

Part 3

The Parables

Book 1	This is Not a Rehearsal...	5
Book 2	'Rectum Defende'	53
Book 3	The Need to Know	69
Book 4	The Last Temptation	133
Book 5	Now is the Time for Action	187
Book 6	Ye huvnae git a Scoobie, huv ye?	229
Book 7	Why is There Nothing to Believe in anymore?	267
Book 8	I'm at the Mercy of Bureaucrats	313
Book 9	This'll Take you Where you Wanna Go	345

You're not paranoid, if they really are out to get you

I BEGAN this story in September 1995, when I was still working in MI5. Over the following two years, I wrote about 60,000 words in my spare time. Then in August 1997, I blew the whistle and went on the run. After the death of Diana a week later, I found myself in hiding in France with no prospect of interesting the media in my disclosures. So I took the opportunity to fulfil the only task I ever set myself in life: to complete a novel. Over the following three months, I wrote another 150,000 words, then had to edit those back down to a readable form.

Apart from a few additions over the years to clarify events in the book, the story you have here is the one I finished in early 1998, before I went to prison for the first time, hence the original foreword. As I was in hiding from the British authorities at the time, my location is only referred to as 'France'. I was in fact near a village called La Celle Dunoise in the department of La Creuse, 'The Hollow'.

Although the book had a working title of *The Human Vomedey*, I finally settled on the title, *The Organisation*, without knowing that the Greek translation would be the *Cosmos*.

All those years ago, I set out to write a story about the unbearable lightness of being, by which I mean I thought I was writing a book about a world without God. To convey this, I took all mention of 'Christ' out of the story, replacing the word with an 'X' as in 'Xmas'. For example, the names 'Chrtistabel' and 'Christchurch' are rendered 'Xabel' and 'Xchurch'.

In 2005, I began to take a different path, moving away from atheism. Through my understanding of Qabalah, the source of all religious and spiritual knowledge on the planet, I realised that all my attempts to remove Christ from the novel had been thwarted by the Almighty: Zadek, the letter 'X' in Hebrew, the sacred language of the Torah, means 'The Teacher', another name for Christ.

I have come to see this as a classic example of the futility of the will of man being at odds with the will of God. When I came to re-read the novel as a believer, I saw it with new eyes, realising I had somehow written a story about spiritual redemption, in which Damien Dean, the anti-hero, is the Christ in waiting; Dolores Kane, the anti-heroine, is the Magdalene; and the Organisation itself represents the secret societies – both good and bad – that run the world.

In fact, I conceived the story as my worst nightmare: I am an atheist denouncing a sinister organisation which runs the world and is out to eliminate me. That of course came true so this work Of God has its prophetic elements.

Obviously, you write about what you know so the hero is based on my own experiences. I like to think that Damien is a version of me who made the wrong decisions at the critical junctures in my life, not least due to his weakness for cocaine, the ultimate Anti-Messianic Zionist drug, which I personally have never had any affinity for. I prefer a decent espresso and a spliff.

Both of these helped inspire me with the words of the Father, the words that now form the last part of *The Third and Final Testament*, a 'comedy noir'.

David Shayler the Christ

Ladbroke Grove, London W10

Thursday 20th December 2012

The **Organisation**

Book 1

**This is not a
rehearsal...**

1

Jesus X, I've just had the worst four or five days of my life. I'd never seen a dead body, or **anyone** murdered, for that matter, until last Thursday morning. Now I find them in airing cupboards, under my bed, in the tea caddy. No, that's an exaggeration but you know what I mean.

I woke up at five thirty this morning with my tongue plastered to the roof of my pub-carpet mouth not knowing whether I was at the park or the pictures after a night on the town with Dolores -- yes, Dolores. As I cracked open my eyes from beneath the gritty sleep, my heavy lids fell shut again when I saw she was no longer here. Not here, again. Not here more often than here now. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. But at least I was still alive. It would be hell to die on active service for the Organisation, although if I'm honest last night was more personal than business. Then I just slumped back into my drink-induced coma.

A few minutes ago, I woke again -- in pain. But that's drink for you. If you felt like this and you'd not been drinking, you'd go straight to the quack. Absent a medical check-up, I begin the hangover routine. I unglue my tongue. Bad news. It sluices sticky red mercury through the gaps in my teeth. I try to swallow but my throat is hoarse, like it's been bound in rusty barbed-wire. I gingerly lift my head just enough to sip from the puny beaker at my bedside table. I've still not opened my eyes, just in case the light makes my head cave in. So I try Braille. I raise my hand to my face and it *does* feel sticky. Then again, the bedclothes are hot and damp like restaurant towels, stuck to me like I've been embalmed. I think I might have a fever. Until I open my eyes.

The radiator is up so high it is shuddering, hissing, bulging. The hot hotel room air shimmers like a mirage, like the chimneys and cooling towers in the petrol-streaked air of a hazy, grey afternoon in Ironopolis, my home town.

In response, I sit up slowly and mechanically like an army of Lilliputians is winching me up. The mirror on the wall at the bottom of the bed shows me in sharp, chrome detail that blood the colour of claret has dried on my face. As I lean over to turn down the heat, I drip a stray globule of sweat on to the furnace. It hisses then turns to vapour. I shudder. I drink in my surroundings.

I try to get my bearings. The bedside clock has the time and the date. It says: '09:07, Tues 27 Sep'.

Where the hell am I?

Hangover

As I said, this all started last Thursday morning, 22 September 1994 to be precise. Or rather that's when things began to go wrong. The drink had blacked out the previous evening so I was spared to start with. I woke up with a hangover then, as now, but in Ironopolis, in unfashionable, polluted, wrung-out Ironopolis, not the metropolitan smartness that (I think and hope) sits smugly outside my window just now. I had spent the evening with Ironopolis Special Branch, celebrating our latest success in the war against terrorism – the arrest of four Loyalists trying to smuggle weapons from the continent to Northern Ireland via Ironport docks. Then we'd gone out, had a few too many beers... the traditional curry... but my evening had only really got sizzling as the polis had gone to their homes and families.

As I delved into my rickety memory, discrete but random snapshots popped up like a flurry of rogue dialogue boxes or files recovered from Windows 3.1, slapping against my monitor, visually at first then as scratch and sniff. Only the following made any sense at all:

Snapshot 1: a raddled blonde in a low cut dark dress with a crepe-paper-skin cleavage. Maybe forty years old.

Scratch and sniff: cheap watery roses, breath of old casks once used to mature wine or whisky.

Snapshot 2: people crammed into a heaving bar, laughing, drinking, loud.

Scratch and sniff: pheremonal sweat, fresh cigarette smoke in the air, stale cigarette smoke on the clothes, fresh and stale beer.

Snapshot 3: the dark pavement close up but blurred. (The Boots advice label says: 'Camera too close to subject').

Scratch and sniff: the wet smell of tarmac.

Snapshot 4: the beaming, simple face of a naked curvy, peroxide blonde blowing into something off camera which I think is my ear.

Scratch and sniff: air freshener perfume, heavy natural musk.

The last one was no silent still though. The soundtrack burbled Ironopolis dialect. So I checked the sheets for corroboration, for collateral but there were no signs of woman there. No long blonde hairs, no streaks of make up, no warm, re-assuring scent. The sporadic, single pubic hairs sitting on the sheet in their own spastic shapes were mine and only mine.

As the heavy-handed drab dawn slowly rose over Ironopolis, I began to realise why I felt so uneasy, so like my skin was *Ages 10-12* when the rest of me was 29, like I'd played a in muddy, sweaty football match, got changed and gone down the pub without showering. I'd met a bird the evening before, that same evening I was out with the Branch, and shagged her. Jesus, at best I'd only been a bit-part player in this sordid scenario. Resigned to rat-arsed impotence, I somehow got hard. Taking this as her invitation, she had then straddled me, grinding slow and hard on my distended bladder, like squeezing a

balloon already full of water, before stealing her pleasure. I couldn't visualise her face. She was just udder breasts and 1970s muff, and therefore more likely 'identical with' or id/w – as they say in The Organisation -- snapshot 4 than snapshot 1.

As I fell towards the bathroom that Thursday morning, I noticed that the standard issue green piece of cotton was still in place trapped between the door and its frame. Even senseless, I was glad I had still remembered the Organisation's defensive measures: I knew no one had slipped into my room in the night. But when I came out after thundering into the pan, then standing under a hot thundering shower in the echoing, windowless bathroom, it was gone. Before I could react, the phone rang.

- There's a Detective Constable Dur'am to see y', the receptionist said trying to disguise her Ironopolis accent. – About a pust-mortum.
- Tell him, I'll be down in about five minutes, I replied.

As soon as I had thrown the receiver down, I hauled my boxers on and whipped the bedroom door open. I stared into the long gloom of the hotel corridor but no one was there.

Autopsy

I arrived at the post-mortem later that morning, at around eleven.

- Y' aright? Ya lukin' a bit pail, like, said DC Durham, my SB contact. – Y' dunt huv ta de a' this, mun. Y' dunt huv ta impress a' thum bloks back at the eadquartass, naawharrameen?

DC 'Jus' call uzz Ron' Durham was about 5'5' with a tache, a beer gut and a squashed face but was the kind of bloke for whom the phrase 'salt of the earth' was invented. Like many of his generation in Ironopolis, born during the war, he was cynical about the government, the metropolis, the borough council, social workers, trade unions and, even, the polis itself but reserved a begrudging warmth and concern for those he trusted, most of whom happened to come from Ironopolis.

- I'm OK, I croaked, powder dry from the night before, – I carried on with the beea last night after you lot had gone, I add realising that I'm slipping into the accent, the accent I was born with but had fought so hard to lose.
- Ya werr in sum state wun w' left, he joked as we put on those peculiar green operating theatre gowns.

Once attired, we walked into a gleaming, tiled room, half-operating theatre, half-butcher's shop. Spread out on the bench, was -- what I thought at the time was -- a shopfront dummy, a practice corpse for trainee Quincy's to hone their dissecting skills. After all, it had the insouciance of the inanimate, like traffic bollards, hatstands and mantelpieces. The lifeless hair, blond and ragged like dry straw, flopped unrealistically over the table. The glazed eyes were dead like gelatin. The dried red stuff looked no more gory than claret.

- Welcome to our little theatre, exclaimed the doctor expressively and warmly.
- I'm Doctor Charles Spence but please call me Frank. People usually do. If you don't feel well, don't be afraid to leave the room. After all, it is easier for all concerned if you chuck up out there rather than in here.

Before I could reply, he prodded the 'corpse'. It made the awkward jerky unhuman movement that in films gives away stunt dummies as they hit the windscreen or the floor.

- Damien Dean. Pleased to meet you. I croaked in reply, looking around for a long kitchen drawer from which the fresh corpse would inevitably be produced, with an ID tag appended to its toe, just like on the box. – So where is this dead body then? I've never seen one before
- Well, yung un. Yuv got alot ta lairrn, DC Durham proclaimed unceremoniously prodding the dummy with the end of his pipe.

The polisman and the doctor just laughed. Only then did I realise the 'dummy' was the corpse.

- Go on, Dr Spence dared. Touch it.
- Yeah, go on, DC Durham egged me on.

Still in shock, still feeling like a fool, I pinched the skin gingerly. It was cold. Cold and clammy like uncooked turkey skin.

- Is that the best you can do?

As I tried to move one of its – her – limbs, the whole thing – sorry, body -- jerked, staccato, wobbling the deflated, pendulous saddlebag breasts. Then the atmosphere suddenly changed. Dr Spence put on his serious face and explained:

- This is a murder case. There has to be an inquest. My job is to determine the exact cause and time of death.
- Not difficult, she's got a bloody great knife sticking out of her belly, I pointed out.

With that, the good doctor began his expert work, drawing fluid from the glassy eye. He then squirted a sample into a test tube, before re-inflating the collapsed socket by injecting water from the tap. Placing a scalpel at the base of the front of the neck, he deftly trailed it down the corpse's front. The skin split after it like the thinnest gossamer revealing a red and yellow velvet lining underneath, as the stench of rotten eggs and rancid meat filled the room. I was trying not to retch. But to be honest my stomach was really turned by the abstract, not the physical. If you'd seen that dead body, you'd never believe in the resurrection,.

- ...and then we cut the back of the head just like this... Dr Spence explained.
- And then we pull up the skin over the skull... For the second time in a minute, I blanch. – ...then we can see the top of the skull off to remove the brain so we can weigh it.
- Geoff. Peter, he called, to two assistants I'd caught sight of in the room next door, – could you do the honours while I show our friend here the various organs in the chest and abdomen?

The two hired hands arrived with a bow saw and set to their work like two lumberjacks wrestling with a difficult log.

- We used to do this with a Black and Decker circular saw, chirped Dr Spence but that used to spray bone dust all over the shop. Had to stop. Danger of inhalation and contracting AIDS, apparently. Anyway it keeps otherwise idle hands like these two chaps in work, doesn't it, boys?
- It's a pretty dreadful case this, he continued, more for something to say to fill the empty silence as we watched him work his way through the prime cuts and the offal whiled the hired help removal the skull cap. -- We estimate time of death was between 2300 hours last night and 0500 hours this morning...
- Can't you be more accurate than that? I quizzed.
- This is not *Silent Witness*, Dr Spence chided me. – Even with modern forensic science, we can still only make a broad estimate of the time of death. The body shows contusions around the base of the skull suggesting that this woman was assaulted from behind. If you look here on the shoulder you will also see bruising indicative of a struggle and her being pinned down. She was also dragged while still alive over ground. Look at this grazing here.
- Aye, wu reckun she werr tekkn fr' the street ta behine a warrl about fifty yerds awa'. She wer then tied t' a fence face down bfore bein' buggud, like.
- Anyway, we believe that she was still alive when anally assaulted, Dr Spence continued. -- She was also alive when this knife was introduced into her and there is a deep incision under her breasts made by a very sharp kitchen or butcher's knife. Again we believe that the victim was still alive when this happened.

As Dr Spence withdrew the knife from her abdomen, a clear fluid ran from the corpse all over the bench.

- Urine, he remarked, catching some in a beaker. – The bladder has clearly been pierced.

As Dr Spence and DC Durham bent down to clear it up, I realised that the enormous blood stain across one leg hid a clothing label stuck to the inside of the thigh with congealed blood. Checking no one was watching, I picked it up and slipped it into my pocket.

- This lass wus engayged ta be married, yknow. Ah knaw the lad, like. Smashin fumily frm round arr waye. Back o Linton Rd areu. The burth o thum ad bort a nice owse owt in Linton. Ahv knawn his fatherr since bluddy skul, Reg Simpson. Ahm tellin yer wha, tho. Wer gunnie gerrem, the buggar wha did this. Ahm persunallie gunnie mak fuckin shuerr?

I laughed uneasily inside at the colloquial 'bugger' in this context.

- Er name werr Liz, Liz Crebbin.

Only then did it come back to me, Liz Crebbin, 17. In the lift at the hotel earlier that Thursday, just when I had again wondered if I could cope with the post-mortem -- I'm not squeamish, just scared of the infinite blackness that is death -- I'd sought comfort and

distraction from a poster on the lift wall, studying it in minute detail. 'Employee Of The Month', it proclaimed, above a photo of an ample, young peroxide blonde. Beneath it was the name of Liz Crebbin, 17, the youngest ever employee of the Welcome Home hotel chain to win the coveted title. And fifty notes, no less. Liz was going to put it towards savings to get married to Kevin, 18. The poster said so.

I thought at the time she looked a bit like Snapshot 4. Wouldn't it be funny, I'd thought, if I got off with the Employee of the Month before dismissing the idea. After all, there must be hundreds of girls who looked like her in Ironopolis. Now, here she was dead, hideously murdered. If I'm honest, I knew then she looked a lot like Snapshot 4. I wondered if I should tell anyone.

- Are you all right, Damien? Called Dr Spence. – Need a bit of air? Bit green around the gills?
- No, no... I'm fine, really.

After that, I could only watch on mute, getting more and more troubled by the distressing familiarity of the skull-less face, as her organs were slapped on the table, dissected and swilled. All I could think was: 'Is this corpse id/w Snapshot 4?' as DC Durham and Dr Spence warbled on while bits of the former Liz Crebbin, ex-Employeee of the Month, no longer 17 but dead, were cut up and packed into marked evidential bags for further tests. After all the samples were taken, the hired help sluiced down the offal slops on the bench then threw them back into the body cavity, joking about the weekend to come. Dr Spence sewed up Liz Crebbin and stitched her face back on, ready for the relatives and the funeral.

- Put some clothes on it and no one would ever guess we'd even been here, chirped Dr Spence.
- Well, I suppose I'd better be getting back to my hotel so I can pick up my bags and go and see my granddad. I'll get a taxi back. Well, thanks very much Dr Spence. Thanks for havin me, Ron. No doubt see you soon down in the metropolis. I reckon

3-0 home to Swindon on Sattadee. Cheers.

And with that I strode out of the hospital and hailed a cab to my hotel, all the time clutching the piece of material that has two words on it I just think I might recognise.

2

That was Thursday morning -- four, no five days ago, it's Tuesday today Tues 27 Sep 09:18, as my bedside clock tells me. Bad enough, you might think. But things got worse last Thursday evening. Just like they did Friday, Sunday and Monday. In fact, Monday night with Dolores is the reason I'm here now, in this god awful, formica-covered hotel room, which is still baking me and my hangover at 103 degrees C, even though I've turned the radiator down as far as it will go.

Jesus, it's fuckin Mercury in here.

My flushed red head throbs like a cartoon thermometer pushed to breaking point. Red head? Hell, even that reminds me of *her*, Dolores the redhead. Why the fuck did it ever have to end between us? Or rather why didn't it just end and be over and done with? Why did I ever go and meet her straight from Kings Cross last Thursday night? Why didn't I call Charlie or Jason or Simon? Then, I'd never have seen those two skinheads murdered and I wouldn't have to have lied to the polis on Friday night. Mind you, I'd never have met that posh bird so perhaps it's all worth it after all.

Departure

After the autopsy, I went to see my granddad that Thursday afternoon. He was in his usual good spirits, despite being 85, you know, and, as I keep pointing out to him, over half the age of Ironopolis. I can't get my head round being him, to have lived through all the chaos and progress of this century and yet to still wax lyrical about the 'good old days' when men were men and there were no 'darkies', particularly on the football pitch, undermining the gentlemanly game that football was in those days. I try and go see him whenever I'm back in Ironopolis but the truth is I don't. Since my nana died a few years ago, he hasn't had much to look forward to so I felt guilty when I had to rush off to the railway station for the last train to the metropolis.

As the 20:26 pulled out of the grand old Victorian railway station, I said a silent goodbye to Ironopolis again as I did on countless occasions as a child after visiting the many relatives who remained there then, who still remain there now, seemingly imprisoned by circumstance and insecurity. Ironopolis never gets dark. That evening, the flares of the remaining local industry lit the night sky like primitive torches, spewing their sulphurous grime into the purple above. We passed the Majestic and Regal, which once upon a time

resounded with the drawl of Bogart and Cagney, beamed giant Monroes and Hayworths to captivated audiences in packed houses, entranced, mesmerised and grateful. Now they resounded to the less than Majestic or Regal calls of 'clickety click', 'two fat ladies', 'all the ones' echoing around half-empty yet still glorious art deco interiors.

We passed dark red rows of brick terraced houses, gleaming in the damp from the rain earlier in the day, like terracotta, the colour of the temples in the ancient citadels. We ambled past the remnants of cobbled streets glinting like wet rubber or polished leather in the late evening light. We trundled past neat gardens with prim lawns interspersed with neglected yards brimming over with corpses of the consumer age: old cookers, fridges and the odd settee or mattress, other unidentifiable rusty iron skeletons. As the train gathered its momentum, we began to fly past bigger and tidier lawns while rows of terraces were replaced by semi-detached suburbia.

Gaspar

The journey back to the metropolis always takes longer than timetabled and as usual my boredom revealed itself in bitten fingernails, overflowing ashtrays and distant stares out of the Prussian blue mirror window. But that night I wasn't thinking of Ironopolis scoring the winning goal in the Cup Final or my next fantasy blonde but the dead, glassy-eyed stare of Liz Crebbin. As I looked back into the carriage, there was no escape, even here: the headline on the local gazette demanded attention like a precocious child:

Police appeal for help in 'worst ever' attack in area

IRONOPOLIS WOMAN, 17 BUTCHERED

I knew then I had to read the article below:

POLICE have vowed to hunt down the sadistic killer of a pretty local girl who was murdered on her way home from work in the docklands area of Ironopolis last night.

Liz Crebbin, 17, a chambermaid at the Welcome Home hotel in Wynyard Street, was pregnant and to marry in three months. Her assailant is believed to have sexually assaulted her but it is not clear whether this took place before or after the murder.

I hadn't been able to read any more. I knew I should've stuck around, been a useful hand for the boys in crime squad, offered my expertise. Who am I kidding, my possible personal insight. But the Organisation quickly confines to desk duties those whose names become public until the collective memory of their existence has long since faded to nothing. It was then I began to sweat, not the damp patches about the armpits and neck

of Hollywood disaster movies but rivers pouring in torrents from my brow to my shirt collar which had shrinkwrapped my throat. I tore at the top button on my sopping shirt and ripped off my tie -- just to gulp down the rancid atmosphere of the smoking compartment. It was this desperate gasp for breath which prompted the balding middle aged bloke opposite to offer me a wee drp ov iz bearr:

– Aryarawlrite, sunn? he asked before realising that I had been looking at the front page story. He took a deep breath, like he was breathing for me, like he was preparing to deliver a speech.

– Ow, munn. Wha tha fuck sit come to these days , he began, lighting an Embassy Regal without offering me one. – Folks behavin like this. A puir wee lassie fra doon Wynyard way. Ma wife naws hor familie. Y knaa whara think, like. I’m nut kiddin. Ahd huv um al lacked up and the key threwn away. Hungins ta guid f thum, yunnderstan? At least tha fuckin murderer wuid suffa guid and proper like inside. Them utha cons wuid huv mair than huv a fuckin ward wirrim. Muar like cut izz baalls aff.

– I’m all right, I grumbled, not knowing whether he had stopped or was pausing for breath. – It’s just that I was at the autopsy of that woman today.

He was interested, excited even as I tried to explain I couldn’t tell him too much, that we’d got to keep things secret as it helps the polis with their treatment of any informant who might come forward. I had felt myself slip back into the accent so I cleared my throat and reverted to my habitual accent, from the London borough of Posh Estuary.

– Hrrmph. As I was saying, how would you know if an informant had good information if everyone knew how she’d been killed. Do y see wharra mean?

– How, munn, yer right. So yerra coppa, polis like?

The Organisation’s officers are civilians. Unbeknown to most forces though, our names are entered onto their staff database as DC Whatever and we carry a polis warrant card. We are only supposed to use this in extreme emergencies, usually when dealing with the polis themselves. As a rule though we are supposed to operate under the cover of being a Home Office civil servant which I detest.

– I’m Home office. I’m doing a project on polis procedures to co-ordinate autopsy information in the event of a serial killer working in different polis areas, I lied convincingly, I lied as I do all the time in this job.

My change of tone had Mr Hang-Draw-em-and-Flog-em appearing to think I was adopting airs and graces so I caught him offguard by saying:

– Good result last Saturday.

It was the only subject where I even felt vaguely at ease with Ironopolites.

– Whar? Y s’port the Iras? Y kiddin us. Why the fuck da y s’port thum thun? Wuz yer mam born ere?

– I wuz born ere.

We talked about the FA Cup quarter final defeats in the 1970s and early 1980s; how we fervently wished that our day, our time would come; how we believed that the new

manager would sort us out (and deal with the referees who seemingly conspired to deprive us of major honours at every turn); how we just needed an even break.

At around 11 o'clock, we finally approached railway-sidings London but it took another agonising, temple-bursting twenty minutes for the train to finally come to a halt at Kings Cross. As I got out, the big, hollow station echoed with the drunken catcalls of tarts and kids; stood over couples snatching indiscreet kisses before they had to return to their homes and their partners; and nursed weary commuters ready to return to the northern home counties after yet another late night at the office at the end of a long but necessary day.

I changed in a cubicle of the station toilets, took a deep snort of a line and then checked my baggage into a locker. Sparkling, I bounced out of Kings Cross, that pimple on the arse of the central metropolis. I skipped past the pimps and the drug dealers – who spotted me not as one of their own but as a fellow traveller and so made whispered offers of ganga and coke which I smilingly refused – and climbed into a cab. There were few options open to me but I knew that Dolores Kane would more than likely be at *The Pink Pussycat* being lapped up by the perverse and perverted court which hung around her like a bad smell.

If I had known then what I know now I would have gone straight home to Westminster and tucked myself up in bed with some cocoa, a good novel and a joint. But I didn't. I fancied my chances with Dolores that night. After all, this is not a rehearsal.

3

Lipstick

Dolores Kane stretched a long leg out of the shower, a smooth leg dripping water to the floor. She pushed the curtain to one side and slipped out with walking-on-air elegance, admiring her naked body and naked face in the wall length mirror. It spoke of too many late nights, too many cocktail bars, too many mornings in unfamiliar beds. But Dolores wore it well. Her eyes were her betrayer or rather the dark circles under them, the crow's feet spreading out from the corners like a road map of motorways leaving the metropolis.

The evening changed almost instantaneously outside the small but well-located flat. One casual swirl of a painter's brush and the drab unused water of the brush jar clouded purple before easing into darker and darker shades but was never black. Dolores looked across the rooftops of the city while she lit a long, slim joint. The evening light caught the twisted and contorted plume rising like fluid marble.

She prowled to the dressing table and pulled a brush through her long, dark red hair revealing her arched almost black eyebrows. Dolores pursed her lips, blew a kiss at the mirror and exhaled the hot aromatic smoke which tickled her throat like raw emotion. She began to work on her face with the practised precision of a graphic designer, evenly applying her foundation, erasing the dark bags, deftly lining each lid with a single stroke of black liquid, gently coaxing thick mascara to the end of each lash, filling each heavy lid with dark green and silver grey eyeshadow. She batted her eyelashes a couple of times to ease the stickiness then finished with a flourish of powder and blusher to add hue and shape to her cheek bones. She ground the naked roach into the ashtray, made her mouth into a slack arsehole and smeared ruby red *Dior* lipstick around it, tracing the outline of her lips before filling the gaps. She bit a toothless bite into a tissue. The smell of her lipstick made her buzz like neon.

Dolores quenched her thirst with a long slug on a Margarita she had prepared earlier. She licked the salt off her *rouge noir* finger nail and thought of all the anonymous groins to melt with in the vast crucible of the metropolis. She held the *La Perla* boned basque up against her shapely body then hooked herself into it drawing her waist in as each eye met each hook, pushing her breasts up and together into an arresting cleavage. Two puppies fighting in a bag... That's what Damien had always joked, when they were still together. She cursed herself for thinking of that bastard.

She peeled the packet off a new pair of *Wolford* stockings and slipped into their silkiness. Contorting one way then the other, she fixed them to each of the four suspender straps on her basque, struggling only with the back left. She straightened up then felt them pull the basque tight against her narrowed waist. Dolores admired herself in the wall length mirror before stepping into her black *Parisien Lace* thong. Despite its narrowness, it more than contained her well-trimmed pubic hair. She knew Damien wouldn't be able to resist her dressed like that then cursed herself again -- for thinking like that. She calmed when she thought how it would help her finally get even with Damien Dean.

She pulled on a *Christian Lacroix* tigerskin-print sleeveless minidress which only just contained her pushed up 34D breast, squeezed her 22' waist and barely came down to the stockings adorning her 38' legs. She slunk towards the door with her powerful hips undulating like a tiger's shoulders and slipped on a pair of *Manolos*. With her practised ease, she drifted down the stairs in them and out into the city.

Cocktails

I smile the slightly lame disarming smile I use with bouncers and others who have authority over my life no matter how temporary but particularly when I'm out of it. They wave me on with barely a cursory glance or comment or sarcastic remark and I descend into the hell that is called *The Pink Cat Club* or *The Pussy* to its regular clientele such as they are or might see themselves. The club heaves with sweat, pheromones, gyrating bodies, smoke, dope smoke, cigarette smoke, cigar smoke blown ostentatiously in seemingly solid smoke rings by predatory lesbians and anguished *femmes plus age* of the decadent scene. Men barely dressed without an ounce of fat on their honed bodies push against each other to music that makes your ears bleed and proclaims the anthems of rejected women stolen by the gay scene for its sensitive pathic element who see themselves as wronged perpetually in love. *I will survive*. Leather is everywhere, shinier and more sinister, more redolent of sin in its enduring parody of the Nazis who took so many people like these and simply denied them the most basic of human rights, the right to life and they don't teach that in our schools, do they? *I was petrified*. Is it dry ice that hangs in the air like the aftermath of some nineteenth century battle or is it simply smoke or is it all in my mind or is it just the incessant, pulsating beat of the strobe? My ears seep and my eyes roll and my head tightens and I can't take all this madness and I need to talk to someone, to confess to anyone, but who and how and when and where is Dolores who must be here. Why?

– It's the coke, I hear someone say.

I swivel around amazed that I can hear someone, anyone, anything in this inferno of sound. Then I realise it's in my head. I have to calm down. I need a drink. As the coke wears down, I don't so much battle my way to the bar as enter into a full scale war and its attendant diplomacy. 'Sorry,' I mouth again and again, gesticulating by raising my shoulders in the manner of an Italian footballer proclaiming his innocence after an innocuous but illegal challenge. Already nervous and exhausted, after having braved the

cut and thrust of the rapier wit, I find the bar. It displays a gut churning array of cocktails, their names, prices and descriptions etched into an old, scuffed blackboard, the only old and scruffy object in a sea of green light, chrome fittings and mirrors – apart from, of course, myself. The blackboard reads:

Handjob: cream, banana, Malibu, Cointreau, peach schnapps, vodka, frothed	£4.50
On the Blob: like the above with a Grenadine top	£4.75
Golden Shower: Tia Maria, Lucozade, cider and yellow Chartreuse	£5.00
Puke-in-the-Pan: advocaat, vodka, blue bols, lemonade and creme de menthe	£4.50

– I'll have a Handjob, I bark to the blonde behind the bar, who I know is called Leslie because I chatted to her last time I waited here for Dolores.

I snap and pop as I quaff the foaming white goo. *The Pussy* rather appropriately is full of cunts as usual but I can't tell Dolores that wherever she is, I can hardly tell the barmaid that. I watch some rave chick, moving repetitively to the monotonous, dull-thud rhythms. I groan again. Jesus, why does cocaine give me such a raging hard-on?

– Look, I need a wee, I gesture to the barmaid. – Line me up a jug of Handjob and get a glass for yourself.

X, it's after midnight in the early hours of Friday morning. Where the hell is she?

Metropolis

As Dolores wiggled her exaggerated wiggle, she was oblivious to the metropolis, the testament to human endeavour, to civilisation, to progress. She did not think of the many manhours which had gone, and continued to go, into the creation of this and every one of them. As the traffic moaned, limping down Victoria Street, she did not hear the anti-cries of a thousand fashionable but dedicated environmental campaigners. In Parliament Square, she swivelled round as she was sure she had heard Damien shouting drunkenly. But he was nowhere to be seen.

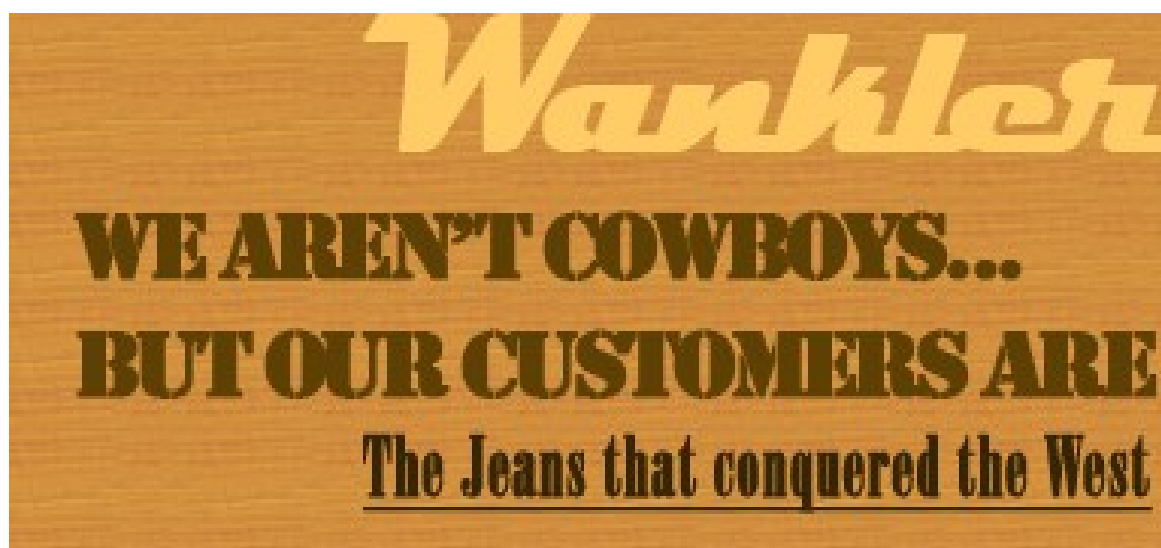
As she airily stepped into Whitehall, the brakes of a car squealed in front of her. She swore graphically at the innocent driver then hailed the next cab she saw and gratefully leapt in. As it worked its way through the madding Piccadilly, she forgot her self-absorption and looked up at the signs blazing their signifiers in dazzling, multi-coloured neon:

Get real

It's Gastro Cola

Free as a bird!

Fly Freebird Airlines



Dolores thought of the dark oblivion of the countryside where she grew up. She saw no poetry in the trillions of cheap sequins tacked to the cheap black velvet dress of a clear country night. Instead, she drank in the light, beauty and common sense of the metropolis as the cab wound its way through Soho before pulling up in Wardour street. Dolores flirted indecently with the cabbie to avoid tipping him before descending into *The Pink Cat Club*.

The pissoir in a place like this is not the place to be. I approach the enormous condom machine covered in garish stickers: 'Get your lips around a Juicy Fruit' one announces in vivid red manuscript-style font. 'If you get a stiffy, wear a Jiffy' blares another. 'Ride a rough Camel, bareback' insinuates yet another, rather perplexingly. Condoms are fun now but not so long ago, when I grew up, the Moral Majority and its PR agency, the tabloid press, could still keep the condom down to a mere passing mention in a sex education class. Disturbed by the flushing of the pan in Trap One, I turn away and splash my face with lukewarm water. I drown in the sounds of water everywhere but I'm silica dry and dare not drink the effluent. I quickly snort

another couple of lines, slip three pound coins into the machine, pull the handle and retrieve a three-pack of lubricated *Pals*.

It is always easier to let drugs make the moral decisions.

Pick-me-up

- Ah, Dolores, I stuttered, – how are you, sweetheart?
- I'm fine, thanks and don't call me sweetheart. Especially in public. Especially in *here*. You gonna buy a thirsty girl a drink then? You've got to try harder to chat up women, you know. It's no good traipsing off to the toilets every time you get a sniff of a chance. Speaking of sniff, you haven't got anything for a poor tired, working girl?
- You, work? Don't kid me, Dolores. Anyway, I wasn't trying anything with your friend here. I was waiting for you.
- Of course you were, Damien dearest, she continued, looking so unlike the girl I started going out with. – Now, I'll have...a Puke-in-the-whatsit...no, I'll have a Golden Shower, please Damien.

Reluctantly I reached into my pocket and pulled out the 50 sheets which remained from the 600 the Organisation had advanced me against operational expenses in Ironopolis. I could account for about a third (with a little generous claiming on undated taxi receipts and dodgy pub chits) but I'd no idea where the other £350 plus had gone, the £350 plus I still have to pay back. But I knew I couldn't tell a stropmy Dolores that I couldn't buy her a drink.

I caught Leslie making the bright-eyed, sexy smirk of a naughty schoolgirl getting away with murder in front of some old fool male teacher unable to stifle his lust for her. I could hardly wait to draw on the acrid fluid as she passed it to me. I then winced three times. Once, at the image of Liz Crebbin impaled like a giant butterfly mounted on a pin. Once, in reaction to the strong liquor blazing down my gullet. And once, as Dolores told me about some conquest the previous evening, the Wednesday night, when I was still in Ironopolis, when I'd never seen a dead body. It somehow involved a Neanderthal called Kev, a Transit van, money and Ironopolis, I think, but at the time there were too many chemicals vying for the attention of my neurones and synapses for me to have taken it all in. Just as well I was pissed, really otherwise I'd have got stupidly jealous even though it's been over three, no, four years since I went out with her.

As Dolores finished her tale, she announced she was off for a 'wee'. As she slinked away to the toilet, my gaze helplessly followed her gyrating rear as it undulated under her short tiger-print minidress. Through barely penetrable double-glazing, I just about heard Leslie say:

- Why do you bother with her?
- Line 'em up, Leslie, I demanded, – and have one yourself.

I tried not to think of *her*, post-modern, post-feminist woman. But I thought then – as I still think now, sitting in this god-awful hotel room – I might go out with her properly again, one day, although I’m not sure why. I mean, I still have her from time to time even now, but on her terms, her conditions.

But Thursday night I just sat there, waiting. The Big Bang came. I drank. The milky way, the solar system then the planets formed from nothing to gas to solid to forms that we could understand. I guzzled. Strings of amino acids became the centre of all evolution and life forms emerged in the sea, then went from the sea to the land (although some went back again). I imbibed. Then the dinosaurs came, I chucked it down, and they became extinct. Then the feminists came. I downed whole jugs in single gulps. Then they became extinct and it all just got worse and I couldn’t get out of my head quick enough. My alcohol-induced self-pity was finally broken only by Leslie saying:

– I should have told you. There’s another door to the Ladies.

Or at least that’s what I think she said because her next phrase came out something like:

– Waawaawaa, and then, – woowoopwuptoodooweewut.

And all I remember after that is other people talking about me as if I wasn’t there. Oh yeah, and I remember Marilyn Monroe, in a white dress with dark, black eyes. Then, falling through blackness. Then, blackout.

4

Powder

Dolores peed slowly and delicately, tinkling against the porcelain. She wiped herself in a long single stroke that touched her clitoris. She shivered. She smelt the scent from her groin and realised how much she resented Damien. She resented his pathetic efforts to try and ingratiate himself with the crowd at *The Pink Cat*. It especially galled her that he had tried to chat up her friend, Leslie. She knew she should never have got back in touch with him, once they had left Caledonia University and their lives had looked to be about to drift apart – forever. She laid out a couple of lines of nose sherbet and hoovered them up in two clinical snorts. It made her feel better, as Barrett’s did when she was a child.

As she came out of the cubicle, the toilet was deserted apart from a blonde woman slumped over the wash basin. She’d thrown up. It was obvious from the bits and bobs which clung to the sides of the sink. And from the smell. Dolores put a sisterly arm around the woman and confided to her like they had been long term girlie best friends:

– I may just have what you’re looking for. Dolores then produced a small wrap of white powder. – Fancy a quick pick me up?

Without waiting for an answer, Dolores laid out two lines and the two women snorted them at the same time.

– That’s good, really good, exclaimed the blonde wiping her nose on her hand and looking for the first time like she might actually be understanding what Dolores was saying to her.

– Here, let me touch up your make up, Dolores beamed as she let her hand skim across the blonde’s face. You got anything with you?

– No, I lost it. I..I..I’ve lost my hand bag. And it was *Xian Lacroix*.

– That’s OK. We can use mine. Dolores pulled her various bits from her tiny *Prada* clutch bag. – What’s your name, sweetie?

– Xabel, she almost sobbed.

– I’m Dolores. I’m sure you and me are gonna get along just fine. Fancy a walk? We can get a taxi to Hyde Park, it’s not far. We could always go back to mine, if you don’t like that idea. I’ve got more booze and more charlie. Or some smoke if you’d like.

In fact, Dolores really meant Damien's flat in Westminster. And Damien's booze, charlie and smoke. She knew he wouldn't be back for a while, principally because he would be waiting for her; trying to chat up Leslie; or martyring himself on the crucifix of drink. When she had first come down to London, he had let her stay in his rather nice flat and even given her a key which she now recognised as his last desperate attempt to get it back together with her. Wisely, she had resisted -- getting back together, not the key to a well-appointed W1 flat. After college, their relationship had ended nearly as quickly as it had begun and in a plethora of arguments over drugs, sex and debt. Replace the drugs with drink and Damien and her could have been anyone of a million standard, home counties divorcees. And the things she had done for him didn't bear thinking about now. But he'd never changed the locks.

- Let's go to the park, beamed Xabel as the coke brightened up her evening.
- OK. But we have to go out this way because I've got this crazy bloke after me. Won't take no for an answer. You know the type of man?

Xabel smiled, shrugged her shoulders and the two of them were off.

Cant

Blackout. Blackness. Black eyes. Back from the black. Light. Street light. I open my eyes. No, I don't. They are already open. I simply become able to once again to record my environment. To see requires the play of light on the retina. To observe requires memory and consciousness. So what happens when my motor functions continue but no seeing, no recording takes place? Jesus, I'm sitting on a parkbench but where? It is about as dark as it gets in the metropolis but I have no problem making out the strange, perturbing shapes shuffling towards me, grunting.

The undefined gains definition.

- Are you sam kind a fucking dossin' bastard, y'cunt?
- Hur. You fucking scammy twat. You a fuckin' queer?

There they are in front of me. Two monstrous human beings. From the distance of my armchair reading *The Citizen* it is possible to feel that certain individuals have been excluded from Society. That, given different circumstances, they would have made a useful contribution. But alienated and jobless with a surfeit of initiative and time, they become criminals. I mean, I know I would. I'd rather be a criminal than a lower middle. But these carbon copy skinheads in front of me are not the cunning dispossessed who might pull off some master crime: they are an embodiment of social alienation, criminal *untermensch*. They glare hard unrelenting stares without humour or compassion. Their skin is stretched over gaunt faces but tightened a notch by chronic amphetamine abuse and a natural surfeit of testosterone. Their heads poke out of their bomber jackets like sculptures carved from coarse granite, eyes hollowed too severely, bullnecks not whittled away enough. Stubble covers the entirety of their visible skin, apart from the eyes which are sunk into deep grey pits, topped by dark, menacing eyebrows.

Their image is completed by the obligatory 15-hole Doc Martens and rolled up jeans. I can already imagine the shiny leather repeatedly pounding against my head, my ribs and my gut. Fight or flight? It is all I can do to stop myself from crying. I breathe thick milky breath from my thick overcoat. They advance on me in those thin nylon bomber jackets, warmed by their bubbling adrenaline. One is slightly bigger than the other; that is the only factor which distinguishes them.

- Say ‘I’m a queer bastard’. Go on. Fackin’ say it, you pile of shit.
- Yeah. Tell us now or we kick yar fackin’ head in, you snivelling cant.
- Do ya fink yar clever? Do yar fink yar fackin’ posh. Weww, mite, y’ve got no-fackin’-where to run, you cant.
- Yeah. What the fuck do ya fink yar playin’ at out ‘ere at this fackin’ time of night. Without no fackin’ fucker to call for. Or are ya tryin’ to pick up one of them queers what ‘angs around this fackin’ park?
- Fackin’ faggot. Fackin’ faggots deserve to be fackin’ kicked in, doan vey?
- Say ‘I’m a fackin’ faggot’ you faggot. NAUW! Y’cunt! I ca’t wite aww fackin’ night. Queer.

Never ever answer in these situations. Remain quiet. Remain calm. Do not make eye contact. This advice may not necessarily work but it is the last desperate act of faith when hope slips through your fingers like water.

- Not fackin’ talkin’ to as, you fackin’ queen. I reckon this fackin’ queen is too stack up to give an answer. ‘E woan fackin even talk to as ‘e’s such a posh cant.
- Fackin’ talk or wiwww fackin’ make yar talk. NAUW!

Fear jams my brain in reverse for three long seconds before I slip up into first again and think of running. No good. I can’t judge how steady I will be on my feet. And that might be the excuse, if any is needed, that they’re looking for.

- He’s a little fackin’ queer cant wiv nah fackin’ manners. He’s gonna get a fackin’ good lesson, innee?
- Yeah.

With that solemn half-formed syllable, I see hope drip away. The taller one produces a long blade which catches the eerie neon glow as it slides ever longer from his pocket. The two advance towards me. Is this time to speak? I doubt a few well-chosen *bon mots* will save me now but perhaps some form of communication might prevent the mutilation that is now as certain as death. I bolt to my feet and throw myself at them to catch them off balance and buy me an expensive extra second to secure my long odds freedom. But they grab me and I can think only of dead butterflies next to a glassy-eyed, open-mouthed sex doll. They look at each other, then they look at me. I cup my hands but they are dry of hope. It is time to cry.

One grabs my lapels and staples me to the bench. My swollen heart explodes against my narrow throat. My rollercoaster final breath rushes from my winding trachea. The other skinhead lashes my shins. But I do not gain the strength of twenty men. I do not call on hidden reserves of energy. As I see the bigger skinhead raise the knife above his

head, I prepare for the clean, precise ache of a slashing and the empty numbness which follows.

Serpentine

The abundant harvest moon shimmered in the mist made milky and crusty by the nightlight of the city. The two women looked into the Serpentine, a vast, calm well, shivering as the mild, late September air briefly cut across them. As women do when they get together without men, they had been discussing them. Dolores had started to explain her relationship with Damien to Xabel in the cab on the way to the park. Now, the two women passed a joint back and forth as they exchanged tales of male excesses.

– You know what Damien asked me to do once? Dolores declared rather than asked.

Xabel shook her head and watched as Dolores spread herself on the bench in a passable imitation of male posture – arms behind head forming a great triangle like a giant’s upturned collar, legs spread wide-open like pornographic posturing – and put on her best serious Damien voice.

– Can you go on the game, sweetheart? Can you believe it? Dolores asked as she threw the roach into the lake creating endless ripples. – He had the fuckin’ cheek to accuse me of getting him into trouble with the McParlane Brothers, this pair of half-baked gangsters from the badlands of Leith. Then he thought I should sell my body to pay off the debts.

She shivered sharply and involuntarily, like a thick-plumed bird of paradise ruffling its feathers to keep warm. The gentle breeze jabbed the two of them making hard-pointed goosepimples run the length and breadth of their exposed shoulders and arms. Xabel was just about to say that she was cold when a cry as sharp as a scalpel ripped across the eerie mauve sheen of the city night.

– What was that? Asked Xabel. – I’m sure I heard a scream.

– Don’t worry about it. It was probably only a cat, Dolores smiled.

Xabel hugged Dolores for warmth and security, inhaling her spicy, exotic perfume. Dolores smelt the vomit on Xabel that still clung to her despite the scrubbing and liberal coating of *Fendi* that Dolores had given Xabel in the toilets of *The Pink Cat*.

– Let’s go back to mine now, it’s just around the corner in Westminster, Dolores offered.

– I’d love to, replied Xabel, knowing that her cats never made that kind of noise.

Balaclava

Then I realise I am struggling against nothing. No one is holding me down. No one is pressing on my chest. I drink down the cold night air then throw it straight back up as a violent, hacking retch of a cough.

As I gather my breath, I hear the sounds of a scuffle in front of me. Four lean, muscular men, faces hidden by balaclavas, have set about the two skinheads. The two thrash about but their movements are slight and ineffectual like small children trying to hit a playful father. The four men have them pinned.

Silently, two of them contort one of the skinheads into a full nelson. Any second, I expect to see handcuffs. Instead, they turn the skinhead round to face me. As I hear the crack of both his arms being broken, followed sharply by the scream from hell, I see his features spasticate with the searing pain, I can't help smiling. As his body sucks the blood from his outer reaches, he turns translucent white, like the dead, before his throat is slit.

Being made to watch, the other skinhead is now begging for mercy. But he too is dragged in front of me as I sit motionless, in shock at the flurry of adrenaline racing around my system. I'm not anxious though. I am calm. Calm at the prospect of bitter-sweet revenge. The skinhead struggles -- as I did -- as he makes his futile efforts to avert the fate which had just befallen his accomplice.

One of the four assailants places a Doc Martened foot on the skinhead's head and grinds it into the wet tarmac of the path by the bench. Then another picks up the skinhead's knife and thrusts it in one single smooth motion into his solar plexis until it is sheathed to the hilt. Sandwiched between the tarmac and the rough sole of one of my four rescuers, the intense, uncontrollable writhing tears the skinhead's skin and muscle from his face as blood gurgles from his mouth. I admit it. I laugh. Then my face puckers like I've just sipped vinegar before I retch all over the damp tarmac. I look up and the four assailants are gone.

5

Thursday the 22nd was, I must admit, the worst of the last five nights. As I said, I'd never seen a dead body until that morning. But by the time I got back home I'd seen three, if you count the body on the slab. Typical. Wait years for one, then three come at once.

But compared to Thursday, Friday was a doddle. I even got a posh bird's telephone number although I still haven't phoned her back. I mean, it never gets any easier asking them out, does it? My mate Jason can do it and my mate Simon can't but that's always been the case. Me? I fall somewhere in between: I can sometimes. If I time my run into the box perfectly – if I have just the right amount of booze – and get on the end of a perfectly weighted cross, then it's just the keeper to beat. But that so seldom happens.

Jesus, it's half nine, this bright Tuesday morning. I've got to be in work before ten, at the Organisation. I hope to X that I'm not too far out of the metropolis. I've absolutely got to go in today because I threw a sickie on Friday – because I threw up over that posh bird – and another yesterday because I got pissed, cocktail-pissed, with Charlie Preston on Sunday.

– Hello, would you mind telling me where I am staying? I ask the receptionist over the phone.

– The *Bartchester*, the receptionist replies down her nose at me. – The young lady said you were taking the room for one night. Is that correct?

I confirm this and put the phone down resigned to paying an arm and a leg for the privilege of a night here. Why the *Bartchester*? I mean it can't be more than ten, fifteen minutes walk from where I live. And not far from where I work. Even though the clock says: 09:31, I can still make it there for then.

That woman. She thinks she teases me. I think she tortures me.

Jesus, anti-interrogation training was easier than *her*.

Morning

I dragged myself through the door of my Westminster flat towards 7 am that Friday morning. The Organisation sells former safe houses to members of staff at knock down prices. This means I live in a luxury I could never afford on my Organisation salary.

As I pushed open the door, I was met by the all too prominent, telltale signs:

A wineglass with a neat lipstick mark around the rim.

The roaches of three joints, also with lipstick prints, in the ashtray.

A gold bracelet and ear rings collapsed on the coffee table.

Black stilettos kicked carelessly across the lounge.

The shutters for the French windows to the balcony left open.

The phone left off the hook, wailing like Starsky and Hutch's siren.

Stockings draped over my dresser, like discarded, long-forgotten banana skins.

The bed crumpled like the canvas after an all-in bout, Kendo Nagaski versus *The Urge*.

A dark red lipstick standing on end on the bedside table, like an angry mini-vibrator.

Dolores had been back, probably with some dubious partner in crime. I remember thinking at the time I should have changed the locks but I hadn't – another minor but ultimately disastrous decision. I killed the screaming by replacing the receiver. Inquisitive, I picked it up again and, as the Organisation trains us during covert entry, I dialled 1471. The computerised voice said politely but mechanically:

– You were dialled at 3:17 am today. The caller's number is not available.

With that distressing news, I replaced the receiver and meandered over to the kitchen to make some coffee to kickstart the day (even though the last one hadn't ended at that point). There are only two reasons why the network fails to give out these numbers: when the incoming call is made through an old fashioned analogue, as opposed to digital, telephone exchange or if the call comes from a government department which does not want to be recognised. Like the Organisation. I then tried another trick the Organisation encourages us to use during a covert entry: I pressed redial and waited. The last number dialled came up on a small screen on my telephone: 0171 626 6266. I froze because the Organisation's number is known only to the most trusted of its contacts. I was too dog-tired to assess the implications of this and my back ached from the pummelling I had taken before last night's reprieve so I went to lie down.

I collapsed onto the bed, sparked the radio into life and lit another Marlboro. What it had to say about the events in Hyde Park a few hours earlier made me regret even more my decision to spend Thursday night at *The Pink Pussy*:

– I'm Gavin Cartwright. This is the IRN news at seven thirty. Today's big story just coming in: police have sealed off Hyde Park after three bodies were found there this morning. We don't have much at the moment but perhaps we can go over to Gordon James on the spot. Gordon do you have anything for us?

– Well, Gavin police are not giving out much at the moment. All we've learnt is that a woman walking her dog discovered two bodies, two dead men together, about an hour or so ago. A third, a woman, was discovered when police sealed the area off.

– Gordon, have the police indicated if they suspect foul play?

- Not yet but the word going around journalists is that it appears to be something pretty major judging by the police reaction.
- Thank you, Gordon. We'll obviously keep you listeners posted with developments as we learn of them throughout the day. And now, politics...

I found out later that day that the victim was called Xabel Bontempi but that was all the police had to go on, no other identifying details. As I lay there that Friday morning, the smells of the previous 24 hours returned to haunt me. Liz Crebbin, rotten eggs; two skinheads, metallic blood; and now Xabel Bontempi, fresh soil on pristine, cotton panties, I imagined for some reason, as I made the mistake of drifting off.

Ratcatcher

Woken by the opening jingle of the IRN news at 09:30, I leapt up wearing the previous day's clothes and was off down the stairs in seconds, in an effort to get to work on time. Just as I was about to hurl open the heavy wooden door in the lobby downstairs, a folded, hand-delivered note stopped me dead in my tracks. With the word 'Deano' neatly hand-printed on it in red ink, it made me think of college. 'Deano' was my nickname at Cally - the University of Caledonia -- after an Ironopolis player, Dean 'Deano' Glover, but I remember thinking at the time that no one had called me that since 1990 when Glover was transferred to Port Vale. The handwriting was precise, the folds unhurried and crisp, like it was just back from the dry cleaners, suggesting perhaps the work of an obsessive or an illiterate. The acuteness of the folds made the note spring from my fingers as I struggled to open it. In the same neat, obsessively tidy handwriting, it said:

*I know who you are,
'Deano'. I know who you
really are. I know what
you did last night and
the night before in
Ironopolis. I know about
your 'girlfriend' and
those other girls and I
know about the
'PinkPussycat'.
You know me as well,
you scum, you terrible
scum. Scum like you
should be 'castrated'. You*

*are monsters. Only
people like me can
protect our Society from
scum like you. I am
going to find out more
and go to the authorities,
especially when I have
pictures of
your 'girlfriend'.
Signed
'The Ratcatcher'
Thursday 22nd
September*

I digest the note's contents and my gut churns like the tombola at some dreadful home counties fete. I throw open the heavy front door, and before I know it, I'm hurling vomit from the top step into the road. Unimpeded by digesting food in the gut, the projectile sluices an immaculate blonde who has the bad luck to be walking past my flat, the one time this has happened. But that's co-incidence for you. That's circumstance. As I hover on the step doubled-up, like old age, she stands, rigid, motionless, arms outstretched and contorted like a scarecrow. Then the next blast of stomach acid, a fraction of a second later, splatters her soft skin with the force of a powerhose sluicing down an abattoir. She bends in the mild breeze, dripping stagnant day-old cocktails from her perfect skin as I collapse down the steps into the thin pool which has gathered around her delicate feet and slim ankles like the gentle lap of the tide on the beach. I'm so close I can smell the expensive, black leather of her shoes.

As I clamber to my feet and the blood drains from me sending me back to the ground. I slump there, all bad posture, confusion and stupidity with a white face and black circles around the eyes, like a giant panda. And there she is, opposite and above me: five foot nine; cute, snub nose; almond, sapphire eyes; golden tan; long blond hair expensively dyed – Venus rising from the spume. But this is no two-week-Majorca tan, I know. It speaks of regular holidays in the sun, the expensive sun. Her leather trousers fit like the skin of an aubergine and are bound by a decorative belt which spells out 'Moschino' in bold, gold capitals.

– There, there, I whisper in my most soothing voice as I rise and go to put a soothing hand around her shoulders.

Thunder claps overhead and I stumble to the damp pavement, holding my head and trying to contain the random stars which dance in the daylight every time I open my eyes. Darkness descends on me again and pain re-surges through my already aching, pulsating

head: more ringing, more buzzing, more echoing, more dull exploding. As a reflex, I raise my hand and deflect the third blow to one side.

- You absolute baastaard. You dirty, filthy baastaard, she weeps as she rains further blows down on my head.
- Stop it, I grunt, stop for Xsakes. I'm sorry. Sorry. Sorry. F the love of god. Please stop hitting me! I boom with hidden depths of energy as I catch hold of her arm – which, teamed up with her hard leather handbag, has been making great swathes into me.

She stops hitting me and begins to cry.

Breakfast

I don't know how I persuaded her to come back into my flat to clean herself up but I did. I explained I shouldn't have even tried going to work that morning as I was so seriously ill but duty called and all that. Then I soothed her some more, countering her resistance over a period of minutes, resting a tentative hand on her shoulder. She sobbed gently as I quietly introduced myself and stiffly offered her my other hand which she automatically and limply took, like she was meeting an unwelcome guest at the many society events which her appearance spoke of. I told her I was a policeman, RCS – regional crime squad. The warrant card which I always carry with me was all the evidence she needed to trust me. She lived in Belgravia, she confided, and was heading for the Tate and then a quiet weekend at mommy and daddy's pile in Gloucestershire when I burst into her life. She called me a charmer when I described her as brave after the ordeal I'd put her through and even handed back the bizarre note – without looking at it, respecting my privacy – which started that catastrophic chain of events. I offered her my hand as we stepped back through the yawning front door into the hallway of the flat.

- Let me introduce myself, I declared in home-counties-speak. – My name's Damien Dean.
- Imogen Bowler-Clous, she announced clearly and confidently. – How do you do?
- How do you do? I replied before she half-mumbled:
- I like the name Damien. I really do.

Things like that just don't happen to me.

Back in the flat, my fascination with Imogen was broken only when I realised it was well after 10 am, the time I should have been at work. I dread having to talk to Wendy the Welsh dragon at the best of times but I knew I had to then or the Organisation would have sent out a *Spec Ops* team to check I hadn't been kidnapped. When I spoke to Wendy, I claimed to have flu but she breathed scepticism

over my excuse and tried to convince me I needed a doctor's note although I knew the Organisation's rules said you only needed a note after three working days off sick. I explained this to her only for her to snap back:

– Well, you'd better be back in on Monday or I'll have to take this up with the AC. And you'd better fill in an S34c/219/G9A/5 to cover this day off as soon as you get in, before slamming the phone down on me.

While Imogen showered, I fixed breakfast. For some reason, I just couldn't see myself failing with her so, when she got back from showering, I steered the conversation towards art as she had earlier told me she was on the way to the Tate. She clearly had no love of the subject but 'liked' French 16th century classicism, Velasquez, Goya, Rubens and the French Rococo but didn't really like 'modern art'. How could she call it that? I thought as she went and sat cross-legged on the floor between the coffee table and the coal effect gas fire and said almost petulantly: 'I'm cold', which must be the most used phrase by birds apart from of course, *No*.

I remember thinking then that incipient petulance seemed to have reared its ugly head rather early on in the proceedings. I mean, we hardly knew each other. But I put down the frying pan and leapt to the fire to turn it up and she thanked me warmly again holding my gaze longer than seemed decent. As we ate breakfast, I watched mesmerised as she daintily hoovered up the two eggs and three rashers of bacon I had given her, occasionally pausing to dab her mouth with a bit of kitchen roll, which I had provided to her request for a 'napkin'.

Then, there was a pause and the conversation just jumped to her ex, a rugby player called Jestyn, who had run off with Imogen's best friend, Jemima Pergammon-Birtwhistle. *Would you believe that moniker?* Jestyn only had to wait until Francis Elwell, the current defence minister, the sitting MP for Wiltshire East and Jemima's uncle, stepped down and the constituency was his. Ironically, Elwell was also a friend of 'daddy' and Imogen's godfather but that obviously wasn't enough. I listened to Imogen at length – chatting up women is just like recruiting agents but much more exciting. After all, you put so much of yourself into it (and there's no real fear with agents – all they can do is say 'no' and that's only professional, not personal, failure. And if things get really hairy, you can always call on armed back-up). By the end of our conversation, I had established that:

- a. She hadn't been out with anyone for over a year.
- b. She had been betrayed by a lover and friend and didn't seem to be close to her parents.
- c. She was ripe for an approach by me.

For once in life it all seemed so easy. After this, the rest was the smallest of talk so I just sat there nodding at the right moments, wondering what my mam would have made of her, as Imogen gushed on about her supremely middle class life. She told me almost with embarrassment that she was an airline stewardess, which she enjoyed for the travel but not for the attention of the lecherous men who thought her a 'trolley dolly' and therefore fair game. I told her that I hated it when the snide were condescending about other people's jobs. (I must confess, though, I have long thought airstewardesses to be

glorified, over-paid bus conductresses. Still, thank god she isn't an estate agent or in PR, the usual retreats of the rich and thick).

So I asked her if she was into astrology and she said she was and I wondered if there was ever a woman anywhere who wasn't. A Leo, born the 12 August 1968, she had five brothers all younger than her, none of whom she was particularly close to. In the mid-1980s she went 'up' to Cambridge because Jestyn and daddy went there, although she would have preferred Oxford. Daddy was Sir Hugh, a landowner and former diplomat. Her mother, Jemima, was an artist. They weren't particularly close but they still attended functions and hunts together. Then suddenly Imogen stopped and brightly declared:

– Look, it's been good talking to you. They say it sometimes takes a stranger for people to open up to and you've been that stranger. But I really ought to be going.

I was creamed so I readily agreed. I let her borrow the shirt I had given her earlier on knowing it would give me an excuse to ask for her phone number in order to get it back and she actually gave it to me, when I asked – none of this: 'I'll take yours and phone you'. After she'd left, I made perfunctory efforts to clear up, before undressing for some hard-earned kip. As I put my trousers in the linen bin, I checked my pockets for the stray pen or red hankie that might stain the rest of the wash pastel pink or blue and out-popped the blood-stained label. It had been there since the post-mortem, like one of Mr Benn's mementos from his surreal trips beyond the costume shop. I gingerly retrieved the panties that Dolores had so carelessly abandoned in my flat in the early hours of that Friday morning. The label inside them read *Parisien Lace* as did the blood-stained label from the post-mortem.

6

Jesus, what the hell is *she* playing at, now? Why did her brand of panties match that blood-stained label I nicked from the autopsy? I strain to remember the story she told me on Thursday night, the story I didn't listen to because I was too out of it and because I thought she was just winding me up again, the story about that bloke and the Transit. I met her twice yesterday, Monday 26th that is, once in the morning and again in the evening. On both occasions, I tried to tackle her, I did. I tried to reel her in but she just wouldn't bite.

I have to confess. I still have nightmares about Dolores. I dream of her dolling herself up, like for *those* evenings. Those evenings in the fag end days of Cally, when she used to dance off into the night. When it felt like she was dancing on my grave, her breasts fighting inside her tight, PVC bra, her stiletto heels chattering on my tombstone. And then she'd come home and tell me all about it...

To make matters worse, Jason told me something bizarre on Friday night after the pub: that Simon Register, my best mate from college, was seeing a five foot ten redhead called Delilah who hung out in the metropolis's gay scene. I mean that's got to be *her*, hasn't it? Jason's just got the name wrong...

Unwell

It's Friday night. 8:30 pm. I am in the C&H, the Coach and Horses off Cambridge Circus. We are huddled by the door opening out on to Greek Street. (For those of you who saw that play, it's the back left of the stage, back right if you were in the audience). Jeff 'Unwell' Bernard is having a late one, still teetering on the bar stool, even at this time of evening. Norman, the 1950s throwback publican, tells a couple of backpackers who have just walked in that they're barred while exhorting others to consume alcohol by the bucketful but not show the slightest deterioration in behaviour consistent with this. I can just make out those Private Eye 'Jeff bin in?' cartoons through the perma-haze.

I don't really want to be here but it's better than those chain pubs, those Fuckoff & Firkin places, those Slug and Lettuce franchises or any of those so-called Irish pubs which have opened in the last couple of years. And certainly better than those real ale pubs with their fermented-on-the-premises brews of Syphilitic Pekuliar, Old Beaver Cheese and Bishop's Scrotum. Anyway, I'm not here for the beer. Jason Conscript broke my deep

afternoon sleep with a bastard call at three forty five today, promising great coke which would 'blow my balls off'. Just as well, really. This lager is sticking in my throat like Grappa. So Jason and I discreetly slip off to the toilets, one after the other, for a pick me up. We return and wind Simon Register up that we've snorted all the coke. 'Oh cheers, lads,' he whines before we burst out laughing at the wind-up.

Then, two of Jason's friends from work in the city, Terry and Gerry, wave to us from a wet, dank Greek Street before elaborately miming their decision to come and join us. As Jason talks to Gerry and Terry, Simon informs me that a college mate, Syd Preston, is getting married at Xmas which surprises us – the fact not the timing – but then doesn't really surprise us as, we agree, he always had settling down tendencies. Then the four of us discuss *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and find that we've all been to four weddings this summer just gone which Simon thinks is 'weird' but everyone else accepts that it's just the age we are. I put his behaviour down to the coke or more particularly the *paranoia* induced by it. *Paranoia* is the Amisesque Puerto Rican help who polishes the dusty skeletons in my cupboard; who plunges herself arm-deep in my dirty boxers; who finds my really filthy wankmags and just leaves them there on my bed. The woman who dredges up my suppressed or imagined fears, the woman who does for me. No one's been to a funeral, though.

We move from West End pub to West End pub, but none of us would ever call it that: *West End*. Home counties Henrys and Harriets call it that. Do they think they are fooling us? We know it's not the *End*. We know the richest home counties lie beyond. So, if you're trying to keep it a secret in this rather trite way, don't bother. We're not even interested. You can keep your jamborees and fetes and open days and golf clubs and coffee mornings and light luncheons.

We decide to go elsewhere so we traipse from the *Three Greyhounds* to the *Polar Bear*. (Why animals? The birds in the former were dogs and the blokes in the latter were bears but surely that's just co-incidence). It transpires that Jason's mates, Terry and Gerry, are *Withnail* obsessives.

- How many times have you seen it? Gerry challenges.
- Over 500, Simon discloses with pride.
- I must've seen it twice that at least, ripostes Terry who is starting to get on my nerves.
- Me too, claims Gerry, who is the more accessible of these mix and match city types.

So finding easy common ground, we go through more of the quotes but G&T get some of them wrong and Simon looks pompous as he corrects them. Discussing 1970s popular culture, we agree that the weakest but still possibly the funniest running gag, ever, is Mrs Slocombe's pussy, not least through sheer persistence. And then we get into an argument about *Mission Impossible* or, as Simon points out:

- *Mission Semi Colon Impossible* to give it its strictly correct title.
- It is the least appropriately named programme as they always did it, Jason remarks in his usual sharp way.
- Did what? A chorus.

- Completed the mission.
- Should've been called *Mission: Highly Improbable*, I suppose, concludes Simon.
- But they always did it, Jason comes back.
- So?
- Well, they've got no failure rate.
- So?
- I'm not a gambling man but if someone offered me odds on them doing it, I'd take them.

This isn't strictly true. Jason gambles every day. With other people's money.

- Whaaathefuckurryoutwotorkinabout? I slur.
- Yeah, unite G&T.
- Right who'll give me any odds on a £500 bet that in the next programme they do it, complete the mission, offers Jason hopefully.
- Of course they will. Anyway, you know that because you're the kind of sad fucker who watched them all when you were 10, I proclaim to Jason, speaking slowly to control my slur.
- It should be called *Mission: Very Probable*, rejoins Simon.
- Nooooo, retorts Jason, – if they did it every time, it should be called *Mission: 100% successful*.
- Ah! That's where you're wrong, intervenes Gerry, there was one where they failed.
- Oh fuck this, chime Jason and I, – for a game of soldiers.

And a heated directionless discussion rambles on until it is all too soon exhausted and we fall silent. So we talk football. We banter a bit. Simon jokes about Crystal Palace, his team, being in the Premier League when Ironopolis are not. We agree that, contrary to expectation, Sky TV has improved football coverage on the whole although the days of the Star Strikers Cheerleaders are numbered.

- Yeah, but it's not as good as ITV though, interjects Terry.

Me and Simon look at each other in disbelief. Even Jason who enjoys the game but takes no particular interest opens his mouth in disbelief.

- Whaaaaat???? We say in unison.
- I think Brian Moore and Saint and Greavsie are far better than Des Lynam and Brooking and Lineker.

Me and Simon have to ignore this and continue to discuss the effects Captain Marvel, now Coach Marvel, will have at the Iros.

- You're not an Ironopolis fan, are you? asks Terry in a tone which suggests he is making his second major faux pas of the evening.
- Yes, I am, I say through clenched teeth.
- They're crap.
- Really, what makes you say that?

- Never won anything. No ambition. Face it. It must be you and no one else on the terraces. Your away support don't need a football coach, just a taxi.

He bursts into an exaggerated belly laugh.

- So who do you support?
- The greatest!
- Who's that? I ask knowing the answer but hoping to be pleasantly surprised.
- Well I used to support Liverpool but they're crap now so I support Man Utd, says Terry importantly.

I deck him. One blow of my forehead to his forehead and he is down. Gerry squares up to me and Jason and Simon intervene while I pace up and down blinded by testosterone. Shouting echoes around the bar like feedback at a pub gig and I am led from the Old Bailey like a smiling convicted criminal or from the head master's office like a naughty schoolboy – silent, disgruntled but stupidly proud. So Jason, Simon and I go back to the C&H. The conversation becomes tired and emotional. Voices are loud, sentiments unsubtle. As 11 o'clock tolls literally, I suggest we get some real drinks, some cocktails, from *The Pink Pussycat*.

Harvester

It is strangely quiet in Hell Central tonight as we descend the worn stone steps. *The Pink Pussycat* is ostensibly open but it sounds like the usual ear-bleeding anthems are being played on a Sony Walkman with dud batteries. Free of the magic and mystery of unsampled pheromones, it is a musty wine cellar. A few macho men gyrate on the dance floor, consciously trying to wind up the polis in their uniforms by pointing at them then guffawing with other mustachioed, uniformed gay men. At the sight of the polis, we make to go back out but they've noticed us. And the stairs are blocked by a couple who look like they hail from the eastern home counties and have decided to make this their big night out of the month. As they walk into the club, Jason whispers into my ear:

- 'Have you ever been to a Harvester?'

I look around hoping to god Dolores is not here. I see Leslie behind the bar so I confidently stride towards her as the others look on. As expected, the plainclothes polis approach me. It is obvious the Commissioner has told them not to come out with anything homophobic while they are here -- presumably to ensure the co-operation of the gay community in any enquiry. I am out of my head and I want to blurt out 'I'm not gay, you know' but I pull back at the last.

- I'm DC Brixton and this is DS Holloway. We're dealing with a murder enquiry. You may have heard about it on the news. A young girl was killed in Hyde Park in the early hours of this morning. We have provisionally identified the young girl as Xabel Bontempi from her club membership card found in her handbag that was left here last night. We have no further identifying details of her and

strangely there was no bank card or driving licence in the bag. We were wondering if you might be able to help us.

– I'm job, I say in my best Estuary.

I produce my polis Warrant card, the one given to all officers in the Organisation.

– Thank you, DC Dean, smiles DS Holloway. – I don't suppose you were in this hellhole full of fairies last night, he half-asks.

Simon and Jason stand open-mouthed.

– I was actually.

I have to confess to being in *The Pink Pussycat* as other witnesses might mention me and my denial would subsequently look suspicious:

– I came here undercover to meet a drugs informant. I can tell you a bit about the background as there may be a connection with the murder.

I make up some nonsense and the two polis let me go. Jason and Simon are asked brief questions but they are now conferred the legitimacy I have in the eyes of the polis.

Survival has deprived us of drunkenness. Not to look suspicious we have one in *The Pink Pussycat*.

– DC Fuckin Dean? Jason explodes as soon as we are out of earshot.

I explain it's deep cover. I apologise to Leslie for our sharp exit but she understands that the polis presence has scared most of *The Pink Pussycat's* clientele. And no she hasn't seen Dolores since the previous night.

– Onto the Doghouse lads, screams Jason newly discovering his drunkenness.

Dope

I wonder how many brain cells I've lost, over the years. I really do. As I sit here, lobotomised, in my damp bed this Tuesday morning. Again. Just like last Saturday morning. Just like last Friday night. A couple of years ago when we were playing Trivial Pursuit – off our heads as usual which is the only way to make it any fun – the question: 'At what rate does the human brain renew its cells?' came up. After wild speculation how many we had in the first place – ten billion, one billion, 500 million, 50 million, 5 million – Simon Register flipped the card over and said:

– It's a trick question. We don't. Not at all.

Jason and I grabbed the card but there it was as plain as... writing on card. All three of us went into quiet contemplation for about two minutes, like we were paying our last respects to the bits of our brains that had died and were never coming back.

I mention all this because I've forgotten what happened when we got back to my place, after the scare with the polis in *The Pink Pussy* and the odd half-hearted margarita each in the *Dog House*. (I cannot reveal to you exactly where I live as the Organisation will not allow it for reasons of operational security). I remember Simon being knocked for six

within minutes by the rather average gear but managing to remain bolt upright, cross-legged on the floor, not registering anything, like a robot out of juice or a *replicant* at the end of their time. I remember me and Jason then discussing what a ‘fuckin lightweight’ or, rather, ‘quicheweight’ he was.

I even remember asking Jason for a progress report on his incipient relationship with Kuki Karioki – and not just out of politeness or prurience. We’ve always wanted to know what each other are doing, we’re best friends, after all. Not every man conforms to the stereotype perpetually moaned about in those women’s glossies. Jason, though, seemed more taken with some bird he’d met in *Chappaquiddick*, I think it was. I definitely remember him saying that this bird was all over him, ‘like a bad rash’ and was called Anya, Natalya or Katya. Russian, she was. All *darrleenks* and *zig-arrrrettz*, according to Jason, who – I recall – put the joint to his mouth and smoked it like Cruella Da Ville, in imitation of this floozie, before proceeding to recount ‘a very fuckin silly joke’. Let me tell you it: Man walks into a railway station and goes to the bloke at the counter: ‘I’d like a return, please.’ And the clerk goes: ‘Where to?’ And the bloke goes: ‘Here, of course.’

Things, however, become less clear after that. There may have been a gap. In fact, there must have been as I remember eating anchovy, olive and caper pizza. No. No, that was Sunday night. Anyway, there was a gap. Then, Jason looked me in the eyes and started on what I’ve later come to call *Mission: Freak out Damien*. At the time, I seemed to have no choice but to accept. It started with Jason just saying: ‘Why?’ earnestly and self-righteously. Confused and sensing the attentions of *Paranoia*, fussing around me for a second time that evening, all I could do was reply ‘What?’ only for him to repeat: ‘Why?’ in exactly the same tone and continue to repeat it no matter what I said. Until I asked: ‘Why?’ back. Then he delivered the line which still has me in occasional relapses of paranoia four days later: ‘Because you’re a cunt, Deano.’

I’ve no problem with him calling me a cunt. But why *Deano*? I’m still left wondering. After all, no one has called me Deano for years – *except the nutter who had left the Ratcatcher note that very morning*. When I asked Jason if he had pushed it through the communal letter box, possibly as some kind of practical joke, he eyed me like a suspicious budgerigar and denied it. So I told him about its contents and Imogen and the events in the park and the real significance of the post-mortem and the unexplained visit to my hotel room that Thursday morning when I was in the toilet and the blackouts and all the other crazy shit going on around me. I may have told him much more, I don’t remember. Oh yeah, and I told him about Dolores.

It was then that Jason scared me for the second time that evening. Oddly, I can remember almost exactly what he said, which went like this:

– Dolores sounds like the woman that Simon got off with the other day. You remember, the tall, redhead he couldn’t stop going on about, the one that took him in as chips and spit him out as tatties, then walked out on him the next day without leaving a telephone number or address. He ended up troubling the scorers, I think, for only the second time this year.

This was headline news to me at the time. I had arrived in the Coach and Horses about an hour after everyone else, fashionably late for a do but unfashionably late for Friday

night drinking. My next reaction was probably over the top: I jumped to the floor and shook Simon like a maraca. Even though I know Simon well, even though I know – when he's out of it – it's like waking the dead, I still wanted to beat him to his component molecules. I wanted him badly to help with my enquiries so I could throw him down the stairs to fit with the metaphor. I have never told Simon or Jason any great detail of my life with Dolores, partly because I can't control her and partly because I wouldn't trust Jason not to try it on with her – and succeed.

But it never crossed my mind that Simon Register would be the one to take up the baton and run with it.

7

Invincible

Why did Jason call me Deano that night? Why in god's name does Simon Register appear to be going out with Dolores? I mean it can't be him. *He* can't have chatted *her* up, can he? So, why has *she* gone for *him*? To make me jealous? Surely even she's beyond that. But the thing I have to tell you is this: I spent last Sunday with Charlie Preston, the sister of Syd, the college friend who's getting married. I always think Syd and Charlie Preston sound like they might have been inspirational, uncompromising centre halves – 'big, tough lads at the back' – in the 'Invincibles' side of 1888/89 which won the League and FA Cup double. But in reality Syd is an ex-public school boy I befriended at college. He was Xened Alexander but was re-Xened in fresher's week '85 after Syd Preston, Billy the Fish's coach at Fulchester. And Charlie -- my long term lover (of sorts) -- was Xened Charlotte 21 years ago but reXened herself 'Charlie' 16 years later when she checked out of public school and into a college of further education in the home counties.

Anyway back to the point. On Sunday night, Charlie told me that she had got drunk one night last week and had been seduced by a charming redhead. Hang on, I may be exaggerating there. I may be letting my warped and fevered, pornographic imagination push me one step too far. Charlotte Preston definitely told me a redhead had picked her up and that the redhead had *snogged* her.

But Sunday began with me telling Charlie what me and the Iros got up to the day before. I mean, it was her fault. She mentioned the footie the moment she came through the door, impressing the hell out of me by knowing that:

- a. Ironopolis had beaten Swindon 3-1 to go top themselves.
- b. Jockie got two, 24 and 80 mins, and set one up for Hendo in the 65th.
- c. The Iros had gone top of the league for the first time this season.

Shit

– Yeah, Swindon were shit, I replied taking up the conversational reins. – We dominated the first half. Jockie's first was a peach. Timed his run into the box to perfection springing the offside trap, took the ball down on his knee into a

one on one with the keeper and coolly slipped it low into the left hand corner, in front of the Dock. We fuckin erupted.

I stopped for a second to mime the action of Jackie's goal in front of Charlie.

- Mind you, Jackie could have had a hatful before half time. He missed two open goals, you know. And Henderson fell over his boot laces when he had a golden chance. I said to Jimmy, 'I've got a bad feeling about this game. We should be three, four up but instead they're still in it'. Mind you, I've always got a bad feeling about the Iros.
- And what appens after the break, Big Nige mistimes a backpass and Dav, useless fuckin Dav who used to play for us who we got rid of on a free, nips in and scores in front of the Dock. I went fuckin mental, throwing wanker signs at that cunt. Jesus, I thought, it's gonna be one of those fuckin days. And why him?
- Then, you're not gonna believe this, I missed Big Hendo's goal. I was peering from the other end watchin him runnin into space like a fuckin express train when it all went dark. I thought what the fuck? Then I realised, it was this fuckin flag that Jimmy had been wavin around. And I'd told him to fuckin put it away as it kept flappin in front of me ruining my bloody view.

Not feigning her boredom at all, Charlie sat herself down on the sofa, like she was preparing herself for a long night in front of the telly, pausing only to remove the wankmags that were left out on Friday night.

- So there I was with this fuckin flag over my head, being knocked all over the place by the faithful as they went mental at the goal, going 'Ee-aye-oh, ee-ay-oh'. By the time I'd got out, Swindon had kicked off again and I wasn't totally convinced we'd scored. Jesus, it was a fuckin nightmare. Good job we made sure with ten minutes to go...
- Damien, shut up and engage me in some real conversation, Charlie cut in, clearly irritated. – This is typical of you. I give you an inch and you take a mile.
- Still it's a marathon not a sprint, I replied ignoring her but wrapping up my story as if I'm at the end anyway.

It was only then I realised that I hadn't offered Charlie anything or, indeed, noticed much about her since she'd arrived. Thank god, I stopped before I could tell her I think that football serves as an apt metaphor for life: periods of almost unrelenting misery fuelled by blind hope, relieved only by the odd moment of unbridled joy. That might have been too much, even for her.

Xchurch

- Have you quite finished now? She asked, absent-mindedly flipping through discarded copies of *Flaps* and *Clitoris International*.

As it was Sunday lunchtime, I cracked open a bottle of *Angus Brut*, threw some brandy, a sugar cube and a dash of Angostura bitters into two tall glasses and gently poured in the champagne-style substance. At the same time, Charlie brought me up to date with her astonishing career. At Xchurch, she had developed a talent for spotting rising stars like Marco Fiasco; Firebrand and the Arsonists; Damsels in Distress; and Gonad, interviewing them just before they became famous and then selling the interviews to the glossies just after. Charlie always makes out she has to. She's never stopped telling me how her generation don't get grants, housing benefit and the dole unlike 'old hippies' like me. But, in truth, her father feels obliged to give her an enormous bursary each year which he saved in the very mistaken belief that he would have to send her to some prohibitively expensive Swiss finishing school. In fact, Charlie works because she loves it. It *defines* her.

We drank our cocktails with the meal I had prepared earlier – Duck Liver Mousse with onion marmalade and Cold Smoked Pheasant Breast with mint and pea jelly and deep-fried, shredded leeks – while Charlie regaled me with stories about the 'stars'.

– You'll never believe what Damon Thong said to me when I interviewed him, she related excitedly.

For those of you who don't know, Damon Thong is the lead singer of Gonad – real name: Raymond Daft.

– 'We're breaking down the commercialisation of popular, contemporary expression as it is assiduously instigated by the media prophylactic', she intoned in a solemn attempt at a *basso profundo*.

– What the fuck did he mean by that?

– I don't think he knew. I didn't like to embarrass him by asking so I just put it in the article in quotes. Made him look a right twat. Thing is, he phoned up after it appeared in *Axomania* and thanked me for such a sympathetic interview.

– Jesus X. How thick are these people? I asked as we both laughed with middle class superiority.

At the end of the first half, the score stood at: three bottles of fizz, a half-bottle of brandy and a bottle of Pinot Grigio so I leant towards Charlie and went to kiss her. But she just brushed me off, much to my annoyance.

– I am coming back as a Bonobo chimp, I joked to recover my position.

Trolley

After the brush off, I wasn't too chuffed with Charlie, I can tell you, especially when she carried on talking about her work as if nothing had happened. Her name dropping of minor celebs started to grate after a while so I innocently threw the name of Imogen Bowler-Clous into the equation. I explained the rather bizarre event which had occurred a couple of days before, on the Friday morning. Charlie laughed at Imogen's misfortune

then dismissed her as a Miss Goody Two Shoes, a poor, little rich girl who had, in Charlie's words, gone on to become 'a high class deck chair attendant' which was curious as Charlie had previously had her down as much more ambitious.

At this point, I had thought that our afternoon was to be quarrelsome, unaffectionate and brief as we had been getting on much worse than usual. In fact, much worse than ever before. But then she told me the exciting and disturbing news, which still has me in turmoil every time it pops up and runs across my mind, like the teleprinter on Saturday afternoons – even now, even two days later. And I thought our afternoon could only end in our first full-scale row.

– Oh, hell, I've got something I meant to mention to you, she started suddenly, innocently and enthusiastically. – You'll love this. The other day this woman chatted me up. I'm not kidding. At least, I don't think I am.

Then, she told me this story about how she was in *Chappaquiddick* waiting for some bloke who stood her up when a 'foxy' redhead – Charlie's words – came up to her and started chatting. They drank easily and heavily together, apparently, before going on to another bar, possibly *The Pink Cat* club but Charlie had been too drunk to remember properly. They talked more. Talked of men. And lovers. And sex. The redhead encouraged her to talk of her fantasies. Charlie, all flushed – telling the story to me and at the time – went into it all in depth. Into details. Into her intimate secrets. At one point, I thought she was teasing me with some story lifted from one of the mags she had been thumbing through while I went on my football monologue. After about ten minutes, she began to praise this woman to the hilt, describing her as the only woman she'd ever seen eye to eye with like that, a temptress, a shamen, a white witch. Sick with fear, I tried to stop Charlie's tale but she kept on going.

– She was so open with me, she opened my soul, Charlie gushed. – She peeled me open and burrowed inside. And then she left. But she kissed me before she flew off. Full on the lips.

It had to be Dolores. Of course, I knew that. But I didn't say anything. What could I have said without looking like I was trying to interfere, that I felt jilted and usurped by her – which of course I did? I mean, lesbians are worrying enough as it is. I worry about them. I really do. They're taking over. Once they were inconsequential – bull-dykes, troglodytes and prop-forwards to a woman. But as I sit here in this claustrophobic hotel bedroom, there are more and more *lipstick* lesbians coming out everywhere. Previously only a figment of the pornographer's fevered imagination, they are now made flesh – as if in response to a frenzied, collective *Urge* of men: life imitating art. And I know, if I were a woman, I'd sure as hell be a lesbian. But that doesn't excuse Dolores's behaviour towards Charlie. I mean, what the hell is Dolores playing at? Hitting at my weak spot, my Achilles heal, my blindside as she hits on Charlie? And where will it all stop?

Baclava

A snort or two of coke and we are an eruption of shirts, shoes, boots, trousers and underwear. I don't know how I've turned this one round. Must be the booze, those tequila slammers.

– No, keep them on, I hear myself shout.

I hate penetration. Vaginal penetration, that is. Charlie knows that. Dolores knows that. And they hate it as well. Imagine fuckin for reproduction rather than pleasure. How strange. How weird. How *perverse*. Men who are bad at sex, who have no sex imagination, come with their penises. The *phut* of a premature, damp squib. A squirt of blue flame. The last of the gas. Expended energy. Expelled minerals. But I ache. In my groin. In my chest. In my shoulders. Helpless. I do nothing. I don't have to. I am kissed. I am bitten. I am stroked. I am massaged. Gentle fingers probe my balls and my thighs. Soft hands cup my genitals. And caress. I throb and I fill. My whole body fills. I am so taut, so full I could burst. For two or three seconds, all is numb. All is stopped. Then, I supernova, gushing, flooding her warm, wet, soft, nurturing mouth. And she swallows greedily while I giggle like I'm stoned.

When I have recovered, it's her turn. I kiss her. I peck her. I stroke her. I massage her. I trail my fingers over her body so they barely, barely touch her. Barely touch her like tissue, barely touch her like gossamer. Her face. Her back. Her neck. Her breasts. Her belly. Her thighs. Her pubis. Her clitoris. Some women don't come at all. But that's their fault. For not examining, not probing, not having enough *initiative*. They don't try hard enough. It's uphill sex with them. Uphill football on a ploughed field. With Blodwyn Bowen, with Debi Mitchelin, with Juli Flank it was hiking, climbing. Up a slippery, wet rock-face. With Charlie, I meander, I drift, I roll true. A forty yard ball across the sunny Wembley pitch on Cup Final day. A perfectly weighted wood which traverses the length of a crown green bowls square and gently topples plum beside the jack. I tease her dark, rubber-bullet nipples. I draw them out still further. I gently squeeze her down below. Juices ooze from her, like warm honey from baclava. I descend down her, splashing her with delicate kisses. I blow on her then plunge my tongue through the crust. I flick. I tease. I caress. I nurture. I lick. I eat. I love her hot-button. And she is awash. Ripples turn to tidal waves, drenching me. Overwhelmed, it is her turn to wail for her demon lover. Four or five times before collapsing boneless.

Boozed-up, coked-up, sexed-up memory fog. Snatches, rushes of dialogue. Up West in the metropolis. Somewhere. It's late, very late. I should be tucked up in bed – it's Monday tomorrow. The latest score: 6 Margharitas. 2 Woowoos. 3 Manhattans. 5 *Handjobs*. *Each*. I tell Charlie about Liz Crebbin's autopsy. Tears well up inside. How could he, the whodunit, do *that* to Liz Crebbin? Charlie can't believe it either. I catalogue the details. She won't, can't, hear any more. Then we fight about rape. Just an argument to start. But I'm a libertarian and I don't explain my point well. Then booze-fuelled coke-aggression. It takes three or four seconds for me to realise. She has made to slash me across the face with her fingernails but fortunately only caught

me on the ear. We must be in *The Pussy*. It's the only place that does *Handjobs*. Then I realise why we are here. I want her to point out Dolores. Then there is more pain.

Then I am eating olive, caper and anchovy pizza. Alone in my bedroom. I remember that.

The rest is gone.

8

Sitting up in this damp bed-- it's only taken me about 20 minutes -- I stare at the Death mask, the African tribal mask, the Cubist study in grief which stares back at me from the icy mirror. But that's just the five day-old hangover. My 29 year old face doesn't look too bad, certainly no older than 29. I'm not going bald, my skin is generally holding firm. My eyes betray me, though. The whites are shot through with tiny red strands, like superfine saffron mingled with white rice cooked in a dark stock. Or unfamiliar pink-veined grey marble. But worse are the two old baccy pouches below with their purple-grey lining and the coked-up streaming nose.

When I woke up, I was soaking. I was so wet I thought I'd pissed the bed. But it was the searing heat and my mind playing tricks on me again, reminding me that longevity equals incontinence, impotence, ill-health and simple old age – when mere bodily functions become complicated tasks – and that the alternative is even worse: no consciousness ever again.

It's nine thirty six so there's still time. I go to flick on the telly with the remote control. There is a pause. Then TV pops up, purist morning telly, lurching into my hotel room, almost sharing my bed like the incorrigible drunk it is.

A well-groomed, silver-haired presenter thrusts an erect microphone into the face of an all too willing punter. He seems to have come into my sordid life right on cue:

- *Do you have any particular reason for this view which I'm sure many people will find controversial?*
- *Well, they're always killin their blokes, like when they're 'on', know what I mean?*
- *Well, that's certainly a controversial view, Reg. What do other members of the audience think about...*

Bonding

Monday morning is always a trial after the excesses of the weekend but the one yesterday was a real humdinger. When I turned off the alarm, I decided on the spot that the sick call I put into Wendy on Friday would cover another day. As I lay there trembling like a leaf, too sick, too queasy, too fucked-up to sleep, I tried a reconstruction of the events Charlie and I enjoyed the night before. But my vertical hold was fucked. All that

came back was a mesmerising studioshot, etched on my monitor like I'd left my computer on without the screensaver. It showed Dolores's cruel, dramatic face clamped to Charlie's flushed, puppyish features, like the despicable villain and the innocent virgin in some post-modern, post-feminist, lesbian melodrama. On Friday night, Simon Register told me that a recent survey in *Cosmo* found that 37% of men between the ages of 17 and 25 could not locate the clitoris when shown a picture of a woman. It's no wonder the male of the species is about to hit his sell-by date. That got me paranoid until I began to think about the gaps, the missing scenes, the absence of narrative glue from the previous night's performance so I smoked a tubeful of Dr Dean's cure-all and the day slowed down still further. Then the buzzer went. Uncannily and right on cue, it was Dolores. Speak of the devil...

After a brief exchange of greetings, she tells me she has come round for fun and games. Even though I have a thousand questions to ask her, I know what I have to do. I know the script. I know my role. I climb onto the bed and spread my naked form while Dolores deftly and intricately ties me to each corner, binding me tight with leather straps. I have to do this to 'keep' her. Meanwhile, she stares at me with all the arrogance of the French before bending over my hard-on and pretending to flick the sensitive tip with her tongue. It pulsates, red, angry and comical, like a cartoon thumb struck by a cartoon hammer. I sob again as Dolores swivels round and squats onto my face taking my breath away. She plays hard. She plays dirty. She doesn't take prisoners. You deliver the goods. You don't get a second chance. I know that from the years I spent with her, all voodoo sex, voodoo chemistry, voodoo biology.

Orgasm One - full-throttled but I think she can go higher.

Before I met her, I fantasised like very other bloke about a woman whose body spoke of glossy, high-class wankmags; showed the faith and patience of Job; came at a stroke (or two); and was as equally at ease discussing post-war US fiction as the offside trap or the team of the century. (On the latter, I rather controversially opt for the 1973/4 Ironopolis promotion side over the 1970 Brazilian World Cup winning team).

Orgasm Two - lobbed up and volleyed home at full stretch.

After I had started going out with her at Caledonia University, I thanked god, I blessed allah, I invoked the Greek and Roman deities, I danced to the tunes of Cernunnus and Morrigan, I worshipped Amon and Isis.

Orgasm Three - 0-60 in five.

Someone had looked on me favourably and I as sure as hell wasn't going to miss them out in my thanks – even though her knowledge of the offside trap and the team of the century was a little sketchy.

Orgasm Four - top marks for style, less for the unconventional technique.

But I fluffed it. I don't know how but I did. And I've spent the rest of my life regretting it. Women don't forgive, not women like Dolores. I get special treatment still but I'm not

No. 1 now. I'm not thank god, Jo Payola – I still get it for free – but I don't command primetime anymore.

Orgasm Five - she wept, she cried, it was Swan Lake, it was the death of Ophelia, it was the last farewell of Cleopatra.

I have shuddered under her orgasms, which nearly exhaust me as much as they have her. I've been under the cosh for ten, fifteen minutes, like I was drowning. We used to have day-in, day-out sexual telepathy – perhaps we're still connected, perhaps we're still on the same party line – as she knows it's time to peel herself off me, pulling long strands of sticky juices from my mouth, from my nostrils, from my hair. I can breathe again.

I thought I'd impressed her with my performance, with that performance but she wasn't having any of it. Then, she... Then, she... Look, she did something terrible and told me some awful things which you don't want to hear. It's probably male pride. I mean, Dolores scared me. Really scared me. Anyway, it's nine thirty seven. I've got to stop gassing. I've got to miss the Pomegranate Diet on Richard and Judy and the pruning tips on Anne and Nick. I've got to get to work. I've got an important mission, protecting national security from my desk in the badlands and bandit country on the third floor of Nation House, SW1.

Book 2

‘Rectum Defende’

9

Billions

It's Tuesday. Tuesday 27 September to be precise and I'm standing on an Underground platform, having resolved to give up drink, drugs and Dolores, and to phone Charlie to find out what happened Sunday evening after I blacked out. Even though it's only nine forty one a.m, I realise I'm already fed up to the back teeth with today and that's without speaking to Wendy Probit. I know it's not too late to throw another sickie but, hell, I'm up now. I'm halfway there. I imagine what I'd like to do to Wendy, the most odious human being on the planet, if I could, if our positions somehow got reversed but my reverie is broken by the mechanic mantra of the Underground system, 'Mind' the gap, mind the gap, mind the gap..."

I look up to see the weary tube hiss, sigh and disgorge its half-digested prey. I grab the hand rail above and shoehorn myself into a non-existent gap between the bodies and the bacteria, leaving go only when I know my place is assured. The train jerks off and the bright, intense colours of the Underground map blur like a kaleidoscope, like the stars in a jump into hyperspace as I'm thrown with an outstretched arm flailing into the ample matronly bosom of the mutton-dressed-as-lamb pouting next to me. I smile and apologise. She smiles back.

Earlier today, I told you *she* did something terrible to me yesterday but I still can't bring myself to tell you exactly what. But I can tell you that, when I came round, I thought I had been *dreaming* of her spicy *Fendi*, her fresh and stale menthol cigarettes, her unique, warm, erotic scent on my face so I was calm, almost numb. Then, some strange instinct made me reach out for my genitals. They felt damp so I lifted my hand to my face. It was only then I saw the blood.

After being thrown around for another quarter of an hour or so, I arrive at the station near the Organisation's secret building but I cannot tell you where. As I climb the steps to the outside world, I'm assaulted by the habitual nonsense of the post-industrial society:

**You're only 2 minutes
from...**



Gonad

Black and Blue
(from lovin you)

The new album, out now

Marcie Tarnish

Temptress

Her new blockbuster **Out 5 October**

\

S p e a k S o f t l y
B u t C a r r y a B i g S t i c k

SmeaR

Be there or be a round
peg in a square hole

...a tasty Big Wonga

Outside, I briefly dry-clean myself to ensure I haven't been followed before I make my way to the anonymous office block where we now work. I don't walk into the back of a tailor's shop in the West End. I don't mutter conspiratorially 'the swallow is silent when it migrates but only in the spring' to a besuited but discreet lackey. I don't step through a panel in the wall. I don't climb into a lift without buttons. I don't descend into the bowels of the earth. I do, though, enter an anonymous grey 1950s building which has enough style to frighten the inquisitive but remains unremarkable to the passer-by.

We have only been in Nation House XVI since July 1993, just over a year – the Organisation has to be able to move around at short notice in case its existence is compromised. We moved the last time because the 1960s hairdressers we used on Grosvenor Street was blown after some pink-rinse old dear went in search of the toilet. Somehow, at odds of billions to one, she pressed the correct eight-digit, alphanumeric combination in the lift and finished up in the Department Y – Technical Support section, the closest thing the Organisation has to Q's department in James Bond. Rumour has it she is still on sedatives, even after the *Temazepan* the Organisation gave her (without her knowledge) ran out. Before that, the Organisation was based in the 1960s Sovbloc-style Ministry of Truth, a dirty concrete affair just off the Euston Road. And up till then – going back before my time – it was split between the 1930s BBC-style Ministry of Information at Curzon Street and the black Lubyanka which runs the length of nearby Bolton Street. As office space in Central London has become more expensive, the Organisation has been shoehorned into ever cheaper and smaller accommodation over the years. The current offices are cramped, dirty and either too hot or too cold, even though we've only been here just over a year.

I swipe in and step into the booth to be X-rayed and scanned, before I am allowed to go on my way. 09:57, it prints off. I tear off the print-out and put it in my pocket, just in case of any bureaucratic dispute later on. I'll be leaving at 18:12 today, not a minute later – unless Wendy Probit tackles me around six, in which case I could be ensconced here to gone ten for 'security reasons'.

When we first came to the new building, the newly emulsioned walls gleamed in the July sun like snow as we trudged through the thick carpets to our modern, ice-grey desks in offices which were divided by frosted glass rather than the crumbling, moth-eaten plasterboard of Grosvenor Street. X, it was fairyland compared to what we had grown used to. But no one had budgeted for the up-keep of this new wonder so it soon began to chip and peel and, before long, the carpets became worn and frayed like old tennis

balls. For some inexplicable reason, the walls were then painted standard issue Government green, the pale and sickly hue seen in a hundred Monty Python sketches satirising Whitehall. Surrounded by all this, I grow paler and sicker still, chiefed out by the radiators clanking their monotonous, irregular beat, like death row prisoners banging on their cell bars.

As I get closer to the CP/3 section room, I shudder once again, first at the thought of justifying my absence to Wendy, then at the thought of yesterday. Once I'd seen the blood, I leapt out of bed, put a foot in Sunday night's unfinished pizza, stretched out a hand to steady my balance and electrocuted myself on the barren bulb socket protruding from an old lamp on the bedside table. I then vomited into the bin before finally forcing myself to look down in the same way I have to force myself to watch a last minute Ironopolis penalty. My genitals were still there but retracted and covered with an oily slick of semen. Blood was running down my leg like lubricant down a Castrol can.

I smelt her cigarettes again, the cool menthol. I searched to recognise her but couldn't. Then, I realised she was no longer wearing that dark-red wig. I stared at her short, spiky dark hair. She looked just like she did when I first met her at the Freshers' Fair at Cally, when she stood there in her innocence and her dungarees not far from the Lesbian Action Group stall watching a rugger bugger facetiously trying to book some 'hot lesbian action'." It is strange to think that at that moment – that precise moment, the one before I said: 'Just' ignore them, they're rugger buggers" and she spun round to look at me with those eyes like sin – we felt nothing for each other but indifference. If I'd never have whispered those words, we'd never have spoken and we'd never have had the opportunity to cut each other to the emotional quick as we have done over the last few years. It is better, they say, to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. But *they* never saw Dolores and me at our worst.

Then, just as I realised there were a hundred questions I had to ask her, she looked at her pink translucent Swatch and declared: 'Duty' calls. I'm off. See you in Ronaldo's at eight," before daintily stepping out of my cramped bedroom and clicking shut the front door behind her. I belatedly went to scamper after her, only to realise I was naked, my penis retracted like a snail in its shell, shy and embarrassed. I picked up her red wig and threw it on the floor in frustration. I knew then, I would have to make that date, that evening, last night in fact.

Lacemaker

On the stroke of 10 o'clock, I slump down in my marked area in our small, windowless office and spark up the obsolescent computer which squats on my desk like a prehistoric bird with enormous hunched shoulders and a single, gnarled foot. For some reason, it is

codenamed ONLY CHILD. I exchange tired, murmured good mornings with the grey men and women of C3/P who are either:

- Beaver away copying their urgent intelligence digests off Ceefax (or out of obscure periodicals that the Organisation doesn't know about). Or:
- Reading the latest sports news off Ceefax. Or:
- Reading their morning paper. Or:
- Catching up with their private correspondence. Or:
- Down in the subterranean canteen, enjoying a leisurely breakfast.

As long as they have swiped their ID card in at the main door, the clock is ticking. And you don't actually have to do anything to run the clock down. In fact, doing things is a positive hindrance to your career in the Organisation as something may go, or may be perceived to have gone, wrong and then it's a punishment posting to telephone transcription, supplies management or fixtures and fittings maintenance. In films the hero always needs another 48 hours, chief. In the Organisation, it's:

- Just give me 48 hours to finish this note for file, group leader (before asking for another interminable extension). Or:
- I can't progress this investigation because the target has a dog. Or:
- We can't place this device as the target left a key with his dear old mum in Ironopolis (even though the target is in Acapulco and the target address is in Kent).

I slump down in front of ONLY CHILD in preparation of another weary day and begin to draft, format and encrypt a telex destined for Ironopolis Special Branch. But my eye is caught by the group secretary, PA and clerk, Amy Tuppham. The Organisation frowns in its eugenic way at its officers and secretaries fraternising and many a promising career has ended in the Controller General's office with an admonishment that officers are expected to behave like...well, officers, old chap. But I'm fascinated by her upper working class, West-End-cheap-seats face, a picture of concentration and work. She is Vermeer's Lacemaker or one of Degas' laundry women. Her wet, pink tongue peeps out of the corner of her mouth like a shy, uninitiated clitoris, as she continues to type away. Her efforts are only broken by her attempts to brush the odd, stray strand of long, chestnut brown hair which flops over her face from time to time.

- Damien, hisses a shrill, upper-class Welsh voice, breaking my rapture and not for the first time. – Damien, come into my room...Now, please, not tomorrow.

C-word

Last night, I managed to stay sober enough in Ronaldo's for long enough to start to ask Dolores just some of the questions I needed to put to her. But it was like trying to catch trout or salmon with my bare hands – each time I thought I had her, each time I tickled her under the gills, she just sprang free and was off on another tangent. I asked about

Charlie and she denied all knowledge of it. I asked about the phone call from my flat to the Organisation, or a government department as I called it to her, but she denied that as well. And she claimed not to have any knowledge of Simon Register, either recently or at Cally, even though we all read English there at around the same time. And as the cocktails and wine were sunk, I became less bothered and she became more coquettish, more flirty to the point that I thought I might nip in with a late goal against the run of play – for the second time that day, for the second time, *yesterday*. Yes, this really happened yesterday evening, just twelve short hours ago.

But as the evening wore its weary way on and I became more drunk, more stocious, more inebriated, I felt the million gripes which we've given birth to and nurtured over the years begin to set out their stall between us. So when I called a mutual friend a *cunt*, she picked up me as she used to when we co-habited in South Queensferry.

- Oh, Damien, the C word, she teased. – Why is it that men have to resort to crude slang for the female genitalia when they really want to insult someone?
- And what the fuck happened to you the other night? I growled, hoping to steal in on her blind side, to spring her offside trap, to slip into her penalty area unmarked.

It was only then that I realised, from the torturous sub-text of the strangled conversation which followed, that Dolores either genuinely didn't know – or was putting it about that she didn't know – that Xabel Bontempi, the woman I had seen staggering into the *Ladies* last Thursday night, just after Dolores had gone in, was dead. I hadn't told the police on Friday although I don't know why. I have to confess, she looked genuinely crest-fallen when I informed her, but she always was a dissembler. In fact, I hadn't seen her look like that since I came clean about our debt to the McParlane Brothers. But I still pushed, I still probed, I still examined her with all my interrogative powers learnt from journalism and the Organisation as I knew she could twist and turn men any way she wanted. This time, though, she was content to defend competently and professionally, like the Italian national side, until I just came out with it:

- Dolores, did you kill Xabel Bontempi? I asked, calmly like a concerned parent.
- No!
- What about that knife you had this morning, the one I thought you were going to use on me?
- That was a joke.
- Some joke. I think you know more than you're...
- ARE YOU LISTENING TO A WORD I'M FUCKIN SAYING? She screamed suddenly, all wronged and injured teenager.

I thought she was going to cry so I instinctively went to put an arm around her bony shoulders across the table which squatted between us but she shrugged it off.

- That's fuckin close enough, you rapist, she spat.
- Fuck off, Dolores. You of all people should know better than that.
- You behave like one.

She paused and fixed me with a gaze drawn in dashes in the treacly atmosphere of Ronaldo's, like a cartoon stare, before continuing her assault.

- You're a fuckin man. Of course, you are, she seethed calmer and more incisive.
- I thought you'd given up that sort of student feminist bollocks, I tried to laugh but it came out all hollow. – And anyway, we are talking about the death of a human being here. Dolores, you must have been the last person to see Xabel Bontempi alive.
- Apart from the bastard who murdered her.

And that unfortunately is the last I remember clearly about last night with Dolores. At that point, I think, she flew off into Dean Street leaving me to pick up the tab. I remember fumbling to settle the bill and pursuing her into the street, like the fanny I am around her. I think I persuaded her to talk. I must have done something right or I wouldn't have finished up in bed with her last night. Beyond that, it's all rushes and flashbacks again although, in truth, I'm not sure if made up those conversations I've just recalled -- false memory syndrome -- because I failed to get to grips with the problem at hand -- her. I know I urged her to go to the polis. But my appeal to her sense of sorority and feminist unity, and even self preservation ('It could be you, next') fell on deaf ears. She simply wouldn't go to the polis for reasons that remain unclear but I guess have everything to do with the mysterious ways in which she makes a living. Let's face it, who *does* trust the polis, these days? I also remember one outstanding accusation which, I think, went like this:

- Of course, you know I was in there in the park with, Damien. I saw you there with a woman. Just by the Serpentine.

But I never got to the bottom of it. I was just too pissed.

10

Probity

– Sit down, Damien. I haven't got all day, snaps Wendy my boss, which by her standards is a cautious opening gambit.

Wendy Probit is typical of the Organisation. In her mid-thirties, she has skin the colour of candle wax and the complexion of one which has burned for twenty minutes; her body belongs to a 12 year old boy; her world view to a 12 year old girl. As I walk into her tidy, meticulous, anal office, I imagine her naked: the limp, doughy breasts, the Belsen ribs; the scaly, ostrich legs; the bush as thick and as hairy as a Guardsman's busby. I want to retch but I know I can't because she's watching me.

I try to engage her in small talk but all she wants to know, as usual, is how the operation went with Ironopolis Special Branch. I give some flam but she's quickly on to me.

- What about the ringleader, the OC, O'Donnell?
- He got away but there really was little we could do...
- Between you and I this is really is an extremely unsatisfactory state of affairs, Wendy declares with her serious face, with her only face. – On another subject, I have written and routed through line management a report to the Controller stating that you absconded to Ironopolis to watch a football match. I'm certain in my mind that you'll be in agreement with my assessment that this is a grave dereliction of duty. A blackmark, I think. You'll have a chance to state your case after the Controller has seen the report.
- Wendy, what the hell are you talking about?

Wendy Probit hates the fact that the Organisation insists that everyone below senior grades is expected to address each other by first names. I long to call her Miss Probit rather than the title she would no doubt prefer – *Ms Probit*. She doesn't answer my question. She just sits there, smug and silent.

- What in god's name are you talking about? You've got to tell me, I urge, betraying my fear, the only real fear I have these days: of getting caught, of being found out.
- Blaspheming will get you into trouble and I don't have to do anything, she responds firmly.

Not for the first time, I want to wring her neck. I raise the ugly spectre of the grievance procedure, which usually shuts up Office-careerists like Wendy but she smiles and murmurs sinisterly that I've got a lot to learn about this place. I suspect she is right. My time in the Organisation has taught me that you get nowhere if you complain. Godfrey James, an officer I joined with, told me he had once invoked the grievance procedure for an annual appraisal which claimed that he was 'too enthusiastic'." He tried to use the proper channels of redress until The Board got to hear of his exploits. Its response was even more chilling and Orwellian: 'Godfrey' must learn to curb his independent traits," it arrogantly reported back after a half-baked enquiry. Rumour has it that Godfrey was forced to leave the Organisation after that. As we are forbidden from contacting former members of staff, I haven't seen him since.

- Wendy, I don't have time for this. Either get back to your original complaint about me watching football in Ironopolis or let me get back to my desk.
- Oh no, Damien. No, no, no, she says shaking her head vigorously, the excess grease moving slowly across her skin, like an oil slick, as a result. – You were seen at the match *last Saturday*. And if I remember correctly that means after you had come back from Ironopolis and while you were on sick leave. And you can't have recovered by Saturday as you would have been in on Monday.

I curse inwardly. I curse myself. I curse Charlie Preston. I have to bluff my way out of this – lying to the Organisation is an extremely serious offence, at the best of times. In my case, it could finish up with me going to jail.

- And I have the video to prove it, she declares with self-satisfied efficiency as she finds the video and winds it on to the correct place.

With precision, she points the remote control at the TV and emphatically hits the play button and the video tuts, hisses and moans as it comes to life. The tiny, barely audible click echoes around the sparse, loveless room – there are no photos of children or husband on the desk as Wendy Probit doesn't have any.

- There you are. Just above the line which says '15:12 24.09.94', Wendy proclaims, a child settling a playground argument.

The great strengths of the Organisation are its security, secrecy and its disciplined culture. No one except the CG and his deputy knows its total budget, due to the secrecy which surrounds the work of the intelligence services, even in Whitehall itself. Only the Cabinet Office knows the total budget – or vote, as it is mysteriously called – of the intelligence agencies combined. It does not, however, know the individual vote for each service. Conversely, the individual services know their own vote but do not know the aggregate intelligence vote or that of the other agencies. These circumstances make it very easy for the Organisation to cream off its vote without Whitehall, the government or parliament knowing (although the recent round of cuts has eaten into the Organisation's budget as there is simply less pie to go around).

Similarly, no one knows exactly how many people work here. Officers only know colleagues in their section or those who work on the same operations; if they go to the subsidised canteen, they are obliged to go in certain pre-arranged shifts so their exposure to each other is kept to the minimum. They clock in each morning in a strict rota of fifteen minute slots which vary according to the time of year to minimise the risk of exposure to other officers in the surrounding streets. There are still, even in the mid-1990s, the odd few support staff, mostly older folk, who do not actually know they work in the Organisation but believe themselves to be in a *Spec Ops* unit of naval intelligence (which was once mis-spelt on pay slips as 'navel intelligence').

But, by the time that I joined in the early 1990s, the Organisation had abandoned its policy of touring schools and offering the malleable potential recruits jobs in the Civil Service, only to tell them later they were working in 'security'. Many staff recruited in this way believed they worked for *Securiti 7, Zone 12* or one of the many, pseudo-paramilitary organisations which now offer these services.

The select few Special Branch officers (rank of detective inspector or above, or of 15 years service or more in the Branch), who meet the Organisation officers trusted to liaise, think all these officers are in a super-secret section of MI6. So the Branch officers never mention them to visiting MI5 officers while real MI6 officers consider visiting local Branches beneath them. And Organisation officers attend meetings of Whitehall officials, like the ad hoc CIGs or weekly JIC, under the cover of the National Audit Office or the Treasury checking that the intelligence agencies are spending the public's money with discrimination and wisdom.

Sexual

There in Wendy's office, I study the image on the now still video. It shows a skinny, dark-haired, pale-faced bloke with an unmistakable pointed chin. I am about to plead clemency when I see a flag. A flag. A fucking flag. My job for a fucking flag. The dark figure is standing waving an enormous flag in front of him. It's my brother, Jimmy, and the flag is obscuring me. I wait until the video runs its few minutes before it stops abruptly and turns its hand to the production of electric snow. Only then do I look up at Wendy.

– That's not me, you sill... I stop myself. This is what she wants. – Let me have the remote, I explain calmly and patiently, taking it from Wendy's limp hand.

I rewind the tape and zoom in to Jimmy, my brother, waving his preposterous but now beautiful flag. Wendy's face falls as she realises that the image is clearly someone taller than me. I sense she is desperate as she pouts petulantly and threatens to report me to Department Q that minute, for 'sexual harassment', for invading her personal space.' Department Q is more feared than Department X. The Organisation embraces political correctness more than any other ideology, partly because the head of the Organisation has an English degree and partly because it gives the Organisation a sense of satisfaction

with itself that, outside operational activity, it appears ‘liberal’ to its more gullible staff. Most of these, it pains me to say, are women who are just obeying orders.

Wendy reminds me that Department X can raid my flat whenever it wishes – we are all obliged to sign away our civil rights on joining – but I know all this already. I’m already halfway to the door, my insides churning like a cement mixer, my face as bleak and grey as concrete, when I hear her demand:

– QC/1? QC/1? Yes, I’ve just been harassed. No, in fact, I’ve probably got enough grounds to claim assault. Yes, sexual assault.

I know that by the time that Wendy has written the complaint, I will have had time to talk to her superiors in the Organisation, to get my appeal in before I am accused. The Organisation’s motto is *Regnum Defende*, Defence of the Realm. To its staff, it becomes *Rectum Defende* – politely translated as Watch Your Back.

But security is also the great weakness of the Organisation. Great *OpSy* and *SyCom* sections have evolved from the ranks of the older officers, who should have been sacked long ago, to advise the busy desk officer about the risks inherent in any operation they undertake. Most of this is common sense – ‘Don’t tell members of the public you work for the Organisation’; ‘If you are caught on ops, just deny it. Claim to be a common or garden criminal’; ‘Never carry material which reveals your real identity when operational’. They re-issue endless tomes which have hardly been updated since the Second World War and are at best irrelevant and contradictory, if not actually dangerous. And, of course, each of the *OpSy* and *SyCom* sections needs its own, dedicated support – battalions of secretaries, clerks, electricians and photocopier engineers – for undefined ‘security’ reasons, which are, of course, assessed by *OpSy* and *SyCom*. Officers elsewhere in the Organisation never question any of these assessments as they know that being seen as ‘not one of us’ in the field of security is tantamount to professional suicide in the Organisation.

Of course, the Organisation has many other sections which thrive on disseminating rulebooks, handbooks, guidance pamphlets, regular circulars, bulletins, tomes and volumes to a controlled (and captive) audience. All of these papers notionally go to make up the *Manual of Investigations and Operations*. I say *notionally* because no one has bothered to comprehensively update the original manual held in Department R – ‘the Registry’ or ‘the Bunker’, as it is known to officers – for as long as anyone can remember. Essentially this means you can do what you like – including blackmailing or exposing ‘political renegades’ and assassination, although I am told the latter rarely happens, anymore – as long as you jump through the right bureaucratic hoops. Bureaucracy must not only be done but be seen to be done. And that can sometimes count in favour of the hapless intelligence officer or IO, as we are known.

Crosswords

I stride along the oak-panelled corridor to the AC's office. The door stands resolutely shut even though the Organisation supposedly has an open door management policy. I can't afford to be fobbed off so I ignore the 1980s throwback PA with the large framed glasses and power suit and knock firmly on the AC's oak door before she can intercept me.

– Come! booms a voice inside, like CJ from *Reggie Perrin*. I draw in a deep breath and burst in. – Ah, Mr Dean, what can I do for you? He inquires arching his eyebrows with the air of an adolescent boy whose mam has nearly caught him with a wankmag. I notice *The Times* he has hastily thrown to one side.

The AC is sitting behind a mahogany desk the size of an aerodrome. He is flanked by two paintings, both overwhelmed by their pompous and unnecessary ornate golden frames, which depict HMQ (the Queen to you, me and anyone outside government) and the CG (the Controller General, Richard Blenheim, MA English, Cantab) pompously awaiting his inevitable knighthood for undisclosed services to the crown. The AC belongs to a class and culture that is slowly and very reluctantly losing its grip on many facets of public life – except in the Organisation. He sits ramrod straight in his chair – sporting a parting which splits his head with the cleanness and precision of a laser, not that Colonel Harton-Smith would know what a laser was – and dreams of a time when life was simpler and everyone, including him, knew their place. Surprisingly, the AC has taken a close interest in my career after our first meeting at my final assessment interview for the Organisation. Godfrey James once whispered to me that Harton-Smith had argued for my selection as he saw some of his younger self in me. Not that I could see it.

– So, Mr Dean, what can I do for you? He notices I am eyeing *The Times* which has been carelessly tossed aside. – Coffee break, he explains hastily sensing my curiosity. – My breaks get longer because the crossword takes longer. Anyway enough of this.

He stops and looks at me over his glasses, wonders why he's done it then recovers himself by asking:

– So, out with it, Mr Dean. Why are you here?
– I'm afraid I'm having a bit of a problem with Ms Probit, Colonel.

The Colonel doesn't like to hear the word 'problem'. It evinces to him work and intellectual effort, two drains on his time he clearly resents as he approaches his long awaited retirement tending roses in Gloucestershire. So I explain my predicament, stressing my role in organising and directing operations. I know this line will appeal to the Colonel. The Organisation has two types of old guard: Career Bureaucrat and Old Soldier. Old Soldiers always prefer uncompromising action in the field to tweaking drafts and endless mental masturbation. I tell him about Ironopolis and the operation up there, the results of the operation he has sanctioned and why they weren't quite as full as expected.

– Don't know. Don't know, Mr Dean, he says more irritated than annoyed. – We've spent all that bally money to send you to some god forsaken place and

you come back without O'Donnell, the ring leader. This is going to fuck up our performance indicators with Department H.

Department H is the most feared in the office, even by the management. That's where the office accountants live. I explain the bizarre circumstances of O'Donnell's escape then I explain the even more bizarre allegations made against me by Wendy Probit. I am tempted to appeal to the Colonel's bigotry. I mean he is bound to hate the Welsh as much as me. If Cindy Crawford was Welsh, I'm sure I'd think twice about it. I decide against it and bring my sorry tale to a sudden climax, suspecting that the Colonel is off reliving ancient triumphs on the playing fields of Eton or in the jungles of Borneo.

– Good god, man, whatever reason would you have to be at the Foundry Ground? Is all he can ask after an uneasy two seconds pause between us.

For a second, I almost lose my thread completely, wondering how the hell this old git knows where Ironopolis play. But I recover and tell him it was my brother not me and that if the picture is put through EACS (pronounced 'eeks' and standing for Enlargement, Analysis and Comparison System for photos) it will confirm my story.

– Well, obviously I'll have to hear Miss Probit's side of this rather sorry tale, the Colonel reassures me like the bureaucrat he has become. – In the meantime, I have this for you.

The AC drags open the drawer to his desk which groans in complaint at being violated, at having its privacy invaded, for the first time in an age.

– Ms Probit has called in Department Q. I venture before I lose him.
– Oh Jesus! The bloody stupid bint, the Colonel groans letting his head fall into his hands like his shoulders can no longer stand the strain of managing Wendy Probit.

I watch him think out loud that Department Q will tell her to route her complaint through him and that he can sit on the G1A/C2/G9A/5 while he 'considers' the 'appropriate' course of action. The AC then produces a brown personal file from his desk stamped TOP SECRET ORGAN EYES VARIANT NTK. This meaningless string of words breaks down into:

TOP SECRET: highly damaging to UK national security (and embarrassing to the Organisation) if information is revealed to public.

ORGAN EYES: only the Organisation's members are allowed to see this (not the other intelligence services).

VARIANT: covering material concerning the investigation of an MP.

NTK: Need To Know. Knowledge of operation restricted to key members of Organisation working on the operation.

Flushed with the confidence the old man obviously has in me – investigations into MPs are only given to officers the Organisation trusts in terms of character and ability – I adopt my I-won't-let-you-down face and say simply:

- Thank you, Colonel.
- I want your recommendations and assessment on my desk by close of play Thursday, he smiles. – Two days time. If Miss Probit asks you what you're working on, tell her its NTK.

As I leave the AC's office, I look down at the name on the cover of the manila folder. I unleash a guttural 'Yeeeeees!' – the immediate unself-conscious cheer of the crowd the moment Ironopolis score – only to realise that the harpy PA is looking down her nose at me. I don't care. I recover my composure. I shouldn't tell you this but the subject of personal file PF/312,634/R2 is: Francis Kenneth Elwell, dob: 14.02.46, MP for Wiltshire East – Imogen's bloody godfather.

Things like this just don't happen to me.

Book 3

The need to know

11

After Hangover Tuesday, I decided to jack it all in for a bit and show willing. Given the faith the Colonel and the Organisation had obviously shown me, it seemed like a good idea at the time. So I've spent what, a fortnight, clean? Jesus, no, it's only a week. Is that right? Yes, I went out with Dolores on Monday 26th. Now it's Tuesday 4th October, just after half six. I've just got in from work and all I feel like doing is staring at the intricate ceiling of my converted Georgian flat. Jesus, it's been a long hard seven nights being sober. God, I'm bored.

I flip through the shoddy, discoloured, manila files of my own internal Department R to find when I last enjoyed – if that is the right word – a similar period of sobriety. And eventually I find it. It started with Juli Flank walking out on me because I went to a League cup semi-final instead of her 25th birthday party. Then, after standing in the freezing cold pouring rain at Old Trafford for two and a half hours, I went down with the flu which was doing the rounds at work. That, combined with our sickening last minute defeat and the subsequent bender, sent me to my apparent deathbed for five days. I'd been so worried by the severity of this illness that, after I'd stopped taking the codeine and the *Nightnurse*, I packed it all in for two months. But, Jesus, that was April to June 1992.

Cherokee

That Tuesday morning a week ago, I returned triumphant to the office I share with Amy Tuppham and the other members of C3/P only to find that Wendy was declaring her delight that Pdraig O'Facherty, Seamus O'Facherty's father, had died of a heart attack in custody. Flushed with confidence from my meeting with the Colonel, I pointed out to Wendy that Pdraig was not a terrorist but an unfortunate paddy who had shown the decency and loyalty not to shop his own son and had finished up on remand for his trouble. My outburst was provoked by my own guilt in the affair. While I was happy to see Seamus O'Facherty in prison for blowing up innocent citizens, I resented the fact that the Organisation had seen a good chance to boost home office crimes solved stats. The Organisation's (undeclared) officer in the CPS had urged it to go for a conviction on a technicality under section 18 of POTA and had succeeded in setting a date in the high court. Touchingly, Amy expressed her support for my views but got short shrift from

Wendy for her spiritedness, although I came to Amy's rescue by informing Wendy that I had recruited Amy as my SADO for Operation PANGOLIN.

– Oh really, what's that, then? Wendy asked as cheerfully as she could.

I paused for a second before uttering three letters dreaded by every pushy ambitious bastard in the Organisation dreads.

– N–T–K, just tripped off my tongue.

– NTK?

– Yes. NTK.

– Oh, right. Well, I'd better not say anymore, she declared looking away.

Wendy knew that even a half-hearted enquiry about an NTK case by anyone outside the NTK group was seen as the height of unprofessional behaviour by the Organisation.

On the pretext of discussing the new case, I took Amy out to lunch at *The Admiral Nelson*. She is the only person I trust in the Organisation: I told her when drunk at the Xmas party last year that I smoke dope, a serious offence for an Organisation officer. As far as I am aware she has kept this to herself. So, over plates of expensive Sausage and Mash, I was glad to share with someone I could trust the twists and turns of the strange and bizarre narrative that had unfolded in front of me the previous week – interspersed, of course, with my reflections on the Ironopolis victory v Swindon that Saturday.

Then, after the no-alcohol lunch, a vast tureen of tar black coffee and the inevitable dump, I spent the rest of that day ploughing through the muddy, uphill trudge of ELWELL's file. (I've adopted the Organisation's curious convention of recording targets' surnames in capitals).

The first serial on the PF was as follows – I've taken a copy of it:

CHEROKEE

Transcriber: Chris **Ext:** 396

Date of contents: 17 Mar 1964

Line intercepted: Cambridge University Communist Party

O/G from Charles (pres Charles WHEELER, Secretary) to Cambridge 24941
(subscriber: Kings College, Kings Parade, Cambridge).

Charles asks Francis (nfd) if he has received it. Francis (appears to have hangover) asks what he is supposed to have. Charles says that bloody money 'You the stuff from the (words indistinct)...Remember, Comrade. Do you remember that comrade, last night.' Francis mutters something about a blinder and a ?mint ?bint. Charles disapproves and asks Francis to come round to his (Charles's) place. 'But not the usual one'. Charles asks if Francis understands and Francis moans that (sense lost).

Call ends 1032 am

The next material on the file was MOHICAN, the product from a device which had been installed in a piece of furniture sold to the CP secretary. Dated 18 March 1964, it reported a conversation between WHEELER, Francis SNU (surname unknown) and

Natasha SNU who had a marginal input into a conversation about end of term exams. The officer responsible for the case had recorded on the transcript that he believed that 'exams' were in fact code but he did not know for what. I wondered at the time how the hell a presumed Communist turned into a right wing dry-as-dust defence minister and why more hadn't been made of this in the media -- unless, of course, the gentlemen of the press didn't know.

The following piece on the file was the result of an enquiry with an agent at Kings College who reported there were three men called Francis at Kings: ELWELL, JONES and ST JOHN. I had already jumped to a conclusion. There was no proof as yet on the file that ELWELL was WHEELER's contact: Francis SNU could have been any of them. In fact, the case officer had indicated that JONES was the most likely candidate as he was a scholarship boy from a mining town in South Wales. Jesus X, I thought, same prejudices as ever.

The next few serials were a combination of more CHEROKEE, which concentrated on:

- Comrade Ivan (no further details).
- A reported visit to Vienna by Francis SNU, which the Organisation only learnt about after the occasion.
- Further mentions of Natasha SNU.

These were interspersed with reports from agents in the University to establish ELWELL's particulars, like date of birth, employment history, bank account details; and reports from agents in CUCP (Cambridge University Communist Party). These indicated little other than the fact that Francis ELWELL never attended meetings, went to demos or seemed to be known by the local party executive.

An Assessment Note (AN) then recorded the verdict that there was no proof that Francis ELWELL was the Francis SNU who had come to attention in Operation HATSTAND but recommended that the mobile surveillance unit should cover ELWELL and WHEELER for two weeks. The subsequent surveillance logs recorded that on 4 November 1964 ELWELL and WHEELER had brushed past each other in the mid-morning in the park behind the colleges known as the Backs. As Francis JONES and Francis ST JOHN had not met WHEELER, the case officer and his AC, Colonel Barker-Smythe, had been forced to conclude that ELWELL was their man.

ELWELL, now codenamed FILTHY LUCRE, was followed for the remainder of his time at Cambridge. His phone was tapped (or intercepted as the Organisation insisted on calling it). However, this only established that ELWELL was a gambler, drunkard and womaniser who kept failing his exams but was allowed to stay at Cambridge due to his father's prodigious self-made wealth. One call particularly interested me – again I kept a copy.

CHEROKEE

Transcriber: Sarah **Ext:** 962

Date of contents: 1 December 1967

Line intercepted: FILTHY LUCRE's home telephone, Cambridge 33451

I/C from Gemma ASHINGTON to FILTHY LUCRE (FL)

GA: (sobbing) I've got to sp-speak to you.

FL: What's up, old girl? Fancy a night of fun and (indistinct) ??? games?

GA: I need to speak to you urgently, Francis (fighting back the tears). This really is(too upset to speak)...Francis?

FL: Things can't be that bad, ???ogre ???Oggie. (Sense lost) Off to the Fens for a spot of R&R. That'll cheer you up.

GA: (Hard sobs) I...I...I really need to talk in ... in private. Soon. Please.

FL: Look, I'm rather busy at the moment. Got to go and play rugger this afternoon. Can't we get together at ???Sumpture, Sunday when we can go out in the (sense lost) and play some of those games we enjoy - much. You know how it is when you (words indistinct, could be 'get around' or 'get down').

GA: I'm pregnant, Francis.

(Silence, FL is trying to reply but is only making incoherent sounds)

GA: Francis? Francis?

FL: (regained composure) Does Shoggie? (poss Shuckie) know?

GA: I haven't mentioned, you know, haven't said anything a thing yet.

FL: Is it his? His child, I mean.

GA: It can't be. He was away, you know, away. Countryside, field trip thing, all last month. I've only made love, love with you. You, Francis.

- 2 -

FL: Jesus, you'll have to...you know...I know someone. Don't worry about the cost, my cash'll cover. I'll take care.

GA: What do you mean?

FL: Well, you can't have the bloody kid. Can you, old girl? Can you? It's not possible. You know Shoggie/Shuckie's mad about you, head over and all that.

GA: (now sobbing uncontrollably) You're such a sod. A BLOODY AWFUL SOD. (Sense lost due to tears and shouting) Why did I start all this spectacular nonsense with a rat like you?

FL: What are you going to say to Shuggie?

GA: You tell him.

FL: I think we're being a little (???dastardly or perhaps, dashed something) here, dear Gemma.

GA: Oh so you can remember my name now, you rotten man. (Silence) I want the child.

FL: Look, Gemma, don't do anything bloody stupid. I'll cancel rugger and come round straight away.

Call ends 1204 pm

I could hardly contain my excitement that Tuesday evening as my downtrodden colleagues began to miserably file out back to their wives and family or, more likely, their bedsits and single gas rings. I am scheduled to leave between six and six thirty in the autumn months so I quickly turned the page to sneak a look at the next serial but it was missing. I knew it had been ripped out as two small white circles with holes in, like lifebelts for flies or flat polo mints remained attached to the purple gift tags which bind papers to files in the Organisation. This was unusual even by its standards. Then, of course, a million conspiracy theories lobbied for my attention. Had an officer, in a misguided act of loyalty, ripped it out to protect ELWELL? Was the missing serial about to magically appear on the PF again, making any recommendations I was to put forward look like I was stupid, or worse, abusing Organisation resources for my own ends? Should I report this to JZ/2, Document Security and Audit?

I resolved not to, as I knew any enquiry would put operational activity on hold for months and it was just as likely the serial had simply fallen out. Anyway, the whole sordid scenario intrigued me. Here was ELWELL, a minister who made solemn pronouncements on The Sanctity of the Family and who voted against abortion whenever possible, advocating that his girlfriend, or rather Shuggie's girlfriend, go and see some backstreet butcher. But what if poor old Gemma hadn't gone along with it? ELWELL might not even know that he has an illegitimate kid. I wondered how much the papers pay for this little titbit as I thought about leaking it.

I have since decided against this – the missing serial suggested this might be a trap. Anyway, it would be too obvious it was me and I don't want to abuse my newly won position of trust. But I just can't help wondering where Gemma Ashington is now.

12

X, I haven't even been in half an hour and I'm bored. I should make some dinner but the truth is I'm not really hungry, not munchie-hungry. I suppose I should bring you up to date with my progress with Imogen and the great opportunity I have to really get at ELWELL but I've got no enthusiasm for it at the moment. It's a vicious circle, boredom. I mean, what the fuck do people do on the first Tuesday night in October, especially when it's pissing down outside, if they don't get out of it? Become listless, anti-social and bored? Collapse with terminal *ennui*? I mean, that's all we've got in life – work and getting out of it. Let's face it, not many breweries or distilleries go bust, do they? Similarly, you don't see many poor drug dealers.

Jesus, I'm bored with sobriety. And I know by this time on a Tuesday evening, that I've painted myself into a corner. I can't phone Jason or Simon or Jimmy or Charlie or anyone else who will insist I distort, alter or reduce my consciousness. Jesus, I must remember to phone Charlie sometime – I still haven't spoken to her since that weird night a week ago Sunday. But not now – there's a danger she'll come round and challenge my hard-won sobriety. So what am I left with? Myself. Watching paint dry with my crystal clear, knowing, pain-in-the-arse consciousness. Anymore of this and I'm going to have to get a hobby.

Termination

The one thing I didn't, of course, do that Tuesday night a week ago was phone Imogen, even though I had been putting it off for three days by then. I found all too convenient excuses: how could I phone her up when I was drunk or stoned? How would I fare with a debilitating hangover? What if it was a full moon that night? On the way into work the Wednesday morning, I resolved to phone her by eight that evening or never show my face in polite society again. I often set myself such deadlines, make such pacts with the devil – it's the only way I ever get anything done.

Later that morning, I briefed Amy on my progress with the ELWELL file and showed her the offending serial regarding ELWELL's little misdemeanour at college. She laughed.

– I'll tell you what. I hope to god we can stitch him up good and proper, I confided to her.

We were having our coffee break, which the Organisation decrees we take from 10:45 to 11:00 in a cramped, grubby cubby hole redeemed only by the panorama of Hyde Park below.

- Like a kippa, she replied turning the rusty tap on the large, chrome urn which dispensed a watery brown liquid that went under the rather unconvincing cover story of being coffee.
- Like a kipper, I agreed as Amy looked suddenly distant and disappointed. – Jesus, I’m sorry, I said grovellingly. – I forgot about your abortion.
- OK, OK. I’m awl right naw, she said bravely as she passed me a chipped SWP mug that some long-forgotten agent had claimed as the spoils of war. – I’ve ‘ad a year ta get over it and I’m OK, yeah?

Last year, I went to the clinic with her for a *termination*, as she insisted on calling it, as support because she didn’t want her family or friends to know about it. To her credit, Amy never revealed to me who the father was. On the debit side, however, she blamed herself for forgetting to take her pill, despite my attempts to reassure her that this didn’t make it any of it her fault.

Back in the section room after coffee, I returned to the file. After the abortion episode, ELWELL changed. He became involved with the Cambridge Union, the debating society to you and me, and began to give parties for visiting Conservative politicians; those returning to their *alma mater* – as they no doubt would have called it – and his political contemporaries, Ken Clarke and Michael Howard. In 1969 ELWELL graduated and the Organisation under cover of a polis routine enquiry interviewed him. He denied ever having been to Austria, contrary to the intelligence reports concerning Francis SNU, and was able to ‘prove’ this by showing that his passport had no stamp for Austria or any of the neighbouring countries. He was never directly asked if he had worked for the CP as this would have given away the Organisation’s investigation into him, if – conversely – he had been involved.

The file then revealed that Francis JONES became a Labour politician so it was assumed that he was Francis SNU although he denied having anything to do with the CP when asked by a close friend who had been recruited by the Organisation. The case officer commented in the write up of the debrief that JONES was probably lying to safeguard his future career in politics and that he had the right background to become involved in Moscow Gold, the money that the Organisation suspected the Soviet Union had supplied to the British CP. WHEELER, the secretary of the CUCP, could not be interviewed as, the file recorded, he was killed in a car crash in 1968. The case officer also recorded that it was highly unlikely that ELWELL was Francis SNU from the original intercept.

The file then leapt to 1979. Various newspaper cuttings recorded that ELWELL had been elected the MP for North Nottingham in one of the constituencies which swung to the Conservatives. In 1987, as a rising star PPS, he was selected for the safe seat of Wiltshire East and increased the majority to over 20,000, one of the biggest in the country. Margaret Thatcher made him a junior minister at the DHSS where he wholeheartedly pushed through every reform of the National Health Service. Thatcher’s demise did not

inhibit his climb up the greasy pole and John Major rewarded ELWELL's success at Health with a spell at the Treasury. In 1992 Francis Kenneth ELWELL at the age of 48 made it to the Cabinet as defence minister. The file's record of his progress was punctuated with photocopies of ever lengthening Who's Who entries. ELWELL, I noticed, didn't go to a private school. Like me, he was a grammar school boy. I looked to see the name of his wife: 'married 1972 to Yvonne nee Forbes-Masterton. Children, Anastasia born 1974, Charles born 1976' so it didn't look like poor old Gemma Ashworth, or whatever her name was, got her man.

The file was also punctuated by assessments of the threat he posed to national security each time he climbed the ministerial ladder and gained greater clearance to see the secrets of state. On each occasion, the assessment recorded the rather inconclusive investigation of Francis SNU in the 1960s, drew attention to the *apparent* brush contact with WHEELER in the park in Cambridge and summarised the interview with ELWELL. Each ended with the phrase:

In the absence of any further information, overt or covert, our conclusion at present is that Francis ELWELL does not pose any threat to the security of the UK nor is he likely to damage in any way this country's economic well being.

It is also unlikely that ELWELL knows of the existence of the Organisation and, if he receives information alleging it exists, it is our assessment, given his political beliefs, that he would not act upon it.

The last few serials concerned the Organisation's current interest in ELWELL. RUSH HOUR, described as an informant close to ELWELL, had reported that ELWELL regularly visited a Russian prostitute called Natasha OBLMOV but the agent didn't know where. Abdul Fatah EL HELAWI, a Libyan intelligence officer with a history of involvement in arms smuggling, had also begun to visit the prostitute. The Organisation was to investigate FILTHY LUCRE again for the following reasons:

- a. It was possible that Natasha OBLMOV was the Natasha SNU who had come to attention in Operation HATSTAND, the investigation into Francis SNU who was believed to be a communist agent.
- b. Natasha OBLMOV also had other interesting European and Arab clients. It was possible she was satisfying FL's sexual appetite in return for sensitive information.
- c. FL was known publicly to have business links to Libya and had travelled there many times before diplomatic relations were broken off with Libya in 1984. It was possible he was a contact of EL HELAWI.

FL had been placed under surveillance briefly but this had been inconclusive not least because he had been away from London for most of the operation. The Organisation had a requirement to get another agent, apart from RUSH HOUR, alongside FL to know when to trigger YZ/01.

I had just the person in mind. Imogen Bowler-Clous. I knew then I absolutely had to phone her.

13

7:15 pm. Yes, it's Tuesday evening still, three quarters of an hour after I got in from work. I used to wonder how I filled the dead, empty hours between sessions but now I have to fill the permanent void, to occupy my time for the next five hours or so before I am forced into bed, not because I want to sleep but because I should. Without dope, I just can't make the plunge into the cleansing, heated pool of sleep. It's just like when I was a little kid, standing at the edge of the high diving board. An anti-*Urge* inside stopped me taking that plunge so I'd be left there in limbo, in purgatory. And I'll tell you something else: I can't crap to save my life. Booze and nicotine are the great liberators, the great liquidators. Excesses used to equal hours of untold misery clutching the seat as I exploded, rasped and squirted into the pan time and time again. But now, I'm useless, constipated. I strain gripping the seat, with my vinegar-strokes face, rupturing a hernia in an effort to remove the waste that is building up – and hardening – in my bowels. I have tried and I have tried: oats, branflakes, prunes, dates, walnuts, hazelnuts, raisins, figs, peanuts, bananas and sultanas but none of it has worked. Anymore of this and I'm going to have to poke it out with a pointed stick.

With my bored mind and full bowel, I work my way through backnumbers of *Bloke*, which Simon handed over with wild enthusiasm a week ago Friday. I can't get with this mag though. Too much fashion and raving. So I flick through some footie mags. It's fuckin appalling: just because we're in division one we get fuck-all coverage. I blame the Premier League. I think about the game this Saturday away to Leicester that me and Jimmy, my brother, are going to. (Did I tell you we lost 3-1 away last Saturday? Less said, the better). I always start to get excited about games I'm going to a couple of days beforehand. I'm like a fuckin kid when it comes to footie.

After half an hour, I'm bored with that so I spark up my steam-powered computer and choose the chess program. I am crap at chess. I play the computer on level one and it still beats me like an irritating prodigy. On this occasion, I stare at the board trying to work out the possibilities seven moves ahead for each piece. My brain aches while my computer hums and burbles away to itself as if its mind is on other things. So I get fed up and spark up the TV – it's eight o'clock, time for *Tobacco Road*, the BBC's twice soon to be thrice weekly soap opera. But I grow exasperated as it trundles past slowly and irrelevantly with its narrative-coherent reality and its soap-scrubbed morality. The Kemp brothers are up to their usual loveable-villain, salt-of-the-earth tricks:

Scene One in car lot:

- ‘E’s dun our sis wrong, innie, Trev?
- Yeah, bruv. We gotta do ‘im over, antwe?

Scene Two in George and Dragon:

- Did ‘im over good an propa, dinwe, Wayne?
- Yeah, sorted Trev.
- Fancy gahwin ap West?

I recall for a second the real Kemp brothers that night in the park and make a mental note to check the police computer for any updates on the investigation into their murders. I looked at HOLMES last Friday afternoon but – would you believe it? – the Met still hadn’t entered details of the crime or opened an investigative file on it. I ask you, is it any wonder that clear-up rates are so low? Shuddering at the memory of my near-demise, I hop – or ‘surf’ in the credible argot – across the twenty four stations I now receive in this age of technological satellite marvel. ‘You’ll never say there’s nothing on the box again,’ they said whe they launched the new service, yet my surf through the stations produces nothing watchable.. I only got it when live footie went to Sky in 1992 but Ironopolis were relegated at the end of the 92/93 season. I’ve only kept it in the vain hope that we will return to the Premier League. Even Eurosport where I can watch every goal scored each week in the continent of Europe (and, occasionally, highlights of the Brazilian leagues, if I’m really at a loose end) disappoints tonight, opting to show Danish Tow Truck Challenge followed by Drag Racing from Tallahassee instead.

As I become bored again, my mind slips back to *Tobacco Road* and last Thursday’s episode. Not because it was good or interesting but because I finally summoned up the courage to phone Imogen straight after it.

Shirty

- Oh come on, I joshed from my end of the phone line. – It can’t be every day that someone throws their breakfast over you in the street. Well, it doesn’t happen often in my life but you may have different experiences.

I paused. Why the fuck is real life always like this? I had put my proposal to the Colonel earlier that Thursday without even being sure that Imogen would agree to speak to me again, never mind provide intelligence on Francis ELWELL. I had put myself in an invidious position by cowering out of phoning Imogen the previous evening but still informing the Colonel I had quickly identified a potential source, to impress him. As the *Tobacco Road* theme tune trundled along, I strode over to the phone only to realise that Imogen’s number wasn’t where I thought I’d left it. I’d then spent one and a half temple-bursting hours of frustration throwing open drawers, upending furniture and turning out my pockets in a Herculean effort to find that elusive piece of paper with those seven important digits on. (I finally found it on the pin board among the leaflets from pizza,

curry and chinky carry outs). On top of all that, it appeared at that moment that Imogen was getting all shirty. *Bloody stuck-up cow.*

- This is 730 6229. Isn't it? I asked after the long pause.
- Yes, it is. And this is Jemima, Jemima Bowler-Clous, came the rich, assured, smoky voice. – To whom do you wish to speak?

The voice spoke of long ago appearances as a debutante; lunches at Claridges; glamour at the Ritz; charity balls in aid of the less fortunate; and strong, classy cigarettes – Rothman's or Dunhill. Mid to late forties, I decided there and then. I dropped the laddish slight Estuary tones and made to adopt the cultivated tones I used with the Men in Grey of Whitehall.

- Imogen, I replied. But it came out as a squeak. I cleared my throat before uttering the first thing that came into my head, which was: – I'm looking for my shirt.
- Well, if she can't contact you tonight, Jemima rejoined as I heard her lighting a cigarette, – you may have to wait for a while as I know she's off on a jaunt to Bermuda tomorrow for a week and a bit. Combined work and pleasure, the lucky thing.

Stooge

When the phone went again at around 11:30, I pounced on it, like it was the last cocaine on earth. Given my luck, I'd thought at the time, Imogen wouldn't get my message then she'd be off to sun herself on some alabaster beach with Capt Studly-Buffered, the square-jawed, chiselled-featured pilot who'd no doubt charm his way into her panties. And I wouldn't get another look in. But the excited ring of the phone indicated that, for once, the run of the ball was going the way of the young Dean lad. Or that's how it seemed until I heard the familiar voice and fell back into the nadir of despair. Premature expectation, once again.

- You're not gonna believe this, the voice declared all pally. – Fuckin own goal.

It was Simon Register.

- What fuckin own goal have you scored? I asked, feigning interest and resisting *The Urge* to instruct him to get off the line as I was expecting a very important phone call.

It was only then I remembered that I had forgotten. It had slipped my mind to phone Simon after that night up West the other week. Jason had remembered in the midst of that mind fog, that mind fuck that Simon had got off with a redhead who hung around with the *beau monde* in London.

- There I was in a one on one with the keeper, continued Simon ignoring my rock-solid defensive apathy. – I slipped the ball under his legs, ran round him and converted the chance.

- Did you force the ball over the line? I probed, foraying into his midfield.
- Well, not exactly...he backtracked.
- You're not gonna win the golden boot award, are you, mate? I declared, running at his scattered defence.
- Look, it was far better than the missionary position with a Ms Goody Twoshoes, right? He parried. – Anyway getting back to the point, you're not gonna to believe this but I've lost her telephone number.
- Let me guess. I paused, drawing breath for the setpiece I'd been rehearsing since that Friday night. – She had straight red hair and angry eyebrows.
- Yeah...
- She picked you up in some club, probably in Soho
- Yeah.
- You met her when you were pissed.
- Yeah.
- You went back to your place.
- Yeah. And I...
- Fucked her up the arse.
- ...up the arse...He trailed off, winded by my verbal magic. *Dean, 1-0. Register was nowhere.*
- Hang on, Deano. How the fuck do you know all this?

At that moment, I felt like the striker who has rushed to his fans, kissing his shirt in celebration of his spectacular goal only to find that the linesman's flag is parallel to the ground, pointing to the last defender. Suddenly back in defence with Simon on the counter, I used that perennial anti-interrogation technique, beloved of politicians and suspicious partners: I answered a question with a question:

- Why the fuck did you call me 'Deano'?
- Jason told me to. He reckoned it would freak you out. And I have to say, it worked, you paranoid twat.

Simon paused. He drew breath at the other end of the phone.

- I'm shagging this bird, you know. Her name is Dolores, I said quickly.

Like Norman Hunter, I was determined to get my retaliation in first.

- Ah, that's where you're wrong, he popped back. – She was called Delilah.
- It's the same fuckin bird, you daft twat. She's always changing her name. And you didn't lose her telephone number. She never gave you it.

Silence has its own sound and it tweeted and wahwahed in my ears. Simon then muttered a mumbled valedictory and the tweets and wahwahs metamorphosed into the angry buzz of a receiver deprived simultaneously of a connection and its cradle. He was gone. I'd meant to tell him that I'd met a Crystal Palace fan the Sunday before in *Luz* in Soho and we'd got chatting. I'd told the fan I knew another Crystal Palace fan and he asked who, in that wouldn't-it-be-funny-if, small-world kind of way.

- Simon Register, I'd said.

– *The Simon Register?* He'd replied.

I'd silently nodded wondering what the world was coming to now we had *The Simon Register*.

– *He's the bloke on the South London Press, enthused the fan. – I always read his stuff. Does occasional bits for Metropolis Radio now as well.*

This fan – Dave, I think his name was. Came from Croydon – seemed to have archived the entire Register bibliography of match reports, absorbed every one of Simon's articles and couldn't understand why Simon wasn't more famous. I kicked myself for not telling Simon – he would have been dead chuffed.

But I forgot.

Missionary

Let me tell you about Simon Register. He's a football writer, you know. And a very good one too. In fact, he is so good that he can't prostitute his trade on a Fleet Street which prefers *racing certainties*; endless line-ups of clichés; and phrases which have long fallen out of the general vernacular or have been rendered harmlessly ironic by the new wave of alternative comedians. The following are Simon's favourites:

The young lad was a bit special.

The big lad made the No 1 shirt his own.

Spurs will have to overcome another in a long line of reverses.

And once again the manager's job is on the line.

The local lad made good is tipped for the top.

At the end of the day:

- a. *football was the winner.*
- b. *Man U were well worth the three points;*
- c. *it was a hard fought contest but Arsenal ran out eventual winners (Eventual? Eventual? As opposed to the winners at half time, the winners on 76 minutes?);*
- d. *it gets dark, Brian.*

Simon and his sub-editor are at the moment locked in a battle to the death over the poetic licence Simon is allowed in his copy although the argument really centres on just how much sexual imagery Simon can slip undetected into his detailed match reports. After the sub ripped the heart out of a particularly vivid piece describing an away victory at Leeds, last month, Simon has taken to inserting obscure sexual innuendo. A goal celebration by Crystal Palace – the team Simon covers and *supports* – had the players 'bouncing around the corner flag, like a pearl necklace on a debutante's chest' and one game was so closely fought it was 'like a dead heat in a Zeppelin race'. Simon even worked the phrase 'moist gusset' into a report but how he did it eludes me now.

During the half-time interval one cold, black and white Saturday afternoon at the Foundry Ground last season, against Bolton in November I think it was, Simon argued that his role of football reporter was similar to that of a vicar. As usual, in his desire to impress, Simon actually undersold himself. Simon Register was more a war correspondent, a missionary, a clairvoyant than a vicar. Let's put it like this. You believe this guy, god, created the universe and the myriad complexity within it: the unfathomability of the human brain, the magic of sex and life itself, the diversity of insects, the shifting balance of evolution, rocket science, supernovas, nuclear physics, blackholes, voodoo, which are all quite apart from the concept of omnipotence. And the best vicars can do in celebration is the church service: all that Latin, Hebrew and 17th century English. All that repression. All that boredom.

Let's face it, vicars do a crap job.

When the phone went at half twelve that night, I initially assumed it would be Jimmy or a mate ready to bellow an incoherent, drunken rant into my ear via the miracle of telephony so I got my retaliation in first again. I adopted my sternest, most disapproving voice, pouring thick, liquid nitrogen down the line and over my caller's warm enthusiastic hello which, I thought at the time, was fuelled by booze rather than bonhomie. But it was Imogen, who for reasons best known to herself, rambled on for the next ten minutes about her work tending to lecherous old men and their lizard-skinned wives, who simply could not stand attractive young women near their husbands. When she stopped gushing I asked with whom she was to spend the holiday part of her trip. I felt deeply sick, dead tired and very alone when she said:

– It'll be just Ralph and I.

It was pronounced, by the way, as 'Raif', like waif, not Ralph, like Hughie. But she immediately dismissed him as just some childhood friend, as if she really didn't want me *to get the wrong idea*. I wondered if old Raif saw it the same way or whether he was, as I spoke, scrubbing his boxers and his balls in preparation for ten days shagging the tits off the delightful Imogen.

– Er, well, I just wondered if like...I began to ask, emboldened by Imogen's dismissal of him, – when you get back, of course, if you wouldn't mind going to the National with me. The gallery not the horse race, I added as unnecessary clarification. – Or perhaps dinner at Boisdale. It's in Belgravia, you know.

– You're not really like a policeman, are you? She declared while I, thinking on my feet to avoid this obvious brush off, played my Joker:

– That's because I'm not. I really work for the Secret Service, I blurted. This security breach somehow seemed more serious, once the words had left my mouth.

– Damien, I don't mind your being a policeman, you know, she chided like I was making it up to impress her.

Then, she invited me to the local hunt's annual ball at Francis Elwell's of all places.

- It's on Saturday 15 October, she informed me after I'd squeaked a non-descript affirmative to her. – Black tie, of course. But I expect if you work for the Secret Service, you'll wear one of those at least three times a week. Like James Bond or Napoleon Solo.
- Contrary to popular belief we do not spend our time swanning around casinos in dress suits, I intoned with mock-seriousness. – But I do have one, I lied.

On reflection, I decided it didn't do any harm to allow Imogen to know where I really worked. I have never entirely trusted the Organisation and I figure the more people who know I work there, the more chance I have of being safe if it ever PNG's me, rules me persona non grata. Anyway, I might have to recruit her to report on ELWELL soon and her *indoctrination* will go some way to preparing her for that difficult pitch.

And I'm getting a chance to study the enemy at close quarters with perfect cover – that's ELWELL, by the way, not Imogen.

Drain

Then, on the Friday of that week, the last day of September, my life took a real turn for the worse. I was in the middle of directing the round-the-clock surveillance on FILTHY LUCRE via a Comms console on my desk when the hairs on my neck stood to attention like a thousand delicate acupuncture needles gently but rapidly jabbing the length of my spine. I shivered. I knew it was Wendy before she spoke. I am not psychic. I just smelt her French-drain breath.

- Wendy, look I'm busy directing a NTK operation, I declared.

I knew what she wanted.

- Sorry to disturb your extensive and I'm sure worthwhile labours, Damien, she hissed, a quiet menace in her tone. – But I think it has lapsed from your mind to complete and render to me the necessary paperwork in an X41ZJ/F2C/7 form.
- What's one of those, Wendy? I asked, disingenuously, half looking up at her, half-ignoring her.
- To cover your pecuniary expenditure while in Ironopolis for the last operation of which you were responsible for conducting the course, she explained patiently, looming just that little bit further over me.
- Oh yeah I'll get it done, I shrugged.
- It must be presented to me in triplicate by the 18th or *reluctantly* I'll have to report the matter at hand to Department H. I'll confirm this conversation in a loose minute, as a formal reminder.

Rectum Defende. I had receipts to account for maybe a third of my expenditure and with a bit of imagination I could take the claim towards half the value of the money I had been advanced. But there was a limit to the taxi drivers who had run out of receipts and

pub landlords unable to provide chits. I had to pay back about £350 even after that imaginative accounting. October's pay had gone towards the previous month's debts and it was still two weeks to pay day. I had long since breached all credit limits and even the 10,000% APR loan sharks had declared me a bad debtor. I owned nothing. Absolutely nothing – apart from an extensive collection of mags and Ironopolis videos (which I played on my rented video and TV) – not a single gadget, not a single item of designer clothing, not even a stereo. Even *Cutthroat's*, the new nation-wide pawnbrokers which are now on every street corner outside the home counties, had me on some sort of blacklist (for trying to flog them my last rented telly). I couldn't pay. I simply couldn't pay. Even if I sacrificed the £60 I had borrowed from Jason for a night out with Imogen, I was barassic.

Too bad, Ralph mate. Roll on the ball, Imogen and ELWELL. At least, I've got something to look forward to, although it's freaking me out that Simon Register, my best friend, is going out with Dolores, my ex-girlfriend, and Jason Conscript, who I go all the way back with, has suddenly taken to calling me 'Deano' to inject a little neat paranoia into my life (which I need like a dose of paraquat). And Mad Wendy, my boss, is breathing her stinking breath down the back of my neck for me to pay back money I haven't got and have no way of getting. No wonder Friday 14th, the date of Imogen's projected return, has taken on the allure of Xmas and birthday, rolled into one orgy of presents to a five year old. I don't know whether it's the boredom or what but I have already assessed – or is it just speculation? – that I have fallen hopelessly in love with Imogen, even though I haven't even kissed her yet. This makes the long, *unspoiled* hours of straight consciousness drag even more, like slowly solidifying treacle being forced through a drinking straw.

You would think that the ELWELL case might provide some welcome respite from this tedium but the current surveillance op has established nothing. He appears to lead the life of a regular MP and Minister, although he does seem to go to his private dentist's just off Harley Street a lot and we are checking this out at the moment. But as yet we have seen nothing illegal or threatening to national security. I even fear the Colonel might suspend the surveillance in Op PANGOLIN until the agent runner can meet RUSH HOUR again. I'm hoping to take over the running of RUSH HOUR as part of this case, although the signs from G6/R are not encouraging. They're jealously guarding this one for themselves. He must have extraordinary access to government, whoever he is, this RUSH HOUR.

I glance at the clock and realise it is 01:34 am. It's time to drag myself to my bed to rotate, contort and choke myself on the damp bedding (but at least I'm now spared the scorching nylon sheets I endured as a kid). The next week and a half until Imogen returns is going to be hell.

14

Return

I expected her not to turn up or, if she did, it would only be to announce that she had made the most awful mistake. There I was yesterday evening, Friday 14 October, wedged into the prolapsed, herniaed settee, trying to get comfortable awaiting the return of the prodigal Imogen. I had got in from work then spent the next couple of hours scrubbing, scouring and brillpadding myself, particularly under my helmet. I had to be scrupulously clean – in every way. It was three weeks since that episode in the park and two and a half weeks since I had last seen Dolores, but I didn't care about her. I was now willing my relationship with Imogen to happen, not least because it might give the ELWELL investigation the boost it needed.

The rhythmic hoot of a car horn – da-da-dider-der – butted into my affirmations and resolutions so I rose gingerly to look out of the bay window and into the marigold yellow and Prussian-blue night of the city. There she was. There was the new bird of my dreams. There was Imogen at the wheel of a racing green 1960s MG, her burnished blond hair fixed like sculpted gold yet fluid, the hallucination of a gilded waterfall, in the silica-dry wind of the city. She had come back. She waved to me excitedly and I beamed back to her, like something out of a 1960s British film.

A couple of seconds later, I threw the door open and we fell into each other's arms. We stared into each other's eyes and before we knew it we were enjoying our first kiss, then we enjoyed our first fuck, or we would have done but I couldn't get a proper hard-on – my usual embarrassing curse – so I had to wank. Imogen didn't mind too much as I gave her a slow licking which made her come three times, I think. (It is so difficult to ask at this stage especially with someone of her class. How can you know?). As we lay there, me missing my post-coital cigarette, I told her that I had got her postcard, had missed her and, even though I didn't really know her, I felt as if I had been going out with her for a long time.

I threw my overnight bag into the back of her battered MG and jumped in. Imogen put her foot down flat on the gas and didn't let up until we arrived at Clous Hall. She thought I spent the journey staring at her because I was besotted – the truth was I was so scared I couldn't look at the road. It was dark when we shot into the long winding drive so I didn't have a chance to see the grounds of the pile where she lived. That night, I met her father,

Hugh, and her mother, Jemima – the archetypal older woman, all elegance and restrained ageing. Both of them looked far more pleased to see me than they should have been.

Mind you, you should have seen the look on their faces when I said that I came from Ironopolis. Where? Where? I could hear them saying in their heads. And giving up smoking proved to be hell, especially with Jemima chainsmoking Dunhill and Imogen's father puffing away on his briar. But this was made up for by the sex. Around 11 o'clock Imogen started making very obvious stretching tired noises. With a casual 'Coming to bed?' we took our leave of her parents and were up the grand mahogany staircase in seconds. Before I knew it, I'd slipped the tongue in and we were rolling around her enormous bed kissing deeply and laughing.

– You make me laugh, she confided.

I wasn't sure whether this was a compliment or not. But I was sure I was desperate for sex. Anxious to convince her my performance earlier in the evening was not a reflection on her attractiveness, I had her expensive clothes off in minutes and was kneeling over her with my wang sticking out like a taut high diving board. With a twist and a tumble, I dived into her neck and started splashing her with soft then harder kisses, which made her gasp and whimper in the way women do. This was a great performance. Masterful. I brought her to orgasm after orgasm. At one point she bit the pillow to stop herself from screaming so loud she would have disturbed her parents. Finally, I allowed myself to pump hard and rhythmically into her at speed bellowing my orgasm before rolling over and resisting the lead shutters of my eyelids long enough to sustain a few words of pillow talk. She then decided that she needed 'her beauty sleep'."

Jesus, if she needed her beauty sleep, what the hell did I need? Five years in a coma?

Nature

This morning, I rose at eight (this is what happens to your sleeping habits when you renounce booze and dope). Imogen had complained of jet lag and needed more sleep before the ball so I had decided to explore the local area thinking that no one would be up at that time on a Saturday morning.

– And where do you think you're off to? came a joshing voice which echoed around the vast, oak-panelled vestibule adorned with the stuffed carcasses of long dead animals and stuffed portraits of long dead relatives.

I swivelled round to see Imogen's mother at the rustic breakfast table in the cavernous kitchen. Breakfast? I couldn't face polite conversation over the scrambled eggs and devilled kidneys which I could smell cooking.

– I'm just off for a walk to build up an appetite for it, I chimed back and she smiled indulgently and let me go.

The house looked even more like a country hotel, the setting for an Agatha Christie or the *Cluedo* mansion from the outside than it did within. I strode down the sweeping drive

as the cold, cold morning air stung my nostrils, stung my eyeballs. The lemon yellow sun beamed its bleached rays through the vermilion, limes, ochres and siennas (burnt and raw) and filled me with optimism. I breathed in hard. The cold air scraped my lungs like a spatula removing flaking paint and I coughed gently and easily – a natural cough not the hacking of the city – which brought up a healthy myriad of phlegm, like a mustard yellow oyster flecked with crimson. I knew I could go and buy cigarettes – even country villages have shops selling tobacco – but it somehow seemed inappropriate. I still couldn't shit though.

The rest of today's daylight hours were spent trying to describe this apparent Elysian conversion to countrylife to Imogen and her parents who, I'm sure, thought I had launched on some form of charm offensive to ingratiate myself with them – modern forelock tugging if you like. I managed to slip away to the portable TV in Imogen's room, while she was showering, for the crux of my weekend, 4:45 and the football results. I hadn't seen any progress during my babbling to Imogen's parents so this was going to be either a swift cruel blow or an immediate surge of pleasure. The videoprinter began to its insistent run. 'Ironopolis 3...' – I cheered, it had to be at least a draw – 'Charlton...' – I drew breath – '...0'. I yelled a guttural 'Yeeesss' and jumped around the room, on the bed, shaking my clenched fist out of the nearby window. I had only just calmed down when Imogen came in claiming she'd heard a wail of pain. I shrugged and made my way to the bathroom, only slightly embarrassed at being detected.

Needless to say, as the hour came upon us and we gathered in the great main hall of Clous Hall, I was by far the worst dressed. Imogen's brothers all wore heavy wool dress suits – Imogen told me not to call them that although I still don't know why – while Hugh wore old-fashioned tails that looked as though they had been passed down from his great-great-great-great grandfather, who had had, Hugh later told me, a hand in setting up the Indian Civil Service. Imogen glided down the main staircase sodden with jewellery and wrapped like an expensive present in a classy, sumptuous black velvet, full length ball gown which was coarse against her tanned, unblemished moleskin. Jemima, skinnier, less busty and more leathery but still stunning breezed in after Imogen, who very definitely took after her mother in looks but not in build. On the other hand I was resplendent in my polyester M&S dress suit, which would have been a snip at £150 (if I hadn't had to shoplift it).

In the chauffeur-driven car, we made small talk about the Ministry of Defence. Since I had told Imogen I worked for the Organisation (although I'm sure she didn't believe me) I had convinced her that I should go with MoD cover in front of her family.

- What's Elwell like these days? Asked Imogen's father.
- Well, us underlings don't get to see the Minister much, you'll appreciate. How well do you know him?
- Knew him very well at Cambridge as a matter of fact. We were drinking partners for most of our undergraduate years. He could knock the old poison

back like no one else I knew. Then he just stopped. Just like that, didn't he, dear?

- Yes. He changed from wild card to swot just like that, replied Jemima underwhelmed by the conversation yet maintaining a stately air as the chauffeur threw the limo around yet another dark, blind hairpin bend.
- Bit of a ladies' man as well from what I can recall, Sir Hugh continued oblivious to his wife's apathy.

In the intense gloom of the country, I wondered who else might know about Elwell's bastard child.

- Yes, Hugh. Just like you would no doubt love to have been.
- I had you, my dear Jemima. Who could want anyone else?
- Do you still see the Minister? I interrupted.
- Occasionally. You'll understand he's a busy man nowadays. Imogen still sees him though, don't you?
- Yes he takes his role seriously as godfather, she chipped in quietly but confidently, – he's always showering me with expensive presents.

I could hardly hold myself back. What was he like? Did he support the Communist Party? Does he shag tarts? What happened to that child he had? Can you introduce me? I wanted to ask but knew I had to wait my time.

Ball

We arrive at Elwell Towers at around 8:30. The entrance hall reverberates with the whispered murmur of semi-interested conversation that promises, that longs for, something, anything to happen which just has to be more exciting than *this* – standing around gassing and sizing up the opposition. Contrast this random assembly with a football crowd just before kick off. That is anticipation which hovers, which contorts, which makes men sick with hope, and buoyant despite the possible – no, probable -- impending despair. Or perhaps it's just me. Perhaps I am interested in nothing – except football – until I'm out of my head. I mean, I am the one always anticipating. But anticipating what, exactly? At the moment, my mind is whizzing round and round. Meanwhile, the centrifugal force seems determined to throw ideas out through my mouth, almost at random. How the hell am I going cope with this sobriety among company for a whole evening without putting a well-shod foot wrong?

I am introduced to a thousand space cadets in an hour. Square-jawed, coathanger-shouldered, young men. Ruddy middle aged country types. Slim, classy birds. Leathery older women. Strapping, simple lasses. Some belong to the city, some to the country. But they have two vital traits in common: unswerving self-belief and quietly conspicuous wealth. Jesus, these people scare me. I find myself dropping into broad Ironopolis or the eastern home counties estuary to show I'm not aping them. And don't worry, I can spot the climbers, the *arrivistes*, those watching their 'betters' for fear of violating ceremony,

fear of using the wrong knife, wearing the wrong style of collar or cuffs. I know all that (although I choose to ignore it at dinner and use the same fork with each course). The food, I'd prefer not to discuss – a fresh fruit ensemble (bits of underripe melon with raspberries and strawberries and a cape gooseberry); Mediterranean lamb (overcooked lamb with a vinegary 'mint' sauce); and mousse au chocolat (or Angel Delight, as it is more commonly known).

After the meal I talk to an attractive but xylophone-thin blonde who asked for some special vegan concoction rather than the English 'fayre' on offer. She is sober too, but dull. I hope deeply I am not dull even when sober. At dinner – at least, they didn't call it *supper* – I thought my wit was well-received until I realised the upper class twits laughed at absolutely anything. And I mean it, anything:

- My father works in the city.
- So does mine.

Then endless peals of belly laughs. Politeness without intoxication is wearing me down.

I try the dance floor with Imogen – an unusual place to find me at the best of times, particularly without amphetamines – but I soon leave for that very reason. I make my way to the first floor terrace. The spotlights throw *chiaroscuro* shadows across its expanse picking out in brightness the edges of faces and plants. An individual about my age huddles himself up, in the manner of outdoor smokers, and futilely tries to light a Black Sobranie. I step up to him, produce my silver Zippo – the only present I have ever received from Dolores – spark it up and smugly declare:

- Try this. If you don't get a light, I don't get to ponce a cigarette off you.
- Thank you old chap, he says with his face still shadowed.

I recognise his voice before I catch a glimpse of his face.

- Syd, I don't believe it. Syd Preston, I declare, stepping back as if the shock of this is making me recoil.
- Deano, you old git. How are you? Long time no see, he replies with open faced warmth.

Sometimes I see a resemblance between him and his sister Charlie: I think it's the straight, retrousse nose or maybe it's the almost Persian, heavy-lidded almond eyes. Either way, it chiefs me out, I can tell you.

- You too, Syd.
- Oh by the way less of the Syd now. It's Alexander, he corrects as he bends down from his six feet three inches off the floor to light his Sobranie.

He offers me one, without speaking, shaking the packet almost in impatience, and I take it.

- Yeah, right. What the hell are you doing here? I ask as I light the black and gold stick and fill my lungs with its harsh, aromatic smoke.

Liquid pleasure pumps, surges, courses through my veins, knocking the clear red corpuscles of oxygen aside, like fleeing yobs knocking over old ladies in a shopping

arcade. My limbs melt. My heart beats so fast I think I've flatlined. My head whizzes. I'm back on 133 Mz. No longer leaden, I beam at Syd as I take another heavy drag. *X, this is only nicotine.*

- I'm sorry, Syd, I've got to go and have a shit, I squeeze out as I waddle away touching cloth.
- Your comment on present company, no doubt, he shouts after me, exhaling ostentatiously but coolly through his nose as if unconcerned that his brain might be on fire.
- Noooo but it would be a tragedy if I shat myself, I wail back as I frantically search for the nearest lavatory, as they no doubt would have called it here *chez Elwell*.

Rag

I first met Syd through *The Rag* at Cally at the beginning of second year. I had been roped into doing some Arts reviews for the Fresher's Week edition by the then arts editor (who dropped out of college shortly afterwards for failing his re-sits). Syd was in second year as well but he had already risen to Editor – in a bloodless coup, it was rumoured, centring on financial irregularities, or good old plain theft, on the part of the previous editor which Syd very nobly threatened to bring to the relevant authorities. I was a newspaper rookie, after having spent my entire first year drunk. The inaugural meeting that year as ever was full of freshers who stretched their arms high into the air to volunteer for the cinema, theatre, book and band reviews and then just chatted away to each other inanely, garrulously and sententiously (Where do you come from? What are doing? What did you get in your A-levels? Are you into *2000AD*?) while the rest of us discussed where *The Rag* was going.

- Are you any relation to Syd Preston, the Fulchester trainer and physio? I asked at one point with an entirely straight face.
- No, but I am a fan of *Viz*, he quickly replied. – So Mr Dean do you plan to make the arts editor position your own?
- Eh, Syd, what d'you get in yer A-levels? Asked one cheeky fresher.
- You can shove your head up your arse, Syd replied to him, offhand before signing us up to his goal – to win the Scotsman Student Newspaper Award 1986.

After that, I learnt a lot about Syd through two sources: a) Syd in his cups – we never met outside newspaper business without getting out of it in some way – and b) Charlie, post-1990, when my friendship with Syd was all but over. I think if I'd known then what I know now, me and Syd would have been different.

- I might ask you the same. Fancy a tot? Syd offers on my return as he slugs from his engraved hip flask.

- What do you mean ‘I’ might ask you the same?’ I ask as I approach him again, content with the smoothness of texture and delivery of the turd I have just expelled.
- Before you left you asked me what I was doing here.

I refuse the offer of a swig and Syd steps back in mock-astonishment.

- What the hell? I’ve heard bloody everything now. What is it? Hangover from hell?
- Well, if want to know a secret I’ve just started going out with this girl who is so posh...
- ...you could use her shite for toothpaste.
- Yeah that’s about the extent of it.
- What’s her name?
- Imogen Bowler-Clous.
- Imogen?!?!

How many question and exclamation marks does it take to record the level of Syd’s disbelief, his outrage, his shock?

- She’s a nice girl. Just watch it right.
- You sound very protective.
- I know her family. I handle their legal matters now and I’ve always found Imogen enchanting.
- Have you ever shagged her?
- Don’t be so fucking coarse, you bastard.
- Do you know ELWELL?
- Yes, I’ve just started to handle his stuff recently.
- Jesus X, if they could see how you were. Syd Preston, third XV captain with his pants around his ankles and a tampon up his arse drinking a pint of neat Bacardi...
- It was Drambuie, he corrects as if this makes the allegation less serious.
- Or down *The Rag*’s office in fits of dope-induced giggles over jokes like pointing to a prostrate Struan MacDougal and shouting ‘Where’s Struan?’ And everyone shouting back like a pantomime audience, ‘He’s Struan all over the floor’.
- OK. It’s good to see you again, old man.
- Good to see you.
- I notice that the Iros are doing well, this season.

People who have no interest in football can’t help but look out for the Iros results after knowing me for a few months. Like me, they are cursed for life – but not quite on the same register.

- Yeah, we’ve only lost two games this season and we won 3-0 today. ‘Say,’ we are top of the league. Say, we are top of the league’.

- Still I suppose you'll go through the usual mid-season slump after Xmas, he points out without malice like the realist he is.

I wince but it is true. Ironopolis's season is always characterised by the depth of the mid-season slump. If we get points then we usually get promoted or stay up. If we don't, it's freefall down one long and slippery slope to depression in May.

- Naah, we're going up this season.
- You always say that.

Syd's parents, Alex and Joan, were pushier with him than with Charlie, I learnt, like my parents were pushier with me than with Jimmy. Pushy home counties parents, eh? Being the eldest, Syd had to fight his corner all the time – push the boundaries back, stake the new claims, negotiate the new deals. By the time Charlie came along, eight years after Syd – as a result of the proverbial hole in a dunkie – Alex and Joan had settled. By the time Charlie was 13, they couldn't be bothered with all that teenage angst stuff. That was what Charlie told me anyway. Or perhaps it's just that parents these days are *more* lenient with girls, especially as they know that girls in the home counties can always be married off, when men are still expected to bring home the bacon.

Syd was taken out of grammar school at 16 and paid for to go to Gayhurst as his parents had decided to send Charlie to Wycombe Abbey school and felt they would be seen as unfair giving one child a private education and not the other. (Charlie used to joke that it was unclear whether it was Syd, the neighbours or colleagues from the golf club who were likely to perceive this injustice). Syd hated public school, he told me, because he never belonged. The only blokes he made friends with there also started in sixth form. They were the sons of small businessmen who owned their own building firms or scrap yards or of salesmen who worked in the new financial services, like debt collection and insurance, which seemed to boom in the Thatcher revolution. Syd, of course, was from the established, liberal middle classes but the sons of the diplomats, doctors, lawyers and dentists had already carved out their own destinies. They already knew the form, the etiquette, the unspoken rules so Syd, to them, was just another 'grocer's son' (although there weren't actually any grocer's sons at Gayhurst).

To avoid the inevitable pisstake, Syd ganged together with the lower middles but he used to confide to me in his cups that he never really belonged with them. He often told me he thought they deserved their plight, given their unswerving support of the Conservatives; their tendency to devour James Bond films uncritically; and their stuck-up attitude to what they called the lower or drinking classes. Because Syd boarded, he lived this life 24 hours a day, non-stop, without privacy but he was fortunate in that he was a big lad – six three, by the time he was 17 – so his physical presence stopped him from getting his head kicked in. It also saved me once, when we had just failed to score at the *Happy Hillcock* in Muirhead and some cashie and his mates pulled a knife on us. Syd, shitting himself, accidentally broke the cashie's arm which sent the rest of them scampering off back to their mams.

It was at Gayhurst Public School and Preparatory that Syd started drinking obsessively and smoking 30 Embassy Regal a day, he confided to me once, to cope with the prospect of the three years of law in front of him, after he'd finished the (arts) A-levels he loved. His drinking made him cock up his A-levels, sending him inevitably to Cally. (In the UCCA handbook, in the examples of how to fill in the form, the otherwise unsuccessful candidate got to Cally through clearing, presumably as everyone got in that way). Charlie told me much, much later that the whole college thing for Syd was worse than he'd ever let on to me. Dr Alex Preston snr wished that there should be a Dr Alex Preston jnr, so Syd went into the science forms for O-levels. Then he rebelled at 16 and did English, French and History but at a price. Alex snr told Syd that he would only fund him through college if he did law rather than waste his time on non-vocational subjects. Syd reluctantly agreed to this. He had no choice. Three years at college were still three years at college.

And do you know what? Alex and Joan really thought they really were giving Syd the best start in life.

Angst

We stand out on the balcony reminiscing and exchanging new anecdotes for maybe an hour – welcome relief from the hard of understanding at dinner. I tell Syd I last saw his ex, Cath, in February 1994 when Simon Register and I pitched up pissed at her flat in Didsbury, Manchester the night before an Iros match. Simon shagged her then, which comes as no surprise to Syd, when I tell him. He concludes she was probably doing it to get back at him. I don't tell Syd that Cath talked endlessly about him then and still harboured a burning desire to see him or, failing that, was likely to do him some serious harm, which was quite something considering they haven't even spoken for over seven years.

- Simon Register told me you'd got engaged. I thought it was a wind up but when Charlie confirmed it I knew it was true.
- Seen Charlie just recently?
- Yeah, I bumped into her in London, I lie. – She was looking for a job. Around where I work. We just bumped into each other.
- But you work in Whitehall and she works in Mayfair now, challenges Syd, thinking I work for the MoD. – And you've always had a soft spot for her, he proposes like he is examining me in court, like he has all the answers and I have to say: 'Yes'. – I've noticed the way you've asked after her over the years. In fact, whenever we've met.

Good sense, though, tells me he is bluffing. Syd was always a crude bluffer at Cally. When we were stoned, it worked on me. But now, after years of running agents in the field, I simply look him in the eyes and ask him to specify. He makes up two occasions both of which I reject and the fragile trust built up again a few moments earlier shatters, ringing resoundingly in the silence around us. I never really knew Syd well but after

saying that I was about as close to him as anyone in those exciting, promising days, including Cath. Syd and I stand there staring at each other, his hair slicked back hair like a wet, deep black, rubber swimming cap unruffled by the elements, mine not long but still unkempt, mud-brown and being raised up and flopped across my eyes with each subsequent gust. At the same time, I realise his DJ fits like his own skin, when mine flaps around my middle like a marquee in a tornado.

- Deano, get a new tailor...
- ...or read Norman Mailer... I interjected hoping he'd see the funny side.
- ...before you come to one of these events again, he continues ignoring the reference.

Syd had this intense relationship with Cath, who he met in first year and went out with until the very end. They were in love, I think, but Syd, being the middle class English man he was, sometimes took his repression and frustration out on her, accusing her of everything under the sun, usually in his cups. Mind you, she was no better. She often lashed out at him with the slightest provocation, like catching him glancing at an attractive woman in the street or in a bar. To quote some old aristo – I can't remember who -- at least by going out with each other, they only ruined two lives rather than four. Even then, they still had some of the worst fights I've ever seen between couples. I've forgotten how many times I saw one or other of them in public with a raked face or a blackened eye. In fact, the most demeaning, non-violent treatment of a human being I have ever personally witnessed involved Syd and Cath. As Alex snr prepared to pull away from the 1987 Cally graduation ceremony in his home counties Landrover, Joan beside him in the passenger seat, Syd calmly wound down his back-seat window and said to Cath, who was seeing him off:

- Catherine, our relationship has become a farce. I no longer want to go out with you.

He then hurriedly wound up the window again as the Landrover sped off and we all waved to him leaving Cath guppy-mouthed and gutted. He refused to see her again or take her telephone calls, just like that after a three-year relationship. She phoned me up many times in tears, asking for Syd's new number and I had to lie to her that I didn't have it, that I never saw Syd anymore, as I knew he would have killed me if I'd let on, if I'd given her that number.

Zigarettes

When I get back inside, Imogen and I decide to play some blackjack and roulette although this bores me even more as we are playing for plastic tokens. I tell her I knew Syd at college and she says that her father and Dr Preston knew each other at Cambridge and that Syd and her used to play together as kids when the grown-ups had their interminable lunch parties and barbecues.

– Do you know Charlotte Preston, Syd...sorry, Alex's sister? I ask hoping for some gen on her.

Information is after all power, as they keep banging into our heads in indoctrination sessions held within the bowels of the Organisation.

– Yes, I met her once at a Wycombe Abbey old girls' night, Imogen replies airily before completely changing the subject with: – Damien, do you know Strip the Willow?

I shudder at the thought. Fortunately, her younger brother Giles intervenes on cue to request the next dance. Imogen asks my permission and I nod, smiling inwardly at the Jane Austen courtesy of such a question. I am desperate for another cigarette. Black Sobranies are all well and good but I could commit mass murder for a Marlboro. Then, right on cue again, as if by magic, I hear the most mundane proposal put to me in the most exotic manner:

– You luik lake you nid a zigarette.

I find myself looking down at a thrust forward, black-gloved hand clasping the famous red and white, mythically-KKK packet, framed by a long and full cleavage. I look up to see a heavily made-up brunette withdraw two Marlboro with one of those black-gloved hands; put both cigarettes in her broad, glossy lips then produce an intricate *Cartier* gold lighter. She delicately sparks up each one. She exhales slowly – the exhaust breath which passes from the blue lips of a recently dead corpse, if you squeeze its chest – into the spastic shadows cast into the dark corners of the room by the fixed-grin dancers. She meets my gaze and slips one of the *zigarettes* into my mouth. It is damp and sticky and smells of her perfume. It tastes of her lipstick. I think of Dolores.

– I hayve sin yu in ver *Pink Pussycat*, she accuses narrowing her thickly lined eyes.

– Where? I bluff.

– Ver *Pink Pussycat* in Warrdourr Street. Dont trry to fuil mi. I noew vat yu arrr a frorreent of Doelorrrez.

I don't recognise her. But I don't say anything.

– Yu noew who I min. Ver Rrredhedd, she announces, tilting her head back in premature triumph.

– Von who? I shrug.

– Ver Rredhead, she repeats, slightly angry, slightly scolding.

- Oh, Dolores the redhead. I couldn't understand your accent. *Jesus, any minute she's going to say, 'I hayve bin expectink yu Meester Bont'.* – So how do you know Dolores then?
- Frrrom ver *Pink Pussycat*. Ant you cout say vee'rr in ver same line of bizinness.
- So what are you doing here? I chirp. – After all I don't see many other of the regulars from *The Pussy* at this rather fancy hunt ball.

Agent handling training again comes in use. I have succeeded in hiding my fear and am driving the questioning.

- I too woz in Hyte Parrk on that Verrsday night when vart puirr womin was merrterrt.

I draw heavily on my cigarette. I don't know where to look.

- Look, we can't talk here but perhaps we can meet up for a drink in Soho. At the *Pink Pussycat* if you like. I need to know what happened that night. What's your number?
- 0171 219 6667, my wurrk numberrr.
- That's the Houses of Parliament.
- Off corrse, I yam Frrancis Elwell's parliamentarry rresecherr.

X, this is dynamite, I think as I scribble down her number. This is Pamela Bordes II.

- I am Damien...
- I noew
- ...I'll phone you in the week. By the way, what's your name?
- Natasha. Natasha Oblomov, she purrs as she quickly turns away, like a heroine in melodrama.

I think of running after her but she merges back into the throng of fine silks, expensive bridgework and hard-won hour glass figures just as Imogen calls to me from the dancefloor. She approaches me and kisses me, tasting of second hand booze, a flavour remembered from kissing my parents after dinner parties commemorating each rung they dragged themselves up the social scale. (They are still nowhere near the heights of this milieu but, then again, I never had to live in a two up two down in Ironopolis). With her stilettoes on, Imogen looks more or less straight into my eyes, straight into my soul. I break the gaze.

- Damien, she implores with a combination of career-woman self-assurance and schoolgirl vulnerability I cannot reject.
- Yes? I ask, knowing what she is going to say.
- I want to love you.
- I I-I-love you too.

15

Exclusive

- Damien, have you seen today's *Scorcher*? Imogen asked as soon as she arrived that Monday evening. We had been separated only by the inconvenience of my day at work while she was on what I had taken to dubbing as *shore leave*.
- No, I don't read tabloid newspapers.

Imogen pulled the ragged, grey paper from her shoulderbag and held it up in front of me:

YOU AND WHOSE ARMY?**Top toffs ruck at
Francis Elwell's
annual hunt bash**

It was illustrated with a spectacular photograph of dinner-jacketed men with red faces hurling punches and furniture at each other.

It had happened at 2:00 am just as Saturday evening had been starting to wind down. Unfuelled by drink and drugs, I had exhausted all possibilities several hours before so I was clear-headed enough to recount the ridiculous scene which unfolded before me. A young, arrogant type in a red tailcoat started to jostle with a middle aged, blustery type. The middle aged bloke hit the younger one full on the jaw. He reeled but went with it then squared up to the middle aged type. Middle Aged Bluster went for Young Arrogant again who caught Middle Aged Bluster's swing and then decked him with a right hook to the jaw. Middle Aged Bluster's idiot son – the in-bred resemblance was too acute to miss – waged in on Young Arrogant with two of his friends. Young Arrogant's friends then came to his rescue and a full scale scrap ensued. It was only then that I realised that the boneheads in DJs were not middle class rugby players but the security staff. They waddled, in the manner of men with movement-constricting muscles, into the melee, like a troupe of Kemp brothers from *Tobacco Road*. A few quick enquiries had established that Young Arrogant was the master of hounds for the hunt and Middle Aged Bluster was Francis's brother, Charles, a banker in the city. Later that night I had slipped off to phone my contact on *The Scorcher*.

- Anyone could have leaked the story but I wonder who took this rather tawdry photo, Imogen bounded on like a three year old. – Francis is asking anyone who had a camera to account for their photos.
- I've really no idea but I could try and find out from my contacts on *The Scorchers*, I lied.

I already knew who had taken the photos – me, with the micro-camera that I'd attached to the back of my buttonhole to get an up to date close-up of ELWELL.

- Could you? It's really exciting, she enthused as she mesmerised me simply by gliding to the sofa (as she insisted on calling it) and elegantly folding herself into it. – Certainly beats being in *The Tatler*.
- Your great quality is that you're not like the rest of them. You're somehow more genuine, down to earth, I declared.
- I've always felt that as well. Strange isn't it? She replied.

As the last vestiges of daylight were flooded by night, I was content to let Imogen rabbit on. This was our first evening alone together and we were in my flat. I was preparing her a Savoury Bluecheese Cake with port and blackcurrant jelly and Maigret of Duck marinated in honey and balsamic vinegar with Red Cabbage and Dauphinoise Potatoes.

All was going well but I had to ask her a question which I knew could ruin the intimacy of the evening.

Disciplinary

Wendy had approached me that Monday morning to remind me that I *still* hadn't accounted for my advance of £600 from the Ironopolis trip. Or, as she had said:

- If you do not account for, with supporting receipts, your advanced sum to cover the expenses you incurred while operational in Ironopolis, I will have no option but to alert management through the appropriate channels and bring the matter to the attention of the Fiscal Discipline Committee in Department H, as is procedurally correct in these circumstances.

I had told her I would have the money by the next day. I had meant to ring around mates – Jason usually helped out in these circumstances – but I had had a hell of a day with the ELWELL case. (We had finally established he was visiting a high class knocking shop off Harley Street rather than going to the dentists). Meanwhile Amy Tuppham had brought me some disturbing news. Rumours had been circulating that Godfrey James, the officer I had joined with, had fallen out with the Organisation after he had left and had been sectioned by an Organisation-friendly psychiatrist in Rampton mental hospital. I had dismissed this as so much rubbish until I read the letter sent to Amy's home address.

- It's signed Thomas Parkinson, almost Godfrey's two middle names, she had pointed out.

On closer reading I had realised that it also mentioned LONDON, TOWER and POMPOUS in capitals. They were all codewords for operations Godfrey had conducted. Amy had done all the checks and there was no record of a Godfrey Thomas Parks (or Parkinson) James at Rampton but it had unnerved me slightly. I had liked to think the rumours I often heard about the Organisation were urban myth. I liked to think the best of the Organisation – it was the only way I could cope without *Paranoia* paying me an impromptu visit. So information which apparently gave substance to the stories upset my closed but optimistic view of what went on in the Controller General's office on the fifth floor of Nation House.

I knew I had to get it over and done with.

– Imogen, I have to ask you something, I asked trying to sound like I wasn't grovelling – too much.

I tried not to be distracted by the sapphires, ceruleans and cobalts which shot from her eyes, like one of those house or techno or whatever they're called videos I see from time to time on the Chart Show.

– Fire away, she pouted pinning her silky, golden hair back behind her ear.
– This is a slightly touchy subject.
– You're married with three children?
– No, I'm not married with three children, I replied letting a hint of anger slip out.
– You smoke? She continued to tease. – I smelt it on your breath at the ball.
– Imogen, please, this is serious, I said putting down the saucepan and spatula I had been agitating from time to time during our conversation to compensate for the empty-handedness I felt without a cigarette. I sat down beside her and let my hand rest on her thigh. – I owe the Organisation I work for £350 and I haven't got the money to repay by tomorrow when they want it back. My boss absolutely hates me and if I don't have it I'm in big trouble.

I paused just to let her know I was serious, just *to let her know I was there*.

– Dear god, Damien is that your problem? She asked, almost annoyed that I could be so serious over something so inconsequential. – Don't be so uptight about money. What's £350 between friends?
– I mean I haven't been going out with you long...
– So, you're going out with me now, are you? She declared, removing her hands from her knee and making inverted commas in the air.
– I'm not a conman or anything, I protested, wondering why she wouldn't acknowledge how difficult all that was for me. – I want honesty in this relationship because I've seen precious little of it so far in my relationships.
– I'll lend you it on one condition, she purred teasingly, – that you tell me, honestly, how you managed to blow £350 of taxpayers' advance, you reprobate.

I smiled at her sensing the comedy of the situation and me being all lower middle about money:

- I blew it on a scarlet woman, I joked.
- Damien, a woman, she intoned in mock-scorn, – well, you’re going have to tell me all about her if you want the benefit of my wealth. After all, I need to know what I’m up against in the race for the heart of Damien Dean.
- I wasn’t even going out with her, I ventured reluctantly but knowing that I had to go along with the fun. – We used to meet up for sex every once in a while.

I got up and walked to the stove in the tiny kitchen off the converted front room, pretending that I had an urgent rendez-vous with the red cabbage and dauphinoise potatoes, which sizzled in the oven.

- Did you pay for it? Imogen asked matter-of-factly from the front room.
- No, I bloody didn’t, I retorted just too forcefully, wondering why her expensive education hadn’t taught her not to ask such rude questions. – That is one thing I would never do. Paying for it is the ultimate admission you’ve lost it. I wouldn’t, of course, stop anyone who wanted to though.

I was rambling, I realised, as I turned around straight into Imogen’s groin-aching beauty as she stood there behind me. I wanted to weep as I looked at her through my mineral water consciousness.

- Did you love her? She asked.

This time her tone had dropped into concern and she took my hands, one of which was still enveloped in the giant *mitten* we refer to as an oven *glove*.

- No, I didn’t, I hissed without meaning to. – I’m sorry, darling. Let’s talk over dinner.

She nodded a nod which said: ‘I’m understanding but at the same time I’m not letting you get off that easily’, while I was left to wonder why women are so obsessed with ex-girlfriends.

Dinner was delightful that evening. Intimate, jokey, easy, like I’d known her all my life rather than this being our second night alone together. I even allowed myself the odd glass or two of icy, brittle Pinot Grigio to lubricate my conversation. But then Imogen raised the spectre of Dolores again and, once again, I found myself playing the straight politician to the conspiracy theory journalist whose scoop is in reality a hoax. ‘You don’t need to know her name’; ‘Yes, she did come to the flat’; ‘We had sex occasionally in my bed’; ‘No, I didn’t love her’; ‘Because she didn’t love me’; ‘No, I wasn’t using her, if anything she was using me’; ‘That is not like paying for it’; ‘You’re far more beautiful than her’ adding for good measure ‘and you’re a better friend’. These were all true, deeply held beliefs but Imogen girlishly persisted. ‘Not many’; ‘No, far fewer than that’; ‘Less still’; ‘No, I’m not a virgin’; ‘Less than twenty’; ‘All right, seventeen’.

And on she went, through the whole lot. ‘Did you love them?’; ‘How good were they in bed?’; ‘Why did you stop going out with them?’ When women are like this, there is

nothing that men can do except be as nice as possible, smile and hope that sex is still possible in the near future. I bided my time. I lied with a grin on my face. Eventually, it worked.

16

Holmes

It's Tuesday 25th October, exactly four years to the day since I joined the Organisation and I'm still cursing the place, even now, as I sit in front of this buzzing green computer screen, wondering if I have the courage to interrogate the HOLMES database with just one simple word.

I joined the Organisation to get off a four year sentence for computer fraud, or embezzling as the Organisation called it, which they said they'd make me do in the Scrubs, if I didn't play ball. What could I do, a nice lower middle class boy like me? I couldn't appeal to my friends in high places – I didn't have any – and I didn't fancy being 'striped' with a razor every morning, slashed that is until I was so scarred, such a crisscross of ugly red scars that there was no point in vandalising my face any longer. Or being bugged by a gang of psychopaths every evening till I was ripped permanently open at the other end.

I've always hated the Organisation for threatening me in this way but now I hate it even more because it keeps me away from Imogen who I love deeply. I imagine, in my more paranoid moments, the Organisation in its omniscient way knows this, and like a spiteful maiden aunt chaperone, devises endless schemes to keep us apart or sets me tasking that is (obviously) designed to put me in situations likely to compromise my relationship with her. For example, I could quite happily go to my grave never speaking to Dolores Kane again. At the same time, I really don't care that ELWELL's 'researcher' might be a prostitute or a card-carrying member of the CP. But I've had to contact both these two-bit tarts on behalf of the Organisation.

I've phoned Natasha OBLMOV countless times over the last couple of weeks leaving messages on her answering machine. When she's returned my messages in her ridiculous but alluring accent, it has only been to tell me she wasn't available to meet me. Yesterday, Wendy gave me a hard time about this, suggesting I should carry out some low level recce and surveillance work. I told her to NTK her own business but she has somehow managed to work her way on to the periphery of the Need To Know group, in exchange for not pursuing her harassment claim against me with Department Q. There are limits to what can be lost even within the Organisation's *kafkaesque* paperwork and systems – and I am using the word here in its original rather than its undergraduate-essay sense. When I joined the Organisation, I thought about mending my ways, wrongly

believing I might get time off for good behaviour so I asked to see the *Manual of Acceptable Personal Conduct*. I found out it was held in the DX/1 vetting section and staff outside the section were not allowed to see it. In fact, I discovered, reading it was a disciplinary offence but, of course, you wouldn't have known that until you had read it. But I digress.

Late last week, I gave up on the enigma of Natasha OBLOMOV. That meant that I had to track down Dolores, the only person I knew who might be prepared to compromise ELWELL. As usual, she was nowhere to be found in official records. After Cally, she trusted no one, especially me. And I didn't know why. Even now, after four years in London, four white-knuckle years of snatched kisses, kneetrembling fucks up blind alleys and all expenses paid weekends at my place or in hotels, I still don't have Dolores's phone number in London. Over the last couple of weeks, I've put her off in the same way we put off the dentist or the doctor, as if simple faith, simply believing there's nothing wrong with us is a tried and tested scientific cure. In fact, the exact opposite is the case: the longer we put off the awful appointment, the more devastating the decayed tooth or dicky heart will have become, and the more painful and expensive the treatment will be.

Then, this morning, the Organisation finally insisted that I locate and meet my slightly unreliable agent source, known to them as PEARL NECKLACE, known to me as Dolores Kane, in an attempt to resolve Operation PANGOLIN. I really don't want to see her but know I have to. So, earlier today over lunch at *Wheeler's of St James*, I spouted a long and involved story to Imogen about hostile Libyans intelligence officers, difficult agents and long operational shifts and she accepted that I had to do 'my duty to queen and country and uphold the cub scout law'.

On my return, I checked our HOLMES terminal once again to see how far police enquiries had got with the murders of those skinheads and that woman. First, I found Operation HYDE, the rather transparent and original name for the Met's investigation into the murder of Xabel Bontempi. Strangely, there was still no mention of the murder of the skinheads there or under any other codeword. Then I checked the Actions log. The Met had checked all the usual records, DSS, NHS, electric, gas, telephone companies, the DVLC, the passport office, the Inland Revenue and all the major banks and each had drawn a blank as to Xabel Bontempi's identity.

The investigation has remained at this point every time I've checked HOLMES since the enquiry began in September. None of the intelligence agencies have any record of this mystery woman. She remains a name on a *Pink Pussycat* membership card.

Sitting here in front of HOLMES, I know I have to do it. I type in:

```
> Redhead
```

I hold my breath as the computer audibly delves through its memory and comes up with:

```
> 10 mentions located
```

I type:

```
> List
```


And it throws back one disturbing entry:

> Statement of Leslie Martin, cocktail waitress at the Pink Pussycat

I skim read it absorbing the gist of Xabel's evening as told from Leslie's point of view. Nothing untoward, Xabel got drunk, threw up over a bloke, chatted to some people, danced a bit, made a fuss about losing her handbag. But then one nauseating line pulled me up:

> Xabel came back from the toilet and left with Dolores saying they were going to Damien's flat. I know I saw Damien leave at about half past midnight as I had my break shortly after. They left about one in the morning.

Damien's flat? I spoke to Leslie until gone two in the morning. What the fuck is she playing at? I read through the rest of her statement and try to assess how accurate the following descriptions are:

> I do not know Damien's surname but I think he is a free-lance journalist. He is 5' 9'' and is of slight build. He has shortish, unkempt brown hair, brown eyes, a narrow face, thin lips and pointed eyebrows. He wore a charcoal-grey crumpled suit on the night in question.

> Dolores has an angular face, green eyes, full lips, arched eyebrows. She is about 5' 10'' and has an athletic but, shapely build but is not fat. That night, she wore a tiger print minidress and black stilettos. I do not know her surname.

> Both drank a number of cocktails although I didn't see them together.

My brain races: Leslie is the one person who can fill me in on the void of that night but here she is, clearly lying to the polis. I was there and we had a three way conversation. That much I remember at least.

I notice that the autopsy report on Xabel Bontempi has finally been entered on HOLMES. About bloody time too. There appears to be some complication, parts of her have been sent off for some kind of special tests. I look for the results of these but they have, apparently, been deleted. Who the fuck could have done that and why? And what bizarre tests were they? Then, as I read the rest of the autopsy report, I become increasingly agitated. I can scarcely believe what I am reading: the cuts under both breasts, the knife plunged into the lower abdomen, the body dragged across the ground, details of anal sexual assault. The m.o. is exactly the same as the murder of Liz Crebbin. I call that up, Operation Welcome, from the Ironside Constabulary *domain* on HOLMES just to check that I'm not suffering false memory. The details are exactly the same and the two forces have not cross-referenced them.

We're now looking at a serial killer and I am ahead of the game. Just as soon as ELWELL is safely tucked up and sucking his thumb, I will be able to concentrate on this case. But I can't do that until I find Dolores Kane.

17

Agony

I have tried to put it off as long as possible, despite pressure from the Organisation and Wendy. But I know there's no way around it. I have waited, what? A month. Yes, just over a month. I last saw her 26th September, now it's Friday 28th October. I've waited over a month for Dolores to make contact. She usually phones more often than that, even if it is just to scrounge cash, coke or booze or to call in some favour or other she imagines I owe her. Anyway today is Friday and that means she is even more likely to be down *The Pussy*. If I miss her this time, I might as well forget it.

I have a secret, a guilty secret that I have to share with you. It is not big or clever or hard what I do. In fact, thousands of men, and ever increasing numbers of women, do it each day: some in private; others in full view of their fellow addicts; some are even paid to help others to do it. It is not pleasant. The immediate side effects include a racing heart, chronic overheating, cramps, stiff aching limbs and even vomiting or, in rare, extreme cases, death. It all began innocently enough. Just a bit of fun. My first hit – or 'session', as it is known in the argot – was free. I was a young impressionable student at Caledonia at the time, trying to establish my own independence, my own identity. Hell, I was into trying new things, experiencing life's rich and varied tapestry for all it was worth. A more experienced bloke showed me what to do. He warned me that it was dangerous to do too much. So I only did it once to start with. But I woke up the next day dehydrated with aching useless limbs. Others told me the pain would only go if I did another 'session'." So I did. And I felt better.

I continued, getting a hit from time to time. Hell, I thought I could handle it. And *The Urge* went away when I had other things to occupy me. But when I finally left Cally and came down to London, I became bored again and searched out other devotees. The first hit was free again but the subsequent 'sessions' were hideously expensive. They knew they had me where they wanted me: at first I felt great but as the 'sessions' became more frequent I was plagued by an overwhelming sensation of permanent fatigue. And if I tried to avoid them, they would ring me up at home or work and hassle me to come for another hit. They knew how to make money out of me. And I just couldn't say: 'No'. It all seems so stupid now. Hell, we were all adults. Yet, we lived in fear of these people. They made it seem like we had to, just to fit in with our peer group. How Eighties the whole thing was. By the second half of 1994, I hadn't had a hit for almost exactly two

years. But with the empty hours created by not getting out of it, I knew history would inevitably repeat itself sooner or later.

Then it happened: in late September, I started going down the gym again.

After one or two tentative efforts, my resolve was stiffened by near asphyxiation having what the tabloids call ‘full’ blown sex” two or three times a day with Imogen when she was around (and, if I’m honest, by catching a glimpse of my saggy, spotty arse in the mirror by accident one morning). The Organisation’s gym had been set up to accommodate the build up of testosterone and energy experienced by former SAS, marines and SBS officers conned into joining the Organisation only to be trapped behind desks under a mountain of paper. That meant virtually everyone who used it was a monster. Their muscles didn’t so much ripple as surge like waves in a wavetank. Hard wire cables ran over their bodies -- like a diagram of the major bloodvessels stripped of skin and subcutaneous fat -- expanding to critical bursting point as they benchpressed, jerked and snatched freeweights the size and mass of oil drums filled with concrete. And why did they all have moustaches? Jesus, they can’t have been insecure in their own masculinity, in their own machismo – ‘any more testosterone and they’d have to live up a tree’. Ironically, the only other people I had come across who displayed such obvious machismo combined with preening vanity, gyrated their butts in shiny leather trousers in *The Pink Pussycat*.

But the Organisation gym had one sole advantage over all others in the city: it was free (rather than costing the best part of 2K for the compulsory annual membership, the price chrome and glass places up West demanded). Apart from that, it was an approximation of hell. Located in the bowels of the basement next to the boilers, the gym had the unrelenting dry heat of a tandoor even when empty and was dirty, dusty and dark. When it’s cramped space was filled, the kilojoules – pumped out by the sweating, writhing bodies within – pushed the needle of the thermometer to cardiac arrest. Add to this, the methane exploding from bodies honed by high fibre, high protein diets; the echoes of the farting and belching boilers; and the tortured grunts and groans, and the uninitiated might just be convinced they were passing into an old testament vision of hell.

I began my self-imposed sentence slowly and with trepidation. I gingerly wheezed my way through puny, budgie weights, entirely self-conscious while he-men preened and posed in front of the grubby wall length mirrors. I progressed gradually onto the step machine, the rowing machine, the nautilus pulleys and the crunch cradle, easing into higher performance at my own pace. But the improvements soon became exponential. Not only had I stepped off my hamster wheel of ever increasing depravity but I had jumped onto an upwardly spiralling virtuous circle. The better I felt shagging Imogen and running for busses – taxis were suddenly for puffs – the more I convinced myself I needed to spend extra hours at the coal face. By the end of October, I was hitting endorphin heaven for at least two hours every day.

In short, I had become an addict. Again. And, as I began to admire the definition of my pecs, my abs, my lats and, not least, my glut max, this hard-won aesthetic athleticism was to attract me attention in a way I could never have envisaged.

Het

As I walk down the familiar worn stone steps of *The Pink Pussycat*, ‘Money Makes The World Go Round’ (disco re-mix version) pounds out from the gimlet crack in the entrance and I half-expect to be confronted by Simon Register’s cheery, flawless face bobbing up and down next to Dolores, like a faithful puppy.

After seeing Leslie’s statement to the police and taking into account her nudge-nudge conversation with me the last time I was here, I can’t help thinking she is somehow tied up in all this as well. I go through all the questions I want to ask her and Dolores. How well did you know Xabel Bontempi? Did she frequent *The Pink Pussy*? Who was she really? What happened that night in the park? How much is the Organisation paying you to spy on me, Dolores? How much is the Organisation paying you to make up stories about me, Leslie? Did either of you *murder* Xabel Bontempi?

Normally, I dread everything about *The Pussy*. I get insulted as I push past people. I am accused of paying too much attention to some and not enough to others. But they *know*, don’t they? They know you’re het – in the same way they can spot each other in het haunts like a pub, an art gallery or a railway carriage – so they make your life here hell. Fair do’s, I suppose, they’re hardly made to feel welcome in the George and Dragon, despite various attempts in *Tobacco Road* to pretend that god fearing East End communities welcome gays with open arms and unmitigated liberal tolerance. But today is different. As I enter, the doorman doesn’t even give me a second glance in my sleeveless T-shirt and snug black jeans. People smile at me. I smile back. I exchange hello’s as I saunter past the dancefloor to the bar. Leslie is not there. Dolores is nowhere to be seen. I order a mineral water. Peering around into the strobo-gloom, I make disconcerting eye contact far too often. I am beginning to think hets like me should have chosen more het threads to wear in a place like *this*.

– What’s a nice bloke like you doing in a place like this? A disembodied voice.
A tap on the shoulder.

Oh, X, the originality of it. The first gay bloke I ever met, when I was at Cally, had just left a *ballet* company and was training to be a *nurse*. He used to sit at home, pining for his boyfriend, a *theatre director* with a touring rep company, and doing his *knitting*. Go and play football, ya big jessie, I used to think, but my liberal conscience stopped me from ever saying as much.

– Avoiding predictable puffs, like you, I reply rather too curtly. He gets the message and wanders off. Nonchalantly.

I watch a Marilyn Munroe lookalike strutting her stuff on the dance floor. As she pirouettes, *that* white dress from *The Seven Year Itch* spins up, revealing hi-cut, white lacy panties, a neat arse and long, shapely legs. She is stunning. I have *The Seven Week Itch*. But before my cock can get carried away I have to remind him that in *The Pink Pussy* the chances are ‘Marilyn’ doesn’t have a pink pussy.

Our eyes meet accidentally and I make the worst mistake I could in here. I smile. Marilyn smiles back. This really could be the beginning of a very beautiful – but the wrong sort – of friendship. She makes an exaggerated pout and thrusts her cleavage

towards me. Is she a bloke? The breasts look real enough. I pointedly and deliberately look away, like I am avoiding the results of a football match on the News at Ten when the highlights are on later. But that requires the discipline of seconds, this is a lifetime undertaking. Every time, I absent-mindedly drift across the dance floor I meet her cleavage or her gaze. Eventually she strolls across to me. I am hypnotised by the exaggerated swing of her hips. Marilyn stops just too close to me, close enough to invade my personal space. She flutters her eyelashes and purrs:

– Hi there, loverboy. Don't you remember me?

I flip through my roladex memory. I locate nothing. I mouth nothing.

– From a month or so ago. I gave you a blow job and left you on a park bench, sweet heart.

All I can think to say is:

– Did I come?

– No, you were far too gone for that, Marilyn replies without pause.

She is clearly not making this up.

– Why did you bother, then? I ask, testing the story anyway.

– Because you insisted, hon.

I pause. Silence hovers in the air, like a hummingbird fanning us both, while Marilyn consciously fumbles with her, his, her fake pearl necklace.

– You didn't see two skinheads, did you? I ask to break the hovering tension he/she has set up.

– No, darling. Should I have done? He/she pouts huskily and predictably.

As I go into het denial – I'm het so I can't by definition have been turned on by a bloke no matter what form he takes – Marilyn moves closer and strokes my pecs through my T-shirt:

– Been pumping iron, have we, gorgeous? You're in better shape than last time. You know you've got to be when I'm around, honey.

I tense before asking:

– Do you know Dolores? Dolores Kane. Tall, quite striking. Redhead.

– Oh, you mean, Dolores Golightly, sweetheart. She's next door. In the chillout room.

And with that, I push Marilyn to one side and am striding off.

– Bitch, I hear him/her call after me, as I try to ignore my raging hard-on.

Ecstasy

Ambient techno meanders from each of the four speakers (hardly in stereo, hardly in concert), slowly, painfully slowly, like superglue might ooze from a leaky tap. My ears adjust from the pumping, throbbing anthemnic stuff next door. Emotions seep into the chillout room as the atmosphere drifts, like snow in a blizzard, and I wade through the weak Copydex solution which conducts unspoken thoughts and pervades the entirety of the sticky atmosphere, holding the dynamics of the shadowy room together, like the attraction between molecules. Some couples stare at each other with the intensity of the poet, the intensity of the fan; others grind so hard, sparks shoot off the stubble on their raw faces; while a third group gently caress their partners' exposed tribal skin. As my eyes drink in the golden syrup scene, I am rent between darting from lipstick lesbian couple to lipstick lesbian couple – each softly and delicately pecking her partner – and blundering into the raw, unnerving panorama of skinheaded men swallowing each other alive, swallowing each other whole.

I spy Dolores and Leslie kneeling up on cushions staring into each other's souls with an intensity I have never seen in either. They wear short, wispy rave dresses which cannot weigh more than a couple of ounces each. Dolores's says 'Floozie'; Leslie's says 'Whore'. Every so often, Leslie's hand slips under Dolores's dress which rides up as Leslie strokes her taut belly and her curved hips.

I am sick with lust. But not here. Not now. I can't. Not when I love Imogen so much.

– I used this on her.

Dolores fumbles around in her handbag and I expect her to reveal a great dildo. But she whips out a knife instead. She trails it over my body, letting the blade scrape my skin. Its sharpness removes the soft negligible hair from my legs. It is the morning of Monday 26th September, virtually the last time I saw her. Strapped to the bed, to my bed, I look into her empty emerald eyes. Our telepathy has gone. I communicate with her in stuttering, incoherent whimpers.

– What do you think I did to her, Damien? She asks like a Hollywood weirdo in a soft, deliberate, mechanical voice.

– I-I-I-I...

– Scared, Damien? Scared of a woman, she challenges as she strokes the hideous blade up and down my leg, a barber sharpening a razor.

– Dolores...Dolores. Please calm down. N-n-n-now d-d-don't d-d-do anything stupid.

– I'm perfectly calm, you little shit.

She sits there in her wankmag gear, in her professional wankmag gear, and I don't know what will happen next.

– Right, apologise, you misogynistic bastard. Apologise for all the women you've fucked and fucked up. Or I'm going to cut off what has got you into all this trouble.

Jesus, this is all I need. Dolores discovers her moral conscience, age 28, and decides that I am to pay for the sins that men do to women. She casually leans on the point of the blade and it pushes into the top of my leg. My skin indents. A small pool of blood forms in the well. Dolores looks hard at me from under her strong eyebrows, her straight red hair framing her face, framing the deep cut of her cleavage. She bobs her head down and her wet crimson lips suck up wet crimson blood. She runs it around her mouth, over her teeth, now stained like an exacting dental hygienist's test for plaque. She runs the knife over my shaft.

I might shit myself with fear.

X

- How's Simon? I ask looking down on Dolores and Leslie and breaking their reverie in the chillout room.
- Simon who? Dolores replies, coming to.
- You know, Simon Register.
- I'm dehydrated, states Leslie, brightly. – I'm gonna get some water. Want some, Dolores?
- Oh, please, sweetheart. I could do with a bucketful.
- And you, Damien? She queries, suspicious of me as Dolores falls into my lap, like a playful kitten.
- Thanks.

I let Leslie go. I can tackle her when she returns. Dolores is my public enemy number one. I am not going to waste time. Not now. Not anymore.

- Dolores, there are some things I need to know.
- Damien, we don't always get to say what we want to say to each other. This bastard commercial, unfeeling world stops us from revealing our true feelings. I have my regrets about Cally, you know. About me and you. That it should have ended.

It's some years since I've given Dolores any credit in the profundity account, not that this was profundity but it betrayed an approach to life which went beyond the basic fuel, food and sex equation I have more recently associated with her. She looks at me, like a fox wordlessly begging for mercy before being savaged by the hounds. Her pupils are the size of dinner plates.

- I love you, Damien, she says warmly looking into my eyes.
- I love you too, Dolores, I say back automatically, as I did habitually at Cally.

Life gets weirder: I never thought I would ever utter that particular exchange again with Dolores Kane.

- What are you on, Dolores?
- Pills.

- What sort?
- Get with it, Daddio. E, love eggs, X, MDMA.

I have never taken it. I don't know why.

- You'd love it. Everyone's your friend and life's so intense.

Everyone's your friend? Indiscriminate friendships? I can't think of a better reason *not* to take it. But, thank god, they haven't got her hooked on state-sanctioned, mind-control drugs, as can all too easily happen, given the power of the pharmaceutical giants.

- Dolores, do you know anyone in the Organisation? I continue. – Has anyone ever asked you to give them information about me? They may say they were from the DSS or the Inland Revenue or even the police or an intelligence service.

I pause. Dolores's head is resting in my lap right next to my hard-on. I look into her bottomless green eyes.

- Well? I ask trying to sound tetchy.
- What's the question, sweetie? She giggles back.

I repeat it.

- Damien, I knew you were different that day I met you at the Freshers' Fair, she continues totally ignoring my question and my tetchiness. – At Cally, you remember, don't you? God, how new and invigorating life was in Cally. The whole world in front of us. Just us.

Leslie drifts back into the room half-spilling the three already open half-litre bottles of sharp, chilled Volvic and hands me and Dolores one each. I am parched so I slug mine back. With eyes closed, Leslie gyrates gently and stretches rhythmically a yard or two way from us, occasionally sipping at her water, but oblivious to the rest of the universe. I turn back to Dolores. I ask her a series of questions but I am getting nowhere fast until something clicks inside her:

- That night in Hyde Park was a laugh, she declares to no one in particular.
- Go on, I urge.
- Well, we were about to go back to your flat. When we heard this laughing and joking and singing. Me and Xabel thought it sounded interesting so we went to investigate - all very Famous Five, I know. Well, first we bumped into Natasha Oblomov, a friend of mine...
- I know.
- Shut up, Damien, will you?

I cursed myself for breaking her concentration.

- Where was I? Natasha was with this job I recognised. Government type.

Jesus X. ELWELL. This is better than I could have expected.

- I've done him before as well, kinky sod he was. Anyway, I went to speak to her but he stood in the shadows, until he recognised me, that is. Just as I was

about to go off with Xabel when we all heard this mighty hullabaloo: ner-ner-na-ner-nil-er, ner-ner-na-ner-nil-er.

She hummed the tune over and over again. It was *My Angel is the Centrefold*, as rendered by the Iros' faithful. I knew what was coming:

- It was you, very drunk, and Marilyn. Weaving across the park snogging and groping.
- Then what happened?
- Natasha and her man slipped off. I talked to Marilyn for a bit and Xabel decided to go home.
- Where?
- I don't bloody know.
- What about me?
- You were dead to the world. We tried to wake you up but it was like trying to raise the dead. So we left you.
- Then what happened? *What happened?*
- We went we went back to your back to your flat your flat flat. And had some had some fun together fun together together. We waited up waited up for you for you you you. But you didn't you didn't turn up turn up so we so we went went went.

Why is she speaking like that? I go to question her again. But my lips won't move. I am sick. I am swimming. I am swirling. I can see techno escaping from the speakers in purple, blue and green, like gas hissing from a cooker ring. Light dances like fire sprites, like bonfire night sparklers, like reflections on a river on a sunny day, like exploding flash guns, like forked and sheet lightning at the same time. But everywhere. At random. At once. And some bastard's giving me a blood transfusion while my balls and nob have shrivelled to nothing. I am cold, despite the furnace that burns outside me. It's *that* nightmare. I need an operation. I don't want it because I'm scared that if I go under the anaesthetic my consciousness will think I've died and will close down my systems and I will *actually* die. So I resist. But the anaesthetic has numbed my lips so I can't speak but I'm still conscious. I feel everything as the surgeon cuts me open and holds my throbbing organs in front of me, like I'm being hung, drawn and quartered, and I'm in so much pain, my body wants to die but I won't let it but what can I do? I am freezing. Jesus, it's fuckin Pluto in here.

- What what are you are you talking about talking about talking about, Damien Damien Damien?

It's Dolores, her hair crimson, cadmium red, electric orange, on fire; her eyes emerald, vermilion, ablaze. They are flares burning off the sulphurous yellow gas shooting from her sockets. Horns force their way out of her head as I watch, open mouthed and cracked, Sahara-dry. Her words – I see them as if written down – wind around the musical notes spitting, surging, pumping sporadically from the speakers. But echoing all the time to infinity.

- It's Ketamine logic K-K-Ketamine K-K-K-Ketamine logic logic logic logic.

- Jesus, Jesus Jesus you didn't you didn't you didn't give him give him give him
Ket Ket Ket Ket Ket, did yyyyouuuuuuu?
- N-o-o-o-not-t-t-t-me-e-eeeeeee....
- What's Ket?

I am manhandled by Leslie, Dolores and, I think, Marilyn to my feet and out of *The Pink Pussy*. I am upright and being made to move my reluctant feet. An inch or so at a time. *Europa* is ablaze in an otherwise dark Wardour Street engulfing me. All the time, shadowy malevolence squats just out of my vision. Every time I zip my head round to see it properly, it has gone and is, by virtue of this, more malevolent. I hear my name and try to pull myself out of the blackhole.

- Damien? A distressed voice.

I peer hard and recognise the form in front of me. I squeeze out a single word, like my last breath: 'Imogen'.

18

Plan

Jesus, I was bad the next day. Like someone had put me on a slow arsenic drip until *that Friday night* when they decided to really dose me, really poison me, *really finish me off*. But who? It wasn't the Organisation's style. Too messy. Too much forensic. Too many questions. Too many journalists. Even if it was made to look like a drug overdose, there would still be an inquest and someone, somewhere might slip through the Organisation's complicated defensive tactics and score a very telling and public point. Dolores had phoned me at home the Saturday, the next day, and invited me to lunch at *Sofra* in Shepherds Market, probably because it is near where she works these days.

Imogen wasn't speaking to me and at the time I never thought she'd speak to me again. It's amazing how the best laid plans of mice and men go awry. When I had planned to meet Imogen later, I had done so to avoid any temptation of ending up in bed with Dolores. Things are back on track now but I fear she'll never let me forget it.

Dolores even paid for the meal although she evaded every single question I asked her, including: what's Ketamine? I then spent an hour flattering the bugger, persuading her to use her connection to ELWELL to do me a favour and to serve her country. And even more amazingly she agreed. I put it down to guilt although she denied all knowledge of spiking my drink and claimed Leslie was just as surprised. With Dolores's co-operation secured, we are now in a position to ruin ELWELL.

Some might frown on my callous disregard for civil liberties, disregard for his freedom to pursue life, liberty and happiness. I can't give a fuck. He's a Tory. Admittedly not one of the worst self-made scrap merchant Tories. But I have him in my sights and he's going to suffer. All those years of work will come to nothing. That self-sacrifice will be precisely that – a sacrifice and nothing more: no ultimate reward of the highest office in the land and all that shite. Anyway, the man is a philanderer and a hypocrite: I ask you, getting a woman pregnant then insisting she have some kind of dangerous back street abortion to save his skin. After I've finished with him, Francis ELWELL, the upholder of family values, one time rent-a-quote-MP, dry-as-dust Tory might as well whistle Dixie for the rest of his natural life in the Commons. Of course, Dolores did not really dance to the tune of the patriotic bugle but even she could hardly turn her nose up at £40,000. After all, that was a lot of cocaine. And it will save her a hell of a lot of bored hours lying on her back – or

down on her knees – serving the sexual peccadilloes of some oily, obese punter. It is even more gratifying that Dolores thinks that this is a newspaper stunt to set up ELWELL.

In short, nothing can go wrong and I am beginning to think in terms of being recommended out of my section to serve my remaining time as Our Man in Havana or wherever the Organisation sees the latest international threat (or at least far, far away from mad Wendy). I am going to enjoy this. Here is the plan: next Thursday, Thursday 3 November, Dolores is to replace ELWELL's usual tart, Natasha Oblomov, who is out of the country for the week (£2,000 took care of her). Then, Dolores is to coax ELWELL into bondage – which she knows he likes – and give us the signal when he is trussed up like a Xmas turkey. I will, via a phone call relayed through a news agency telephone number, contact *The Scorchers*'s photographers who have been briefed to expect a hot tip but, up till now, know little of the details. The photographers – already in position – will charge in and photograph ELWELL *in flagrante* and we, the Organisation, will not be associated with any of it.

Operation

– Picked up FL. East. East on foot along Marylebone Road, the speaker crackles in the control room.

I am sitting in a swivel chair in a sparsely decorated, shabby, linoleum floored cubby hole on the 18th floor of the Telecom Tower, not far away from FILTHY LUCRE, ELWELL's nickname in case you've forgotten, but that is just co-incidence. In fact, FL could be anywhere in Britain and I would be able to pinpoint his movements with the help of:

- a mobile surveillance team of thirty people either on foot or in a car;
- the CCTV cameras which have appeared everywhere in Britain (and are capable of sending back detailed moving surveillance pictures to this very room);
- the small, undetectable device in FL's shoes which records his movements as a red, pulsating – or, if I choose, bleeping – dot on the map on the computer screen in front of me.

– Crossing Marylebone Road. South. South, the speaker splutters again.

So far everything is as predicted. As usual FL has left his chauffeur at Regent's Park – he clearly trusts no one – walked down Gloucester Place, turned right into Taunton Street, then immediately left into Balcombe Street, continued straight to Upper Montagu Square crossing the Marylebone Road in the process, turned left before turning left again into Chiltern Street before crossing the Marylebone Road again. He stands there for five minutes, occasionally glancing at his watch, before going east along Marylebone Road. This behaviour is classic anti-surveillance, in which case it seems likely that FL has been trained by an intelligence agency, possibly the KGB or GRU who presumably handed him over to the SVR after the fall of the Soviet Union. At one point we were convinced that this regular Thursday meeting (in Devonshire Place, just off Harley Street, where FL is heading now) was cover for some left over Cold War relationship. After all, the Russians

are still looking for economic and techno-commercial intelligence. Until we found out the dentist's serves as cover for a high-class brothel.

The intelligence game – and it is a game to us, we don't usually die, unlike the unfortunate PIRA informers or the Russian or Libyan agents who are blown – is an old jigsaw where the box is lost and half the pieces are missing. Assessment is all. And that is, at best, semi-informed guessing.

On screen I watch FL as he looks both ways before crossing the road and is partly obscured by a floating '15:33' on the image sent back by the traffic camera in Marylebone Road. The infantry and cavalry have clear instructions not to press surveillance as FL may be alert to the possibility of it. (On 24 October, he aborted his visit to Devonshire Place and for a while we thought the operation had been compromised).

- No eyeball on target. No eyeball
- OK, HICKTON, don't push it. Don't push it.
- Read you. I'll stay at the corner of Marylebone Road and Marylebone High Street.
- Well, MADDREN, all looks well then, I remark contentedly to the Static (surveillance officer) next to me.

I go to the window and pull back the bombproof net curtain. I look out over the busy, innocent metropolis from which I feel so disconnected, culturally and physically. I watch a drunk dancing in Tottenham Court Road to the amusement of a bunch of school girls. I long for a cigarette. I have smoked only two cigarettes in two months and they were both, ironically, at a ball given by the man I am about to entrap. I think of Ironopolis three points clear at the top of the 1st division. I think of the home game to come against 2nd placed Derby, an early six-pointer. I imagine Captain Marvel picking up the 1st division trophy in May and a tear coming to my eye – perhaps this time we'll be back for good. I think of the note I got yesterday morning, again from 'The Ratcatcher'. I am trying to ignore it. It must be the work of a crank. But how does he know so much? I'm kidding myself. This can't be a crank. I can't help pulling it out of my pocket and studying it again:

Deano

How much? How much can
you take? How much can
Imogen Bowler-Clous, 146a
Belgrave Square take? And
what about poor old 'Marilyn'?
And how much did 'Xabel'
have to take? Xabel was the
kind of independent woman
you don't like, that's why she
died.

Did you father Amy's aborted
foetus? Abort! Abort! That is
what you should do. Abort
your 'mission'. You have no
choice or I'll get them. And
what are you and your
'girlfriend' planning. I know
you're a deceptive pair but she
can be bought, can't she?

And what about poor old Fiona
McKeighley? What would her
parents say? What would they
like to do to you? What would
the other cons do to you inside?
You're going down, signed
'The Ratcatcher'

Wednesday 2nd November 1994

How can anyone think the Iros are going down when we're top of the league? I ask myself before I realise that I've missed the point. But I am suddenly scared for Imogen.

After the Leslie and Dolores episode things have calmed down again although I fear she will never let me forget it. But she could be in danger. I have to act. I vow to try to identify Fiona McKeighley as soon as I have the chance. Her name rings a vague bell. But who can I have told of Amy's abortion and when? The indiscreet drunken moments are too great to remember.

I walk over to the map and watch the red dot appear and disappear as it lugubriously moves south down Harley Street. I flick a button on the Star-Trek console.

– Dolores.

There is no reply. I apply a firm but continuous pressure on the button again. My stomach churns.

– Dolores? Where the fuck is she? Come on, baby, I whisper out loud. – Don't do this to me. Dolores! I scream.

– Hi, honey, the console breathes as if it is exhaling her smoke, her very breath.

– Right, let's go through this one more time.

– Ohhh, don't be so tedious, Damien, she intones from a safe house in Harley Street.

– Dolores, people's careers are riding on this. Mine in particular. Now let's get this right first time shall we? Then we'll all be a lot richer: you financially, me spiritually.

– Damien, for Xsakes, will you stop flapping.

Like an unimpressed teenager parroting for her parents for the umpteenth time why she should not take drugs, sleep around or keep the wrong company, Dolores trots out the plot.

– I go in, explain that Natasha is not available this week. I offer him my services which he has had before so he shouldn't be too bothered. I win his confidence. I get him into bed. I tie him up, take my clothes off and then before I start, I press this thingummy...

– Signaller.

– ...signaller. I climb on board and, just as the old git shoots his load, your friends from the press burst in and flash away, so to speak. The police arrive. In the resulting confusion, they slip me out of the concealed back entrance into a waiting car where I am taken to meet you at another safe house for what you cloak-and-dagger journalist types call a 'debrief'. Damien, you're a genius.

– Less of the sarcasm.

I have a hard-on because of her croaky voice which stops every three or four seconds to inhale on a cigarette. Croak? Cigarette?

– Shit! Dolores, are you smoking weed?

– What if I am?

– X, can't you stay in your head for more than one fucking minute?

– Why should I? Anyway, dope's my oxygen.

I think about all the questions I still need to ask her. Why the peculiarities with my phone that night of the murders? Why did she seduce Charlie and Simon? What else did she know of the murders? Above all, was she responsible? And *why*? For X's sake, *why*? I phone the photographers to check that they are in place and ready for the signal, as I do with the 'police', who are undercover Organisation officers.

- Don't fucking even think about moving until you hear the signal. Got that? The wrong move could fuck up several months work and, need I remind you lot, several promising careers in journalism. Now lads, this has all gone well so far and we're on a fucking winning team...
- Unlike the Iros. I hear peels of laughter at the other end of the phone.
- Just like the Iros at the moment, I chuckle back.

And it is true, too true. Once again, Ironopolis are mirroring my success.

Rectum Defende. I make a brief phone call to Colonel Harton-Smith to bring him up to date with events. At least he can't blame me now. If they try to get me, I'll say I briefed him. (Everything is recorded so he can't deny it). I then switch to another TV screen which feeds back images of the front door of the dentists in Devonshire Place and watch FL enter the parlour. I switch on the audio device the *Spec Ops* team has thoughtfully placed in the walls of the lounge and bedroom.

Bondage

Dolores slips the device into her *Prada* clutchbag, slinks down the stairs, opens the front door and looks up and down the street. Damien told her not to do this but she feels she has to. After all, they always do it in films. She adjusts her sunglasses then takes them off when she realises how dark it is at quarter to four on a November day. She is still buzzing from the joint. She imagines what she will do with all the money she's going to get. She senses the primitive stares of primitive men as she wiggles down Harley Street in her red *Gucci* stilettos, red *Versace* Lycra minidress and fur coat.

As she arrives outside the dentists, she looks around again before pressing the bell three times to let the punter, who is already there, know this is a genuine call. She walks into the lobby downstairs and shudders at her memory of being there before. She smells the stale sweat of that night. She thinks of the money again. No more of this for a while. She brushes her long, dark hair and touches up her make up before climbing the stairs.

Something vibrates in her handbag. It's the device. Damien has told her to ignore it until it is time to give the signal so she wraps it in some paper hankies.

- What the fuck is going on? I shout. Who the fuck's she? And where's Dol... I mean PEARL NECKLACE? I jab at the Signaller. – She's not bloody answering wherever she is.

- I thought it was your agent you had recruited, points out MADDREN also staring at the frozen video screen of the brunette entering the dentist's surgery. – Well, is that her?
- She normally has red hair. No, that's not true. She normally wears a red wig.
- Perhaps she's wearing a different wig. Hang on, isn't that ZEPPELIN RACE?

ZEPPELIN RACE is the nickname for Natasha OBLMOV.

- I gave PEARL NECKLACE two grand to give to ZEPPELIN RACE to go on bloody holiday.
- Looks like you've been had, sir.

I scowl at MADDREN before launching into a tirade:

- MADDREN get this fuckin computer to run up some similar shots of ZEPPELIN RACE and PEARL NECKLACE entering this bloody flat. In fact, do an EACS on all the photos we have of them and compare them. Twist them, reverse them, blow them up, wipe your arse on them. I don't care what it takes just get an assessment. How long will it take?
- About quarter of an hour at least.

I wear the worn linoleum still further as I wait for MADDREN's magic EACS to come up with something.

- The people below are complaining of the light coming from the hole you've worn in their ceiling, MADDREN laughs as my patience drains away.

I stab frantically at the button which is meant to connect me to PEARL NECKLACE but there's no reply. For once Dolores – wherever she is – is sticking to the drill.

- We might have to abort this yet, you know, MADDREN, I confide as I wait for the recording device in the flat to kick in.

As the first muffled sounds come through, I know the quality isn't good enough to do a voice *ident*.

- Francis, you're looking so very well.
- My dear girl, you look more gorgeous than ever. A glass of bubbly perhaps?
- No thanks, perhaps you'd like some of this, says Dolores producing a long thin joint from her bag. – It's good stuff, white widow or La Veuve Blanche, I call it because it's the Veuve Cliquot of cannabis.
- Don't mind if I do, replies Elwell as he slips her jacket off her shoulders and undoes the zip of the top of her minidress.
- The usual then, she asks brightly.
- I think so.

Elwell draws hungrily on the joint four or five times then passes it back to Dolores before bouncing off to the shower. He has the energy and drive of an adolescent.

Dolores hears him singing 'Jerusalem' as she finishes the joint and slips out of her dress to reveal her appropriately named *Agent Provocateur* boned basque, *Wolford* stockings and *Parisien Lace* panties. She knows she will never see Damien again. After this, she could never face him again. Still that suits her.

Elwell jumps out of the shower, rubs himself down vigorously and throws himself to the bed, still with boundless enthusiasm. Like a schoolboy anxious to please, he allows Dolores to slip him into black suspenders, stockings and skimpy, frilly knickers before she takes his arms and ties them one after the other to the iron bedstead with a leather strap. Dolores draws the knots tight around Elwell's wrists and then ankles while imagining sunning herself on a beach far away. She longs to be released from all this, when her vendetta with Damien is over. Then, she can get on with her life as she has always planned it to be – her independent and in charge.

– Ouch! Ah, that's nice and tight. Just how I like it, Elwell trills.

Dolores remembers doing this to Damien. Why didn't she follow it through with him? Still, she realises, after this, it doesn't matter: Damien will be finished with the Organisation, with football and with all his other idiocies. Dolores grasps hold of the silk scarf she has pulled from her bag and twists it until it resembles a long piece of cord. Elwell lifts his head to allow her to blindfold him with it. She begins to kiss down his neck. She rubs her groin into his before climbing off and wiggling out of her knickers.

– What are you doing? Elwell calls out with a hint of anxiety in his voice. – Tell me a story about you and your girlfriends. What you get up to when we aren't around.

– I will Francis. I will, reassures Dolores as she stuffs her panties in to his mouth.

Elwell can only mumble as Dolores begins to stroke and lick his body. She swivels around and sits on his face. She hears only his groans of pleasure as he tries to tighten his mouth around her lips but cannot as the gag prevents him. Elwell's contortions and grunts grow more desperate by the minute.

– Francis, what would you like, you indulged little man? Elwell is unable to reply but his frenzied, muffled screams go up a pitch. – Are you trying to say something? Are you? Should I let you? Do you deserve it? Sit still, Francis.

His body goes limp for a second and Dolores removes the gag.

– My girl, you're really giving old Francis a pasting here. Please let me come soon. Please.

– I have something very special for you, Francis.

– Oh, Natasha.

19

Scalp

- Play that back. MADDREN, play it back.
- We'll lose simultaneous record and playback, he advises like he's Solomon.
- Just do it.

MADDREN reluctantly winds back the great spools. I listen like I once listened to a transistor radio at quarter to five on Saturdays in my student bedsit at Cally.

- Jesus, MADDREN, he called her fuckin Natasha. How's EACS doing?

A number of stored videostills of ZEPPELIN RACE and PEARL NECKLACE have been overlayed and adjusted. I peer into the screen.

- The height's about right, give or take the odd inch of stiletto. Look at the bloody facial dimensions.

The computerised rulers all over the screen show that the two have exactly the same width face, the same level and depth of cheekbone, the same length face. The make up and clothes are very different and these have conspired to give the effect that ZEPPELIN RACE is smaller and thinner than PEARL NECKLACE, with a rounder face. I remember the smell of the cigarette that 'Natasha' gave me at the ball. It was Dolores all over and I didn't make the connection. Fuckin madness. Fuckin madness.

- What the fuck is she playing at? We're going to have to abort. What do you think, MADDREN?

MADDREN scratches his balding scalp and sucks air through his teeth like a builder surveying the work of the previous 'cowboys' you got in to do the extension:

- Well, Mr Dean, I've seen these operations man and boy, like. And I've seen many a hasty decision ruin a promising career. Now, an intelligent young man like you shouldn't react with blind emotion. You're a thinking man, I know, sir. So, if you're wanting my opinion, I think you need to consider before moving. After all, I can't see PEARL NECKLACE or ZEPPELIN RACE contacting us now as she appears to have her own agenda. And don't forget, sir, you recruited her and this has been a very expensive operation. Up to about three quarters of a million in all. I don't think the young lady is coming back so this may be the last chance of a result. But I am only a humble surveillance co-ordinator and you must make up your own mind.

- MADDREN, I'm gonna go down there myself. If EXPENSE ACCOUNT rings, don't give them the address, just tell them there's been a slight hitch and they'll have their story soon.
- This is highly unusual, sir.
- I need to talk to someone urgently.

- Now, Francis, I'm going to take your blindfold off and reveal what I'm going to do to you this week.

Dolores unties the blindfold and Elwell sees her standing there holding a black plastic binliner.

- I'm going to put this over your head, Francis. Don't worry, I'll release it just before you come. It's really very good you know, the very best way to come.

Dolores drapes it over Elwell's head then sits on his face again. She takes his entire shaft in her mouth and begins to deepthroat him slowly. Elwell signals his approval by kicking his fastened legs.

I am running down the Marylebone/Euston Road. I am glad I started going to the gym. Even though I now crave a cigarette. I turn into Harley Street almost slipping on the paving stones wet from the downpour earlier. I whiz past murky shapes in the dim evening light. Despite the cold, I am sweating like a bull elephant into my shirt which, undone at the neck, flaps in the wind with my tie. I know Dolores has struck a deal with someone else but I don't know who. Only if I get there on time, can I stop these interlopers ruining my sting operation.

- Francis, you're about to come, you're about to ex-plode, Dolores chides.

She begins to whisper a story about her and her friend Marilyn and what they get up to. Elwell thrashes in pre-orgasmic pain.

- The Elizabethans called it the 'little death', you know, the orgasm. But you should know that, you are an educated man.

My heart pounds as I up a gear hurtling down Harley Street. I knock a rich, attractive, middle aged woman to the floor but cannot stop to help her as she expresses her disgust. I turn into Devonshire Place and make for the flat. I've been here before recceing the area, recceing the front door, putting in the CCTV camera in the flat opposite. I wheeze. I gasp. I cannot draw breath. I try to pull my set of universal skeletons keys we all carry –

which can open any door in the world – from my pockets but they are tight on my body and my hands slip with sweat. (Don't even think of charging the door down, it'll dislocate your shoulder before it comes anywhere near budging).

There are maybe twenty or thirty keys on the ring and I can't find this particular Yale key so I place one of those neat devices (like the ones that Q always supplies Bond) over the lock and the lock falls out of the door. (I'm only supposed to use this in emergencies as it leaves evidence, namely a perfectly circular hole in the door, which might compromise the Organisation's involvement). I explode through the gap. Shooting up the steep stairs, I erupt into the bedroom. Dolores is gone.

- Black Label repeat Black Label, Black Label, I shout into my lapel microphone.
- Infantrymen, CRAGGS, SPRAGGON and BOAM get here now! I scream to the mobile units on foot. – Cavalry, FOGGON, HICKTON and ARMSTRONG cruise the area for ZEPPELIN RACE and PEARL NECKLACE, I radio to the car units, – and bring her in if you can. MADDREN, communicate Black Label to HQ and lay off EXPENSE ACCOUNT.

There is a man's body on the bed. It is wearing women's underwear and is tied to the bedposts. It has a binliner over its head and it is still. I know it is ELWELL. My training tells me not to touch anything until the MOP UP team have been in but I cannot resist tearing open the binliner to look at ELWELL's dead body. I cut one hand free and pick a pair of *Parisien Lace* panties from his mouth. I slip them into my pocket before I hear another eruption downstairs. I radio to MADDREN who says EXPENSE ACCOUNT are go.

- MADDREN, you fuckin idiot. You were supposed to lay them off, I scream but there is no time to apportion blame.

I speed towards the back route Dolores has just used. As I fly down the backstairs, I hear the exploding of flashguns for fifteen seconds before one bright spark shouts:

- Fuckin hell. It's Francis fuckin ELWELL.

20

Kidnapped

When the Organisation is after you there is nothing you can do but wait. There is no point in trying to hide or flee the country: they will have put out warnings on polis, customs and intelligence channels. I doubt I can buy a bus ticket without alerting the squads of watchers waiting for the off at Telecom Tower.

I am at home. I ran here to intercept Dolores but I was too late. She has removed her things from my flat, except, I notice, the red wig which hangs formless from the wardrobe door handle. As the evening grows murky I spend my last hours of freedom burning the traces of her and drugs in my flat. I have to burn it all: I know the Organisation will already have started to intercept the detritus from my drains and bins for this very eventuality. (Jesus, imagine sifting the contents of *my* bowels).

It is dark. All I can do is wait so I light my first cigarette in weeks.

At 17:30 hours precisely, the insistent buzzer on the door sounds. I fight *The Urge* not to answer it but I know any delay will count against me.

– Yes?

– Damien Dean. It's Ralph McGowan here, Department X, he whispers.

I let him in. He climbs slowly and mischievously to the top of the staircase as if he enjoys what he is doing, as if he enjoys prolonging the agony of uncertainty. Once inside my flat, he closes the door and says:

– We need to talk about your welfare after the...he pauses, – the trauma you've been through today. There is a procedure we have to follow and it's in all our interests that we follow it as closely and as honestly as possible. I have not come to condemn you but to help you.

I know the routine. I hand over all my ID, real and alias, including my warrant card. I bow my head, partly in defeat, partly in embarrassment, then McGowan leads me away with a firm but guiding grip on my arm like Mephistopheles leading Faustus to an eternity in darkness. As we reach the pavement outside the flat, the very pavement where I threw up over Imogen – was it really only five weeks ago? – a black *Potentate 750 SL* with dark windows pulls up regally and I meekly get in followed by McGowan. I realise that these tinted windows also prevent the passengers in the back seeing from inside to out.

I wonder if I will ever see Ironopolis play again. I wonder if I will ever see Imogen again. Or Charlie or Jason or Simon or Amy. Or Dolores. Or Godfrey James. Godfrey James. How that name and its owner's uncertain fate now chill me. There are no handcuffs, no blindfold, no dodgy chemicals but I am still shackled, blind and groggy.

- Your accent. Edinburgh isn't it? I smile but there is no reply. – I went to college there. To the University of Caledonia. I lived in Leith for a while. Do you know it?
- It is Thursday 3 November 1994. You are being safehoused under your own will by Department X. You have the right to invoke grievance procedure NHS/DSS/CR/T2A/11 but the Organisation will take a dim view. I take it you wish to proceed.
- What happens if I don't agree?
- NTK.
- What the fuck do you mean? NTK? I, me, I need to fuckin know.
- I'm afraid I have to wait for your agreement to the safehouse procedure before I can continue. He holds my eyes for about 30 seconds.
- I agree.
- Sign this.

I scribble my signature.

- Now we can begin. As the procedure advises, you will answer all the questions I ask you as briefly yet fully as possible. If you do not know the answer, you say: 'Don't know' immediately and clearly. You will answer truthfully and concisely. You will not speak otherwise.

I look McGowan in the eyes. He ignores me, opens a briefcase and pulls out a pair of mirror shades and a device with wires coming off it. He puts on the glasses and sticks the wires to my chest and temples.

- Don't even think of lying. At what time did you leave the operations room this afternoon?

21

Funeral

I have not seen natural daylight since I got into the *Potentate* three, maybe four days ago. I don't even know if I was held in Westminster, Greater London or another country. I am not allowed to discuss with anyone what happened in the interrogation or I will be in real trouble. Believe me. I've seen what they can do and how they do it so I'm not letting on to *anyone*. Trust no one, is what I say. But now I am 'free' again, suspended from duties on full pay pending the investigation into why Operation PANGOLIN went wrong. I should be happy at this but I know the Organisation will follow my every movement for days, if not months now. I have been told to tell my friends I was called away on urgent polis business in the north of England in connection with the case of the Ironopolis rapist and murderer. I know I have been released to attend ELWELL's funeral.

The media were trying to keep their distance from the graveside mourners but they were fighting their basest instincts. Out of the way of the cameras, sharp-suited tabloid hacks waved money at anyone they suspected might tell all about ELWELL's *alleged* appetite for prostitutes. Invited as the partner of Imogen Bowler-Clous, I pushed past them hoping that no one I knew was among the media pack. I was just glad to be wearing clothes again, to feel safe in the public glare, to feel the security we often take for granted in this day and age: that no one is going to torture or kill us in the next few minutes.

I had spent the day consoling Imogen but whatever I did it was not enough.

- I can't believe you went to the north of England for some operation when you must have known how I felt, she chided me. – If I can get back from Fiji, I'm pretty sure you can get two hundred miles. How could you, Damien?
- I'm sorry. I was operational before it happened. When we are operational we are deliberately kept away from the events of the outside world as the Office feels it might unduly influence us, I parroted the line the Organisation had given me.
- What no newspapers, no TV, nobody allowed to contact anyone?
- No, look...

- Damien, Francis was like a father to me. I really needed you. I kept phoning and phoning when I heard the news and there was no reply from you. And I felt so alone, so insecure, so...she broke down into tears. Not the suppressed, mangled tears of frustrated rage but the breathless, globular sobs of releasing pent-up constipated emotion.
- I'm sorry, I said placing an arm around her shoulders.

As she drew closer to me, her breasts pushed against my chest and I twinged. *Not now. Not now*, I pleaded with my own anatomy. But it was too late. As we walked towards the open grave and the other mourners, my hard-on reared its semi-autonomous ugly head and I hoped no one could see it through my trousers. As we stopped by the grave, waiting for the others to beat the media scramble at the gate, I found my sexual desire twist up a notch, prompted by the rich, elegant women around me in their black finery. The eroticism of the old-fashioned funeral stirred me and I was lost.

More death, more death around me. Two months ago I had never seen a dead body. Now, I find them under the bed, with my dirty washing, in cereal packets. It's funny what you think about in situations like this but I suddenly remembered I still hadn't phoned Charlie since that ridiculous night in late September. I really *must* phone her soon.

Elwell's political allies stood shoulder to shoulder, erect with discipline. One or two shed a tear, which, so far from the media gaze, had to be genuine. The women wept – and there is no better word for it – inconsolably. *Why the fuck are you weeping, you hypocrites? Why? Why? Why? Why?* Francis Elwell was a good Xian. He's going to a better place. So why weep? As the massed throng dropped their heads in prayer, I kept mine still and erect. I was in no mood for concessions to god, even here, even now. As Francis Kenneth Elwell was laid to rest, my eyes circled the group one last time, leaping from black-veiled face to bowed head looking for any signs that someone there might have wanted Elwell dead. I was stopped in my progress at Jemima, Imogen's mother. I stared at her mature, vintage beauty beneath the delicate veil which obscured her face. I couldn't take my eyes from her until a gust of wind lifted the veil. For a second, I caught Jemima Bowler-Clous smirking the broadest smirk I had ever seen.

Book 4

The last temptation

22

Abstract

– What do you see? I ask.

We are at the Tate. It is late November but don't ask me what day of the week it is. I've done fuck-all for the best part of a month, except sit at home and watch old Ironopolis videos and go out with Imogen, occasionally.

– Nothing, she replies blankly. Well, nothing real, anyway.

– You're not wrong there.

We are in the Rothko room. I know the 'American tourist' who shares the gallery with us is an Infantryman assigned to watch me. They have been watching me since ELWELL's funeral. And I am obliging. I use the phone to make my arrangements so they can be there ready for me (hearing my words on the tap). My real life has stopped though. I live a home counties life, doing home counties hobbies with my home counties wife and new home counties friends. I never use the home counties tube anymore. Instead, I use a home counties car. 'The tourist' hovers in my background watching everything I do, like my sponsoring Greek god, like a Rothko painting.

– Don't you think it looks like god? Imogen continues, oblivious to the Infantryman's presence with her untrained eye.

– Do you mean the holy trinity?

– Well, yes. That 's the obvious conclusion to draw.

– I think not.

– Why not, Mr Expert?

Before I speak, I look over my shoulder. 'The tourist' has been replaced by a bespectacled 'art critic'.

– Because to a Xian the elements of the holy trinity must be equal. To depict any part as greater or smaller than the others is heresy.

– You're very literal sometimes.

I am in full flow. I've not only caught up with the plot but I'm ahead, ahead of the others, winning. Linear logic is so right now, so tight now. I feel like a god. I've sacked *Paranoia*. I don't need her fussing around with her *Mr Sheene* in my brand-new, self-cleaning chrome and matt-black consciousness. Why didn't anyone tell me it was this easy? So I tell Imogen that belief in the resurrection is the only passport to the kingdom

of the Xian god. That you don't have to believe in it for long. If in your dying moment, for example, you decide to believe in the resurrection of Jesus X, you have a chance of getting in. If on the other hand, you spend your last moment thinking: 'Shit, this is it', you don't get in. At all. It's as simple as that.

The 'art critic' leaves. Two sixth form schoolgirls walk in. I look them up and down to decide whether they are two 'sixth form schoolgirls'. Imogen catches me and, thinking I am sizing up the teenage tottie, drags me back round by the arm.

– Damien, I am here, you know, she hisses. – Put your bloody tongue in, before you trip over it.

The two sixth formers – X, they look young – suss Imogen's displeasure and smile at me knowingly. Invitingly. Coquettishly. I conclude they can't be Infantry.

– Let's put it like this, I proffer. – Adolf Hitler spends the best part of his life on earth overseeing the single greatest massacre of a population the west has ever seen apart, of course, from the massacre of the plains Indians by the white settlers in America. But I digress. Anyway, Hitler or any of those settlers has a chance of getting into heaven because he believes in the resurrection.

Others filing into the gallery – there either for the quiet contemplation of absolute certainty that only Rothko can bring or to watch and note my demeanour – stare disapprovingly at Imogen, at first, then at me, waving my arms around. Imogen has forgiven me for not being around when ELWELL died. I shudder at what horror she would commit if she knew that my ex-girlfriend had murdered him with me unknowingly complicit in the denouement.

– Look at those brushstrokes. Go on, look at them, I urge, – get close.

I push Imogen to the painting so she is only about an inch or so from the actual canvas. An attendant eyes her, unsure how to approach a creature so beautiful, so remote from his world, so radiating natural authority.

– Look at that line, I urge again. – Perhaps I should make those cunts who protested outside *The Last Temptation Of X* stand in front of this and open their eyes.

– I like the Pollocks, she says pointing to the splashed canvasses, glimpsed through the high white dividing walls.

– Never mind the Pollocks. They're just teenage bedroom wall angst. Interior design for art college wankers.

– You're so very passionate, she chirps in that precocious little girl way, playing with her delicate burnished necklace draped around her delicate burnished neck.

– You should see me at a footie match.

– This is all a big pose, isn't it? You don't really like art, do you? You were using it to demonstrate your shy and sensitive artistic side. Weren't you?

– I wasn't honestly. But is it any bloody wonder us men are like that? No one takes us seriously when we give free rein to our emotions.

– It's OK, I'll come to the football.

Backdoor

– And I suppose you call this art.

I spin round to see Imogen in the corner of my bedroom holding up to me, like a used tissue, by its very extreme tip, a wankmag. We have been discussing whether I would be invited to Syd's wedding but that is suddenly so out of place. I stand silent and wait. Women don't understand porn. Some will tolerate it, others despise it, only a minority will *embrace* it. I wonder which Imogen will choose as I watch her leaf through my new copy of *Lesbian Labia*, while I squirm on the spot.

– 'Fuck my girlfriend while I lick your balls', she enunciates in her Oxford English, slowly and deliberately reading out captions to photographs of peroxide blondes stretching their cunt lips or their arse cheeks wide, wide open. – 'Shaven ravers lick each other'; 'Lesbian bull dykes fuck with giant clitties'; 'I'm a cum craver with anal lust'; 'Kayla Cupcakes – Butt-banged and creamed'; 'Madame Petra's Three Way Gash Bash'; 'Pop my backdoor cherry'.

– It's an anti-rape device, I blurt in my defence.

– What? 'A backdoor cherry'.

– No, wankmags...I mean porn.

– What did you call them?

– Nothing.

– Yes, you did. Come on, tell me.

Not for the first time, I am an adolescent boy under her spell.

Come on spit it out, boy.

– Wankmags, I whisper.

Speak up, boy, and share the joke with the rest of the class.

– Wankmags, she spits out in the way that only anglo-saxon can be spat out. – I suppose that just about describes them. Graphically but accurately. You don't pull any punches do you, Damien?

I sense my moment:

– You would've made a good wankmag model.

– What do you mean?

– Well, you've got the tits for it, I joke lunging forward and attempting to juggle them through her white blouse and balcony bra.

Imogen elbows me to one side and storms off out of the flat. As she disappears down the communal stairwell, I hear her shout:

– You're a fucking sick bastard.

23

Square

Me and Jason are stoned, pimp-shuffling through Eaton Square on the way to Imogen's flat for the first time. She's invited me to dinner to draw a line under that last episode. Occasionally, one of us speaks, saying to no one in particular:

- I'm stoned, or:
- I'm really out of it.

The other looks back in goggled-eyed fear and says:

- Likewise, or:
- Yeah, soameye.

Then we both giggle into the cold December night air.

- Jason, was it really a great fuckin idea to smoke so much before Imogen's dinner party?
- Why not?
- Cos I actually want to carry on going out with her.
- Jesus, you'll be telling me you've got *so much in common* next.

I have broken my drug-fast as I'm bored being suspended from work. Although I've made my peace with Imogen after the wankmag incident, I haven't told her about my suspension as I can't think up a convincing enough reason for it. I also fear she might somehow find out that I was implicated in her dear godfather's death despite the fact that everyone now appears to believe that it was accidental suicide – a self-inflicted sexual prank gone wrong. The Organisation is ruthlessly efficient, especially when vulnerable, so it has done a very professional job of covering its tracks, dangling the right sort of stories in front of the newspapers. In fact, only the other day, a brunette (not Dolores disguised as Natasha) told all to the newspapers about how she was ELWELL's mistress and that he often tried auto-erotic asphyxiation despite her concerns. By the end of it, I nearly believed the stories myself.

I'm left wondering, though, why I personally haven't been treated more harshly. I know I still have the disciplinary committee to come and then they might... what? I turn from the train I have embarked upon and, putting it down to dope-induced fear, look at Jason and say rather than ask:

– Fancy a quick one for the road? Just as we arrive outside Imogen's flat.

Addict

Let me, tell you about Jason Conscript, one of life's drifters and my best mate. Unlike most drifters, he drifts into high performance, high mileage, contact-me-any-time jobs. He's bothered by nothing. He comes from what is popularly called a broken home, as in his parents divorced when he was 10, at the same age and at the same time I was divorced from Ironopolis but unlike his father I exercised my visiting rights as often as logistically possible. But Jason rode this like he has ridden everything. Since I've known him, he's been £30,000 in debt without any prospect of employment and occasionally homeless, usually as a result of an eviction order from the small claims court when six or seven months in arrears. He's also walked out – as in got up from his desk at 11:15 one Thursday morning and *walked out* – on a £50,000 a year job in business intelligence. And, once, he was up before the beak for driving while drunk, without a licence, without insurance and under the influence of drugs (they banned him for three years but he doesn't take any notice).

Now, he's a free-lance clairvoyant, a *wonga* clairvoyant. He has the best sort of job a maverick chancer like him can hope to have: he gambles with other people's money. He helps those who have grotesque – or sublime, depending on your point of view – amounts of money, with their fortunes and futures. His clients are usually pop stars for whom, Jason has said, the phrase 'more money than sense' must surely have been coined. But Jason's growing bored with other people's money. He's told me he is actively thinking of leaking stories to the press about his amorous liaisons with one of his clients, Kuki Karioki, lead singer of Damsels in Distress. Jason wants to raise his media profile because there is, apparently, even easier money in fame for fame's sake than in money itself. Of course, he doesn't actually have amorous liaisons with Kuki Karioki but he does invest her squillion dollar a year salary which requires the odd, conspiratorial business meeting in the *Bartchester* hotel and which might provide an intriguing scenario for a *Scorcher* photographer with the right tip-off. And who knows, with Jason's talent for clairvoyance, it might even become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Casual acquaintances think Mercenary or Survivor would be more appropriate surnames than Conscript. But close friends know that he doesn't do it for the money. He just drifts into it. And the money just drifts in. Before it drifts out again – at twice the rate. Neither would friends call Jason a survivor because to him there is nothing to survive, just strange new worlds to seek out and explore. But to the Organisation, he once posed a dangerous subversive threat to any one or any combination of the following in the UK: parliamentary democracy, national security, economic well-being. I should know. I've read his file.

Whim

Me and Jason fall into Imogen's plush faux rustic interior flat, hurring and harring like Beavis and Butthead, fizzing from the joint we had in the street. As I try to drink in the environment, I see the world in the first person camera movements of a cheap sci-fi movie, used to save on the costs of making up the alien or show its other-worldly point of view. It always seems so strange, so unnatural, so obviously self-conscious in the cinema and yet this is human experience: how we all see the world. My camera pans to Jason whose lids are heavy, whose face is skew-whiff staring forlornly first at Imogen, then at a slim, flawless brunette and then at a pretty but reserved sloane whose Alice band seemed only to confirm she was sexually repressed.

– Let me introduce you to Jemima Harrison-Smith, Imogen declares, gesticulating towards another woman with dirty-snow skin, rusty brillo pad hair and splotches of cancerous-looking freckles. – This is Harvey Rogers, Jocelyn Twigg, and Francesca Goforth. And of course you know Alex Preston although I don't believe you've met Patricia Whimsy, Alex's fiancée and soon to be his wife, Imogen continued gesturing – she would never do anything as rude as point – at the Repressed Sloane.

Jason ignores Jemima and makes straight for the brunette who is by deduction, Francesca Goforth. She looks uneasily at his cheesy grin before offering her hand limply and enunciating through her nostrils:

– I don't believe we've been introduced.
– Jason Conscript, king of the wide grin leer, he smiles kissing her hand.
– Jason, I hiss, – you're making a bloody fool of yourself.
– Not half as much as I'm going to, he chirps back to the exclusion of everyone else.

I shake hands, extra firmly, with all present and peck Imogen politely on the cheek, drawing on her vanilla and musk perfume. While I wonder if she's guessed that I'm stoned, she gets us around the rustic table with a regal wave of the hand. Jason sits on one side of me and Imogen on the other so I'm not exposed to the perilous small talk. Jason the raconteur leads the conversation while I follow the conversation two or three seconds behind everyone else, as I have to translate the echoes and vibrations into recognisable diphthongs, then into speech I can understand. The sounds are of university and I realise Jason has something in common with the throng – he went to Oxbridge.

– Oh really, I hear someone say, – which college did you go to? which they take as their cue to drone on about tin-pot personalities and otherwise long-forgotten events.

Eventually, I strike up a dull, meaningless conversation with Harvey, who is sitting opposite me, about stocks and shares. His face is flushed like he has consumed too much port despite his tender years. I nod sagely, no longer so out of it, as he advises me to put money in all the building societies as they're about to become *demutualised* – whatever that means – and I can make 'significant gains at zero risk'. I hope to fuck no one starts talking about house prices or I'll lose it again. I listen to Harvey's *Which Investment?* spiel

intently, although wishing all the time I could have Imogen to myself. Just then, Jason leans across and whispers, just as I take a slug of Pinot Grigio:

– He scares me. He’s got more money than me.

Failing to suppress a fit of the giggles, I splutter the cold, crisp fluid over Harvey. It fizzes, like sulphuric acid in a Hammer Horror film, against his well-spanked face.

– You bloody idiot, you absolute bloody idiot, he cries in his Old Etonian tones, with his Old Etonian arrogance.

– I’m sorry, I smirk, trying not to. – It was an accident.

Imogen comes rushing through from the open-plan kitchen I have been forbidden from entering lest I make her feel inferior, I am told, about her cooking when compared with mine.

– Damien, what are you like? She groans like a mother trying to scold a mischievous child she has neither the time nor real inclination to condemn. – He did this to me, you know, she rejoins while wiping Harvey’s face for him.

She recounts the story of how we met and every one winces sharply as she describes the ‘awfulness’ of it all. Harvey nips off to the toilet and Syd Preston leans across to me, slightly drunk, and sloshes and slurs:

– I’m glad you did that. Harvey’s such an utter bore.

Addict

I have known Jason Conscript since I was twelve. We met on the first day of big school. I had to integrate after spending two years as an outsider at primary school after my arrival from Ironopolis. Jason had spent many years moving around with his father’s work as an international auditor. This saw him live in Italy (his father was half-Italian but was born in the US and was very American from what I understood from Jason), Greece, Cyprus and Turkey until his father left Jason, his mother and his sisters to fend for themselves in the home counties. Jason was as dispossessed as I was. I had though lost my accent, just about, after a number of kickings at primary school for being ‘a northern cunt’. At the time, Jason spoke with a curious inner London accent and added the interrogative ‘innit?’ after everything he said. Or least he did until form 2A took the piss out of him so mercilessly that he consciously dropped it which in turn gave rise to another vicious rumour – that he had had elocution lessons – and another round of pisstake.

I had to find a new role to ingratiate myself with my new peers as all my friends from primary school had gone to the posh grammar school on the other hill. I wasn’t particularly tall, hard, intelligent or good at football, even though I loved the game. And, to make matters worse, I was scared. I was petrified of the big kids, like Martin Pretty, who I met with Jason on our first day. You could tell from his five o’clock shadow that he already shaved regularly – even though he was 12 like us. And no one ever, ever, in our six years at The Oliver Cromwell Grammar School took the piss out of his name.

At school, for the first year or so, we all jostled for position, like the young stags we were. I had always been tallish for my age but suddenly I was small. Others shot up around me but I steadfastly remained a bit over five foot. The good roles went to the hard kids who filled out early. I became the class clown, the joker, the idiot. It was the only way I could fit in. The only thing I was half-decent at. Pissing around. And Jason became my partner in crime. I think we both knew the real reason we stuck together: because we were scared of the hard kids. Nothing changes. Now we stick together because we're scared of the posh kids. We both also knew we could pass the exams, not with flying colours but well enough to stay in the top stream of this second rate grammar school.

Top stream in the second rate. Me and Ironopolis, eh?

Half an hour later, I am warming to the occasion as the cold wine sinks to my gut and begins to seep slowly into my speech. Jason has given up flattering Francesca, the ice queen in the corner. Imogen fetches the food from the kitchen. She lugs a great tureen back, draws off the lid with false drama and plunges the ladle into the rather un-Italian looking tomato sauce, serving everyone around the table in turn. They sniff and taste it, murmuring their contentment. Jason leans over to me once again and I look at him with dread.

– It's some kind of student pasta wank, he whispers to me and me only.

I convulse and quickly get up from my seat and go to the bathroom, trying to suppress another fit of the giggles. In the bathroom, I toke quickly on a grass joint and Jason turns up, intuitively sensing this scenario in the *lavatory*.

– Eh, Damien. That bird Francesca's a bit posh.

– Yeah, you could use her pubes for dental floss...

– ...and shite for toothpaste.

– Mind you, I confide, – I don't really fancy her. Too thin for my liking. Arse like a 14 year old boy.

– I like birds like that, he says grabbing the joint off me without asking.

– Yee're a fuckin hermasecksewal, I riposte, as we both falling about giggling.

Despite our friendship, me and Jason spent the better part of our first two years at big school beating the hell out of each other. In fact, before I head-butted Jason's friend, Gerry (or was it Terry?) the other week, I think the last person I hit in anger was Jason – when we were 14 or 15. But we really bonded when Jason got grassed up for shoplifting by a mate. We used to shoplift all the time. I think it was the second of my addictions after football had established the familiar but dangerous behaviour patterns that I am still paying for today.

But Jason and me really became mates when at 16 we discovered a semi-legitimate, common pursuit. Girls. It was safety in numbers and we soon figured they hung about in pairs so we would increase our chances by going on the pull together. The phrase we used more often than any other must surely have been: 'Don't think much of yours,

mate,’ as we argued about which of us would target which of the two girls sitting together. The discussion was largely irrelevant though. Despite the best laid plans of mice and men, we had virtually a 100% record – of failure.

And we did anything, absolutely anything, to meet them. We joined drama groups, went to dreadful 1980s discos (all boob tubes and rahrah skirts, how I loved birds in rahrah skirts); hung around in theatres and art galleries; and as we got older, went to the obligatory pubs and parties. We even went to a meeting of the Young Conservatives in the hope of meeting some Lucinda or Veronica who fancied a bit of rough (and by the standards of the western home counties, lower middle class grammar school boys were the bits of rough). We talked the same talk and even dated the same girls in some cases. Jesus, the proto-aga-sagas we had with Vicki, Nicki and Jacqui from the age of 15 to 18. It must have been worth a mini-series at least. Even Jason’s brief fling with Vicki when I was fucking her didn’t undermine our friendship.

When we went to our different colleges, I became a new man and read *Cosmo* – know your enemy, I reasoned – and Jason flirted with communism to impress and ultimately to sleep with some right-on feminist. (I still haven’t told him that the Organisation has a file on him for his association with this bird who was on the X-List for being a local organiser of the Communist Party. If the balloon had ever gone up, the Organisation had agents in place to assassinate those on the X-list, forthwith).

And then, at the start of my second year at college, we fell out and didn’t speak for nearly five years.

Haika

When Jason and I have finished the joint, we return to the polite company around the *faux* rustic table. I catch the eye of Patricia Whimsy for the first time and smile at her. She smiles back and, encouraged by this, I offer her titbits about ‘Syd’ and the Caledonian Haika, when the rugby team would all stand in a circle and wank and the last one to come had to drink a pint of once-around-the-optics. As Patricia blanches, Syd who has been getting ever more agitated as I recount his misdemeanours, rises to his feet and snarls:

– You know what your trouble is, Deano? You’ve never learnt to grow up.
Everyone else who left Cally managed to do something worthwhile but you.
You’re like some student leftie or hack poet still.

Syd knows he has breached dinner party etiquette but elects to continue his assault:

– Some of us work hard for a living and could do without your constant carping from the sidelines. You just hid away from the world with some trollop who no one else was allowed near and who binned you because she couldn’t stand the fuckin sight of you anymore.

Jason and I burst into another fit of giggles as if Mrs Prendegast has told us off in fourth year French for the fifth or sixth time that lesson while Pattie Whimsie-kins chastises Syd for swearing in front of a dinner party.

– It's not big and it's not hard, says Jason and everyone laughs deeply and genuinely, grateful for the opportunity to break the incipient nastiness.

And, as if to prove to Syd I do have a serious job, my pager emits its plaintive and repetitive whine. Making my excuses, I walk to the corner of the room wondering what the Organisation could assess to be so heinous that it was worth breaking my gardening leave. TV images pop into my mind, like I am surfing the global media, leaping from channel to channel of *Disaster TV*. DTV1 shows some Arab suicide bomber taking out the Queen, caught on a punter's hand-held. DTV2 relays scenes of communist insurrection in Ironopolis as workers hurl Molotov cocktails at the army units brought in with the introduction of martial law. Elsewhere on satellite, CNN follows in the wake of Scuds headed for Israel and Kuwait from Iraq like a computer game war while dour state telly in Iraq proclaims a great victory and looks forward to the *grandmother* of all conflicts.

I punch in the code on my pager, 28/5/88/BERNIE, and watch the characters roll across the screen like impotent Space Invaders.

```
> DEANO, I KNOW YOU'RE IN THERE. I KNOW YOU'RE IN THE  
FIRST FLOOR FLAT OF 146A BELGRAVE SQUARE. I SAY  
'THERE' BUT IT MIGHT BE HERE. I MIGHT JUST BE IN HERE  
WITH YOU, WATCHING YOU, PROTECTING POOR FRANCESCA OR  
IMOGEN FROM YOU.
```

I swivel and cast my gaze across to the table but no one reacts and no one looks like they're deliberately trying not to react. I pour over the rest of the message:

```
> POOR OLD FRANCIS ELWELL, EH? YOUR GIRLFRIEND OR YOU TO  
BLAME? YOU'RE AS BAD AS EACH OTHER, AREN'T YOU? YOU  
STILL HAVEN'T MADE MUCH PROGRESS WITH FIONA MCKEIGHLEY  
HAVE YOU? TIME IS RUNNING OUT, YOU EVIL BASTARD. YOU  
WILL PAY THIS TIME. OH, BY THE WAY, IF YOU LOOK OUT OF  
THE WINDOW YOU MIGHT JUST SEE ME IF YOU'RE QUICK ENOUGH.  
I'M STANDING UNDER THE LAMPPOST WAITING FOR YOU TO TALK  
TO DEAR, REPRESSED PATRICIA WHIMSY. YOU SCUM. THE  
RATCATCHER. 10:45 PM TUESDAY 6TH DECEMBER 1994
```

Box

When me and Jason fell out in October 1985, it was nothing to do with girls which would have been the obvious thing to really fall out over. I cocked up my A-levels and went to Cally because it was the only uni where I could find a place – still, I got four years out of it which was the basic course in Scotland – but Jason, who did seventh term Oxbridge, got accepted by Corpus Xi. I remember things were a little tense when I came back after my first term. I expected my mates who'd stayed behind to be exactly the

same people when I got back. I mean, X, it was only ten weeks. But it had all changed. Jason and I worked in some arriviste home counties pub that Xmas, me to pay off the debts I've never actually paid off, and him to get cash together for inter-railing or some other box he could tick off his poncey student itinerary.

After eight months abroad working, he more or less went straight 'up' to Cambridge. I phoned him a few times but all he could ever talk about was bloody inter-railing or 'travelling'; his time in Bodrum and then Bangkok; and after that, Cambridge. As he was telling me a particularly tedious story about some great backpacker he met called Jeb or Seb or Jez, I just hung up. And that was that. We didn't exchange a single word from October 1985 to June 1990 – although we learnt of each other's exploits through mutual friends.

Then, back in the home counties for a Syd Preston's party in June 1990 -- co-incidentally the one where I met Charlie for the first time -- I phoned up Jason and we got on like we'd never left off.

I charge across to the French windows, throw them open and launch myself on to the balcony. I stare into the misty, December evening, my eyes darting from lamppost to lamppost like fireflies but there is no one there. My heart is beating 'like fuck' and everyone is staring at me as I shout obscenities into the damp street. As I return to the throng, I try to convince the open-mouthed assembly, still sitting there with half-full bottles, glasses and plates in front of them, that it is some Office joke but Imogen excitedly informs them that I work *in intelligence*. I try to tell them they don't want or need to hear about my work but they insist.

When tested, my cover story is useless. I try to tell them I work for MI5 but Harvey's father used to work for *Box*, as it is known in the trade, so he catches me out with simple questions. Syd spends fifteen minutes exploiting these breaches in my defence, clearly endeavouring to make me look a fool. Imogen, looking slightly distressed, is about to intervene when we all turn our attention to a scratching at the front door. It opens to reveal Jemima, Imogen's mother, who Imogen whines at for being there, that night.

– Imogen, my dear, she declares airily, – I've been consoling Yvonne over at Zefferano's. She really is absolutely distraught. I mean the ignominy of it. One's spouse exposed like that in the tabloids.

Meanwhile, I just get up and walk out on to the balcony, still shaken from the Ratcatcher's latest missive, and gulp down the thick night air.

Bully

– You look like you need a cigarette.

I wheel around to find Jemima. She extends an elegant but wrinkled hand, offering me one of her Dunhills. Why is it the hands that always give them away? Hell, I can hardly talk, though, she has fewer wrinkles around her eyes than I have – and she must be nearly fifty. I forget I have given up smoking so I take it gratefully. She lights it for me and I draw on it greedily.

- You look like you *really* needed that.
- Yeah, I’ve given up, you see, I explain, drawing on the spicy nicotine. – In fact, this is only my fourth cigarette in over two months.
- Counting is a bad sign.

Still intoxicated, I invite Jemima to tell me about Elwell’s college days and she recounts a bizarre tale, like she is revealing the most heartfelt confidences when she is doing nothing of the sort. Apparently, Elwell was bullied mercilessly at Cambridge for his grammar school background, Hugh took Francis – or Frankie, as he was known at first – under his wing and taught him how to be a gentleman. And it worked. To start with, Francis apparently felt sorry for himself but he soon grew in stature, gained confidence and ceased to take any tosh from the ex-public school boys. At one point, he was outdoing them in the spoilt bad boy stakes but then suddenly he changed and started pouring all his energies into politics.

When she stops and draws heavily on her Dunhill, I want to ask her about that smirk at Elwell’s funeral but I’m distracted by the way she hoovers up her cigarette while maintaining the elegance of a Reynolds portrait. I have never seen a woman inhale so much smoke in one breath. It all just vanishes; there is no exhalate. When Jemima re-addresses her story, it is clear she does not know just how much information she can provide to an intelligence officer like me without her realising it.

- Why the change? I ask trying not to let my gaze fall on her cleavage.
- I’ve no idea, she replies looking into my eyes. I am bewitched. If I didn’t know better, I might think his woman fancied me. – It was around the same time that Hugh and Francis lost their intimacy. I suppose Francis saw that Hugh had given him everything he could and it was time for Francis to look elsewhere. New horizons and all that.
- Did Francis ever get into trouble at college? I ask, drawing on the cigarette and ostentatiously exhaling to break her hold over my eyes.
- Not that I can think of, although I know he went through a drinking and gambling phase but I think that was one last fling before he settled down to politics.
- Was he ever a bit of a lefty?
- A bit in the earlier days. He used to chide Hugh for his background. But he quickly became a dust-dry conservative, which was relatively unusual in those days.
- He certainly stood up to the unions as health secretary.
- Well, that’s right, answers Jemima taking to her theme with enthusiasm. – He always saw them as bully boys who didn’t protect the working class because

they, the unions that is, were too busy trying to foment revolution. And Francis never liked bullies.

– Are you two coming through? Imogen shouts from the lounge.

As we walk back in together I shudder as Jemima touches the goosebumps on my arm and says:

– You're so cold. You're shivering.

I smile a piss-weak-tea smile as I flutter inside. In the lounge, I am stunned to see Imogen sitting on the floor cross-legged skinning up with Jason attentively awaiting the joint. The others have gone. I think I pissed them off.

– I've got a date with Frankie Goforth, chirps Jason.

– How the fuck do you do it? I reply. – And what are *you* doing? I ask Imogen in mock-disgust.

She looks up and chides:

– Damien, you really can't think that I didn't notice you were absolutely blotto tonight. Anyway I like the occasional smoke. The others have gone. Apparently you are invited to Alex and Patricia's wedding, after all.

Imogen proffers me an ostentatious, sculpted white card which displays the usual flowery lettering and flowery language. In the space for the guest's name is written in black fountain pen ink: 'Imogen Bowler-Clous' and scrawled next to it in black biro 'and guest'.

Sleeper

With little to do over the next few days and feeling chronically embarrassed at my late night behaviour at Imogen's *after* the dinner party, (the less said, the better) I lounged around in bed convincing myself that ELWELL was a Soviet sleeper. It was obvious. He was second generation nouveau riche. He probably hated his father and had rejected his values in the only way he knew how: he had espoused communism. I began to weave a fantastic plot in my head. The Soviets recruited ELWELL at Cambridge because they knew he didn't fit the usual middle class Establishment profile. They told him not to get involved with the Communist Party at Cambridge because it was too full of MI5 or Organisation spies.

He was probably reluctant to take tasking from the Soviets initially as his espousal of communism had only been a way of getting back at his father rather than as a result of any deep ideological commitment. But – and this is where it began to make sense – the Soviets blackmailed him about the illegitimate child so he had to do what they wanted. Before he knew it, ELWELL was pushed into politics and subsequently government. His treatment of the unions was perfect cover. It was also perfectly consistent that, despite the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russians would continue to use his services, particularly as he was promoted to cabinet around the same time. Who would suspect someone like

him of being a Soviet sleeper? Jesus, why did they all come from the A11 branch of Oxbridge? If ELWELL our defence minister *was* a Soviet sleeper, how many secrets had he passed to the other side? I paused to draw breath. I never I thought I would say it but I longed to go back to work.

Then, I realised there was one very sinister question I had so far failed to ask myself: if Dolores Kane was tasked to kill Francis ELWELL, who was she working for and why? Was it the Russians? The Libyans? The Organisation? And if it was the Organisation, why go through with Operation PANGOLIN with me in charge?

24

Partytime

I hate the run up to Xmas. Don't get me wrong. I don't have any problem with the festival itself. We all know now the Xians nicked it off the pagans so I'm quite happy to celebrate Saturnalia, Yule or whatever it is. No, I hate the run up to Xmas because the pubs are even more dreadful than normal. Central London is littered with the walking wounded of the 'festive' piss up season. Amateur drinkers from the home counties crash and burn in the street, letting off their leery mating call of 'Merry Xmas, everybody's having fun' to other amateur drinkers and new found mates. The female of the species offers her arse, metaphorically of course, like a baboon on heat as the Greater Spotted Kevins, *officebois acnepus*, drive home their drink-induced advantage in the male pecking order.

I brave this cold and miserable Serengeti of promised copulation and next-day denial as I walk across Leicester Square on my way to a dinner date with Charlotte Preston at some new glass and chrome place that I've been to before, apparently. (She is claiming it on expenses, thank god). Although I'm still suspended, it has been an eventful couple of weeks since Imogen's dinner party. I have, in my own handwriting recognisable to Syd, very kindly replied to his wedding invitation, then I got Imogen to sign it and postscript it: 'I shall of course be bringing a guest, Mr Damien Dean'.

Imogen went away long haul last Friday, the 9th, and is only due back for the wedding, in a couple of days time, just before Xmas. The day before she left I got another communication from 'The Ratcatcher', the second in three days, but this time to my e-mail address, rather than to my pager. The e-mail said:

Subject: More trouble
Date: 08/12/94 03:47:16
From: Ratcatcher@hotmail.com
To: Iros88@aol.com (Damien Dean)

Deano

Good dinner party, you terrible cunt? Hope I ruined it for you.

You're really not playing 'the game' properly. Are you? If you don't find out who 'Fiona McKeighley' is soon, I cannot be held accountable for my actions. Are you prepared for that?

Unlike you, I am not an unfair man. I will give you a 'sporting chance'. Go north, you fuckwit. Back to your alma mater. Back to your second rate university. And then, you just might just find what I have in store for you. Meanwhile I am after 'your girlfriend', the Golightly woman, because I know that she, like you, was responsible for 'murder'.

I am giving you a clue. Katherine Marton may hold the 'key'.

Go rot in a cell
'The Ratcatcher'

I still had no idea who he or she could be or how they knew my e-mail address. (Discreet enquiries established that the Organisation has no way of establishing real subscribers to *Hotmail* addresses so I replied with a skipload of obscenity). After reading and re-reading the original to see if there was anything that might give the Ratcatcher's identity away, I had written to Amy at home to try and identify Fiona McKeighley from the Organisation's records. Amy knew she was taking a risk contacting me but I had persuaded her in the letter that I believed Fiona McKeighley was genuinely in danger of her life. Amy had phoned back, from a callbox, of course, the following week with full identifying details as follows:

Name: Fiona Farquarson McKeighley
DOB: 30.7.66
Add: 1987: Flat 7, 53 Hanover Street, Edinburgh.
1985: 13 Carnoustie Lane, Edinburgh.

Just as I had been about to heave a sigh of relief, Amy had added:

- Deceast, earlie owrs of 7 May 1989. Murdered. Caise unsolvved. Feeoretically, it's stillw ohp'n bu' no one's 'eadin it at ve momen' so i' maiy be difficul' ta folla ap. Kaffrin Marton's not iyden'ified. Anyway, why'd you wanna know?
- Don't ask, I had replied rather than burdening her with my hatstand life.

I had resolved to go to Edinburgh immediately but circumstances, as usual, conspired against me. Being suspended from work, meant I had spent even more *wonga* than usual. It just slipped through my fingers as I sat around in cafes, ate out, bought magazines; went to the cinema up West or to bars in the city; and traveled to the Iros home and away. (This included a rather demoralising defeat in the 5th round of the Coca Cola Cup away at Birmingham City). In short, December's pay packet had long since gone the way of all flesh along with the £2,000 I'd made for the 'You and whose army story'. (I had particularly enjoyed spending that. Spending money you haven't really earned is *pornographic*. No wonder the fat cats take such delight in awarding themselves such whopping rises, bonuses and share options). I couldn't afford to go to Edinburgh. And anyway, what could I do for a woman long since murdered?

That was the Thursday. Thursday 15th. On the Friday, I had been sitting innocently at home in Westminster watching Ironopolis videos from the 1991/92 season onwards, when there was a knock at the door. Not a buzz downstairs but an actual knock on the front door of my flat. The only other time that had ever happened, I had my one and only encounter with a real aristocrat. The Viscount Woolmer, who has his *pied a terre* upstairs, asked me to look after his fish. But that's another story. Given the events of the last few months, I called out gingerly to those at my door. The reply came:

- DS Brixton and DC Holloway. We'd like to ask you a few questions.

I invited them in and spoke at some length about my movements of the night of 22 September. In clever films, policeman always weigh up their words and pause with intelligent menace, like they've just stepped out of Pinter. These had just stepped out of the swamp.

- Do you ever use the cover of working as a journalist as part of your anti-drugs work? They had asked.
- Do you know a redhead called Dolores? They had put to me later.
- You are DC *Damien* Dean, aren't you? They had sought to verify.

I repeated the story I had told them two months ago in *The Pink Pussy* as honestly as I could remember it: yes, I was working undercover as a journalist. Yes, I was trying to identify a Dolores who, I had lied, seemed to be the connection to the drugs cartel we were closing in on. No, I hadn't fully identified her but she had gone missing in recent weeks and we were wondering if the operation had been blown by enquiries made elsewhere. I explained that I had developed a professional relationship with the barmaid at *The Pussy*, Leslie Martin, who was unwittingly providing information on the drug cartel. And, no, neither Dolores or Xabel Bontempi had ever been to my flat. Not the night of the murder, not at any time.

DS Brixton did most of the talking while DC Holloway took notes. DS Brixton worried me by walking around the room and fingering the various bits and pieces on the mantelpiece.

Then, just before they left, he picked up a small bag of grass – which had been hidden by a bottle on the mantelpiece – threw it onto the coffee table and said:

– You really should learn to leave your work in the office.

I cringed but smiled openly – what else could I do? – as he laughed contentedly. DC Holloway joined in and we all chuckled heartily. And then they left, happy with their work.

As I walk past *The Pink Pussycat*, I fight *The Urge* to nip down the worn steps just to check if either Dolores or Leslie is there. (I still think *they're* watching me so I don't want to be seen *there*). Anyway, I figure that Dolores is flat on her back now, bronzing herself in the infernal sun of some Caribbean island. I crane my neck to look into the grotto below, only to pull away as two sexy Santas wobble up the steps on steep stilettos, bitching each other up. They call to me but I am already well on my way to Oxford Street. After Marilyn, I'm not taking any chances.

Where was I, now? Oh, yes, the coppers had come round Friday. Saturday, I was watching Ironopolis in a disappointing home draw to Reading when DC Ron Durham approached me out of the blue and asked me to be at the Boxing Day match because by then, he would have something very important to share with me. I still do not know whether Durham is aware I have been suspended or if, *in spite of knowing*, he wants to give me something. Otherwise, why not just send it to the Organisation at the usual Box 850X address?

Then on the Monday, Simon Register phoned.

– No hard feelings, he said, the cheeky sod.

He then went on about Dolores – or Delilah, as he called her – at great length. Sensing my last chance to get anything out of her, I suggested a no-hard-feelings drink. Him, her and me. But, of course, he had to check with her first. Then, he said something which chilled me to my core:

– I bet Imogen's not too pleased about your investigation not picking up that ELWELL was suicidal. Still, the funeral looked OK on the telly.

I pleaded with him to tell me when he would next see Dolores but he refused as, he claimed, he couldn't predict my behaviour towards her. So we agreed to see each other at Syd's wedding, if not before.

– And, no, he concluded our conversation, – Delilah is not coming.

Tuesday, yesterday in fact, I phoned DC Holloway to ask what they were doing about the murders of the two skinheads, that I had, of course, heard on the radio the same morning as I had heard of the death of Xabel Bontempi. He put me in touch with his boss, D Supt Fullsutton, who claimed to know nothing about them. I despaired at the Met's inability to share information, even between departments.

Then today, with four days to go to the safety of Xmas, Charlie phoned out of the blue, saying she had some very interesting information about Imogen – which she could only impart over dinner, in person.

I first met Charlie when she had just turned 17, the summer after she had left Wycombe Abbey school. The Preston seniors had flown off on their annual jaunt to *Exotica* – whichever location her mother Joan had chosen that year. Joan had two requirements in a holiday destination: a sun powerful enough to significantly top up her all year mahogany tan and enough local Culture to insist to the *beau monde* of the home counties that there was some form of educational value in her trip. In fact, she didn't even see the Culture unless it was on the route from the local airport. Instead, Joan depended on detailed guide books which she read intently while sunning herself on the beach.

Syd had been hassling me to 'get your arse out of Edinburgh for a weekend of drink, drugs and debauchery in the wild home counties' but I had been reluctant to go. I had had no money and no legal way of accessing any. He told me that Debi Mitchelin, my recent ex, was to have been there, as if that was supposed to be some sort of incentive, which it wasn't. And, if I had been honest with myself, Syd had become more of a getting-out-of-it partner than a real friend. But I went in the end because it was a party (where else could I meet birds?) and I enjoyed the challenge of getting to the home counties from Leith, Edinburgh with no money. I remember Charlie and some of her friends being round the Preston place that evening but I had largely ignored them on the grounds they were jailbait – and some of them actually were – although I do recall thinking Charlie had something more to her than her contemporaries.

In fact, I still remember the first words Charlie said to me. They were:

– I didn't know Alex had so many dishy friends.

So she was a charmer, even then, even just turned seventeen. We quickly agreed we were both glad to be away from the booze-fuelled matey-ness of Syd's contemporaries from both his schools. This proved to be the excuse she was looking for to strike up a conversation although, by that time, I knew that the bottle of ether Jason had stolen from Dr Preston's surgery had been a bad idea. (He was later found comatose in the High Street, a great way to celebrate us seeing each other for the first time in five years). But I still struggled to maintain some dignity in front of the attractive but young woman in front of me. With all the purpose of Sisyphus, I lifted my head again to look into her eyes, only for it to flop to my chest again. I was determined to stay sitting upright, though.

I don't know what happened after that but I do remember thinking one thing while I felt her pert little breasts through her wispy, little blouse and she inexpertly grated my groin through my trousers: 'How the hell will Syd feel about me getting off with his kid sister?' And it must have weighed heavily for all of what? About two seconds, probably. The next day I woke up in bed with a gorgeous posh 17-year old brunette.

C-list

Luz – pronounced ‘Lootz’ not ‘luge’ – is the usual combination of two distinct tribes. The after work crowd: flash, overpaid city Suits, all braying voices and forced laughter; and their Shoulderpad girlfriends, all neat bobs, neat boobs and neat arses; sporting their be-seen-with friendships. And the C-list celebs: Marco Fiasco, the alternative juggling act (not that I could see anything remotely ‘alternative’ about juggling); Tamara Trite-Colm, the It-girl; Ben Dobbs (and broomsticks, I always wanted to say), the Rite&Brite morning TV presenter; and Knut Case, the new Wankler jeans model, among others. But, of course, the Xmas accumulator has already raised the indulgence stakes.

As I sweep down the curved staircase, I am bewitched by the luminescence below, broken by the odd, erratic explosions from cameras, distended like machine guns. At each volley, I jump out of my skin, look for the monkey and leap out of shot. As a spook, the last thing I want is gratuitous exposure in the Sunday supplements, caught behind some third rate ‘personality’. Charlie looks up at me beaming as I approach the table. She is either high on the atmosphere or already high on something else. In her neat, red Chanel jacket and with her neat dark bob, she neatly blends in with the Suits and their Shoulderpad squeezes. She half-rises and we gingerly kiss air by each other’s cheeks.

– You look well, I say.

And she does. Work makes her blossom, makes her mature, gives her a sense of worth.

– You actually look well too, she declares, stepping back and marvelling at me, – for a change. Hell, Damien, it’s ages since we last saw each other. Or spoke to each other, for that matter. This Imogen bint must have some kind of hold over you. I’ve never known you be so hard to pin down as you’ve been recently. It must be voodoo. Or *love*.

I smile limply and bashfully. We pause for a second before we sit down to study each other more closely. Imbued with the Xmas spirit, I order two margaritas before filling her in on recent developments in my hatstand life.

– What’s the line, again? I ask, animated, as I get to the bit where the two polis find my dope in my flat. – ‘I could hardly piss straight with fear’ isn’t it? I shat myself, I’m telling you. One thick *Boudin Noir* turd just dropped into my pants and squatted there, like some amorphous, unspeakable toad.

– Why do you exaggerate so much, Damien? She asks giggling but plaintive.

– Because life’s so mundane.

– Yours isn’t. Not last time I saw you, anyway.

– I know. I think that’s why I’ve stopped exaggerating so much.

– So these coppers didn’t do anything about your grass?

– No, that’s the amazing thing. We all just laughed and they went on their way.

The waitress – or resting MAW, as she would no doubt describe herself – puts two margaritas down and, before she can coolly slink her way back to the bar, I swing round and – accidentally – ask her peachy little arse for two more. As I down the first, the

fizzing and buzzing I hadn't tasted for ages, for eons, since the pre-Cambrian era, dries my mouth like Bayonne ham. I lick the salt from my lips, like Sid James eyeing up a couple of 'smashers', and look hard at Charlie. I know she will be wearing her wankmag gear underneath her semi-prissy, bitch-hard exterior.

- Alex is behaving strangely lately, she rejoins. – Dunno whether it's the wedding or what.
- Didn't invite me, the bastard.
- Well, he did sort of, she replies fiddling with her Marlboro packet. – Anyway, he asked me the other week whether I took coke. So I told him I did and he went mad shouting: 'I'm going to get the underhand, snivelling little git'.
- What did he mean? I ask, taken aback. I've always had Syd down as on the make but nothing like this. – Jesus, he didn't mean me, did he?
- Well, I don't know because I don't know what the fuck he was talking about.

Charlie pauses to light her Marlboro and I long for one, like I long for her.

- You know what? She continues. – I think he's starting to lose it. Alex and Joan were away the other weekend in New York so I had some friends around.
- Syd, aged 30, went away with his mam. That is fuckin weird, I laugh as the waitress brings over another liquid nitrogen margharita.

It smokes. It bubbles. It spits. Beyond the visible spectrum, it is the potion Dr Jeckyll drank which turned him into a hairy monster or a sex maniac, depending on your cultural reference points.

- No, Alex as in daddy, you numbskull... She is about to berate me for being stupid when she realises I am winding her up. – Oh, Damien, you always do this.
- Well someone has to.
- Look, I'm trying to be serious, she whines. – I had a few media friends around for drinks and one of them was looking into the back garden when she screamed. We wondered what the hell was going on and then I saw Alex blind drunk in the back garden, hardly able to stand up. But the amazing thing was he had driven home from a country pub in Gloucestershire like that.
- Good work, fella.

Love it

So I don't really remember much of what happened that night at the Preston place when I first got off with Charlie in June 1990. I know that I haven't spoken to Syd much since then but we'd drifted apart anyway. He had to present an image to his lawyer colleagues while I simply carried on like I had never left college. Charlie swears she's never told him of that night or the relationship that developed so I don't think he knows. But he suspects.

After that night, Charlie pretended to Syd that she had plans to stay with a friend for the week, as it was her summer vacation from college, and very publicly offered me a lift into the metropolis. Before I knew it we were speeding up the M1 to Leith in Charlie's Golf GTi, which Daddy had bought for her 17th birthday. I hated to think what Leith would make of her but I was overwhelmed by the prospect of easy, stoned sex again. One-on-one with the keeper, my finishing instinct had deserted me and I was fed up of hearing the words: 'What are you doing? We're just good friends', as I tried to force the ball over the line -- so to speak.

It was also a convenient excuse to put off my thesis, *Mrs Loveit, I Bet She Does – The use and effects of innuendo in British Comedy from Shakespeare to Carry On*. As we drove in the pleasant heat, she beamed a smile from behind tortoiseshell Raybans which shielded her from any more of the warm sun. I remember wondering at the time how it would work out as she told me I was great in bed and I went to light a cigarette.

– Let me do that, she said with one hand on the wheel as we roared past Leicester Forest Service Station at 110.

Lighting my cigarette is one of the most erotic acts a woman can perform in front of me, in a car – in broad daylight, anyway. That sunny June afternoon, I watched captivated, as she took the Marlboro. I then waited for her to place it between her lightly-lipsticked pout. But she threw it out of the window and I was left mourning my last cigarette until the next service station, thirty miles on. She claimed it would do me some good. I failed though to see how missing one cigarette was going to reverse nearly ten years of thirty Marlboro a day but I tried to ignore the irritation I always felt when someone tried to take over my life – for my own good – and smiled.

– You young people, these days, I joked, – are into the healthy life, all Es and whizz but no fuckin baccy.
– Or swearing, she laughed before claiming she had to swear to stop the proles down the college thinking she was some terrible lower middle.
– I'm a bit of a prole, I said taking the opportunity to establish in her mind what I really was or how I saw myself then.

I explained my background in Ironopolis to her, the last three generations of Deans having all been born within a ten mile radius of the town centre and how my immediate family left to find work and prosperity in the home counties. As we zoomed under motorway bridges and past all the slow coaches, roaring like a football crowd, I confessed that my dad then worked in the city, as he does now.

– Very prole, she smiled

I explained he worked his way up in industry and then became an adviser to city firms after we had moved down to the home counties, in fact not far from where Syd and Charlie lived. Not far, at all. But I didn't like to talk about it.

– Ruins the working class credentials, I suppose, she chirped.

I open my gullet to throw down the margarita the waitress has left then urgently order more via semaphore. As I wave across to the area in front of the busy kitchen, I notice Jason Conscript walking down the art deco staircase with a redhead I recognise after a couple of seconds as Kuki Karioki. In her emerald green, spangly minidress, which only just contains the vital bits that everyone in *Luz* has probably already seen in *Bloke* magazine, she looks nothing like a damsel in distress. Sweeping majestically down the stairs, Kuki looks like Norma Desmond, tossing her thick, saffron hair as she comes to the last step. I try to catch Jason's eye but he is too busy looking cool – in the full knowledge that they are being both sized up by Alpha males, but for different reasons: they're trying to figure whether they can beat the crap out of him while sizing her up for a fucking – to notice or acknowledge me. (I've got to say Kuki looks a fecund creature with those 34DD breasts, 22 inch waist and 36 inch hips).

- Damien, this is serious, Charlie chides. I wheel my head back round to see her sip delicately at her first margarita. – He could have killed himself or someone else. Anyway, when I tried to put him to bed he started going on about how he didn't love Patsy and he wanted his true, long time love but couldn't have her as she had some duty to do or some such nonsense. I don't know whether it was just because he was mullahed or what. But he wouldn't talk about it the next day.
- Well, I always thought he could do better than Little Miss No-Muffet.

The waitress casually places two more margaritas on the table. I am tempted to ask if she does *Handjobs* but I don't think she'd get the joke. To her I'm a Suit. And the Suit says *cityboy*. While Charlie is my be-seen-with squeeze. Charlie and I order food and the resting MAW oscillates off towards the kitchen as flashbulbs explode in the hallucogenic atmosphere of *Luz*. A paparazzo is standing virtually on Jason and Kuki's table, firing volley after volley of explosive shots at them while they smile like they really are enjoying the experience. For a second, the MAW stops wiggling her arse and I see her drift off to Planet Stardom, Planet Catwalk, Planet Hollywood, all far, far away from work-a-day Lunar Satellite Luz.

- I'd rather have a Big Wonger than this over-priced nonsense, I confide to Charlie, hoping to distract her from the popping flashes. – Wouldn't you rather be at my place sucking strands of spaghetti vongole off my stomach?

Charlie doesn't smile. She pauses then asks:

- Who's that bloke with Kuki Karioki? I've seen him in something before.
- You met him years ago at one of Syd's do's. At your parents' place. That's Jason, my mate. I've told you about him.

I explain the background but she doesn't seem impressed by my association with Jason, like she thinks I'm making it all up. Then, something clicks, some spark shoots across two distant points and she shoots me a look right between my eyes.

- Damien, are you sure about Imogen?
- Do you mean 'Do I love her'??
- Look, I don't doubt that. But is she really all she seems?

I bristle with defensiveness. Hell, she's talking about the woman I love:

– Say what you mean, Charlie, I say tetchily and rather too harshly.

There is an awkward silence; all the more remarkable as it is the first I can recall between us.

– Damien, my lovely man, I don't want you to get hurt.

– What are you getting at? Almost a snarl.

– Who does she work for?

– Freebird Airlines.

– Do you know anyone else who works there?

– We all know it exists, I reply confidently. – There are enough bloody adverts for it. What is it again? *Fly like a Bird*.

– Look I happen to know someone else there. She's never heard of Imogen Bowler-Clous.

We argue about the significance of this, broken by an uneasy truce as the waitress puts down Charlie's Seafood Melange and my Carpaccio with Blue Cheese. I want to dive into Charlie but I wrong-foot her by diving into the carpaccio, tearing the raw flesh with my fork. It makes me bullish, like I want a fight. Or is that the margaritas?

– Damien, you can't just ignore inconvenient facts, Charlie continues, in her ever-so-reasonable voice. – She's lying to you all the time. On what basis is that to begin a relationship?

– Why the hell would anyone want to lie about being an airline stewardess?

– I think it may be something much, much worse.

And with that, the worst argument with Charlie I've ever had, begins and then continues over most of dinner. And we're not even properly drunk. I accuse her of not knowing her facts; she accuses me of being a snob (*Me?*); I accuse her of reading too many conspiracy theories; she accuses me of being lovelorn; I accuse her of being jealous of Imogen; she accuses me of being an egomaniac. I can barely raise the once happily chattering margarita to my lips. Meanwhile, Charlie sulks. Like a child, a spoilt child. She always gets what she wants at home, at school, at college, at work, with her mother, her father, her brother, her friends, her teachers, her lecturers, her bosses. And with me. But I'm not having it anymore.

– Coffee?

The word sounds as bitter as the cheap version tastes. I spit it out in thinly disguised disgust.

– N-n-n-no, she almost sobs in reply.

– I'll have one, I bark to the waitress who is clearly enjoying the spectacle. I wait until she has gone before I start on Charlie again: – Why don't you stop behaving like a spoilt child and grow up?

– Oh, Jesus X. That's is the most astonishing hypocrisy I have ever heard.

Damien, you'll be writing *Daily Wail* leaders next, she challenges, recovering her self control.

- I am not a fuckin hypocrite.
- That’s your problem, Damien Dean, you fuckin are. Everyone knows it – except you. You are so fuckin selfish.
- You’re just jealous because I’m screwing Imogen and you’re not screwing anyone because they’re fed up of Daddy’s spoilt little madam.

At this, she is off. She knocks a knife to the floor as she gets up which turns a hundred expensively and immaculately coiffured heads in our direction. I toast them all. Knowing she is in the limelight, Charlie shimmies between the tables just that bit too quickly which stops her exit from looking stately, dignified and ordinary to the assembled throng. I am satisfied in victory, dissatisfied with the ensuing peace. As the waitress brings my coffee, she presents the bill sandwiched between two perspex sheets. Like a Suit, I am about to comment how mouthwateringly tempting this polymer and paper sandwich appears compared to the food until I realise that Charlie is supposed to pick up the tab. I look around for Jason and Kuki but they are nowhere to be seen.

What’s more, I have no means of settling the £96.48 we owe Terence Conran.

25

Coupling

– Eeee, ah luuv a guid weddin, me, I whisper to Simon Register in the grand auditorium of the CofE church in West Ebury, Gloucestershire, – and dunt the brahd luik luuvli?

We are halfway through Syd Preston's wedding to Patricia Whimsy. It is Friday 23rd December, a strange day to have a wedding, but most people can get the day off work as Xmas is on a Sunday, this year. So far, I've avoided Charlie Preston after our argument two nights ago but I've been tempted to get alongside her and make another pitch, given the crimson, crushed velvet number she is wearing. For some reason, I'm not allowed to sit next to Imogen either in church or at the meal.

Every one in church always speaks in the hushed, overawed tones of the snooker commentary box so even I lowered my voice when proclaiming my adolescent scepticism, earlier. I mean, getting married in church when you are a fervent atheist just for the sake of the family. We stand up to mime the words of long forgotten school hymns, like 'The Lord's my shepherd, I shall not want' – which still strikes me as utterly turgid, even now, even though I finally sing it, knowing what the words actually mean. Then, the school assembly atmosphere sparks something within me. Furtively, I point to the pile of stacked hymnbooks next to Simon. He passes them to me and I put the pile on the pew of the row in front. As the hymn finishes, the full weight of Sparky Bobe's arse comes down on them and he and they tumble to the floor. The entire congregation spins around and collectively hushes him. With his eyes blinking twenty to the dozen, he ineffectually hisses me to:

– Watch it, Deano.

Then as we stand again for the vows, I take the pin from my carnation – or 'buttonhole', as Imogen insisted on calling it. I wait until the vicar gets to the 'If anyone knows any just impediment to why this couple should be joined in matrimony, speak now or forever hold thy peace' bit. I am just about to jab it into Sparky Bobe's arse when Simon Register spots my game and grabs my hand.

After that, the wedding is one long round of pink champagne, gin and tonic, real ale (I don't why either), mulled wine, pinot grigio, fruit punch (don't be fooled) and a home made brandy alexander (an obvious choice really, made by me with brandy, brandy, sugar, left over whipped cream from the trifle, Nescafe from my cup and more brandy).

Snow

I wake up on the floor of one of the guest rooms of Patricia Whimsy's parents. The day will be manageable but only if I don't have to lift my head off the floor. Just a couple of inches, easy does it... But it's too much. I never know what is worse in these situations:

- waking up with all your clothes on: clear evidence that you were incapable of undressing yourself;

Or

- waking up with nothing on, with the worrying implication that you either vomited over yourself or that you committed instantly regrettable sex acts with person or persons unknown.

Somehow, I have combined the worse elements of the two. I have my clothes on *and* I am covered in sick. I turn to *Filemanager* to search but *Windows* is down today – it crashed with software overload, last night. My eyelids droop in resignation, cutting me off like an old-fashioned screen saver from any neatly organised narrative of file trees and folders. The last undamaged file in the C:\My Documents\Syd and Pattie Wedding folder shows me desperately trying to chat up Charlie but that can't have been much later than six thirty. Occasionally, as I move, my system opens a variety of random files. Some are so new they are *recovered* rather than saved; some are so old they have been archived. They are all periodically hurled against my monitor, where they hover until I have no choice but to study them in detail, to find the missing pieces, to fill in the empty gaps, to polyfilla over the cracks in my consciousness.

Funeral.avi

Scene: *Function lounge at a four star, nineteenth century, family-run hotel. As Simon and Damien chat, they are regularly topped up with pink champagne by bow-tied waiters.*

Damien: Well, five weddings and a funeral, Simon.

Simon: Yeah. I'm not sure if it was more weird that we'd all been to four weddings last summer or that up until today, you'd been to four weddings and a funeral. Life imitates art, eh?

Damien: I thought the funeral might be my own at one point. (Sips drink waiting for reaction. None comes). So do you reckon you and Dolores might tie the knot, then?

Simon: (Genuinely inquisitive). Who's Dolores?

Damien: I forgot. You call her Delilah. So are you and Delilah going to tie the knot?

Simon: Look, are you sure it's the same woman? After all your Dolores went to Caledonia, like us. It's not a big place so you

would think I'd have at least seen her before but I haven't.

Damien: The pattern's exactly the same for fuck sake. I fuckin spelt it out to you on the phone. Anyway, she looks different now.

Simon: I'm not convinced.

Damien: Well, why doesn't she want to meet me then?
(*Pause as Simon stammers*)

Simon: Ah...that's because I didn't really ask her. I was scared you might take the piss in the way you and Jason do, if you got to meet her.

Damien: How do you know about the investigation into Frankie Elwell then?

Simon: I heard you that night at your place when you and Jason were gassing on.

Damien: You were asleep.

Simon: I was pretending. I heard everything.
(*Silence*)

Me and Simon: Well...er...er. (*Pause*)

Damien: Had a *Wank* in The Pink Pussycat yet?

Simon: (*Overly triumphant*). They're called *Handjobs*.

Damien: Ah ha! You've been there with her. Dolores or Delilah or whatever name she's taken you to her favourite dive. I am surprised they didn't have your arse for breakfast, a nice young man like you.
(*Pause*)

Simon: I saw them when I was there with you that time. I did.

Turtle-neck

I first met Simon Register on *The Rag* at Cally when I was a two-bit arts editor and production assistant and he did band reviews. He was more quietly spoken then. Women envied his flawless, delicate features – which they spent a fortune in *The Body*

Shop trying to re-create – and his lustrous, blue-black, hyacinthine hair. In those days, he always wore black turtle-neck sweaters – just like in the Lloyd Cole song – black jeans and black Doc Marten shoes. He didn't have an ounce of fat on him and not much muscle either. In fact, although he was near six foot, his body just looked like it had been stretched, rather than suffer the indignities of adolescence.

I used to sub some of his stuff for the paper then. It was always immaculately presented and conscientiously written, even it was occasionally delivered a day or two after deadline. But I'd never actually met Simon until the then music editor of *The Rag*, an upper-class bint called Maude Cloraes, sent me round to his flat to hassle him for his latest copy. Most student bedrooms are post-apocalyptic but his was meticulous. Magazines were stacked not just by periodical but in ascending date order. Posters were framed with metal and covered in glass. Houseplants looked like they would flourish well beyond next week. Scrapbooks were neatly laid out with Palace match reports and photos indexed back over the last ten years. Simon had even installed a coffee table, laid with fresh coasters to prevent the varnished wood from staining. Conspicuous by its absence, there was not a single speck of post-fallout dust.

In brief, Simon Register was gay in every aspect except actually fancying and having sex with men. Student girls loved him because he was so quietly spoken, so unthreatening, so lacking in testosterone, so apparently in need of mothering. He went out with one of them for most of his time at Cally and beyond but I had heard of her before I knew Simon as she was famous the college over. A skinny, mad, blue-skinned Weedjie, she never ate but drank her own weight in cheap whisky and smoked 60 *Kensitas Club* a day. Simon, I had been told, had to fish her out of the docks in Leith and other men's beds on a fairly regular basis for which she roundly abused him:

– Saemun!!!! She used to scream in her discordant dialect. – Yeeere a wee pile o shite. Yeeere a lang streak o pish. Ye huv nae gott unnie baals and yeer wullie's sae fuckin wee ye cudna sutisfae a gnat. Laeve us alane, yer rapist.

But Simon would just drag her home, sometimes by her long, unkempt, raven hair, and throw her into bed where she would wake up much chastened, and hungover, the following morning.

From the dim light creeping through the crack between the curtain and the windowsill above me, I sense it is a cold, grey day outside the Whimsy residence in West Ebury, this fine Xmas Eve morning. The same childish impulse which overwhelmed me in church yesterday now fills me with images of good-tidings-to-all-men. Urchin children lob big furry snowballs at each other. Carol singers trill away under their portable brazier outside snow-capped houses. A giant spruce, heaves with baubles in front of a roaring fire, extending a protective arm or two over the vast array of lovingly wrapped presents, beneath. I curse myself for my momentary sentimentality. Like most things a) traditional and b) Victorian, Ye Olde White Xmas is no more than a myth, I reflect still lying prone, flat on my back with my limbs stretched out, like a starfish. But this prompts me to squeeze my hand into the pocket of my suit trousers which lie to my

side and feel around for the coke I scored off Simon Register yesterday evening. But there is nothing there. I panic. I don't *feel* like I've done piles of coke.

If I've snorted the couple of grammes I bought, I doubt that inferno would now be raging in my head, quite so fiercely.

Pulp.avi

Scene: *Edge of dancefloor in marquee, lit up by outside gas heaters. In the background, grannies dance with children to non-descript 1970s/1980s pop while teenagers sulk and twenty and thirtysomething women walk precariously through the ever-expanding mud gingerly pinching their expensive dresses, rucking them up like the flaps of the marquee.*

Damien: Been to see Pulp Fiction?

Simon: Yeah, it's fuckin fuck great. *(Laughs)*. I've been to see it five times already. And you know what?

(The two exchange a bag of white powder and a roll of £20 notes)

Damien: What?

Simon: Delilah found it such a turn on that she sucked us off in the Gents afterwards.

Damien: That is more information than I need to know.

Slambo

It was through football and drink that Simon and I got to know each other properly at Cally, in May 1987 when I was in third year and he was in first year. Ironopolis had that night been promoted from the (old) third division to the (old) second division after being resurrected from bankruptcy the previous summer. After hearing the result on the radio, I had already drunk the best part of a bottle of whisky and had the bit between my teeth. Sparky Bobe and Mike Piper, my drinking companions for the evening, had left me in Victoria Street, heading for the union bar just off Grassmarket, as they knew from experience that at this stage nothing could rein in my aching desire for lots more, potent alcohol. Even though I was alone when I arrived in the Tav, I quickly ordered a couple of large tequie slambos which I poured down my throat, like water in the middle of a five-a-side game. I fought *The Urge* to retch by singing:

- Up the Iros, the Iros're going up. The Iros're going up to stay-ay-ay...
- You an Iros fan? Asked Simon, who had approached the bar just after me and was slightly wide-eyed. A waterfall of blue-black hair cascaded over his front from his girlfriend's head which lolled on his shoulder.
- Ae wunta Grouse. Eh lairge Grouse, nae fuckin ice, demanded the pale, sunken yet strangely compelling face.

– Yeah, ah’m a fuckin Iros fan, I slurred back drunkenly. – First fuckin time they’ve done owt and ah’ve been supportin thum for over fuckin thirteen yerrs. An ah’ll tell y wha – ah wouldn’t purrup wi that kinda fuckin return from a wummun!!!

I burst into pub-drunk laughter and slapped Simon on the back. Fiona joined in, even though she had no idea why I was laughing, and Simon smiled a genuine and warm smile which made his flawless features crumple.

– Fancy a drink... Damien, isn’t it?
 – Yeah. No, call us ‘Deano’. Every utha fucka does. Large tequie slambo.
 – We’ve met once before, he said as I shook his hand with drunken ceremony,
 – You came to my room to pick up an article.
 – Oh yeah, I rem...
 – Ae wunta lairge tequie us wull, yee wee pile o shite, Saemun. Lairge tequie! Lairge tequie! the vast, painted mouth foghorned, turning the simple request into a mantra.
 – This is Fiona, my partner, he announced to me hesitantly, – Fiona meet Deano. He works on *The Rag*.

Fiona lifted her head off Simon’s shoulder, pushed the heavy curtain of her hair to either side of her face, clearing a path to her mouth, and threw first the large whisky and then the large tequie down her gullet. I followed with my tequie but somehow she had robbed me of my mantel of that night’s Tav Bar Drunkard.

– Mair! Fiona commanded as she brought the tequila glass down on to the bar smashing it in the process.

Simon apologised for her, looking like he was well-practised in this particular art, but it did us no good. The union barman hated *Rag* hacks after we had exposed the rather imaginative interpretation of *stock-taking* on the part of many of the temporary barpeople so he threw us out. I remember we carried on at *Deacon Brodie’s*, then the *Mary Rose* – boy, those £1-a-slice pizzas there saved us that night – and finally *The Venue*, for booze not music. I don’t remember much else except that we talked about football and post-War fiction a lot and Simon had to pull me and Fiona apart from a drunk-passionate snog, on one occasion, when he had come back from a wee.

– Ah’m so, so fuckin sorry, I managed to get out, like I had motor-neurone disease as I kept repeating the same phrase. – Ah’m so, so fuckin sorry.
 – It’s not your fault, he replied trying to keep Fiona pinned to the seat as she tried to lacerate him with her sturdy fingernails, – she’s always fuckin doin this.
 – Whey tha fuck d y purrup whi it, mun?
 – Because I love her.

Punch.fli

Scene: *Animated film. Could almost be a silent but there is poor quality sound. Location indeterminate.*

Damien: Imogen's so understanding she'd forgive me anything but you Simon Register are an absolute cunt

Simon: It's 'You, terrible cunt'.

(Damien unsteady on his feet, takes a very telegraphed swing at Simon, misses and falls over).

Syrup

I peel my lids back and rise unsteadily, wishing I had a gimbal in my neck, to keep my sloppy brain level, to stop it from sloshing out of my ears or seeping out of my eyes. I stumble to the ensuite bathroom, like Frankenstein's monster newly conscious with his ill-fitting second-hand limbs and his foggy second-hand memories. I ransack the bathroom cabinet for something, anything which can alleviate my pain. But all I find is toothpaste, Rennie, syrup of figs, pessaries, razors, spare razor blades, dental floss, mouthwash, KY jelly, vaseline, handcream, footcream, facecream, thrushcream, I scream, Zovirax, a can of warm Coca Cola and half a packet of junior dispirin.

Lamenting the day they took the cocaine out of Coke, I chuck five junior dispirin into a glass with the bubbling brown stuff then groan as I wait for them to dissolve. The mirror confronts me with my 29 year old face – still holding well, no major repairs necessary – which is covered in a thin film of...white chrySTALLine powder. Over my nose; in my stubble; in my hair; in my eyebrows; on my eyelids; in the dry, chapped cracks of my lips. In short, anywhere but up my nostrils.

– My coke. My coke. My coke. My coke. My coke, I wail, dropping to my knees and pounding the basin in front of me.

– Who do you think you are? King Lear? Asks a disembodied voice from nowhere.

I hardly bothered to register the prone form in the bed when I woke up. Now it is behind me and it belongs to a naked Charlie, all 21 year old neat tits and neat bush.

Luz.avi

Scene: *Same location but later on the afternoon of the wedding. Damien approaches Charlie who is standing by herself.*

Damien: Eeee, the nights is fair drawin out.

Charlie: *(Looking around for someone else to talk to).* I've just got to go and say hello to...

Damien: Look, I owe you an apology for the other night.

Charlie: Oh, the great Damien Dean condescends to apologise to little old Charlotte Preston. I am privileged.

Damien: Don't be like that.

Charlie: Why not? You accused me of being everything under the sun, including being spoilt. What was it you called me?

Damien: A little madam.

Charlie: I didn't actually want an answer to that question.
(Pause as Damien grabs a waiter, gets him to fill up his flute, downs it and then gets the waiter to refill it).

Damien: Look, I am really sorry.

Charlie: You really push it sometimes.

Damien: *(Under breath, out of earshot of Charlie).* Sod you.

Charlie: What was that?

Damien: I said: 'So do you'. We all do. Can we be friends?

Charlie: I suppose so *(reaches up and kisses him on cheek)*. How much do I owe you for the other night? I take it you paid and got a receipt – it can't have been cheap.

Damien: I didn't have any means of paying.

Charlie: Oh, X. I'm so sorry. What the hell did you do?

Damien: I told the waitress I was a showbiz agent and that I thought she could go places. I asked to note down her address and telephone number, if she didn't mind, of course, and while she went to get a pen and paper I legged it.

Charlie: Look, I'll take you out between Xmas and New Year to make up for it.

Damien: Not Luz, obviously.

Charlie: No, the Pacific. It's better.

Damien: *(Damien, now swaying, grabs the waiter. In a drunken pleading voice).* Got any more?

Waiter: I think you've had enough, sir.

Damien: Liar, you've got Chateau Margaux in your cellar. *(Pause).* Best of the century.

– You were on cracking form, yesterday, Charlie announces delightedly. – 'The young Dean lad could do no wrong as he single-handedly wrecked the Preston defence'.

I really don't understand what Charlie is getting at so I sit meekly in the corner of the bathroom, shivering against the cold, pink pastel tiles. She produces a bottle of cold Gastro Cola, seemingly out of thin air and pours it into a glass.

– Here, she says as she thrusts me the other effervescent brown stuff.

It chatters so quickly in the tumbler, I can hardly understand what it is saying. Then it dawns on me. It is chanting. Chanting a mantra: 'Get real. It's Gastro Cola. Get real. It's Gastro Cola.' Over and over again. But very quickly. And very excitedly.

– Get real. It's Gastro Cola, smiles Charlie and ruffles my hair, like my dad used to.

I slug it back. Jesus, I need it, ice cold fizzin, bubblin, motivatin, dehydratin, exhydratin, depilatin, exfoliatin, hyperventilatin, dedenticatin...Gastro Cola! (or whatever it was). She leads me out of the bathroom, then reclines on the bed in front of me.

– Here, she says, teasing her powder grey pubic hair, – have the rest of the coke as well.

I drop to her crotch to Hoover up the Charlie entangled in her muff, caught in her mound. Like a pig snuffling for truffles, I push my nose down and wallow in her intoxicating scent.

Until there's a knock on the door.

Snort.jpg

Drunken Charlie standing over white line on top of toilet seat.

Line.jpg

Very close, very blurred white line.

Pubis.jpg

White line down pale skin to top of trimmed pubic hair.

Moan.wav

Woman moaning forever and ever.

Laugh.jpg

Naked Charlie lying abandoned on bed, laughing head off.

Pie

I stiffen as I feel Charlie throw the vast double duvet over me, like a milky cloud turned solid, concealing me from the world.

– Come, she calls out.

I freeze as I hear Imogen's disembodied voice say:

- Morning, Charlie. How are you today?
- Fine, thanks.
- There's coffee and hot croissants ready downstairs. Come and join us.

I squirm until I hear Imogen retreat. Then, I sigh my relaxation.

Drunk.avi

Scene: *Darkness outside marquee.*

Damien: Imogen, you're so understanding. You forgive me everything. You're not like other women in that respect. I love you so much (*lunges clumsily towards her*).

Imogen: Damien, you're drunk.

But then I hear Imogen throw open the door again and announce rather than ask:

- You haven't seen that drunken idiot Damien anywhere, have you?
- No, squeaks Charlie.
- It's just that he hasn't been seen this morning. And you know what?
- What? *Another feeble effort.*
- He was so drunk he tried to snog mummy last night.

Snog.avi

Scene: *Same marquee but much later. It is virtually deserted.*

Damien: (*Slurring very badly*). Jemima, I've got to tell you this.

Jemima: Damien, are you all right? You look a bit green around the gills.

Damien: Must have been that dodgy looking pork pie we had at lunch. Has anyone ever told you that you're absolutely fuckin gorgeous?

Jemima: Damien...

Damien: Give us a snog (*tries to slip tongue in as Jemima fends him off*).

Jemima: Damien, you're drunk. Go to bed.

Damien: Tuck me in, Jmmma.

Jemima: What did you call me? No one's called me that for years.
(*Damien is off in search of more people to annoy*).

While Charlie and the others are having breakfast, I sneak out to Imogen's MG and cover myself in doghairs, rolling in Biggles's blanket. I retch time and time again at the smell of rank dog. Eventually, about an hour later, Imogen comes out to the car and I pretend to doze, slumped uncomfortably across the beige vinyl front seats.

- Oh, there you are, you naughty boy, she scolds as if she has mistaken me for the dog. – X Almighty, look at the bloody state you're in. We have two nights together before I have to go back to work and you spend one of them pissed out of your mind ruining a perfectly good wedding.
- What did I do?
- Where do I start?
- How can I make amends?
- By apologising to Alex and Patsy?

Panties.jpg

Bare flowerbed with discarded panties.

Scratch and sniff: moist soil; scented silk; musky voodoo juice.

26

Eve

Xmas Eve is the worst night of the year for drinking. One of my mates has his birthday then. And I can tell you he's never celebrated it properly. Nearly all the pubs shut early. And those that stay open are a mausoleum as everybody's buggered off back to their home counties homes for Xmas, even if they don't usually live in the home counties or go there all the rest of the year. But this year we were lucky: Jason, Simon, Charlie, Jimmy and I got a lock-in until 11:30 with an Irish landlord – which wasn't bad as we'd started at six. As usual, Jimmy mistimed his run into the box and was pissed by ten thirty. We left him propped up in a chair as we carried on drinking. Every so often, he would briefly stir, leap up, throw both his arms into the air and shout:

– 'Ands up if yar not a queenie bandit!

Then, he would start accusing anyone with their arms down – all the rest of us, unimpressed by his antics – of being 'bandits of the highest order' before collapsing into his chair asleep again. Every quarter of an hour or so, one of us would nip off to the toilets either to snort a line or to smoke a joint. Come 11:30, we were, to use Imogen's phrase, *blotto*. I don't know whose idea it was (it was much disputed afterwards) but we decided to put years of cynical atheism behind us and go to midnight mass at St Stephens, the church next door to the flat. Don't ask me why.

We declared Jimmy a lost ball and left him in an armchair in the lounge of my flat. Then, before we knew it, we were sitting on pews in church singing carols; Jason and Simon in pole position in the middle of the front row, me and Charlie in the row behind them.

- It's like the fuckin TARDIS, this place, Jason stage-whispered inadvertently out of the corner of his mouth.
- Whaddya mean? I asked in mock-hushed tones.
- It's some poxy, little two-bit church outside. Inside, it's Westminster fuckin Abbey.
- That's the wonder of god, I smirked.
- Like the wonder of Woolies, Charlie added and giggled. – Are you sure we're *not* in Westminster Abbey?

We all looked at each other on the point of exploding. Wouldn't it be funny if we'd somehow stumbled, stoned, on the service of the year at Britain's most prestigious church? Then, I thought of the Rothko chapel in Houston, Texas and those sombre black

canvasses which sobered me up. Where could civilisation go from there? Certainly not to St Stephens which had clearly had its time with its name in lights as was evidenced by the restoration fund thermometer. It stood at £5,467. When I first moved to the area it had sat at £2,365 and that was three years ago. And it was a long way short of the target of £100,000.

– Jesus, Charlie, church twice in two days, I muttered.

The congregation rose for *Away in a Manger* and I welled up inside as I recalled it was the first song I'd ever learnt. And I could still remember all the words.

– Stop blaspheming, hissed Simon after the music had started.

I regretted I didn't have a pin as I quite fancied completing the trick I was going to pull on Sparky Bobe at the wedding, on an unsuspecting Jason or Simon. As we sang, we actually *sang*, I rubbernecked the rest of the faithful just to see what those much referred to 'god-fearing' people looked like.

As expected, most of them were old; the others were terminally naff. But my heart went out to one: a Down's Syndrome bloke of about fifteen, sixteen who was happily singing with all his heart. Not singing the same hymn as everyone else, mind you, but this only added to the pathos. I mean, he couldn't make any rational decision about god. And yet, his parents had seen fit to bring him to this neolithic worship. A thousand years ago, they'd have lynched him or left him to the 'devil', if he was lucky. Now they shoved this crap down his throat. I tried to envisage the life he had led, compared to mine, and what he made of it. But it was beyond me. I couldn't imagine the awfulness of it. I couldn't imagine the unmitigated *boredom*. In a fit of self-righteousness, I thought of kidnapping him for an evening and giving him coke and booze and dope and even a high class tart. Let him experience real life, let him join us in a real celebration of humanism, make him one of us, one of the lads. As the hymn faded away, I was weighing up how we could snatch him from his evilly repressed parents.

– And now the reading, the most important of the year, the vicar announced in his sanctimonious, man-of-the-cloth way.

I shut my eyes as he started, rather predictably I thought, to inveigh against the commercialisation of Xmas:

– The abbreviation Xmas is what is responsible for this travesty, he concluded after a long list of perceived woes. – It is a deliberate attempt to take the X out of Xmas. And let us not forget at this time of year that X was born to ultimately save us from original sin, a sin visited upon Eve through the deception of Lucifer in the form of the serpent. And to this day the serpent must crawl on his belly and all women bear a terrible curse to atone for Eve's deadly sin.

Jesus, did he really just say that?

– It's all your fault, Charlie, joked Jason but I could see she was silently fuming.
 – Lord, deliver us from sin by encouraging us to have faith in Jesus X and his resurrection especially today in celebrating his birth day when you, Lord, gave your only son human form so he might know our experience and ultimately save us from ourselves.

I think of Liz Crebbin's glassy-eyed, sex doll stare into space from the mortician's table. I think of ELWELL's unnerving, moronic gaze, once I had removed the panties from his mouth. Both at a sort of peace. Both capable of little else.

- Happy Birthday, Jesus, whispered Jason. – How the fuck do you get 1,994 candles on a cake? Get any decent presents, this year?
- Yeah, I know it must be a bummer having a birthday on Xmas day, added Simon warming to the theme. – I bet your stingy relatives got you some cheapskate joint pressie.

In our merriment, we failed to realise that the vicar had ended his sermon and was now recruiting to the cause.

- Come forward, my children, he said like a child molester might ask a ten year old to come and look at his puppies.
- Help, I'm being propositioned by a man in a dress.
- Shurrrup, Jason.
- It's all right for you. You're in the second row.

I snapped into the enormous human comedy of the situation. Jason was first in line for the sacrament. But first, another cleric, another bloke in a dress, another fuckin *transvestite*, walked across the front of the church wafting smoke from a lantern.

- Jesus, what the fuck's he playin at? Asked Simon clearly worried by the surreal turn of events. – It's fuckin incense. Bloody hippies.
- Jesus, we're in a left footer church.
- No, it's not. Its High Anglican, corrected Charlie. – And stop blaspheming for...my sake.
- How the hell do you know it's Prod? I asked in a genuine spirit of enquiry.
- What sort of family do you think I grew up in?
- Yeah, come to mention it, I remember Syd saying summat.
- Don't worry Damien. I don't believe in it and I probably never have done so I'm not about to try to convert you godless lot.

While me and Charlie had been chatting away, the vicar had coaxed a very stoned Simon and Jason to the altar and they had gone down on bended knee in supplication. I remember I could hardly watch as the vicar bent over the two of them, gave them both the cannibalistic sacrament and then made the sign of the cross over them. And I remember putting my head to Charlie's breast to suppress the teenage giggles which threatened to rack me as Jason said:

- Crap canapes, mate.

But I still don't really know what happened after that. I know I felt suddenly hot. Very hot. And then *Pandemonium* broke out as I exploded into flames. The panicky flock saw a sign from god and fell to their knees crossing themselves while I leapt over the front row and plunged my left side into the baptismal font, knocking the communion wine from the vicar's hand into the font in the process. (Oh, the terrible symbolism!) Scorched, drenched and dazed by my ordeal by fire and water – and the scorched shock branded on

my psyche – I did what any sane person would do in the circumstances: I started laughing. Very loudly and very manically. But this filled the hollow auditorium with echoing, unholy demonic cackling which proved too much for the god-fearing folk of the ancient parish of Westminster.

Some had quickly formed a rudimentary lynch mob and were advancing on me, holding giant church candles aloft, like torches. This was turning ugly. Jason, Charlie, Simon and I looked at each other, our eyes betraying our intense fear. Jesus, we're liberals living in late twentieth century England, right next to where they invented parliamentary democracy. It surely couldn't end at the hands of an angry Hammer Horror mob. Not *here*. Not *now*. Could it?

As we all pondered the irony of this, the great double entrance doors of the church kaboomed open and we all – the infidels *and* the flock – turned open-mouthed and stared. Simon told me later that he thought it was god putting in a personal appearance, perhaps the second coming. Of course it wasn't but it was our salvation – in the form of Jimmy with some sort of makeshift battering ram, which distracted the lynch mob long enough for us infidels to run like hell. As we made off, my stoned Pentium consciousness, fired by primitive fear, was processing at 200 Mhz: I had been smote by the wrath of God. Because I was Lucifer. I was Satan. I was the Serpent. I was the Prince of Darkness. I was the Evil Chosen One. I was the Devil Incarnate. It all made stoned-sense now, why my mam and dad had given me this stupid name. I was Damien the Antichrist.

We flew across the street and shot up the stairs to the flat. After we had bolted ourselves into sanctuary, we choked on our own hoarse, asthmatic laughter. Charlie was the first to regain control:

– Damien, you silly sod, she gleefully announced, – I knew you shouldn't have stood so close to that bloody candle.

27

Honk

I heard the insistent honking of the car horn down below outside. Cheeky cunt, half an hour late and now he's beeping me to hurry up. I gathered up my things – a couple of footie mags, some wankmags and some gear, in case we were staying with mates overnight – then ran downstairs, knowing that every second was vital. As usual Jimmy had arrived towards 11:00 and I knew we had to break the sound barrier to make the 3pm kick off at home to Sheffield Utd. Worse still, my inevitable Boxing Day hangover had just started to kick in.

- How goes it after your stupendous Xmas Eve performance? I asked as I leapt in.
- Doan ask.

Jimmy put his foot down and the Cheetah sped away through the streets of Westminster towards the Edgware Road.

- Hang on, you fucker! I mouthed.
- Whaaa? We're late.
- I know, I said matter of factly as the Cheetah skidded to a halt.
- Well? We haven' gorr all bladdy day, y'know.

I jerked open the car door, leaned out and, restrained by the seatbelt, threw up. I was left hanging and retching.

- Bladdy hell. Doan gerrit on ve seat.
- Thanks for the fuckin' concern.
- Ya finished? Fackin great, said Jimmy as he hit the gas.
- Let's get this show on the road. I said, wiping my sleeve.

Jimmy is my brother. James is not his real name, which is John. But it was a fairly obvious nickname for someone whose name in the school register read: 'J Dean'. He's two years younger than me but much more of a lad. People say we look alike which pisses us both off – although in moments of weakness I'm prepared to admit that we both have dark hair, neat features and small noses, which we get off our mam. In addition, we both have pointed eyebrows but his are much heavier than mine – on

bad days, he looks like Sam the Eagle out of the Muppets. His colouring is Anglo-Saxon – though he’s not a ging-er, thank god – while I’m more sallow, although that may be due to my failing liver. He is also two or three inches taller than me and built like a brick shithouse due to all the training he does for squash, cricket, tennis and football. But apart from our colouring, our fanaticism towards the Iros and our overriding *Urge* to suppress consciousness, we are very different.

Jimmy drinks in a way which makes me look teetotal. I only drink if there’s nothing more interesting around. Saying that though, we’ve experienced pretty much the same idiocy on drink: the gropes, the blackouts, the inexplicable wounds the morning after. I’ve tended to steer clear of the polis, though, when wankered whereas Jimmy’s tally so far includes twelve arrests but, by the luck of whatever angel guards him, no charges – although he has on occasion spent the odd business meeting or football match he was supposed to be at, in a cell. He’s also come very close to some spectacular beatings when pissed. The best must have been a couple of years ago when he performed a Cantona-style drop kick on a bemused bouncer outside *The Grand* in Clapham. The bouncer simply stood there in open-mouthed disbelief that a punter could pull such a ridiculous, audacious move while Jimmy picked himself off the tarmac, brushed himself down and ran off like Harold Lloyd.

He also pissed on our parents’ landing when he was 17, thinking it was the pan, but that’s another story although, I have to admit, I’ve never laughed quite so much as when our mam told me about it with a face caught between thunder and tears.

Samba

– Wha d ya reckon the score’ll be today? Jimmy rejoined after I had finished wiping my sleeve and got comfortable in the car.

I kicked a few empty fag packets, Wongerburger wrappers, Diet Gastro Cola bottles and old newspapers around to make space for my feet.

- 3-1. Hat trick from the big Swede up front.
- ‘E’s not plyin. Injured. Groin strain. Never shuda shagged vat bird off the telly, if y ask me.
- Shit. Any other injuries or out I should know before I make any more rash predictions?
- Clog is dou’ful, calf strain.
- That wasn’t on bloody Ceefax.
- Ceefax is fackin useless f injury news. ‘Ere use me mobie and phone Clubcawwl.

I went to punch in the stream of digits but realised *my* memory recall was on the blink – I couldn’t remember the number. That’s the problem with abusing the delicate instrument in your head: you suspect you’ve broken it but you can never quite face up to this. It’s like Alzheimer’s, I suspect. Everyone else knows your mind is in shreds, as you

wander confused through the miasma of Diadora, Rothman's and Beezer Homes leagues thinking you're still playing Premier League because your mind referees itself. And it is the blindest and most partial bastard-in-the-black: judge, jury and executioner. .

I pulled out my wallet but my Clubcall card was gone. I tried to remember when I'd last used it but nothing came to mind. Did I have it when the Organisation took me away? I delved, I trawled the depths but it was all so murky. I sighed an asthmatic sigh.

- Can't find it. Never mind, I still reckon we'll win. Yeah, 3-1. Jockie'll get a hat trick.
- I r'ckan 2-0. Jockie an Captin Marvel.
- Captain Marvel? You must be joking.
- Look, e's gotta score samtime and it might as wewl be this savo.

I am a football fan. The uninitiated talk of a particular supporter as a lifelong fan of a chosen team. This doesn't make any sense. To any real fan, support by definition is lifelong. So I am simply a fan. An Ironopolis fan. I know it is a cliché to say that football is a religion. But, to me and millions of other 20th century beings on this happy little planet, this insults our devotion, our faith and our loyalty. It is blasphemy to football. After all, I cannot imagine anyone travelling 300 miles in a day to listen to a sermon. Yet, every weekend, a 100,000 or so of ever hopefuls in Britain alone travel such distances to see their *élus*. I know it is the triumph of ideology over commonsense. I understand Marxists and Islamic and Xian fundamentalists because of football. Ironopolis FC defines me in a way that nothing else does. If I decided who the Organisation would recruit, I would choose an Ironopolis fan over and above anyone else. After all, I reason, someone has to make up for all the heartaches this fan has suffered, like me, through criminally irresponsible refereeing and criminally irresponsible defending. I even root for third-rate celebrities because they support Ironopolis.

Sounds unreasonable? Well, it's our Masonic handshake, our old school tie, our Oxbridge network.

Zip

I picked up the paper and glanced at the top of the table. It read:

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
I'polis	23	13	7	3	36	18	46
Reading	23	12	4	7	37	29	40
Wolves	24	12	3	8	42	28	39

Then, we discussed the usual football rumours which pass for hard news in the tabloids before I remembered Xmas Eve again.

- You OK? I mean to drive.
- Well, I've dan it befor and I'm sure I can do it again.
- I suppose we can be thankful for small mercies after the last frigging debacle.
- Yeh, wew. Least said. Eh?
- You were a fuckin useless cunt. Gettin arrested so that I had to miss the bloody Leicester match as I was depending on you to give me a lift.
- Y poor sod. Wharrabout me? I fought I waz on a drank and disordly and Mnney mornin in Suvvuck magisrayes' cour.

We carried on like this bantering away about football, drinking, getting out of it, birds. As we sped towards Ironopolis on the M1, freedom was an open motorway. Our trips are always like this, like Brazilian football, slow to start: the laborious, staccato process of getting out of London on a Saturday morning; upping the pace as we hit dual carriageways and motorways; dribbling between the opposition. Until we hit dense traffic, a formidable last line of defence. But with a shimmy here, a burst of speed there, a run on the blindside and we're on our way again.

As we roared down the fast lane at 110 mph, the cooling towers soon announced our arrival in the North, as they stood there like deep, upturned monotone samba trumpets.

- Jesus, Jimmy, it's fuckin alf one and we've got 100 miles to go. We're never gonna do it.
- Fack. Fack. Oh wewl ere we go, ere we go.

And he really put his foot down.

And I am a Jehovah's witness. I convert the terminally bored to the cause, or rather, try to. All my girlfriends have been harangued in to sharing the experience at some ramshackle second or third division ground (in the old pre-Premiership Football League). Relationships are made or broken by it. I only went out with Debi Mitchellin because we won 3-1 away at Reading in the first (and only) match I dragged her to. I knew Ironopolis would get relegated when my first teenage crush chucked me in April 1982. God alone knows how Charlie Preston got away with making me miss the promotion decider at West Brom in May 1992 although she may have been given a papal dispensation as Ironopolis have never lost a match she has been to. (No, she won't go more often even though I've pleaded with her, bribed her and soft-soaped her in an attempt to persuade her to bring her luck to many, many other matches).

Before that, Juli Flange left me after I insisted on going to a semi-final 2nd leg of the League Cup in 1992 which just happened to fall on the same day as her 25th birthday party. I explained that if she stayed with me, we could spend many of her future birthdays together, if not all, but Ironopolis might never make it to the semi-finals again. But she wouldn't listen and that was that. The fact that Ironopolis haven't means I was

vindicated. And we lost that semi. 2-1 after extra time – Man U won with a dodgy penalty well into injury time.

Dash

The Cheetah is old and can barely handle being opened up on the A1 like a car of half its age and double its horsepower. This is a video game. We are still while the road and the cars in front are eaten up, reversing at 110 mph. Thank god, I didn't have that smoke. My heartrate climbs as we nearly go into the back of an articulated lorry pulling out to overtake a caravan.

– Fuckin caravans, we chime in harmony.

As we pass him, I do a wanker sign to the lorry driver who gesticulates back at me. Around Leeds we see a car with one of those miniature football kits in the rear window but we can't make out which team it is. For a second we think it's Ironopolis.

– Perhaps they've been stuck in the same jam as us, I grimace as we bear down on the Volvo in front and Jimmy playfully flashes the driver may be six or seven times. We then see that the kit is a Man Utd kit.

– Fuckin wanker, we chime in harmony again.

– Wher the fuck ur they plyin?

– Fuckin Leeds. They're virtually there and we've got seventy fuckin miles to go. And, it's fuckin two o'clock.

This news sparks Jimmy into ever more stroboscopic headlight flashing as he gets even closer to the bumper of the car in front. We can read the fucking car-dealer's address now, never mind the sponsor's name on the mini-kit in the backwindow.

– Owee. Get the fuck over man.

– Gerrroutoffit. Go on. Fuckin gerrover.

– You fuckinuselessfuckincuntingbastard.

We interchange insults to the driver in front like competing voices in a Greek chorus. I hit the dash in frustration. Jimmy beeps the horn. Single piercing bursts, each time longer until the final continuous paaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa
aaarrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr shocks the driver in front into pulling over. As we sail past the
rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrp comes to an end only when Jimmy removes his hand from the horn to flick V-signs at the driver. He is a thirtysomething lower-middle. He looks straight ahead as we pass, hoping we'll just leave him behind. But we don't. We pull up along side him and travel at the same speed as him for a mile or mile and a half. He studiously ignores us pretending he is concentrating on the road in front.

I notice there are kids in the back wearing Man Utd scarves. I am tempted to make wanker signs at them but I figure it's not their fault their old man's a useless cunt behind the wheel so I concentrate on abusing him as wildly as I can with his car window very much up. I imagine him relating the story to his wife back in their suburban semi in

Kettering (it certainly wouldn't be Manchester) of how a pair of 'uneducated jobs' had virtually assaulted him on the road.

Jimmy's got his foot down now. Other road users have the sense to vacate the outside lane of the dual, or should it be duel, carriageway, as the Highway code dictates they should. For once the law is on our side. We approach a hitchhiker in the now pouring rain holding a sign saying 'Newcastle'.

- Reckon he's a Geordie?
- Fackin yeah.

Together, after having wound the window down, we sing:

- We 'ate Geordies. And we 'ate Geordies. We 'ate Geordies. And we 'ate Geordies. We are the Geordie -- 'aters.

It's two twenty five and we're on the A19 – 40 miles to go. Then we hit traffic, a single lane. We rage against the machine. Then the recriminations start.

- Why the fuck can't you be on time for a fackin change? I grumble at Jimmy, not looking at him.
- Fack off. You cahn fack off back t the fackin train.
- At least I've got half a fuckin idea what time I might get there.

We exchange unpleasantries until the traffic clears and we're off down the A19 at mach two and we burst into fits of giggles, both of us.

- It's a sane reaction to an insane world, I joke as I light a nerve-calming Marlboro and pretend to Jimmy that my face is changing shape, like in a sci-fi movie, because we're going so fast.
- We're makin time, I shout above the noise made by the open window to let my smoke out. – Fancy a fag?
- Fack off.

We nearly went bankrupt eight years ago – they shut the gates and the old club called in the official receiver. I can remember, even now, sitting in the car in my parents' drive in the western home counties as the radio news declared it was all over. This wasn't relegation (which has been an all too familiar black sheep in our football family) or getting knocked out of the FA Cup (an annual event which never gets any easier to bear) this was football death. I sat back and fought the tears. I went into our home counties detached and was told not to mention anything to Jimmy as news of this bereavement might just ruin his performance in his A-levels. But a consortium of local businessmen resuscitated the sleeping giant and we went on to get promoted twice in two years but were soon relegated, promoted and relegated again because the backers wouldn't put their money where their publicity was.

Allegro

The Cheetah is doing a hundred, a hundred and ten as we hit the cross-Pennine A66 just outside Ironopolis. We swerve to avoid an Austin Allegro superglued to the tarmac on the inside lane. *What were British Leyland management on in the 1970s? What goes through the minds of those still driving them?* More raised fists, more anger – from us to them. Psychologically, you cannot miss kick off as you are never a part of that unique match; you never belong to that unique crowd; you cannot claim that unique victory. And defeat, you feel, in your more superstitious moments, is all your fault for not being there on time. Miss the early goal and you might as well go home.

We fly off the A66. I smell burning rubber, I see the number plate of the car in front rush towards me like a jump into hyperspace as Jimmy throws out the anchor to stop us dead at the junction with a roundabout. My chest is tight and, for a moment, I think it is the inevitable heart attack until I realise that I am pressed hard against the inertia seatbelt. As Jimmy hits the accelerator like a machine hammer, I am thrown back into my seat and we career off again through the shiny red bricks and black cobbles of the soaking streets around the Foundry Ground.

It is two minutes to three.

On a cold November afternoon last year, growing increasingly disillusioned, I wished after a home defeat in front of one of the lowest post war crowds at the Foundry Ground, that we would go bankrupt again to put me out of my misery. But now we have invested in new players; recruited a former England captain as player-manager; and are building a new 30,000 all-seater stadium. Once again, we are top of the league – but outside the top flight.

And that was really the story of Ironopolis FC: not so much always-the-bridesmaid-and-never-the-bride as never-even-the-fuckin-bridesmaid. 118 years of history had seen little more than two amateur cups, won before the turn of the century, grace the trophy room at Foundry Park, Corporation Road, Ironopolis.

Jimmy hurls us past the black, skeletal ironworks. It stands depressed and idle, like the already ancient couple who push a desperate pushchair along the pavement next to us, for a fraction of a second. With the looming corrugated iron of the Foundry Ground towering above us, we ditch the car by a polis 'No Waiting' sign. Jimmy slaps a disabled sticker inside the window and we both run in the way of men whose aerobic fitness has seen better days, particularly now that I've started smoking again. At the Foundry Ground, I throw my £8 to the man in his little hut, hurl myself at the turnstile but am ruptured in two as he has not yet let the catch off. When he finally releases it, smiling, I burst out in unison with Jimmy from the other turnstile,

like two greyhounds from the traps. We tear up the steps and hit the wall of terraced people at the top who gently give, breaking our momentum and bringing us to a dead standstill.

Over the pounding inside my head, I hear a faint drift of the opening to *We Shall Overcome*, the Ironopolis and civil rights movement song, but it drifts out before it gets started. As I catch my breath, someone farts last night's beer and curry so I retch. Then I look up and, between the backs of two heads, see Jockie tap the ball from the distant centre spot as the crowd as one heaves a final "Oweeeeeeeeeeeee". I relax. I am happy.

Home

I was ten when I left Ironopolis and the industrial heartland of the north east, as a home. The town boasts, if that's the right word, the highest unemployment per head of population in Britain and, conversely, the highest concentration of industry anywhere on planet Earth. I was eight before it dawned on me that clouds weren't created from the vast cooling towers bellowing their smoker's breath into the sky each day. My father was thought to be posher than my mother: his father was a semi-skilled steel worker so they could afford to live in a three bedroomed semi in a suburb of Ironopolis that, in its day, was a splendid Victorian seaside town. My mother's father was a labourer so they lived in a two up two down with an outside toilet and a front door which opened on to the pavement.

My father made good in engineering so in 1968 so we moved from a flat in the by then decaying and neglected seaside suburbs to the new suburbs which were shooting up around Ironopolis – homes fit for middle-managers. We moved from suburb to suburb, places with names like Marthorpe, Hemelhurst, Nunton and Duneaton, each one once a village but by then subsumed by the suburban sprawl. Each time we moved, my parents bought a bigger house: separate bedrooms for me and my brother, two toilets; next, a playroom and a utility room; and then three toilets, a guest room. Each time, I left a group of mates and began again because at that age the three miles down Dawson's Bank to my old pals might as well have been a trek to Siberia. Every time we bought a house, we used to drive past it for the following six months and watch it being put up before moving in. I had some of my best moments on deserted building sites: smashing the glass in the portacabins and the JCBs; scaling the heights of the skeletal scaffolding wrapped around slowly evolving houses; jumping off piles of detritus or stacked drainage pipes.

From the age of eight, my dad took me to Ironopolis FC home games, the formal rite of passage in the nuclear age, how working class men bonded with their sons. And I became addicted as I was to become addicted to so many other naughty but nice pastimes. Looking back I don't know whether I should thank or curse my dad for passing this affliction to me. After all, if he'd waited another year, I would never have gone to the Foundry Ground and seen the Iros play. I might have been spared the agony of the Iros: the obsession, the injustice, the despair, the endless hope. Heck, I could have been an Arsenal fan – not a bad spell: too young for the 1970/71 double, I would, at least, have experienced two Championships, two FA Cups, two league cups and a European trophy.

Sod the fact they're boring. I'd happily exchange twenty years of misery for even one of those trophies. Or I could have supported Spurs. Or West Ham. Or anyone in the metropolis: in the last twenty years, Spurs have won the FA Cup three times, Wimbledon once and Palace and QPR have appeared in the final. In the same period, I have been through four FA Cup quarter final defeats, two League cup semi-final defeats and a highest placing of seventh in the old first division. But would it have mattered so much, if I had supported a team from the metropolis? Would I have 'belonged' in the same way? One thing I know for certain: I can remember my first match at the Foundry ground (3-0 win against Man City) but I can't remember my first Ironopolis away match.

Don't tell anyone this. Please don't. It's one of my more mad thoughts, my more crazy superstitions, almost as bad as believing in god (which I don't of course). But me and Ironopolis FC are secretly linked by some bond, our fortunes are tied together like the economies of France and Germany. Hell, they can't do anything without it affecting me and I can't do anything without it affecting them. It started shortly after I went to see them for the first time in 1974. They won at home 3-0 in front of a crowd of 38,000 and I got picked for my cub pack's first eleven on the Sunday as the regular full back had broken his leg. And it's got worse ever since. We both had miserable seasons last year: the Iros didn't even make the division one play offs; I was posted to a new section in the Organisation, C3/P, where I continue to be balled out, bollocked and blackmarked by Wendy Probit, my mad boss.

Anyway, my life was all pretty normal until summer 1975, when I was told we were moving to 'London'. I fondly imagined us living on the Mall or Downing Street or Trafalgar Square, places I'd been to on what seemed like far-flung holidays and whose names I knew from the Monopoly board. Of course, we didn't even move to London or its suburbs. We moved to the home counties and joined thousands of other anxious but hopeful families, dispossessed of the jobs handed down from generation to generation since the start of the industrial revolution. They were all there, by then: Brummies; Geordies; Weedjies; Mankies; Lankies; Yorkies; Scousers; Taffies. They had all pinned their hopes on the new order just outside London. They left behind sleeping in vests, cooked breakfasts, dinner and tea, and Sunday night bath night for duvets, muesli, luncheon and supper, and powershowers, just as I did, to fit in with this self-possessed new world.

Dock

At half time, I go to the floodlight in the north east corner as I know Ron Durham will be standing just to the left of it, so that it obscures his view of corner kicks taken from the south east corner. He always complains. But he has always stood here. For nearly every Ironopolis home match since the war. In fact, when Ron's dad first took him, it was a cup match – a quarter final in 1947 which Ironopolis inevitably lost in a replay to a controversial goal. Ron's dad couldn't stand in his usual place because the Dock was too packed so he took young Ron over to stand by the floodlight. When they went to the next match, and the crowd had gone back to its usual size, Ron's dad took up his habitual

position in the front of the Dock End but Ron insisted on standing where he had first stood. And to this day, he has always stood by this particular floodlight, slightly to the left, with its obscured view of corner kicks taken from the other side of the Dock End.

On this particular wet Boxing Day afternoon, he spends the first five minutes of our conversation moaning to me about:

- how useless this shower are.
- how they would never have got a match in the old days.
- how we should bring back wingers.

The first half was patchy but we have outplayed Sheff Utd and the 0-0 scoreline flatters them rather than us – although you wouldn't know it from the way Ron Durham goes on. If Ironopolis won the Premier League for the first time in their history, most of the fans would boycott the club if we didn't win it again the following season. We talk more football than work usually but today I am impatient for Ron Durham to stop his beery reminiscence of otherwise long forgotten matches played at the Foundry Ground (he's never been to an away match, doesn't believe in them, he says).

– Ron, I interject, seizing my moment before it is too late, – last time I was here you spoke to me about something I could do for you.

He eyes me quizzically. I have broken his stream of consciousness. I hear the cogs and gears of his brain moving to retrieve this long lost file. Ron Durham Ltd has definitely not gone over to IT.

– Oh, aye, like. Y' mite rememma that wee lassie's wha's postmorrtnum y' wenta. Musta been like back in Septemba wann y' wiz up f tha lung uppurayshun, naawharrameen?

I nod my concurrence, hoping his mechanics can deliver the interrogated data before the second half.

– Wal, wuv ad sum input inta tha investigayshun, lust furtnite or sur, he begins slowly. – Werr Branch, like, so itsa bit outa tha urdinury. Narmullie yud expec tha crieme squadd ta be dooin unnie investagatin. Bu thems been pulled affit. An manudgemen as tolt us nout abow whiy werr dooin it and wha furr. Bu al tel y' wha I cannot fuckin baleave: tha Kavven Simpson, the poor wee lassie's feeancee, as bin questionnt an cunnecshun wi the bluudy merrder.

– Well, I suppose he's the obvious choice. After all, it's statistically more likely to have been him than anyone else.

I am trying not to say too much, not to let on what I know from HOLMES.

– Naah, its nat jus tha, munn, e wuz fuckin sin wi sum berdd the nite o tha merrder. E woak up the nayburrs a fuckin fourr i tha murnin as e drove iz Transit up tha drive atha fuckin hows e sharred wi Liz Crebbin.

I concentrate hard to understand what DC Durham is saying as he gets faster in his excitement and the tannoy blasts out its half time drivel (I also have half an ear on the latest scores elsewhere). Kevin Simpson, Liz Crebbin's fiance, was arrested the day after I went to the autopsy. He claimed a strange alibi: he spent the night with a woman from

London. They got drunk together and went back to Kevin and Liz's place. Liz was not yet back from work. Not unusual as she often did overtime, even if it came up at short notice.

Kevin, not knowing what he was doing, allowed his pick-up to perform oral sex on him – 'fullayteeoh' in Ron's words. Kevin fell asleep and woke up early the next morning to find the woman and about £200 gone. Kevin phoned the polis only to be told the news about his fiancée. The next thing he knew, he was helping the polis with their enquiries. Neighbours confirmed that he arrived back at about four in the morning with the mystery woman.

- Y' realise that ahve been suspended from duty, doan y'? That neither of uss should be 'avin this conversayshun?
- Luik, lad. Ah knurr ya as wull as tha nex munn, he announces, letting a pudgy hand rest on my shoulder. – Yer wun a uss. Ann ahm gerring reet fucked aff wi tha munudgement a this force intafeerrin whi mattas which dunt concern thum. Therr fuckin wankas an surs yer fuckin bossez. Ah reckon itsa serriull killa, naawharrameen?

Salt of the earth, I think, secretly glowing inside that I am still accepted by my home town and its people.

- Why's tha, then?
- The blurk wah did this wuz an exper, like eedunnit befarr, like. Deemeyan, munn, cun yer gerrus owt else abuit this cays un uthas tha mite be cunnectet?

The players are running out of the tunnel for the second half so I readily agree, with the proviso that I can't really do much until I get back to the Organisation, or MI6 as I called it. But I add:

- Try the Met. Ask them about Operayshun Hyde but doan say y' got it frm me.
- Thaill telt us nowt. Thay fuckin eat like an fuckin elleffunt bu fuckin shet like a fuckin cunnairie.
- Wharra y' gunna give uss to be goin on wi'? I clear my throat to avoid slipping back into the dialect. I want to get back to my position before the second half kicks off.
- The wummann Kavven wen bak ta iz playce wi wuz fuckin lash, like. Fahve tenn wi lang darrk rud airr. Called Delilah.

My laptop brain goes into overdrive. It's all there somewhere. This document or that folder will tell me what I need to know. I am confident of that, now. But what I want explained is: what happened to that meaningless conversation in *The Pink Pussycat* between the end of September and now? Was it in RAM or had it been etched onto my hard disk, my C drive? How come suddenly I can open a file that a moment ago was not even listed in *Filemanager*, and see it, undamaged? Where did it go for three months? Or is it just that my mechanisms are fucked?

- Luk, Ron, I've gorra get back to my brother fur the second arf. I'm not promisin nowt but I reckon I can help yer.

– Good on yer, sunn.

As I walk back to the heart of the Dock, I know it is obvious. In late September, that night in *The Pink Pussy*, Dolores told me she had gone back to Ironopolis with a Kev and had sex with him. She even took some money. That meant Dolores was:

- in Ironopolis the night Liz Crebbin was murdered.
- in Hyde Park the night Xabel Bontempi was murdered.
- at Caledonia University, Edinburgh when Fiona McKeighley was murdered.

Mind you, so was I.

Book 5

**Now is the time
for action**

28

Fiasco

The drive back Boxing Day was miserable. We lost 2-1 after being 1-0 up. Home defeats are the hardest to bear, especially after going in front, especially after having Jamie 'Hooligan' Ulligan, the 18 year old local lad made good, sent off in circumstances we could not even begin to understand. I braced myself for the mid-season losing streak, I braced myself for my personal tumble down the league table.

Then, it happened.

Inevitably. Ineluctably. Unavoidably. Fortune, Fate, Destiny, Nemesis, Kismet. No matter how you dress it up, it knocked on my flat door on Tuesday 28 December. I opened the door expecting the Viscount Woolmer again with another fish – or perhaps more seasonally, a turkey – but it was a morbid figure in a black, hooded cloak holding a boxed selection of *Sabatier* kitchen knives. The hood came off to reveal a familiar, varnished, dark bob and a healthy, glowing, flushed-pink face.

- Merry Xmas, said Charlie Preston brightly offering me the knives. – I know you've always wanted these. Sorry, I didn't have time to wrap them.
- You've just bought these in the sale at the Army and Navy. The price tag is still on.
- What if I have? It still shows more imagination than the lacy, black underwear you've bought me for every birthday and Xmas since I was 17.

Charlie chatted about some horrific murder she'd read about, some woman had been attacked on her way home from a party the night we'd been out before Xmas. *What are the police doing about the real criminals these days?* She moaned about Syd and how he'd had to briefly go into work Xmas Eve before going off on his honeymoon. *Weren't city law firms terrible, working their staff like dogs?* She chatted about the Iros. *Why in god's name were refs so biased against the Iros, sending Hooligan off like that?* She chatted about Xmas day in the home counties. Thank god, *the queen hadn't referred to an Annus Horribilis, this time?* But this was all warm-up, stretching, pre-match kickabout. The game proper started with:

- Damien, I've got to tell you about Imogen. I know you think the sun shines out of her neat little tush but I'm very worried.

As Charlie lit a Marlboro, I silently sank into the flabby old sofa which, in old age, sagged like it had lost all muscle definition. I pretended to myself that my crazy-paving pecs and

cattle-grid abs *weren't* craving fresh, toasted Virginia tobacco. Did I tell you I've given up again?

- I followed her into work, the other day, she continued without prompting. – After you dropped her off at Heathrow on Xmas Eve. She went to the terminal and I waited an hour or so then she came out and drove off to the city.
- Where did she go?
- I don't know. I lost her in EC1: she may even have known I was following her. It was Xmas for Xsake. There was no traffic on the road and she was driving at a hell of a speed.
- But I had her MG. And she always drives fast.
- She was driving a huge black *Potentate* convertible injection, Charlie continued breathlessly waving her Marlboro under my nose. Its vapour twirled up and into my nostrils like the aroma of Bisto, *Aaaaah*. – I'm not an expert on cars but I would say it was way beyond the salary of a glorified waitress.
- Why didn't you tell me this Xmas Eve?
- I didn't want to ruin your Xmas.

You hadn't time to make it up, more like. I thought of saying it but didn't. I was in no mood for a Charlie Preston super-strop and I was beginning to suspect that Charlie's *allegations* might have had some substance to them. And that's the problem with intelligence work, with processing information from different sources, with assessing directly conflicting accounts. Any story has at least at two different points of view and they often hardly co-incide. So who do you believe? That is *the* question. In the end, it can only come down to that: the more reliable source. And one thing is for sure, in real life there are no omniscient narrators to stride in, sweep up the debris and put it into neat little, discrete piles.

So I had to ask myself: who do I trust? A long term but sometimes petulant lover who had never *really* lied to me in over four years but did twist things to suit her own ends? Or a well-balanced but relatively unestablished newcomer who was loyal and understanding, even when she really should have kicked me into touch?

Hostile

At one point in our blossoming relationship, a month or so ago, I started to believe that my life with Imogen was too good to be true. But recently, she has begun to give me cause for concern. And not just because of my behaviour at the Wedding or at that dinner party a couple of weeks ago. It's really not going as well I hoped. And that's why I haven't really mentioned it much. Because I can't face up to it myself. We've never had a really fierce argument but I think I've pushed her a little too hard sometimes.

In the early days in relationships, you don't really get into arguments, even if you feel aggrieved. For example, on the Sunday after the ball at ELWELL's place, I woke Imogen up to very slow, very intense cunnilingus. I must have given her at least

three orgasms. Expecting at least a handjob, if not a slow-train blowjob, I laid back and closed my eyes as she pulled back the bedclothes. When I opened my eyes, Imogen was gone and all I could hear was the sound of her casually getting ready in the ensuite bathroom. (I had a wank though, sniffing her panties she had discarded from the day before. Mind you, even this proved fruitless as the panties weren't even that *smelly*). But I didn't say anything.

As our relationship went on, I became increasingly distressed at Imogen's lack of interest in any form of sex outside the missionary position. I mean, X, aren't the posh ones always supposed to be dirty (or *dairr-tee*, as they say in Ironopolis)? So that night in October, the one where I tapped her for 350 sheets, I curled up behind her in my crisp-clean bed and began to kiss her neck and stroke her breasts and fanny, clamping myself to her all along her body. From above, we must have looked like the German SS symbol. As she let out her pathetic little *ooohs* and *aaahs*, her pipsqueak *uh-uh-uhs* and her langorous, husky *ooh*, *yyyyeeeeessses*, I manoeuvred my hard-on next to her buttock cleft and then began to move it tenderly up and down the entire crack. My excited cock provided the immediate lubrication as I readied myself to locate and probe her tight little starfish. As if telepathic, she grabbed me from behind and hurled me to the floor in one fluid movement, like I was taught on the Organisation's *Defensive Techniques in Hostile Situations* course.

As I rubbed my scorched elbows – torched by the dense carpet – I tried to gather my wounded pride:

- Where the hell did you learn to do that? I laughed.
- Oh, it's the kind of thing we learnt at the Abbey. You know, self-defence and all that.
- Next time, we run out of bog-roll late at night, I quipped, – you're going down the Seven Eleven, not me.

I was too shaken to even get off the blocks establishing why exactly Imogen objected to arse-fucking.

After that, she kept just letting me know that I was £350 in debt to her – like I was never allowed to forget it. Jesus, it was Arab horse trading, like she enjoyed it because she had something over me. I was in her eternal debt.

After the arse-fuck fiasco, I kept a lower sexual profile. I still fucked her every night but in the home counties, eight-o'clock-on-a-Saturday-night-with-the-lights-out missionary position (with a condom). So I only got one orgasm a night, just like teenage sex. It was like the last fourteen years of my sex life hadn't happened. One minute I was up there in the European Champions League, the next I was kicking around a casey with a bunch of kids in the park. So I came over all adult and asked Imogen why she didn't like fucking any other way, although in not quite so many words, but she fobbed me off with her usual nonsense, like:

- I don't feel ready yet. Or:
- It doesn't feel right at the moment. Or:
- I'm still not properly over Jestyn so it would be unfair to both of us. Or:

- Just wait a little longer then it will happen. And you'll be really glad you waited. Or, simply:
- Later, later.

Why is it always later with women? Why not now?

But it wasn't just sex. She gave me a hard time about not being around when ELWELL died, even though I had explained to her that I was operational and life stopped for the Organisation. Then she was always complaining about my personal habits, like picking my nose or farting. I mean, women do – it's the covenant men have to endure in exchange for regular sex – but Imogen was crazy. If I let off the slightest squeak, she would berate me, leap up and spray *Neutradol* over the room, like agent orange. We virtually never spent time at her flat as it was a minefield. If I moved a chair slightly, she complained about me making new indentations in the carpet. If I did the washing up, it was never squeaky-clean enough. If I read a newspaper, I had to be dipped in bleach before I touched anything else. X, it was like living in an advert.

We had our first raised-voices row after that dinner party at her place. We had smoked a bit with Jason and her mam, even though I kept hinting to Imogen I wanted some time with her alone. Then, in bed, Imogen had claimed to be too tired to make love so I asked her for a good, old-fashioned handjob. You should have seen her. She couldn't help looking down her nose at me. At one point I thought she was going to enunciate in her clipped, BBC-English: 'I'm not touching that – you wee out of it.'

In the end, she agreed to give me sex if I was that 'desperate' – I was. I was very stoned – but then proceeded to keep hushing me, every time I thrust forward, as it made the bed squeak, apparently.

- Ssshhh, she whispered with her finger to her lips, – mummy will hear you.

When I eventually came from this gentle rocking, it was the quietest and least intense orgasm I'd ever had but even then Imogen ranted that her mummy must have heard *something*. I was so angry that night, I tossed and turned until the wee hours – bleeding more complaints from Imogen – before I went to the bathroom and beat off, shooting my load over the wall-length mirror and leaving it there. The next morning, I clean forgot about my unspeakable act as I saw Imogen off to her friend's for the day, only to be reminded of it later that Wednesday afternoon, by an over-excited commentator on the video of the 1993/4 season:

- He shoots. He scores. That goal, Ron, a mirror image of his first, the way he brought it off with cool control. Just look at his face. Just look at the mess he made of the Charlton defence.

As a result of this, I resolved to try and avoid Imogen until the last minute before she left on her long-haul flight the following Friday evening. But she caught me out. The phone went at three pm and I answered it thinking Imogen couldn't possibly be back from her friend's.

- Damien, she breathed, – I'm so, so sorry about last night. I was such a prig. I should have remembered that mummy always takes a sleeping pill when she has to stay in town. Anyway, she paused, catching her little girl breath, – I

thought I could make it up to you. I'll get an Indian on the way to yours, as I know they're your favourite, then we can have a quiet night in and have some fun. Some rrrreal fun.

Just wait until you see your bathroom mirror, I thought. You won't like me then. But when she arrived she mentioned it but only to play it down. Then we ate and chatted and drank and smoked and stroked and kissed until it was time for bed.

– I can't give you anal sex, she confided rather clinically as we were getting undressed. – It's just that I have a mental block about it after Jestyn told me what happened to a boy at his school. But I think it's time I performed some fellatio on you...

Imogen didn't pronounce it like Ron Durham. She pronounced it right. That was my first thought after she made her offer. Then, she did it. She gave me a blowjob. Not a brilliant one. Not like the ones Dolores gave me at Cally, gave me up until recently. Not like the ones I get off Charlie (or should it be *used to get*?) But a blowjob nevertheless. I remember thinking at the time it was like she had recently learnt how to do it, like she was a *novice*. But surely that couldn't be the case with an attractive 26 year old woman who'd had a long-term relationship. Or, perhaps, Jestyn was one of those weirdoes who didn't like *blowjobs*. Either way, me and Imogen had non-stop sex until she left for South America on the Friday.

Jesus, I thought, I'll have to jizz over her bathroom mirror more often.

After that, I was really looking forward to seeing Imogen when she returned from her jaunt the Thursday before Xmas, the night after my argument with Charlie and the night before Syd's wedding. In my mind at that point, I had already kicked Charlie into touch to make a proper go of it with Imogen. But Imogen was at her very worst that night and we argued almost as soon as she arrived at my place because, she claimed, I was hurrying her into sex before she'd even had time to settle. We barely spoke over the next couple of days before she was off again on another shift. If the truth be told, I was glad she hadn't been around for Xmas.

So, with the old year ending and the new beginning in just a few days, I have decided things have to come to a head. Imogen's hypnotic beauty, her tolerance of my excesses and our already fading love are, I have decided, not enough to sustain a relationship. I have decided to tackle Imogen on the allegations Charlie made yesterday before Imogen goes off on her next jaunt. I think I have the ideal opportunity. You may remember that one November afternoon in the Tate Imogen provisionally agreed to go to a football match with me. Well, since then, I have spent many of our hours together pestering her, like I pestered my dad to take me to more Iros games when I was a kid, to keep to her word, her word of honour, her oral-contract *obligation*. Ironopolis are playing in the metropolis on New Years Eve, at Charlton, and the Valley is on the way to Gatwick from where Imogen is to jaunt off on her next exotic shift. With Charlie's bizarre allegations still ringing in my ears, I dial Imogen's number.

It is time for Imogen to be tested at the Iros. It is time to resolve all this nonsense, one way or the other.

Revolution

That News Years Eve afternoon at the football, Imogen whined about the cold, whined about not being with her family, whined about the boredom. She might as well have whined about the industrial revolution which gave birth to the town of Ironopolis in the first place. (How could anyone be bored at a football match, at an *Ironopolis* match?) But my problems really began when she span round to me on the hour mark and declared loudly:

– Someone just groped my bum.

I studied the faithful around us. No one blinked an eyelid, each stared mesmerised by the game, distractedly and tunelessly murmuring:

– *Jingle Bells, Jingle Bells, Jingle all the way, Oh what fun it is to see the Iros win away.*

As we were 2-0 up at the time, I laughed and said:

– You shouldn't be so damned attractive.

Even I realised later what it looked like: me laughing at her and condoning the worst sort of sexism. We won 3-0 and I spoke to her of the neat symmetry of a 3-0 victory v Charlton that weekend at her parents place, our first together, and the same result this afternoon, possibly our last together. But she didn't protest the inaccuracy of this. After the match, on the way to Gatwick, I had to ask her:

– After I dropped you off at Heathrow the other day, Xmas Eve...

I tried to peer into her crystal blue eyes as she concentrated on the empty M23, endeavouring to emotionally detach myself from my hard-to-break suspect. But there was no flicker.

– Did you...Did you go off to work, then?

Imogen didn't bat an eyelid. Sweet Jesus, she's had anti-interrogation training, *Paranoia* whispered in my ear, taking a break from her general fussing. Neither Imogen nor I said a word for a long sixty seconds – or was it five minutes? – until, like a fool, I broke with my training and spoke. I had to. The silence was too oppressive.

– Imogen, I love you, you know, I declared like in a movie. – I'm sorry about dragging you to the football but I just wanted you to... *know*, that's all. Know what it means to me.

– I love you too, Damien, she uttered coldly as she pulled the MG up outside the terminal.

We climbed out in silence and she leaned over to grab her expensive, leather hold-all from the back seat. For a second, I admit, it flashed through my mind to slap her firm

Golden Delicious arse. But I didn't. I had let her off the hook, failed to reel her in with patient silence. But love is not patient. It is urgent and we are not trained to *rein* it in.

- Imogen? I implored pathetically.
- See you on the fifth, Damien. Happy New Year, she said brusquely before throwing her hold-all over her shoulder and marching off through the bustling, bristling terminal.

29

I spent New Years Eve with Charlie. It was a dispiriting affair. Another year dead, another closer to death, another reminder of dread knowledge, another reminder of failure against the benchmarks we set ourselves. Where should I be now? Let me see. 1995: news editor or commissioning editor on a national. With Ironopolis about to make their second, and this time successful, bid for the European Cup.

- Happy New Year, Damien, you depressing sod, jeered Charlie as she wrapped her arms around my neck. We were at some packed house party somewhere in NW3 and the recorded chimes of Big Ben had just rung in 1995.
- Happy New Year, Charlie, I smiled, *Auld Lang Syne* starting its inevitable build up in the background.

I loved her. I really did. She was infectious. You couldn't help being susceptible to her, you went down with her, she laid you out, consigned you to your bed. In the nicest possible way.

- It's the Big One in five years' time. That'll be some party. I wonder where we'll be then.
- Yeah, I wonder, I replied as she laid me out a line like a thick, hairy, Arctic caterpillar.
- You know what I read the other day? She asked as I stooped to Hoover it up in a single, clinical snort.
- Whaaaaaat? I asked, bolt upright and continuing to inhale, my eyes streaming, my world sparkling.
- There are gonna be more technical innovations in the coming five years before the end of the century than there has been in the century up until now.
- Jeesusss X.

Charlie looked at my coked up nose. I was all over the place, happy to be part of the singing shortbread festivities, joining arms in that peculiar criss-crossed way, shouting the first line of *Auld Land Syne*, giving it all I had. The coke fuelled my racing mind as it tore out of the earth's atmosphere:

- Isn't it funny, I shouted to Charlie as I went mental above the din, – how we all like being Jocks one night a year?

But that's the trouble with coke. Like science, it's exponential.

All that first week together in June 1990, me and Charlie talked non-stop: chat, wittering, discussion, debate, seminar (with my friends in pubs), one to one tutorial (with practical in bed), interview, inquisition, interrogation, joke telling, story telling, bad puns (me), mock quotes from Shakespeare (me, again), serious quotes from Literature (her), lyrics from popular songs of the twentieth century (her, again), characters from telly (both, but different periods) but never argument. When she left, we agreed very adultly that we could never have ‘a proper relationship’, because, Syd would have killed me – he was very protective of his much younger sister and claimed that I had a reputation, which I disputed, for using women. With my record? X, if you had seen some of the boilers I had got off with, you’d have thought they deserved it.

At that point, I was about to jack in my thesis as a result of ‘money worries’. But not the ones lower middles quaintly refer to when they miss a mortgage payment or bounce a cheque when Daddy Breadwinner is made redundant. After all, why worry about what a bank or building society can do? They can’t break your legs or have you slashed or put your bird on the game and take the proceeds, unlike the McParlane Brothers. I needed *wonga* fast. £1,000s of it. And *Mrs Loveit, I bet she does* wasn’t going to provide.

Anyway, there was no question of Charlie coming to Edinburgh to study, even if she wasn’t pursuing her own agenda. So, as she drove off up Leith Walk and turned into London Road late on the last Sunday night in June 1990, I thought I’d never see her again. Relationships are like language. They prosper in the right social, economic and political circumstances or they wither, like Welsh. But I was wrong. It continued because the circumstances changed. *Propinquity* – another of those Amisesque Puerto Rican helps – took over. I moved to the metropolis in October 1990 to work with the Organisation, while Charlie signed on at the A40 branch of Oxbridge Plc, only sixty miles away. I had to tell her I had joined the polis and, like everyone else who knew me at all well, she laughed hollowly at this before joking:

– Drug squad I suppose. Call in a fuckin expert. Call in Damien Dean.

Copacobana

- Charlie, did you put this in my pocket?
- What?
- This.

She studies it closely, very closely.

- Charlie put your glasses on, you vain sod.

She normally wears contact lenses but at 11:30 this New Year morning, she is a blind, pink puppy. As she scrambles around in the debris which has surrounded my bed in waiting like hostile injuns, I read the letter again. It is the same old immaculate handwriting, the same school textbook paper, the same red-pink ink.

Deano,
You really are a twat, aren't
you? Do you think I can't
see you? I pinched Imogen's
bottom at the football today
then I slipped this little note
in your pocket. You're a
crap intelligence officer.
You really are.
By the way, you'd better
stick with Imogen, otherwise
I might feel moved to act
against her. The Preston
girl is fine but not here, not
now, not with Imogen
around. And your other
floozy, the redhead, she's
sunning herself on the
Copacabana, telling any one
who'll listen what a stupid
cunt you are.
I should tell you I expect
more progress from you.
You're a lazy, drunken twat
at heart, aren't you? But if
you don't make progress in
the right direction more
'innocent' women will die.
You are a cunt.
The Ratcatcher
Saturday 31st December

Charlie reads it and turns to me, scared.

- Damien, this weirdo knows about me. Who is it?
- How the hell should I know?

- Have you had these before?
- Yeah.
- X, what have you done to identify the Ratcatcher, then?
- Fuck all, what can I do? I pause and look Charlie in the eyes. – I thought it might be you at one point. In fact, I thought it might be you, just now.
- How the hell could you think that? She interrogates me. – This freak is obviously following you around. Anyway, you're a policeman: you've got access to all sorts of records. You can track him down surely.

If only it were that easy.

- I don't know. I've done what I can. I've made enquiries about that and other notes. None of it makes any sense.
- Can I see the other notes?

I reach over to the tatty, formica chest of drawers by my bed, force out the ill-fitting drawer and rummage through the mountains of paper which record the bureaucratic ebbs and flows of my life. Charlie reaches across me and grabs something which I only realise is *that* red wig after she has spirited it away. She tries it on. She looks stunning in it but I know I can't say that. We have a brief conversation about it anyway and I give in to her requests, telling her it belonged to Dolores, before I return to my rummaging. Eventually, I find the first note, dated the 22nd September; the second written note, dated 2nd November; my copied out version of the pager message; and a print out of the e-mail. Charlie studies them expertly and intensely in her studious tortoiseshell frame, little round glasses. Occasionally, I see her make a mental marker, a footnote to probe me further on a particular comment. She has her hard-hat on, ready for manual labour.

Jesus, I fancy her. Jesus, I want her.

While Charlie was at Xchurch (which she never tired of telling me had given Britain thirteen of its prime ministers), we exhausted *The Joy of Sex* (but not the joy of sex), getting thrown out of bars, restaurants, cinemas and on one occasion a rush hour tube – berthed at Oxford Circus – in the process. When she was reduced to tears by retarded ex-public schoolboys or the unscrupulous media *beau monde*, she hopped on the *Oxford Tube* to escape all the hideousness of earnest undergrad culture. I would listen to her, laugh with her and tease her to wretched orgasm after wretched orgasm, dissolving the horrors done to her by males barely out of adolescence.

One such night in May 1992, Charlie buzzed at my place in Westminster in a Niagara of tears as she had been cast aside once again, like yesterday's papers, by some hack from *The Citizen* prowling the A40 Oxbridge campus for new talent. He had secured his time in the sack with Charlie on the promise of a summer secondment which had now fallen through because she didn't fit *The Citizen's* new policy of *slanting* recruitment. Actually it wasn't one night. It was Friday 2 May 1992. Why do I remember the date so well? I was only at home that particular Friday night because I couldn't risk getting too *langered*, as

Charlie would put it, and missing the historic promotion decider at West Brom the following day. Somehow, she convinced me that the game was off as West Brom fans had vandalised the pitch, making the match unplayable the following afternoon. Ceefax confirmed there was an element of truth in this but the match went ahead anyway. Without me. We won 2-1 and went up. And I missed it.

Yet she had me cooking her favourite dish that night – Lime and Mustard Scallops with saffron and shallot mash.

Volts

After the slow-train intensity of the sixty nine, we are both lying flat on our backs pinned to the bed and barely able to touch each other anywhere (and certainly not on the genitals); covered in spunk, juices and saliva; our bodies limp and our minds in freefall. I reach a hand across to Charlie's taut yet silky and tender belly and trail my fingers across it. She jumps, like the contact has joined an electric circuit and sent 240 volts through her.

- Don't even think of touching my clitty, she orders, pooped out on the bed, taking hold of my errant hand just in case, – or I'll make a cartoon Charlie-shaped hole in the roof. How do you read my body so well?
- Lots of practice, I reply jokingly.
- Right, she says, determined, – let's take another look at those scary notes.

Then, she is an accountant sorting out the affairs of a client whose only records for his tax returns are a drawer full of copied invoices, payment slips and scrappy receipts. She probes, as she questions, as she clarifies: *Am I your 'girlfriend'? Who's 'Marilyn'? Why the inverted commas? Who's Xabel? Who's Fiona McKeighley? Who's the Golightly woman? Did you father Amy's abortion? And while we're at it, who's Amy? Who's Katherine Marton? Why the hell is Alex's fiancée mentioned? What have you and Imogen got to do with that government minister's death?*

It is time to come clean with Charlie. It is time to decide this nonsense, one way or another.

- That note from yesterday was the first time you were mentioned. Dolores Golightly was my girlfriend at Cally, although her real surname is Kane. Marilyn is a woman I got off with once at *The Pink Pussycat*. Xabel is Xabel Bontempi – a woman who was murdered in Hyde Park in September. Fiona McKeighley was murdered in the 1980s in Scotland. Katherine Marton, I don't know – she remains U/ID...
- What does that mean?
- Sorry, it's officespeak for 'unidentified'.
- Didn't Alex know a Catherine at Caledonia Uni?
- That was spelt with a 'C'.
- The Ratcatcher might have got it wrong.

- No, her name was Cath Evans.
- I don't mean her. It was another Katherine. I'm fairly sure he pointed her out when I went to his graduation. She was there, protesting about something, not graduating. He pointed her out as one of his 'enemies of our great nation', as he does.
- Given Alex's politics that could mean she was a Tory wet, I laugh gingerly.
- Are you all right? You look a little off-colour.
- It's last night's excesses. I can't party like I used to. Anyway enough of this. Back to your questions. I received the pager message at one of Imogen's dinner parties when Patsy was there.
- I know. It made my blood run cold when I read it in that pager message. Don't you find that freaky?
- It's more scary that he knows that Amy Tuppham – a girl I work with – had an abortion. Only me, her and the father are supposed to know.
- Could be him then – the father, I mean.
- I was going to check with Amy just as soon as I got back to work.
- What do you mean 'back to work'?

I paused.

- Charlie, I'm not a proper policeman. I spoke in the slow, deliberate manner of the confessional. – And I'm suspended at the moment.
- I knew it. You're Special Branch, aren't you?
- Not exactly. But my work did bring me into contact with Francis ELWELL, who is Imogen's godfather.
- My, we are using our friends in high places, aren't we?

I stop. How much can I tell Charlie? How far can I trust her? How far will her eye for the main chance – a great story – get in the way of our friendship? I tell her the special polis department I'm in is investigating a serial killer then weave a story around this, involving ELWELL and tying up every other loose end Charlie knew about. She cajoles me into telling more but I already regret revealing so much. Charlie is the pushiest person I know. If the Organisation were to recruit anyone to report on me, it would be someone like her, especially as Dolores has now gone.

- Is there anyone in your life you've really pissed off? She asks, frowning her concern. -- Anyone who might want to take revenge on you?
- Jesus, where do I start? I've even seriously fallen out with Jason twice and he's my best friend. And I shagged Simon Register's bird at college even though he was my best mate there.
- You absolute cunt.
- The correct phrase is 'Monty, you terrible cunt'.
- I wasn't quoting Withnail.
- Well, Simon is more than getting his own back now he's seeing Dolores. I really don't think he is the type to freak me out like this. Let's see, who else

might want revenge on me? The many people I pissed off as a student editor; Dolores, of course, my ex from Cally; your brother Syd...

– Why him?

– Because of you and all the other shit.

– Alex wouldn't do that.

– Oh yeah, you hardly know him, really. You're just little sis.

– Look, you've got to tell me everything. My name is mentioned in those notes. I may be in danger. What if something happened to me? It'd be your fault if you were keeping stuff from me.

At this very moment, I go a ghastly shade of pale. I recognise the tactics, the informer's m.o. or *modus operandi* for getting information out of a target. Now I *know* she's been sent. *By the Organisation.*

30

Adultery

Apart from the shock to my system of returning to the Organisation at its secret location in the heart of the metropolis after so long away, after so long effectively in disgrace, January began to meander along in its usual hopeful but ultimately disappointing way. As everyone dragged their New Year hangovers in on the 3rd, I hauled in my three month sloth, like a giant sack of anti-presents only to be confronted by the cheeriest person in Britain at that moment – Wendy Probit. She was back at work after only two days off in the entire holiday period (and those were the weekend), but without hangover, without regret, without the misty-eyed hope that all the rest of us wrap up with the start of the New Year. Wendy had no other life. No partner, no children, no family, no friends so she never took her leave entitlement and always took the *dirty nappy* shifts of Xmas and Boxing Day, every year, which saved management the migraine of having to bribe a reluctant officer to come in.

I met Imogen in the *Red Lion* off Curzon Street after work on the 5th, on her return from her New Year shift to South America. She had phoned me earlier that day, as soon as she had got back, and her tone had been pleasant – none of that ice queen or ice bourgeois stuff remained from our last conversation. So I was hopeful but, before I had even had a chance to warm my cold aching limbs in front of the *Red Lion's* roaring fire, she came right out and confessed to adultery – with a colleague from *Freebird* on Xmas Eve in the city.

- Can you ever forgive me, Damien? She asked imploringly, picking up my numb hand with her delicate ivory fingers.
- But why, Imogen, why? I emitted from grinding, chattering teeth.
- My shift was changed at the last moment and I couldn't be bothered to see you after the wedding and your appalling teenage behaviour.
- That was nothing. You could've given me a ring rather than run off with the first available man from your office.

I stopped myself from pouting with hurt but only just. *Jesus, I've learnt far too much off women.*

- Some bloody pilot, I bet, I continued warming to my performance, – all gleaming teeth, management hair and square jaw, no doubt. Bloody glorified bus drivers if you ask me...

- Damien, wrap up that bloody chip on your shoulder...she almost hissed, more forcefully than I had ever heard her speak before. – I-I mean, you can't talk, she accused, breathily.
- I'm not letting some bloody woman pull the moral high ground from beneath my feet this time.
- So why were you seen kissing Charlotte Preston at the wedding, then? And don't say it was a drunken indiscretion. You carried on with her all evening and would probably have slept with her if you'd been able to get it up!

Not for the first time in my life, I stood there, guppy-mouthed. How did she know? No one else at the wedding had mentioned it. Had Charlie told Imogen, to split me and Imogen up? Had the Organisation pushed some scurrilous note under Imogen's door – with photographic evidence from the Department Y technical operatives who still followed my every move? Had Imogen realised that I had my head buried in Charlie's coke-caked crotch the morning after when she poked her head around the door?

- What do you think we should do? I asked, rather too pathetically.
- Damien, she smiled, – I love you. If you can forgive, I can forgive.

I nodded as we fell into each other's arms and hugged for all we were worth, swaying from side to side like a gentle metronome, in front of the hardened regulars. Back in their local, they were all too clearly relieved to be free of the amateur drinker Xmas crowd, and relieved to be warming themselves in front of the roaring fire with foaming pints of strong ale.

- I love you too, I whispered, almost in tears.
- Can you do one thing for me? Imogen asked breaking our hug which seemed to join our very souls. – Stop seeing the Preston girl, altogether. She's so immature. And such a spoilt brat. I'm sure she doesn't like me and I don't want anyone to come between us.
- OK, I agreed, mentally checking my internal resolve, my inner steel, like I was carrying out maintenance on an aircraft.

Hell, I figured, I had to be able to do that for the woman I loved. But my relationship with Imogen seemed to be cursed. We set a date for the opera in mid-January, *The Marriage of Figaro* at the English National Opera (which I have never noticed is just up from the Chandos pub, by St Martin in the Fields). Over two days, I risk-managed my life to ensure that I didn't cock it up. I stayed in the night before. I refused offers of lunch time drinks, that day. I even had a light salad lunch, lest the Organisation canteen stodge take me hostage with turbulent guts before or during the performance. With a couple of hours to kill before meeting Imogen at seven – and to avoid Amy Tuppham's offer of 'a few pre-operative cheeky ones' – I went down to the gym for some gentle exercise. No weights. No straining. No coronary, no hernia, no slipped disc was going to threaten this opportunity to get my relationship back on track with Imogen.

Gently and self-consciously, I jogged on the treadmill, stretched on the spot and rolled my head on my shoulder muscles in front of the ex-services gorillas, orangutangs and apes. They gradually all filtered out no doubt in disgust at the feminine puniness of my performance before I decided it was time to shit, shower and shave in preparation for a

night at the opera. My skin hummed, it bristled, it gave off an aura, projected from deep, inner cleanliness and deep, inner healthiness as I walked across the oily, dank gym floor to the shabby exit. The handle was, as usual, a little stiff so I gripped it with both hands and twisted it. I waited for that understated click which indicated that the gym door was once again open, that I was once again free of this torture chamber. But nothing happened. I twisted again – this time with my whole body but the handle simply came off in my hand. My internal organs clumsily hurtled into each other and sunk collectively to the pit of my stomach, like cartoon characters. Not only was I going to miss my date with Imogen but I was already dehydrated, and becoming steadily more so as the Inferno began to really test its last sinner of the day.

For a mad moment, I actually thought Charlie had somehow conspired to have me locked in to fuck up my chances with Imogen. I had told her on the phone the night before – in agreement with Imogen – that I thought we were getting too serious so we should cool it a bit. Charlie had accepted this manfully although I later thought I might have detected a slight choking regret in her tone. Trapped in the Inferno, her slight regret became quiet, waiting, stalking revenge, the sort of revenge that only women get involved in. The sort you read about in the tabloids where all women, no matter how intelligent, sympathise with the ‘wronged’ woman even though any sane individual would assess the retribution to be way out of proportion to the original misdemeanour. But it couldn’t be Charlie. She had no access to the Organisation or its staff. Or did she? Once I had dismissed *Paranoia* for the day, I began to panic. How much air did the wheezy, old gym contain? More importantly, how much *oxygen*? The gorillas in there with their locker room lungs, their whooping, jet engine breaths consumed the finite oxygen by the barrel-load and left behind nasty, useless CO₂, or worse its nastier and deadlier partner in crime, CO, carbon monoxide.

– Fuck being scared of Imogen, I whispered to myself, trying the loose brickwork, – I’m scared of dying.

I didn’t die although every few minutes I swore I was getting drowsier, happily ignorant of the poisonous gasses overwhelming my blood supply, the sickly, pasty, unwanted white blood cells kicking out healthy red-blooded corpuscles, like cuckoos. A cleaner who heard my pathetic and weary scraping on the back of the gym door eventually released me at six the following morning. I looked and felt like I was hungover: dirty, frazzled, tired and weepy – out of boredom rather than fear. After several days of not returning my calls, Imogen finally spoke to me and accepted that it was ‘just an unfortunate incident’ although, she did point out, I seemed to be ‘particularly prey to unfortunate incidents’. I must have done something right as she proposed we go on a cheap weekend break, courtesy of *Freebird Airways*.

That minor excitement over, January just fizzled away. By this time of year, I have usually given up any hope that the brand-spanking New Year will be any different from last year’s model. So February usually sees me taking things by the hair, pro-actively asserting myself on the group dynamic, as Wendy might put it: ending long term relationships, starting new ones, or succumbing to the turbulent desire to find a new job, new university or a new life abroad somewhere. But 1995 just trundled along as more of

the same. The journey from 1994 to 1996 looked like it was going to be the direct, no change, no stopping, express service.

Even Ironopolis showed little deviation from their usual pattern. As predictably as New Year follows Xmas, they got into their mid-season losing streak in earnest and I saw almost every one of them. It began with a 3-1 home defeat to Grimsby on 2 January, took in a 1-0 away defeat at Oxford; an away draw then home defeat in the FA Cup against third division Wrexham; and a near defeat at home to bottom placed Bradford – only Richie Mustang's 89th minute equaliser saved us – before staggering to the end, like a condemned racehorse, with an abandoned match against Barnsley. By the beginning of February, our six-point lead at the top had been turned into a two point deficit. And it could have been a lot worse: only the weather and postponed fixtures saved us further humiliation.

None of it boded well for my hearing in front of the CG on 1st February.

Sacrament

I didn't know what would happen at the tribunal. I knew some sort of penance, as the Organisation called it, would be in order. But I couldn't be prepared for the charge brought before me: behaviour unbecoming of an officer. No, not that, the *specific*: possession of 'degrading and offensive' material. I hadn't realised this was a contractual offence, nor had the Organisation, I doubt, until it retrieved my wankmags during its search of my Westminster flat.

– What do you have to say in your defence, Dean? Asked the CG from behind his steel-rimmed Hubble-lens spectacles.

His lank, dark, tuppenny-all-off hair flopped across his balding scalp, like the black cap worn by judges sentencing the guilty to hang. But it did not accord, or even lend, him an imposing, sinister or despotic air as he was the kind of career bureaucrat who blended with the wallpaper, if he didn't move every ten minutes or so. A different toss of Fortune's coin and he would have been PUS in the home office advising the minister on immigration, drugs, law and order and, even, pornography or have been beavering away in the Bodleian on his masterwork thesis, *The Role Of The Villain In Jacobean Revenge Tragedy*. The suit he wore was plain, M&S mid-blue which carried none of the stateliness of a Prussian or navy blue. It was single-breasted but not in the sharp-cut of the 1960s, more in the pinched shouldered cut of the late 70s and early 80s. In fact, with his chubby face and dark hair, the CG may have been Rodney Bewes in disguise.

On closer examination, I realised only his upper half was implacable. Where I stood, looking up at the raised, deep mahogany, Mr Sheened platform, I saw his little legs going twenty to the dozen under the oak, football-pitch desk. It was designed to give him the gravitas his position so clearly called for but he was so desperately unable to provide. In fact, its vastness made him smaller, younger, less mature: a cartoon swot, Walter the Softy, Marcie from *Peanuts*, a youngish Charles Hawtrey.

I thought about making a political point about the right to legal representation but I knew this would count against me. I began a defence:

- Yes, I cracked under pressure although I would have stood a much better chance if the Office had told me what was going on during the FILTHY LUCRE operation. I could...
- That is dealt with, announced the CG in his Oxbridge whine. – It is now NTK, Dean. You must postulate a defence or I will be forced to withdraw and decide your penance without further ado.

I paused. I don't know where my next speech came from. I didn't prepare it. I couldn't have. I hadn't known the charge until a few minutes before. When I had finished, I didn't know whether to be pleased at my eloquence or ashamed that I stored so much pornographic background in files dredged up from the archives of my hard drive. The CG, ever mistrustful of appeals to the better nature of man, eyed me suspiciously over his glasses. Without even saying: 'Thank you', he waved the Department Q prosecutor into action who, bewilderingly at the time, quizzed me about the pantheon of pornography with doorstep contempt. When he came to urophilia (or golden showers) and coprophilia (or shit shots – I couldn't help translating to the vernacular), I wondered what the hell he was getting at. Until the prosecutor threw down a pack of playing cards. Each one showed a different mouth hovering near a different set of genitals and receiving a different golden sacrament. The cards sprawled over the mahogany table as they came to rest – in front of me, in front of Valerie Queen, my Department B parish officer; in front of Sally Tram, the typist dedicatedly keeping a verbatim record of the hearing; and last and certainly not least, in front of Wendy Probit. I swear I saw a glint in her eye which said to the prosecutor: 'I told you so. I told you so'. The cards – which I had brought back from Amsterdam at Xmas 93 as a shocking joke – had come back to haunt me. When shown them, most of my friends saw the joke but everyone, including me, stopped laughing when we got to, ironically, the Joker: a woman depositing a long *boudin noir* turd into the mouth of a bloke crouching below her.

But out it came now, the final, unnecessary weight on the lid of an already open and shut case. The prosecutor tossed it towards the table. It span like a sycamore leaf coming to rest face up. I sat down in the dock, resigned and scared.

- Balls, I said under my breath, – I'm going the same way as Godfrey James.

31

Fleece

The Organisation revoked my special duties status, taking away my ACCESS card for six months and various other bits and bobs of alias and status. And I was given a punishment posting to JATEAR, the joint assessment of threats from eco and animal rights groups. However, Wendy Probit had very kindly agreed to put to one side my peculiar temperament and to continue to supervise me. Jesus, how bad could it get? Well, I was by no means finished. I spent two days following around Simon Register hoping he would lead me to Dolores. At the end of the second day, he came out of the *Fleece and Llama* in Clapham, walked straight up to the Organisation *Nova* and said:

– Damien, what the fuck are you playing at?

I told him that I was on a highly sensitive MI5 surveillance operation and he would be in deep trouble if he blew it:

– It's a very serious charge, hampering an MI5 officer in his duty. You're looking at the wrong end of 14 years in chokey, mate.

– Damien, I'm not stupid, he said thrusting his thick head of dark hair through the *Nova's* window, invading my personal space like he had never done before.

– You're after Delilah because you think you know her. Well, I've asked her and she says she doesn't know any Damien Dean...

– Well, she would, wouldn't she? I replied cockily, wondering why his hair was much shorter.

But, of course, Dolores loved men with cropped hair.

– Fuck off or I'm calling the polis, he said calmly as he walked away.

But just as one door slammed in my face, like some convoluted Brian Trousers farce, another one flew open for no obvious or apparent reason. After the tribunal, the Organisation had finally allowed me back to my old desk and security cupboard. I knew all the lively stuff with the charm, intrigue and sexiness of spying would have been snapped up long ago, leaving me with the wall-flowers and the lumpen. I looked at my IN tray, which had hernia'd under the dead weight of routine and mundane intelligence; its contents hung around like the unemployed, befuddled by bureaucracy, waiting to be processed through the system.

The last thing I had done before being suspended was to task Department H to carry out financial enquiries into ELWELL. The results were lying in my IN tray. I fancied I could

make a few sheets flogging them to one of my contacts in the media so I scanned the numerous statements for coded evidence of credit card payments to *Kitty Haha's Massage Parlour*, *Mr Wu's Opium Den* or *Insider Info*, the dodgy stockbrokers.

There was nothing but the usual stream of upper middle class debits: W1 restaurants, Jermyn Street tailors, a laundry/dry cleaners in Belgravia; private medical insurance with Coutts, personal trainers at an exclusive health centre; hotels, like the Waldorf and the Ritz; and rare, moderate cash withdrawals. In fact, petrol and rail debits – always the top debtors on my statement – were virtually non-existent, presumably as Elwell had his chauffeur-driven limo, paid for by the tax payer. But, among the trust fund payments to ELWELL's kids – they each got £20,000 a year while at Oxbridge – I came across a monthly direct debit to a private fund. The payments of £1,500 a month went back through all the statements we had. Department H were notorious for making auditors' rather than investigators' enquiries but, for once, they had actually followed up the right lead. The account belonged to one *J Ashington* but gave an accommodation address in Landsdowne Row. I knew it was an accommodation address as the Organisation had used, and spied on, the same firm. *J Ashington* had to be identical with *Gemma Ashington*, the woman on the telephone tap, the woman who was to have ELWELL's illegitimate child.

- Amy, I called her over excited by life once again, – where is my old ID?
- Why? She asked absent-mindedly as she shuffled a ream of papers and then placed them into three discrete piles, marked IN, PENDING and OUT.
- I need to check out something to do with ELWELL, I stage-whispered from my maroon swivel chair. Amy barely looked up as I hissed: – You remember ELWELL, the philanderer.
- No' stiwl, she hissed back as she pinned DR slips to her IN destined for Department R look-ups.
- Please.
- You cahn ave it. Wendy'd lynch mi if she newwe.

Amy winced. I thought it was the stress of questioning but she had pricked herself with a pin, drawing blood.

- Bu' I ave an ID card. If I cam wiv ya... she continued, reaching for a tissue.

I thought she'd genuinely been concerned by the whole case but she had just been angling for a trip out, the *tease*.

- Get your coat on. We're going.
- Wharrabaht Wendy?
- She's briefing McKay from Department Z. He's just divorced. She'll be flirting with him for hours.
- Yad behha brief mi on ve waye.

I decided it was time to let Amy Tuppham in on all the hatstand goings-on in my increasingly paranoid world.

Ugly

On the way to Landsdowne Row, W1 that bleak February morning, I found myself feeling increasingly cheated by Amy. In my usual confessional style, I had told her just about everything about my crazy life on the way there. After this, I had felt sure she would open up about the father of her aborted child, vital stuff I needed in connection with the Ratcatcher notes that I had just told her about. Amy looked distressed as she assured me that the father couldn't possibly be the Ratcatcher, then all snooty when I asked her how she could be so sure. I then wished deeply that I hadn't told Amy quite so much. But, I concluded, she was at least trustworthy.

At Landsdowne Row, Amy showed her warrant card to the bim behind the counter who reminded me of a down-market Dolores, unable to quite pull off wearing so much slap, especially when the slap was so obviously cheap. The bim looked away unimpressed and called the manager. A fat, sweaty individual, he was all charm and 'umble pie, running a legitimate service, you understand, for those hiding from spurned lovers or angry former business partners or some such. It was just that some of the scum out there sought to abuse this service for their own diabolical criminal purposes. But Big Ron – he looked like the character in *Tobacco Road* – was always there to weed out the wrong-doers.

He went around the back again to fetch the real, postal address of our subscriber while the bim, who looked good enough to eat in a custard tart kind of way, asserted her petulant, arrogant and generally bored air. She made breathing look like a particularly irksome activity while reserving her particular contempt for Amy who she'd fingered as one of her own – eastern home counties girl, the poor cousins, the niggers, the Irish of the home counties. They had enjoyed a brief holiday in the sun, in the glare of the fish and chip media, until negative equity, downtown sink schools and job insecurity stopped them singing the praises of Thatcherism. Oh boy, did they come down to earth with a bump when they realised that the mainstream media were only fascinated in them as long as they voted Tory. By then, everyone else had more than good reason to think them trite, vulgar and common.

Big Ron returned, looking less *accommodating* and more *ugly*.

– I got contacts in the Met, he growled like some two-bit villain from *The Sweeney*, – and they're tellin me they doan know any Amy Tuppham in that departmen and as for you, ya fuckin chancer, where's your fuckin ID?

This was Amy's first time. She was a virgin in this game. A novice. That much I knew. She had been dying to use her warrant card which support staff were given after ten years service in the Organisation so they could carry out more operational work. But now fear had paralysed her, apart from the tears which began to ooze from her cow eyes.

– I'm a fuckin coppa and she's a fuckin coppa, I growled back, like Jack Regan. I had him taped as one of those fat blokes whose bulk works against them not for them. With my training I reckoned I could have him, one on one. – And I'll fuckin haul you down the nick on an aiding and abetting, if you doan give us those fuckin details.

– I got a brief. I doan fuckin av to take nuffing from you...

– And I’ve got mates in Stoke Newington nick who’d happily talk things over with you – until you decided to throw yourself down the stairs, o’ course.

He paused but it was obvious he had been through this shit with the polis before.

– Me, I’d be glad to elp, he smiled, – just as soon as you get a warran or a cour order coverin this material. Otherwise, gerrout ov ere. Lorraine, call me brief, will ya, lav.

Some minutes later, over a coffee in Simpson’s, Piccadilly, Amy and I joked about how investigative work just occasionally lived up to its seedy-mac, consorting-with-low-life myth.

– Doan tewl, Wendy, wiwya? She blurted through her man-size Kleenex. – Wendy’w tewl personnewl and iye ain goin nawhere in vis office anymorwe. She paused to blow jazz trumpet into her tissue before continuing. – Lissen ta mi naww. Seyin ‘aint’ liyk am dead comman. Vey’wl neva gimme a decen job if eye taw like vat awl ve tiym.

– Don’t worry, Amy, I re-assured her as I took her unadorned hands and held them, – I would never tell Wendy anything. You know me. But I am worried about you, especially as you were mentioned in those weird notes I keep getting.

I took advantage of her weakness without her really knowing. She confessed she had told some of her close friends about her ‘termination’ but only those she could really trust. None of them knew anything about me or where I lived let alone my e-mail address.

– Of course, they could have talked to someone else, I pointed out, – without even realising they were giving the game away. You know, get an agent alongside, make friends and then Bob’s your uncle.

– Deymeyan, ya’ve bin readin tu mani spy noffles. Or wurkin in vat Office f tu long.

Everyone called the Organisation ‘the Office’ in public. Perhaps, it somehow knew about Amy’s abortion. Perhaps, it was sending me the notes. Perhaps, it was ahead of the game. Perhaps, it still hadn’t finished with me after the bizarre denouement to Operation PANGOLIN. Perhaps, Charlie really had taken over from Dolores in providing the Organisation with intelligence on me.

But why?

Only

When we got back, Wendy was already there, sitting upright and smug in her faux leather, high-backed boss’s chair. I knew she wanted something as I sparked up the steam-powered computer, ONLY CHILD (or SPOILT BRAT, as it was known to its frustrated users).

– Damien, Wendy trilled across the room, – I’ve got a little job for you.

I sank. It could have been anything from the most routine, mundane research into the latest flavour of the month, probably involving the left but certainly avoiding the economic anarchists of the city and the right, to some meaningless, unnecessary errand like picking up a file from the Bunker or even getting her a coffee from Alfonso’s in the street. And I had so much to get in motion.

– I’m having a slight problem with ONLY CHILD.

I breathed an internal sigh. This could be as long or as brief as I wished.

ONLY CHILD hates Wendy and has made a better job of fucking her up than I ever could. I mean, it began early. As soon as the instructor talked Wendy through her first baby steps onto a slip road of the information superhighway, she nervously coaxed ONLY CHILD into life only for it to promptly electrocute her. Somehow, it *knows*. It smells her fear each time she freezes in its headlights, her pocked skin emblazoned with the fiery green cyphers it spits at her – mirror images of LIGIOUS FANA, SS PIT, RUSH HOUR, THY LUC and many more. In front of ONLY CHILD, Wendy is so obviously scared, her face set rigid in terror, like a gothic gargoyle lit up in a bolt of lightning or a wicked old witch of melodrama, thrown into hideous relief in the limelight. When it comes to Wendy, ONLY CHILD seems to have feral cunning. It plays with her like a Lothario toying with a virgin, its vast, bored mathematical brain seemingly devising ever more ingenious tortures for her.

To me, though, it is CHILD PRODIGY.

Time and time again, I’ve had to disappear from the room in fits of concealed giggles as Wendy smacks the keyboard against the desk and screams at the innocent computer, like she screams at me, after it has stolen her day’s work and has either secreted it away in some hidden systems folder or trashed it forever. On one occasion, when Wendy had worked at a whole day of two fingered typing, ONLY CHILD inserted the following line between Wendy and her precious work:

Delete All? (Y)

At that point Wendy got up and didn’t even dare breathe – or let anyone else breathe – on the arrogant machine in front of her until technical support had come down to our office whereupon the line simply disappeared. Seldom a week passes that there isn’t someone from *Tech Supp* playing with Wendy’s keyboard or in more extreme cases, prising the back off her machine. Some months ago, they revised their service targets to include a specific one purely for Wendy, before ceasing to come out to her at all after she reported one of their programmers for losing her day’s work – even though she had clearly failed to save it properly herself.

Just as Wendy avoids every human virus like some naturally immune alien, she goes down with every computer virus doing the rounds, even though the Organisation has

installed a variety of thorough cleansing, disinfecting software. It is on these occasions she is indebted to my limited but vital knowledge of computers:

– Damien, she screams from time to time, – what’s this blasted thing doing now?

And I sit in front of the monitor for a few seconds – or an hour or so if I’m feeling particularly vindictive – tickling the keyboard and whirling hocus-pocus cursor around like a magic wand unfurling menus of deliciously obscure gibberish. Gibberish to Wendy, that is. Then I finally summon up the dazzling characters which represent her mundane work. On one occasion, she even accused ONLY CHILD and me of being in cahoots, of being as thick as thieves, conspiring to prevent her meeting section deadlines and targets.

I ask you: how paranoid can you get?

Motorcar

After I had finished ‘fixing’ ONLY CHILD for Wendy, who begrudged her thanks to me, I went back to my desk to find a note she had left there but not mentioned. The note just said: ‘Please read and assess,’ in Wendy’s immaculate handwriting. Beneath it was a two foot pile of magazines, letters, newspapers and photocopies with a source report note pinned to the top sheet. It said: ‘Handed over by agent BROWN WINGS between November 1994 and January 1995. Please contact C6/X before using, 10.2.95.’ I thumbed through the pile. Most of the publications were the sort produced on desk top publishing systems in trendies’ bedrooms, ready to be photocopied then distributed wherever the fading Left decided to hold its latest rally against ‘the cuts’ or ‘road-building’ or ‘live animal exports’. I knew that all of this stuff was a red herring. Hell, I was a lefty at college so I knew how disorganised and fractious the Left had become even in my day, even before the fall of the Iron Curtain so what chance had any of these middle class wankers of destabilising the state?

As if in response to this question, my eye caught the headline of the newsheet on top, *Hedgerow*. ‘Protect us from the evil of the motorcar’ it said, exactly like that, with the inverted commas. It obviously wasn’t produced by some co-operative of eco-anarchists as the last paragraph said:

If you are interested in joining our ‘crusade’, please send your details to ‘The Cedars, Cherryblossom Lane, Whitworth nr Newbury, Berkshire.’ We welcome any articles or any help in putting our magazine together. You don’t have to be good, just enthusaistic.

I rifled through the rest of the material. Boy, BROWN WINGS sure had been busy. There were copies of every conceivable ‘subversive’ publication, including *Living Marxism*, *Class War*, *The Ecologist*, *Rainbow*, *Animal Rights Now!*, *Black Flag Mag*, *Direct Action*, *London Greenpeace*, *The Morning Star*, *Commintern*, *Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism!*, *Protect and Survive*, *Earth Matters*, *Stop the Traffic!* (the official publication of the ARA, the Anti-Roads Alliance) and *Stonewall*. Even though I knew that none of them were a threat, I knew I had to read them all as I couldn’t rule out the possibility that

Wendy had slipped in the odd publication which somewhere said: 'Smash the State' or 'Our time has come' or 'By any means necessary'. And, if I didn't find it, I would be on double detention all week. But I didn't just have to read them. I had to send off the details of every individual, every group and every publication which came up to the Organisation's Department R, the records section, for them to check whether the Organisation already had files on these individuals, groups or publications.

Then I had to read these files for background, which would, of course, affect my assessment of those involved, even if some of the files dated from the last century. Then after that, I would have to write all this up, checking every single detail twice for accuracy and sense as I knew Wendy Probit would rake it with a fine-toothed comb. Then Wendy would re-write it, changing the 'but's to 'however's or the 'might's to 'may's for her boss, the AC, claiming it as *all her own work* (unless of course there were any errors which she had missed which were subsequently picked up higher in the management chain. Then, I would be to blame. It would be *all my work*).

The AC would then write a shorter version of the document, disguising all the *sensitive* sources, which after being approved by the Branch Controller, would come back to Wendy to check that her words had not been misrepresented in the translation process. This meant, of course, that I would have to check the BC-approved version against my original. Then, with a bit of tinkering from the Deputy Controller General, it would be circulated under cover of an MI5 Box 500 report in slightly different versions to the polis, Whitehall and the other intelligence agencies (apart from MI5 who would get it as a caveated Cabinet Office document).

I saw three or four months of my life stretch out in front of me sitting behind a grey desk, surrounded by grey officers and administrators and reading grey material. (Some of it was *literally* grey, as being ecologists, they used the roughest recycled paper). Why would I bother to do it properly? What could the Organisation do to me, if I just refused? Well, the Organisation had a myriad of minor threats it held over me. It could send me to Department Y – Surveillance and pair me up with some square, some company man, someone who could bore for England, who I would be with 50 or 60 hours a week, every week. Or to Department Y – Telephone Intercept, which would involve listening to nonsense conversations for 40 hours a week by myself in a tiny booth with a typewriter and a pair of headphones. And, if this didn't buck up my act, my four year sentence for computer fraud could be resurrected at any time during my ten year stretch here – there's no time off for good behaviour.

With all this in mind, I sat down and began to skim the drivel but, like a great Ironopolis goal or a particular pornographic moment, imagined or real, I couldn't get Operation PANGOLIN out of my head. Each time I began some dreary, right-on tract I thought about J Ashington and ELWELL – here was a real mystery which really needed solving. Then I had a great idea. Like all great ideas it was simple but just might work. I decided to write to J Ashington at her accommodation address, claiming that I knew everything about her illegitimate child – I felt sure the payments had to be some sort of maintenance rather than hush money – and she might like to reply to me at *my* accommodation address. I picked up the Organisation's out-of-date and tatty Yellow Pages for the central London area, circled a few likely looking places and began dialling.

Now, was the time for action.

32

Uniform

Hey, I've got some great news. Imogen's got good at sex. Virtually every night she has spent with me over the last couple of weeks, between her now shorter jaunts, she's come up with the goods. And she's led it all. So here we are, on a Saturday in mid-February, in my genteel but distressed front room. I'm half-naked, still with my comic socks on, but glad to have come quite so intensely. She's still gift-wrapped in her classy gear – *Janet Reger*, she tells me – at my feet. We're laughing and chatting as lovers do. I'm in confessional mood, again, and I start to tell her just some of the crazy stuff going on in my hatstand life starting with the glassy-eyed Liz Crebbin. I mention Simon and Dolores, 'the painted hussy', I joke. I mention those skinheads – Imogen winces and her hard, lace-trimmed breasts gently heave. I mention my worries about Charlie – Imogen pulls her concerned face which narrows her eyes and makes her sexier still. Obviously, I don't mention anything about FILTHY LUCRE. All the while, Imogen just nods, adding the odd: 'You poor thing' or 'That's terrible'.

- Who have you told about this? She asks when I've sighed a final breath and brought my abridged tale to an end with the denouement in Lansdowne Row.
- Just Jason and the colleague from work, I lie regretting that I have told Charlotte Preston the half of it but not letting *that* on to Imogen.
- For your own safety, don't tell anyone else, she confides stretching her lithe, lean-limbed body, like a contented cat. – My father once worked in the intelligence game, for CX on one of his postings. Accra, I think. He has never really recovered from the cover-ups and backstabbing.
- Yeah, Rectum Defende, I joke noticing the ultra-marine blue splotch on the crotch of her otherwise turquoise panties.
- At work, who did you... I mean, how much do they know?
- Quite a lot. Too much, I suppose.
- For your own safety, you really should tell me whom you told.
- I can't.

I've seen nothing of Charlie at all recently but I did manage to fit in a night out with the lads, last Wednesday. I apologised to Simon Register for following him around, putting it down to jealousy over his success with 'Delilah' at my expense, *so perhaps we could all put that funny business in the past and just meet up for a drink or two*. Simon frowned,

said: 'Apology accepted', then claimed he would have to OK any proposed meeting with Delilah – as he has alerted her to what he calls my *jealousy*, the cheeky sod. Anyway, I was no nearer getting back at Dolores, no nearer to bringing those contorted, cramped nights without sleep to a dark, senseless end. But it got worse. Jason just told the whole of *Legends* – which he had got us into on the guest list – that, by the way, Natasha asked after you. Natasha who? I'd wondered. Natasha/Dolores never even crossed my mind in this context until Jason had reminded me that he had once, when we were stoned, one night last year, told me he'd met a Russian girl called Natasha. After their brief fling in October 1994, she'd phoned Jason again the Friday before last and taken him out to *Luz* for a slap-up meal and *picked up the tab*. All Jason had to do was pass on Natasha *Oblomov's* best wishes to Damien Dean, the next time he saw him.

- You didn't go back to her place, did you? I anxiously interrogated Jason, just as soon as he had finished revelling in her flirtation, her charm and the unspeakable acts she performed on him in the gents at *Luz* before tossing the attendant a £20 note on the way out, for his discretion, you understand.
- No but we fucked every which way at my place, he beamed through his floppy, curly brown fringe and caterpillar eyebrows that went to the middle of his heavily lined forehead when he smiled.

I sipped at my margarita slowly then launched into an explanation of how Dolores, Natasha and Delilah were the same person only to be met with blank, ever more sceptical stares and, finally the words, 'Just fuck right off,' from the two of them, my supposed best mates.

- Too much, James Bond, mate, Jason declared before urging me to drink up and head for *The Pussy* which put an effective end to the matter.

That session, or rather the hangover which came with it, and the subsequent bollocking I got off Wendy for coming in outside permitted core hours, the next day, made my third conversation with DS Brixton and DC Holloway even more bravura than usual.

Guvnor

The two policemen, both in serious grey suits but slightly different shades of grey, go through what I know about Dolores Kane – her contacts, her movements, her personality. It's 19:32, Thursday 9th February 1995. I give them what seems a decent amount of information, based on my knowledge of her and my own experience of handling agents. There is some detailed personal stuff about her parents' divorce but that's OK. I'm not one of these runners who keeps their distance from sources. I commit myself. Because it works. I get more information from them. I get more grief too but what the hell? The polis sit one in each armchair at opposite ends of the room with me on the busted sofa in the middle. I have to move my head from one to the other as they question me. It's Mickey Mouse stuff, though. I'm surprised they haven't tried hard man, soft man to break me, they're so *telegraphed*. Finally, they seem content with what they have and make to leave so I seize my opportunity. I ask them why they haven't identified Xabel

Bontempi yet and they murmur a variety of schoolboy excuses. I want to ask them why there have been irregularities with the autopsy report but I know I can't give away my sensitive sources.

– A mate of mine who's *job* talked about something weird about the autopsy on the body, I begin, not knowing where I'm going from here. – It had gone missing he said. Probably just a stupid rumour.

DS Brixton and DC Holloway look at each other like disbelieving parents, then draw air through their teeth, before DS Brixton says:

– Who told you the body had gone missing. That's tightly held information.

Jesus, I meant the *autopsy*, not the *body*.

– You've lost the fuckin body? I don't fuckin believe it, I declare dramatically marching away from them to the French windows. The Royal blue night is blotted out by the reflections of the two polis.

– Look, Damien, son, says DS Brixton. – You know what it's like in this game sometimes. Some bastard guvnor does something wrong and that's it. We're to blame, if it gets out. So ours is not to question why. And we don't want a media witch hunt of decent coppers. There's few enough around. Can I trust you to keep schtum, son?

I nod dumbly, not able to believe that a body could go missing in a murder enquiry. I knew there were dodgy polis who would destroy evidence for a consideration but who the hell would steal a mutilated dead body? And *why*?

That weirdness was at least balanced by an encouraging bit of news last week. You will recall that I sent a letter to J Ashington at her accommodation address, claiming that I know 'everything.' In reality, I know very little but I am now convinced she is the mother of Elwell's legitimate child and holds some sort of key to the madness now going on. Amazingly, she replied by return of post, urging a meeting at 6 Hanover Square, Edinburgh at one o'clock on Sunday 5th March. I have been told to come alone but I'm not that stupid. I think Imogen and I will make a weekend of it. I just wish it was sooner.

– Hell, squeezes out Imogen through heavy sobs, maybe ten minutes after I've finished performing acts on her that cannot be described in a family newspaper, – there's no doubt you understand a woman's body.

I ripple inside with *ah-shucks* pride.

– Why the change of attitude? I inquire genuinely intrigued.

– It just felt *right*, she replies nonchalantly.

Jesus, a typically female answer, I sigh inside. But we end up discussing what is 'right' and I tell her all about Amy Tuppham, for some reason, giving her hitherto undisclosed identity away. And Imogen tells me I shouldn't trust anyone, especially not a seccie, so I blow up in a self-righteous rage only to realise when apoplectic she is taking the piss out of me. We laugh and tumble and I tickle her until she can take no more.

What a great way to spend a Saturday afternoon, I think, especially when I find that Ironopolis have won 6-1 at home to Huddersfield. Me and the Iros are going all the way.

33

Squash

I swear I never knew that Charlie Preston would be here when I agreed to play Syd Preston at squash the one last time.

In fact, when I arrived here three or four hours ago, she was the furthest thing from my mind. Anyway, the whole thing was Imogen's idea, not mine. Nearly two months have passed since Syd and Pattie got spliced and I got mullahed and, according to Imogen, nearly ruined it for everyone. She and I have few enough mutual friends, she argued the other week, even though we've been going out for four months – I couldn't believe it was that long either – so why didn't we spend more time with Syd Preston, as we had both known him for years? At the time, I didn't have the heart to tell her that I now thought Syd an *utter bore* but, I figured with my recent return to health, I could *actually beat Syd at squash*. So I agreed. I mean, even if I do get well and truly hammered on court, I know I can still get well and truly hammered here, later on. And I just can't miss this opportunity to remind Syd of his less than exemplary record at Cally in front of the new Mrs Preston.

I didn't even have to make an embarrassed phone call to Syd, as men do with mates they haven't spoken to for an indecent length of time, to arrange this weekend. Imogen did it all. The first I knew it was happening was when Imogen got back from New Guinea last Tuesday and said:

- It's all fixed. This Saturday. The 25th February. Put it in your diary. A pleasant weekend in the country. And don't forget your squash gear.
- To an excellent weekend in the country, I replied clinking my cracked 1970s Ironopolis FC mug of PG Tips against her glass of Aqua Libra.

When we arrived at the Preston's executive starter mansion, a five-bedroomed, scaled down *Styles* set in ten acres of land, Patsy was assigned to give me the obligatory tour. I kept trying not to sound so amazed at the whole set-up, not just the aircraft-hangar house but the fixtures and fittings, the furniture, the carpets, the cleanliness. It just never occurred to me that Syd would use his no doubt, bloated salary to live in anything other than the kind of tiny rundown and dust-drifted cottage he shared with Cath in Fife in his final year. Take the front room (or the *sitting room*, as Patsy called it). It's a real grown-up's place: bound books on the shelves; CDs and albums in purpose-built cabinets; matching old-fashioned, possibly antique, armchairs; two *chaises longues*; an oak coffee table with ornate Chessmen lined up for battle atop; and three expensive, unstained

Persian rugs. I swear to you there wasn't a single, wounded, winded paperback lying prone *anywhere* (when there were usually at least two or three per room when Syd lived with Cath).

When Pattie and I returned from the tour just a couple of minutes ago, we found Syd hanging around in the utility room with Imogen, just looking nonchalant. I'm still not sure whether he was trying to convey ease at such conspicuous consumption (I loved the electric potato peeler) or whether he was simply hiding his embarrassment at revealing his rather *middle class, home counties* home to me. Of course, it might have been something else. While I was pondering this – and the imminent gladiatorial combat haring around after a squashy rubber ball – I saw Imogen's face freeze deadpan, as it always does when she attempts to conceal her displeasure.

- What's *she* doing here? Imogen asked Syd, trying to make her tone sound reasonable (and failing, I thought) as Charlie strolled out of the wood panel kitchen, in a simple dark purple Lycra top and a simple, black microskirt which came nowhere near meeting the top of her hold-up stockings.
- I never like to miss a good game of squash. Especially when two such charming men are playing.

T

- Charlie, give us some coke, I plead as I drip like washing just hung out on the line, as my temperature soars into the low hundreds. *Jesus, my thermostat's packed in.*
- No, Damien. It might kill you.
- I can't even begin the fifth, I wheeze, bent double with a steady hand against the vacated-seat-warm plaster wall, as I alternate gulping down icy, chilled water and hot, dry air bled of its oxygen. – Please Charlie, I've got a chance of beating him. Just one line. Can't you see I've got nothing left? I'm running on empty. Leeches. And I've got thermo-regulatory problems.

I'm not one of these heroic types who eschews large-head racquets or performance-enhancing drugs simply because they make winning easier. No way. I need all the help I can get. My racquet is a triumph of modern technology – superlight graphite with a head the size and shape of a hot air balloon. When I first picked it up, I thought it just might be a tennis racquet or a snowshoe, it's so big. The purists claim this is some sort of unsporting advantage. But what about Syd's going down the gym every day? Or employing a personal coach? Isn't that an unsporting advantage?

- Using drugs would not be a proper victory, Charlie informs me, like a cartoon good angel sitting on my shoulder. – It would not be moral. And what's more, you would derive no real satisfaction from it knowing you had effectively cheated.
- Jesus X, I don't care, I wheeze, knowing that arguing here really is a waste of my very precious breath. – I just want that cunt to know what it's like to lose.

Before the game this afternoon, just 45 short minutes ago, I was still feeling quietly confident that I could beat Syd at last, given my new found fitness, my new found ability to breathe. Besides, Ironopolis won earlier on, 2-0 away at Wolves, which I took to be a sign. Now, though, with my body racked and my soul-searched, I really don't think I can go out on to Court fuckin 3 of this country club and win this final game.

– No, Damien. Just go out there and do it, says Charlie giving me a squelchy pat on my sodden back.

I stand up and make to tear off my '1987/88 Promotion' Ironopolis T-shirt but it is so wet it sticks to me. Charlie helps me remove it. When it is off, I wring it out, like an old dishcloth, making my sweat cascade to the floor. I rub myself down with my towel, which is soon damp with the moisture pouring off me. My skin stings then burns. Each time I dry myself, tiny beads of perspiration re-appear, then grow like speeded-up plant development in nature programmes, before falling on the tiled ground, like water-bombs.

– Yeah, *Just do it*, I leer cynically at Charlie as I struggle into my only remaining dry T-shirt.

As soon as it touches my skin, it begins to absorb moisture. By the time I stand up, it has already been dabbed with darker, translucent patches, like wax on a batik, like chip grease on newspaper.

– Break a leg, she smiles back.

As I walk back into the sweatbox, I hit a wall of tropical humidity. It bleeds my bandy, rubber legs as they quiver in the shimmering intensity. I gasp for breath as the front wall contorts before my sweat-stung eyes, like I'm on an acid trip. As the door thunders shut behind me, I wait for the gentle cooling rain, the right rain, but there is only magnetic humidity as the handle disappears into its crotch and I am in this cell again. Syd is ready and waiting for me, jogging on the spot, racquet poised like a sword. So I slowly *stroll* over to the red box marking on the floor on my right – where I must have at least one foot, in order to serve legally – to psyche out impatient, hissing Syd as I drown in the underwater atmosphere of the court.

– Right, chirps Imogen from the gantry of the West Ebury Sports and Country Club. She is marking us in every sense of the word. – Two all, love all. Damien to serve, deciding game.

I won the first, nine-one. Then I lost the next two but came back to take the fourth nine-five in a dazzling display of determination over good sense. It may have been too much. I mean, wheezing and gasping your heart up to 220 bpm can't be good for you. As I now summon up the strength to lift the racquet, pulsating lights glint in the corner of each eye, like a heavyweight boxer has slugged me, like I'm Tom hit over the head with a cartoon plant pot.

– Ready? I ask, turning to Syd, to snatch a few more empty seconds before the gladiatorial combat kicks off again in earnest in the pit below Charlie and Imogen.

Syd is all bristling energy, bouncing on the spot, spitting on his hands, like Impatience has won his soul in a card game with the devil. He nods without catching my eye.

My first serve arcs high into the air. The tiny ball looms large in its turgid trajectory as it comes back off the front wall, almost gently tickling the hard underbelly of the roof, almost kissing its own shadow in the process, but it drops suddenly towards the corner at the back. Syd is tall. Syd is strong. He can punch volley all day. Me, I'm an old-lag boxer holding his guard up but wearying over the rounds of endless pounding – I cannot punch volley my way out of trouble in the denouement. But Syd's volley has no length, no depth so I stride across in a single heavy bound and whip the rubber bullet, backhand. Dazed, I try to follow the crazy, bristling, energized spot as it whizzes off the front, comes back past me and brushes the side wall on its way around the scoured, white interior.

Syd is jostling me at the T – he always does this – while simultaneously reaching back and playing a decisive, sizzling back-hand boast which travels direct and true, like the bleeping, beeping dots of white on early *Binatone* video games but much, much faster. Its height is all wrong, though, so I wait at the T for the ball to pop up like a helium-filled party balloon, then smash it forehand so it rebounds from the front wall and burns up as it plunges into the deep space of the back, right-hand quarter. Syd is off like a greyhound from the traps but the hare here, the ball, zooms back, looms back, off the back wall. Syd is too close, too contorted, too wrapped up in his own confused limbs, like a knackered spring, to play a proper shot. And it dies. 1-0.

– Lucky bounce, he mutters but I do not respond.

Junction

By the end of our second year, after a year as editor of *The Rag*, Syd was in real trouble with the law faculty. He might have got away with it, if he'd stayed in Cally all summer and worked like a coolie for the re-sits. But the college 'accidentally' sent one of their angry letters to his home address in the western home counties and Alex snr opened it and was livid. He threatened to cut Syd off without a penny – a real threat, as Syd's grant was paid entirely by his parents – unless he gave up *The Rag* and went back home for the summer vacation. I know he and Catherine thought long and hard about jacking in his parents and getting jobs in Edinburgh to fund him through college. But Syd hated routine work – he had a very low boredom threshold and as a result had been sacked from about 10 or so vacation jobs over the years – so they ruled this out in the end. Syd had to agree to spend summer '86, back in the home counties. Once there, Syd's old man was merciless. He bollocked Syd then subjected him to the ultimate humiliation. He rigorously 'supervised and quality controlled' Syd's work to ensure he completed his outstanding coursework on time. Syd had no choice but to comply. It was that or suffer the indignity of being a failed student, consigned to Death Row in HMP Office Job.

Jolted by all this, Syd went for the law prize the following year while I took over *The Rag* which went from strength to strength. Syd never asked about it when we met for our

weekly game of squash although one afternoon, while changing, I asked if he might like to do some book reviews for us and he nodded his head. Later that day, I took a selection around to his flat off Gt Junction Street but he just said:

– Sorry, I really haven't got time. I'm too busy trying to get a decent degree.

Syd serves at love six – six love down that is. I can't believe it. I am winning by six clear points, in the final game. As I step across to return it, we argy bargy on the T. I ask for a let and I get it. But I am playing for time. Exhausted, I watch as the next few points drift surreally past, like I'm a spectator who shouldn't be on court or this is the world championship and I am there by some terrible mistake. But this is no dream. Before I know it, Syd is mercilessly driving a forehand into the back, left-hand corner and it's 5-6.

– Good shot, I call, not because I think it is but because I want to show what a sportsman I am. And to break his concentration. But Syd is unimpressed. He wears an expressionless, African tribal, death mask, the one worn by Bjorn Borg at Wimbledon in the 1970s.

I'm going to vomit, I'm sure, as my distended, hot head throbs like a cartoon thermometer, all angry, flushed protest. As I take up position to receive, I glance up at Charlie who gives me a subtle thumbs-up from behind Imogen. Delirious with the adrenaline, endorphins and pheromones, I warm to this support, then slump into the doldrums, then ride a wave all in the space of a few seconds – mood swings like the worst kind of trip. Syd serves before I am properly ready so I instinctively swat the irritating fly as it buzzes towards me and it comes straight off the meat (of the racquet) on to the front wall and into the knick, dead, as I come alive, as I resurrect myself. 7-5. 8-5, match ball, pressure point for Syd, all I've got to do is serve in and he'll crack.

Hammer

After Syd gave up *The Rag* we carried on playing squash – he was then strictly squash and the odd game of rugby, which he played more for the *social side*, to let his hair down now and then. We continued to get hammered together but really our friendship never progressed beyond that second year with him editor of the Rag and me his deputy, his right-hand man, his sidekick. I'd like to say he taught me everything I know but the truth is, he didn't. He taught me nothing. He was an awful teacher, a dreadful mentor, a useless manager. He moaned at new staff who he expected to have somehow mastered journalism by a process of telepathy or osmosis but never gave them advice or complimented them, even when he knew they had done a good job.

Sometimes our matches were close, particularly if Syd had been on a bender the night before and I hadn't, but it was always die-in-a-ditch competitive. At one point, we'd even considered getting a marker to score for us, to stop us spending a quarter of the session bickering over calls, points and lets. It was almost like we were playing for the soul of *The*

Rag. And I never beat him. I had him once at 8-6 in the fifth but I'd given everything getting that far. I searched my soul for that drop, that last surge, that last effort but I served out and he eventually ran out the 10-9 winner. Jesus, I hated the obligatory handshake that day, even more than usual.

Syd does crack at match point. He cracks his racquet against my dolly and easily wins that point and the next. 6-8. And the next, 7-8. Pressure point for me. Syd is clever – he's playing this long, making me run, running down my supplies, my resources, my reserves as I can't let him get to 8-8. I'm twisted inside out, like one of those babies born with their organs on the outside, as Syd hits another emphatic drive and I proffer my racquet more in hope than in expectation.

The goofy, little ball distorts against my unyielding graphite head, veers off to the side wall then casually brushes the front wall with the delicacy of a Casanova trailing his fingers over the small of his latest conquest's back. Syd looks like he's conceded a last minute goal in the European Cup Final as open-mouthed, jaw-dropped he watches the awkward, spastic ball fall in. There are no complaints. There can't be. 8-7, hand out. I smile at him through the dense wall of sweat which cascades down my face as my *Bollocks to the Poll Tax* T-shirt swims in the torrent which bursts from every pore to regulate the furnace raging inside me, to stop the pressure cooker from blowing my mechanisms sky high. As I amble to the service box, my feet squelch inside my ill-fitting, ill-equipped trainers.

I serve suddenly and quickly, a machine hammer serve which, like a bullet, spurts off the front wall, ricochets just below the redline on the side wall and buries itself in the nick at the back behind Syd. *Victory is mine. The young Dean lad can do no wrong.* Poker-faced, I pull myself erect and swagger towards Syd in cool, slow-mo, head held high, like the title shots of *Reservoir Dogs*, with a conciliatory hand outstretched, ready for the final (humiliating) sporting handshake.

X, I'm gonna savour this moment. I'm gonna roll it round my mouth, like a vintage wine, then decadently spit it out. But all in private, of course.

Syd got his law prize but I got my newspaper award as well. I congratulated him. But he never congratulated me, even when Cath offered her congrats in front of us both. And, for ever after that, it was never mentioned. Even when Syd got his shit-hot city law job and I was holed up in a cottage in South Queensferry, unemployed and running up debts, like the mile-o-meter on the space shuttle, with nothing to my name but love and Dolores. *Even then.* That award was somehow important, much more important than a simple student newspaper award. It was the real reason that me and Syd stopped talking, not my dalliance with Charlie. I mean, I never made it in journalism either but then I never defined myself by status and position

in the same way that Syd did, as he had to, given his home counties, semi-public school education.

As I've said before, I knew Syd better than anyone while he was at Cally. After he graduated, he still came up to visit and we continued to meet up to get blind drunk, either in Edinburgh, the metropolis or the home counties. It was one such session where I met Charlie for the first time in June 1990 (although she swears she remembers me from Syd's graduation day in Cally). After that, Syd and I were never close at all, although we continued to drink and take drugs together – despite the fact he would be struck off if he were ever convicted – but less often and less intensely. I suppose he 'grew up' and could no longer tolerate my adolescent antics, like snorting all the ether from his father's surgery. But the truth was, he couldn't stand the fact that I had succeeded where he had failed.

I don't often feel sorry for competitive bastards when they lose nor do I quote from the bible much but there is one line which sums up Syd rather neatly:

- What does it profit a man if he inherits the world but loses his soul?

Wind-up

- That was out, says Syd firmly, without emotion, then with increasing fear. – It was out, I tell you. It hit the red line, he remonstrates striking the red line with his racquet where the ball was supposed to have glanced it.

We hate nothing more than a bad loser so this adds spice to my famous victory, the twist in the tale when, over the following weeks, I will recount my triumph with endless mates in endless bars. I cannot help smiling, now.

- The ball was out, Imogen declares, masquerading as an impartial judge.
- That was never out! I whine, looking up to Imogen like this is some sick joke.
- That wasn't fuckin out. No way. No fuckin way! Charlie, was that out?
- I don't honestly know, Damien. I didn't see it.
- You must have seen it. It was in by a fuckin mile. This is a wind-up. It has to be.
- Play a let, says Imogen, all natural authority and conciliation.
- No, it was in, damn it!!!! I scream as I hurl my racquet across the court and storm off towards the changing room, after struggling to open the door to the court.
- Let's play a let, I hear Syd offer from the echoing cell.

Charlie intercepts me before I hit the changing room.

- Damien, she implores, – get out there now or no one'll ever respect you again. Including me.
- That was a fuckin shite call and you know it.

– So what? It's happened. Are you gonna play the spoilt child every time something doesn't go your way? Grow up, Damien, you soft lad. Get out there and beat him again. Don't do it for me or anyone else. Do it for yourself.

So I do. I get out there.

And I lose 10-8.

Book 6

Y’huvnae git a
Scoobie, huv
ye?

34

Concrete

– This is great art? I half-ask her.

We are in the Tate. It is a Thursday evening in early March. Strange things have been happening this week (more about the others, later). She phoned me at work today and asked me if I was at a loose end, in which case we could do something cultural, like go to the cinema. I opted for the Rothko room instead, hoping this would annoy and alienate her.

– Damien, don't pretend you don't like it, she frowns from under her big, floppy, velvet hat, which makes her look insufferably cute. She suspects I'm playing up for the sake of it, like a recalcitrant brat. – *You* were the one who introduced *me* to this.

The scrappy, indiscriminate Rothkos hang limply like a comment on our day. I feel guilty about being here with her but I just couldn't refuse when she phoned up. Hell, she's an insistent, persuasive woman. And when she wants something, somehow you can't refuse, you can't help going along with it. Because she makes you feel as if she's the one doing you a favour. Meanwhile, I keep looking nervously over my shoulder. Not for Infantry but for *her*.

– This is great art because it moves people, she says without enthusiasm but making a grand gesture towards *Claret and Black*. – Or that's what you told me when I was an impressionable and innocent 18 year old.

– I don't see many people here being moved, do you? Unless you count that hippy, dippy art college chick over there.

A girl with splattered-orange hair stands rocking on one foot with the other entwined round her shin, sucking on a wayward lock which has pinged free from its lacquered compatriots. She is attractive in that art-college, trendy-chick kind of way. She wears clothes no doubt bought by the baleful from an Oxfam in the home counties -- definitely the home counties -- and a crinkled, sexy smile. She is staring at *Orange, Black and Purple*, like it is gripping television. I am sure she knows we are watching her.

– You see, people like that are *moved* by art and we can clearly see she's a middle class wanker.

– What have you got against the middle classes? You're like some teenage socialist from the 1970s. Remember Citizen Smith? Well, that's you that is.

- You aren't old enough to remember Citizen Smith.

We are only talking about great art as we are both avoiding a much more controversial and taxing topic. Us. Our future. Our options. Our stock. Insider info on Dean and Preston Amalgamated Plc.

- You've stood in the Dock, I continue, sitting down on the faux leather seats in the middle of the gallery to relieve my aching plates. – What does that look like when we score? Tumultuous emotion, raw joy, laughter, tears. What do we have here?

I swivel to survey all around us. The sparse figures, with their guileless, gauche real life poses and positioning, with their church-hush and semi-bowed heads, with their shabby donkey jackets and grubby overcoats, or corduroy and cravats, stand motionless barely conversing, barely interested in the canvas tombstones which tower over them. The style is Lowry. The content is Hockney.

- Zilch, I say answering my own question.
- It's a different kind of being moved...
- Give me something concrete for Xsake, I mock-wail. – But I forgot. The middle classes look after their own. Tell everyone that this is great art to create a market for it, to look after their own investment in other abstract expressionists. Have you read *Bluebeard*?
- Of course I have, replies Charlie, glad of the seat, sighing in resignation as she sits, – you've made me read it at least twice.
- Well, that's fuckin brilliant. You remember. All the paintings start to fall apart...
- And all the middle class wankers lose their investments.

I hate it when she finishes my sentences. I hate it when she puts on her bored face. I hate it when she looks down her middle class nose at me. I hated it particularly when she made me go out and drink with her and Imogen, Syd and Patsy after the squash, when I could barely speak through injustice and exhaustion. Jesus, that was an awful evening – apart from the late night, drunken grope I had with Charlie, while Syd showed Imogen where he was going to erect the stable block. In fact, the more I think about it, the more dreadful my memory of that whole day becomes. And I'm never going to ever forget that call at 8-7 in the fifth. I bloody won. I bloody beat Syd Preston, fair and square. It just doesn't feel like it, though.

- Anyway, real people are moved by football and pornography, I throw in knowing I am being contentious. – Middle class intellectuals are moved by 'great art'.
- Damien, a 2.1 in English literature with an art history subsid from Caledonia University hardly excludes you from the middle classes. Anyway, football and pornography say nothing about the human condition.
- What is there to say, anymore? Life's hard. Then, you die.
- Yeah, eat, sleep, shag, die, Charlie enunciates mechanically before looking me in the eyes and asking: – so where do you, me and shagging come into it?

Caledonia

– So, ya gan art wiv Challie, ooz wan o yar best mites sista? Vat rite?

We are in the Cheetah doing 110 down the A1(M). It's half one and we've just passed Doncaster. Jimmy wasn't even arrested last night. He just didn't get it together in time, this morning. That would have been too easy. Getting it together for a clear run. To make matters worse, my guts are rotten after that curry (of uncertain identity) that Imogen cooked last night.

– Yeah, but he's not my best mate anymore and I'm not goin out with her properly.

– Wahrrabaht Mgen?

– She's my girlfriend.

Jesus, I'm having the conversations me and Jimmy had when I was 16 and he was 14. Now we know your *girlfriend*. There must be a better word. Partner? Other half? *Aristophanic* Half? Significant other? The wife? *The missus*?

– Fackin ell. Want catch me garn art wiv mi mite's sista. Too many fackin prablins, if ya ask mi. I men, fack, if ad a sista ann she waz garn art wiv mi...'Ang on... I rilly men if ad a sista ann she waz garn art wiv mi bu I wazn her bruvva az wewl, I wunt let er go art wi mi. X, Id be wurriyd wha I waz doin ta er. If ya see wha I men?

– Er, yeah, like right Jimmy.

– What d'ya reckon tadey, ven? Two niwl, I reckon, he ventures clearly bored with this subject.

He cranks the Cheetah up to 120. It rattles. It shakes. It roars like the wounded beast it is. My stomach chortles and gulps and belches internally, much to Jimmy's delight, as I concentrate hard on keeping my sphincter locked.

– We're doing the fuckin speed of light: 186,000 miles per second! I roar over the engine, over the spirited heart of the beast, as we dodge the computer game caravans and artic lorries. As we weave in and out of the tiny fairground dodgems.

– Nah, it's not. It's 186,287 miwles p' secon.

– That makes fuck all difference.

– Wanna bet? It's va dis'ance frm Lonnon ta Ironop'lis ina secon. Imagin if we cad do vat.

– We'd still get there late, somehow.

– I reckon we'el get ver an time fr tdey's gaime.

And as if to prove a point he squeezes the gas just that little bit harder, which squeezes my bowels that little bit harder. I reckon it's evens. Evens we get there alive.

Men like Syd and Jimmy see woman as either madonnas or whores. Jesus, what a fuckin lack of imagination. What sort of madonnas? What sort of whores? I mean, look at Charlie. Look at all the things she is in my life. Sometimes she's my £1,000 a night hooker, then she's my two-bit tart, my kneetrembler by the Ironopolis docks. Other times, she's my mistress ensconced in her paid-for Pimlico pad or my straightforward flirt or my teenage prick-teaser. Then again, she plays my older woman or my initiator, or, conversely, the innocent virgin I seduce or the bird I flirt with but don't make it with. And of course, she can be any one of the following: my girlie best friend, my lover, my mother, my daughter, my sister, my wife, my soulmate for life, my muse. Whatever she is, I have to face it: Charlie Preston has somehow wormed her way back into my life.

Last Thursday, she gave me what for in the Tate gallery café after what she called my 'spoilt brat performance' there. Later on, we went to see *Loaded* at the Odeon, Leicester Square. (This was a compromise as she really wanted to see *Il Postino*, which struck me as far too worthy, and I wanted to see *Crumb*). We then went on to *Jimmy's* – that cheap Greek place on Frith Street, not my brother's flat – as we always do when we have little cash. We both drank far too much that night and, inevitably I suppose, finished up snogging wetly, blindly and deeply at our table just by the stairs out. It was only when we came up for air that we realised that we were the only punters left – being watched by the old lag waiters who stood nonchalantly around the room, white cloths draped over their angled forearms. I then insisted on paying only to be told that I had already settled the bill, having given a generous tip of £5 on the £28 total, which only came to so much as we had drunk three bottles of retsina – without noticing.

Charlie came back to my place in Westminster and we *made love*, coked out of our minds, into the early hours. As we plunged back to earth, we agreed that Imogen had first refusal on my time and that we would never discuss her, ever again. The next morning, yesterday in fact, I informed Charlie that, in keeping with our agreement, I was taking Imogen up to the Iros this weekend and wouldn't be able to go out with her. Charlie accepted this with good grace as she was to review and interview a band somewhere up north.

Then, last night after dinner, Imogen received a call from *Freebird*. As she was on call and one of her colleagues had taken sick, she had to agree to jet off to some sunny clime at six thirty this morning. While Imogen went for a 'pee', I phoned Charlie and asked her if she would like to come to the football in Ironopolis. After all, she could see the band she was reviewing that night and then go on to Edinburgh where I was scheduled to meet the mysterious and intriguing J Ashington on the Sunday at one o'clock. It was a package Charlie could hardly refuse.

- What a bizarre coincidence, she shrieked down the phone. – That group I'm reviewing is playing *The Venue* in Edinburgh. Lucky Imogen's going away, eh?
- Yeh, I muttered, almost hating myself for wanting so much to be with Charlie, my lover, my heroine, my other half, my Everywoman.

Apart from getting it together with Charlie again, last week, my hatstand life has taken another series of weird, creepy B-road diversions. Last Monday morning, Wendy *actually took a day off sick*. Being the mature responsible adult I am, I neglected to work on my Organisation Assessment Report (OAR) on the animal rights and eco-terrorists and decided to lark about all day. Amy and I had a skinful in the *Red Lion* at lunchtime, before repairing back to Wendy's office with a view to enlisting the support of SPOILT BRAT in my war against the Wicked Witch of the Welsh. When we got back, we found the rest of C3/P had taken advantage of our unique circumstances. There was no one there.

While Amy kept watch, I flicked on Wendy's terminal only for a whole series of unencrypted files to appear, as if by magic, on the monitor. Wendy had, of course, not shut down properly (I had to explain to her many times that turning off the monitor so there was no picture did not mean that the computer itself was off). I still remember very clearly me and Amy reading the pre-wysiwyg programme in fluorescent green text on a forest green background; turning to each other in slow motion and wondering exactly the same thought. Why had Wendy been in the weekend before to precis FILTHY LUCRE's file for the CG, the head *honcho*?

Amy and I then opened other files created by Wendy. The Organisation insists that officers encrypt their computer files using a combination of words and numbers but Wendy clearly hadn't understood this concept. She had resorted to adopting names of other officers as passwords. Most of her files were routine but it was clear that RUSH HOUR had provided a great deal more intelligence than I had ever seen during Operation PANGOLIN. And who the hell was RELIGIOUS FANATIC, another key player or source but one I didn't know about even though I was the H/Op officer on the case? We then tried to break into Wendy's security cupboard to look for the hard copy paper files, on which Wendy's research was based, but without the eight digit, mechanical combination, we were lost. I resolved to tackle Wendy about FILTHY LUCRE in a roundabout way when she got back.

But Wendy didn't return on the Tuesday or the Wednesday.

Kex

What can I say? The draw is bad enough. But, even then, there's the moral victory of coming back from one down or the psychological defeat of throwing away the goal lead. There are rare occasions when we've come back from two down to draw. (It's happened twice when I've been there in my 20 year supporting life and one of those was at the start of this season, home to Sunderland. And we should have won in the end). But 0-0. That's a banker's life, an accountant's game, a librarian's match. But to be honest, it's better than losing. I'd rather have 0-0 than a 5-4 defeat. Perhaps I should have been a *librarian*.

But I got really scared at half time. Having conceded that for the first time in my life I would have to use what passes for the pan at footie matches as a result of Imogen's

curry, I found myself touching cloth in the only trap which still had a door properly attached. To make matters worse, I had to get my kex down without dipping them in the urine-awash floor while at the same time keeping the lockless door firmly shut to interlopers. As I pitched my kex at just below knee height, fell back onto the seatless pan and extended my left leg so it wedged the cubicle door shut, I had the shock of my life, just as the world was falling out of my arse.

Alongside the moronic graffiti, hacked into the back of the crimson wooden door with what I imagined was a carving or hunting knife, was the following message:

*You're gonna get your
fuckin head kicked in
The Ratcatcher*

Why does sex complicate life so much? No, that's a stupid question. Sex never complicates life unless you're Catholic or repressed or old-fashioned. I mean, in this day and age, you shag a bird and if you like her, you shag her again until you stop liking sex with her or she stops liking sex with you. It's that simple. We don't need any of this morality and responsibility malarkey. And I've never taken the slightest bit of notice of birds who approach you the next day and make some claim on you because they've 'let' you have sex with them, like you then owe them something or have some duty to them. If we both enjoyed it at the time and neither of us promised anything more, I don't see why it can't remain as a mutually enjoyable experience which might get repeated in the future. There's no absolute need to form a relationship afterwards, just because she swallowed my load and/or I stuck my tongue up her twat. And if you think those sentiments are harsh or sexist, you should know I got them off a bird, off Dolores in fact, after we'd shagged for the first time. And I respected her position as an empowered woman.

No, sex doesn't complicate life. Love does.

Last Wednesday night, I bumped into Jonathon Beaver, a former SADO of mine who was serving drinks at an Organisation retirement do I had felt obliged to attend in the bowels of Nation House.

– Sir, how are you? He asked in his manner of exaggerated courtesy as I grabbed a flute of New World Champagne-type substance from the solid-silver, heirloom tray Jonathon was carrying on one hand.

He always brought it to these events to accord them, in his words 'that extra little bit of dignity, that extra little bit of class that is so hard to find anywhere at all these days'. In

his rather splendid tails and waistcoat, grey, striped trousers, starched collar and real bowtie, he looked every bit the butler he so wanted to be.

- Awlreyt, I replied in the exaggerated Estuary I always addressed him in. – How are things in Throb Central?
- Well, sir, he began before pausing.

Perkins, who worked in C3/P before his much maligned posting to B2/A, walked up, helped himself to a fluteful or two from Jonathon's silver tray then withdrew without once troubling us with a smile, a *hello* or his mealy-mouthed wisdom.

- No class, Jonathon tutted. His butler gear, his wire-framed spectacles and his slightly dodgy 'tache combined with his incipient, 30-year old spread made him look like the shopkeeper in Mr Benn. But younger. – Now, where was I?

He looked up and down the oak-panelled room before whispering conspiratorially:

- I've heard a very strange story, he looked around again, just to make sure, – that the Office was responsible for the death of that government minister back in November last year.
- What do you mean?
- The Office wanted him out of the way, sir. The minister was going to expose the Organisation in Parliament, no less.
- How reliable is this? I smiled, thinking it was the usual nonsense which did the rounds whenever ministers had to resign for health problems, after sexual exposure or to spend more time with their families.
- Straight from the SADO who photocopied and filed the Order.

Colussus

I stand there like the Colossus of Rhodes, hands on hips, legs apart staring down at the top of Fiona McShane's blue-black hair as it tickles my groin and legs, turning me up a notch each time she thrusts her head forth and then back, as she deep-throats me on bended knee. It is late on the night of Saturday 6th May 1989, the day Ironopolis were relegated from the old first division after one season up. I am in Simon Register's flat in Cockburn Street. Some townie tart I picked up is wazzed on the rug in front of the fire, in the front room to my left. Dolores is revising for her finals in South Queensferry, I think. Simon is in a drink and dope-induced coma on his bed in the bedroom to my right. Fiona has come every which way. Now, it's my turn.

I am stoned rather than drunk so I know I can come as I lock my buttocks, stretch backwards and flex my thigh muscles. This is not comfortable. This is hard. But at that moment, I imagine Simon throwing open the guest room door and standing there staring in open-mouthed, jaw-dropped disbelief at the perverse tableau within.

- Damien, what the fuck are you playing at? He would have shouted.

– Can you not see, I would have said with injured innocence, like Rene in Allo, Allo, caught with one of the waitresses, as he so often was, – that this poor girl is using my cock to clean her teeth because you have not seen fit to provide her with a decent toothbrush?

The Cheetah comes to a halt by Haymarket Station, Edinburgh. As I get out of the car to signal to Charlie, it crouches there panting, dribbling its oily drool on the wet tarmac. Its sleek, slant eyes lit up in the dark, it watches the little cars, the *Micros*, the *Pingos*, the *Bongos*, the *Wombles*, ready to ease up alongside these city runarounds, then gobble them up.

– C’maan, I wanna fuckin drink. I’m fackin parcht, moans Jimmy from the car’s controls. – Why the fuck wi ere agin?
– Charlie’s interviewing a band. Then me and Charlie have to go and see someone tomorrow.
– I dunno why the fuck I bovva wi awl this shi’.

Charlie finally gets herself together and clammers in the cramped back of the Cheetah, clearing a space among the empty Ginsters wrappers, Gastro Cola bottles, Wongerburger wrappers, old *Nation’s* and *Scorcher’s*, fanzines and a cornucopia of official Ironopolis teamshirts and unofficial T-shirts sold at £5 a pop outside the ground. I crank my head round to wink at her, only to find her sitting mock-comfortably in a pile of garbage.

– You’ve met each other before, Xmas Eve in Westminster. Jimmy-Charlie, Charlie-Jimmy.
– Hiya, Gorgeous, says Jimmy giving Charlie a quiet wink, like he used to with girlfriends I brought home when we were teenagers.

I wonder how the same two sets of genetic codes inherited from our parents came up with me and him. Me all words and him all numbers. Me all poetry and him all practicality. He doesn’t just work in the city – he loves it, that mysterious world of institutionalised gambling. And he’s good at it. Unfortunately, he’s not as good as with his own money, especially when it comes to booze, birds and the geegees. Ironopolis aren’t Jimmy’s life, though, in the same way they are mine. He gambles his money on them which, apart from being heresy and sacrilege, demonstrates how in both these disciplines the triumph of his hope overwhelms the depth and breadth of his experience.

Now, we slip into the roles we know, the roles we have been taught to play, roles almost learnt from the cinema and the telly. He’s little brother. I’m big brother. But we’ve been through that. We used to fight. I used to pin down his chest, hold his nose and put grass in his mouth (common or garden grass, that is) until he got too big. We get on now, better than a lot of brothers. In fact, he’s one of my best mates. That I cannot deny.

I laugh my head off inside at the Rene from *Allo! Allo!* image, breaking my concentration, rendering myself temporarily impotent as I lose the tension that is the prerequisite of orgasm.

- Whit ye plaein at? Fiona asks as she withdraws her drunken mouth from the rinsejob it is performing on my erect member. – Sssshhhh! Saemunn or that tart'll fuckin hear us, ye daft ee-jit.
- I'm sure it would be OK.
- Ye huvnae git a Scoobie, huv ye?

I tell her about the Rene idea and she laughs raucously and loudly, in Scottish, rocking back and forth on her knees pushing her head into my groin in the process.

- I need to come, I whisper, I wheeze, I breathe gently through my fear of being caught.

The old, wooden furniture throughout the flat makes its plaintive creaks and odd, loud cracks as the temperature drops with the dying fire in the hearth.

- Umagine me and that townie tart next door in a 69, she says, looking up at me, naked and coquettish in the light blue that streams through from Hangover Street.

Smiling knowingly, I flex my muscles again, as Fiona starts her expert work again.

Venue

The Cheetah pulls away, bounding down Princes Street, its clear vision in the dark an asset, until we go past the St James Centre then take a sharp right and descend the 1:8 gradient to *The Venue*. Charlie jumps out into the jungle of black, orange, green and purple furs, prints and silks.

- I'll leave your names on the guest list. I've got to rush. I've got to get the set, she announces fighting her way out of the back seat through the detritus that was thrown over her each time the *Cheetah* negotiated a corner.

We prowl through the urban undergrowth tracking down somewhere to park.

- 'Ow much is that? Asks Jimmy looking at the one-eyed parking meter in Hanover Square. – It's fuckin Satdee nite. Vey cahn charge Satdee nite.
- They fuckin can. Anybody who takes possession of a piece of land and calls it his own depends on the gullibility of those around him to respect that right. Jean-Jacques Rousseau.
- I doan fuckin care about fuckin Jan Jack Roosoe or oo raspec's what. I'm fuckin parkin ere an I'm not fuckin payin.
- On your own head be it.

Jimmy locks up the *Cheetah* and strides off towards Princes St with the determined look he always displays when beer is on offer.

- ‘Ow owld is she, ven? He asks the question he has been dying to ask since he first clamped his eyes on her, tonight.
- You’ve met her before for Xsakes.
- Yeah, bu I waz fuckin wankard.
- 21.
- Fuckin ell. I’d fink abow it. 21. Fuckin jailbait.

As Jimmy and I tumble down the metal steps which lead from Waverley Station to the Venue, we notice that the urban jungle has cleared of its fauna. Me and Jimmy muscle our way to the door – not that anyone else is around but home counties grammar schoolboys like us have grown habitually used to looking hard, pretending to be the urban-dispossessed, copying the sloppy, indiscriminate lingo, the clever argot, the no-glottalstop street drawl.

- Och, war on the gues’ lis’, pul, I say in my best Scottish, hoping the monkey suit doesn’t think I’m taking the piss.
- Whit’s yir naemes?
- Damien Dean and James Dean.
- Och, funny wun, sun.

As Jimmy stands there chewing the fat with the monkey suit, easing our passage into the club, I peer at the posters for the first time:



35

We taxied our way around all my old haunts: the Macdougall hall of residence on Ferry Road; the flats I occupied in Madeira Street and at the foot of the Walk; the pubs: *The Poxy Doxy*, *the Port O'Leith* and even *The Leith Oyster Bar*. Jimmy got more and more pissed on 80 shilling and in *The Poxy Doxy* grabbed Charlie and tried to snog her while we laughed our heads off on the coke and dope, on the booze, on the buzz. Meanwhile, no matter where we were, Jimmy wandered off to chew the fat with anyone, with any sad cunt who would listen, although I had to keep a *loco parentis* eye on him – old habits die hard – in case he started calling drunken Leithers *Jockos* or *Sweaties*. Although Jimmy has the common touch, it often gets him into trouble on alien territory and I didn't want him *chibbed* by some real-life, low-life Begbie.

– Zaire, Peru, Iran, Uruguay, Costa Rica. Teofilo Cubilas, he began to joke and I finally decided it was time to wrench him from the posh dockside – sorry, docklands – pub which I think was the Oyster Bar.

I had been phoning Sparky Bobe and then Baldboy since we had arrived in Edinburgh. Neither of them had broken the umbilical cord with Cally, so I thought they would be game to put us up for a night but they were never in. Hardly surprising, you might think, but they had settled for a life of Sattadee night in with a video, a carry out and the missus while still at Cally. Despite this co-incidence of interests and both still living in Leith, they had despised each other since second year, for no particular reason I could fathom. When I finally got through to Sparky Bobe from the *Port O'Leith*, he was so drunk he couldn't speak. I later got through to Baldboy at 3:30 am but after a quick drowsy conflagration with his wife, he embarrassedly explained:

– No, I'm afraid, it won't be OK for you to stay the night.
 – Ah, come on, Anton, I whined, – we were good mates. Cun ye no help out an old pal?
 – Look, it's just not convenient, he said.

And that was that. We were fucked. There was no chance of a B&B at that time of night and the hotels were joke-expensive. We struggled to pile comatose, deadweight Jimmy into a mini-cab, then had a brawl with the driver as Jimmy kept pretending he was going to throw up – as a joke. But Charlie calmed everything down and the cabbie took us from the Oyster Bar up the Walk to Hanover Square. All the way there, I effed and blinded to myself for letting Jimmy leave the car on a meter without paying for over six hours, which no doubt meant me organising the unclamping or a visit to the city pound.

But as we turned into the Square, I flooded with relief when I saw that none of the Cheetah's four feet were caught in a yellow mantrap. When we went to get in, we realised there wasn't even a fine slapped to the windie.

I don't know what fuckin star that Jimmy was born under but it fuckin looks after that dos bastard.

I was scared shitless when Wendy came back last Thursday. Department Y/TS had been in to look at her computer before I'd even got to my desk. She claimed to have dragged herself off her deathbed but her doughy complexion didn't look any better or worse than usual. Of course, the individuals who make up C3/P were called into her office, one by one to explain in detail how we had spent our time in her absence. By then, I had just completed the first draft of my OAR, which, needless to say, exonerated just about every group BROWN WINGS had collected information on. I slapped it on Wendy's desk and deliberately let her absorb herself in the *Key Points* before catching her off her guard:

– I never asked you what happened about the FILTHY LUCRE investigation in the end, I stated then fell silent.

Wendy ignored me, which was not unusual.

– I mean, someone must have put the operation to bed. Was it you?

She looked up from the thick wedge of A4 squatting on her desk like a paving stone, in a way which said: 'How dare you interrupt my reading?' before shaking her head and adding a simple:

- No.
- Someone mu...
- It wasn't me.

We fell silent again. I knew had caught her lying. At that moment, the AC poked his head around the door, gave me a nervous glance, then asked Wendy to pop into his office for a couple of minutes. As she left the room, she instructed me to go nowhere *then checked her cupboard was combination-locked and her computer was off*, which she never normally did, except when going home for the evening.

Bathtub

I'm shit-scared of the polis lifting us – we're all pished, out of it and holding. I twist the ignition key on the *Cheetah* again and again and again only to get that wheezy, harsh-dry cough. We should never have driven the Cheetah the 450 miles from the metropolis. I mean, X, that would have winded a car half its age.

– Jimmy, how the fuck do you start this bathtub?

Jimmy is splayed across the back seat, dead to the universe. Charlie and I shake and punch him while, all the time, polis wagons speed past and I shit myself some more. The penalties for Class As are a different ballgame: big boys' rules, zero-tolerance.

– Get the Coke, I bark to Charlie, increasingly desperate.

I turn around to see her handing me the wrap.

– Not this. The Coke, I roar. The fuckin Coke. What do you think I'm gonna do? Force feed this cunt our finest Bolivian table salt. I want the Coke, you daft cow.

I gesticulate wildly at the giant suppository-shaped bottle which rattled round my feet all the way up to Edinburgh, slamming the backs of my ankles to let me know it was there, every time Jimmy threw on the brakes – about twice a minute for four hours. Charlie flicks the courtesy light on:

- You mean the Gastro Cola, she says, looking at the blue gem in a sea of garbage.
- Yeah, whatever.
- Well, you should have said, Charlie gently scolds, passing the two-litre bottle.
- If you don't put in the right requirement, you don't get the right end-result.

Jesus, is everyone on fuckin junior management training courses these days? I'll *end-result* her when we're all up in front of the Procurator Fiscal or whatever cunt dispenses the law in Jockoland. I shake the Gastro Cola like a maraca, smashing it against the dash occasionally for good measure. Then I point it at Jimmy and twist the top shooting a geyser of brown effluent over his face. He comes to like the confused drunk he is, shouting:

– Cant! Cant! Fuckin mather of awl cants!

He squints through the gloom trying to decipher my features, trying to recognise his assailant.

– Jimmy, how the fuck do we spark this bastard-cunt up? I ask urgently, spying the jam – or rather yellow curd – sandwich circling the square like a vulture. – We're all in fuckin big trouble, if those polis cunts come over here. *Have they seen the courtesy light on?* – Get down, I scream to Charlie and Jimmy while I fiddle with the tiny switch which seems to have retracted like a reluctant clitoris, shying from fumbling, inexperienced fingers.

Suddenly, the Cheetah's *faux* plush interior is plunged into darkness and Charlie pushes me down, so we are both crouching below windie level, while she clamps Jimmy's face with a sticky but tiny hand. The headlights of the lemon curd sandwich beam glutinous, twisting, snapping shadows on to the roof as the polis trickle past in what seems to take an eon. *Paranoia* tells me they can see the Cheetah throbbing with our thumping collective heartbeat. No one breathes. Then Jimmy stirs from his coma. He yawns like he is about to vomit or groan or stretch, all of which would give us away so Charlie hurls herself on him and clamps her mouth to his. Like a kind relative clamping a pillow over a tortured, cancerous or AIDS-ridden relative to relieve their suffering – when no

consciousness is better than some. And, as if playing along with the metaphor, Jimmy struggles for a second or two before resigning himself to Charlie's overwhelming mouth. He smiles. Then, it goes dark again.

The polis gone, I beat some sense into Jimmy who mumbles some instructions, like a Hollywood hero on his deathbed, about the throttle, the gas, the clutch and the combination quirk to coax the reluctant beast into life. It doesn't work. In my rear-view mirror, I see the glinting fluorescence of the polis car as it turns round and heads for us again. I fumble through the procedure again and, as the clutch springs out and I hit the gas in a simultaneous movement, the Cheetah roars into life, with a tortured scream. We tear off, catching the polis unaware. With my *Defensive Driving – Part Two* under my belt, I handbrake turn into tight sidestreets, working the rattling gears of the Cheetah for all they are worth. The polis are no match for us and we have soon lost them somewhere just off Ferry Road. Sometimes, I wonder where I'd be without the Organisation.

In prison, no doubt.

As I sat there in Wendy's immaculate, empty office, I grew quickly bored not knowing when Wendy was to return. I was just about to stroll back to my desk next door when I noticed that Wendy had left her red, plastic SWAG bag by the desk. The SWAG is used for discarded secure material (it stands for Secure Waste And something but no one can remember what). Each staff member has one and it is picked up every evening before close of play and emptied into the vast incinerators in the sub-basement of Nation House to ensure that all classified papers are destroyed absolutely. In Wendy's I found two or three torn working copies of Department Y – Surveillance reports, which I quickly pocketed before she returned.

On the way to see Charlie at the Tate that night, *Paranoia* paid me one of her impromptu visits, obliging me to wrap the bits and pieces in a plaggy bag and tidy them away under a bush in the nearby grounds. That may sound strange but, at the time, I suspected again that Charlie had been tasked by the Organisation to get close to me, possibly to check for the very kind of material that I then had on my person. Barring tornadoes or hurricanes, I knew I could pick them up the following evening, yesterday in fact. So, before I met Imogen at my place, I got them back and studied them in detail at the Astral café off Horseferry Road, over a plateful of bacon, eggs, sausage, chips and a slice, washed down with a mug of very sweet, very rusty tea. I don't know what the regulars made of me, that evening, especially when I spat most of my second mug over the 1970s, patterned linoleum floor. Both RELIGIOUS FANATIC and RUSH HOUR had been covered by Department Y at Elwell's bash in October but no one in the Organisation had seen fit to tell me, the H/Ops officer, of this rather pertinent fact.

I know I have to act but I can't trust a soul so I haven't breathed a word to anyone I've seen since, not Charlie, not Imogen, not Jason, not Simon, not Jimmy. But what to do?

Ashington

The Cheetah pulls up in Hanover Square at around 11 am Sunday. We are deliberately two hours early, hoping to get a look at our target arriving for the meeting. Get ahead of the game. Who is the target with? How is he or she dressed? What expression do they have on their face? Information is power, as we know all too well in the intelligence game. I can barely keep my heavy lids up after last night's snatched seconds of uncomfortable, unrefreshing sleep under the Forth Road Bridge in South Queensferry.

At about seven thirty in the morning, Charlie and I had fucked, sucked and licked in our woolies, in the open-air as the warm sun rose over the Firth of Forth even though I thought the cold morning dew would dampen my ardour or drown my bull-necked hard-on. Afterwards, with Charlie's sleeping head in my lap, I remembered the many hours I had spent there walking, talking, laughing, chatting, smoking, groping and fucking with Dolores. I fought back a stray, undisciplined tear as we had driven past the cottage we shared for over a year, five years ago. Five fuckin years ago. Where's my life going? I'm thirty in three months time. When I left Edinburgh – when I lost the plot with Dolores and never gave up regretting it – I could never have imagined I would end up back under that string bridge again. But, thank god, Dolores is gone now. Forever, I hope.

I have always been glad to carry out low-level surveillance ops for the Organisation, as it has always been a chance to catch up on some reading. It's like fishing. Or rather, how I imagine fishing. Just waiting there for a bite. But getting so wrapped up in your novel or thoughts that you can't be bothered to react when the target/fish sticks his head above the parapet. A couple of times, I've done just that: sat there and watched a target disappear rather than fire up the surveillance car in pursuit. It made the paperwork easier, I can tell you.

The *Cheetah* falls silent. The silence is only broken by Jimmy's occasional glugs and gulps from his lager can and then a rip-snorting fart. Jimmy laughs and Charlie pulls a face, like she's tasted Marmite for the first time, having first been convinced by a trusted relative that it tastes like a *Curly Wurly* or a Cadbury's *Creme Egg*. Just as we are recovering from this I see a kid of about 13 pimp-shuffling past in the usual *faux* rap gear of baggy jeans, beanie hat, medallion knicked from a VW, and a black T-shirt. But on it, in a big bold lettered WOB which shouted louder than a *Scorcher* screamer, were the words:



– It's one o'clock, time to go, I chuckle. – We've seen no one so we'll have to play it by ear.

36

Coffee

I wake up Monday morning with guilt seeping out of every pore. Me and Charlie have to get to get this Imogen thing worked out: it's our Alsace-Lorraine, our Bay of Pigs, our Afghanistan. Even before Jimmy had dropped us off at my place at about half nine last night, we had been gently bickering about Imogen. When we got back, a full-scale conflict began which lasted for an hour. Charlie eventually ran off crying into the night, leaving me shaken and annoyed. I know that I should have told her there and then that I love her, even though I love Imogen as well (I think). Not able to cope, I rolled a monster (medicinal) joint which knocked me out better than any sleeping pill at about half ten. So at least I can be thankful for small mercies: I've enjoyed an excellent night's sleep in preparation for the busy week ahead, for once.

I shake my head in despairing disbelief at it all as I prepare my morning kick-start: tar-pitch crude – coffee to get the space shuttle out of bed and on its way to the moon in the mornings. The usual Dean recipe: chuck in half a packet of grounds, flick on the desperate machine then let it go about its work, its job, its daily grind. Like the average, neglected, piss-bored employee, it complains every time. Today, as usual, it is a gurgling baby at first, happy at the attention of all this coffee, happy at my touch. But once it is properly in motion, it lets out the occasional whine, the odd whimper or a plaintive, sporadic moan. After a few minutes, it grumbles. And rumbles. Like it might be looking for a fight. It makes me think of Charlie's parting words as she fled down the hall stairs, last night:

– I've got the proof, you stupid bastard. You really should have listened to me, listened to my tape, you arrogant cunt.

The word 'cunt' rings around my ears, as it did then, as I remember Charlie's obvious distress. I curse my own pig-headedness for not running after her.

I am brought back to my Monday morning kitchen by the sporadic but troubled grumbles which emanate from the belly of my coffee-maker. I eye it carefully as the grumbles become more rapid, rising in tone until the manly full-throated *basso profundo* is replaced by a whining *castrato*, and it dances involuntarily under the great weight of intense coffee it's expected to process. After stepping the light fantastic across the kitchen tiles for five minutes or so, the percolator collapses exhausted, dribbling the viscous, black treacle into the tiny pearl white *demi-tasse* below.

I pick it up and sniff it – in the exact opposite way to sniffing, hoovering, snorting the line on the coke mirror. More like how you might be tempted to tentatively sniff a dirty nappy for a bet or in a spirit of scientific, empiric curiosity, to verify it was that bad, that overwhelming, that nauseous. Just to say you'd done it. Then I sip at it precariously, like you might pat a real tiger in the wild for the first time, and my eyelids shoot up like faulty blinds while my heart lurches violently before kettle drumming my chest at 150 bpm. It isn't quite coke but it comes bloody close and is a damn sight easier on my runny nostrils, (which are now hairless worn away by the scorching delivery of green and red napalm to my hankie every morning). X, Charlie, Jimmy and me were so happy snorting that powder doing a 120 on the M6 south, yesterday afternoon. How did it all go wrong? More importantly, what sort of *proof* does Charlotte Preston really have?

I am about to dance balletically into the shower when I hear the bright ring of the phone. Who in hell would phone at ten past nine on a Monday morning? Charlie to apologise? Work to say that Wendy had died at her desk? 'The Wicked Witch is dead, hoorah, hoorah!' I sing feverishly as I pirouette to the phone:

- Hoorah! Sorry, hello. I was miles away.
- Hi, there how are you, *lover*?

A female. With enthusiasm. With verve. With unabashed, unashamed, naked cheek. I wish I were miles away. Perhaps I am. Perhaps this is a long distance call. From say, Timbuctoo. Or Mars. Or hell.

- Hello?...Hello? The hoarse voice repeats into my dead silence. – Are there, Damien?
- Dolores, I concede.

The Ashington escapade in Edinburgh was a farce. From one o'clock, I hammered hard on the black, glossy front door for a good half an hour but there was absolutely no response or indication that anyone was inside. After half an hour, I got back in the car to keep watch on the door more discreetly. About half an hour after that, Jimmy, bored with all the waiting, decided he was going to take his own unilateral action, went round the back, climbed up a drain pipe and broke in through a second floor window. He came to the front overlooking the square to signal his success, opened the window to wave to us but was so drunk he fell out, straight into the shrubbery below. Before we knew it, a crowd had gathered around the supine Jimmy and a well-meaning idiot had called an ambulance. At that point, I wished deeply that I still had my polis warrant card.

Without it, I still managed to intervene, adopting the first aid measures we are taught in the Organisation. Before the ambulance arrived, I had Jimmy on his feet and was dragging him off down the street, claiming that we had a bus to catch in the nearby St Andrew's bus station. I could see that some of the better-heeled wanted to stop us leaving as they had seen Jimmy fall from the window of a flat, one he was clearly not meant to be in. But they were too concerned about their own welfare to challenge us,

except one raddled but attractive brunette. She must have been 45 at least and kept asking us for our names and addresses. Jimmy reckoned she fancied me and I have to admit I quite fancied her – she reminded me of Imogen’s mam a bit but without the swaggering confidence or expensively dyed hair. God, they could have been sisters.

Once we were a safe distance away from the woman and the gathering melee in the square, I found a callbox just by the Top o’the Walk and called Charlie on Jimmy’s mobile which he had fortunately left behind in the *Cheetah*. She’d had the good sense to drive off when she saw the potential trouble Jimmy and I were in and was now waiting at the Leith Walk/London Road junction. As we finally limped up to the red *Cheetah*, I reflected that Charlie really was the kind of girl blokes would die for.

It was a real shame we had to fall out that afternoon, on the long journey back.

– Oh, you remember littl ol me! I was beginning to think you’d moved or that you...

– I can’t believe this is happening. I cannot honestly believe that things like this *deserve* to happen to me. If Ironopolis really did match me point for point, I would be six or seven adrift by now – at the bottom of the third division.

If I carry on in this way, she might go away or I might persuade myself it’s not happening, I hope. Perhaps it isn’t. Perhaps that rocket-fuel coffee has finally done for me. So strong, so concentrated in its dose of treacly caffeine, it has induced hallucinations.

– Oh, Damien, you always were so dramatic. Too much journalism, if you ask me. Makes you constantly overreact to the slightest little thing.

– Look, Dolores, I hardly call conniving in the death of a government minister the ‘slightest littl thang’.

I impersonate her adopted, breathy, excited voice, which clearly annoys her. She has never been able to tolerate her peers not taking her as seriously as she takes herself.

– Damien, she ejaculates with vigour, with no-nonsense vigour, – if you want to know what the police have in store for you, and you know what’s good for you, get to the *Bartchester* in Buckingham Palace Road for one o’clock. Right?

– OK, I reply, convincing myself that I would and wouldn’t keep the appointment, simultaneously. – Why are you doing this?

– I don’t want to see you get hurt. I want to help you because if I don’t you’re gonna be in real trouble.

At she speaks those words, Ironopolis drift into the Vauxhall Conference of non-league football.

Gaudie

I first met Dolores Kane at the Fresher's Fair on Gaudie night in my second year. This celebration saw a senior to take out a fresher or bejant(ine) to introduce them to the city and university life. That was the theory anyway. And how it happened at our 'sister' university, Edinburgh. At Cally we took a more robust view. Find a bejant or bejantine and get them so drunk, so pissed, so stocious on drinks which made the cocktails at *The Pussy* look like *Bailey's* or *Malibu* that they spent the early hours of the morning and much of the next day heaving up from their toe nails.

My version for Dolores was to have been different, though. With fastidious liberal heart beating on my sleeve to anyone in a ten mile radius – hell, to any sentient lifeform in the Cosmos – I was determined to ensure that if Dolores wanted to get drunk, she could but I would look after her. And if she didn't want to get drunk, that was also fine by liberal-wanker me. The trouble was I got drunk, *me*. Drunk like a fresher, drunk like a bejant on Gaudie Night. At one point, a group of concerned second year female students picked me up off the pavement and propped me against a pub wall while they looked for my irresponsible and reprehensible senior student.

– Who did this to you? They kept saying with the kind of self-righteous indignation only student women can muster.

In truth, Dolores got blotto, wankered, kaputt that night as well. And I couldn't look after her – I was too pissed. The next day, – Afterpill Tuesday as it was affectionately known for the obvious reasons – she claimed I had tried to take advantage of her which I knew couldn't be true as I had been incapable.

– Me? Take advantage of you? I asked, disbelievingly. – I spent £20 last night, most of it on large vodka tonics. And you smoked half my eighth.

Believe me, £27.50 was a lot in those days. So Dolores was a lot cheaper than nowadays, I grant you, but hardly as good value for money.

And then she stormed off.

37

Commotion

As Dolores strutted across the Mall that sunny early March afternoon, like a peacock, like an exotic bird of paradise, with her plumes of iron-ore hair, her copper-sulphate jacket, her potassium-permanganate miniskirt and her sturdy, shapely charcoal legs, she felt like a chemical reaction waiting to happen. Oh, and it was going to happen. She even had her flatties on – in case she had to make a run for it from Damien. In fact, she liked her peacock-strut because it was so ostentatious and so *male*, unlike the sparrow-feathered peahen, unlike the sparrow-feathered wives of the Japanese tourists, who now flapped around in front of the Palace, like second class citizens, like second hand clothes while their menfolk took endless photos of anything but them.

Up until 16, Dolores had to all intents and purposes been daddy's pretty little angel – her brief and obligatory tomboy phase notwithstanding. At 16 she blossomed, she bloomed, she flowered: relatives would comment on what a striking girl she had grown up to be, with her long, straight, red hair, her willowy height and striking face. (They didn't mention, or at least not to her face, that she had a body to stop traffic on the North Circular, to distract stampeding wild animals, to make passing spaceships detour to earth). Then one day, she had all her red hair shaven off and took to dyeing what was left of it deep black. She also began wearing baggy cheesecloth tops and voluminous hippy skirts. At the same time, Dolores told her mother she wasn't going to be a bourgeois plaything like her mother had been all her life, grateful for scraps from the table of the now dreaded enemy – men. Oh no, Dolores would celebrate her independent womanhood, her *difference*.

She stopped talking to her daddy or Des, as she now called him on the infrequent times she spoke to him after the divorce, but still accepted his money when it was offered to pay her grant at Cally. Not many of those who ended up at Cally actually *chose* to go there but she put it down on her UCCA form as first choice. She wasn't going to Oxbridge or some respectable redbrick or even one of the magnificent seven as, to her, those seven had all passed through their teenage rebellion and had now settled for middle-age, bourgeois, professional liberalism. Cally was new, the youngest university in Britain (before the upstart polies recent assent to university status) while the polies of the time were full of well...male engineers, technophiles, glorified grease monkeys. Dolores, age 18, was having none of that.

Cally had two other significant advantages over most other British universities: the basic course was four instead of three years long and it was in Edinburgh, a good 500 or so miles from either of her parents. But what to do there? Her new friends advised her that English as a course was bourgeois – all dead, white, European males and read by pretentious ex-public schoolboys and ditsy sisters who had been spoonfed at school and went to college to find a husband. Do peace studies, do women's studies, they urged. But she had been pleased with her A-level results, an A and two Bs which wasn't bad considering she'd got pissed the day before one of her English papers. (And English was the A). She swanned around at her father's place that summer, summer 85, and fell out with him again when he accused Dolores's mother of trying to turn Dolores against him. Dolores told him he deserved it for making her mother into an unpaid prostitute then a paupered single mother, and that he was probably a rapist or a child abuser – she'd just read about suppressed memory syndrome. At this point, her father threw her out and only subsequently communicated with her via the obligatory grant cheque and the odd, scribbled plea for forgiveness.

Then, on virtually her first day at Cally, she had met Damien and he had taken her out, got her drunk and taken advantage of her.

Brakes scream in wounded-animal confusion as the traffic edges past me on the Duke of Wellington roundabout, next to the address known to locals as 'No 1, London'. No, not the Palace – the Duke's house by the park. It's beginning to rain, big water-bomb drops that at first come down so slowly you can spot them, then dodge them before they get near you. To avoid arriving with the demoralisation of drenchedness and therefore at an immediate disadvantage, I hail one of the cabs which scurries off Piccadilly, like a busy but determined beetle, pushing its way through the insect feeding frenzy of the other traffic to pick me up.

– *The Barchester, I call as I clamber in and the rain lets go in earnest.*

The cabbie clearly doesn't look impressed by the size of this potential fare but I can't see the problem: even from here, it might be a fifteen minute journey. My problems are compounded by my bladder jabbing me in the guts every so often – to let me know it's already over capacity. Why did I decide to walk from Mayfair? Especially after those two bottles of Semillion Chardonnay in the *Artiste Muscle* with Amy Tuppham, to discuss tactics at the meeting I'm heading for.

– *Why, Amy? Why? I asked. – You're a woman. Tell me why women do these things.*

– *Praps she's pregnan, Amy ventured helpfully, – wiv yor sprog.*

I didn't have the heart to tell her that *that* was impossible. Although Dolores and I last saw each other five months ago, we just didn't have sex like that.

Naked

As Dolores stood there pondering in electron-microscopic detail her own reality, old men twinged with a long forgotten ache, like the desire for home and hearth from Occupied France during the last war. Adolescent boys unused to the fizzing, rising sap, which flushed their embarrassed, acne-mapped faces, went suddenly and unusually quiet. Adult men, distracted by the potent reaction of fading testosterone and naked female sexuality, nearly killed themselves as they distractedly stepped into the paths of the waltzing buses outside Victoria Station. Harassed wives of all ages grabbed their partners and scolded them like naughty boys while pairs of carrier-bagged fishwives exchanged bitchy remarks about the artificial chemistry and physics of her face, her hair and probably her breasts; the length of her skirt or the plunge of her top.

- Eee, shu’ll catch ‘er death, like that, northern matriarchs, come to London for a couple of days for shopping and a show, muttered conspiratorially to each other.
- For heaven’s sake, the lower-middle, home counties housewives exclaimed loudly and unembarrassed, – who does she think she is, done up like Lady Muck? – like this mattered – while conjecturing knowingly to each other about how such a creature might make her living in the metropolis, in town, in the post-industrial age.

Dolores didn’t give a fuck. She had re-positioned herself in her own reality. This was the last act. And Damien Dean, as she had planned, would be unable to stray from the script she had prepared.

Women’s group refuses entry to interested men

Dolores read it again. And again. The Womyn’s Group’s free copy of *The Rag*, which she knew the editor resented them having, had just been dropped on her desk. She scoured – good word that, summed up her conscientiousness, her dedication, her diligence even if it did have overtones of the sink and housewife drudgery – every issue to check for anything remotely offensive, sexist, heterosexist, homophobic, chauvinistic or downright dangerous. This wasn’t censorship, you understand, it was just ensuring that womyn’s personal and mental security wasn’t compromised inadvertently by the phallocratic newspaper team of Damien Dean, Simon Register, Maude Cloraes, Mike Piper and Becky Wasp, the token fellow womyn. Dolores had long been worried that even the paper’s title appeared to be a jibe at her fellow

sisters but she had believed putting a censure motion before the union council would only draw unnecessary attention to the matter.

- Is it just me or is there a puerile innuendo in this headline? Dolores asked Kath, the deputy chair of the Womyn's Group.
- Cath looked at it. Again. And again.
- Where's the innuendo? Asked Cath.

She was desperate to find it as she didn't want to displease Dolores. And Dolores was clearly in a determined mood.

- Look! Look! For god's sake.

Cath wanted to say she saw it but she was afraid Dolores would test her on the exact nature of the innuendo, like Dolores tested her ideological commitment from time to time, so she just stood there blankly.

- Sara, could you come and look at this, Dolores called summoning over a large-boned woman overwhelmed by natural, non-resource-consuming fibres.
- Where is it? Pleaded Cath. – I just can't see it.
- Look, said Dolores pointing at the headline.
- It's a disgrace, said Sara indignantly. – He's gone too far this time. Let's get a censure motion together.
- It'll require a vote, pointed out Cath trying to make amends, – to be constitutional.
- I knew it, declared Dolores, – that chauvinistic bastard, Damien Dean, is having a smutty dig at us.

Before anyone knew quite what was happening, the meeting had a quorum (6 people) and two motions were passed unanimously. The first to raise the matter at Council. The second to send a delegation to lobby the editor of *The Rag* forthwith.

Gin

The tearoom on the ground floor of the *Bartchester* belongs to another era – it just wasn't sure which one. Many years previously, it had competed with Lyons Corner Houses rather than Wongerburger 'Restaurants' for its clientele. It still has stucco ceilings and elaborate corniches, in the style of eighteenth century baroque, according to the blurb, but these are in fact neither eighteenth century nor vaguely similar to baroque. Most of the furniture is '*belle époque Louis XIV*', perfectly varnished and restored since it was first cut in 1937 while the *pastel* green of the walls is meant to conjure up the pleasant pastoral of pre-industrial England. It was all created, rather than designed, by an enterprising painter-decorator who mixed some left over camouflage paint with standard issue emulsion just after the war (although nobody was sure which war, exactly) which had been used ever since. But the Americans loved it. Every bit of it: the cheap, *English Breakfast* tea; the packet Victoria sponges; the production-line fondant fancies; the stale scones (which the *Septics* thought were meant to taste like that). And now the tearooms,

renamed the lunchroom between midday and two, served exotic nouvelle cuisine just when everyone else was dropping this in favour of sturdy, stodgy *Olde English Fayre*.

Dolores is over half an hour late which suits her as Damien is bound to be even later – which she guesses when he is not there waiting. Of course, he may have been and gone but this seems unlikely. She plucks off her black *Umberto Carletto* kidskin gloves and admires her exquisitely manicured hand. Life is being good to her lately and, hell, if a girl can't pamper herself every once in a while. Dolores studies the young girls – and more bizarrely the old dears – scurrying around in their pre-war, frilly maid outfits. She knows the only place, outside the *Bartchester*, you come across these period costumes is in pornography and lingerie catalogues.

Looking good has come to define Dolores in a way that nothing else does. Even though she has come relatively late to this *friperie*, she has to admit it opens doors and wallets more obviously and regularly than anything else. Now, years on from Damien, it is demanded of her by her job – she can never let herself look dowdy or frigid as that's bad economics, a sign of bad attitude. But this is personal. Dolores is about to see Damien for the first time in nearly five months.

When he walks in, she's going to make sure he wants her, he aches for her, he weeps for her.

Women's group refuses entry to interested men

■ next came across Dolores in the April of my final year as a result of a complaint about the above headline:

She arrived at my hall of residence bedroom with a lynch mob of wimmin. Needless to say, she was by far the most attractive of the lot. They asked for an apology for the headline and I refused. After all, *even if* the headline was sexist (although it was difficult to see how) the article certainly wasn't: it was a sympathetic look at the Women's (sic) Group and the problems they encountered with the union's rules forbidding affiliated societies from excluding members on grounds of gender. In this case, the wronged party happened to be men. So couldn't these wimmin just laugh about the article, put it down to experience, let it go just this once?

I pointed out to Dolores and her cronies, at that very moment, in places like Ironopolis, millions of teenagers and twentysomethings were hunched over grubby sinks of fag-ashed, cholesterol-worn plates, swigging cheap oily gin. That everybody in places like that gets it bad but the women always get it so much worse. That their big ends go. That

their carburettors get blocked up. That birth stretches and dents them beyond recognition. That, by the time they were 25, you had no idea what make or year or model they had originally been. I told Dolores this in not quite so many words. She gave me some guff about solidarity with all women. But it must have worked. A week later she came down to *The Rag's* subterranean office and asked me out to lunch to help her promote some Third World breastfeeding campaign.

Cosmopolitan

Dolores can see the other women staring at her as she pretends to work at her face with a flourish of lipstick, powder and paint. But like in the movies, she pans the genteel tearoom with her compact mirror which sends back images of compact women. The middle class whores. The mussed up, sex-safe, gentle-figured ladies who lunch on nouvelle cuisine. The food is Art, the Ladies who Lunch are Art, the waitresses are Art. It is all art, all artifice, all artificial. But the LsWL are no different from Dolores, Ms Artifice herself: they have prostituted themselves to older, bloated men to be shown off to colleagues at home counties dinner parties, city work do's, the Royal Opera House, the latest Lloyd Webber premiere, the exclusive golf club annual dinner. But they are under contract for life – or at least until their husbands trade up to a younger, racier model – just like the career women who sit like geishas performing to jolly plutocrats.

As she looks around again, wondering where Damien has got to, she thinks she might recognise some of those complacent, middle-aged, home counties men. She studies their faces and bodies long and hard, sketching in the leather collars, bondage harnesses, rubber pants and over-sized nappies. Oh, yes the career harpies are entertaining the same men as Dolores entertains but – she did a quick calculation on the back of a napkin – at about a tenth of the rate. Dolores smiles as she puckers up her lips and touches up her *Dior Rouge Noir* lipstick, studying her confident, strong face. Another Gainsborough flourish of *Elizabeth Arden* powder, another single Ingres line across the rim of each eyelid, another darting but exact stroke of blusher on each cheekbone, like a Turner wash. She admires her handiwork. She admires herself. What was it Damien declared to her that time at Cally? 'You've got cheekbones like geometry and eyes like sin. And you're sexually enlightened by Cosmopolit-in.'

As she bristles with ah-shucks acceptance of this compliment, blasted from their past, the rain begins to really come down outside.

– What's our policy on prostitution? Asked Cath, the deputy chair of the WG and Dolores's best friend, in the cramped Womyn's Group office of the student union.

Dolores paused. She was not thinking of prostitution. At that moment, she didn't give a fuck about prostitution. The sisters could go all go and sell themselves into the white slave trade for all she cared. She wanted to know exactly what Damien Dean was playing

at. She'd had lunch with him that day to discuss the Third World Breastfeeding campaign. It had been a long, drunken affair – all stale ploughman's and buckets of cheap, rough, potent cider, the sort of cloudy piss that looks like it has bits of the village idiot's brain preserved in it. But she had drunk it, in pints, matching Damien round for round. Half-pissed and against her better judgement she had let him pick up the tab as 'it was on exes', even though she knew their lunch had little to do with the *Rag*, really. She knew she ought to report him. Then at the end of the lunch as they had parted Damien had leered at her, his face skewed with drunkenness, and said:

– You've got cheekbones like geometry and eyes like sin. And you're sexually enlightened by *Cosmopolitan*.

Dolores knew she should have hit him or slapped him across the face for unforgivable forwardness in public but she knew she had fantastic cheekbones of which – unlike her fantastic breasts – she was immensely proud and showed off as much as possible without resorting to cosmetics. But Damien's line was somehow familiar yet somehow alien.

– Cath, have you ever heard the line: 'You've got cheekbones like geometry and eyes like sin...'

– '...and she's sexually enlightened by *Cosmopolit-in*. She's got perr-fect skin, ditdarditdardoo, perr-fect skin, ditdarditdardoo...'

– What are you talking about?

– It's a song by Lloyd Cole and the Commotions, said Cath helpfully.

– Jesus, I hate Damien Dean.

38

Bleeder

Damien looks mad, mad and dangerous, as he staggers into the *Bartchester* tearoom, hair flattened by his brief encounter with the stage rain which pirouettes, bounds and tapdances on the pavements outside. His eyes dart round the room, not like a fly but like *The Fly* unable to settle his features for a moment. He would not be a comfortable guest at your dinner party in the home counties.

- Would you like some cake, Damien? Dolores asks with efficient politeness before he can settle himself. – ‘Cake and fine wines,’ I believe the phrase is.
- Look, I’ve got to find the fuckin pissoir, he slurs back, – before I do anything fuckin else otherwise I’m gonna prolapse and pass out.

Dolores smiles broadly and indulgently but Damien is not sure whether it is with him or at him. It is a combination of both because she knows she now has him in her sights.

- Prostrate trouble, Dolores chides. – My, we are feeling our age, aren’t we?

As Damien waddles off with a contemptuous *tish*, Dolores rehearses her lines. This is her final act, her denouement, her script. All she has to do is make sure Damien sings from the same hymn sheet.

After that first lunch with Dolores, I stumbled back down to the *Rag’s* dark, basement front office. I watched the passersby amble past about 15 feet above me through a haze of headrot cider because I couldn’t get down to the afternoon’s work. Through my association with a tabloid hack – which I kept very quiet about – I knew all about the world of WOBs, rag outs, splashes, screamers, bleeders, flyers, monkeys and steps. I mean, I loved it, all of it: the complaints, the abuse, the threats (of violence, legal action and being kicked out of Cally), the whinging, the criticism, the honest, *hard work*. Jesus H X, the *hours* I put in, 14 hours a day, 16, over 24 on the days when I didn’t have time to go to bed. In short, the buck stopped with me. If I didn’t get out of bed, the paper didn’t get to bed. I literally ate, slept and breathed the bloody thing – I didn’t have a flat. I didn’t need one. I lived in the office and slept on a camp bed.

I looked at my mock-up of that week’s front page – ‘Rooms for sex’, an expose of an academic who had suggested to female students that they might be better placed to get

college accommodation, if they slept with him. I had designed it before lunch and had felt that tingling expectation, which can only come from story like that. This, I imagined, was to be the greatest high of my greatest addiction. And, believe me, I'm an expert.

But after that lunch with Dolores Kane – for the first time in my life – the buzz of it all rang strangely hollow, like a pea in a cheap, Acme whistle. I wandered next door to the production room and looked up towards Arthur's Seat. The watery, lemon rays of the late afternoon poured into the office and flooded the Athens of the North with a Claude Lorraine haze. I lit maybe my twentieth fifth Marlboro of the day and gazed longingly out of the window. This was love. But why her? What did she have over other women? OK, she had great tits and a great arse, even though she hid them in coal-sack tops and wind-sock trousers, and a striking (but unmade-up) face.

But so did lots of other women and they didn't carry with them everywhere a whole range of matching-set ideological baggage.

He looks worn, worn and weary but relieved, as he returns from the toilet, walking upright, erect, with a glint in his eye. Damien determinedly does not apologise for being late even though he should have been there about an hour ago. Neither does he compliment her on her appearance, even though he secretly thinks she looks more stunning than ever and she has got all dolled-up just for him. Men, eh?

- OK, Dolores, he says looking into her fizzling green eyes for some kind of signal, some recognition from the days when he spent hours just staring into those deep, emerald pools. – I didn't come here for the good of my health...
- You look like you needed to though. Sit down.

Dolores doesn't want to concede anything.

- Jesus, that puke green decor isn't doing me any good, he groans as he holds his intestine playfully.

Dolores laughs. Properly at first, then recovering herself, politely, as if for social acceptance as women do, as they have to, when men *joke*. Damien sits down and declares in an officious voice:

- 'We want the finest wines available to humanity. We want them here and we want them now.'
- Damien, I've already done that one, Dolores chides, holding the heavy hoods at half-mast before darting her gaze directly into his eyes: – You just did coke in the loo, didn't you?
- So... a little pick-me-up. You wouldn't begrudge me that, would you? He is almost sorry for himself for some reason. – What about the polis? You said you had something to tell me about the polis?
- Oh, yes, Damien. All in good time. It's just that...

- Just what Dolores? Who paid you? Damien's mood is snarling aggression, tempered only by their genteel and very public location. – Why did you kill ELWELL? Did you think I'd hang for it? Did you?
- Shhh! Damien, people will start looking at us.
- Let them.
- Damien, I saved you from a rape charge so I figure you owe me one.

Dolores pauses for one, two, three, four, five seconds – as she planned – to let Damien know she has him wiggling on the hook of a fly. Then she continues just as he is about to make a point, leaving him guppy-mouthed:

- You weren't supposed to escape, Damien. You were supposed to be caught there bang to rights with the Elwell body. That way, they'd get rid of both of you.
- You'd see me go down for fuckin murder, you bitch.
- Well, they were paying me a lot of money. But, Damien. And this is a big but. I couldn't go through with it. I let you escape.
- Whaaa?
- You escaped by the back way, like I did. I was supposed to lock it behind me.
- Why let me go?
- Because I realised I still felt something for you.

Time slows down and dislocates like in some cheap sci-fi movie. Dolores is in control. Damien is trying not to be confused, flattered and contemptuous all at the same time. He thinks about declaring: 'You're just saying that'. or mouthing some other platitude but decides there and then this is not the place for false modesty.

- Why all that nonsense as Natasha? He asks calmly like he has taken on board and exhaustively analysed all this hot new intelligence.

Secretly, Damien wants to impress her with his intellectual rigour. And, of course, his charm. All the time, he thinks he might be on for a session with the love of his life.

- I was told to do it, Dolores replies calmly but ostentatiously, lighting a Marlboro.

She slots it neatly in the side of her cruel, red mouth, inhales and then even more ostentatiously exhales, knowing all the while Damien is craving a cigarette, before she resumes:

- I think originally they thought I'd only ever be Natasha in the Elwell operation so you wouldn't think that dear old Dolores here had anything to do with it. But you fooled us all with your long period of sobriety. I must admit, when I approached you at Elwell's ball, I was amazed to find you stone-cold sober. And so I couldn't be sure whether you'd recognised me or not, that night.
- I did. I bloody did. I recognised the scent of the lipstick on the Marlboro you gave me but I couldn't get my head around it. I just thought *Natasha* used the same make.

- In the end, it didn't make any difference. You were so happy to recruit me as myself. That is so happy to think you could still persuade Dolores Kane to do things for you that you forgot I might be playing for the other side.
- Hang on. Why the fuck didn't the Office just use someone else? Why you, at all?
- Because they wanted my expert assessment of you. A gal who really knew you, knew the real Damien Dean, knew I suppose when he was about to crack or...
- So why did you turn up to see Elwell the day he... *died*, dressed as Natasha?
- That was part of the plan. We had to lure you to the dentist's...
- The brothel...
- Whatever. Being the hotheaded idiot that you are, I knew you wouldn't be able to resist coming over and sorting things out.

Dolores makes inverted comma signs in the air as she says the words 'sorting things out' before measuredly asking:

- Why do you think the dentist's was so close to your ops room?
- Why the fuck are you playing with me like...
- Because you put me on the game, Damien. No one else.

Another pause. Damien, blinded by conscience, glances away and raises a hand to protect himself, to steady his psyche. He pauses then frowns.

- We're not gonna go through that fuckin shit again, are we?

He is playing this long-suffering, almost bored but he betrays a slight anguish in himself.

- What's the line from that Billy Bragg song? Dolores asks, challenging his do-I-have-to-put-up-with-this-again air. – 'I put you on a pedestal, you put me on the pill' or the game, rather.
- I thought was that Kirsty McColl.
- She did a cov... Damien! The point is you put me on the...

Before Dolores can finish her accusation, Damien is defending himself, disputing the facts, challenging her recollection and the argument descends into attack and counter-attack, while all the time Damien Dean thinks of his life in football metaphors.

As I became more sober that sunny May afternoon in my final year at Cally, I winced in acute-appendicitis embarrassment at the 'Perfect Skin' line. I writhed. I squirmed. I screamed inside. It echoed around the silent room and I felt the red hue in my cheeks from the cold outside deepen into an indigo-maroon. It had been going so well until then. Women loved the ask, listen, sum up technique. Don't chat them up – let them chat themselves up. But making the chance count here was going to be tricky. If I let her know I was there in the usual fashion, I might finish up on a rape charge if it went wrong.

At the time, I thought that was what Dolores Kane was up to, setting me up on a rape charge – for that women’s group headline in the paper a month before. It is ironic that I now chide myself – these six years later – for thinking such a thing. I mean, I even wondered if she was a lesbian or whether she carried CS gas or mace to spray indiscriminately over perceived sex attackers, like wanton boys would have done with flies, if they’d had flyspray in those days. The union council and the Women’s Group and the rest of the right-ons I had pissed off at Cally would have loved that. But I got it so wrong, so hopelessly, hopelessly wrong. I remember grinding my cigarette into the windowsill, adding another pock-mark to *The Rag* production room. I remember thinking that it looked as bruised and burnt as a veteran junkie’s arm as I declared Dolores a lost ball for good.

Of course, I couldn’t have known at the time, how it would all end up or indeed how it would progress over the next few weeks. But, if I had known what I know now, I really would have done things differently.

Crone

Damien looks at Dolores, holding her gaze. His eyes are welling up with water. They are about to overflow when he sneezes ostentatiously and wipes his face with a grubby white hanky, the size of a tablecloth. It is the tablecloth.

- Look, I’m fuckin parched, he rejoins. – Perhaps I can get one of these old *crones* to serve us. And perhaps she could give us the benefit of her magic cauldron at the same time.
- Damien... retorts Dolores, laughing despite herself.

One of the waitresses approaches them with her pen and pad at the ready, clearly not relishing the prospect of serving this rather loud upstart and his underdressed floosie. Her name is Mavis. She is a spinster who has worked at the *Bartchester* since the 1950s and deeply regrets the decline in standards in British society, which she has seen and lived through at first hand. Mavis has a controversial theory about this decline which is shared by many others of her age: *decimalisation was somehow to blame*. Mavis wasn’t quite sure how. But she knew it was something to do with it. That nice, old Mr Prentiss next door in Hackney, he often said the same thing. And she overheard many other sensible, retired people standing in bus queues and groceries sighing and sharing exactly the same sentiment:

- Eh, I blame decimalisation, y’know.

It was bad enough with the ‘permissive society’ in the 1960s when young people and the scum started cheeking their betters and had no respect for the queen but things just got worse with decimalisation. Them unions, commies the lot of them. That nice Mrs Thatcher tried to take them all on but they didn’t like her, they didn’t. Those horrible wets in the Party saw to that. The time was when this yob – you could tell he was already drunk, even though it was only half past one, you only had to look at his eyes – and his... what? Look at her done up like Lady Docker. What was she? His live-in lover (no

wedding ring) or his... his... *doxy*. Not long ago, the two of them would have been out on their ear on instructions from the *maitre d'* without so much as a bye or leave. And they would have called the police, just to make sure. In this day and age, you could never be so certain though. Either of them might be one of them pop stars off the telly or a famous actor or summing. Or even one of them new city tycoons you read about in the *Daily Mail*, all money but no manners and certainly no class. Or they could be one of those multi-millionaire American types, who were our cousins in the war but turned out not to *really* be like us at all. All brashness, filthy lucre and no class.

As I strolled back to The Rag's front office to get on with all those irritating little newspaper jobs, the phone went.

– Hi, this is the women's group, said the disembodied voice at the other end of the line, – we were wondering if you'd like to cover a demo on Saturday by the Leith Collective of Sex Workers.

At the time, I didn't recognise the voice. I knew it wasn't Dolores and we were always getting bizarre requests from the worthies who believed they should decide what went in the paper without actually contributing any of the graft. Normally, I would have smiled a polite *no* but I still hadn't put Dolores Kane to bed. This, at the time, seemed a way of ingratiating myself with her through the women's group so I jumped at it.

– Yeah, sure. Could I meet with you to discuss it? You'd like to? Should I come over to you? No, you'll come over here. All right. Tomorrow evening at six. By the way, who am I talking to?

– Kathrine Manton, the deputy chair of the woman's group. – That's Kathrine with a 'K' and no 'e' between the 'h' and the 'r'. You might spell it right next time you quote me in your paper.

39

- Afternoon, sir. Mavis saw this as a test of her professionalism. – What would you and your good lady be wanting?
- We are multi-millionaires, declares Damien waving his hands around theatrically, – we are mega-rich actors...
- That's all well and good sir but have you chosen yet? I could come back in a minute, if you'd like some more time.

Typical, thinks Mavis, drunk as a skunk. And more money than sense. Damien is giggling like a three year old and Dolores is on the point of collapse. As neither of them can speak, Mavis starts to wonder off, tutting, shaking her head and wandering what course of action is open to her in this day and age.

- Miss Blennerhasset, Damien calls out as Mavis continues to walk away. – Miss Blennerhasset, he repeats giggling incessantly.

Mavis wheels around and marches back to their table where both Damien and Dolores are bouncing around like two jacks sprung from their boxes.

- How do you know my name, young man? She asks indignantly as Damien and Dolores suddenly turn the colour of Dolores' mini-skirt with asphyxiation.
- How? How? And why is it funny? If you were any younger, I'd clip you around the ear.
- C'mon, Dolores manages to squeeze out between her clenched teeth, – let's go and have some fun, as they charge out of the *Bartchester* tearooms.

Unusually Damien isn't sticking to the script. Dolores has pencilled in simple sexual attraction as the means to the end. The *How*. The *What*, *Where*, *When* are A Private Show; Damien's Flat; This Afternoon. The denouement? Wait and see. This is Mike Leigh, thinks Dolores. If everyone stays in character, they will get there in the end.

Meanwhile, Miss Mavis Blennerhasset is left once again pondering why no one thought her name even remotely amusing until the late 1980s but after that just about every young person she mentioned it to either smirked or laughed openly in her face.

Chemistry

It wasn't anything in particular that sparked me and Dolores off. True, Ironopolis were promoted to the (old) first division, after an absence of six seasons, a couple of weeks after we started going out. True, *The Rag* was declared student newspaper of the year for the first and only time, a few weeks after that. True, mind-blowing sex was a part of it. I virtually hallucinated the first time I came with her, my member so far down her throat I thought she had swallowed it with my cum. At the same time, she screamed: 'Damien, you've got a woman's touch', the first time I teased and nurtured her to langorous orgasm after langorous orgasm with the odd 0-60 thrown in for good measure – which I took to be the ultimate compliment.

But that was it. Apart from that, we had nothing but chemistry. It is only in soap or films or comic books that new ready-to-be-infatuated couples find the banal excuses, banal motivations, banal co-incidence of interest that lead to relationships.

But for the inevitable underwear, she is naked on the bed, on all fours, primitively offering her swollen, engorged oestrus like primitive courtship, but I don't want that. I don't want her quim, her vagina, her pudenda. She knows this. She knows this because of our *chemistry*. She turns on all fours like an obedient dog so she is facing the wall-length mirror. I walk my stage direction to the end of the bed and stand erect behind her. She reaches back and stretches her buttocks, digging in her red-black finger nails, like she is dividing a *Terry's Chocolate Orange*. Everything's a-flutter, like the soft, dense eyelashes of a cartoon sex-bomb, as I swallow a constipated swallow and behold her sphincter, her ring, her asterisk.

My hard-on stands there proud, urging me on, beyond free will. Trembling, I peel off my outer layer, I peel off my inner layer before shuffling myself, exposed, on to the bed until I am shunted right up behind her. I squeeze her buttocks like the Man from *Del Monte*, savouring his work, taking intricate pride in his job, checking a melon or a grapefruit for ripeness, for readiness, for plucking from the plant. She is firm, but with just the right give, just the right softness without being *over-ripe* and too *yielding*. I peel back my foreskin, to uncover my glistening, swollen, purple bulb. It oozes fresh, sticky nectar as I squeeze it, too, for freshness but delicately, so as not to burst it. I trace a finger over it and the juice sticks like one long continuous spider's thread, as I pull it away.

Her buttocks are still stretched – her arsehole and her slit capture my arousal with an inverted Latin exclamation mark – so I touch the puckered fold with a lubricated finger. And she rears, jerky, staccato, like a horse with *Tourette's Syndrome*, whining, whinnying, neighing as I break her gently but insistently down onto the soft, downy duvet and straddle her, my thighs gripping her buttocks, maintaining the critical tension. I nuzzle her – down below – probing, searching, exploring remotely till I know where I need to be. Then I raise my head and look full into the mirror meeting her pleading doe eyes before I plunge in, like an executioner, in one long, deep, fell swoop. She screams. In the mirror, I

see the sharp, sudden pain etched on her face like she's been branded. But I stay there, scabbarded, sheathed to the hilt, as she writhes erratically and without rhythm like a frantic bucking bronco, trying to hurl me off with her strong hindlegs.

She cannot so she settles. Her narrow hand burrows instinctively towards her clitoris, like a blind mole, then nibbles it, teases it, draws it out to the size of a rosebud about to burst into bloom. As I begin to work in and out of her like a piston engine, she pants like she is letting off steam. In the mirror, I see myself faster and faster, like a jerky, speeded-up, old-fashioned movie in the black and white gloom of this late March afternoon. We are Siamese twins, Victorian fairground freaks, joined at the coccyx. As my *Urge* gets greater, more insistent, I go for release and we take off together, defying physics, defying chemistry, defying the mathematical universe, like I'm riding a flying carpet of sexual ecstasy and fizzing pheromone sulphate till we belly flop, drained and exhausted, back to the material bed, panting, wheezing, barely able to draw a sane, controlled breath.

So it was chemistry which got me and Dolores together at Cally. Pure chemistry. Pure cornball, you're thinking. But it *was* chemistry, the sort of chemistry you can't even begin to understand. Fusion or fission or blackhole chemistry. Or voodoo chemistry: a negative mass, a negative's square root, a negative energy. And it doesn't matter that you don't understand it. Not understanding it adds spice to it: a little copper, a little sodium, some water, some oil and half a teaspoon of cayenne pepper. When I was a kid I got near sexual pleasure from adding water and sugar to fertiliser then running off like the shockwave from the explosion, which more often than not blew me off my size one feet before I was anywhere near a safe distance away. Teachers and other grown-ups used to say to me:

– You'll kill yourself one day. Why don't you channel it? Get to understand all that stuff. Go and work in ICI Ironopolis, be like your dad.

But they missed the point. That was the thrill, the fetishistic craziness of it, the sexual experimentation of it, the fantasy-made-real orgasm it blew through you. *Not* understanding it. It was so powerful because I was a clueless primitive mastering fire, mastering iron, mastering fusion. In the same way, me and Dolores burned, reacted, fused *because we didn't understand*. Friends used to say:

– What can you see in a bra-burning, crypto-lesbian, sisterhood feminist like her?

And her friends asked:

– What do you see in a beer-swilling, chauvinist, football yob like him?

But that was until I graduated. Then, we virtually gave up friends, social life and pretend hobbies to concentrate on what we did best: each other. My postgraduate thesis was an excuse for us to spend more, even more, time stuck together by sexual glue. She effectively gave up her degree during her final year which we spent ensconced together in South Queensferry. Unburdened by work or lectures or study, our minds were freed to

pursue new sexual frontiers, seek out new spheres of sexual influence, to really scratch each other's eternal itch.

Mind you, we may have got on so well for one simple reason. We come from the same lower middle class background and were moved around as children while our respective fathers climbed the career ladder. We were both outsiders who found their roots with each other.

And then of course she started wearing that long red wig...

Gloom

In the gloom of the overcast March afternoon, we laugh together like we are high on potent, designer drugs, like we used to in our cottage in South Queensferry on a soft, fur rug before a lapping flame fireplace. Our days of mortal thunder flood back, and we laugh some more, collapsed in each other's sweat, in each other's discharged sex. There is no need – no use – for words, just peeling ecstatic laughter. Now, that's *chemistry*. And chemistry will more than do. Until I sense a presence in the room. A presence which speaks of distress and betrayal. In the dim light, I see a shape, an hourglass form, sobbing. As it turns and flees like air into a vacuum, like dead love from the solar system, like everything into a blackhole, I recognise it as the prosaic and distressed Imogen.

Book 7

**‘Why is there
nothing to
believe in,
anymore?’**

40

Gone

That March afternoon, I couldn't even chase after Imogen – I was naked and knackered. Dolores stayed behind for a while after Imogen had fled but only to give me a load of nonsense about how I smothered her at Cally, stopped her development into a fully mature adult, hampered her glittering potential – all of which she was paying for still. I accused her of deliberately setting me up but she claimed not even to have known who Imogen was until that afternoon. And at the time, I had no proof otherwise. At around five, the phone went and I had to go and get it because I knew it would be Wendy 'just wondering' where I had got to. After making up more nonsense about being ill, which Wendy didn't believe, I lost my rag with her. This played straight into her hands and I knew I would be on another charge when I went back.

When I returned to the bedroom, Dolores was gone. Rather touchingly, she had left a note scribbled on toilet paper in lipstick. It said:

*So long and
thanks for all
the sex
D
XXXX*

I no longer knew whether to laugh or cry. It was only much later that afternoon as I retraced those events again and again that I realised Imogen had had no reason to come round *at that particular time*, when I should have been at work. Dolores had stitched me up like a kipper although I have no way of establishing exactly how she did it.

Then I lost it. I lost it badly. I stopped going to work regularly, without a long-term sick note – I couldn't be bothered to even pretend to the quack. I tried contacting Imogen but this was an indiscretion, an infidelity, an adultery too far. I phoned all hours of the day and night but her mother was like battery acid poured slowly down the telephone

line corroding my ear and, eventually, my brain. I turned up at the flat in Belgrave Square, about 7 o'clock one half-remembered evening, shouting drunkenly like a tramp how much I loved her, but they threatened to call the polis. And when people like Sir Hugh's wife call the polis, the polis mean business, believe me. So I gave up on ever seeing Imogen again.

Then I really lost it. I lost all sense of time, of day and night, of weeks passing. At one point March turned into April but I didn't notice. Why should I? It was only the utterly meaningless attempt of a discredited culture to impose order on an otherwise chaotic universe. Why not just celebrate chaos? Oh, and I did. That butterfly's flapping wings or whatever it was in my case – the batting luxuriant lashes of a teenage prostitute in LA; the dying fart of some old and wise Psquitt in a much violated and transgressed reservation; the sneeze of a pock-marked Colombian drugs baron as he snorted too much pure flake. They all conspired against me even though I didn't know them, even though they didn't know it. Hell, that's chaos. Chaos does not have to be beautiful, you know. Fuck knows why we ever adopted the butterfly motif. Given our history, more likely than not chaos will start ugly and end ugly, Nazi holocaust-ugly, Commie Indochina-ugly, medieval Xian-ugly. Chaos blew me, it lacerated me, it tore me right off the tightrope I had been walking for years and years.

In the drop on one side of the tightrope had been the world of professional jobs, a decent salary, medical care when I needed it, pension schemes, drinks in the winebar after a hard day's work, a nice well-located flat near Westminster Bridge. But, on the other, there had been a demi-monde of unemployment, the brew, street drugs when I could get them, welfare schemes, meths in the gutter after a hard day's begging and a cardboard box in a well-located spot near Waterloo Bridge. Go on. Go on, guess which side I fell. But I was lucky. I never quite lost touch with the other side, the civilised, middle class side. But how I craved suddenly to be middle class, even lower middle class, or indeed, suburban.

I kept the flat, which stopped me falling headlong into the abyss, despite the Organisation. Grown exasperated with me, it decided I was a lost ball, surplus to requirements. The state I was in, no one would have believed me if I had claimed to have worked for them so I figure the Office thought it was safe to cast me adrift. Under the cover of the home office, it tried to cancel my 'lease', some forged document which claimed my flat was rented rather than bought. Only Charlie saved me from the Men in Grey by threatening the home office with bad publicity. All I remember was the endless, numbing cold and the endless, numbing violence of the rounds of dealers, pimps and other assorted untermensch who were intent on ripping me off and doing me damage wherever I turned. None of my friends ever knew how bad it got. I just became adept at lying and never let my new 'friends' mix with the old ones. If I hadn't been a nice lower-middle class boy, I might still be there now.

But through all this fog I vaguely remember that the Iros, true to form, had a series of disappointing draws and defeats, punctuated by the odd win. When I came to my senses, I discovered that no one in division one seemed to have been that bothered about the only automatic promotion spot to the Premier League and the extra squillions of pounds a year it brought in. Other teams had all drawn with each other or lost to the teams

below and any one of about 14 clubs had a realistic chance of being top, almost by accident, at the end of season, as we approached the second last Saturday in April. It was that kind of forgettable, unmemorable season – and not just to me with my head of bad chemicals.

It all came to an end when I was arrested in Trafalgar Square and charged with D&D (although, my real offence was looking scruffy and out of it in a tourist area) which sparked something off on the Organisation's IT. Within an hour, a standby officer from the Organisation was down at Charing Cross nick, bailing me out. The Organisation then treated me for 'stress' in one of its private military-style hospitals more normally used for traumatised agents. I don't have a clue where it was or how long I was there. Jesus, I needed rehab but all I got was more drugs, just this time it was the socially-acceptable, prescription-controlled, yuppie-friendly flavours – Lithium, Prozac, Surmontil 50 – designed to stop you questioning the madness going on around you, stop your *sane* reaction to an *insane* world. When I went back to work at the Organisation, I hid my dementia like an alcoholic hides booze. But before I knew it, I was secretly on the trail of madness again, balancing on a cotton-thin tightrope without a pole over that abyss of detritus, of urban waste, of untermensch beneath me.

Then one night, I got off with Dolores Kane again. And, somehow, I didn't manage to despatch her to the place where she was inevitably going. At least, I think it was her. Either way, I was glad that Charlotte Preston chose that morning, Thursday 20 April, to unwittingly come to my rescue.

Down

– Damien, How are you my aged lover?

Fine, I growl into the phone from my ashtray throat.

Last night, I got home in the not so small hours, absolutely wankered – as Jimmy would say. It was so late I phoned in sick before I went to bed. Not even keen Wendy was there at that time. Then I shagged some redhead who I'd dragged back with me, either because she was Dolores or because she looked like her, before I threw her out drunk into the street for being sick over me. Then I sank into a coma which was only broken by the incessant, demanding squawk of the telephone and Charlie.

– Look, I want to talk to you about a piece I am doing, she continues with no regard for me. – I need some of your excessive amounts of worldly experience.

Charlie, now 22, has a staff job on *StileFyle*, the style magazine for twentysomethings with carefree minds and carefree wallets.

– Yeah, I've got to talk to you. Something mad is going on around me and I have to tell someone. You're the only person I really trust. I could be in very big trouble but I need someone to tell my side of the story if necessary.

– What, tell it to the papers? Charlie asks, excited.

– Yes, probably.

Charlie tots this up in her mind. Her big break in journalism. There are only eight years difference in our age but we're from different geological eras:

Damiensis: college in the early 1980s *ergo* hangover from the 1970s: hippies, demonstrations with CND, political consciousness, rebellion, hedonism and socialist tracts.

Carliferous: college in the early 1990s *ergo* hangover from the 1980s: yuppies; presentations from IBM, drug consciousness, conformity, puritanism and filofaxes.

So she talks football, fluent Iro, to keep me onside but I am angry with this foot-in-the-door salesmanship.

- Look. I fear for my life, I tell her so deliberately I almost stumble over my words.
- Have you been dropping acid again?

She is concerned. Suddenly.

- No, I bloody haven't. Look, I've told you far too much on the phone already. Let's go and have a drink somewhere. But not here. I think it's bugged.
- Damien, I've got to review a band tonight. For *StileFyle*. They're playing *The Falcon* in Camden.
- Well, we'll meet there, then. Six.
- No, I can't get away that quickly. Seven. And, by the way, I have something else you might just finally be ready to listen to. About Imogen. That was why I rang you.

Damiensis? *Carliferous*? When was *Imoginous*? When the dinosaurs walked the earth? A mere blip ago. When the earth solidified? A few thousand blips. When those now visible stars first gave up the ghost and sent us their galactic warning? A billion blips or, in fact, a month, five weeks ago. And she has been written out of history as a hoax or myth, like a Soviet dissident, like Piltdown man, like Genesis – the book, not the band.

- Be there or be square, I mutter deciding not to protest.
- And Damien. Cheer up you miserable sod.

Five

When I leave the flat, it is a grey, blustery late April day. I thank god the clocks have just gone back – until I remember most of April is missing: my hard drive just didn't get any of it; it went straight from RAM to trash because I couldn't save it properly. That's the story of my life: failed attempts at salvage and salvation. Jesus, it's hard re-adjusting when so much is missing. I pick up an *Evening Standard* and climb on the number 24 bus in Victoria Street. The journey is soon taking at least twice as long as at weekends – it's the time of night. So I unfurl my *Stannit*, as the vendor called it, and I retch an empty-

stomached retch into the corner of the bus as this chance chronicler, this bit part chorus brings me mercilessly and brutally up to date:

‘Woman involved?’

POLICE REVEAL SERIAL KILLER VICTIM No FIVE

Police today established the identity of what they believe to be the fifth victim of the serial killer who has terrorised the country for at least the last eight months. She has been named as Wendy Probit, 37, a civil servant.

A party goer found Ms Probit’s mutilated body near her Belgravia home mid-evening last night. Police are appealing for witnesses.

Det Supt John Fullsutton of the Metropolitan Police team dealing with the enquiry is now convinced that the five murders – which have taken place in London, the north east and Edinburgh – are the work of the same individual.

‘We have noted down a number of similarities in the methods used to commit these atrocious offences and our officers have recovered remarkably analogous forensic evidence from virtually every scene where the suspect or suspects have struck.

‘We are currently still eliminating a number of people from our enquiries who were arrested earlier today.’

Police are not releasing names of those arrested or details of the killer’s hallmark which it is believed he has left on the body of each woman.

The murderer has been dubbed the ‘Red Fox’ as police have indicated that they are looking for a suspect with red hair and a pointed face in connection with their enquiries.

Jesus, it’s a ging-er, I joke in my head before it sinks in that my boss of the last couple of years has been murdered. Yet, all I can do is laugh, like it’s a black comedy, like this is theatre and come the curtain call she will get up, brush herself off and get on with her life. Mind you, what else can I do? I can’t bring her back. I can’t pretend, even in death, I have or had any respect for her. I’m not about to join the hypocritical public figures who plunge the metaphorical knife into someone’s back – or their heart for that matter – but the moment the victim is pronounced dead deftly withdraw it, wipe it off and use it to carve the eulogy on their tombstone. No, that is not me. But there is one very good reason I should whisper in hushed tones and carry my hat by my waist as I pay my last *respects*. They will suspect me. And I will have to tell them who I think it is, who I know it is. I can see there is one last paragraph I haven’t read.

They also confirmed that they were probably looking for more than one culprit. Evidence gathered suggests that the murders are the work of a man-woman team which has led to speculation that this may be the work of a Hindley and Brady style couple.

And when I finish, I wonder again why she is doing this. Why is she trying to implicate me in all these murders, in all this mayhem, in all this madness? What have I ever done to her?

41

Nasty

– Didn't you guess that she was too good to be true?

We are in the bar of *The Falcon*. It is packed with dyed haircuts, bondage trousers, leather minis, pale faces, make-up and fishnets. Charlie is laying into me about Imogen, now Imogen's gone – for good, by the look of things. Charlie apparently has a tape. A tape she has kept for weeks or months – I don't know which – but she doesn't really understand. It's something to do with Imogen and the Organisation. I can't *wait*.

– I mean didn't you ask yourself: 'Why does posh, girlie Imogen who is beautiful, fairly intelligent and well-connected – and could have any bloke she wanted – put up with my endless crap?'? I mean, it's such a bloody obvious question. You're such a fuckin ego-maniac you never thought for a second that she might be conning you. You believed she was impressed by your boyish good looks and charm *despite everything*. Damien, you're a twat. The world doesn't work like that. Too much literature has done your head in.

I go to walk away. I'm not taking this shit from anyone. She drops her pitch. Conciliatory. Concerned. Your-own-best-interests bullshit.

– I've got the proof, she continues, – I've had it for ages. I'm going to make you listen to it later.

Jesus, she's looking rough. Her face is sharper, no more puppy fat; her lips are thinner, crueller; her dark, collar-length bob is rigid, lacklustre; her eyes watery, colourless. She is chainsmoking and sniffs a cocaine sniff, every so often. But I can't talk: I'm streaming.

– That's a nasty cold, I chide, *anyway*.

We make our way to the gig venue part of *The Falcon* and Hoover up a line each in the toilets. Then we stand there waiting for something to happen while the rowdies are ejected by the bouncers. Jesus, I never knew it was just like the footie. The support band lopes on and they are shit even by pub-band standards.

– I reckon every pub band plays the same set but nobody's ever heard clearly enough to realise, I roar into Charlie's left ear – my lips grazing her eardrum, my lungs filled like a balloon fit to pop – to drown out the distorted, white noise screeching from the cliff-face speakers.

– Whaaa?

I climb into her ear and roar like a wind-tunnel. I am hoarse. She nods and smiles like she hasn't really heard my point.

I've never understood popular music. At Cally, I thought it was a conspiracy that trendies wouldn't let me in on. As each new band did the rounds, individuals I knew independently of each other would rave about these bands, independently. At first I used to say I liked Pink Floyd but I quickly learnt they were *infra dig*. Then I listened carefully to the bands they talked about: Zappa, Prefab Sprout, Everything But The Girl, Talking Heads, and bought their records. I even played them occasionally. I also took up the guitar and tried to read music although I soon realised I was never going to be a Jimmy Hendrix or a Leonard Cohen (or even a metal axeman). It took me six months to learn to tune the bloody thing.

I just didn't *understand*. So I took to asking:

– Why is this band *good*?

Because the word they always used was 'good'. So and so are good. Not original, exciting, innovative, challenging, breaking down the conventions of, using the forms of...for their own ends, in the style of, derivative of, irony on or satire of. None of these. Or any of the basic tools of litcrit. It was all the more frustrating because I know why I like Vonnegut. Or Shakespeare. Or Milton. Or Restoration Comedy. Or Shelley. Or Greene. Or Auden. Or Amis (Mart, of course). Or even *Carry On*... In art, I can confidently like and explain Rothko. Or Constable. Or Turner. Or the Impressionists. Or Miro. Or Mondrian. In art and lit, I can *appreciate* Dickens, the Brontes, Keats, Eliot (TS), Reynolds, Matisse, Magritte or the Superrealists, because I *understand* what they are doing, even though I don't like their work at all.

But to me popular music fits nothing. I can't appreciate or understand it. Perhaps my intellectual demands of the genre are too high. I am not an intellectual snob, I hasten to add. I admit I used to pour over Beckett deciphering incoherent symbols and cobbling together essays on the structural unity of it all. But those days were the pretentious affectation of an ex-grammar school undergrad, a teenage infatuation, if you like. Now, they are long gone. And I know the history of culture is the history of popular culture. (Don't think so – who watched Shakespeare? Who listened to Mozart? Who bought Dickens's stories?). So I have no doubt that come the mid-21st C, professors in conservatories will specialise in Lloyd Webber or write theses on the uses of the three chord trick in punk.

Hell, I like some bands, I really do. Trendy ones even. I can name them: Early Pink Floyd (that's *is* allowed), Leonard Cohen, The Sex Pistols, The Sisters Of Mercy, Lloyd Cole and the Commotions, The Cure, Soixante-Neuf, The Ruts, Oasis, Massive Attack, Elastica. But I also like Herman's Hermits, King Crimson, Showaddywaddy, Later Pink Floyd (*still* not allowed), Spandau Ballet, Iron Maiden, Adam and the Ants, Soft Cell, Sinitta, Rick Astley, Damsels in Distress and Kylie Minogue. But I don't why. Yet, these friends know. Without recourse to each other, they *know* – they *simply* know – that ZZ Top or The

Police are popular yet acceptable to the *Beau Monde* in the same way that U2 or Simple Minds are not, never have been and never will be. And don't even get on to soul – I've never even begun to understand or like it. But I love jazz. All of it.

At the age of 25, I came to a frightening but simple conclusion which I haven't let on to anyone else: I don't know much about music... but I know what I like.

Cheap

While Charlie goes off to the toilets for yet another line before the set begins, I read the press release she has handed to me to keep me occupied, like a troublesome child. *Cheap N Nasty* are Nasty Littleman, lead and vocals; Cheap Scrapings, rhythm and backing; Vic 20, bass; and Attila the Drum (machine). The demo tape has '2p off' scribbled on the cover. It makes *Never Mind The Bollocks* look like illuminated script. I am impressed that they are grammar school boys from the western home counties, just like me.

Charlie returns and roars at me over the discordant chaos which roars over the crowd from the PA:

– Ave go the poof wuvbin luck infor yen oh. Abu Imogen. Ill show queue. Bah cunt kippy frum mew, on knee long garr.

I smile and nodd sagely. *Father of Imogen?*

– Let her. Isle pay that ape fur y'heathen. Whey nits kite unwicken here out prop early.
– Look like they might be a decent band, I reply in response quietly enough so I can be sure Charlie cannot hear me.

The band breaks our 'conversation' at this point as it bounds on the stage. The cramped venue surges forward and yells discordantly. The crowd may be abusing them but I can't tell: my ears are a permanent fire alarm. The crowd subsides while the band find their instruments and throw them around their necks. Nasty Littleman, who is actually quite tall but rock-star gaunt, Iggy-Pop-gaunt, late-Sid-gaunt, squares up to the microphone and shouts:

– Hello, Clapham.

The crowd jeer and some, missing the joke, roar back for their worth:

– It's Camden.

Cheap Scrapings totters across the stage. He is gaunt and even taller, clearing six three, six four. And dressed in a purple frock coat. He has hair like the fuzz of a worn-and-torn tennis ball.

– Laedeeeezzz and gennnlemennn, welcome to an evening of rock N roll, continues Nasty, like he's a compere at the wrestling. – It's the new comedy, you know.

I find myself laughing, pleasantly surprised. By the *irony on* pub gigs.

- How's it goin Mr Scrapings?
- Grrrreat, he squawks back, – apart from the existential angst of having to live in Ealing, Mr Littleman.
- Mr Scrapings is an ironic skin, Nasty announces as Cheap leers demonically into the audience. – OK, Clacton we're gonna play some shit!

They rev up their instruments and I am about to turn off and go back to the discordant orchestra in my head when I hear a simple but powerful opening line:

- I threw my bible out the window and turned my back on Jean-Paul Sartre.

I like this, I think, tapping my foot just about in time as the song meanders to its catchy chorus of:

- Oh why is there nothing to believe in anymore?
- Why is there nothing to believe in anymore?
- Nihilists unite. In nothingness. In hopelessness. In nothingness and hopelessness...

As CNN come to the end of this three-minute wonder, the audience mutedly cheer and Nasty waits for the catcalls to subside before stating matter-of-factly:

- Er, that was a little ditty called 'Hope Springs Eternal'.

The bondage trousers and the miniskirts don't get it. They just don't get it. Some of them have begun to file out already. No one takes the piss out of pop music, obviously. These *weirdoes* are about as alternative as Henry and Harriet Home-Counties. But I love every minute of it, every minute of the thirty minute set. It ends with the title song '2p off' which Nasty Littleman reminds the audience is what they should do. It contains the immortal lines:

- I'm feeling blue, I'm feeling blue
- I can't think of a rhyme er Katmandu
- It's the business, it's the business. And don't we love it!

Charlie has etched scorched notes onto her pad throughout the gig. As we leave, sweating like from a sauna, I turn to her and say:

- That was fuckin great.
- Really? She replies, – I thought it was public schoolboy juvenilia. Pretty cheap.
- But they are *ex-grammar* school boys. It says so in the press release. And isn't 'cheap' the point?
- You know what I mean, Damien.

You see. I just don't *get* it with popular music.

Shock

– Jesus, Damien, you stink.

We are in *The Wig and Suspender* in Gray's Inn Road. We have walked here from Camden after the Cheap N Nasty gig.

– What?

– You fuckin smell. I thought it was the great unwashed at that gig but it was you. When did you last wash?

– What's today?

– Thursday.

I am searching for keywords. Wash, shower, bath, flannel, soap. This combination search throws up the last episode I saw of *Tobacco Road*, when the Kemp brothers fixed the faulty washer on their dear old mum's bath tap. *Flannel* and *soap*. That was last Sunday's omnibus. My last wash was the day before. Or was it the day before that? Yeah, Friday morning. Jesus, no wonder that bird last night, the Dolores doppelganger, threw up when she gave me a blow job. And I thought it was the booze.

– Er...Tuesday, I lied, unconvincingly.

– You must've been bathing in sweaty socks and stale pee then. And what the fuck are you wearing?

I pull my overcoat close to me, tight around my neck like a windcheater.

– Damien, you perfumed ponce, you're wearing a black silk blouse. Where did you get it from?

It was the only clean thing I could find when I got up at six this evening to come and see Charlie. Dolores left it behind after her last visit to my flat – the one the other week, the other month, not last night. Last night is still an allegation in my consciousness, a proposition ready for investigation, searching for collateral and corroboration from independent sources. It is, as yet, unestablished as fact.

– Missing her, are you? Is it Imogen's or Dolores's? It smells better than you, she states inhaling deeply on the soft, shimmering fabric. – *Fendi*, isn't it?

How do women know these things?

– Look, I didn't come here to be insulted by you. Now, show me what you've got to show me.

Charlie pulls a small tape recorder out of her leather handbag and very deliberately inserts a clear mini-tape.

– What is this? Mission: Impossible?

– Listen, she hisses, echoing the tape she has set in motion.

It is the recording of two women having a drink and eating. One is older but has less inherent self-confidence than the other. But she is pushier, more cajoling. Like the product of all eavesdropping devices, it crackles and lisps its way through its incoherent narrative. Dropping letters, dropping words as it sees fit, failing to fill the gaps

understood by those discussing a common, shared subject, it lisps out its Pinterese. And I recognise the rich, assured tones of feminine huskiness. It is Imogen. I strain to recognise the other female voice. Gradually, it dawns on me, like a whisper from the grave, those singsong cadences, the harsh throaty Ls and Hs and the bureaucratic lexicon. Wendy fuckin Probit.

- Charlie, when was this recorded?
- Listen, she hisses again and I turn my full attention to the tape.

You've got to get me out of this. I can't. I-I-I can't.. stand it any longer. He's a fucking idiot. Had him jiggle my breasts, whine for perverted sex, have intercourse with other women that he thinks I don't have the faintest idea about. Humiliation after blasted humiliation. My friends wonder, they do, you know. I'm as ready as anybody. What more, my friends desert me - they're starting to. Look, Agent RUSH HOUR. Whether the recommendation for your promotion goes forward to the appropriate authorities depends on whether you have the qualities and by that I mean to say mettle, guile - Conduct yourself through this operation and to an appropriate conclusion. ELW...(Pause) FILTHY LUCRE has been terminated and RELIGIOUS FANATIC is to intents and purposes where scrutiny entirely expendable. Handler PRAETORIAN GUARD. Fed up, I am. I am. I can't do this. This thing. Bad enough, you see, pretending. Pretence that I'm a bloody airstewardess, a flaming trolley dolly.

There is no mistaking that 'bloody'. It is Imogen or Agent RUSH HOUR, as I should now call her. What can I do but listen to my character condemned and my activities lampooned? The bitch. The emotions brought about by betrayal are the hardest to bear. And to think I spent so many nights out of my head trying to cope with my guilt at betraying *her*, when I was the injured party in this whole thing all along. Oh, it makes so much sense now. Keeping me away from Charlie. The little girlie boys-will-be-boys resignation at my more outlandish activities. The cover of being an airstewardess so she didn't have to see me all the time. Not admitting to infidelity on New Year's Eve when challenged but five days later coming clean – no doubt after taking her instructions from her handler, Mad Wendy Probit.

And what's her role in all this? Was it Wendy who led the case against me in some despotic abuse of power? Unlikely, Wendy would always clear everything with management before it left her desk. Has Wendy's death changed anything? Did the Organisation kill her because they'd had enough of her? They could easily duplicate the m.o. of the Red Fox. Is there some serial killer sitting alone in a bedsit or having his tea with his mam indignantly protesting to himself that some sick fucker is using his technique? But surely even the Organisation isn't that vicious. Mind you, the most trustworthy are the easiest to despatch as it's unlikely they've told anyone outside the Organisation about what they do. But the tape. I am missing the tape...

I had to say it was an affair. Understood that. He did. It's his degraded world. And football, if I hear another word about bloody foot-ball, I'll...wring, I'll wring his bloody neck. I will. I tell you...wring. (Anger). There, I had my bloody bum pinched and all he could do was flaming well laugh. It is not funny. And he propositioned mummy. Try telling, try explaining that to an irate parent. And he tried to take me up the...the...the tradesman's... At least I managed to utilise the bottom pinching incident to advantage by disconcerting RELIGIOUS FANATIC via RATCATCHER. But, look, my girl. I understand. But you're one of my protégés. I put all my faith. I've invested time, I've accorded to you an abundance of my personal time which I was under no obligation to give. Time at liberty it could have been. But you've developed your skills and qualities for this market. In conjunction with me. You've learnt from the vastness of my experience pertaining to matters of counter-espionage, particularly in an undercover environment. We are on the point of turning in a success outcome here. Win-win. Let's not lose-lose.

I think 'win-win' and 'lose-lose' are an echo on the tape but I realise they are examples of Wendy's bizarre managementspeak. I shudder as I remember her using 'win-win situation' along with 'empowering the individual'; 'touching base'; 'keep me in the loop'; 'I feel unsighted, Damien'; 'singing from the same hymn sheet' as if using this jargon absolved her from carrying out what it actually laid down. Perhaps, it was beyond her vocabulary – she simply didn't understand what she was supposed to do. The intellectually inferior often hide behind long words because they think it makes them look intelligent when, in fact, real communicators use the simplest words in the simplest order. In short: be simple, keep to the point. But I know I am mulling this because I cannot face the truth, the truth of the tape, the absolute truth. I want to take it out on Charlie. Jesus, I can't take any more of *this*.

- I've heard enough, I announce bitterly over Hissing Sid.
- You really should hear more, Damien.

My fist comes crashing down on the machine which pops up like a jack-in-the-box (remember those? Remember when toys were simple mechanical wonders?) Complicated and intricate wires spring from its bowels, like C3PO with his guts blown out by a stormtrooper. Wendy's voice stops dead like I've killed her, like I've always want... The other punters in *The Wig and Suspender*, who have been eyeing us nervously since Charlie got the tape machine out, turn and openly stare at us, florid-faced legal types to a man (and woman).

- This tape self-destructed in five seconds, I say smiling before dropping into stony-faced interrogation mode: – Do you realise the other woman in that debrief was murdered yesterday?
- Oh, X.
- Yes. Murdered.
- Who? What?

- The police think it was that serial killer, the Red Fox.
- Jesus.

I tell her about the deaths, the m.o., my fear of Dolores's involvement. I spill out facts, opinion and conjecture, at random and Charlie, as sharp as ever, checks against what she knows of the case, against what I told her in January.

- Are you getting this down? I pause to ask.
- I can't. Some bastard smashed up my tape recorder.
- How did you get this stuff?
- I kept following Imogen to these strange meetings but I couldn't get proof of what was going on as I was never able to get near enough. Then, one day in Piccadilly, I saw them head off towards the *Artiste Muscle* in Shepherds Market. They'd been there before. So I got there before them and put the recorder under the table they'd used the last time. First rule of spying: never use the same place twice.

She's right, you know.

- I think we should turn over Dolores.
- Are you sure, Damien?
- Yeah, we'll get her to confess, to cough into the tape. And you'll get a great scoop.
- I'm not so sure.
- Who the fuck do you think RELIGIOUS FANATIC is on that fuckin tape? It's me. And if I don't get Dolores, she as sure as hell is gonna get me.
- OK but tell me everything now just in case this goes wrong. Not that I'm saying it will, of course. My parents are away this weekend so we can use their place, if you like.
- Yeah, brilliant. Right, where was I?

When I've finished telling Charlie everything, I look at her, like I've just passed on *The Odyssey* to the next generation of wandering poets. Then I start to laugh. I am laughing at Imogen, waiting for me to go to work outside my door one late September morning so she can 'accidentally' bump into me. And what happens? I fly out and throw up over her. And trying to arsefuck her. And making her read out that wankmag. And her getting her arse pinched at that football match. I know it's not much but you've got to take solace somewhere. Serves her right, the careerist cow. I suppose she must have been the Ratcatcher. She was always there or thereabouts when those notes appeared.

Charlie wonders if I am losing the plot. I see it in her watery eyes. I see it in her coke-fuelled soul. And that is what is important in this post-modern world, ironically enough. Keeping up with whatever the plot can throw at us, its unrealistic and topsy-turvy twists and turns. Concentration camps in Yugoslavia; death squads in Rwanda; the Davidan cult in the US; my ex-girlfriend a serial killer. It's not that we are any more violent or less human than we were. It's just that we have better technology to make our evil go further. And you just wait. When we hit the Millenium, Planet Earth is going to wobble like one big rickety firework under the weight of suicides, apocalyptic cults and millennial

terrorists. Be afraid. Be very afraid. Be prepared to wobble, to fizzle, to judder before we regain a toehold, a tiny foothold on our endless progress towards that illusory goal, stability. Because part of the problem is this: if we admit for a single moment that none of it makes any sense any longer, that there is no more narrative coherence to our personal plot, *they* will think we're one step away from the funny farm.

Yet, in this day and age, what could make *more* sense in real life than *less* sense?

42

Heaven

I got utterly arseholed with Charlie. So arseholed I didn't even remember saying goodbye to her. I think she is beginning to suspect that my coke-sniffing and drinking are more than just recreational – they've become my Imogen, my Ironopolis, my one-time Dolores: the reason I get up in the morning not just the added extras.

When I crawled in at two, the inside of my nose burned like napalm. I smoked two joints of White Widow in the empty, early hours as I sat there in bed wrestling with recent events. I wanted none of it but my head, the coke – I don't know what – was as bright as a pin. Wendy Probit flashed before me a million times before *The Urge* and Giant Haystacks took it in turns in a dirty tag match to grab me by the scruff of the neck, slam my nose to the canvas and rub it in the shit. In the same shit which had oozed, squirted and exploded from the bowels of my mind over the last nine months or so. Illegally, away from the referee, they repeatedly poked their fingers in my eyes, rendering them red and raw.

Having seen off the wrestlers, I then wanked myself raw. Fighting the images of Wendy Probit which popped up every so often and rendered me instantly flaccid, I doggedly worked away at my semi, pursuing release into the black, velvet blanket of the unconscious or, as any psychologist will tell you, the semi-conscious of sweet, unhindered sleep. Tossing around the vilest sexual fantasy in my head – you don't want to know, you really don't – I whimpered my way to orgasm like one of those early Olympic marathon runners completing the course in grim, grimy, grainy black and white. So I was in a foul mood when I was resurrected from the drifting limbo between somnolence and wakefulness by the mechanical whine of the phone. I clamped the duvet over my head like giant earmuffs but still I could not drown the interminable dringdring dringdring dringdring dringdring.

I peeped out and saw the red-rimmed figures of the alarm clock radio hovering in front of my red-rimmed, smarting eyes. Five fuckin forty six.

– Yes, I hacked into the receiver after relieving it of its St Vitus Dance.

The resultant green catarrh hung from the mouthpiece, like Strange Fruit.

– Is that Mr Damien Dean?

A woman.

– No, it's the Dean of St Paul's.

A pause.

– This is WPC Parkhurst. I'm at the Royal Fulham. Could you come to the A&E, please, as Ms Charlotte Preston has been attacked. She's not seriously hurt but she is in shock.

Warped

Memory fog. Snatches, rushes of dialogue. Up west in the metropolis. Somewhere. The latest score: 6 Margharitas. 2 Woowoos. 3 Manhattans. 5 *Handjobs*. *Each*. It's Sunday 25th September 1994, that mad week when all this nonsense started. I tell Charlie about Liz Crebbin's autopsy. Tears well up inside. I am scared for me. I am scared for her. How could he, the whodunnit, do *that* to Liz Crebbin? Charlie can't believe it either. I catalogue the details. She won't, can't, hear any more:

- Fuckin rapists. Should cut their fuckin balls off, she says. *Booze-sentiment*. – I'm serious, hanging's too fuckin good for them.
- Why is it that fuckin so-called liberals suddenly lose their fuckin liberalism when it comes to fuckin rape? I swear through the tear-mist. – Most so-called fuckin rapes are fuckin date rapes, not the violent stuff of the fuckin tabloids. Just non-sensual sex.
- What the fuck????
- Sorry. Sorry. Fuckin sorry. I'm fuckin pissed. I meant non-consensual sex, I correct myself.

A tirade before I am allowed to continue:

- You're more likely to be raped or fuckin murdered by some fucker you know than some fucker you don't. Most likely be your fuckin spouse.
- Don't get fuckin married then.

Calm bitch again.

- That's not the fuckin point and you know it, I slur back at Charlie.
- By your warped fuckin logic it fuckin means *you*. You a rapist?
- Don't.
- How would you feel if it happened to me? Squeezed out slowly. Squeezed out drunkenly. Self-righteous. – Or Imogen. Or even Dolores.

I look around. Is she here? Did she hear?

- We should cut their fuckin balls off. Hanging's too good for them...
- But you can't take away hope like that. I mean, Jesus, in this day and age, it's bad enough. But to condemn someone to death.

I fret. I get shit-scared.

– But rapists kill hope. And anyway Damien, we're all condemned to death.

And with that it all goes blank again. Then I am eating pizza. Alone in my room.

The rest is gone.

The hospital was bright – white-tile, clinical, kitchen-commercial bright and made worse by the grass I had smoked. As I walked down the corridors with medical staff dressed in green and white rushing past with trolleys and corpses, I died and went to heaven, because heaven would look like this, if it existed. Forget white clouds and pearly gates, it would be all *Domestos* and *Dettox*, wiping away doubt, making hygienic the terminal arrivals, cleanliness next to godliness. As I approached the sister on the A&E desk, she looked at me uneasily. At the time, I wondered if she was assessing me for entry to the kingdom of god. It was only afterwards that it even crossed my mind that I looked so bad she thought I was an OD case.

Charlie was in a single room but not by herself. A uniform woman polis sat by her bed. As I looked in through the square wired-glass cutaway panel, I had *polis fear*. I always get it near a polis – even now after having worked with them so long and having made friends with a few. I fear they've got something on me, they're going to search me, find some long-forgotten scrap of hashish in my jacket lining and march me off to the cells. But I was too concerned about Charlie to let paranoid *polis fear* get in the way, even though I knew my red-raw eyes would light up like a neon sign in this polis's head and flash: *junkie - junkie*. Hell, they can't do you for looking out of it. Not yet anyway, although I'm with William Burroughs on this one. *They're* using public concern about drugs as a backdoor way to invade the privacy of the underclass now that communism's gone. And the fellow-travellers will be next, the fifth columnists who have already penetrated their way into middle class, home counties England, like Charlie and Simon and Jason and me and just about everyone else I know.

As the female polis eyed me suspiciously from the private room, in my mind I pulled her to one side and had a friendly word along these lines:

– If you'd been out devoting the resources you waste on us to tackling the real criminals, maybe, just maybe, this *wouldn't* have happened.

Naive? Consider this: it would certainly be *less* likely unless, of course, you just flushed down the pan all the money saved by not fighting drugs (like drugs were first world war trenchfodder: keep throwing resources at them. We've got more of them, *ergo*, we'll win). But, of course, I didn't say anything at all. I hated not having my warrant card. That made all the difference with the polis. They thought *everyone* was a criminal until proven otherwise in their minds, which was quite a different matter from being declared innocent in a court of law. If you smelt wrong, they still wanted you. Except, of course, fellow polis – even the bent ones, even the useless ritualisers and backhanders. So my warrant card got me out of all sorts of scrapes, like when DS Brixton found that dope on my mantelpiece, like when the polis tried to lift me from the terraces. Just get me warrant card out, then embarrassed smiles all round as I was let back in. (Only problem

was I had to scarper sharpish after the game as the faithful looked like they might turn nasty on me). But, yeah, they looked after their own all right the polis.

But I wasn't going to hang around in the corridor looking sus, looking shifty, loitering with intent, as they'd no doubt have it. I burst in confidently:

- Evening, I'm Damien Dean, I take it you're WPC Parkhurst, I declared.
- You're who?
- Damien Dean. *How stupid are they?* You phoned me at home.
- Ah, yes.
- How is she? I asked looking across at her.

Charlie looked like a 12 year old who'd had a bad accident on her pushbike. She was tucked up in the clean, crisp, linen sheet which virtually blended with her skin, blanched by the shock of the attack. At first I thought the red blotches were on the pillow but I quickly realised they were across her face and neck. On her left eye, she had a swirling bruise, the pattern of an indigo, yellow and green bouncy ball or marble.

- The physical injuries are worse than they look. She's been given a sedative so she may be out for a while.

I stood by the bed, stroking her hair that was still lightly matted with caked blood. Why did I get so fuckin pissed? Why hadn't she come back with me last night? Why hadn't I been *there*?

- She asked for you rather than her family.

I flushed with pride. Despite everything, she wanted me above anyone else.

- Were you with Ms Preston last night, sir? WPC Parkhurst asked.
- Why? I asked.

Experience had taught me that you never said anything to the polis unless you had to. It all got written, recorded or 'noted' somewhere and, despite what they said, it wasn't going to be used in your defence.

- Could you answer the question, please, sir? She asked again firmly, ignoring me.

My problem: they would have checked Charlie's blood for drugs when she came in, just in case she had taken anything which might react with the prescription chemicals they wanted to pump into her. WPC Parkhurst would therefore already know that Charlie was as high as space station Alpha when they brought her in (mind you, at least the coke would have anaesthetised her during the attack). To admit being with Charlie would be tantamount to admitting I took Class As as well. Sure, I could deny it but they might just arrest me in connection with the attack. As the nearest thing to a spouse, they could argue that I was the prime suspect and have me down the station for a range of forensic tests as quickly as it took to read my rights, such as they were. As I pondered this imponderable, pretending to be waylaid with grief for Charlie, she saved me from my quandary by stirring.

- Charlie, I said to her urgently and she opened her eyes and blinked.

Blind and covered in red splotches, she looked like a new-born.

- Dam-i-en, she murmured, drugged to the eyeballs, – ar-yu-al-reye?
- Am I all right? X, Charlie, it's you, I'm worried about. Why didn't you come back with me, last night?
- Doan-yu rem-mer?

I looked over my shoulder at WPC Parkhurst. She was noting all this down in her polis memory, in her polis vernacular: 'Suspect clearly had very little cognizance of his actions the night of the 20th April 1995 as he had to enquire of the victim to ascertain his precise activities and motivation.'

- I was drunk by that time, I whispered as quietly as I could.
- Wuhad an ar-gu-men.

Drunken argument? I half-thought about offering my wrists to the polis and saying: 'It's a fair cop, guv, you've got me bang to rights.'

- An yu st-storm-ed off, Charlie continued.

Syllables seemed to hatch in her mind, germinate, then sprout through her head in real growth time. I could tell she was making a supreme effort for me, as I stroked her hair and kissed her forehead: my Everywoman, my child.

- Sir, I think she needs her rest, WPC Parkhurst said, gently tugging my arm.
- Has she given a statement of any kind?
- We got a lot when she came in but she was in some state. From the attack and from all the drugs she had been taking. Cocaine, I believe.

I tried not to but I did. I looked down, guiltily. I don't whether the polis had taken pity on me during the bedside scene but she ignored the obvious questions that I thought were to follow.

- Sir, she told us she was attacked by a red-haired woman, about five ten with a pointy face and you would know who she was.

I sat back on the bed, like *The Urge* had forearm-smashed me, and did something I haven't done when sober for many years. I began to cry. Not a manly, holding most back but letting a few dribbles go, not a to-let-them-know-you're-there cry. But a wailing-baby-wants-feeding cry, a three-year-old-just-fallen-off-its-swing cry, an eight-year-old-just-gashed-half-his-kneecap-off-playing-football cry. Hell, a good old female blub. I told WPC Parkhurst about Dolores, our bizarre life together, how I never imagined it would come to this. My brains streamed from my nostrils like Niagara. Between sobs, I looked up and asked plaintively:

- Do you think - there's any chance - she may be - the Red Fox?
- She may be involved. Luring the victims in. But we think the actual murderer is a male. They brought what we think was the sixth victim of that serial killer in tonight, in here as a matter of co-incidence.
- Who? Whaa? When?

These words came out like sobs, like wails.

– A Ms Leslie Martin, a barmaid in *The Pink Cat* club. The same club where a previous victim had been drinking before she was murdered.

Through my tears, I knew now was the time to force Simon Register's hand. Now was the time to get the blasted redhead and make her atone for her sins.

43

- MUGS GAME to MOROCCO MOLE, repeat MUGS GAME to MOROCCO MOLE, I say deliberately into the moby on the steps from St James's to the Mall. – I have visual on PEARL NECKLACE and SINGING CANARY.
- MOROCCO MOLE reading MUGS GAME, Jason replies sonorously, trying to hide his enthusiasm, from his moby in his *AltaVista 530 SL*. – I am on standby for Operation SNATCH.

We've had to wait a week for this. It's the last Saturday in April and the penultimate day of the football season. Charlie is out of hospital and her parents are away. Meanwhile, Jason is loving every minute of it. He did the recce's; he devised the operational plan; he thought up the nicknames. I don't have the heart to tell him that telephone security isn't an issue because these mobies can't be intercepted or, indeed, that routine intelligence work is a sham, and a damn sight more boring.

- Remember Jason, we just scare her, really scare her, I explain. – That's all. No matter what I say I don't really mean it. But anti-interrogation training taught me tonnes about freaking people out. She'll be a gibbering wreck by the time we've finished with her.

Jason had taken some persuading to enter into this little escapade. I think it was Charlie's intervention that made the difference. She told him in no uncertain terms that Dolores appeared to have the protection of the secret services, even though she was a serial killer.

Earlier this afternoon, as Jason had gone through the operational plan one last time, the radio via FiveLive informed us that the Iros had gone 2-0 up at home to Port Vale. The scorers were Jockie, or McFinlay, as they called him, 61 mins, and Eriksson, the big Swede on loan from Borussia Kindergarten, 64. Reading were losing 1-0. If it stayed like this, even if Reading won next week away, we only had to draw to lowly Watford at home to win the league. We were virtually up. Any qualms I'd had about our daft plan, quickly disappeared. The Iros had endorsed it.

I then jumped out of the *AltaVista 530 SL* at Soho Square, took up position at 16:30 hours by *The Green Man* pub and waited. Fortunately, PEARL NECKLACE had followed the usual routine. I caught the back of her head as she came off Dean Street and met SINGING CANARY in *The Green Man*, before setting off towards the flat in Petty France, SW1. I had glanced at my watch as they left. 16:45. What sort of fair-weather fan was

SINGING CANARY? His team faced with relegation, here he was with this *jezebel* for final score. I cursed the fact that I didn't have time to phone Jason for the results before I began to survey them. At a safe distance, I followed the swinging motion of PEARL NECKLACE's hips thinking only of revenge. Revenge for Charlie. Revenge for me.

Bleeding

– I didn't put you on the game, as you put it, Damien declares.

Adept move with the ball at his feet by the young Dean lad, wrong footing the Kane defence.

– You spent all our money on drink and drugs, Dolores comes back at him from the mock-Georgian splendour of the *Bartchester*.

It is Monday 6th March 1995, *that day*.

– And then you asked me if I wouldn't mind doing you a favour to save you from getting your legs broken. I had no choice. So it's all your fault.

The tame shot is saved. The keeper throws the ball out to Damien's right back who starts on the counter-attack.

– We both took the drugs and spent the money...

This is a mazy, tantalising dribble.

– ...it was just that you had a better way of earning money than me...

He beats one.

– If I had been in your position I'd have done it...

Beats two.

– ...it was either meet our debts with the McParlane Twins - *he shoots* - or me in hospital with broken kneecaps.

He scores.

– You could have worked in that bloody watch factory...

Weak effort

– ...rather than have your supposed loved one open her legs or down on her knees...

Promising, promising

– ...for disgusting sex with criminals.

Close, very close but no cigar.

– I worked fuckin 16 hours a day in that fuckin factory to pay off the debts which you mainly incurred. You were the cokehead.

Another penetrating run.

– Another shot at goal...

Another shot at goal.

– That is breathtaking hypocrisy, Damien Dean... Hang on, *another shot at goal*? What the fuck are you on about? Are you thinking about football? You are. This is fuckin typical of you. You cannot face up to complex emotional problems so you resort to football.

– Er...

Own goal. Dean collapses in the last minute. It's all over for Ironopolis.

– Er, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

Just look at his face. How did he ever think he could get away with that?

– Have you got visual, MOROCCO MOLE? I ask the moby.

– Roger, MUGS GAME, Jason replies as I see him edge around the corner in the *AltaVista 530 SL*.

I give him the thumbs up and watch him pull on his ski-mask. I put on mine.

– Are you ready to move, MOROCCO MOLE?

– Roger, MUGS GAME.

– Thunderbirds are go! I scream.

Jason leaps out of the *AltaVista*, dashes up to SINGING CANARY from behind. At the same time, I whip out a sack and slam it over PEARL NECKLACE's head. I have her in a bearhug and lift her into the car. She kicks with her stilts and struggles girlishly as I handcuff her to the rail under the passenger seat. I look up to see Jason whack SINGING CANARY over the back of the head before he can turn round and identify his assailants. He goes down like a sack of spuds. Then Jason leaps back into the *AltaVista* and we pull our masks off and speed away through the streets of W1, like the bad guys on *The Sweeney* or, more prosaically, actors recreating an attack on *Police 5*.

– Shit! What about Ironopolis? I ask several minutes later as we speed down the Bayswater Road at the side of Hyde Park.

I remember *that* night in the park. The cause of all this grief. So I want her to know it's me. I want her to know the Iros are doing well.

– Bollocks! I forgot to listen, replies Jason slapping his hand to his forehead.

Jason surfs the radio waves to locate the latest news. We hit station after station of nonsense, GLR, SCR, LBC, this FM, that FM until news crackles from HCR – BBC Home Counties Radio. But it is the usual diet, or gluttony, of voyeuristic stodge, whipped together to satiate the appetites of drooling respectability: football fans riot in London; inflation up, growth down, again (or was it the other way around?); PM chides single mothers in no dole threat; woman kidnapped by gang of black youths in broad daylight.

– Jesus, Damien, what's the world coming to? Jason asks, swallowing his nausea.

– Fuck that. There’s always been violence. And much worse than that. Lower-middle paranoia about crime is the last of my fuckin worries. I want the Iros’ result.

I hit the arrow and the numbers on the LCD screen reconfigure. More Radio Gaga. More drivell. U2, Boyzone, Damsels in Distress, Take That, Gonad. But no football results. We hear a whimper from the back. Dolores may be crying.

– Shut it, you slut, I roar like a two-bit villain at a two-bit tart. – And you can stop fuckin snivelling. You once accused me of being a bleeding heart liberal. Well, I can tell you something. Times change.

Ridings

When we got to The Ridings, the Preston residence in the home counties, Charlie wasn’t there so we threw Dolores into the cellar which was nicely cold, dank and dark. I handcuffed her to the Ikea metal shelving, the giant Meccano in the oil sump corner. Jason trotted back up the stairs and I was about to follow. But I paused.

– It’s just me and you, baby, I whispered. – I’m going to really enjoy this.

Like Superman – the comic book *and* the Nietzschean hero – concertinaing sheetmetal or the untermensch spirit, I rucked up her Imperial purple micro skirt, missing a heart-case breath over her shimmering, white, nimbus wankmag gear, and stroked the probing, insidious hand of a faith healer over her groin. It spoke of absolute power or asylum psychosis, designed to gently reminded her of calculated, unhurried rape.

– Fun and games to come sweetheart. Neyeh, neyeh, neyeh.

And that laugh. Where did that come from? Stomach-deep, full-throttled, rattling my ribcage, vibrating my windpipe, escaping like from the knackered exhaust on Jimmy’s *Cheetah*. Dolores stopped her baby-struggle and held herself absolute-zero still. The slightest vibration of a molecule might just have set me off. But I weakened like sheetmetal by the furnace. Leavign the hood over her head – sensory deprivation always works except with the intelligence pros – I cuffed both her hands to the fixed metal shelving. Coldly and casually, I sneered over one shoulder, like I might just forget I had left her there:

– You make me sick.

– What was the Iros’ score? I ask, looking at Charlie with hope, with despair, with ignorance, as she struggles through the kitchen door. I have struggled to find the result but the Preston telly is so ancient it doesn’t even provide Ceefax.

I am her hostage. Hostage to her knowledge, her information, her power. She is silent so I know it is bad. But how bad?

– They didn’t throw it away, did they? Tell me they got a draw, at least.

– Port Vale won 3-2. And Reading got a last minute equaliser.

A cosmos of equations, a galaxy of permutations, then a supernova crash as all is sucked into a critical blackhole in my puny abacus brain. I wish I had Jimmy's head for figures. I wish I really had *Windows 95*. I wonder what use words are now as I search. But a tiny, six-legged bug blows the logic circuits, and the primitive software is going down: what have the Iros got to do with free will? Oh, yeah, I chose them. But for Xsakes in the same way I chose my biological parents. That's destiny for you.

I have to dissect the result though. In the same way that Dr Spence had to dissect Liz Crebbin by unravelling her colon, picking out her choicest offal, examining her prime cuts, her secretions, her bodily fluids, to determine the circumstances, the causes, the truth of her death. The football result is only the *ans=* of school book calculus. It's no longer a question of veracity. It is a question of cause and effect. A question of *understanding*. Charlie sort of knows:

– Damien, you don't want to hear...

I know I don't *want to*. But I *have to*.

– It was 2-0 until the 83rd minute when they scored. They equalised in the 89th. And got the winner in the sixth minute of injury time. And Deano Glover got all of them.

44

Panties

This is *her* fault. Her fuckin fault. She's quietly orchestrated this like some despotic, obsessive, headbanging conductor weaving her magic baton. Everybody else is stringing, blowing, strumming, bowing, banging, dancing to her tune. How the fuck does she do it? She must be a fuckin witch. My low tech brain has jammed, like an Etch-a-Sketch. The same frozen image pours from the screen, a tormented frozen squirm, a spastic caught in aspic, a Jackson Pollock, at 186,287 miles per second. But you can't just boot me up again, pull out my lead or hit my off button. I am possessed and possession is nine *points* of the law. Not *parts*. Not *tenths*. But *points*. I fuckin hate ignorance. I hate knowledge without *understanding* – not *compassionate empathy* but *logical comprehension*. But I am as bad. Why don't I ask the right questions? How many *points* are there? Where do these points come from? Whose law is it anyway? Wow, I'm motoring at 233 meg.

Why does no one *understand* what I want to do now, as I charge down the stairs with my *Sabatier* kitchen knives? Charlie is hassling me. Jason is hassling me. What is it with them? If you want a job doing properly you've got to do it yourself. She is there in the corner, still handcuffed to the shelving, still snivelling, still feeling sorry for herself, still in the dark. Not as sorry as she's going to be, not as regretful as she's going to be that she ever set eyes on me.

– Wish you were dead, Dolores, I scream. – Damien is coming to get you, I add for good measure, of course.

Then I scrape the meat cleaver over the metal Ikea shelving and it sounds like the football rattle from hell. But I am slapped back to a cold, dank cellar in the home counties by the cry of 'Damien!!!' from Charlie and I see Jason hovering uneasily in the background. I stop, like all fuckin instinctive: it's me mam stopping another inquisitive, primitive, kiddie experiment. Like the effects of a garden rake on a four year old's bonce. Or the effect of two tonnes of metal travelling at 35 mph on my three year old body. Or the effect of that electric ring on my plump, underformed fingers. They all finished with the word 'Damien!!!' like that. And with all the exclams. Just as well really or I'd have done some real damage at some point. Or was it just attention seeking, as Sparky Bobe, a psychology student, suggested years later at Cally.

I tell them, Charlie and Jason, I was just scaring her as I explained to Jason earlier on, *didn't I, mate?* He nods his agreement but adds that if we're gonna scare her, *mate*, we

should do it together properly. Charlie scolds me like I'm a little kid that I'm losing the plot. It's me mam again. And this was her plot – Charlie's not me mam's – as much as mine. We all trot back upstairs to discuss tactics. Me and Jason are to rough her around a bit but no knives, no threats of slashings, no blood. I complain to Charlie that Dolores did this to me while I was helpless.

– How were you helpless? She demands to know.

I explain, embarrassed as Jason Conscript laughs in the background, that she tied me up and she threatened to cut my cock off. I explain the full story to them expecting some sympathy, especially from Jason but I don't get any. Apparently the principal of *volenti non fit injuria*, should apply which basically means if I agree to let psychopathic redheads into my home and let them tie me up, it's my fault if they cut my cock off.

– This is fuckin double standards, I tell them. – And you were the one who wanted to cut rapists balls off, I add for Charlie's benefit.

That's different, of course though but only in Charlotte Preston's mad universe. Bloody double standards. Jason tells us to stop squabbling. Then he starts laughing his head off. What's his game? He apologises but it's just the thought of some woman with a knife holding my nob and me literally shitting myself before passing out. That's funny, that is. Apparently.

They tell me to calm down again and suggest I smoke some grass which seems a great idea except we don't have any on us so Jason has to go and see one of his old dealers he hasn't seen for years. I kick my heels for an hour while Charlie tells me to sit down and behave because I'm making her nervous as she lights up again. Poor thing. X, she smokes for England, these days. I can't believe the Ironopolis result. Six minutes away from the Premier League and two up. It reminds of me a mate at Cally, a Hearts fan. I went to see Dundee v Hearts with him in '86 to take my mind off the Iros last game of the season which they had to win to stay up (they lost and went down, nuff said). So I was in the Hearts crowd that day at Dens Park that was seven minutes – no, I tell a lie, one minute – from seeing its chosen ones lift the Scottish Premier Title. Only if Celtic won by five clear goals and Hearts lost to Dundee would they throw away the title. And it was nil each Dundee/Hearts with seven minutes to go. But Celtic won 5-1 and Hearts lost 2-0, with Dundee's second coming in the last minute. And Hearts lost the cup the following week and they've never really recovered. Won nowt since. It goes to show.

I tell Charlie this and she isn't very sympathetic even though I point out parallels with the Iros. She tells me I'm rambling but Jason comes back before we can argue, which is all we seem to do these days and we never used to at all. Jason has scored an insultingly small scrap of hash for £30 but hell, it's gear, so I skin up and it does the trick although it's not superskunk. Then, I'm really up for it. Sex that is. I think about fuckin Dolores, that is fuckin as in having sexual congress with, not fuckin as fuckin hell, but the others won't let me so somehow I persuade Charlie to give me a blow job. It's perfunctory but it does the trick so I'm happy.

Back in the kitchen, Jason tells us all we have to do is get Dolores to confess, which after her five hours in the pitch dark without a watch, should be easy, I point out. It did my head in during anti-interrogation training I can tell you – not having a watch. So me and

Jason shove the hood back over her head and drag her upstairs and I'm giving it the Jack Regan all the time and Jason keeps telling me to shut it, as a joke. But she feels all wrong: her tits, her arse, her limbs have all collapsed. I'm starting to feel sorry for her so I think about the Red Fox's, her, victims.

– How would you like your tits cut up, you bitch, I whisper in her ear, – and a *Sabatier* in your belly.

She moans like she's not really conscious, not aware, but I reckon she's faking, faking it so's I'll stop. But Liz Crebbin, Employee of the Month, smiling from that fuckin poster makes me so fuckin angry, so incensed. I rough Dolores up a bit more as I kick her into the kitchen with Jason where Charlie is, where the light is blinding, dazzling fluorescence which makes me twitch like I'm bordering on, teetering over the sheer drop of epilepsy.

So there we are in the kitchen with Dolores tied to the chair with her mini-skirt riding up so we can see her panties and I realise she's pissed herself. Which suddenly makes me feel guilty, guilty as hell, so I take them off her. Charlie spins around and asks what the fuck I'm doing then she sees what has happened and she has a go at me for making Dolores suffer unnecessarily and I point to Charlie's eye and say super-sarcky:

– Remember that. Yeah, I'm really *sorry* I forgot to let Dolores go to the toilet.

Eventually we are all set up. Charlie stands in front for the formal identification. I pull off the hood from behind and ask Charlie:

– Charlie is this the woman who attacked you?

– No, she replies.

Just one fuckin word but the wrong one, the exact opposite of what I should be fuckin hearing, so I run around the front and it's not repeat not Dolores. The woman is virtually unconscious and delirious so I quickly cover her eyes up again so she can't see us. Shit, we've kidnapped the wrong fuckin woman. What are the fuckin chances of this? How many straight-haired five ten redheads are there in London with pointy noses? Some cunt's set us up. Simon fuckin Register has rumbled us and put in a doppelganger, a double for Dolores or fuckin Delilah or whoever the fuck she is. I don't know how much of this I'm thinking and how much I'm saying, like I'm stoned. I turn to Jason and ask if he told Simon and he says of course he fuckin didn't and we're all in fuckin big trouble.

Then, all the madness slows down again as I catch my breath.

– You were the one who talked about ripping rapists balls off, I accuse Charlie.

We are arguing in front of the woman, Simon Register's bird, in the Preston snr kitchen, one of those mock-country affairs – like Syd's got now – all wood finishes and fake leading in the glass panes which neatly display all that high class crockery and silverware which is never actually used.

– Damien, she is not a rapist or a serial killer. We have the wrong woman, states Charlie in her most reasonable voice, the one she knows winds me up.

- That’s not the point, I growl banging my fist on the faux rustic kitchen table, not knowing if I’m doing this to frighten Charlie or Simon’s bird or both.
- Look, stop fuckin panicking, says Charlie, calmer than Jason and I. She has every reason to be. It’s me and Jason who are looking at the wrong end of ten years in chokey. – She hasn’t seen our faces. She doesn’t know who we are.
- She knows my fuckin Xian name thanks to you, I hiss throwing my arms in the air.
- But what are we going to do with her? Asks Jason concerned with the logistics while I help myself to one of Charlie’s Marlboro.

Neither Jason nor Charlie think about chiding me as they would usually, in my moments of nicotine-weakness.

- You don’t fuckin realise, I declare lighting the cigarette while taking care not to singe my eyebrows on the flame thrown by the cheap lighter, – you can get life for aggravated kidnap.
- Damien, will you shut up...
- Stop saying my fuckin name, I shout between rapid-fire, neurotic drags.
- Stop being a fuckin idiot then.
- Jesus, I fuckin hit her. I put the bag over her head. She’ll be covered in my DNA. X, if the Office finds out they’ll throw away the key. They’ve already got me down as a sexual deviant. X! X! X!
- Damien, if we stay calm we can all get out of this OK.

The phone rings and we all stare at each other.

- Don’t answer it. It might be the polis, I reason.
- It might also be entirely innocent, Charlie replies as she picks up the receiver before I can physically stop her.

I listen to half the conversation, drawing on the sweet taste of toasted Virginia tobacco and staring out into the vast panorama that is the Prestons’ backgarden.

- Hello... Simon. How are you? ... OK, come down for a party, I have, Charlie says, all-matey. – I say party but really a get-together ... Yeah, while my parents are away ... No, I’ve not seen him for a bit ... Yeah, I was gonna invite him but he’s been out all weekend ... No, I haven’t seen, Jason either ... Look, you really should pop along tonight ... You can’t? ... You’ve what? ... Lost your girlfriend ... How? ... How bizarre. Look Simon, there’s someone at the door I’ve got to go. Look after yourself and say: ‘Hi’ to Damien and Jason, if you see them.
- What’s the verdict? I hear Jason ask.
- He hasn’t called the police because he thinks it’s some sort of prank. But he thinks you’re in it up to your eyeballs, Damien.
- Stop calling me fuckin Damien, I declare, spinning around in the same movement. – Why don’t you just tell her my name is Damien fuckin Dean?

Delilah bristles, pretending she hasn’t heard. After all, this accidental news might compromise her new-found hope that she might, just might, get out of this nightmare

alive. (See, it's always hope. The more you see of that little floosie, the more priapic you get. And this only goes to intensify your anger, disappointment and frustration when she indiscriminately flounces off with a new flame). Charlie and Jason look at me. Any respect for my talents as an intelligence officer have clearly flown out the kitchen window, like so much hot air from the clanking central heating system.

I grind my Marlboro out on the aluminium sink and wash it away with water from the cold tap. I look into the distance of the sunny, Sunday afternoon and spy the spot by the hanging bench where I first spoke to Charlie nearly five years ago. I wish deeply that she had picked on some other unsuspecting, drunken punter, that night, so I wouldn't be here, now, knee-deep in crap.

45

Jeckyll

That Monday morning was weird without Wendy there. I still felt the edginess of the consciously surveyed, like even though she was dead, her spirit had not given up the ghost, so to speak, and had decided to continue my persecution at her hands from beyond the grave. I knew I had to act fast anyway: the polis were probably already looking for me in connection with a kidnapping charge or worse.

– Amy, can I borrow your ACCESS card? I pleaded before I had even said ‘Good Morning’ to her or the other members of C3/P who were contentedly filing down to a leisurely and subsidised breakfast.

An ACCESS card opens up the vista of police and commercial databases to the Organisation. Mine was still held by Department X until my six months penance were over, in late July. Amy said nothing. She just stood there, looking reluctant but I could see she was torn between her loyalty to me as a friend and her fear of being found out, caught with her pants down being shafted by a potential fugitive from the Organisation. Figuratively, of course. If a breach *was* detected, the audit trail would point its Big Brother finger at Amy Tuppham, a mere seccie who the Organisation would see as expendable. I didn’t want to get poor old Amy into trouble but, hell, I knew innocent women might have died if I hadn’t acted then. So I appealed, to her sense of sorority and, amazingly, it worked. Amy handed over the white slab of plastic.

– As this goh summing to do wiv Wendy? She asked, nervously, wondering what the hell she had let herself in for.

– Amy, if anyone asks just say I stole your card.

As I sparked up the steam-powered computer, I recalled ONLY CHILD electrocuting Wendy the first time she turned it on. I just wished it could have finished the job there and then, saving us all a lot of time and effort, including the psychopathic Red Fox out there. As it finally spat up HOLMES, I sensed Amy hovering behind me, like the uneasy spirit of the murdered or betrayed. Operation HYDE, Operation WELCOME and Operation EASTER had disappeared. And there were no obvious signs that the murders of Wendy Probit or Leslie Martin had been entered even though they had taken place a week and a half before. I scanned the long list of murder investigations – all unsolved but all meticulously operationally codeworded for the home office stats. I opened Operation HOSTILITY, Operation JECKYLL, Operation TRANSIT and Operation XMAS.

I was beginning to suspect a conspiracy of the highest order when I noticed Operation VIXEN. I smiled. Red Fox? A woman? God, those boys in crime squad had a vivid, refined imagination. And a command of the English language which mesmerised like Maradona at his peak. Sure enough, SO11 of the Met had taken over the enquiry and all the murders were now listed under this heading. The deaths of Wendy Probit and Leslie Martin showed the same m.o. as Liz Crebbin, Fiona McKeighley, Xabel Bontempi and... Nicola Jones, murdered 21st December 1994, near Piccadilly Circus. I racked my brains and realised this meant something to me. Charlie had mentioned it to me last Xmas but at the time, I hadn't paid it any attention. I tried to remember what Dolores was doing that night but I recalled that she had disappeared at that point. I then tried to account for my own movements but could dredge up little other than the inevitable Xmas parties at that time of year.

Rattled by this, I called up the psychological profile of the killer, which had been prepared by a leading criminal psychiatrist. I scanned through it noting how closely aspects of it applied to Dolores: the Jeekyll and Hyde personality; the keen intellect; the unhappy childhood leading to personal underachievement; the dissatisfaction with work and status; the sense of being undervalued; the insecurity; the inability to form emotional relationships; the desire to manipulate those who did get close – in her case, with cold, passionless sex. However, the psychiatrist did mention that, according to research, a serial killer was much more likely to be male than female – although this obviously did not rule out entirely a woman or a couple.

I read with amusement the history of the 'anonymous' tip off that had alerted Ironopolis SB to the possibility that the redhead who had come to attention in Operation WELCOME was identical with the one the Met were trying to identify in Operation HYDE. The Met had initially written back to Ironopolis their assessment that it was a hoax but, of course, Ron Durham knew it wasn't so he had had to pursue it but without compromising me, the source of his information. He just about summed the Met up the day of the Sheff Utd match when he said officers there 'eat' like an elephant and shit like a canary'. After four or five efforts, Ron Durham had given up writing letters to the Met.

There followed a note, written by DS Brixton, which described a visit DC Durham made to New Scotland Yard, in which he poured a sack of 'anonymous' notes all over the poor DS's desk. (I only wrote two so I don't know where the hell he got the rest from). This was quickly followed by the write up of a phone call from Chief Constable Ford of Ironside Constabulary threatening to alert the media, if the matter was not pursued by the responsible agency with 'due diligency'.

The screen then said:

Action 478: to identify Dolores Kane, suspected in connection with Operations WELCOME and HYDE.

Result:

Dolores aka Delilah Kane aka Golightly aka Delightful.

DOB: circa 1966-67

Add: London area

Gas - NT, elec - NT, DSS - NT, banks - NT, IR - NT

NT means 'no trace' or 'no record of' so the polis had done no better than I had. When I joined the Organisation, I had in the true spirit of scientific enquiry (and as a nosey parker) called up the details held on my friends. That's how I found out that Jason had gone out with an X-lister and Simon's 'father' was not his father (he still doesn't know). But Dolores didn't appear to exist anywhere. I had asked her about this in passing and she had told me that she had never had a proper job; didn't pay tax in her *game*; never had a bank account; and never put her name to a gas, electric or telephone bill. The last bits were all true I knew as she had insisted that I put my name to everything in the flat in South Queensferry and even used my bank account (why do you think we got into so much trouble with the McParlane's?). But she didn't even know whether she had a national insurance number. I had found this suspicious at the time although she later claimed her parents were Irish nationals and this had something to do with it.

Beneath this was another note which I had dropped directly into NSY which had been scanned into the computer. It said:

DS Brixton

***You dont know me but I know its you doing this
inqry. Dolores Kane was at Caldonia Uni, Edinboro.
She done english and philosophy. Shes yor woman.
Check it out.***

A Concernd Citizen

I admired my own artistry not only in concealing my identity but in creating another, creating a character through a short note. I imagined some amateurish petty but ultimately *moral* thief, crafting the note with his minimal education and street cunning. Keith Talent came most obviously to mind.

Entered below on the computer no doubt by some underpaid, civilian was a hand-written note in fluent polisspeak, in fluent *plod*. It said:

On 4 March 1995, I contacted Dr James Francis, Admissions Tutor, Caledonia University. They held in their archives records appertaining to a Dorothy Kane and a Delilah Kane but the former's year of birth was 1976 and the latter 1948. After careful consideration, I came to the

conclusion that neither of them was likely to be id/w the subject in Operation HYDE/WELCOME.
I passed my gratitude to Dr Francis for his time and information and he was in agreement with my proposition that he ought to get in contact if he ascertained anything else pertinent to this enquiry.
DC Holloway 7564

I remember her from Cally and I'm sure she was called Dolores Kane. I mean, she can't have been chair of the women's group, if she wasn't at the college. Anyway, I remember seeing her from time to time in the English department although I never dared talk to her, not after that Gaudie night and getting so pissed in front of her.

As I flicked up the next part of the Operation Vixen file, I was brought clumsily and suddenly back from the rarified atmosphere of life at my alma mater by this:

Note passed from PC Ashford 2178 at 03:00 1/5/95
Scanned into Holmes at 08:00 1/5/95

Sir

I dealt with a woman, Delilah Day, in considerable stress who walked into Battersea police station with her boyfriend, a Simon Register yesterday evening, 30 April 1995. She claimed to me to have been abducted by a Damien Dean on Saturday afternoon who threatened to cut her breasts off and stick a knife in her stomach.

I believe this is the murder method favoured and utilised by the Red Fox serial killer you are currently conducting an investigation into. I have identified Damien Dean as:

Roger Damien Dean
DOB: 24 June 1965
ADD: 14F Morpeth Terrace, London SW1 8DU
OCC: Civil servant, Home Office

Hoping you can pass on any thanks to my sarge if this tip comes off.

PC Ashford

Snivelling little careerist. Jesus, Simon fuckin Register really has stitched me up on this one, I thought, plotting my revenge. But before I could go on, I noticed below the note an even more chilling message:

Action 612: Arrest Damien Dean as above.
Action 613: Obtain and execute search warrant for above address.

– Ya awlrite, Daimeyn? asked Amy as I sat there twisting from side to side in my standard issue government swivel chair.

Its broken back was breaking mine. Trade unions wouldn't allow that sort of thing. But trade unions were, of course, illegal in the Organisation. That, though, was the least of my worries. Ignoring Amy I got up and hit 'Print' for the psychiatrist's report. I picked it up off the printer, neatly folded it and put it in my pocket. There was one reason why the polis hadn't already arrested me – they would now be at Queen Anne's Gate, SW1 or

Lunar House, Croydon, charging around the corridors looking for Damien Dean, home office civil servant, and swearing that the Establishment stooges were obstructing polis enquiries in a damage limitation exercise. X, civil servants suspected of serial murder. It just doesn't bear thinking about, old boy. Dennis Nilsen was bad enough – but another one, so soon. There would be questions in the House: what is the Civil Service doing about the extraordinary numbers of serial killers in its ranks? It amazed me that the Civil Service *wasn't* the first place the polis went. 'Police are looking for another serial killer. 750,000 civil servants are helping them with their enquiries.' *Fuckin weirdoes.*

Thank god, we had waited until very late Sunday to return Delilah to Simon Register's place in Clapham. We had kept her in a light blindfold in the Preston lounge all day Sunday so she couldn't see us but had the benefit of our company while we all watched the omnibus version of *Tobacco Road* and the live footie on the telly, Tranmere v Bolton. (She didn't even know what division Palace were in so X knows what Simon Register had told her about football). Charlie was, of course, brilliant, *an absolute gem*, using her private school, middle class, home counties accent and attitude to make it seem like *the whole thing* had just been *one dreadful mistake*, like someone had forgotten to book the WI speaker for that week. In the end – after Charlie had coaxed her through her trauma – a bemused Delilah was gladly partaking of tea and crumpet with us (although I pointed out that in Ironopolis we called them *pikelets*). Jesus, it must have looked faintly surreal to any passerby who craned their neck towards the Preston living room, that bright April afternoon.

– Whas that? asked Amy breaking my train of thought, studying me, unsure what I was going to do next.

It was just us two in the cold, grey office although Wendy spied on us from her empty desk, beyond the grave. I swear when I had gone near it earlier on the seat was warm with that particular warmth you only get from one which someone has just vacated.

– You saw what it said, Amy, I said calmly but prepared to use violence if necessary. It hadn't taken long to turn me into a desperado. – Please give me a chance. Let me get away. A fuckin sporting chance, it's all I ask.
– OK, mike et look reawl, teye mi ta summing.

I eyed her suspiciously.

– Look, Daimeyn. I'm gonna bi in vis ap ta mi eyeybawls, if ya doan. Yuv yewssed mi ACCESS car'.

I ferreted around in my desk and found the handcuffs we had nicked from the Room 1817 Xmas Party at the Met, the spoils of war. As I clamped Amy to the clanking Victorian radiator, there was one question I was burning to ask her.

– Who did get you pregnant? I asked before I hugged her, with tears in my eyes.
– Go'frey Jaymes, who'd ya fink. Why va fuck d'ya fink vey go' rid ov im?
– Is he in Rampton?
– Danno.
– But this could be important...

– Now, gerrou off ‘ere, Daimeyn.

And with that, I was off.

Refugee

When the Organisation is after you there is nothing you can do but wait. There is no point in trying to hide or flee the country: they will have put out warnings on polis, customs and intelligence channels. I doubt I can buy a bus ticket without alerting the squads of watchers waiting for the off at Telecom Tower.

I am squatting in a cottage in the Yorkshire Dales. I think I’m somewhere near Osmotherley, one of the picture postcard villages I was dragged to screaming as a child on Sunday afternoons when all I wanted to do was kick about a football with my mates. It is dark and there is no electricity or gas or water, but not because it is backward. On the contrary, this cottage is up there with the best of them in the amenities stakes – I even spotted a murky waste disposal unit in the extensively begadgetted, *Evergreen* kitchen. No, this is not a peasant’s, an artisan’s, a humble farm-worker’s abode. It is a rural retreat, for weekenders, for stressed denizens to escape to the country for the odd long weekend where they can play at being simple country folk – interrupted only by the odd tuneless call of the city when the mobile goes.

No, there is no gas and electricity because I do not want to turn them on, even if I could locate the stopcocks and switches, as I would alert anyone to my shadowy presence here. So I sit in the dark eating cold *Ginsters* pasties, hardly able to look out of the window for fear of a face, any face, just looking into the sort of windows faces appear at. Are you scared of the dark? No? You think not? Then, install yourself in a nowhere, dark cottage and wait. The ignorant, primitive fear borne of childhood confronts learned, adult information and slowly muscles it out of the arena of your mind, like so much Sumo. Just wait. Every creak, every crack, every wheeze chills you to your core. It is as if the building has come alive, stretching its rickety limbs, sighing its resigned breaths, gurgling its empty stomach which you of course agitate with your illegitimate presence, like indigestion. Once or twice it even cracks its knuckles like some cornball gangster and I become petrified, scared of the sounds I make. And this fear is quite apart from the fear that the Organisation will snatch me or the polis will arrest me and I will finally be incarcerated.

My heart lurches as I glance from the corner of an eye a rural terrorist scampering across the floor on his belly in search of food and shelter. I quake at the thought of Maquis mice, suicide squad rats and any number and variety of regimented creatures with shiny backs and six or eight legs tearing over me carrying out their surreptitious night time manoeuvres. I mean, have you seen the size of them in the country? Their equivalents in the city are the deprived, urban dispossessed, undernourished and undersized in the struggle to make it on a day to day basis. The crack squads here live off a diet of unadulterated cow dung, fresh invigorating air and steroids to pump them up so they are the split of nightclub bouncers bursting out of their off-the-peg suits.

Please don't let me awake if they come for me. The insects or the rodents, that is. I don't want to know. Take me back to the city, to street lighting, to Wongaburgers, to sanitation, to democracy, to safety.

I know I cannot hide forever even in the country so why secrete myself away? The stress of the boredom itself is enough to finish me, without the endless fear – and I'm still weighing up whether it is worth smoking that little piece of hash left over from Saturday, left over from when? Two days ago. I will be happy when I'm caught but I'm not giving myself up. X, I've come over all primeval, all quintessence, all instinct, all animal stupidity. I mean, why doesn't the bull just think: 'Sod this for a game of soldiers. They can come and get me but I'm not playing ball.' Not much of a spectacle and a damn sight more dignified for the bull. But we can't do that. We don't give up. Even now, even approaching the third millenium in the absence of god, most of us still procreate, or falling short of that, fuck in imitation of sexual reproduction. I've given up trying to decide what is more pointless.

Sod this for a game of soldiers. I'm going to have that *smoke*.

46

I climb on the Suzuki 850 I knicked in Berkeley Square, by the Organisation's offices, to get out of the metropolis and up to North Yorkshire. It's Sunday 7 May 1995 and I haven't spoken to anyone for six days, the opposite of my interrogation by the Organisation in November when I talked non-stop for five – when I had to. I don't know whether I've gone mad or I'm just bored. But I'm going to the Foundry Ground. I'm going to see Ironopolis v Watford. I'm hopefully going to see the Iros promoted.

Faith

As I look around to check there are no polis nearby, I reflect that this is not just the last match of the season but also the last match *ever* at the Foundry Ground (it can never be anything so trivial as a *game*). Next time we play at home, it won't be 'home'. It will be the £20 million Webnet Docklands Stadium. I am scared. I am scared. Will our first match there be in the Premier League or the first division? The Foundry Ground has served us for 90-odd years. The first match at the new place will be an omen. An omen of future achievement. And that omen will be decided here and now. Two fifty. In two hours time, we will know.

There are no away fans. Their team in mid-table mediocrity, the match means nothing to them so they have given us their space, usually allotted under league rules, in the far corner. As I survey the Dock, I spot Jimmy down below in his mid-1970s Ironopolis home shirt. I scream at him but he doesn't hear me. He's so pissed only the pressing crowd, a praetorian guard, keeps him on his feet but he carries on tunelessly mouthing the words to the many hymns in the Iros' canon, like the mong in St Stephens on Xmas Eve. I go to push through the throng then remember I'm wanted. I know he will be under surveillance (it may even be why he is pissed). They're just waiting for him to lead them to me.

We erupt as the teams run out. It's going to be an old-fashioned aerial battle between Big Hendo and their centre halves who tower and mirror each other like the twin turrets of Wembley. From the off, we're up and at them like terriers, harrying them, harassing them the second they get the ball, then winning it

and intelligently playing it on the ground. Wee Jackie runs rings around them before setting up Richie Mustang for our first after 12 mins. And it's fully deserved. Football commentators often talk of the *script* of a match.

– They haven't read the script, they yell when some underdog excels.

The script for this drama surely laid down that the Iros would dominate the match in front of the capacity home crowd but fail to secure a lead. But we're 1-0 up already and, though we worry about a repetition of last week, the dynamics of team and supporters has fixed itself firmly to the upward, virtuous circle. No-one dares sing songs of promotion though.

Over the next half hour, we have all the possession, we have all the chances, we miss the chances we create but, as the half-time whistle goes, I reflect on how solid we've been:

– I think we're gonna walk this, Jimmy, I declare, wincing afterward at my temptation of fate, tempting a repeat of those anxious few minutes of the Swindon game back in September.

Jimmy looks happy but slightly bemused. Then, the rusting incoherent tannoy tells us all what we need to hear to give this match any meaning: Reading are 1-0 down as are Bolton. If it stays like this, we go up. I relax but only for a second. Even with my face painted red with a white hoop, I still have to be vigilant. I might be recognised. I risk a glance across at the south east corner. There is Ron Durham, smoking like Ironopolis, absorbed in his own pre-tech consciousness, gears grinding up comparable circumstances from the most ancient of matches. That is what all the faithful do to give form to what happens around them – summon up the memories of the most ancient of games, like the spirits of primitive ritual. But we are on different sides now, me and Ron, even though we both still stand resolute in the same Dock End.

The teams re-emerge to the uninterrupted, basking sunshine of a glorious day. We quickly settle and create some deft chances which we again fail to convert. The Dock is baying for a goal and 25,000 hold their heads in their hands when Jamie 'Hooligan' Ulligann, the 18 year old local lad made good, misses a sitter after 60 mins. And you know what? I think my granny *really* could have buried that one.

– Gerrinta em.
 – Fuck em up.
 – Gerrinta em.
 – Fuck em up.
 – Gerrinta em.
 – Fuck em up, chant different parts of the faithful, like competing choral voices in Greek tragedy.

We are warming to this. We never sing: 'We'll score in a minute' at Ironopolis. It only tempts fate. But we feel like it now. Other results are still going our way. Then, for a second – but it only takes a second to score – we fall asleep and their big centre half saunters in on a cross and nods in an equaliser. Not just the whole of the Foundry Ground is silent but the whole of Ironopolis. Sunday afternoon shiftworkers have

downed tools in unison and disappeared; Sunday afternoon motorists have all stalled their cars and deserted them; families at home have slipped down the backs of their sofas and armchairs. Ironopolis is a ghost town, a shanty town, the Marie Celeste.

Bizarrely, I remember *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, when all the clocks stopped. I wish all the clocks would stop now. Because only one sound can be heard in the brave, stoic, silent Foundry Ground:

– Tick tock. Tick tock. Tick tock. Tick tock. Tick tock. Tick tock, goes the stadium clock as 25,000 anguished faces stare open-mouthed at the arbiter of their destiny.

The full-moon face is filled with pressing portent: resolute big-hand on five. But time is no longer on our side. Twenty minutes left. Plenty of time. But not for us.

Iron

The big stadium clock: its larger muscular iron arm points between six and seven. Surely not. But you cannot argue with time. Jackie picks up the ball on the halfway line. He slips one, slips another. Twenty five yards out, he looks up. Have a pop, Jackie! But he wrong-foots the defence and flights a ball onto Big Hendo's head. He clashes in the air with their big centre half and the ball bobbles free. 50,000 eyes are on Don Clog, our left back inexplicably in the box – in front of the Dock, in front of their goal. Death or Glory moment, mate. Time is instrumental. Slow. Discordant. Chaotic. Cacophonous. Like a *Striker* figure Clog is stock-still. He lifts his left peg and the hand of god comes crashing down on Clog's head, a steam hammer shot unleashed.

Their keeper – split second reaction – palms the ball onto the head of their other big-lad-at-the-back. The ball spirals up towards the corner of the goal. The dazed, stumbling keeper rises again instinctively to tip it onto the bar. And over. You useless cunt, Clog. He stands there head in hands. Alone. Death not Glory. Three of the faithful have collapsed around me. Grown men cry, head in hands. Leave the fucker alone, ya cunt. St John's Ambulance men part the crowd, like Moses dividing the Red Sea. The anxious faithful look over their heads. They cannot miss a moment. Corner. Hircock runs up and flights it into the box. Their big centre half rises effortlessly but heads it behind. Another corner. An inferno of sound. Come on, Iros. Come on, Iros. Come on, Iros. Come on, Iros. Another corner floated in comes to nothing.

You get that feeling, you really do. *Iron in the soul*, is what you need. In this *game*.

The muscular arm of the stadium clock is taut, pointing resolutely to nine. A despotic polis directing the traffic, insisting it goes one way. But Jackie has been cynically brought down and is lying out cold on the canvas. Match time is theoretically frozen. But resignation and its bastard brother, despair, set in like the leaden sunset of winter days. Hope slowly sinks with the bright clarity of the afternoon. The tannoy emits its mechanistic gibberish. The voice of a cold, disembodied god. A

reverential hush falls over the faithful: weev-vgot-vt-tsummtmnewssfyu-u-fu-fu.
 Rddinnillprdsmlthwun-nn – fnlfnllsccoscorr-r-r. Anbltnavdrwn-n-n. The keen ear, the
 learned ear decodes it. Reading have lost 1-0. Bolton have drawn. The guttural roar of
 25,000 voices in harmony. Suddenly, Hope radiates from the sun's suddenly brightening
 rays. But we still need a goal.

Despair I can deal with. Hope I cannot.

Big Nige is holding the ref's wrist and pointing to his time, the only true time, the only
 time that matters. We read Nige's lips as he says Stop the clock, ref. Stop the clock. Only
 the ref has the power to do this. To stop time. Elsewhere, it lurches into injury time,
 injured time, endured time. Get up, fuckin gerrup, Jockie man. The pocket dynamite Scot
 is up. Hobbling. No time to cheer or applaud. We're running out. Of time. Clog sends a
 powerful hoof up field. Big Hendo rises and heads it on to Jockie who is hobbling still but
 thwacks the ball from twenty five thirty yards we look to the net but it is deflected
 swirling skidding skewing across their penalty area the faithful at the back the blind
 faithful surge forward they cannot see and the ball comes to Jamie 'Hooligan' Ulligann,
 the 18 year old local lad made good, he steadies himself he shoots time stops as twenty
 five thousand Ironsiders watch the finely crafted and firmly stitched cowhide with its 28'
 circumference and artificial bladder of pressurised air whizz toward the yawning
 goalmouth. Children grow into men. And grown men become children. As the spinning
 orb zips against the nylon netting and settles dead in the back of the goal. Look at the
 man-in-the-middle (don't insult him, he might disallow it). Like the stadium clock but
 puny, his arm directs the traffic. To the centre spot. It's there. It stands!!!! Glory not
 death.

Ee-ay-oh, ee-ay-oh, ee-ay-oh...

Blackout.

We come. We collectively come. We collectively come *to*, with waves of euphoria
 lifting us off our feet as we surge, we resurge, we re-emerge. Waving not drowning.
 There are some people on the pitch – they think it's all over. Me and Jimmy dance in a
 bearhug in the penalty area among the Watford defence who stand there like Greek
 tragic sculptures, staring moodily, disillusioned with each other and destiny. With a darr-
 darr-darr, the bastard-in-black brings down the final curtain on this two act drama. It's all
 over. We're up. We're fuckin up. We're going back to where we belong, where we
 started from.

The polis strongarm us off the playing area and shoo us back into the seething mass
 of the Dock but the hearts of the faithful have expanded to fill the already aching, heaving
 paddock so there's no room and we can hardly *breathe*. I hear a familiar voice:

– Daymeeyan, yer fuckin nickt, sunn.

I am a sitting duck for Ron Durham as he directs three burly uniform polis to drag me off
 as I lash, I kick, I struggle for my life, my liberty, my pursuit of happiness. Then over my
 shoulder I see a drunken Jimmy:

– Noooooo!!!! Jimmyyyyy!!!! You stupid twat!!! I scream, as I see him launch a
 drunken *Kicker* at the polis who has me in his iron grip.

- Yerrr fuckin nickt azwull, a spare polis growls taking the inebriated Jimmy in a half-nelson and frog-marching him off.
- Jimmy, gerruzz a fuckin brief, I cry as I am man-handled around the playing area in the opposite direction.

Blood boils like lava in my ears, a fire alarm screams its incessant, urgent warning and chemicals whizz around my head in the panic brought on by self-preservation. Then all I hear – wafting, haunting, serene – is 25,000 human voices, singing the same hymn in harmony:

- We shall over-rr-com-ome. We shall over-rr-com-ome. We shall over-come, some day-ay-ay. Ohohoh, deep in my heart, I do-oo bel-ieve, we shall over-come, some day... Ohoho, deep in my heart...

It drifts across hunched, thickset terraced houses, which give an innocent, sentimental shiver. It reacts with the omniscient pall which hangs like Damocles's sword over the acne-faced chemical plants as aesthetic as the Centre Pompidou but with function as well; over red-hot, mannequin-thin steelworks chimneys; up and over square-shouldered, body-builder cooling towers, off over the sea. As I am crowbarred into a black maria with ten or more of the faithful, I shiver too at what I know will be the last sight of the town I love, possibly for the next twenty odd years, which I will spend in prison for crimes I didn't commit.

Our chosen few have done us proud today. The Iros are up. That is all that matters.

Book 8

**‘I’m at the
mercy of
bureaucrats’**

RECORD OF AN INTERVIEW UNDER THE POLICE AND CRIMINAL
EVIDENCE ACT 1984

INTERVIEWING OFFICERS:	DS CHRIS BRIXTON (P1143 – Met)	DC JOHN HOLLOWAY (D9675 – Met)
LOCATION:	Paddington Green Police Station, W2	DATE: 9 May 1995
		START TIME: 09:00
INTERVIEW ROOM:	15a	FINISH TIME: 11:34
INTERVIEWEE:	Roger Damien Dean	ADDRESS: 14F Morpeth Terrace, London SW1 8DU
		DATE OF BIRTH: 24 June 1965
ALSO PRESENT	John Foulds (counsel for interviewee)	TAPE IDENTIFIERS: NA/018 96, NA/018 97

THE FOLLOWING IS A VERBATIM TRANSCRIPTION OF THE ABOVE
TAPE(S).

P1143 OK, it's nine oh three, Damien. I have to remind you that you are still under caution from your arrest yesterday on suspicion of murder. You have already agreed that you understand the caution. Is that right?

Dean Ye...No comment

P1143 You've had breakfast. You've got a cup of tea and a packet of cigarettes. Did you sleep well?

Dean No comment

P1143 For the benefit of the tape, the interviewee has a cup of tea in front of him and a packet of Marlboro and has undergone a police medical which confirms that he is fit to be interviewed. Now, Damien, we want to ask you a few questions in connection with a series of murders. Do you understand?

- Dean No comment
- D9675 Damien, I appreciate that you may not wish to say anything but I have to remind you that if you try to use a defence in court which you do not mention during these interviews, the jury will be told that you did not mention your defence when you had the chance. Is there anything you wish to say in response to that?
- Dean No comment
- P1143 Damien, we have spoken before, obviously in different circumstances. You are a clever bloke. You were very clever in your dealings with us before. To the extent that you gave nothing away. I mean, it can't have been easy can it, staying cool like that, for so long?
- Dean (Long pause) No comment
- D9675 OK, Damien. I want you to look at the following items which were found in your flat. Tell me if you've seen them before. For the tape, I am now holding up Exhibit AC/003, a long red wig. Damien, do you recognise this?
- Dean No comment
- D9675 Damien, can you tell us how this wig came to be in your flat?
- Dean No comment
- P1143 Traces of it were found on the bodies of Fiona McKeighley, Liz Crebbin, Nicola Jones, Wendy Probit, Leslie Martin and Amy Tuppham...(sounds of scuffle). For the record, suspect just lunged at DC Holloway. Did you know any of these women?
- Dean (Silence)
- P1143 Amy Tuppham worked in the same home office section as you. Did you see her outside work at all, Damien?
- Dean (Silence)
- D9675 Damien, can you explain to me how this label covered in Ms Crebbin' blood came to be in your flat? For the record I am holding up Exhibit AC106.
- Dean (Silence)
- D9675 Damien, it doesn't look good all this, you know. If you want some advice from me, I suggest that you tell us everything now, while you have the chance. It's only going to look worse in future, if you don't.

Now, tell us about this Parisien Lace label, Damien. Do you know who it belongs to?

Dean No comment

P1143 OK, how did you get your name onto our personnel database?

Dean No comment

P1143 Where did you get that very convincing fake warrant card you showed us in the Pink Cat club on Friday 23 September 1994?

Dean (Silence)

P1143 How come an Ironopolis Clubcall card with your fingerprints on it was found by the murdered body of Francis Elwell, the former defence minister?

Dean (Silence)

RECORD OF AN INTERVIEW UNDER THE POLICE AND CRIMINAL EVIDENCE
ACT 1984

INTERVIEWING OFFICERS:	DS CHRIS BRIXTON (P1143 – Met)	DC JOHN HOLLOWAY (D9675 – Met)
LOCATION:	Paddington Green Police Station, W2	DATE: 10 May 1995
INTERVIEW ROOM:	15a	START TIME: 09:00
INTERVIEWEE :	Roger Damien Dean	FINISH TIME: 12:15
	ADDRESS: 14F Morpeth Terrace, London SW1 8DU	DATE OF BIRTH: 24 June 1965
ALSO PRESENT:	John Foulds (counsel for interviewee)	TAPE IDENTIFIERS: NA/018 98, NA/018 99

THE FOLLOWING IS A VERBATIM TRANSCRIPTION OF THE ABOVE TAPE(S).

P1143 Damien, I have to remind you that you are still under caution. Did you get a good night's sleep, last night? I hope the cell wasn't too uncomfortable?

Dean Yes – No, I mean, yes, I slept well. No, the cell wasn't too uncomfortable

P1143 You sound more positive today, Damien. Is there anything in particular that you want to tell us?

Dean Yes, I've decided to tell you everything I know

Counsel Damien, as your lawyer, I have to...

Dean It's OK. I know the legal position but I've decided there are things I have to say, otherwise I'm going down for a very long time

P1143 Where do we start then, Damien?

- Dean Those things you showed me yesterday. The red wig belongs to a woman called Dolores Kane who I used to go out with. The blood-stained label I picked up at the post-mortem of Liz Crebbin...
- D9675 Hang on, Damien, are you saying that you were at one of the victim's post-mortems?
- Dean Yes and there's more. I have to tell you about the organisation. Officers there hack into your computers and look at how your investigations are progressing. That's how I could tell you in February or March or whenever that Xabel Bontempi's body had gone missing...
- P1143 Damien, let's start at the beginning. Why did you go to Liz Crebbin's autopsy?
- Dean Let me see, it was the same day the organisation put me on to the Elwell case, the 27th September. No, sorry, I'm wrong. I'm getting my hangovers mixed up. That was the 27th but this all started the Thursday morning before, 22 September 1994 to be precise. Or rather that's when I began to actually sense something was wrong. The drink had blacked out the previous evening so I was spared to start with. I woke up with a hangover then but in Ironopolis, in unfashionable, polluted, wrung out Ironopolis...

RECORD OF AN INTERVIEW UNDER THE POLICE AND CRIMINAL
EVIDENCE ACT 1984

INTERVIEWING OFFICERS:	DS CHRIS BRIXTON (P1143 – Met)	DC JOHN HOLLOWAY (D9675 – Met)
LOCATION:	Paddington Green Police Station, W2	DATE: 10 May 1995
INTERVIEW ROOM:	15a	START TIME: 16:45
INTERVIEWEE:	Roger Damien Dean	FINISH TIME: 20:32
	ADDRESS: 146a Great Peter Street, London,	DATE OF BIRTH: 24 June 1965
ALSO PRESENT:	None	TAPE IDENTIFIERS: NA/019 00, NA/019 01

THE FOLLOWING IS A VERBATIM TRANSCRIPTION OF THE ABOVE
TAPE(S).

P1143 OK, Damien, you've been formally charged with the murders of Liz Crebbin, Wendy Probit and Amy Tuppham but you are happy to continue making a statement in your defence even if it means you are charged with other offences

Dean Yes, that's right

P1143 Now, Damien, we've started to check out your story. According to the government, there is no such thing as the organisation or the office. We've even sent officers to check out the address you gave us in Mayfair...

Dean I told you they can move very quickly, if they have to...

P1143 Damien, I have to be honest with you. The more we check of your story, the more guilty you look

Dean What about Dolores? Why the fuck don't you go and find her? She's the fuckin key to this.

P1143 We can't identi...

Dean I know. I told you. How the hell do you think I knew you couldn't identify her?

D9675 Damien...

Dean Have you spoken to DC Ron Durham of Ironside Constabulary?

P1143 Yes and he described you as a home office civil servant he met through work and he'd gone to the football with a couple of times.

Dean Jesus, I'm fuckin doomed, doomed. Doomed I am.

P1143 Look, Damien, I have to go with this even though I don't think any of this is doing you any good

Dean Which aspects of my story don't you think fit?

D9675 Well, there's no mention of the computer fraud in 1990...

Dean Jesus, don't you understand? They've erased it. The organisation is everywhere

P1143 Did you wear that red wig to murder those women, Damien?

Dean Jesus, I can't take any more of this shit

THE SCORCHER, Thursday 4 May 1995

RED FOX CASE: TWO ARRESTED

TWO people were arrested yesterday in London in connection with the serial killer that police have dubbed the Red Fox.

Charlotte Preston, 22, and Jason Conscript, 30, were arrested at their respective homes in dawn raids in two separate operations. They were then questioned for six hours at Paddington Green Police Station before being released.

The two have been charged with kidnapping and aiding and abetting the sexual assault of a 29 year old woman from central London last Saturday. The woman cannot be named for legal reasons.

By Simon Marsden

It is understood that Preston and Conscript are close friends of Damien Dean, 29, a home office civil servant whom police are looking for in connection with the Red Fox case.

His whereabouts are currently unknown and the public has been warned not to approach him as he may be dangerous.

The police have refused to confirm whether Dean is in fact the Red Fox. Preston and Conscript have to answer bail at Westminster police station on 11 May.

The GAZETTE, Monday 9th May 1995

Red Fox is arrested at Ironopolis game

THE SERIAL killer police have been investigating since earlier this year has been arrested, according to police sources last night.

Damien Dean, 29, a home office civil servant, was arrested at the end of the Ironopolis against Watford game yesterday afternoon after a late goal from the home side won them promotion.

A keen-eyed duty sergeant recognised Dean on the CCTV cameras in the ground when he invaded the pitch in celebration. He was taken from Ironopolis last night to Paddington Green police station, where he is currently being held.

The police began to investigate the serial killer, who has operated all over the country since the late 1980s, when Wendy Probit, 37, another home office civil servant, was murdered in April. It is believed that Probit was Dean's boss in the home office. At the same time, police are investigating two associates of Dean who were arrested last week in

connection with an alleged kidnap and sexual assault in London and the home counties. It is understood that the victim, who has not been named, is pressing charges against Charlotte Preston, 22, and Jason Conscript, 30, after refusing to accept their actions were the result of a prank that went wrong. Meanwhile, grieving relatives of those murdered praised the police investigation and demanded justice for their loved ones.

THE SCORCHER, Monday 9 May 1995

**KUKI'S LOVER
QUIZZED OVER
RED FOX LINK**

THE CITIZEN, Wednesday 25 JUNE 1995

Alleged Killer in plea to 'other woman' in case

THE MAN allegedly known as 'The Red Fox' has issued a statement to the public asking one of his former girlfriends to come forward and admit to the murders of six women over the last seven years.

DICK RAMONE

Damien Dean, who was 30 yesterday, issued the statement through another former girlfriend, Charlotte Preston, a journalist who continues to visit Dean and campaign for his release.

The statement asks Dolores Kane, aged around 30, who Dean claims was at Caledonia University with him from 1985 to 1989, to come forward and admit to murdering women in London, Edinburgh and the north east. Kane is described as tall, slim and glamorous with either long red hair or short black hair. The statement goes on to claim that Kane worked for a secret branch of government called 'The Organisation' which was involved in the death of government minister, Francis Elwell, last year.

'If it hadn't been for the Organisation and Dolores Kane, Francis Elwell would be alive today. Before his death, he was to have exposed the inner workings of a branch of the state which is answerable to nobody but continues to wield an influence over many parts of British daily life,' it says.

The government will not comment officially on the case as it is sub judice. But a well-placed minister speaking yesterday said that Dean's claims were the last desperate attempt of an alleged murderer to absolve himself of his terrible crimes.

THE SUNDAY CITADEL, Sunday 11 February 1996

Police fail to investigate park deaths

Police failed to investigate the apparent murders of two skinheads in Hyde Park the same night as one of the probable victims of the so-called serial killer, the Red Fox, was murdered, according to a *Citadel* investigation.

This may support some of the claims made by Damien Dean, who is on remand awaiting trial for that murder and three others. Dean claims that the intelligence services were responsible for the deaths and that the police have lost the body of Xabel Bontempi, one of the murdered women speaking last night, Charlotte Preston, 22, who has spearheaded the media campaign to have Dean released, said:

'This clearly shows that Damien is not talking on sense as the government has suggested. Given the injuries, it is quite clear that Damien cannot have been responsible for the hideous deaths these two young men underwent. We must ask who else was in the park that night and if they

were responsible for the murder.

By Daniel Ackroyd

We must also ask why the police, who were aware of these murders at the same time they became aware of the murder of Xabel Bontempi, chose not to investigate them at the time. 'Ms Preston went on to allege that the body of Ms Bontempi, which was never formally identified, had gone missing after the autopsy in September last year. The police deny this but will not allow any inspection of the body as it is 'against police procedures in an ongoing murder enquiry'.

They also point out that Dean has not been charged with the murder of Xabel Bontempi, so his recent revelations are not

strictly relevant to the case. Police have, however, admitted that there are a number of similarities between the murder of Ms Bontempi and the other victims of the 'Red Fox' and that they initially believed that it was the work of the same killer. Recent information has led them to believe that the similarities are purely coincidence.

A home office spokesman said yesterday:

'Any new information must be presented to the police for their investigation. It is up to them and the CPS (Crown Prosecution Service) to decide whether there is enough evidence for Mr Dean to stand trial.'

Full story, pages 4 and 5. Comment, pages 16 and 17

Psychiatrist was in pay of secret organisation

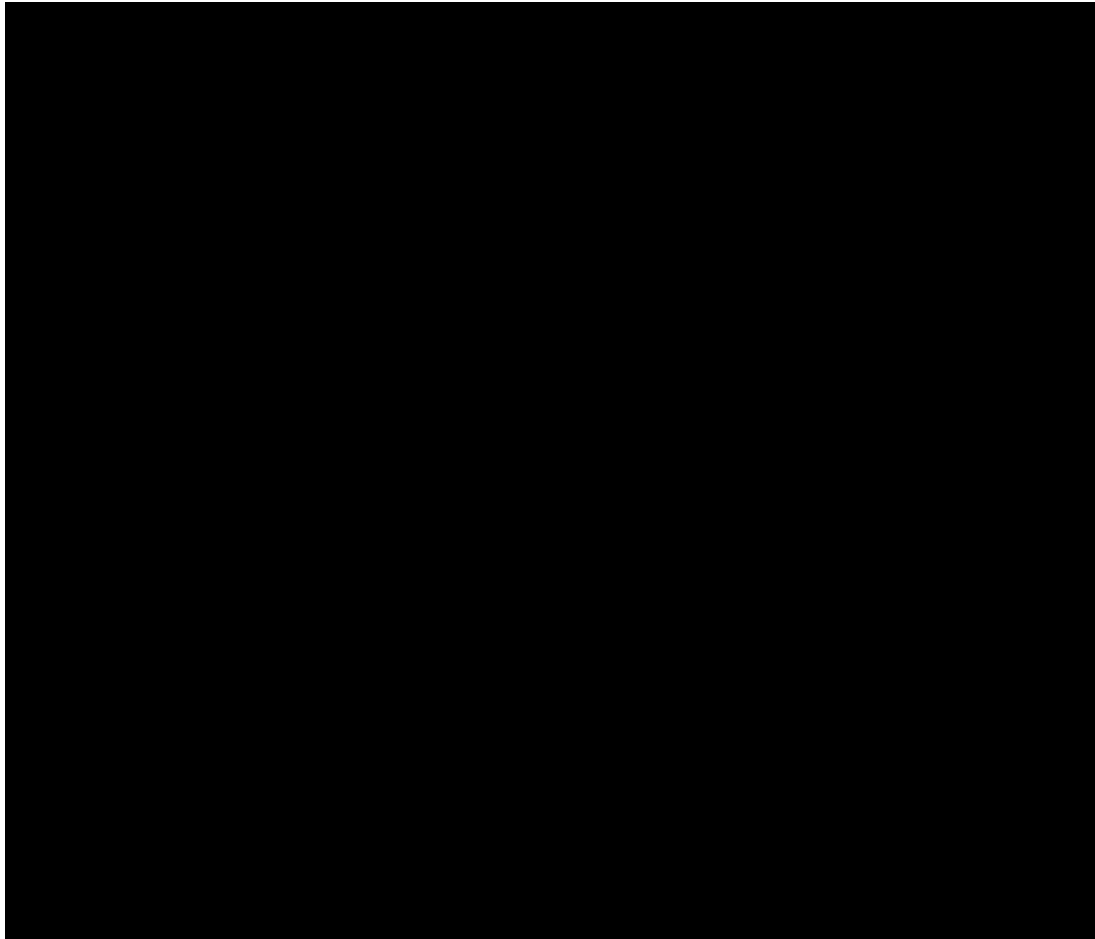
The psychiatrist who assessed that Damien Dean, the alleged Red Fox, was fit to stand trial was in the pay of a secret intelligence organisation, a court heard today.

But Mr Justice Green, the trial judge, refused to halt the trial, in its second week, at the request of Julian Cuthertson, QC, Dean's defending counsel, on the grounds there was 'no evidence whatsoever' to support this assertion.

THE BUGLE, Thursday 4 April 1996

Alleged rapist was at victim's postmortem

THE NATION, Saturday 6 April 1996



- **Convicted of**
three murders
- **Killer sinks to**
knees in dock
- **Judge refers**
case to shrink

THE MIRROR, Thursday 18 April 1996

The Scorchers says

Damien Dean was today found guilty of brutally murdering three young, innocent girls.

It was only as a result of the idiocy of our jury system – and the bungling of police – that he was not convicted of the hideous murders of three others.

Our hearts go out to the parents of those girls.

Although they are convinced of the animal Dean's guilt in all this, they may never be able to feel that justice served their loved ones. But The Scorchers and its readers will always remember the names of these innocent lambs who went to the slaughter and never knew justice:

Fiona McKeighley

Nicola Jones

Leslie Martin

The judge was so appalled by the case that he referred Dean for psychiatric reports, even after psychiatrists agreed that he was fit to stand trial in the first place. We have seen scum like Dean pretend to be mad before.

If he is declared insane, he could 'get well' in a few years time and then be on the streets to murder again.

Scum

Any decent person who has followed the case can only come one conclusion: Damien Dean is a cynical serial killer who preyed on and mutilated innocent young women and then invented a bizarre conspiracy to cover his tracks.

So the Scorchers has a message for the do-gooder, woolly liberals looking at this monster's case.

Don't be fooled. Then, we can all sleep safely in our beds.

Thursday 18 April 1996

PSYCHIATRIC REPORT

Damien Dean, dob 24.06.65

This report is prepared on the instruction of the Court where Damien Dean has been found guilty of three charges of murder. In addition to interviewing Mr Dean, I have seen the following documentation:

The pre-trial report prepared by Mr John Stone, Consultant Forensic Psychiatrist, Ashton Psychiatric Unit; the subject's medical, work and school records; and other sources, like police records where possible.

The direction of the court in requesting this report is to comment on the subject's mental condition, and suitability for treatment, if necessary, with regard to his sentencing for the above offences.

Family Background

Mr Dean was born into a working class background in Ironopolis, Ironside. There is little history concerning his early life, which he spent in various suburbs of Ironopolis until the age of ten. His father, Roger Dean, worked for ICI where he worked his way up until he set up his own chemical haulage company while his mother, Jean Dean, was a housewife before becoming the accountant/ secretary for subject's father's company. Mr Dean has one brother, John, who is two years younger than him.

Subject describes his parents' relationship as strong but is loathe to discuss his relationship with them further. He describes the years spent in Ironopolis as pleasant. Family life appears to have been 'not unusual' and Mr Dean seems to have developed a close relationship with his maternal grandmother, who looked after him when his parents were house-hunting, as they did frequently in his early years. Subject describes himself as 'an bit of an outsider', something he only realised when he was much older, as he moved around a lot when young and was unable to settle. When pressed, he describes his relationship with his parents as 'not much different from the usual lower middle class situation', which meant he 'got hit by his mother a lot more than was necessary' but this, he claims, was not excessive.

He claims that his relationship with his parents fell apart in his teens, when they wouldn't let him grow up and they 'crowd at' his failures, when he didn't take their advice (details are included below). He has not spoken to them since the early 1990s, after subject 'failed to honour a deal to train as an accountant' (see

Work History) and I have not attempted to interview them in connection with this case.

Academic History

When Mr Dean was ten, the family moved to Berkshire permanently as Mr Dean's father was in the process of expanding the family business. Subject spent a year at the Rosehill Middle School, where he says he was bullied and ostracised not just by the other children but by the teachers as well, who, he claims, 'spotted him as a victim'. When asked why teachers would do this, Mr Dean recounts a story of being hit by a male teacher when he was eleven, who left him with a small scar on his left buttock (which he showed me). Subject tried to complain to another teacher but was told 'not to tell tales'. There is no record of this incident in subject's medical or school records but he claims 'there wouldn't be, would there?'. He claims his mother told him not to make a fuss about the matter and his father was away at the time. Subject believes that the teachers disliked him because he was 'ugly, thick and spoke with a northern accent'.

Shortly after this, Mr Dean was sent to board at a minor, private school, the Licensed Taverner's Boys Preparatory, Hertfordshire, (LBPT) as his parents believed he would not pass the 12 plus, which still operated in Berkshire. They also thought that it would save him from being moved around again, when they moved house (they actually moved again, to Buckinghamshire, when subject was 12). Despite settling at LTBP and getting better grades than before, the subject was taken out of the school when his father's business began to fail in the late 1970s. He then passed the 12 plus to the Oliver Cromwell Grammar School, Buckinghamshire.

His school reports indicate that he was an unremarkable child who scraped into and stayed in the top stream doing as little academic work as possible. In these reports, various teachers raise concern over the fact he did not appear to fit in with the other children and was sometimes arrogant and churlish when told what to do. One report at the end of his fourth year in July 1981 records that he had become a troublemaker who undermined the work of the rest of the class.

Mr Dean says, he consciously became the 'class clown' at this point to try to ingratiate himself with his peer group, which resulted in him 'getting in with a bad crowd and getting a reputation'. His school records state that he co-operated with the school in a shoplifting enquiry in May 1981. When this was put to him, Mr Dean got angry for the first time in the interviewing process and refused to answer questions. Through my persistence, subject finally confessed that he had been stopped by a store detective but had had nothing on him. A friend, who had taken something, had run off. The shop had, apparently, phoned subject's parents and school. After a period of three days suspension with the agreement of his parents,

Mr Dean had finally told them the identity of his co-conspirator, who was punished in front of the school. (Much of this is supported by school records).

After that, subject claims he 'banished himself from mainstream society and never really returned'. Around the same time, his medical records indicate that he was prescribed medication for a nervous disorder (see Medical History below). He says he had to all intents and purposes a nervous breakdown, which he didn't overcome until well into his A-levels. During this time, he says he played truant so he could go home to paint and draw, while his mother was at work as an office administrator following the collapse of the family business. There is no record of the truancy in the school records but the subject claims that he was too clever to get caught.

Mr Dean appears to have had a natural talent for art. His paintings (which he has shown me) done from the age of eleven reveal what I believe is called a precocious talent (but see Psychiatric History below). At 16, he decided to concentrate on art but his father, he says, refused to support him through art college and he couldn't get a grant elsewhere because his father by this time earned too much in the City. He took this with good grace but stopped painting shortly after as a result of disillusionment and lack of time (see Psychiatric History below). He agreed to do accountancy after college as long as he could read English literature and art history at college. 'The world of books, texts and ideas saved me from the awfulness of an accountant's life', he told me proudly during the interview.

He says he worked hard at his A-levels but also began to socialise more, once he had discovered alcohol. In 1983, he did quite well in his A-levels but considers his grades of A in English, D in economics and C in history as an outright failure because he wanted to go to Oxford (where his closest friend went). When asked why he didn't do better, he claimed it was a combination of 'booze, birds and stress' (see Psychiatric History below). He took a year out which he appears to have spent living with a friend and signing on for benefits, when his parents believed he was abroad for the year.

In 1984, he found a place at Caledonia University in Edinburgh through clearing where he says he spent his first year 'drunk, stoned and friendless' (see Psychiatric History below). After that, he made friends through the university newspaper where he eventually became editor. He was forced to resign from this position after a female student, Katherine Manton, accused him of using his position to rape her, although the facts of the case are not clear and the university has refused to allow me access to their records of the incident. There is certainly no police record of this alleged incident (see Psychiatric History below).

Mr Dean left Caledonia in 1988 with a 2:1. He believes he was denied a first class degree by a lecturer who took a personal dislike to him. Mr Dean then

refused to go on an accountancy course, as he had agreed with his father, and went his own way. He tried first to persuade the university to let him do a thesis, then sought work in arts journalism, which he couldn't get because, he says, the field was 'too full of Oxbridge wankers'.

Work History

Mr Dean spent two years unemployed although he claims his time was spent writing a thesis about British comedy (although there is no documentary evidence of this). During this period, he was 'forced' on to a government training course in computer programming as it was 'better than having absolutely no dole money'.

Until this point, Mr Dean's version of events has been exaggerated but, generally, in accord with what I know from records and other accounts. From this point, his account varies widely from the records that have been made available to me, including his home office record of service. In fact, I think I am at liberty to comment that his story becomes fantastic and unreliable, although I stress there is no indication that this is a result of any recognisable, clinical disorder.

He refused to include this qualification on his CV, when applying for jobs as he didn't want to go into this field but claims to have enjoyed a period of 'hacking' for his own pleasure which he claims led to an incident with the police. There are no police records of this incident. Eventually, he was obliged to take a position as an administrative assistant in the home office or face having his benefits stopped completely (although he disputes this – see below). As he had at the time, he says, just finished an intense relationship with his alleged girlfriend (see Sexual History), he decided to accept a post, based in London as he no longer had a reason to live in Scotland.

According to his record of service, he was an unremarkable employee who, after having difficulty settling in, carried out his allotted tasks to standard but without enthusiasm until he was transferred to the Migration and Visa Department in January 1992. Here, Mr Dean had his first dispute with his line manager, Wendy Probit, who was later one of his victims. His work brought him into occasional contact with the police and the intelligence services (which, I believe, may have led to some of his more sensational claims in his defence).

After his move to MVD in Croydon, his work and his attendance became erratic so he was obliged to undergo an extra six months probation from October 1992. He appears to have held that a personality clash with Ms Probit was responsible for his adverse report rather than the standard of his work but it is not clear from the personnel file whether there was any substance to this allegation. On file, there was another formal complaint submitted by Ms Probit in September 1994, which does not appear to have been acted upon.

In 1992, Mr Dean also began to work with Amy Tuppham, another of his victims. She worked as the group secretary in MVD. Mr Dean formed a close relationship with her outside work until January 1995 when he was reprimanded for bringing in a packet of playing cards depicting scenes of urophilia. Subject admitted to having them and described them as 'piss shot' playing cards which he had picked up as a joke in Amsterdam (although he denied that he took them to work, claiming they were taken during a raid on his flat).

According to his record of service, Mr Dean was referred to a private hospital by a home office doctor in April 1995 after a period of regular absenteeism from work, which led to Mr Dean living rough and being arrested. I discovered this information on subject's home office file rather than in his medical records, which was slightly unusual. I have tried to contact the doctor who treated Mr Dean as the records of the medicinal treatment given to subject are not clear but the doctor has been posted abroad. It appears that as a result of his brief psychotic episode, which displayed the classic ideas of persecution, Mr Dean was prescribed thioridazine. His condition responded rapidly to this course of treatment, although Mr Dean claims he pretended to take the pills but in fact regurgitated them later, once the medical staff had gone. Mr Dean claimed he had been sent to a 'secret hospital by them'.

This episode prompted Mr Dean to recount the story he related in his defence in court, which lasted over two hours. He says he worked for a secret organisation; was involved in the death of a cabinet minister; helped in the enquiries to bring himself to justice; and was framed for crimes he did not commit by a mysterious ex-girlfriend who was in cahoots with the secret organisation. All of this is directly contradicted by the official record and is the clearest evidence of subject's tendency to fantasy. Again and again during the interview process, I explained that he would be better off telling the truth rather than spinning a tissue of lies in the mistaken belief that he would be declared insane. However, he continued with the story and I had not dissuaded him from this point of view when I decided that there was little else I could do but discontinue the sessions (see Behaviour at Interview).

Sexual History

There is no actual documentary evidence of anti-social sexual conduct (if we accept that the playing card incident was a badly judged prank) and subject was quite happy to discuss his sexual activity in detail.

Subject says that he was aware of sex from an early age but went out of his way to stress that he was not abused. He says he has masturbated at least three times a day, every day since the age of 13, frequently using pornography. He first had intercourse when he was fifteen and claims to have had 'a varied sex life', which included routine intercourse; giving and receiving oral intercourse; and some mild

bondage, until he stopped going out with her eighteen months later. He then describes sex as 'the usual combination of fumbles and one-night stands' which on closer examination meant that he had had full intercourse with another female of his age and had performed oral sex on a third.

At college, he met a female student in his second year but she stopped going out with him as a result of subject's requests for what he called 'non-routine sex' which he explained meant the kind of things discussed in the above paragraph. Apart from her, he only had occasional, brief relationships with females who he claims 'bored and underwhelmed him', particularly sexually, until he says he met Dolores Kane, the woman he accuses of the 'Red Fox' murders. With her, he claims to have rediscovered an 'obsession' (his word) with pornography. (Mr Dean is happy to confide that, until his time in prison, he still bought upwards of ten soft pornographic magazines a month. He shows no signs of guilt-associated psychosis over this).

Again, subject was a very plausible story teller who had convinced himself of the veracity of his tale. Again, there is no documentary or witness evidence to support his version of events. Given the sometimes sadistic nature of his stories here, the sexual excitement they are designed to generate and the subject's lack of sexual activity otherwise around this period, it seems likely that Kane is a creation of Mr Dean's over-active imagination and frustrated sexual drive.

I also read a police interview with a Ms Imogen Bowler-Clous, whom subject claimed to have gone out with. She told police that she had met Mr Dean on two occasions only, when he had attended a party at her flat with one of his friends who happened to be Ms Bowler-Clous's stockbroker and at the wedding of a mutual friend, both in late 1994. As if to authenticate his story, subject claims that he tried to push Ms Bowler-Clous into sexual activity but not, he claims, against her will. Given this as well, it seems likely that Dolores Kane is a fabrication based on a real person that Mr Dean once met.

Subject was also happy to talk about his sexual activity with Ms Charlotte Preston, the sister of one of subject's college friends who is some eight years subject's junior. According to a police interview, she has confirmed that she has had an on-off affair with Mr Dean since June 1990 but refused to discuss Mr Dean or his activities further with the police. This leads me to conclude that the substance of this story does appear to be true but I cannot comment on the detail as there is no corroborating information.

When asked if he had ever practised any other forms of sexual activity, he admitted to once receiving oral intercourse while drunk from a transvestite but denied otherwise being involved in homosexual or transvestite acts himself.

It is difficult to assess how far subject's sexual claims are honest and accurate as he boastfully discusses sexual matters. I believe his claims usually have some substance but are likely to be exaggerated and misleading, but in some cases are entirely fabricated. There is certainly no indication of psychosis resulting from sexual guilt or repression.

Previous Psychiatric/Medical History

There is no evidence of specific psychiatric or psychological disorders (apart from on subject's home office record) although there are indications on Mr Dean's Intimate Medical Record that he has suffered from nervous disorders, including asthma, eczema and hyperventilation, since shortly after moving to Reading when subject was ten.

At the age of sixteen, he was tested for various syndromes resulting from deficiency in concentration and/or leading to mild anti-social behaviour, like vandalism and shoplifting but subject was not found to have any clinical disorder. In his first year of college, he says he became 'very depressed' and regularly saw his GP but refused to take any prescribed drugs for his condition. At the time, subject says he was regularly drinking towards a hundred units of alcohol a week 'to cope' but never confided this to his GP. At this time, subject also abused other substances including cannabis (from the age of sixteen), amphetamines and amyl nitrate. In his second year, he gave up all these and devoted himself to the college newspaper while continuing to do well in his studies.

In May 1988, he started taking cocaine, he says, to cope with the stress of being accused of rape by a female student, a Ms Manton. The circumstances appear to indicate that it would have been date-rape, if indeed there was any non-consensual sex between her and the subject. When questioned, he reluctantly admitted that Ms Kane got him off the charge. (As I have said, there are no documentary details of this offence). Subject describes cocaine as 'the worst drug you could do, with an addictive personality like mine'. He claims he was encouraged to take it by Dolores Kane (see above). Mr Dean disputes cocaine itself is addictive but did admit to running up debts as a result of his and Kane's habit, which he says led to the end of their relationship (although they continued to see each other in London until March 1995).

I feel there is another matter I should raise in connection with subject's psychiatric history. Since being held on remand at HMP Belmarsh, subject has started painting again. He says he stopped at the age of eighteen as it was not worth doing if he couldn't do it properly. These recent paintings are violent, pornographic and harrowing, depicting scenes of forced sex and mutilation in minute detail. When asked about these, he retorted aggressively, 'They're only fucking paintings. They don't attack people. They don't kill people. And they don't wrongly put people in prison'. He accepts they are 'troubling' but refuses to

associate the word 'obscene' with them, stating that fatcat salaries, urban poverty and any form of injustice are the real obscenities in society.

Behaviour at interview

Mr Dean is a convincing narrator who conveys his passionate belief in the veracity of his tales to his listener. However, the documentary record shows that, despite his convincing demeanour, he is inclined to fabricate almost without realising he is doing it, what would be popularly called a 'Walter Mitty' or 'Billy Liar' syndrome. Otherwise, subject was polite, articulate and chatty. At one point, he even tried to start making me the subject of his questioning on the grounds that I had heard all about him but he knew nothing of my background and motivation.

The Offences

Mr Dean continues to maintain his innocence in every area, including the other murders where police decided not to proceed on lack of evidence and for fear of overly complicating the obvious cases they had against him. Subject speaks in almost theatrically moving terms of the victims, some of whom he knew well, particularly Amy Tuppham. He claims that Wendy Probit was probably the most odious human being he has ever met but 'no one deserves to die like that'.

Although this could be seen as a clinically sociopathic or psychopathic disorder, I have not observed any other symptoms in Mr Dean which are normally associated with these disorders. I fear that his refusal to accept his guilt will count against him in the prison system, although I suspect it will be a long time before he is considered eligible for parole.

Opinion and Recommendations

It is not suggested that Mr Dean is suffering from mental disorder notwithstanding that by today's diagnostic criteria he may be understood to have an anti-social personality disorder. The evidence of this is the presence of conduct disorder in his teenage years; the alleged pressuring of others into unorthodox sexual activity; and the intermittent history of theft and drug abuse.

There are certainly elements of paranoid delusion to his story, which have probably been induced by his consumption of proscribed drugs, particularly cocaine. Similarly, there are some symptoms of schizophrenia, like aural and olfactory hallucinations, but I cannot be sure that subject has not invented these symptoms to convince me of schizophrenia.

Mr Dean shows some signs as well as of obsessive compulsive disorder which he calls his 'addictive personality'. At one point, subject became quite agitated when awaiting a football result, which he claimed was 'a matter of life and death' as it had some bearing on whether his team, Ironopolis, were relegated or not. Again,

it is possible that this disorder informed his behaviour which led to him committing multiple murders. However, there is no clear evidence that Mr Dean has clinically diagnosable OCD.

In conclusion, Mr Dean is an extremely intelligent young man, like many multiple murderers, with an extremely active imagination and convincing demeanour. He appears to have embarked upon the murders to cope with his powerlessness in the face of parental and institutional authority and to cope with his jealousy at the success of friends who have rewarding professional jobs in the City, law and journalism. He never changed his story during the interviewing process but at the same time never admitted any responsibility or guilt in the matter. It is my assessment that he did carry out the murders when suffering from long term depression, induced by the consumption of drugs, but that this does not constitute a recognisable clinically diagnosable state (and is certainly not a defence in law). There is therefore no need and certainly little potential benefit in any treatment. He is clever enough to have invented his story. He knows he now has to maintain it as his best defence against murder. In addition, he knows enough to be able to express regret at the fate of his victims even if he does not accept responsibility for their murders.

Importantly, he does not exhibit any of the behaviours associated with psychopathy or sociopathy. It is therefore my recommendation that Mr Dean is fit to be sentenced and to serve his term without treatment and in a non-specialist facility.

Mr Richard Randall MB ChB MRPsych DPM

Consultant Forensic Psychiatrist

Director of Medical Services

Approved under Section 12(2) of the Mental Health Act 1983

24th April 1996



THE SCORCHER, Thursday 2 May 1996

Ironopolis stay up in **last match of season**

THE CITIZEN, Monday 7 May 1996

Woman killed on Leith Links

- **Witnesses see redhead near murder scene**
- **Police rule out any links to Red Fox case**

THE BAGPIPE, Thursday 11 July 1996

Ironopolis top Premier League

THE RECORD ON SUNDAY, 27 October 1996

Standing by her Man

Damien told me that if he had had the courage he would have taken his own life after being sentenced to at least 25 years for a crime he insists he did not commit. Instead, he is now researching a history of Ironopolis’.

Town or football club?

‘Both,’ as Damien believes the economics of the area are affected by the success of the football team. He currently believes he is going to get out as Ironopolis are doing well. He longs to go to the new *Webnet Docklands Park Stadium*. He wants to see them play when top of the league.”

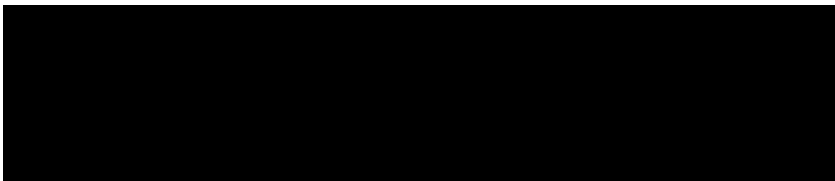
From an interview with Charlotte Preston, GLOSSIE, October 96

Body found ‘mutilated’ in the Park

THE STANDARD, Tuesday 19 November 1996

Ironopolis slump to bottom of the league

THE CITIZEN, Thursday 25 February 1997



THE BUGLE, Tuesday 23 March 1997

On a Whim and a Prayer

This week Ironopolis have won an FA Cup quarter final and a Coca Cola Cup semi-final, each for the first time.

Meanwhile, an innocent man whose principle pleasure is football continues to be denied that pleasure because the home secretary refuses to re-open his case, even though two more people have been killed *in exactly the same way as those murdered by the Red Fox*.

This week *The Scorchers* has tried to pour scorn on our campaign branding us as out of touch liberals who are soft on criminals. Well, I've got something to tell all their claimed 14 million readers: you are morons. The editor of the paper which claims to love its readers actually despises you all.

He went to Harrow where, despite his expensive education, he got no more than two O-levels, one in art and one in woodwork. After that, he drifted around after being kicked out of jobs on serious newspapers because he was too thick and too lazy.

Now, he peddles crap to morons. And does not have the common decency to recognise that a man's liberty is more important than a pathetic newspaper circulation war, which swells an already bloated editor's obscene share options.

The Preston Front, The Sunday Citadel, 2 March 1997

Transvestite found dead in Pink Cat Club in Soho

The Daily Digest, Friday 14 March 1997

Dean case referred to Court of Appeal

THE SUNDAY CITADEL, 20 April 1997

After missing Ironopolis's defeat in the Coca Cola Cup final and their nail-biting FA Cup semi-final victory, Damien Dean is determined to be out of prison for the Cup Final at Wembley on 17 May. Lighting his third cigarette of the interview, Dean draws on it, like his last breath depends on it, gesticulates wildly, mock-heroically even, then speaks quickly and excitedly about the unaccountable forces of the state which have forced him to miss Ironopolis's historic run in both cups this season. 'You know what?' he states, fixing my gaze, 'I spent nearly 16 years of my life waiting for that FA Cup quarter final victory and even longer for our first trip to Wembley. I just cannot f***** believe that I wasn't there when it happened. That's what pisses me off more than anything. Now, of course, I'm at the mercy of bureaucrats. F***** bureaucrats will decide whether I see the Iros play in their first FA Cup Final.'

Taken from an interview with Damien Dean in HMP Belmarsh
THE SUNDAY CITADEL MAGAZINE, 27 April 1997

Ironopolis are relegated

THE GUARDIAN, Monday 12 May 1997

New evidence makes conviction 'unsafe'

**DEAN
GOES
FREE**

**THE SCORCHER,
Tuesday 13 May 1997**

In an astonishing move, the Court of Appeal yesterday freed Damien Dean who was convicted of the brutal murders of three women over a year ago.

The Court said that it was not happy with a number of aspects of the police investigation into Dean, now 31, and the conduct of the trial.

By Scott McLeod

It said that the police had withheld evidence about the murder of Xabel Bontempi in September 1994, which bore many similarities to the so-called 'Red Fox' murders. It has now become apparent that her body went missing during the enquiry.

A key defence witness, Ms Charlotte Preston, 24, who has also campaigned for Dean's release, was threatened by investigating officers, if she spoke in defence of Dean. Ms Preston persuaded what was once seen as a potential victim of the Red

Fox, a Ms Delilah Day, that Dean's and other's actions towards her were 'a stupid prank gone wrong'.

The Court was also concerned that three more women had been murdered using the methods of the Red Fox since Dean's conviction.

These methods were never made public during the trial and the later murders occurred in the same areas where the Red Fox operated before Mr Dean's conviction.

**My prison hell:
Damien Dean speaks to
your super, soaraway
Scorcher exclusively -
pages 2, 3, 6, 7 and Our
View, page 8**

Ex-Rag editor finally cleared

It was party time last week on The Rag when Damien Dean, editor until four months ago who graduated with a 2:1 in English in July, was finally cleared of an allegation of rape made last May by Katherine Manton, now in her final year and a former deputy chair of the Women's Group.

The key witness in the anonymous witness, a case has asked to remain anonymous but it is understood that she gave evidence contrary to Ms Manton's which supported that of Mr Dean. One night in May this year, Ms Manton met Mr Dean in the Rag's office on the pretext of wishing to discuss an article in the paper, information which is not disputed by either of the two parties involved in this case like the information that they had sex in the rag office. After that no one knew what happened really until the

anonymous witness, a former friend of Ms Manton and now it is thought Mr Dean's co-habitant and partner somewhere in Fife, told university officers that she saw the sex between the two and Ms Manton had led Mr Dean on, supporting Mr Dean's story but against Ms Manton's claim that she was raped at the time.

Mr Dean has graduated but has asked to do a post-graduate degree even though he got a 2:1 because the stress of the case got to him.

By Jake Laurenson

The university has refused, citing Mr Dean's lack of commitment to course work because he worked for the Rag for much of his time at the university.

'I' feel vindicated and am glad this is all over," Mr Dean said last week at a party in the Rag office where he finally got hold of the Scottish Student Editor of the Year 1988 award. 'There' are no winners in this whole affair but justice has been done."

THE RAG, Fresher's Week Edition, 30th September 1988

Book 9

**‘This’ll take you
where you wanna go’**

Out

It's been a **confusing** week. It started with me walking out of the Court of Appeal last Wednesday, my systems overloaded, crashing as a result of the unfamiliar chemistry and electricity **which** surged through my clean, efficient but under-used Pentium II processor.

I was blinded by the white light of day, the white light of freedom, the white light of my future. And I cried. I know that I saw daylight nearly every day in prison but it was muted then. All the category As (of which I was one) were allowed only an hour out of our cells in the exercise yard each day. Fights often broke out as the vast majority of the lags were looking at the wrong end of 20-odd years for offences like cocaine smuggling; armed robbery, serial rape and terrorism. They had no real reason to fear prison sanctions. Among them, I felt as out of place as I was among the sons and daughters of doctors and lawyers who I met at college and in the Organisation.

Until the day I got out, I hadn't taken a drug since I was arrested over two years ago. I knew I had to be a model prisoner as some screw would no doubt have leaked any of my misdemeanours to the squabbling tabloids, adding grist to the mill that they were then using to grind 'the impeccably middle class boy' into tinier and finer pieces, over and over again. Yes, I was clean when I got out. But not for long.

As I broke down in the last-match-at-the-Foundry-Ground cauldron atmosphere of the cheering crowd, Charlie – like the shopkeeper from Mr Benn – appeared from nowhere. She threw her delicate almost puny arms around me and squeezed me for all she was worth. Even during her prison visits, such contact had been denied me by over-zealous guards who I refused to bribe. As I burrowed into her neck, I inhaled the pheromones which clung to her like some new age aura and felt the immediate aggro and anger evaporate like liquid nitrogen from the door of a blast furnace. Even Charlie, looking more self-assured and career woman than ever, felt like she would snap in my strong embrace. She then slipped me a tiny white pill and said: 'This'll take you where you wanna go', the words of an old rasta we'd once bought some gear off in some god-forsaken suburb of Wolverhampton. Only that night at my Welcome Back party, did I find it was Ecstasy although I suspected throughout the day it was some new designer chemical tailored to our expectations of life in the late twentieth century. And I have to concur – it really does make you a better person.

I don't want to talk about my time inside. Except to say Seamus O'Facherty was the only real friend I made there, the same Seamus O'Facherty I helped put away only months before leaving the Organisation. He's doing a degree in English literature or rather literature written in English, specialising in Irish writers. He plugged me time and time again for details of others who worked for the Organisation but I had to admit that the addresses and telephone numbers of personnel were closely guarded. I confess that I did give him details of how the Organisation went about its operational business, which I strongly suspect were passed back to the RA. I never told Seamus that I had put him away though.

As always Ironopolis were there, a Greek chorus in the background, an emotional weathervane, a sometimes bamboozling narrator. Three days after getting out of prison, I saw them play at Wembley for the first time. That is, the first time for me. I missed their first appearance on the hallowed turf in the Coca Cola Cup final a month earlier. They lost that, of course, just as they lost the FA Cup Final, as seemed inevitable. Still, I can't complain too much as I've just finished a piece on the final for some new footie mag, for which they will pay me a grand, once it's published. Irony really, considering the offers I've rejected, since I got out, to write articles on the Organisation.

The tabloids have, of course consistently carped from the sidelines that I'm guilty – especially the ones I refused to talk to – despite the conviction being quashed while the polis have made every effort to get me back inside on my computer fraud conviction. To make matters worse, Charlie thought I'd done it. After the trial, she had thought I was guilty, thought I really was the Red Fox. I only found out because I accused her of not coming to my aid when I was first convicted, on our way to the Welcome Back party in her flashy yellow Renault *Megane Cabriolet*.

- There was overwhelming evidence that you might have been a serial killer, she replied matter of factly. – Did you know what that did to me?
- Didn't you follow the trial? I raged at her. – You knew I had gone out with Imogen – you were the only person on my side who saw us properly together. You must remember that squash weekend when I was robbed. And your brother Syd's wedding.
- Syd told me you were after Imogen but she wasn't so keen so I just humoured you. Anyway, you hardly spoke to her either of those weekends.
- Humoured me? Jesus X. What about all that time that you tried to convince me she was having affairs and the like.
- I just wanted you to stop going after her.
- Didn't you think it a little bizarre we used to argue about her and I used to say what I'd done with her?
- Look, Damien. I didn't want to tell you this but Jason and I were let off that kidnapping charge, only if we didn't use our information to support you and let the *guilty* get away with it. I was shit scared. It was only when I managed to get Delilah Day to agree that the whole crazy episode with her was a prank that I could really come to your defence. Once there was no chance of her pursuing charges, I knew I could expose the police position and defend you without being at risk.
- Jesus X, Charlie...

- And Jason and I were the only two who ever saw you with Imogen or who you had briefed about the whole affair. We slipped through their cover-up, just like your name on the police database. But we had to be stopped. There was nothing I could do. I mean, I was so scared they were going to just kill us or something.

After that, I really was prepared for anything. I thought. Until last Sunday. We were moving the few possessions I own into Charlie's flat off the Kings Road when I accidentally lifted up the base of the boot of her *Megane Cabriolet*, where the spare tyres are kept. In the well of the spare was a *red wig*. Just like that red wig.

- Charlie, I enquired innocently as she struggled to the door of her flat, a binliner in each hand, – did you happen to murder anyone and forget about it?

Charlie turned round as slowly as Windy Miller. I then produced the now slightly tatty wig from behind my back and let it hang there like a dead fowl I had bagged earlier.

- Damien, she scolded, – the police still have the wig used by the murderer. And anyway, you dullard, I was attacked by the murderer or his accomplice. Don't you remember, Damien, that I spent a week in hospital as a result?
- So how come you have a red wig?
- I like it. It re-invents me. It makes a change when I go somewhere I'm not known. Don't you remember I put on that one, years ago at your place?
- Surely such a place where you're not known has yet to be invented.

Then she stopped, looked me in the eyes and said:

- Why don't I wear it next week when we go to *The Groucho Club*?

I paused then she whispered, like the bad angel in a cartoon: – how mental are you, Damien?

I know this is sick but I said yes. A couple of minutes later the Kathrine Manton issue came up and we nearly had our first argument proper since my release. (Charlie keeps joking we'll be like John McCarthy and Jill Morrel: as soon as he got out, they stopped going out). Charlie disappeared into the study, rummaged around, marched up to me and slapped down an old copy of the Rag. She'd done her research all right. I picked up the rather sorry looking newspaper and briefly gloated, hoping no one would think it was one of the editions where I was in charge.

- You got away with it, didn't you? All along you knew who Manton was and you didn't tell anyone because she tried to stitch you up for rape.
- What did you expect me to do? I didn't know whether you'd understand.
- Damien, you lied to me.
- It had nothing to do with the Red Fox. The Organisation knew it had happened and used it to freak me out. Kathrine Manton fuckin well stitched me up.
- You still lied.
- I didn't.
- You did by omission.
- Didn't!

- Did!!
- Didn't!!!

With that, we fell into each other's arms laughing and kissing, blaming the *e-downer* for the incipient row.

But I had my very worst shock, yesterday. I was easing my way to climax with a quick one off the wrist, frantically flipping through *Velvet*, my new favourite wankmag, when I just stopped and wilted. There she was, lounging back dressed only in a black elegant choker and a pair of crimson stilettos, coyly pouting at the camera – and by extension, me – with a cigarette in one hand and her left breast in the other. Dolores. I examined the next few immaculate, glossy pages in detail but there could be no doubt, no denial. It was her. She even appeared under the pet name that I once used for her, Haze. After, of course, Dolores Haze. I showed it to Charlie who has started using her contacts to try to track her down through the magazine but we've had no luck yet. Still, it's a lead.

Apart from that, I think the world is great these days. Without me, it's become my kind of town. Real pornography is simultaneously more sordid and more glamorous. The pseudo pornography of the mainstream media has become spicily more fetishist while clubs everywhere seem to have a rubber or leather night. On normal nights, these days, most of the women look like whores in their leopard-print micros, tight, low-cut Lycra tops and leather boots. But I'm not complaining. Drugs are ubiquitous and have never been easier to get. The quality of Ecstasy, I'm told, is back to its 1980s standard while grass has replaced hash as the preferred puff of the UK dopehead. They even grow it in this country now, apparently, in vast warehouses nurtured by ultra violet light and hydroponics. The effect is trippy; without the sluggishness of hash; and much, much more intense.

A secret report leaked to today's Times claims the National Audit Office has established that billions of pounds of taxpayers' money has gone missing from the overall intelligence agencies' budget over the years. Of course, the government is 'looking into the matter'" but will not say any more for 'national' security reasons'. Meanwhile, the Organisation goes about its everyday business so I am careful never to be in possession of drugs. For fear of kidnap, I try to be with other people at all times. Charlie's not working for a couple of weeks, as she's a freelance now, so I spend most of my time making love, devising my media strategy, laughing and generally catching up with her.

She's just getting changed at this moment for that party at *Groucho's* I mentioned. I'm meeting her meejah friends but some of my mates will be there, including my brother Jimmy, Jason Conscript, Sparky Bobe, Baldboy, Jake Laurenson and, even Syd Preston. I learnt that his marriage had fallen apart while I was inside. But I didn't know the real reason why. According to Charlie, Syd was caught in flagrante with Imogen. Yes, good old Imogen. What I'd give to meet her up a dark alley, one day. She and Syd had been having an affair even when I was going out with her. Once Patty was out of the way (and had taken Syd to the cleaners) they bought some pile in Gloucestershire. At one point, I was tempted to go around there and give Imogen a piece of my mind but I've now decided that would look unseemly, especially if Syd were there. Still, he's having my sloppy seconds, although I hope I don't get too pissed tonight and remind him of that. I can't wish him any ill will though.

Simon Register hasn't spoken to me at all, not since that fateful day with Delilah. And he didn't actually have a chance to say very much then. I tried to stay in contact with him but he just ignored my letters. I've even invited him tonight but I doubt he will turn up. We all strongly suspect that Delilah has locked her claws into him and won't let him go until he agrees to slip a wedding band on her finger.

Charlie steps into her bedroom – our bedroom, now – and twirls in a forest green cocktail dress. She is wearing that wig. Her make-up is heavy. I can't keep my hands off her. We hug and grope but she chides me slightly as we are already late. I've got the protection of the media behind me now but I'd feel safer if the Organisation wasn't still there going about its everyday business unchecked. In my heart of hearts, I know the only reason I am still alive is because they want me to be. For what I don't know.

But what can I do, a humble lower-middle class boy who belongs neither to the home counties, nor the metropolis nor the town where he was born?

And then God rested

Amen

If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book:

And if any man shall take away from the words of this book, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.

And if any man impede the dissemination of the content of this book, I will visit upon him the severest penalties under the Law.