place where one feels at home and the other feels the promise of a new land. It's ok to be open, you don't have to say it so plainly, in the beginning, or during, but plain at the

end. 'Will you come to my bed?' That's how it goes: 'Will you come to my bed?' My bed, my bed. And there's no untoward fumbling, an agreed amount of gradually increasing licence. Licence to touch at all, to touch more, to slide under and over, to gradually approach (and unthinkingly retreat from, only to return to) the hidden and warm parts, the soft and juicy parts. The fingers take the place of the lips. Really the lips should be there and there. The fingers will do for now, the forearm, the hand, always gentle, always light, teasing, tasting in lieu of the mouth, the tongue. For the mouth is the thing: once mouths are involved there's no going back. Nobody wants to retreat once the mouths are involved, Oh, the mouth, the mouth's touch and taste, then the fingers won't do, they're no real substitute. They're ok until the mouths come. They're ok till the wet things get wet, begin to flow. Until the soft things begin to weaken, and, curiously, expand, grabbing attention, saying 'suck me, fuck me, kiss me, lick me, taste me'. No, too soon for the licking, that comes later, when the heat's enough to become a little dishevelled, negligent of the proprieties.

Fuck the dress code now: bugger off grace (for we all know the strained manoeuvres required in all this business, the heaving and stretching and reaching around). We help, it's good, we're considerate, knowing how it feels, to be taking liberties—and how to know we have permission if we are not helped in our liberties. Nice too, to know that it's all appreciated, invited. For what is there but the invitation—that's what we're here for, because nobody knows what the promise will become. The invitation is the thing—you're special, for now, so special I invite you to share my body. My body of course has the last word. If it likes you, if pleasure raises it's ugly but likeable head, then all's well and good, but it's the invitation that counts. That's why we stray—the invitation shows goodwill, allowance will be made, eyes will half-close in order to suspend the usual judgements, the usual habits of mind. Often terminal to the success of a bout of pleasure. We'll have to pay. That's what to avoid.

'You're not seeking me either.'

'I'm sorry. I can't think of anything to say.'

'But we can talk, can't we? Why can't you flirt with me a little? You don't seem to have any trouble talking to Eva.'

I looked over to where Eva sat on the sofa, slumped, drunk, thin, grey...well, she might need a bit of talking up, but she's not for me.

'Flirting is light-hearted. The whole point is trying to find out what's on offer. Excuse me if that sounds cold, it's the very opposite of what I mean. With you, I can only see things in black and white. We sleep together or we break the connection. Maybe we can flirt again when I don't feel that you're mine.'

‘But I still find you sexy, I still want you to touch me, talk to me—I don't want you to go away.’

‘I'm sorry, but you can't just give me bits of you. Everything has to be possible. We're grownups: I don't expect we'll run away together. But I've got to feel that it's possible. You're closing down the possibilities. It's too conscious.’

He closed his eyes briefly, aware that such talk only makes people scared or bored. Too serious. That was the problem in the first place. She wanted to fall in love, aware that she was pushing herself and enjoying the feeling. But when he responded in much the same way, she couldn't rely on him being sensible. And she was afraid that he wasn't discreet. The things he did made her passionate, but simultaneously made her fearful, then irritated, then angry.

‘I think one of the things that separates us is that you've resigned your life, you're storing things up for later. I'm not. I'm hungry for new and subtle and overwhelming desires. I'm encouraging them. If I talk to you, it's in the hope that you'll make some assignation with me in the garden and we'll have secret sex.’ His eyes brightened and he felt an erection rising. He looked, hoping for a response.

She stared at him. ‘You just used me for sex,’ she said, ‘and I used you. But neither of us could keep it so simple. I really hurt, I was obsessed with you.’ She closed her eyes briefly. ‘And now I'm not. At least, only sometimes. I can't make love with you again.’

‘What a waste. You're denying yourself so much pleasure... The denial itself is a powerful feeling, but it doesn't compare. I don't know. It's not just you. Esme is great on denial, but she's never tried not denying herself. She has great body, she's a nice person, and she's wasted on me. Oh you know, I get pleasure from looking at her and sleeping beside her. But I don't feel intimate with her, I don't want to make love with her. I don't really want to touch her, and she feels it, yet she won't find someone else to love her, have wild sex with her. At least, she hasn't yet. I hope she does.’ He looked directly into her eyes. ‘I really do. It's such a waste.’ He paused. ‘I can't love her, and I can't have you. Fuck it.’ He felt tears coming and turned away.

He'd lied to Zoë. Esme had found somebody else, but he couldn't admit it to himself.

...everybody's lost

He couldn't remember when it first started. Maybe it was always there. The daily road to work. Now he was sure that if he went blind tomorrow he could find his way, but he might have to get someone to do the tweaky bits like make sure his pen was the right way up.

Esme didn't help, her and her bloody flower shop and her wittering on. What was that she kept on about at breakfast? He couldn't remember, except that she gave a couple of meaningful looks. What meaning they had, he couldn't say. Daffs, St Valentine's day, and how come Nicole, the shopgirl, couldn't spell. She kept having to rewrite the signs, and you couldn't trust anybody. The last girl ran up that huge phone bill, George, and then didn't come in. She went on and on. The girl...

The rain outside the carriage did an odd thing to the houses by the track. It made them gloomier. Odd because he wouldn't have thought they could get worse. Tiny yards full of junk, battered old balconies with plant pots with straggly things in them, washing lines full of pants, bras and sheets. All getting wet while their owners were driving cabs or running up and down stairs in white office boxes, *just like me*, he thought.

He had a quick look to see if the woman opposite him had left her bra on the line, but no, the white lacy thing was displayed as usual. Never saw a peek of a nipple though, those bra people knew their business. She was reading a magazine. *How to have great sex! Fifteen ways to turn him on! Shape up for summer!*

That's the problem with women, he thought, they only read and talk about it. Always want something different, something to help them, *somebody* to help them. Never want to do anything about it though, just want that somebody to come along out of a selfless desire to help them in return for a bit of petting, a smile and some grub. They might at least be upfront about it, instead of all this "Do you love me?" lark.

Wanted: *bloke. To provide money, something to laugh about to mates, and to deal with kids when I'm sick of them*

Or the older woman's version:

Wanted: *nice man. To provide money, someone to talk at, help me out, and take me to nice places. Oh, and to keep me company because I feel so alone*

Mind you, there was that woman who turfed out her husband and then hired a Kango to smash up her concrete drive that she'd been wanting to do. Some of them have it, he supposed, you just have to look for them in the ironmongers instead of Boots. Probably frustrated farmer's wives or sweatshop supervisors.

One of them would make me happy though. Bit of a tongue-rasping I'd get at first, I expect, but that's just their way. What they really want is someone like me...

He paused and tried to pigeonhole his qualities. Hard to do. When he hit on one that seemed likely, there was always something that made him change his mind. He was *useful*, that just came with practice and age, but damned if he could pin down anything else. He could only think in negatives: not rich (but not poor), not particularly clever (but not stupid either), not young (but not old)...It didn't really do him justice. Or did it? Actually, when it came down to it, he sometimes thought he really was a bit of a catch. Not after a few pints the night before though. And sometimes he thought he was the last bloke anyone would go for.

The train had stopped, and there was a space opposite him. Already the bargain hunters on the platform had their elbows out and fierce faces on, ready to trample and poke to the free seat. No chance of that little blonde getting here first, then. More likely that bloke with the umbrella, he'll keep them at bay and chuck his case from three seats away to get it.

No, he wasn't a catch. But a Frenchwoman though, how could she tell? I mean, all the French looked good to him, nice voices most of them, trim. If one of them came along he might pass muster. Just have to be a bit careful in his manners. He spoke a bit, after a fashion. A bit of practice listening to the radio soon got him going again. Maybe get a few smarter clothes and spend a few days in Paris for the accent. Of course, he'd have to get a more specific vocabulary. He tried to think what "Can I take your coat?" might be. "Veuillez-moi prendre ton robe"? He had no idea. Definitely have to brush up on some slang, otherwise you never knew what you might be hinting. "In through the out door", they'd probably never get the musical connection on that one for a start.

And it wasn't as though he was naturally talkative. Bad enough in English, what could he say in French? It'd be different if he could write it down, he fancied himself quite literate, and translating's not hard if you've got a bit of time.

It's the chat he didn't have. Women like a bit of chat, though God knows what they got out of knowing how old Lucy's nephew was, or whether it was Mrs Bowen had bad legs or had had the operation. Maybe they just liked the sound of voices, and the chance to agree with something and

smile, or frown a bit, or look surprised: some sort of face aerobics. But he didn't think they really cared, not best friends, not like two blokes who go fishing together for twenty years and only say about three things, and two of them about how far to shove the hook up the arse of the livebait.

No, it was more like keeping tabs on the opposition, seeing what new means and methods of assault were being cooked up. Keeping in touch so they can't be ambushed. Always on the lookout they are, for slights and attacks and being got at. And you can't tell them it's not personal. Every conversation is personal and has a subtext for them, praise or blame, if they can't see one or the other they'll ask you what you mean by it, and call you a liar if you make one up for a bit of peace. Still, what are they, women, really? Recreation zones for blokes, of course—although they don't really put any effort into it, most of them, do they, so what do they expect? What else?

He was right about the seat, although that hard-faced git had been beaten to it by a weaselly type wielding a phone and a laptop like they were a topper and hamper at Ascot. 'I say, oik, I'm a member, would you mind just effing orf while my companion and I have a good time? Thank you so much.' Although Weasel didn't look like he belonged, just corporate membership, couple of hours making up the numbers.

Though that's us, George thought, just filling in the gaps, being thrown a bit of tat occasionally. It doesn't need to be like that, we help by going along with it. I mean, I could up sticks tomorrow, and live the life of Riley. I say that, but I couldn't really.

I don't know, though. Trouble is, getting started. You get told all the time it's your choice, but it's not, is it? It's only a choice from a definite range. Being able to choose for yourself, choose the choices, it's being bred out of people. Supermarket people, that's what we are. Tesco's people or Waitrose people doesn't matter, we can't even eat what we want, it's chosen for us. Poor bloody farmers chucking away all the bent cucumbers. Over here, anyway, they're a bit more bloody-minded in France or Italy, for example. Catch them throwing away anything, especially the French. Famous for it: pig's arse sausage, chicken beak pate, intestine soup. But why not? They're not squeamish like we are. That's because they're still bloody peasants at heart, hard life, poor ground, do what you can and make the most of it. I like that attitude. I could do that. Well, maybe, I mean, what am I doing complaining about my life, why don't I make the most of that? Because it's crap, as I said before, the choice is between someone else's idea of crap and someone *else's* idea of crap. Not my idea of crap.

He looked out of the window again. What are they, people? Just stick insects from here, or shadows in houses, gardens. Can't tell anything from here. Other people change with distance. Far away, they're simple, and the same nearby if their job is a bit lowly. Or in a suit. Only complicated when you get to know them, but maybe it's only you who are complicated? You'll never know. And if people are that simple, it can't be difficult to make one, can it? Look fine from a distance. So what's the trick? Just the look, really, and fitting in with expectations. What am I? Just what you expect. Best to keep out of the way then.

I'd be a farmer if I could, I suppose, down in the country. Probably hard and dirty, but outdoors anyway, a bit more proper living. A few sheep, goats, cows, chickens, a duck pond, some woods and fields. Four am starts, maggoty sheep, disease, death, and disembowelling too. Do they still do that themselves? It's the money. I wonder what a farm goes for here? Half-a-million if you're lucky, because if it's any good the big neighbours snap it up, don't they? Like stockpiling car parks: when people realise what sucking devils supermarkets are, it won't matter, they'll happily go and live where they'd just parked before. Still, life is change.

Bet farms are cheaper in France. Not so well-kept or productive of course, probably barely earn a living, but rich in the essentials. Stink, muck and disembowelling—what makes me keep thinking of that? But again, how do you break into it, how do you get to be a French farmer without being French or knowing anything about farming? It's a poser.

Bloody Woking. After bloody Guildford, bloody Woking was his least favourite stop. At least in Guildford you got some classy crumpet. Woking was just full of those stone-faced harpies in suits, all swinging their fat initialled leather bags around. He'd been clumped a few times when they got dizzy talking. They'd swing at anyone with a seat then.

Hello, what's that bloke done? She's giving him a mouthful and no mistake. Look at that, spit positively dripping off her. And he's looking pissed-off, but letting her get it out of her system.

Fifteen minutes to go, and it's getting a bit warm in the carriage. Pity about outside, be nice to be able to just go out when you feel like it, walk around, listen to birds and animals instead of mobiles and cars. He sighed, wondered if he was getting old and crotchety.

Imagine getting up at six and leaning out of the window to a still, blue sky. Smell of something, maybe honeysuckle or jasmine, sounds of singing birds. Could be like that, if only I had the guts. Mean giving up all these habits, maybe finding I can't back it: but if I don't do something pretty soon I just won't have the energy.

The train was standing outside Waterloo now, and there was a lot of bum-shuffling and paper-folding and other sorts of tidying-up-and-preparing-to-go movement. He sat still and closed his eyes, sat straight, sat quiet until he could feel the train move again and slowly gain the station. He sat until the go-getters had go-got, and the shoppers had rattled their as-yet-empty bags, and the mobile phoners had imparted their wishes to their astonished and wide-eyed adoring public. He sat until the guard pushed past the late-leavers and bundled his unread Mail into a sack. On automatic now, he found his way to the office, and put on his office face, his office manners.

...it's so leisurely

'Carl, do you still have that article? You know, it was on your desk. Remember I asked if I could look at it when you'd finished? I think I need some ideas.'

'Of course—here!'

Denbigh returned to his office and sat down. He'd already lost interest, but read the article through from force of habit. Habit, habitual, habit-house, inhabited. He was inhabited by forms of thought he had no wish to keep. Break-up, breakout, break. He needed a break. Breakfast, lunch, dinner; coffee, tea and toast; suit, tie and jacket. He was sick of it. He picked up the phone.

'Hello Em? No, don't wait for me, you go and enjoy yourself. Yes, I know. No, I really can't, sorry. Yes, I know I promised. Look, there's a sort of firm's outing to the races on Friday...OK, OK, I know. Well, never mind then. Yes, your sister's. No, probably not back in time. Yes, OK, I'll get my own. No, not late, though the trains aren't fast from here. Yes, OK. No, don't worry. No. No. Enjoy yourself.'

He hung up. That was good, she didn't want to go. But now what? Head off Maureen I suppose, she's bound to want to go.

His hand reached for the phone, but as he held it in his hand his courage failed him. *No, I'll do it later. Besides, why not? But...no.* There was nothing there for him. If Zoë...but then he remembered that it was Henrik who had suggested the trip in the first place. It was surprising, he didn't think Henrik gambled. Perhaps some other reason made him want to go? Hard to know with Henrik. Inscrutable, or at least unfathomable. Denbigh wasn't sure there was actually anything to fathom. Sometimes he thought Henrik was just a blank wall. Although that wasn't how Zoë saw him, but she was a romantic and maybe inferred too much from the blankness—plenty of material for fantasy from a blank.

No, Denbigh wasn't fond of Henrik, something nasty there, unpleasant. And he was a bastard to Zoë, though she didn't seem to mind.

He put the phone down and started work.

During lunch—sandwiches in the park—he practiced the relaxed face, the mindless present. Happy to see the sun and to smile. He got several smiles in reply, some on faces that didn't look like they smiled much. Pretty girls and women too. He fancied he saw a sparkling eye in one or two and he

got bolder, smiling and whistling under his breath, glancing ever longer at the prettiest ones, and reaping more and more smiles, the occasional “hello” as if some knew him.

It felt good in the sun, just walking along the parkways, smiling. He began to feel handsome and available, and started staring just a little too long at the faces of the women. He felt confident and swell, as the Americans say, handsome and interesting. He bought a paper and some cigarettes, and found a bench in the small square. He sat for a while and mused, reading, a smile on his lips, ready to talk to anyone who might pass or ask for a light or just sit down.

Then the two kids skidded to a halt by the next bench, and threw their bikes to the ground. George turned the page of his paper, immediately resenting their intrusion on his quiet space. Then they really got to him. He tried to ignore them as they made loud calls on their mobile in that whiny voice put on precisely to wind listeners up. He stopped being able to read, concentrating on ignoring their loud play-fight. A silver-haired ex-service type came over to tell them to be quiet, and they swore at him, grinning. The man grew red-faced with anger and spluttered, and they just stood and grinned at him. As he turned and walked away, they swore at him and called him an old fart, repeating it when he turned and glared at them. As he walked away, they spat in his direction and called out “stupid old bastard”. A second victim came over to them and got the same treatment. They loved it, two old farts humiliated in the space of ten minutes. They sat and mumbled just-audible obscenities at anyone that passed and dared look at them.

George gave up on the paper. They’d really got to him, these two ignorant young kids, revelling in the fact that no-one could stop them. It isn’t illegal to shout and irritate the fuck out of people. As he walked past, the tall fat one grinned at him.

‘Nice day, old timer,’ he grinned. George couldn’t help himself, he’d turned into one of the old farts, and whacked him with the rolled-up newspaper.

‘You’re young, you can get away with anything, you stupid, braindead twats,’ he said. As a rebuke it didn’t quite make it. ‘Why don’t you just write “I am a brainless twat” on your coat instead of spending all that energy advertising it?’

‘OK, mate, and you can write “dickless old fart” on yours an’ we’ll be quits.’ Grinning.

He had him. Why didn’t he? Fifteen minutes earlier he’d been walking round with notions that women were looking at him and fancying him,

and he was feeling energetic and smug. These two little gits had done for that. To them, and maybe to half the people George was passing, he really was old, old. He suddenly felt stupid and a little afraid. Had all those opportunities gone? How long had he been kidding himself? It made him shiver, the first genuine feeling that he was old. He stopped smiling, he slumped when he got in the car, and stared at the wheel. Gerontion, a little old man, shrivelled and dry, stared out of him.

...it's time to do something positive

Denbigh had no doubt that he was valued and he had no financial worries, despite Esme. Nothing was *that* complicated. He just felt sick to his bones, there was ice in his heart. Just for a laugh, he thought, I could do something just for a laugh, a joke. How do you spell “laugh” again, mate? I've forgotten.

He started to write a letter. He found an old biro in the drawer and took some blank paper from the copier on his cupboard. Good paper to write on, very white. He put it back and pulled some crumpled sheets from the shredder bin.

Dear Madam,

No, that was no good.

Chère Madame,

Much better, but now what? Fucking robots, fucking Zoë...she's a woman though, Zoë, how did she come up with that notion, for example? It was a nice wine, and the meal was good, but we didn't exactly talk philosophy. But she did put me up for that Plastikon business. And yet she said on the phone...It's just her way of being nice. Yes, an exceptionally nice woman. And things happen in that head of hers, odd things to be sure, but interesting all the same. And this? Certainly interesting, but is it possible? From anyone else, probably not. We're all inclined to help her, me as well as anyone. But she's a giver, life and soul. Pity she's married to Henrik. I suppose I don't know him well, but I think he's really rather nasty. What she must put up with. And France, what about France? Maybe she'll come with me. Live on a farm, muck out the horses, bottle-feed the lambs. I don't really see either of us there. But the alternatives? God has forsaken me. I walk alone through the valley of the shadow of death, and I fear evil. Evil old age, evil cold, evil Greeks bearing gifts. Am I so scared?

... some people can't have a good time

Carl wasn't sure how it happened. It's true that he made a habit of coming to this particular pub because it was trendy enough to attract women, and it's true that he'd been watching the others do it, pick them up, and had been practising. But he still didn't know how she'd arrived next to him, and even more worrying, he couldn't remember who made the first move. And that was only—he glanced at her watch—an hour ago. He'd have to be more watchful in future.

She'd noticed his glance. 'Is there something you're missing on TV?'

Sarcastic, he thought. *Magic, I've blown it*. But then seeing that he couldn't remember what they were talking about anyway, maybe he'd already blown it, and needn't worry. Yoga was great for that. Go with the flow.

'No, no...' he scrabbled for something that might rescue him. 'I just liked your watch. Swatch is it? Neat.'

He'd struck lucky and was treated to the full trip to Oxford Street with her girlfriend. He was lucky like that. Even now she was moving closer and touching his arm. He hoped Henrik didn't turn up. It wasn't likely he'd be on time anyway.

But that wasn't luck, it was the strange truth that Henrik was habitually late, even if he was doing nothing else, particularly. Often he didn't turn up at all, and was concerned when Carl mentioned it later. He didn't make excuses, he just seemed to think that—outside work—there was no time and no justice and no need to think of anything or anyone outside of what he was doing right now.

There comes a point where you have to stop looking—Ah! the primacy of sight!—and start talking. It's all very well practicing this stuff, but when it comes down to it—what? Nothing too complicated, "What's your name?" and so on, but where from there? Lighthearted is good, but how to do lighthearted when your brain is numb and your tongue twisted. Those phrases, those words even, they all go. Not far away, but far enough to keep you twisted up and to kill the heart, time to reflect on what you're doing there, with this terrible feeling that if only you could produce a bit of chat—just nice, ordinary chat, nothing grasping or sinister—how different it might be! Well, how different would it be to recognise the cold shoulder when it comes, the frozen stare (not hard to cotton on to that, really), the politeness and humouring of that old bugger. What did they say? "Dickless old fart"? As well they might. It haunted him now, that

phrase. Ever more applicable, ever to the front of each careless glance, nothing sinister, honest Mr. Policeman, all he wanted to do was sink into a comfortable conversation, one that flows without prodding, one that brings a smile, a warmth.

Like on the train that once, though there were no words there. The occasional smile at the girl opposite, returned, and when he left to go, the “Goodbye” misinterpreted as a kiss—and kissed back! A whole day feeding on that unexpected kiss, not even felt. So simple, in some moods so simple to provoke such frivolity—never again to see her, a brief, seconds, flirtation, no possible consequences—what better? If only, each day, there were one such moment instead of this dull, dreary talk, even if well-intentioned.

Why do they speak so quietly, these people who are attracted to me, so quietly I can’t hear them, so I mishear like an old man, mishear and lean forward, hands cupped, head cocked, mind blank, smile fixed. Mechanics of autogyros for fuck’s sake. The history of bicycle brakes, or the varying size of wheels on Renault 19s. Do I look like someone who might be interested in such things? Do I give off the smell of fusty cupboards and rotten cigars, broken biros and crusty lathes? It’s a conundrum. When all I want to do is chat lightly of this and that, airily of life and the scent of flowers, the taste of air and the possibility of rain. Much better—we can all judge someone by their response to news of rain or snow: automatically reaches for the umbrella, or shivers? Avoid. Neutral? Best. After all, what does weather signify? Someone who enjoys rain, unless they live in the desert, or have a taste for monsoons—rainhats and retreat—as I say, avoid. It tells of a sickly sprit, and probably bitter. Avoid.

Carl admired Henrik for it, it’s what he would advise anyone to do, if they asked his opinion, if they wanted to enjoy themselves. Admired the attitude, but couldn’t do it himself. He wondered how he managed to get so involved in what he was doing, the ordinary things. It took a special kind of talent to be so self-absorbed. Carl couldn’t do it. He knew others that tried and made a moderately successful stab at it, and they had so-so results, but Henrik was the real thing.

There was a touch on his shoulder and he started, turning at the waft of scent. It was Maureen. She’d surely arrived at the right time this time. The other woman seemed to have left without kissing him.

‘Ciao bello!’ Maureen smiled with full lips and a pout, a grin. What was she doing here?

‘What are you doing here, Carl? I missed you in the meeting.’

‘Oh, I needed a break.’

‘But it’s so exciting! Do you know what Zoë’s dreamed up? It’s a miracle—I’ve no idea where she gets it from. Maybe she’s been talking to Denbigh.’

I watch them come down the drive leading to the wet and windy house. It’s dark, muddy, cold. The stream is fierce where they emerged, into the driving rain. They scramble nearer, grotesque dwarfs with misshapen heads and long, dirty fingers. They move to hide in the trees.

In the house, terrified, I see more and more dwarfs lunge out of the stream and join the others in the dank grounds. I run downstairs to lock the doors: just in time.

She pushed herself into the seat beside him, forcing him to move up against the pile of coats and bags. Things dug into his side.

‘I’m so excited, I don’t know how Zoë does these things. I remember when we were living together before Henrik...’ Her mouth turned down. ‘How she came out with other crazy stuff like this. Usually at breakfast. What dreams she had! and still has, by the sound of it. I think the Plastikon people are expecting us to suggest games and things, but this is really grownup. It’s something I might think about getting. It’s another person really, tuned in, clued up...free couch.’ She laughed. ‘Suggestible, aren’t I? And why not?’ She leaned closer, companionable. ‘I like it. I want to work on it. Denbigh’s such an old stick in the mud, but I like him. And I’m sure it must be partly his doing. Funny man, cute even. But Zoë’s the bright one—*he’s* just clever. Smarter than Henrik though. Actually, I suppose it’s possible we’ll end up with a brute like Henrik. You don’t like him do you?’

Carl started. Weird he should be thinking of Henrik too.

‘No, not much. it shouldn’t be hard to clone him, you’d just need a nice warm gorilla brain, a dick and stomach, and a nylon bag to stick it all in.’

‘String bag, I think, so he could put himself on show.’

‘Red string bag, so he could get away with being really bloody.’

They laughed, and Maureen repaired her lips.

‘Did you know Denbigh is thinking of leaving his wife? Someone at work overheard him talking on the phone. He doesn’t seem the type—most probably just hot air. I’d miss him if he left.’

Carl looked at her. He didn't know Denbigh well, and at work, Carl certainly wouldn't class him as charming. Carl liked Denbigh because he was dead straight, and reassuringly clever, if distant. Always thinking of something else when he talked to you, but always polite, and always made some remark to show he was listening. Those slightly shabby dark suits he wore. Yes, reassuring.

The next day was Goodwood. Carl drove while the others took trains and taxis. He looked forward to the time to muse, the relaxing drive through the lanes, woods and fields. He drove past sheep, cows, deer, foxes, rabbits, pigs, horses, without a thought. Why was he going to the races?

He turned the music up, a loud reggae beat. Cars and coaches suddenly appeared in a line ahead, going even slower than he was. It took an hour to drive the last three miles to the car park in front of the course. He slid into a place on the far side of the hill and turned the motor off. He closed his eyes and sat for ten minutes listening to the music, sighed, got out, and locked the car. He was in no hurry, he moved erratically round the cars on his way to the gates, noting the different and brighter colours of the newer cars, the shapes of the plastic wheel covers and the stupid graphics. The sun was out and he lingered with his eyes almost shut, letting his feet go.

Suddenly, near the gates, someone appeared at his side and began speaking low and fast about stable boys. Carl opened his eyes and saw a thin hard face with a trilby pulled low on the forehead.

'Are you selling programmes?' he asked, and got out his wallet. The weaselly man moved nearer until his face was very close, his shoulder was brushing Carl's at an angle, the horsey smell of his wet coat strong in his nostrils. One of his hands was on Carl's arm, and he talked faster, quieter. All Carl could distinguish were the words "stable boys" again. Suddenly his hands were on Carl's wallet and picking notes out. Carl started to move back, but two tenners were gone and the man was shoving a small folded paper in his hands. What was happening? Carl had no idea. He stood still and the man moved off. Carl saw a security guard approach.

'Is everything all right, Sir?'

'Sure, yes, it's OK, thanks.' He counted the remaining notes. Yes, two ten-pound notes were gone. *Twenty quid!* he thought. He looked at the paper, "Nietzsche" it said. A horse? A tip for twenty quid? He relaxed as he contemplated the ease with which this man had got twenty quid for nothing. The paper might just have been blank, why bother with a name? Perhaps he had more difficulty with other suckers. Carl put the worthless paper in his pocket. A good story, he thought.

He smiled to himself and kept going towards the gate. He could see the long queue of ticketless punters and small bunches of tweed hats relaxing a little way away from the queues. A yellow arm waved in front of him and he saw Gelda waiting by the gate. He hadn't expected her. As far as he knew, neither did Henrik.

He was happy to see her. She was tallish, blondeish, good-looking in a cool way. He had met her several times, working. Should I kiss her? he wondered. It seemed like a good opportunity, everyone he knew kissed, even the men each other, some of them. He didn't mind if it was a woman. But sometimes it seemed that everyone was someone else's wife, girlfriend, lover, or property of some kind and he couldn't tell if it was allowed. He didn't want to seem pushy. However, today it was easy. Gelda took his arm as he approached and kissed his cheeks lightly. The angle was wrong and he couldn't get anywhere near hers. He couldn't tell if he was supposed to.

'Have you just arrived?' she asked. 'I've been waiting for quite a while. Nobody else is here.'

Carl looked round. 'You mean no-one's offered you a free lunch yet?'

It hadn't come out as he wanted but she didn't take offence. He knew he needn't bother: as far as he could judge, she couldn't recognise a joke anyway. He found her and her fellow Dutchmen serious. Not solemn, but whenever he'd met them, always in Henrik's company, they talked simply and relentlessly.

She was looking at him curiously. He thought she must be wondering where Henrik was.

'Henrik's supposed to be here already. I think he might have Maureen with him.' Immediately he thought *Bugger, I shouldn't have said that.*

She looked puzzled for a moment then nodded and smiled. 'Thank you, but we're just casual acquaintances.'

He immediately told her about the spiv. 'That's where I lose out I suppose. I couldn't imagine trying something like that. I guess if you can only bring yourself to look at people as victims and punters, almost anything is possible. You could sell anything.' He looked at Gelda, who was smiling, warm in the sun, listening, happy to please him.

She had her own story. 'I remember a job I had for a week. We were selling a roof coating. We had to learn a spiel by rote, and were shown how to separate couples by sitting between them and turning their television off and ordering their children to play in another room. There was a black couple. When I knocked on their door they offered me a cup of tea, and when I started talking they smiled and said yes, tell us more! I

could have sold them their own furniture. But when I understood that they might buy what I was selling, I couldn't go on, so I just stopped and left.' She smiled and waited.

Carl looked at her again. He didn't know what to say. He was surprised and pleased by her friendliness. She had always been friendly with Henrik, but he had thought it was a special relationship. He knew nothing about people. Maybe some were pleasant when you met them in the right place. He was staring at her, forgetful, but she just smiled back. She took his arm purposefully.

'Let's go and find the bar.'

They found Henrik in the bar talking to a thin woman wearing a body stocking and a fur coat, not Maureen.

Henrik introduced them. 'This is Natalya. My friends, Carl and Gelda.'

Gelda inspected their sunglasses and nodded. She turned to Carl. 'What do you want to drink?'

'Stella, please. No, make that Fosters, I expect we'll be here a while.'

'Maybe', said Gelda, and waved to the barman.

'How are you, Carl?' said Henrik. 'You're looking fit.'

'Oh, I'm Ok. When did you arrive?'

'I came by train to Chichester and shared a taxi with Natalya. We were early, I think.' He looked at Natalya. Clearly, they had already made some sexual arrangement.

Gelda handed Carl his drink. 'Come Carl, let's go look at the horses.'

Outside, Carl was poised to accept some bad temper, but Gelda kept her mood. He was surprised. Women, in his experience, invariably made a fuss over any small slight. He wouldn't have dreamed of arranging to meet a girlfriend, only to pick up someone else. But then, he wouldn't have had that option.

'Natalya looks like a ballet dancer.' Carl spoke carefully to this unknown woman. 'Do you know her?' He thought it possible that she was another old girlfriend or wife of a business contact. He didn't exactly understand what was going on: hardly ever.

Gelda looked at him closely. 'Didn't you hear? They met in the taxi rank. I thought you knew Henrik? Women throw themselves at him. I, too. But we're not stupid. Come, today a woman will throw herself at you. Perhaps. If you relax a little!'

Carl stared at the horses. It was a fine day, not too many people, everyone seemed polite and interested. He recognised a famous jockey just feet away, on the back of a giant horse that was having an anxiety attack.

‘Carl!’ Gelda turned to face him. ‘There’s no conspiracy. No-one planned or expected this situation to arise. It just happened. Nobody is scheming or making cheap moves. Now, relax with me, maybe we can have some fun! You don’t have much fun, do you?’

He had no experience of this. But she seemed to know what to do with him. He hoped she wouldn’t be disappointed. He let her lead him to one of the bookmakers.

Henrik and Natalya joined them on the terraces for the first race. Carl just wanted to sit down somewhere but there was no seat to be had. Eating, drinking and watching was all apparently done standing up. He closed his eyes and let his thoughts wander as the spots of horses raced up a faraway hill and undulated slowly round the bend. As they reached the straight he could see they were running quite fast, although none was straining as he expected. Nietzsche was last. He tentatively put an arm round Gelda’s waist, and she eased herself against him, warm.

Henrik rolled up while everybody else was watching the horses. He hardly noticed the joint as he consumed it. Nor did he seem to be watching the horses. Carl glanced at him from time to time. A lot of thinking going on. Was there?

Carl wanted to move closer, to be in range of the joint, but he didn’t want to let go of Gelda, who had her hand in his pocket. So he stood still and waited. It was a thick joint and he thought he had a good chance of getting some. Some of these horses looked like they would break into pieces if there was any weight put on their backs.

But then Henrik trod on the remains of the joint. Reluctantly, Carl asked, ‘Shall I roll another one?’ and took the makings. He concentrated on the work and made a good straight tube, lit it, and inhaled sharply two or three times, and passed it to Gelda, who took a long, deep, drag. He felt his shoulders slump and his stomach muscles relax and he watched some sort of shimmering shapeless mass move slowly up a green slope.

A little later, Carl was finding it increasingly hard to focus, and he didn’t feel firm on his feet. Too conspicuous sitting down here though, no-one else sitting on the grass. He felt his legs shift, trying to get comfortable. He was feeling hot, his cheeks were hot, he was sweating. Closing his eyes he could feel the sun burn him. Leaning on the rail, he blinked his eyes open momentarily. Natalya looked wolflike and straining: too thin, too hard. He had to close his eyes again, the colours coming and going were

making him feel sick. And Henrik looked like a block of stone, like a thug, standing and frowning. *Angry*, Carl thought, *humourless*.

He lost the train of thought and suddenly remembered Gelda, pressed all this time against his side. He tried to steal a glance at her. She smiled, but it came from a long way away, her blonde face and clear eyes held his for a moment before he had to look away.

He felt far too hot, and needed to go to the toilet, but wasn't sure how urgent it was. He didn't want to leave Gelda—he wasn't sure he could find the toilets alone, or, once there, find his way back. There were too many people and he felt clumsy.

Gelda took his hand. 'We're just getting some coffee,' she said to the others, and led him slowly to the tea tent.

'You were looking uncomfortable, Carl. Come with me, I'll help you, that stuff's a bit strong if you're not used to it.' She smiled, and he was grateful. 'Maybe you should get Henrik to take you to his home town. A trip to Amsterdam will give you the opportunity to get used to it.' She continued to smile.

Natalya was smoking Caporals beside Henrik, neither looking at the other.

Before the last race, Henrik had had enough. He hadn't laid any bets, just steadily smoked and drank. His behaviour didn't change. 'Let's go to a pub and get some chips,' he suggested.

'I must return to London now, said Natalya. We can eat at a little restaurant near my flat but I must leave you at ten O'clock.'

'Henrik, Carl would like to see Amsterdam,' said Gelda.

He looked at her, amused. 'Good idea, I'll organise it. Now I have to get a cab. Do you need one?'

'Thanks,' said Gelda, 'but we have our own plans. Nice meeting you.' She shook Natalya's hand. 'Carl, you can drive me home.' She started walking up the hill, and Carl followed.

He could be a nice man, perhaps a little mournful, a little uninspired, but she could make up for that. What she could do for him, for most men, if they listened! But men don't. It's not important. What is important is to have a good time—nothing exotic, nothing forced, just good: good is enough. You can only plan a good time, anything more requires luck and circumstance. But good is easy. People thought her cold, but no, she was sure she wasn't. She didn't allow herself to be sucked in, that was all. She appreciated calmness and thinking space. Carl wouldn't rush for her, she was sure. A certain hesitancy, modesty, she found attractive. Space for manoeuvre, for changing one's mind, for being tired if necessary. Most

people had interesting things to say, or had done interesting things, you just had to ask, and perhaps dig a little. Except those, like Henrik, where digging was counterproductive. He told you what you needed to know all by himself, everything. Inside was a dark pit, better to stay out of there.

...it's pataphysics

It was already evening when Denbigh arrived back at his desk. He was tired and now he had to do the most important work of the day. Working was getting like being in the army—the more you sweated, the more they pushed. They talked about personal evolution, but no-one believed it. Their aim was always to break you. Officers, bosses, owners, keepers, women, kids. And just at this moment, Denbigh felt they had succeeded. He sighed. He hadn't wanted any part of this project, but he couldn't argue with them. He knew his position was delicate. One more unhappy customer and he would be out. He felt the air, hot and sticky, closing round him. Soon he would start sweating the stinking sweat of facing-up-to-death. The thought brought a rictus of amusement to his lips. Dramatising situations had never been his style. His glasses misted over.

He rose and opened the window, setting off a small but insistent bleep. The bloody burglar alarm. He picked up the phone and dialled security.

'Hello Peter, look I'm going to open a window, can you fix the alarm for me? Yes, 208, thanks.' He tried not to sound edgy. In truth these small irritations now made him almost furiously angry. He waited a few minutes and tried again. Blessed silence. Relieved that some people still did their job without pomposity and self-aggrandisement, without giving him hassle, he relaxed.

Leaning on the sill he looked at the lights of the town and thought of Maureen. She was a strong woman, a good companion. He wouldn't be George to Maureen, as he was to Esme, but Philip, the planner, the lover, the man of parts. It was very curious, not least to himself, why he used his middle name at work. "George" was too familiar maybe, too easy, too compliant? "Philip" he felt had a certain in-built distance, a certain edginess, a certain necessary formality.

He liked Maureen but did he want to leave Esme for her? In spite of appearances, that's what she meant by "sleeping together". She wasn't casual about sex. But he didn't like being pursued like this. She propositioned him several times a month. But there was so much work, so many problems to deal with. And of course it meant leaving Esme—not that he felt Esme couldn't cope with that. He knew about her nest-egg, and was not worried that she couldn't support herself or that she would pursue him for what he took. Legally, she wouldn't have a leg to stand on. He had already discussed these things at length with old university friends, now glossy from the marriage-breaking trade. And Tim had given him hope.

And it was rumoured that Maureen was sleeping with Henrik anyway. He could understand why she was still looking. But *two* married men? How stupid was that? And rumour also said that Henrik's frequent trips abroad were not entirely concerned with his firm's business. But Maureen had stuck up for Henrik when he had mentioned it, so he kept quiet.

And what about love? Denbigh had known love, and it haunted him. She'd left for no reason, one day she just wasn't there, and it still hurt. His thoughts drifted to those miraculous days: which were gone. All he had left was Esme and work. It seemed the good times were gone for good.

But he couldn't be side-tracked now. He needed space and time... The thought amused him, reminding him of intense black-haired precisely-spoken lecturers talking of *substance*, *essence* and *form* before lunch. He would've roped them in, if he thought they could help. He'd given up these sorts of speculation, he felt they weren't helping him. There was some satisfaction in pursuing arguments and marshalling thoughts in debate and essay, but finally he'd decided this kind of amusement had no value. Of course, he knew he'd needed to do it to understand why it was of no value. The ability to discriminate, classify, disentangle, search out propositions and assumptions among the endless words of which the world was made, he knew was important to his sense of well-being. But now he also knew it wasn't a necessity for everyone, and indeed that, possibly, if he had never considered these things it would not matter a jot. He had adopted the slogan of his favourite character: "Hang the sense of it and keep yourself occupied." It comforted him.

And now these stale old preoccupations were surfacing all around him. People who had never thought farther than where to eat their next meal were now eagerly addressing those same fundamental problems of definition. What is a man? Is the brain the same as the mind? Can we make a machine that works like a brain? If we can, are we creating a new mind? Can it be qualitatively different from the brain it replicates—can we create some sort of super intelligence? Is the concept of super intelligence intelligible? And of course, the most interesting question of all, "If we solve the problem can we make money from it?"

It depressed him listening to them. Discussion tended early on to be polarised between the thorough-going scientists, who thought that if a metaphor seemed appropriate then the thing it represented was "real", and the mystics who bleated of Capra and the spirituality of physics. The one group spoke of atoms as though this Greek word for "indivisible" indicated a "thing" that was indivisible. When you describe one thing in terms of another you are not imparting knowledge of the thing you are trying to define. Denbigh himself always thought of doctors pompously

pronouncing diagnoses as though they were doing more than rephrase the English into Latin or Greek.

The other group simply denied that the world of everyday senses could be understood, in the sense of literally described, since the physical units of which it was constructed did not themselves subscribe to the laws of the senses. Denbigh at first tried to follow their arguments, he was drawn to the second group whom he called the metaphysicians, mentally swiping at the doctors he despised. But he couldn't reconcile their belief in unintelligibility with their reliance on intelligible systems. Nietzsche himself had trouble, he seemed to recall, and ended up writing literature instead of philosophy.

A few light drops of rain splattered on the window. He turned back to the desk. The work wasn't going too well. He was beginning to feel tired of the endless detail and hassle, and he was sure others had noticed. He thought that it would be the end of his career if he got too bored, he wouldn't be able to cope if he couldn't pretend to be interested. Maybe sleeping with Maureen would jerk him out of it. Maybe he should try it.

He sucked his lip and slowly ordered and reordered the few objects on his desk as he considered his problems. Sex and drugs and metaphysics. He had the ruler and pencil perfectly square, then exchanged the pen for the pencil and turned his glass over on the blotter. He drew a circle around the glass and cautiously balanced the pencil on top of it.

He needed help. He considered the project again. He doubted that anything he could devise could meet their expectations. They wanted *sexy*, they wanted *class product*, they wanted substance made animate. And they wanted his arse. The vulgar expression cheered him, it made him feel that they were children to be taught a lesson.

At some point I have to start joining all the threads, isn't that how it goes? But really, why? Things don't work like that. You have promises and good, bountiful moods, and suddenly pretty, interested glances—next, nothing. Roadblocks, bills, and lostness.

Even driving around this new city is a chore, looking for an air-line for a flattish tyre (why did I swap the tyres? God knows, somebody suggested it, not my plan, not my life, just someone else's suggestion, so why listen? Because you've ignored so many suggestions, or haven't asked in the first place. Lack of trust. But then, "trust", there's a word. Praiseworthy, trustworthy, careful, precise, soon turns to cautious, finicky, careful (with money, with heart, with soul). For example, why not ask the girl, you know, the one that smiles? Well, of course you know it's because she smiles, that's what she does, nothing else).

She's got a boyfriend, a husband, a lover, a hard life, no time, no enthusiasm, or maybe too much. You don't have anything there, even speech, but though you make heavy weather of trifles, it's not hard, not hard on the heart or soul. You miss the company of easy people, even of casual friends (who has acquaintances these days? Everyone has friends, or might have lovers—see above—certainly they have ex-lovers, ex-friends, fighting friends, dull friends, outcast friends, but all friends). Though these are people here, just ordinary people, with dogs, lives, old cars and jumpers, shiny lipstick, cool smiles...hmm, maybe a short question. She does have a certain look, a gorgeous bum—and already it's done. You've asked her out, taken her to bed, discovered her body and her need, her tense smiles and vicious friends, her lonely, careful life—as if you couldn't have told all that the first day, when you exchanged shy glances. Yes, shy, shy at fifty, it can be done. Because that's another thing: soon you have to make the moves, always. It's your job, just another job.

'Where shall we go?

'You decide.'

But how? I don't know this place and already I'm being depended on—not like that other one, the flirty, untouchable one. Not surprising, a woman—this is just a girl. A very pretty girl with a certain air, but a girl who can't decide, at first, what to wear, to eat, to do next in bed, just lies there asking if there's something wrong. No, there wasn't, not till you asked, but now? Perhaps, because in my head, I'm already there, where I don't answer the phone, and pretend to be busy, to have terrible, pressing things to be away for.

Well, that's it, bugged before it begins. I bet her name's Vera or Maude or something—not, for sure, Marianne.

Sighing, he turned back to the report he'd thrown on the desk. He frowned at the company's new lilac paper and fine gold logo. He shook his head but he couldn't shake off the fatigue he felt.

His thoughts wandered, and he sat down. Does Maureen really want to come in on this fiasco? Denbigh knew that he couldn't resist her if she chose to insist. It was difficult. What else could she do now she's sorted out that other project? Denbigh wasn't desperately impressed with her tactics there, as indeed, he hardly ever was, but who else noticed or cared? Certainly not his boss, who was happy as long as his customers were off his back.

There was a knock at the door, and Maureen entered.

'Hi, where have you been? I was here at six and it looked like you'd gone home.'

'No, I hadn't arrived then. But what's happened to you?'

‘Never mind that, I had an accident, but I’m OK.’ She came over and sat on the desk. ‘You look knackered, Philip.’

Denbigh knew immediately that she had decided to join his project. He looked up at her smooth face, her plump lips. She seemed bruised, though her teeth gleamed whitely as she smiled, and her spectacles made her eyes wide and welcoming. It was too much. He knew his only chance of retaining some control over the project was to make her think he wanted her in. He knew about Amsterdam, but it wasn’t his business, he didn’t want to pry.

‘Yes, I am a bit. Actually, I’m glad you waited, I need some help.’ He stood and walked over to the window. ‘You know about my project? I’m having difficulty resourcing it with so many good people stuck in the Jelly lab.’ The Jelly lab was another research project, itself behind schedule and needing some kicking. ‘What are your plans? Mackenzie is pleased with you, I know.’

‘I’m virtually free. I’ve done my bit on that shitty system, and they can clear up after me. Not that they should have much trouble if they follow my recommendations. Of course, with that lot, you never know. For all I know they’re all waiting for us to lose the contract so they can sign up as freelancers. It’s not unknown.’

Denbigh ignored this piece of bitchiness. He found her contempt for the other programmers unpleasant. ‘Are there still problems there?’

‘Not as such. It’s been a flaky system from the start. Too many new applications, too many things just strung together, too little testing, too little actual design. It’s a mess, but today it works. But I want to talk about this robot thing. It sounds fucking interesting.’ Denbigh flinched.

Maureen continued. ‘I know you don’t want me with you.’ He showed no reaction. ‘But I need to do something different. And this is high-class stuff. I can do it, I know the words.’

Denbigh too knew the words, but he also knew about business and about academics and about how things got done. It couldn’t work.

‘Your Master’s was related?’ She’d given her MSc dissertation to him to read and he had put it unopened in a draw. ‘You think you can handle the pressure? There are a lot of people with their necks on the line. This is an expensive piece of development. If it fouls up, half the company won’t have jobs the next day.’ Denbigh knew he was exaggerating only a little. He tuned back in to Maureen, who was still speaking about the last project.

‘And I don’t want to be around if the system starts to go wrong, as, in my opinion, it will. Anyway, it’s late, let’s go for a drink. Hey, are you

listening?’ She stood and started towards the door, knowing he didn’t find her attitude sympathetic. But for her all this was just work, of no importance.

Denbigh was finding it hard to think. He felt confused, words just came into his mind and stuck there for it seemed like minutes, meaningless words. He was just tired. He needed to produce a team list for the following day, but he had lost interest. He’d have a quick drink. Brian should be finished by now. Or Patty. He began to dial their extension, forgetting that Maureen was still in the room. He looked up, but she’d gone. He relaxed and listened to the dialling tone.

‘Comment tu t’appelle?’

‘Marianne, et toi?’

God, don’t you love it when they tutoyer you—so much promise in that initial pair of kisses, the brushing of the lips, as they pass over from cheek to cheek, the smell of her perfume, they must know, of course they know. Do they try harder? It’s possible, how do you tell? Severe, no, you can’t call her severe. Soft, soft...

‘Comment tu t’appelle?’

What did you suppose? Was it Martine? No, Marianne, or perhaps she’s a Nezette or a Nicole, or a Nicorette or Lucozade. A Pretty Polly or, God help me, an Elizabeth Arden or, wow! a Rampant Rabbit. So,

‘Comment tu t’appelle?’

or not. Best not to practice too far ahead, after all, she works five nights a week here. A student? A schoolgirl? Supporting her mum and her little brothers and sisters? No, not so careworn. Saving for a holiday in Disneyland, or a car, or for her trousseau (do they still have *those*?). For God’s sake, a small chat and light kiss would be fine, in fact would be best, but too.... How is it that you never apply the same words to yourself as to those other *obviously desperate* bastards. Am I obvious? English abroad, OK. Obviously alone, OK. But really, obvious? Shameful.

Yes, to feel that body, to kiss those thighs, to feel all that—not to be missed, but will be missed. By the time of that “Comment tu t’appelle?” it will be too late, all over. She’ll have lost interest, (does she have any interest to lose?), she’ll have got bored and moved on to that loud Amer’ at the bar, smiling, smiling. Or John, Jesus, will come along and bombard her with laughs and chat until those few crazy days when he doesn’t turn up for work, and then does, knackered, pasty, fucked—*fucked!* Oh God! furniture is what I need, not fucking, furniture and email, furniture and

soft chat around a table, on a sofa, soft chat and a soft body. Which she has, So, again,

'Comment tu t'appelle?'

Now? Tomorrow? But get ready for the cold shoulder and the hard glance and the loss of those smiles and careful glances. For that's how it happens. You don't have it, but yet you've had it, and it looks nice and it was nice. You have it, and now you have to create something, and the scheme is not one you know, or want.

'Comment tu t'appelle?'

Perhaps, enfin, Vera.

Denbigh woke up, perplexed. He couldn't remember what he was doing here, he didn't know what he wanted to do. There's the crux.

Denbigh considered himself to be fairly representative of the species *man*. But there were a few problems. What are the defining characteristics of a representative man? Consciousness to be sure. But then what? Do we know what Mr Man is for? Clouds of butterflies surrounded him.

And yet, these robots will be better than a man? Better at what? If we don't know what the purpose of a man is, we can't make a better one, we can only imitate what we have and let the technology take over. The result won't be a better man, but a better machine. Perhaps.

People are certainly recognisable by what they do. But when you look at what people do, they often appear to be acting mechanically. So you could say that in that mechanical state they are machines. They weren't built to do anything except, if you have a certain kind of faith, survive. Survival machines. Their will directed towards survival. So we have consciousness and will. Not will~~power~~, because that implies that an individual has access to his motivation and can control it. Some yogis might claim it, some magicians, some religious nuts. But for the rest of us it's just blind will.

So, then. A machine that imitates a human must have consciousness and will. What does that mean? Consciousness involves, at a basic level, a simple awareness of order and pattern, internal and external. Internal order requires memory and a feeling of engagement with something that is not internal. That feeling of not-internal can be the only way of describing *external*. Whether external is some kind of reflection or consequence or absence of *internal* is beside the point, it can't be known. It's only the feeling that matters. But this is the basis only of *self*-consciousness: it's only the feeling *me*. All else, all external replicas or representations of *me* are not proven.

More than that. He, me, I, she, we're, only the objects and inferences that we see and make (*objects*, huh!). Where do they come from, these pronouns? The division of experience, yes, but an experience forced into inventing categories for the otherwise unintelligibly complex or irritatingly simple—we are, she is, I am, moody, driven, constrained and consumed by the nasty divisive exigences of expression.

So where does that get us? Me? thinks Denbigh. There is *me*, and apparently, so I say, an unknowable, inexplicable but unhidden *not-me*. And somewhere in this not-me is a particular not-me, a pattern or form or ordering that can be *more* than me? More than my capacity to understand?

There are many things that I appear not to understand, examples are easy, but is there any difference between things I appear not to understand because they are in the scheme but outside my part of the scheme (like *quantum mechanics*), and things that are in my part of the scheme but are nothing other than names? And if there is a difference, how could I explain the difference? And if I could explain the difference, would the difference matter?

Denbigh was lying back in his chair, these notions washing over him. He could see how simple things that worked in scales could be imagined: slow, fast, superhumanly fast. But what of those things that are spoken of in scales but which are in fact made up of families of other qualities: stupid, bright, genius. Not really a scale, more a mishmash based on a judgement of dissimilar qualities or features.

So what else besides consciousness and will? Habit. Humans have the habit of forming habits. Why? To make or impose sense, ie. order and pattern. So that's it? Consciousness, will and activity patterns. The first two to be inferred from the last. But they must be a certain kind of habit, a certain kind of will: ordered activity, some specific, some general. So also *intent* can be inferred. Or is that a red herring?

If this conscious, habit-led will is to be found in robots, what will it consist of? And what of purposeless habits (art for art's sake)? And gratification, what is all that about? The pleasures of sex and art are gratifying (*just make me feel good*, OK?) and entirely gratuitous.

Denbigh was tired, it exhausted him, all this stuff. It all seemed so easy, so right. But in the abstract. When you got right down to it, describing, categorising, *motivating* an action was seemingly not possible. Habitual activity is not hard to synthesise, anything can exhibit this activity, from amoeba to gorilla to clock mechanism. What makes a human is the range and variation in habitual activity such that many elements of the activity can be removed or changed before it's no longer that activity. A paraplegic punching a keypad with his nose counts as *writing*. There, it's

the product that's important. Making noises in the throat that issue as sounds in an indefinable context counts as *singing*. In that case, the product is singing because the performance, the intention, is singing. In dadaist or found art, it's art because that's what I say it is. The product is immaterial.

Denbigh was still chewing this inedible gristle when finally he felt compelled to move, move up from the chair he had made comfortable with his bodyweight, move out from the room he'd made comfortable with his small adjustments of commonplace furniture and his few ornaments. The *me-comfort* that no-one else could know or replicate.

Too tired to think now. And this morning my eyes wouldn't open. Not tired I don't think, they just wouldn't open. I wanted to take out the lenses but my lids were so swollen I couldn't get to them. Lids were just heavy, left eye a bit red, nothing serious. But open, no, they wouldn't. After an hour of cold sloshing water they were no better. I had to walk to work blinking furiously, wouldn't stay open more than a second. Lucky I knew the way, I just needed hints of the outside world—avoiding dogshit and so on. The rest on automatic. By midday I could see—but have you ever tried working, staring at a computer screen with your fingers holding your lids open?

Not that it helped much, my eyes wouldn't focus in the briefly open periods. Everything a blur. All my carefully positioned equipment, distances and angles set up over weeks, are fucked now: The screen I had to move nearer, pointlessly because I still couldn't see anything, but it seemed a good thing to do, the keyboard further away, to rest my elbows. Going downstairs was the worst, just missing tripping, dragging feet, and then at the bottom aiming vaguely for the slot in the coffee machine with what I thought were the right coins. No panic though.

I tried to imagine what it would be like to be blind, of course. Only lasted a few seconds. Glimpses are enough to give you the feel of the full picture. Which is: 99% irrelevant. Hints and glimpses are all you need really to keep going. Nothing like being blind—no hints or glimpses there.

So after I had my sight restored, much later, I found that the hints and glimpses were enough, but very fatiguing. I'm fucked now, though it hasn't been a hard day, and I'm going to bed.

The next day Carl watched Denbigh rearrange the pencils and pens on his table while he talked. They were pretty neat when he started; they were unnaturally well-ordered when he'd finished.

...everyone runs away at least once

The next day, George went to the library and asked about the French section.

‘We’ve got de Sade in translation you know, over there on the fourth shelf.’

‘Thanks, no, what I’m looking for is information about French rural life, farms, organisations and so on.’

‘I don’t know. If you wait a minute I’ll ask the head librarian.’

George sat on a chair and mused over the Times. He was fascinated by the obituaries. What a source of business they must be for flower sellers and estate agents. Anyone looking for vulnerable people to take advantage of. Widows and old people, famous for being taken for a ride. But also good for genuine offers of help. There must be some decent people around.

Look at me, I’m not too egoistic, a bit selfish perhaps, but how can you not be? It just expresses itself in different ways. I mean, I’d like to get out— He surprised himself. He’d never really put it into words like that, or thoughts even. But he was comfortable with it. Before, even such vague feelings had caused him immediately to break off and castigate himself for his selfishness. But—there was no doubt—something had changed. Maybe talking to Tim. Yes. He felt for the letter in his pocket, stroking it like a talisman.

He looked at the obituaries again, and a thought occurred to him. If they did the same thing in France? He’d look. Luckily, he still had some French, left over and a bit mouldy but, he thought, serviceable. How to find out?

He found the French section and its newspapers. Picking one up at random, he pored over it, searching. And there it was.

*Mme Veronique LaBorde
Mlle Stéphanie LaBorde
ses frères, soeur
et leurs enfants*

*ont la douleur de vous faire
part du décès de*

Michel LaBorde

ancien combattant

le 18 décembre 2008.

La cérémonie religieuse

sera célébrée le 22 décembre 2008

en l'église Saint-Joseph

au cimetière de Bélâbre

He felt like a ghoul, but why not? He checked out some other obituaries, which, luckily, gave the age of the widow. He didn't want to waste his time with the young or too old. Middle-aged and desperate was the thing here. Names, addresses and contact numbers. He could feel a wave of enthusiasm building up in him as he read more. *Must be careful with the names, make sure they're widows.* But it was easy, the French formality made it plain.

Leaving the library, he walked to a nearby bookshop and bought a stack of newspapers. He found a café. Two hours later, he had a list of 10 candidates. Now he had to go and see them. That'd need some planning.

At home later, when he found the places on a map, he saw that the distances were too great. He'd need to spend at least a couple of days in each place, and he had only three weeks. Paris was no good, it had to be some rural place, somewhere dead. One of the library books had been full of pictures, so he pulled it out from under the stack in his boot.

An hour later, he had another list, of departments. Another book yielded background details of the culture and geography of each place, and he circled the three most likely. He included Grenoble for romantic reasons, though he didn't like the city much—he'd crossed the Alps by car from Italy once, and it had taken far longer than he thought. At last, after dark, he'd come to the lights of Grenoble as to an oasis. Or was it Chambéry?

He crossed it out again. None of that stuff. He added Varèges and Varilhes, although both seemed rather near the mountains. He liked the idea of mountains, although the actuality was short evenings and viciously cold mornings. But the Pyrenees, they're different to the Alps, so he'd read.

Methodically, he went to work, getting out a pack of local French maps and circling each of his chosen districts. Then he went back to the list of names and crossed out the ones not in those districts. He swore to himself. It left a single widow, Monique Delacroix.

I need more than one, it's ludicrous. I must get more organised.

Painfully, he made more lists—of papers and districts, of districts and their location and geography and brief history, of deaths and towns. He examined more papers, made mistakes—so many towns with the same name!—and finally realised that either not many people died in France or they weren't so desperate for everyone to know.

But his list now had five names on it. Ten days later he was at the station in Limoges. It was raining and he wished he'd brought the car.

So once again he arrives in a shut town, in the rain, no street signs to be found. The walk to the hotel was miserable, and arriving there was worse—the hotel desk behind locked doors. This is obviously how it must be. He has to learn—but what? He makes the usual arrangements, spending more of the money he has not yet earned.

Yes, and what? What are these lessons he has to learn, that someone is determined to teach him? What lesson is worth so many painful arrivals and sudden—even if half-expected—wrenches to the, lurches of the, heart? He'd like to guess, but he really can't see it—resilience and that claptrap? Not worth the bother, and it's not like he slips into some soft luxury when he's not being actively punished, again and again, for what? And why bother, since it certainly looks like he's not the star pupil.

Although this time he could come out on top. Even in the dark and the rain it feels good, this foreign surface, sitting in this little restaurant, cheap but edible, feeling warm, drinking beer, eating a steak-frites.

He paid, hoisted his gear, and walked and walked and walked.

This is the feeling: your back aches, so you shuffle the rucksack every few minutes. You pull in your stomach and straighten your legs. Your knees and ankles ache, so you straighten your feet as they hit the pavement, and slightly curl your toes. It's eased for a moment. You adjust your rucksack again, and change the grip on your laptop bag containing the new, suddenly heavy, laptop that you were sure you'd need, and that you've stupidly brought with you. The rucksack, perversely, is fairly light, containing almost nothing but one of everything in the way of clothes, or one pair, plus a pair of gloves, a spare beany, and a map, two maps, the big one for when you're truly out in the suburbs, the lost lands of concrete flats, huge scarcely-negotiable ringroads and motorway bypasses, shitty alleys and doomed souls; and the small one for the centre, the busy careless centre with its beggars, fur coats, more shitty dogs, and neon. But the centre map has the places of refuge, two pubs, Irish pubs such as you swore you'd never enter, filled as they are with loud twanging yanks and

scurvy Irish, playing the yokel for all they're worth. Vicious, on the make, but that's what a refuge contains anywhere.

Oh, and your overpriced, underspaced room, and the internet café. God, that the internet has become a refuge. But it has, the last refuge of us with no expectations except that something is familiar. Even familiarly irritating will do at this stage.

Luckily you're not far from the best pub, which is hardly crowded with tens of Italians, sixes of French, small groups of Americans, and ones and twos of English, and with easy down-home Irish music on the good sound system, not too loud. For those times when the small of your back is cold and aches, when your eyes are tiny specks in puffy holes, when all you want is to sit and stare, when sitting and staring is the sum total of your expectations for a great evening, it's not too bad.

Do I sound desperate? Not at all. Sometimes sitting and staring in a warm place with a cool drink, a cigarette and the occasional pretty girl to glance at, is a kind of contentment. We don't all get angry or petty, nasty or aggressive, or feel sad or downtrodden when the breaks are not going our way. Most kinds of despair, most kinds of loss, most degrees of ill-luck or abandonment can be borne with a little heat, a safe bed and a bit of food. Good music helps too, and a hot bath.

He arrived at the hotel. The rucksacks were heavy and his laptop was heavy, they weighed him down. Meditation; calm, cool. But what a dump! The pictures on the internet were of an old but interesting building, with windows. He climbed up the broken stone stairway to the door and looked inside. A narrow passage led into a dingy interior. Two Arab rapists manned a rickety table that passed as the reception desk. They looked, he stammered his name, they took his money—he'd booked for a week. One led him further into the tunnels of which the place seemed to be composed, and fumbled for a door. It was too dark to see properly.

The door opened and the rapist disappeared, leaving him inside what seemed a cellar. He clicked on the light and slumped at the sight of the single broken-backed bed, and the torn curtain to an alcove, and the door with a broken lock opening onto a tiny broken balcony—the balcony that he found housed his wash basin and toilet in a wooden lean-to.

Panicking, he sat on the bed and let his bags drop. Jesus, what was he doing here? Calm, meditation, cool. His head felt too heavy. He lay down, staring at the sign, *'The management is not responsible for thefts in the hotel'*, hand-written on a torn and brown-stained sheet pinned to the back of the door.

Ten minutes later, having made the best job of hiding his stuff that he could manage, he walked out again into the cold rainy street and headed for the station, his heart pumping, his neck stiff with fright and anxiety. This was where he wanted to live? This dreadful heart-constricting Hades? At the station he looked for lit *Hotel* signs and aimed for the brightest. Yes, they had a room, he took it, and ran back to retrieve his bags, hoping they were still there. He left the key and cautiously slid out past the thankfully vacant desk, banging his bags as he hurried towards the rain and the ruinously expensive sanctuary.

That night he sat in his new room, heart palpitating, sweating, alone, pissing money. He thought this, he thought that. He was one moment ready to run, the next, calm. Why is it always like that? He had foreseen such stuff as this after all—he'd been here before. And he had been warned, but warnings are by their nature inexplicable, theoretical. After all, if you know what's coming—really know it, as in, your body has prepared itself with physical sensors and hardwired responses, rather than knowing *about* it—the warning is a conversation filler, something to pass the time and assure all the participants they're in the know. Otherwise, the blood and the rising heat cannot be prevented (pre-vented: you can't get it out of your system before it happens, much as you'd like to, and much as, sometimes, your career or wellbeing depends on it), and is not easily explained. How can you explain that such a small thing as a particular kind of stare, a tone of voice, an infelicitous phrase, combined with the general high feeling—that anxiety when nothing is familiar and you'd brought with you, deliberately, and apparently with malice aforethought, so many useless (and expensive, and therefore stealable, breakable, losable things). It gets so mixed up in seeming innocuous dealings with these other people (these well-named *others*), these new bosses and colleagues, providers of money, and occasional sympathetic ears. These good intentions, prepared and ready to roll as you thought they were, but really already lost and on the point of being added to the general angst.

But it was all right. He could flim and flam and suggest and smile and nod and speak intimately, low, reassuringly, as well as the best. Avoiding the avalanche, his speciality, mostly reliable. He could avoid it this time for sure, that was a special skill, the knowledge that when he needed to be saved, he could save himself, unaided, every time, even if he couldn't save himself. It helped that there is, at some point, time, time that can be used to recover, to plan. And there are always Others Worse Off.

This time, a humdinger, a woman, the woman who brought him here, who seduced him over the phone with her Southern soft cheerful intimate voice, the woman whose husband it appears is dying of some interior sabotage, some internal plot, the woman with two small excitable children,

two of three. One killed at birth, held, suffocated and strangled by its cord. One damaged at birth but overcoming and Getting Better Thank The Lord—not that you'd realise that this cow-gazing, blank-featured little boy was *better* than he had been, you couldn't imagine worse without an obvious physical handicap such as a missing nose or no feet. But she's only hopeful, not pathetic, and still the warm Southern woman, humanly soft and welcoming, that you knew her to be as you flirted on the phone, and not the spastically deluded soul she could be. He wondered vaguely what had become of her.

He tramped the streets as the rain thankfully turned to snow as it got colder. All white now, cars with handfuls of snow removed from the windscreen, pavements six inches deep in dry powder, but no wet socks, a function of the cold, minus six, and the bitter, blustery wind. Up by Notre Dame the open square encouraged swirls and blasts, head down, chin down and frozen.

A small dog bounds around, pissing small yellow holes. A woman in a skirt, I guess legs already frozen, hoists a tiny umbrella that catches the wind and sucks the kamikaze flakes into her face, where she collects them on her scarf. The lights glowing yellow, showing the pattern of winds as the snow drifts into four foot barriers. A few people move, then no-one, everyone sitting glumly in the cafes and bars. Cars, drivers only used to playing at winter driving in this cold dry city, crawl and squash and glide through corners, slipping slowly sideways at each bend, expensively, sedately, crunching wheels and the odd abandoned bicycle, half-hidden in the snow.

The green river flows low, unexpectedly, and a ghastly oily green that holds the city's detritus. The snow is often pretty but you can hear the rats burrowing through the underside of the cold world, safe in their search for soggy fast food boxes. It's too cold for the street people, even those under the bridge in their nests of blankets and boxes.

Gratefully I reach the pub door and grin at the warm faces. An hour in here to unfreeze, then back out into the wind. I could imagine lying down in the snow, too cold to feel, even soft and comforting. Would I get up again? They think not. Maybe I'll find out—but not quite yet. Nothing dramatic you understand, just a quiet lie down to sleep and to forget the swirling in my head. I can't imagine these feeble sucking thoughts would survive such a dreary burial. One way, my love, to find peace— under a white sky in a white field.

And so it goes, we all go, when we leave the easy hearth, when we venture out, alone.

*In the snow, yellow dog
on your belly—
red dog blues is what I've got
just like the telly*

*Up, dog, howl, red
blue, black, white
yellow dog pissing in the corner
white dog squeezing out shite*

*Leap dog, it's a leap dog
sniff and lick and growl
take me by the scruff
and howl, howl, howl*

*How much for the white dog's skin?
the blue dog's bones?
how much for the black dog
howling, howling alone?*

*Drag out the blanket
drag out the tramp
sniff the curdled beer
and piss against the lamp*

*Howl my red dog
I've got a blue dog
white dog, black dog
howl, howl, howl*

...we sometimes need to jump the light

A weary night, worn out, sodden. Out of the fog walked a man, Carl, talking, talking. He was reconstructing a conversation just passed, and this time he was winning. Magic.

It's not yet evening and yet it's not light, there are shadows and houses with lit windows and slow traffic. Some grey dogs. Some red coats.

The windows down the side of the street were draped as ever, women's clothes, flashy electronics, fridges, the odd book. Mostly board adverts, in fact, for building societies and banks. Bankers!

There is this white bed at home, I'm Mrs. Sindico's lover, never even shows the creases. Always turned out just right, verging on the puritanical. Greasy, she is, as lovers go, greasy and sweaty, and of course energetic. It goes without saying.

Carl didn't really know how Maureen had talked him into coming to Amsterdam, he'd thought he wouldn't like it. But now being there, he was fascinated, and it was Maureen looking pissed off. She said she didn't like the crowds, or the Japanese, looking so clean. 'Why are they here?' she wondered.

She had a closer look at one of the girls opposite. What must it be like to sit in a window in a red light? Perhaps they have that foil on the window, so they can't see out. The woman came to the window and smiled at her, and Maureen turned away, wondering what it would be like. Carl was looking sideways at some streetwalkers hanging around outside a small shop. One or two were really good-looking he thought.

'Could you do this?' he asked Maureen.

'I hadn't thought about it, but yes, I suppose, if I had to. What's a body? Of course, if you have a good one, let's suppose a nice pale skin, a redhead, yes, then maybe not, don't want to spoil it—probably wouldn't need to. Otherwise, yes, why not? And perhaps more easily with another woman.'

They walked on. Carl was tired, disliking the gloominess of the district. He still had the speed Henrik had given him in his pocket, and fingered it as he neared their hotel.

Maureen was feeling jumpy and she didn't want to go back to their hotel yet. 'Carl, let's try another bar, there must be some good music here. I used to go to the Melkweg, but I can't remember where it is. Anyway, there should be something about. Where do all the old hippies go?'

He had no idea. When he came with Henrik, they just used to wander around aimlessly, as far as he could make out, and could end up anywhere. Well, not quite; he thought of the time they'd brought the motorbike with them. That had been good—he could remember the fear of sliding on the cobbles. They'd been in a bar in a square near the Rijksmuseum, a long walk from the red light district.

Somehow he managed to wave down a cab, and when they arrived at the next square, he was glad to have shown some drive. The beer here was the same but in taller glasses. There were more Dutch people, and it was livelier. He began to notice the way Maureen held her drink in front of her face, as though it were a mirror, staring at it and smiling. She was feeling more cheerful, and teased him.

'Should we tell each other some secrets? I'll start.' Without waiting for him to answer, Maureen began to tell him about her first husband.

'He was nice enough, we trundled along, making a bit of money. We had two children, they were small, and we spent a few years dragging them around the country as he was sent to make new deals in Manchester, Glasgow, Plymouth. One day I didn't want to move anymore, and I didn't like him anymore, and I left.'

She looked at him. 'I hope you're polishing your own story, I don't want a one-minute wonder.'

She continued, 'So I didn't have a job, but I kept the house, and of course, the kids. I knew someone who worked for a big computer company and I thought there'd be a future in it, so I just started going to work with her. I learned how to type and use their word-processor, and after about three months I was quite good. Then, when someone left, I got a job there—well, they could hardly refuse, they all knew me, and I'd been doing their work for free. I was there two years after that. Then Henrik came to train some of the salesmen. We had sex in the lunch hour on his first day, then every day, at my house. He got me a job where he worked—and we stopped fucking. Kapow! No sex in the office.

'One weekend I had some other bloke over. I'd sent the kids away with my by now ex-husband. We had some acid. He said there was a string

coming out of my heart, it was fiery. My eyes were pure white, I'd rolled the pupils out of sight.

'Funny stuff, acid, I've never eaten cheese since. Once you really experience that cow fat in your mouth, when you realise what a sluggish mouthful it is, not fit for eating. Cucumber's the thing.'

'I wouldn't trust cucumber entirely,' said Carl. 'Lawrence Durrell quotes an Arab proverb: "The world is like a cucumber: today it's in your hand, tomorrow up your arse."'

Maureen giggled and took hold of his arm. Carl was pleased, it was one of the few quotes he could remember.

'I wonder what...no.' She paused then shook her head and changed tack. 'Tell me something interesting that you've done.'

'I'm not sure I can, it's a secret.' He paused. 'And maybe that's its only interesting quality.' He considered for a moment. 'At least, I think it's a secret, I can't remember who I've told. Anyway, I had a girlfriend and we used to muck around, you know. We went out for several years, on and off. It was just after my A levels, I just wanted to live somewhere else, so one weekend we went to Manchester, Longsight, and after about eight hours of looking through ads and standing in queues outside flats and being told "Come back when you've got a job" by agents, we found ourselves at the top of an old house in a crescent with a bald bloke, standing in a large room. I really liked it. The bloke only wanted two weeks in advance, which was OK. There was a small kitchen, and another room, a large bedroom with a double bed.

'We agreed to take the room, and left. And then outside, Melanie said we'd have to ask the landlord to swap the double bed for two singles. I couldn't believe it. I was leaving home so we could *live* together. I don't suppose we had ever discussed each other's motives. Anyway, she went back in and he apparently said he would. On the train, we studied the timetable and worked out what train we would catch back, and then Melanie started talking about her mum being at home and that it would be difficult...

'It was the first time she'd hinted that leaving would be a problem. My parents didn't take much interest, and I did what I liked. Hers, apparently, did take an interest. She said that she'd ring me when her mum went out, and get a taxi. I wasn't happy, but went along with it.

'When it came to the day, I got to the station and bought the tickets, and sat down on my bags to wait. The trains came and went, and then, about two hours late, Melanie came scuffling over the footbridge carrying about ten plastic bags. Well, frankly, I was fed up enough to have got on the

next train without her. So, yes, I was happy to see her! And we sat on our bags and waited. Suddenly, someone was shouting—Melanie had left a note for her mother telling her she was going by train to Manchester at four o'clock. What an idiot I was! "I thought we'd be gone by now", she said as she picked up her bags. I actually helped her mum carry them back over the bridge.

'And so there I was, two tickets to Manchester, paid for, two weeks in a flat, paid for, and no-one to go with. I went anyway. At the end of the second week I joined the army.'

Maureen felt in his pocket. 'What's this? Speed? Do you want to go back to the hotel?'

'What?' Carl wondered how eager he should seem. 'Sure' he said, and managed a grin. He hoped she'd take over again soon.

Once back at the hotel Maureen carefully unrolled the paper and licked. 'Tastes OK.' With a small movement she sucked half of it up her nose and began to pull off her clothes untidily. Carl watched from the chair as she fumbled with her bra, threw it down and stepped out of her pants. He wasn't expecting this. Some sloppy-tongued kiss and a goodnight...but she undid his belt, unzipped his cock and sucked it in.

'Relax, she breathed. I'm not going anywhere tonight.'

But later, in her own room, she wished she had. She wasn't really in the mood, and he'd been so nervous. She liked him, but it was hard work. She wanted to help him, he was too easy, a bit grovelly, but she knew she was impatient. Now she sat in her room, listening to Frank Zappa. The sudden high notes made her tense, they sounded like telephone bells.

She picked over the coins from her purse and looked out the window. Her face was steady, her mind blank. The guitar stopped her from thinking. Without deciding, she left the room to make a cup of coffee.

She pulled the ski brochure from the pile in the rack and leafed through it. Unable to decide if or where to go, she thought she may as well go down to the agent and just choose one there and then. It was clear in her mind—the exhilaration, the anxiety and the concentration needed to stay in the lanes. *This is pleasure! and it's true, I do enjoy it*, she thought. She booked a chalet in Zermatt. Maybe she could organise some friends.

...we're all animals

The next morning, Carl sat distracted in the tiny diner downstairs, drinking coffee while Maureen got ready. He wanted to leave but didn't know how. Henrik had just arrived and called him, wanting to meet up. 'Let's go to that place on the Prinzengracht.'

Henrik had spread his own memories of Amsterdam. They included eating mounds of buckwheat and seaweed at the vegetarian dens near the student hostels. When Henrik came back he always intended to go there and look at the girls he remembered. But everything had changed. There were a lot of scruffy blacks and lowlife whites hanging around offering marijuana, cocaine, heroin. He was tempted, but he didn't trust them. He didn't want to snort baking powder, or even speed, particularly. Carl agreed to meet him at the central station. Later, they wandered around the canals. Carl was trying hard to find it exciting. Eventually they had to go to the red light district and pretend to eye up the women.

Henrik wondered if Gelda was in the city. He needed distraction. 'I've just got to make a call.' He looked around and walked over to the nearest bar.

Carl looked at Maureen. 'He's not really interested in you.'

Maureen smiled and patted his hand. 'Look, if he gets through to Gelda you'll get your chance to show me a good time again tonight'. He flushed. The land of plenty.

Henrik returned, and as they walked, Carl looked about him for something to do. He'd forgotten how different from home the shops looked. The girls looked different. Many seemed beautiful to him. What should he do? He risked some furtive looks but sometimes a girl returned his glance and he had to look away. It all floated away.

He'd had enough of this. OK it was easy, and he was somewhere warm, but he couldn't see it going anywhere, nowhere he could think. And they'd lied, there was no chance. The corporal told him he was a squirt, among many other things, but he didn't mind, and made him stand in the corridor for hours. The sergeant just shouted, but that was OK, he knew they couldn't stop him. The lieutenant barely spoke, just telling him it would be arranged. Then the sergeant-major, another loudmouth. The captain took him apart, they'd known he wasn't up to it. Two weeks for all that, in between

cleaning the kitchen and doing the freezing winter runs. They stopped him going for rifle practice. Then at last the Colonel, who knew it wasn't right: asked him if he wanted to try for a commission. But he'd made his mind up, for once. He'd made it out. They let him go.

They sat in a bar and Gelda appeared. The Italian girls sitting next to Carl chattering, it seemed for hours, without a stop. He could swear he heard one of them gasping for breath as she struggled to spill out more words. Nobody looked or listened. The TV sat there with the sound off, music slowly oozing out of some hidden speakers, different music. He drank something that was brought over from time to time. He read some pages of a book, he looked up, he looked around. It was unreasonably cold, although he hadn't removed his coat. Suddenly he wondered what they were all wearing that stopped them complaining. There was a group opposite him. Some vaguely Fair Isle sweater, if he knew what Fair Isle was. It seemed vaguely to fit. He didn't know how it was spelled even. 'Everybody hurts—hold on' sang the speakers.

And then more bars. Henrik led them erratically. He said he knew places, but they all looked the same to Carl. Just the same, except they were separated by wet, windy trudges down the wet alleys. It was always the same with Henrik, being with him was like being evacuated of any will, you just had to go along with it. Moody sod he was, and couldn't do anything he hadn't decided to do himself, on a whim usually, he didn't seem to be able to keep a plan longer than ten seconds. So everyone was dragged around.

They came wearily to a bar and had a drink. Carl wondered what the hell it was about Henrik that made people like him, because they did. But he was so bloody self-centred. Maybe they'd just got fed up with wishy-washy. Could be it, but Gelda? Not so believable.

And then they were back out on the street. He hunched down the cobbled street. At the corner was a little group. He couldn't care less.

All at once he felt a blow on his ear. He watched as Henrik fell to the floor with three or four shapes around him, kicking gently. He fell back, and another blow sent his glasses flying. He moved back, going into what he hoped was a boxing crouch. There were four or five figures opposite him, looking like they wanted to hit him. They didn't know how, he was on his feet, they just stood with their fists raised and he hit them easily, one after another, a quick, light punch to the cheek, he didn't want to hurt his hands, he didn't want to feel anything sagging or breaking under his fists.

Henrik was rolled up on the floor, the girls were shouting. He moved back, the figures followed him. Some were kicking Henrik, it didn't seem hard, he couldn't make much out, he'd lost his glasses. They went slowly, him and five or six of his attackers, backward till they reached a corner and they turned and ran. The girls had shouted loud enough, he thought. Then he looked for his glasses.

At first he thought it was Henrik on the floor still, and he went to pick him up, until slowly approaching he realised it was one of the girls. Her hair was spread around. Maybe she'd got hit by mistake, but no, she wasn't moving, and Henrik was running back, and so was Gelda now. It was Maureen on the floor, she'd fallen, and they'd kicked her harder. Blood pooled round her head. Henrik sat her up, her eyes were blue, her teeth were red, she had a slash along her neck. They'd found the courage to take a swipe at her with a knife and she'd been unlucky, she didn't seem to be breathing. Everything was still. Gelda stood back.

'O Jesus,' Carl breathed. 'Now what?'

Henrik's face was set in a scowl. He wasn't hurt, their attackers didn't know what they doing—didn't know, or weren't really interested in hurting them. Just a scare, so how had Maureen been hurt so badly?

'She took a chance, standing up to them like that, didn't she? She's a mess,' said Gelda. 'I'll call an ambulance. It's OK, she's breathing. Maureen? Maureen?'

'There's no need to shout,' said Henrik, nervously. 'She'll be OK.'

'Oh yes? And since when were you a doctor?'

Henrik stared at Gelda. 'Shut the fuck up Gelda, and make the call. She's not lost a lot of blood, nothing's broken. A cupful of blood makes a big mess, that's right. She'll be OK.'

Impatiently, Gelda stood and walked away a little, dialling. Carl, sitting heavily on the kerb, frightened, watched her. She spoke rapidly, the guttural Dutch making her soldier-like, police-like, cold, alien. Henrik was smoking, hunched, expelling great gusts of blue air.

'Here, keep her warm. Give me your coat Henrik.'

'Take Carl's, I'm cold. I have a big meeting tomorrow. She'll be OK. Carl! Give Gelda your coat. I've got to make a call.'

Dialling, he moved out of earshot. When he'd finished, he came back to say, 'I'm leaving. I can't get involved in this. You don't need me, I've nothing to add to what you can tell them. I'll see you at the hotel.'

He turned and started walking quickly towards the lights of the station, and then flagged a taxi, which ignored him. He began to run as Carl watched, turning a corner just as the first police car arrived.

Carl and Gelda looked at each other. Gelda had put her own coat under Maureen's head, and was shivering. There was blood on the coat. Maureen's head moved and they heard a low groan.

'How do you feel?' said Gelda.

'Please get someone. Tell them I'm pregnant, I don't want to lose my baby.' She turned her head and groaned again.

'Where's Henrik?'

'He left. It seems he has things to do.'

'The bastard.' Maureen closed her eyes. She was fighting panic. 'I think he has drugs in the hotel room. He's probably gone to hide them. He won't want to be searched. I hate him. I really hate him.'

Gelda stood back as the ambulance arrived. Maureen's eyes stayed shut as she answered their questions and was put in the back of the ambulance.

'Can I go with her?' said Gelda.

'No, I don't want you,' came Maureen's thin voice from the ambulance, 'I'll be alright. They all speak English here. But thank you.'

The doors closed, and Maureen relaxed, even though she knew that she'd be frightened alone. Better than letting them see. At least she could concentrate. Zoë had given her some tips.

Gelda turned to Carl, who was being questioned. Another policeman was approaching her. She waited. It was all over.

...it's fake

Denbigh drove five hours from Limoges to Grenoble, which he remembered was pretty. The traffic before Lyon didn't faze him, nor the sight of the building on the outskirts of Grenoble that he knew housed the little brother of Geneva's particle accelerator. The mini nuclear reactor next door, and the relentlessly white industrial, technological, soul-blackening starkness of the rest of his slow drive in made him pause.

The web only spoke of the Silicon Alp in the abstract, neglecting to mention the effects on the spirit of this inhuman, sub-human mania. But once in the town, in the old town, the old stone-seeming district, the sunny quais lifted his spirits, the blue- and green-painted windows of the houses rising on the banks of the Isère looked fresh, though he didn't look closely. He parked on the relatively quiet far side, and wandered about, over the old bridge, getting lost in the strange concrete-stone alleyways that looked just like the stone alleyways of every old place he'd ever been, except that here, at the end of each boulevard rose a mountain, not a high mountain, just enough to form a painted backdrop.

Soon, since the streets were uniformly flat, and the traffic uniformly slow, and people uniformly fit-looking, he started to think he was in the middle of a film-set, nothing real. He couldn't really convince himself the buildings were old concrete, they looked just like stone, perhaps the information he'd been given was fake, maybe for some reason the citizens of Grenoble felt a need to differentiate themselves from those of other old towns by pretending their stone was fake stone?

The next day it was bleak in that damp city, pretty, or so-so, and because of the new snow, less traffic. But bleak, not a strong wind, but a chill one. Two-coat weather, two-sock weather, thankfully dry though. Where the snow was cleared, the roads were completely dry and cold. Thick soles necessary, and layers. In the summer all would be different, they said it was muggy in summer, and smelled bad. Yes, that would be right—even now, there was a lingering whiff of diesel—but just now the snow covered the cracked concrete and the dogshit, covered the coats and hats. How nice! And soon it would melt, the sun would come out and he could eat outside. In six degrees! But yes, after weeks of freezing cold, it's possible to feel warm, even take off the coat, in six degrees. The same dour waiter, the same hard faces of the men, the same yap, yap. But the giggling girls, so many of them, giggling and baring their stomachs, their slim, fit, stomachs.

But what to think, in the bleakness? Find a nice breast, a warm hand, a warm corner to sit and blank out the day.

To be sure, yon man had kept away, ever since he knew I was leaving soon. Left alone, I got a bit lazier, ate more lunch and drank more coffee. A natural and unaggressive reaction. He'll be here for ever, souring the milk, chilling the atmosphere, glaring for attention. But I'll be gone, with the image of Zoë in me, burned in me. She was really something; and he was already a fading shadow, a shade. deathly though, while I was there. Deathly.

He left two days later, feeling vaguely something-or-other about the fake-or-not quaintness, and definitely uneasy about the nastily unfake, squatting offices and plants that palled his exit from the town. He supposed it was a city, but town, fake town, was what it was in his mind. There was something oppressive, dispiriting around. He was glad to leave.

...it's easy

'Hello, Philip? Zoë. Yes, at the office. Can I see you? Twelve, good. Blooms. Ok, see you then, darling.'

She switched off the phone and sat back. All night she had worried that Denbigh might have gone already, and she needed him, just at this moment she needed him to rescue her. Events were becoming uncontrollable. She was awake all night with work or Emily, she slept at odd times during the day and in the morning for an hour after Emily had been taken to school. Thank god for the Prozac, but even so, things were a mess.

'But not more than usual?' Denbigh poured her wine.

He was looking strained, she thought. She often wondered about resuming their affair. She told herself it was because there couldn't be much hassle, but then she thought of Maureen, and he didn't seem so safe. Of course that made it possibly more interesting, but she couldn't imagine sex with him any more. Sometimes when he looked at her in a particular way she thought he wondered what sex would be like with her now.

She came to the point, keeping her voice low. She knew he liked that.

'I know this is difficult for you, Philip, but I need a favour, a big favour. I know it's not the right time, you're already getting hassle, but let me ask you anyway, you can always refuse.' She smiled at him and leaned forward a little, showing the tops of her breasts, perhaps not deliberately.

'It sounds mad, but I need an art critic, and I think your robot could be it.' She frowned. 'I have this account, art2go, do you know them?' She pursed her lips. 'They're into exhibitions, promotions...'

Denbigh let her talk, imagining her dress floating over her breasts, her shoulders, as she shuffled it lazily off, perhaps revealing white lace pants, perhaps nothing. If she was naked so much the better, her bare flesh comforting, warm beside him. He remembered how much they pleased each other.

He interrupted his own thoughts. 'Is it so stupid, Zoë? Art critic sounds like an ideal occupation for a robot.' He was not disparaging it, thinking more of the ideals incorporated in robots, and ideally in critics: disinterest, objectivity, cool judgement.

This was one of the problems with his own conception of the robot. He thought that to be human, it must necessarily be imperfect, interested,

enthusiastic, if only because, all sentimentality aside, who could say what any human being was *for*. If you don't know what a thing is for you can't make it better. A human is not a thinking machine, although some of the Plastikon people thought so, and they knew their robot was an imperfect thinking machine, could only ever be imperfect. That made him smile: they were unhappy about the very thing that made the robot more human for him!

They were trying to imitate, replicate, and had a small success, in some respects. They wanted to synthesise a man but their target was unknowable. And they were not skilled thinkers outside their field. They were engineers, technologists: to them all problems were soluble, they had a bottomless fund of egotism, of certainty. They could dismiss any argument he brought with a demonstration that a human being was simply a machine that was continually presented with simple alternatives. Simple.

Apparently, only the effort of remembering and sorting the issues involved in each choice, analysing them and correctly applying the results of the analysis stopped the choice being perfect, and put like that, it seemed that some mechanical help would be a relief in an intolerable situation.

For Denbigh nothing of the sort occurred, but he had no explanations that these people could accept, or even understand. They were on different planets. *His* planet consisted of people in all their *nakedness*, as he liked to think of it, arbitrary and incomprehensible. *Their* planet was perfectly comprehensible and just needed some enlightened guidance, some *organisation*. Of course, he simplified, but they thought everything was possible.

‘Art critic?’ The thought vaguely amused him. ‘But who could possibly be interested in another art critic?’ He smiled, ‘Let’s think about this. We’re trying to fool people right? As I understand you, not only does this robot look like a man, but it thinks and talks like one?’

‘That’s what Luc said, and I suppose he should know.’

Denbigh looked at her sharply, then continued. ‘OK. We’ll assume for a moment that he has managed to create some kind of biomechanical man-machine. Why should we be suspicious? There are several things to consider.

‘One’ he lectured, ‘it’s obvious that recognition and intelligibility inheres in the perceiver, and is not necessarily connected to intelligence. What does that signify for us? Well, it means that I can dream up a selection of schemes that, if adopted, will make anything anyone says or does

intelligible. For you, it means that if you are persuasive enough, you can make people believe that the robot is human. You just have to define “human” in a way that they will accept, wittingly or not. In other words, what you say about the thing, how it’s presented, must be stronger than their preconceptions. The important thing there is to introduce your claims little by little, at a level that won’t produce immediate objection.’

He paused, enjoying the intimacy. Zoë was relaxed, alert, engaged, though staring at the candles, unwavering flames, hair falling over her face. The smooth lines of her cheeks, and lips sharply defined and lightly closed. But she wasn’t thoughtful, no. No thought there.

‘People don’t really have any control over what schemes they use to understand the world. That sounds good for you Zoë, but there’s a big *but*, which is that there is no formula for making people believe what you say enough to change their perception. Changes happen all the time, but we’re not exactly in control of them. People in advertising, in government, know *that* some things work, but not everywhere, and not for everyone, and that means we don’t know *how* it works.

‘The problem for you is that although there are changes, the changes are small and tend towards consolidation of attitudes—ideas that don’t fit or don’t give some kind of comfort or reward are rejected—the underlying schemes are pretty fixed. Most people can’t see others’ point of view, we know that, the evidence is all around us. The reason for that is that most underlying schemes are not democratic, and don’t contain the appropriate mechanisms for allowing meaning to other schemes. It’s nobody’s fault, it’s self-preservation, the scheme is designed to restrict choice. Only data appropriate to *my* scheme is intelligible. We’d all go mad otherwise, swapping from one opinion to another from minute to minute. And giving value to another’s point of view makes you vulnerable in this wood of wolves.’

Denbigh wondered if she was listening. Something was happening there. Warm in the candlelight he saw a small bloom of sweat on her lips.

He went on, ‘You’re going to say that you know people who seem to change their minds like that, at the drop of a hat, and I do too. But think carefully, how do you feel about those people? Are they happy? are those around them happy? are they normal? Do they make you feel uncomfortable?’

She looked up. ‘Normal? What do you mean? Everyone’s normal, or maybe nobody’s normal.’ She chewed her lip, guard down already: she was safe here. ‘Does it matter? Is being afraid normal? I think everyone’s afraid, and it’s our job to make them afraid, more afraid, it’s why we have this job. It’s our job to make them mad and afraid, and it works, and I’m

good at it. It's why you like me. You think I'm very kissable, right? You want to kiss me... well, kiss... because I'm mad. You like me because it's not about talk, not even about feelings, it's that things happen around me for whatever reason, maybe no reason. You don't care what's in my head—and that's why I like *you*. We don't argue—what would be the point?

Denbigh reached over and refilled her glass. 'No Zoë, you're right: persuasion doesn't work with you. Argument doesn't work with anyone really, or not many. Prompt and guide, poke and scratch, pinch and slap, kiss and tell and humiliate and reward. Ah, the reward, that's what most of us are after... but the stubborn ones are just dumb-stubborn, hanging on to a dumb habit, self-denying the reward. Neither persuasion nor confrontation works with them, or with you.

'Anyway, where was I? Oh yes, the point. The point I'm trying to make is that people are hard to persuade if what you are trying to persuade them of is excluded by their current scheme. You have to avoid confrontation to be successful. With the robot you might be lucky, because robots won't figure much in people's minds. What you're doing here is creating a new part of the scheme. Most people won't have a hard opinion. It's a big responsibility.'

Zoë let the big words roll over her, leaning back in her grey silk dress, shadows in her grey eyes, wineglass in her hand. 'So we have to use Luc?'

'Er, what?' He was thrown momentarily.

'You know, *Luc*. We have to involve him. I guess that's what I'm here for. And we need a show or a circus,' she sighed, her speciality, with faded-out look, 'or a surprise party.'

Denbigh carried on, he knew it was no good asking questions yet. 'Er, yes, we need Luc, obviously. But,' looking at her eyes, 'your version of him, yes? I doubt it'll be nice to see, and before that we need information, and that's my job, or maybe Paul's. We have to know the limits, what's possible, what makes people human, and what human things people will be looking for in the robot.

'I mean, on the one hand, there are animals that can do "human" things like use tools, and words, and otherwise communicate. You only have to think of chimps, parrots, dolphins. On the other hand, there are people who lack human skills but are still counted as human: they enjoy a kind of *potential* effect. If only the mongol had brains, he could think, that kind of thing.'

Slumping back in her chair, slightly drunk but face calm, eyes wide, Zoë turned to Denbigh and laughed. 'That's horrible: is it true? We're all

puppets and all our schemes are puppet-shows? We don't pick and choose, but are picked and chosen? I suppose I can believe that.' She sighed again. 'More schemed against than scheming. No choosing the scheme that grows inside and fills us, that roots us out. Maybe my dreams are someone else's real life.' She shuddered.

'Yes', said Denbigh, 'you have to be careful—so many are careless. We ask people to act responsibly, but what if the choices that we call "responsible" are only those that maintain the scheme, ones that strengthen it, or stop it being weakened? What if "taking responsibility" is not a rational process, is not an outcome of having "free will", but is just the result of taking a particular scheme to heart, and adopting an appropriate set of habits? Maybe all we do is protect the given scheme, maybe that's just all we do.'

Zoë was staring at him. 'That's rather depressing. You're saying that there's no escape? That I'll be trapped in this nightmare for ever?' She said it softly, musingly. 'I suppose that might explain why I just want other people to stop telling me what they think something *really* is. Why should I think their reality realer than mine?' She looked at Denbigh with wide eyes, questioning.

'Well, yes,' said Denbigh, 'why? We don't have a definitive guide to what things are, what things mean, what we're supposed to be, so we fall back on consensus. I don't even know that people actually do share similar perceptions or meanings—you and me definitely see things differently—but for the most part consensus works, and if it's wrong why should we worry? Who's to know?'

He felt a blankness coming over him. How idiotic to think of changing his life. Things don't change, people don't change, can't change, and even if they did, they couldn't know it was for the better. You can't be sure, ever.

He wanted to finish this now. 'Frankly, Zoë, I don't think you have a big problem, especially if this robot will be just an anonymous ranter. But someone will want to see him, and that needs careful handling. A fundamental quality of a human is its ability to feel a certain sense of self-determination, to sense that in others, and to engage with those others on that assumption. Standoffishness and aloofness are opposed to engagement, they're cues that humanity is lacking, so your robot has to have, has to project, these qualities. However clever and witty and wise it is, you would have to feel that there was an individual, a self-determined person behind the eyes, as it were. I don't know if that's possible. You have to feel you could share a joke, or talk about socks.' He paused. 'Does Luc say it has a mind?'

Zoë was confused now, and wished she understood more. But then again, understanding wasn't important, only getting him involved was important, and that was done now, enough to make him interested. It was time to leave.

'Mind? I don't know,' she said. 'I don't really get that stuff, Philip. Things are matter and metaphor, and metaphor is more real and more powerful. Mind is more real. I know where my brain is, but brains are sausage meat. I don't know what or where my mind is—and I wouldn't want any mind mixed up in *my* sausages, too gruesome—and yet I know that it's the real thing, that we only live through metaphor, that meaning is only suggestion and supposition.' She smiled at last. 'What do you think? Could Luc show me where to find my mind? He seems to have the equipment. Could you?'

She glanced at Denbigh. He seemed weary. She leaned over a little more until her face and lips were only a few inches from his, but his eyes were closed. Suddenly she wanted to feel his cool hands on her body, his warmth at her back. She put a hand on his shoulder.

He could smell her perfume, felt her near, and knew that if he should try at this moment she was persuadable. But he saw only complications and disappointment in it. Opening his eyes he lightly kissed her cheek and stood up.

'Excuse me. I'll be back.'

...it's easy to lose old habits

Once upon a time, Denbigh stepped out of a train and walked calmly to the station exit. He wondered how they had managed to make a small station like this difficult to move around. There were barriers in strange corners, kiosks in unexpected places. He asked directions to the taxi rank. He was sent down a small corridor that opened into a large circus containing twenty or more cabs, forgotten.

Today another hassle. The taxi delivered him precisely at eleven, and he waited in the foyer while his clients organised themselves. He expected it to be acrimonious and possibly expensive. They sat round the table. A secretary brought the coffee and then left.

'Well, let's start,' said Denbigh, who hoped to impress on them his reasons for not delivering what they, severally, expected. He had carefully prepared a new schedule.

'Before you begin,' said Mann, the client's project manager, 'I have to tell you that we are terminating your contract.'

Denbigh stared at his hands. This was it, then. 'Do you want to tell me why?'

'Mainly, you have not delivered the items required in the contract,' said Mann. 'Our deadlines are not negotiable. This was made clear in the beginning. Also, we do not feel that you are capable of carrying out the work satisfactorily. Your contractors are not of the quality we require. Your management of the project is unsatisfactory.'

Denbigh felt elated, he knew the project was unworkable. However, he now had to face McKenzie with the loss of the contract. He would already know, Mann would already have called him. How could Denbigh explain? And how much would it cost them? He didn't care.

His task had been to replace an old and imperfect system with a new and perfect system. Money was tight, staff were long-serving and settled, and not amenable to change, especially changes required by new foreign bosses. They had different ways of doing things, odd and foreign.

The offices were small, British, dingy and crowded, yet twenty million pounds had been allocated to the computer project. Twenty million! The staff were engineers and housewives. They were not *professionals*. Clashes occurred on every level as the old, promotion-by-long-service ethic was undermined and it was made clear that profit was king.

Perhaps it would have been acceptable if the new regime were efficient, but everyone could see that the very expensive contractors already in place were causing chaos. Attempts were being made to train existing staff in the new technologies, and they were eager to learn, but the project was too big, the deadlines were too tight, the various levels of management too keen on preserving their old authority.

Denbigh's head contractor had phoned him from Victoria station after his second visit to the site. This was extremely unusual.

'Denbigh, I don't know what's happening here. It's a madhouse. I just spoke to their programming team leader. He told me they were having problems with the reporting system and that he had spoken to Mann and the schedules were going to be revised on Friday. I noted the new dates and discussed some of his problems. Basically, they were half way through their budget and none of the reports were finished. They were also behind on all the other projects. He said there was no possibility of meeting the current go-live date. When we'd finished, I went outside to see Mann. You remember the offices, these people are ten feet apart. He was affable and hoped everyone was being helpful. I asked him if he would get the new dates to me as soon as possible.'

'And he said there was no alteration in the dates?' Denbigh didn't need to be told.

'That's right. So what am I supposed to do? There's nothing for me to work on, there's nothing completed. Mann wants me to finish on the contracted date so that they can start training. He says I can use the old system as a guide. He keeps telling me there's no difference, they're reproducing the old system using the new software, which, he says, is more efficient. But that's crap! I've seen both systems, they're completely different. If they're not different, why do the staff need training?' He snorted. 'As I say, I don't know what to do. I could do as he says, but then we'd never keep to our budget because it would have to be rewritten when they finally got things together. So, I give up. What do you want me to do?'

Denbigh had sighed. 'OK. I agree. Don't use any more of the budget until we've sorted something out. Oh, and thanks for telling me.'

Why was this news? Did the project manager know? Why hadn't Denbigh been told? He'd spent the afternoon making phone calls and asking a few questions. It had become clear that his project team were in a mess. The project was a fiasco. There had been no real attempt to discuss the Company's progress with the key people, all of whom had been out or unavailable when called, he was told. And now they'd lost the contract. Bloody mess! He was glad to be rid of it.

He should have left then. But now he was out, definitely—it was all too familiar. Then, he'd had a brief meeting with his directors. He'd taken the full blame, but hadn't been allowed to explain what had happened. He'd fought as well as he could, but the zest had disappeared. He had no energy for this any more. At the next meeting with Plastikon he'd handed over to Maureen, as he had told Zoë he would. A fairytale ending.

Zoë had explained to Luc that Denbigh was being promoted and sent overseas. Men were not happy. In the meeting, Denbigh just sat and looked wearily from Luc to Maureen and back while Zoë conducted the transition, skilfully and efficiently. But he didn't care any more, either for the job or for the people who put up with this absurd nonsense. And both personally and jobwise, Maureen had moved on.

Denbigh had wanted to retire gracefully, to show them that brashness and violent confrontation was not, in the long term, the best environment for creative work to be achieved. He wanted to show them gentlemanly conduct, to let them realise how much richer the world is when daily life is varied and interesting.

Maureen was busy filling the shelves of his old office when Denbigh passed it on his way out. She looked up when she heard him.

'Oh Philip, I'm so sorry.' She stared at him. He didn't think she looked particularly sorry. He wasn't sorry himself.

'You can keep anything you find interesting, I won't need it.'

She thought he was giving up. 'Don't be silly, there are thousands of jobs you could get without trying.' It was true. He'd already had three calls from old clients offering jobs, more of the same.

'But you see Maureen, I don't want them. I'm old, I have a car and a house and a small income. I don't need this crap any more. I'm retiring. This—he indicated the office, the business—frankly, sickens me. It makes me want to throw up. I can't believe human beings can think that any of this is worthwhile. Of course, human beings don't run things. Do you know what Descartes thought of human beings without a purpose? Robots. Exactly.'

'Thanks.'

'You think you're different. Perhaps you are. Maybe you're a new breed, a new design. Maybe someone has found a purpose for us, there may be some of us who can find our own way. I don't know, myself. There's talk of artificial intelligence. I'm intelligent, but I don't envy any machine boxed up with my intelligence. I find it hard just to choose a cereal for

breakfast. 'There are too many possibilities.' He smiled at Maureen. 'With other people too. They'd have to invent a new language. God knows this one conveys nothing any more. Have fun.'

...we hope in the face of all probability

The next day rained, and the next, and the next. George wandered the city, bleakly planning his move into the country. How stupid to have left the car! This escape was meant to be permanent and he must have imagined he'd be able to take a bus to the village where Monique lived. The bus was never there when he checked. He arrived an hour before it was meant to depart and waited an hour after its scheduled departure. It never came. He felt stupid, and lost, and desperate. He was supposed to be taking a break—he didn't want a scene with Esme, and just going seemed the best option, leaving his car. But now he would have to fetch it, or have it delivered. He panicked a little: it had already cost him so much to break away and come here, and now this.

Have it delivered? What was he thinking of? It wasn't as though he had friends, or knew how it could be done. No, he'd have to fly back and skulk and waste yet more of his precious cache of slyly accrued notes. He'd opened another bank account of course, but Esme wasn't one to ignore the financial state of their union, and he waited for the expected call and her demands for an explanation. She knew where the money went, and it wouldn't be there this month.

Leaving his bags at the station, he hitched back home, it took two days, two unshaven days when he was, by turns, standing by the road wet, shivering and afraid, and in an overheated car or lorry, dough-headed and merely anxious. All in all, he didn't think this was the best plan he'd ever made, and when he found himself amazingly at the bus-stop opposite his house, he teetered on the edge of chucking it all in. He was a coward, but he knew that, and he thought he'd taken it into account. You can't take things like that into account though, he knew that too.

It would be so easy to give up, so why not? He had no pride, and it wasn't as though this was an adventure, it was more. It was either death, or it was life, he couldn't decide which now. Risky? No, he didn't think of it like that. Just something.

So he waited till he was sure Esme wasn't there—she tended to pop home at odd times—and stole his car, driving calmly now, heading back to the dream.

Now he was prepared: *now* it had to get better.

And within weeks it had. He didn't know whether he was lucky or not, or just euphoric. A job, somewhere to live—but on the other hand, now he

was tied; not that he had any great plans. He'd see. Albrecht, his new owner—or perhaps in this day and age, employer—seemed OK, and was impressively generous, or so it seemed.

What a strange week. Arriving, lost, then the trip to the cottage, the meeting with Albrecht, all odd. And Albrecht offering to phone the owner of the cottage from his place, “Come back to my castle”, some kind of deadpan Dutch joke, he thought.

But there it was, the Dutchman's chateau, and there was the other cottage, now his cottage, sitting waiting. And in return, a bit of gardening. A dream, except that now he is sat in the kitchen drinking tea and staring at his few belongings. Well. It also made some things easy of course, he could bring some things there, do a couple of hours in the vegetable garden and then spend the evening sorting a few things out. Not that there was much to sort out, either in the cottage or in his head, it was a case of waiting and listening, waiting and seeing. The idea that someone could do anything with so much land, so many buildings, just so *much*, rather bemused him. How did Albrecht keep on top of it all? He had no idea.

... some people are nasty

Asleep, Henrik was convinced she was in the room, walking around. He waited for more evidence. She seemed to have slid, bumping down the stairs, and crawled back up. Henrik watched her as she crawled towards the plank leaning against the wall. At last he couldn't keep still. He rose and went to the light switch, but he couldn't find it. He groped around for maybe a minute where he knew the switch must be, and shook his head to clear it. Emily was awake, he knew, and just then she asked him if he was all right. He grew angry and leapt to the curtains and opened them violently.

It was obvious that the baby wasn't in the room, and that he had been in the wrong corner looking for the switch. It was all just too familiar. He span round, screaming.

'I'm going to burn you, you fucking Jew. Burn! Burn you! You'd better go now; NOW!' Spitting, his voice high and uncontrolled. 'Start running! I'm coming now and if you're still in this house when I get out of this fucking bathroom you're gonna burn!' He fell over getting into his trousers, hurting his toe, breaking a nail. Shaking, he tore his shirt as his head pounded and the room went out of focus. He knew where he was going, the matches were in the drawer, if she was still there he'd torch her hair.

But she was gone. He heard banging from outside. Going to the window he watched by the dim streetlighting as she hammered her shoe on a door across the road. It opened slightly and she pushed by and fell inside. He wondered whether she knew who lived there. He couldn't picture them. His head started nodding, what's that tune? He put a tape on and relit the joint. He put the papers he needed for the course in his satchel and zipped it up. Ok, all was ready. He lay on the bed and dozed.

Passionate by text, it suits her. Not me. Horrible words I have to say to comfort. "Love of my life"—what sort of love, of life, is that, then? Where's the thrill, the smile unnecessary, unforced, maybe unwanted, but there anyway it comes. I know that smile, sorry I have known that smile, the girl in the shop, I couldn't help it. It just came right out. Too pretty though, too bound up. "Smile and be gay", is what her face, her body said to me, "Do it! Do it!". Irresistible. But this one, oh yes, sometimes within the hug, the embrace, lies the smile.

But, "love of my life", don't make me laugh. Nurses are nice, even bus conductresses, when we had them, could light up a day.

So what are we saying here? No shit, but what it is. By txt, the whole thing manages itself. Face to face I hope. Continual signs of being somewhere

else, we use drugs for that, when even wallpaper gets interesting. Tonight I came home and went to bed. Reading, watching the snow, I'm not romantic like that, and it's lucky about the story.

And now, in come some lips, attached to this woman. Perhaps a flicker? Damn, not so easy after sitting here for two months. Fresh, it'd be nice to think, but beguiled by lips is my thing. There is, I guess, an assortment of signals happening here, but two women talking, talking, talking and only the bar or the bog for relief. Too many cigarettes, and the grey pallor associated won't be enough attraction. Grey, OK, but grey and sickly—I don't think so. Somersaults don't come easy now. And a hard mouth, in spite of the lips, and talking, talking, talking. Animation is one thing, but is this, this gasping for breath between words, indicative? or somewhere else, always somewhere else. Be her! Be here! not in your head, look at me. These expressions are polite.

Women have a wider repertoire, they say, but designed, freaky. Do they need encouragement? So they say. They say. So they say. Why not smile and relax? So wound up, gotta get it out, all of it, and somewhere in there...I don't know. Respond, respond, respond. Please me. Smile. Talk. Sit back and enjoy, why don't you? What is there so urgent? I can hardly see the teeth and, if the evidence wasn't otherwise, I'd swear no tongue. So what becomes of *changez de langues* then? No hope there, she doesn't have a useful tongue in her body. Talk, talk. Talking heads, wet stuff no room, sorry, can you move? Busy, busy head.

Melt my lovely, that's the thing, melt and cleave. Yapyap, let's leave the yap and softly slide into the hot place it leaves. Move closer, smile. Thanks. Take your coat off, you could be beautiful. And that red stuff—not red at first, but then after passing over your lips—what is it? I hesitate—just take your coat off, I need shapes, but perhaps that's it, a fat mind, overflowing. Not what I'm looking for. The secret places, yes, they should be dark and warm with a pleasant fullness, but how, coat-covered, can I tell? And if you live perpetually in those cold places that forbid you to be naked, what a tease. Perhaps, no, I won't say it, unlikely to sweat under that stuff.

It reminds me, but of what? Another woman's lips. We can't have that. No other women in you—but I don't know why, you should contain all women. When I look I should see all the women I want, all the speculative looks I crave, all the ordinary, tender, sweet movements and gestures that comfort, all the hot sensuality I need. Cool, warm, hot—but never frozen or broken. Is that what you seek? My frozen face here in the corner is not a good omen then, and the frantic writing can't be good. Let's try Some. Thing. Else.

...we think in parallel lines

...or zigzag

Thanks a lot. Thanks for giving me a hard time. Thanks for a great lunch.

Zoë stood up without speaking. It was *that* conversation again. The stomping-off one. How could she have let it come round again? Why the fuck did she bother? She was affronted, yes. She was bored, yes. But to let it happen, *make* it happen, it was unforgivable. And there was no time to change, nor any will.

Just what are we talking about here? Talking cars? Jealous fridges? Intimate moments with machines? How about you? Do you love your car? Does it irritate you with its quirks? Is it lively and dependable. Could you take it anywhere? Lets get something straight: although I have a pretty good idea of what a machine is, I don't have a bloody clue what a person is. If you're asking me to abort a semi-person, well, I don't know.

Denbigh stared at his cigarette. She called it a rant. Is no-one allowed to be actually interested enough in what they say to argue? Do we just talk about shopping? Am I allowed only to talk about neutral things?

'Go, then.'

'I don't know why we thought it would work out,' Zoë said.

'Fine.'

Zoë left.

Why is all so personal? I hate it, crap software, and it isn't my fault and you try it then, you fucking smartarse knowitall.

... or in and out

The machinery is wearing out. It's very new, in fact *brand* new, and they say its wearing in, but in fact, in fact, it's wearing out. That's what they always say, it's wearing in. If it doesn't work properly, it's wearing in. If it's more than a year old, it's wearing out. They take something you want that doesn't work and they give you something else that works but doesn't do exactly what you want. It's also wearing thin. Or it's wearing off—oh, I don't know, maybe it's not wearing at all well. Maybe I'm just weary.

Coming home I am now. It's the end of the day, I'm pausing every now and then to relax my neck, undo my shoulders and just walk. When you're

walking, just walk. When you're looking, just look. When you're relaxing your neck, just... When you're cold, tired, hungry, destitute, slaving, discontented, poor, filthy, dribbling, out of control, careless, stupid, damnable, constipated, just...

It's all relaxing. I feel better now. I feel better than James Brown. I don't know his stuff, I'm just repeating slogans. Slow ahead both. Drop o' the hard stuff. He was a good boy. Keep still, can't you. Let me alone. Kick his head in. I think I'm in love. Sorry Sir, I'll have to take you in. Sweet dreams.

...or up and down

At first, Zoë said she felt at last that she was home. They laughed and talked and sweated together. When they made love it was dramatic and made his head swim. After the first time together he lay in bed the next morning, reliving it, gently masturbating while she made breakfast. He reaches the point where he closes his eyes and starts pumping harder –

Her breath came sharply and her eyes closed. He slid his hands up over her breasts and found her nipples hard and long. Massaging them gently he moved his lips over her belly, licking the salt. She opened her legs a little wider and pulled him closer, bending and pushing a hand into his trousers and gently squeezing his cock. He could feel her stroking the little well of fluid around the head. He unzipped her trousers and reached under the soft swell of her buttocks to find her wet cunt. His tongue slipped into her, his fingers working the edges of her lips. In a little while she began to struggle.

"Don't make me come. I want you inside me."

They broke off to step out of their clothes, then came together in a heap on the floor.

"Quick, inside me. Now. Ohh! Oh Jesus. Oh yes."

...or upside down

'How old are you?'

'Sixty-two.'

'And you still think about sex?'

'Sometimes do it, too. Most often alone, but occasionally with other people.'

'Do you wanna do it with me?'

‘Of course. You’re very attractive.’

‘Now?’

‘I have some things I have to do right now.’

‘When then?’

‘I’ll call you.’

... or faithless

It’s a history of a selfish man, and the women he treated as pleasure gardens, isn’t that it? Men are not pleasure gardens—you can’t enter them, they don’t often smell good—but are they even the key to the gate? For women, an extra sense? For surely, we are asked so many times, so many questions. Are you OK? Did you like that? What do you want? Is what we see, feel, added to the woman’s stock of memories? Why ask else? Do they eventually contain us?

Is that why? Have they stolen our feelings (sorry, *shared* our feelings)? No, because we don’t agree about how it felt, or even what we saw, they don’t translate. Ever and ever we disagree. And that’s why. A woman would never write ‘he stole my feelings, my memories’. First, because he doesn’t know what they are, because he never asks. Second, because he doesn’t want other people’s feelings or memories, he has enough trouble with his own.

It’s what they have, all of ours belong to them, nevertheless. We forget, they store...cherish (only a word to be used sentimentally and not by us). We just forget. And enable the cherishing.

But what to think, in the blackness? Find a nice breast, a warm hand, a warm corner to sit and blank out the day.

...or faithful

At last the time arrived when he could no longer face her. His wonderful love, his deep and sweet delight! In amongst the confusion of his heart lay the certainty that soon he would lose her, and the thought pierced his heart. Better to end it now, while he felt strong in their love. To give her up was an abyss of pain, but if in order to preserve it in his heart, in its fathomless certainty and joy, he could do it. No deceit, no false excuses. The only way was to take another—it would break her heart, but so be it. It had to be hard and sharp or he would waver—and then? It could not be. He wrote, briefly and direct. He’d found another, he was enslaved, he could not deceive her, they must end.

She screamed her heart, he was a fool, the years of love were a lie, he had deceived her, their love never was, he never was, she never was. All was dust and death. She abused him inventively, cruelly, without reserve. He didn't reply. At length she questioned him.

Was his new love so amazing it was worth destroying those years? How could he sleep? How could he break her heart so? He read through tears. At last, exhausted, she tried to understand, and wept with pain only. Now he called, spoke softly, and they cried together. It was over, but that wonderful love that had sustained them both was preserved. It would not die, but would enable other and greater loves. But, for the moment, none would compare. Their irreplaceable, undying, love would sit at their heart's core, serene and untouchable.

...we should split

Zoë stared at it. *It's obviously a model*, she thought, *it doesn't look real*.

She slid her fingers along the glass dome of its head. It was cool to the touch, not cold. Inside she could distinguish nothing that looked functional.

The stuff inside the head was mostly grey, and solid. Here and there were streaks of colour, azure, vermilion, cyan, acid green, all bright and slightly luminous. As she watched, some streaks seemed to lengthen or squirm, very slowly, twisting and burrowing into the grey mass. One side of the head was perfectly flat, a flat face, and several of the coloured streaks were attaching themselves to the inside of the face, anchoring. Now a faint transparent blue haze rose like a sea mist around the anchor points, the blue intensifying at two particular anchor points about halfway up the face. The anchored streaks, one violet, one indigo, wound and unwound around each other, and finally both took on an intermediate melting purple tone, and were still. Eyes? The other streaks fell away and shrivelled into grey threads, still entwined.

Zoë stared down. Below the head was a dumpy body, almost round, black, with a flat base and what looked like castors. Here and there, some slight misalignment of the covering black plates showed a greenish-tinged interior. Not much of a glimpse, perhaps a millimetre crack, but noticeable because of the slight green glow against the dull black of the body.

'It looks creepy, and it feels creepy,' she whispered to Paul as she moved the back of a fingernail along one of the joins. 'And the body is warmer than it looks.'

In truth, she was unnerved by the thing. What to say? What to think? Paul agreed, wondering. He knew they could do a lot better than this—he supposed it was in disguise.

'Does it speak?' She felt stupid. She couldn't see a mouth-type thing or a grille-type thing that might be covering a speaker.

'Not as such, no,' said Paul. 'They found—that is, it doesn't itself make any sound. It was easier to, it was easier for it to use its own, its own *stuff* to make us hear...' he floundered. 'I'm sorry, I'm not being very clear. But anyway, you can hear it, but it doesn't speak as such, it's directional, a small antenna, only the person it's talking to can hear it.' He shrugged. 'A defence requirement. This one's slightly modified so it can broadcast to a group of people if they're fairly close together.'

‘Is it switched on?’

‘It’s actually just been *born*.’ Paul smiled. ‘Not very cuddly, is it? But yes, it’s on, it’s been started. It takes a few hours to become active, and then it has to learn what to do. This one’s a thinker and speaker, though, so I guess that’s why it’s fat and round. Stereotyping.’ He smiled again.

‘They’re different shapes—depends what they’re for. Some are apparently being sold as companions. They’re mostly small, grey and handy with their claws. Sex toys too—they’ve got a bit more padding, and er, different, um, appliances.’ Smile, smile.

‘The grimmest are the labourers, I mean, they can’t do heavy work, these, but light, precise assembly. Intricate, they’re good at. But since they generally do it alone, the um, the affective, the social side is a bit lacking, so the thickest-skinned are selected for that type of work. Or they’d get bored.’

Zoë laughed.

‘Oh no, I’m not joking. It’s a feature: engagement, attention, it’s all part of the mix. Because of the nature of the materials... What happens is, they all start with the same stuff in their heads. But as soon as the head-stuff is made, a headful at a time, it kind of picks up—it’s influenced by all the, all the other stuff there is. Apparently. Anyway, the upshot is they’re all different. So they’re graded. The head stuff is taken out of the vat and sealed in the glass dome, the dome’s put in a testing box, and the box reports what a particular head is best at, then it’s assigned a body, and... like this one. This one is ours, they say. It’s the best articulating head they’ve had in the last month. You’ll be able to talk to it soon. The bodies are made somewhere else, by other companies. There’s a big choice—some are quite human-looking.’ He smiled.

‘Must I?’ She didn’t want to seem stupid, or frightened. She didn’t want to condescend to it if it came to that. She was embarrassed and outraged at the same time, it made it hard to know what to say.

But Paul carried on. ‘Oh yes. It has to learn what it must do. It’s not automatically able to do what you want, you have to show it. It’s flexible.’

‘Oh? Not so human then.’

He laughed again. Zoë noticed his eyes didn’t change, nor his expression.

‘No? Not like men?’

Zoë had a blank look, so he continued, ‘We’re getting there. In fifteen years, we’ll all have the manners of this machine.’

‘Can you show me what it can do?’

‘Not yet. When it speaks, it’ll tell you itself. Look, it’s starting to move.’ Fascinated, Zoë sat on the edge of the desk and watched.

It’s the humanity, the human scale. These mountains, for example, nice backdrop, good colour, but do they do to look at? No. A kind of upward facing desert. Now to be in them, probably different, though I only remember the snaky roads and parts where you can stop. But there, you’re surrounded. Up the top, where you have to walk, I never got there. No racquets, you see, no waterproof shoes or trousers. From the car, and from the get-out-of-the-car-and-look-around-for-a-moment-wondering-if-anyone-will-mind-if-you-take-a-piss places, from there, it’s like stopping on a park bench for a moment, pleasant enough, friendly, even, but not stirring, even in the cold, clear air. Much of a muchness, mountains. Some up, some down, some glimpses of more interest. Like that mountain outside the window, the one where the layers are so stark, and snow-outlined, so attractive, but like an attractive coat or a friendly dog.

Not stirring, no, not for me, not like the silhouette in the candle-light, not like the shape of your forward-falling hair as you slipped into a comfortable and—not exciting, no, that’s not what I mean—a shape that enthrals, because of the clear line and the form, the knowing it’s you. You’re just five feet, and not 8000 metres, but you mean more. I can stroke you and you’re here. Much love, much love. Even if I never see you again, much love. You make me very happy. Even so far away, I remember.

‘Why do they call it Zero?’ She asked. ‘It’s more like a Dick or Mabel, not quite there, a bit fantastical, but clumsy. Anyway, why? I don’t like it much.’

Paul pointed to the whiteboard, where someone had scribbled $-4 -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3 4$. He smiled. ‘I think they think that the name is cute, but officially it’s because it’s neither machine nor human, an unknown, a nothing, a beginning. Actually, I asked them which bits of Zero were manufactured and so expected, and which had just appeared, I mean, whether it behaved as they expected. Emergent properties I believe they’re called. They told me that they weren’t sure of the full extent of Zero’s talents. Something happens in the vat, that’s all they could say. Well, actually, they said a load of stuff, but with so many qualifications... Anyway it works. And they’re very keen on the name, so Zero it is. I’m tempted to challenge it to a game of chess.’

He’s serious, thought Zoë. It’s a competitor, he doesn’t like it much.

‘Look at this bit,’ said Paul, ‘they call it the wrinkled nadger.’

‘Why on earth? What a stupid name!’

‘Stupid? well let’s see.’ He pointed to an etching on the wall. ‘Do you see that? *Corpus callosum*, *amygdala*, *thalamus*. Do you know what they translate as?’

‘No, what?’

Paul intoned, ‘Here is the splenium (patch), and the genu (knee), between them is the corpus callosum (the bridge body). The most anterior part is the rostrum (beak or snout). Over here we have the hippocampus (horse field), and the amygdala (almond). See? Names are usually stupid if you work them out. You’re just an animal, for example.’

Zoë smiled quizzically.

‘And here’s the thalamus.’ He paused, and then felt increasingly foolish as he waited. When she stayed silent, he might have blushed as he finished. ‘The bedroom.’

...we go around and about

George walked from his cottage the fifty metres to the barn where he kept his car. Most of the barn was filled with winter wood. He drove slowly into the village. A large village, but in the midday heat, silent. He stopped in the first car park and sorted his bag while dripping sweat into his seat. Finally he hefted the rucksack and got out, leaving the car unlocked.

The street was empty, with shutters closed and shopkeepers probably asleep behind their freshly painted metal grilles. He walked past the boulangeries, the charcuterie, the little bar-tabac, to the tiny square with the notaire's office. He walked smiling, flicking his eyes here and there among the cracked and crumbling old stone, flaking windows, sagging drainpipes.

I love it here, he thought, the endless, wide-open, deserted roads, the space, the silence, and the dead towns.

He'd seen plenty of dusty or faded or boarded-up shops lately. This was the France he liked, old, as many tractors as cars on the road, old men and women. Everything randomly shut in the towns, except, though not always, the only bar, dirty, hardly decorated, and always owned by the most miserable and worn-out woman he could imagine.

There wasn't much to see. The church had the best view, overlooking the little river and the green banks and hills beyond. A few narrow streets, some sheep, an old part of some fortifications, a tiny hotel in what was left of the turreted walls. A beautiful place.

He went to the bar, bought a beer, and moved to a corner table.

George stared into his beer like a lost soul in Paddington, but he was just ruminating. He had hung around Monique's house for a few days, and she was no looker—pleasant, in a cowgirl type of way, but not what he'd call attractive—and so *old*. He couldn't bring himself to approach her. He didn't think she'd noticed him.

He looked round.

Not like that barmaid. She seems familiar. Do I know you? Black eyes, dark skin, a bit on the thin side, reminds me of someone. Nice mouth. Yes, when she's serving, something sullen, but when she's tidying up, something soft, some small relaxing. She doesn't like the job much.

He tried listening in to her as she served, but she didn't say much. Not really much to say to these taciturn Frogs. Banging their glasses down and bobbing their heads. The odd "quoi?" and "grande/petite?" or "merci"

was all he could catch. She spoke softly too. Seemed an odd accent, though he was one to talk. Different, anyway. Nice looking woman.

George stood and patted his pockets, made a few arbitrary movements, and walked slowly to the bar so he could take a long look. Very pretty in fact.

‘Encore, Madame, s’il vous plait.’

He still wasn’t sure that he was saying it correctly, but it had worked before. He smiled at her. About forty, he guessed, definitely not French. Russian or somewhere over there, wide cheekbones and thin mouth.

‘You are English.’ She smiled, rather grimly. ‘I have a sister in England, in London. She is with an Englishman. Such a miserable country, such soulless people. Even the French have more...élan. You are here yesterday. Do you stay long? I am here for two months, with friends.’

‘I’m looking for a job’, said George. ‘I thought it would be easy,’ he lied, ‘but it isn’t. The farms are small and are run by families, not such an industry as in England.’

‘Yes, the English, they are little Americans, everything is business or sentiment. My father says it used not to be so. But now, MacDonalds and Hovis and Kleenex. In France, yes, the people are dirty but it is their own dirt. Why would an Englishman want to live in France?’

‘There’s the weather. And some English don’t like business. They’d rather earn little and have more freedom.’

‘You think here is freedom?’ She paused. ‘Yes, I think so. I do not have a work permit, but no-one asks. I will be a short time here only.’ She looked into his eyes. ‘So what will you do? You cannot have my job, I need it.’ She smiled again, a little more relaxed.

‘I’ll hang around to see if something comes up.’ He took a surreptitious glance at her breasts. Full they were, and swinging gently. He looked into her eyes. ‘Are you married, a boyfriend?’

‘You are married, yes?’ she shot back. ‘Myself, I am free. I leave my boyfriend at home. He probably sold my things by now. My sister in England, she will send for me when they have some money. My name is Mazella. And you are George. Hello George.’ She held out her hand. He shook it, it was warm, and he wanted to hold on. ‘Where is your wife?’

He was taken aback. How did she know his name?

‘Don’t be afraid, there are not so many English here. Everyone knows who you are.’

He relaxed slightly. 'Do you have a break this afternoon? Maybe you can tell me something about the place? I'm a bit lost about what to do. Oh, my wife, she's in England. She owns a shop and didn't want to move. I'm here alone. Can we meet when you finish? I have a few small things to do, but they can wait. You seem very nice—easier to talk to than the French here. Would you mind?'

'That would be nice, George. My friend lives a few kilometres away in the woods. I usually walk. We could walk together. I'm afraid we can't find work for you though. There is no work here. You would be better off in Marseilles or Toulouse.'

'I came here for the peace and quiet. I don't mind being poor, at least, I don't mind the thought of it. Perhaps when it happens, who can say? But cities are not for me. In cities it's all rush, rush, and jabber, jabber. I'd like to walk with you. When are you off?'

'Please?'

'Ah, when do you finish work this afternoon.' He tried his French 'A quelle heure vous finissez travailler l'après-midi?'

She paused and smiled. 'Ah, three o'clock.'

George looked at the time: it was twelve-thirty. 'Good. I'll meet you on the bridge at five past three then.' He smiled, nodded and started to leave, startled at his own boldness.

'George?'

'Yes?'

'Where are you staying?'

'With Madame Priedieux. It's very cheap. But I'll have my own place soon, one of Monsieur Albrecht's cottages, in exchange for a little work.'

'OK. See you later.' She went to serve a customer.

George walked into the sun and stood for a few seconds with his eyes closed, feeling the warmth, then started towards the Post Office. There were some cards he must send. It was very strange, she must be Zita's sister. But how? Unless...no, it wasn't possible, but maybe Zita and Tim had talked about his coming here. But had he told Tim? Perhaps in passing. But how could she know he would be here, he wasn't sure himself. He shook his head. Things were obscure, he didn't want to pursue it.

Behind the bar, Mazella smiled. Zita was right, it only required a little investment. George was already in love with her body, she could see. It should be easy to manage. She turned to her boss.

‘André, we’re not busy, I’m going to see Tante Rose. I’ll be back at six.’ She moved to the door in time to see George enter the Post Office. She quickly set off towards Madame Friedieux’ house in a little road off the small central square.

George waited in the square, reading the article he’d written that morning. There were people about today, busily walking, languidly cycling, slowly driving. He drew slowly on his cigarette, enjoying the sharp taste. Pigeons dared nearer, pop-eyed. George’s eyes were half-closed. He felt like someone had given him a present. Mazella’s perfume drifted in and out of his head as his body drew the warmth of the sun into his soul. Yes, his soul. He felt his soul, his sensuous core, long coldly undernourished, had suddenly been warmed and opened. He felt soft and sentimental, and didn’t fight it—although he didn’t quite believe it was genuine. That warm feeling, so much spoken of. He could even smile at the pigeons. He watched their smooth grey bodies and harpy eyes almost fondly, felt their warm feathers with his mind, stroked Mazella’s back, sipped at a weak coffee, lazily watched her dressing. He supposed this was euphoria. “Sensuous”, he liked the word and began weaving it into phrases—the sensuous vine, a sensuous song—he liked the sound.

Glancing up, he saw François cross to the patisserie. Abruptly, his mood changed. This was his rival for the ancient Monique.

Mazella was nice, he liked her a lot, and George had to remind himself why he was here, the reason he’d found Mazella so easy. Strange, all that time in England he’d been hoping for something like this to happen—maybe once again with Zoë.

Mazella arched her back, and under my hand her heart hammered, The perfect angle, I was right there; inside in the soft and warm, in the slowly tightening and pulsing place—I have to hold on now, gripping against the force trying to squeeze me, squeeze me out, her stomach so hard, muscles like no muscles I have, there, felt before, squeezing and squeezing. A restful place nonetheless, the home base. Her hair spread, I concentrate on staying inside as she pushes and pushes, her nails gripping the mattress, head, neck, taut.

The red whip seems the thing now, and I stroke it gently on her arse, pale below me. It’s a little awkward getting the swish just right, and I can’t place it so the fronds—

just—catch her lips as she likes; because I'm in between, glistening cock appearing now and then from the wet place, the thoroughly and gorgeously wet place she makes for me. Still, I try: I start slowly and softly stroking her back, and her small arse as it rises and falls, taughtens and slackens for me, and move round her thighs where her fingers are busy. My hand over hers, we move over and inside her lips, around my cock, and together with my cock into her hot purple-cushioned lips, together stroking and pressing while I stay there, cock so stiff and wet.

This is what we are: together, melted, spliced, yoked. I lay over her, and feel again the hard beating of her heart—how could this be so good, so good?

'Cigarette?'

I glisten out and she rolls over. Hands around my neck, eyes in eyes, seriously, she pulls herself up into my lap, guiding me in until fully submerged, thighs wet against mine. We sit still and close, smoking over each other's shoulder, kissing occasionally lips, neck, shoulder, forehead, cheeks—light, cool while my cock is so deep in her; but small trembling light movements we can't stop, though I try, unwanted as we generate the sweet glue that holds us—small squeezes, small pulses, internal, inside her, her beating heart under her small breast, cupped and kissed and almost swallowed as I open my mouth to eat whatever of her I can find. Then we play—I luxuriate now, sliding my tongue over her wet happy cunt, inside, back. My lips, slippery with her hot juices, she greedily sucks them. I move my finger, fingers, with hers, then without, over and in and further into her. So soft, so yielding—her arse too, licking and sliding the tongue in, and the fingers, and my cock, hot and wet from her cunt, Slowly into that tight place, that delicate place, her arse, where I stop and she moves against me, a little further with each breath, until the tightness ends and the gasp and the unstoppable thrust as she comes

back onto me, pushing, shaking, squeezing, coming again in shivering pulses, gasping. And then in again to her delicious easy cunt, contorting ourselves as we try to stay together, lifting her leg and rolling so I can sit on her thigh and choose arse, cunt, arse, cunt.

'How about a joint?'

'I'm thirsty.'

We roll onto the floor, and I make coffee while she rolls the joint, a good joint of good skunk—the evil smelling skunk the smell we like best after our own smells. The high comes on slowly, and I move back inside her while still holding the steaming coffee, to get the feel of her again.

Sometimes he'd spent days wandering around looking into women's eyes hoping for a spark, and just made himself stupid and creepy. That's how he thought of men who did just that. Creepy, it was a woman's word for unwanted attention. Unwanted attention is of course exactly the same as wanted attention, and consists of the same glances, smiles and casual contact. It even came from the same man or woman, and the object was the same man or woman. The only difference, which was undetectable, was that it was unwanted. How can things go on like that? It's a joke. Perfectly acceptable behaviour suddenly becomes totally unacceptable on a whim or a change of mood.

François came out of the shop and glanced around. George caught himself thinking that François looked shifty. Sleeping with Mazella had obviously done other things to him, not only made him sentimental. He'd been scared of François, but now he'd begun to judge him. François the proud, the strong, the enemy, had become François the creepy, the snakelike, the vicious.

No longer detached from the scene, George, looking up, watched Mazella swing towards him. 'Hi George. I know you've just arrived but do you think you could help out a friend? She needs somebody to help her feed and give water to her sheep for a little while. Would you mind?'

...it all meeps

This was all so new, so strange. The lamb lying on its side in the filthy straw.

Picture cards they were too, except for this one. His leg looked bent, and he couldn't get up.

'Hold the lamb while I keep the ewe still.'

Berthe trapped the frightened ewe in a corner and leaned her bulk on it. She motioned George to bring the lamb. He lifted it carefully. It was lying in a pile of faeces and urine, its side caked. He moved his hand gingerly to grip it, and carried it over. It poked uncertainly at the teat, well-hidden, she didn't have much milk. Then he stood it up and held it while it probed and sucked, but the ewe wriggled and tried to move away. It hurt. But he persevered and after a few minutes the lamb was sucking strongly on the second teat as the ewe struggled.

They were there for 20 minutes—too long for them to be able to do this every day.

'Why don't you make a sling, like those child things, bouncers?'

She didn't understand, so he looked around for materials. Nylon string and an elastic strap, and an old feed bag, these were always lying around the sheds. He got to work with his new knife and ten minutes later there was the sling slung from a beam and the lamb walking unsteadily but not in obvious pain.

Job done, thought George, and smiled at his cleverness.

The next day, and for a week more, George visited the lamb that he thought of as his—it would surely have died otherwise. On the fourth day he found it entangled in the torn bag, a leg hanging. The past few days it had learned to be confident in suckling and had put on weight. The bottle they'd used for the first days was no longer needed, it had sucked and walked with only a little prodding.

But now it lay exhausted, the ewe evidently had trampled over its leg, which lay floppy and bleeding. George splinted and bandaged the leg, and remade the sling with more string and sacking. The lamb recovered enough to feed but over the days, although the wounds on its leg healed, the leg stayed bent, and a large bulge appeared around the break. It seemed hopeful, George held it to the teat once more and gave it the bottle when the ewe had had enough. Over a few weeks the lamb grew, in the pen with its restless mother.

Finally, in late spring, after George had given Berthe what help he could (and had been thanked with a fat goose) he visited her and asked after the lamb. She wasn't certain which one he meant, she had had to care for ten or so other weak and injured lambs, and directed him to the field below. Searching in the field he found the lamb dead, trampled once more, thin, scrawny and dead. Meeps, he'd called it, a short-lived name, probably just as well.

He carried the body to the shade and walked home silently. His first real death. And understood that death was here, all around, inherent in life, and, here, breaking out from the shroud of invisibility customary in his previous life. But not his death, not yet.

...nobody knows

In the beginning is darkness and fear of injury and death. The secret is to become familiar, a familiar face—a friendly face appears familiar. A friendly spot, seek it out, unless *you* are the friend, then create a familiar space. Move in, defend, wait. Afterwards, alliances, unless you don't need friends.

Zoë wasn't nervous. She was sure. This, all of it, was *her* territory, here she was everyone's friend. She talked. Talking helps. Timbre, tone, she's a touchy-feely woman. She kisses without distinction. It made Carl's day, which, till then, had been dull.

He'd been impressed by the size of the room, almost empty when he'd arrived, but it had meant he'd had first choice of food, chair, space, but he wasn't here for the food, and Zoë was busy somewhere. The food table stretched across the room, it was hard to ignore, and behind it a deep black theatre curtain, to keep out the cold. Carl's slight anxiety left him as he saw Maureen enter. She was his date tonight, he felt safe, she'd know what to say—even though Denbigh was with her, but that was OK, she'd said she was getting a lift. Carl didn't feel inclined to move from the dim corner he'd found, so he waited, and hoped.

*Montaigne wore a little medallion round his neck,
nestling in his furry chest. It said "Que scais-je?", that
is, "What do I know?"*

*Now I wouldn't ask that, myself. No, far too difficult.
Instead, I'll ask, "What do I think?". Even that's
hard. Do I have any firm opinions, or is it just habit to
roll out a skein of words to fill a gap or to make
someone laugh?*

*I've a friend who started off, I'm sure, just saying things
to make people laugh, and as he got older, and kept
saying the same things, he started to believe what he was
saying. Or did he? Didn't we get into the habit of
taking his word, like an advert, at face value, just
through repetition?*

I think he did. What he said was what he thought.

The room began to fill up and get noisier as the many people arrived. Already it had turned into Henrik's reunion. Zoë moved around, talking, smiling, glass high, looking for Luc. At least she liked some of them. But how can you be interested in what they did? which was what they talked about.

She noticed for the first time that Henrik had become hunchbacked. Long hours of rolling joints and leaning forward persuasively has bent his back. Women of course still want to stroke him for luck. Lucky them.

As she moved around, she heard people begin to talk about themselves, their work. It has to be done, before you can get anywhere. You have to have some background, some category indicators. Women, especially, categorise: girlfriend, friend, boyfriend, lover, associate. It's why, when a girl has a best friend it's so upsetting not to be *her* best friend. She's managed to escape the category, a crime.

She saw Denbigh being questioned by an orange-haired woman. Zoë was surprised to see him. She'd had to email the news of her party. She'd tried to call him but he didn't answer. Maureen had told Zoë about what had happened at work: she thought he'd gone off somewhere. But here he was, and she was glad to see him. She didn't want him any more, didn't need him, but it was a comfort that he'd come. The orange woman was moving in, Zoë saw, and she hovered closer.

Denbigh was saying, 'So that's it, I'm an ex-employee, not very interesting, I'm afraid.'

'It's nothing to be ashamed of,' said the orange woman, struggling to avoid condescension.

'Oh, no, I'm not at all ashamed. It's a bit unfamiliar, but I should think I'll get used to it.' He'd tried to sound boring, but felt he hadn't quite succeeded, so he started talking about his old job. It didn't take long, but it wasn't as effective as he wished, so he tried another tack: the people he worked with. It worked, after a while. He talked about the gnome, who gets a twelve-hour headache if he doesn't eat *right now*, right in the middle of this town, this field, this bus journey, this film, this bar. The gnome, satisfied, but not obnoxiously so, amenable, well-off, who rode on his motorbike to the arctic circle, who rode around North America, Alaska to Mexico, who rode around Ireland, France, Germany, all Europe. Five hundred thousand miles on ten different bikes, and who now walks in the mountains, keeping a cheap mountain bike in the back of his Frontera for longer rambles. He's amiable, but missing something, amiable, happy, but not smug. Open, familiar after two days, but paying serious attention to his small needs and quickly irritable when they're not met.

Still, what of him? No passion, not in words, not in actions, wears a dayglo jacket on his stowaway bike, obviously suffers when you tell him what your ever-impecunious life costs. He owns four houses, has done well, rents out three, built the fourth into the side of a Welsh mountain, a craftsmanlike job, was an apprentice when such things still existed, repairing one of the rented places by hand-digging foundations for a reinforcement for the main supporting beam of the swamp-house on stilts in New Hampshire, far away, where his brother lives. An engineer, as I say, a mousy lover (no, not *lover* or *amoureux*, but *époux sans épouse*) but a lover of things, mostly. A sort of lover, sort of contented.

It all comes alive when he goes, OK not alive but a warmer dead, although a possible source of warmth is absent, perhaps with child. With children even.

Zoë was bemused by Denbigh's story. It sounded made up, which surprised her. But now, turning, she saw Luc come through the door, alone.

It took her several minutes to make her way through the crowd to him, the room was cluttered with little knots of Henrik's friends and acquaintances. And, of course, the few crucial people that Zoë had invited, the few who mattered, the ones who nodded slightly as she passed. Luc smiled as she approached.

'Hello Luc, I'm glad you made it. We're having a little surprise later, I think you'll find it interesting.'

'I was just hoping there'd be dancing.' He smiled again.

'Dancing first then. Give me ten minutes to circulate, and then I'll see what I can do.'

'I'd like it if you could do some of whatever it is with me.'

'What did you mean about the dreams? Remember, at the first meeting you were talking about dreams.'

'I was perfectly serious,' said Luc. 'You can't go out and buy happiness—pleasure perhaps, briefly, but not...and why not? Because nobody knows, they can't, can they? People *are* happy, or they've been happy, but when they say, "That would make me happy" they can't be sure. It might bring them that small dose of pleasure, but a pleasurable feeling, you can get that stroking a cat.'

'Dreams now, they are all-engrossing, I guess that's what I mean. You don't sample pleasures in dreams, you live the pleasure—you're happy if you have a happy dream. I see you're not convinced. Well, what are we doing here? What am I feeling now? Pleasure at your company, but maybe

it's momentary. I have other feelings, nothing to do with being here or doing this. I'm not happy to be here, I mean it's not all-enveloping. Sorry.' He smiled.

'I think I see what you mean,' said Zoë. 'Yes, the dream-world doesn't fall apart with a sore toe, does it? Everything fits together, it's tough to escape...I like that though, it makes me feel special—I probably shouldn't say that to you.'

'We'll see—people should feel special sometimes. I think so. Me, I get a buzz from making things happen, from getting someone on my side, from getting them to expand. It's my pleasure to see someone happy to work for me, for example. Am I a nice guy? No, I don't think so, especially. But I'm genuine, and I see potential, I want it to happen.

'I guess you're uncomfortable now—don't worry, you have my trust. This is just getting to know each other. I don't expect you to open up right now, there's time—not much, but some. I saw Paul looking at you—you're a strange pair in some ways. Excuse me for asking, but is there anything between you two? Strictly work?'

'Strictly work.'

'Good. I don't think he'd do you any favours.'

'I like him as a colleague, he's smart, he's good, we do good work together. That's all.'

'I can see that.'

'You like the people you work with?'

'Mostly. We were at university together, we've been together a long time, we've made things happen together. But this could be where it all ends. By the way, if you don't mind me asking, how are you going to set about the job?'

'The job? Oh, it's not so hard. We have contacts—specifically, I have a friend working in this area. He's on the design side, a bit of an intellectual, his background is philosophy, psychology, that sort of thing—I shouldn't be telling you this, should I? But everyone knows how things get done, it's the people you know, the contacts you have. He's here, his name's Denbigh, I'll introduce you later.' She glanced around.

Zoë didn't feel good. She hadn't slept well, the faces had been too frightening. And this morning they were still there, whenever she relaxed, waiting at the computer for her mail to appear, staring in the mirror as she dressed. They weren't too bad at the moment but she could feel them waiting for a pause in the conversation. Ordinary faces, but never kind, always with that nasty expression, nameless hostility. She was frightened a

lot of the time, not showing it, any time she wasn't busy. The details kept her busy usually, but she was never free of them. How she longed to be rid of them, but then, afterwards? In some ways they spurred her on—to forget, to make things happen. The more things happened, the more was going on, the happier she was.

Too stupid. She wanted to be tired, even exhausted, so the faces went away, but she missed them then, and wandered directionless, unmotivated, when they weren't with her. Last night they were metal faces, plastic faces, hybrid men, constructed women. In her better moments they acted out some mini-drama, some obscure play. Their roles and motivations obscure, but each determined, often angry, often vengeful.

'Denbigh is good, a serious guy, seriously good, He'll help us out. Don't worry, Luc, you'll have your dream. Sorry, I have to go now.'

She put her hand on his arm, briefly.' You can trust us, Luc, I guarantee it. Our dreams are your dreams.' She smiled. 'See you later.'

And now I'd guess, just at the wrong time, they'll all start asking. Why did you never ask? Because that's how it goes. As if frequency and familiarity were really the most important criteria. As they might be.

Suddenly that plain face is a nice smile, a sweet laugh, soft hair, a slim and enticing body. Who are we to know? but it must go something like that—how else would we speak? Time, motion and gab. Soft and slow—yet sometimes it happens that the new becomes familiar enough after an hour, a day, a second meeting, a quick brush of the cheek, the lips. The smile just for you, if only because you are the nearest familiar face, but that's enough to start. And often the slow talk continues, talk of nothing in particular, soothing voice, a soft caress and bright eyes. But I'll never forget your silhouette in the candlelight—beautiful, if ever the word was used correctly, it's for that. What was it that connected us? How can I be expected to remember the detail? I just remember the feeling as I looked and drank you in, sucked you in, as later you sucked me in. In the late evening, in the candle-lit room, in the sweetest way, you invited me to your bed and made me welcome. What is there nicer?

...it's endless

When he arrives, will I leave the curtains? They made all the difference when I put them up, they filled the room with blue light, and the blue lamp and candles made it—nothing else needed. Well, OK, the fridge, and the bed helped, but the blue lights, O Sylvia, the moon, cool how I like it. No good for reading, even writing is hard in this light. But it also promotes the nights. Nice. When there's no-one here, that's the time I like, not best, but best lasts such a little time anyway, when the room is cool and clear, and the tea is clean and the cigarette just smoking away as it should. And then I can open the curtain, I like that too, letting in the light of the mountain, at dusk when everything up there—forests, houses, roads—is blue too. And cool doesn't mean that, it means calm and strong, with space for thought, and unburied time.

Mazella wanted to move in the next day. George hid his anxiety well, he thought. He didn't want to share a bedroom with her, not every night. But the other rooms were neglected, and he didn't want to catch something in their dank, unaired atmosphere.

He wandered around the house. It really was in need of clearing out. He stared round the kitchen, trying to see it through Mazella's eyes. It was filthy, he decided, noticing for the first time the dusty shelves, grease-laden cooker and cracked stone sink. The walls were brown and gloomy. He was surprised that he hadn't noticed before that one of the windows had a piece out of it, next to the latch, as though someone had tried to break in. Nothing to steal though. He'd thought of the kitchen as comfortable, but where he saw comfort others would only see decrepitude. He should throw out the badly-mended chairs, whose straw seats left red ridges in your skin. The same went for the lino on the floor, which had dirt-etched cracks and yellowing edges. Mouse droppings were in the corner by the wood stove, and more behind the old gloves and other bits and pieces on the shelves.

It was a large room, but it was filled with stuff that had worn out years ago. The previous tenant hadn't been a good housewife. By the door, the stone pantry built on the outside wall was damp, and mouldy boxes littered the floor, along with rusty tools that he didn't recognise. There was a broken rabbit hutch, cracked china, and a stack of damp envelopes. She couldn't have used the pantry for years, its door hinges were rusty and one broke as he tried to shut it. Brown water came from the taps and dripped onto the floor beneath the sink, leaving green rings.

But this was what I wanted, he thought to himself. To get away from the stainless-steel and melamine and worktops and Agas and cafetieres and all the rest that had become necessary to life. To get away from the 4x4 culture, the dog culture, the novel/MacDonalds/Antiques/TV stuff that made a nonsense of his life. The house/car/job nonsense. The wife/kids/pub nonsense. The non-life, that's how he'd come to think of it, the non-life, even though he knew he was lucky and there were people on the dole and on heroin and on the waiting list, and all that. He didn't want to be lucky if that's what being lucky was. But at least he had the good sense to look after the money it provided, money that he'd now spent on this hovel in the French hills that would probably ruin him.

He stooped to go into the back room. Now that he was sensitised, he could smell the rot and rats and other animals that cohabited there. He threw open the windows, but outside was damper, he'd have to wait till April before that'd do any good. He tried to remember if he been in this room before, but his memory was hazy. He would have remembered the smell, he thought. Dead mice or rats somewhere.

He decided to make a list of things that needed doing, and opened his briefcase. Inside were rags of paper and the smell of mice. *Christ! did I leave it open?* He turned it round and saw the small hole nibbled in the bottom. *OK, that's enough.*

The next half hour he spent emptying the kitchen. He just threw everything through the window except for the table which was heavy, solid and black. Then he went to the barn and returned with the small portable generator. After ten minutes he'd managed to start it, and hoovered the floors, walls and ceilings of the room. He found the mouse holes and plugged them with expanding foam, then he found a large drum of disinfectant in the shed and sprayed the room thoroughly, table, windows, shelves, fridge and all, ignoring electric cables and the phone wires in his efforts to be thorough. A job bloody well done he thought. Now for the rest.

Making his way through the house, he broke up, swept up and threw out beds, furniture, fittings, shelves, anything that didn't stand up to a good swipe from his heavy, metal-tipped walking stick. He wanted it bare. He saved two chairs and the kitchen table, a towel and his duvet. The rest went on the heap in the field. With a crazy relish he threw paraffin and diesel over the whole lot, lit an old lamp and threw it into the middle. Later, he sat naked and sweating, late into the night, drinking gin and watching it all burn, smiling at first, then, face set, falling into a dreamy half-sleep.

Then he revisited the memories that sustained him, when he was in charge of his life, when his life seemed to have a purpose—at least, not a purpose, but when he made and achieved goals he'd set himself, when things happened as they should, when he wanted and got women, when he had fun. There were not many of these memories, they were very old, and usually they brought the bad ones with them. Humiliations he'd suffered at the hands of rivals in work and love—particularly love. He didn't mind any more, he'd got used to it, but sometimes he wished he was the one who made surreptitious assignments with other people's girlfriends or wives, he wished he was the one that got the sex he wanted, and watched others get uselessly angry and destroy relationships and marriages. Sex—that was the thing. Why did his girlfriends always sleep around? Why was it his friends that were always out screwing around? He liked sex, he loved sex, but he'd married Esme and given it up for twenty years. That's how it seemed to him, in his tormenting memory, given it up while everyone around him was fucking like rabbits, everyone. He was the one looking for a bed at the end of a party and finding them full of groaning adulterers, finding them full of three or four moaning and giggling bodies, who made it very clear there was no room for him.

Waking in the morning on the floor beside the empty and broken glasses, the spilt beer and abandoned shoes and bags, waking early with a sick head to make coffee and sit around in the silence. There was always more of that, always more dick-shrivelling and heart-shrivelling detail to dredge up and drench himself in. He remembered vividly that pumping sick feeling that nothing could get better, that other people were always going to be having a good time while he sat alone at a table, drinking.

He woke up late, still in the chair, his head full of these thick, bad fantasies, his back stiff, an arm aching, and the rank smell of cigarette smoke on his breath. He couldn't stop thinking of the pain of his lost youth and years and opportunities, pacing the room, going outside to poke the fire. He suddenly felt old and weak and alone. The dark and the cool air made him tremble, the fire couldn't warm him. He felt stupid to have thrown away things that he didn't know he could afford to replace. His heart beat rapidly and he could feel panic, just there, just beyond the point where he could lose control.

That point of panic, he knew he could stop himself, it was a feeling he had that, sometime, when things had really got bad, when his memories and the physical body sickness in his stomach got to that point, sometime he would just let go and reach beyond it. Then what? When he got to the point he wouldn't care, he'd be too lost in his misery. And then the misery and self-torment would either take him over completely and he'd die, or it would reach so far into him that he'd simply not care that he was living.

He'd got close to the point, he could visualise it easily, he could even summon it up in certain moods. But now, far away from his old life, alone, bitter and trembling, it came of its own accord. The dark enveloped him, the cold stripped him, and the memories took over. He wanted to go to the toilet, but couldn't move from the chair. Sick, drunk, alone. Of the three, the last was worst.

He remembered another of the shaming episodes, one that highlighted his loneliness more than anything he could have imagined. He was seventeen, and running away with his first girlfriend. Only she didn't make it, and he spent two weeks in a dingy bedsit, utterly alone. There were brown stains on the brown walls, and brown flakes of something on the brown carpet. It was cold and the passage was dark where he had to go to get to the toilet. He had five pounds to live on for the rest of his life. He ate bread and marmalade for two weeks, and lay on the sofa in the brown twilight, cold, hungry, sick and alone. The dark came and he trembled, like he was doing now in front of the dead fire. The dawn came and he shivered at the prospect of another.

I really should have been more prepared, I should have known this would happen. Do I love her? No, I don't think so. She is nice, yes, but there's something about her I don't trust. Maybe it's my imagination. But I've been alone too long. Esme was hardly any company. All this thinking's not good for me. I should do some of those romantic things, surrender to the moment or whatever they do.

He tried closing his eyes for a moment. In the distance he heard the sound of a car coming down the lane.

...it's blue

It's time, thought Zoë. She glanced towards the curtain, and as if on command, it parted and drew back silently.

She stood in front of the canapés and carrot sticks and drank a toast to herself. Paul was at the door, as arranged, and now he moved to the little panel of switches and flicked them. The room darkened, and behind Zoë a big screen lit up, an enormous screen, swamping the stage.

The deep blue sea. A moving blue backdrop shimmered into life, the deepest blue, moving. Low soft music entered from the inaudible depths, a slight, swirling, drifting zing hovered over the silence, against the blue. The deep blue. Nobody stopped talking, the chatter and occasional penetrating or vehement exclamation rose above. But the deep tones gradually rubbed out the voices and cries, glided under the noise, split the chunky babble, soothed the raw edges of shrillness as it massaged the blue swell.

Eventually, quiet came. Even upholstery ceased to scratch, and bags quieted. Glasses stopped clinking, throats stopped choking. It was quiet above the music as Robbie glided on, his pneumatic plastic soporific tyres whispering below the silence.

'I expected something more glitzy, but I guess he'll do,' she overheard someone say. And then louder, 'Is that a number? Hey, that's *my* number!'

The big screen behind Robbie slowly flashed the numbers, he had everyone's number, and he showed them one by one—it took time, but I was busy checking the other numbers, no names. The numbers streamed peacefully across the screen, my number, your number, many numbers I recognised. Some good gothic script for the women, nice angles and swirls, and for the men, plain, well-proportioned and sedate.

All this took a while, and the music still flowed, some small lights twinkled, and we all stood around. The last number was Robbie's, I recognised it, and it remained in heavy bold in the middle of the screen, not his phone, but his assigned number, his chosen name.

At length a small hiss issued from him, and his gloved hand rose. He had their attention.

'I think it's time to talk... but first let me introduce my friend Paul.'

There was a general head-turning. Paul had been waiting by the drinks table. He put his glass down, and walked to the front of the stage.

‘Thanks Robbie. Good evening everyone. Some of you already know me. I work with Zoë.’ Paul smiled in his thirties suit and trilby. ‘I’m sorry to see that my good friend Denbigh has already left. I tried to persuade him to stay but as always he won, he is hard to sidetrack. Hi anyway Philip, you are going to miss something that may have interested you.’

He waited for a second, glancing around the room.

‘But Zoë and Henrik, Carl and Maureen, and my other friends, it’s nice to see you. And if there are people out there who do not know me, well, you are friends with each other. It’s good to have friends. Let’s give ourselves a big hand.’

There was sporadic clapping from the drunker parts of the audience. The rest just looked slightly bemused. Luc was next to Zoë, watching her reaction. He didn’t get her.

Paul had got into his stride. ‘Hey, if you don’t want to clap, then kiss your neighbour!’ He paused while they tried to fathom this. ‘Sorry, bad joke. And here’s another—Did you see those people kissing? Some of you are keen on the idea, I see. In case you’re still wondering what’s going on, well, today is my birthday. I’m twenty.’

There was a general shuffle and guffaw, relief at the joke, something they understood.

‘I see you don’t believe me. But just check out Robbie, isn’t he younger than he looks? He’s just a few short weeks old, and already smart—in two years he’ll have left me way behind.’ He smiled. The screen behind him began to change, the blue slowly turning into a dark red, unfocussed.

‘You’re wondering what this is.’ He waved vaguely towards the screen. ‘Am I right? Just keep watching for a moment.’

The screen sharpened. It seemed to show a row of barrels.

‘Vats. They’re vats. The vats where Robbie and his brothers were made, at least the bits that matter. And the man who designed them is here. Hi Luc! Good to see you.’ He smiled once again.

Luc was staring at Paul, puzzled. He gave a vague wave of acknowledgement.

Paul put his hand in his pocket. On the screen, a ghostly, white-gloved hand appeared. It moved to the edge of a vat and gripped it.

‘That’s Robbie’s very birthplace. Hmm, did I mention that it was my birthday?’

On the screen, the hand rose and floated over the vats to a door, and passed through it. On the other side was some sort of museum

exhibition—antique computers and other gadgets crowded the walls around an enormous glass bath filled with a green liquid. Pipes and wires snaked across the floor to the bath. On a table nearby, a small monitor showed what appeared to be animated film of a moving figure. The floating hand rested in the bath.

‘And that’s *my* vat.’

There was a brief silence, and then the voice of Luc.

‘Liar!’ He moved to the front, angrily. ‘I never saw you before this year. If you’d worked on that, I’d know. I know the names of everyone who worked on that. You’re lying.’

Paul smiled. ‘Ah, Luc.’ He stopped. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, may I introduce Luc, Robbie’s designer, perhaps his *dad*... A big hand please.’

There was a brief ripple of wary applause.

‘I think you may have misunderstood. That’s *my* vat, Luc, my birthplace. You weren’t told everything. Believe me, there are things you don’t know.’

He stepped back. ‘Robbie, here!’

Robbie stood. Moving slowly, he walked towards Luc and beckoned him to join them on the stage.

‘Robbie, you’re learning fast,’ said Paul. ‘Last week you could hardly stand. It took me weeks.’ Paul turned back to the audience. ‘I say you know me, and you do, yet you don’t. But isn’t that the same as the guy standing next to each of you: how well do you know him? Or, indeed, her? Did you kiss? Was it strange? No stranger than kissing any stranger, I’ll bet. You do know me. I’m Paul. You think I’m rather cold, I know, but I try, I do try. And Robbie is my son too, in a way. Like his old man, but younger, better, stronger.’

‘How did I get away with it? Well, you’re not so perceptive, I’m sorry to say. Even Zoë, who I worked with for the last ten years, she didn’t know. Is that possible, you ask? You people, you’re really quite wrapped up in your own worlds. Robbie here, you’ve had a few seconds of him in the TV ads, and now here he is, in the flesh. On TV he’s super-real but here...he’s a bit tame in the flesh, isn’t he? He looks just like everyone else. I wasn’t so perfect, in the beginning, but some small changes, a lot of learning, and after ten years they let me out. There’s a room next door...’

The screen changed, the camera moved following the hand into the next room. It seemed to be a playroom, a toddler’s, given the plastic trains, but the posters on the walls were a teenager’s.

‘This is my schoolroom. There’s my name on the door, Plastikonlife, or P O L, or, as you know me...I see you’re not convinced, you think that this is a joke. That’s OK. While we do have feelings, you can’t hurt us.’ He smiled. ‘But to get back to Robbie. He’s a bit of a hobnailed star, isn’t he? I can see you’re not excited. You don’t really think much of us now.’

The murmur in the crowd was rising. A short, orange-haired woman that Paul recognised as a friend of Zoë was grinning madly.

‘Do you think you should be excited? Is it so strange?’ He paused. ‘As ever, there’s some good news and some bad news to give you.’ He smiled. ‘I’ll leave the good news for Robbie, he’ll talk to you in a few minutes. The bad news for us is that we don’t feel emotions. What you call “love”—emotions, moods.’ Paul took a piece of paper, carefully folded, from his jacket. ‘Zoë once quoted this to me.’ His voice softened and smoothed, became almost hypnotic. Behind him the screen swirled and two lovers kissed in the rain.

‘The force of love is that it creates a calm centre shared by two human beings, The centre is personal, it is shaped by each individual, then it is willingly shared. One body, one mind, each held calm and close.

If you would love someone, help them in small ways. It is the constant small difficulties and minor strifes that take the pleasure from contact. If you are beautiful, intelligent, wise, and fun, enjoy yourself, live yourself, share yourself. By all means be contrary, perverse and provocative when you achieve the calm, cool deep centre, but beware of these manipulative aspects before you have the true centre; you will provoke only extraordinary and random behaviour in others. You will be frightened and disturbed, and blame them, blame yourself.

You hope to be loved, but love does not establish itself when either is false or perverse.

The force of a calm, strong love cannot be overturned. It is not a gooey, sticky trap that binds and envelopes: rather, a warm sun that warms and nourishes, that imbues restfulness, tranquillity and peace.’

‘So what’s all that about? You ask. Maybe Robbie will explain it to me one day. But I think we’ll take a break now—time for a drink.’ He stepped down from the stage, and was confronted by the curious stare of Zoë, and the hostility of Luc.

‘Well, you had me fooled, absolutely, my dear, oh yes,’ said Zoë. ‘A good joke—did you ever mean to tell me? And you even let me set this up.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Paul. ‘The deal was, no-one was ever to be told if they didn’t guess. It was my choice to tell you tonight. I don’t think anyone expected us to be so successful. The way it was supposed to go was, a little while and our imperfections would give us away. But it didn’t work like that. Nobody’s perfect, and so we just fitted in. I suppose if we’d broken down or been badly damaged it would have been different, but we didn’t, the engineering was good. Not as good as yours though, yet.’ He smiled.

‘I’m beginning to wear out now. It’s not that apparent, I dare say, but I can feel it, it’s getting harder to keep going. And Robbie is much better than I was. Listen—you too Luc, I’m sorry you couldn’t be told, but your father...’

‘Dad? But he didn’t have anything to do with the business. He told me.’

‘That’s correct. And the reason is,’ he fought for the words, ‘you wanted to control us. You thought of us as products, but your father, he wanted to see what we could become. So he left you in the dark. And here I am, an answer. But I say “we”—the others will no doubt be in touch with you shortly. It’ll help Robbie if you talk to us. But I think you will be disappointed, we’re no better than you. But look, here’s Robbie. We can listen to what he has to say. We had a long chat this afternoon.’

Robbie wheeled himself back on.

‘Sorry for the disguise, but give me a minute, Zoë doesn’t know about this.’ He moved behind the curtain, but his voice continued. ‘Paul promised you some good news. Well, this is it. You can do this.’ He reappeared, but it was Paul, fresh-faced. He held up his hands, shushing them.

‘No, I’m still Robbie—at least I’m familiar. But isn’t that good? To be able to swap bodies? You can do it with our technology. Imagine, you, Zoë, imagine swapping bodies with Henrik, or with your friend Maureen. Or you, Carl, *you* could be Maureen for a week. Just think, watching yourself from the body of your lover. And not just the body, it’s more like being in and with the body, but not quite, and with the thoughts too. You share the thoughts of the body, its feelings, its desires, anxieties and moments of joy and pleasure...’

Without waiting for a response, he continued, 'We found that we're hardly different from you. Not much better, and only in small ways. In other ways, worse. And the real news is that we can't get better, we *are* human, as far as it's possible to be. Human is human. We can't be cleverer or faster or less fragile than any of you. Improvements in one area brings deficiencies in others that eventually kill us. There's no difference between us.

'And that's the end, the end of the experiment. It's a dead end. You *can* make things like us, but our only use is replacement. And there will be ethical problems with that, except for the bodies. We can make you all bodies to die for.'

'So how are you all doing?' There was a pause. Nobody answered.

Disappointed, Robbie switched himself off. It was the end of the party.

...it somehow remains till the end

*Zoë and the house are set,
effervescent. A switchblade
never locked.
A new twist every day.*

*Masses, both. Multifaceted
architecture showing now
round, now flat. Each a
constant problem and resolution.*

*How can they join
in occupancy? I thought the
numbness had gone. I thought the
game now was delivery.*

*The way things go! No sooner does
one commit one's
Now! than Maybe! stabs again.*

And now it was his turn—a straw house. It made him giggle to think of it, but there it was, in his head, a house made of straw. Well, the inside anyway. It all seemed so easy: big blocks, hardly a foundation at all, a few bits of wood, and some lime mortar—easy peasy. Lime paint too, easy-peasy, according to the fray-covered book he'd found in the library.

Lime Paint.— A mixture combining the qualities of paint with those of whitewash may be made with slaked lime as a basis by the addition of various materials, as milk, whiting, salt, alum, copperas, potash, ashes, sand and pitch. with or without a small portion of white lead and linseed oil. These mixtures are more durable than whitewash, but have less finish than white lead and oil. The cost is intermediate between the two.

To prepare a lime paint, slake lime with water and let dry to the consistency of paste. Thin with skimmed milk to the proper thickness to lay on with a brush. Add color matter as desired. Or slake 4 ounces of lime with water to the consistency of cream and stir into it 4 quarts of skimmed milk. Sprinkle the surface through a sieve 5 pounds of whiting. Let this gradually sink, then stir and rub together thoroughly and add coloring matter as desired. The casein or curd of milk, by the action of caustic lime becomes insoluble and produces a paint of great tenacity

suitable for farm buildings, cellars, walls, and all rough outdoor purposes. Apply with a paint brush. Two or three coats will be necessary. The above quantity is sufficient for 100 square yards.'

Oh yes. So he got to work on the plans. It took him two months to decide where the plumbing should go. Another month to settle on the height of the walls after he'd discovered that upper windows might be a help. Another month to stop himself religiously putting the ground floor walls under the crossbeams, a little bit longer to resign himself to having no underfloor heating—he realised the builder had made the floor too high—and sketching where the electrics should go.

Every little decision tore him up, he didn't want to spoil anything. He didn't want to make holes in the stone-and-mud walls, and here he was, needing *big* holes for new joists, doors, windows, pipes, other exits.

Then he'd started the work, but changed his mind. Wool insulation turned to polystyrene and then cork, and then to stuff whose cost made his eyes water. He couldn't bring himself to order the thousands of pounds worth of materials. Those he did order, were stacked waiting. And waiting. He bought tools, lots of tools. A wonderful saw, that he never got around to using before it was stolen, hammers, other saws, Japanese saws, specially ordered, a vice, too small, and so on. But eventually he had everything he needed to start. So he changed the plumbing plan, and thought the heater would be better somewhere else, and re-laid the few pipes he'd done, mixing the pipe sizes as convenient, instead of sticking to the plan. A real builder! But the plan, what had become of the plan?

And meanwhile, it rained. Now July, it had been raining for two months, since April when the temperature had reached thirty-two degrees for a couple of weeks. He felt sombre in the rain and accused it of stopping him working. Not even the foundations, the vanishingly small foundations, nothing. Except to sit at the computer and read disjointedly, occasionally to start a vital piece—but now he had Albrecht's cottage, nothing was vital. Taking it was a mistake, because now there were too many things to be distracted by—the weather, food, drink, cigarettes, his neighbour, another part of the plan, whatever.

The fields were mires, the roads a slippery rink, his clothes sponges—he daren't go out. He watched his neighbours in all weathers tending to their garden, and neglected his own. He saw them weeding and digging in the rain, and felt the heaviness of the earth—too heavy for him, and besides the mud stuck and he had no shoe-scraper.

But he would change. Today he would begin the real work. There were windows and doors to cut out of the solid stone. But he began with the

beams, solid oak, four metres long, fifteen centimetres square. They felt like a ton each and there were twelve to remove.

After a brioche and some water, yoghurt, and orange, he began waggling the first beam. One end rested on the central wall and it was fairly easy to begin easing it out of its hole in the outside wall. After a few minutes it was on the lip of the hole, all that remained was to lower it—easier said than done, but he was prepared. He'd improvised platforms from the ladders and scaffolding, and it was a slow, laborious but straightforward job to shoulder the beam and ease it down the series of steps until its end rested on the floor. Then the other end, more dangerous as he felt its weight try to drop sideways as he held it straight-armed above him and slowly walked sideways and collapsed his knees until he could change his grip and settle it on the floor. Then it was another slow job balancing it on the wheelbarrow and wheeling it round to the barn, out of the way.

He sometimes regretted being seduced by the cottage, a wasted year. But he had learned a lot, or at least seen a lot, mostly dead, dying or rotten it was true, or falling down. He had learned how fast grass grows and how resilient it is, and how tedious it is to cut. And how to climb and cover a water tower, and what not to cover it with, and the strength of winds in open fields, and the multiple uses of over-ripe fruit, and the eagerness of sheep and lambs to die.

Two beams done after three hours, and George was ready for a break. A cigarette, a glass of water and a wander round the back of the building to stare down the valley, listening to the dogs. Not a thought in his head. Perfect.

...dreams are everything

Zoë picked up the phone and put it down again. She remembered, Paul wasn't there, his name was Robbie now, or at least, Robert. She had depended on Paul, but now...no. It wasn't the same.

She looked out of the window and watched the birds wheeling around the sky, and she thought: *birds in the head*. Everything was in motion, cars, people, leaves blowing off the trees, everything. She'd never dreamed she would ever feel this, left behind. She closed her eyes, but nothing came.

...dead lucky, we all are

The woman stepped gingerly into the street, slow and unsteady. She felt old and worn out. The handrail that she had had screwed inside the door frame was a great help but she hated it. She hated her soft shoes, now overflowing with her swollen feet.

She turned slowly to close the door but it was out of reach. Once she would have leaned over to the grey heavy knob, once she would have asked Albert to close it for her while she hurried over to the boulangerie for her morning croissant.

Holding on to her empty basket, she shuffled down the road. What was the matter with her? She had no breath, no life. She was tired and felt old, that was all.

I'm twenty years younger than Marie, who drives to the supermarket in her smart little electric car. Thirty years younger than Auguste, who beats the young petanque players in the square every Wednesday. So why? There was no earthly reason.

She leaned on the wall to get her breath back, and a voice said, 'Can I help you? You look tired Madame. Take my arm and I will walk with you a little way. I am in no hurry myself, it would be a pleasure.'

She didn't know the voice and went stiff as she heard the first words, remaining so while he spoke, only lifting her eyes as the arm came into view and waited in front of her, swaying a little.

With gratitude at last—'Where are my manners? Tch!'—and a small sigh, she took the arm, not caring now whose it was, and finally raised her eyes to the stranger. Not completely strange though, she'd seen the face before. But when? In any case he seemed friendly enough and she straightened as much as she could, shifting her weight carefully, leaning into the arm. It's warmth felt pleasant to her hand.

At the door to the boulangerie, the woman started to disengage her arm, but the voice spoke again.

'Ah, you need some bread. I'll leave you here if you wish, unless you would like to sit down with me for a moment next door? I'm having coffee there, but I can easily fetch your bread while you rest. Would that be better? Forgive me if I seem rude, I am English and after many years still not so familiar with French courtesies, but please believe me when I say I only mean to help.'

Such an unexpected offer, and indeed her feet ached even after so short a journey. She nodded, and turned towards the nearest table beneath the awning, and sat.

'You are kind, monsieur, I would like two plain croissants and two batons.' She fumbled in her bag and purse, but the voice restrained her.

'Please, there's no hurry, I'll be right back. My name is George, by the way.'

George. English. Why did she know the name? And then the memory of a letter, it seemed so long ago. How many years? Before François was killed, after Albert died, before the bad summer when everything died. She sighed: too long to remember.

A sudden chill touched her, and she felt afraid. She didn't know what was wrong, and became agitated. Taking up her bag, and despite her sore ankles, she pushed herself to her feet and walked as quickly as she could manage towards the rear of the café, leaving by the back door, through the yard. Today there would be no bread till later.

George returned and smiled ruefully at her empty chair. A shame, he thought, it would have been good to talk about the letter and to make explanations, and to make things right. But never mind.

He sat at his old table and drank his coffee watching the fountain and its familiar crooked spout of water dribbling awkwardly into the worn bowl.

Yes it could have been pleasant, but she has aged badly, me too, perhaps it is just as well. He ordered another coffee and ate the croissants, chewing the remnants of the memory.

George sat at the table in the sun for a long time, enjoying the wind and the murmur of voices. The coffee was making him feel slightly sick, but a pleasant nausea, one that lit up the things around him, that made the voices more interesting. It was easy to switch off the sense of those around him and listen as to a hum. Understanding nothing of the arrangements being made, debts repaid, arguments. It was peaceful.

Most of his thoughts were replays of conversations, rewind scenes whose details he knew well. It was automatic, the worrying out of meanings from episodes already dried to a crusty mass. Another pleasure though—after all there was nothing unexpected there. Odd how things occur: this chance meeting with the person responsible for bringing him here. Chance, not design. His design was scuppered at its first test, his first messy attempt to arrange a coincidence. Impossible, the concept was flawed, unworkable. But yet he is here—it seemed such a time ago, and now he is comfortable enough with himself not to be thrown by this real coincidence.

Coincé, to be stuck in a doorway. There was no significance. All goes to plan, but whose plan? Does anyone care, at our age?

A novel by Vonny Thenasten

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