

Thicker than water

By

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I have lied, cheated, stolen, even murdered. But I am not a villain. A tragically flawed hero perhaps; tragic in the strictest classical sense, by which I mean a defect within my own nature is responsible for my downfall.

To the world I am a success, well connected and apparently wealthy but in a few moments I will kill myself. It will not be a particularly messy suicide, very clinical as these things go, and not at all tawdry, no vomit on the pillow or faeces across the bedspread. But there will be blood. A tiny trickle, not more than a few teardrops I daresay.

My suicide is an act of ritual; a thing of resonance and it brings us both, my friend and I, full circle in our Danse Macabre, that strange waltz we began what seems a lifetime ago.

Prologue

There's a boy on the back seat of a large, old car. There's a brother too, older, sullen and twitchier; an elegant mother weeping silently in the passenger seat, and the father at the wheel, driving through the rain with a grim, fixed expression.

Scotland was way behind them now. Scotland was gone for good. There had been no long walks along the Spey this time, no trips to the tea shops of Oban for drop scones with home made jam and thick clotted cream, only a joyless dislocated house full of silent rooms and brooding dust sheeted shapes - the ghosts of furniture. And an excruciating parade at the bedside of a withered, petulant crone. She'd stretched out a desperate bony claw to clutch frantically at the hand of the boy, as though the touchstone of his young flesh might prolong her life another hour or two. Her grip had proved surprisingly strong and her gleaming nails had pinched him. He'd been drawn inexorably towards her mouth for a final terrifying kiss. Bad breath always frightened him; bad breath, sweat stinks, adult smells; the odour of corruption and death.

He knew that the vain old woman had prepared herself for this moment with the careful application of her favourite coral-pink lipstick. Her ancient face had been rendered artificially whiter with powder like a Pierrot, and there had been a spot of rouge on each cheek. But most grotesque, most terrifying of all, had been the wig; squirrel-red and utterly unconvincing. The boy had wondered why anyone would want to meet their God looking like Coco the Clown. But the old woman had never been known for her sense of the absurd, and the abiding shameful memory that the boy carries with him as the car speeds back down the M1 is of that improbable hairpiece slipping to one side and he, laughing his final farewell to his imperious grandmother; a great snotting, sniggering guffaw that would never be forgiven.

His brother had laughed too but the blame, typically will lie with him.

The elder brother sits beside him on the back seat, perhaps sensing his unhappiness and, always willing to shovel on another stratum of misery, brings his closed fist down hard onto the boy's knuckles - it's a preemptive strike in the game of 'Raw Meat.'

The boy responds with a sullen poke. The poke is answered by a jab to the solar plexus. The conflict escalates into a flurry of open handed uncoordinated blows to the face and neck. An intense battle of quiet desperation takes place across the faded and scabby blue-black leather back seat. Cheeks and nose are the prime targets, balls being as yet of little significance since neither brother had yet discovered the pain or pleasure of this particular region.

The mother's arm appears to curl around the front seat at an improbable angle. As though some hideous, angry viper in a gold collar had been dropped into the back seat it lashes out, not with venom, but hard ringing slaps to exposed thighs.

The mother twists her body round in the seat to face them now. For a moment the boy almost feels sorry for her. She looks utterly weary and there are still tears on her cheeks.

'For Christ's sake,' she says. 'For Christ's sake, enough now.'

This is the first time in his life that the boy has heard her take the Lord's name in vain. The brothers are suitably impressed, and for a while, the back seat is at peace once again.

But.

It's not really over. Like the trick of idiots savant, the brothers are capable of keeping an automatic mental tally of who has done what to whom and who has landed the most telling punches down to the last blow. There's a fizzing malice in the expression of this elder brother as he glowers across the back seat. He has come off worst by precisely two blows, not including the extra slap from the

mother which stings pride as much as flesh. He waves a threatening finger; nothing has been forgiven or forgotten.

Without warning, the brother launches a raid and begins to strangle. This isn't fun. This is a focused attack on the boy's air supply. He's too small and weak to defend himself, or so he believes. But somehow, amazingly, two arms emerge from his shoulders with strength enough to shove the brother away. Only it's way too hard. It's a double-handed blow that knocks him heavily against the door. And to his horror the door springs open - it is after all, an old car. The boy just has time to register the look of shock and disappointment on the brother's face as he tumbles silently onto the slick, glistening tarmac at 73 miles per hour.

Bernard Baxter sat brooding in the Lair, his comfortable one bedroom flat on the top floor of the ivy-clad Victorian-Gothic pile that was Thackeray's House. Though it was an Indian summer, a log fire crackled in the grate to ward off the evening chill. Nights like these reminded him of his native Scotland. He studied the flames through the multiple facets of his cut glass tumbler before sipping at the peaty Talisker. Soon he became aware of the shadows beginning to gather round him like ink-spill on a boy's blotter and switched on a nearby Tiffany lamp. Tomorrow, he would assuredly recheck the wiring.

A soft amber glow illuminated framed photographs on the corner table. His newish girlfriend Miriam, considered them morbid and badgered him to throw them out but the collection was sacrosanct; a shrine to his late wife, Brenda. There in the dark-wood frame was a snapshot of Brenda skiing, in that one Brenda cycling, in another, skating. He selected the photo of the two of

them hill-walking in the Cuillins and scrutinised it. It was on that wonderful Isle-of-Skye holiday that he'd developed his taste for the Talisker malt, a tippie he now enjoyed a little more frequently than was good for him. In a way it had been her passion for hill-walking that had led to her death.

Across the room the bottle-green armchair lurked in the shadows like a huge toad. That chair...he could almost see Brenda sitting there now, struggling with the laces of her muddy tramping boots, just as she had on that fateful evening.

He replaced the photo, wondering for the thousandth time if there was anything he could have done to prevent it.

They'd returned late on a Sunday night, still bundled in their damp gear after a weekend up in the Lake District. Bernard had fixed the fire in the grate before pouring a couple of large and well-deserved drams. He'd filled the electric foot spa with warm water and mixed in the Epsom Salts. It bubbled and whirled with the promise of bliss as he'd bent to pull off Brenda's water-logged woolen socks. He loved to watch her face as she plunged her aching blistered feet into the soothing broth. This time though, she'd grimaced. Her features coalesced into an ugly rictus. Water strobed, fluorescing with an eerie green glow. No scream. Just an odd, abbreviated mewling sound. Bernard reached out, touched her quivering shoulders. A judder, like falling chest-first down a flight of stairs.

Nothing.

Bernard woke in hospital to bad news.

The stench of charred flesh, like roast pork, pervaded The Lair for weeks but he'd stubbornly refused to be moved.

They later discovered the wiring had been faulty and some three thousand Ling-Hua electric foot spas were recalled. The UK distributor, faced with a massive lawsuit simply dissolved, disappearing like Brenda's Epsom Salts. Over in Taiwan the manufacturers simply stonewalled the British Board of Trade and passed the responsibility back onto their now defunct distributors. Baxter had raged at the impotence of his government until one afternoon in the Master's Common Room, the Senior physics master pointed out realistically and not at all unkindly: 'they've washed their ruddy hands of it old chap, they've just washed their hands of the whole thing.' This may have been true, but the ghastly and embarrassed silence which greeted the observation suggested that it might have been better phrased. At any rate, Baxter never mentioned the tragedy again in public.

He now found himself glaring across at the empty armchair. One of these days he'd drag it down to the dump at the bottom of the playing fields and set light to the fucker. See how it liked that. But not yet. Not for a while yet.

'So,' muttered Baxter as he refilled his tumbler and toasted the photo of Brenda in a bright red Kagool at the foot of The Old Man of Coniston, 'what am I to do about that little shit, Cole, my love?'

Hammond was late for gym. That Welsh psycho, Evans-the-Physical would no doubt paddle him with his purpose-built, flat wooden bat unless he got a move on. It wasn't the pain, so much as the humiliation. He was after all, a Lower Sixth former, but Evans would still paddle him in front of the entire gym team if he were late. It didn't seem to matter to Evans that what he was doing was illegal, Evans-the-Physical had no time for the niceties of hierarchy or school protocol; he'd paddle anyone if they failed to measure up. Legend had it that he'd even planked the Head Boy a few years ago. Hammond shuddered at the thought as he sprinted through the cloisters towards the changing

rooms. Too late he noticed the figure of Baxter examining one of the house notices on the Cloister Boards as he turned the corner.

Hammond skidded to a halt, but the metal tips attached to the soles and heels of his shoes betrayed him and sent him skittering across the uneven, ancient tiles of the cloister floor. He landed heavily on his elbow and a painful jolt of electricity shot up his arm. At the same time a rolled up copy of Mayfair fluttered from his inside jacket pocket. Baxter was quick to spot it; too quick for Hammond. He swooped down and scooped it up while Hammond lay there nursing his injury.

‘I think I’ve shattered my Funny Bone, sir.’

‘Nonsense, boy.’

‘No seriously, sir, I might have fractured it.’

Baxter examined the contraband magazine; scrutinising improbably pneumatic breasts and buttocks while Hammond writhed on the floor.

‘Explain.’

‘I landed on my elbow, sir. On the tip of the funny bone, it’s like a horrible electric shock, sir.’

Baxter brandished the magazine. ‘Your command of human biology leaves a great deal to be desired. Explain this, boy.’

‘That sir? Mayfair sir?’

‘Yes, “Mayfair Sir”. What are you doing with it?’

‘Improving my command of human biology, sir.’

‘That will get you an hour in the Detention room this Saturday. Would you care to try for another?’

Hammond decided that the game was up. ‘Cole lent it to me sir.’

The housemaster's heart skipped a beat. ‘Cole, you say?’

‘Yes, sir, scholarship kid in the Fifth.’

‘I know perfectly well whom he is,’ snapped Baxter imprecisely. ‘This is his, you say?’

‘He lent it to me for the afternoon, it’s a new issue, just in. Hardly used, one previous owner – a little old lady in fact. So he says.’

‘You mean there are more of these in school?’

‘Oh, yes, sir, from “The Pornocopia”. It’s like a lending library of Jazz-Mags. Sorry, sir, smutty magazines.’

‘Where’s Cole now?’

‘Um, I think he does Army Cadet Corps on Thursday afternoons. You’ll probably find him in the Armoury, sir.’

‘I shall of course be confiscating this,’ said Baxter, rolling up the magazine. ‘Get along now, no running.’

Hammond walked quickly towards the vaulted doors at the end of the cloisters relieved to have escaped relatively unscathed from his ordeal.

‘Humerus boy - your Humerus, do try to remember that,’ shouted Baxter at the departing boy’s back.

‘Am I, sir?’ Hammond waved back ingratiatingly as he reached the doors leading to the open air. Wanker, he thought.

Geoff Williams, Junior Physics master and Territorial Army Captain stood, arms akimbo outside the Armoury facing a motley line of listless boys in ex Second World War British Army battledress.

Unlike his charges, who made do with ill-fitting khaki blouses, trousers and puttees, Williams sported the most up-to-date combat clothing, purchased at his own expense by mail order

from an Army Surplus warehouse in East London. He wore a parachute helmet with chinstrap, parachute smock and olive green fatigue trousers with knife-edge creases. His jump boots were American Special Forces style, high laced and polished to a mirror finish. The smock was perhaps a few sizes too small, stretched tightly across his gut, but that was one of the drawbacks of using mail order.

Williams was in the process of briefing his platoon on the finer points of close order drill when Baxter arrived, breathless and verging on hysterical. The housemaster waved the assembled ranks aside and waded straight in: 'Cole. Where is he?'

Williams was fiercely territorial and disliked other masters interfering with his authority, which he considered absolute whenever the boys were wearing the Queen's uniform. Moreover, he viewed the Armoury as hallowed ground; he was buggered if Baxter was going to just march in without a by your leave and so moved into the doorway, his solid bulk barring the way.

'Who goes there?' was all he could think of to say.

Baxter, the taller of the two men looked down his nose at the junior master. He considered Williams ludicrous: a fat little dictator strutting around in his outfits and aviator sunglasses, El Presidente of some banana republic.

'Don't be absurd. I need to speak with Cole, immediately.' He waved his fingers dismissively in Williams' face.

'Not possible. Quartermaster, Acting-Lance-Corporal, Cole is busy at present on important duties.'

'What can possibly be more important than a request from a colleague?'

'That's classified.'

'Look, he's probably pilfering your fractions or ratios or whatever you call them, even as we speak.' He brandished the rolled up magazine for emphasis.

‘Rations,’ corrected Williams.

‘Just let me past, will you.’

Williams drew himself up to his full five-foot-five-and-a-half and sucked in his gut.

‘I regret to inform you, Mr Baxter, but on Thursday afternoons and indeed any time we wear the uniform, the troops and I are subject to the authority of Her Majesty’s Armed Forces which overrides that of the School. Also, for your information, the Armoury is a highly restricted area.’

Williams held up his arm to underline the fact that the way was barred. The boys began to titter nervously.

‘I’m sorry, there are weapons in there, I can’t permit you to enter.’

Baxter could see that they were fast becoming a laughing stock. He gazed down at Williams' podgy face under the ridiculous steel pot to find the man actually grinning at his discomfort. Patience finally snapping he made to push Williams' arm away from the doorframe. Williams was ready though. Moving surprisingly fast for a fat man he gripped Baxter’s wrist with both hands and twisted, yanking the man off balance. Baxter instantly dropped the rolled up magazine and sprawled on the ground.

Hugely pleased with his unexpectedly successful martial arts maneuver, Williams returned to his previous stance, legs apart, arms akimbo. He addressed the boys:

‘Now that was a perfect demonstration of how to neutralise an assailant armed with a knife. Dodds, I hope you’re paying attention.’

‘It was a smutty magazine you idiot, not a knife.’ Baxter sat on the tarmac ruefully nursing his wrist.

The smirking Williams released his helmet chinstrap and offered his hand.

‘I gave you fair warning, Mr Baxter.’

Baxter gazed up at him. That was his career over, Baxter thought with no small satisfaction.

Williams's feet wouldn't touch the ground when the headmaster and governors got to hear of this.

Williams turned to wink at his assembled cadets. It was his way of showing what a blokey, relaxed kind of master he was, but it was the final indignity for Baxter. As if it weren't enough for this ridiculous pipsqueak to physically humiliate him in front of the boys, he was now behaving as though it were all some kind of a joke; actually inviting the boys to laugh. Indeed, many of the boys were already smirking.

On instinct, the enraged Baxter lunged at the crotch-piece of Williams' combat smock and squeezed hard. Williams's head snapped round as he doubled up in agony. The brand-new para helmet flew from his head, olive green paint finish cracking as it bounced across the concrete.

'My helmet!' shrieked Williams.

'I'll twist your bloody helmet and your balls off too,' snarled Baxter, hanging on like a Pit-Bull Terrier.

The two masters thrashed and kicked on the ground. The boys, as they would for any good scrap, gathered round and roared encouragement.

'What's all this then?' Cole stood in the open doorway in fitted battledress, on the right shoulder of which was a single, pristine white stripe.

The fighting stopped. In a bizarre reversal of roles, the scrapping adults had been brought to their senses by a schoolboy.

'Chocolate anyone?' asked Cole holding out a green Compo Ration can full of confectionary.

Williams leapt to his feet, instantly moving through a sequence of martial-arts stances. Baxter ignored him, dusted himself off and still almost incoherent with rage, shook his finger at Cole. ‘I want a word with you, a word about the filth.’

‘Filth, sir?’

The acting-lance-corporal watched Baxter in a curiously detached way as the man straightened his shirt and tie.

‘You know very well. The filth you’re distributing around the school.’

Cole selected a barley sugar from the tin. ‘And what filth would that be, sir?’ He slowly unwrapped it.

‘Pornographic magazines. Here...’ Baxter cast about in a frenzy but the smutty magazine and treasured Para helmet had both disappeared; spirited away in the course of the melee.

Charles Russell Fellowes backed slowly away from the crowd outside the Armoury. He’d arrived at the tail-end of the excitement, at which point Cole had seen him stoop and skillfully pocket the offending magazine in one fluid movement. Now those same sharp eyes examined the departing figure with interest. This Fellowes was small for his age; compact, nothing striking, but easy on the eye. Fair, wavy hair worn just over the top of his collar, hazel eyes, slightly upturned nose and a complexion clear of acne and pubescent sheen. And curiously, no earlobes to speak of. He wore the blue and silver striped tie of Thackeray’s House but the standard uniform of brown herringbone wool jacket and charcoal trousers, seemed annoyingly elegant on him; almost dapper. A remote, almost melancholy figure, Fellowes was left largely to his own devices by the other boys in the Fifth. Yet he was well regarded by the seniors, many of whom, treated him with amused

condescension. Under the complicated and unwritten conventions of Slatters' society, Fellowes was understood to be protected. He had influence of one sort or another; a family finger on one of the complicated levers of power somewhere along the line. Cole made a mental note to pay a visit later. Like any good retailer he knew a potential customer when he saw one.

The Hog, Frederick Blair Hogarth M.A. hons, was bored now. He'd never really enjoyed Baxter but had a certain respect for him and latterly even a little sympathy, but this obsession with the Cole boy was becoming tedious.

'Inferior stock, headmaster. He's a guttersnipe and a bad influence. What's more, I believe his contemporaries in the House are frightened of him.'

The Hog leaned back in the red leather button-backed chair and tried to appear interested, 'He's not large for his age, I can't believe that you're suggesting he's a bully, surely?'

'Not as such, Headmaster, but he's well treated by the older boys and frankly, I don't like what I see. He's almost certainly peddling pornography and alcohol, or worse.'

'Would you feel more comfortable if he was being mistreated by those above him Bernard? Is that what you're saying?'

'That's not it at all, headmaster. You're putting words in my mouth.'

Hogarth surreptitiously slipped his fingertips inside his jacket and cupped the moist warmth of his armpit for a few seconds. He gave the matter before him, at least the appearance of some consideration, then carefully withdrew his hand to stroke his beard and at the same time, inhale the sour acrid aroma on his fingertips.

‘I’m sorry, Bernard,’ he said, ‘I don’t see what you want me to do. As far as I’m concerned and as far as the School is concerned, this boy has not put a foot wrong. He’s doing exceedingly well.

Great things are expected. You should be delighted to have him in your House.’

‘Hobbs nearly drowned last January.’

‘And would have done had not Cole managed to pull him out.’

‘I spoke to Hobbs at length. It was Cole who persuaded him that the ice on the surface of the outdoor swimming pool was thick enough to skate on in the first place. A dubious rescue at best.’

‘Hobbs is not, it must be said, Slatters’ brightest button, but the fact is: Cole did rescue him. How would it look if I were to punish a pupil for such a sharp response?’

‘He’s manipulative and cunning, I believe he’s someone who should be watched. Bad blood sir, bad blood. Mark my words.’

‘Have no fear, we’ll keep a close eye on him. And speaking of bad blood, I’ve been hearing disturbing rumours about some kind of brawl...?’

Baxter opened his mouth to object but Hogarth held up a pacifying hand.

‘Believe me, I understand what you’ve been going through and I’m willing to make certain allowances...but don’t push it, Bernard.’

With a fixed smile Hogarth waved him absently from the room and stared glumly out of the window at the garden where the unseasonable chill would be playing havoc with his bulbs.

Baxter’s comments had irritated him. Cole was a fine lad; a tribute to Slatters School Scholarship selection process. He’d been chosen from thousands, plucked from some grubby smoke-stained comprehensive up north to receive the benefits of a decent education. Admittedly there were still a few rough edges, but academically the boy was mustard and what the Hog especially liked about

Cole was that he wasn't just a bloody little swot. The lad had already distinguished himself once or twice in the sporting arena. He was a terrier on the rugger field and he'd been hearing good reports from Williams about the lad's performance in School Corps too, the way he'd taken over the running of the Armoury in particular. Since young whatsisname had left last year the place had been like the Augean Stables but Cole had gone through it like a dose of salts. No, the boy was essentially good stuff even if his parents were a little 'ey oop, me dook'. Baxter was just a ruddy snob, that was his problem.

Cole stood in the doorway to Fellowes' cubby. He kept his voice neutral, 'I think you have something that belongs to me.'

'Oh, hello. Cole isn't it, you wouldn't mind popping another crumpet in the thingy, would you?' Fellowes lounged back in the dark green armchair that now accounted for most of the space in the tiny cupboard-like room. It was the chair he'd rescued from the dump at bottom of the playing fields a few weeks ago, and quite serviceable it was too, the only blemish being a slight scorch mark on the left arm. He munched a crumpet, eyes closed in attitude of sublime contentment. Cole wondered if Fellowes might be falling asleep and reached out to shake his foot.

'You may, for the moment, keep your hands to yourself. Not, that I'm not flattered.'

Cole withdrew the hand.

'Help yourself to a seat, a mug of tea and a crumpet in any order.'

Cole warily perched himself on rickety wooden chair and rolled a Poker dice expertly over his knuckles as he examined the tiny domain. The walls were covered in photographs, some torn from newspapers and magazines, others were black and white photographic prints.

There was a photo of a pupil with the unfortunate name of Smelt, shot very close, on a high contrast film stock. He could make out almost every pore and there was a large boil on the tip of his nose.

‘Such a wonderful subject, like a lunar landscape.’

‘Or a mountain range,’ offered Cole.

There were other, more staged compositions: a pupil with his finger tied to the model railway track in the Hobby Room with a blurred Hornby steam engine bearing down on it; another boy staked out naked on an archery target, a dozen or so arrows apparently protruding from his body.

‘St Sebastian?’

‘Very good. I rather thought you might be a man of catholic tastes,’ observed Fellowes.

‘And you?’

‘My mother dabbles.’

‘In art?’

‘In religion,’ replied Fellowes with a shrug. ‘So how do you like them?’

‘They look like fun if that’s what you mean. I might even do one for you, if you like.’

‘Fun? No. I think not. It’s a photographic record of my time at this ghastly place - evidence so that I can sue in later life.’

‘I’d still like to do one, perhaps the Crucifixion?’

Fellowes smiled. ‘An interesting idea, but I always imagined that I’d reserve the Lamb of God for little Blake; the fluffy third-former with his golden curls and lost innocence. Perhaps I could get a shot of Baxter administering fifty lashes while Godfrey, our House Captain looks on, wringing his hands, dressed as Mary Magdelaine.’

Cole smiled at the image of Godfrey - big, beefy first-XV scrumhalf in a scullery maid’s headscarf.

‘But there is nothing of the gentle martyr about you, I’m afraid. For my biblical compositions I require an innocence; an absolute lack of self-awareness that you don’t seem to possess at all, in fact, you have a peculiar whiff of menace about you.’

Briefly, Cole’s dark eyes narrowed to pillbox slits, then he smiled.

‘I’ll do Judas then...for thirty quid.’

Fellowes was saved from a reply by the tinny click of the toaster. He watched with interest as Cole helped himself to a mug of tea and a freshly toasted crumpet, applying liberal layers of butter and the precious Lemon Curd. The young man’s delicate saturnine features and absurdly long lashes were misleading, he moved with the assurance and precision of a predatory cat.

‘Well?’

‘Well what?’ said Cole, through a mouthful of warm buttery paste.

‘I thought you might be about to begin your sales pitch. I’m eager to find out what it is that you want to sell me.’

‘Everyone has their weakness. I reckon yours is crumpet.’ Cole smiled at his own weak joke.

Fellowes reached over into his jacket pocket for the rolled up copy of Mayfair which he flung to Cole. ‘Not really. I’m not sure why I swiped it at all. Probably just to confound that arse, Baxter.’

‘Wrong sex perhaps?’

Fellowes smiled crookedly. ‘Good try. And to be fair, I have noticed you disporting yourself in your games shorts up the Prefect’s Passage, if you’ll pardon the expression. But then again, who hasn’t?’

‘I do the best I can with what I have.’

‘Yes, I suppose you do.’ Fellowes took a small sip of tea. ‘You know, beauty is a great gift and brings with it its own responsibilities. It is a pearl that must not be frittered away before utter swine.’

In my first year at Prep School, I too was the object of unwelcome attention. And have even been preyed upon within the apparently safe bosom of my own family.’

Cole raised an eyebrow.

‘Not, a direct relative, you understand but a close friend of my father’s. At nine-and-a-half, he inveigled me into his disgusting shennanigans by asking if I wanted to watch his dolly being sick. I found it quite fascinating at the time, but then I expect my sexual psyche is now a time bomb; permanently damaged in a way that is yet to reveal itself.’

Cole grinned despite himself.

‘You made that up.’

‘I may have embroidered a little - as the cosmetic surgeon said to the lawyer. But truth, like beauty depends entirely upon one’s perspective.’

‘So what can I offer you?’

‘Nothing.’

Cole smiled. He knew better already.

‘Boy...’ The call echoed down through the corridor, bouncing off the ancient finials.

It was one of the prefects exercising what power still remained since the recent abolition of the formalised Fagging system. But it was sufficient to drive a herd of third, fourth and fifth formers down the narrow passageway like the bulls of Pamplona – the last to appear was awarded the shitty task.

They sprinted along with the rest. At the corridor’s final stone buttress, Fellowes bent to catch his breath, when he looked up, a small brass key dangled across his eyeline.

‘Interesting. Lead on then, MacDuff.’

‘MacDuff is not so wide of the mark,’ replied Cole. ‘It’s the key to the Shakespeare Costume Cupboard. Let’s go get a drink.’

The Shakespeare Cupboard was not in fact a cupboard at all but a large room in the Theatre Complex located under the school stage containing a treasure trove of costume.

Naturally, the room was utterly off limits until the annual play. Indeed some of the costumes were extremely valuable, if not priceless. The bulk of the collection had come from a West Country Repertory Theatre run by an Old Slasher. On his death in 1952 he'd bequeathed the sets, props and costumes to the school. Since then the basic collection had been supplemented over the ensuing years by various old boys, most notably, Thomas Tretwin, School Governor and now Director of Contemporary Drama at the Young Vic.

The two slowly fumbled their way down the pitch-black stairway under the stage. Cole inserted his key and they entered, being careful to close the door firmly behind them before he switched on the light.

Fellowes was staggered by the gorgeous display; rack upon rack of period costume; masks, doublets, hose, rich brocades, deep velvets and bright moiré silks; many sheathed in dry-cleaner’s plastic sleeves like beautiful multi-coloured butterflies ready to emerge from their chrysalis. But the room reeked of rancid smoke and old cigarette butts littered the floor.

‘You’ve got the place stinking like a betting shop,’ observed Fellowes.

‘Sorry, I fired the cleaners last term.’

‘You’ll get busted if anyone checks.’

‘No one ever comes down here. Except during drama season, which, thank God, is now over for another year. Don’t worry I’ll have the place Shake ‘n’ Vaced by the time they open it up again.’

Other than a sixth former's study, there was almost nowhere that a boy could be alone and undisturbed for any length of time at a school like Slatters; a secret sanctuary like the Shakespeare Cupboard was a precious find and Fellowes was genuinely flattered to have been invited.

Cole rummaged in his jacket pocket and offered up a Woodbine.

Fellowes wasn't a smoker but understood that to turn it down would be to invite derision.

He lit up and puffed without inhaling. 'Masks,' he said, indicating the gorgeous collection of Venetian masks adorning the wall.

'Oh, well spotted. Give that man a Woodbine and permission to inhale.'

Fellowes ignored the rebuke and attempted a tentative lungful.

'I once saw a collection of Papuan masks at some museum or other,' he wheezed, 'not like these of course, they were ugly wooden things with shells on, but quite pleasing in their own way. It seems that every society understands the power of the mask. Fascinating, don't you think?'

'Not really.' Cole shrugged, waiting.

'Perhaps it was because the Papuans were so innocent that they made their masks so horrendously ugly. And by contrast, the corrupt and vicious old Venetians, poisoning one another and shagging their sisters, strutting around wearing these gorgeous things.'

Cole was losing patience. 'What's your point, Fellowes?'

Fellowes bristled. 'A little theory about concealment... ah, just making conversation really.'

'No, you weren't,' replied Cole. 'You were going to bore me with some kind of pathetic allegory about hiding behind appearances. Pretty lame.'

Fellowes' face remained impassive as he continued to feign interest in the masks

Cole was genuinely delighted. He chuckled. 'The thing is, Fellowes, old chap, old bean, I'm not actually wearing a mask. I'm the most honest person here, because I really am what you

see. I don't have bullshit codes or honour or any of that rubbish that you snotty bastards pretend to live by, because it's you lot that are wearing the masks. There's nothing beneath this skin; I'm motivated entirely by survival and an instinct for self-preservation and I'm not ashamed of it. That's it; I've saved you the trouble of insulting me or wasting my time with half-baked psychobabble.'

It was wonderful. The way the languid blond boy suddenly recoiled; the way he almost had a full-blown asthmatic attack on the Woodbine smoke.

Cole walked across to one of the tall cupboards and flung open the doors. Inside was a stack of well-thumbed magazines; cartons of cigarettes, a bottle or two of whisky and a few six-packs. There was even a small polythene pouch containing something green and herbal looking. 'This is what I do. Welcome to my corrupt society.'

Fellowes goggled at the contraband.

'It's my lockup; where I stash my merchandise. I sneak down here to get away from everyone and have a fag or two.'

Fellowes examined his Woodbine, it was coming apart in his fingers, soggy from spittle.

'You know what, Cole? The only trouble with you is that you don't play the game.'

'What is the game? I can't even afford the kit, so how do I get to play?'

'I think you could fit in here if you wanted.'

Fellowes was beginning to feel dizzy now with the unaccustomed nicotine buzz.

'I don't want to though, that's the point. They're all just customers to me; sheep to be fleeced. You too.'

‘So what am I doing down here?’

Cole paused. ‘No man is an island.’

Fellowes took a final puff. ‘Is that your roundabout way of saying that I might not be a complete tit?’

Cole shrugged.

‘What a compliment,’ Fellowes stubbed the remnants of his sodden Woodbine, ‘does it entitle me to a discount-card?’

‘Nobody’s that lucky,’ replied Cole as he took down a nearby costume. ‘But you can help yourself to a drink.’

Fellowes wandered over to the contraband cupboard where he spied a polythene pouch on the top shelf. ‘That isn't what I think it is, is it?’

‘Nah, it’s just Oregano from Mr Oy, down in the kitchens. But it gives a few people a kick.

Actually, I think there’s one or two might be becoming addicted.’

Fellowes pulled out a bottle of White Horse whisky and uncapped it.

‘Not that,’ said Cole quickly.

Fellowes fumbled irritably in his pockets for cash. ‘I can pay.’

‘That’s not whisky, it’s prescription cough linctus - Benellyn. It'll put you out like a light.’

‘Christ, there's almost a litre, enough to take down an elephant. What are you stockpiling Benellyn for, smoker's cough?’

He turned to find Cole prancing theatrically in plum silk doublet and hose surmounted by a matching hat with a peacock feather.

‘A drug is a drug; fetches a good price during the exams, when “the chaps” can’t sleep for nerves; knocks ‘em out. But if you want a Scotch, help yourself to the Bells. On the house, of course.’

He uncapped the Bells and took a huge pull.

Fellowes inspected his reflection in the full length mirror on the back of the wardrobe door, admiring the slashed scarlet doublet and matching pantaloons. ‘I had an Aussie nanny once, or was she a kiwi? Pretty girl anyway.’

Cole raised an eyebrow and reached for the bottle. ‘This isn't going to be another of those heavy-handed attempts at moralising is it?’

‘Sorry. I was just admiring the cut of my calves. And no, I'm sure there's no moral here. More a sort of joke I suppose.’ Fellowes continued to preen. ‘Have you got one of those velvet cod-piece thingies? Extra large, I should think.’

Cole sighed, ‘Get a ping-pong ball and cut it in half. So, what about this old heifer of a nanny?’

Fellowes grabbed the Bells and took another good pull.

‘Well, she used to say to me from time to time, and God only knows why, “There's no use trying to knock a squeer pig into a reend howl”. For years I had this image of a squeer pig. I thought they might be specially breeding them to make those disgusting square ham slices we get served up in the sandwiches at cricket teas.’ Fellowes shifted his cap to a more rakish angle.

‘So?’

‘So, I think you may be a squeer pig.’

Cole was taken off-guard, the insult catching him like a bucket of ice-water. The black eyes narrowed dangerously.

‘That was the story was it? I'm some kind of pig?’

Fellowes smiled, grateful that the scabbards were empty of stilettos.

‘Don’t get all chippy on me again, it’s a sort of compliment. It was only years later it dawned on me that she was talking about a square peg and that’s what you are. Baxter is one of the world’s round holes. You just keep sticking it to them the wrong way, that’s all. You confound them, because you don’t fit into their worldview. It’s very entertaining.’

Cole had never considered himself in those terms before. Put like that, it didn’t sound half-bad.

‘Well....’

‘Well, there you are then,’ agreed Fellowes, ‘ Hey, what are you up to this weekend?’

‘Bugger all; mooching around the House, keeping out of Baxter’s way, as always. Why?’

‘I’ve had a bit of a thought...nice pantaloons, by the way.’

Like a bad mime artist in an imaginary gale, Fellowes staggered through the violently swaying compartment and with a sigh of relief, finally plonked down the red plastic tray. He reached for the stainless-steel pot and poured himself a cup of weak black tea.

‘So how was Baxter when you asked him for the exeat?’

‘Grumpy,’ replied Cole.

‘Probably a little envious given that he’s always angling for an invite to our place. I take it he didn’t notice the whisky on your breath?’

Cole made a sour face across the table.

‘I bought mints. Yeah, he gave me the Third Degree. You might have warned me that I’d be asking for an exeat to the one place he’d like to go himself. How come?’

‘He wants to be Head when the Hog retires and he thinks my father can help his chances.’

‘Can he?’

‘I suppose - Aubs is one of the Governors.’

Cole opened a tiny canister of milk, which exploded against his shirt.

‘So what exactly does your dad do?’

‘Messes with plants; he’s a horticulturalist and cultivates new kinds of tulips which sort of pays the bills. But the truth is, my folks are pretty well skint; Granny made a pile from her cosmetics business and got bought out by Max Factor - Max fucked her actually, on the price at any rate. My father should have inherited, but he was sort of skipped over at the last minute. There’s a smallish income, the school fees and things are paid from a Trust and there are huge endowments to the School and various other institutions, but as for the jackpot, it was all bequeathed to some fucking cattery; to make amends for all the animal testing she did over the years, I suppose. So, Aubrey does what he can to make a living and keep the old pile from falling down around our ears but in the meantime, he’s just a highly opinionated noisy bugger, not averse to throwing his weight about.’

Fellowes was silent for a while. He turned his attention to the scenery flashing by and addressed the glass.

‘You know why I asked you to come today?’

‘No. I have no idea.’

‘I admire your bollocks...not literally, of course.’

Cole looked blank.

‘You do your own thing. You don’t expect favours, you make your own way; you kick, claw and scramble. It’s part of your “squeerness”.’

‘Sounded good in parts. Thanks.’

Cole fiddled with a plastic spoon as he attempted to puzzle this one out. Here was an unexpected opportunity. The Fellowes family would be useful to know, they could probably open doors and help him get ahead, but it would take finesse and he'd have to play it on fly. He was well aware that he didn't know a fish knife from a pitchfork – but that wasn't a worry. What troubled him was that Fellowes had a sister, a legendary elder sibling, reputedly as flirtatious as she was beautiful. The prospect unnerved, yet enthralled him.

Fellowes intruded on his thoughts: 'You need to know a couple of things for your own protection: my parents are deeply embarrassing of course, but not irredeemably foul, and you are likely to stumble across my sister. Like the Yeti, she does exist but is rarely sighted. She's home from France this weekend and will terrify you as she does everyone, including my parents.'

Cole started. It was as though Fellowes had been reading his mind. Hot tea splashed everywhere. He attempted to mask his discomfort, 'Look at this fucking tea. It goes up my sleeve, all over the tray, anywhere but in the cup, it's like a cow pissing on a flat rock, Christ.'

'Ah yes, Christ. Which brings me to my mother.'

'What about her?'

'She's something of a religious mentalist. Quite harmless though.'

Cole brightened; a chink in the armour here?

From the corner of his eye Cole noticed a flabby woman in her late thirties sitting across the aisle, an expression of purse-lipped disapproval stitched across her face. She tutted audibly.

Opposite her was an elderly couple, on the verge of sleep. He, slight and cadaverous, she, plumply maternal with a jet black bun.

Cole fussed with the pot.

'God, these things are useless.'

Fellowes studied him shrewdly. 'So it wasn't the mention of my sister that had you leaping like a scalded cat?'

'No. It was the scalding fucking tea that had me jumping like a scalded person.'

The woman huffed, thin red line of a mouth shrinking to the size of a paper cut.

'I'll bet the same people design these milk containers which are rigged to go off like a grenade no matter which way you open them. Look over there,' Cole indicated the elderly couple. The man had slumped onto the table, head resting on his arm. His wife's head lolled, swaying to the motion of the carriage 'You think he's asleep. But he's not. He's drinking British Rail tea, sipping it with milk and two sugars, through his sleeve.'

Fellowes smiled and reached for a little plastic pot of U.H.T milk. In one precise movement, he peeled off the lid just as the train braked violently. To Cole's irritation the milk remained supernaturally motionless in its little container; barely a ripple to ruffle the pristine white surface. Fellowes considered it for a moment. 'Actually, I don't need this. I don't even know why I opened it, probably just to annoy you. Do you want it?'

Cole warily accepted the little container. Holding it well away, he edged it gingerly towards his cup like a bomb-disposal man who'd just been an alarm-clock-shaped package. The train lurched sending a spatter across Cole's hand.

He crumpled the little container and shook it with murder in his eyes. Glistening white threads coursed through the fingers of his balled fist.

'Fffffff...uck!'

'Language,' hissed the purse-lipped woman.

Cole glared back in a passable imitation of her own malevolent expression: ‘ Which one? French, Greek, Latin, Serbo-Croat? Pick one. I’m fluent in all of those...but only at swearing. So, ficken sie auf, va faire en couler ...’

At that moment the train trundled to a halt at a small country station. Still giving Cole the evil-eye, the woman stood and reached up to the overhead rack for her luggage, carelessly allowing her heavy overnight case to fall onto the supine head of the slumbering passenger, hammering his bony temple into the formica table. The man’s upper dentures flew from his gaping mouth onto the compartment floor.

She remained sublimely unaware of the chaos, an unstoppable juggernaut of righteous indignation with an American accent. ‘I’m about to give you a piece of my mind, young man.’

Cole was doubly outraged - some fucking Yank tourist telling him how to behave in his own country. He gave her his most languid stare and prepared to fire off a magnificent put-down: ‘I have an I.Q. of a hundred and fifty-four, why on earth do you think I might benefit from a piece of what you don't need, no hang on...what I haven't got and you don't need...what I can ill afford to part with. No, wait...’

Cole’s brilliantly crushing epithet was still on the tip of his tongue, poised to unscramble itself and burst free upon the world when the woman lost patience.

‘What the hell are you babbling about?’ she snapped.

Cole allowed himself a small smile of satisfaction. That got to her anyway, even if he had completely ballsed it up.

Across the aisle, the elderly man was on his hands and knees, searching under the table for the missing dentures.

The American aimed a pudgy index finger at Cole's jacket.

'Let me just add, that uniform is known to me... Yeah. I am a personal friend of Mr Baxter, Headmaster of Thackeray's House, Slatters School - yeah, Slatters School.'

She smiled now, seeing the electric effect those words had had on both boys. They were too stunned even to correct the fact that she'd promoted Baxter to Headmaster. Cole silently cursed his decision to wear the distinctive brown herringbone with his jeans.

Having won the day, Miriam Mallone clumped off trailing her small, but lethal overnight case. She'd made her point all right, observing with some satisfaction that the cocky youth had been visibly shaken. Yes, she would be sure to mention the incident to Bernard when she saw him next weekend. Something brittle crunched under her feet. It would have spoiled the effect of her haughty exit had she stopped to investigate, so, without a backward glance, she disembarked.

'Ach mein zahne. Das schreckclict torte-misgeburt,' muttered the elderly man, in some distress. He stooped to retrieve his buckled dental plate and a handful of shattered teeth from the carpet. His spouse was awake now. 'Like a big night at the Schatz Bar,' she observed, in a heavy Teutonic accent.

Fellowes spotted a bicuspid sliver under one of the seats and retrieved it.

The man nodded gratefully, 'danke, my boy,' a similarly guttural accent, rendered mushy by the absence of upper teeth. He turned to his wife, 'Ach well, sheisse, easy come, easy go. I can never do this thing now, mein liebschen.'

The woman was not so philosophical.

‘No, we must go to this interview, but you will be serious. You will not smile, that is all. You will be no less ugly, naturlich.’

The man gingerly maneuvered the bent pink plate back into his mouth. He rewarded the boys with a genial smile.

It was horrible, like a shell-shattered building; two front teeth entirely missing, the remainder, cracked and broken.

‘If you're not trinking that tea, boys...’ he spoke now with a peculiar sibilance as the air escaped through the gap in his upper set, ‘...my wife and I are very thirsty.’

His wife elbowed him in the ribs, plainly embarrassed.

‘Please,’ responded Fellowes gallantly, ‘come and join us; wet your whistle, so to speak.’

The couple didn’t need a second invitation. They moved across, the man sat himself next to Fellowes and rested his elbows on the table. A puddle of tea leached slowly into the old grey jacket. His wife joined Cole on the other side of the table.

Fellowes stood up and rummaged in his pockets. ‘Look, it was more or less our fault that that despicable old “cake-monster” – if I understood your German correctly - knocked your teeth out.’

‘Torte-misgeburt, yah,’ agreed the little man.

Fellowes grinned, brandishing his wallet. ‘We’d like to buy you both a sandwich perhaps, or a bun or something, it's the least we can do.’

The woman gazed at Fellowes fondly. ‘You are very kind but we have no requirements for charity. We are not yet beggars.’

‘But we have had nothing for...’ the little man protested. His wife glared at him and he submitted gracefully sucking at his damp sleeve in silence.

‘Well, it’s Cole’s turn to go to the buffet car where he’ll buy a fresh pot of tea, two cheese rolls and a couple of doughnuts. It will only go to waste since my doctor has ordered that I should never, under any circumstances, consume British Rail food and my friend has already eaten himself completely stupid - when you consider that he claims to have started this journey with an I.Q. of one hundred and fifty-four, that's quite a lot of food.’

Cole scowled as Fellowes handed him a fiver. ‘Soft buns and things. Nothing too chewy.’

The woman's face softened. ‘If you insist on buying these things anyway... it would be wasted otherwise.’

She gave Cole a grateful smile as he rose and made his way back down through the swaying compartment.

Fellowes turned his attention to the little man.

‘So, how is your head, it looked like quite a bump she gave you?’

‘The head is not so bad, but the teeth...’ the little man sighed wistfully. ‘We had so much hopes and now...disaster.’ He indicated the wreckage.

‘I’m not sure I understand. A few broken teeth don’t constitute a disaster in my book, or any other book...with the possible exception of Ken Dodd’s autobiography...you can get yourself another set, surely?’

‘Ah yes, but it is tonight at eight-thirty, precisely, we go to be inspected by this certain gentleman for a new position. For which I am requiring smart suit and tie, and the teeth in one piece.’

‘I see.’

Cole arrived bearing a tray.

He handed over the change; barely a handful of coins.

‘What’s this,’ objected Fellowes, ‘the Great Train Robbery?’

‘British Rail prices.’ Cole shrugged.

Fellowes grimly inspected the receipt before settling back to watch old couple eat. They reminded him of hamsters, the way they took their food with both hands; a quick and desperate method of feeding as though at any moment the plates might be snatched away. Even so, they were still noticeably solicitous of each other. Now and again, the little man would stop for a moment to check that his wife had something in her hands at which point, reassured by a brief smile or a nod he’d continue cramming bun or sandwich into his toothless mouth. It was achingly sad to watch him pick up his tea with both hands, yet still the cup shook.

Fellowes broke the silence. ‘Uh, look. Is there anything we can do about fixing your teeth, do you think?’

The man leaned back in his seat and smiled, exposing a ridge of wet pink gum, ‘They are destroyed...finished, and you have both already done enough for us.’

‘That is so,’ agreed his wife.

Fellowes sucked on his own fine white teeth, considering the problem.

It was Cole who came up with the answer. ‘I’ve got a bag of Nuttal’s Mintoes in my holdall.’

‘Good thinking,’ grinned Fellowes.

‘You have so many good things to eat always in this country,’ noted the woman. ‘We share your food and yet we don’t ask your names.’

‘Charles.’ Fellowes offered his hand.

‘We are the Goldbergs,’ said the plump woman, ‘but we have been many people. So many that it is possible to forget who you really are. Madeleine and Albert Goldberg. Yes.’ She took a deep and satisfying breath. ‘We could not always say that without fear.’

‘Jonathan,’ added Cole noncommittally, rummaging in his little case. ‘Let me get these Mintoos then.’

‘Excellent plan,’ said Fellowes, taking charge. ‘Mr Nuttall's famous Mintoos: purveyor, for fifty years, of toothsome goodness, and now, with a little luck, some goodsome teethness.’

Cole placed the half-empty bag on the table.

Madeleine selected a sweet and began crunching, but Fellowes demurred: ‘no, please don't crunch. The point is, that Nuttall's Mintoos are notoriously adhesive having ripped the fillings from generations of unsuspecting jaws. If you suck them down to about half the size, flatten them, make them soft, sticky and a little pliable, we may be able to create a reasonable facsimile of a set of gnashers by affixing them to the gaps in the dental plate.’

Madeleine crunched her approval of the plan.

‘Don't crunch them,’ reiterated Cole, ‘it would be bad if you crunched them all because we don't want to bust any more of your teeth. And I don't have many left.’

Madeleine helped herself to another and chewed away, atomizing the precious confection between her molars. Cole sucked loudly and dramatically to demonstrate that he at least, was conforming to the plan and reducing the size and shape of his mint.

Fellowes settled back again and smiled benignly at the foreigners. His companion spat out the shrunken mints and carefully placed them one by one onto the heating grille to soften up. Within minutes, the half-sucked sweets were sufficiently pliable to work with. Fellowes deftly molded and wedged the mintoos into the gaps of Albert's dental plate; the yellowing tones of foxed

parchment more or less matched. It was a terrifying construction to be sure, but slightly better than nothing.

‘There, you’ll look a bit buck-toothed but at least you won’t whistle like a randy builder every time you speak. It might hold up, so long as you don’t say too much and, what’s more, you’ll have excitingly minty-fresh breath for the whole of your interview.’

Fellowes took the dental plate, dipped it into a cup of ice-cold water as a fixative, then carefully wrapped it in a stray piece of cling-film before handing it to Albert.

‘Put it in just before your meeting, OK? Not too early otherwise it’ll go soft, understand?’

‘Thank you,’ said Madeleine gazing sceptically at the Heath-Robinson construction, ‘you are so very kind boys.’

The train rolled into the insignificant station of Waughstone Bridge. Cole was feeling good as he basked in the approval of his fellow passengers; a warm, benevolent feeling, the kind of feeling you get, he mused, when you’ve helped someone else but don’t have their troubles - a bastard form of schadenfreude, or at any rate, a second cousin, once-removed. He felt good enough to patronise the Goldbergs with a small wave and a smug grin as they shuffled towards the door with their tatty cardboard suitcases before settling back in his seat.

‘This is us too,’ warned Fellowes, hauling his overnight case from the overhead rack.

‘What?’ Cole began frantically gathering his scattered possessions, ‘but this is only Waughstone Bridge, I thought there was another stop yet.’

Fellowes strolled to the carriage door, oblivious to his friend’s rising hysteria. ‘You’d be surprised how many people make the same mistake.’

In a panic Cole bundled his jacket under and snatched at his case. Meanwhile the guard on the platform slammed the door behind Fellowes and blew his whistle. The train lurched away.

‘Hell.’ Cole flung open the door, leapt from the moving carriage and hit the platform running. Violent acrobatics of this nature were too much for the rusty rivets of his ancient luggage. The body of the case parted company from its handle and impacted on the concrete platform like a like a leather torpedo in a magnificent explosion of multicoloured clothing. Cole’s legs, although wiry and athletic, were unable to keep up with the momentum of his own body. He sprawled face first onto the platform and skidded to a halt by a small pile of his scattered possessions.

‘And so these are the famous Shocky-Shorts?’ said Madeleine, dangling a pair of shabby grey Y-fronts on her little finger.

‘A pretty fair description,’ replied Fellowes helpfully.

‘Jockey-shorts. Give them to me now,’ said Cole picking himself up off the station floor. His jeans, a thin denim, had ripped at the knees. Madeleine waddled about the platform collecting bits and pieces. Fellowes knelt to retrieve a single Durex in its silver foil. ‘And this is for?’

‘Just...just in case,’ replied Cole defensively. He collected his scattered belongings in mortified silence, cursing himself for his stupidity.

He glanced up to find Fellowes grinning with delight. ‘I can only assume that you were intending to roger my sister, my mother, or myself. My father, I would hope, being entirely out of the question. Or do you care? Ought I to advise my Father to lock his door and load the Twelve-bore with salt?’

A taxi-driver plodded onto the platform. ‘Waughstone?’ The man gave Fellowes a cursory nod of recognition and made to pick up his case but Fellowes waved him off.

‘Age before beauty,’ he remarked, indicating the elderly Germans.

‘Be a while before there’s another cab, there’s not enough room for the lot of you with all that luggage.’

‘Perhaps you could radio for another driver?’ Fellowes suggested quietly.

The cabbie shook his head. ‘Could still be a while, Saturday night and all that...’

Fellowes shrugged, ‘Ah, well, off you go then.’

The Mini Clubman pulled up on the patchy gravel driveway of the sprawling building, the setting sun investing the structure’s decrepit silhouette with the colouration of a bad bruise. Only at the side entrance did the house begin to reveal any signs of habitation - a thin yellow light issued from under the kitchen porch. The door opened and a shambling figure in a threadbare Guernsey emerged to welcome the couple. He pressed his monstrous moustache against the windscreen and bellowed, ‘ah ha, the people who’ve come to sort us out. Come on inside and I’ll rustle up some tea.’

The man fished in his pockets for a collection of coins and dropped them into the cabbie’s outstretched hand without troubling to check the value.

Back at the station two huddled figures were illuminated in the single working headlight of an ancient Ford Grenada. The driver unwound his window.

‘You got the fare?’ he snapped, ‘I want paying up-front tonight. No mucking about.’

‘I have, as it so happens, a five pound note,’ announced Fellowes imperiously. He opened his wallet and found it to be empty.

‘Ah, yes,’ he remembered the ruinously expensive buffet-carriage bill.

‘Don’t mess me about, son.’

‘I think you’ve only got thirty-odd pence left,’ said Cole, ‘but I’ve got a couple of quid.’

‘Two pounds, thirty pence?’ calculated the driver, ‘that’ll get you two to Gibbet Gate. Not a yard further...’

True to his word, some ten minutes later the cabbie unceremoniously deposited the boys at Gibbet Gate.

‘Shit,’ said Fellowes, correctly identifying the cowpat engulfing his shoe. Cole hoisted his damaged case over his head and trudged stoically across the fields.

Madeleine was growing impatient with this lumbering man and his filthy hands. They’d had a pleasant enough conversation and he’d made them a decent cup of tea, but he was rather sloppy and she suspected that his glass tumbler might contain gin. Once she’d secured the position of housekeeper, and Albert, that of major-domo, things would certainly change around here. She would take steps to discourage the staff from scruffiness and alcoholic excess.

‘And so, you are working where?’

‘Mostly in the hothouses out the back, with the plants.’

Madeleine nodded politely. That would explain those hands.

‘Ach so.’ She checked her watch. It was almost eight-thirty and it must have been obvious that they were eager to move onto their pressing business with the master of the house. Why wouldn’t this garrulous fool just take a hint and fetch him?

‘My husband must be finding the water closet, before we are having a talk with “sir”’. She gave Albert a nudge, he got to his feet, patting pockets for the prosthetic teeth.

‘Through the door, down the stone steps and then turn right.’ The man took a long sip from his tumbler as Albert scuttled out.

‘He has need of a mirror,’ explained Madeleine, ‘to look delightful for when we speak with the gentleman who is owning this house.’

The man emitted a great rumbling chuckle and stroked his moustache. ‘You’re hoping to speak with the chap who actually owns this place? Then you’ll have to call Barclays’ on monday morning and ask for that bloody oaf, Clarke. In the meantime, there’s only me, I’m afraid. For the moment, the de facto owner of Waughstone - although it’s probably only a matter of time before those pikers at the bank foreclose on me.’

Madeleine gaped, floundering for a way to cover her blunder. She was gratified to hear the sound of footsteps crunching on the gravel outside.

Aubrey St John Fellowes leapt to his feet and flung open the kitchen to reveal two wet and muddy young men.

Fellowes was somewhat taken aback to see Madeleine now seated at the kitchen table. ‘Mrs Goldberg?’

She gave him a puzzled nod in return.

‘C...’ Aubrey stepped towards his son, arms outstretched then checked himself, embarrassed by the display. He remained in the doorway undecided.

‘Uh...so, you know this lady?’

‘We met on the train.’

‘Right, yes, of course. Ah...how are things, C.?’

Fellowes was uncharacteristically edgy in his Father's presence. He gazed down at his sodden shoes. 'Oh, well, you know...'

There was an uncomfortable silence during which Cole inspected the room from his vantage point in the shadows of the porch. It was an old kitchen but a practical one, from the cast iron AGA to the vast square Belfast sink - ancient fittings that would probably fetch a fortune somewhere like Hampstead.

The space was dominated by the good-sized country kitchen table at which Madeleine Goldberg sat, perched on one of the mismatched wooden chairs. In one corner of the room was a pile of logs and an axe; no doubt fuel for the stove. On the far wall was an intriguing double doorway, a pantry of some sort, padded and faced in red velvet.

Fellowes turned and gestured at Cole in the darkness behind him 'And this is my friend.'

Aubrey, relieved to break the tension, squinted out into the shadows. 'Well, don't just stand there, come on inside.' He gave Cole a friendly yet nerve deadening punch on the shoulder and in a more conspiratorial tone added 'While you're here kindly don't bugger around with my fruits of my labour or my loins, otherwise you're welcome to anything else you find in this house. And if you do find anything worth eating or shagging in this dump, be sure and let me know.'

Cole, stunned by the vulgarity, stammered an unintelligible response.

Albert now reappeared, dentures in place, hair slicked across his cranium like a roadside skid. His presence recalled Aubrey to his duties. He spun away, all business now. 'Okay, chaps, I'm in the middle of interviewing these people at the moment. But I fear I've made a bollocking rotten

impression so far. They seem to think I'm some kind of squatter.' Aubrey resumed his place at the kitchen table and took a restorative sip of his gin.

'Alloo,' said Albert, pleased to see the boys again. He favoured them with a grotesque smile of recognition. 'Alloo,' he repeated, placing unnecessary stress on the already rickety teeth. 'What are you doing in this place?'

'Albert,' hissed Madeleine, 'sit down. This man is Mr Fellowes, owner of this house and the papa of our new friend.' She nudged him in the ribs to underline the point.

'Ach, I was thinking he was the gardener.' Madeleine nudged him again before he could compound the error.

The jury-rigged teeth simply weren't up to this flurry of hard consonants, Albert could feel them starting to collapse. He shut his mouth.

Aubrey St John Fellowes gazed suspiciously at the little man. There was something different about him since he'd been to the loo - his upper lip now bulged like a Neanderthal.

Albert shifted uncomfortably in his chair under Aubrey's baleful gaze, then smiled; a carthorse rictus.

'What the bloody hell has happened to your teeth?' bellowed Aubrey.

Albert quickly closed his mouth and nodded.

'Is this some kind of joke? What are you playing at, man?'

Albert tried to explain through a post-apocalyptic landscape of a jaw. 'These are not my teeth....'

Two yellow misshapen Mintoes began to sway back and forth like pub signs in the wind.

'Sir, let me...' The first word emerged as 'Thirr', along with the left upper Mintoe which landed on Aubrey's leg, where it stuck.

The assembled company held its collective breath; all eyes fixed on the fiendish lump lying like a yellow maggot on the dark brown cords. Madeleine shuddered. Fellowes convulsed helplessly in the corner. Albert continued to grin bravely through his one remaining front Mintoe.

A furious Aubrey snatched the sweet from his trouser leg and inspected it.

'Is tooth,' advised Albert.

'This disgusting thing? It's not a tooth. It looks like a grub of some sort. What do you mean by it?'

Fellowes took it from his father's nerveless fingers.

'Calm down, father, it's just a Nuttal's Mintoe.'

Aubrey sputtered outrage and gin & tonic. 'How dare he spit Nuttal's Mintoes at me. I've had decent people spit at me before and sometimes for good reason, but never a Nuttals Mintoe. A Nuttal's Mintoe is going beyond the pale, that's a missile.'

'They're nice people, just what you need,' advised Fellowes evenly.

'Don't tell me what I need - I don't need you bringing home the kind of people who think I'm the gardener and spit Nuttal's Mintoes at me every time I turn around, I know that.'

'I didn't actually bring them, father.'

It was too much for Albert; he couldn't allow the young man who had helped him on the train to get the blame here. 'This boy,' shouted Albert, 'is good boy. Kind boy. You have problem? You deal with me.' The effect of this courageous defense was entirely ruined by Albert aspirating his remaining right upper Mintoe into Aubrey's gin.

Tonk...

Aubrey looked slowly down at his glass. 'That's it. You're bloody fired,' he said.

'You can't do that, father,' said Fellowes calmly.

‘He...he just fired another Mintoe at me,’ bellowed Aubrey, ‘so *he*’s fired.’

‘You haven't hired him yet.’

Aubrey rootled the mint from his glass and flung it into the sink. He took another swig, eyeing Albert venomously. ‘All right then, you're hired...’

Albert grinned as Madeleine gasped with delight.

‘...and now you're both fired...for gross misconduct.’ He took another sip of his mintified drink, ‘...unbelievably gross,’ he grimaced and turned to his son. ‘I mean I wouldn't mind so much if it was a bloody Pimms...’

‘Well, now you'll have to pay him severance, or he might sue.’

Aubrey lost all patience. ‘Whose side are you on? You bring vicious Krauts into my house and they stand here shooting spittle into my gin and tonic and you tell me they can sue me? In a pig's arse they can. You're not hired, by the way,’ he added warily.

Madeleine whispered something German into her husband's ear, which calmed him. ‘Is time for us to go, I am thinking.’ She sighed, got to her feet and stooped to retrieve their shabby cardboard suitcases.

‘Thinking without bugging trace, I hope. Like a U-Boat,’ added Aubrey uncharitably.

Fellowes put a restraining hand on Albert's arm. ‘These are good people, Father, they'll look after you.’

‘Is really this man your father?’ asked Albert incredulously, pointing at Aubrey.

‘That is really my father, if the various blood tests which I have had secretly commissioned, are to be relied upon. Be nice.’

‘In a pig's arse,’ Aubrey grumbled into his gin and tonic.

‘And so we have company?’ Antonia Fellowes had, moments earlier, wafted unnoticed into the room accompanied by the scent of citrus. Only Madeleine observed how quickly Aubrey's tumbler disappeared under the table. ‘Ah yes,’ he blustered, ‘just interviewing a couple for the live-in-help thingy. But, so sorry,’ he waved his arms dismissively, ‘dental problems...I think we're all agreed, won't work, totally incompatible. Yes. Just on their way out as a matter of fact.’

Antonia advanced modestly and in silence, yet it was immediately apparent to the assembled company precisely where the balance of power lay in this household. Petite and pale but with the piercing eyes of a Celt; a fragile bone structure and long jet-black hair - if not a natural colour, then expensively and convincingly dyed. She was almost anorexic looking but undeniably beautiful in an ethereal way. She would, in a previous century, have been the muse and inspiration for romantic novelists, artists and idiotic young men with suicidal leanings; the kind of pale and interesting heroine who must first endure a good buffeting by the winds of misfortune before emerging victorious, principles and virginity intact. Indeed, Cole was finding it difficult not to imagine administering a good buffeting of his own across the kitchen table. He'd never seen anything like her. The fine muslin dress allowed the light to penetrate as she shimmered across the room, revealing the contours of her slight but unmistakably pert body. She moved like a wraith, silent, potent and unnerving.

Antonia's face softened as she noticed her son. ‘And my darling has arrived, how wonderful.’ She made no attempt to reach him but pursed her lips and blew a small kiss across the room. He blew one in return. ‘Hello, Mother.’

Antonia squinted slightly as she tried to identify her son's companion skulking in the corner of the room. ‘And hello to you. Charles told us all about you on the phone. Welcome.’

Cole started. He hoped to God she hadn't been able to read his thoughts. Still in a kind of trance he managed to marshal enough of his wits to raise a hand in greeting, although not sufficient to close his gaping mouth.

'Charming.' She gazed back at her son in a slightly distracted manner and added, 'Oh, and Charles, Lor's home.'

Fellowes's face lit up. 'Where is she?'

Antonia sighed, 'I really couldn't say...' With that she returned her attention to her husband who was, even now, attempting to shove the elderly Germans out onto the porch.

'Stop it, stop it this minute, Aubrey.'

Aubrey froze, caught in the act. 'They're going, darling. Big mistake, not right for us. Not right at all. Not the proper teeth, for a start.' Aubrey dug deep in his pockets for cab-fare but came up with fluff and buttons, 'OK, cheers, thanks, bye.'

'It's wet and dark, and furthermore, it's getting late. Whether these people are right or wrong for us, they must now be accommodated. They will have a three-month trial to determine their suitability for the positions of major-domo and housekeeper. Please show them to the spare room and try not to overdo the strong spirits.' She indicated Aubrey's telltale glass on the floor under the table with a finely arched eyebrow and wafted from the room trailing her citrus scent.

Aubrey slumped defeated into his chair and sulked. 'Well, someone better get me a drink. Now I've got four more buggers scrounging off me, one of you ought to do something to earn your keep.'

Albert and Madeleine weren't listening; but were huddled together in whispered conference.

Finally, Madeleine delivered her verdict, addressing Fellowes with all the dignity of a High Court

judge: 'You are good boy. We are happy to look after your papa and this big house. But only because you are a mensch and we are liking your Mutti. It is decided.'

Fellowes grinned. 'Excellent. Well, you could start by getting him that drink; he usually keeps a bottle or two hidden under the sink. The glass one, not the white plastic ones, you understand?'

Albert stood to attention and clicked his heels together.

Aubrey wagged his empty tumbler impatiently.

'Get on, get on. Under the bloody sink, like the boy said. And mind you don't pour me a bleach.'

He watched with jaundiced eye as Albert rummaged amongst the bottles before turning his gaze upon Cole, still skulking in the corner. 'You, what was your name again?'

Fellowes smiled, 'Pops, you haven't been properly introduced. This is Cole.'

Aubrey appraised him for a moment or two, and then nodded abruptly in acknowledgment. 'Good, at least we'll have something to put on the bloody fire. It's going to be a chilly night and we've got bugger all else.'

'Very amusing,' sighed Fellowes. He determined to keep an eye on Albert in order to preempt any further disasters while Cole ingratiated himself with his father.

Albert began to construct a grotesque gin & tonic from the selection of bottles secreted under the sink. Fellowes directed a momentary glance at Madeleine, who was now bustling about collecting dirty dishes but it was just long enough for Albert to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory - misled by the scent and the illustrated lemons on the label, Albert was in the process of applying a liberal squirt of washing up liquid to the gin. He selected a dirty teaspoon and gave the mixture a swirl.

'Ah, no, best not stir that, Albert,' advised Fellowes, sotto voice.

With a flourish and another heel click Albert presented the concoction. Aubrey took a long swig and affected not to notice the alien taste or probably didn't. It was an immensely strong gin in

any case, which was the main thing. Aubrey encompassed Albert and Madeleine with a sweep of his hand. 'Uh, Charles, perhaps you'd show these people to the top of the house. And your friend can have the guest room. I'm off to inspect the cultivars before I turn in.'

'So, are they hired?' asked his son.

'Your mother seems to think so. Whatever, I've still got work to do and I'm too tired to argue the toss.' He turned to address his new employees, 'I like my tea at six-thirty a.m.; Earl Grey in a pot, with milk; skimmed or fatless or whatever they call that white muck I'm supposed to bloody tolerate these days. We'll square it all away with your agency on Monday. All right?'

Aubrey nodded to Cole, 'Goodnight, young Coke.'

'Goodnight, sir.'

Aubrey froze momentarily in the doorway and glared. Cole visibly wilted under the scrutiny. Finally the big man turned, sighed in disgust and padded from the room in his stockinged feet; a gnarled brown toenail poking through the worn wool like a stubborn tree root.

Cole glanced at Fellowes for enlightenment. With his father out of earshot, Fellowes attempted an explanation: 'what can I say? A few vouchers short of the pop-up toaster. Actually his bark's much worse than his bite especially if you keep him well supplied with gin. Try not to call him "sir" though.' He shrugged, 'sorry, that's just the way he is.'

'Is funny man but also maybe not so happy. There is some sadness with him and your Mutti?' observed Madeleine as she sat at the kitchen table tucking a few errant hairs into her jet black bun.

Fellowes pulled up a chair and patted her hand. 'Every family has its secrets, Madeleine,' he gave her hand a little squeeze, 'and most are best left unspoken.'

Madeleine nodded. There'd been too much tragedy in her own life for her to misunderstand.

Fellowes checked his watch and yawned. 'Time to hit the sack, I think. Let me show you to your room. Tomorrow, we'll sort out something more permanent.'

Madeleine hauled herself to her feet while Albert eased a solicitous arm under hers. In the dim light of the kitchen the couple were transformed once again into the indomitable refugees, which they had been for most of their lives.

Fellowes scooped up the larger suitcases and ushered the couple out of the kitchen and up the spiral stone stairs. He flung a swift and incomprehensible stream of instructions at Cole as he passed. 'Guest bedroom's up on the second floor, straight on, second right along the passage, straight on and then third right, OK? If you need a pee there'll be an old pot or something under the bed. Don't try to find the loo, you'll only get lost and do something ghastly. See you in the morning, bright and early.'

The last few words were lost to the night as the trio disappeared into the dark upper reaches of the huge house through the shadowy stone funnel of the spiral staircase. After a while the only sounds remaining were the percussive echoes of Mrs Goldberg's old knees, snapping off like rifle shots through the corridors, until even they faded to nothing.

Cole sat alone at the kitchen table, memorising the instructions: "up the stairs, second floor, straight on, second right along the passage, straight on and then third right". It occurred to him that Fellowes might have given him the wrong directions for a laugh. Perhaps this was the route to Antonia's bedroom where he'd bumble into Fellowes' imperious mother, naked at her toilette, or worse - on it. Well, if that was his game then he'd enjoy every moment of it. He decided to give the house a chance to settle down before blundering about the hallways. At least wait for that psycho of

a father go to bed. Clearly the old reprobate no longer shared a bed with his wife, but that wouldn't prevent a him pursuing with a shotgun anyone he even remotely suspected of taking liberties.

He wandered over to the cupboard below the sink and withdrew the gin bottle, sniffing carefully before taking a good long pull. It hit the spot. He stuck the bottle under the tap and made up the difference with a few inches of water.

Cole prowled the kitchen, enjoying himself. There was a kind of illicit thrill in exploring an unknown house; an almost sexual frisson. He shot a glance at the one-handed axe propped up in the wood-basket by the AGA. Most likely the very tool that would be used by Aubrey St John Fellowes to separate him from his private parts should the old man catch him doing anything untoward - like guzzling his gin and snooping around his kitchen at night.

'AGA,' he said, out loud.

'AGA,' he said it again, louder this time. Funny word.

Cole examined his reflection in the shiny palindromic nameplate, up close the weird distortion made him look like Julian Lloyd Webber. He lifted the hot-plate lid and spat onto the griddle, saliva hissed and balled, leaving only a black dot.

He hefted the axe, testing its weight, swung it round and brought it down on a chunk of timber, splitting it neatly in two. There, he'd done some work; earned his keep for the curmudgeonly old Aubrey-bastard. He flipped the axe into the air, expecting to catch it by its haft, but the weight of the head caused it to spin erratically and he was forced to side-step as it embedded itself into the lino floor, cutting a nasty looking gash through the brittle cream and brown chequered pattern.

'Shit,' he whispered, returning it safely to its basket.

Cole decided to scrounge a little something from the fridge. He heaved on the chrome handle of the stately old 50's Kelvinator, the heavy, off-white door opened with a wet slobbery sound but there was nothing remotely edible inside, only an array of spooky trays containing stoppered vials and culture plates, some Kodak film and a few brown glass chemical bottles. He let the door slam back against the flatulent rubber seals. The place was beginning to give him the creeps.

Although he'd made a conscious effort to ignore it since he'd been left to his own devices, the huge and peculiar padded pantry door was simply too large and too there. Upholstered in blood red velvet and dotted with tiny gold stars, it was way too incongruous to remain unmolested, managing to be both sinister and yet faintly ridiculous. As Cole inched closer, the hairs on the back of his neck prickled, a sense that someone was watching. He knew in his heart that it was only a pantry, but there was definitely something odd about it. Tentatively, he stretched out his hand to the ornate brass handle where a gold lamé moon and star conjoined. Half-expecting to find an impaled corpse, he pulled.

The door flew open to reveal a nightmare made flesh, bloody flesh, a hellish shambles punctuated by flashes of lethally sharpened steel; hanging corpses swung heavily towards him and in a blur a screaming, whirling demon sent him sprawling to the floor.

‘Ahh!’ he shrieked, dropping to a protective crouch, hands instinctively covering his groin.

‘Ha, you scream like a girl.’

The dervish settled itself on the kitchen table and rubbed its arms briskly.

‘Ooh, it was nippy in there.’

From his crouch, Cole ventured another glance at the interior. His eyes had not in fact deceived him, there were carcasses dangling there; pink, fatty sides of beef, pork and lamb swayed gently on the ends of viciously curved meat hooks.

He swivelled to consider his antagonist, a girl of about seventeen with bright blue eyes and long chestnut hair, dressed in nothing more than a fine cream silk nightgown.

‘What the hell were you doing in there?’

‘Spying on you of course,’ the girl gave a demented giggle, ‘scalding your tongue on the AGA, juggling axes and almost cutting your bits off. And...’ she wagged her finger at him reprovngly, ‘...pinching my father's gin, which I laced with bleach. No, I didn't - only joking. I wouldn't do that to my father, but if I'd known that a twerp like you would be drinking it, I would have.’

Cole's heart was still pounding like a trip-hammer. ‘You must be Laura.’

Laura rolled her eyes and yawned. She dropped her legs, trailing them over the edge of the table.

‘Oh, well done. I bet you're always top of your class.’ She scrutinised him shrewdly. ‘You're a friend of C's. A good friend?’

Cole shrugged noncommittally.

‘You can't feign indifference, I can see through you, I have Celtic blood in me; the blood of druids and witches. You feel the need to impress because you're frightened - you're intimidated by our breathtaking beauty, éclat and obvious breeding, yet at the same time confused by our threadbare, impoverished state and of course, the shockingly unmistakable signs of insanity. Am I right?’

‘Yes, I mean, no. You've got me a bit confused. But at any rate, I think I'm ...a friend, I mean.’ He thought about it for a second, ‘It's not like I have that many.’

‘Oh, boo hoo....’

‘And I would hardly call all this threadbare. Some people don't know when they're well-off.’

Laura's legs shot up again. She hugged her knees once more stretching the delicate fabric tight across her buttocks, and appraised him coolly, 'Yes, you're intimidated and anxious to please, no doubt just as you are at that grotesque institution.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'It must be very difficult being a pauper among princes. I feel for you, really I do. Especially since young boys can be so cruel.'

Cole bristled. Laura had, within seconds, scored a bull's-eye. Perhaps she was a witch. A finely curved brow twitched scornfully as she assessed his ill fitting jacket, uneven fringe and ripped jeans. He squirmed inwardly.

'You mustn't be ashamed of your clothes, even if they are somewhat beyond the pale. You should know that the flip-side of social inadequacy is the most awful, awful kind of snobbery. And you'll soon become quite insufferable if you continue to try to live up to the twisted values of that miserable school. We should have some whisky.'

Cole nodded, grateful for the opportunity to escape that penetrating gaze.

'There's a bottle in the Meat Locker. Right at the back, under the bags of offal.'

Cole entered the shambles and was surprised to find himself inside a butcher's Tardis: what appeared to have been a simple cupboard was actually a tunnel recessed ten feet or so into the stone foundations. Cole walked the freezing bloody gauntlet of dangling flesh until he found a pile of plastic bags, he rummaged and emerged with a bottle of Laphroaig.

'Your Dad's?'

'No, my own duty-free supply. I favour the peatier malts. Aubrey only drinks crappy blends. Cheap bastard.'

Cole took a couple of mugs from the draining board and filled them to the brim. The girl was just as he imagined she would be, beautiful but infuriating and utterly self-assured. What he hadn't expected were the discomfiting insights.

He sipped urbanely and said, 'So what do you do when you're not hiding in meat lockers?'

'Is that really the best you can manage? If that's what passes for an amusing opening gambit, then I might as well go to bed.' Laura yawned, chugged her whisky and slid from the table.

'No... not yet.'

The girl eyed him for a moment before relenting. Cole refilled her mug as she settled herself back on the table.

'If you're trying to ply me with drink, it's OK, at least that's an honest ploy and not as sneaky as attempting to be witty, charming and pretending to be such a great friend of my brother's.'

Cole sighed and refilled his own cup. 'Fine, why don't I just ply myself with drink instead?'

'Ah, Dutch Courage.'

Laura drew up her knees again, treating Cole to a brief flash of her white underwear rucked tightly into the cleft of her buttocks.

'You boys are always so obvious.'

'Eh?' Cole croaked. He leaned forward to disguise an embryonic erection.

'Look at you, sitting there as if butter wouldn't melt trying to hide the fact that you've been trying to look up my nightie for the past five minutes.'

Cole snorted whisky from his nose, 'Christ, I wouldn't...' he choked, raw alcohol searing his sinuses.

Laura straightened her legs and primly tucked the nightgown around them. 'It's quite all right you know. I was just checking; to see if you were queer or gay or whatever they call it now.'

‘Bent. And no, I’m not.’

‘You look rather bent from here, contorted over your trousers like that.’

‘Do you make all your guests feel this uncomfortable?’

‘Depends on whether they fancy me or not I suppose. Besides, strictly speaking, you’re not my guest, but you do look incredibly uncomfortable sitting down there. You can sit up on the table and I might allow you put an arm round me if you like, but only because I’m still freezing from the meat locker. That is not *carte blanche* for you to try and cop a feel of my tit.’

Cole wondered briefly if this were some new scheme to humiliate him. It wouldn't have mattered. As he'd feared, his hormones were in the driving seat now, overriding cautionary messages from the brain. He hoisted himself onto the kitchen table, and as he slid his arm around her, he noticed that, like her mother, she exuded the fragrance of lemon, but with an underlying muskiness. They swung their legs in time from the edge of the table. Cole poured more whisky.

‘If you have any more you won't be fit for anything else.’

‘Eh?’ Cole's head was reeling, not from the alcohol but from the pungent, heady odour that filled the air. Laura leaned across him to reach for the bottle and whether by accident or design her hand brushed the tip of his penis. He almost fainted.

‘My goodness, you are quite straight aren't you?’

He coloured, slipped the hand from around her shoulder onto her breast and cupped the softness there, surprising himself with his own boldness. Shaking with excitement, he turned his head and inched his mouth toward her. She moved to him, lips parting like a delicate bud.

Then, she belched in his face.

Not a small accidental burp, a great fulsome whisky-breathed eruption.

‘I can burp the national Anthem, if you like,’ she informed him cheerfully.

Cole recoiled, shaking his head in frustration. 'Jesus.'

'Does dying scare you?'

'What's that got to do with anything?'

'Does dying scare you?'

'No. Yes... I suppose so.'

'Well, I've just saved your life, so you might at least show a bit of gratitude instead of blaspheming.'

Cole slid off the table and slumped back down onto the rickety chair where he massaged his temples. 'What the fuck are you on about?'

'If you lost control and did what I think you were planning to do to me, which incidentally, I wouldn't have minded really, because although you're a bit young, you're not bad looking, especially with those extraordinary eyes, then my Father would have killed you, for sure.' She smiled sweetly at him. 'He's got a shocking temper, and I did hear him warn you.'

'Is it inbreeding or what?' said Cole, exasperated.

'Ah, you're just being rude now. You mustn't confuse rudeness with wit you know. It's not the same thing at all.'

'All you Fellowes seem to be stark staring mad.'

'I don't think it's interbreeding.' Laura gave the matter serious consideration. 'But now you mention it, Charles did like to watch me in the bath. He used to climb up to the roof and peep through the skylight.'

'I might have to go to bed.'

'No. I'm quite enjoying you now. You're being honest. A bodily function or two always seems to engender a little honesty between people. And now you won't have to go back to that revolting

school all moony and put me on a pedestal and write embarrassing letters and poetry to me in France, which I shall only burn anyway.’

‘Put you in a freak show or an ambulance, more like,’ muttered Cole.

‘Now that's so much better than the mealy-mouthed little shit who was slinking about trying to suck up to my parents, calling my father “sir”.’ Laura’s shoulders heaved in delight at the memory.

‘I wasn't.’

‘You looked like a big toad with a big toady grin and my father gave you one of his looks.’

‘Yeah, but your mother took a shine to me.’

‘You think that, do you?’

‘She was nice....’

‘She's nice to everyone at the moment. She's doing her Kumbiyah thing. Everyone is one of God's special creatures, even a toady like you. She's only being nice so she can convert you.’

‘Oh...’

‘Don't worry, she'll be probably be a fundamentalist next time you see her and we'll have a couple of flaming crosses on the lawn. And then she'll hate you. She might even try to lynch you for being Jewish or Indian or something.’

‘But I'm not.’

‘Doesn't matter. You know what these extremists are like.’

‘She's a sweetheart.’

Laura sighed. ‘And you know that because you spoke to her for all of, how long? - three seconds.

You want to try being her daughter for eighteen years.’

‘And you want to try being my father’s son for...uh...nearly seventeen years.’

‘Parents - can't live with them, can't get born without them.’

‘Charles did mention that she was a bit...religious.’

‘A God-botherer. We’ve seen them all: Findhorn, Krishnas; Aetherius Society; Emins; Mormons; Earth Mothers and new Agers. She has a void that needs filling, but it's only the one between her ears. Anyway, there are plenty of charlatans around ready to offer solutions and we've been through most of them. Some more than once. We’re back on the Christians again; the clap-happy lot this time. And they’re not so bad; they don't try to ram it down your throat, they're just a bit wet. And their clothes are disgusting. Actually, not unlike yours, but with Crimplene trousers and Jesus-boots – those awful white ankle-socks and sandals.’

Laura opened a drawer in the kitchen table, extracted a small pouch of rolling tobacco, some papers and began to assemble a small cigarette.

‘If these people have a fault, it's that they're far too quick to bring out their guitars and inflict foul noises on anyone not quick enough to get out of range.’

‘And how about you, what do you believe?’

‘I believe,’ Laura licked the paper and sealed the slim tube, ‘that the Devil has all the best tunes.’

She lit the cigarette and inhaled deeply.

‘You’ll go to hell for that.’

‘Then I’ll be spending eternity with a fabulous sound-track. And I shall ask Jim Morrison for an autograph...and a shag, probably.’

‘Dying doesn’t bother you?’

‘Not at all,’ said Laura, running her fingers through her lustrous hair, ‘I use a Wella Chestnut formula which doesn't damage the ends. In reality I'm a natural blonde.’

‘Not from where I'm sitting.’

‘God, you're such a kid,’ she snapped, readjusting her nightie.

‘Answer the bloody question then. Stop being so evasive.’

Laura stared at the burning tip of her rollup.

‘The prospect of infinity scares me. It scares me that I might have to live forever. I mean ever and ever. So long without end. So long that I can learn everything that has ever been experienced or said or thought and that colossal experience would only be a mere blink of the eye in terms of time. I get bored easily, so what would there be left to do? It's a scary thought to exist forever, even while shagging Jim Morrison. But then if you die and become nothing. You die forever. So that's a scary thought too. The prospect of forever is just too grotesque to comprehend.’

Cole nodded, sobered a touch by the thought. He sloshed whisky into the mugs.

Laura glumly passed over the cigarette. Cole took a drag and tried not to cough on the acrid, unfiltered fumes, enjoying the wetness in his mouth. Laura's spittle.

Laura brightened.

‘I prefer the idea of reincarnation. At least one can expect to forget the past and begin afresh each time, and it might be interesting to come back as an African despot or some such. You must of course, expect to come back as a pig, because you're not a good person. I shall enjoy thrashing your wobbling filthy pink buttocks around my royal kraal with a birch twig.’

‘I might enjoy that myself.’

‘And then I will eat you.’

‘I might enjoy that too.’

‘Dirty beast.’ Laura reached for the last few centimetres of rollup.

‘Squeer pig,’ mumbled Cole.

‘What?’

‘Not important.’

‘Anyway. The whole principle of reincarnation appears to be that if you lead a good life you move up the chain of being to greater and greater enlightenment. But if you lead a bad life, you come back as an ant or a sloth or something. So....’

Laura was warming to her theme now, ‘...the question is: how do you get back up the ladder once you've come back as a farm animal or an insect?’

‘Or a squeer pig?’

‘What are you on about, queer pig thing? The point I'm trying to make is that how can one possibly be a good pig?’

‘Or a good ant?’

‘Precisely, how can you possibly lead a good life as an ant? I mean, you can make the supreme self-sacrifice for your colony and fling yourself under a shoe but who gives a fuck? What difference could you possibly make? You find yourself in someone's pants, and for moral reasons, refrain from shoving your needle sharp mandibles into private parts, then after you've been sat on, you come back as a slug. Then what? How sanctimonious...how good can a slug be?’

‘Here,’ Cole offered the bottle, ‘have a good slug.’

Drunken laughter reverberated through the kitchen.

Cole climbed back onto the table, close but not quite touching.

Laura stared at a spot on the wall, finally she said, ‘Look after my brother, will you?’

Cole slowly turned to face her. This time she took his chin in her hand, kissed him full and hard, her tongue surprisingly large in his mouth.

Abruptly she pulled away. ‘This is not the time or the place and besides if Aubrey doesn't kill you, Charles might. They'd go to jail and you'd come back as a farmyard animal and I really couldn't

stand the prospect of a big smelly piglet following me around the place, watching me through those lashes, making me feel guilty.’

Cole knew when to concede a battle and win a war. The girl was some kind of a Will-o'-the-wisp; fascinating, challenging, impossible to pin down. Shame to jeopardise it on the first night with some coarse fumbling and a drunken anti-climax.

He levered himself unsteadily from the table's edge.

‘If you'll just give me directions to my bedroom, I'll bid you adieu.’

‘I'll see you a Jew and raise you a bunch of Christians.’

Baffled, he stood, swaying.

‘The born-agains. You'll meet them tomorrow, Mother's invited them over for a love-in or sing-in or something. I expect you'll be alerted by the God-forsaken twanging of their guitars.’

‘Oh.’

‘And your room's up the stairs, straight on, then second right. Don't get lost.’

Cole left her swinging her legs at the kitchen table, rolling another cigarette. He filled a glass tumbler with water from the sink and blundered up the spiral staircase. Now what was it again? Straight on, first left, right and left again. Confusingly there was another small flight of steps branching off to a door which looked promising. Cole gingerly opened it and felt for the switch. Nothing, the wall was bare stone to the touch. In the moonlight, he could make out the bulk of a blessedly unoccupied bed; four-poster, no less. He felt rather privileged, never having slept in a bed with a roof on it before. He gingerly toed his way towards it, stumbling over something snake-like on the floor, possibly a draught-excluder.

Cole placed his glass on the bedside table and began to undress at which point he remembered that he'd left his case in the kitchen, there was nothing to be done, he was certain he'd never be able to retrace his steps. He left his clothes where they fell and slipped naked under the covers which were heavy and musty with mildew. It was too warm for covers anyway, so he flung them off and settled back onto the lumpy pillow. He thought about Laura and wondered whether he might be in love.

Sometime in the early hours of the morning, he awoke with a raging thirst and a head still thick and fogged from whisky and sleep. He flung out his hand and scrabbled about on the side table for the water. Eventually his probing fingers made contact with the tumbler. He sucked his fingertips and took a sip, some of the liquid dribbling down his chin. It tasted oddly thick and syrupy but that might be a symptom of wool-tongued dehydration. Another sip. No, it wasn't just the vile state of his mouth, there was definitely something wrong with the water in this house. He sniffed the glass and dipped a finger, tasting carefully like a sommelier. Most likely lead pipes or a dead bird in the cistern. He fumbled the glass back on the bedside table, preferring desiccation to cholera.

A babble of excited oriental voices brought him to his senses. What was that? Mandarin? Japanese? And where the hell was he? Cole opened a crusty eye, instantly and painfully assaulted by stiletto beams of light now streaming through the lead-paned window.

At the foot of his bed was a gaggle of chattering, photo-snapping Japanese tourists. Cole wallowed defensively on the huge mattress, blinking like a Myxamatotic rabbit caught in headlights. What on earth was going on?

Some of the younger girls screamed and covered their mouths while the men pointed and tittered. Dimly his brain began to marshal the facts: he was in a strange bedroom, he was hung-over, stark bollock naked and sporting a fair-sized early-morning erection into the bargain.

‘Argh...’ Cole screamed.

‘Aieeee...,’ answered the girls.

The morning’s agenda for the Japanese Tour party contained nothing more diverting than a whistle-stop tour of a not particularly old or famous English house and garden – and something to do with Churchill, the cigar waving fatty of whom the British were so fond. There was nothing about a slim, prick-waving gaijin in blue war-paint leaping around a four-poster bed. But this was fabulous. What a bonus. The British were so theatrical. Another flash bulb popped.

Cole dived for a drape, flung it around his body and remained there cowering as the group continued to take snapshots, chattering excitedly.

‘Bru boy, ha, ha, bru boy.’

There was a familiar snort from the direction of the doorway. Fellowes crouched there in an almost identical posture to Cole, clutching his abdomen, convulsed and helpless with suppressed laughter.

‘Do something, get these people out of here for Christ's sake,’ yelled the panic stricken Cole.

‘Our guests seem to be enjoying the show.’

‘The bloody curtain's come down so they can piss off.’ Cole arranged the drape more firmly around his torso.

‘You realise you could be arrested for a performance only half as titillating in Soho?’

‘Tell them to stop taking photos at least.’ The flash bulbs continued to pop as Cole crouched in misery.

‘Show’s over. Domo, domo, arigato, arigato, thank you so much...’ Fellowes ushered out the Japanese, ‘...that was of course, a rare and singularly exciting sighting of the Waughstone Ghost in Winston Churchill’s bed, fascinating. Please tell your friends. Now, perhaps I might show you the gardens?’ It was necessary for Fellowes to use physical force to get one last remaining couple out through the doorway.

‘Bru Boy?’ the man asked.

‘Hai, yes indeed, our famous Blue Boy. Hanged himself in this very room, two hundred years ago.’ The woman turned to snatch one last snap shot of Cole, who was moaning softly beneath the curtain.

‘Very unhappy spirit.’

‘Poor soul,’ Fellowes grinned and closed the door.

Cole crouched defensively until the excited chatter had faded away. Finally, he rose, released the drape and took stock of his surroundings. Seeing the room for the first time in daylight, it was less impressive than he'd imagined the night before, somewhat basic with walls of rough, undressed stone and a simple parquet floor. The only decorations were a large wartime map of Europe on one wall and a framed print of Churchill on another. The furnishings were equally plain but of good, matching mahogany. Apart from the four-poster bed and side table there was a washstand complete with pitcher and ewer and a small chair which, in a halfhearted attempt to convey a sense of period, had been draped with a second world war helmet and knapsack. The bed it seemed, had been roped off, but he'd tripped over the slack cord in the dark.

Cole now noticed with some alarm that the sheets and pillow were covered in a blue dye as, on closer inspection, was his own chest. The mirror now revealed that his face was covered in the stuff too.

There on the bedside table was a little inkstand and a sheaf of bogus War Office documents. Cole noted with disgust that the glass containing the evil-looking ink was now half empty. He spat, hoping the stuff wasn't poisonous.

‘Is there something wrong with you, boy? Is there something wrong with him?’

Aubrey helped himself to a boiled egg and began slathering butter across his toast. ‘What the hell were you doing scarfing back Quink in Winston's bed anyway? Perfectly good bed in the spare room made up for you, and not half so smelly. What’s wrong with you?’

Cole opened his mouth once like a fish but there was no answer really. The Quink had left a pale blue stain across his chin like a Maori moko, underneath his face was pink from scrubbing and embarrassment. He wondered if Laura or her brother had deliberately misdirected him. Perhaps it was the whisky. He'd probably never know.

‘Leave him be, darling, and please go easy on the salt and butter,’ said his wife as she nibbled her own dry brown toast.

Madeleine and Albert attended to their new duties, bustling around the AGA, scorching toast, kippers and water. Albert placed a cracked and dribbling boiled egg before Cole with a flourish balancing it on top of an old glass Caper jar. Cole inspected it curiously.

‘Sorry. No more eggs-glasses,’ Albert apologised.

‘Cups, cups, egg-cups,’ Aubrey peeled his egg and chopped it adding salt and pepper, ‘this place has been like a madhouse since Charles came back. If it's not krauts spitting cough drops at me, it's naked blue teenagers waving their cocks at my tourists.’

‘Mintoes,’ corrected his son.

‘I dislike the word, cock,’ interjected Antonia, ‘It’s rather vulgar.’

‘They enjoyed it very much, father, as you well know, given the size of the tip you got from Mrs H.’ Fellowes smiled encouragingly at Cole.

‘Mmm, a decent back-hander from the old bag for a change.’

‘Well there you are then, a whole coach load of happy Jappies. Might not be a bad idea to bring Jonathan back every Sunday.’

‘That is not in the slightest bit amusing.’ Antonia sipped watery black tea

‘So, you both seem to be coping,’ Fellowes addressed the new Major-domo in an effort to change the subject. Albert clicked his heels and saluted. ‘I am very pleased and proud.’

‘It’s only probation,’ growled Aubrey.

Antonia slid the butter dish out of Aubrey’s range. ‘We do need some help here. And I’m grateful to have them. We’ll confirm their permanent position with the agency first thing tomorrow morning,’ she said, adding additional emphasis to the word permanent.

Madeleine gave Albert a hug, they beamed at the assembly as Antonia continued: ‘of course we’ll also need to take Albert into Gloucester and arrange for some new clothes and dentures. So how are you boys planning to spend your day?’

Aubrey waved his butter-knife at Cole. ‘No more terrifying my Japs.’

‘Or my born-again, if you please,’ added his wife.

‘Oh God,’ said Aubrey, ‘not those frightful twerps with their mealy-mouthed self-righteousness. I shall have to fetch my megaphone.’

‘They’re a great comfort to me, as you know,’ replied Antonia defensively, ‘I’ll be upset if you harangue them again. They nearly didn’t come back at all.’

‘As in “reborn”?’

‘Please don’t be provocative, you know very well what I mean.’

‘Is that really Churchill's bed?’ ventured Cole.

‘Who knows?’ Aubrey crammed a wedge of egg and toast into his mouth and pointed to the stone jar with a cracked glass top. ‘Marmalade.’

Cole obediently passed it up the long kitchen table. The house was full of surprises. He'd been expecting cold formality and Edwardian splendour, not innuendoes, banter and a shabby old kitchen full of mismatched furniture. The chairs looked as if they'd been bought in an old jumble sale while the crockery was an eclectic combination of Willow pattern, bone china and early sixties plastic.

‘We bought it at a junk sale somewhere. The catalogue mentioned that the old fatty might have kipped in it once, but then again, he might not have, so who can say?’

‘It's not his room then?’

‘Good Lord, no. We make a few bob in the spring and summer seasons from the Jap tourists. Mrs H., the local tour guide diverts the coaches up here for an hour or two and we give 'em a cup of tea, a peek at the dubious bed, a wander round the gardens and I flog them as many tulips as I can. For some reason the Japs love tulips.’

‘And a chance to see the ghost, although no one ever has - until now,’ added Fellowes. He handed Cole a piece of blue A4 paper. A flimsy, badly-designed pamphlet describing Waughstone Hall’s equally flimsy claims to historical significance. There was a crude illustration of a naked but genderless figure hanging from the rafters, entitled, “Blue Boy - The Waughstone Spectre” with a brief and patently bogus mythology underneath.

‘Of course I'll have to completely redraw the thing now for the sake of anatomical accuracy.’

‘Stop teasing, I think your friend is charming, if a little accident prone,’ said Antonia kindly.

‘Besides, it's wonderful to have a couple of handsome young men about the place...’ She broke off abruptly. Cole sensed a sudden change in atmosphere around the kitchen table. Aubrey harrumphed with discomfort; even Fellowes seemed uncharacteristically glum.

At length Fellowes shoved his watery egg aside and got to his feet. ‘Fishing I rather think.’ ‘Must you darling? The born-again will be here soon. They're not big on dead animals,’ said his mother.

Aubrey rolled his eyes.

‘Loaves and fishes, mother, loaves and fishes,’ countered her son. ‘A miraculous event, one half of which we hope to reproduce today. Ask them to pray for us, or make a sacrifice or something.’

It was with mixed feelings that Cole noted Laura's absence from breakfast; she would doubtless share her brother's glee over the whole Blue Boy fiasco but he still hoped to catch at least a glimpse of her before the day was out.

‘Don't blaspheme Charles, you know I don't care for it.’

‘Just paraphrasing the scriptures, mother, and anyway, fish are just fish, not in fact, animals.’

Aubrey took a gulp of tea from a chipped West Ham mug. ‘Good idea, Charles, get some fresh air into you. Now bugger off, and keep that maniac away from my hothouses.’

The pair wandered down the gentle slope of woods towards the bright ribbon of river, specks of sunlight danced through gaps in the canopy overhead. Fellowes had a long brown canvas case slung across one shoulder and a matching pouch across the other.

For Cole, the weekend was finally beginning to live up to his expectations. Here he was, ripped jeans and faded T-shirt notwithstanding, strolling in the grounds of a country house; a guest not a paying visitor. With any luck they might even encounter some peasants or serfs or something; people who actually knew their place and who would defer and doff their caps a bit. This was more bloody like it. Play his cards right and the odd but well-connected Fellowes family could provide him with a decent leg up. He could almost hear his punchy, ambitious father, Len, standing behind, cheering him on.

Come to think of it, there was cheering coming from behind him, and singing too. Cole stopped and turned to gaze back at the house. There was a group of young people with guitars spread across the apron of lawn. The born-again, he surmised.

Aubrey St John Fellowes appeared on the first floor balcony with a megaphone and began to address the assembly with harsh metallic pronouncements. ‘There is nothing for you here...we have already sold ourselves to the Cloven-Footed One – in exchange for eternal youth, power, good-looks, and a Goblin Teasmade...’ The message was abruptly terminated as the instrument was snatched away by an irate Antonia.

On the lawn a young woman in a flimsy white shift danced madly in the centre of the throng. With a thrill of recognition and a savage twinge of envy he recognised Laura. Tearing his gaze away from her lithe figure, he noticed the tall, swarthy-looking man standing quietly apart from the crowd. Ordinarily Cole wouldn't have given him a second glance, but for the fact that he had, somewhat incongruously, a Chimpanzee on a leash.

‘My sister,’ Fellowes nodded in the direction of the lawn. ‘how d’you fancy her?’ Cole realised that his mouth had been hanging open. Christ, he may even have been salivating. ‘I... er, quite a lot actually.’

‘Don't worry, I won't come the heavy brother on you and tell you to keep your hands off. I don't need to. She's very capable of looking after herself. It doesn't matter what I tell you, I daresay she'll only break your heart anyway, that's if you ever meet her.’

In companionable silence the two of them gazed at the little scene on the grass. Even at this distance the body language of the young born agains was telling. Laura flung herself into her performance; a kind of raunchy disco twirl, while the young men sang “Lord of the Dance” and strummed their guitars - more than a few harbouring quite unchristian thoughts regarding the nubile young woman in their midst. It occurred to Cole that Laura might be taking the piss. Nearby, the chimpanzee cavorted on the grass, fighting and losing the one-sided battle for attention.

Cole turned and made his way down to the riverbank where Fellowes was already in the process of unstrapping the long canvas case. He withdrew an old but serviceable looking shotgun, broke it open for safety then fished around in his knapsack for a strange looking metal tool which he used to adjust the barrels.

The river ran fast and clear over flat rocks, in places the water swirled in deep jade pools.

‘Just opening up the chokes.’

‘I thought we were fishing,’ said a puzzled Cole.

‘Yes, well life's a bit too short for sitting by a boring bloody river all day, getting tangled up in line and sliced by hooks. The water gets a bit low at this time of year which means that the fish tend to congregate in deep pools, so we prefer to tease them out with buckshot.’

Cole was staggered. ‘You're going to shoot the fish?’

‘It's the only way to hunt.’

‘Isn't that a bit unsporting?’

‘Not perhaps as unprincipled as passing off marjoram for marijuana, but yes, pretty sneaky.’

Fellowes filled the double breeches with a couple of red plastic cartridges from his knapsack.

‘We're not actually going to shoot them. More blow them out of the water.’ With that Fellowes inserted the barrels deep into a whirling green pool and squeezed both triggers. There was a muffled discharge as the double barrels fired followed by a huge grey bubble which surfaced and released its acrid smoke.

‘Like the devil letting off in the bath, I always think.’

Within seconds a number of Rainbow trout floated stunned to the surface. Fellowes deftly flicked them out and began to gut them on the grass with his Swiss Army penknife.

Perhaps it was his effort to impress, but in his urgency, the blade slipped. Fellowes dropped the knife and sucked at the bleeding gash on the base of his hand.

‘Bugger.’

‘Is it bad?’

‘Yes of course it is. I'm losing a lot of blood here and I'm beginning to feel faint.’

Fellowes squeezed his bleeding hand between his thighs and peered accusingly up at his companion. ‘Well aren't you going to do something?’

Cole considered the situation for a moment. He recovered the knife then slowly and deliberately sliced through the skin of his own hand. He held the outstretched palm to Fellowes.

‘There.’

‘How's that supposed to help?’

‘You were looking at me as though it were my fault in some way.’

‘Naturally. When something as pointlessly irritating as this happens, one's only consolation is in making someone else feel guilty for it...’

Bright red blood dripped slowly from Cole's palm onto the riverbank creating a miniature Passchendale of his own muddy footprint.

‘...except you've now buggered that by making me feel guilty about what you've just done to yourself.’

‘Don't be. I did it to make you feel better.’

Fellowes shook his head in disbelief. ‘How is it that now I'm feeling guilty because you decided to maim yourself on my behalf? You may be insane. Did you know that?’

Cole shrugged. ‘Just a sympathetic gesture I suppose; a way of sharing the pain.’

Fellowes stared intently, serious now. ‘No,’ he said, ‘you'll never be able to do that.’ He grasped his companion's hand. ‘But I do think we could be friends,’ he murmured, ‘if we tried hard enough.’ Their blood mingled and dripped into the river sending bright red streamers into the current, turning the clear water pink.

They trudged slowly back up the slope. Neither speaking, each trying to find meaning in what had just occurred. Fellowes stole a quick glance at his companion. On the surface, Cole was cynical, untrustworthy and ruthlessly ambitious; with the exception of his energy, the boy possessed so few redeeming features. What Cole had just done had been a gauche, even childish thing but it had a curious resonance he felt - a sort of clumsy sincerity.

Fellowes was suddenly faced with the inescapable conclusion that he was in fact, a shit. He'd made friendly overtures to Cole for the sake of his own amusement. No emotional investment required. The weekend only ever meant to have been a brief but interesting diversion- and it had

been. But now his companion had surprised him - ambushed him - and the dynamics seemed to have changed.

Fellowes' feelings of disquiet increased as he picked and prodded at his guilt like a half-healed scab. He shifted the gun sack on his shoulder and clumped on through a soft carpet of wild flowers without noticing, stealing instead a curious sideways glance at his companion. He hadn't expected this. This creature, squeer pig or whatever it might be - had just changed the rules. The boy had revealed a facet of his nature that was simply not supposed to be there. It was as unexpected as if a fighting bull had simply trotted away from the Matador and nuzzled a Picador - most unnerving. Like the trout river, there were hidden depths here.

Fellowes might have been less perplexed had he been able to read Cole's mind. Cole too had been lost in a jumble of thoughts, temporarily astonished by his own spontaneous and sentimental gesture. It had not been premeditated but it was a hell of a smart move. He could sense that he'd somehow broken through a deep layer of reserve here and that was all to the good. The benefits of being considered a true friend of Fellowes back at school were manifold. Not to mention the likelihood of being invited back to Waughstone on a regular basis.

Yes, he decided, sometimes it didn't pay to be too logical; too coldly calculating. The day had begun badly but it was shaping up well, the kind of day, he felt that would fundamentally change his life.

He was right. But for somewhat different reasons.

On the lawn ahead the music was becoming increasingly frenzied. The born-agains were strumming faster and faster to keep pace with Laura's gyrations. She was lost in the dance,

oblivious even to the admiring circle of youthful, clean-cut proselytes. Only one man stood apart; unwilling to participate. The Monkey Man: Hartim Nasir.

Nasir had made the three-mile trip to Waughstone that Sunday from his research centre for the purposes of canvassing influential local support for his presence in the area - not money, but goodwill. The Centre, a recently established private concern was well financed but had faced resistance in the village. True, it offered occasional, low level employment to members of the local community for which they ought to have been grateful. But there were two fundamental objections: one: that it dealt in diseases, and two: that it was run by foreigners.

Nevertheless, over the past year Nasir had made good headway into the local hearts and minds through a series of liberal and well placed financial donations to local community projects. And the chimp, Kareem, was turning out to be an excellent public relations device for the animal-loving British .

Kareem may have been Arabic for kindness it was by no means the most appropriate name for this ill-tempered teenage primate which had spent most of its early years in a brutal, unreconstructed Eastern European Circus. Kareem now sat quietly squeezing the two solid rubber balls which always accompanied him.

Other than the one tricky moment in the Rum Duck some six months ago, the project had gone smoothly. It had been a close run thing though.

Nasir recalled the beaming, sweaty faces surrounding him as they downed pint after pint of warm, dark ale at his expense. He was beginning to feel a distinct thaw in his relationship with these suspicious and bigoted sons of the soil when one of the clods had come right out with and asked the \$64,000 question: ‘All right then Mr Nazza, so what the fuck are you gonna be doing at that centre of yours anyway?’

Nasir had calmly sipped at his Coke buying time; considering his response. ‘Simple scientific research. Finding cures, my friend.’

‘So what’s wi’ the monkey then?’

Nasir had sensed the fifty or so pairs of local ears tuning in. Realising that this was a critical moment, he’d been more forthcoming than usual, ‘The...chimp, Kareem is simply a mascot; a symbol of our commitment to the preservation of life.’

The man stared into his empty tumbler before looking up with a sly expression. ‘So you’re not plannin’ to inject ‘im wiv anfrax or sumink then?’

Collectively the pub emitted a gasp of outrage.

Nasir had spun around to address the wider audience in the pub. ‘We will be doing important work. Researchers like myself have already found a cure for Smallpox, we expect soon to find more effective treatments and inexpensive prophylactics for Cholera and ...Malaria.’

The Rum Duck went deathly quiet.

A harsh whisper from somewhere by the door, ‘Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Malaria? That’s serious wog’s diseases.’

‘What we do is vital to mankind,’ Nasir had continued evenly, ‘one day we will find way of defeating malaria, it may be in Los Angeles, it may be in Harare, it may in fact be in Waughstone Village, but rest assured we will find the key. I should of course prefer it to be in Waughstone, such a thing would put this fine community on the map.’

‘Aye, but rest assured, if you do,’ said an ale-sodden voice, ‘we won’t know a fuckin’ thing about it.’

‘Yeah, ‘cos it’ll wipe us right off the map if we all come down with the flamin’ ab dabs.’

‘Or the screamin’ heebie-jeebies.’

Nasir was on the verge of losing control, public house opinion was turning against him.

‘All right, Mr Nazza, I think it's time you went home.’ The publican had correctly sensed the mood of the crowd.

Nasir was confused, these strange country folk enjoyed destroying animals in so many ways but were suspicious of the idea of a man who wanted to annihilate viruses. They liked to kill pests and vermin but kept rats and ferrets as pets. They were an impossibly contradictory people. Nasir had been on the point of giving up when the pieces of this paradoxical jigsaw suddenly fell into place for him.

The bald publican leaned across the bar and glared. Violence imminent.

‘You...fella...’

Nasir raised a placating palm. ‘Please listen. At the Centre we are simply engaged on a hunt.’

All mouths became all ears, Nasir pressed on, ‘What we are dealing with are tiny life forms, but animals nevertheless. We hunt them, trap them and try to find ways to destroy them. That is all.’

‘Be they voles?’ asked an old poacher.

‘No, not voles,’ Nasir had replied, ‘viruses. We are virus hunters. When we hunt we wear blue plastic suits and helmets and instead of your dogs...’

‘Hounds...’ slurred the publican.

‘Thank you. Instead of hounds we use primates or rodents such as rats, gerbils and hamsters.

Instead of trumpets to put us onto the scent we use microscopes. So what do you think of that?’

‘orns.’

‘ ‘orns?’

‘ ‘orns.’

‘Horns. Yes.’

‘Funny old kind of hunt, wi’ a bunch of gerbils and monkeys, like,’ the poacher had scratched his head in wonderment. ‘What will they come up wi’ next?’

Silence as Nasir's work hung in the balance.

Finally, Gilbert Fowler, a well respected tenant-farmer had spoken up. ‘All right’ he announced, ‘we get it. We’re not all thick-headed local yokels here. We understand hunting even if you're doing it under a microscope.’

The pronouncement had been greeted with a chorus of approval.

‘But,’ he continued. The pub hushed once again. ‘Better t’were done up front. We all understand what you’ m doin’ now but you've gotta sell yerselves better, you bein wogs an' that. You've gotta sell yersels to the people what owns the land; the Big Nobs. You gotta go out and ...,’ there was a pause, the entire pub held its collective beery breath. ‘...curry favour wi' 'em - no offence, mind.’ A beat, then the place exploded in raucous laughter. The fact that Nasir was Lebanese and not Indian had been quite lost on these earthy villagers. Gilbert Fowler beamed at his own wit and sage advice, drinks had been ordered at Nasir's expense and everyone agreed that ‘Curry Night’ had been one of the best evenings in the Rum Duck since anyone could remember. Nasir had simply smiled indulgently, sipped his Coca Cola and silently hated these cretinous, boorish folk.

But it had been good advice as it turned out, and it had brought Nasir to Waughstone Hall, on this particular day. The loud-mouthed Aubrey St John Fellowes had been especially supportive, possessing a surprisingly keen understanding of virology from his work with tulips - after all, the botrytis virus was responsible for many of the world’s tulip variations. In return for his support, Nasir had promised him a consignment of expensive industrial-standard test tubes and petri dishes hardy enough to withstand the rigours of quick freezing and thawing.

Kareem fidgeted at his feet prompting a scowl from his master. The Chimp's presence on these occasions was always a calculated risk. Kareem had been so mistreated in Poland that he'd exhibited signs of what doctors would describe in a human as irrecoverable Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Kareem was and would always be a dangerous and unpredictable animal. As soon as the Centre had its lines of supply fully opened Kareem would be humanely disposed of and another more tractable creature - probably a Macaque - would replace him in his Public Relations role.

For the moment Nasir was content enough to bask on the lawn in the sunshine of Aubrey's hospitality and good opinion. He caught sight of the two young men as they emerged from the nearby woods. The dark one momentarily piqued his curiosity; a strange figure in this quintessentially English setting, almost Bedou in colouring and appearance. But no. On closer inspection, although olive-complexioned, he was too soft featured: a handsome boy though.

The Chimp, scampered across to an abandoned guitar lying on the grass near the circle of figures. Something in his distant memory told him that if he ran his fingers across the wiry things he would be given a reward; a happy thought. He opened his fists and allowed his stress balls to roll away from him down the slope. He extended a finger, twanged, then began to pluck and slap away at the strings.

All eyes however were focused on the madly gyrating figure in white. The crowd's peculiar humming was beginning to annoy the beast. He picked up the guitar and banged it on the ground. He hit his head with it. He ought to be getting attention and a banana for doing this. But something was wrong. That white spinning creature was distracting everyone. He needed to squeeze something, but the balls were nowhere to be seen.

Cole too, was unable to prise his eyes away from Laura's twirling form, enjoying the manifest evidence of God's creativity as much as any of the born-again. Suddenly, from the corner of his eye he caught sight of an ugly streak of enraged black fur racing down the slope. Without thinking he sprinted to head the creature off.

Amongst the born-again, Tom the Alto had also spotted the danger as the hunched and spitting chimp charged towards his quarry. Tom hefted his guitar by the neck and being a reasonable cricketer, caught Kareem with a powerful on-drive. The guitar exploded in a shower of varnished wood chips, the creature rolled back down the slope, momentarily hors de combat.

Nasir was now conscious of the disaster unfolding before him. 'Kareem,' he screamed 'Kareem, calm boy, calm, Kareem.' But Kareem was beyond calm. He sprang back up the rise on all fours and leapt at his antagonist, biting down on the Alto's calf; powerful incisors crushing bone. Tom dropped to the grass, face inches from the chattering yellow jaws. But Kareem was not so easily distracted. His darting eyes locked onto Laura's frozen form and in a moment of Zen-like clarity she understood that she was going to die in the same way that Kareem knew with a certainty that he was going to rip her throat out.

'Quickly, get his balls,' screeched Nasir.

Cole scooped up a discarded croquet mallet on the run.

'You must get his balls,' instructed Nasir, indicating the two rubber spheres at the foot of the lawn. But the born-again were unable or unwilling to move. They'd seen the power of the beast and stood quaking in their Jesus-boots. Tom rolled on the ground vainly clawing at the grass as though trying to pull a carpet of lawn from under the chimp as it advanced towards Laura.

At the bottom of the grassy slope Fellowes picked up the closest of the dense rubber balls and, conscious that his sister's life was at stake, made the throw of his life. An instinctive throw,

launched directly at the beast's skull; the result of so many afternoons' practice on the field of play; a throw made with an automatic and instant assessment of weight, wind speed and a billion other variables instantly processed by the trained athlete, culminating in one single magnificent physical feat.

The ball arced high into the blue sky, sailed thirty-five yards over Kareem's head and shattered a roof pane in one of Aubrey's greenhouses.

The maddened Chimp was scarcely diverted by the noise but it was enough. He turned quizzically to watch his beloved, calm-ball disappear among the glass splinters.

Cole sprinted on.

'His balls you fools, it's the only thing that will stop him,' bellowed Nasir. 'Somebody get them.'

The Chimp never knew what hit him.

It was a single well-aimed blow from a size 9 Collet & Burns Ash Croquet mallet which crushed his testicles, ruptured his bowels and mercifully almost instantaneously rendered him unconscious before he finally expired on the lawn some six minutes later.

'All you had to do was get his balls,' screamed a furious Nasir.

'I may have hit them a bit hard,' conceded Cole, 'but for God's sake.'

Nasir pointed a quivering finger at the panting Fellowes holding the remaining rubber squeeze ball.

'Those balls'.

'Oh.'

'Jesus Christ,' bellowed Aubrey, trotting down onto the lawn, 'that beast was going for my daughter.'

‘Yes, indeed. The Beast. Revelations 13:11,’ added a shaken born-again, ‘God save us.’

‘Best get that leg looked at, lad,’ advised Aubrey with a cursory glance at the supine and agonised Tom.

Nasir checked himself and took stock of the surrounding carnage: the born-again huddled together in an ashen, traumatised group, mumbling prayers while Aubrey enveloped his trembling daughter in a meaty arm. Tom continued to irrigate the lawn with a nasty looking leg wound, the dark-haired boy leant on the croquet mallet and regarded him insolently. Clearly, this was not the moment to take umbrage. Nasir was too shrewd an operator to allow his life's work to be confounded by a displaced sense of outrage or loyalty to a psychotic simian.

‘My, my, yes, yes,’ agreed Nasir, ‘we must, we simply must, get this brave young man to medical attention, post-haste. We have First-Aid facilities at our Centre which is only three miles from here.’ He was deeply conciliatory, almost deferential now.

‘There may of course be other damages to consider,’ the dark-haired youth grinned maliciously, ‘shock and trauma, for example.’

‘Indeed,’ conceded Nasir, producing his cheque book.

‘Five pound notes make the most effective bandages.’

Aubrey was not slow to take up the theme. ‘Well quite. Perhaps a small donation to the clap-happies would make excellent amends.’

‘And something for your own..ah..inconvenience?’ queried Nasir, brandishing a wad of cash.

‘Well...ah...,’ harrumphed Aubrey, ‘Yes, well. No real harm done.’ Aubrey swiftly trousered the notes and ruffled Cole's hair before absently wiping his hand on his trousers. ‘Quick thinking, young Cole, I won't forget this.’

With surprising tenderness, Aubrey led his daughter away. Fellowes helped Tom to his feet leaving Nasir and Cole together in the centre of the lawn.

Nasir gazed at the young man in silence before peeling off a further fan of fivers with a practised smile. He would get even. He was a patient man and revenge, he reflected, was a dish best served cold.

‘Sir?’

‘What is it, Tatham?’ Baxter was in a foul mood. Having to work alternate Sunday evenings was one of the more disagreeable aspects of housemastership.

‘My dad wants me to play a townamen next Saturday.’

‘Oh really?’

Baxter stalked the oak floorboards of Red Dormitory, hoping for an excuse to vent.

‘And what pray, is a townamen?’

‘Sir?’

‘Tournament...T.T.T.T..The word has a “T” at the end of it.’

‘Tournament sir. Urlingham Junior tournament.’

‘Ah, yes...’

The boys were all in bed: seventeen-year olds and not easy to intimidate, not even Blake, the once frothy little squirt who never failed to blub if anyone even looked at him askance. Now he just stared contemptuously back. He was still a little mincer, but cockier these days.

The Sixth form dormitories were designated according to primary colours and over the past year Red had become a focus for Baxter's increasing enmity and bitterness. It had been so since

Cole and Fellowes had entered the Upper Sixth and Fellowes had become a School Prefect. In Red Dorm they'd gathered about themselves the flotsam and jetsam of the House: the slackers, ne'er-dowells and fairies. As a prefect, Fellowes was entitled to sport a gaudy waistcoat, but he'd abused that privilege as he abused everything - instead of the traditional silk confections, he favoured tatty old cardigans.

Baxter could have forgiven Fellowes his eccentricities but for the fact that he had chosen to keep company with the odious Cole. He was powerless to break up the friendship though and it irked him also that Fellowes could have done so much better; an amiable and intelligent boy, with enormous gifts that he'd chosen to hide under a bushel. Such a boy could have been running Yellow Dorm by now, if he'd wanted to.

Yellow. Glorious Yellow.

Yellow was overseen by Tremlett, the house captain and a fine lad, apart from a terrible speech impediment; good stock, despite the fact that nobody ever wanted to be within miles of him when he sipped soup.

Yellow was what all dorms should be like: never a moment's trouble, comprising as it did, the cream of the House: a minor Eastern European royal (deposed), two hons and the rest decent chaps. The antithesis of Red dormitory in fact - two right royal bastards, assorted odd-balls, and a little queen, oh, and not forgetting the unctuous Stutchley.

Baxter surveyed these dregs of Red in their cast iron beds looking as though butter wouldn't melt. One more year, he thought to himself as he stumped along the uneven oak boards towards Tatham. Like Cole, Tatham was, in Baxter's view, another unwarranted charity case; the beneficiary of a sports scholarship.

Tatham's father, Stanley Oswald, was a south Londoner, a hard man who'd once worked for the Richardsons. A man who knew where some of the bodies were buried, but even though he'd fallen on hard times, he'd never grass. He now ran a floundering second-hand-car dealership in Balham.

Lately, because the readies weren't so easy to come by, Stan had begun to fall back into the old ways, a dodgy deal here and there, to pay for a bit of extra coaching. But this was only because he knew his boy had talent. Come what may, the kid was staying at Slatters; the school was good for him - they had excellent sporting facilities and the services of a decent coach, what's more, the place was helping to knock a few of the rougher edges off. In Stanley's view, all his son had to do was to stick to his training and one day he'd make it. There was big money in tennis and he was looking forward to helping his son negotiate all the lucrative sponsorship deals that would one day be falling into his lap.

'Mr Tatham, how long have you been with us?'

'Free an a 'alf years, sir.'

'Almost four years, Tatham, yet you still possess the speech patterns of a costermonger. Slatters exists not merely to provide you young men with an education but to enable you to go forth in life with the ability to rub shoulders and hob-nob with the finest in the land. In just one more year, when you leave these confines Mr Tatham you will be free. "Free" as in a state of liberation, not a numerical quantity pertaining to that number which sequentially follows two. Who is that sniggering?' Baxter turned and caught sight of Blake's sly grin.

'Me sir.'

'Why, pray?'

'You said "knob", sir.'

‘How old are you, boy?’ Baxter sighed, but his heart wasn’t in it. The car-dealer’s son was the object of his enmity tonight. He directed his attention to the matter in hand.

‘Well Tatham?’

‘I just wanna play tennis, sir, everyone knows that.’

‘Tennis is the sport of gentlemen.’

It rankled that this piece of south London flotsam was so proficient at the genteel sport. Baxter withdrew a Badminton racquet from a nearby locker and selected a pair of balled-up socks from the laundry basket. ‘I will play a tennis match with you, Mr Tatham. If you win, you will grace the court next weekend in your “Urlingam townamen”. ‘If you lose you will not grace the court next weekend. I believe your father is a gambling man, so I’m sure he would approve of my proposal.’

Tatham looked on, baffled, as Baxter threw the socks into the air and brought the racquet down in an overarm smash. The racquet hissed ineffectually, missing the dark-blue cotton ball by some inches.

Cole too, watched with narrowing eyes from his bed in the far corner, pretending to read a copy of Private Eye. Fellowes sat on the next bed, the only pupil still fully dressed at this late hour, according to his privilege as Dormitory and School Prefect. It seemed wise tonight, not to catch the eye of the irascible Housemaster.

‘Not a problem sir,’ grinned Tatham, ‘I’ll see ya on cowt, tommorah.’

Baxter lofted the socks once again and attempted a forehand topspin. He swatted air as they plopped unmolested to the floor once again. The master lashed out with his foot and stubbed his toe on an uneven board. He may, or may not have, imagined a snigger from the bed behind him.

‘We all know how adept you are between the tramlines. But your attendance at this school is not simply in order to hone your athletic skills. It is to develop further that much-underused muscle between your ears. So, the contest I am proposing, is a game of the mind - Housemaster’s Tennis.’

Tatham's face fell.

‘Sir, how about doubles, sir?’ piped up Stutchley from across the room. ‘I’ll partner you, sir.’

‘Oh do shut up, boy.’

Stutchley had been a great disappointment to Baxter. Although the housemaster had been powerless to prevent Fellowes gathering about him the dregs and undesirables of the school, Baxter had shrewdly implanted Stutchley into the infamous Red Dorm to serve as his eyes and ears.

The boys of Red Dorm may have been slackers and odd-balls but they weren’t entirely stupid. Each night after lights-out Stutchley had been neutralised by means of binding, gagging, blindfolding and generally being beaten senseless. Unbeknownst to his attackers, he had over the course of time, developed something of a preference for this form of manhandling.

‘You may serve first,’ Baxter continued, ‘what you must do is ask me an history question; any question of course, so long as it is a bona fide syllabistic question and one which you yourself are able to answer correctly. If I return the correct answer, your serve is broken, then it’s my turn, and so on. Do you catch my drift? Bona fide, I might add, is Latin for good faith, not the name of an Italian Poodle.’

‘Good one, sir,’ crowed Stutchley.

Tatham looked desperately to Cole and Fellowes for support. Cole grimaced. Fellowes merely shrugged. Baxter’s game would have to play itself out.

‘What am I gonna ask?’ Tatham pleaded.

‘Ask him about Miriam Mallone,’ suggested Cole, under his breath.

Miriam Mallone, Baxter’s purse-lipped, teeth-shattering American girlfriend who’d first locked horns with him on the train to Waughstone a couple of years ago. Although he couldn’t put his finger on it, Cole knew instinctively that there was something not quite right about Baxter’s regular weekend visitor and main squeeze. He could smell it.

Baxter preened, swatting the air importantly. It so happened that he was thinking about Ms Mallone too, contemplating with pleasure the coming weekend and Miriam’s amazingly eclectic lingerie collection. They’d been an item for a while now and after three years hard grind Miriam had managed to put a significant dent in both Baxter’s savings and mattress. Although she wasn’t exactly in love with the housemaster, she kinda liked his cute, blustery Scottish charm and enjoyed the comfortable set up in “The Lair”. He wasn’t wealthy, but he was a respectable British gent and not such a bad catch for an ex New York hooker, pushing forty.

‘Now, boy, an history question, if you please. Notice if you will, the way I have used “an” to precede the word, “history”. One should use “an” to precede a word beginning with an “H”, particularly if the “H” is soft, just as one would to precede a word beginning with a vowel. This is quite deliberate and correct usage, not by any means erroneous.’

Baxter pirouetted around his racquet.

‘Listen to me, boys, and you might learn something. Your serve, I believe.’

Tatham fuddled on the bed. ‘I...I...can’t sir...’

‘First serve,’ said Baxter swishing the racquet.

There was little that Cole could do. His instinct was to put the covers over his head and ignore the little psychodrama that was being played out. But he hated Baxter’s pettifoggery and

humbug too much to remain a conscientious objector. He reached for the Oxford Pocket Dictionary in his bedside locker and began to flick through it ostentatiously.

‘Sir, this word, syllabistic?’

‘Shut up, Cole. You have nothing to do with this.’

‘The word – syllabistic, sir. I must take issue.’

‘If you say the word syllabistic one more time, I shall award you a Triple Det.’

‘I can't find the word in the dictionary; therefore by *extrapolation* I must assume that you have accidentally made it up. Extrapolation's in here though.’ Cole proffered the dictionary as evidence.

‘You...’ Baxter shook a quivering badminton racquet in Cole's direction. ‘You.....don't question masters.’

Fellowes came swiftly to the rescue, ‘that's an interesting, if revolutionary point of view, sir. If we don't question, what is the point of education, Mr Baxter? Cole is simply curious as to the etymology of the word “syllabistic”.’

‘Etymology's in here too,’ advised Cole, flicking through the pages.

Baxter glared. ‘Syllabistic – of, or pertaining to a school syllabus. Now, I am in the middle of an intellectual Tennis match. How dare you put the Ille Nastaste of education off his cerebral serve?’

Baxter brought the racquet to bear once again on Tatham.

‘Now, Mr Tatham, answer me this, the Russian Revolution was achieved by a synthesis - and I don't mean that in a Marxist Dialectical sense - of two distinct political parties, we all know what one was called - the Bolsheviks. What was the name of the other?’

Tatham sat on his bed swallowing air.

‘Ha, that sailed right past you. Ace service...me.’

Baxter executed an imaginary backhand topspin.

‘Net,’ protested Cole, ‘let, or whatever it is at Wimbledon.’

‘Super ace service, sir,’ reported Stutchley from across the room.

Baxter spun round to confront Cole.

‘What do you mean “let”, what do you mean by that?’

‘Well, sir, the history set don't study the Russian Revolution until the second term of the Upper Sixth and of course Tatham is still Lower Sixth and with all respect, sir, I don't even think that it's your serve...sir.’

There were white flecks on Baxter's lips now. ‘Impertinence...’

‘In....1666...in 1666...what happened?’ ventured Tatham

‘The great fire of London...pathetic boy. Do you see? I can smash you with my history, ace you with my intellect, erase you with my erudition, in short, devastate you with my knowledge. Thirty Love.’

‘Love, thirty...’ corrected Cole.

‘Quite,’ agreed Baxter, somewhat mollified.

‘...which is what your fat-arsed American girlfriend does every day, for cash,’ he added.

PUPIL MURDERED IN UNPROVOKED ATTACK BY UNSTABLE PUBLIC SCHOOL

MASTER - the headlines screamed. Some of the more sallow Sunday papers even front-paged with a murky black-and-white photo of Cole lying on the dormitory floor, brains bashed-in with the handle of a Badminton racquet. A two-inch white strip marked the outline of his prone body.

Nah, decided Cole, not worth it.

It was a close run thing though. Instead Cole was forced to watch helplessly while Baxter pranced about the dormitory.

‘Another question; swiftly, boy, swiftly.’

Tatham's face contorted with the tremendous effort of dredging up a spare fact from innumerable and unmemorable History lessons past. The boys willed him to find something, anything. After a few moments, he found one and served it up unsteadily.

‘All right, who succeeded the Shtewit King....er James the ...um ...?’

‘James the Sixth of Scotland or James the First of England?’ returned Baxter dancing about the dormitory in what he imagined were authentically athletic tennis postures.

‘Well....uh....I.’

‘Same thing, boy. Love, forty. Next?’

‘I...can't sir. I can't do it sir. I'm only s'posed to get in to Luffbra on a tennis scholarship, sir. No one's actually expecting me to know anyfink.’ Tatham was broken. He slumped back miserably onto his pillow. ‘I ain't clever,’ he added in a miserable voice.

‘Sir takes the match by default,’ announced Stutchley gleefully. Knowing full well that he'd really get it for that after lights-out.

Baxter sneered at Cole. ‘Of course, that's if it's quite all right with our Line Judge-cum-Umpire-cum-lexicologist? So our Cinders will not go to play ball next Saturday. So sorry. Game, set and match.’

Cole shrugged. Baxter raised a supercilious eyebrow and tossed the racquet onto Hobbs' bed as he made for the door. ‘You'll thank me one day of course. After that abysmal performance it is clear that you ought to be spending a little more time on the Courts of the Stuart kings and rather less on the courts of Slatters. You will not be permitted to play next weekend. And let that be an

end to it.’ With that Baxter switched out the lights and fairly skipped from the room. ‘Lights out - gentlemen. And I do use that description in its loosest sense.’

‘Good one sir,’ shouted Stutchley nursing a quiet erection before a rock-hard pillow smashed his head backwards into the cast-iron bedstead.

There was a palpable sense of misery emanating from Tatham's bed which infected the entire dormitory; a silence punctuated by muffled gasps from Stutchley's bed as the few members of the dorm who could be bothered, went to work on him.

‘Revenge is a dish best served cold,’ pronounced Fellowes from the darkness, ‘as the Belgians -or is it the French? - quite sensibly remind us. Like Vichy Soise. Which I suppose, is probably their revenge for Waterloo.’

The mood of the dorm lightened a little. They began to chuckle and the blows falling on Stutchley increased in tempo and impact along with his groans. But the laughter was desperate and unhealthy, more like that of the Blitz; mirth in the face of adversity; verging on the hysterical.

Baxter stood outside the door listening for some minutes until the sounds died down. Finally, he grunted and stalked back up the spiral stairs to the Lair and well-earned nightcap.

Like a C.I.A operative waiting for the tell-tale extra click of the phone tap, Fellowes made certain that he registered the secondary clack of Baxter's retreating heel before he broke the silence once again, ‘Cole, the Bennelyn. You still got a supply?’

Cole affirmed that he did indeed have a small amount of the drug still bottled in the Shakespeare cupboard. But the “Mocks” had recently taken place and most of it had already been sold at premium prices to the quiveringly hysterical, sleep deprived “O” and “A” Level candidates within the school.

‘How much do you have left?’

‘Dunno...maybe twelve good doses.’

‘In that case, Tatham, your worries are over, you shall go to play ball,’ announced Fellowes without further explanation.

‘So, what’s the usual dosage for a fully grown man?’ demanded Fellowes irritably.

‘How the fuck should I know?’ replied Cole with his head in the upper cupboard. He retrieved the old White Horse bottle containing the remainder of his Bennelyn supply and held it up in the dim light of the Shakespeare costume cupboard to examine the viscous liquid.

‘This stuff’s quite old now and some of it’s evaporated. I don’t know whether that means it’s going to be weaker or stronger.’ ‘

‘Well fuck him, he’s going to have to take his chances.’

Cole passed the Bennelyn down to Fellowes who carefully decanted the medicine into a half-full bottle of Laphroig before shaking up the mixture and replacing the cap.

‘I think it might be too much. I mean you know how much he drinks on a Friday night. He’ll do the whole bottle.’

‘Mmmm, with any luck. But if you note from his empties, he’s drinking the blends these days. So if we leave this outside his door, at about, say, ten o’clock, he’ll have already drunk a good half bottle of the cheap stuff and he won’t be inclined to scarf the whole lot. Just sufficient for our purposes. A serious dose should last for about eighteen hours I imagine.’

‘Why don’t we try it out first on Hobbs, just so we get an idea of how powerful it’s going to be? I mean we don’t want to kill him or anything.’

‘It’s too late now I’ve poured it all in.’

Cole bit his lip and eyed the drugged whisky.

‘So, Baxter’s out cold most of Saturday morning while Tatham nips up to London on the train?’

‘Ah, if only it were that simple,’ replied Fellowes. ‘The first train to London’s not ‘til eleven and Tatham’s got to be on court at the Hurlingham Club by 12.30, he won’t make it.’

‘Oh well, that’s the end of that.’ Cole reached for the adulterated bottle. ‘I can probably still sell this stuff.’

Fellowes retained the bottle. ‘I rather thought he might go up in the school Cabriolet.’

There was an old Black Cab that Sixth formers used for preliminary driving lessons. It was not road worthy nor even particularly safe but had for decades, chugged around on the lower field with generations of sixteen year olds flailing at the wheel in an attempt to familiarise themselves with the basics of driving.

‘So you’re going to drive Tatham all the way up to London in a banged up old Cab. That’s your plan?’ Cole held his head in his hands.

‘Oh God no,’ Fellowes blew his nose, ‘I assumed that you, with your experience of the more rough and ready side of life might in fact be able to perform that function. I was banking on you being my wheelsman.’

‘Fuck right off,’ said Cole.

‘Can it be that you don’t, in fact, know how to drive?’

‘I’ve had a few lessons...’

‘Ah, but surely driving stolen cars at high speed is second nature to you roaring-boys. Isn’t that how you go shopping up North? Just back a motor into the shop window – ram-raiding?’

‘What do you know about the North? It’s not all crime, coal mining and urban decay, we have heard of interior designers north of the Watford Gap.’

‘Oh God, how undermining for you. I can just imagine it, all the hard boys of the Dales singing:

“You're going home to a fuckin' ambiance”. Now, can you, or can you not, drive the Cab?’

Cole bit his tongue. ‘I can't drive all the way to London. I'll get stopped.’

‘Disappointing.’

‘Yes, and if you were planning on making me your chauffeur when we leave School you can just fuck off and rethink that one too.’

Fellowes shook the bottle of tawny liquid and inspected it against the light.

‘Shame to waste an absolutely masterful plan. I shall just have to enlist an alternative wheelsman.’

‘Good, because I'm telling you here and now that there's absolutely no way, no way on God's green earth that I'm doing it.’

That Friday evening a bottle of Laphroig was deposited outside The Lair with a note reading: “To the finest Housemaster a boy could ever have. Yours S.”

Fellowes knocked twice on the stripped pine door and scuttled away. From the lower floor of the spiral staircase they observed the unsteady Baxter tripping over the gift. The bottle careered across the lino and was in danger of falling through the balustrade when it was saved by a steadier hand - that of Miriam Mallone. She bent to retrieve it as the two boys ducked out of sight. They craned their necks and were rewarded by the spectacle of a pair of thigh-high patent-leather boots connected to a gigantic mini-skirted backside. Fellowes fell back gasping and gagging.

Cole stuck to his post until he was certain the woman had returned to the Lair, adulterated booze clutched safely to her ample bosom.

‘OK,’ he said, ‘that's the tricky bit over with.’

John Roberts was a face: A face that knew places that knew faces. He was a Blagger; a serious crim who wanted to be taken seriously. The problem was, that you couldn't have it both ways. You only got respect if you made the papers. And you only made the papers if you got nicked. With the exception of Ronnie Biggs, the notion of a famously successful criminal was a contradiction in terms. Roberts had lost count of the times he'd been out-bragged in the boozier by some ex-Scrubs wanker taking the credit for a good score that he'd actually pulled off. He wasn't taken seriously because he'd never done time. He'd never done time because he was good. And because he was good, he was anonymous.

But John Roberts craved a bit of respect. Which explains why this careful, consummate professional made the terrible mistake of partnering the notorious Ben Swank on a job.

The stolen Ford Escort containing John Roberts and Ben Swank crawled slowly through the busy Saturday morning traffic at the junction of Parson's Green lane towards a bank at the far end of the New King's Road. To Roberts' distress, Swank had elected to wear leather trousers and a T-shirt, which proclaimed in gigantic blue letters: "IF YER NO SCOTS, AWAY AND THOW SHITE AT YERSEL".

Although Swank was the designated wheelsman, it hadn't occurred to him to check the earlier traffic reports.

'J...j...j...jim-jam-jiggered!' intoned the Capital radio announcer cheerily, 'that tailback from King's Road to New King's Road is still causing problems. If you're a switched-on driver you'll have taken an alternative route, because you're a C..C...C...C..C...'

‘...cunt,’ said Swank sourly.

‘C..C..C..Capital Traffic Report listener, on the hour, every hour,’ concluded the announcer.

Tiny tendrils of black smoke began to curl through the heating system as they sat motionless in the stalled traffic.

‘We're overheating,’ observed Roberts.

‘Under control.’ Swank addressed the Glade air-freshener disc above his head: ‘Houston, come in Houston, we’re experiencing a wee problem, Houston.’

Roberts had visions of himself being arrested in the stolen Escort before they got within three miles of the bank. The downside of criminal notoriety slowly began to dawn on him.

Roberts sighed as he watched the temperature gauge needle crawling toward the red quadrant.

Swank rummaged in the nylon bag at his feet and emerged with a sawn-off shotgun and a weird transatlantic accent.

‘Are you speakin tae me?’

‘What?’

‘Are ye speakin tae me? Cos if ye are

Swank adjusted the broken rear view mirror a touch.

‘Are ye speakin' tae me?’

He waved the shotgun about a bit still trying to catch sight of his expression in the wonky mirror.

‘Cos if ye are...you'll....’ Swank paused for emphasis, and dramatic effect but mostly because he'd forgotten the rest of the dialogue, ‘...you’ll be....er.... in a lot of trouble,’ he tailed off.

Roberts began to cough as the smoke caught his throat. ‘Put the gun away,’ he ordered through clenched teeth.

Swank hesitated for a moment or two then shrugged.

‘De Niro, by the way. That was De Niro, ye know from tha’ Taxi film. Tha’s ma best impression, cos ah look so much like him. Some folk say ah look like Keitel but ah don’ know, ah think I’m more De Niro than Keitel.’

‘Hey, how about this one?’ Swank loosened his shoulders. ‘Don’t fuck with me....’ he growled in another unrecognisably mangled accent.

Roberts put his hands to his face and massaged his eyes. He was stuck in a hot motor, on the verge of breaking down in the middle of London, with a moron whose only response to the crisis was to attempt shithouse impersonations.

Swank hunched his shoulders, ‘Adrian,’ he wailed ‘Adrian... don’t fuck with me.’

Roberts glared at him.

‘Rambo,’ explained Swank helpfully.

He sank back in his seat and lit a fag, happy with his accomplishments; cigarette smoke merging with the noxious fumes from the heating vent.

‘Rocky. It’s Rocky who says that, you tit.’ Roberts reached over and wrenched the keys from the ignition. ‘And can’t you see that this fucking motor is about to break down?’

‘Aye, so it is.’ Swank sat motionless for a few moments, then wound down the window. They weren’t going anywhere for a while.

All Roberts’ instincts screamed at him to abandon this job, but he needed the money. A simple choice: go home empty handed and face months of earache from the missus or tough it out and return with a bag full of readies to shut her up with a couple of weeks in Benidorm.

Swank was the problem. He was a moron; a dangerous, unstable, loudmouthed moron. On second thoughts, that might not be such a great disadvantage in a bank robbery.

‘Right,’ he announced coming to a decision. ‘The bank's no more than half a mile from here. We’ll wait a while ‘til it’s almost midday closing time then ditch this dog and do it on foot.’

Swank looked disappointed. ‘How do we get away?’

‘We hijack a motor on the way out.’

Swank thought about it for a moment and found it agreeable. He rummaged in the holdall at his feet and reappeared wearing a strawberry blonde wig under a pink satin cap. He brandished the sawn-off threateningly.

‘Shut yer fuckin' teeth and put the money in the bag,’ he bellowed.

‘What...?’ gasped Roberts.

‘Aye, s'good innit. Just practicing.’ Swank lowered the weapon and preened in the rear view mirror.

He straightened a strawberry blonde tress and grinned at Roberts.

‘Smart thinking ye see. Plannin’ is everythin’.’

Roberts sighed, ‘What the fuck you playing at, Swank?’

‘Misdirection. It’s what they magicians do. You make the audience think about the wrong thing.’

Roberts was losing his patience. ‘What audience? This is not a kid’s fuckin’ party.’

‘No, but there’ll be customers and other folk, right?’

‘And?’

‘Same thing.’

‘So, instead of all these customers thinking you’re a dangerous armed robber, they think you're a cunt? That is not a good plan. Forget about making them piss themselves in fear, they’ll be too busy pissing themselves laughing. Is that how you plan to incapacitate them?’

‘Hey...I never agreed tae chop anyone's head off.’

‘Forget it. Just forget it.’ Roberts had had enough, he was resigned to his fate. ‘Just do what you have to do.’

Swank was genuinely offended. This dull unimaginative Englishman just couldn't seem to grasp the sheer genius simplicity of his thinking. ‘No, no. You don't see it at all do you? Fella walks in tae the bank screaming with long blonde hair and a pink satin Rubettes cap, and robs ‘em.’ He was excited now, hitting his stride. ‘So wha’ are they gonna tell the polis? They’re gonna say: “he was a fella wi’ long blonde hair in a pink Rubettes cap what robbed us”. And here’s the really clever bit.’ Swank winked and tapped his nose for emphasis. ‘I've got short dark hair and I'd never wear a pink Rubettes cap, ever.’ He stopped, scratched his head through the cap and added, ‘well, fair do’s, except maybe at a Rubettes concert, like. But ah would never wear a blonde wig with it.’ He paused again and pondered this for a moment. ‘Except, come tae think of it, didn’t they split up a few years ago? Yeah, ah think that’s right. So, no, actually there's almost no chance of me ever actually bein’ seen in a pink Rubettes cap except at a bank robbery. It's foolproof.’

Roberts rubbed his eyes again. This was turning out to be a very bad day.

‘Do me a favour.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Don't wear it till we get to the bank...and no more impressions.’

‘Och, no problem.’

Marco’s cafe was fug-full of smoke, the aroma of unwashed manual labourers and sweaty Traffic Wardens.

Fulham's legendary Senior Warden, Maurice Martindale sat polishing his cap badge, deep in conversation with Betty Hodges.

The little brass bell over the door tinged, announcing the arrival of Dobson. He swaggered to a nearby table and ostentatiously dumped a huge wad of paper onto the cracked pink surface, like Vegas High-Roller, flashing cash. Once seated, Dobson began to count the chits. From time to time he dipped his finger into the mayonnaise dish to moisten the digit. Martindale studiously ignored him and continued to instruct Betty Hodges in the finer points of infractioneering.

Looking up from the pile of tickets before him Dobson coughed modestly before announcing, 'I think I've just beaten your record, Mr Martindale.'

You could have heard a pin drop.

Martindale, aware that all eyes were upon him, showed no flicker of emotion but idly flicked a crumb from the cracked pink surface before him. The arrogant Dobson had overstepped the mark now and no mistake. He'd challenged the master.

Martindale clicked his fingers imperiously, eager wardens passed the wad of tickets across to him for adjudication. As he expertly flicked through the stubs it soon became evident that Dobson had been pulling some serious and indefensible stunts. Amongst other things, he'd booked an Invalid Carriage, a Sinclair C.5, a Bath chair and a wheelie bin.

'I think not.' He pronounced with finality.

He looked disparagingly at the pile.

Secretly, he was thrilled - he was still top-dog; Czar of the car; Emperor of the infraction. He tutted. 'Gratuitous ticketing is no way to establish a record. In fact, I must warn all of you here that this kind of ill-considered, arbitrary work will only accord you a demerit on your own, ahem... record. Whilst I applaud the exuberance of our Mr Dobson, I can only censure his uncontrolled

zeal. Our function is to keep the traffic moving, not merely to amass tickets. We cannot be seen to be competitive in our distribution of penalties, what would the public think of us? All it takes is an investigation from one nosy parker and... oh, hang on, nosy *parker*, that's rather good.'

Betty tittered loyally.

Dobson seethed. He'd out-ticketed the master. And he'd done it fair and square. And now the old hypocrite was changing the rules; chiseling him out of the record.

Martindale gave his badge one final rub before putting on the black peaked cap with its distinctive yellow band. He rose. 'No rest for the wicked, ladies and gentlemen. London's arterials must be kept free of clots.'

The café disgorged wardens like an aggravated wasp nest. The bitter scowl on Dobson's gaunt, sallow face suggested that this would not be a pleasant afternoon for the West London motorist.

Trevoir peered up from a blue rinse.

'Ooh, ooh,' he squealed like a spaniel in labour, 'it's Dobby.' Trevoir was excited. He lived for these moments, streaked blond head bobbing with glee.

Trevoir and his partner, Edgar, owned the "Ladies of Distinction Salon" two doors from Marco's Cafe. Although the salon did good business, the stylists gained far more satisfaction harassing the parking wardens than providing perms for the elderly ladies of Parson's Green. Delbert Dobson, gaunt and pitiless scourge of the west London motorist, was a particular favourite. Their hypothesis was that Dobson was in fact, a repressed homosexual and it was their mission to bring him out of the closet. Gently if possible, but by force if necessary.

The hairdressers wore matching leather-look chaps over tight pink satin shorts, Trevor pressed his blonde moustache against the Salon window and made a moue against the glass while Edgar turned and rubbed his silk-sheathed buttocks against the window.

‘Give us a smile, Dobby,’ pleaded Trevor.

‘Ignore them and they’ll go away,’ hissed Martindale as he led his wardens past with all the dignity it was possible to muster whilst being assailed by what appeared to be a gigantic, squashed peach.

Dobson grimaced. ‘Why don’t I go over there and put my boot up it, Mr Martindale?’

‘Because that’s precisely what they want, these homosexuals,’ replied Martindale. He pronounced “hom” to rhyme with “Tom”, giving the word a peculiarly 1940’s fastidiousness.

The Hairdressers tapped on the glass with ten pence pieces.

‘I do love a man in uniform,’ announced Trevor.

‘I’m all of a lather,’ wriggled Edgar.

‘So dominant.’

To Dobson’s dismay, Martindale led the group to a sloppily parked Ford Capri right outside the salon. The excitable hairdressers stood on the pavement to observe.

Martindale gestured to the vehicle. ‘Note that, although in all other respects legally parked, the rear wheels of this vehicle are in fact about a foot-and-a-half out from the kerb. Infringing what?’ He waited expectantly for the bright button.

Betty Hodges raised a hand.

‘Road Traffic Act 1969, Section 23, subsection C, Mr Martindale?’

‘Precisely,’ beamed Martindale. ‘Your ticket then, Betty.’

‘Mmm, authoritarian.’ The hairdressers’ stage-whispered remarks were clearly audible.

‘Vicious even. J'aime les types vicieuse - William Burroughs. A quote from the old Queen, long may she live.’

‘God bless her Crown jewels. Observe the way the vent of Dobby’s uniform jacket perfectly frames the perky promise of his booty,’ observed Edgar.

‘Mmm, cheeky.’

‘Mr Dobson, since you are closest, and so that we are not open to any criticism, would you be so kind as to establish whether in fact Section 23, Subsection C has in fact been breached, by empirical means?’

‘Christ,’ muttered Dobson under his breath. ‘What?’

‘Use your tape measure to establish the exact distance between the vehicle's rear wheel and the kerb so that we can all be absolutely, scrupulously certain that a genuine infraction has in fact, taken place.’

‘Why can't she do it?’ snapped Dobson petulantly, indicating Betty Hodges.

‘I will not have a lady bend and crouch in full view of these perverts.’

‘I don't think these perverts are exactly interested.’

‘Oooh.’

‘Nasty.’ The two hairdressers pretended to be deeply affronted.

‘Do your duty, Mr Dobson,’ ordered Martindale, with a dismissively regal wave of the hand.

‘I don't believe this,’ muttered Dobson as he crouched over the kerb, patting his pockets for the tape measure. His jacket and shirt rode up, exposing a fraction of cleft.

‘Mmmm...’ sighed Trevor.

Edgar pretended to swoon.

Dobson had never been one for psychic mumbo-jumbo, but at this moment was willing to try anything to make these bastards disappear. Crouched at the nearside rear wheel, he closed his eyes, clamped his temples between forefinger and thumb and attempted to harness the power of mind over matter: 'Fuck off, you two bastards, fuck off, you two bastards,' he uttered repeatedly under his breath like a mantra.

When he opened his eyes again he found to his chagrin that instead of fucking off, the hairdressers had crept even closer. They hovered on the kerb above him.

Trevoir was quick to pick up on Dobson's failed attempt at E.S.P.

'I think he was trying to bend us to his will.'

'Chance would be a fine thing.'

'Nice crack.'

'Seen better, darling.'

Dobson, to his credit, refused to be provoked. He extended the tape measure.

'Oh my God,' announced Edgar. 'he's getting his retractable thing out now.'

'Ignore them, they will, eventually, get bored,' advised Martindale, inadvisedly.

'I do hope so,' said Trevoir.

'Nineteen-point-two inches,' announced Dobson.

Trevoir gasped and pretended to faint.

Betty Hodges began to write the ticket.

'Mrs Pullen!' exclaimed Edgar, suddenly remembering a blue rinse who'd been put under the lamp an hour ago. She'd probably gone all magenta by now.

Roberts stared. Ahead of him in the sluggish queue was an ancient Black Cab and he wished he was still driving one himself. You could turn a thing like that on a sixpence. But after a moment it struck him that there was something odd here; it was one of the very old-style cabs for a start. He searched for the Hackney Carriage badge. It wasn't there. Just some bullshit plaque with the name of some school or other. It was a wrongun or he was a Dutchman. He flicked his gaze to the temperature dial on the dash. The needle still wavered in the red and he could smell the foul stench of burning rubber. In an instant, his mind was made up. 'Pull up and park, Swank, we're ditching this shitheap.'

His partner revved the engine and ignoring the double yellow line, steered violently towards the pavement. The ailing car half-mounted the kerb, then stalled.

Lugging his holdall, Roberts got out of the smoking car and trotted up to the dodgy Taxi ahead. The driver was a young man, no older than seventeen - no way was this a genuine cabbie; no way was this a genuine cab.

The traffic was thinning and the cars up ahead were beginning to move. Roberts' instincts took over. He dug into the rear pocket of his jeans, produced a flattened black-and-gold packet of John Player Specials and flashed it through the cab window like a warrant card.

'Plain Clothes Div. - all right, lads, the game's up,' he announced in a wearily tolerant voice.

Back in the stalled Ford Escort, Swank observed his partner curiously through the windscreen.

Surely Roberts wasn't thinking of nicking a cab? They weren't going to be able to do the job in a

cab; cabbies couldn't be trusted; they had a reputation for being grasses. He watched as Roberts clambered in. Maybe his partner had just given up and was doing a runner.

His thoughts were interrupted by a traffic warden tapping insistently on the side window. He wound it down and the warden stuck his face in. 'Shall I be stating the obvious, sir?' 'If you're about to point out that ye're a complete wanker, then no, that won't be necessary.' The supercilious smile faded from Dobson's face. 'Right, there are two infringements here already and I haven't even checked your tax disc. After that I'm going to ask for your M.O.T and your license. And I should point out that it is an offence to.....' The warden froze in response to the two sawn off steel barrels that had been jammed into his face. 'I don't have a license for this, neither,' Swank informed him.

Thirty seconds later Swank piled himself and the terrified warden into the cramped passenger compartment of the black cab. He clambered over the litter of racquets and tennis clothes and squeezed in between the two passengers, shoving the whimpering warden unceremoniously to the floor.

Cole was still at the wheel, but Roberts now sat next to him in the passenger seat. Fellowes had been relegated to the passenger compartment and he and Tatham hurriedly made room on the backseat for the shotgun toting Swank. 'What are you thinking of, hijacking a black cab? Cabbies is all bastard grasses.' Roberts explained: 'Ah, but this ain't a proper cabbie or cab; just a bunch of kids out on a joyride.' Swank inspected the occupants. It seemed that his partner was correct. 'Och well, good idea then.' 'What the bloody hell's that?' asked Roberts, referring to the trembling warden. 'Traffic warden,' shrugged Swank. 'I had to bring him along. Either that or shoot him.'

On the floor, Dobson moaned.

‘Shut up.’ Swank hit him in the ribs with the butt of his gun. Outside the traffic began to move again.

‘You do understand that this cab is only licensed to carry four passengers?’ pointed out Fellowes.

‘Shut the fuck up and just drive,’ advised Roberts. He took the sawn-off from his holdall and shoved the business end into Cole's ribs.

‘I didn't say anything,’ said Cole.

‘Shut your friend the fuck up then.’

Cole turned his head to the rear, ‘Shut the fuck up, Fellowes.’ A bead of sweat trickled down his forehead and hovered on his left eyelash.

‘What do you want me to do now?’ he asked.

‘The kid's sweating,’ observed Swank from the back seat.

The lights changed again, traffic eased forward. ‘Just drive, son,’ ordered Roberts. ‘We just need to keep going straight on for another half mile or so and then you can all get out and piss off.’

‘Ah....’

‘“Ah”? What does that mean, “ah”?’ Roberts twisted round from the front seat to aim his shotgun at Fellowes.

‘Yeah, what does that “ah” mean exactly?’ reiterated Swank, shoving his own weapon into Fellowes' midriff.

‘It means no,’ said Fellowes, simply. ‘It means we have a conflict of interest here. We have broken as many of our rules that it is possible to break in order to get our friend where we're going, and

we're pushed for time. I'm sorry but you'll just have to hijack another car for your getaway or whatever.'

Roberts scratched his forehead with the barrel of his sawn off, amused despite himself. 'You've certainly got bollocks, son, I'll give you that.'

Swank jammed the sawn-off into Fellowes' crotch, hard enough to double him up. 'But you won't have in a second, unless you shut up and do as we say.'

Fellowes gasped, 'No, I don't think so. What are you going to do kill us all? Where does that leave you?'

Roberts nodded thoughtfully. 'You've got a point there.' Abruptly he swung round in his seat and screamed. 'But it's just that I've got the gun. So while I've got the gun, I'm in charge and we go where I tell you to go. So keep driving, kid.' Cole obeyed, jerkily heel and toeing in the barely moving traffic.

'Anyway, what's so important to you? Almost sweet shop closing time is it?'

'Or knocking shop?' added Swank with a leer.

'Since you ask,' said Fellowes evenly, 'we have to get this one to a tennis match,' he indicated Tatham, 'at the Hurlingham Club before twelve-thirty. In one piece preferably.'

'Well why din't ya say so? And after that we'll stop for a game of croquet and a little round of polo and after that we'll have a spot of tea with Lord Longford. We can chat about old times. Like when he used to come visit me and Brady in the nick. Oh, and mind I'll have a little wedge o' lemon in my Earl Grey. And no crusts on they cucumber sangwidges.'

'A chukka of Polo,' corrected Fellowes.

'A chucker of polo?' screamed an incredulous Swank, 'a chucker?' For some reason the word seemed to annoy him intensely.

Cole was trying to concentrate on the road but out of the corner of his eye he could see the shotgun jiggling dangerously up and down next to him as Roberts heaved with laughter. ‘What we’re going to do, boys, is a bank job and no more pissing about.’

‘No, I’m sorry,’ said Fellowes, holding Roberts’s gaze, ‘first, we’re going to drop our friend off at the Hurlingham Club, after that, we are at your disposal.’

Roberts turned to Cole, all trace of humour gone. ‘First of all, we’re going to knock over the bank on the Fulham Place Road. And after that we’ll decide exactly how and where to dispose of you lot.’

Dobson began weeping quietly.

‘Oy, shut up, you warden.’

‘I’ve got family,’ he pleaded.

‘You should have thought about that before you became a Custard Cream,’ yelled Swank, referring to the yellow band on the Warden’s hat.

‘Please, I’ve got a wife.’

‘What’s she do?’ asked Roberts, genuinely curious.

Snot and saliva dripped onto the floor of the cab. It took a moment for the warden to collect himself. ‘She’s a... a Custard Cream as well.’

‘Tell you what,’ suggested Swank, ‘why don’t we turn this whole thing into a hostage drama. Get the wife to come along to help negotiate and then do her as well?’

‘Tempting thought,’ said Roberts. Dobson howled messily on the back floor.

The cab lurched; Roberts swiveled and rammed his gun under Cole’s armpit in one fluid motion. ‘Sorry,’ said Cole, ‘traffic’s moving again.’

‘OK, keep straight on across the lights.’

‘Absolutely not,’ countermanded Fellowes, ‘take a left here for the Hurlingham Club.’

Cole braked, unsure of the right move. Beads of perspiration popped on his upper lip.

‘Don't be a silly boy,’ Roberts threatened.

‘Oy look. He sweating buckets now,’ said Swank helpfully.

‘I've got to make a decision now,’ Cole warned he caught sight of his friend's face in the rear view mirror. To his surprise, Fellowes seemed to be mildly amused, enjoying the drama.

‘They're not going to shoot us. Just turn left.’

‘That's easy for you to say.’

‘Yeah go on, mate. They're all mouth - no trousers,’ piped up Tatham.

Cole glanced at Roberts. He too, was smiling slightly. The moment of truth. Cole was a good enough judge of mischief to perceive that Roberts wasn't going to carry out the threat. He wasn't sure about Swank though. Perhaps Tatham might disable the man with one of his racquets if it came to the crunch. He swung the wheel and wondered momentarily what it would be like to have his brains splattered against the side window. It would be quick at least, he decided.

‘Right, you sweaty little bastard, you've done it now.’ Swank cocked the hammers and shoved his gun into the back of Cole's head.

Roberts batted it away. He craned his neck to look at Fellowes approvingly - he admired courage. ‘You aren't half a ballsy crew but we can't let one of you out before we do the job. Surely you can see that?’

‘I wouldn't worry about our friend here. All that concerns him is the Hurlingham Juniors' Championship. He's got, let's see now,’ Fellowes consulted his watch, ‘just under eight minutes to arrive, get changed and get onto court. I wish I could say that our own well-being was in fact his priority, but it's simply not, is it, Tatham?’

‘Nah. Sorry but I couldn’t give a rat’s arse about you lot just now. I gotta think about my game,’ confirmed Tatham, as he pulled a tennis shirt over his head.

‘Besides, you’re forgetting that we ourselves, should not be here at all. And frankly, if we grass you to the local constabulary there would be altogether too many uncomfortable questions to be answered at our school. We’d all end up expelled. In any case, you’ve still got us as hostages. So do whatever job it is that you have in mind and then let us go. No one gets hurt. We sneak back into school and everybody wins, including, I certainly hope, Tatham, after all this bollocksing about.’ Roberts considered the logic.

‘All right, I trust you. Thousands wouldn’t. And if you muck about, I promise you, we will blow your brains out.’

‘Why don’t I just do ‘em all now, right here in the cab?’ suggested Swank, ‘be a lot simpler.’

‘Nah, they’re are on a mission.’ Roberts chuckled. ‘You gotta hand it to them. They’re OK, this lot. You lads called the ultimate bluff so I gotta take my hat off to you lot. You’re rock. I expect that’s the kind of stuff that got the Empire sorted.’ He turned and winked at Swank. ‘Besides, it’s better we turn off here to dodge the traffic, hang a right and we can be back on Fulham Palace Road and into the bank just before it closes. Perfect timing.’

In the back Swank spat a green gob of displeasure onto Dobson’s boot and sniffed.

‘They’re not that rock,’ he observed, ‘one of them’s definitely whizzed themselves.’

Cole grinned at Fellowes through the rear-view mirror.

‘Watch the sodding road, you little git,’ warned Roberts.

More by luck than judgment, Cole swerved out of the path of an oncoming Sierra and kangarooed past with inches to spare. Roberts sighed and shook his head.

On the back seat, Swank observed Tatham curiously. Fully changed now, he sat, eyes closed, deep into his pre-match meditation programme.

There was a ball of yellow light in his mind's-eye, moving astonishingly fast. He held it in focus, controlling it, shifting it, slowing it. He was in the Zone. After only a few sessions with his Swami, Tatham was something of an adept at visualisation technique. He could now tune out of the most stressful situations with a couple of swift "Oms" and summon up his cosmic tennis ball within seconds.

He was jerked back to reality as the cab see-sawed over the sleeping policeman at the player's entrance.

Swank poked him in the ribs. 'What's your game then? You don't speak like His Lordship over there. So, watcha doin' wi' these toffee-nose lot?'

'I just play tennis,' Tatham shrugged and rummaged amongst his bags for his competitor's pass. On the floor at his feet, Dobson moaned softly. Cole took the pass and flashed it at the guard in the booth. For a moment he seemed puzzled at the sight of such a young cabbie, but raised the barrier anyway.

'This one don't talk like the others. He's all right,' announced Swank, prodding Tatham with his sawn-off. Tatham swatted it away and clambered over Dobson. 'Pass us them bags,' he instructed Swank.

'Good luck, Tatham,' said Fellowes.

'Yeah, best of luck, Tatham,' called Roberts, 'say anything and we'll kill your mates.'

But it wasted on Tatham. He was focused on his game, oblivious to everything as he shouldered his racket bags and strode towards the courts.

‘Right, lads,’ said Roberts, ‘mission accomplished. Happy now?’

‘A deal’s a deal,’ confirmed Fellowes, ‘we are now entirely at your service.’

‘Good, so drive, and quick,’ ordered Swank.

Cole popped the clutch, the cab swung out of the Hurlingham and back onto the road.

Fellowes struggled to keep a straight face as Swank donned the strawberry-blonde wig and satin cap.

Within a few minutes the cab emerged onto the Fulham Palace Road. Cole pulled up on the double-yellow outside the bank and applied the handbrake, leaving the engine running. Roberts checked his watch, ‘Five minutes to closing, couldn’t be better.’ He gave Cole a curt nod of approval. ‘All right then, you can piss off now. We gotta go make a withdrawal.’

Fellowes shifted uncomfortably. ‘There is one small matter...’

‘What now?’

‘You see, we were rather expecting to drive our cab back to school, we used all our cash filling up this morning as a result we find ourselves somewhat financially embarrassed.’

Swank could scarcely speak.

‘You what?’ he screeched.

‘We’re skint.’

‘How would you like an extra arsehole, ya little ponce?’

‘An extra fiver would be handier...’

Roberts chuckled. ‘I gotta hand it to you....’

‘Well if you would, it might allow us all to go about our business without annoying one another any further.’

Roberts dug in his pocket and threw a small bunch of notes onto Cole's lap. 'Go on then, lads. Sod off then.'

'You don't mind if we watch do you?' said Fellowes, clambering out.

Without bothering to reply, Roberts and Swank jumped out, weapons in hand and sprinted up the steps to the bank.

There was a short blast from inside followed by the sounds of screaming. Moments later Swank reappeared, nylon hair streaming, cash bag in each hand. He flung himself behind the wheel and gunned the engine in readiness for his partner.

Swank checked the road ahead, the traffic had eased considerably. To his dismay he caught sight of a distinctive yellow and black livery in the wing mirror. A police patrol car a hundred yards or so behind.

Shite.

What else could go wrong?

Swank kept a wary eye on the vehicle and as it pulled out of the traffic and cruised up the bus lane, he banged his head on the wheel in frustration. At the sound of the horn, the patrol car began to accelerate towards him.

Roberts now emerged from the bank in a black ski-mask, lugging two bulging holdalls. Talk about bad timing.

The jig was well and truly up. Swank leaped back out of the cab, ran into the middle of the road and raised his weapon, discharging both barrels at the oncoming patrol car, which swerved

violently. The bonnet took the brunt of the projectile force and flew upwards smashing the windscreen. The vehicle skidded to a halt and with a heavy sigh, the two front tyres slowly deflated and collapsed onto the rims.

A uniformed officer emerged and sprinted away, diving for cover behind a nearby wall. Time seemed to stand still after the explosion of noise and violence. Swank reloaded.

A truncheon flew from the window of the patrol car. It bounced hollowly onto the road, breaking the unnatural silence and rolled slowly towards Swank's feet. Swank looked puzzled for a second, then shrugged and retreated to the cab. He revved the engine and rammed it into gear.

Still loitering on the nearby pavement, Fellowes and Cole waved cheerfully at the departing villains. Roberts grinned wolfishly, holding up one of the large canvas bags and returned the wave. Swank flipped them the finger.

Constable Mike Miller, still trapped inside the crippled patrol car, flung his right arm out of the window. 'Don't shoot, I'm unarmed,' he shouted.

He peered gingerly out of his window, then fingered the dashboard radio into life with his other hand.

'Unit Tango Sierra five. Requesting assistance. Armed Robbery in progress, Barclays bank, Fulham Palace Road. Two suspects, armed, dressed as a clowns. Suspect vehicle is a London Taxi Cab registration...Sierra, Lima, Alpha, Tango Zero. False plates. This unit has been fired upon.' His voice steadily rose in pitch to a screechy falsetto. 'I repeat, I have been fired upon...and I no longer have my truncheon.'

Miller tried to clamber out, but his body refused to answer. He jerked back and forth like a gaffed fish, paralysed. To his horror, he realised that a stray pellet must have severed his spinal cord.

‘Officer is immobilised,’ he shrieked into the radio, ‘probably paralysed....for life,’ he added, breaking into a sob.

‘Well that was exciting,’ said Fellowes, ‘a good day’s work, all things considered.’

‘Not a bad tip either,’ said Cole insecting the crumpled notes in his hand. ‘I suppose we'd better find the nearest tube before the whole area gets sealed off.’

‘Oh Lord, oh God, help me,’ a voice from the patrol car.

They looked at each other aghast, before sprinting across to the vehicle. Mike Miller was slumped in the seat. He'd ceased struggling, face deathly pale.

‘Can you move?’ asked Fellowes.

‘A little,’ replied the officer, weakly. ‘It’s my spine.’ He strained his torso ineffectually against the seatbelt.

‘OK, OK, calm down now. Try to keep absolutely still.’ Fellowes opened the door and leaned across, gingerly unclipping the belt. Miller shot forward in the seat and gripped the steering wheel. He pulled himself up, energetically wiggled his chest and clambered out of the car.

‘I'm all right!’ He stared at Fellowes as though he'd performed a miracle. ‘I'm all right.’ He touched his toes.

‘Yes. I think you’d ...ah...just forgotten that you were still belted in.’

Miller considered the implications. He’d be a laughing stock back at the station. ‘No, must have been a temporary trauma. But I'm fine now.’ He scrabbled for the radio handset. ‘Officer received

spinal trauma. Now recovered. Officer was in trauma. But is now, I repeat, fine and fully recovered. Am in pursuit on foot.' He turned to address his young samaritans. 'Strange things traumas, one minute you can't move, next, you're right as rain. So, uh, cheers then, lads.' With that, he trotted off up the road in the direction of the cab, pausing only to retrieve his truncheon.

'Bravest thing I ever saw.' Fellowes and Cole watched Miller's partner emerge from behind the nearby wall and dust himself down. 'Takes on a shotgun killer armed with only a truncheon, gets paralysed in the spine and still runs them down - on foot, mind. They don't make 'em like that any more.' Constable Rowe shook his head in admiration.

'It was just his seatbelt,' snorted Cole.

'Shot though the seatbelt, was he?' breathed the constable, awestruck.

'Come on let's get out of here,' suggested Fellowes quietly.

'Those were no killers,' objected Cole.

'Let's go.' Fellowes tried to haul his friend away. But Rowe was oblivious now, busy submitting his own account of his partner's heroics.

'...I repeat, shot through the seatbelt... bullet lodged in spine...giving chase on foot...'

They could still hear him jabbering as they turned the corner.

'Wouldn't be so bad if either one of them had any sort of a spine to get shot in,' grumbled Cole.

'Just like you to side with the criminal. They're not nice people you know.'

Cole peered at his friend with a cynical smirk; Fellowes was forced to concede his hypocrisy. 'Yes, all right, they did bung us twenty-five quid I suppose.'

'And they let us get Tatham to his match on time. And they didn't blow our brains out.'

'OK, OK,' agreed Fellowes, 'they didn't blow our brains out.'

Swank's off-the-cuff plan had been to merge with the Saturday lunchtime queue on the Hammersmith Road where the two would simply ditch the cab in the gridlocked traffic and walk away. Under normal circumstances, the going was usually so slow that it would have been at least twenty minutes before anyone discovered that the vehicle was empty. The problem was that for a change, the West bound route of Hammersmith road was running smooth as silk - smooth as molasses, at any rate. The other problem was that the helicopter, which had been over flying the road for some time now, seemed to have zeroed in on them.

Despatchers had alerted CO53, the Met's Air Support Unit following Miller's call and the Twin Squirrel was in the air within minutes; landing only once in Central London to pick up a sharpshooter. Having correctly anticipated their likely escape route, the pilot was now slowly circling above, keeping watch on their movements.

It was Swank's turn to sweat. And it wasn't just the unwelcome attention from the chopper that was beginning to bother him. Even with the windows fully down the cab reeked. An unpleasant ammonia smell wafted across reminding him abruptly that they had overlooked a passenger. He angled the rear view mirror down and saw Dobson in the reflection, curled up in a foetal ball on floor.

'It's that fuckin' Parking Warden.' He gestured behind with his thumb, 'we forgot all about him.' Roberts didn't even bother to look. He rubbed his eyes instead. It had been a long and remarkably awful day.

'Pull in here,' he ordered.

Swank swung in to the new Texaco station. The chopper duly changed course to hover overhead like an annoying insect.

‘Drive up under the carwash,’ shouted Roberts over the clatter of the rotors.

The red and white helicopter dropped altitude and hovered just above the car wash exit as a second bright yellow chopper came zooming in over the entrance, flaring its rotors. Swank craned his neck upwards to check out the newcomer. ‘Hey, there’s another one. Oh, that one’s not a copper-chopper. It’s a news one. They’ve got a TV camera, aye. Halloo Mam!’ he yelled.

The networks had been quick to respond to reports of an armed robbery and shootout at the bank and even now the Fulham Palace road location was swarming with reporters; most of them queuing to interview Rowe and hear more about his missing partner. Theories pertaining to Miller’s whereabouts flew thick and fast. Some held that he must have passed out from loss of blood or succumbed to his terrible wounds, others suspected that he’d caught up with the villains and was now either dead or a hostage.

Only ITN had the foresight to send a camera team to Battersea heliport where they’d hired their own chopper and were now first in line for on-site coverage of the still unfolding drama at the petrol station. The cameraman focused in on the red striped Police Twin Squirrel as it hovered lower over the carwash.

‘Be informed, there is a sharpshooter on board. You are ordered to throw out your weapons and come out with your hands up.’ The harsh electronic sound of the aircraft tannoy reverberated through the cab over the clatter of the blades.

‘If we're going tae do something, we'd better do it now,’ suggested Swank, ‘but personally, I think we're fucked. You should never have let them kids go. They make good hostages.’

In the gloom of the carwash Roberts inclined his head at the passenger compartment. ‘We've got a hostage.’

‘Nobody gives a crap about a Custard Cream. They'll probably do him first just to get a clear shot at us.’

Dobson whimpered in the back.

‘He's still a uniform -a sort of second cousin to a copper. And he's all we've got.’

Swank nodded and swarmed over the seat into the back of the cab. He landed heavily on the Warden who squealed like a stuck pig.

‘For fuck's sake, Swank,’ sighed Roberts.

Swank looked up guiltily. ‘I did'nae do much. I did'nae hurt him hardly.’ He gave the warden a rabbit-punch in the arm for good measure.

Dobson squealed.

The police helicopter hove into view once again, tannoy booming, ‘You have one minute to comply. Armed police are already in position. Surrender, and all will be well.’

Dobson shrieked, combined with the cacophony of the overhead rotors, the noise was deafening.

‘They won't have the ground units here for a while yet...,’ bellowed Roberts, ‘Oy, I can't hear myself think.’

‘That's 'cos I can't get this cunt to shut up.’

‘It might help if you stopped punching him.’

‘Och, it’s all right...he’s fainted.’

Roberts wasn't such a bad person. He was neither mad dog nor scum of the earth; in Underworld terms he was an aristocrat; his criminal antecedents reaching a couple of generations back. As result, he felt bound by a professional code of ethics; if not exactly honour-amongst-thieves, then at least a compulsion to do the honourable thing. And so, because he'd set up the job which had gone so pear-shaped, he felt that he should be the one to take the fall, giving his subordinate an opportunity to escape.

Roberts' initial thought was to hang on to the hostage while Swank ran for it. He could keep the helicopter marksman occupied by taking pot-shots out of the window.

Then it came to him.

He climbed into the back and stripped the insensible warden down to vest and shorts while he explained the new plan to his partner.

Swank took one look at the warden's sodden serge trousers, ‘There's no way I'm puttin' on them pissy keks,’ he said.

Roberts swore in frustration. ‘It's that, or a twenty stretch.’

His partner considered the options. ‘Gi'us the whizzy bastards then.’

Swank dropped his beloved leather trousers to the cab floor and put on the warden's white shirt, tie, uniform blue-black jacket and rancid trousers.

Roberts inspected him approvingly. ‘You'll pass as a copper from up there.’

The two fugitives looked at each other and took a deep breath - Make or break.

‘Let's do it,’ murmured Roberts.

Through telescopic sights, the sharpshooter hovering on high observed the two figures walking purposefully out from under the cover of the Carwash. Roberts had his sawn off shotgun pressed tightly to the disguised Swank's neck.

The marksman took up first pressure on the trigger. 'Two men. One armed, one hostage,' he reported into the mike.

'Fire at will. Over...' a crisp command through the radio net.

'Repeat, one hostage observed. Over,' responded the sharpshooter laconically.

'No hostages reported. Two suspects only. Fire at will. You have clearance to take the shot. Over,' insisted the voice.

'Negative. I have one suspect and one hostage. Hostage appears to be a uniformed police officer. I cannot fire at this time. Over.'

'Do you know who I am?'

'No...sir?'

'This is assistant commissioner Reilly.'

'I see....very good, sir. I still cannot open fire without endangering the hostage.'

There was a silence on the radio followed by an electronic kafuffle.

A new voice came on line, less aggressive, more considered.

'Unit 12. This is assistant commissioner Hawks.'

'Yes, sir.'

'I have operational command in Hammersmith. Do you confirm that you have sight of a uniformed hostage?'

'Confirm that. Yes, sir. Over,' replied the sniper.

‘Negative on the shot. Do not, repeat, do not take the shot. Do not endanger hostage. Standby.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

In the control room the two squabbling assistant commissioners glared at each other over the electronics. ‘You almost took out P.C. Miller, one of your own officers and a hero. How would we explain that to the press, you wanker?’

Reilly stared uncomfortably down at his spit-shined shoes. Nobody had briefed him that he had a man unaccounted for down there. Heads would certainly roll for this.

Roberts shoved Swank into the garage shop. They crashed through swing glass doors to find a gangling youth seated at the till in grubby Texaco overalls. To their surprise, he ignored them. Lars Peterscham, exchange student from Sweden and Texaco non-attendant, was utterly transfixed by the dramatic images on the small portable black and white TV on his counter.

Raucous disco music pumped from the shop speakers obliterating the clatter of chopper blades outside.

Lars gazed idly up at the two men, did a double-take, then goggled: ‘I am seeing you all over the TV...you are famous.’

Roberts aimed the gun at him. ‘Yeah, we’re the famous garage-attendant killers, so shut up and do exactly what we tell you.’

The youth’s eyes widened in alarm.

‘Give us them overalls,’ demanded Roberts.

The Swede cowered under the counter in his underwear while Roberts quickly zipped up the oily uniform. He put on a Texaco cap to complete the disguise, then shoved the cash down the front of his suit. 'Right time to go, mate. Are you coming?'

Swank grinned. 'You first.'

'Stay where you are,' boomed the voice from the tannoy, as Roberts bolted from the rear of the Garage. The bank robber obediently dropped to the asphalt courtyard as the helicopter whirled overhead.

Roberts lay spread-eagled, feigning abject terror as the helicopter hovered closer; backwash whipped the air as the occupants checked him out. 'Be informed, one hostage has been released.' The marksman relayed to the Command Centre through the mike. The craft swung away. The instant it disappeared, Roberts leaped to his feet and hopped over the back wall into the gardens beyond.

On board the helicopter a voice from Command Centre cut through the internal radio chatter.

'Ground units delayed. Hampered by traffic. Wait one... I have assistant commissioner Reilly for you.'

Assistant Commissioner Reilly had resumed operational command and, frustrated by delay of his ground units, had decided to act decisively and commit the helicopter crew to an immediate armed assault on the garage.

'Go, go, go...go...' he barked into the mike, like a demented D.J.

The pilot objected. 'Ah...we're not actually an assault team sir; we're an air unit - eyes and ears of the Met. Furthermore, we advise against such an action at this time. Over.'

'I register your objection, MP210. Are you or are you not assault trained?'

There was a brief silence. ‘We did a few days at Hendon but that was just...’

‘Then you will carry out my orders. That is all. Over...’

The headphones crackled again. ‘Now go, go, go... Over.’

The crew gaped in disbelief. The co-pilot rolled his eyes, shrugged and pulled the pin on a smoke grenade, the detonating lever sprang away and he let it fall from the Plexiglas bubble to the forecourt below.

Inside the shop, Swank helped himself to crisps from the display buckets, comparing flavours. He saw the billowing smoke outside and observed the helicopter beginning its descent. Nobody could have accused Swank of being a genius but he did possess a talent for mayhem, he grabbed a half-dozen blue butane gas cylinders, piled them in the doorway and chucked a couple of new tires on top for luck. He sprinted to the back door, turned, and fired off both barrels. The canisters exploded taking out the huge plate glass window in a cascade of brilliant gemstone shards - nuggets of safety glass pattered to the asphalt like diamond rain.

The helicopter crew gripped their seats with white knuckles as the low hovering craft was buffeted by the blast. They'd been fortunate that only one of the cylinders had exploded and there was no blaze as yet.

‘If he does that again, the pumps are gonna go up,’ observed the sharpshooter.

‘Fuck this for a game of soldiers,’ remarked the crew-chief,

The pilot simply raised the collective, wrenching the aircraft skywards again, safely above the billowing smoke. ‘Yeah, that’s exactly what it is - a game for soldiers. They want the bleedin’ SAS for something like this, not Heli-Coppers. I vote this is getting way beyond the call.’

In the chaos and under cover of the smoke, unobserved by either helicopter, Swank dashed out the back of the garage shop, like Roberts, he too slipped over the wall into the obscurity of suburban Hammersmith.

‘Oh God, this is sooooo exciting,’ squealed Trevor. The stylists squirmed with excitement at the drama unfolding before them on the wall mounted TV set.

‘To think, it’s all going down, so to speak, a few miles away.’

The two men looked at each other at the same moment. ‘Should we?’

‘I think we could,’ announced Trevor checking his watch. ‘Mrs Westaways isn’t due for another twenty minutes.’

‘And she can wait, the old cow.’

‘Never tips.’

‘Never,’ agreed Edgar pursing his lips with disapproval. The two men quickly flipped their plastic sign to “closed”, locked up and totter-trotted precariously into the street on their red Cuban-heeled boots, where they hailed a passing taxi.

Alone, in the back of the old cab, a measure of awareness was dawning on the quivering Dobson. He was unharmed, no longer insensible or panicked beyond reason. He attempted to reassemble the shards of this traumatic afternoon: he’d been abducted at gunpoint and, at some point, stripped of his uniform. He had also, he felt, managed to disgrace himself in some way. He sniffed at the stale pungent air.

A blue light flashed, illuminating the shadowy interior of the carwash and he could hear the steady wop of rotor blades. Salvation was at hand. The choices were simple then: he could emerge from the empty cab in urine-stained undercrackers and grubby string vest and be the laughing stock of the world; alternatively, he could try to emerge from the situation with some credit. If the villains had escaped or were dead, he could turn the story to his advantage without fear of contradiction. He recalled hearing shots fired, which gave him grounds for optimism. If he played his cards right he could emerge from the hijacked cab, calm and unruffled - hero of the hour. He might even make the nine-o'clock news, and that would certainly put in a crimp in Martindale's week.

In the well of the passenger seat he noticed Swank's discarded black leather trousers curled up like a loathsome Mamba skin. Not his style of pant certainly, but adequate enough to conceal the evidence of his shame from the general public. He climbed over and pulled them on, a little short, and tight over his long thighs, but fastenable.

Outside, the Texaco forecourt was now awash with patrol cars. Uniformed officers swarmed around the garage shop like ants - fighting to control the smoldering heap of tires, others searched the premises but to their disappointment, unearthed nothing more than a quivering, bedraggled Swede.

Two Met Police Rovers had been tactically parked to the front and rear of the carwash and spotting movement inside, armed officers now covered the cab. 'Throw down your weapons and come out with your hands in the air.' A senior officer in a bullet proof vest stood at the carwash entry and bellowed into a bull horn.

Dobson frantically wound down the passenger window and roared, 'I'm unarmed.'

'Identify yourself,' came the harsh metallic voice in reply.

‘Parking Warden, Delbert Dobson, public servant, kidnap victim, and...’ he added optimistically, ‘...hero.’

‘Come out slowly with your hands in the air.’

On the floor of the backseat he found his beloved and only slightly dented Parking Warden's peaked cap. He picked it up and dusted it off. He was going to emerge from this crisis with all the dignity he could muster. Dobson carefully placed the hat on his head and checked his reflection in the rear view mirror adopting a suitably heroic expression. Pity he no longer had his shirt or uniform jacket.

‘I'm coming out,’ he warned, ‘don't shoot.’

A crowd had gathered on the pavement outside and people were now spilling out into the road. The local constabulary had erected a cordon around the service station but crowds always instinctively know when danger is present and when it has passed. They pushed up against the flimsy plastic tape, jostling one another for a better gawp.

Edgar and Trevoir scuttled around the corner. They caught sight of the bright yellow helicopter hovering over the garage. A news cameraman leaned out on the skids, filming the scene below.

On the nation's TV screens a young woman at the familiar ITN newsdesk interrupted the late afternoon programs with an update.

‘The Hammersmith Carwash hostage crisis appears to be entering its final phase. Dramatic pictures are coming to us live from the site...it appears that someone is about to emerge from vehicle in the carwash...it is not known at this time whether this is a hostage or one of the assailants. Armed police have the situation under control.’

Footage of the jostling, wide-eyed crowd appeared on screen, Trevor and Edgar preening, waving furiously in amongst the throng. There was a cutaway to the smoking shop doorway, the camera then panned across to the carwash where it relayed a wide shot of the structure bottled up at both ends by the two patrol cars, surrounded by armed men. The police helicopter dramatically flitted past the lens, whipping tendrils of black smoke into haze.

They cut to the helicopter's interior where Martin Bell, in his trademark white linen suit, appeared to be listening to something important in his earpiece. He made the announcement that the nation had been waiting and praying for.

'An unarmed man is coming out and we are informed that it may be the missing hero, Constable Michael Miller, safe and sound.'

Delbert Dobson now emerged blinking in the light from the carwash. Armed police, shielded by the open doors of their Rovers covered him in the sights of their American Armalite rifles, while in the air above the sharpshooter maintained a steady bead slightly to the left of centre of his grubby grey string vest.

Dobson held his hands in the air, conscious of being the centre of so much attention and slowly approached the police officers, jaw set firm. He was the defiant hero, quintessential public servant, dignified and dutiful till the last. Taking a chance, he clenched a fist and raised it high in a gesture of defiance and victory for his public.

What the public actually saw was a tall man with a Zapata moustache, in a string vest, peaked cap and tight leather trousers, punching the air - a crazed Village People fan perhaps, or a bad Freddie Mercury impersonator striking some kind of gay-rights liberation pose.

There was a puzzled silence, broken by desultory whistling and the squeals of the two hairdressers. ‘Oohoo!’

‘Weeoooh!’

‘Hey fun-boy, over here.’

‘Get you, Dobby.’

‘He never let on.’

‘No, they never do.’

‘Dobby, Dobby, it's us.’

‘Disgraceful!’ grunted an tweedy old buffer. It was unclear whether he was referring to the hairdressers or Dobson’s outfit. Although the show was more or less over, the crowd seemed unwilling to disperse. There was still enough adrenaline sloshing about to make the spectators edgy and over excitable; enough to turn them from a crowd into an irritable mob.

‘I beg your pardon?’ said Trevor.

‘I dig your garden?’ echoed Edgar.

The man waved vaguely and crossly in the direction of the carwash. ‘It's bad enough to see him parading in public like that without the two of you standing here flaunting yourselves...’

The crowd closed in. A further source of entertainment.

Trevor was speechless.

‘Yes, flaunting yourselves in your buttockless trousers. What do you mean by it?’

‘Hey, live and let live. If they're over twenty-one they can flaunt each other.’

‘There may be fucking children around. I don't want them to see these people flaunting.’

The situation was running away from the normally unflappable Trevor. He began to fan himself.

‘Edgar, get me away from these Troglodytes. I may swoon.’

‘Hey, that one just called us Trog...uh...something... I’ll bet they’re connected to that one in the car wash; the big Nancy in the leather trousers and the cap.’

‘This whole thing may very well be an obscene publicity stunt for the Homosexualist Movement.’

Edgar tried vainly to shoo the converging crowd away.

‘Unless I’m very much mistaken that was a Homosexualist movement he just made.’

‘The police should just shoot them before any kids arrive.’

‘I’m not taking this lying down,’ threatened Edgar, striking a magnificently butch pose.

‘Not on your back, at any rate,’ replied another voice in the crowd.

‘Now you’ve done it.’

A small scuffle broke out.

‘For heaven’s sake -’ objected the tweedy man as he was short-armed swiftly in the gut.

The scuffle quickly spread as elements of the crowd closed in on the two hairdressers.

A blanket was flung over Dobson’s head and he was bundled smartly away in one of the police vehicles. In the meantime Edgar and Trevoir fought back-to-back in a Custerish last stand, lashing out with pointy red Cuban heeled boots and Pierre Cardin tote bags against the combined forces of enraged cockney mechanics, middle-aged librarians, west London shop assistants and Home Counties’ Majors. Finally, the police forced their way through the melee and the stylists were scooped up for questioning and possible charges of affray.

‘This is bad.’

It was late on Saturday evening, Fellowes and Cole stood silently in the bedroom of the Lair and considered the still sleeping forms of their housemaster and his female companion. Their breathing was shallow and they'd been out cold for almost twenty-four hours.

Baxter snorted, eyes flickering. 'You boys, what...?' he muttered.

The woman at his side began to stir. 'Shit,' hissed Fellowes, 'we're going to get busted.'

'Ok, they're alive at least, let's just get out of here while we can,' whispered Cole.

The two boys crept back to the safety of their dormitory where a discreet celebration was underway; a bottle of Tequila passed quietly from hand to hand.

The triumphant Tatham shyly unzipped his sports bag to reveal a massive gold trophy. He sloshed a little liquor into the gleaming cup and raised it to his friends. It had been a good day. Against all the odds, he was 'Urlingham' Junior champ, with the promise of a major sponsorship. He was on his way.

Baxter dreamed on. He dreamed of the Cuillins; a recurring nightmare in which he and wife made the final ascent and found the whole of Western Skye spread before them. They stood on the knife sharp edge of black volcanic rock. Nothing below and nothing above. Unusually, there was an absence of fog revealing a breathtaking view of the patchwork greens and purples interspersed with delicate wisps of ground mist.

'Goodness,' murmured Brenda. She held out her arms to embrace the landscape, before Baxter could move she stepped out into the void. 'Noooo!' wailed Baxter, but the sound refused to emerge. He wanted desperately to convey to his wife his despair, even as she fell. In his dream he remained mute, fighting against the obstruction and awoke screaming, bathed in a stinking whisky sweat.

The heavy woman at his side, barely stirred.

It took a while to register his surroundings. Baxter sat swaying on the edge of the bed, heart racing. He held his head in his hands for a while but the dizziness would not pass. His leaden brain remained addled but he fought against sleep. He wanted not sleep but the oblivion which alcohol brought. The master refilled the glass from the remains of the bottle on the bedside table and drank it off. Curiously, the liquor didn't bite as he expected but slipped down smoothly, sweetly even. After a few moments, he slumped to the floor by the side of the bed, still cradling the glass and slept on.

'Look at that.' Leonard Cole was impressed. He smacked the sports page with a salami forefinger. There was a shot of David Tatham, grinning and shaking hands with some executive type.

' "Schoolboy signs up with Slazenger." "

'Yeah I know.' Cole could tell what was coming next.

'Says here, he goes to Slatters.'

'Yeah, he does, I know him.'

'That's a sponsorship deal he's got. It's a shitload of money, son. His dad must be well-chuffed.'

Cole waited for the inevitable...

'Why can't you do that?'

He sighed. 'Because I only ever played tennis once before - on the beach at Morecombe. A bloody great Alsatian came along and ate the ball. I don't think Slazenger would be that interested...they might give me another ball, I suppose.'

Len chewed a blackened hangnail.

‘Shouldn’t stop you if you want it bad enough. I was like Rod Laver in my Butlins days. Wasn’t I love? Love?’

‘Reykjavik,’ shouted Julia Cole from her armchair in response to a tie-breaker on the telly.

‘I was a Red-Coat at Skeggie,’ announced Len, proudly.

‘You must miss it; the tricorn hats, the old Brown Bess, Wellington, floggings...not like the army now I suppose.’

Len’s bushy brows fell, two caterpillars taking a bow.

‘If you could use that big mouth of yours to get yourself sorted for a job instead of ripping the piss all the time, you’d be a lot better off.’

‘I’m considering my options.’

Len tapped the paper again with force enough to stun a cat. ‘See this kid, he’s set for life. Be a multi-millionaire by the time you’ve been booted out of your first interview.’ He squinted at the grainy photo. ‘And he’ll probably get all the birds as well.’

Len finished his rum and Coke.

‘Look, son, I know fella over at Walkers Metals, who could set up an intro to Mr Walker himself. He could always use a bright lad from a good school. You want me to have a word?’

‘I thought I might give university a go.’

Len looked over at his wife, silhouetted by the neon tube in the tiny front room. ‘Hear that, love? The boy’s talking about uni.’ He nodded approval, leaned forward and whispered conspiratorially. ‘You’ve got one term left at that school, so get your head down and get those grades.’ He waved a threatening finger. ‘You hear me? Don’t fuck it up.’

The commercials were on, so Julia turned and smiled, acknowledging the presence of her two men. ‘Gi’s us a smacker then. I’ll have to get your Nan to knit you a scarf. Like they have on University Challenge.’

Julia picked up a Woman’s Own and flipped to the latest competition. ‘In five words or less, Len, how would you describe a Ford Sierra?’

Len considered this for a split second. ‘Shite...shite...shite...shite...shite..and..shite.’

His wife never even lifted her eyes from the page.

‘That’s six words - seven if you include “and”.’

‘Oh dear, I do apologise.’

The room was stifling hot. The three electric filaments of the bar heater were on full blast illuminating the twin porcelain dogs at the hearth. Inwardly Cole sneered at the gaucheness of it all - the cheap flock wallpaper, the leering ceramic Turk’s head over the fireplace. He was ashamed of his own home. He’d rather have been anywhere but here.

‘That’s why you’ll never win the big prizes, Len, because you don’t stay within the rules. You’d be surprised how many people fall down on that one. Brilliant poetry they write, I’ve seen it. Makes me look like a moron. Some of it I couldn’t even understand. Progressive stuff; blank verse they call it. Here’s the thing though, those clever-clogs don’t always win because they don’t follow the rules.’

‘What would you know?’ sneered Len.

‘Oh, I know that, ‘cos every competition you enter, you’re entitled to find out who the winners are and what they did to win. I’ve seen –’

‘Why don’t you talk to His Cleverness here. Get him to write your six words for you?’

‘Oh come along, he wouldn’t want to be bothered.’

‘Why the hell not?’ Len was clearly building himself into a righteous rum-fuelled fury.

Cole slipped out of the stifling room and padded up the stairs.

‘Why wouldn't a boy whose education cost me a fucking arm and a fucking leg, want to help his mum get rich? I'll kill him, the ungrateful little sod.’

‘Don't be daft Len. You know he's on a scholarship. Let him alone.’

‘If he thinks he's too la-di-da to help his old mum write a couple of lines of crap to win some shit, then what's the world coming to?’ Len raged. He pointed to the ceiling. ‘If there's any competition going on up there right now, it's wanking for England.’

‘Just leave hi - ’

The Woman's Own magazine was ripped from Julia's grasp. She listened to Len's heavy footfall stomping up the stairs and shook her head sadly. There was going to be a contest all right, but there weren't going to be any winners tonight.

‘I hear Robert Marley is cutting a new disc.’

Aubrey pitched another steaming forkful of orange meat into his gaping maw.

‘What on earth are you talking about now?’ his wife enquired.

‘That Reggie singer, Rasta fellow from Trinidad, you know? By the way whatd'ye call this stuff Albert?’

The major domo clicked heels. ‘Is goulash. Gut, yah?’

‘Kraut thing, is it?’

‘That is not strictly so.’

‘Well, not bloody bad for all that.’

‘Indeed not,’ Antonia agreed.

It was one of the rare occasions on which the family was together around the enormous mahogany dining table. They were however, crammed together around the far end of the spacious but sadly neglected and dusty dining room closest to the inadequate heat of a sputtering log fire. The cream-coloured walls were punctuated every so often by a lighter coloured rectangle or oval where portraits or landscapes perhaps, had once adorned the handsome room. Cole sat at Antonia’s right hand and attempted to keep his thoughts on the plate before him. Every so often his gaze would shift to Laura seated opposite. And in particular, to her luscious cleavage.

‘Jamaican,’ corrected Fellowes, ‘Bob Marley was Jamaican.’

‘No, she went of her own accord,’ riposted Aubrey with a guffaw that sent a sliver of beef flying down the table towards Piers Peacey, a young man in a beautifully cut suit who sat unnecessarily close to Laura.

Cole had taken a dislike to him not merely because he was present this weekend at Laura’s invitation but because of his languid manner, his bespoke pin stripe suit more appropriate to a man twenty years older, and the fringe of floppy hair which he continually flicked away from his eyes with irritating, mannered jerks of his head.

Laura sighed, giving Cole a mild palpitation as he sneaked another peek at those pneumatically charged breasts of hers. ‘That pathetic schoolboy joke only works if you say “Jamaica” not “Jamaican”.’ She glared irritably at Cole, who quickly returned his gaze to his cracked lime-green plate. ‘It doesn’t make any sense if you say “Jamaican”, just “Jamaica”.’

‘As I’ve already pointed out, she went of her own accord,’ replied her father equably. ‘Albert, this is very good. Be sure to pass on my compliments to your wife, as always. Now what do you say would be an authentic accompaniment for this dish in Krautland? A Burgundy perhaps?’

‘I think a good Tokaj would be most appropriate for a dish of this nature,’ offered Piers, overly enunciating the Hungarian pronunciation, - Tookeye.

Albert clicked his heels and refilled Aubrey’s plate from the chipped bowl. ‘This is Hungarian dish so the young man is perhaps correct that you could be serving de Hungarian Tokaj with this...’

Albert muttered under his breath, ‘...if you was serving it for pudding.’

‘Got none of that of course, would a gin do? - shame not to do a strong flavour justice.’

Antonia pursed her lips in disapproval. ‘Albert, this is a transparent attempt to introduce alcohol to the meal. Please ignore my husband.’

‘Bob Marley,’ insisted Fellowes, ‘his name was Bob Marley and I don’t see how he can be cutting a new disc. Slipped one perhaps. But I doubt he’s making a new record since he’s been dead since 1981.’

‘You mustn’t engage your father in badinage; he’s only trying to get a rise out of you because I won’t let him have a drink this week. He’s like a bear with a sore head,’ Antonia advised.

Aubrey took a surly sip from the glass of tap-water by his plate then raised his head with a jerk, startling Cole by glaring down the table at him. ‘And you, Organ Grinder, what’s the point of you? Here for yet another weekend? Making sheep’s eyes at my wife and ogling my daughter’s tits.’

‘Good gracious,’ sputtered Piers.

Fellowes patted his father’s arm. ‘Father, he’s my guest. Anyway, you don’t mind Cole. We’re here to revise together. The dreaded ‘A’ levels are upon us in just under seven weeks.’

‘If there was a qualification in Laura’s tits he’d get a first class degree with honours from the way he’s been studying them.’

‘I don’t mind him looking at my tits,’ said Laura mildly.

Piers threw her a furious glance.

Antonia stared at the ceiling. ‘I cannot tell you how much I dislike the word “tits” at the table. Is it possible, just possible that we could have a meal, as a family, without alcohol and without profanity, just for once?’

‘What would be the point of that?’ grumbled Aubrey.

‘I wasn’t ...’ objected Cole weakly.

‘Never mind my darling. He’s been grumpy all week.’ Antonia patted Cole’s hand affectionately.

He gave her a grateful smile.

‘Look at him. There, the sheep’s eyes. With my wife, that’s what I’m talking about. Somebody quickly get a camera and take a picture for the lawyers,’ commanded Aubrey.

‘I’ll do it,’ offered Piers helpfully, rising to his feet.

Antonia rolled her eyes and waved weakly at Albert: ‘Oh, for goodness sake just get him a Gin.’

‘Don’t be an arse, boy.’ Aubrey waved Piers back down into his seat.

With a litre bottle of Safeway’s own-brand gin before him and half a tumbler of that product comfortably warming his insides Aubrey became an expansive and philanthropic host once again.

‘Yes, chaps,’ he addressed Cole and Peacey, ‘I’m a bit of a rum bugger I know, but I do appreciate the fact that young Cole saved my only daughter from that insane Arab Monkey.’

Antonia sighed.

‘It was a Chimp, father,’ corrected Laura.

Piers gazed curiously at Laura. ‘What’s all this then Lor?’ He gave his fringe another languid flick.

‘Oh, long time ago, Charlie’s friend saved me from a rampaging chimp.’

Piers tittered wildly - another thing about him that set Cole’s teeth on edge – although he possessed a deep, plummy baritone speaking voice, his laugh was pitched somewhere between a Japanese Geisha girl’s giggle and the cackle of a demented hen. ‘What happened, someone swipe his nuts?’ Laura smiled at Cole.

‘In a manner of speaking,’ replied her brother. ‘Cole here, did somewhat deprive the monkey of his nuts, - with a mallet. It’s why Father occasionally refers to him as the Organ Grinder.’

‘I’d wrestle gorillas for you, darling, you know that,’ said Piers quickly.

‘I know you would, sweetheart.’ Laura smiled.

Fellowes pretended to gag.

Cole felt a sharp stab of jealousy.

‘But I would hate for you to get your lovely suit creased. So if there were any gorillas in need of a good malleting I might still ask Jonathan to see to them,’ explained Laura.

Piers appraised Cole’s patched herringbone jacket from across the table and grinned. ‘Yes, I see what you mean.’ Cole was just aching to mallet that supercilious smirk from his rival’s face but instead of attacking him he kept his hands busy under the table, wringing his napkin like a chicken’s neck. Besides, Laura might just conceivably be flirting with him again.

Piers had recently started work at prestigious City brokerage where his father was a managing partner, as part of the trainee programme he’d been avidly attending a series of financial seminars. Piers now saw an opportunity to inject one of the pithier commercial aphorisms into the conversation.

‘One should never wrestle with pigs, as the saying goes, nor I daresay, monkeys.’ Piers released a bizarre titter.

Gnomic self-help speak always irritated Aubrey beyond measure. ‘Why on earth not?’ he demanded, slamming down his tumbler.

Piers flicked his fringe and explained: ‘Because you’ll both end up getting covered in ah...

“doings” ...and only the pig enjoys it.’ He sat back smugly, awaiting laughter. Aubrey simply

glowered at Piers beneath thunderhead eyebrows - the storm followed swiftly. ‘What do you mean

“doings”? What does that mean? What are you on about, “doings”?’ You think you’re some kind of

Jap, Kung-Fu-Zen-Master or something that you’ve got to talk in riddles instead of having a proper

conversation? What is this “doings”?’

Cole smirked in the ensuing silence.

‘I think he means pig-shit, father,’ explained Fellowes.

‘Well if he means shit why can’t he say shit?’

‘I would so rather he didn’t,’ sighed Antonia.

‘Perfectly good Anglo Saxon word. Still don’t understand how pigs got into this conversation. We were talking about monkeys weren’t we?’

‘Chimps,’ insisted Laura.

‘Although we did make a Monkey out of it.... by way of compensation.’ Cole couldn’t resist the Cockney cant.

Aubrey was astounded. ‘Nasir paid you a Monkey?’

‘Not quite, old father. It was only twenty-five quid. Cole had to twist his arm a bit though. We nipped off to Lobb & Co and purchased some rather marvelous bespoke footwear with the cash as it happens.’ Fellowes hoisted his leg and planted a highly polished black leather brogue onto the table. ‘Still good as new.’

‘Feet off the table at dinner, darling,’ admonished his mother lightly.

‘Twenty-five quid? That’s all he gave you for saving my life? Tight sod,’ objected Laura, now swigging a glass of something that Cole suspected was somewhat stronger than water.

Aubrey considered this, geniality restored at the thought of his son’s extortion, ‘Good work, chaps.’ He gazed at Cole, almost with affection, ‘And how’s your final term, Organ Grinder? How are you coping with that twerp, Baxter?’

‘I try to keep out of his way generally. He...uh, doesn’t much approve of me.’

Aubrey finished off the remainder of his gin and waved the empty tumbler. ‘Could do with a shot of Angostura, this time, Bertie.’ Albert squirmed for a moment or two, unsure, until Antonia nodded affirmatively. He trotted off.

‘Well, frankly, I don’t much approve of him,’ said Aubrey, ‘and I’ll tell you why...’

‘Oh, I think not,’ objected his wife, ‘now we’re going to have more disgusting things said at this table. I must draw the line somewhere. And, darling, it’s simply not a christian thing to do.’

‘You’re not a Christian, so what do you care?’

‘I’m a Buddhist now. But we still adhere to certain principles.’

‘Oh, bollocks, Mum. Let Dad tell his story,’ insisted Laura.

Antonia took a sedate sip of her water, gazed with mild disapproval at Aubrey. ‘It’s late in any case, so I shall leave you all to your dubious amusements.’ She rose and walked around the table to Laura, touching her lightly on the shoulder. ‘Goodnight, Laura. I’ll be up early tomorrow to see you off.’

At the doorway she blew a kiss in the general direction of the group. ‘Sleep well, my children.’ She peered at Aubrey in mock seriousness. ‘One thing’, she warned, ‘honi soit qui mal y pense.’

With that she was gone. And with her any restraining influence over Aubrey’s language and alcohol intake.

Albert arrived and with some complicated heel clicking delivered a small bottle of Angostura Bitters and a chipped bowl of ice cubes to his master before departing for the night.

Aubrey gave an approving nod and set about constructing a substantial Pink Gin.

‘Well, you remember my pal Timothy Nugent? He’s Head of Blundells now, but many years ago he was housemaster at a rather smart little prep school in Oxford where Baxter started out as a bushy-tailed junior master, straight out of college. Anyhow, there was a conference or a junket of some sort in London, which they all got to attend. After all the yakking was done, Nugent, Baxter and the rest of the crowd pitched up at the East India - not a great club, but they do a perfectly acceptable Sago pudding – where a bit of session took place. Evidently the port on top of the brandy disagreed with the young Baxter and he made an arse of himself. Got into a blazing row with the Club Steward and at some point managed to lose his jacket, wallet and everything.’

Aubrey stood up and rummaged amongst a canteen of silver cutlery on the nearby dresser. He pulled out a flaky and slightly battered Cohiba cigar. ‘Aha. Thought there was still one left.’ He sniffed the tobacco appreciatively. ‘Dry as a camel’s eczema, but it will serve.’ He raised a meaningful eyebrow. ‘Not a word to Lady Macbeth though.’

Aubrey carefully lit the contraband cigar and expelled a long jet of smoke towards the sagging ceiling.

‘By all accounts the young Baxter ended up creating something of a stink.’ Aubrey closed his eyes, luxuriating in the pungent smoke.

‘Go on then, father. Don’t keep us in suspense. Was he black-balled or something?’

‘Precisely as I have described. As I said, the port on top of the brandy disagreed with him and the twerp fouled himself. So I suppose brown would be a more appropriate colour.’

Cole sniggered; Laura feigned disgust and Piers simply stared at his host, mouth agape.

‘Of course they had the last train to catch, so they rushed him into the nearest branch of Top Dog or Top Bloke or whatever those high-street fashion emporiums are called, where Nugent buys him the first pair of track suit trousers he could find. Off they all dash to the station, catching the Five-thirty to Oxford with mere seconds to spare, whereupon Baxter makes straight for the loo and divests himself of his soiled underwear and trousers which he promptly slings out of the window. He cleans himself up, opens his shopping bag only to find he’s somehow picked up the wrong one. In the bag is a bright yellow cashmere cardigan - Ladies.’

Fellowes snorted. Aubrey guffawed and took another puff on the cigar.

‘It seems that he was able to construct some kind of modesty-preserving diaper affair from a few yards of Kleenex and by jamming his legs through the arms of the cardigan gave at least the semblance of being clothed. And that is how he emerged to everyone’s delight, looking like the worst kind of child-molesting pervert. He’s never admitted it, but I have a feeling it might have been Nugent who pulled a Switcheroo on him.’

Laura frowned. ‘So you despise him because his so-called friends played a horrible trick and he was forced to wear a lady’s cardigan in place of his trousers?’

‘Oh, goodness, no, I don’t approve of him because the man can’t handle a drink.’ Aubrey returned his attention to the bottle confirming his own astonishing capacity in that department. ‘And on the few occasions I have been forced to do my duty as a School Governor and extend the hospitality of this house to the senior Slatters staff, he hoovers up my finest clarets and malts like an elephant in a drought. And let me tell you, he’s neither an interesting nor amusing drunk; he starts out as a pompous ass and then becomes dreadfully maudlin and does nothing but whine on and on about that dead wife and the bloody footspa. I mean who the hell would want to buy an electric footspa in the first place? - the kind of person who shops from catalogues and buys pointless devices which

plug into the car cigarette lighter. And damnfool reading lights to clip onto the side of their latest Jilly Cooper, that's who. And who can't hold their bloody drink.' Aubrey gazed around at his rapt audience. Only Laura was frowning slightly.

'Besides, Nugent informs me that he never repaid him for the track suit trousers.'

Laura folded her napkin. 'Well it's been the usual delight but I'm off to bed. Early start for France tomorrow, back to the intellectual grindstone.'

'Millstone, more like – bloody great financial one around my neck,' grumbled Aubrey.

'He doesn't pay a penny for either of us, you know. It's all from a Trust Fund set up by our late lamented wiggy old Granny, so I don't know what he's moaning about.' This, for Cole and Peacey's benefit.

'It's all the incidentals that are crippling me; skiing twice a year, jaunts to the CoteD'Azur and God alone knows what else, private lessons in commercial French, and deportment for crying out loud...which is just walking around with a book on your head, might just as well be my chequebook. You're supposed to be studying European law at that university, not Vogue.'

Piers cackled obsequiously. Laura gazed at him briefly with a curious mixture of pity and affection before turning to her brother. 'I've just had the most wonderful idea. Piers is coming out to see me in August, why don't you and Jonathan come along too. It would be the most fun and the French girls will be all over you both like a rash.' She glared theatrically at her father, 'provided he doesn't cut my allowance as he keeps threatening.'

'Not a bad thought.' agreed Aubrey releasing a jet of smoke, 'so long as it doesn't cost me.'

Piers sat up at this: 'Lor, I really don't think that's such a great idea. I mean Paris is very expensive and all that.'

'Are you saying my brother can't afford it?'

Piers looked uncomfortable. 'That's not what I meant and you know it.'

Laura feigned incomprehension for a moment. 'Oh, I see, you mean you don't think that Jonathan can afford it?'

Piers tittered nervously. 'Lor, you're embarrassing everyone.'

Laura swung round in her seat towards him and brushed the fringe from his eyes in a gesture that should have been intimate but instead, seemed utterly dismissive. 'No, Piers, I believe you've embarrassed yourself.'

Laura rose stiffly and kissed her father on the top of his head. 'Think about it,' she ordered. As she left the room it seemed to Cole as though she made her thrillingly loaded parting comment to him and him alone: 'I mean it, one of these days, I'd love you to come.'

Baxter stalked the corridor, gown flapping behind like a small thundercloud. He'd awoken with a hangover, not so much greeting the dawn, as colliding with it. It had not been an enjoyable summer. No matter what he said or did he simply could not drive a wedge between Cole and Fellowes, indeed the boys seemed thicker than ever this term; that sneaky little parvenu spending more and more of his weekends at Waughstone; no doubt worming his way into the good graces of the mercurial but influential Aubrey. Fellowes was beyond saving. He'd been turned by the malign influence of the degenerate, Cole. Whereas once Fellowes had harmlessly subverted the Prefect's waistcoat privilege by wearing tatty blue cardigans, in recent weeks he'd taken to wearing bright yellow. Now, why had he chosen that unpleasantly resonant article of clothing? It seemed as though the boy was deliberately goading him.

Then there had been the spate of inexplicable events over the past year: the school Cabriolet had been stolen, only to turn up on national TV as the centrepiece of a hostage drama, and he was reasonably certain that he and his girlfriend had been drugged for the best part of a weekend. There was some malign influence at work here and he instinctively felt that it all somehow led back to Cole. But how could an eighteen year old boy – even one as manipulative as Cole- have been involved in a bank robbery, the demolition of a petrol station and a full-scale riot? It beggared belief. Certainly no one would ever take his suspicions seriously, especially not the Hog who'd made it plain that he was already somewhat concerned about Baxter's mental state. Could he be having some kind of nervous breakdown? How was one to know? To a madman the rest of the world seems crazy. It was all conjecture, he knew, but there was still some tangible evidence: the anonymous gift – and Miriam was a witness to it - the bottle of whisky, which they firmly believed had contained some kind of weird narcotic.

That bottle hadn't come from Stutchley either - that was certain. He'd grilled the boy and he'd denied all knowledge, but then Stutchley was no longer as reliable as he had once been. It had been a mistake to plant him in the same dorm. Most likely he too, had now been turned by the manipulative Cole. Baxter veered left into the cloisters and examined the notice boards.

A corridor and a mere flight of steps away, down in the Shakespeare Cupboard the twin objects of Baxter's venom sprawled in candlelight across satin pillows. On this occasion Fellowes had chosen a plum velvet waistcoat and a silver silk turban with a peacock's feather, Cole wore a medieval Jester's cap tipped with bells. They passed a large spliff between them, watching with idle interest as the red tip sliced random arcs through the rump of the shadows. Final exams loomed and the boys needed a respite from the pressure. The Shakespeare Costume Cupboard was still a good place

to unwind from time to time, especially with the help of a joint or two. Fellowes took a long drag and exhaled a joyless nimbus.

‘Out of interest, where did you get this stuff from?’ he asked suspiciously.

‘Aspinall.’

‘You feeling anything?’

‘No. You?’

‘Nothing. Are you sure he hasn’t sold you a pup? It smells suspiciously like Italian cooking.’

‘He probably has. But then of course, I don’t keep my own supply any more,’ explained Cole.

‘Yes, but you only ever sold fine herbs too.’

‘True. Then I suppose it serves me right...so what happens next?’

‘We smoke some more and see if we can possibly get the remotest kind of a buzz from this rubbish, then we go back to the study and hit the books again for another eight hours I imagine.’

‘That’s not what I meant.’

‘I know.’

The tip glowed briefly like a miniature volcano, illuminating Fellowes’ face for a moment.

‘For me, a trial year in the City, at Cazelet’s, then uni perhaps. After that I don’t know. Catch the eye of a big-titted heiress, settle down, have kids and then devote the rest of my life to totally fucking them up.’

Cole gently prised the spliff from his friend’s fingers and took a drag. ‘And what about me?’ he asked shyly.

‘I’m sorry, Cole, but you don’t have any money, your tits are nothing to write home about, and I do hope this won’t come as a shock, but I’ve never really fancied you all that much.’

Cole punched him hard in the thigh giving him a dead leg.

‘Ow.’

‘You’ve got it all figured out then?’

‘No. Not figured out. Lined up, certainly. Aubrey sorted the City thing through Piers’s father. You remember Piers, of course?’

‘I do. And how is Piers?’

‘Ah, you managed make the word sound rather like piss.’

‘I don’t like him.’

‘You should be more sympathetic. Laura is merely trifling with his heart. There will be tears I assure you. You must realise by now that she’s far too old and sophisticated for the likes of you.’

‘I s’pose.’

Fellowes pinched the end of the spliff and took another drag. Even in the dim light Fellowes could sense his friend’s morose mood.

‘What is it you want from me, Jonathan?’

‘I don’t know...some kind of reassurance maybe.’

‘Look, we’ve had a few laughs. We’ve shared a dorm, shared a study, played a bit of cricket, stole a cab, drugged a housemaster, helped out with a bank robbery – all the usual things that school chums do, but life is about to take us in different directions now, you do understand that don’t you?’

‘Yes, but it’s just...’

‘I mean, I’ve already explained why we can’t get married.’

‘Don’t be an arse.’

‘You’re just nervous. Change makes people nervous. In a few weeks time our paths diverge somewhat but it’s not like we’ll never see each other again. We’ll stay in touch.’

‘It feels like you’re just chucking me out like an old shoe or something.’

‘People have to move on. It’s called progress.’

‘You seem so sure about where you’re going. You’ve got it all mapped out. I’ve got no plans at all.’

‘Somehow I doubt that.’

‘What about our...handshake?’

‘What handshake?’

‘You know, that day down by the river. We shook hands and stuff.’ There was a wary note to Cole’s voice now.

‘Oh come on, Cole. You can’t be serious. Blood-brothers? It was just a silly childish thing to do, even then.’

‘I know but I feel like we’re.... connected. When you’re not around I feel like.... I don’t know really, but I feel like something’s missing somehow.’

‘I understand that. It’s your better judgment that you miss. Your conscience. A role which I have occasionally been forced to fill.’

‘No I’m serious.’

Cole flicked his lighter and relit the stub of a guttering candle. He needed to read his friend’s expression. But Fellowes’ face was impassive.

‘You can be a conceited prat sometimes.’

‘It’s my only failing. Look, you saved my sister’s life and you helped Tatham become ‘Urlingham Junior Champion and get his sponsorship deal. You’re too hard on yourself, you really are a better man than you think you are.’

‘Yeah, but see what happened: a bank got robbed, a Traffic Warden got kidnapped, there was a riot, a whole bunch of people got terrorised and injured, and a garage got blown up. Oh...and I murdered a chimp.’

Fellowes sighed, his exhalation sending the candlelight into spasm.

‘It’s never black and white. Sometimes doing the right thing can be the wrong thing. That’s what makes it all such a minefield. And that’s why it is so lethal to impose one’s own morality on others. You, of all people, know that.’

Cole swung his head sharply setting the bells on his cap jangling.

‘Look at me. Take a good look. The cap fits, doesn’t it? Because this all I am to you - your jester. A temporary amusement to take your mind off whatever it is that’s eating you up inside. But I haven’t a clue what that is because you’ve never really told me anything about yourself. We’re not real friends because you’ve never shared anything with me and that’s OK, because it’s the price I pay for your patronage. But now that you’ve been amused for a while, you just want to chuck me aside for another distraction. I’ll tell you this though; I didn’t do those things because they were right. I did them because you wanted me to; I did them to please you. I wanted your approval. Don’t you get it?’

Fellowes flung off the feathered turban. He gripped Cole’s wrists tightly and shook him hard, causing the bells to jangle like an angry rattlesnake.

‘This isn’t a game, Cole. For Christ’s sake, grow up. How dare you try to shovel your shit onto my conscience? You can’t go through life refusing to accept responsibility for your own actions. You make choices and there are always unforeseen consequences. That’s what makes it so hard and that’s why you’ve got to get out there and make something of yourself on your own. You are not my Jester...and I will never be my brother’s keeper.’

Fellowes stalked from the room, slamming the door, leaving Cole alone with his thoughts shocked and baffled by the outburst. The bells tinkled sadly in the dark.

Baxter cocked an ear. There was usually some form of ragging going on in the Lower Library during study periods supposedly supervised by the senile Miss Butterworth.

Baxter grimaced and turned his head away, a sharp movement that only served to worsen his leaden hangover and mood. He was about to return to the Lair for another couple of aspirin and a hair of the dog when he heard footsteps coming from the passage to the School Theatre. The Theatre complex was of course, strictly out of bounds during the normal course of the day and these were not the confident footfalls of a master but the irregular and stealthy pattern of a boy up to no good. Excellent!

The master concealed himself in the shadows of a stone arch where the cloisters connected with the passage to the Theatre complex, just as the double doors ahead squeaked open a crack. A tousled blond head appeared. The young man briefly checked to see if the coast was clear and scuttled out. Baxter leapt from his hiding place in the shadows.

‘Fellowes,’ he bellowed.

‘Christ.’ Fellowes clutched his heart. ‘What are you doing here sir?’

‘I might very well ask you the same question.’

‘Except you probably wouldn’t call me sir, sir,’ replied Fellowes, desperately playing for time.

‘Stop driveling and answer the question, boy.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Well then?’

‘The question mine, sir, what was yours exactly?’

Baxter was in no mood for this kind of repartee. He slowly enunciated each word. ‘What are you doing here, Fellowes? You do know that The Theatre complex is strictly out of bounds, of course?’

‘I’d rather not say, sir.’

‘You’d rather not say. I’ll wager you wouldn’t young man, but you’re going to have to. Either now, to me or to Mr Hogarth, it’s entirely your choice.’

‘I see.’ Fellowes’ mind raced.

‘I’m waiting.’

‘It’s rather embarrassing actually.’

‘Not as embarrassing as an interview with Mr Hogarth would be at this late stage in your school career, I’d imagine.’

Fellows considered his predicament. At any moment now Cole would be emerging through these same double doors from the Shakespeare cupboard below. If Fellowes couldn’t get the master away before his companion came blundering out the game would soon be well and truly up for both of them.

‘Is there some way we could have this conversation in private, sir?’

Baxter considered the request. There was something fishy going on here, the boy seemed skittish; not at all his usual languid self. The master shook his head and noticed to his satisfaction that the throbbing in his temples seemed to have subsided somewhat.

‘I’ll have your explanation right here, right now, if you please, Fellowes.’

Fellowes lowered his voice to a whisper. ‘It’s just my father - who thinks the world of you, sir - feels that I tend to gabble a little when under pressure and I’m inclined to agree with him. He believes that if I am to become a Captain of Industry or to make my mark on the world in any significant way, as you yourself have done, sir...’

‘Don’t patronise me, boy,’ snapped Baxter. He could smell blood and he wasn’t going to be drawn off the scent so easily.

‘To cut a long story short, my father feels that I should practice my public speaking and I’m afraid that I have somewhat been making illicit use of the theatre facility for that purpose. It has very fine acoustics.’

Baxter studied the boy carefully for signs of irony or deceit.

‘I’d be grateful if this doesn’t go any further - you see, I use poetry to hone my oratorical skills. Sometimes quite slushy stuff, you know, love poetry, sir. If anyone else knew I’d absolutely never live it down.’

Baxter was inclined to believe the boy’s story, knowing Aubrey’s eccentricities as he did, it sounded just the sort of nonsense he would inflict on his son.

‘Very well, in view of my admiration for his father as a man and a Governor of this school and for his sake, just this once I’ll let it....’ Baxter stopped mid-sentence and narrowed his eyes in suspicion. ‘If you have as you claim, been reciting poetry, tell me, where are your notes, your book of odes? Show me. Your odes, boy, your odes.’ He snapped his fingers.

‘Odes?’

‘Odes, sonnets, couplets.’

Fellowes tapped his temple. ‘In here, sir. I commit them to memory.’

‘In that case, would you be good enough to give me an example.’

‘Oh I couldn’t, I really couldn’t. Someone might hear.’ Fellowes racked his brains for any scrap of decent verse. If he could pop out a rhyming couplet or two the crisis would be over and this annoying man would go and find someone else to terrorise. But try as a might, all he could remember were the words of a limerick: “There was an old Bishop of Birmingham, who buggered

the boys while confirming ‘em...’, that wouldn’t do at all. There must be something about roses he could use. Roses are red - absolutely no go. Wait, there was piece one of the prefects had made him memorise a few years back...

‘I thought not,’ announced Baxter after a mute pause.

‘All right, sir, if you insist.’ Fellowes tucked his thumbs into his waistcoat and puffed out his chest.

‘I know that I will meet my fate....’ he began at ear-shattering volume, ‘...somewhere in the clouds above...’

‘Quuuuu...iet,’ screeched a voice from the Lower Library.

‘...those I...!’

‘That’s quite enough, Fellowes. No need to disturb the entire school. Off you go and we’ll say no more about it.’ But it was too late. Miss Butterworth, the school’s frail and elderly librarian had already come trundling up at supernatural speed to investigate the noise. ‘What’s all this brouhaha? Insolence, both of you...’ Baxter was blasted by a gust of Miss Butterworth’s foetid breath as she glared up at him, arms akimbo and panting heavily. ‘How dare you rag about in the corridors like this? And you, you’re big enough to know better. Report to the headmaster, this instant.’ Baxter made appeasing noises and attempted to take her arm in order to lead the ancient functionary back to the Lower Library but she angrily shook him off. ‘You dare lay hands on me?’

‘I’m so sorry, Miss Butterworth, you see...’ he smiled through clenched teeth, but the furious Butterworth cut him short. ‘Don’t you try to soft soap me, boy. I’ve heard all the excuses, you shall not escape punishment.’ A gaggle of Upper Fifth had come tumbling out of the Lower Library and Baxter angrily waved them back inside with one hand while taking hold of Miss Butterworth’s arm once again with the other. She wriggled energetically from his grasp ‘What’s this?’ she screeched, ‘I’m being molested by boys; gigantic boys.’

‘I’m a housemaster for goodness sake.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. Boys are not permitted to be housemasters, not even during the war. I never heard the like.’

Baxter reached out to take her arm.

‘Miss Butterworth, I was born in 1948.’

Miss Butterworth stood her ground, glaring at him, ‘That butters no parsnips with me, young man, no parsnips at all, the headmaster will make you wish you had never been born at all when he finishes with you. Mark my words. You shall be flogged to within an inch of your life.’

The Hog, who had been interrupted a few minutes previously in the course of his mid-morning meeting with matron by Miss Butterworth’s ear-splitting shrieks, now arrived on the scene to find the Butterworth shaking her fist at the mortified Housemaster. ‘What’s all this? My dear Miss Butterworth, what’s afoot?’

Miss Butterworth stood stock-still and gave The Headmaster a puzzled stare. ‘It’s twelve inches precisely headmaster. Surely you must know that?’

The Hog pursed his lips, inhaled slowly and glanced at Baxter. ‘Mr Baxter, an explanation if you please.’

‘Miss Butterworth here, seems to have formed the impression that I am a pupil at this school.’

‘Indeed?’ The Hog waved an admonishing finger at Miss Butterworth. ‘This is Mr Baxter, Housemaster of Thackeray’s whom you have known for some years, as a colleague.’

‘Really?’ Miss Butterworth removed her round tortoiseshell glasses and wiped them on her cardigan before putting them back on. She peered myopically at Baxter, then simpered sheepishly at the Head. ‘I do apologise, headmaster, I dropped my spectacles in the marmalade at breakfast this morning.’

Matron now arrived on the scene with her basket of smelling salts and bandages. 'Is there something I can do?'

'Miss Butterworth has had a bit of an upset, perhaps if you'd be good enough to take her up to Sick Bay and make her a nice restorative cup of cocoa we can all get back to the business of running a school again. No harm done.' He smiled reassuringly at the old lady as she was led away, and then turned to face Baxter with an altogether grimmer expression, 'Baxter, a word if you please.' At that moment The Hog caught sight of Fellowes who was trying to make himself unobtrusive behind a stone butress. 'What are you doing here boy? Was that you making that God awful racket I heard earlier?'

'Yes, I fear so, sir. I was reciting poetry sir. For Mr Baxter.'

Hogarth was beginning to have very serious doubts about Baxter's competence. 'Do you really have nothing better to do, Bernard?'

'There is an explanation, sir.' Baxter could see Fellowes grinning at his discomfort behind Hogarth's back. The boy put his hands into the pockets of his purple velvet waistcoat and bounced gently up and down on his heels, waiting to be dismissed.

'Wait a minute,' Baxter aimed a finger at Fellowes chest; 'You were wearing a yellow cardigan at breakfast this morning.'

Baxter stepped forward and grabbed at the boy's gaudy waistcoat.

'I recognise this. This vest is...is Bottom's.'

With sinking heart Fellowes realised his awful mistake. He'd forgotten to remove the fancy costume vest in his hurry to leave the Shakespeare cupboard. He tried gamely to exploit the Hog's evident exasperation with the Housemaster to brazen it out.

'With respect sir, it may not be to everyone's taste but aren't you being a little personal?'

The Hog was quick to agree. 'Mr Baxter, you must calm down.'

Baxter held tight to the material bunched in his hand and grinned triumphantly at Fellowes.

'Fellowes knows exactly what I'm talking about, don't you boy? It's Bottom's and we all know where Bottom's things come from, do we not? Poetry forsooth!'

The Hog was fast losing his patience. 'Are you insane man? Raving about bottoms. Let the boy go this instant.'

To his credit, Baxter was able to remain utterly calm in his moment of triumph. He released Fellowes and turned to his superior. 'I am referring to Bottom, headmaster, not in the rectal sense but as in the character from *Midsummer Night's Dream* - which you will recall I staged not two terms ago to some considerable acclaim - and this is an article of his very costume which under normal circumstances is stored in the utterly and absolutely out-of-bounds and off-limits Shakespeare costume cupboard, where all the evidence suggests this boy has been. And, where Fellowes has been, one invariably finds Cole.'

Unable to contain himself any longer, Baxter dashed off through the double doors. 'Follow me, Headmaster.'

Comprehension dawning, the Hog gazed at Fellowes disappointedly.

'Fuck it,' sighed Fellowes, as he unbuttoned the incriminating waistcoat.

The Hog attempted to put the facts as diplomatically as possible to an emergency meeting of the School Governors. They sat in a semi circle of collapsible chairs in the Hog's study on a humid summer's evening.

‘Slatters has, up until now, enjoyed an enviable reputation as one of England’s premier schools; if not exactly Top Drawer, then certainly the next one down. Besides, people tend to keep their pants in top drawers,’ he added gravely, pacing the carpet. ‘As a highly respected premier school we like to get on with things in our own way according to time-honoured tradition, without encouraging too much unnecessary publicity...’

‘What, you mean like the Texaco hostage-drama last year?’ asked Thomas Tretwin undiplomatically. Thomas Tretwin, old Slasher and now avant-garde actor/director of some note, enjoyed a reputation for outspokenness.

‘Most unfortunate but sadly unavoidable.’ The Hog was careful to emphasise the word unavoidable.

The recently widowed Irene Fortesque to Tretwin’s left, licked her coral-pink lips: ‘Nevertheless, our unfortunate connection with that dreadful London bank robbery and its aftermath was...ah...not good for our reputation.’

‘However much we would prefer it to be otherwise, we cannot exist in a vacuum here in our cosy environs. We cannot, no matter how hard we try, Mrs Fortesque, prevent all encroachments from the wicked world. Yes, the School Cabriolet was stolen and used in an outrageous and appallingly vicious crime, but short of patrolling the place with attack dogs and armed guards...’ The Hog sighed and held out his hands to indicate his powerlessness. ‘Which brings me to the matter in hand, I cannot immunise the boys in my charge from the temptations of modern life and all its manifold vices. I am speaking specifically of the scourge of drugs...’

‘Dreadful, perfectly dreadful.’ The Restoration-haired Tretwin’s outburst, apart from cutting the headmaster off midstream, was louder and far more emphatic than he’d intended mainly because he was still a bit stoned from the first-class joint he’d smoked in his car but a half hour ago.

‘Earlier this week, a boy from this school deviated from the path of right, the fact is that one of the boys, a young man who I’m afraid has been associated with your son, Aubrey,’ he nodded deferentially at Aubrey St John Fellowes in the front row, ‘although we cast no aspersions,’ he added quickly. ‘This young man was found smoking what we believed to have been an illicit substance.’

‘Black or Leb?’

‘I beg your pardon, Mr Tretwin?’

Tretwin smacked himself hard on the forehead a couple of times to curious looks from his colleagues. ‘Nothing, sorry Headmaster, continue please...continue.’

Aubrey glowered at Tretwin. He was finding the office too sultry and claustrophobic and was fast beginning to lose his notoriously minimal patience.

‘As I was saying, the young man was caught smoking what we believed to have been an illicit substance, however, on further investigation, it turns out to have been Oregano with some lesser elements of Marjoram, Basil, Thyme and Parsley.’

‘You’re talking about whatisname of course, young Cole?’

‘Indeed, Aubrey.’

Aubrey exploded, ‘so the young fool was puffing on a few kitchen herbs. So what?’

The Hog was becoming flustered; he put his hands behind his back as he paced the rug.

‘Has the boy become addicted? I mean what the bloody hell are we all doing here. I know I’ve got better things to do on a perfectly good Saturday afternoon. Let’s wrap this up shall we?’ Aubrey looked around for support, pleased to note a murmuring of dissent from the uncomfortable VIPs.

The Hog felt a bead of sweat start in his lower back and slowly slip down his spine. Unconsciously he slipped his right hand down the back of the waistband of his trousers and intercepted it with a probing finger to his coccyx.

‘Believe me,’ said Hogarth, ‘nobody is more mindful of the value of your time than I. But some of you may be wondering how I can be so emphatic as to the composition of the suspect substance and I’m afraid the fact is that one of our housemasters, without referring to me, I might add, decided to bring the matter to attention of the authorities.’

‘Are you saying that some twit informed the police?’

‘To cut a long story short, yes.’

Aubrey saw his evening ruined unless he could get the matter resolved quickly. ‘But I take it they won’t be bringing charges. I mean, unless the law has changed and inhaling a Bouquet Garni has suddenly become a serious criminal offence?’

Mrs Fortesque tapped her prominent front teeth, one of them underlined by a tiny smear of pink lipstick. ‘That is true, but the problem is, Aubrey, that once the police get involved, it impossible to keep matters out of the press. And you know what these reporters are like; rabid communists all of them.’

‘If we can’t keep this out of the papers we must be seen to have taken action. The boy will probably have to go,’ announced Hugo Snelling, Chairman of stockbrokers, Snelling Montgomery, ‘who are his people, by the way?’

‘Nobodies. He’s one of our scholarships,’ replied Hogarth.

‘Ah...’ The assembled Governors all understood precisely what that meant. It made it all so much easier.

‘Well, there you have it. No individual pupil is above the best interests of Slatters. Q.E.D.’ agreed Sir Robert Ashburton, Q.C.

Only Aubrey objected: ‘I know the lad, he's as smart as a whip and what's more, he saved my daughter's life. I will not be party to making him a scapegoat. It's the bloody master who's at fault here.’

Irene Fortesque, galvanised by this juicy tidbit, leaned past the Reverend Dodds and simpered like a schoolgirl. ‘How exciting - do tell, Aubrey.’

‘Oh, go on then, Aubs. Make a case for the defence. If Mr Hogarth might be persuaded to crack open some of the aptly named Governor's Port, this might not turn out to be a complete and utter waste of a bloody afternoon after all,’ agreed Sir Robert.

The Hog was relieved to be handing over control of this difficult meeting. He nodded brusquely at Mr Oy standing discreet and silent against the paneled wall. With due ceremony and a lugubrious smile Mr Oy opened the Rosewood drinks cabinet and applied ‘the Butler's rub’ to the seldom-used crystal glasses; a gob of spit and a quick polish with his grubby handkerchief. Meanwhile, under the pretence of directing the servitor, the Hog took the opportunity to pass the sweat-drenched finger of his right hand under his quivering sensitive nostrils - he wasn't at all displeased with the bouquet.

The sheer force of Aubrey's personality combined with the soothing effects of a steady stream of fine port very nearly prevailed. But as Aubrey was concluding his passionate and convincing summary there was a hesitant knock on the door followed by the Hog's secretary who announced nervously that there was a gentleman from the News of The World waiting outside to speak with the Headmaster - there were one or two things he needed to clarify.

The Hog exhaled in the cool sensation of stainless steel. He'd inserted his Cross biro down his left sock and by raising his foot an inch or two he was able to jam the tip against the base of his heel where with a few tiny adjustments he quickly located the epicenter of the most sensational itch. There was a reticent cough and the Headmaster peered up to find Bernard Baxter staring down at him. Resentfully the Headmaster withdrew the implement and placed it carefully on the leather bound blotter in front of him at an angle of precisely 90 degrees and leaned back in his chair.

‘Mr Baxter, take a seat.’

Baxter took the facing chair with an ill-concealed smirk.

‘Bernard, Bernard, Bernard, sometimes I don't believe that you care about this school at all.’

Baxter looked crestfallen and was about to object but the Hog cut him off, ‘Whilst I applaud your zeal in bringing to my attention a misdemeanor...well, frankly I cannot for the life of me understand why you wanted to go and get the police involved, without consulting me first.’

Baxter was quite calm; safe in the knowledge that right was on his side. ‘You should have listened, headmaster. The Cole boy has been a bad influence since the day he arrived. He was caught, in flagrante, peddling drugs and alcohol.’

‘The boy was out of bounds but there were no drugs and the old whisky bottles contained nothing more sinister than cough-syrup residue - no doubt to mitigate the abrasiveness of the herbal mixture he was inflicting on himself. Idiomatic certainly, but hardly venal.’

‘The boy was the lynchpin of a narcotics ring. Which I have succeeded in smashing.’

The Hog raised an eyebrow: 'A ring of Rosemary and assorted fine herbs - scarcely the crime of the Century.'

'I'm certain that he was passing it off as Marijuana. It's simply a question of intent.'

The Hog sighed and opened one of his desk drawers from which he withdrew a sheaf of newspaper cuttings. He hurled them onto the desk sending his steel biro spinning to the floor.

'There's no evidence of that whatsoever. I take it you've read the Sunday papers. All you've succeeded in doing by involving the police is to make this school a laughing stock; bringing us into disrepute and forcing me to expel a promising young man a mere matter of weeks away from his 'A' Levels; a chap from your own house.'

Baxter bent to retrieve his Headmaster's pen from the carpet. He popped back up, grinning.

'Expelled? Oh, congratulations, headmaster. Well done indeed.'

'I have not finished.' the Hog looked grim. 'I have ...we all have... tried to make allowances for you, in consequence of your...uh...tragedy. But you have allowed personal antipathy to override your better judgment. By doing so, you have singularly failed to act in the School's best interests. It is therefore the opinion of myself and the Governors, that you, yourself, should be encouraged to find another position at the end of this term.'

The Hog rose and offered his hand.

'I'm sorry, Bernard. Truly I am.'

Baxter gaped, the Headmaster's beloved stainless steel Cross pen twitched in his nerveless fingers.

Cole wandered the grimy, terraced streets of Hardcastle scanning his tattered copy of Bleak House. It was easier to study in the grim outdoors than the even gloomier confines of his own home; the atmosphere was just too awful; like someone had died. Although technically summer, a chill Northern wind cut through his thin bomber jacket and as he passed a low wall, a few aimless, whey-faced local kids spat and jeered. After all, he was famous; he'd made the local papers. In a depressed community of high unemployment and low opportunity everyone dreams of bettering themselves but nobody likes it when someone else does. One of the youngsters threw a piece of gravel which splattered across his head. Cole span around and the kids scattered. He couldn't be bothered to give chase. In the town-centre it would be easier to concentrate. He wasn't so well known there.

He quickly checked his watch as he passed the bus stop. There was one due in another couple of minutes.

‘Oy you, snotty.’

Cole turned. It was a gangly redhead who'd spoken. He looked vaguely familiar. ‘You don't remember me do you, snotty?’

Cole shrugged.

‘Johnny Burt, from St Mark's.’ Cole recognized him now from his old school all those years ago; a boy whose only outstanding feature apart from his bright red hair had been his ability to produce improbable fart-noises by cupping a hand under his armpit and flapping his arm. Cole gave him a curt nod and returned his attention to the book. ‘You think you're better than us, you wanker?’ Burt was accompanied by a group who encouraged him to continue the harangue. ‘You think you can get out of this town, Mr la-di-dah?’

Cole peered back up the road but there was still no bus in sight.

‘My mum thinks you're a twat. You're the same as us, you're just shite.’

They were working themselves up now. This group of young men damned by the frustration of poverty, ignorance and the inescapable certainty of their own bleak futures, just wanted some way to get back at the forces which conspired to keep them down. Cole was an irresistible target, representing a double betrayal; a member of their own community who had tried to elevate himself above them and failed, but who was even now, literally and metaphorically turning his back on them. The tall redhead shoved Cole in the back. It was a slow almost lazy shove for which Cole was prepared. In a blur of motion he spun, grabbed his assailant's little finger and in the same movement rotated his wrist. The finger gave a satisfying crack. With his other hand he brought the spine of his heavy novel down hard on the youth's ginger head. It took a moment for Burt to appreciate the agonizing pain, but then he shrieked like a stuck pig. The mob backed away in shocked confusion; a momentary respite. The red-haired youth stared in disbelief at his hand, blood draining from his face. His little finger flopped backwards at a nauseating angle of ninety degrees. The posse seethed forward now, bent on revenge.

Da da, dadada... Da da, dadada! A horn blared “La Cucaracha” and an old Morris 1000 pulled up, packed it seemed, with braying girls. ‘Johnny-boy, jump in.’ The rear door opened and the injured Burt, hunched protectively over his damaged hand, scuttled over to the car.

‘Not you, ginger-knob. You, Johnny, yes you, come on.’ Cole now realising that the voice was addressing him, didn't need a second invitation. He shoved Burt aside and leapt for the back seat just as the angry crowd charged towards him. A hand grabbed for the pocket of his old bomber jacket, ripping it as the car squealed away.

‘Naaahahahaha...’ the large blonde girl at the wheel shrieked with laughter, drowning out the sound of tortured rubber. ‘It's me, Shazza Corbett,’ the blonde girl announced in her broad

Yorkshire accent, grinning at him in the rear view mirror. Cole smiled. He'd recognised Sharon Corbett easily enough. She'd always seemed larger than life. Puberty had filled out her breasts and hips, turning her into a voluptuous young woman. Like Johnny Burt, she'd been at St Mark's Primary but he retained fonder memories of her - she'd once shown him the contents of her knickers at the special discount price of five pence. 'Tray, Babs, this is Hardcastle's famous Johnny Cole. Used to be in my class,' she announced with pride.

Tray, a dumpy, mousy-looking girl sharing the back seat with Cole, smiled shyly. Her leather skirt, Cole noticed, was far too short and rode up further, exposing a landscape of dimpled, pasty white thigh. Babs, the tall willowy black girl with dreadlocks in the passenger seat twisted round and held out her hand, appraising him. 'No,' she said grinning, 'he's way out of your class, Shaz.'

'Oooh, back in the knife drawer, Miss Sharp.'

'How are you, Sharon?' grinned Cole.

'Get you. Aren't you proper? Just call me Shazza. It's not every day that we get a celebrity in the car is it girls?'

'Hardly that.'

'You made the front page of the Hardcastle Gazette.'

'Don't I know it,' replied Cole grimly.

'I'm sorry they chucked you out of that posh school,' said Babs quietly.

'Yeah, busted for dealing Chives. Nice one,' chuckled Shazza as she gunned the protesting motor and cut up a dithering Reliant Robin.

'I wasn't dealing the stuff,' he protested, 'I was smoking it, and it was mostly Oregano, I think.'

‘That’s how it starts; before you know it you’re into the Chili powder. Where were you headed anyways, apart from deep shit?’

‘To the Library I suppose. I need to study, for the dreaded ‘A’ s next week.’

‘They’re still letting you take them?’

‘Yeah, only I get to do them in a room up at the City Poly. Just me on my own.’

‘Don’t see the point of them myself. I mean why spend more time at school than you possibly need to? I couldn’t wait to get out of the bloody place. Mind you, you always were the brain-box. We... me and the girls, work down the Co-Op on the tills. It’s OK, apart from Bertie Fletcher – the Dirty Letcher - so-called Manager, always trying to “accidentally” brush up against your arse and that.’

‘Well, I suppose that’s why I need the results. I don’t want to end up at a place like that...’ Cole could have bitten his tongue off. And almost did, as Sharon flung the car round a tight corner on what felt like two wheels. ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean -’

‘Nah s’all right,’ said Babs. ‘We’re stuck here. There’s no way out for us. We’ll do us a few years at the tills, have a bit of fun and then we’ll end up getting hitched to some poor sod like Johnny Burt.’

‘I’m not that desperate,’ shrieked Sharon, ‘ginger pubes,’ she gagged. ‘Tray is though - you shagged him dincha, ya dirty cow?’

Tray was speechless for a moment. ‘I was off me face. Anyways, he was hung like a peanut.’

Cole was equally uncomfortable. He squirmed in the plastic seat, producing a mortifyingly flatulent squelch.

‘Don’t mind us,’ quipped Babs.

‘You can’t be hung like a peanut. You’re either hung like a donkey...’ pointed out Sharon.

‘Terry Talbot,’ chorused Babs and Tray.

‘...or you’re hung like a Gerbil.’

‘Bazza Andrews,’ chimed the girls.

‘You can have a peanut for a dick, but you can’t actually be hung like a nut.’

‘It was more like a cashew anyway,’ Tray pointed out, ‘bent to the right.’

‘You know why that is?’ Sharon made a masturbating gesture with her right hand and the car slewed across into the oncoming lane. ‘Too much of that.’ The girls screeched with laughter.

‘Hey Johnny, why don’t you come to the coast with us. We’ve got some good blow. Proper stuff, bit different to the shite you’ve been smoking. Come on, it’ll be a laugh.’

‘Booze too.’ Tray rattled bottles in a plastic bag by her feet. Her skirt rode up again.

Babs rummaged in her handbag and brought out a chocolatey cube wrapped in cling film. She waved it temptingly at Cole with a dazzling grin.

Cole considered the offer. He should be at home studying but anything was preferable to Len’s silent wrath or the long-suffering, agonized looks from his mother. He fingered the dope and sniffed it. ‘OK,’ he said, ‘I might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. So why not?’

There was a puzzled silence in the car as the girls tried to figure that one out.

Nasir tapped his gloved fingers impatiently on the airlock doors. They finally hissed open allowing him to enter the blindingly white, negative pressure environment of his research center. Chris Semel, a young American microbiologist in a pale blue biohazard suit, greeted him with a nod. Nasir could already see through the young man’s plastic helmet screen that his eyes were wide with

shock. In the confines of his own suit he heard the gentle hum of his air hose and the sound of his own breathing coming in quick, excited gasps. The crackle of the radio mike cut in. 'Forget about monkey pox, this is a really scary one. You gotta take a look at these cells from number 4.'

Nasir gazed round at the stainless steel cages ringing the worktables. There was little or no movement from inside. Taking care to protect his air hose he slowly made his way to the electron microscope on the central workbench.

He made a couple of minute adjustments bringing the subject into sharp focus. It was like peering into a nest of cobras; hundreds of slim wriggling life forms struggled for space. He noted the curvature at the head of each virus; the highly distinctive shape of a shepherd's crook. But he was disappointed; there was nothing here that hadn't seen before. He looked again. The fragile cell walls suddenly burst open like a lanced boil, spilling cargo like a net full of eels.

Nasir raised his head shrugged and spoke into the radio mike, 'it's a Filo, could be a Marberg variant again.'

Chris shook his head. 'Not Marberg. This one's more like the Seventy-six Zairian Ebola. It's a primate pathogen - came in with the Uganda Vervets - and it scares the shit out of me.'

Nasir was puzzled. 'Why?'

'Number 2 was the carrier. Number 4 was clean when I put him in here. No antibodies.'

'So?'

'So I never injected him. He was the control specimen.'

Nasir gasped. 'Are you certain? There can be no mistake?'

'One hundred per cent.'

'I see.' Nasir's heart was pounding. This was glorious news if it were true. He looked again into the young biochemist's eyes. But there was no triumph there, only pure atavistic fear. The two men

walked towards the cage containing the number 4. primate, a young macaque lying on its back and breathing heavily. Nasir dispassionately observed the weeping bloody sores covering its body. Tiny trails of blood led from its nostrils, blood streamed from its ears and eyes. As Nasir watched, the animal gasped and a gout of dark red blood gushed from its mouth. The death itself was nothing new, they'd both seen hundreds of primates die in this way. The creature twitched once and Semel shook his head in disbelief. 'This is really creepy man, it has to be airborne, respiratory transmission.' Even through the crackle and distortion of his earpiece, Nasir could discern the terror in Semel's voice. It appeared that this was a disease you could catch through the air.

'Nice to get some fresh air.' Sharon sucked in the dope-tainted fug inside the car and stared through her windscreen at the uninspiring view of a grey, wind blasted north-eastern coastline. A coach pulled in beside them with a pneumatic hiss. From the commanding height of its windows, a couple of elderly men attempted to peer down Sharon's cleavage. She gave them the finger. In the back seat where Cole reclined smoking a second spliff, Tray poured water from a plastic bottle into the wax Pepsi cup and gave the potent mixture of Pernod and blackcurrant cordial a stir with a pencil.

To his surprise, Cole decided that he was very much at home here. The smoke was amazing, much better than Oregano; all his troubles seemed to have evaporated and he was relaxed and happy in the company of these earthy girls. Maybe he'd finally found his place in the world after all. He watched the gaggle of pensioners struggling unsteadily against the wind as they made their way from the coach down onto the sands.

‘I’m busting for a pee,’ announced Sharon.

‘I’m not surprised with the amount you’ve drunk.’ Tray offered the lethal looking concoction to Cole. ‘Too sweet for me,’ he demurred.

‘He’s sweet enough as it is,’ said Sharon as she tuned the old radio into The Jam’s ‘Eton Rifles’. Babs took the proffered cup and drank it down. She grinned at Cole licking the sweet stickiness from her prominent lips with a predatory gleam.

‘Hey, they’re playing your song.’

‘It wasn’t exactly Eton.’

‘Same thing. All them expensive posh schools are the same. Spending good money for what the government gives everyone else for nothing. It’s like paying for air. Make us another drink Tray.’

‘I can’t, there’s no water left, you’ve gone and drank it all, you greedy slag.’

‘There must be a shithouse in this car park, with a tap in it.’

‘There used to be, but the council closed it down. Too many druggies.’

‘Selfish bastards,’ said Sharon, taking a long drag on the joint.

‘There’s gotta be some water somewhere around here. No one can drink this piss straight.’

‘There’s the whole of the Atlantic out there,’ pointed out Cole, ‘but if you’re really desperate you could always siphon some off the radiator.’

‘Gross. It’ll be all gopping and rusty,’ objected Tray.

‘Nah, it’ll be fine,’ said Sharon, ‘I only filled it up fresh this morning, ‘cos it’s got a leak somewhere. Go on Tray.’

‘How am I supposed to do that?’

‘Did you get a straw with that thing?’ asked Cole.

‘Yeah, so?’ Tray kicked at the plastic bag by her feet and picked up a discarded red and white plastic drinking straw from the rubber mat on the floor. ‘What now?’

‘You suck a bit of water out first then bend the straw downwards and the water should keep flowing into your cup if you keep it at a lower level than the water in the radiator.’

‘That doesn’t sound right.’

‘It’s just basic physics - air pressure. You’re creating a syphon effect.’

‘My mum’s got a Soda-Syphon thing but I don’t think it works like that.’ Tray was suspicious.

‘Will it come out all fizzy then?’

‘Never mind,’ said Cole.

‘No, go on girl. I want another drink,’ ordered Babs. Sharon pulled a lever, which popped the bonnet. ‘Yeah go on, Tray.’

‘Why don’t one of you lazy cows do it?’ objected Tray.

‘Because you’re in charge of drinks. I’m in charge of dope and Shazza’s in charge of driving.’

‘What’s he in charge of then?’ Tray was becoming surly.

‘He’s in charge of Physics.’

Tray stomped round to the front of the car armed with the wax cup and straw. She lifted the bonnet; there were sounds of tinkering followed by a screech. The bonnet slammed down to reveal Tray spitting water. ‘You bitches,’ she mouthed furiously and stormed back inside. She slammed the door and turned on Cole. ‘You bloody bastard. The water was scalding. I’ve burnt my sodding mouth off.’ It was true, her lips were already beginning to swell badly.

‘I don’t see why,’ said Cole genuinely puzzled, ‘it should have cooled down ages ago.’

‘Oops. I’ve been running the motor for the radio; otherwise it runs the battery down. Sorry, forgot.’ explained Sharon. ‘Never mind though, you’re getting a right lovely D.S.M.’

‘D.S.M?’ queried Cole.

‘Dick Sucking Mouth,’ chorused Babs and Sharon. Tray’s mouth had metamorphosed into a kind of caricature of a fifties-starlet pout. ‘Saved you a fortune in plastic surgery.’

Cole giggled; Tray punched him hard in the arm sending sparks flying from joint in his hand. He giggled again. In the heavy dope tainted environment the laughter was contagious. She slapped him a few more times, but her heart wasn’t in it. She was beginning to giggle too. ‘Ow, it hurtch.’ She fingered her huge lips. ‘You bloody bishes,’ she repeated thickly.

The old folk struggled gamely back on board their coach; teeth chattering. They could scarcely fail to notice the little car parked next to them rocked by gales of laughter. Nice to see young people enjoying themselves without having to resort to drink, drugs or sex.

‘Can anyone smell burning rubber?’

Cole took another drag on the spliff. Nothing but air. It was no longer alight and he realized he ember must have dropped off when Tray slapped him. He raised his buttocks and twisted his body round to begin the search and rescue operation. ‘Er...slight emergency. I think the end of this joint might have fallen down the back of the seat.’ Cole’s announcement prompted a fresh chorus of giggles from Babs and Tray. Sharon was less amused: ‘I thought I could smell something. Right everyone out of the back,’ she commanded.

Sharon leaned in the rear door and hauled on the plastic seat, her tight pink dress rode up treating the two old voyeurs on the coach to an unimpeded view of her underwear. The banquette came away to reveal a smouldering nest of oily, greasy fluff and old sweet papers in the floor-well. With the influx of fresh air from outside, the pile caught fire rapidly and little tongues of flame

began to lick upwards, feeding on the oily residue. Cole barged Sharon out of the way, removed one of his trainers and began to beat at the floor but his flailing only served to fan the flames. The rubber-soled shoe began to stink as it melted. 'We're going to need water,' he shouted.

'There isn't any,' Tray reminded them.

Cole retreated.

For the pensioners on the coach this was much more exciting than their usual outings. That little bonfire in the back of the old car was going nicely now. They lined the windows of the coach, scrabbling for the best view. It was just like the films. Better even. It was agreed that the dark youth with the matinee-idol looks put one in mind of a young Gregory Peck. He'd been beaten back by the flames but he'd tried his best. And apart from the overly tight, shiny pink dress, the big blonde girl could have passed for a Lillian Gish. Wouldn't it be lovely if the dark boy and the girl got together at the end? A chaste kiss backlit by the flames of the burning vehicle like the poster of "Gone with the wind": a latter-day Rhett Butler and Scarlet O' Hara embracing while Atlanta, or in this case, a clapped out old Morris 1000, burned. Gorgeous.

But it seemed that all was not yet lost. The blonde girl had taken charge again; she appeared to be saying something uncomplimentary to the young man as astonishingly, she began to remove her off-white knickers.

They watched open-mouthed as the girl climbed back into the car, hoisted her dress and squatted over the little conflagration. In a matter of seconds the fire was out.

Well, you certainly never saw an ending like that in the movies – not unless you counted old Mr Noble's appalling video collection.

Cole retrieved his soggy, melted trainer to a round of applause as the coach pulled away. The two old voyeurs still had their noses pressed to the window, unable to tear their gaze away from Sharon. One of them clutched his chest and fought for breath. What they'd just observed would be enough to fuel their fantasies for the remainder of their days. If indeed they survived the excitement at all. Cole manhandled the lower seat back into place. Sharon slumped on top of it. 'Two birds with one stone,' she announced, 'now give us a bloody drink Tray.'

'There's no water.'

'Shut up, just give us the bottle.' Sharon swigged straight Pernod, she pointed at Cole. 'And you can drive.'

'I don't have a license.'

'I'm too pissed, so you'll have to, 'cos neither of these two useless slags know how.'

Jonathan gingerly pulled out of the car park. It wasn't so bad; he hadn't drunk anything and his initial hesitancy soon wore off as he got the hang of the mushy gearbox. He began to enjoy the feeling of freedom and speed as he cruised up the road from the coast.

'Easy, Tiger,' advised Babs as the speedometer needle wobbled towards the 70 mph mark, 'you don't want to burn out the engine as well.' Cole looked guiltily in the rear view mirror to check Sharon's reaction but she was out cold sprawled across the back seat. Likewise, Tray snored loudly; her enlarged lips emitted a "brrrpt" sound with each exhalation.

'So what's your story, you seem like you're well, a bit different to these two?'

'Oh well done, you spotted the fact that I'm black.'

'No, no, that's not what...'

'I know. Just mucking you about.'

‘You just seem different. You don’t talk like these two. And I don’t remember you around here when I was a kid. I’m pretty sure I’d have noticed.’

‘Why ‘cos I’m black?’

Cole swivelled his head towards her, exasperated.

Babs put on an innocent expression. ‘Just mucking you about again. You’re right though; we’re not from around here. I grew up in London – sort of.’

‘Mmm, you seem less.... I don’t know, more delicate, refined maybe. You don’t talk like this lot either.’

‘That’s because I’m really a princess.’

‘Oh, ha ha.’

‘No really. We’re from Nigeria. I’m really and truly a princess of the Yoruba tribe. But you’re not expected to curtsy or anything because there’s like, tons of us in the Royal Family so it doesn’t count for much. But for God’s sake don’t tell this lot,’ she gestured towards the backseat, ‘they’d give me a right hard time.’

‘What’s a genuine African princess doing working at the checkout of the local Co Op?’

‘Back in Nigeria Dad was quite a big-shot; big house, plenty of money and stuff, best schools for his kids. But he made the mistake of picking the wrong side; Ojukwu and the Separatists against Babangida. He was always more of a talker than a fighter though. One day he said the wrong thing to the wrong person and we had to get out in a hurry. Lost everything. We came to London with just the clothes on our backs and Dad tried to get work, he was a trained architect, got a job with Lambeth Council. Then he got made redundant and so we moved up here on a vague promise and because it’s cheaper to live. He died a couple of years back. I think he just gave up.’

I don't flash off but I'm proud of who I am. The family is still pretty important in Nigeria, especially in the Southeast of the country. Still got rellies there but we don't keep in touch. I hear they're the kind of people who can...get things done. So, if you're ever in Nigeria the name Tolifari will still get you a long way with certain people – just not the government.'

'If you're proud of who you are, why do you keep it quiet?'

'I feel sometimes like such a fish out of water. Neither one thing nor the other; not a Nigerian princess any more, not a small-town girl from the Co-Op either,' she said sadly.

'Funny.'

'I don't think it's funny.'

'No, no, I didn't mean that it was funny-funny. It's very sad,' gabbled Cole.

'I know, just mucking about with you.' Babs grinned.

'But it's funny that someone once described me in the same sort of way.'

'They're right,' she agreed, appraising him, 'You'd never pass for a Co-Op girl and you sure-as-shit don't look anything like a Nigerian Princess.'

Cole ignored the flippancy, 'I know what you mean,' he said, 'it's about knowing where you slot in. Maybe you can't be truly happy until you find somewhere you fit.'

'For some people that's true, but I think that there are others who are very unhappy when they do fit – the misfits I suppose. They're the ones who refuse to accept the prescribed roles, they kick against the pricks and can't be happy unless they're doing that. They don't shape themselves to fit the world; they try to shape the world to fit around them. I think my father was one of those.'

'I'm not. I've got no interest upsetting the status quo. I'm not looking for trouble.'

Babs stared at him with a strange smile. 'I think trouble has a way of finding certain people, whether they want it to or not.' She abruptly put her hand on Cole's left thigh. 'Do you mind?'

He swerved, narrowly avoiding a cyclist on an old-fashioned sit-up-and-beg bicycle.

The hand crept playfully up his leg. Cole kept his attention on the road but it was hard to ignore the long urgent fingers now tugging at his zip-fly. He slowed for an oncoming junction while Babs rummaged in his boxer shorts. She expertly guided his now rigid cock through the vent; it sprang out like a Jack-in-the-box, swaying and twitching in the open air, giving her the unequivocal thumbs-up. ‘Just muckin’ about with you,’ explained Babs huskily. Although the lights at a junction ahead changed to green, Cole slowed to a crawl, shifting down through the gears. Babs’s deft fingers wrapped themselves around his cock, mirroring his manoeuvre. Cole flicked his gaze to the rear view mirror once again to check that the girls in the back were still oblivious, he braked and glided to a halt. The light remained green. As though obeying the signal, Babs bent her head over Cole’s lap and took him in her warm, silky mouth. He watched incredulous, as the cornrow head bobbed up and down before him. He closed his eyes and gasped, head pounding. He arched his buttocks upwards and pumped. The junction lights winked on and off though red, amber and green, while those in his head exploded in a multitude of secondary colours.

The cyclist pulled up behind the old Morris 1000 and waited. Although the lights were green, the car didn’t seem to want to move. The rider inched his old bike closer to the rear of the vehicle and peered in through the back window. It was all highly irregular: there were two young women sprawled across the back seat, apparently asleep, possibly unconscious. In the front, the driver appeared to be having convulsions, the passenger appeared to be doing something violent; stabbing him, it looked like – and now she was giving him CPR. Hang on a minute, he’d done National Service and that wasn’t how you gave someone the kiss of life.

He edged his cycle forward squeezing himself into the gap between the rear of the car and the kerb and banged on the back window. 'What the devil's going on in there?'

Babs's head shot up. She giggled. 'Whoops.'

Cole quickly tucked himself back in, smearing come over his trousers. In his haste he had trouble locating the groove for first gear, finally he jammed the stick down, the car jumped forward and stalled causing the vehicle's chrome wrap-around rear bumper to snag in the spokes of the bicycle's front wheel, lifting the wheel a few inches off the ground. The attached and panic-stricken cyclist now beat furiously on the back of the car. 'Yeah, yeah,' mumbled Cole, 'I'm going, I'm going.'

Without a license, he had no wish to draw unnecessary attention to himself so he ignored the irate cyclist and restarted the engine. He pulled smoothly away dragging the bicycle with him; front wheel now firmly hooked into the curve of his rear bumper. The unfortunate rider gripped the handlebars tightly and concentrated on hanging on as the car picked up speed. The back wheel of his bike remained in contact with the road, bouncing him around like a cheque from Jeffrey Archer.

Cole inspected the rear view mirror but could see only empty road behind. 'Where'd that guy go then?'

He adjusted the mirror and caught sight of the cyclist apparently still on his tail: 'He's right on my arse, the sod. He's probably going to report me or something.'

Babs calmly reapplied her lipstick. 'What for? You haven't been drinking.'

'I don't have a license, remember?'

'Yeah, but he doesn't know that.'

'There's bound to be some kind of an offence, receiving a blowjob while in control of a vehicle; I mean it can't be legal - coming whilst going, or something?'

‘Perhaps we should have put up the hazard triangle.’

‘That’s probably it. Anyway, the old sod isn’t giving up too easily.’

Babs turned in her seat. ‘He’s right on our tail. Surely you can shake him off, even in this old banger.’

Cole shifted up into third. But the cyclist hung on grimly, fixed in position at the rear offside like a parasitic bug. ‘He’s still with you,’ announced Babs.

The car gained speed but the captive cyclist stayed put.

‘Calves of steel, he has.’

Cole changed down to second as they approached a junction leading into Hardcastle centre. The man was still with them. ‘Pretty fit for an old geezer,’ said Babs with some admiration. Through the rear side window, the cyclist could see Cole’s eyes in the rear-view mirror. Still holding tight to the handlebars he tried to communicate his predicament through his anguished expression and mouthed the word: “Stop”.

‘The fucker’s giving me a right leery look.’

‘He must be a nutter.’

Cole narrowed his eyes to determined slits. He revved the engine and changed up through the junction. As he sped over the cobbles through the old part of town the bicycle jounced violently up and down on its back wheel. The rider though, was hunched down, gripping the handlebars like grim death, his bike still locked to the car in a terrifying embrace.

In the heart of town, Cole accelerated towards a set of lights in a final attempt to beat his unwelcome guest. At the last moment they changed to red and Cole deciding that discretion was the better part of valour, hit the brakes hard. The Morris screeched to a halt while the bicycle, still under considerable momentum, continued on its journey full-speed ahead. The front wheel

detached itself from the bumper and bounced back onto the road at a slight angle. The elderly rider immediately overcompensated by steering the other way. Wobbling back and forth, doing his utmost to stay upright, he sailed past the Morris, on through the junction, narrowly missing an oncoming lorry. But it was only a matter of time and physics. Cole watched with satisfaction as the cyclist skidded to a crashing halt against the opposing kerb in a sprawling tangle of arms and legs. The lights turned green and the Morris pulled sedately away from the junction. As he passed the bruised and battered cyclist, Cole glared and gave him a valedictory one-fingered salute for his presumption.

With the exception of that one blessed and blissed-out day out with the girls, Cole had been utterly diligent in his exam preparations. A little simple detective work had revealed the precise room at the local Polytechnic in which he would sit his solitary exams and he'd prepared the ground accordingly by removing the bulbs from a few of the ceiling lights and pasting text-book pages of some of the trickier equations into the mantles. All he had to do was lean back in his seat and gaze up at the ceiling for inspiration and answers. The adjudicator was, as he'd hoped, bored and unwary, spending most of the time immersed in a newspaper. Cole had also gambled on the fact that the cash-strapped local education system wouldn't be inclined to pay for an extra adjudicator to accompany him to the toilet. And he was right. Over the course of two weeks he fished a variety of plastic wrapped books and pre-prepared crib-sheets from the cisterns and then, like Michael Corleone, returned to his desk fully armed, ready to blow away the examiners.

One day in early September an official envelope dropped onto the mat bearing the news that the Oxford and Cambridge Examination Board had seen fit to award him three 'A' Grades. He'd made the front page of the Hardcastle Gazette for a second time and all was forgiven on the home front.

'Walker is dead excited about you.' Len, leaned forward in the velveteen armchair, face flushed with a febrile excitement and gulped his brandy and Coke. He could barely get the words out. 'I got a call from him this morning.'

'Walker?'

'Mr David Crispin Walker of Walker's Metals, he said he was going to organise some kind of special graduate intake training thing for you. Just for you.'

'Lady Asquith, you silly twollop,' howled Julia Cole from the sofa.

'But I'm not a graduate.'

'You might as well be with those results. Walker...Mr David Crispin Walker, is putting together this training program just for you, if you're interested. They'll probably sponsor you through University too if it goes well, then there'll be the Accelerated Management Scheme and before you know it, you'll be taking over from the Old Man. I mean, you can hardly afford to ignore that. Can you?'

'I'm not sure I want to spend my life in some shitty factory.'

'Son, in Thatch's Britain, the new aristocracy is industry, and industry is people like Mr David Crispin Walker of Walker's Metals; people who aren't afraid to get their hands dirty.' Len examined his own grubby nails. 'Speaking of Mrs Thatcher, there was a picture of her in the local paper on a factory walkabout. I kept it for you. Can you believe it?'

‘No I can’t.’

‘Tonto, It was Tonto. Silver was the horse, not the sidekick...’ Julia groaned and slung a Cadbury’s chocolate éclair toffee at the screen in disgust.

Len gazed at his wife. ‘I’ll give you an arse-kick in a minute if you don’t shut it. You’re the one that’s bloody tonto.’ He returned to his theme, eyes glittering. ‘Mrs Thatcher at Walker’s Metals, here in Hardcastle. Hard to believe but it’s true. It was right there in the papers. She had a white helmet thing on and she was watching some shit or other being melted. Makes you proud, son. And of course, there was Walker and all these other blokes standing around her in white coats.’

‘Probably psychiatrists.’

‘Is that you being clever?’

‘I am clever Dad, it says so in the papers; in black and white. Some of the highest grades in the country.’

Len raised a fist but managed to control himself, instead, he reached for his drink.

‘What about the army? I could easily go for a commission with results like these. That’s what you always wanted wasn’t it?’

‘Forget the bloody army.’ Len took another swig, becoming more emphatic. ‘Forget it. It’s done nothing for me. You’re not going into the army. And you can forget about University too unless Mr David Crispin Walker decides he wants that for you. You’ll go into Walker’s accelerated management program - which he’s setting up, specially for you. And who knows? In a few years you could be boss of your old Dad.’

‘Oh don’t tell me, you’re leaving the army now?’

‘I’m taking early retirement next month; starting at Walker’s in October. So I’m relying on you to look out for your old dad when you get to top management son - which you bloody well will,

because I've arranged an interview at nine tomorrow and you're going, even if I have to drag you there by the ears.'

'Beethoven, dummy,' erupted Julia, 'oh, I don't believe it....'

Len leaned over and cuffed his wife hard around the back of the head.

The name on the inside page read Hamid Al-Salihi T'ar'iq. It was bogus, but close enough - T'ar'iq at least, was his real name. He very much liked the idea of having a British passport and the photo was quite flattering as far as these things went. It showed a swarthy Arabic looking man of about twenty-five with the obligatory lush moustache of the Middle East. His expression was serious to the point of threatening; eyes narrowed dangerously, implying that this was not a man to be trifled with. The truth was that he'd had to have the shots retaken after the camera flashes had left him looking like a startled rabbit the first time round. He caressed the document lovingly - there was something so very solid and serious about the intricate, fantastical gold crest on its dark blue background - and popped it back into the briefcase on the passenger seat, exchanging it for a powerful Maglite torch.

T'ar'iq was an Iraqi by birth; a shoemaker by trade but an assassin by inclination. For him, one nationality or cause was as good as another and over the years he'd lived in a number of countries throughout the Middle East, mending shoes and all the while, waiting and hoping for someone to recognise his potential as a stone-cold killer. Beirut, with its constant conflict and manifold terror groups was where he'd ended up. But it had just been depressing; confusing and terrifying; the Syrians, Falange, Nasserites, Palestinians, Morabi Tuun; nobody knew who was fighting for what and why. There was no precision about killing there; just random explosions that

destroyed anyone and everything around them. But it was where Nasir had stumbled across him, in a coffee shop, boasting about his prowess and bemoaning his lack of opportunities. He'd been flattered of course, that Nasir had instantly offered him the job as his assistant, factotum, gopher and right hand man, but not entirely surprised. Although he hadn't actually killed anyone yet, he had, he felt, begun to develop something of a reputation within the local freelance community for his attention to detail and professionalism. He was, if nothing else, dedicated to his craft. He read anything he could get his hands on about his fellow professionals from Carlos The Jackal to the Bader Meinhof Group and he wasn't too much of an egotist to learn new methods from anyone. At first, he'd been ecstatic about a job in the UK. The money was fabulous and it was full-time work. Besides, you could get killed in Beirut. And he'd always fancied the idea of Britain; the girls were easy for a start, and they were just crazy for short men with moustaches. He'd read that in a magazine somewhere.

Now that he was actually here, he was ambivalent about his new role. On the one hand, there were very few explosions and stray bullets to worry about, he was proud of his new passport and loved his wonderful new car but he still hadn't been asked to shoot anyone and he'd had absolutely no luck with girls, not even when he'd done his sexy tongue-flicking trick for them. To make matters worse, Nasir had been a bit tetchy when he discovered that T'ar'iq's spoken English wasn't quite as fluent as he'd made out. In fact, Nasir had been treating him more as a lackey than a professional hit-man, even insisting that he attend English language classes in London for three days a week. It was so humiliating. Ahmed and Suleiman, Nasir's other assistants weren't treated like that. And because Chris Semel, the young researcher was an American, Nasir had arranged for him to live in the Centre's annexe, on-site, rent-free and all his food and bills paid for. T'ar'iq and

the others had to put up with a damp, smelly hostel in London. It rankled a bit that Nasir was so generous to the Yanqui, it seemed that he treated the infidel better than he treated his own kind. T'ar'iq sighed heavily and cast these bitter thoughts from his mind and forced himself to concentrate on the task in hand. He'd been the one selected for the mission tonight, not Ahmed or Suleiman. And Ok, not much of a challenge, to be sure; but a mission nonetheless.

He emerged from his lovely Ford Mondeo and sneaked past the annexe; the basic breeze-block hut where the favoured Semel resided in comfort. The lights were still on and through the single tiny window; T'ar'iq could make out the Yanqui researcher inside goggling at the TV, as always. He moved stealthily towards the entrance of the Centre itself and swiped his entry card across the electronic reader. With a click the security door of the darkened laboratory slid open for him. Recalling Nasir's instructions, he made his way in torchlight quickly and unerringly through a series of containment areas until he stood outside the Biosafety Level 3 Staging area. He swiped his card against another reader and the door hissed open. He was momentarily startled by the racks of bluesuits hanging from the ceiling like an abattoir full of human carcasses. They gave him the creeps but they weren't going to prevent him carrying out his mission.

He meticulously began to check the tags on each bluesuit in the beam of his powerful torch, quickly found the suit number and double-checked it against the number on the scrap of paper in his pocket. Satisfied, he proceeded to punch numerous tiny holes in the top of the rubber hood with a wide-bore, surgical needle.

At exactly ten minutes to nine the following morning Leonard Cole and his son sat outside the office of Mr David Crispin Walker of Walker's Metals. The anteroom made no compromise whatsoever to the modern world; a secretary with a sixties hairdo and a fifties' face sat vigil at a large mahogany desk, steel In and Out trays full of red and yellow card folders positioned perfectly at each corner. At dead centre was an old Bakelite telephone into which she spoke breathlessly: 'Yes, they're here now. Very good Mr Walker, sir.' Without glancing at the Coles she replaced the handset, picked up her fountain pen and began to make careful, prissy notes in a file. After some minutes she peered up as though seeing them for the first time and announced, 'Mr Cole, young Mister Cole? Mr Walker will see you shortly.' With that, she returned to her file paying them no further attention whatsoever.

'He's a big biker,' whispered Len.

'A big biker?' Cole had visions of a massive, bearded Hell's Angel crashing through the paneled doors.

'He's into bikes. It's a small part of the business now, but the company's been making cycling frames for Raleigh bikes for years, and bits of the Sturmey Archer gears, don't ask me what. If you run out of things to say, the Old Man loves talking bicycles.'

Len licked his palm and tried to plaster his son's thick black hair down. He only managed to push it against the natural lie causing it to stick up like a bog-brush. 'Lay off,' objected Cole, squirming away. Len twitched uncomfortably. 'Do something with it then, you look like a punk rocker,' he hissed savagely.

'Well, you look like an old Teddy Boy.'

'You're not so big that I can't give you the back of my hand,' warned Len.

'Great, I'll go and see Walker with oil stains all over my face.'

Len inspected his hands. He'd scrubbed them raw that morning with a nailbrush but they were still grimy; pink and grimy from the gear-boxes of the huge Chieftan tanks he repaired. The oil had leached into his flesh of his fingers and knuckles over the years, like the ichor of some mythical beast, and he doubted that he'd ever get them completely clean. He bunched his right hand into a fist and shoved it under Cole's nose. 'Sniff that, you little bastard; it's the smell of honest labour. Not good enough for some people I suppose?'

The balled fingers remained twitching a centimeter from Cole's nose.

'Or maybe a whole bunch of bruises, like Mum. Won't Walker be impressed?' Cole whispered back.

The fist detonated into a rabbit punch and Cole's nose exploded in a cascade of blood.

'Tsk.' The secretary looked up at the sound of the scuffle and squealed softly as she noticed the blood.

'Sorry, sorry,' soothed Len whipping out his handkerchief and crouching over his son, 'he's got himself a bit of a nosebleed. Just nerves I expect.'

The secretary grimaced. 'I think I may vomit,' she announced, 'I cannot abide the sight of blood.' She dry retched and rushed from the room with her own handkerchief clutched to her mouth.

The phone on the desk rang shrilly and Len froze, blood spattered handkerchief still in hand. The phone rang again. Len seemed rooted to the spot. He cast around in a panic and finally flung the handkerchief at his son. 'Get that sorted. Quick.' He leant across the desk and picked up the phone. At that moment the door to Mr Walker's office opened revealing the great man himself. 'Ha, so what have you two done with my secretary, hey?'

Len slowly replaced the receiver. 'Mr Walker. Yes sir. She got into a bit of a tizz. My boy, you see, has had a bit of a nosebleed - as a result of the excitement.'

‘Oh I see. I do see,’ agreed Walker, ‘she can barely stand to look at me without catting-up, I’m afraid.’ Walker’s right arm was in a sling and there was a nasty patch of half-healed scab over a good portion of his face. Len retreated appalled.

‘Oh no, please,’ appealed Walker, ‘nothing contagious, not leprosy or anything, merely the result of a cycling accident a month or so ago. How’d you like that?’

‘I’m sorry to hear it.’

‘Sorrier I think, to know that it may have been caused by hooligan in our own community. Hey?’

‘I find that hard to believe, Mr Walker, given the enormous respect you enjoy here in Hardcastle.’

‘Dreadful experience. And I failed to mark the registration of the offending vehicle. Couldn’t though, from where I was positioned. Stuck to the rear bumper of the car like a ruddy limpet.

How’d you like that, hey? But I’ll always remember ‘till my dying day that brute, that delinquent’s evil black little eyes staring at me through the rear view mirror; the Devil’s eyes, killer-eyes they were but I’ll never forget them. Still have nightmares about them. How’d you like that, hey?’

Len wasn’t sure whether or not he was expected to respond, so he grunted.

‘But enough about my troubles, let’s have a chat with your boy-genius shall we? Let’s have a look at him.’

Cole, still holding his father’s handkerchief over his nose to stem the blood, peered up at Walker with the Devil’s eyes, the glittering black killer-eyes of his nightmares.

Semel peered pleadingly up at Nasir through bright ruby-red eyeballs. ‘You gotta tell someone.

Help me, please,’ Semel begged. But he was wasting his precious breath; Nasir merely grimaced inside the bluesuit helmet and continued filming.

It was all proceeding as expected. This new virus was an extraordinarily virulent pathogen, capable of airborne transmission: it had filtered through the pinpricks in Semel's helmet and after a shortish four-day incubation period the young researcher had begun to complain of a headache; two days later he spiked a fever and became nauseous. Nasir had been careful to keep his other employees well away from the Annexe hut and wore full bio-suit with breathing apparatus on visits to the young man.

He focused on the pale figure through the viewfinder of the video camera. Semel's scarlet eyeballs seemed frozen in their sockets. The skin of his face had turned a waxy yellow and was speckled with tiny bright red blotches: signs of toxic shock.

After a few moments, the eyes moved. Accusing.

Thirty-six hours later Semel began hemorrhaging from every orifice, producing the so-called vomito Negro; a black vomit mixture of old and fresh arterial blood. He filled sick bag after sick bag as Nasir implacably continued to document the progress of the disease.

Two days later, Semel was dead.

Viruses often become more virulent and stable after passing through the live incubator of a human body, so Nasir carefully harvested what was left of Semel's liver, a soggy bloody mass teeming with what he hoped would be a hardier strain of the new pathogen. He bricked up the door to the breezeblock Annexe and painted over the single sealed window obliterating the sight of the deathly pale and wasted body lying in a pool of black blood on the bed inside.

T'ar'iq had claimed his first victim and didn't even know it.

Fellowes' pinstriped legs were aching. A month or two into the new job, he was standing before the hexagonal booth designated for stocks in Investment Trusts. Affixed to one side of the Hexagon behind him was a whiteboard showing the current buy and sell prices for the relevant stocks. As a Blue-button in the firm of Cazelets it was Fellowes' job, amongst other things, to keep the prices on his whiteboard up to date. On The Market, there were three levels of seniority: Member Dealer, Senior Dealer and Blue-button, each recognizable by the distinctive oval badge they wore on their lapels; silver, yellow and blue respectively. The Blue-button was the lowest of the low and as such, Fellowes was not permitted to make trades, wander off or even sit down throughout the entire trading day. It was, he thought, even worse than Slatters for pointless rules.

Senior Dealer on the pitch was Anthony Hutchinson, The Hutch; a short, prissy, forty-something individual with an even shorter temper. He lounged back on the abbreviated, padded banquette attached to the Hexagon, examining the Dealer's book, before coming to a decision, he squinted up at Fellowes through thick lenses. 'Take Garton Trust down a point, and close up the spread by a half. We might see some action in minute, there's a good Fellowes.'

Fellowes dutifully picked up the cloth and Magic Marker and turned to the white board, he caught the eye of Mike Brown, his Yellow-button who'd just returned from coffee at The Arbitrager.

Brown winked sympathetically. Fellowes liked Brown. The men - and handful of women - on the Market came in two flavours; ex-public school or cockney barrow boy, and Brown was very

definitely one of the latter; a tubby individual in his late twenties with an uncooked dumpling of a face and a bizarre pudding-bowl hair cut that belied a razor sharp mind. 'All right mate?' he said.

'He wants me to close the spread on Garton by a half,' whispered Fellowes, making it clear that he had absolutely no idea how to go about it. Brown winked again, drew Fellowes aside and began to explain in a furtive voice.

‘The spread, right... is just the difference between the price at which Cazelet’s is prepared to sell the stock and the price at which we wanna buy. Got it? Market-making is basically piss-easy. If we can buy stock at a lower price and sell it on at a higher price, then we make money – we all get a bonus which I blow on a flash car and then crash it, Hutch buys some crappy piece of art, like half a dead sheep in a tank which leaks and stinks up his living room. If we do it the other way round; we buy high and sell low, then we lose money – we’re fucked. The difference between the two prices is the Turn; the margin. The market’s a bit soft today, so Hutch wants to reduce the difference between the two prices by half a point on either side in order to get a bit of interest going. With me so far?’ Fellowes nodded.

‘But you’ve got to watch it when you’re adjusting margins because market-makers, that’s us, never know whether the broker, that’s them of course...’ Brown waved his hand around the market, indicating the pin-striped figures hurrying from hexagon to hexagon, ‘...is going to turn out to be a buyer or a seller. If we get the spread wrong, we could end up going long on a shit stock when the price is on its way through the floor. Or, going short of a good stock when the price is on its way through the roof. Either way – we’re fucked and we can forget about my motor and his half-a-dead-sheep. Got it?’

‘I think so.’

‘Right, the only other thing to remember is that we’ve got to keep track of the company’s financial position all the time. That’s the amount of stock on the books, which we’re either long on, because we’ve bought or which we’re short of, because we’ve agreed to sell it. That’s why you Blue-buttons have to tot up the positions in your book every hour and hand them in.’

Fellowes wiped the Garton Trust prices off the board with the white cloth and made the necessary amendments with the magic marker. He grinned gratefully at Brown.

‘One more thing,’ he asked, ‘how do you know when to move the prices up or down?’

‘That’s the \$64,000 question isn’t it. Some people use systems and try to see patterns in the Market, but the really good dealers, like me and the Hutch, can feel it in their bollocks.’ Brown grabbed his crotch and jiggled it.

‘Oh Fellowes,’ called out Hutch, ‘pop across the road and buy some more of those jujubes, why don’t you?’ Brown rolled his eyes sympathetically. There were always tins of tiny, impossibly strong mints available at each of the Hexagons but the Hutch was addicted to Maynard’s wine-gums and insisted on a constant supply for which Fellowes was expected to pay from his own pocket. ‘And try not to run out in future. I don’t ask for much, but a few jujubes now and again shouldn’t be beyond you.’

Fellowes hurried away, passing the Cazelet’s Gilt-edged securities pitch where Piers worked. There were a few Mullins people gathered around him, not trading but playing ‘Spoof’ a popular gambling game involving the serial numbers on paper money. As Queen’s Brokers, Mullins’ traders were entitled to wear top hats in the market and so were instantly recognizable, even to new boys like Fellowes. Piers folded a wad of notes into his pocket, broke away from the group and hailed him excitedly. ‘Hey Charles, I just took fifty-five quid off Kirkpatrick.’

‘Whoopee-doos,’ Fellowes replied grumpily.

‘What’s up, young C?’

‘Bloody Hutch.’

Piers looked genuinely puzzled. ‘Hutch? Great bloke. One of the best, that’s why Pa put you with him.’

‘He’s a bad tempered short-arse.’

‘Tell you what, Kirkpatrick’s money’s burning a hole in my pocket, why don’t we pop down the Greenhouse after work and I’ll buy us some champers?’ Piers breathed on his yellow oval badge and pretended to polish it. ‘My new button has not been sufficiently well toasted yet.’

Fellowes considered the alternative: another night in his damp and grotty one-bedroomed flat in Clapham, alone - or worse, - in the company of his sponging second-floor neighbours. It was a close run thing. ‘Yes, all right Piers, I better hurry now, the short tempered bad-ass will be screaming for his jujubes.’

Sometime after eight that evening the jubilantly tittering and now well-toasted Yellow-button staggered up the street in the direction of Bank tube station accompanied by Fellowes. In the sodium glow of a street lamp Piers caught sight of a sleeping tramp wrapped in newspaper on a nearby park bench and altered his course. He whipped away the itinerant’s newsprint blanket, exposing the man’s ragged back to the cold night air.

Fellowes protested on behalf of the comatose figure.

‘My need is greater, I haven’t seen how the Dow opened,’ explained Piers, riffling through the evening news to the business pages. ‘Piss. Dropped a few points.’ He made a sour face before discarding the loose pages to the wind. ‘Speaking of which...’ Piers steadied himself with one hand against a wrought iron lamppost and fumbled at his button fly with the other. A stream of pee arced into the shadows of the gutter. ‘Look at that. Twenty five quid’s worth right there,’ he announced expansively, indicating the fast-forming puddle at his feet.

‘I very much doubt that anyone in The Square Mile would pay twenty five quid for the privilege of taking the piss out of you, Piers. Not when we can all do it for free on a daily basis’ Fellowes stood

at a safe distance with his hands rammed into the pockets of his cashmere coat. The nights had recently turned chilly.

‘Oh, ha, ha. I’ve just bought you a gallon of expensive champagne and my father pulled strings to get you the job in the first place, and all you can do is...uh... take the piss out of me. Just like your bloody sister.’ Piers buttoned up his bespoke pinstripe trousers and lurched forwards just missing the lamppost with his pale, floppy-fringed forehead.

‘Yes, sorry, Piers, I’d be much more sympathetic if I didn’t think you and your father had stitched me up by putting me on the shittiest pitch in the City. I mean, has there ever been a more appalling, avaricious, bad-tempered individual than the Hutch, in the history of the world?’

Piers swayed, grimaced like a pantomime dame and emitted his odd, high-pitched titter. ‘Oh my God, you think Hutch is bad? He really is the nicest of the lot. You’ve been given the best. Wait and see what the rest of them are like. Hutch is a pussycat. Bloody pussycat. Dealers aren’t like other people, Fellowes. To make money in The City someone else has to lose it, the best dealers - like me - are sharks, they can smell blood up to a mile away, which is why we all work in a square mile of each other. You smell blood, you go in for the kill and feast on someone else’s fuckup. You do it, because you know they’ll do it to you. There are no niceties here.’ Piers pantomimed a dog savaging a bone, ‘rrrr...rraagh. And you think the Hutch is such an arse-tempered...uh...short-thing. Ha, ha, I’ll tell my father that, he’ll enjoy it.’ He tittered again - a Geisha impersonating a chicken. Fellowes sighed and walked on up the darkened street. ‘I’m delighted that my misery is to be such a great source of joy for your father. I think it’s time we were getting home.’

At that moment, a hooded, shapeless mass came to life, extricating itself from the base of a statue of John Maynard Keynes in the square nearby and advanced on the pair extending a grubby, expectant hand. ‘Oh God, it’s another vagrant,’ exclaimed Piers.

Fellowes dug into his pockets and extracted a crumpled five-pound note.

‘No,’ ordered his companion, ‘let me.’ Piers produced a ten pence piece, which he flicked at the beggar. ‘Share the wealth by all means, but go easy, after all we’re not trying to create a society of takers. You don’t want to overdo it with the phil...the philan...the ph...the phhh...the charity – before you know it you’ll have entire generation reliant on donations, content to produce nothing whatsoever for a living. A class of parasites, all voting socialist.’ He waved a hand dismissively at the hunched shape. ‘You’ve got your money, now be a decent fucking chap and kindly begger off.’ The hunched and hooded figure wasn’t so easily bought off. Enveloped in an outsized, grubby beige duffle coat like a rancid Benedictine Friar, the apparition followed swiftly behind. ‘Oh my God,’ squealed Piers, ‘that minging pile of litter is actually following us.’

They picked up the pace.

‘Get away, you disgusting heap of stench. I obviously gave it too much, now it’s become overexcited; maddened by greed and thinks I’m some kind of automatic cash dispenser; shove a knife in, get cash out.’

Piers looked behind nervously to see that the cowled figure was gaining on them. Without warning, Piers suddenly broke into a sprint and shot off up the road leaving his companion to his fate. The shambling figure halted and stooped over as though about to be sick. Fellowes turned with some trepidation: ‘Er...hello? Do you want something? Are you feeling all right?’

Fellowes noticed with alarm that the figure was trembling; some kind of seizure perhaps. It slowly dawned on him that his assailant was quaking with suppressed laughter. The figure threw back the hood of his dufflecoat. ‘No of course I don’t feel all right. I’ve been freezing my bollocks off out here.’

Cole's hair was long and lank, he was unshaven and there were dark circles under his red-rimmed eyes but he was grinning like a conjuror who'd just pulled off an impossible trick.

'Ah, then it's probably safe to assume that this is not a coincidence.' Fellowes was shocked to see his old school friend in such a state, and in truth, he was uneasy about this unexpected reunion.

'I went to Cazelets and they said you'd be at one of the bars around here, probably the Greenhouse. But none of them would let me in like this. So I just hung about on the off-chance.'

Fellowes gazed at his contemporary and compassion quickly overcame misgivings: 'I heard about your results.'

'Yeah, not bad eh?' replied Cole, preening in his filthy dufflecoat, 'Baxter might have actually done me a favour by getting me slung out.'

'Why?'

'Made it easier for me.'

'Made what easier?'

'Things.'

'I knew it. You cheated didn't you?'

'If I told you the truth I'd have to kill you.'

'Sometimes I worry about you.'

'No you don't. You worry about yourself and whether your precious but precarious moral framework might be undermined by the fact that cheats do invariably prosper and that the best man doesn't always win.'

'Yes well, congratulations you look as if you've done really well for yourself.' Fellowes shook his head. 'Baxter always said that you'd come to no good, but to go from being one of the top students

in the country to...what was it again? – “a minging pile of litter” - in three months is pretty bloody extreme even for you.’

Cole looked crestfallen.

Fellowes broke the uncomfortable silence: ‘I tried to call.’

‘Did you?’

‘Your Dad claimed he’d never heard of you, then he told me to piss off.’

‘I messed up a big interview, Len went mental and chucked me out.’

‘I take it you’re not at the Ritz then?’

‘Beds are too hard.’

‘The Carlton?’

‘Too poncy.’

‘Grosvenor House.’

‘Don’t rate the service.’

‘YMCA?’

Cole shook his head.

‘Flea-bitten bed-sit?’

‘Sorry.’

It seemed to Fellowes that he was destined never to escape from the dark boy’s presence in his life.

‘I must have done something bloody, bloody awful in a previous existence,’ he sighed. ‘I suppose you had better come with me then.’

Cole grinned delightedly.

Fellowes led the grubby, frozen Cole gingerly up the stairs to his first floor flat just off Clapham Common. ‘Don’t tread on the next stair, it creaks,’ he whispered, ‘damn, too late.’

‘Is ‘at you Chazzer?’ came a strained nasal voice from half way up the next flight of stairs.

‘Yes, it’s me,’ admitted Fellowes reluctantly.

‘Ah...that’s great news, we’re on our way down.’ The announcement was followed by the sounds of unsteady footfalls from above as Fellowes unlocked the door to his flat.

‘Make yourself at home,’ he said to Cole, who flopped into an armchair from where he surveyed the single room. It was furnished with a mixture of threadbare and unsavory items: the paisley velveteen armchair in which he sat had a dangerously wobbly arm, there was a purple nylon two-seater sofa, a polka dot beanbag and a single bed. In one corner was a steel sink and a Sadia hot water tap, a tiny fridge and a small cooker topped with the greasy blackened skin of a thousand culinary tragedies. The carpet throughout was pink shag-pile and badly stained in places. The only signs of civilized occupation were the striped duvet on the bed and the three beautifully cut suits, a cashmere coat and some half a dozen shirts and silk ties hanging from a railing on the far side of the bed.

A huge figure with a mass of long tightly curled black hair stumbled onto the landing followed by a smaller man in round granny glasses who wore what remained of his thinning chestnut tresses in a pony tail.

‘All right, Chazzer, you got company?’

‘I did have,’ observed Fellowes reluctantly holding open the door for the two new arrivals, ‘now it’s a crowd.’

The curly-haired monster entered and sprawled full-length across the greasy sofa, while his pony-tailed companion slumped onto the punctured beanbag which ejected a small stream of polystyrene beads onto the shag pile like so much frogspawn. They nodded at Cole, who caught the unmistakably pungent odour of hash emanating from their greasy clothing.

Fellowes closed the door before addressing his guests in a long-suffering tone: ‘Bubbles, Nevin - this is my old school-friend, Cole. Cole, this is Bubbles and Nevin, a pair of utterly degenerate scroungers from upstairs.’

‘You got something to eat, Chazzer?’

Fellowes switched on the bar heater, then rummaged in the cupboard over the sink and brought out a box of Shreddies and some bowls, Ritz crackers and a pot of Gentleman’s Relish. Having fulfilled his duties as a host, he perched on the arm of the sofa, the only unoccupied platform in the room.

‘Ah, Nev, man. He’s got Shreddies.’

‘Extravaganza!’

‘There’s no milk though,’ warned Fellowes.

The second-floor pair was unphased by the news. They helped themselves to Shreddies, simply adding water from the tap and began to eat as though it was their last meal. Cole watched them aghast.

‘Munchies,’ explained Bubbles as he dipped a stray Shreddie into the Gentleman’s Relish.

‘You hungry?’ Fellowes asked Cole.

‘Not any more.’

‘Good, because I haven’t got anything else. Bubbles and Nevin are musicians.’

‘Starvin’ musicians,’ Bubbles added, scooping up another dollop of Relish. It was easy to identify the strong Bristolian accent giving a West Country burr to his words.

‘As you can see. But the only reason they’re starving is because they get so stoned during the daylight hours they forget to go out and buy groceries. Then of course they get the munchies and wait for me to get back so I can feed them. It’s like keeping a pack of mongrels.’

‘We’re starving for our art. And besides, you can afford it. You pray daily at the temple of Mammon and wallow in its fruits, so it’s your responsibility to support us struggling artists.’

‘Struggling to get out of bed before two in the afternoon,’ commented Fellowes acidly.

‘What sort of music d’you play?’ asked Cole.

Bubbles considered this carefully for a moment. ‘We’re a Concept Band.’

‘Only, we ‘aven’t come up with the concept yet.’

‘We’re still experimenting with a number of musical styles.’

‘And influences.’

‘And instruments.’

‘How many in the band?’

‘There’s just us.’

‘They’re a duet,’ explained Fellowes.

‘Duo. We’re a duo, like the Pet Shop Boys,’ replied Bubbles. ‘He only says that to annoy us. I play the keyboards.’

‘And I play the keyboards,’ added Nevin. ‘We take turns.’

‘They operate an ancient Yamaha Home organ upstairs, which they use to keep me awake and generally render my life utterly miserable.’

‘We let Chazzer listen to our compositions but he’s a fuckin’ philistine.’

‘What was that thing you forced me to hear yesterday?’

‘“All round my head.” Ready? A-one, a-two...’ He began to sing in a nasal whine: ‘The sounds they are buzzin’ buzzin and buzzin ‘til I wish I were dead, Buzzin’ buzzin buzzin, all round my head.’

‘Boom chikka, boom chikka, boom chikka...’ chorused Nevin.

‘That was it, “All round my head”, agreed Fellowes. ‘The lyrics are quite ingeniously post-modern, summing up precisely the sentiments of anyone forced to listen to them. But the melody sounds suspiciously reminiscent of a dreadful old song called “All around my hat” by Steeleye Span. Only with a Samba beat.’

‘The Samba beat button is the only one that still works on the organ. It’s not meant to be a Samba track. It will eventually be a Post-Punk thrash rock number. When we get some decent kit and a sampler.’

‘Our influences come from all over. We have electric tastes,’ sniffed Nevin.

‘Hey,’ Bubbles addressed Cole excitedly, ‘you look like a smart kid; I like the grunge thing you got there. How about managin’ us? You doin’ anything right now?’

‘Good question,’ interjected Fellowes. ‘What exactly are you planning on doing right now?’

‘Well, I thought you might be able to help in that department,’ grinned Cole, shamelessly.

‘Oh no,’ Fellowes shook his head emphatically, ‘Piers can’t stand you and you’ll have hardly endeared yourself after more or less mugging him tonight. What happened to that job your father was supposed to be sorting out?’

‘I told you, I stuffed up the interview.’

‘How?’

‘I accidentally sort of ran over the boss....’

‘Extravaganza!’ applauded Nevin.

‘Smash the capitalist state,’ agreed his partner.

‘...and then sort of gave him the finger,’ added Cole. ‘I didn’t actually know it was the boss at the time.’

‘Geezer,’ Bubbles whispered lost in admiration, ‘hit and run was it?’

‘I s’pose. My dad hit me - I ran.’ Cole shrugged.

‘Perhaps if you just went back and apologised...?’ suggested Fellowes, but he already knew that the thing was hopeless.

Nasir withdrew a file from the drawer at his desk and handed it to T’ar’iq. Things had been going well but now there was an emergency. He’d just been informed that the shipbroker who handled his imports might not be all that he seemed; agents keeping watch on the Israeli Embassy in London had recently spotted the man attending a meeting there. If it turned out that he was passing on information about Nasir’s activities to the Mossad - notorious and feared Israeli security service – then the entire UK operation would have to be abandoned. It was news of the worst possible kind, just when his work was beginning to bear fruit.

And he’d been so careful when he’d selected the shipbroker. He’d imagined that it had been a masterstroke to hire a Jew – a good way to deflect suspicion - what’s more, the man was known to be less than scrupulous about licenses, bills of lading and paperwork and his business was understood to be in difficulties, making him doubly malleable.

The Embassy visit could of course turn out to be nothing: a routine passport renewal or some such. But on balance, Nasir had decided that the risks were just too great, the Jew had served his purpose, he would have to be eliminated, just to be on the safe side.

T'ar'iq was ecstatic as he examined the black and white photo in the file, a bland looking, balding individual with a slightly jowly face and pale complexion stared back. There was nothing in the photo to suggest that this was a person deserving of a death sentence. But it was all one to T'ar'iq, he was a stone-cold killer and he was delighted that he was finally going to carry out a professional hit. A number of creative and increasingly fantastical methods came to mind.

'It has to look like an accident,' emphasised Nasir, pouring cold water on T'ar'iq's dreams. He spoke brusquely in Arabic since T'ar'iq's English, although much improved, was not yet precise enough for explicit instruction. 'You will use the Mondeo to run him down at high speed. If you inspect the map in the file you'll see a spot marked with an 'X' - that is his office at number 3B Whitecross Road. He crosses Whitecross Road each day at around 12.30 to get lunch from the Goldy-Lox Delicatessen here.' Nasir pointed with a manicured forefinger to a spot on the map marked with a 'Y'. 'This is not a busy thoroughfare so you will be able to park up for a short time without attracting undue attention – pretend to be reading a map, not this one, of course – and when you see him crossing the road, you will simply run him over at no less than 80 miles an hour if possible. Then you will drive straight to the location, marked on the map with a "Z" where the vehicle will be taken care of.'

'But my lovely car. It will be dented.'

'It will be crushed.'

T'ar'iq was himself, crushed at the news.

Nasir reached across the desk and patted his hand sympathetically. ‘I’ll get you another. A better one.’

T’ar’iq shrewdly saw an opportunity for an upgrade here. ‘A Fiat X19?’ He’d spotted a powder-blue and cream, two-tone model in Earl’s Court one afternoon and had instantly fallen in love. ‘God willing.’

T’ar’iq hugged himself with glee and pretended to study the map. His eyes glazed over as he imagined himself in a white suit, open black shirt, slowly cruising the King’s Road, roof off, Wafid Ibn Wafid and his Camel-Drum Ensemble blasting out of the stereo. The back shelf of the X19 was crammed with bronze-thighed young women. All he had to do was gaze into the rear view mirror to enjoy their ample bosoms. He saw himself flicking his tongue in and out like a King Cobra at passing blonde who almost fainted but recovered herself sufficiently to fight a vicious pitched-battle with a long-limbed brunette for the place of honour in the cream leather, bucket seat beside him...ah yes...

‘Did you hear me?’ Nasir had switched to English, breaking in on his thoughts.

‘Indeed. Most assuredly.’

‘Your English must be up to standard in case you are questioned while you are parked. That is your most vulnerable period. Do you understand?’

‘We am ready,’ replied T’ar’iq in a dignified manner and a mild Scottish accent.

Fellowes had had another tough day. He’d arrived at the trading desk in Cazelet’s offices at seven sharp along with the rest of the Blue-buttons and had set about the task of doing his Alts; trading alterations in the huge book of computer printouts. These registered each and every deal from the

previous day and were logged by the settlement offices of both parties to the trade into a huge computer called Talisman. Sometimes, one of the parties mistakenly logged a 'buy' as a 'sell' or vice versa and the whole thing would have to be unstrung and ratified manually. Fellowes usually had one or two simple errors to track down and a couple of brief phone calls to the brokers' clerks soon put them right, but his pitch, Investment Trusts, had been carrying an on-going and perplexing anomaly on the books for quite some months now and Fellowes attempted to unravel it once again before the Market Trading commenced with the bell at nine.

He was still scratching his head over a pile of Talisman-transfer printouts from six months ago when the Hutch arrived at his usual time of eight-thirty.

'Other Member dealers have their coffee ready for them at their desks when they arrive. I wonder why is it that you can't do that?'

'I'm sorry, Hutch. I'll get it now.'

'Please don't call me Hutch.'

Fellowes' head snapped up, alerted by the quietly threatening tone in his superior's voice.

'My name is Anthony. You can call me Anthony or Tony, but I'd prefer not, I'd rather you called me Mr Hutchinson. Not Hutch or The Hutch, if you don't mind.'

The Hutch got to his feet and bent over, exposing his beautifully tailored backside to Fellowes. 'Do I look like I have a rabbit up my bottom? Or is there somewhere else that you feel I might be able to successfully stash a bunny?'

'No.'

'Well then.'

'Wotcha Hutch,' said Brown, flopping into his seat. 'Ay, Charles. Get us a coffee. No, get me two. Black.'

‘No problem, I was just about to get one for Mr Hutchinson. Hey Brownie, can you help me with this Albion Trust alt? I can’t work it out at all.’

‘Ask your mate Peacey. He was the button here when that thing started. Get him to sort it out.’

The Hutch spat remnants of a green wine gum across the desk. ‘You will do no such thing. You’ll get to the bottom of it yourself, Fellowes, but not before you get me a fucking coffee. And I don’t care for these green jujubes. Try to purchase the packets with fewer green ones.’

Fellowes picked up the plastic tray and ran to the coffee machine.

Bubbles and Nevin were huddled over the grimy stove in Fellowes’ flat, stirring beans, rice and assorted vegetable matter like a couple of witches while Cole admired himself in the dusty full length mirror adorned in Fellowes’ blue pinstripe and a white shirt with a Yellow silk tie. It might have been made for him. He unhooked the long, blue wool-and-cashmere overcoat from the rail and tried that on too. With his chin scraped and hair freshly washed, he looked... well, there was simply no other word for it... prosperous.

‘Well guys?’

‘I hate to break it to you mate, but you look like a tosser what works in the City.’

Cole sighed. ‘That is the general idea.’

‘Oh.’

Nevin stopped stirring. ‘Wait one. That might make a good song title.’

‘That it might. Yeah, you might have somethin’ there, my boy. Let me ‘ave a go.’ Bubbles put a hand over one ear as he’d seen professional musicians do in the recording studio, screwed up his face and began to croon in a weird falsetto voice while Nevin continued to stir, further adding to the impression of a coven at the oven.

‘S’ a bit long though in’t it?’ Bubbles stroked his dark stubble thoughtfully. ‘What about just, “In the City”?’

‘Extravaganza,’ nodded Nevin excitedly, ‘I get co-writer’s credit though.’

‘You and The Jam,’ pointed out Cole.

Bubbles rolled his eyes at Nevin, dipped a filthy finger into the pot and licked it. ‘We’re not makin’ jam my lover, this is Chili Con Carn. You can’t make jam from beans and rice.’ The two of them sniggered at Cole’s manifest ignorance.

Cole was the first to hear the rattle of the key in the front door. He guiltily flung off the dark blue coat with the suit jacket still inside and attempted to insert a hanger just as Fellowes entered his flat.

Fellowes took in the situation at a glance. ‘Oh no, not tonight. I’ve had a really bad day; splitting headache.’

Cole stepped up grinning and pristine in the commandeered Thomas Pink shirt, ‘You were right about them, but I roused them early and sent them out shopping.’ indicating the two musicians.

‘They brought back a bag of rice, kidney beans, Chianti and stuff. And for some reason - a bottle of Matey. I’ve had a long bath and the guys have made a chilli-something-or-other. You hungry?’

Fellowes was too tired to remonstrate with his unwanted guests, he shucked off his tie and dropped his grey Burberry mac on the sofa. ‘Not right now, but a bath is an inspired idea. If you haven’t squandered all the Matey to bring you up to your currently glistening condition?’

The musicians began ladling their steaming rice and bean concoction into bowls. Fellowes finished undressing and flung a towel round his waist. 'Oh, before I forget, there might be something going in Settlements - it's only back-office but it's better than a slater up your nose, as my wiggly old Gran used to say. You need to be at Cazelet's at eleven, sharp, to see Mr Ogilvie, our Head of Clerks. And I was going to suggest that you wear some of my clothes but...' he indicated the commandeered pinstripe trousers, braces and shirt, 'you're way ahead of me. Anyway, for tomorrow, you can borrow the Prince of Wales Check.' With that, he padded off out the door again to the shared bathroom at the end of the hallway, crossing his fingers in the hope of a few inches of hot or possibly tepid water.

Five minutes later, there was an urgent thudding of sprinting footsteps on the hallway lino. The door burst open to reveal an agitated and foam covered Fellowes. 'Just one question. The kidney beans? Please tell me you soaked them before you cooked them?' The last remaining spoonful of rice and beans was halfway to Bubbles's open mouth. It remained there, frozen in mid-air. 'Eh?' he said, baffled.

At ten the following morning, Fellowes quickly totted up the rough position for the Investment Trust pitch: minus 322. It meant that Cazelet's were long on stock. If dealers like the Hutch were in a buying mood, it could signify an upturn in the market. A strong, bullish market was more likely to result in a good bonus at the end of the year.

He scribbled the figure onto a pink slip and folded it in half. He wandered over to the Hexagon containing the senior Blue-Button and inserted the slip into the narrow slot.

‘These are very agreeable,’ pronounced the Hutch, chewing on the black bottle-shaped wine gum. ‘I did a deal with the blue-button on “Boots and shoes” for all his black ones. Two greens and a yellow for one black,’ explained Fellowes.

The Hutch was pleased: ‘Not exactly the deal of the century, but we’ll make a trader of you yet. When you can get three black jujubes for just one green, then I’ll be impressed. Now, young Mr Brown and I are required to attend a small presentation up St Mary’s Passage for an hour, do you think you can hold the fort without totally bankrupting a company which has otherwise survived unscathed for these past two hundred years?’ The Hutch handed over the Dealer’s book. ‘The prices on the board stand, but if there’s a problem, any kind of problem, page me. Instantly.’

The moment his superiors left the market, Fellowes was on the Hexagon phone to his flat: ‘It’s ten-thirty, what are you still doing there?’ ‘The voice in the earpiece was weak and quite unlike Cole’s: ‘I was up all night. Poisoned.’ ‘That’s your fault for trusting those two twits to make dinner,’ hissed Fellowes forcefully, ‘this is your big chance. Get dressed; you’ve got half an hour to get here. And try not to do anything unspeakable in my suit.’

In the flat, a pale-faced Cole replaced the phone and checked his watch. Half an hour, he could still make it, just. He caught the sound of the toilet in the hallway flushing for the umpteenth time and heavy footsteps padding back up the stairs. Well, at least the two musicians were suffering too. He threw on the grey Prince-of-Wales-check trousers, adjusted the red braces across the shoulders of his beautiful double-cuffed white cotton shirt, shoved his size nine feet into his own Lobb & Co black brogues and swiftly knotted the yellow silk tie. He ran a quick comb through his thick black

hair, grabbed the long blue cashmere coat from the rail and flung it on before scooting out of the door.

At five-to-eleven Fellowes recorded a trade in the dealer's book; a good one too. The broker wanted to deal in a larger quantity than the marked prices quoted for, so Fellowes adjusted the spread; opening it by half a point on either side. He'd ended up with a sell at a higher price than that marked on the whiteboard, nearly closing off the long position they had in that particular stock. He checked his watch and wondered if Cole had managed to prise himself off the loo yet.

'May I take your coat?' asked the stunningly beautiful Asian girl at reception.

Cole gave her a raffish smile, he was confident, a slicker; looking the part as he handed her the blue coat.

She giggled.

He caught sight of his reflection in the glass frontage: a handsome, dark-haired man stared back. A touch paler than usual perhaps, but not bad for all that: beautifully suited in grey turn-up chequered trousers, yellow silk tie and ...oh my God, a dark blue pinstripe jacket – the jacket he'd left inside the coat when he'd guiltily flung it off the previous night. He checked again. Yeah, he looked the part all right – an absolutely colossal private part.

'D'ya you nick the trousers then? Or was it the jacket?' queried the receptionist.

Cole's stomach growled a reply. He wouldn't bother asking for her phone number now.

'If you take the lift to the fifteenth floor and ask for Mr Ogilvie, I'll try to let him know you're on your waieeee....' The last word tailed off into a screech of hysterical tittering. The girl covered her

mouth with her hand and tried to compose herself, 'I'm so sorry,' she sputtered, 'but you looked so pleased with yourself when you came in and....' she wiped a tear from her eye and handed him a visitor's pass.

Cole gave her the evil eye as he entered the crowded lift. In turn, the occupants gave him strange looks as the glass box silently and smoothly ascended. His stomach grumbled horribly. Someone at the back began tittering at the sound. By way of reply his stomach made a kind of elongated "gawp" sound. He was relieved when the cramped lift thinned out by the twelfth floor. By this time he was getting serious griping pains from what he prayed was just gas. He was desperate to release the pressure on his bowels but held on; it wouldn't do to greet a prospective employer with a skin-blistering cloud of poisonous fumes.

The doors slid open at the fifteenth. In the corridor ahead, City types bustled past but there was no sign of anyone waiting for him; one or two raised eyebrows in response to his curious attire but no one stopped or challenged him. There was a W.C sign at the far end of the royal-blue carpeted corridor. Cole could scarcely walk, but gritting his teeth, he staggered to the door of the men's lavatory. It swung open to reveal a room of granite, marble and stainless steel. The place was not as deserted as he'd hoped. A quick glance at the cubicles told him they were both occupied. He could hear the crackle of newspapers being turned from within. Bluff men in braces and stripy shirts with white collars chatted about the market as they peed or dried their hands. It wouldn't do to let off a titanic fart in front of this lot, besides any one of these men could be Mr Ogilvie himself. His guts continued to growl ominously – something needed to be done and fast. He would have to find somewhere more private to deal with his crippling discomfort.

He allowed the door to swing shut again and backed out. There was a limed ash doorway further down the corridor and he limped towards it in agony. Opening it a crack, he furtively peered

inside. Mercifully, the room was pitch black and silent, so he scuttled into the blessed darkness and with a sigh of relief released a thunderclap of toxic gas. The sound was shockingly loud in the silent room and seemed to go on for ever...

There was a tiny click. Cole found himself suddenly illuminated in the beam of a multi-coloured slide; an illustrated pi-chart graphically representing the presumed overheads and profitability of Cazelet's over the next twelve months. The figures and percentages projected across his face, distorted by his horrified features. Cole stood motionless in front of the screen, caught in the beam like a rabbit in the headlights and now, as his eyes adjusted to the sudden luminance, he could make out the silhouettes of heads and shoulders in the rows of seats before him. For the second time in a matter of months, he fled without waiting for an interview.

'Nightmare...we had to evacuate the room for a while,' chuckled Brown.

It was four in the afternoon, the Stock Exchange had closed for the day and the dealers were manning the banks of phones at their desks back in the dealing room, booking early trades for the following day. 'What on earth had the guy the been doing to get himself into a state like that?' Fellowes shook his head. 'I don't want to talk about it, I really don't.'

The Hutch pushed his heavy glasses back up his nose and peered intently at his blue-button. 'I knew, I just knew, that that bizarrely-dressed young man had to be in some way connected to you, Fellowes.' Fellowes grimaced and pretended to be studying the dealing book as he waited for the hatchet to fall.

'I am right aren't I?'

'Yes,' mumbled Fellowes. 'He's an old friend, staying with me at the moment.'

‘Peacey was furious. It was his presentation that was, ah...interrupted. He’s set up an internal inquiry.’

‘Oh God.’

The Hutch sighed. ‘But I daresay it’ll blow over. Your friend didn’t take anything or do any damage, after all.’

‘Might ‘ave stripped a bit of the paper off the walls,’ added Brown.

‘So what will happen to me now?’

‘Nothing.’

Fellowes looked up. The Hutch was actually grinning.

‘But, I set up the interview with Ogilvie.’

‘Well, Ogilvie is denying all knowledge of this intruder. As are all the other department heads.’

‘So, what about Gerri, the receptionist?’

‘She’s saying that it must have been some maniac off the street who found his way in and told Peacey in no uncertain terms what he thought of his presentation. By the way, she has a coat down there with your name in it. I should go and pick it up, sharpish, if I were you, Fellowes.’

‘What about you, Mr Hutchinson? Will you say anything?’

‘Me?’ the Hutch looked puzzled. ‘Why should I? I thought it was fairly accurate and concise comment on Peacey’s presentation, all things considered. Besides, I’m quite pleased with the trades you pulled off today. You might not be a complete waste of skin after all.’

‘And what about my friend?’

‘Well, he’s hardly likely to be in line for a partnership here, any time soon.’

‘He needs a job.’

‘Don’t push it, Fellowes.’

‘Oh come on, Hutch, you’re big mates with that bloke from Wedd’s, you could fix ‘im up. I reckon he deserves it,’ interceded Brown.

‘I’m not inflicting a loose cannon like that on the Market - farting his way round the Hexagons, I’d lose my button. God only knows what he’d be capable of. It’s quite frightening enough having Fellowes out there on the floor.’

Fellowes could see that Hutch’s thin veneer of disapproval was crumbling: ‘Perhaps not in the Market, something else then.’

The Hutch was silent for the moment, he carefully selected a black wine gum and popped it into his mouth. Finally he put on his half moon spectacles, opened his drawer and retrieved a printed news-sheet. ‘Lloyds.... Lloyds. ...Cummings and Co...no. Ah yes, here we are, Perlmann. Shipbroker, in Whitecross Street who might be looking for an assistant. I know the man vaguely, used to be a player on The Baltic at one time. Now...?’ The Hutch made a face. ‘As far as I know it’s not much of a business, in fact, it’s bloody awful, but then again, your friend can’t do much damage to it. I’ll give him a tinkle. But that’s all, Fellowes.’ He picked up his handset and flipped one of the many outside line switches on the bank before him.

In truth, Cole had been surprised by Fellowes’ equanimity when he’d arrived home that evening. He’ been expecting a major bollocking and if there had been anywhere else for him to lay his head he’d have happily slunk away, but Fellowes had returned to flat in a reasonably cheerful frame of mind, all things considered. Admittedly, he’d banned the two Bristolians for the night and not unreasonably, insisted that as soon as Cole was in funds he dry-clean the Prince of Wales chequered trousers, but other than that, he’d seemed quite philosophical about the disaster.

To his further astonishment, he found that Fellowes had even managed to fix up another interview for him in the City. But then Cole had long since given up trying to fathom his friend's motives and the source of his forbearance.

It was enough that he wanted to help.

T'ar'iq extinguished his eighth cigarette, leaned over and wound down the passenger window. He had a map in his lap and appeared to be lost, so the two secretaries walking past on their way to lunch were happy to offer their help. T'ar'iq smiled politely. 'Good afternoon ladies. I am wondering if you see this before?' He briskly and expertly flicked his tongue in and out like a Cobra on heat.

His right ear was still ringing with the slap some five minutes afterwards when David Perlmann emerged from his tatty office doorway. T'ar'iq checked his watch: twelve-thirty, precisely. The man he had come to destroy was nothing if not punctual. T'ar'iq observed him crossing the road, then revved the motor a few times, allowing the lethal horsepower to champ at the bit a bit. He forced himself to kill the engine. Today was not the day for killing a human being, just the final reconnaissance. He wouldn't want such a punctual individual to meet his maker early, that would be wrong somehow.

Cole waited for a break in the lunchtime traffic, then crossed the Whitecross road. There was a chill wind coming up off the Thames and he was coatless, but he didn't care. He looked good; respectably and correctly dressed in matching jacket and trousers this time, and he was early. He checked the discreet bronze nameplate affixed to the wall. "Perlmann & partners, Shipbrokers - 1st Floor". It was the right place, but hardly an imposing venue. He took the rickety stairs two-at-a-time and found himself in a squalid reception reeking of old cigar smoke. The diseased, threadbare carpet was partially obscured by bulging cardboard files and arcane reference books. Like an island in the sea of chaotic stationary, there was a laminated desk occupied by a spotty young receptionist with poisonous punky blue hair and a plastic polka dot dress, squealing into a phone. She stopped when she saw Cole and guiltily put a hand over the mouthpiece. 'What?' she inquired aggressively. 'Jonathan Cole?'

The girl rolled her eyes, 'Do I look like a Jonathan anything? You've got the wrong floor. Now, piss off, I'm on the phone.' She resumed her breathless conversation, 'sorry about that...no, he said that to her? Really? Well she should tell him to shove it right up his knob, the wanker...'

She looked up to find Cole still standing there. 'Look,' she explained in exasperation, 'this is Perlmann's. We're not Jonathan Coal and there's nobody here called Coal, so I can't help you, can I?'

'No, I'm Cole.'

The girl took a deep breath. 'Well, aren't you lucky? What do you want, a medal?'

'I've got an interview at one, with Mr Perlmann.'

The girl released the hand covering the mouthpiece and spoke quickly: 'Gotta go... work, work, work, never bloody stops.' She replaced the receiver, tutting and turned her grumpy gaze on Cole. 'He's not here,' she snapped.

‘No, I’m early. I think it’s only twenty-to.’

‘Is it?’ she screeched, confirming the fact by her own watch. ‘I’m ten minutes into me lunch break. I’m not slaving my guts out for three quid, fifty an hour. If you want to hang around for Perlmann, you can wait in ‘is office. E’s gone for ‘is beagles.’ She jerked a thumb at the door behind her. With that, she grabbed her bright red A-line coat and was gone.

Cole gingerly opened the door to Perlmann’s office. If anything, it was even more squalid than the reception area; paperwork littered the floor. In places it might only have been the untidy columns of cardboard files supporting the sagging, yellow ceiling. Somewhat incongruously though, the desk was expensive-looking and expansive; matt-black wood surface and chrome-framed. Likewise, the two facing seats were black leather and chrome and obviously pricey. Cole guessed the furniture was all that remained of a once prosperous business now ignominiously relegated to these cheap and shabby accommodations. There was even a Barcelona chair in the far corner. It only served to underline the contrast between what had once been, and what was now.

Scattered across the desk was an assortment of clues as to the occupant’s personality and occupation: a scale model of Nelson’s “Victory” which would have been beautiful but for the fact that the meticulous cotton rigging had broken and one or two of the spars had snapped, as though the ship had recently taken a chain-shot broadside or two; an old lamp decorated with Eighteenth-Century ships-of-the-line; a miniature ship’s cannon; grease stained blotter; half-chewed red Bic biro, and finally, a distinctly un-maritime and overflowing ashtray which judging from the logo, must have been pilfered from the Braganza Restaurant, Soho.

Cole sat at the desk and fiddled with the model while he waited. He made a half-hearted attempt to repair one or two of the spars but they were too far gone, so he turned his attention to the

little cannon. There was a small lever on one side which he pushed forward as far as it would go. Nothing happened. He removed the tompion. Again, nothing. Then he noticed a square button at the base. He depressed it and promptly released a huge gout of vertical flame from the touchhole, nearly taking off his eyebrows and singeing the lampshade. Damn, not a good start. He was no antiques expert but the lampshade was very old and doubtless valuable, and now there was a brown scorch mark up one side, all but obliterating one of the old ships. Cole licked his finger and gave the blackened area a quick rub. The brittle parchment-like material instantly crumbled, resulting in a hole the size of a ten-pence piece.

Cole took stock of his situation. There was no reason to panic. He was early, well dressed and he had so far, managed to avoid fouling the room. All he'd done was mutilate a crappy old lampshade. If the damage could be temporarily concealed, then no doubt the sloppy, stropic secretary would eventually be blamed. Serve her fucking right too.

He tried to twist the lamp around but there was no slack in the cord. He gave it a good tug and with a sudden jerk, it came loose. He quickly shifted the lamp and turned it so that the blackened hole now faced the wall. He resolved not to fiddle with anything else, folding his arms emphatically.

A few moments later a bald man with a prominent gut bounded into the room nursing a greasy brown bag and a steaming polystyrene cup. 'Oh, hello,' he said cheerfully.

Cole jumped to his feet and offered his hand. 'You must be Mr Perlmann...your secretary let me in. Jonathan Cole.'

Perlmann grinned at the formality. He clumsily transferred the coffee and brown bag into one fist and pumped Cole's outstretched hand with the other. 'Ah yes, good. Excellent. Call me Daniel; I

like to keep things informal round here. I suppose she's already gone to lunch. Sit down, sit down, Jonathan.'

'She left in a bit of a hurry.'

'That's Penny. She's just a temp and about as useful as tits on bull.' Perlmann sat at his desk and took out a couple of bagels from the paper bag. 'You don't mind do you? Have you eaten?'

'No, I'm fine. Stomach's a bit tender today.' Cole observed with some distaste the dill pickle and pastrami filling oozing onto the pink blotter forming dark, shapeless, greasy stains.

'Your loss, the Goldy-Lox makes the best bagels and coffee outside of New York. I shouldn't really – dickey heart, but I can't resist. Enjoy life while it lasts, I always say... actually I don't *always* say that. That would make me a complete tit and a bore if that's all I had to say, don't you think?' Perlmann bit into his bagel squeezing a dollop of the artery petrifying mayonnaise onto his chin. 'But I do say it from time to time and what's more, I believe it. I like a bit of fun, a bit of laugh but that one...' Perlmann jerked his head in the direction of the door, '...face like a guppy chewing a lemon, most of the time. I can't bear down-Doris's and moaning-Minnies. Do you like a joke Jonathan? You look like you appreciate a joke.'

'I do.'

Perlmann selected his second bagel and took a bite and without missing a beat, said: 'All right, this bloke walks into a pet shop and he says: "I'd like to buy a wasp please".' The shipbroker adopted a weird, nasal drone as he delivered the dialogue. 'The shopkeeper says, "Sorry sir, we don't sell wasps. Too difficult to train." The customer looks really puzzled and says: "but hang on, I see you've got one in the window."' Perlmann guffawed at his own punchline, spattering himself with flecks of pickle.

Cole grinned – a fixed, plastic expression in which his eyes failed to fully participate.

Perlmann started slightly, face flushing. ‘Bloody hell, that’s a scary look you’ve got there, Jonathan. Penny Mark-Two. Hire you and I can finally say that I’ve got two Penny’s to rub together.’ Perlmann raised his eyebrows, awaiting Cole’s response to his latest sally. Cole lacked the performance skills to appear even vaguely amused at the weak pun and so resumed his usual, slightly brooding, saturnine expression.

‘Phew, that’s better, son. You gave me a bit of scare with that psycho smile. For a second there, I thought you were about to do me a mischief.’ The shipbroker brushed himself down. ‘Well, let’s to business. I’ll just grab a pad.’ Perlmann reached across his desk to the drawer and with a muffled gasp flipped backwards in his chair, as though wrenched by an invisible string.

Cole sat there for a moment or two wondering whether this was some new form of bizarre test.

Perlmann had completely tipped over in his black leather seat; all he could see of the man were the quivering soles of his scuffed brown shoes sticking up over the edge of his desk. ‘Mr Perlmann, are you OK?’

Cole rose hesitantly, waiting for his prospective employer to leap back to his feet reveling in his latest gag, but he did no such thing. Perlmann remained in the overturned chair, body spasming slightly. Cole gingerly crouched over him. He put a fingertip to the side of the man’s neck and checked his watch, as he’d seen the paramedics do on the TV, without the faintest idea of how to detect a pulse. The man did seem dead though and his watch now indicated twenty-five past one. The wretched Penny would be back from her lunch hour any moment. If Perlmann was still alive there wasn’t much he could do for him given his sketchy knowledge of trauma medicine, and if the man was dead then there wasn’t much point hanging around any longer since a job was probably out of the question.

Cole decided to watch from a safer distance and see how things turned out.

From his Mondeo, T'ar'iq observed the slight, olive-complexioned young man in the flamboyantly chequered suit and yellow silk tie emerge swiftly from the office doorway and cross the road. He entered the Goldy-Lox deli, ordered a coffee and settled himself in a window seat. T'ar'iq made a note of the time and the circumstances in his diary. Nasir would certainly be impressed with his diligence; after all, this newcomer was a wrinkle that even the omniscient Nasir had failed to anticipate. Was he a client? Did he work there? Could he be a witness? And what if he was to accompany the target to the deli tomorrow? What then? At least it demonstrated that Nasir didn't have all the answers. Perhaps T'ar'iq should take care of the interloper: follow him and garrote him, or knock him out, roll him up in a carpet, bundle him into the boot of his car and take him back to his hotel in Paddington, bound and gagged, where he would slowly flense flesh from sinews with a butter knife- just to be on the safe side.

T'ar'iq was not so lost in his homicidal fantasies to have been unaware of the return of the sour-faced, red-coated secretary. He duly noted this event as she entered the open doorway and began to climb the stairs.

He also noted that precisely two minutes and twenty-five seconds later the sash window on the first floor was flung upwards and a spiky purple head appeared, screaming, what the English called, appropriately, blue murder.

The ambulance arrived some seven and a half minutes later accompanied by a trio of Police cars, one of them an unmarked cherry-red Sierra. T'ar'iq knew enough not to want to draw attention to himself when police of any nation were involved so he moved off and cruised slowly

away watching the whole time from his rear view mirror. There was a vacant parking space thirty yards further down the road, so he pulled in, switched off and got out, pretending to study his A-Z of London over the roof of the car. To T'ar'iq's utter dismay, a limp body wrapped in a white sheet was stretchered down the stairs and whisked away in the ambulance.

The police remained in a huddled conference on the pavement. A young man in a Harris-tweed jacket and beige slacks seemed to be in charge.

T'ar'iq got out of the Mondeo and walked slowly back up the pavement towards the group, ears twitching for any tidbits of information. The man in the tweed jacket seemed to be remonstrating with the uniformed officers: 'It's a homicide, so that makes it my jurisdiction.'

The uniformed officer, Sergeant Dunbar of The City of Westminster Division, bristled and held up four fingers which he retracted as he made each of his points: 'First, they're still trying to resuscitate him, so he might not actually be dead. Next, even if he is dead, there is nothing to indicate foul play. My lads have managed to ascertain that there's an electrical cord from an old lamp that's got itself snagged under the leg of his desk. It's so ancient that the insulating plastic's gone all brittle; it's worn away and exposed the bare wires. Basically, the poor sod got a bloody great electric shock off the metal frame of his own office desk. Heart stopped. Case closed... And finally, we all know you're Reilly's Golden Boy, but haven't you got anything better to do at the Yard, Miller, than to sit around listening to the emergency-net and come barging in on my call-outs?' Having made these three shrewd and insightful objections Dunbar was chagrined to find himself left with a fourth redundant finger - his pinkie - pointing futilely upwards. He quickly retracted it before anyone noticed.

Miller was indeed one of Assistant Commissioner Reilly's favorites. He'd emerged as a media hero from the so-called Texaco Service Station Siege some years earlier, despite not even being present at the final act. The TV and papers had lionised him for his courage, but in truth after being shot at by Swank, Miller had only managed to stagger a few hundred yards or so up the Fulham Palace road. He'd given up the pursuit at the King's Head pub where he'd dosed himself with double-whiskies until last orders, at which point he was ejected for throwing up on the carpet.

None of this mattered to Assistant Commissioner Reilly, who'd hyped the heroics of his young constable to the media whilst playing down his own mishandling of the crisis. After all this time, the case had never been solved - not even close - especially since half the Heavy Firms in Britain were taking credit for it.

As a reward, Miller, albeit callow and inexperienced, had been offered his pick of the Met plums: he'd chosen O.C.G.; been duly crash-coursed through the training programme and promoted to Detective Sergeant at Scotland Yard. At the Yard, none of his superiors trusted him to catch a cold. So Dunbar was absolutely correct in his assumption - Miller really had nothing better to do other than to listen in to the emergency traffic from the local Divisions before rushing to the scene in the hope of a high-profile homicide case.

Miller stroked his sparse chin thoughtfully. 'Who is to say that an ingenious assassin did not rig the desk to deliver a lethal electric shock to the victim? Sergeant Dunbar, in my experience, the perpetrator or "perp", rarely makes a murder look like a murder. He gives it the appearance of an accident. You uniforms shouldn't be expected to know that of course. But a thing that looks one way at face value may be an entirely... er... 'nother thing. If all murderers made their murders look like murder, what would be the point of me?'

Good fucking question, thought Sergeant Dunbar. At which point a young Arabic looking gentleman approached, waving an A-Z.

‘Good day, yes. I am ecstatic. If the young lady will demonstrate me a Post office?’

‘Fuck off,’ growled the grouchy Dunbar.

T’ar’iq backed away, but not so far that he couldn’t hear what was happening.

‘He was murdered. Oh, my God,’ shrieked the blue-haired secretary as she was led down the office stairs on the arm of a uniformed constable.

‘Ah ha.’ Miller treated Dunbar to a triumphant sneer as he moved across to intercept the hysterical girl.

‘What makes you think so, my love?’

Penny sniffed and gulped. ‘There was a strange bloke here, young guy, a weirdo ...before I went to lunch... he was waiting for Mr Perlmann.’

‘Did he say anything?’

‘No. Not much. I was on the phone.’ She rolled her eyes and adopted a long-suffering expression.

‘Work...never stops.’

Miller looked sympathetic. ‘Whatever information you can give us could be useful. It may mean nothing to you, it may seem inconsequential, but to the trained mind it may be the signpost that leads to the next signpost, and so on, which ultimately enables us to assemble the complex pieces and with a great deal of effort, experience, technology or what you might refer to as crime fighting wizardry, and a little dab of luck, will allow us to finally identify the culprit.’

‘Just his name.’

‘Pen!’ screamed Miller, ‘someone get me a pen...or a pencil.’

T'ar'iq stood by, ignored by the police as they waited for the secretary to name the attacker.

The girl looked crestfallen as she racked her brains: 'Er...well, he did tell me.'

'Yes.' Miller put a proprietorial arm around her.

'No, it's gone. I told you, I was on the phone. I've got so many things to think about.'

'Think.'

'I'm thinking.'

'Think harder.'

'I'm thinking.'

Dunbar smiled and raised his eyebrows. He'd seen the drama kings and queens before; the hysterics, the timewasters - he'd seen it all before. It just wasn't going to happen. He keyed in his radio to check with the hospital.

'Jonathan, I'm sure it was Jonathan...Jonathan Pole. No, that's not it. Pole. Rhymes with Pole though.'

'Hole?'

'Hole...?'

'Yes?'

'No. I think I'd have remembered if it was Hole.'

'Foal?'

'No, but he did look a bit like a foal though - an evil foal. Smallish, long eyelashes and big black/brown eyes.'

Miller scribbled the description down in a notebook with the stub of his borrowed pencil.

'Appearance: "like an evil foal." Go on.' He put an encouraging arm round her once again. 'Just close your eyes and say what's in your head. Anything you like. Feel free.'

‘Ok, can you get your arm off me? You’ve got quite bad B.O. ’

Dunbar snorted.

‘Bowl?’

The girl rolled her eyes. Dunbar snorted again.

Penny could feel the scepticism rolling off the uniformed copper; it was only the stinky, plain-clothes one who seemed to have any faith in her. She dredged her memory. If only she hadn’t had those five pints at lunch. Suddenly she had an epiphany: ‘Mole. Something Mole. I think that was it.’

Dunbar cut off his radio transmission with an amused expression. ‘Mole, miss?’

Miller gave him a warning glance. ‘My investigation takes precedence here Dunbar. The girl is talking about an audacious and clever killer, who has styled himself “The Mole”. Please try not to interfere.’ Miller was quivering like a Red Setter. He could smell the front page again and like his mentor, having once made the front page he wouldn’t quit until he’d once again sniffed the glorious aroma of printer’s ink, hot-off-the-press. It was his drug of choice and he was addicted. A killer like this was just tailor-made for great headlines: MOLE BURIES VICTIM IN GARDEN, followed by MOLE GOES UNDERGROUND – MILLER UNEARTHES MOLE.

‘No. Not “The Mole”, but something like that.’

For a moment Miller was crestfallen.

‘Roll?’

‘Nah.’

‘Dole?’

‘No.’

‘Goal?’

‘Wait, oh...yes, it could have been.’

Miller’s eyes widened in excited comprehension: ‘The Goal? Oh my God, that’s even better.’

‘Goal. Yeah I think that’s it. I think he told me his name was Goal. And then I said: “what do you want, a medal?”’

Miller was ecstatic. Unbelievable; he’d been bored out of his mind all morning, earwigging the emergency channel when he’d heard a report of a suspected heart attack followed by confused and hysterical reports of foul play. But his nose, his unerring nose for the front page had led him here to take up the cudgels against London’s latest and scariest killer: The Goal. What a name! What an opportunity! The sub-editors would have a field day: GOAL SCORES AGAIN and of course, GOAL BLOCKED BY MILLER, PENALTY –LIFE.

The papers would dub him “THE KEEPER”. If he didn’t make the youngest Police Commissioner and Grand Master of his own lodge after this, well, there was no justice.

‘Right,’ shouted Miller, ‘I want a door-to-door; every house and office questioned and the registration number of every car within a mile radius. I want the entire area sealed off as far as Golden Lane. This is now officially a murder investigation. Led by me.’

Oh bloody, bloody, bloody hell, thought Dunbar along with every uniformed officer within earshot.

T’ar’iq had heard enough. There’d been some serious bickering amongst the policemen, but the young one in the civilian clothing seemed to have won out over the uniforms. That was no surprise - in many Middle Eastern countries the ones in civilian clothes always had the last word because they were the Secret Police with direct connections to power. He hadn’t realized that that was also the case here in Britain.

He crossed the road and trembling with excitement, entered the Goldy-Lox Deli where he put a ten-pence piece into the phone box on the wall and dialed the number of Nasir's London hotel to make a full report.

'You are The Ghoul?' T'ar'iq had been quick to recognise a word of Arabic origin and was tremendously excited by its implications: in Eastern mythology a Ghoul was a spirit that preyed on corpses. It was a terrific name for an assassin and T'ar'iq wished he'd thought of it first.

Cole peered up over the stale rim of his coffee mug. 'Go away please. I don't have any money.'

'You are The Ghoul?'

'Fuck off.'

T'ar'iq waved an admonishing finger at him. 'Tsk, tsk, you... the Mr Perlmann die quick, so clever.'

Cole almost vomited. 'Who are you?' The generously mustachioed individual seated opposite him could barely speak English, so he couldn't very well be a copper. Or could he? There was talk of introducing more ethnic groups into the force but surely they couldn't be this desperate. 'How do you know about Mr Perlmann. Is he ...is he dead?' he whispered.

'Tsk, tsk.' T'ar'iq waved an admonishing finger but was content to sit and gaze at the young man, a look of admiration, verging on hero-worship in his eyes. Cole wriggled uncomfortably and considered running but the police were still huddled around the secretary on the pavement opposite. If he walked out now she'd certainly recognise him. The cops might hold him responsible in some way. For the time being he was trapped, stuck in The Goldy-Lox Deli with this mustachioed lunatic.

Two uncomfortably silent cups of coffee later the bell over the door jangled and another Arab, older and more distinguished looking, entered the Deli. T'ar'iq leapt to his feet and led the man to Cole's table. With some alarm, Cole recognised Nasir - the Monkey Man. Nasir raised his own eyebrows in mild surprise before extending a beautifully manicured hand across the table. Cole shook it nervously.

'Ah, I never forget a face, or a name... Mr Cole. What a happy coincidence. You must tell me what brings you here at this time. But forgive me, I must first speak with my associate before we two old friends become reacquainted after all these years.'

Nasir turned away. The Arabs embarked on a long, excitable conversation in their own language, the names, Perlmann, Goal and Karim, sprinkled liberally throughout. From time to time T'ar'iq gazed over at Cole with ever increasing awe.

T'ar'iq had quickly realised that he'd been mistaken about the young man's soubriquet. The handsome young assassin in the snazzy chequered suit was not the Ghoul after all, but Kohl. And looking at the young man it was easy to see why, his huge dark eyes and long lashes had quite clearly been accentuated by the famous jet-black Middle Eastern eyeliner. What a distinctive trademark for a killer! In addition, the young man had made a successful hit on a certain Karim some years previously, with a mallet to the testicles of all things. Resourceful, brave, creative and flamboyant, yet not averse to resorting to the most appallingly brutal methods when required – all the attributes T'ar'iq admired in a fellow professional, what's more, the young man couldn't be any older than nineteen now. Truly a prodigy, this Kohl.

Conversation over, Nasir returned his attention to Cole: ‘Mr Cole, it seems we have another mutual acquaintance. Or perhaps more precisely, we did have. I speak of poor Mr Daniel Perlmann.’

Cole opened his mouth to object. But Nasir raised a placating hand and chuckled. ‘I must first apologise for my excitable young associate; he seems to have entered the realms of fantasy and believes you to be some kind of assassin. Absurd, no?’

Cole glared at T’ar’iq. ‘Yes of course bloody absurd,’ he snapped a touch too quickly, then shook his head as though flinging off the unpleasant memories of the past few hours. ‘Look, it’s been a strange day...a strange week, in fact.’

Nasir studied him thoughtfully. ‘Tell me, what brings you to London and in particular to the offices of poor Mr Perlmann, who is, or was, a close associate and friend of mine?’

Cole recounted the events of the past few weeks to sympathetic and understanding nods of encouragement from Nasir. T’ar’iq on the other hand, continued to stare at him across the table like a lovesick teenager.

Cole broke off his narrative and nodded irritably at T’ar’iq. ‘Does he have to stare at me like that? It’s very off-putting.’ Nasir emitted a brusque stream of instructions in Arabic; T’ar’iq immediately jumped to his feet and went to order more coffees.

‘...and so then he just sort of keeled over backwards.’

‘I see, most unfortunate.’ Nasir stroked his moustache. ‘My friend Mr Perlmann has not in recent years enjoyed the best of health; his heart has not been strong. But it is God’s will.’ Nasir shrugged.

‘So what will you do now, my young friend?’

‘I really have no idea.’

‘I feel that perhaps destiny has thrown us together once again. And who am I to cross swords with such a powerful force? You seek employment, I myself, have need of an able assistant. There will, I’m afraid, be some travel involved, first class of course and the very best of hotels, but most inconvenient nevertheless. Would this put you off? Yes, but of course it would. It is a poor offer compared to what might have been.’ Nasir gestured towards the dismal shipbroker offices across the road and sighed.

Get in, thought Cole. What a result! He hugged himself under the table but his face remained impassive. ‘No, I think I might be able to cope with all that, provided I was well enough compensated.’

Nasir pretended to be pleasantly surprised. ‘And are you familiar with Nigeria at all? I have certain crucial business dealings in that country.’

‘I’m well acquainted with the Tolifaris,’ lied Cole smoothly. ‘They are a royal family, although in Africa that doesn’t carry quite the same weight as it does elsewhere. They were at one time very powerful but made the mistake of siding with Ojukwu and the Separatists and even now are still at odds with the government. Nevertheless, they retain enormous influence in certain quarters, particularly in the Southeast of the country. They are the kind of people who can...ah... get things done.’

Nasir fought hard to control his emotions. Destiny was indeed a strange and unfathomable force. He’d marked the young man down as a glib but plausible Ox-Shitter, to be used for one simple courier job and then disposed of, but amazingly, he did seem to know what he was talking about. The Tolifari clan had been repressed and driven underground by successive regimes but still retained a powerful network of supporters. These days, they were primarily involved in smuggling

which made them potentially extremely useful to Nasir. There were hidden depths here. It might not be so wise to underestimate this one, young and cocky though he might be.

T'ar'iq rejoined them with another three cups of strong, overly sweet coffee and resumed his hero-worship. His boss appeared to be on the point of recruiting the young man too. What a break – a chance to work with and learn at the feet of the master. And the best news of all was that the soubriquet, “Ghoul”, hadn't already been taken. He must have it for himself, as a *nomme de guerre* as it were; he would have cards printed up to leave behind on his victims. Gold embossed on black. A nice touch, he felt. And as a sign of devotion to his mentor, he too would wear eyeliner. The Ghoul in Kohl. Yes.

Nasir peeled off a sheaf of notes and handed them to Cole. ‘If my poor offer is agreeable to you then you must accept this, as a token of my good faith.’ Cole accepted the cash and shoved it into his jacket pocket. He didn't bother to count, sensing from its bulk and weight that it was a great deal of money. ‘So when do I start and where do I work?’ ‘You have already begun.’ Nasir permitted himself a wry smile. ‘For the moment, you may stay in London, or as you wish, and I will speak with you by telephone when I have need of you.’ Cole quickly jotted down the telephone number of Fellowes' flat onto a napkin and passed it across to his new employer. ‘From time to time, you will be required at the Centre in Waughstone, though I doubt you will account that such a hardship.’ Nasir recalled the gyrating girl in white and stared piercingly into Cole's eyes as though reading his thoughts regarding the lovely Laura.

Cole blinked rapidly.

Nasir put an elegant hand to his breast, knowing that he'd hit the bull's-eye. ‘Ah yes, when you come to know us better, you will learn that we Arabs have long memories and are very insightful when it comes to matters of the heart.’

‘Oy, Fell, fancy a bevy?’

Fellowes was at his desk in the dealing room on the third floor of the Cazelet’s building. It was past six but he was still trying to muddle his way back through that annoyingly persistent Albion Trust discrepancy. He checked his watch, ‘I’m supposed to be meeting my friend Cole...five minutes ago actually. The plan is to either celebrate his new job with some dodgy half-broke shipbroker or to drown our sorrows. Either way I expect I’ll be paying, so a couple of shandies will almost certainly be the order of the day. But if the prospect isn’t too unappealing, I think we could probably bear your company for the evening.’

Brown sucked his teeth and nodded. ‘I’ll take that as a yes, then.’

Cole depressed the recessed black button in the beige leather arm of the car door. The tinted electric window slowly descended as the two City-types approached.

‘Oh no.’ Fellowes compressed his temples between thumb and forefinger. ‘He got the job and now he’s just blown six month’s salary.’ Brown opened the rear door and sniffed the air in the rear compartment warily. ‘Just checking,’ he explained, ‘’cos I was at your last performance.’

Fellowes climbed inside and perched on the edge of the tan-calfskin backseat looking anything but comfortable while Cole poured them each a brandy from the decanter from the small but well-stocked cabinet. ‘Keep it coming,’ enthused Brown.

Fellowes was suspicious and unamused: ‘Not one week ago, I find you fifty yards from here in a shit-coloured horse-blanket begging ten-pence pieces from Peacey and now here you are in your own limo. What’s going on?’

‘It’s only hired.’ Cole languidly sipped his outsized snifter of Brandy.

‘Of course it’s only hired, but the price of these things per hour is more than I make in a week. And where the hell’s my suit?’ Fellowes had only just registered the brand new double-breasted blue pinstripe adorning Cole’s body along with a salmon-pink silk tie.

‘Back at the flat, but I’ll be taking it to the dry cleaner’s first thing tomorrow. I promise.’

Brown sloshed himself another grotesque brandy from the decanter. ‘Leave ‘im alone mate, he’s doing well for ‘imself. What’s your problem?’

‘He hasn’t done anything yet. That’s the whole point. You just can’t chuck this kind of money about before you’ve even earned it.’

By way of answer his friend reached into his inside breast pocket and retrieved a wad of Nasir’s ten-pound notes, which he used to fan his face in an exaggeratedly dignified manner.

‘No. I don’t believe that some down-at-heel, bankrupt ship-broker gave you that as a starting salary.’

Cole looked irritated. ‘Oh that’s nice; you line me up for a job with some shit-broker. That’s all you think I’m good for? Well, I found my own job thank you very much.’

‘You killed him didn’t you, and then you robbed him?’

Cole started. Fellowes was only half-joking and glared at his friend from across the plush leather seat.

‘Calm down lads,’ said Brown, sitting between them.

The smoked glass panel separating the driver from the passengers slid down on its silent electronic servos and the smartly uniformed chauffeur interjected: ‘Listen lads, I don’t mind if you piss about here all night, it makes no difference to me, I still get paid, but I am supposed to be your driver. Do you want to go somewhere or what?’

Brown turned to Cole. 'Is that big wad of cash spoiling the cut of your suit? 'Cos from where I'm sitting, it looks like it is.'

Cole grinned.

'Right, I know where you can drop a bundle and still enjoy it.' He turned to the driver. 'Spooky Lady, mate, and don't spare the horses.' The driver didn't require an address.

The lights from the disco floor pumped on and off in a multicolored frenzy; bass notes pulsed through the mass of bodies in a violent sonic massage. They were in the wilds of Essex, inside a huge barn of a building catering to every vice – if the money was right the punter had but to name it. The place was covered mirrors and jam-packed with hard-looking men in soft suits and Barbara Windsor look-alikes in Leopard print dresses with too much lipstick.

Over the sea of tables surrounding the dance floor, Fellowes could distinguish Brown's brown bowl of a head at one of the green baize Blackjack stations; relying on his cherubic face and mad monk hair-do to sucker the dealer. Each time he laid down his two kings or five-card run to beat the bank he looked every bit as bewildered as a pensioner winning the Pools and then roared with excited laughter, pretending not to understand how he'd done it. He seemed such a tyro that the other players were even giving him advice and helping him to scoop up his winning chips. Only Fellowes knew that the brain beneath that retard haircut was as finely tuned as a thousand Commodore 514's and was presently counting cards.

At another station, Cole was playing the antithesis of Brown's game. He inspected his cards with the deadpan expression of a pro but was as inept at the game as Brown was expert. He blew every decent hand, hitting on 19 and sticking on 11's. Even the House dealer in his white shirt and

red silk waistcoat couldn't disguise a superior smirk in the face of the young man's hare-brained floundering.

Fellowes couldn't bear to watch. He finished off the gin and tonic he'd been nursing all evening and was about to leave when he noticed that a stunning blonde in uniform white shirt, scarlet silk bowtie and waistcoat had just relieved Cole's dealer. Very bad news. If Cole had been trying to hard to impress before, now he'd be beyond reason - whoever managed this place was no fool. True to form, Cole began to play the insouciant high-roller and doubled his stakes. Fellowes shook his head sadly and reached for his coat, but found his wrist instantly clamped in an iron grip. 'I know you, son.'

Fellowes examined the iron-grey cropped hair; scarred face, high cheekbones and granite chin. This Dickensian face didn't belong to anyone he knew, and more particularly, anyone he wanted to know. The man was dressed in a tight white T-shirt and jeans and even though he must have been in his late forties or early fifties he was still powerfully built.

'Yes, of course,' mumbled Fellowes, humouring him, 'you're looking very...well...'
The man squeezed his wrist harder. 'You don't recognize me, do you, son?'
'Magwich...?'
'I know you.'
'If it's about the rent...'

The man smiled, like a flaw splitting across a block of marble. 'I know you.' The man nodded then chuckled a few times as if remembering something. Fellowes' slim wrist was painful now; his wafer thin gold watch was beginning to dig into flesh.

'Very good, son. I like the way you handle yourself. My boy always said you handled yourself well. Even when you was piss-scared.'

Fellowes exhaled, conscious of the fact that he hadn't taken a breath for at least half a minute.

'Splendid, excellent. Now that we've got that cleared up, if you'll just let me have my wrist back I'll go and...well, handle myself into a taxi.'

'Planning on driving are you?' The man's eyes crinkled in amusement. He seemed friendly enough at present but clearly possessed the potential for inflicting great physical damage.

'Well, usually I prefer the cabbie to deal with that side of things. I find it often works better that way.'

Fellowes wagged fingers, reminding his captor that his hand was still clamped in the man's iron grip. The man released him but stepped closer, looming over him.

'I know you.'

Fellowes took a step back and nursed his compressed wrist. It occurred to him that his assailant might have a screw loose. 'Ah yes... we may have already had this conversation a few moments ago.'

'I know you...'

'Absolutely. No question...uh... cheerio then.'

'I seen you, at Slatters.'

Fellowes was momentarily taken aback to hear the name of his old school.

The man grinned broadly.

'My boy pointed you out once when I come to pick him up. Never forget a face, son. I want to thank you for the solid you done for my boy.'

Fellowes dredged his memory. He couldn't place the man. Nor could he imagine what "doing a solid" entailed. He hoped it wasn't anything disgusting.

‘My boy, he’s got a place at Luffbra and a ruddy great Slazenger sponsorship. They reckon he’ll make Wimbledon this year. And a good bit of that is thanks to you. He told me all about the taxi ride you gave ‘im. Nearly kakked meself laughing.’

The penny dropped: ‘Uh...David...David Tatham’s father.’

‘Stanley Oswald Tatham.’ The man shook Fellowes’ hand in knuckle compressing grip, then reached into his suit pocket for a business card. He stared into Fellowes’ eyes in deadly earnest.

‘Listen to me. I owe you, son. I’m serious, if you’re ever in any kind of trouble or need anything...anything at all ... ‘cept money, of course. Call me. Any time.’ The man put an outsized arm around him. ‘Come on, I’ll get you a cab. Least I can do.’

Cole was on a winning streak. The cards were suddenly going his way and the stunning blonde dealer seemed to be giving him the eye. He was holding five cards: two twos, a three, a four and a five. He tapped the baize with his left knuckle. ‘Hit me,’ he ordered. The players tittered; even the pretty blonde dealer smiled. ‘You’ve already beaten the bank, sir. It’s a five-card-run you’re holding.’

‘Oh,’ said Cole, ‘that’s good is it?’

‘Unbeatable.’ Her cornflower blue eyes twinkled at him in amusement.

‘Oh, right, well...’ Cole looked sheepish as he dropped his cards and raked in the huge pile of chips.

‘Electrolux wants to see the two of you, now.’ A monument of a man with one eye addressed them. The girl obediently began to gather up card dispensers and chip trays as the other players nervously melted away.

‘Excuse me,’ objected Cole.

‘Why what have you done?’ The rumbling voice sounded as though it had just emerged from a couple of miles beneath the earth’s crust.

‘I was playing cards here, if you don’t mind. And winning...’

The heavy turned his back on them and began to force a passage through the crowds. Before Cole could say anything else, the young girl raised a hand to hush him. With a flick of her wrist and from out of nowhere, a single playing card appeared between her impossibly dexterous fingers: The Joker. There was a phone number scribbled across it. Cole took it with a grin and began to put on his jacket. ‘Well, I’m done here. You can tell Electrolux, thanks, but no thanks, maybe another time.’

The man stopped dead in tracks and turned slowly.

‘Mr Luxton, to you, sonny. And I wouldn’t keep him waiting.’

Cole had had a few drinks, he’d hit a lucky streak and now this “Electrolux” had spoiled his fun.

‘Tell Electrolux to go fuck his horrible luck.’

Before he knew it, the monster was in his face. Cole threw a punch but the alcohol had made him slow and the man was pretty nippy for a geological feature. He expertly gut-punched Cole knocking the wind and resistance out of him. The one-eyed man grabbed him by the lapels of his coat and half-dragged, half-carried him across the packed club and up a spiral metal stairway. The crowds parted like the red sea; no one batted an eyelid.

Cole was thrust into an office with a carpet in the same shade of scarlet as the dealer’s uniform. He noticed that the walls were decorated by a collection of framed Dandy and Beano comic covers from the 50’s and 60’s. There were a couple of silver sofas on either side of the room and on one of them sat a miserable looking Brown holding a Kleenex to his split lip. An overly muscled black man in shorts and a singlet stood over him, arms akimbo. The young dealer brushed

past Cole and settled herself petulantly on the opposite sofa. The cyclops took position against the door, arms folded.

Dominating the room was a large red, perspex desk on top of which was a simple glass of milk and a sandwich. A small unprepossessing man with crinkly, mousey hair and a hearing aid sat behind it impassively.

Lionel Luxton produced a paper napkin from his drawer and tucked it into the collar of his yellow polo-necked jumper. With fastidious precision he lifted his sandwich and took a bite. He chewed slowly for a while before breaking the silence. He spoke precisely and slowly with a South London accent. 'Try to chew each bite twenty times before swallowing and you'll never suffer from stomach trouble. Did you know that?' Without waiting for an answer he continued. 'The process of digestion in a human being actually begins in the mouth. Saliva contains an enzyme, which begins to break down the food even as you chew it. You watch a dog eating for example, or a shark and they just gump - gump, gump, gump.' He pantomimed a dog bolting its food, 'Nasty fucking eaters but that's because they need to get their scran down into the stomach as fast as possible where the process begins. But us? We can keep our food -all those lovely flavours and textures - in our mouths for longer and enjoy the experience, because the mouth and the nose are where all the receptors are located. Did you know for example that 80% of what we think of as taste is in fact smell? No? Didn't think so. Anyway, chew your food properly that's my advice. You'll live longer and happier.' He reached across for his glass of milk and took a small sip, sloshing it around in his mouth like a fine wine. He pointed to his plate. That there is a 'nana sandwich. Sometimes, I have one with peanut butter, sometimes Marmite; sometimes I have it with a bit of honey. But tonight it is pure unadulterated banana, which I am prepared to bet you didn't

know is part of the Ginger family. I am very fond of bananas, as everyone who knows me knows, but that is no reason to come into my club and try and take me for one is it?’

Cole lost his patience: he didn’t need an elementary biology lesson from a long-winded old deafer. He’d already passed his A-levels.

‘OK, if I promise to chew my food at least twenty times, can I go?’

‘Do I look like a ‘nana?’ Luxton stood and stretched out his arms in a pleading gesture.

Cole sniggered. He did in fact, look very much like a banana in his tight yellow polo-neck jersey.

Luxton sat down again, hugely disappointed. He rolled his eyes sadly. ‘Hit him, Breeze.’

A fist smashed into Cole’s left kidney collapsing him to the carpet.

‘Dad, stop it. You nutter.’

Cole groaned and peered up from the carpet. It was obvious now why the club’s motif was scarlet.

The pretty young dealer had just interceded on his behalf, but surely her dad couldn’t be Cyclops?

It was Luxton who responded though. ‘Yeah, all right, Breeze, that’ll do. Help him up.’

Breeze effortlessly hauled Cole to his feet with one hand.

‘I’m sorry, where the fuck are my manners? I’m Lionel Luxton and the enormous bastard who just smashed you in the kidneys, is Breeze-Block. The strong, silent type with Popeye-the-Sailorman’s forearms who’s busted your mate’s nose for him, is Nelson. You’ve already met my daughter, Debbie.’

‘Your daughter?’ wheezed Cole.

‘Why do they always sound so surprised? Am I such an ugly cunt?’

‘No.’ Cole put a hand to the small of his back and groaned. ‘I see the resemblance now,’ he lied.

‘Well, that’s the formalities out of the way. What I’m wondering is, how you and the tit on the sofa with the bloody nose and the piss-pot haircut have got the bollocks to come into my club and take me for a ‘nana?’

Luxton made a show of turning up his hearing aid. ‘I can’t hear you.’

‘It’s been a long and very odd day and I haven’t a clue what you’re on about.’

Luxton looked disappointed. He switched the volume of his hearing aid up another notch. ‘I’m not hearing you, I’m still not hearing you.’ Cole looked across to Debbie for some kind of enlightenment but she stared fixedly at the carpet.

‘You are currently sitting on a broken shitter and when it collapses you will not be coming back up smelling of roses. I like to keep a clean house and I do not appreciate filth. Which is why a great many people call me Electrolux.’

Cole felt his arms being pinned behind his back. Nelson pushed one of the wall panels, which sprung open to reveal a cupboard full of house cleaning equipment. He took out a vacuum cleaner, which he plugged into a wall socket.

‘Oh no,’ said Cole sarcastically, ‘what are you going to do, suck the lint out of my belly button? Don’t use the feather duster on me. I can take anything but that.’

Luxton ignored him and took hold of the hose. He depressed the button with a grey leather moccasin and the cleaner began to suck in air noisily. As the gangster approached Cole noticed for the first time that there was no attachment on the end of the nozzle.

Luxton caressed his cheek with the aluminium pipe. With an obscene slurping sound the open nozzle scooped a handful of his flesh and continued to suck; quite a pleasant sensation really. Cole grimaced, pretending to be in extreme pain.

‘You might have noticed that Breeze has only got one eye.’ Luxton’s banana breath assailed Cole’s nostrils. ‘Now, why do you think that is?’ Luxton shifted the nozzle across Cole’s face sucking in his nose, Cole sputtered, mucous streaming up the nozzle. Luxton carefully inched the pipe higher, giving Cole a pig’s snout, until he held it steady across the bridge of his nose. Cole could feel the terrifying suction pulling on his eyeballs – an inch either way would do it.

‘Dad, for Christ’s sake,’ screamed his daughter.

‘I can’t hear you,’ sang Luxton over the vacuum’s drone.

‘It’s all right, Mr Luxton,’ interjected Brown from the sofa. ‘It’s my fault. I can explain.’ Luxton held the aluminium nozzle against Cole’s face for a moment or two longer before finally stamping on the button. The cleaner gave a final emphysemic inhalation, then died.

Brown shrugged, he knew that Luxton had already figured it out; otherwise he wouldn’t be sitting there nursing a bleeding nose and cut lip. ‘I was counting: basic Hi-Lo system on a good hot shoe with a plus fifteen value and about two decks left before the shuffle card.’

‘I know you were counting cards, my son, that’s why Nelson gave you a smack, but what was this one supposed to be doing?’

‘I don’t know. Was he winning?’

‘Yes, he was bloody winning. A lot of money. My money. I’m confused though: Piss-pot head acting the twat and playing sharp I can understand, but Silly-Sod playing like a twat and still winning money? How does that work?’

Brown touched his lip ruefully. ‘Must have been dumb luck. It happens.’

‘Not in my fucking club, it doesn’t.’ Luxton stared thoughtfully at his daughter, then at Cole, then back at his daughter again. Finally, he came to a decision: ‘Right, I think I get it. Now, empty your pockets.’

Brown and Cole turned out their pockets and dropped the chips to the carpet; no point holding back. All told, there was some eight thousand pounds worth between them. Breeze rummaged through their inside pockets where he found the remainder of Cole's cash – a few hundred pounds – which he scattered across the carpet. 'That's mine, that's my cash,' objected Cole.

'Stamp Duty,' said Luxton. 'Think of it as a tax so's you can leave here tonight with none of your bits missing and without Breeze stamping over what is left.' Luxton addressed Brown: 'Now you, Piss-Pot Head, if you ever even think about coming into one of my clubs again I'll have your eyes. And you, Silly Sod.' He looked at Cole, 'if you speak to my daughter, if you look at my daughter, if you even think about my daughter again, I'll suck your nollers off with my vacuum cleaner. And that is not a joke...it is a vaguely amusing innuendo, I grant you, but it is definitely not a joke.'

The small of his back was still aching as the plane circled over the green waters of the Gulf of Guinea. Cole peered out of the window at the grey smoky city below. Cole pressed the "Recline" button on the arm of his seat, adjusting it slightly, but it made no difference, his left kidney was still tender.

Lagos airport teemed with brilliant colour, life and sound: men in djellabas and agbadas, the traditional long sleeved flowing robes; women in Iro and gele, swathes of bright eye-catching material wrapped around their heads and bodies. People stood, sat, shouted or just lugged refrigerator-sized pieces of luggage from one spot to another. Goods of all description were on sale. Here and there the gaudy visual palette was interspersed with splashes of green and brown; the

uniforms of grim, black-bereted and heavily armed soldiers who prowled the complex like rotting leaves in an exotic fruit bowl.

Cole retrieved his new, blue suitcase and dragged it single-handedly into the tropical heat outside, waving away the persistent solicitations of the pimps, guides, drivers, porters and assorted flotsam and jetsam.

An advertising billboard caught his eye, featuring a handsome, affluent-looking young man sitting at a beach bar with a beer in hand, grinning broadly. The headline read simply: DRINK BEER. The hoarding lurched dangerously to one side on a broken post, as though it had taken its own message too much to heart. Next to it, another billboard with an almost identical young man in an almost identical location holding a packet of sweet-potato crisps. This time the headline exhorted: EAT CRISPS.

‘Sir, you must come with me. I can drive, unlike these other bloody idiots who will crash you very hard into a tree or a cow. You must understand sir, that most of these men are suffering from Trachoma and the rest, sleeping sickness.’

The speaker was a young man, smartly dressed in black trousers, pristine white short-sleeved shirt and somewhat astonishingly, a red and yellow striped M.C.C. tie. Cole inspected the crowd of drivers touting for business and it was certainly true that more than a few were slumbering and many others exhibited a disturbing variety of symptoms; facial lesions, cataracts and conjunctivitis. Cole shuddered, he hated disease. The young taxi-driver on the other hand, seemed to revel in the symptoms of his fellows. ‘Look that one there, the turned-in eyelashes – a sure sign of Trachoma. That one, elephantiasis.’

To shut him up Cole handed the young man a piece of paper with the address of the hotel and allowed him to take his suitcase, which the taxi-driver hoisted above his head, before gesturing

for Cole to follow. ‘I see you were admiring our advertising material. This beer campaign has been very effective. Very clever indeed. Many people here now drink beer. “Eat crisps?” Not so clever, I think those bloody idiots have just copied the beer concept.’ He grinned broadly. Cole couldn’t tell whether or not this was meant to be ironic. Probably not, he decided.

Cole bounced along in the back seat of a rusty old black Peugeot. The suspension was long dead and his kidneys shrieked each time they hit one of the many spelunkable potholes in the road. True to his word, the driver, who introduced himself as Eugene, did manage to avoid the many trees and cows lining the road, but only just. He drove with one hand on the wheel, the other jammed firmly on the horn and he had the disconcerting habit of twisting almost completely round in his seat to speak, which he did often. Children ran in and out of the traffic with heart-stopping courage, like miniature toreadors, with fruit and luridly coloured beverages for sale.

They passed another ramshackle billboard, this time with red letters on a black background reading: AIDS THE SILENT KILLER.

Eugene swiveled in his seat again. ‘It is becoming a very big problem in Africa, this disease. Many of our prostitutes have it, and syphilis too. I tell you this, sir: you must not sleep with prostitutes.’

‘I’ll try to remember that,’ replied Cole testily. Even with all the windows down he was hot, and in severe discomfort from his bruised kidneys. He wished the trip was already over and despite his boasting he had absolutely no idea how to go about contacting the Tolifaris or anyone else who might be able to smuggle a half-dozen live Macaques into Britain.

‘You must only sleep with the girls that Eugene brings you; they are not prostitutes, but intellectuals, athletes and royalty. You will have to pay them of course and then you must pay

Eugene, also. But surely you agree that it is better to pay more and remain clean and symptom free?’

‘I don’t suppose you know anything about monkeys?’

Eugene swiveled in his seat and waved a cautionary finger. ‘Tsk, tsk.’

Cole rolled his eyes and stared sulkily out of the window. This was a horrible country; full of disease, filth, corruption and moronic taxi drivers.

A willowy figure sashayed her way up the road dressed in a bright yellow Iro. Cole craned his neck to stare at her as they bounced past. In the West she’d have been a supermodel. Perhaps this place had some redeeming features after all.

‘Do know anyone by the name of Tolifari?’

Eugene shrugged. ‘What is a common surname in your country sir?’

‘Smith, Jones...’

‘Well sir, that is the same as me visiting your beautiful Scottish, London-Town and asking you if you know a Mr Smithjones.’

‘I see.’

The conversation was brought to a swift end by their arrival at a dilapidated pink structure. ‘Ah yes, here we are, sir, The First Class Hotel. One safe, luxurious ride as promised; without trauma, spinal fractures, abrasions or diseases of the parasite.’

Cole peered up at the flickering neon sign in the crumbling plaster. When he’d read the words ‘First Class Hotel, Lagos,’ on his itinerary, he’d imagined it to be the hotel’s classification, not the name itself. The First Class Hotel, Lagos was manifestly in violation of the Nigerian Trade Descriptions act - if there was such a thing. On reflection, perhaps not. Most of the letters had burnt

out leaving only the final section illuminated, forming the words: ...ASS HOTEL. Cole smiled for the first time since his arrival here.

Eugene lugged his case into the reception area which was deserted but for an old man in a loose agbada and a mangy dog. They both dozed in the heat. The dog, or the old man farted, further fouling the already oppressively tropical atmosphere.

‘Eugene?’

‘Yes sir,’

‘Those girls you mentioned...’ Cole had no idea of how he was going to fulfill his mission but he had a great deal of Nasir’s American currency burning a hole in his pocket so he decided to have a bit of fun while he figured out a plan of action. He peeled off the taxi fare plus a considerable bonus from his sheaf of crisp U.S dollars.

‘You will not be disappointed sir, nor afflicted with skin rash, foul discharge of the penis, fever, patchy hair loss, brain damage or death.’ Eugene accepted the money and shoved it into his inside jacket pocket.

Eugene shook the old man awake and held out Cole’s printed itinerary. The old man inspected it carefully before shaking his head. He waved his flywhisk to encompass his domain.

‘As you can plainly see, we are full to capacity.’

Cole’s temper was fast deteriorating in the heat.

Eugene smiled smoothly. ‘Perhaps a small present then? To ease any inconvenience?’ He nodded meaningfully at Cole, the cue for more cash.

Cole couldn’t be bothered to argue, it wasn’t his money. But it did gall - not only was he staying at the ASS HOTEL, he was actually having to bribe his way in.

With the U.S \$10 bill tucked into his bright blue agbada the old man was suddenly all efficiency and obsequiousness. He kicked the flatulent dog hard, up the offending orifice, sending it skittering and whimpering out of the door and handed over Cole's key with a bow. The key had a grubby rubber hula-dancing doll attached to the end. Cole examined it curiously.

'In case you drop your key into the swimming pool. It will float, you see,' the old man explained. Cole brightened visibly.

'There's a pool?'

'But of course.'

'Can I use it now?'

The old man looked puzzled.

'Whatever for?'

'Swimming,' replied Cole warily.

'But there is no water in it.'

'No, of course, why would there be?'

'No,' the old man looked disheartened for a second, then brightened, exposing one remaining tooth.

'But then there is no need to worry about dropping your keys into it.'

At that moment Cole wanted just three things: a shower, a long cold drink and to smash this frustrating old man's teeth down his throat; but clearly a previous guest had beaten him to it.

Cole shook his head and determined to make the best of it. 'Well that's a weight off my mind,' he replied.

'All part of The First Class Service,' the man grinned broadly flashing an expanse of pink gum and that single white tombstone.

Cole unpacked and sprawled in his Y-fronts across the pink nylon bedspread in his room watching soccer through a snowstorm raddled TV screen. To be fair to the receptionist, not once in that time had he experienced a scintilla of concern regarding the buoyancy of his key. He had however, been distressed to find a neat slit down the side of his new blue case. His electric razor had gone, along with his pristine Sony Walkman, and brand new Nike Trainers.

The ceiling fan squealed intermittently like a turkey having its neck wrenched as it slowly redistributed the stifling air.

There was a discreet knock at the door. Excellent. Eugene's girl no doubt. Cole composed himself in what he imagined was an alluring and studly posture on the bed.

'Come,' he ordered in a manufactured baritone.

The door opened to reveal a thickset, serious-looking Nigerian in his late fifties with short, curly hair, graying at the temples. Despite the heat he wore a three-piece pin-stripe suit of an old fashioned cut. A solid gold watch chain dangled across his potbelly. Cole jumped to his feet and grabbed the hotel's threadbare white towel from the end of the bed, which he quickly draped around his waist.

'Who the hell are you and what do mean by barging in on me when I'm practically naked?'

The Nigerian, although past his prime, displayed a physical confidence and a calm, unruffled manner suggesting authority. Ignoring Cole's protests he pulled up a rickety wooden chair and carefully settled himself into it so as not to crease his perfectly pressed suit.

'Why do you ask about the Tolifaris?'

'That's none of your business.'

'You are mistaken.'

'This is a private hotel room and if you don't leave I'm calling the police.'

The Nigerian chuckled with genuine amusement. The watch chain jiggled up and down over his pot.

‘Then you must have very deep pockets, my friend, but I doubt if they will turn out to be deeper than mine. This is Nigeria. Nobody does anything here without “un petit cadeau” - a gift. If you call the police you must bribe them to do something about me and then I will bribe them to look the other way and then you will have to bribe them again, and so on. So the money goes round. Now, unless you wish me to bribe someone else to have you disappear - and you would be surprised how little it costs - you will answer my question.’

‘What’s it worth?’ asked Cole, slyly.

The Nigerian roared with laughter. ‘You learn quickly. I like that, so I will not have you killed. I will only pay someone to have you beaten, maimed...oh, and robbed, naturally.’

Cole found himself warming to the dignified Nigerian, threats of violence notwithstanding. At least he was honest. ‘A friend of mine said that the Tolifaris and their friends can get things done, ah... outside of the usual channels.’

‘And this person is?’

‘A Tolifari.’

‘Then why don’t you ask him to do whatever it is you need doing?’

‘Her...’ corrected Cole.

‘Her?’

‘A she...not a he.’

‘I think not,’ declared the Nigerian, imperiously.

‘I know so...at least I bloody hope so. A young girl. Back in England.’

The man's stern expression slipped into one of puzzlement, then into one of eager concern. 'Tell me....'

'She calls herself Babs.'

'Baby Barbara....' whispered the Nigerian. 'She is my niece. Her father and I...I have not spoken to him nor seen my niece for many, many years. Is she beautiful? How did you meet her?'

Cole nodded. 'Er...' he thought it best not to go into too much detail here, 'though a mutual friend.'

The man smiled sadly. 'Business must come before pleasure, tell me what it is that you have come here to do and I will help if I can. But then you will tell me all about Barbara and the wonderful life she is living...'

An hour and twenty minutes later Cole said farewell to Babs's uncle like a long lost friend. Only after the man had left did Cole realize that he didn't even know his first name. It didn't matter - arrangements had been made for the smuggled delivery into Britain of a steady stream of live Macaques, Vervets and Green Monkeys, no paperwork, no questions asked. The subsequent payoffs would be made through a series of European bank accounts under fake names. Nasir would be impressed. Incredibly, he'd done the job in record time and could leave first thing tomorrow. But not before a little pleasure of his own. He picked up the phone and rang reception to book a mid- morning flight and find out what had become of Eugene's athlete or intellectual or whatever.

The girl must have been waiting in reception; she arrived seconds after he replaced the receiver. Saying nothing, she simply closed the door and stepped naked out of her gaudy orange gown. Like the beauty he'd spotted earlier at the side of the road, she was tall and willowy with small upright breasts, her looks only marred, from his perspective, by a series of tribal scars across the prominent cheek-bones. In one finely tapered hand she held an old lemonade bottle full of a

dark amber fluid, which reminded Cole of the mixture he'd once fed to Baxter. Slatters and its disagreeable Housemaster was already becoming a hazy, distant memory, it all seemed so long ago and so far away to him now.

The girl poured some of the fluid into the cheap plastic tumbler from above the sink. She handed it to Cole. 'Drink,' she ordered without a smile.

'You must be fucking joking. God only knows what's in it. It looks like piss.'

By way of reply the girl took a mouthful herself, then climbed onto the bed and straddled him, her long lithe legs tucked under on either side of his body. Cole took the glass and drank. Whatever it was, was coarse and harsh tasting but he forced himself to swallow. It burned like molten lead as it traveled down his oesophagus. The girl smiled for the first time and wriggled her groin against him. He tugged at his Y-fronts; penis snagging briefly like the pole of a Big Top. He kicked them off and now fully naked, he could feel her coarse, tightly curled pubic hair scratching against the hypersensitive head of his rigid cock. She moved her head slowly towards him, lips pressing against his and he felt a warm gush of something enter his mouth. It was that foul drink again. He swallowed it anyway as the girl inched her sex up and down over the tip of his penis, almost but not quite, allowing him to penetrate. He could feel the full weight of her body on him now, his own body tingled strangely and he was on the point of orgasm when a curious wave of fatigue washed over him. It suddenly occurred to him that the girl hadn't drunk the filthy stuff after all; but he couldn't hold the thought. He tried to push her off but he was too weak, his mind began to wander, something to do with Baxter, monkeys and a grubby rubber hula dancer. It was all too complicated to sort out now; his head sank back onto the pillow.

Somewhere above Cole's head a chicken was being strangled. And a terrible thing had happened in the night - the rancid dog from reception must have sneaked in and mistaken his gaping mouth for a latrine.

Cole rushed to the sink vomited, then sucked greedily at the tepid brown water from the tap. He had a throbbing headache and wondered what time it was. Where was his watch anyway? He could see his grubby Y-fronts lying under the bed like an unsavoury maggot and bending to retrieve them, was relieved to find the missing watch lying underneath.

With mounting alarm the events of the previous night came flooding back. He'd passed out, or more likely been drugged. He ran to the sock drawer where he'd hidden his wallet. Empty. A glance at his watch told him that it was already eight-thirty and his plane left at eleven. Too late to do anything about his money now, it was long gone and he'd have to get a move on to if he wasn't to miss the flight. He took the suitcase down from the top of the wardrobe and with a feeling of foreboding, unzipped it. To his relief, his passport and ticket were still there. He tossed in the grubby pants and flung open the wardrobe doors. His worst fears were now confirmed – empty. All his clothes were gone, even the rumpled, sweaty outfit he'd traveled in. She'd literally swiped the shirt off his back. He briefly considered calling the police. Bad idea; particularly if Uncle Tolifari was to be believed.

Cole took a deep breath, retrieved the underpants and put them on before checking his watch again; he now had just under an hour to get to the airport without money, luggage or clothes. He double-locked the door to his room and walked over to the window. He peered down onto a scrofulant courtyard below in the center of which was a large hole in the ground decorated with cracked blue tiles - that must be the swimming pool. It was dry, apart from six inches or so of scummy green water at the bottom of the deep end. Around the sides a couple of scrawny chickens

pecked away at the hard red earth. A washing line was suspended across the shallow end and hanging from it was a length of a virulent green material patterned with bright orange mangoes billowing in the warm breeze. Cole jettisoned the useless suitcase onto the bed. It had set him back thirty quid in London the previous week and, despite the razor-slit down the side, should adequately cover the hotel bill for one night in a dump like the Ass hotel. He clambered out of the window and hung briefly from the ledge before dropping to the courtyard below. The pain of landing from that height onto the bare balls of his feet was excruciating and took his breath away for a moment or two. Better that though he decided, than landing onto his bare balls. He hopped about like a manic flamingo until the pain receded somewhat. Then he snatched the gaudy billowing material from the line and wound it around his body in an abbreviated toga before slinking across the yard to an old wooden door set into the far wall. At that point he remembered that he still had the hula-doll room key in his clenched fist. He hurled it into the viscous green puddle at the end of the pool where unbelievably, it actually floated as promised; the dancer's upraised arm waved a cheery farewell as it bobbed on the slime.

Gingerly, Cole put a little of his weight against the yard gate. The cheesy, rotten wood gave easily and he found himself in a rutted alleyway. From there he sprinted through a maze of claustrophobic back lanes and, navigating more or less by sound alone, finally emerged onto a bustling street.

A few yards ahead was a large man leaning against the bonnet of an old Mercedes taxi, smoking and chatting with a group of idlers. Cole slowed his pace to a steady walk and advanced towards them with all the dignity he could muster in his bizarre outfit. The driver and his friends, a tough looking crew, giggled through their hands at his approach. 'Good morning gentlemen,' said Cole, draping his cheap Seiko across his forearm like a top Tiffany's salesman. 'I have here a

beautiful watch which in my country is considered to be worth many camels and women and money and ...gold.'

The taxi driver and his crew tittered again. Cole held up a restraining hand. 'All I want for it is a ride to the airport and it is yours to keep.' He zeroed in on the owner of the dilapidated vehicle.

'You will be the envy of your friends and have many wives.'

The big Nigerian giggled uneasily.

'Your last chance,' warned Cole, 'otherwise, I will be forced to offer this astonishing deal to someone else.' He caressed the watch. 'It's an elegant and beautiful timepiece; hand crafted by experts employing timeless techniques. A chronometer, but also a statement to the world - "I have arrived," it says.'

To Cole's profound annoyance there were tears of mirth in the man's eyes now. He blinked them away. 'What are you doing here, white boy, in a woman's dress?'

Cole grimaced. 'It's a long story. Now, do you want the fucking watch or don't you?'

'What time is your flight?'

'Eleven.'

The driver languidly raised his left arm, which had been resting on the bonnet of the old Mercedes and checked the monumental gold Rolex on his wrist. 'Then we have no time to waste.' After a brief struggle he managed to tug open the buckled passenger door. As Cole clumsily splayed himself across the back seat, a flash of his grubby underwear prompted a fresh chorus of high-pitched titters. The driver was forced to wipe his eyes with a tissue before he was capable of further action.

'No, I don't want your hand crafted timepiece my friend,' the driver waved away the cheap Seiko as he negotiated the lunar sized potholes. 'You keep it. You make me laugh a great deal and

my friends too, and we will talk about you for a long time to come, so I think of myself as well paid. Laughter don't you agree, is better than money? It gives so much joy and yet can never be fully spent. It can be stored and brought out again and again and there are always fresh supplies from the most unexpected quarters.' The driver peered at Cole meaningfully through his rear mirror and grinned. 'Some people believe that beauty is a gift from God but it fades, some think that the hand of God is in music or art and that may be so, but I believe that the true voice of God is laughter. That is when we are closest to Him. Man is the only creature to supposed to possess an immortal soul and man is the only creature capable of laughter. Other creatures can be beautiful, some can make wonderful music and intricate patterns but there are none, none capable of making real laughter.'

'I'm delighted that the sight of my pants has given you such a theological boost.'

The Nigerian shrugged as they passed another stern roadside warning about the dangers of Aids. Cole desperately tried to remember whether penetration had actually taken place the previous night. He was beginning to worry; this new sexual disease was no joke out here.

'It would be pointless to look for lasting joy in the realms of beauty and the flesh,' advised the driver, but sensing his passenger's gloom, he quickly changed the subject. 'Here is something for you - A Chadian arrives in Lagos. He walks around staring at all the big buildings when a Nigerian runs up and tells him: "Hey, you, stop that. Don't you know you must pay to look at the buildings here? How many buildings did you look at?" The Chadian thinks quickly and replies: "Just two." And so he pays the Nigerian for looking at two buildings. When the Chadian gets back home, he tells his friends, "Ha, how stupid the Nigerians are. I paid to look at two buildings, but really, I looked at ten.'" The driver hooted with laughter. 'Ha ha, where do these things come from,

I wonder? Nobody seems to know. Is God talking to us? I expect he thinks the Chadians are famous idiots as we do. What an embarrassment to Him. Do you know of anyone who made up a joke?’

‘I do, as a matter of fact.’

‘You do? That is most interesting. You must tell me.’

‘No. It’s not worth it, believe me.’

‘Tell me a joke, English boy. What was the last joke you heard?’

‘Last time someone told me a joke, he laughed, then keeled over and died. And before you ask, it really wasn’t all that funny.’

‘Ah well, that proves my point. You are closest to God when you laugh. And if you die laughing? That is just God wanting to share the joy. What was this joke?’

‘I’m not going to tell you. You’ve been well paid by the huge laugh you and your friends have already enjoyed at my expense.’

‘As a tip then.’

‘No.’

‘Ok, a bribe.’

‘For what exactly?’

‘For getting you past the many curious soldiers at the airport.’

Late the following evening Cole arrived back at the Clapham flat, exhausted and sweating, still dressed in his green and orange wraparound, along with the six pairs of free airline socks, which had enabled him to leap the barrier and outrun the ticket men at Clapham Common tube station without cutting his feet to ribbons.

‘Ah,’ said Fellows. ‘So I take it that your journey was not an unqualified success?’

‘No, it was a major coup.’

Nevin and Bubbles sniggered from their usual positions on the rickety sofa and leaking beanbag.

‘Where’s all your luggage then?’ asked Bubbles.

‘Gone. Lost.’

‘So d’ya get us a souvenir?’

‘Yes. This dress. It’s an Iro, authentic national costume.’

Beads of sweat dripped from Cole’s tousled dark hair onto his extraordinary outfit as he unraveled the bolt of cloth down to his foetid Y-fronts.

‘Extravaganza!’

‘And you’re welcome to my underpants too, if you like. They have a kind of religious significance in Nigeria.’

‘Sort of fetish-object thing, like?’

‘Exactly.’

‘Please don’t encourage him,’ advised Fellowes

Nevin appeared to be seriously considering the offer. ‘Nah, I think I’ll pass,’ he said eventually.

‘I never saw a bloke go from ‘avin’ nothin’ to ‘avin’ loads and buyin’ new Nikes and Walkmans and stuff so fast, and then back to ‘avin’ nothin’ again,’ Bubbles announced with some wonder in his voice.

‘You have haven’t you, lost within the space of a month, more money than I make in a year?’ said Fellowes.

‘Yes, but the business trip was actually a huge success and I’m expecting a bonus. So, in the meantime, any chance I could ...?’

Fellowes sighed. ‘You lost your suit too? Oh God... all right, the Prince of Wales check and I’m serious now, I want it dry-cleaned as soon as you’ve got the money.’

‘And a fiver?’

‘Excuse me, Madam, I would like to buy one of your delicious cream horns. My uncle is very fond of such sweetmeats. How much do they cost please?’ Baxter scrawled the phrase on the blackboard in his showy italic and wondered who thought up these deranged expressions.

There were six adults in his Thursday evening class at the Fulham School of Spoken English; two Italian students, a Japanese businessman, two elderly Indian women and a young Arab - and he would have been happy to bet a week’s so-called salary that not one of them would ever, ever find such a pointless collection of drivel even remotely useful.

It was deeply humiliating. Such a comedown from the heights of a Housemastership at one of England’s premier schools to itinerant phrase-slinger at this horrible dump.

Still, at least he and Miriam weren’t broke. They’d rented a small flat in Wandsworth and although Baxter’s temporary language teaching was demeaning and badly paid, Miriam was bringing in good money doing some kind of promotions work at a number of top West-End hotels.

It was tough on her though, poor thing. She’d return late most nights, dishevelled and tired, usually way too fatigued for sex, which was disappointing, but at least she was paid in cash, which helped.

In any case, this state of affairs wouldn’t last forever. He’d heard from his agency - the improbably named Gabitas & Thring - of a vacant Housemastership at Blundells. And the Headmaster, Timothy Nugent was someone he’d worked with in the past. He recalled Nugent vaguely from his

days as a junior-master at the Dragon School and wondered whether Nugent would remember him. Actually he hoped not, the very thought of that hideous incident with the yellow cardigan still made his ears burn with shame.

Aubrey St John Fellowes would be the key to this job. Baxter was well aware that Aubrey had been a bosom-pal of Nugent's since university and he was confident that Aubrey could be persuaded to put in a good word for him. After all, Aubrey owed him - Baxter had been careful to avoid incriminating his son in the Herb-Smoking incident. He would phone Aubrey and arrange a get-together. In the meantime, he still had to arm his motley students with the necessary linguistic skills to accommodate a sweet-toothed uncle's unlikely passion for cream horns.

'Again please class.'

The students chanted the phrase like a dirge. The young Arab in the second row however, appeared to be in a world of his own.

'Very good. Now T'ar'iq, on your own if you please.'

Good God, thought Baxter with a start, the man's wearing makeup.

T'ar'iq's pleasant vision of a powder blue X19 loaded with beautiful sexy English girls suddenly evaporated and he found himself gazing up into the icy blue eyes of the stern English teacher in the tweed jacket.

'My name is no more T'ar'iq... ' The young Arab stared back through heavily Kohl-rimmed eyelids.

'Your name has been T'ar'iq throughout this entire course. What are you talking about?'

'Now I am call Ghoul.'

'What?' squealed Baxter, too shocked to correct the faulty English.

'My name is Ghoul.'

It was too creepy for words. Just when he'd imagined he'd got the evil little bastard out of his life for good, here he was again - or at least a sort of rough carbon copy. The man even resembled Cole, especially with all that mascara thickening his lashes; he was about the same height and build, and apart from the badger on his upper lip, could have passed for an elder brother. But the man was undoubtedly Arabic. What was going on? Had he in fact gone mad, as the Hog had predicted? Had he slipped into a Kafkaesque nightmare in which, instead of him becoming a beetle, the rest of the world had become Coles? He spun on his heel and glared suspiciously at the elderly Indian lady at the desk behind him.

'And you. Are you a Cole too?' he demanded.

'No, I am still being Mrs Mogheri.'

Thank God. Thank God she was Mrs Mogheri. What a beautiful, beautiful name was Mogheri.

Baxter turned back to the Arab. 'You registered as T'ar'iq Hamid Al Salihi. I remember clearly. Explain yourself.'

The Arab shrugged. He wasn't going to be bullied by some jumped up little English language teacher. 'Now, my name is Ghoul. You are calling me Ghoul please.'

'Very please for meet you, Gole san,' said a Japanese businessman at the desk behind with a courteous nod. T'ar'iq smiled back. He was an assassin. His name was Ghoul. And it sounded fantastic.

Baxter sucked in air and made a conscious effort to slow his racing pulse. If the bloody man insisted on being Cole, then worse luck to him. He returned to the blackboard and slapped the chalk sentence with his palm raising a puff of white dust. 'Very well then "Mister Cole". Please repeat the following useful phrase: "Excuse me Madam, but I would like to buy one of your delicious cream horns. My uncle is very fond of your sweetmeats. How much do they cost please?"'

Fuck. He really, really hated this job.

Nasir handed over five hundred pounds to a grinning Cole. 'I love this job,' he said, tucking the cash into his inside pocket.

T'ar'iq of course, was utterly besotted; and it was hard not to be impressed. Nasir gazed at the cocky youngster in the bespoke Prince-of-Wales-check suit as he lolled in his armchair over scones in the Grosvenor House Tea room. He'd been away for all of two days during which time he'd made contact with the suppliers as promised and done the deal. Coded faxes confirming the ongoing shipments had already arrived from the front companies in Nigeria. Cole was assuredly capable, but that didn't mean Nasir had forgiven him, nor loathed him any less. The boy was useful and probably ruthless but nowhere near as clever and shrewd as he imagined himself to be, which made him ideally suited for the final task. Nasir had decided that Cole and T'ar'iq would now carry out the last and most important mission together. It was beautiful because it was all so neat. There would be no loose ends; Cole's goose was almost ready to be cooked. The promised dish - the dish best served cold - would soon be served. He hid his feelings behind an avuncular smile as he patted the young man on the shoulder. 'Now you may go and play until I need you again.'

Fellowes flicked a mint into the air and attempted to catch it in his open mouth. It bounced painfully off his eyeball and rolled under Hutch's returning feet. The member dealer's gleaming shoes ground it into powder against the grey lino floor of the Market as he arrived back from coffee with Brown. 'Any trades?'

Still blinking, Fellowes handed back the black Dealer's book and pointed out the put-through with De Zoete's and a couple of smaller trades with Henderson Crossthwaite. Hutch grunted his approval. He was almost friendly these days. 'Any luck with the Albion Trust thing, young Charles?'

Fellowes rubbed his watering eye and shook his head. 'As near as I can figure, It started out as a sale – Sixty Albion Trust priced at thirty-three with Elliott's, which they confirm, but then it was reversed as an early trade. Elliot's say it wasn't a reversal. They claim it was another sell – same amount, same price. So they think we sold them a hundred and twenty at thirty-three – whereas we think we're square with them. The problem is, Albion announced their figures the next day and the stock jumped like a cat in sackful of Dobermans. The stock's now priced at a hundred and sixty. So, one or other of us is down a fair chunk of money.'

'I don't recall either of the trades.'

'Me neither,' said Brown.

'Must have been Piers Peacey, the twit.' The Hutch rubbed his chin. No point hauling young Peacey over the coals now - he'd just go running to his father and there was nothing to be gained by antagonising Elliotts any further either. The dispute had gone on for too long as it was. In market-speak Sixty, actually meant Sixty thousand shares, which meant that someone was going to have to swallow a significant trading deficit. The Hutch took off his heavy glasses and rubbed his eyes, as he did whenever there was a difficult decision to be made: 'We'll just have to put it down as a loss on the book. Let Elliotts have the fucking trade.'

'You're the boss,' agreed Fellowes, relieved to have the matter finally settled.

Somewhere in West London T'ar'iq was on another mission. He had a car to kill. Because the Mondeo had been parked in Whitecross Road on the day of Perlmann's death, Nasir was certain that the police would have noted the registration. And even though it was made out to a fictitious company, Nasir had decided that it would be prudent to dispose of it anyway. Official attention was best avoided at this crucial stage.

It was a simple task: all T'ar'iq had to do was drive the car to a dodgy scrap metal dealer in Chiswick where it would be broken down and crushed according to the original plan. The registration docket would be transferred, then cancelled. There the paper trail would end. Although it didn't actually involve killing a person, it was still a task that T'ar'iq relished because he'd been given seven thousand pounds in cash to purchase a replacement vehicle. The only thing now standing between him and a brand new powder blue Fiat X19 was the bloody stupid A-Z of London lying open on his lap. Hardly any of the streets were where they should be, and even when they were in the right place, they seemed to go in the wrong direction. It was like one of those Ruben's cube things.

He took his eyes off the road to check the map again. At that moment a huge black Rottweiler dashed out in front of him, T'ar'iq swerved to avoid the animal but he was too slow. There was a gut-wrenching thump as the near offside clipped the beast's hindquarters. T'ar'iq screeched to a halt and pulled over, heart pounding. He checked the street for the owner. Thankfully it was deserted. He got out, noted the shattered headlight and dented wing, then walked back up the road to where the dog lay breathing its last. He stood impassively as the massive canine gasped and gazed back with what seemed to be an accusing stare before expiring. T'ar'iq grinned. What a feeling of power and invulnerability! So this is what it felt like to take a life. Shame not to take the credit for it.

He rummaged in his jacket pocket and withdrew one of his brand new black and gold visiting cards and placed it in the dead dog's floppy ear. In embossed gilt script the card read simply: You have been visited by The Ghoul; the word, "Ghoul", stylishly picked out in Vivaldi Bold, twenty-six point.

T'ar'iq leapt back into his car totally re-energized. It was as he'd always suspected; the act of killing was an incredibly intense experience, almost orgasmic. And this was fantastic practice for him. He had a vehicle that was going to end up at the crushers anyway, so it might as well serve some purpose in its last few hours on the road.

Ah, hello there, little Tommy-cat.

A few yards ahead was a large ginger Tom, dozing on the pavement in a patch of sunlight, oblivious to the recent tragedy. T'ar'iq gunned the motor and swerved the car up over the kerb. The squeal of tires was quickly followed by the chilling screech of crushed feline. He slipped another of his black and gold cards into the dead cat's collar and sped off in search of further prey.

If she wanted the phone to ring, she took a shower. It was infallible, especially when she washed her hair. True to form it was ringing now, she turned off the faucets, wrapped herself in a fluffy white towel and padded down the hallway dripping water all over her white Wilton carpet.

'Are you the girl that does tricks?' asked a male voice.

She slammed the phone down with a sigh. Donna, that slag, or one of the other girls at the club had scribbled her number on a toilet wall or put it in a phone box somewhere - not very original, not very amusing. The phone rang again.

‘Listen. If you ever call this number again, I’ll get my dad onto you and ‘e’ll ‘ave your fucking Jacob’s for earrings and your ‘ampton for a pencil sharpener.’

There was a momentary silence. ‘I’m sorry, someone did a kind of magic trick and gave me a playing card last week - The Joker -with this number on it.’

‘Oh, it’s you.’ Debbie smiled to herself.

‘Yeah, it’s me.’

‘I didn’t think you’d call.’

‘Why?’

‘I thought my dad might have put you off.’

‘Take more than a vacuum cleaner to do that.’

‘He really will suck your nollers off if he finds out, you know.’

‘And what about you? What will you do?’

‘Why don’cha come round and find out?’

Twenty-five minutes later Debbie peered out of her first floor window to see a slim figure emerge from a black cab onto the pavement of Brixton High Street below. He was wearing a nice grey chequered suit with a bright yellow silk tie. In his hand was a small bunch of pink roses; silly sod. Still, he was every bit as tasty as she remembered; compact, dark and fine-featured, almost effeminate, yet there was a definite hardness to his eyes; a ruthlessness that gave him a strong sexual aura. The afternoon was definitely looking up. She dropped the towel and padded across to the intercom to buzz him upstairs.

If she’d stayed at the window just a moment longer she might have seen a figure emerge from the Newsagents on the other side of the road: six foot, seven inches tall, and almost as wide, in his scarlet satin bomber jacket. But Breeze didn’t miss Cole, even with one eye he recognized

the dark-haired young card-cheat as the smooth little bastard slipped through the downstairs door into Debbie's flat.

'Road-kill, Miller?'

Miller held out a collection of monochrome photos to the newly promoted Deputy Assistant Commissioner Reilly.

'No, sir. Murder.'

'It may have escaped your attention Michael, but these are domestic animals and they've been run over.'

'Nothing escapes my attention, sir.'

With a deadpan expression, Detective Sergeant Miller produced a series of small plastic baggies, each containing a black-and-gold embossed visiting card.

'These cards were found on the victims, sir.'

'I see...' Reilly did a double take at the gilded name, "'The Ghoul'"?

'Sound familiar sir? It seems that the girl in the Perlmann case was mistaken in respect of the name,' Miller continued, conveniently forgetting his own contribution. 'It wasn't "The Goal" after all, but "The Ghoul". Sounds more or less the same until you see it written down.'

Reilly had been skeptical. He'd received complaints from the Uniforms about Miller's increasingly bizarre suppositions and highhanded manner. The Perlmann killer, soi disant "Goal" seemed to be nothing more substantial than wishful thinking on the part of his protégée, but in the light of this new evidence he had to admit Miller might actually be on to something. His heart began to pound. There really was a nutter out there, calling himself The Ghoul and the cocky

bastard even had his own visiting cards. What a fantastic name for a serial-killer! The press would lap it up. Reilly attempted to control his excitement and spoke in measured tones, ‘let’s just say this “Ghoul” killed Perlmann, why would he suddenly want to murder a ...’ Reilly examined one of the photos of a mangled dog, ‘...a Rottweiler?’

‘It must have known too much, sir.’

‘It’s a dog.’

‘I’m aware of that, sir.’

‘What could it possibly know?’

‘Where the bodies are buried.’

‘Eh?’

‘You know sir, dogs – bones.’

Reilly flipped through the photos. Could this “Ghoul” really be connected to the dubious death of a dodgy shipbroker? It was certainly possible, if a little circumstantial, but as the great Sherlock used to say: once you have eliminated the impossible, all that remains is the probable. At any rate, whoever was going around West London murdering household pets, leaving visiting cards was at the very least, dangerous, if not completely deranged. And he had to admit, it was an absolute spanker of a name.

‘Hmm... what about all the dead cats?’

‘To put us off the scent sir. Draw our attention away from the real motive: the dead dogs... and of course, the human victims.’

Reilly hadn’t achieved high rank in the Met without being a decisive man. ‘My instincts tell me you may be onto something here, Miller. So I’m going with you on this one; I’m authorising all the resources you need. Top priority. Whatever it takes, it’s imperative that you catch this “Ghoul”

before he strikes again. Oh, and we'd better organize a press conference.' He picked up the phone. 'And have someone ring Mrs Reilly this instant, and tell her...tell her for Christ's sake, to lock up the Pokes.'

'Hallo my lovely boys. How's business?'

'Hello, Yetta. All the better for seeing you, my love. Edgar, it's Yetta here.'

'Straight jacket for mad Yetta.'

'Coming right up.'

The elderly woman chuckled and allowed herself to be helped into the reverse nylon gown. The two hairdressers led her gently over to the washbasin where they began the process of rinsing her sparse bluish locks in tepid water, just as she liked it.

'Are you comfortable, darling?'

Yetta shrugged. 'Ach vell, I make a living.' It was the same old joke, but the boys smiled appreciatively, as they always did. Yetta was sweet, funny and she tipped, unlike most of the other grumpy old bags.

Yetta eased herself into the leather and chrome cutting-chair as Trevoir towed her hair dry.

'So, what's it to be? Spiky punk, afro, beehive, bob, perm, highlights, number-two buzz cut? No, I have it, how about bangs this time?'

'Tsk tsk, you offer me bangs at my age. You'd kill me.' Yetta wagged her magic forefinger at the blond stylist; an awesome thing to behold, gnarled, calcified and knotted with arthritis, culminating in a wickedly pointed orange nail like a juju stick. Over the course of Yetta's seventy-eight years

on the planet, this sharp digit combined with an even sharper tongue had been leveled at many a dishonest tradesman, cheat, liar and corrupt official to devastating effect. Today, it was being brandished in jest.

‘I’m an old Jewish lady. Vat you tink? A blue rinse, like always.’

Edgar brought her a cup of coffee and a copy of the Evening Standard.

‘So what do you make of this “Ghoul” then?’

‘I don’t know from Ghoul, vat is dat?’

‘It’s all over the front page. London’s latest, scariest serial killer.’

Yetta tutted as she unfolded the paper. ‘I came to dis country to be safe, but nowhere’s safe now especially for an old lady. Oy...some day, I’ll go to Israel. But I need a young man to take me. Ven are you boys going to take me, hmm?’ she demanded with mock petulance.

‘One of these days Yetta, one of these days.’

“GHOUL HAUNTS LONDON”, screamed the front-page banner headline accompanied by grainy shots of manky, flattened pets. Yetta sniffed and scanned the article in a desultory fashion, skipping over the details of the task force headed by D.S Mike Miller. With heart-stopping shock one name leapt out at her, a name she knew only too well; the name of her estranged nephew: Daniel Perlmann - murder victim.

The paper slipped from her hands and she slumped forward into the stainless steel blue-rinse bowl on the counter.

‘Edgar,’ said Trevoir nervously. ‘Edgar...’ His voice rose in pitch to a squeal as he tried to push the old woman upright again. ‘Edgar, come quick. I think old Mrs Perlmann’s karked it.’

Nasir sat at the stained kitchen table. The room was warm at least, if chaotic. The housekeeper bustled around chopping vegetables while her cadaverous husband prepared another pot of foul coffee.

‘I was wondering...’ Aubrey St John Fellowes said diffidently, ‘...whether you might be able to let me have any more of those well-plates of yours.’

About time too thought Nasir. This impossible man had already taken up far too much of his valuable time; beating around the bush with his pointless and trivial conversation about Tulips and cultivar-breaking viruses. Now he’d finally got to the point - more free laboratory equipment. A nuisance, but a small price to pay for keeping the locals sweet and out of his hair. In a month or so it would all be over anyhow. His work at the Centre would be done and he could put this foul English village and its inbred occupants behind him, forever.

‘But of course, Aubrey. Whatever I have, is yours.’

‘Excellent and perhaps a little Agar? And I know you must have an electron microscope on the premises somewhere. I’ve got some kind of blight which I haven’t been able to identify, I can’t tell whether it’s Augusta or just Botrytis Tulipae...’

‘Now that I cannot do, my dear Aubrey. Although we are a private research centre; I am not licensed for casual visitors. You understand.’

‘No, no quite right. Shouldn’t have asked. I’ll just have to send the stuff off to the lab in Cambridge again for analysis. Expensive business though,’ Aubrey sighed as Albert served another pot of his dishwasher coffee.

Nasir sipped the insipid brew, unable to conceal an expression of profound distaste. Why did English people always expect something for nothing?

‘If you were to perhaps...give me a sample, I shall see what I can do.’

Aubrey grinned, reached across and pounded him on the back, spilling his coffee. ‘You’re an excellent chap Nazee, an excellent chap, no matter what they say in the Rum Duck. It just so happens that I have one already...’ Aubrey opened the Kelvinator and withdrew a stoppered test tube half-filled with a straw-coloured fluid, which he handed to Nasir.

Somewhere in the bowels of the house a phone rang. Albert dried his hands on a threadbare tea towel and bustled off to answer.

Nasir in turn, picked up the discarded cloth - a souvenir from Llandudno - and wiped himself down.

‘Speaking of excellent chaps. That young man, Cole, is now in my employ.’

‘Is he? Is he really? What’s he doing for you? Disposing of your old apes with a Jack-hammer or something?’

‘The Centre has a constant requirement for equipment...’ Nasir nodded ironically at Aubrey, ‘and of course, live subjects. The young man manages my imports and administration. There is so much paperwork to be attended to and I am a mere virologist, not a man of business.’

‘He’s a bright lad, but I’d check your receipts if I were you.’

Nasir smiled.

At that moment Albert returned looking grim. There was a brief whispered conversation between the two domestics by the huge porcelain sink and with a heart-rending wail Madeleine collapsed to the floor.

‘What the hell’s going on? Somebody die or what?’

Albert nodded mournfully. ‘That is in fact the case.’

Four young men staggered unsteadily out of the Windmill Pub at closing time and made their raucous, bantering way across the oily darkness of Clapham Common. A curiously mismatched group: the first in a purple T-shirt and stinking, sleeveless Afghan coat; another in a leather jacket with a scraggy ponytail. Their companions wore the uniform of what might normally be taken for the opposition: finely tailored pinstripe suits, white shirts and yellow silk ties. Like two sides of the same coin, one was dark, the other blond. The dark boy seemed in an expansive mood. And why shouldn't he be? Life was good for Cole – he'd made his temporary home in a comfortable town-house hotel; for once, there were decent clothes on his back; he hadn't been beaten up, robbed or poisoned for some weeks now; he had a sort of girlfriend, or at least a girl with whom he'd recently enjoyed some of the most fantastic and creative sex ever, and he was making good money. What's more, he had an exciting and unusual job, which would soon be taking him to another enviable international destination – that very afternoon the dark blue British passport in his jacket pocket had been stamped with a tourist visa for Israel.

Fellowes halted and vomited unsteadily into a bush. 'Get out and walk,' he ordered.

At that moment the hypertrophic silhouette of Breeze-block appeared from behind a tree, slapping a baseball bat against his palm, 'All right, lads?' Nelson and half-a-dozen heavily tattooed, shaven-headed figures materialised from the surrounding shrubbery.

'We ain't got money,' babbled Bubbles, 'we spent it all on Cider, which is why 'e's just puked.' Pointing treacherously at Cole he added, 'that'un's got loads of cash though.'

Like Bubbles, Fellowes assumed they were about to be mugged, but to his surprise, the giant only seemed concerned with Cole. Breeze leveled his bat. 'You, sonny Jim, are in for a right spanking.'

Nelson floated, wraithlike, from the undergrowth and threw a haymaker at Cole who ducked easily. He rabbit-punched his assailant on the nose. A sharp crack as the bone splintered.

‘Ow, fuck man.’ Nelson retreated, clutching his injured face.

Breeze rolled his one good eye. ‘I done you a favour, son. I didn’t tell Electrolux, but I know you been shagging his daughter. I didn’t tell ‘im, ‘cos I don’t want ‘im upset and e’d ‘ave killed ya. But me and the boys are still goin’ to give you a good hiding.’ He advanced on Cole who seemed stunted and child-like by comparison. Cole steadied himself, then lashed out, putting to good use every painful ounce of the pugilistic training Len had given him over the years. It didn’t make a blind bit of difference. In a moment the giant had him in an unbreakable headlock and began pounding his face with the hilt of the baseball bat.

‘Stop,’ shouted Fellowes, ‘you’re making a big mistake. You’ve got the wrong person. I’ve known Cole for years. He’s still a virgin.’

‘I am bloody not,’ objected Cole from under Breeze’s elbow

Breeze paused and stared at Fellowes quizzically. ‘I think you might be a bit pissed, my son.’

It was enough of a respite for Cole to wriggle out from the chokehold. He darted for the safety of the shadows where Bubbles and Nevin still lurked in terror, but Breeze had positioned his men well. Strong hands gripped him and his arms were shoved behind his back. The vengeful Nelson held him fast as a couple of shaven-headed louts took turns to boot him in the testicles. True to his name, Breeze swept Fellowes aside like an autumn leaf and advanced, bat at the ready.

Cole could only watch, powerless, as the monster raised the instrument above his head like an executioner’s axe. Breeze might not intend to kill him exactly, but this kind of a “spanking” would certainly render him spastic or brain damaged – and all for a fuck. Well, more than a fuck actually, an entire afternoon of the most degraded sex he’d ever imagined and some that he hadn’t.

God, the memory alone was almost worth having his brains bashed in for. Except if they bashed his brains in, he wouldn't be able to remember it any more. Still, there was no doubt about it – people were calling the wrong Luxton, Electrolux.

Cole spat a gout of blood into the giant's, leering slab of a face. Breeze let it pass – it wasn't the first time it had happened in his career.

'A question before you hit me. Do you read the papers?' sputtered Cole.

Funny lot, these youngsters, mused Breeze - this one's about to get his head stoved in and he wants to talk current affairs. Breeze decided to humour him, so he lowered the bat, granting a momentary stay of execution.

'Yeah, The Sun, so?'

'Then even you must have heard of Aids?'

'What if I have...?'

'Any idea where it comes from?'

Breeze shrugged. Everyone knew about this terrifying new disease -gay problem - nothing to sweat about. Cole struggled to get his hand to his inside jacket pocket, fingers searching desperately for his passport. He flung it towards Breeze who picked it up, flicking through the pages in the watery moonlight. He wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer, but the penny began to drop as he noted with mounting alarm, the recent African visas.

Cole twisted his bruised and bloody mouth into a grin.

'That's right - Africa. And guess what? I fucked a load of prozzers while I was there and I just found out that I've got it. You stupid fucks.' Cole sprayed another random arc of blood, but Nelson had already released him, hopping backwards like a scalded cat. The rest of the group retreated

slowly out of range. ‘You catch it from bodily secretions...you know, like blood and stuff...and saliva.’ Cole threw his head back, gathering another gob.

Breeze and the boys stampeded across the Common. With immense satisfaction, Cole wiped his bloody mouth and stooped to retrieve the little blue book from the wet grass.

‘Len?’

‘What?’

‘I don’t think I want to be married to you any more.’

Len didn’t react. It was difficult to hit someone from the prone position anyway. Len lay stretched out on the double bed next to his wife and tried to assuage his anger by taking long slow breaths, just as the marital counselor had advised him. But it wasn’t working; like trying not to drown by taking long steady drinks of water.

He’d opted for early retirement from the army, so there was money in the bank. Despite his son’s delinquency, he’d had little trouble getting the job of technical director at Walker’s Metals on account of his deft hands and years of army engineering experience. Things couldn’t have been peachier for a childless couple. The problem was, they had a son.

The boy had fucked off to London. God only knew where he was now, or even what he was doing. But Len refused to beat himself up over it. He wasn’t a bad husband or father. Yes, he’d pushed his boy to be a success; perhaps too hard, and to be fair, he’d clobbered him a bit too. But what father wouldn’t? Sacrifices had to be made – eggs had to be broken to make omelettes. And one of these days, Cole-junior would be a success whether he liked it or not. If and when he did

come home, he'd always be welcome. A plate of chocolate Hob Nobs and a cup of tea would be waiting for him. What more could a parent do for his kid?

Yet his wife was still giving him grief.

'Look, I didn't kick the boy out.'

'No. You punched him out.'

'He's welcome back at any time. And he will be back when he runs out of money and I'll patch things up with Walker and maybe sort him a job and everything will be fine again. You'll see.'

Julia was silent. On the other side of the bed she was coming to terms with her own life. This wasn't about the boy, although that was part of it. It was about the two of them. Len simply couldn't or wouldn't see that things had never been fine between them. She was locked in a self-destructive cycle with this man; a cycle of violence and abuse that was destined to repeat itself over and over again, like a scratched record. The only way out was out, and that would take courage. She had one life and she was going to do something with it.

Julia surreptitiously slipped her hand under the mattress and felt for the comforting texture of her letter; the one from Channel 4 with the little Cuisenaire sticks forming the logo; the one that was going to change her life. She'd show Len that she wasn't tonto – besides, Tonto as any decent game show contestant knew, was The Lone Ranger's sidekick.

'Jonathan?'

'What?'

It had been a while since the two young men had spoken like this, sharing confidences in the dark. With his new income Cole had set himself up in a little Soho hotel called Hazletts, and now rarely spent the night on the floor of Fellowes' crusty flat.

From his hastily constructed bed of cushions on the musty carpet Cole could sense his friend's intense scrutiny even in the dark. Fellowes almost never called him Jonathan.

'What exactly were you up to in Nigeria?'

'Business.'

'Yes, but what sort of business?'

'Go to sleep.'

'What sort of business?'

'Monkey business. Now shut up.'

Fellowes fumbled with the bedding. After a short pause he said: 'are you really sick?'

'Am I sick?'

'You know...'

'I know what you're thinking. You're thinking: in the pub back there, he got my pint of cider by mistake; he took a sip and then I drank out of the same glass. Ooh mummy, I hope he doesn't sit on my toilet tomorrow. I might get AIDS too.'

'Well, have you got it?'

'How the hell should I know? I might have that Mad-Cow disease. We all might.'

'Half of Africa seems to have it now. You didn't do anything stupid over there?'

'No, I swear to you I didn't touch a single hamburger while I was in Nigeria.'

Cole heard a further rustling of sheets as Fellowes sat upright on the bed above him.

'Did you have... you know, did you do it with anyone over there?'

‘I don’t know, Charles, do what?’

‘Do...it?’

‘Have you ever done it Charles? You haven’t, have you? You haven’t ever had-it-off; made the beast with two backs; horizontal danced; jiggy-jigged; screwed; shagged; vicious tit-fucked; doggy-styled, or even presented a pearl necklace to anyone? Have you? You can be quite a bumpkin sometimes. And a prude, which makes it worse.’

‘This isn’t about me,’ insisted Fellowes.

‘Oh really? Why not?’

‘I was asking if you were sick.’

‘What gives you the right to ask that kind of a personal question?’

‘We’re...friends.’

‘I don’t know. I ...may have done something with this girl, a prozzer, but I don’t know. I don’t think so. Now, since we’re such good friends, and we’re both still a bit pissed, let me ask you a personal question. Are you happy?’

‘What?’

‘Are you happy?’

‘Yes...no, I don’t know. Problems at work...it’s life. You get on with it as best you can. What’s the point of complaining?’

Cole chuckled in the dark, without humour. ‘You’re the one with a disease, Charles. It’s called fear and it’s wasting you. You shut yourself off from so much, sealing your emotions inside a shell of anodyne amiability. Where’s your passion Charles, your love, your laughter, your rage? All this time I’ve known you, you kept us all, your friends, your family at arms length. You’ve spent your

life on the touchlines; a smiling spectator, refusing to participate, like the fat kid at games. You're "off games" for life. Why is that?

'Sometimes I dream I'm on a high-board; diving into a lake of blood...'

'That's not an answer...is it love that scares you? Who do you love Charles?'

'Why would I tell you that?'

'Because we're friends Charles - or meant to be. But you're content to remain a closed book to everyone, even me: calf-skin cover, hand-tooled and gold embossed, but still a closed book. And that's fine, but don't expect me to share my innermost secrets with you, not if you won't even let me read the prologue.'

'Nobody gets to read the prologue. As for the book, it's all too boring and ghastly for words.'

Cole thumped one of his lumpy cushions in frustration.

'Remember one of the first conversations we ever had: the masks? Well Charles, like I said, you're the one who goes through life wearing a mask. Nobody has any idea of what's going on inside you. And that's why you've never had a fuck. Because people aren't stupid, not even women - especially not women. If you're going to wear a mask, get a Batman one or a Zorro one, not this bullshit tragic thing; this Byron mask.'

'Brian mask, it's actually a Brian mask.'

'Very amusing and enlightening, as always.' With that, Cole turned himself over and pulled the sleeping bag over his face.

'I don't want to play games, Cole.'

He could hear Fellowes fidgeting on the squeaky bed above.

'What happened to make you like this? You can tell me. I may not remember in the morning.'

'Don't... don't keep digging. You won't like what you find.'

Cole heard his friend sigh. 'I'm a closed book, Cole; one of those hand-tooled red, calf-leather jobs with gold embossing. Can't we just leave it at that?'

Cole lay back in stubborn silence.

Fellowes exhaled; a weary, long-drawn out thing, filling the air with the bitter tang of cider-breath.

'It's not fear you know, it's guilt. You really want the story?'

'I do.'

'Fine. Here it is: once upon a time... a long time ago, I murdered my own brother. The end.'

Even in the darkness Cole could sense his friend's agonized expression.

'Jesus... I thought you were just going to tell me you were gay or something.'

As Antonia warmed herself at the AGA, she was alerted by the sounds of a car on the gravel outside. The door opened to reveal Madeleine, lugging a heavy Tesco bag. In silence the housekeeper sat wearily, untied her black headscarf, then produced a large copper urn from the bag which she placed reverently on the stained table. Albert presented the women with mugs of steaming tea and tactfully withdrew.

'Oh dear,' said Antonia, taking the housekeeper's calloused hands in hers, 'Madeleine, I'm so sorry, I didn't realise that poor Mrs Perlmann was a relative.'

'Not a relative, no. But we came to this country together, from Berlin in Sixty-Seven, hoping to get to Israel, but there was war. So here we stayed, in England, and we had nothing and we knew nobody. She looked after me then. Yetta was good friend.'

'That is so,' agreed Albert, clicking his heels, saluting the reliquary.

‘What about her children though, surely they would want to...?’ Antonia inclined her head toward the urn.

‘She had a fine clever son Bruno, but he disappeared like so many in those days. Her man, her husband, did not go with her, he stayed in the East waiting for news and so I took his place and later when he knew that there was no hope, he tried to make escape another way, but...’ Madeleine shrugged, ‘...he was killed, at that terrible, fucking wall.’

Antonia let the unaccustomed profanity pass without censure.

‘Sometimes I believe I did not try hard enough to make him go when he could. But I was thinking only of myself, you understand. Poor Yetta. How different her life would have been.’ Madeleine shook her head sadly.

‘That which doesn’t kill us...so often diminishes us,’ murmured Antonia. ‘So there’s no family to take charge of the remains?’

‘There was a nephew in this country, Daniel - a how-you-say-it? - a never-doing-it-well, always he was asking for money; “Yetta, I need more money or my business is finished, I must have more money ,Yetta. Help me with your money.” But she stop with the money and so they did not speak no more. Her heart, it was broken. And then, last month, he died already. His heart was broke also, but some say he was killed, murdered. Who knows? ’

‘Was he married?’

‘An ex-wife, she was the one that called with the news; a selfish woman. She does not want to be bothered with this. What does she care for an old lady she hardly knew? She paid for the cheapest cremation and is signing the papers to me - all legal and in the shape of a ship.’

‘I see.’

‘So now I must keep my promise. That is all I can do for her.’

Antonia hoped the poor old soul hadn't specified that her ashes be scattered on a flowerbed somewhere. Aubrey would go doo-lally if he found chunks of char-grilled German refugee in amongst his precious tulips.

'Uh...what exactly did you promise, Madeleine?'

The old Housekeeper took a deep breath: 'First, I must tell you about Berlin, so you will understand: they took the petrol tank from a big Mercedes car and built a secret compartment under the boot; enough for two people to hide,' Madeleine glanced ruefully at her own substantial girth, 'of course, I was not so fat then. We was at the checkpoint and we hear the dogs sniffing, sniffing...we was so scared, you understand.'

Antonia patted the woman's hands softly. 'You don't have to, you know.'

'Ach, it is OK... there in this dark, without air to breathe, Yetta and myself, we made a promise: some day, somehow, dead or alive...some day we will be getting to Israel, together.' Madeleine wept softly.

Antonia gently raised the Housekeeper's chin and looked deep into her troubled old eyes. 'It's a beautiful and important promise and you must honour it. I shall speak to Aubrey and we'll see what can be done.'

Aubrey, of course, would have absolutely no say in the matter.

There was a further crunching of gravel, a car door slammed and, as though on cue, Aubrey gusted into the kitchen like a small hurricane. He carried a buff folder under one arm, in his free hand was a white plastic tray, full of thick glass vials. 'Funny old bird that Nasir, an oily tick, I grant you, but a tick of his word.' He popped his vials into the old refrigerator and withdrew a series of black and white photos from the file, which with his customary bumptiousness he slapped onto the table for the women's perusal. The pictures were grainy, highly magnified representations

of fungal spores. 'Botrytis, but it's at least it's not bastard canker. What a relief, eh?' He caught sight of the large copper urn. 'New vase? I'll shove a few of my Bybloemen in, if you like. You can stick it in the hallway.'

There was a fresh flood of tears from the housekeeper. Aubrey quickly sensed something not right here; long faces around the table, tears; and the new vase had a screw-down lid.

Which meant that it wasn't a vase.

'Bugger, I've done it again, haven't I?'

Antonia nodded.

Brown shook his head. 'This is really not cool, kidda. Not cool at all.' He was seriously worried.

And Brown never worried. 'That fucking Albion Trust thing. We're being investigated by the S.E.C.'

The Hutch nodded grimly in affirmation.

'Tell them to speak to Piers,' advised Fellowes.

'It's our pitch, we're in the firing line.'

'How come?'

'The S.E.C thinks there's been insider-trading. The Hutch has to see Nick Goodison tomorrow.'

'But you guys didn't even make the trade,' objected Fellowes.

'It's like ministerial responsibility, isn't it? You get a fuck-up on your watch - it's your problem.

No wonder that little sod, Piers Peacey, tried to undo the transaction, after the stock went through the roof. It was too obvious.'

‘So?’

‘So, The Hutch goes down, we all go down.’

‘I wasn’t even here when it happened.’

‘You were the one who actually reversed the transaction. It looks like you were attempting a cover-up.’

‘No, I’ll talk to Mr Peacey. It’ll be fine.’

‘You silly tosser. Mr fucking Peacey’s the one that’s going to sell your bollocks out,’ bellowed Brown.

‘I must be honest with you, my friend. What I am asking you to do is not strictly lawful but that is why I will be paying you a great deal of money.’

Nasir looked to the far side of his desk for a reaction but the young man merely shrugged, his face, with its recent black eye and half-healed split lip, remained impassive. Cole claimed that he’d been mugged earlier that week but Nasir had his own suspicions. He was the type to collect many enemies. Indeed, Nasir himself was one, but his own methods of vengeance were more subtle.

Nasir gave him a business-class ticket for the El Al Friday evening flight. His young employee tucked them into the compact holdall at his feet.

‘It is important that you understand what it is that you are doing and why. You are well educated, so I take it you know something of the Palestinian Question?’

For Cole, the Palestinian Question was simple and could be summed up in one sentence: How much would he get for going there? But he nodded briskly, feigning interest.

‘Good. Whatever the resolution to the larger question of territory and land rights - and only time and God will tell - there is a more pressing issue, one which concerns the condition of our people in “the camps”. I am speaking of innocent civilians unlawfully incarcerated in the most terrible conditions; overcrowding, terror and starvation. Because of the insanitary conditions, there have been outbreaks of cholera; hundreds have already died and hundreds more will die. But the authorities are withholding vaccine. It is but another facet of Israel’s genocidal agenda - disease as a political tool. It grieves me to have to tell you this about your own people.’

Ah, so he thinks I’m Jewish...

Cole was shrewd enough to understand that that might be the reason he’d been chosen for this task. He decided not to disabuse his employer of the notion.

‘I’m not that Orthodox, you understand.’

‘So I have observed.’

‘How can I help?’ asked Cole, with as sincere an expression as he could muster.

Nasir got to his feet and unlocked what Cole took to be a huge metal safe. There would be bundles of cash inside, a good proportion of which would shortly be tucked into his own jacket pockets. This time he was seriously going to put the screws on. Nasir had already shown his hand and admitted the illegality of the project. Cole could scarcely refrain from rubbing his hands in glee.

Nasir hauled open the heavy steel door, bringing forth a cloud of condensed vapour which quickly dispersed to reveal the innards of an industrial freezer. On the centre shelf was a glossy black Perspex flask about eight inches tall. Nasir carefully withdrew the object and placed it on the desk in front of Cole.

‘Inside this flask is a layer of dry ice. At the core is a small glass vial containing Cholera vaccine; a substance which has no intrinsic value of itself, but to the people suffering in these inhuman camps

it is beyond price. Your task is simply to get this flask to Tel Aviv. Once there, you will proceed to the Sheraton and meet with T'ar'iq, who will have left on an earlier flight. You will hand over the flask and he will arrange for it to be taken to the West Bank. At this point, your job is done. Enjoy the hotel for one week – at my expense, naturally – see the sights like any normal tourist, then return home.

‘There is one complication however: under no circumstances allow yourself to be delayed. You must keep this flask in a freezer until you depart tomorrow afternoon. Thereafter, the dry ice inside will keep the vaccine in a frozen state for a further twenty-four hours. After that, there will be biological decay and the vaccine will quickly become useless. Time is critical once the flask is on its way. Is that understood?’

Cole nodded. ‘What about customs and stuff?’

‘There are no metal components in the flask or the vial, so neither will show up on an X-ray. As for concealment? Well, that is where I must put my faith in your resourcefulness. It is why I have chosen you, rather than T'ar'iq to courier the vial. For this, I will pay you two thousand pounds now, and two thousand on your safe return, mission accomplished.’

Cole inspected the flask dubiously. Droplets of condensed moisture were beginning to appear on the glossy, obsidian surface.

‘There can't be much vaccine in there; not enough to inoculate hundreds of people. Come on, Nasir, I'm not completely stupid. Five grand now, and five on my return. And what's really in it?’

Nasir was delighted; the young man was behaving exactly as predicted by trying to haggle. The question of money was moot, since by the end of the week, Cole would be dead, along with a substantial portion of Jerusalem's Old Jewish Quarter.

‘You are so very astute my young friend and quite correct. Cholera is an acute intestinal infection caused by the bacterium *Vibrio cholerae*. It has a short incubation period, from less than one day to five days, and produces an enterotoxin that causes the copious amounts of so-called rice-water diarrhea that can quickly lead to severe dehydration and death if treatment is not promptly given - which in the camps is ...let us say, problematic.’

‘The shits?’ offered Cole sympathetically.

‘Quite. The substance in this glass vial is a modified and very mild strain of *Vibrio Cholerae*. It is a relatively complicated task to bioengineer such a strain, so that it is not lethal, but still effective enough to generate appropriate antibodies. This is delicate work, which our friends cannot easily achieve in Palestine, - they lack the facilities that we are fortunate to possess here at the Centre. But what our people can do, on-site, is combine this seed-strain with serum from the blood of horses where antibodies will form to create the appropriate quantities of the vaccine required. It is, if you like, a starter-kit for an effective vaccine. You have humbled me, I should never have underestimated your intelligence and, as a gesture of my contrition, I will offer you four thousand pounds now and another four on your return.’

‘Done,’ agreed Cole. They shook hands. Cole scooped up the phallic flask and popped it into his holdall. ‘And if one of your boys can drop me up the road at Waughstone, I’ll whack the old elephant’s dildo into Aubrey’s freezer, tout-suite.’

Nasir raised an eyebrow.

‘Sorry...’

‘I shall have T’ar’iq give you a lift. You can get to know one another better and he can show off his new toy for your delectation.’

Life was good. The talented young master occupied the beige leather bucket seat of his new X19, Wafid ibn Wafid and his Camel Drum Ensemble blared through the speakers and a watery June sun permitted T'ar'iq to negotiate the country lanes with the roof down. To add icing to this beautiful spicy almond-cake of an evening, a flea-bitten old hedgehog wandered blindly out of the hedgerow; a golden opportunity to demonstrate his technique to the young master. T'ar'iq spun the wheel, instantly crushing the creature into spiny pate. With a screech of brakes the young Arab stopped the car, jogged back up the road and inserted one of his visiting cards into the sticky entrails.

Back behind the wheel, he peered at Cole from behind Kohl-enhanced lashes, seeking approval. Finding none, he gunned the motor once again. He broke the strained silence, smiling as he explained: 'Is good for practice... my uncle is liking your cream horns, how much is for your sweet meat please?'

This fucking nonce fancies me, thought Cole, as he shifted uncomfortably in the bucket seat. 'What is it with you?' he bellowed. The driver grinned at him for the umpteenth time before swerving towards a jaywalking pheasant, but the creature was a split-second too fast.

'Will you fucking stop trying to kill everything on the road, including me,' objected his passenger as T'ar'iq fought to regain control of the careering vehicle.

T'ar'iq was quietly pleased as he turned into Waughstone Hall and skidded to a halt beside a black Seven- Series B.M.W saloon. He'd impressed the master, he knew that for certain. The young man might even be jealous of his skills.

Cole leaped out of the bucket seat, glad to be alive. ‘You’re insane, T’ar’iq, do you know that?’

T’ar’iq grinned and waggled his head from side to side. ‘I am Ghoul now,’ he announced.

‘No,’ said Cole patiently, as he retrieved his holdall from the bucket seat, ‘you are T’ar’iq.’

‘I am Ghoul,’ insisted T’ar’iq, mildly.

‘I’m Cole. You are T’ar’iq.’

‘Now, I am Ghoul,’ T’ar’iq searched his pockets for another visiting card.

Cole was beginning to get his dander up: this psychotic, transvestite Arab was trying to hijack his name. It simply wouldn’t do. ‘No, I am Cole and you are not. My mum and dad went through quite a painful, probably unpleasant experience to make it so. Which means that you cannot just decide to be a Cole unless you agree to live with my moronic parents for the next twenty years. No short cuts, sorry, pal.’

‘I am Ghoul.’

‘This is not negotiable.’

‘I am Ghoul.’

‘It’s not a great name and it won’t get you into the best schools, universities, restaurants or clubs, but it is my bloody name and I earned it. You can’t have it. Try something else.’

‘I am Ghoul.’

‘You’re not.’

It was getting to be a like a bad pantomime.

Miriam Mallone gave the dusty library window a brisk wipe with her satin sleeve and peered out.

There was an open-topped sports car parked at the top of the gravel drive, where two slight, dark-haired young men were beginning to shove each other. One of them looked like that little shit,

Cole, actually, come to think of it, they both looked like that little shit, Cole. She couldn't be sure though and Bernard always reacted badly to any mention of his nemesis. In truth he was still somewhat obsessional, like the time he'd imagined that his entire class had suddenly become Coles. It was all a bit of a worry, could she now be suffering from the same disorder?

The taller of the young men turned, giving her the opportunity to see his face in full. Her heart sank. No doubt about it - it was Cole.

She turned away from the window to break the bad news. Baxter lounged in the Ox-Blood leather armchair in his rented dinner jacket and withdrew a large cigar from the top-pocket, inhaling the rich aroma of moist tobacco leaf.

'Bernard, I hate to tell you....' Miriam's observation was interrupted by the heavy-footed arrival of Aubrey in his holey socks, patched sweater and baggy jeans.

'Ah...Baxter, there you are.'

Baxter leaped to his feet and clasped Aubrey's hand. 'Aubrey, I'm very grateful to you for setting this up.'

'Think nothing of it old chap. And there's...Mrs, Miss... um.'

'Miriam.'

'Yes of course.' Aubrey gave Miriam's hand a bone-crushing squeeze. To his horror he noted that she resembled an Oxford Street Christmas tree in her bright green taffeta gown and outsized accessories.

There was an uncomfortable silence as Aubrey appraised his formally attired guests.

'Well...'

'Yes...'

'Mmm...'

‘Here you both are then...’

‘Yes, here we are.’

‘Yes.’

‘Yes.’

Baxter looked around the room, each wall was fronted by a tall shelf full of books; an eclectic collection in which valuable pasteboard-bound first editions rubbed shoulders with cheap Louis L’Amour paperbacks. A few dusty rugs were scattered here and there across the scuffed, oak-timbered floor.

‘Lovely room, very comfortable I should imagine.’

‘Cold though...in winter. Never even come in here in the winter.’

‘No. I suppose not.’

There was another uncomfortable silence. ‘Um, look, I don’t mean to pry but are you going somewhere later, Bernard...in your, ah, glad-rags?’

Miriam was about to open her mouth but Bernard quickly cut her off. He silently cursed her for insisting they hire that bloody great B.M.W and the formal evening wear – to make an impression, she’d said - he should have known that Aubrey would never bother to dress up for dinner, or anything else, for that matter.

‘Oh, I see, of course...the evening wear, yes, we’re going on to a bit of a function afterwards.’

‘I was going to say, you’re a bit overdressed for dinner at Waughstone; pair of long-johns and a string vest would be pushing it, most nights.’

‘I hope we’re not making you feel uncomfortable.’

‘I’m not the one in the penguin-suit. I expect Nugent will be here soon, probably stuck in traffic or something. So how about a drink, brandy?’

Aubrey wandered over to a small dark-wood cabinet. Inside was a collection of crystal decanters. Baxter noticed that the levels of each had been carefully marked in black crayon.

‘Mmm...’

‘Do you know how to make a Brandy Sour?’ asked Miriam.

‘Is that a joke?’

‘I don’t believe so.’

‘Why on earth would you want to make a perfectly good brandy, sour?’

‘Oh, never mind. On the rocks will be fine, with a twist.’

‘What?’ Aubrey was genuinely perplexed at this strange desire to adulterate his good brandy. ‘You actually want ice and lemon in it?’

Aubrey shook his head sadly and poured three large glasses from the crystal decanter on a nearby cabinet. At that moment Albert arrived with a click of his heels. ‘Ah, Bertie, yes, Mrs...ah Miss ...ah, Miriam, would like, for some reason, ice and lemon in her brandy.’ The Major-domo peered at the large American woman in the gaudy green frock with a face like a toddler’s painting. He recognised her from somewhere. He had a good memory for faces, even one disfigured by three layers of foundation and swathes of green eyeliner. Yes. It was that bad tempered torte-misgeburt from the train who’d smashed his teeth to smithereens few years back. She’d shown no signs of recognising him. Indeed, she scarcely deigned to notice him as he took her brandy glass and quickly bustled off to the kitchen for the adulterating ice and lemon.

Baxter gave his partner a swift, sour look of his own in return for her solecism.

He accepted a glass and sniffed appreciatively. ‘I agree, this is excellent brandy, Aubrey. Shame to spoil it with ice and such, but Miriam is of course...an American.’

Miriam bristled. ‘Meaning...?’

‘Nothing, my love. It’s just that you do things differently in the States.’

‘We don’t look down our noses at our guests and try to make them feel uncomfortable if that’s what you mean.’

Baxter gave her another look but Aubrey wasn’t listening, he was peering through the library windows at the two young men rolling around on the gravel outside – the Organ Grinder and one of Nasir’s boys. It looked like Cole was winning, but he couldn’t be sure. Nasir’s factotum was quite a useful street-brawler and he wasn’t allowing Cole any distance to put a punch in. He wondered if he should fetch his megaphone and commentate.

‘Aubrey, I almost forgot. I took the liberty of bringing along a couple of very fine Cubans. I know how partial you are to a good cigar.’

Like a dog hearing the word ‘walkies,’ Aubrey’s ears immediately pricked up at the word cigar. He dragged his gaze away from the skirmish in his driveway.

‘A Cohiba? Bloody marvelous.’ He accepted the proffered cigar, mood improving by the second.

‘Sit down, sit down. Make yourselves comfortable. I’ll fetch the instruments.’

Baxter settled himself once again in the leather armchair while Miriam took the sofa. Albert arrived with her drink and placed it on the little side table in front of her. The long glass contained a plastic novelty swizzle-stick with a gorilla’s head on the top. ‘I am telling the Mrs Anthony that we have the company and she is telling me that she is coming. And that is that.’ With a small dignified bow he left the room, tripping only slightly on the rug.

From the recesses of the drinks cabinet, Aubrey withdrew a pair of silver scissors, an oversize box of matches, and deep white marble ashtray the size of a bucket, half-filled with the ash and carbonised residue of decades. He settled himself in the matching leather armchair facing

Baxter and carefully clipped the Cohiba. He lit up, puffing joyously, ‘better... smoke ...up... Antonia’s not exactly the world’s biggest cigar fan.’

Baxter lit his own, and to Aubrey’s surprise, Miriam did likewise.

The three of them puffed away in companionable silence. Aubrey leaned back and meditated upon the evening ahead: This bloody man, Baxter, had been phoning almost constantly for the last few weeks begging him to set up a meeting with Nugent and he’d even had the cheek to apply a touch of emotional blackmail. Aubrey had finally agreed on tonight’s dinner just to get the monkey off his back. And although the ex-Housemaster and his grotesque girlfriend had pitched up looking like a couple of game-show hosts, at least they’d had sufficient style to bring along a decent cigar or two. Besides, they might not stay too long and he wouldn’t have to shoulder the entire social burden; Nugent was always good for an entertainingly tall story or two; his son would be arriving shortly from London, and now it seemed that the punchy young Organ Grinder had turned up. He puffed out a satisfied “O” and wondered if Cole was winning - whether he should tell Albert to set an additional place at the table, or just call for an ambulance.

‘So, Bernard, where exactly are you off to, tonight?’

‘I’m not with you, Aubrey...’

‘You mentioned that you were going on to some “do”, in your penguin suit.’

‘Yes...yes, so I did. It’s a ball, you know, charity thing.’

‘A charity bollock? Which one? We’re usually quite well up on that kind of thing round here, hunt balls and such like. Bloody bore, but we’re usually expected to fill a table.’

Baxter scabbled desperately for a face-saving answer; peering manically round the room for inspiration, until he caught sight of a book on one of the lower shelves entitled: “Breeding and enjoying Siamese Fighting-Fish.” by Willard Smike.

‘Yes. It’s in aid of ... uh, Siamese Fighting-Fish. A bit specialist, somewhat esoteric for most I imagine.’ Baxter rolled his eyes and tutted, ‘not that I really want to go of course.’

‘So, why are you going then?’

‘Yes, exactly. Why am I going? Good question, Aubrey.’

Miriam could see her partner floundering, like one of his putative fish. She leapt to his aid: ‘Aw, Bernard’s being too modest. He’s one of the country’s top Jap-Fighting-Fish experts.’

‘Siamese, darling.’

‘Whatever.’

‘Are you? Are you indeed?’ pressed Aubrey, ‘and they’re endangered?’

‘Yes, very. They, uh ...won’t stop fighting.’

‘Fascinating...’ Aubrey considered this information as he puffed away, eyes closed in utter contentment. Baxter threw Miriam a helpless glance.

Antonia wafted into the library in light cream blouse and diaphanous white silk trousers ‘Oh dear, it’s those foul stogies. I thought I smelled something disagreeable.’

Baxter leapt to his feet, quickly stubbing the offending cigar in the bucket-sized ashtray. Such a waste - he’d barely smoked a quarter of an inch. He noticed that Aubrey simply knocked away his burning tip and surreptitiously trousered the remainder. Miriam, on the other hand, obstinately continued to puff away.

‘How lovely to see you again Bernard, how long has it been? And of course, Ms Mallone. How distinguished you both look.’

With a bland smile Antonia shook hands with her guests, before turning her attention to her husband: ‘Nugent phoned, he’s at the station; in need of a lift, and it seems that there are two belligerent young men outside, one of whom, I think, is eating gravel.’

Aubrey produced the car keys from his pocket. ‘That’ll be young Cole.’

Antonia raised an eyebrow. ‘Do you think he might prefer roast duck? Please invite him to join us, Aubrey. Speaking of which, you’ll excuse me while I go to the kitchen and find out when we might expect to eat.’

‘Right well, I’ll just ... if you need anything just help yourselves or shout for Albert.’ With that, Aubrey padded off after his wife, leaving his guests to the silence of the Library.

Baxter held his head in his hands. ‘Cole, here? I don’t believe it. That’s all I need tonight.’ He turned on his partner. ‘And why the hell did you have to go on smoking like that? Were you trying to embarrass me?’

‘Fuckin’ snotty bitch,’ hissed Miriam. ‘“Oh, it’s those disagreeable stogies,”’ she repeated, mimicking Antonia’s accent. ‘I’ll shove it up her fanny, if she thinks she can treat me like a piece of shit. Jesus, where do these snotty, penniless English get off?’

‘Oh my God,’ said Baxter, appalled, ‘“Up her fanny?” Why do you have to be so crude?’

Miriam rolled her eyes and puffed on the projectile in question. ‘It’s her ass, Bernard. Not the other. A fanny is an ass, it’s not that crude in the States.’ She inspected the sizeable torpedo of tobacco for a second. ‘Although she could probably do with it up the other too. Might do her some good, the tight bitch. Anyway, what about you? Simpering and kowtowing to the big walrus like he was royalty or something? And what’s with the “Jap-fish” story?’

‘You were the one that insisted we dress up and hire that sodding great B.M.W, which is why I had to think of some excuse for our ridiculously overdressed state. No question, we’ve committed a solecism, Miriam.’

‘We’ve committed assholesism? What the hell is that supposed to mean?’

‘Pretty well what it sounds like.’

‘...and Japanese Wrestling Carp? Is that really the best you could do?’

‘I had to think on my feet.’

‘Because you usually think with your ass, and you can’t be sitting on it at the same time.’

‘...my fanny.’

Miriam grinned, despite herself, and took a sip from her brandy and lemon. She spluttered. ‘Jesus, Bernard, this drink tastes like it has washing up liquid in it.’ She gave it a little stir with the swizzle stick and sure enough, tiny bubbles of foam began to appear on the surface.

‘Just be sure that you’re nice to Timothy Nugent at dinner. That’s all you have to do. And back me up on “the fish-story”.’

In the kitchen, Albert and Madeleine ministered to Cole and T’ar’iq’s minor contusions. Antonia stood by, arms folded like a stern schoolmarm.

‘Ow,’ objected Cole as Madeleine administered a dab of iodine to his knuckles.

‘Silly boy. Your own fault. Why you fight? There’s not enough fighting in de world for you?’

‘He’s trying to pinch my name.’

T’ar’iq sat at the other end of the table in dignified silence.

Finally he declared: ‘It is my name.’

‘No. It’s my name.’

‘What’s in a name? Who cares, Albert and me, we have changed de name so many times I cannot even remember. Who you are is de important thing. Not what is you called. Isn’t that right, Mrs Anthony?’

‘Ah...quite. Yes.’

‘I am Ghoul,’ insisted T’ar’iq.

‘See, there he goes again.’

‘Right.’ Announced Antonia losing patience. ‘Whilst you are in my house, you will be Cole.1 and you will be Cole. 2. Is that understood?’

The two young men nodded sulkily.

‘Now Cole.1, you know that Charles is coming up tonight, so I take it you’ll be staying over?’

Cole .1 affirmed with a begrudging nod of his head. ‘Is it OK if I put this in Aubrey’s freezer?’

Cole withdrew the black thermos from his holdall. It was slightly cracked from where he’d used it to clout T’ar’iq on the head. He noticed a little CO₂ seepage from the dry ice inside. ‘Just for tonight. I’m off to Israel tomorrow, on business.’ Cole added in an offhand manner - hoping to regain a modicum of respect here.

Antonia stood, goggling at him, as though he’d just informed her that he was off to the moon.

‘Israel?’

‘Yeah. Tel Aviv.’

‘But that’s wonderful.’

‘Well it’s not exactly the Promised Land or anything, but...’ Cole shrugged modestly.

‘When?’

‘Tomorrow night. Seven o’clock flight.’

Antonia turned to Madeleine who grinned broadly. ‘Then...?’

‘Of course, Madeleine. You must go with him. I’ll phone and get your ticket changed first thing in the morning.’

Cole held up his hands. ‘Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait... What just happened here?’

‘Madeleine is flying to Israel in a couple of weeks. But now, if you’re going...’

‘But I’m going on serious business. It’s not a holiday or anything.’

‘Well, so is Madeleine.’

‘What? She’s going to clean Tel Aviv? What?’

‘She’s escorting a friend.’

‘Oh no, hang on...’

‘It’s quite all right, her friend is dead.’

By way of explanation, Madeleine waddled over to the Welsh Dresser for Yetta’s urn. She brought it to the table.

Cole was relieved. ‘Oh, I see, that kind of dead.’

‘There’s more than one kind?’

‘The paperwork is all in order of course,’ added Antonia.

Cole’s mind raced: on one hand, the thought of eight hours trapped in a tiny seat with an overweight Kraut housekeeper and her dead friend was distinctly unappealing, on the other, it’d be superb cover; two people traveling together with the remains of a Jewish relative would arouse far less suspicion than one young man traveling to Israel alone. He smiled magnanimously, reached across the table and patted Madeleine’s hand. ‘In that case, of course you must come with me. I’ll look after you, don’t you worry.’

‘Ach, what a mensch. Kind boy you are.’

‘I’m sure we all appreciate it, Jonathan...ah...Cole.1. I can’t tell you how nervous Madeleine has been about the whole thing.’

‘I am very frightened for flying,’ the Housekeeper confirmed.

Cole rose and walked to the Kelvinator. He opened the freezer door to a blast of chilled vapour and popped the black flask in amongst Aubrey’s test tubes.

The steady clink of metal on crockery was the only sound from the dining room, evidence that Madeleine had surpassed herself with the duck. The bird was indeed a triumph; crispy with just enough oozing fat to render the meat juicy, without being over-rich. Albert scuttled around, ensuring that the Claret glasses were kept full.

‘You’re quiet tonight, Timothy,’ observed Antonia from the far end of the table.

In marked contrast with the overdressed Miriam sitting opposite, Timothy Nugent wore a rugby shirt and jeans. Clubbable, was how most people would describe him; a florid-looking bon-viveur with thinning, fairish grey hair; a man to whom the idea of cutting a long story short was anathema. He peered up from his plate and grinned: ‘Can’t help it, Ants, this bird is absolutely perfect. Good food as you well know, is the only thing that’ll shut me up. So my silence is, if you like, the most eloquent testimony to your hospitality.’

‘Then I shall pass on your compliments to the wonderful Madeleine - in sign language of course.’

‘It’s the great tragedy of teaching – in all other respects a satisfying, stimulating and rewarding profession, that it fullfills everything but the stomach. I’ve never understood this nostalgia amongst the English middle-classes for boarding school food; all that overcooked mince, diced carrots, and Spotted Dick with festering custard.’

Baxter saw an opening here and was quick to take it: ‘I couldn’t agree more, Timothy, but there are other rewards, especially if you regard teaching as a life-long vocation, as I do...’

‘I see it as more of a life-long vacation myself – only, without the paella,’ replied Nugent through a mouthful of duck.

Baxter looked crestfallen. Cole sniggered.

Under the table, Miriam felt something soft brush up against her ankle.

Aubrey glanced at the empty place next to Cole. ‘Charles is late. You remember Charles don’t you, Tim? He’s coming down from London.’

‘I do, Aubs. Bright boy. What’s he up to these days.’

‘Something in the City. Bernard here, was his Housemaster at Slatters. Did a fine job, too.’

Nugent peered up from his plate with mild interest.

Bingo!

Finally, the opening Baxter had been waiting for. He flashed Aubrey a grateful look and launched directly into his pitch: ‘Indeed I was. As it happens though, I’ve been looking for a new challenge...’

‘It’s not like Charles to be late. I hope he’s all right,’ interjected Cole.

‘Did he say anything to you; anything about being delayed?’ asked Antonia, a touch of concern creeping into her voice.

Baxter continued doggedly over the parallel conversation: ‘...yes, I thought I might spread my wings a bit. Too long spent teaching at one school is liable to ...’

‘No, haven’t heard from him. He’s been very busy at work, though.’ said Cole.

‘Delayed by the traffic, I should imagine. There was some kind of major pile-up in Gloucester, tail-back for for bloody miles. That’s why I came up by train,’ said Nugent, distracted by the parallel conversation. ‘You know, there was one time I was stuck on the M4 for four hours...’

Aubrey perked up: ‘That wasn’t the time with the woman in the caravan? Bloody marvelous story that.’

‘...as I say, too long at one school tends to...,’ continued Baxter, more forcefully now.

‘It can’t be the traffic,’ announced Antonia, ‘Charles was supposed to be coming down by train too.’

‘... stultify,’ bellowed Baxter, a little too aggressively.

There was an embarrassed silence.

‘Eh?’ Nugent stopped chewing.

‘Mr Baxter just shouted the word, “stultify”,’ pointed out Cole, helpfully.

‘Had a boy like that once,’ said Nugent, ‘used to shout things out in class; like “monkey” and “toast”. I thought he was just bugging about, but it turned out that he had Tourette’s syndrome.

Compulsion to shout and wave your arms about. There’s a version called copralalia, which is basically the same thing but with filthy words. Lucky you don’t have that one, Bernard, be a bit of a handicap for a schoolmaster.’

Baxter flushed. ‘I was just saying...’

‘So, what about this woman in the caravan?’ asked Cole, enjoying himself hugely.

Nugent laid down his cutlery and smiled across at Miriam. She felt his foot softly brush her ankle under the table. ‘Oh, nobody wants to hear that old chestnut. Aubrey’s heard it a thousand times anyway.’

‘Go on Timothy. You know you want to,’ said Antonia, giving her blessing. Albert bustled nimbly round the table with the decanter. Baxter sipped and sulked. Miriam decided that even if her partner

wasn't making much headway with Nugent, she certainly was, - judging by the urgency of the ankle-rubbing now going on. She batted her eyelashes with exquisite subtlety as Nugent hit his stride: 'Well, this junior master and his wife, at Downside...or Ampleforth I think it was, - anyway, quite Catholic; prim and proper couple; mad keen on caravanning holidays. Last morning of their holiday in highlands, they decide to drive back in one fell swoop. So, wifey takes the first leg, but they get stuck in the most horrendous traffic jam. Six hours later, still only just south of Glasgow; wifey's knackered. They pull in. Husband takes over, and wifey - not strictly legal this - nips into the caravan behind for a bit of a kip. She takes her kit off, down to her undies, and pops into bed. Five hours later, the husband's made good progress but he hits a wrong turnoff; has to pull over and check the map. Wifey wakes up, gets out of the caravan to see what's happening. But before she gets to the car, husband figures out where he's gone wrong and drives off, leaving wifey stranded on the side of the road, in her shreddies. It's cold, dark, and it's staring to rain so the poor woman quickly realizes that there's nothing for it but to hitch a lift.'

Nugent grinned at the assembled company and polished off his claret. Albert uncorked another bottle and refilled the empty glasses, keen as anyone else to hear the resolution.

'So here we are - half an hour later; husband happily minding his own business, beetling along the motorway when suddenly this Harley Davidson chopper overtakes him, tooting its horn, flashing its lights, driven by the filthiest, bearded, leather-jacketed ruddy great biker you've ever seen - and on the pillion, frantically waving to him, is, of course, young wifey in nothing more than her scanties.'

Aubrey guffawed and slapped the table, Cole grinned, even Antonia permitted herself a wry smile.

'So what happened next?' asked Baxter.

'Eh?'

‘What happened after?’

Nugent looked puzzled. ‘How do I know? I suppose he pulled over and she got back in. I don’t know, that’s not part of the story.’

‘There’s no ending,’ said Baxter, petulantly.

‘I think you might be missing the point, Bernard,’ observed Antonia gently.

The whole point of the evening was that he should be allowed to impress Timothy Nugent with his suitability for a Housemastership at Blundells, but everyone seemed to have forgotten that.

Aubrey tactfully changed the subject: ‘Why don’t you tell us about these fighting fish of yours, Bernard?’

‘What?’

‘Bernard and Miriam are going on to some kind of charity bollock in aid of Fighting-Fish.

Bernard’s quite an expert by all accounts,’ he explained. ‘Which is why he’s all done-up like a pox-doctor’s-clerk.’

‘Please, I would hardly call myself an expert.’

‘Fascinating. Is there a kind of league or championship, or something?’ Nugent seemed quite taken with the idea of this esoteric pastime, he lowered his glass and leaned forward, rapt. For the first time this evening, Baxter had centre-stage; even Cole was making no further attempt at sabotage.

Baxter’s mind raced. ‘Well, I’ve only been involved for a few years, so I’m not up to speed on all the rules exactly... But basically it’s a bit like cock-fighting.’

‘Gruesome spectacle.’ Antonia grimaced.

‘Quite,’ replied Baxter, hitting his stride. ‘Which is why we want to ban it.’

Nugent’s face fell, as did Aubrey’s. Baxter could sense the moment slipping away. ‘Well, not exactly ban it altogether, more regulate and license the competitions.’

‘So you’ll still be able to compete then?’

‘Uh...I don’t exactly compete myself. The fish usually fight with each other.’

‘But your fish can still fight in tournaments. I take it you have some?’

‘Indeed, I’ve been training a couple, for some years now.’

‘Training?’

Goddammit, thought Baxter. He’d gone too far. He wished he’d taken a few moments to flick through Willard Smike’s oeuvre back in the library.

‘I suppose they must have special schools,’ suggested Cole, facetiously. Even though it was patently obvious to him that Baxter was spouting absolute bollocks, the others seemed enthralled. Cole put down his napkin and excused himself. He had, he felt, bigger fish to fry right now.

In the kitchen Madeleine was putting the finishing touches to a large Sherry trifle; a few strawberry halves sunk here and there into a cream strata of geological proportions. She peered up as Cole entered and smiled, ‘Ach, there is my knight in de shiny suit.’

Cole, always sartorially sensitive, wondered briefly if she might be taking the piss. He decided not.

‘I just came in to see if there was anything I could do.’

‘Ach, what a good boy. But everyting is Hunky Dumpty in de kitchen.’

Cole held the door open for her as she shuffled past, lugging the huge cut-glass bowl. He waited until the sound of her footsteps had receded before moving swiftly to the Welsh Dresser; he grasped the large copper urn, gave the top a brief twist and found it unscrewed easily. Inside was a plastic bag full of an ashy residue.

He was about to open one of the Aga doors and dump some of the contents into the flames when he heard Albert's distinctive heel ascending the stone stairs from the wine cellar. He scuttled back up through the house, still clutching the urn. In the hallway he cast around for a secluded room, and noticing that the library door was ajar, sneaked in with his booty.

There was a white marble ashtray the size of a bucket on one of the tables. Hide in plain sight - always the best way. Cole swiftly unscrewed the lid and poured half of Yetta's earthly remains into the marble receptacle. Ashes to ashes, as it were. He was disgusted to find that instead of a wispy, finely-milled substance, the stuff cascading from the urn was gritty, almost chunky in texture. There were even one or two quite large identifiable bits in it; bones and teeth, and fuck, a charred, calcified lump the size of a finger. He gritted his teeth to stop himself retching and raked the substance over with his fingers, mixing it with the ancient layers of cigar ash. He examined the interior of the half-empty urn, gauging its dimensions by eye. It would do just fine. He popped his head out of the door to see if the coast was clear. Albert was in the hallway heading towards the dining room with dessert wine bottles and glasses. He could hear Madeleine in the dining room collecting plates. If he was quick, he could sneak the half-empty urn back to the empty kitchen, undetected.

'...it's about building up the power in their tails, you see. They sort of slap away at each other with them.' Baxter had no idea where this stuff was coming from but it was too late to back-pedal now. He knocked back a full glass of Claret, before reaching for the Muscat.

Cole returned to his seat. The Fish-Trainer's torrential stream of nonsense was still in full spate.

‘Extraordinary. And you have weight divisions too?’ asked Nugent.

‘Naturally, there’s um...Tiddler, ...Light-Tiddleweight, Tiddleweight and then...uh, Leviathan.’

‘Had you heard of this Aubs?’ said Nugent, eyes shining in wonder.

Aubrey shook his head.

‘I love it. What a bloody marvellous night out! Any chance of a bout this evening?’

‘Not tonight, definitely not,’ stammered Baxter.

‘Shame. So what actually happens...hey...?’ Nugent emitted an involuntary, high-pitched exclamation of surprise. Under the table, a stockinged foot was beginning to stroke his groin. He shoved it away, sharply, as though a scorpion had just dropped into his lap.

It was that bloated, overdressed tart across the table, couldn’t be anyone else. Of all the nerve.

Miriam was put out; she was certainly getting mixed signals tonight. Usually the Footsie-Index was an infallible guide to sexual interest and Nugent had been chafing away at her ankle all evening like a randy terrier, but the instant she gave some back he didn’t seem to want to know. Ah well, some men preferred to retain control. She sat back and waited for Nugent to take the initiative once again.

‘...in the centre of the arena is a huge tank full of water - that’s the Fighting Tank - when the bell rings, the fish are dropped in by the Seconds and they just go at it, flapping away until one of them gets knocked out of the water. In the unlicensed bouts there’s usually a large feral Tomcat standing by ready to pounce on the loser, but that’s the kind of thing we want to stamp out. Gives the sport a bad name...’

Baxter froze. He'd just caught sight of another Cole peering in at the dining room window: the one with the makeup and the moustache.

At first, T'ar'iq had been angry because he'd been hurt – not superficial cuts and bruises – pride had been injured. The housekeeper had patched him up, given him a glass of sweet tea and then sent him on his way, still seething with resentment. But, as he drove back to the Centre, he'd given the matter further consideration: it was like the Karate Kid - a film he'd seen on British television. In this wise and insightful tale, the Sensei initially treated his protégée with disdain; humbling him. It was his way of ensuring that the important lessons would be learned. And now, it occurred to T'ar'iq that his own mentor was treating him in a similar manner. To be fair, he deserved it. He'd been showing off and how could he have imagined that terminating a flea-bitten hedgehog would impress such a craftsman?

He'd been given a lesson in humility and knew that he should return immediately; apologise to the young master, relinquish the name and beg forgiveness.

In the meantime, he'd think of a lesser title.

“Djinn” came to him out of the blue. The Djiin or Jinn was a spirit of the desert capable of taking on human or animal form at will. A modest soubriquet, but still quite catchy.

T'ar'iq checked his glove compartment for the silenced .22 pistol, spun his X19 easily round in the slick shit of a farmyard entrance and set off back down the country lane to Waughstone. He caught sight of another pheasant in the beam of his headlights. Maybe even the same one – an omen perhaps; a sign that he'd made the right decision - he gunned the motor as the startled pheasant took flight. This time, T'ar'iq had timed it just right. He clipped the large bird with the square edge of the offside pop-up headlight, sending it tumbling, lifeless, across the lane.

T'ar'iq pulled over and tucked a visiting card under the bird's wing – one for the road as it were. He flung the remaining cards to the winds.

Now, through the dining room window, “Djinn” wasn't entirely surprised to see Mr Baxter, his English-as-a-Foreign-Language teacher, at dinner with the young master assassin. Of course, they were both part of Nasir's handpicked team. He wished now that he'd paid more attention in class. He must apologise to them both.

‘You were saying Bernard?’ Nugent was tapping the table impatiently.

Baxter had stopped mid-sentence and was still staring out of the window, mouth opening and closing, like one of his putative fish.

‘I...I thought I saw something ...someone...outside.’

‘Perhaps it's your Waughstone ghost, Aubrey. Blue Boy isn't it?’ Nugent chuckled, ‘Christ, and people accuse me of telling whoppers...’

‘Ow...you vicious motherfucker,’ screeched Miriam. Something sharp had sliced into her ankle; Nugent's big toenail, most likley. She glared accusingly across the table and shoved her chair back revealing the true culprit; a large and fearless brown rat, which had just taken a sizeable nip at her stockinged foot.

She screamed louder, this time hoisting her chunky legs up onto the chair in terror.

The rat stared impudently back.

‘There's a fucking rat down there.’

With a soft “Pfft”, the rodent evaporated into a red mist.

‘And...it’s a goddamn exploding one.’

Miriam trembled on the edge of her seat, transfixed by the quivering remains of brown rat on the floor before her. Everyone else was staring at the diminutive, moustachioed figure in the dining room door who brandished an automatic pistol; a skein of smoke wafted lazily up from the silenced barrel.

‘Cole .2?’ exclaimed Antonia.

‘Cole?’ reiterated Baxter.

Cole held his head in his hands. ‘For Christ’s sake, if it’s so important to you. You be Cole, I’ll get another name.’

T’ar’iq grinned at Baxter. He was extremely pleased with himself. The lady in the green dress had screamed just as he’d entered the dining room; he’d managed to whip out his newly acquired .22 pistol and clip the rat under her chair with one, instinctive slap-shot. If that wasn’t impressive he didn’t know what was.

‘Djinn...now,’ he announced, waving the pistol slightly.

‘Bloody good idea. Large ones,’ agreed Aubrey, a second before Madeleine felled the intruder with the half-empty cut-glass trifle bowl.

Baxter had come a long way since those callow days of the yellow cardigan. Although he’d put away more than his fair share of Aubrey’s booze this evening he was still in control; his instincts for self-preservation remained intact and fully operational. The situation as he saw it was simple:

1. The mustachioed Cole. 2 /T’ar’iq person was a student of his.
2. Nobody here knew that – yet.

3. The man was indolent, inattentive and possibly even unstable.
4. Only last week he'd awarded the Cole.2/ T'ar'iq person, six marks out of a possible one hundred, in his oral examination.
5. Now the lunatic had decided to come after him with a gun.
6. This wasn't going to look good on his CV.
7. And what was it with him and bloody Coles?

Aubrey scowled at the body in the doorway covered in shattered glass and trifle; Madeleine hunched over the man searching for signs of life.

Nugent poured himself a full glass of Claret and tossed it off before guffawing. 'I'll say one thing for your evenings, Aubrey, they're never dull.'

'We should call the police,' advised Antonia, 'have him taken into custody.'

'Already I make him custardy,' said Madeleine, proudly.

'Is he dead?'

Madeleine shook her head. 'Just being knocked up, I think.'

Aubrey was still keen to introduce strong spirits: 'It seems like we've all had a bit of a shock.

Perhaps we should have that gin after all. Nuge...? Bernard...?'

Baxter declined. If he hung around, the police were bound to discover his connection.

'Look, I'm sorry to have to run out on you all like this but we really must be going if we're not to miss our Fighting-Fish "do".' He raised his eyebrows at his traumatized partner as she gingerly lowered her chunky legs from the chair. 'You shall go to ball my sweet.'

'Maybe I'll stay and have another drink with these guys.'

'I really think we should go my love,' insisted Baxter, through clenched teeth.

‘Well I really think I need a drink. I get attacked by a rat and then shot at it, it’s not the kind of thing that happens every day, not even in New York.’

Baxter ignored her and instead, addressed the group with forced bonhomie. ‘It’s been a slice, everyone. But we really should be going if the world is not to be deprived of its Siamese Fighting-Fish.’

Antonia pursed her lips. ‘Are you sure you should leave now? The police may want to interview you.’

‘What on earth could I contribute that any of you could not? If necessary, Aubrey has my number.’

Baxter walked round the table and took his partner’s arm in a grip of steel.

‘So do I,’ said Cole, acidly.

‘I’ll get your number from Aubs,’ shouted Nugent, making a telephone shape with his thumb and little finger, ‘I may have something for you.’ The ex-housemaster grinned and nodded gratefully as he sidestepped the supine Arab, shoving the obstinate Miriam ahead of him.

To Cole’s dismay, Antonia now turned her penetrating laser blue eyes on him. He had a momentary inkling of what it might feel like to be Aubrey discovered smuggling full-fat milk into his tea, he wriggled with discomfort. ‘Before we call the authorities, I think you might have some explaining to do, young man: I’m as broadminded as the next person but I do tend to draw the line at gunplay in the house. You arrive here brawling with this Cole. 2 person; the next minute we’re in the middle of the O.K Corral. Who exactly is he and what does he want with you?’

‘It’s patently obvious,’ bellowed Aubrey, ‘he was after my gin, cheeky bugger.’ He cradled his tumbler protectively.

Cole took a deep breath. The truth was that T'ar'iq was a bloody idiot who happened to work for Nasir and had some kind of weird crush on him. He'd have to think of something better than that though.

'His real name's T'ar'iq ander...he's a sort of colleague of mine from the Centre...' Cole gestured at the vaporized rat under Miriam's empty chair: 'works in Pest Control.'

Antonia's eyes narrowed to pinpricks, but Aubrey confirmed the explanation. 'It's one of Nasir's crew all right; saw him over at the Centre the other day. I don't think Nasir lets them have booze up there.'

'Why don't I just call Nasir anyway, get it straightened out, without any fuss?' suggested Cole. Aubrey, who could scent another bundle of compensatory cash, was quick to agree. 'Good idea, young Organ Grinder. No harm done, no need for ruddy rozzers all over the house. Besides I do owe the man a favour.'

Baxter frog-marched his unwilling partner towards the empty library. 'Hey, what the fuck?'

'Shut up,' he hissed. 'That lunatic with the gun is one of my students.'

'How?'

'I don't know. He's mad and he's the one that calls himself Cole in class, although I know for damn sure that his name's T'ar'iq. That in itself should be enough reason to want to get out of here...plus I gave him a terrible mark in his oral.'

'What kind of mark would you give me for my oral Bernie?' Miriam licked her lips and swayed provocatively, grinding her hips against him. Baxter grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her hard. 'This is not a joke.' He released her, holding up the thumb and forefinger of his right hand.

'I'm that close...'

She slumped against him sending him crashing back into the bookcase.

‘...I’m that fucking close to getting the job at Blundells: at this point I don’t need controversy; I certainly don’t need guns, mad foreigners or the police in my life and I don’t need a blow job... well, not right now.’

Miriam pulled herself upright and wobbled over to the armchair where she slumped. ‘ So what are we doing in here?’

‘There’s a book here somewhere - “Breeding and enjoying Siamese Fighting Fish” - which I need to bone up on before I see Nugent again. And if you want to make yourself useful, you could retrieve my stubbed cigar. No point walking away from twenty quid’s worth if you can help it.’

As Baxter searched amongst the lower shelf for Willard Smike’s book, Miriam trawled the huge ashtray with her long emerald fingernails. Within a few seconds they both had what they needed - Baxter crammed the stolen book down the back of his trousers as his girlfriend wrapped the expensive, ash-covered cigar in a handkerchief and stuffed it into the top pocket of his D.J. She kissed him on the lips and they scuttled, giggling, from the house.

Fellowes knew the way with his eyes shut which was just as well because tonight, no taxi would take him. They strongly objected to his traveling companion: a certain Johnny Walker.

As he staggered along the black miles of country lanes, he took comfort in the half-empty whisky bottle and a football song that Brown had taught him: “My old man said be an Arsenal fan...la ...la....la...”

Only a few miles away a light still burned in one of the office windows at the Centre. Nasir sat at his desk talking urgently into the phone. He spoke quickly and precisely over the noise of the paper shredder which had been whirring away all evening. His face, instead of the usual impassive mask, was a study in irritation.

‘I see...then I shall come right away. I am, as always, indebted to you, Mr Cole.’

Nasir replaced the receiver and with a sigh unlocked one of his desk drawers and withdrew a large bundle of cash; as usual with these people, he was going to need it.

‘Oh God. That is so gross,’ objected Miriam from the passenger seat of the huge Beemer.

‘What you’re about to witness is the beauty of rural etiquette, my sweet.’

‘Whenever English people talk about “etiquette” it usually means they’re about to do something disgusting, pointless or just plain dumb.’

Baxter had slowed the hired car to a crawl so that he could investigate the balled-up pheasant on the road ahead through the twin-beams of his halogen headlights.

‘In “the country”, if you happen to run over Game, which includes Stag, Pheasant or Quail, you never stop to pick it up, but are obliged to allow the vehicle behind you benefit from the bounty.

Which in this case, happens to be us.’

‘Why don’t we just leave “the bounty” for someone else, which in any case, in England, is supposed to be a nice coconut bar with chocolate, not some rancid piece of roadkill?’

‘Fresh Pheasant - far too yummy to waste.’

Baxter shot his partner a superior smile; he climbed unsteadily out of the car and hoisted the heavy bird by the legs. He was pleased to find it still warm and slung it across the back seat before speeding away into the night.

Somewhere in the distance, Fellowes could just make out the hard black outline of Waughstone Hall against the night sky . He began to croon in a cracked falsetto: ‘There is a house in New Orleeeans...’

‘Slow down babe. You don’t want to get busted. I mean, you’ve had a few tonight.’

‘Good point,’ agreed Baxter. ‘You know, Miriam, my love, I think our luck is about to turn.’

‘The Nugent guy seemed to like the fish-story.’

‘So he did, and no mention of the yellow cardigan business either, thank God. I expect he’ll phone in a day or two, and when he does, I’ll invite him for lunch on Sunday. We’ll have the pheasant with a fruits-de-foret coulis, chat about Fighting-Fish and hopefully, discuss my starting salary.’

‘You want the guy to give you a job so you’re planning to serve him up some kind of weird hit-and-run chicken?’

‘Don’t worry, I’ll hang it first, it’ll be delicious.’

‘Jesus, Bernard, it’s dead already, that is so sick.’

‘Hanging merely imparts flavour, my darling. I’m not talking about lynching the thing.’

As though on cue, the stunned fowl suddenly twitched and regained consciousness.

Panicked by its strange surroundings it leapt to its feet and promptly defecated over the beige leather of the back seat. It flapped its wings madly in an attempt to escape from the confines of the vehicle.

‘Oh my God, the chicken-thing just came back from the dead.’

‘Shit. Wring its neck. Quick.’

Miriam leaned behind and clubbed at the creature with her handbag. It only served to increase the bird's panic. Feathers flew inside the speeding car as Miriam screeched at the terrified creature.

'Die, you zombie fucker.'

'Wring its neck for Christ's sake.'

The bird leapt for its assailant in the passenger seat

'It's trying to peck my eyes out!'

Miriam clawed in her handbag for the illegal can of mace, which she kept for fending off difficult clients, and gave the aggressive bird a good hosing down. A bad idea as it turned out.

'Ahh... Christ, now I can't see.' The car slewed across the road as Bernard coughed and spluttered, choking on the acrid gas. He clawed desperately for the buttons controlling the electric windows and through smarting, streaming eyes caught sight of something solid in the headlights.

One moment Fellowes had been happily singing away on the grass verge, minding his own business, next, a huge vehicle had suddenly appeared from nowhere and was now heading straight for him, blinding him with powerful twin-beams. He felt himself leaving the ground, the near-empty bottle flew from his hands and shattered on the road as he was hoisted through the air as though on an invisible cord. He tumbled through space; gorgeous stars all around, in his mind or in the night sky - he couldn't tell which. Then nothing.

The B.M.W fishtailed up the lane as the half-blinded driver fought to regain control of the wheel. Cool night air from the open windows quickly dissipated the noxious gas inside. Baxter blinked furiously and as his impaired vision slowly returned, he applied the brakes and brought the car to a halt.

‘Jesus, Bernard. We nearly died.’ To Miriam’s relief, the pheasant had flown the coop. She dabbed at her eyes with a small handkerchief. ‘Bernard, I think you just committed another assholeism, and if you ever, ever see that bird again you have my full permission to hang the fucker.’

Baxter rubbed his streaming eyes. He couldn’t shake off the dreadful feeling that he’d just hit something. ‘Did you hear a thump back there?’

‘Yeah.’

‘We hit something, I’m sure of it.’

‘Well fuck it Bernard, it was probably a wolf or a badger or something. Leave it for the next car to eat.’

‘I should really check.’

‘Bernard, you’re outta your mind, you’re half-cut and the cops are gonna be on their way any minute. You wanna hang around here and explain the skid-marks all over the road?’

‘No.’ Bernard was forced to concede the point. ‘Nor those in my trousers.’

Miriam looked at him with a puzzled expression and shook her head. ‘You know Bernard, sometimes it’s like you and I are speaking a completely different language.’

Bernard grinned as he restarted the engine and carefully pulled away: ‘Excuse me Madam, but I would like to buy one of your delicious cream horns. My uncle is very fond of such sweetmeats. How much do they cost please?’

Miriam tutted, it had been a long night. She closed her still-smarting eyes and settled back into the comfortable leather seat. ‘Whatever.’

At the Belfast sink Albert had made heroic inroads on the huge pile of greasy dishes. T'ar'iq slumped in a rickety chair as Madeleine wound a turban of bandages around his battered head. It ached as though it had been split in half with an axe; he was still groggy but awake enough to know that he'd been hit on the head by a heavy object. Through fluttering Kohl-rimmed eyes he peered down at his chest and observed with a thrill of horror, clumps of a bright red jelly-like substance with a spongy core. On his right shoulder, another, larger glob of the same bloody gore - no wonder he was having trouble thinking. He gingerly fingered his head; his hair damp and crusted with trifle. 'My brains, she is come out,' he gibbered in terror.

In the dining room, rat, remnants of trifle and broken glass had been removed and the table cleared for a game of bridge; Aubrey and Nugent paired against Cole and Antonia. Antonia was becoming increasingly concerned as to her son's whereabouts but forced herself to focus on the play. She trumped Aubrey's ace of clubs with her two of hearts.

'Hmm,' muttered Aubrey as Cole collected the trick, 'in that case, take that.' Aubrey smashed the Jack of hearts down onto the table with his huge palm.

'It's not your lead,' observed Cole. 'Never mind,' responded Antonia, absently beating it with her King. Usually Aubrey was forbidden from taking even the slightest liberty at the Bridge Table but Antonia was very much playing on autopilot now. She glanced at the clock; almost eleven o'clock and no still sign of her son. She wondered if it had been a good idea to leave Cole. 2 in the kitchen. He might still be dangerous.

Aubrey checked his own watch. 'That bloody man Nasir's taking his time.'

The phone rang, startling them all. Cole was playing dummy and a non-participant in the hand so he leaped to his feet and ran to the hallway. But no further cards were played at the table, instead, the remaining players strained to catch the murmured conversation. Aubrey took the opportunity to take a quick peek at Antonia's carelessly held cards - more from force of habit than anything else. After a few moments Cole reappeared, his olive complexion now deathly pale. 'That was Nasir.'

'Where the hell is he? What's he playing at?' snapped Aubrey.

'He's in hospital; Coney Hill, Gloucester.'

'Is he all right?'

'It's not him...it seems that Charles has been run over.'

Antonia's cards fell from her hands. 'Oh...' she exclaimed, then collapsed, sliding bonelessly from the chair.

'Nuge, you stay here and hold the fort.' Aubrey sprinted for the door followed closely by Cole, as Nugent ministered to Antonia. In the hallway, Aubrey scooped up the keys to his Land Rover from the telephone table. The two of them pounded down the stone spiral staircase to the kitchen.

Madeleine and Albert looked up from the sink. 'What has happened?'

'Charles has been hurt, he's in hospital but I need you to look after Mrs Antonia. She's a little shocked.'

'I do this. You not to worry. You get to de hospital quick.'

T'ar'iq raised a tentative hand. 'My brain is keep spilling. You are please to take me with you.'

Aubrey didn't even break stride. 'No time. You sort him out, Cole, I'll meet you there.' With that, the kitchen door slammed and he was gone.

‘Great,’ said Cole to no one in particular, ‘what am I supposed to do, carry him on my back?’

‘My car,’ squealed the frightened T’ar’iq, ‘you are pleased to drive my car.’ He dug in his jacket pocket for the keys to his precious X19 and handed them over before slowly raising himself; holding his head as upright as he could. As he edged towards the door he found he still had brains enough to swipe his confiscated .22 pistol back from the kitchen table.

‘Come on you daft sod,’ Cole grabbed his arm and yanked him roughly out into the night.

‘He’s got what?’

Breeze leaned over the desk and yelled directly into the hearing aid.

‘AIDS...’

Luxton recoiled and clawed at the volume control.

‘Ow fuck...I’m not that fucking deaf.’

Breeze retreated to his former position in front of the desk alongside the silent Nelson. They could hear the thumping bass notes of “Wake me up before you go-go.” booming through the floor from the club downstairs.

‘So?’ Lionel Luxton shrugged. He picked up his sandwich and examined it. His two top men stood silently before him like a couple of fidgety school-kids, reluctant to meet his eye.

‘Marmite. Shall I tell you something about Marmite?’

The men nodded without enthusiasm. They’d done some hard things in their time; terrible things.

But this was unquestionably the toughest.

‘Marmite, the name itself derives from the french marmite; a fucking great cauldron, which in the old days, the Frogs used for their country-cooking. They’d chuck in a bit of meat; often pork,

sometimes mutton or lamb and vegetables - root mainly, a few legumes and stock. Hence the picture of the big iron pot thing on the label. It was convenient because they could leave it hanging over the fireplace to cook all day while they were off being peasants.’ He took another bite and peered up at his employees. Luxton could see that they were behaving strangely tonight, but couldn’t put his finger on it. Something was definitely bothering them though.

‘When these peasants got home from a hard day doffing their caps and tugging their forelocks – which, in case you were wondering, was not some medieval form of wanking, but a show of respect – there was a highly nutritious, delicious stew all ready and waiting for them in their marmite. Now, modern Marmite, is primarily a spread, although it can be used for stock in stews, casseroles and such like; it’s a yeast extract containing Niacin, Thiamin, Folic acid, which is good for your hair and nails, and of course vitamin B12 - which I imagine you two will be delighted to know, is very good for hangovers. It also contains Riboflavin, although I’ve never found any cunt that can tell me what that’s good for.’

He sighed, ‘I know I’m wasting my time. When this club closes tonight, you two, along with the rest of the lads will go straight to “Mad-Donna’s” in Romford and stuff your faces with an ‘orrible greasy kebab and chips.’

The two men stared anxiously at the scarlet carpet.

‘What is it Breeze? What’s bothering you two, so this kid’s a chutney-ferret and he’s got the AIDS. Someone’s got to catch it, I suppose. So what? What do I care?’

‘E’s not a chutney-ferret,’ mumbled Breeze.

Lionel was losing his patience. ‘This kid comes in here and cheats me. We give him a bit of a spanking, he goes away again. I don’t want to see him again. I don’t have to see him again. I do

not give a stuff whether he's got AIDS, measles, pox, bubonic plague or just halitosis - that's bad breath to you - a both-ends-farter, in other words.'

Breeze stared a hole in the carpet.

'What's up Breeze? What is it?'

Breeze took a deep breath; he glanced briefly at Nelson who nodded imperceptibly.

'E's been shagging your young Debbie, boss....'

Luxton stopped chewing, a chunk of partially masticated Marmite sandwich hung suspended in his open mouth. None of his men had ever seen that happen before.

Nasir held out placating hands as Aubrey stormed grimly along the hospital corridor towards him.

Within seconds he was hoisted by the lapels of his yellow linen suit and slammed against the wall.

'What's your game, Nasir?'

'Aubrey, please calm yourself. I was not responsible. My man T'ar'iq waving guns in your house? - that I cannot explain. But as for your son? I came upon him lying on the verge near Gibbet Gate as I was coming to you, I swear. The two incidents are not connected. I am playing no games, believe me, please.'

'This man found your son and brought him in,' confirmed a young, harassed-looking houseman.

Aubrey slowly relaxed his grip and turned to the houseman. 'How is he? How serious?'

'Possible concussion we think. Suspected fracture of the left tibia. He's a bit banged up but seems OK. Anything more and you'll have to wait to see the specialist. He's been transferred to a private room... ah...at your friend's expense.'

Aubrey exhaled slowly and turned to the wall where he rested his head against the pale green gloss; huge frame shaking with relief. Nasir observed him with mixed feelings. As a man of science he could describe the vast and volatile chemical and hormonal cocktail now bubbling away inside Aubrey. As a father he understood only too well the parallel emotions of terror, rage and relief that had so recently fought for ascendancy within the man. He understood them in an intellectual sense but was unable to share them. Not any longer. Not for years; not since he himself had stood in a corridor not unlike this one, desperate for news of his loved ones. He'd not been so fortunate as Aubrey though.

And what if his family had survived? Would it have changed anything, he wondered? But he knew that it was futile to think about what might have been, only what was. What had happened had happened, and it was that which gave him his strength and his resolve. 'Children,' he said, 'they will be the death of us.' Just two fathers talking now.

Aubrey managed a wan smile. 'Your children are not your children, they are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself,' he replied in a hoarse whisper.

Nasir smiled in return. 'Ah, Kahlil Gibran.' He felt a sudden and overwhelming urge to blink.

'You're a good man Nasir. I'm sorry about all that. We just couldn't lose another. We couldn't.'

Nasir gazed keenly at the man. Another? Perhaps the daughter was dead. Certainly he hadn't seen her in over a year now.

'You can't stay there, sir. You're forming an obstruction.' A harsh Midlands accent intruded on the silence. The speaker, a uniformed constable, shoved his face uncomfortably close to Nasir's.

'Right, are you the one who brought in the hit-and-run...?'

Nasir swiftly but gently steered the aggressive policeman away from Aubrey. 'I am the one who brought in the young man after I found him lying unconscious on the side of the road. That is his father. Please give him a some time to collect himself, he is still a little shocked.'

Constable Lister shook him off. He didn't like foreigners. This one had been disappointingly courteous but he was still just itching for an excuse to smash the uppity bastard across his beaky nose with his truncheon. 'I don't care if he's just had 25,000 volts up his ringpiece. He can't stay there, he's blocking the corridor.'

'Clear the way,' screamed a paramedic pushing a gurney towards them at high speed.

Lister studied the Arab minutely, waiting for some sign of objection, but there was none. Taking his time, he slowly and deliberately fished in his tunic pocket for a notebook. Nasir stepped nimbly aside as the gurney crashed past sending Lister sprawling and ripping most of the skin off the back of his ankles. The constable leaped to his feet and bawled after the rapidly disappearing crash-team.

'Oy, you...slow down.'

He inspected Nasir's placid face for any trace of amusement at his expense. Again nothing. 'They want to watch out, someone could have a very nasty accident in here,' he sniffed.

'Indeed,' replied Nasir.

From the corner of his eye Nasir could see the young houseman now leading Aubrey away to see his son.

'Now...'

Before Lister was able to continue the interview a second gurney came pelting down the corridor.

Constable Lister, a quick learner, backed himself tightly against the wall. This time the patient was sitting upright on the trolley; wild-eyed, hands firmly clamped to his head. To Nasir's dismay he released an hysterical torrent of Arabic as he sailed past his boss.

‘You know that gentleman, do you, sir? He seemed to be calling something out to you,’ said Lister, suspiciously.

‘I do not know him, but I do speak Arabic. He just informed me that all his brains were leaking out.’

‘He seemed to recognise you.’

Nasir shrugged. ‘Either the poor man has entirely lost his mind, or... a substantial portion of it.

Perhaps he was addressing you?’

Lister bristled. ‘I don’t think so, seeing as I don’t speak any of that horrible allalla... kkkk... aagak stuff.’ He made an ugly throat clearing sound. ‘Thank God.’

‘Alhamdulillah.’

‘Exactly.’

Cole had already found his own way to his friend’s private room and was at the door when Aubrey arrived with the Houseman. Together, they peered through the crack at Fellowes. He was propped up on a couple of pillows, bleary-eyed and somewhat worse for wear. Tiny white plasters dotted his face covering the many scratches he’d sustained from the hedgerow; it looked as though he’d tried to shave with an electric carving knife. His left leg was plastered, but other than that he was in one piece.

Aubrey flung open the door.

‘C...’

‘No,’ slurred Fellowes, ‘I don’t want to see my father.’

Aubrey froze on the threshold.

‘Just Cole,’ continued Fellowes, ‘I don’t want my father here. Please get him to leave.’

‘C.?’ pleaded Aubrey.

‘No. Please go.’

‘What’s wrong C.?’

‘I’m all right.’

‘I won’t stay long...’

‘Tell Antonia I’m fine and please ...just go.’

‘We thought...’

‘I’m fine. You’ve seen me. I’ll survive. Please go.’

Aubrey allowed Cole to slip past and watched enviously as the young man sat at the foot of his son’s bed. He wasn’t a demonstrative man by nature, loud and aggressive perhaps, but not too good with the touchy feely stuff. Now, for the first time in his life, all he wanted to do was to hold his son and comfort him but Charles had rejected him. He didn’t want him there.

And he’d almost lost the boy tonight. He wanted to reach out and touch his only son; remind him that he was here; that he’d always be here for him.

But he was Big Fucking Aubrey, so he did what he’d been asked. He slowly closed the door and walked away.

‘Woah, what the hell was all that about?’ Cole was secretly thrilled that Fellowes had chosen him to remain, rather than his own flesh and blood.

‘I’m still quite pissed.’

‘Pissed off or pissed drunk?’

‘Both. But I’m sobering up.’

‘So why kick your dad out?’

‘I’ve failed once again to live up to his extraordinarily low expectations. I can’t face him tonight because I can’t decide whether it’s him or it’s me I hate most. But someone deserves punishing right now and it might as well be Aubrey. Forget about it. I need you to do something, I want you to find someone in this hospital who’ll sell you a bottle of whisky or vodka, I don’t care which, anything really. There’s always some kind of thriving contraband operation in places like this. Rather like your little set-up at Slatters.’

‘Is that wise?’

‘No. But I don’t want to be sober for a while. I’m in pain.’

‘What about the drugs?’

‘Yeah, get some dope while you’re about it too.’

‘No, the drugs they’ve already given you. Painkillers and stuff.’

‘I don’t think they gave me anything. They’re waiting for the alcohol to wear off.’

‘Come on Charles, you’re not thinking straight...’

Fellowes bellowed irritably, ‘I’m in pain, Cole.’

Cole shrugged. Fair enough and frankly, he could use a drink himself.

There was a brisk rap. The door opened to reveal Constable Lister accompanied by the apologetic-looking young Houseman. ‘Sorry, but the Constable would like a few words now, if you can manage.’

‘Not a good time,’ Fellowes airily waved him away.

‘Sorry, but he’s quite insist....’

‘Right, name, son?’ Lister barged past the Houseman and strode aggressively into the room, notebook at the ready.

Fellowes gazed balefully up at him through a sour blood-shot eye. ‘My first name?’

‘That’d be a good start, lad,’ replied his interrogator.

‘Claude,’ lied Fellowes smoothly, ‘...although the C is occasionally silent.’

Oh no, here we go, thought Cole, taking the opportunity to slip out of the room and locate an entrepreneurial member of the Coney Hill hospital staff with booze for sale.

At the stained kitchen table Madeleine and Albert silently sipped cocoa together. They could hear the house beginning its nightly exhalations once again. Aubrey had phoned from the hospital with the good news and was on his way back. A relieved Antonia had taken a sleeping pill and retired to bed while Nugent had simply crashed on the leather sofa in the library where his loud snores merged with the various creaks and groans of the old building.

Albert, sensing that his wife needed a little time to herself, finished off his cocoa and gave her shoulder a little squeeze. He deposited his empty mug in the sink and made his way up the narrow spiral staircase to their rooms at the top of the house. Madeleine sat for a while longer lost in her own thoughts. Finally she gazed over at the copper urn atop the dresser and whispered. ‘Well Yetta, these children of ours, eh?’ She sighed and shook her head. ‘Now what you want me to do with you then? Maybe we drive around see de sights of Israel and I find somewhere nice for you, perhaps somewhere on de Mount of Olives, beseder?’ The old Housekeeper raised the chipped mug to the silent remains of her friend.

It was time to think about packing for the trip.

With all the comings and goings she hoped that Cole wouldn't forget about that peculiar black object that he'd put in the freezer. Maybe she should put it in the spare room ready for him, along with the rest of his things. She wandered across to the Kelvinator and heaved open the door. There it was. A strange looking object, to be sure, like a sort of missile.

She'd never really taken to Cole. Nothing she could put her finger on, but he'd always seemed a bit slippery somehow. Like Vera Handelsmann, a neighbour back in the old days, always smiling and helpful to your face but sometimes you'd catch her with a calculating, oddly malevolent expression across her Slavic features. Back then there had been persistent rumours in the neighbourhood that Vera might be Stasi informer, as so many were. Likewise, Cole had always struck her as a bit of a cold fish - polite enough, even charming at times but a bit too calculating for her liking. Perhaps she'd misjudged him over the years. Certainly tonight, he'd been genuinely concerned about his friend; kind and obliging in respect of the Israel trip, but even so...

Madeleine donned her faded pink oven-gloves and removed the black object from the freezer. On closer inspection she was relieved to see that it was neither a missile nor any kind of explosive device, merely a container, like the Devil's thermos flask. She unscrewed the top with her mitt. There was a soft hiss and a gust of something.

Gas!

She'd been right all along and now she was going to die through her own stupid curiosity. She slumped, waiting for the toxic fumes to take effect and wondered briefly if there would be time to write a note to her beloved Albert before the convulsions began.

A few seconds later she exhaled. Nothing. No strange effects, no weird tingling. Nothing - silly, silly, silly. The emissions were just frozen vapour creeping up from a bed of dry ice inside the flask. She chuckled at her own overactive imagination, wafted the gaseous tendrils away with her hand and peered inside. A plastic sleeve in the heart of the container held a smallish, thick glass vial of the sort Aubrey used.

Perhaps Cole had only been doing Aubrey a favour, by returning one of his samples from the Centre.

What a terrible thing was a suspicious mind. All those years of hiding and running had made her mistrustful of everyone.

But wait. Moment mal.

Hadn't Cole said that he was putting it in the freezer just for tonight? Which meant that he was planning to take the thing to Israel with him tomorrow night. Which meant that it didn't belong to Aubrey. Nothing to do with him in fact. The object had been brought over from Nasir's Centre and that in itself was cause for alarm. God alone knew what mischief was being made over there, if the young lunatic waving his gun around the house tonight was anything to go by.

Something was not right here. She could detect the smell of fishes, and she'd never been one to turn a blind eye to the smell of fishes. Whatever was inside this glass thing, it couldn't be good.

Gingerly she withdrew the tube from its plastic sleeve. Through the frosty glass she could make out a straw-coloured mass inside, like the residue of a half-eaten lemon popsicle.

She scanned the freezer compartment and quickly found what she was looking for: the white plastic tray containing half-a-dozen similar stoppered test tubes; a collection of Aubrey's tulip blights from over the years. She selected the one that looked most alike and swapped them round; inserting Cole's frozen vial into the tray and the tulip blight into the sinister black thermos.

As she made her way up the spiral staircase, her old knees popping and cracking like an Australian bushfire, she wondered if she'd done the right thing.

'Reminds me of all those times down in the Shakespeare Costume Cupboard. Do you remember when we met in my cubby all those millions of years ago?'

'Vaguely.'

'I said that I thought there was a peculiar whiff of evil about you?'

'No, I don't remember that.' Cole sipped the cheap own-brand Tesco's Vodka; astringent liquor scouring his throat.

Fellowes sat up in bed drinking out from a plastic cup; he was knocking it back quickly and steadily, as though on a mission.

'Well, I think I was wrong: it's not that you smell of evil, more that you have a nose for it. Rather like a warped sommelier.'

'That bloke, Walker, reckoned I had the Devil's eyes. Now I've got the nose to match. Perfect - after all these years I find out that I've got a fucking Halloween horror-mask for a face.'

'I didn't say you have an evil nose; I said you have a nose for evil. Different thing. I send you off to find some illicit booze and here you are not fifteen minutes later with a litre of Vodka from God knows where. I mean, you have to admit, you do have a bit of a gift for sniffing out the depraved and corrupt. In medieval times you'd have made an outstanding Witch-Finder General, I expect.'

There was an edge to Fellowes' conversation tonight. He was a still drunk and getting progressively worse. But there was something deeper than that; a kind of manic fury.

Cole sighed: 'It's very simple, you just ask any hospital porter, it's what they do to supplement their crap pay - smuggle in fags, booze and stuff for the patients. Hobbs did it in London last summer.'

'It's a gift, let me tell you.' Fellowes swigged the clear spirit with abandon.

'Well it certainly beats the jumper my Nan sent me last Christmas. I burnt that.'

'You burnt your Nan's sweater?'

'The neck was too tight and one of the arms was longer than the other.'

'That's rather sad.' Fellowes gazed glumly at the green bedspread. 'I never knew either of my grandmothers. Actually that's not true. I vaguely remember my father's mother. She wore a wig – a weird ginger rug. Imagine that. I mean, if you have to wear a wig why choose something that looks like a flattened squirrel, why not go for broke and have a fucking enormous Elvis-pompadour with side-burns?'

'I expect it was because she was a woman.'

'All right, a Madame Pompadour then?'

'I have no idea...listen, Charles, you're being very strange tonight.'

'I feel strange. I got sacked today.'

'I'm sorry, I didn't know.'

'No, how could you? I also got run over and may be a cripple, just to put the capper on a beautiful, fucking glorious day.'

'What happened?'

'Piers.'

'Piers?'

‘You smelled him didn’t you, with your exceptional nose? That’s why you never liked him, you could smell what a corrupt, deceitful little fiend he was, couldn’t you?’

‘He’s a twat, yes.’

‘There were some irregularities on the books; some deals that Piers had made on our pitch when he was the Blue-button. So we – Brown, Hutch and I -were hauled up by the SEC; the Stock Exchange Council and told to resign otherwise there’d be an investigation and charges brought. No redundancy, no payout, no nothing. That was the deal. And we took it, because that’s what we do...did... for a living; make the best deals.’

‘Not Piers?’

‘Of course not Piers. His father’s one of the partners and a member of the Council. You know what the motto of the Stock Exchange is? My word is my bond...unless of course, my father happens to be a partner.’

‘Is that why you didn’t want to see Aubrey?’

‘That and many, many other reasons.’ Fellows refilled the plastic cup. ‘Let me tell you something else - you’ll like this. After Nasir brought me in, while I was lying on my trolley in admissions a nurse told me this, it’s a true story but it’s also a joke. In hospital earlier today there was a little boy with leukemia. He’d been slowly dying for months and what they desperately needed was a bone marrow donor, but of a rare and unusual blood type. Finally, at lunchtime today, a suitable donor is found, giving blood in a Shopping Centre somewhere in Gloucester. Anyway, it’s the little boy’s last hope, so this man agrees to donate his marrow. But the boy’s fading fast and it’s a race against time. The traffic’s pretty bad so they send a couple of motorcycle policemen to go and fetch him and bring him back here on the pillion. The surgeons and team are scrubbing up, they’ve got the boy on the table under anesthetic; all they have to do is get the Good Samaritan here on time.

Anyway, in the middle of all that comes a twit who's had a few too many at lunchtime; a fellow who was hoping that Arsenal would be fielding Graham Rix for Saturday's game against Liverpool. But they won't be. While this oaf is reading the sports pages in the pub, or at least looking at the pictures, he discovers that Arsenal have pronounced their handy and popular left midfielder unfit because he's pulled a hamburger or something or shagged too many birds the night before - oh dear. Well the sports-fan storms out of the pub in a rage, screws up the paper in a rage and flings it into the road just as the cops fly past on their motorbikes at 60 miles an hour. The tightly twisted paper is drawn into the front wheel of the leading bike and gets tangled the spokes. Wheel seizes up; rider goes straight over the top and lands headfirst on the deck. The bike bounces across the road and goes through the windscreen of an oncoming car, which crashes. The second bike with the pillion-passenger, swerves, skids and the donor is sent flying across the road whereupon a Cadbury's Dairy Milk Chocolate delivery truck runs over his head.

Of course there's chaos. They now send one of those emergency choppers for the donor's body – after all, it wasn't his brain they were after – and they get it to the hospital here where they are able to remove his precious bone marrow. I don't know how - suck it out with a straw probably. And guess what? The ungrateful little sod they gave it to, died on the operating table at twenty minutes past seven this evening.'

'That's a true story, yeah?'

'Yeah.'

'And a joke, you said.'

'Yes.'

'I think the punchline needs work.'

'Ah,' said Fellowes holding up a finger, 'I haven't actually told you the punchline yet.'

‘Go on then.’

‘Well, the Copper on the first bike is in intensive care with possible brain damage, the driver of the oncoming vehicle was killed outright; passenger also in intensive care; the rider of the second bike is fine, other than some bumps and bruises; the truck-driver is in shock; the football fan turned himself in and likely to be charged with manslaughter; his life’s probably ruined. The donor’s dead and so is the kid. Boom-boom.’

‘I’m still not laughing.’

‘That’s because it’s a really, really bad joke. You know, one of the ones that everyone groans at. The trouble is that it’s being told by the ancient, out-of-touch and deeply unamusing stand-up comedian in the sky: “His jest will savour of but shallow wit, when thousands weep, more than did laugh at it.” He’s just a sad old comic in a sequined suit compereing the Game Show of Life but I know his secret. I have the answer to the \$64,000 question....’

‘Which is?’

Fellowes gestured his companion closer. ‘...that there is no \$ 64,000. And nobody is ever allowed to win the Teas-made or the cuddly toy,’ he whispered.

‘Here’s another one. Guess what the last American P.O.W in the Pacific died of at the end of the Second World War?’

‘I have no idea.’

‘Spam.’

‘Spam?’

‘Spam. This man survived the Bataan death march when thousands didn’t. He’d survived being torpedoed on the prison ships when thousands hadn’t; he’d even survived the camps. But he was

brained by a loose can of Spam from one of the American food drops on Japan from one thousand feet. And do you know what his name was?’

‘Go on then.’

‘Private First-Class, Seymour Pamme. I kid you not.’

Cole raised an eyebrow.

‘That out-of-control can of luncheon-meat had his name on it, you see.’

Cole shook his head.

‘It’s a groaner isn’t it?’

Cole shrugged, undecided. ‘I’ve got a story.’ He leaned back in his chair. ‘A hundred odd years ago, like you, this bloke thought he’d discovered the secret of the universe. He used to get off his face on Nitrous Oxide - laughing gas - and that was when it came to him. But every time he recovered, he realised that he’d forgotten it again. But he kept sniffing and discovering it again. So finally, he forced himself to write down on a piece of paper this amazing and incredible insight while still under the influence. When he came to, he managed to decipher his wobbly handwriting and what it said was this: a smell of petroleum prevails throughout.’

Fellowes rolled around his bed laughing. ‘That’s terrific; wonderful. “The smell of petroleum prevails throughout”- secret of the universe. It’s not all that far off, especially where American foreign policy is concerned. But I still think it’s – “the stench of despair prevails throughout”. The only point to life that I can see, is to have as many laughs as you can while you can, - before that well intentioned can of Spam gets you - because when it’s over, it’s either really over, or you get to spend eternity in the company of a kind of warped, sadistic Bob Monkhouse. There are no good jokes in the afterlife. There’s no dignity in death either. Skulls grin because they can’t laugh. They grin because the fucking joke is on them. They grin in exactly the same way people do after they’ve

just been told a joke that they don't get. As wanton boys with open flies are we to the gods. We are born with our flies undone and banana skins on our feet; the bigger we are, the harder we fall. So, what can we do to survive an eternity of what passes for cosmic wit? We find our own amusements, of course. We surround ourselves with people who might just break the monotony of it all for a moment or two. And that's who your friends are, Cole – the kind of people who can help to kill the boredom of eternity. Nothing more - nothing less. Life is about getting the best jokes while they're being told, and death is catching.'

'You don't think that God wants us to laugh?'

'Only at his own jokes, which are mostly crap.'

'I met this guy in Nigeria who reckons that laughter is the voice of God.'

'Laughter belongs to us, only the groans which follow very bad jokes belong to Him. If you don't believe me, you should have been here this earlier evening. But hang about in Casualty anyway and you'll find out.'

'You've got everything I ever wanted and yet you talk as though the world has dealt you such a bum card.'

'Ah ha, yes. I'm able, because I'm Cain.'

'You're not making sense any more Charles, Claude or Cain or whoever you think you are tonight.'

'I'm paralysed - nothing to do with this nonsense - from a traffic accident many years ago. I can't go forwards and I can't go backwards. All I can do is try to take away the pain by making myself laugh.' Fellowes selected a dog-eared edition from the pile of Reader's Digests by his bed and flipped to the humour section.

' "Laughter, the best medicine" - it really is you know. You're a stand up guy, Cole, I hope you realise that?'

Cole nodded, increasingly concerned by his friend's mental state.

'...a stand-up fucking comedian. You've always made me laugh an enormous amount, which is the only reason I tolerate you. You exist to make me laugh, but you don't any more. I invented you and now I uninvent you.' Fellowes waved his empty hand at Cole as though expecting him to disappear. 'You shouldn't hate yourself so much, you know.'

'Leave me now.' Fellowes picked up the vodka bottle and swigged straight from the neck.

'Why are you still here?' he said, turning a bloodshot and baleful eye on his companion. 'You nibble around me and my family hoping for the crumbs from our table, you mealy-mouth your way around Nasir, you f.f. f...fuck... you mouse...you fool ... you jester...'

Fellowes took another huge swig from the bottle; tears sprang from his tightly closed eyes as he gulped at the corrosive spirit.

'Ah fuck, sorry, Cole, it's the pain...'

He opened his eyes, but it was too late, his jester had already left. '...it's unbearable,' he whispered, to no one in particular.

'Things have changed.'

'Fucking right they have,' replied Cole, still a little shaken by the recent eschatological lecture.

'Clearly, T'ar'iq is in no condition to fly to Tel Aviv at this time.'

'He's a bloody lunatic.'

‘It seems that he has sustained an injury to his head, although I will refrain at this point from asking for a precise explanation. We have other priorities at this moment.’ Cole now sat in the passenger seat of Nasir’s gold Sierra in the darkened hospital car park.

‘He got clumped by a trifle-bowl.’

‘I am sure it would be better not to ask why.’

Cole nodded and scratched his head. ‘Beats a can of Spam, I suppose. OK, so I can’t deliver to T’ar’iq. What now?’

‘Not all our people enjoy the flexibility of movement that you yourself are able to command in the state of Israel. So now I must ask you to take the vial directly to Jerusalem.’

‘Fine.’

‘It will be too dangerous to deliver it to our contacts personally, so you must make what I believe is referred to as a “drop”. At ten o’clock on Saturday morning you must be at the Western, so-called Wailing Wall, where our people will be waiting. Enter the plaza and count off the third ashlar from the northern side. There you must insert the vial into a crack in the wall at head-height.’

Cole shook his head sceptically. ‘I don’t know, Nasir, it’s all getting a bit cloak and dagger.’

‘There will be many people around and this is precisely what they do at the Wailing Wall. Your people write their hopes and prayers on pieces of parchment, which they insert into the cracks; you will scarcely attract suspicion by doing the very same thing. However, timing is now even more critical. This is a fragile bacillus, if you remove it from its frozen state too early, it will be useless to us. You must endeavour at all times to keep it cool or even better, chilled, until the last possible moment; just before you enter the plaza. Is that understood?’

Cole sucked air through his teeth as he’d seen his father do when he wanted to ramp up the price of one of the civilian vehicle repairs he did on the side..

‘Although there is no extra risk, your compensation will reflect the additional effort....’

‘OK.’

‘...on your return.’

‘Bollocks, Nasir, you pay me up front.’

‘Yes, of course. Why is it that I always assume that you are as attached to this humanitarian cause as we are?’

‘Don’t insult me Nasir, I want another five grand for doing this now. And another five later.’

‘Ten is fair.’ Nasir swiftly extracted a wad of notes from his jacket pocket, which told Cole all that he needed to know about the additional risks. ‘Two thousand now, eight on your return.’

‘See you in a week or so then, boss.’ Cole let himself out of the car and wandered over to the nearby taxi-stand.

Nasir watched him leave with some trepidation. Things had suddenly become a little more complex now that the imbecile T’ar’iq had so effectively rendered himself inoperative. Had he but known it, T’ar’iq would have reveled in his final task. On receipt of the flask in Tel Aviv, T’ar’iq was to have been given carte blanche to employ his dubious skills and dispose of Cole by any method he desired - gun, rope, axe, garrote; even butter knife. From there he would have taken the vial to Jerusalem for the endgame: the release of Nasir’s virulent and terrifying airborne pathogen in the very heart of Jewish Orthodoxy - the Wailing Wall.

In the past, attempts had been made to attack the Wall - epicentre of the Jewish faith - but these attempts had been heavy-handed and they had failed. As a biochemist, Nasir was well aware that a precise attack to the heart with a needle could be far more effective than a clumsy bludgeon to the head. Rather than attempt to destroy the Wall of the Jews, let the Wall itself be the instrument of their destruction.

He could see it in his mind's-eye now, just as he'd seen it many times before; Jews from every part of the world, Ashkenazi, Sephardic, Mizrahi, milling, praying, arguing the finer points of the Talmud. Others, hundreds of them, orthodox and not so orthodox with their faces pressed to the ancient stones pouring out their hearts to God; beseeching him for redemption, bathing the wall with their tears, while his vial leaked its deadly contents into the air around them.

He'd been able to cultivate a more potently mutated strain in the kidney cells of his new Nigerian Green monkeys. The improved virus appeared to be hardy, virulent and relatively stable - in many ways the perfect killer, but weaponising it had been the problem. He didn't have the facilities or the technology to turn it into a lethally efficient aerosol powder by freeze-drying or spray drying, and he had no way of obtaining nanopowdered silica to facilitate effective airborne dissemination. The best he could do with the time and money available was to insert the virus - in a soup of amino acids, vitamins, salts and sera - into a pressurised glass vial for deployment as a wet agent. But given the fact that it only required one or two particles of this virulent pathogen to infiltrate the respiratory tract, this basic delivery system wasn't such a long shot; not at a congested site like the Wailing Wall. Moreover, the thing was highly contagious, it appeared to have a morbidity rate of at least 95% and no known vaccine. If all went well the area would effectively become a Hemorrhagic Fever Hot Zone within a matter of minutes. It would only require a handful of human vectors to infect and destroy the entire Jewish Quarter. From there it would spread incrementally into the state of Israel and the occupied territories. Yes, there would be collateral damage; Palestinians might also die, but warnings would go out tomorrow and most would stay safely in their homes while this new plague passed over them. A Twentieth Century Passover; exquisite irony indeed.

Poor T'ar'iq. His name – whichever idiotic one he chose - would have gone down in the annals of the P.L.F.P for eternity. It really was most regrettable that the young man had thrown away his chances of the most glorious martyrdom over a mere trifle - Nasir bristled as he caught his own unintended jocularly. He almost kicked himself for such a trivial thought - he was a disciplined man.

T'ar'iq was now simply another loose end to be tidied away, like the many bundles of incriminating paperwork at the Centre that still needed shredding. In the meantime, Cole would carry the instrument of destruction to its final destination and thereafter...what? He would never have been able to convince Cole to actually break open the vial at The Wall. The young man was a scoundrel, but not a complete fool. Only a congenital idiot like T'ar'iq would have gone along with that. It was like the old proverb – where all the mice got together and decided to put a bell around the cat's neck to hear it coming. An excellent plan, but which of them would bell the cat? He would have to call upon Salah's group; most active and dedicated of all the P.L.F.P cells operating in Israel. Salah, the Righteous One, would ensure success. Saleh himself, or one of his men, must now give his life for the cause and knowingly volunteer to break open the lethal device once Cole had planted it at the Wall. It would add an additional element of risk since Salah's group were known to the security forces and their activities were closely monitored. Such a shame to lose a sound man instead of the dispensable T'ar'iq, ut suicide missions were common in Palestine and the operation could not be delayed. The hawk had been released. What would be, would be, inshallah - it was in the hands of God now.

Nasir gunned the engine. He'd have to hurry now. There was still much to do. Not least of which was a new series of complex instructions to encipher and dispatch to Saleh before morning.

‘Peanuts, drinks?’ The pretty El Al stewardess shimmied down the aisle offering comforts.

Cole had paid his own money to have Madeleine upgraded to Business Class at the Heathrow ticket counter and now, for someone supposedly so frightened of flying, she seemed remarkably relaxed, lolling about in her seat like a Pasha’s wife, thumbing the Stewardess bell every three minutes with whatever trivial request that she could come up with.

Throughout the seven-hour flight, Cole had studiously ignored the copper urn in Madeleine’s grasp, concentrating his attention instead on “Rocky .2”, up there on the cabin screen. Now, as the plane neared its destination, Madeleine had become a little less protective of the object and had shoved it into the seat pocket in front of her.

‘I must go to de toilet now. On this trip we do nothing but sit, eat and watch Sylvester.’

‘What did you expect Madeleine? A Roller-disco or a Hurley match or something?’

‘I could not be doing Roller-disco with my knees.’

‘So, luckily all we have to do is sit, eat and watch Sylvester for six and a half hours then.’

‘I must go to de toilet.’

‘Don’t worry, I’ll keep an eye on Yetta.’

Madeleine turned to him and made a decision. ‘Yetta, she always had an eye for de handsome young ones. She would love so much to be carried into Israel in the arms of an ...an...what is de word?’

‘Adonis?’ suggested Cole.

‘I don’ know dis. But I think she likes that you should take her.’

With that, Madeleine withdrew the urn from the seat pocket and thrust it into Cole’s lap before hauling herself painfully upright.

‘No, you do me too much honour, Madeleine. I think you should keep her.’ Cole tried to shove the urn back, but Madeleine’s mind was made up.

‘She would be so happy

‘I don’t want this.’

‘Please.’ Tears formed in Madeleine’s brown eyes.’ It is such a small thing...’

‘No, I really...’

‘Ach, good boy. Does it feel a little cold to you? That is de spirit of Yetta in de urn.’

Cole watched sourly as she made her way to the rear of the business class section. This wasn’t good. The urn, in addition to containing half the earthly remains of Yetta Perlmann, also contained an illegal glass vial and a quantity of dry ice, which Cole emphatically did not want in his possession. The whole point of hiding the vial in there was so that this idiotically innocent-looking Jewish housekeeper would carry it into the State of Israel herself. The ruse had certainly worked gangbusters at Heathrow, but he doubted whether the Israeli security forces would be quite so accommodating to a young bloke who apparently possessed the eyes, if not the nose, of Shaitan himself.

He had about ten minutes or so to sort out the problem before the plane began its descent.

Cole shoved the copper urn under his shirt and trotted up the aisle to the unoccupied toilet. He double-checked that the concertina door was properly closed before unscrewing the urn’s airtight lid. A small gust of carbon dioxide greeted him. A few scattered chunks of dry ice remained on the bed of ashes. Upright and intact in the midst of the grey detritus was the precious glass vial.

Time to earn his money.

Cole dropped his trousers. He pushed the plunger on the airline’s complementary moisturizing lotion, caught a glob on his index finger and rammed it up his rectum, smoothing the

passage with his forefinger until it became slick. He took the thick glass vial and very gently began the process of insertion.

Although much of the dry ice had dissipated over the past seven hours, the vial was still sufficiently frozen to adhere to flesh. Cole now found himself in a painful predicament - no way forwards, no way backwards.

Suddenly the flimsy concertina door rebounded from the pressure of a pounding fist.

‘What is happening in there? Where is Yetta? You have Yetta in there with you?’

‘Occupied,’ was all Cole could think of to say.

The pounding continued.

‘Busy.’

‘Where is Yetta?’

‘I didn’t want to leave her unattended. Sssh...Madeleine. Calm down.’

‘What are you doing in that toilet with Yetta?’

Passengers in the nearby seats were becoming quite alarmed.

Madeleine leaned heavily against the central hinge. The concertina door gave instantly under her weight, catapulting the bulky housekeeper into the tiny cubicle. Cole, trousers still around his ankles, was shoved backwards, trapped against the wall by the woman’s bulk.

Madeleine wrenched the door shut behind her. She was shocked to find the urn open in the sink and Yetta’s ashes exposed. ‘Oh my God, what are you doing with Yetta, you filthy animal?’

‘Now there’s three of them in there,’ hissed the passenger in seat Fifty-three B to her husband.

‘I’m a bit stuck.’

Cole reached around and felt for the protruding end of the glass vial, fortunately it was still intact.

‘Ach, you have something in your bottoms. What is that from your bottoms?’

The passenger in Fifty-three B liked to think of herself as a woman of the world. Her general principle was to live and let live and she’d heard of the Mile-High-Club of course, but this sounded like some new, deeply deviant, unpleasant variation.

‘Shut up, Madeleine. For Christ’s sake, keep your great foghorn of a voice down.’

‘I trust you with Yetta for two minutes and now you do this disgusting thing.’

‘It’s not how it looks.’ With a grimace of pain, Cole finally managed to wrench the frozen vial from his rectum. ‘Now, Madeleine, calm down and let me explain.’

Madeleine recognized the glass vial and quickly assessed the situation - in a funny kind of way she was quite pleased; her decision to swap vials had been vindicated - clearly Cole was up to no good. He’d smuggled the object in his bottom and now he obviously intended to get it through Israeli customs by stashing it in Yetta’s urn. It was monstrous - not to mention disrespectful and unhygienic.

‘Have you no respect dat you are desecrating de body of my friend, you, you Niebeleungen, you...you creature?’

Cole tried to bend down and pull his trousers back up but there was insufficient space in the cramped toilet. With as much dignity as he could muster under the circumstances he whispered:

‘Please Madeleine, I’m on a humanitarian mission here. This vial contains vital medical aid. People will die if I don’t get it to Jerusalem.’

‘I don’t care. You have no respect for nothing. You are very devious boy.’

‘Madeleine, if you make any more fuss or tell anyone we’ll both be arrested. They’re bound to assume that you’re an accomplice.’

Madeleine paused for a moment as this thought sunk in. She lowered her voice. ‘Then you get rid of that thing, right now, in de toilet.’

‘No. I will not do that. There are human lives at stake.’ - Not to mention an extra eight grand. But he kept that thought to himself.

They were at an impasse. Two of them wedged head to head in the tiny cubicle, neither about to back down.

‘Look, please just go quietly back to your seat and leave me to do what I have to do.’

Madeleine picked up the urn from the sink and screwed the lid back on protectively. ‘You don’t touch Yetta no more.’

‘Absolutely. Cross my heart. Now please just get out of here, Madeleine.’

‘What if they search and look inside of your bottoms?’

‘Then we’re both up shit-creek without a paddle. We’ll probably get five years, apiece.’

Madeleine frowned. They were unquestionably traveling together and if Cole was caught with the glass container there’d be some awkward questions all right, but she doubted that they’d get a five-year jail sentence for smuggling one of Aubrey’s Tulip blights. She couldn’t be certain though. She knew from conversations with Aubrey that many tulip variants had in fact originated in Israel and the State still cultivated the flowers commercially, so they might be suspected of trying to sabotage the Israeli crop. On balance, she decided that it would be safer for all concerned if she dealt with the object herself.

‘I have idea.’

‘What?’

‘I take it.’

Cole was immediately suspicious. He held the vial tighter to his chest.

‘Nice try, Madeleine, but I don’t think so.’

‘They are not going to search a nice old German-Jewish lady in de bottoms.’

‘True.’

‘So. I take it.’

‘No, you’ll ditch it, first chance you get.’

Madeleine offered the copper urn to Cole. ‘I give you Yetta, you give me de glass thing. Hostages, yah?’

Cole considered the idea of the urn as a hostage. It seemed a good compromise under the circumstances. ‘OK, but any funny business with my vial and Yetta goes straight down the nearest toilet.’

Madeleine nodded her agreement and the two articles were carefully exchanged with Cold-War formality.

‘There is one condition.’

‘What now?’

‘In Jerusalem we must go first to de Mount Olives and that is where we say goodbye to Yetta. We throw her to de winds near de Cave of Gethsemane. Yah?’

‘Agreed. When you return the vial to me, I promise we’ll scatter Yetta with all due respect and ceremony, wherever the hell you like. Now, I’ll just get out of here while you ...um...’ Cole nodded at the vial in Madeleine’s hands as he tried to squeeze past her substantial bulk.

‘That is not necessary.’

‘What?’ Cole’s voice seemed to rise an octave or two as he suddenly had a nightmare vision of Madeleine dropping her Big-Top-sized bloomers before his very eyes in the cramped confines of the W.C.

‘I am too old to be shy for such things.’

‘Well I’m bloody not.’

To Cole’s everlasting relief, instead of dropping her drawers, Madeleine hauled up her orange sweatshirt to reveal a colossal pair of low-slung breasts perilously supported by an antique construction of wire, whalebone and pink satiny material. It was not a pretty sight. With an almost catatonic expression Cole backed as far away as could from the monstrous apparition. Hoisting one pendulous breast, Madeleine deftly removed a sliver of whalebone and inserted the glass vial neatly into the horizontal slot. She gently allowed her left bosom flop back over it.

Cole continued to gape like a stunned mullet. Madeleine chuckled, ‘oh, you young ones, you always think that you are de first to be doing anything. Albert and Madeleine were smuggling so many things across borders, years before you were born; sometimes even people.’

Cole eyed her mammoth cleavage warily. ‘Somehow, I don’t doubt that, Madeleine.’

The landing announcement now crackled through overhead speakers, warning passengers to return to their seats.

As they made their way down the aisle, the shocked woman in seat Fifty-threeB hissed at them:

‘disgusting.’ Her husband, on the other hand, favoured Cole with an admiring glance and an envious wink.

An hour or so later the two smugglers emerged, blinking into the harsh sunlight outside Ben Gurion airport and were instantly assailed by the usual insistent and energetic crowd of hawkers, guides and taxi drivers.

Cole counted his blessings that Madeleine had agreed to take the vial. The uncompromising Israeli security officials had insisted on a full and comprehensive inspection of the urn. They'd been polite and sympathetic but that still hadn't prevented them from cavity-searching him too; the second teeth-gratingly cold thing he'd had up his rectum within the space of an hour. The main thing was that they were now safely in the State of Israel; the precious vial intact and undiscovered..

Jamil abu Hashim was gratified to see the Rubenesque beauty in the orange sweatshirt and billowing multi-coloured gypsy skirt emerge from the glass doors accompanied by her handsome son. Jamil was, and had always been, a breast man; the larger the better. But to describe Jamil abu Hashim as a breast man was to understate the case; it was as bit like saying Margaret Thatcher quite liked being listened to. Jamil abu Hashim was a breast man in the way that a newborn baby is a breast man. But he was also a devout man, committed to his wife and many children; a hard worker, good provider and pillar of the community. Yet each day a secret and brutal war for supremacy was waged in his own breast between righteousness and lust. Virtue usually triumphed,

and only rarely did he succumb to the temptation to goggle, like a deranged Basilisk, at the bouncing busts of foreign visitors. It wasn't easy though, the tourists who arrived daily at Ben Gurion had so little modesty; the way they dressed these days left almost nothing to the imagination - it was bad enough having to look up at the Dome of The Rock each morning.

He sighed wistfully as the woman pushed her way through the crowds; she was magnificent, with her jet- black bun, olive complexion and aquiline nose. He approved of the way she dressed - feminine yet modest. There were acres of prime, mature flesh under those clothes; Jamil abu Hashim's idea of the perfect centerfold model – a double gatefold centerfold admittedly, but a bit special, all right.

Simon Blum and his younger brother, Lawrence had been brought up in one of Birmingham's most Orthodox communities and would never have been described as worldly or sophisticated; not even by their severest critics. Nevertheless, they'd mustered sufficient courage to fly half-way across the world in order to leave prayers at the Wailing Wall for the sake of their ailing father.

It had been arranged that a distant relative; cousin David from the Jezreel valley would be waiting at Ben Gurion to shepherd them safely to their destination. But David Har-Zahav was no Sabra; the young farmer had never actually been further afield than Haifa and was, in any case, far more at home behind the wheel of a tractor than the borrowed Peugeot saloon. He'd already managed to get himself utterly and terrifyingly lost on the way through Tel Aviv and was now as anxious and uncomfortable as a pullet at a sly-fox convention. He regretted ever agreeing to this favour and only wanted to get back to the Jezreel as fast as map and wheels would allow. As a face-

saving gesture he offered to drop his two young English cousins off on the outskirts of Jerusalem, but would venture no further into the city itself.

The brothers briefly considered ditching their disappointing cousin, hiring a taxi, or even hitching, but that would have been an insult to the entire Har-Zahav clan. There seemed no way out, until Simon caught sight of the large woman in the bright orange top accompanied by her capable-looking son. They were bickering about their destination but Simon distinctly heard them mention the Wailing Wall. The woman carved an irascible path through the touts, using her small overnight-case as a weapon, although obviously a tourist, she seemed to know what she was doing and more importantly, where she was going. Following a brief but impassioned argument the brothers' determination eventually prevailed over their cousin's temerity. David Har-Zahav grudgingly agreed to trail this woman into the terrifying heart of Jerusalem.

Some yards away another quiet battle was being fought and won. Jamil held himself back from the throng of drivers all touting for the magnificent woman's business, resisting temptation.

To Jamil's surprise, the woman seemed to be making a beeline for him. 'You,' she bawled, 'monit?'

Jamil nodded dumbly.

'Ata medaber anglit?'

'Yes, lady, I speak excellent English.'

'You are de only one not trying to pestering me for business. So, you must be honest man. How much to Jerusalem?' she bawled over the hubbub.

'The Wailing Wall,' added Cole forcefully.

'300 Shekels.'

Madeleine gave him a hard look.

‘200?’

The other touts plucked at the sleeves of her sweatshirt. ‘Get away from me. I don’t like to be pested.’

It was a sign. Jamil had honestly resisted temptation and as a reward for his forbearance, the woman had directly sought him out. He had no choice now but to take them wherever they would go.

‘Please,’ he said, gallantly holding open the passenger door of his Lada. Cole and Madeleine squeezed in across the back seat as Jamil shouted profanities at the other drivers, scattering them. He slowly pulled away.

‘Thank fuck for that,’ said Cole, wiping a bead of sweat from his temples as he lounged back in his seat taking no interest in his surroundings. Madeleine, on the other hand, gazed raptly through the open window, allowing the warm Mediterranean breeze to caress her hair, delighting in the sights and smells. Dusty palms lined either side of the wide road; it was all just as she’d imagined. At last, she and Yetta, together in the Promised Land, as promised. Well, strictly speaking, Yetta was with Cole - cradled safely in his young arms, just as she would have liked.

Jamil forced himself to keep his attention on the road. ‘I am Jamil. You wish to go to the Western Wall, beautiful lady? I shall take you to the New Gate, it will require a short walk from there.’

‘No, de Garden of Gethsemane first; Mount of Olives, yah?’

‘The Wailing Wall,’ countermanded Cole.

Madeleine stared crossly at her companion. ‘We made a deal. First, we go too de Mount of Olives, to say goodbye to Yetta, then I give you de glass thing and we go anywhere you please.’

Cole checked his watch. They still had a couple of hours to get to the Wall but what concerned him was Madeleine's body temperature. The vial was no longer frozen and would quickly become useless if she kept it tucked under her bra-thing.

'Madeleine,' he whispered, 'the vial needs to be kept cool. You can't keep it under your great tits for much longer or you'll destroy the contents.'

Jamil was astonished. He could have sworn that he'd just heard the word 'tits' from the back seat. Surely no son would utter such a word to his mother? He shrugged and put it down to his terrible fixation. Sometimes, late at night he'd lie, sleepless in bed, troubled by lustful fantasies. To his great shame, on those occasions he'd creep downstairs and fumble through his well-thumbed secret 1950's corset catalogue collection, or worse, call a certain number in America where a young lady would discuss her breasts and all the wonderful things she was able to do with them. It was a terrible, terrible betrayal of everything he stood for; an unspeakable, shameful act, and bastard expensive too, at US \$ 3.80 per minute.

'Why you say "tits" to an old lady? You are so vulgar.'

Jamil was reasonably certain that the woman herself had just said 'tits' too. He was beginning to feel lightheaded but kept his eyes locked firmly on the road ahead, muttering his mantra: 'I will not stare, I will not stare, I will not stare...'

He sneaked a swift peek through the rear view mirror and narrowly avoided colliding with a cattle truck.

A dusty black Peugeot cruised alongside. Inside were three Hassidics dressed in the orthodox fashion, complete with black fedoras and swinging peyos - the distinctive curly locks. To Jamil's amazement, all three of them, driver included, were staring fixedly at his backseat

passengers. Instead of overtaking, the car pulled in behind them again. It seemed that the entire state of Israel, was transfixed by this lady and her companion. How very peculiar.

‘Madeleine, I know we made a deal, but I’ve got to get that vial cooled down and to its destination as quickly as possible. As I’ve told you, it’s a vital medical supply.’

Madeleine crossed her arms firmly.

‘Yetta first.’

‘No,’ said Cole, winding down the window. He slowly and deliberately unscrewed the lid of the copper urn. ‘Yetta hits the road. Hello Israel, goodbye Yetta.’

‘No, no, no, please, OK.’ Madeleine’s resolve quickly crumbled - she hadn’t come all this way to blend Yetta with the roadside dust of Highway 1. She tapped Jamil on the shoulder. ‘We are very hot, we need to stop for refreshments, something cool, and then please... to de Western Wall.’

Jamil nodded. ‘A melon would perhaps be acceptable?’

She checked with Cole who shrugged and nodded.

‘That will do very nice.’

Jamil pulled in to the side of the road where an abbreviated Bedouin in a ragged djelaba was selling fruit. He grinned a happy, gappy smile at the approaching tourist trade; prices on his stretch of the highway had just quadrupled.

The salesman greeted Jamil with a handshake as Cole jumped out of the taxi and began rummaging among the melons which lay out in the sun like a row of great green blisters. ‘These are no good; they’re boiling. Who the hell wants a warm melon?’

Jamil translated, the little Bedouin responded with a cackle and an excited stream of Arabic, Jamil rolled his eyes.

The salesman opened a large plastic cool box. Cole peered inside, but to his disappointment there was no ice, just a few smaller watermelons, protected from the more direct ravages of the sun. The Bedouin took a half-melon from the box and cut off a thin red slice with a rancid-looking knife. He handed it to Cole.

‘What was he babbling about?’ asked Cole.

‘Nothing. Nonsense. It is of no account,’ replied Jamil.

Cole took a small bite. It was good. If not exactly chilled, then at least quite cool. He was still somewhat dehydrated from the flight and was finding it surprisingly refreshing.

Watery pinkish juice dripped down his chin. He wiped it away with his sleeve. A half-melon would serve as a temporary organic cooler. If the virus wasn’t already as dead as a doornail, it might at least survive the next twenty miles or so embedded in the cooling fruit. ‘All right, how much?’

The Bedouin held up all the fingers he had: Eight.

Cole dug in his pockets for the coins. ‘Bloody highway robbery.’ Cole passed the half-melon through the taxi window to Madeleine. On the back seat, Madeleine withdrew the glass vial from her brassiere and plunged it deep into the messy red pulp.

Cole gnawed at remnants of his slice. The stunted salesman cackled once again and repeated the Arabic phrase. To Cole’s irritation the man was leering at him now, capering and winking.

‘What the fuck is he saying to me, Jamil?’

‘I doubt that you would wish to know.’

‘I do.’

Jamil sighed and shrugged. ‘It is an old proverb: “A woman for necessity, a boy for pleasure and for sheer ecstasy - a half-melon left in the sun.”’

Cole sputtered, choking up melon pulp, ‘F...fff...uck.’ Curiously, one or two of the black seeds popped painfully back out of his nose.

‘Lady, do you know many Jewish people in The State?’

‘Many in Europe. Not so many here.’ Madeleine cardled the sticky half-hemisphere on her lap as the vehicle continued on its journey.

‘The party in the automobile behind, seem highly intrigued by your presence.’

They craned heads to observe the old Peugeot. Sure enough, the vehicle now accelerated as though to overtake and drew level with them. The occupants stared back impassively through round black-framed spectacles. After a few moments, the car dropped back and pulled in behind them.

‘I do not know them. That is sure.’ Cole and Madeleine sat silent, lost in their own thoughts, disturbed by the presence of the strange vehicle.

The traffic began to thicken as they approached the outskirts of Jerusalem. Soon, the tailgating Peugeot was submerged in a sea of vehicles. To Madeleine’s surprise the roads were broad and well-maintained. In place of flat-roofed homes populated by biblical figures and gentle doe-eyed farmyard animals, they passed large commercial structures and the modern Ben Gurion University. To their left, loomed the square bulk of the Knesset building.

The Peugeot popped up beside them again at the lights. ‘Shalom’, called Madeleine cheerfully, through her open window. The driver studiously ignored her, hunching lower over the

wheel, black fedora jammed firmly over his eyes. Jamil turned north towards the Jaffa Road intersection; the vehicle waited for them to pull away, before following.

Jamil slowed to a crawl at Mahane Yehuda, deftly avoiding ubiquitous fleet-footed Arab boys hawking newspapers, fruit, pastries, sandals and souvenirs; older, slower men too, hawking the contents of their lungs and nasal cavities into gutters.

Madeleine inhaled deeply, head bobbing out of the window like an excited Border Collie as she filtered the unpleasant aroma of car exhaust fumes and unwashed bodies. In between she could detect the scent of ancient spices in the air; a somoom of nutmeg, paprika, cardamom, cloves, the whiff of precious Omani Frankincense. Yetta would have adored this. The gentle winds caressing the Mount of Olives would soon be blending her essential molecules with these, the timeless odours of her spiritual homeland.

They wound they way through to the Notre Dame of Jerusalem. In former times the building had served as a hospice and a monastery, now a guesthouse and pilgrimage center but no less impressive for that. Opposite, the New Gate to the Old City. Gazing up from her window to the Temple Mount, Madeleine gasped as she caught sight of the stunning cupola of the Dome of the Rock, flaring in the morning sunlight like a vast golden goose egg on the breakfast table of God. Jamil kept his eyes on the road; he was having a hard enough time keeping his imagination in check as it was.

‘We’ll have to walk from here on. So you can let me have the...ah, item now,’ hissed Cole.

Madeleine thought about it for a second. Why not? She was a confident traveller in this land; no longer reliant on her young companion - if he refused to accompany her up the Mount of Olives,

she had Jamil, she trusted that Jamil would take her. She dug into the melon, seeking the vial with her nails. Juice spilled out over the thin cotton of her garish gypsy skirt, she wiped her hands on a balled-up paper tissue from her sleeve.

Jamil pulled up by Notre Dame and parked - illegal, but he decided to risk it. He'd already made up his mind to lead his passengers through the maze of the Old City to the Wall, since they would, in any event, require a guide.

It wasn't entirely a sense of gallantry that motivated him to scuttle around to the rear of the vehicle and hold open the door for his female passenger. He was fast losing in the battle with his better self and was banking on getting a good scruze down her gigantic cleavage as she hauled herself out.

'You may leave your cases in the boot, they will be safe for the time being.'

'Hold it,' ordered Cole. Through the rear window he and Madeleine watched nervously as the battered Peugeot pulled up on the other side of the road.

Two bespectacled passengers emerged, toting valises; both tall and lean; almost sticklike, uncomfortable in their ill-fitting black suits and fedoras. The Peugeot drove slowly away, leaving them standing on the curb. They huddled, pretending to consult a map.

For Cole there were only two possibilities: Nasir's men, come to baby-sit the package or, more likely, undercover security forces; Shin Beth perhaps. They could scarcely be otherwise in such pathetically obvious disguises.

Jamil waited patiently, holding the door open for Madeleine.

On the back seat, Madeleine offered the vial to Cole, but to her surprise, he declined it - fearful now of the men-in-black.

'Might be better if you hung onto it for a while longer.'

Madeleine rolled her eyes. ‘Look, de melon is messing my dress. You keep de glass thing now, you have this stupid melon too.’

‘No, please, Madeleine. Keep the vial. Give it to me when we get to the Wall.’

‘No, you take.’

‘I don’t want it at the moment.’

‘You want de glass, you don’t want de glass? What?’

‘You keep the vial, I’ll keep Yetta.’

‘No, you give me Yetta now, I give you de file.’

‘Vial.’

‘Vile...’

‘Ok,’ breathed Cole, ‘keep ‘em both - Yetta and the vial. How about that?’

‘I don’t want de vile.’

‘Well, I don’t want the fucking vial at the moment. It’s too dangerous.’

‘Oh... is too dangerous for you, but not for me?’

‘Madeleine, please just shove the vial back under your tits again, just ‘til I know what’s going on. Please?’

Madeleine gave up. It was too hot to argue. Her knees were to be severely tested on the long walk ahead; she just wanted to get it over and done with.

Jamil stuck his little finger in his ear and waggled it around. Either he was hearing things or the young man had just said “tits” again to his lovely mother.

He gazed curiously down at the back seat, where without warning the woman yanked up her bright orange sweatshirt and tucked something small and glossy under her immense bosom. Just like that, it was over.

Jamil rubbed his eyes. That was an authentic 1950's Carol-Brent Montgomery-Ward pink rayon/cotton brocade, open-bottom foundation garment, or he was a Dutchman. Unbelievable. All he'd hoped for was a simple flash of cleavage down the happy tunnel of her sweatshirt neck as she clambered out. Instead, he'd been treated to a full-frontal of one of the great bra-and-corset combos of all time, and, in his favourite colour. It was as though a classic car enthusiast had just stumbled across a mint condition 1958 Cadillac Eldorado with triple two-barrel carburetors and walrus hide upholstery. Or a lifelong Elvis fan had, well, just seen Elvis. If it hadn't been for his firm grip on the doorframe Jamil might have swooned.

He would file away that beautiful sight in his memory forever. Such incredible fortune was enough for any man. He would not tempt fate by hoping for more. Now, he would simply do his duty and guide his customers to the Wailing Wall as though nothing had occurred.

Madeleine clambered out of Jamil's car holding the redundant half melon. 'What I do with this?' she demanded.

It took all of Jamil's self-possession to hand it off to one of the street urchins. The snot-nosed youth stuck his face into the object which had until recently, been cradled in Madeleine's warm embrace and began to suck at the pink pulp with rat-like concentration.

Jamil stared enviously for a second or two, then turned and headed for the New Gate. 'Follow me please.'

'I don't like those men in de black suits and hats, they make me nervous.'

'You and me both, Madeleine,' said Cole.

Madeleine quickly began to lag, old knee-joints buckling. Much as he would have enjoyed the honour, Jamil felt it only right that the woman's handsome, but foul-mouthed son support her along the way. He wasn't entirely sure he could trust himself, in any case.

It was clear now, even to Jamil, that the men in black were tailing them. Fortunately, once across the road, the New Gate area inside the old City was thronged with Arab moneychangers, tradesmen, tourists, pilgrims, soldiers; even a pepper-potting of nuns. They quickly shook off their hunters.

Jamil forged ahead at a good clip. From Bab el-Jahid they turned into the St Francis road where a couple of heavily armed young IDF conscripts lounging outside a bakers shop dropped to one knee and aimed their lethal looking automatic weapons at the trio until they realized that what they had imagined was the ominous click of a rifle bolt was the popping of Madeleine's rheumatic left patella.

They wound their way through the Christian Quarter, oblivious to the exotic knick-knacks and onto the Via Dolorosa. Even though it was downhill now, Cole was tiring, encumbered as he was by Madeleine's heavy arm over his shoulder - a cross of his own making. He was beginning to think that he should have left her in the taxi after all, but then she did have the best hiding place for the vial. He wished one of the many devout tourists would lend a hand; a contemporary Samaritan or latter-day Simon of Cyrene.

To Cole's relief, Jamil halted at nearby intersection, indicating a sunburst of paving stones. Cole and Madeleine slowly staggered up. 'Station Seven,' announced their guide.

'Thank fuck for that,' said Cole, releasing Madeleine's arm, sweat pouring down his face, 'we can get a monorail or something for the rest of the way.'

Jamil looked nonplussed. 'A Station of the Cross....'

'There's no train?'

'No.'

'Christ-on-a-bike.'

'Nor any form of transport, I fear.'

Cole touched his toes and jiggled his numb right arm, and that was when he noticed that the men-in-black were back again. A hundred yards or so behind, they were pretending to study their map.

Madeleine slumped exhausted, perspiring and breathing heavily in the shade of a shop awning, weakly fanning herself. Jamil waited respectfully.

Cole checked his watch: half-nine, local time. Madeleine was going nowhere fast and the taxi driver was about as much use as a one-legged man in an arse-kicking contest. Perhaps he should just retrieve the vial from under Madeleine's tits and leg it. No. Bad idea. If they were arrested and searched, it would be better if Shin-Beth found the illegal vial on Madeleine.

To Cole's delight, a group of blond, fit-looking young American backpackers trotted up - all tans and teeth.

'Is your mum OK, buddy?'

'No. Not at all. She's a cripple, in fact.'

'But she wants to do the Stations, right?'

'We're really trying get to the Wailing wall, for a prayer...and maybe a psalm or two.'

'Ah...OK. Jewish thing. Not our problem, in that case.'

Without a backwards glance, the muscular, athletic Christians sprinted off again to the next Station, crucifixes and little silver fish jangling gaily from multicoloured backpacks.

'Bastards,' muttered Cole.

He could see that the two men-in-black were still half-way back up the hill, chatting with an antiques vendor. It was obvious that there was no fight left in their quarry. Cole understood that they were only taking their time before moving in for the kill.

Jamil wandered off to talk to the owner of a nearby souvenir shop as Cole slumped down beside the exhausted housekeeper. ‘Listen, Madeleine, you’ve got to keep going.’

‘Why are those men following us?’

‘I don’t know. Probably Shin Beth; Internal security, like the F.B.I.’

‘Maybe they are just tourists.’

‘I don’t think so, Madeleine, they’ve been following us all the way from the airport. If you don’t keep going we’re done for; fucked in fact.’

‘I like “done for” more than de other thing you say.’

‘Yeah, well, let’s see what twenty years or so in an Israeli prison does for your sensibilities.’

‘Twenty years? You said five, maybe. What is in this vile thing?’

‘It’s a contraband medical supply. You know that.’

‘Nothing is that illegal.’

‘They get very pissed off with anyone helping the Palestinians here, even if it’s just medicine.’

Madeleine peered up at Cole, searching deep into his eyes. ‘You believe this?’

She couldn’t run another step; it was time to end this charade and come clean with her companion.

‘Listen, this vile...I must tell you something, I don’t think it is what you think it is....’

Cole wasn’t listening; he was watching Jamil who had just emerged from the souvenir shop, pushing a borrowed parcel trolley.

‘Please,’ said Jamil, ‘it is my job to transport you to your destination.’

‘Bloody magic.’

Cole hauled Madeleine to her feet, she handed him the copper urn and gingerly stepped up onto the metal platform. Jamil tipped the trolley backwards onto its two wheels and pushed off.

At a half trot this curious trio turned down the El-Wad road for the final stretch. Cole inspected his watch again: Twenty-to-ten. He was going to make it after all. He peered back over his shoulder and his heart sank. Their pursuers had also broken into a trot, but made no effort to catch up, merely keeping pace.

Although it was a blessed relief for Madeleine to be riding the trolley she was fast losing patience with this ridiculous expedition. It was undignified; she was hot, exhausted and her knees hurt. What's more, the vile thing – the cause of all this trouble and discomfort - only contained a stupid tulip disease anyway. How bad could that be? All she wanted to do was find a nice spot for Yetta, cast her to the winds in a reasonable manner then go and have a nice bath in her hotel. 'Ow.' The trolley bounced over an uneven flagstone, jolting her spine.

To Cole's immense joy he caught sight of the enormous stone plaza ahead. He might just complete his mission yet. It's not over till the fat lady falls off the trolley, he decided, as he jogged alongside the fat lady, perched precariously on the speeding trolley.

Saleh fingered the smooth, flat rock in the pocket of his jacket. The stone had once been part of his family home; one of the ancient buildings clustered around the Wall; razed in Sixty-Seven to make way for this very plaza. It had been passed down to him by his father as a reminder of Jewish injustice and bad-faith. Now, it would become a symbol of Palestinian justice and the retribution of an oppressed people when he used it to smash open a pressurized glass vial at the Wall. He checked his watch: a quarter-to-ten. Not yet. Not yet.

He had no way of identifying the courier. It was better that way. It could be any one of the hundreds of men flocking to the plaza. All he knew was that at ten o'clock, he would count off the

paces on the left hand side of the wall reserved for male prayer. There, he would find the object embedded in a crack, and there he would strike an historic blow.

He watched with idle curiosity as a chubby fellow Palestinian appeared, pushing a large woman in a garish sweatshirt - like some kind of immense Jaffa orange - towards the entrance of the plaza, on a parcel trolley of all things. It was grotesque; the way his brothers were forced to demean themselves these days in order to scrape a living from wealthy Jewish tourists.

The trolley clattered to a halt; the fat woman stepped off like the Queen of Sheba and began fussing. Salah noticed that neither she nor her young son deigned to give the porter a tip. They were all the same, these people with their pampered lives in the West. No doubt she was annoyed not to have been able to take a camel ride here.

Apart from the fact that the woman in the orange sweatshirt had unexpectedly and eccentrically elected to complete her journey standing upright on a parcel trolley, it seemed to Simon Blum that he'd made exactly the right decision in following her. He and his brother could now see the plaza ahead. Beyond that was the famous Wailing Wall: an extraordinary and profound experience to be so close to such a powerful monument and one of the symbols of Jewish faith.

Simon was feeling confident, almost intrepid. His adventure was almost at an end and he determined to thank his unwitting guide. He would let her know that he would be offering up an additional prayer at the Wall, especially for her.

As Cole walked briskly across the plaza to rent a yarmulke, Madeleine turned to see the two, tall young men in the sinister black fedoras advancing towards her. It was the last straw. She was an old

lady - all she'd wanted to do was give her dear friend a decent send-off and do a bit of shopping. Instead, she'd been forced to become an unwilling accomplice to smuggling; had her knee joints worn down to the nubs, been carted around on a parcel trolley like a sack of potatoes and generally hounded by sinister security men. Now they were about to arrest her. It was too much - they could just have the stupid Vile and good luck to them. All they'd find inside would be a few microscopic bits of old Tulip. How bad could that be?

To the Birmingham brothers' surprise, the large woman at the plaza entrance glared at them and hoisted her orange sweatshirt to reveal a shiny pink undergarment barely restraining a pair of mammoth bosoms. 'I know what you want,' she bellowed, '...I have it right here.'

The smile froze on Simon's face. He stopped dead. This was exactly the kind of thing he dreaded about foreign travel; it was so easy to be taken in. The Mumsy-looking lady was nothing but a Jezebel after all: a Scarlet Woman in an orange sweatshirt offering her dubious favours to all and sundry. And in a place like this too.

They say lightening never strikes twice, but for Jamil it just had. What's more, he'd been spot on about the lingerie - it was, without question a 1950's Carol Brent Montgomery-Ward, and now, incredibly, the woman was inviting everyone to live their dreams. Temptation beyond belief. He didn't need to be asked twice. 'God forgive me,' he cried, flinging himself at Madeleine, nuzzling his head between her gigantic breasts, shaking it violently from side to side like a wet dog. 'Brrrrr...' he shouted. Madeleine tried to fight him off, but he was like a man possessed, 'brrrrr...brrr...'

There was a sharp crack. ‘Ow...’ screeched an outraged Madeleine. She thrust the madman’s head away from her with some force and reached under her bra. A dark patch of moisture had already begun to stain the shiny pink material as Madeleine gingerly withdrew the jagged remnants of the broken vial. Soldiers and police came running from all directions at the disturbance.

From a distance, Saleh watched the woman fish out little pieces of glass and drop them to the old flagstones where they were quickly ground into dust under the shoes of the fast-forming, outraged crowd. He was probably the only person in the entire plaza who fully understood the full biological implications of what he had just witnessed.

Which is why he turned tail and ran like hell in the direction of Robinson’s Arch.

Some time later, curious tourists passing the Monastery of the Flagellation on Al Mujahadeen road were surprised to see a dark-complexioned young man in a Yarmulke leaning against the wall, hitting himself on the forehead over and over again with a heavy copper urn. ‘Bugger, bugger, bugger...’

Cole was at a loss - eight thousand quid for a start, added to the fact that he was now almost certainly a wanted man. When he calmed down he realised that in a way he’d been very, very lucky - obviously, the sinister men-in-black had made their move just as he’d gone to hire the yarmulke.

He’d been able to watch from the back of the crowd as Madeleine and Jamil were escorted away by the police. He was still a free man, but for how much longer? No doubt, the authorities would have found the vial by now and would be searching for him. Somehow or other he would have to get out of Israel before he was arrested. He would need a disguise.

Madeleine sat on an old tubular chair in the Sub Inspector's office at Heshin Street police station. A ceiling fan gently whirred above her head.

Sub Inspector Shoshan entered; a handsome man with slick jet-black hair and excellent teeth who gave the appearance of having been recently painted then gloss-varnished. He produced a dazzling white smile an even whiter handkerchief then briefly wiped the chair before sitting at his desk.

'Mrs Goldberg, we regret that you have been inconvenienced in this way.' The khaki-clad Sub Inspector flicked a tiny speck of dust from the knife-edge crease just below his elbow.

'And what of poor Mr Jamil?'

Sub Inspector Shoshan flicked his gaze to the open blue folder on empty expanse of his desk. He adjusted the position of the folder to form a more pleasing right angle. What he had here was a religious and political hot potato; a Palestinian molesting a Jewish tourist at the Wailing Wall. A messy problem and he wanted nothing more than to get the troublesome thing off his pristine desk as quickly as possible.

'Naturally, this is a serious matter. The comfort and safety of our citizens and our guests must be protected, and also the dignity of our holy places. But perhaps there has been a misunderstanding here.'

'It is possible...'

'Mr Jamil is not a bad man I think, although it may be that he has a personality disorder of some kind.' The Sub Inspector produced his handkerchief once again and rubbed vigorously at an invisible spot on his desk.

'Inspector, what you want with me?'

‘Sub Inspector...for the moment,’ corrected Shoshan gently. ‘The problem, Mrs Goldberg, is that certain people may wish to use this incident for their own ends; to stir up further trouble in this already troubled land.’

‘I don’t want that.’

The Sub Inspector now inspected his beautifully buffed nails.

‘Of course, you must consider yourself lucky not to be in serious trouble also. Witnesses say that you may have exposed your ... uh, brassiere... just outside one of our holiest places.’

‘That was de bee in my shirt. I tell your men this already.’

‘Yes. A bee is...very good. And so, of course, Mr Jamil was only helping you to remove that bee?’

‘That is exactly de case.’

‘Excellent.’

‘Thankyou.’

‘Then we are agreed.’

‘We are.’

‘Excellent.’

‘Thankyou.’

‘Excellent.’

The gleaming Sub Inspector smiled to break the conversational loop, straightened his tie and closed the folder on his desk with satisfying finality.

‘Case closed. Now, what are your plans, Mrs Goldberg? You are of course, free to go.’

‘I just want to go home now.’

‘Yes, that might be the wisest course. I shall be happy to arrange that for you...’

‘First I must say goodbye to my good friend but I don’t know where she is gone.’

Shoshan leaned across the desk. 'Describe your friend and if she can be found, my men will find her, I assure you. It is the least we can do.'

'Copper colour...'

'Yes.'

'And about eight inches high with de handles....'

Cole slunk through the side streets opposite the Damascus gate in his new, black suit. It was a little tight and short in the leg but it would do. A streimel - the traditional round furry hat - was pulled low over his ears. He kept his eyes peeled for taxi. In his hands he still gripped the copper urn containing what was left of Yetta, not through any sense of obligation - he had absolutely no intention of fulfilling his promise to Madeleine - but because he felt that the urn, containing a recently deceased relative, would help with his cover story as he travelled East to Jericho and then made his way somehow across the border into Jordan.

To his dismay, instead of a taxi, a police car drew up beside him. The occupants politely invited him to step inside; it was clear that refusal wasn't an option.

Fellowes was still in pain, although nothing was as bad as the hangover he'd endured two days before.

He reclined on his pillows with his left leg raised in traction, fumbled for the remote and idly flicked through the channels on the wall mounted TV above him.

There was a televised Sunday Morning Service. But the sheer hypocrisy of so many self-righteous families hogging the best camera angles was too grotesque; the only time such people ever used the word ‘pew’ was when faced by a stinky Council House kid on their doorstep, brandishing a collecting tin.

He flicked the button; on another channel a flabby, middle-aged Spaniard with a terrible wig and too much orange makeup yelled at his gypsy-eyed lover across a wobbly set. In desperation he flip-fingered the remote to the BBC midday news where an impassive John Humphreys reported that Boy George had just been convicted for heroin possession. Humphreys shuffled papers. An image of the Wailing Wall appeared on screen behind him: ‘Tensions in Israel continue to mount. Yesterday, there was an incident outside the Wailing Wall involving Palestinian Separatists and Security forces...’

Fellowes’ finger hovered over the button like an angry wasp.

‘...although few details are known at this time, two British tourists are thought to have been involved. Last night, officials advised the couple, for their own safety, to leave the country.’ A series of grainy shots followed: a police car pulling up at Ben Gurion airport, the unmistakably orange bulk of Madeleine emerging heavily from the back seat, followed by the sheepish, crouching figure of Cole, in his Orthodox disguise, complete with round, furry hat.

Fellowes howled with laughter, rolling across the mattress, left leg still excruciatingly attached to the weighted pulley.

Madeleine covered her face and ducked into the airport entrance, Cole produced a copper container from his bag and flung the contents at the lens. Thick, dark grey dust obliterated the footage.

‘Tensions in The State remain high,’ concluded Humphreys.

This last was wasted on Fellowes, who'd fallen off the bed.

'Lovely morning, sir.'

'Good news, I hope, Miller?'

'Good news for us, not so wonderful for "the Ghoul", I imagine.'

'I do hope so. The Press are all over me. I need good news and I need it fast. If you're ever to rise in the ranks, Miller, you need to understand that once you agree to a press conference you expose yourself to a pack of ravening wolves. They only eat results and they've got fucking big appetites. Give me a nice juicy bone to throw them, why don't you?'

'Oh, I've got a bone all right, sir.'

'Good man.'

The two men sat on white wrought-iron chairs in Reilly's well-tended back garden. Rich, meaty Sunday roast smells wafted into the garden from the open French windows, blending with the perfume of freshly mown grass. A couple of Pekingese scuffled on the lawn. It was indeed "the life of Reilly" and most decidedly a million miles away from the brutal, visceral reality of Serious-Crime. Reilly sipped a pre-prandial sherry. As yet, Miller had been offered nothing by way of refreshment. The young officer ostentatiously produced his notebook and riffled through it, taking his time. In truth, he was on the edge of his seat with excitement but if he could spin this out, his superior might ask him to stay for lunch. He began to read out loud:

'Yesterday, Saturday the 15th, at nine-forty-eight a.m, a Mr Trefor Tubbs, proprietor of "Tubbs's Be-em-Dubs"; a B.M.W hire car company, phoned the South Ken station to report that one of his rental cars, a seven series B.M.W motor vehicle, had been returned to him with dents in the offside

front wing. In the course of the valeting procedure, scattered bird-feathers and a black and gold embossed visiting card were discovered on the back seat. The card was in the name of...guess who?’

‘The Ghoul?’

‘Precisely, sir.’

‘One swallow does not make a blowjob, Miller.’

‘I know that, sir, I’ve worked with WPC’s. But I’m not through yet. On Friday, we received a copy of a report from the Gloucestershire Division concerning a routine hit-and-run near a place called Waughstone Bridge. The incident took place late on Thursday night. Victim: male, early twenties sustained a fracture of the left tibia - now recovering in the Coney Hill General Hospital, Gloucester. When the assigned officer, a Constable Lister, of the Gloucester Div. made an inspection of the site on Friday morning, he discovered, in addition to a set of skid marks, a large number of black-and-gold visiting cards scattered around the hedgerows and surrounding area - more “Ghoul” cards, sir.’

‘This is good, Miller; very good. Obviously the Ghoul tried for another kill. So what’s the connection? Who was the intended victim and what did he have to say?’

‘It seems that Constable Lister attempted to interview the victim shortly after the incident, around midnight on Thursday night, but was unable to get a description of either the vehicle or the driver. He reports that the intended victim was at that time somewhat incoherent and distracted; in short, rat-arsed.’

‘Steady on, Miller, Mrs Reilly cannot abide bad language around the dogs.’

‘Intoxicated, sir.’

Reilly was losing patience. He wasn't a patient man and he wasn't cut out for listening, which is why he'd risen to the top of his profession so quickly.

'Has anyone spoken to the victim since?'

'No, sir. I've ordered a discreet watch to be kept over him and I, myself, intend to drive to Gloucester later this afternoon...ah...after luncheon, to take a more complete statement.'

'Good. Whatever you do, don't let the Gloucester lot have another go at him. We've got a live witness here and if he turns out to be the key, I'm not having some bumpkin provincial force getting the credit for cracking our big case, understood?'

'Got it.'

'Mrs Reilly expects me to get my "K" this year. This "Ghoul" thing is a career-maker. It needs to be watertight, do not fumble this one, Miller.'

'K, sir?'

'Eh?'

'K?'

'You sound like that Spanish waiter off the TV. My spurs, Miller - a knighthood.'

Miller leaned back and grinned. 'Well, sir,' he said, emphasizing the word "sir", 'that's still not even the half of it. It gets better.'

'Carry on then, Miller. Give me the rest.'

With a superior smile Miller licked his finger and flipped to another page. He tried to mask the sounds of his stomach rumbling. 'We have a report from our Chiswick station concerning a Mr Rajnish Ramakrishnan, gentlemen's outfitter of Chiswick. He rented out a dinner suit on Thursday afternoon which was returned in good order some time on Friday. Before he sent it out for dry-cleaning he made a routine inspection of the garments and, lo and behold, in the breast pocket of

the jacket, wrapped in a white handkerchief, he discovered a severed, ash-covered, badly-charred index finger bone. We think it's human, forensics are still working on it. Most likely human and most likely female. There's your bone sir.'

'Not a dog this time?'

'Not canine. Almost certainly human.'

'And what's the connection here?'

Miller paused for dramatic effect.

'Turns out that both the vehicle and dinner suit were hired under the same name and address: one Bernard Baxter – a cocky bastard and no mistake; didn't even bother to cover his tracks with a fake I.D. It's our boy all right.'

A bird trilled victoriously in a nearby Dutch Elm.

Reilly gasped and leaned forward in his chair. 'Now you're fucking talking, Miller. I take it you've pulled the bastard then?'

'We have.'

'You reckon this Baxter is the "Ghoul"?''

Miller permitted himself a triumphant smile. 'I'd stake my career on it, sir.'

'Be damn sure, Miller, because I am not calling a press conference over something that turns out to be the char-grilled prick bone of some Chihuahua.'

Miller scratched his head. 'I don't think'

'No, you don't think, but I do, which is why I'm on the hot seat. I want a full report on the that finger, a.s.a.p.'

'That may not be possible sir, it was so badly charred; all we've really got is carbonized, calcified bone, so no prints.'

Reilly's face fell. He absently scratched a Peke under the ear.

'Our best bet is to get it out of the suspect. We've had this Baxter in custody since early this morning - ex-schoolmaster, wife died in mysterious circumstances a few years back. My lads are working on him as we speak.'

'Bucket and book, eh?'

Miller had no idea what his Chief Constable was on about so he flicked through the pages of his notebook and licked his lips nervously.

'Well?'

'Watson and Crow are talking to him, sir. Good cop, bad cop routine.'

'You're talking to him?'

'Affirmatory, sir.'

'What, over a nice cup of tea?'

'And biscuits.' Miller flicked through his copious notes. 'Let's see...Rich Tea and Digestives.'

The Commissioner gave an exasperated groan. 'Digestives? What is wrong with you Miller?'

'We've got Garibaldi, the ones with the raisins...but I thought.'

'I've got the press all over me. There's a funding crisis and massive pressure to show results. We have a high profile murder suspect in custody; an evil git who's already topped two people that we know of; maybe even his wife, and tried to do another one on Friday night; not to mention slaughtering sackfuls of innocent household pets. And you're chatting to him over tea and biscuits?'

'Watson's being quite nasty, sir.'

Reilly sighed - the sound of genuine disappointment. If he had his 'K' he would have retired already. The force was becoming so slack these days. 'Do I really have to spell it out for you,

Miller? Get a plastic bucket, put it over his head and whack it with a phone book until he talks...

And don't give him any more biscuits, not even those Rich Tea ones.'

Miller quickly copied these instructions into his notebook. 'Bucket, phonebook - no biscuits. What about coffee sir?'

'What do you think Miller?'

'Right sir, no coffee 'til the bastard talks.' This he wrote in outsize capital letters and underlined it.

'And it's vital that you get a corroborating statement from the intended victim. No loopholes,

Miller, no cock-ups. Is that clear?'

'Lunch,' called a voice from the house before Miller could respond. Reilly leapt to his feet and without a backwards glance he was through the French windows like a terrier down a rabbit hole.

Miller closed his notebook with a sigh. There might be a decent greasy spoon somewhere along the A30.

Nelson slumped in the old Jag smoking cigarette after cigarette keeping a wary eye on the old Victorian pub at the edge of Clapham Common, but there'd been nothing as yet. A stake-out was an excruciatingly dull business but he didn't even dare flick through the Sunday Mirror in case he missed something.

All they knew about the dark-haired shagger was that he drank in this pub. And that was because Nelson had followed him here after he'd left Debbie's place; the night they'd ambushed him on the Common.

Not much to go on, but it was all they had.

It was without doubt, a totally crap way to spend a Sunday. He wasn't even allowed to go inside the boozier for a lunchtime pint and a pie. Electrolux wanted him sharp. If the little bastard turned up now they didn't want him slipping through their fingers again.

Nelson lit another cigarette. A couple of scruffy-looking men emerged as a bunch of excited Sloane Rangers brayed and giggled their way inside. One of the girls wrinkled her nose as they passed. 'Eew.'

One of the men wore a purple T-shirt and sleeveless Afghan coat; his companion sported a scraggy ponytail and wore a leather jacket and even though he'd only seen them in the dark, Nelson recognised them at once; they'd been with the shagger that night on the common. The two men carried cases and made their way unsteadily across the road to a rusty Ford Transit.

They pulled away in a cloud of exhaust and Nelson decided to follow.

A taxi pulled up on the familiar gravel driveway. The emerging passengers were dog-tired and bad tempered, neither possessed luggage or even a change of clothes. Throughout the entire seven-hour flight from Ben Gurion barely a civil word had passed between them.

Madeleine had been horrified that Cole had scattered the ashes of her oldest friend over a news cameraman, Cole was equally enraged to learn that Madeleine had switched the crucial vial on him.

There was a further squabble, as the taxi driver demanded his exorbitant fare from Heathrow.

'You've already lost me eight grand, Madeleine, not to mention a completely wasted trip, and a business class upgrade. So you can cough up,' insisted Cole.

‘I am just poor housekeeper. You pay.’

‘No, you’ve really screwed me up. I’m probably unemployed and I’m about ready to strangle you.’

‘Well somebody better fucking pay up or I’m calling the police,’ the cabbie interjected.

‘I not have money. You pay.’ With that, Madeleine strode purposefully towards the porch. The kitchen door burst open to reveal a delighted Albert, clicking and saluting, a huge grin across his face. ‘Welcome, welcome. We did not think you would be coming home so soon.’

‘There was change of plan.’

Cole grumpily parted with twenty notes but insisted on recouping every penny of his rightful change. He followed Madeleine into the house and there at the kitchen table was Laura. As if the ridiculously tight black jacket, abbreviated trousers and buttoned up white shirt weren’t bad enough, Cole suddenly remembered that he was still wearing the huge furry hat. He quickly snatched it from his head and tried to stuff it into his jacket. But it was already too late.

‘Oh my God,’ she shrieked, ‘it’s true.’ Her shoulders heaved with laughter, tears trickled down her cheeks.

Laura carefully wiped her eyes. She looked as though she’d just stepped out of the pages of French Vogue, in cream linen suit with a pair of Gucci sunglasses perched on the top of her chestnut bob; discreet gold things dripped from her wrists, neck and ears. ‘That’s just priceless...Charlie telephoned and said that he’d just seen you on the mid-day news looking like Fiddler on the Roof. I thought he might have been hallucinating but...ha ha ha...do you think the Beeb does souvenir videos?’

Cole sighed and sat heavily at the table. ‘I’ll get you a souvenir video, I swear, if someone makes me a cup of tea.’

‘Not me,’ said Madeleine, folding her arms emphatically.

‘I do it.’ Albert scuttled about preparing the usual variety of chipped and faded mugs.

‘Do I detect a little chill?’

‘More a permafrost I’d say. Your housekeeper seems to think it’s OK to go through people’s personal possessions and mess around with them, just because she feels like it.’

‘Is that true Madeleine?’

Madeleine bounced straight back from the ropes and administered a forearm smash of her own:

‘This young man thinks it is OK to be smuggling vile things into Israel.’

‘Oh.’

‘Much needed medical supplies, bitch.’

‘Oyah,’ said Albert, pained by the profanity.

Laura had no wish to play referee in this grudge match. To her relief, Madeleine simply went to the Kelvinator and opened the freezer cabinet. After rummaging for a second she stumped back across the kitchen and slapped a cylindrical glass container down on the stained kitchen table.

‘There, that is your vile.’

It was about six inches high by an inch and a half across half-full of a frozen straw-coloured liquid. It certainly didn’t look that special to anyone.

Laura turned to Cole with a half-smile. Not exactly approval but not disapproval either. ‘So, what exactly were you trying to smuggle?’

Cole’s hormones had kicked in and once again he was putty. A half-smile from Laura was better than nothing at all.

Yes, he was a smuggler - smugglers were sophisticated and cool; like pirates, only not as gay. And that beat the piss out of Piers, especially since Piers had already pissed in his chips by screwing her brother over. As always, Charles was the key to this woman.

‘As I said, it’s an urgently needed medical supply,’ he flicked his hand nonchalantly over the vial, ‘forget that now. More importantly, how is Charles – how’s he doing?’

Laura’s expression telegraphed her anxiety. ‘He’s a bit messed up. Aubs phoned yesterday to tell me about the accident, so I jumped on a plane and got in last night. Charlie’s seen me but refuses to see either Aubs or Antonia. He’s been very low. I don’t think the hangover exactly helped... somebody let him have a bottle of vodka the other night.’ She looked across suspiciously.

‘I see.’ Cole pursed his lips and nodded thoughtfully.

‘But after he saw your performance on the news today, he’s cheered up enormously. Even though he had to have his cast reset.’

‘Why?’

‘He fell off the bed laughing.’

‘I think I do make him laugh sometimes,’ said Cole mournfully.

Laura screeched with laughter. ‘That’s what it is...’

‘What?’

‘You can’t see how funny you are.’

‘I don’t think he is funny. He is a bastard boy,’ announced Madeleine with feeling.

Laura shrieked, ‘that’s fabulous, Madeleine adores everyone and never swears.’

Ignoring the two women, Cole finished his tea and gathered the fast thawing vial from the table. ‘I ought to return this to its rightful owner.’

‘And who might that be?’

‘Nasir, over at the Centre.’

Laura paused and considered him for a second. ‘I see. Shall I take you over there in the Land Rover and then we’ll go and see Charles?’

‘I don’t think so. He called me some horrible names when I last saw him.’

‘Oh, blub blub...what did he call you?’

‘I can’t even remember the half of it.’

‘Oh, grow up.’

Cole shook his head emphatically.

But Laura hadn’t spent twenty-four years on this earth as a more than averagely attractive female without being able to see when she was winning. ‘Go on, Johnathan...and please, please, please will you wear the furry hat thing?’

‘No. Absolutely not.’

Bubbles and Nevin’s clapped-out van pulled in to the visitor’s car park of the Coney Hill Hospital closely trailed by a purple E-type Jag. Nelson hadn’t expected such a long drive, yet here they were somewhere in Gloucester. He switched off the engine and lit yet another fag as he watched the two hippies unloading black plastic cases. He was beginning to feel that it had been a mistake to follow these two. Electrolux would probably do his nut if it turned out to be nothing more than a wild goose chase. But then, one never knew... He stubbed the fag, got out and dutifully followed.

‘We’re here for a Mr Charles R. Fellowes, my lover,’ announced Bubbles at reception, ‘we’re his friends and ‘e’s in a private room ‘cos ‘e’s rich.’

‘Room Twenty-three, Private Ward-B. Take the lift to the second floor,’ instructed the Receptionist briskly.

They were joined in the lift by a sixteen-and-a-half-stone muscle-bound black man in a light blue training vest.

‘All right there?’ nodded Bubbles sociably.

Nelson ignored him and tried not to gag at the smell, staring instead at his own size-twelve trainers.

Mercifully the doors opened and his rancid quarry exited.

Nelson followed. He lurked halfway down the dimly lit corridor until the hippies finally managed to find the right room. As they threw wide the door and charged in, he caught a glimpse of the patient. To his disappointment, it was only the blond one propped up in the bed with his leg in traction.

‘There he is. Our little wounded soldier,’ roared the one in the Afghan.

‘Oh, no,’ groaned the patient as the visitors descended on his grapes like a swarm of fruit bats.

The door closed and Nelson quickly retreated to the other end of the corridor where he located a payphone and dialed his boss: ‘...I’m at Coney Hill Hospital in Gloucester. I spotted his two hippy mates at the boozier and followed them. Sorry, boss, I thought I had ‘im, but he’s not here; just the other one, with a busted leg.’

‘Nah, you done well. Stick to that lot like shit to a blanket, Nelson. They’re all we’ve got to go on. Stay with them and that little bastard’s bound to turn up sooner or later.’

‘Right you are, Mr Luxton.’

‘Sit tight, the boys are on their way.’

‘See ya tomorrow then, boss.’

‘What?’

‘See ya tomorrow, boss.’

‘I’m not one of the boys then?’

‘I thought when you said, “the boys are on their way”...’

‘Suddenly I’m an old twat – I’m not one of the lads?’

‘Well, I always thought “the boys” were me, Breeze, Tony, Rodders, Lugger, Flick, Tats, and Smudger. You’re the boss, boss, I never thought of you as one of the lads.’

‘You bastard, Nelson. I can hardly believe it.’

There was a silence while Nelson tried to think of some way to extricate himself.

‘Pip...pip...pip...pip,’ he squeaked in a cracked falsetto, attempting to replicate the sounds of his money running out.

‘I know that’s you, Nelson, and that is total crap...’

Fortunately for Nelson the real pips sounded off and he quickly replaced the black handset on its cradle.

‘You got anything else then?’ asked Bubbles, finishing off a blackened banana.

‘No,’ said Fellowes, ‘and don’t take this the wrong way, but what the hell are you doing here?’

‘We just ‘appened to be passin’ your flat yesterday when some young strumpet rang.’

‘That would have been my sister, Laura. And you didn’t just happen to be passing my flat, you were evidently inside my flat, almost certainly pilfering the contents of my poor fridge. I’m having the locks changed when I get out of here.’

‘Well, this girl, right...’

‘My sister, Laura...’

‘Yeah, Laura...she asked us, since we were sharin’ your flat...’

‘...which you most decidedly are not. You were burgling the place.’

‘Yeah, but she didn’t know that. This girl, right... she told us you’d been taken to ‘ospital and asked us if we could bring down some of your clothes and toiletries and stuff ...so ‘ere we are.’

‘And my stuff is, where? In those cases?’

‘No, them’s our equipment.’

‘So, where are all these clothes and toiletries?’

‘Nev?’ Nevin was busy scooping the last of congealed gravy with his finger. He shook his head.

‘Fuck. We forgot to bring ‘em after all that. Would you credit it?’ With no evidence of regret, Bubbles snapped open one of the black plastic cases to reveal the ailing electronic keyboard.

‘Yes, I bloody would credit it. So, all you’ve managed to bring me is your clapped-out Yamaha home-organ?’

Nevin opened the other case which contained a set of tubular steel poles, a tambourine and some maracas.

‘And maracas,’ he announced.

The musicians swiftly punched in the tubular legs and had the keyboard erected and ready to play with surprising and uncharacteristic efficiency.

Nevin strode to the congested power point on the wall and wrenched out a random plug, at the same instant Fellowes reared on the bed and writhed in spasm. ‘You idiot,’ he gasped, ‘you just pulled out the life suppor...’ He fell back onto the pillows.

The two musicians stared at the bed in guilty silence.

‘That’s done it.’

‘Is he dead do you reckon?’

‘Probably not yet.’

‘What’ll we do?’

‘You better give ‘im artificial respiration; the kiss of life.’

‘Why me?’

‘Cos you’re the one that killed ‘im. You went and pulled out ‘is electric ‘eart-motor support thing.’

Nevin scratched his head and gazed at the body. ‘How are you ‘sposed to do it then?’

‘I think you got to breathe into his mouth and punch ‘im in the stomach.’

‘I’m not kissing him.’

‘Don’t be such a benny.’

‘I’m not kissing him.’

‘Maybe we could just punch ‘im in the stomach.’

‘I don’t mind punching him in the stomach.’

‘Come to think of it, I don’t know whether that’s right. I think we ‘ave to pump ‘is arm.’

‘No, that’s only in them cartoons after the cat’s been drowned.’

‘Oh, that’s right. When the cat gets drowned, they pump ‘is arm and all the water comes out of ‘is mouth.’

‘Funny when they do that, isn’t it?’

‘Yeah, they’re so funny them cartoons; Tom and Jerry...funny.’

‘Yeah....funny.’

‘I like it when the cat gets hit on the head with a frying pan and a big lump comes out and then ‘e pushes it back down and out it pops, somewhere else. That really makes me chuckle that does.’

‘Funny...’

‘Yeah...funny.’ The two musicians stood grinning inanely, lost in wonder.

‘You really are the most pathetic specimens aren’t you?’ announced Fellowes.

‘Oh thank God, ‘e’s alive.’

‘No thanks to you two.’

‘Did you find yourself floating towards a beautiful light? You heard us didn’t you? Calling out to you; Charles...Charles...come back. You’re too young, you got too much to live for. Charles... turn away from the light and come back to us.’

‘I heard you discussing the finer points of Tom and Jerry if that’s what you mean; you were talking about a bloody cartoon while I could have been breathing my last.’

A tiny electrical spark veered down one of the lesser-travelled pathways in Bubbles’ brain before attempting a suicidal leap across the vast synaptic gulf. Against all odds, it made the connection.

‘Oh, now I get it. You were havin’ us on all the time.’

‘Yes...well done.’

‘Ah, good joke, Charles. Very good. You really got us going there,’ chuckled Bubbles. Nevin inserted his plug and like Fellowes, the Yamaha home-organ suddenly came to life.

Bubbles selected a steel tambourine from one of the cases.

‘Oh God, no, you’re not really going to sing are you?’

‘That we are, my lover - to cheer you up. We are now officially... wait for it...the Chip Shop Chaps and we’ve come up with a couple of new numbers to get your foot tapping - if it wasn’t covered in plaster of course. Sort of Euro-to-House-to-Acid and back to Spooky-Techno with a ding-dong Euro-thump. We haven’t had the buttons fixed yet, so you got to ignore the Samba backbeat, as always.’

‘The Chip Shop Chaps?’

‘That’s it. I’m the mouthy one and ‘e’s the mysterious, quiet one.’

Nevin nodded mysteriously in affirmation.

‘And you don’t think that might be a little similar to the Pet Shop Boys then? Invite comparisons?’

‘Ah... but we do it batter. That’s our slogan.’

‘Is there anything I can do to stop you?’

‘Don’t think so, my boy. A one...a two...a one two three....’

Miller’s stomach was still grumbling as he drew into the staff car park of the Coney Hill Hospital.

A uniformed officer with a sparse ginger moustache stood under the portico at the hospital entrance.

‘You Lister?’ demanded Miller, flashing his own I.D.

‘I am, and you must be the famous D.S. Miller. It’s a pleasure sir. Not often that we get to meet a real hero out here in the Sticks.’

Miller was somewhat mollified by the greeting. This Copper wasn’t the average Gloucester country plod; he could tell that from the Midlands accent.

‘I read all about you and the “Ghoul” case, so when I found those cards on the road I...’

‘Do you like it down here, Lister?’ interrupted Miller as he swept through reception, brandishing his I.D like a flick-knife. Lister broke into a trot to keep up.

‘Not really.’

The two men entered the lift. Lister prodded the button for the second floor.

‘There’s no real opportunity here. Unless you count drink driving.’

‘Arrests?’

‘Fifty-nine - all drink driving. And one, for house-breaking, but it didn’t stick.’

‘You must like traffic duty then?’

‘No, I don’t. No one does, but the old "D-D" keeps the conviction rate up.’

‘I see.’

‘I’d love to be in your shoes, Sergeant Miller. Hero of Serious Crimes; tracking down killers and that. I’ve studied your career.’

‘Then you’ll know I paid my dues in uniform.’

‘You’re an inspiration to beat-coppers like me.’

The lift doors opened at the first floor to admit a frail old woman in a wheelchair accompanied by a nurse, who stooped from time to time to help her to whiffs of oxygen from the plastic mask around her neck.

The old woman gazed up at the uniformed Lister with undisguised loathing. Miller stood upright against the lift wall, pretending not to notice.

‘I lost my house ‘cos of you...’ she wheezed. ‘I was broken into so many times and I rang and rang, and you people never came out. Or if you did, you was always three hours late.’

Lister rolled his eyes.

‘I knew the little buggers what were doing it too; those toerags from the Estate. But you lot don’t give a monkey’s...’

‘Madam, I’m going to ask you to refrain from swearing...’

‘You did sod all.’

‘I’ve already asked you, madam, not to swear.’ Lister reddened.

‘Nothing. Not a dicky bird...couldn’t care less.’

‘The Law moves in mysterious ways, Mrs...?’

But she’d already gone. The doors closed again and the lift continued its ascent.

Miller smirked. ‘A word of advice, Lister, never argue the toss with the public. It’s like wrestling a pig....’

Lister raised a questioning eyebrow.

‘...you both end up covered in shit and only the pig enjoys it.’

Lister chuckled. ‘Nice one, Detective Sergeant.’

‘I read a great many self-improvement books.’

‘It shows, sergeant,’ confirmed Lister, ‘you see what I mean though. That’s exactly the kind of crap I have to put up with down here. Little old ladies getting burgled out of a couple of quid and the drink driving. Not really what I imagined a career in the force would be all about.’

‘You fancy a crack at Serious Crimes then?’

‘Just a bit,’ replied Lister.

The doors opened on the second floor where the Serious Crimes officer almost immediately detected the signs directing them to the rooms on Private Ward B.

‘...I can tell your fortune, can see what’s in your hand,

when you cross my palm with silver

my love’s at your command

and... something, something, something....

It’s written in the leaves, your future’s in the tea

I was made for you, and you were made for meeeeeee...’

‘Stop, stop, stop,’ shouted Fellowes in agony.

‘Something wrong, my boy?’ The automatic Samba backbeat continued to patter from the tinny speakers.

‘Yes, “something” is very wrong, you can’t just sing, “*something, something, something,*” because you haven’t bothered to write all the lyrics.’

‘It’s not a question of bothering; it’s not being able to find the words; we can’t get anything to rhyme with silver. ‘That’s one of the reasons we come down ‘ere; to ask for your help on that. You’ll get a writer’s credit and a percentage of the PRS. Say five per cent?’

‘Five per cent of bugger-all is still bugger-all.’

‘That’s nice.’

‘Well, “Love Lines” does sound remarkably similar to “All around my head”, “In the City” and “East End Boys” – your entire back catalogue, in fact.’

‘That’s ‘cos of the Samba backbeat.’

The entrance of two officials, one uniformed, one plain-clothes interrupted the musicological debate. Lister flashed his warrant card. ‘Claude Balls?’ he barked.

Bubbles and Nevin sniggered.

With a jolt of guilt Fellowes vaguely recalled having given this wildly improbable, fake name on Thursday evening. ‘Hello again, ah yes that, - I’m afraid I was...’

Lister wasn’t interested in explanations; he was keen to introduce his famous colleague from the Smoke. ‘I’m Lister. You remember, we spoke after your accident. This here is my colleague, Detective Sergeant Miller, from the Met, who’s come to assist.’

Miller frowned at the choice of word and stepped forward to appraise the young man lying in the bed. The witness seemed familiar somehow but he couldn’t quite put his finger on it. ‘Not assisting, taking charge.’

‘I see,’ said Fellowes aimably. ‘These are the Chip Shop Chaps, by the way.’

Bubbles and Nevin pressed themselves against the far wall, trying to look as unobtrusive as possible. They mumbled something unintelligible.

The mention of chips reminded Miller that he was still ravenous.

‘If you don’t mind, sir, I’d like to interview you again with regards to your accident.’

‘I think I told your colleague more or less everything on Thursday night.’

Lister produced a copy of the report and scanned it: “‘...I was a few yards from Gibbet gate when this bloody car came out of nowhere and sent me flying. But if it’s real criminals you want, go down to the Stock Exchange and speak to those lying bastard Peaceys...’”

‘Ah yes...’ replied Fellowes, suitably abashed, ‘I fear I may have had a drink or two when I said that.’

‘Now that you’ve sobered up, Mr Balls, I’d like you think very hard about the events of Thursday night. Can you recall anything about the vehicle that hit you; anything at all? It’s very important.

Whatever you can give us could be useful. It may mean nothing to you, it may seem inconsequential, but to the trained mind it may be the clue that leads to the next clue and so on, which ultimately enables us to assemble the complex pieces and ultimately bring the culprit to book.’ Miller now produced his notebook, snapping his fingers at Lister. ‘Pen,’ he ordered. Lister obliged with a chewed Bic.

Fellowes shrugged. ‘It was a car, it came out of nowhere. I was dazzled by the headlights, then, bang, I remember waking up in here. That’s it.’

‘Did you get the colour?’

‘No.’

‘The make of the vehicle?’

‘Not a chance.’

‘Did you get a look at the driver?’

‘Afraid not.’

‘Was it a black B.M.W, Seven series?’

‘I have no idea.’

‘Could it have been?’

‘It could have been a motorised bath-chair for all I know.’

‘Could have been a black B.M.W, Seven Series’, Miller wrote this into his notebook. ‘Right,’ he announced, snapping the book shut, ‘that’s all I need for the moment. Lister, a word please.’

The mission to get something into his wildly protesting stomach would now be taking precedence. Whatever this young man knew - if anything – would just have to wait for another hour or so. He drew Lister to one side, arm around the constable’s shoulders. ‘You really want a transfer to the Smoke; to Serious Crimes?’

Lister was acutely conscious of the ripe armpit but nodded enthusiastically.

‘OK, I’m willing to pull a few strings but, you’ll have to do something for me. I want you to keep an eye out for a while and make sure that none of your local mob gets in to speak to that witness. Do you understand?’

Lister didn’t. ‘I don’t think there is a local mob. Just a few little bastard knackers on the Estates...’

‘The local force, Gloucester Div. Your lot.’

‘Oh, right...so, what about the two hippies?’

‘No.’ Miller shook his head. ‘I didn’t say: stop him having visitors, he can have as many civilian visitors as he likes. Just not coppers.’ Miller lowered his voice to a whisper. ‘We, in the Met, are currently at a crucial stage in our investigation. Between you and I, we already have a suspect in custody and that young man over there could be our key witness. Until further notice I do not want

Forest and Gloucester Div. officers getting at him under any circumstances. I can't have clumsy half-baked country plod all over him bugging up our evidence and trying to take credit. No offence.'

'None taken, sergeant, the sooner I'm out of this backwater, the better.'

'Good man. Whatever happens, no coppers get into this room. OK? Apart from you and me.' Miller gave the man's shoulder an encouraging squeeze. 'Now, the most pressing question -where can I get some decent scran around here?'

'Down in the basement. There's a subsidised cafeteria. Egg and chips, not too greasy, one pound, seventy-five. '

'Good. That's where I'll be if anything comes up.'

Miller turned to Fellowes. 'Thank you, sir, you've been very helpful so far. But I want you to think, and think hard. If you can remember anything, anything at all, you be sure and tell me - but only me. I'll be back in an hour or two.'

Lister followed his colleague to the door nodding gravely at Fellowes. 'You give that some serious thought, sunshine.' He shut the door and wandered off to find some nurses to chat up.

'Now there's a funny thing,' said Bubbles, staring out the window.

Fellowes nodded in agreement. He was still trying to figure out why a Detective Sergeant from the Met would come all the way down to Gloucester to investigate a routine traffic accident. 'It is a bit odd all right. I wonder if I could get that Detective Sergeant Miller to investigate the Peaceys.'

'Don't know what you're talking about, my lover, but you recall that big monster what attacked us on Clapham Common; him with only one peeper?'

‘How could I forget?’

‘Well, he’s down there now, in the car park with a group of ‘ard-lookin’ bastards getting out of their vans. Oh, and there’s that big dark fella that came up with us in the lift - thought I recognised him from somewhere; the one Cole busted in the snout. Small world isn’t it?’

Fellowes fought against the pulley to get a look out of the window but was overcome by the weight. ‘Hang on, Bubbles, you’re saying those maniacs came up in the lift with you?’

‘No they’s just arrived. It was only the darkie feller came up in the lift.’

‘Where did he go to after he got out? Think hard, Bubbles.’ For Fellowes, alarm bells were ringing – loudly. He’d just been visited by a senior copper from the Met and now a bunch of violent London villains had turned up here in Gloucester, mob-handed. It was too much of a coincidence to be a coincidence.

‘He was just sort of trailing along behind us, I reckon,’ announced Nevin.

‘You’re saying he followed you to this room? My room?’

‘I suppose so.’

‘But you didn’t think it worth mentioning, that you were followed here by a huge and violent gangster who once tried to kill us?’

Bubbles and Nevin shuffled and stared at their scuffed and tattered baseball boots like naughty schoolboys. ‘Didn’t recognise him ‘til now.’

Bubbles took another peek out of the window. ‘Aah, that’s nice, they brought flowers.’

‘Dead people get flowers,’ said Fellowes. It was obvious that Cole had dropped them all into some very serious shit that night on Clapham Common.

He briefly considered getting Bubbles to alert the two coppers but he'd already given them a fake name and he'd probably only wind up implicated in whatever Cole had done – so, not such a smart move.

He remembered the plain white business card and that iron-grip on his wrist. Yes, he could fight fire with fire. It was a favour he'd never expected to call in, but call it in he would. And right bloody now.

Rolling across his bed, he reached for his wallet on the side table and found Tatham's card.

'Bubbles, I need you to listen carefully and do exactly what I tell you.'

'I'm all ears.'

'Yes, but try to be a tiny bit of brain as well for a change. First of all, turn that fucking Samba beat down...now, go to the payphone at the end of the corridor, call this number and tell the man this:

"Fellowes is in room twenty-three, ward-B of the Coney Hill Hospital, Gloucester and he's in trouble, big trouble. Bring muscle."

'I can do that.'

The Centre appeared to be deserted as the Land Rover pulled up at the gatehouse with Laura at the wheel. Loose paper scraps flitted across the untrimmed grass verge.

'There's usually one of Nasir's boys on the gate here,' said Cole, 'Suleiman or someone; it's a scary place. They work with viruses.'

'Perhaps they've all died of a new super-plague or something,' suggested Laura.

'Don't even joke about that stuff.'

'Oooer.'

‘No, I’m serious. Something’s not right. Stay here while I take a look.’

Cole was skittish as he walked slowly up the deserted driveway. In truth, he was grateful not to have to deal with either Nasir or his small, but ferociously loyal staff. His bungling had already made the midday news so he was pretty certain that he no longer had a job, but that might be the least of his worries; he was only too well aware that Nasir was not a forgiving man. At least he could return the incriminating vial.

In the car park there was no sign of Nasir’s ubiquitous gold Ford Sierra, just T’ar’iq’s beloved X19, still with the roof off. One of Nasir’s men must have picked it up from the hospital car park after the chaos of Thursday night.

Cole made no attempt to enter the building, but scuttled commando-style to the far side of the X19. He deposited the glass vial onto the beige leather bucket seat along with a hurriedly scribbled note of apology. He checked the office windows but they still blank and lifeless as the eyes of a week-old Cod. He scampered back down the drive to the safety of the Land Rover.

‘Who’s this?’

‘I got a message for you.’ The voice was tinny with a distinctive Bristolian burr.

‘Who is this?’

‘Shhh...Fellowes is in Coney Hill Hospital,’ hissed Bubbles into the mouthpiece.

‘Who the fuck is this?’

‘Don’t matter who I am, Fellowes is in Coney Hill Hospital, Gloucester and he’s in trouble.’

‘What sort of trouble?’

‘Something to do with a muscle.’

‘A muscle?’

‘I don’t know why he said that. Someone’s gone and broke his leg, which I’m sure is more a question of bone.’

As Luxton’s mob exited the lift, Nelson happened to look back down the corridor and caught sight of the layabout in the Afghan speaking urgently on the phone. He broke into a sprint grabbed the man and brutally wrenched him away from the kiosk, leaving the handset swinging and bouncing against the glossy pea green wall...

‘Urk...’

‘Hello...hello...?’

On the other end of the line, Stanley Oswald Tatham knew what trouble sounded like - the sound of a scuffle followed by the echo of his own voice down an empty phone. Some bastard was breaking young Fellowes’s legs or worse, and the lad had just called in his marker. It was time to round up a bit of back-up.

Half-a-dozen tattooed toughs crowded into the confines of Fellowes’ private room and arranged themselves around the walls. They carried bunches of flowers which on closer inspection revealed a variety of weapons; mostly baseball bats, and a sawn off shotgun. The small man with crinkly hair and pale grey eyes strutted across to the bed. He picked up a copy of Private Eye from the side table and examined the cover for a moment. He smiled at the caption, then let the magazine fall to bed before affecting to notice Fellowes for the first time.

‘Well, this is nice isn’t it?’ said Lionel Luxton.

At that moment, the door burst open and to Fellowes’ disappointment, Bubbles was propelled forcefully into the room, followed closely by Nelson.

‘This is a private room, in a private ward,’ objected Fellowes.

‘Oh, I like him. He’s got a bit of spunk. Breeze, kick his bollocks off.’

‘He’s attached to the bed. I’d ‘ave to climb up to do that.’

‘You’re right. Leave him be for the moment.’ Luxton settled himself in the green Parker Knoll recliner, pulled back the handle and arranged his grey loafers more comfortably on the footrest.

‘Very nice.’ Luxton leaned back for a second or two, luxuriating in the comfort of his chair. ‘Where is the dark haired wanker then; your little mate?’

‘He left the country... ah...emigrated I think.’

‘I think you might be pulling my leg son and I do not like having my leg pulled. Breeze, see how this one likes having his leg pulled.’

Breeze hauled on the heavy traction rope before suddenly letting go of the dead-weight.

‘Ow.’

‘Well?’ Luxton fiddled with his hearing aid, thumbing the volume. ‘I can’t hear you. Is he saying anything, Breeze, because I can’t hear him?’

‘He’s not saying anything, boss.’

‘He should be, because I just asked him a question.’

Fellowes folded his arms in stoic silence.

‘Oh, look at me, where are my manners? My name is Lionel Luxton, although some people call me Electrolux, and these,’ Luxton waved his arm around the room, ‘are my boys. Boys, say hello to...?’

‘Charles, my name is Charles. That’s Bubbles, and over there, hiding behind the curtain, is Nevin – together they are the Chip Shop Chaps.’

Luxton’s eyes revealed a flicker of irritation. ‘Chazza...mind if I call you Chazza?’

Fellowes shrugged by way of response.

‘Boys, say hello to Chazza and Bubbles and Nevin.’

Luxton’s boys grunted, nodded and shuffled.

Luxton grinned ironically. ‘I’d just like to say a quick word of thanks to the Chip Shop Chaps for leading my boy, Nelson to this lovely hospital here today.’

Fellowes rolled his eyes. ‘Look...Electro, do you mind if I call you that?’

‘Yes I fucking do as a matter of fact.’

‘Mr Lux then ...’

Flick, an evil-looking skinhead with a bunch of yellow chrysanthemums, sniggered.

‘It’s Electrolux, Mr Electrolux, or Mr Luxton to you.’

‘I’m afraid you’ve had a wasted journey, Electro.’

Luxton pushed the lever forward, collapsing the footrest. He sprang from the chair. ‘I’ve been patient and I’ve been polite and it never works. Now, tell me where that horrible filthy little toe-rag is.’

‘I told you; he left the country. He went to Israel.’

Luxton clicked thumb and forefinger. ‘Breeze, the vacuum.’

Breeze snapped his own Bratwurst fingers. ‘Nelson. The vacuum.’

‘Fuck off, Breeze, you’re not the boss of me.’

‘Where’s the vacuum, Nelson?’

‘I don’t know Breeze, where *is* the vacuum?’

Breeze turned to his boss. 'Nelson forgot the vacuum, Mr Luxton.'

'No, Mr Luxton, Breeze forgot the vacuum. I was following the two hippies, remember?'

'Just shut it you two. You're like a couple of little kids.' Luxton turned to Fellowes. 'Sorry about this, but there is now going to be a slight delay in the proceedings. You're going to have to wait until one of these dozy twats finds me a vacuum.'

'Take your time,' responded Fellowes magnanimously. If the little gangster wanted to clean his room it was no skin off his nose.

'You, Flick, wipe that stupid grin off your face before I get Breeze to do it for you and go and find me a sodding vacuum.' Flick scuttled out of the room.

'Boss, why don't we just hit him with the baseball bats and save the wait?'

'What is my trademark, Breeze? What do people call me?'

'Electrolux, boss.'

'Yes, and if I'd wanted to be called Dunloplux or Mr Spalding, I would go around hitting people with baseball bats, cricket bats, lacrosse sticks and other assorted sporting paraphernalia - but I do not. I have more finesse than that, which is why we are going to wait for a vacuum cleaner.'

There was a long, empty silence. Breeze gazed at the ceiling, Nelson absently tapped his teeth, Rodders and Lugger mooched about staring at the floor. Smudger sniffed the bouquet of roses wrapped around his bat. Luxton rolled his eyes apologetically at Fellowes and exhaled.

'Chee...'

Fellowes nodded in return.

Finally, Luxton broke the silence, addressing Breeze. 'Where's Tony then?'

'Tony's off today.'

'What d'you mean "Tony's off, today"?''

‘He’s off, sick.’

‘Off sick?’

‘Didn’t sound too good this morning. You know, bit chesty - congested.’

Luxton could scarcely believe his earpiece, he twiddled the volume control: ‘Tell me that again.’

‘He’s all blocked up, boss.’

‘Tomorrow, I want you to take that baseball bat, go round his house and unblock him. Have you got me?’

‘Yes, boss.’

To pass the time, Tats idly prodded the keyboard, plunking out a hesitant version of Chopsticks. Bubbles was impressed. ‘So, you know a bit about music then?’

Tats blushed bright pink under the web of facial tattoos. ‘Nah, not really, I like to have a bit of a twiddle, but I’m rubbish.’

‘No. You might have something there; nice little melody, that.’

‘Cheers mate.’

‘What about lyrics? Can you do lyrics?’

‘Lugger’s your man for that kind of thing.’ Tats indicated the leather-clad individual with a bouquet of Lilies; the dull pig-snout of a sawn-off shotgun peeked out from amongst the blooms. Lugger shrugged modestly. ‘I’m just an amateur. Don’t know what I’m doing really.’

Tats refused to let it go. ‘He writes kick-arse Metal verses - like poetry from hell, some of it.’

‘Maybe you could help us with our lyric problem. How about it, my lover?’

‘Well, I could...’

Luxton had had enough. ‘What is going on here? It’s like fucking Woodstock all over again. Shut it, you two...and turn that horrible fucking machine off.’

Tats and Lugger shrank back against the wall. Bubbles pouted and glowered at Luxton, grumbling, 'I only want a word to rhyme with silver...'

'There is no word that rhymes with silver, you silly, hippy sod.' Luxton turned to Fellowes, exasperated. 'Is it interbreeding or what?'

Fellowes shrugged. 'We're not related.'

'Sliver...' hissed Lugger.

His boss must have had the hearing aid turned up to full. 'Sliver does not rhyme with silver. It sounds like it, but it does not rhyme with it. I've already told you, Lugger, there is no word in the English language that rhymes with silver...or orange for that matter.'

'What about wilver then? Nev reckons we could use bilver. It's got a nice ring to it,' protested Bubbles.

'Arsehole's got a ring to it, but it doesn't mean you should use it in a song. What is "wilver" anyway? Never heard of it. What's it supposed to mean?'

'Nev?' prompted Bubbles uneasily.

Nev shuffled under Luxton's irritable glare. 'It's another word for mulbeaver.'

It was too much for Luxton. 'Right, that is it.' He addressed his men, 'I don't want any of you talking to these two stupid bastards; not another word. Somebody turn on the TV while we're waiting.'

Fellowes quickly obliged with the remote. A popular Sunday afternoon quiz show appeared on the ceiling-mounted unit. Luxton settled back in the Parker Knoll.

On screen, Tony Revels, in trademark wig and beige suit pranced about the sparkling set waving a mini-microphone. Centre stage, three nervous-looking contestants waited obediently in

their boxes: an attractive olive-complexioned woman in her late thirties; a chunky, bearded individual and a thin, studious-looking man in his twenties.

‘A.B.C’s on, so you can all shut it,’ announced Luxton.

Tony Revels gazed directly into the lens. ‘...now, it gets serious. We’re down to our final three contestants. Only one of them will walk out of here tonight with the grand prize, because you’re watching A, B or C...’

He flung out his arm, directing the mike at the studio audience. ‘...and it’s one of those three,’ they roared in singsong reply.

There was cut to an estuary somewhere on the Cote d’Azur. A small but sleek-looking cabin cruiser carved its way through the sparkling water, a couple of bikini-clad beauties in bikinis draped across the bows. ‘Yes, Tony,’ agreed a disembodied chucklesome voice-over, ‘today, one of these three contestants will sail off into the sunset with our grand prize: this fabulous four-berth family Cabin Cruiser.’ The screen cut to a close-up a brunette at the wheel. She winked at the camera. ‘Eye-eye, Captain,’ punned the voice. There was a quick cut to the boat at its moorings. ‘Ahoy there, and if that’s not enough to make your friends green about the gills, we’ll even pay five years mooring fees in beautiful, historic, Antibes marina... that’s in France,’ added the voice. The audience oohed and ahed as Tony Revels reappeared on screen. ‘Well folks, that’s a lot of ship,’ he observed, before slipping into deeply-sincere mode. ‘But as we all know, for there to be a winner, there must be losers.’

‘Awww...’ responded the audience.

‘And what do losers get?’

‘Bus fare...’ they screamed.

‘That’s right, bus fare.’

Luxton dragged his gaze away from the screen. ‘I fuckin’ love it when they get bus fare,’ he announced, ‘they always look so fucked-off.’

At that moment, Flick returned, manhandling an ancient cleaning apparatus. ‘Don’t mind me. You lot just put your feet up and watch TV.’

Luxton glared at the man with a jaundiced eye as Flick struggled to unravel the cable. ‘What the fuck is that meant to be?’

‘A vacuum, boss; I lent it off one of the cleaners. Cost me a fiver, but it’s got to go back in half an hour.’ Flick struggled across the room, dragging the heavy machine by its handle. He whipped out the organ plug and replaced it with his own. The machine slowly whirred to life, slipping and sliding around the floor.

‘It’s an upright vacuum, you numpty, what am I supposed to do with an upright vacuum?’

‘It’s a vacuum isn’t it? You told me to get a vacuum you never said nothing about upright or not upright.’

‘It’s got to have a hose and a nozzle, you know that.’

‘You never said anything about hoses neither. You said: “get a vacuum.”’

‘I think this conversation is redundant,’ interjected Fellowes, ‘it’s not a vacuum anyway. It’s a floor waxer. You can tell by the spinning buffer.’ Sure enough the rotating circular pad under the machine was putting a nice gloss onto the patch of lino by the wall.

‘Oh great,’ said Luxton, ‘it just keeps getting better. What am I supposed to do now, give him a leg wax?’

Nelson whispered something to Breeze, who stifled a guffaw.

‘Did you have something to add, Nelson?’

‘Wasn’t important.’

‘He said you could always use it to polish your knob, boss,’ grassed Breeze.

Luxton pursed his lips - always a dangerous sign. ‘Flick, turn that useless machine off. Breeze, Nelson, you hold this one down.’

The heavies grabbed Fellowes by the shoulders and pinned him to the mattress. Luxton bent his face close; close enough for Fellowes to smell the Marmite on his breath. ‘I’m sorry son, but unless you tell me right now where I can find that little git, I will have to ask Tats here to hit a home run off your kneecap.’

Fellowes stared into Luxton’s eyes; grey, blank, pitiless, like a shark.

‘What are you going to do to him, if I tell you?’

‘I’m going to kill him, son.’

‘But why? What’s he done to you?’

‘He’s killed my daughter.’

‘Cole? No. You’ve got the wrong man.’

‘No he hasn’t,’ rumbled Breeze in his left ear.

‘Listen to me, I know Cole, I admit he’d probably swipe your dear old Granny’s teeth from her mouth if he thought he could get away with it, but he’d never actually hurt anyone.’

Luxton seemed visibly upset. Fellowes recognised the signs of incipient and barely controlled violence and so was careful to modulate his voice. ‘Come on, Mr Electro, I’ve known this guy for five or six years now. This is ...it’s just absurd.’

Luxton made no reply. Instead Breeze rumbled a response. ‘Your Cole has been at Mr Luxton’s daughter, Debbie.’

‘So you said, last time we met. But... killed her?’

Luxton turned slowly. 'He surely has, Chazza. As surely as if he blew her away with Lugger's shooter.'

Breeze filled in last piece of the puzzle in his basso profundo. 'Aids, my son. He's got that Aids disease, he told us so hisself and you were there.'

'Oh, come on. He only said that to stop you lot smashing his head in with a baseball bat.'

'Nah, it's a death sentence. I've read all about it. There's no cure and no way back. That Cole bastard killed my Debbie and now I'm going to kill him. Just tell me where he is and I won't kill you too,' advised Luxton.

'Please, Mr Electro. You seem an intelligent man. Don't you see it was just a ploy to stop your boys beating us all to a pulp? I know for a fact that he doesn't have it.'

'Nice try, son. But Breeze got a look at his passport. He'd just been in Africa. Did you know that 80% of the African continent is now HIV Positive? That means they have the virus, in other words sooner or later their immune systems will collapse and they will die. Your little shagger mate shagged someone in Africa, he got the disease and now he's passed it to my Debbie. I've given this a lot of thought, Chazza, and for a while I thought it might be better to just let him die of this fucking horrible thing anyway - which he will. But no, I'm going to kill him first. And it is definitely going to be painful. I'm going to shoot his kneecaps off, then I'm going to shoot his nollers off. I respect that you're his friend, I really do. But nothing you can tell me will change my mind. You say he hasn't got it. But can you you prove it? No. So, I'm about to let Tats go to work on your leg because I really, really want to know where he is and I've already wasted enough time hanging about in here. Do you see my position?'

Fellowes nodded respectfully.

'Well?'

Fellowes took a deep breath. 'I'm not going to tell you where he is, because you are wrong. You're wrong for all sorts of reasons. You're wrong when you think that just because some percentage of Africa has this disease that most people have it. You're wrong when you think that just because someone travels to Africa they must have it, you're wrong when you think that even when someone does have it and they sleep with someone else they will automatically get it. And you're wrong to assume that just because Cole claims he has it, he's actually got it. Personally, I wouldn't trust a fucking thing he ever says.'

Luxton studied him for a moment. His eyes never softened but he managed a lopsided grin.

'You're a good mate to have, son, a very good mate, so I hate to do this....Tats.'

Tats discarded his blooms to reveal a solid looking Spalding bat, he trotted up to the bed and took a practice swing at Fellowes' plastered knee.

'Wait, wait, let me just say one thing.'

'What.'

Fellowes gazed pitifully up from his recumbent position. 'I really, truly, honestly, haven't got a fucking clue where Cole is...'

'Young Cole?' piped up Bubbles from the window. 'He's down there, my lovers, in the car park; larger than life with a lovely-lookin' strumpet by his side. Gorgeous she is. Absolutely gorgeous.'

Breeze strode to the window, peered out and nodded his assent.

Fellowes rolled his eyes. 'Perfect,' he sighed, slumping back on the pillow.

'Oh my God, we can see right down her bouncers from up here,' advised Bubbles.

'I'm reasonably certain that's my sister,' warned Fellowes.

The man sprawled across the overstuffed armchair, long afternoon shadows sneaked up the heavy flock wallpaper but he was far too consumed to switch on the lights. Instead, he knocked back Bacardi after Bacardi, throat annealed by the raw-spirit-burn - he'd long since given up bothering with the Coca-Cola. "A, B or C" was on the box and he watched now as he'd watched every Sunday, through bloodshot eyes as avidly as a junkie scoping out his next fix - after all, it was his own wife sitting there in one of the boxes.

Julia Cole had disappeared over two months ago. It hadn't bothered Len at the time, he'd just assumed she was staying with one of her ugly, embittered divorced mates up the road; making a point - as she sometimes put it. And then amazingly, she'd turned up out-of-the-blue, on the TV; in this quiz show. And she'd only gone and cruised the bloody thing, every week; winning round after round without ever getting the dreaded Bus Fare. Unbelievable; Julia Cole being gawped at by millions of people across the land without making a tit of herself. Far from it - she'd been kicking multiple-choice arse with a size-sixteen winkle-picker-memory and a steel-toe-capped capacity for trivia. The local paper was full of it; even the national tabloids were beginning to speculate as to which of the final-three would win the Cabin Cruiser.

Uncharacteristically, Len had avoided the Hardcastle pubs, eschewing the guaranteed free pints. In truth, he couldn't bear the humiliation; he'd lost control: how could he admit to his mates that his famous wife had upped and left him?

On screen, Julia wrinkled her forehead for a microsecond, a tiny gesture he'd become familiar with over the years. He was astonished to find how much he missed it. Strange to be seeing her on-screen instead of right here in this armchair.

'Now, Julia, think carefully,' ordered Tony Revels, 'is it A, B, or C?' He pointed his mike at the audience. '...because it's one of those three,' they roared back.

‘C: - Gavrillo Princip,’ came the confident response. There was a close up of Tony Revels. He pursed lips with concern before checking his answer card. ‘Answer-C, you say? Hmm, C...is the wrrrooooooooooooo...ight answer.’ He swung his mike in the direction of the audience, they roared their approval in return. Well, really, how the bloody hell would she know something like that?

Len shook his drooping head and took another sip, clumsy oil-smeared fingers incongruous against the delicate crystalline patterns of the tumbler.

It was these hands.

He’d always been proud of the strength in these hands, he’d thought these hands had been the making of him and his family. The hands that put bread on the table; hands that fixed. But really, now he thought about it, these hands had only ever punched and clawed, slapped and wrenched. He didn’t even have a family any more; these hands had certainly fixed that.

With leaden realisation, the dense tumbler slipped through his grasp.

‘A, B, or C, Craig? Which is it? Think carefully now, A, B or C because it’s one of those three.’

‘B - Tony. Hans Christian Anderson,’ replied the bookish young contestant.

‘B, is wrrrooooooooooooo...ight. Hans Christian, for another point.’

Hans, hands...Hans Christian...Hands Unchristian...Hands...these fucking hands.

Len scrabbled for his wallet and pulled out the Walkers’ Metals I.D card with its magnetized strip.

Even though it was Sunday, there would still be activity in the factory - extruded metal piping stopped for no man.

He paused for a second as the image of his wife's furrowed brow appeared on screen. He swayed, taking a second or two to focus on the image, 'Best of luck my love,' he whispered, before blowing her a kiss.

An exceptionally glum T'ar'iq looked out from beneath a thick turban of bandages and gazed at the fish tank in the hospital's reception area.

His brain was intact and he'd been discharged after thirty-six hours of observation. But he worried about the incriminating cat-scans. God knew what would happen if they did dog-scans too - he'd be arrested without question. He knew he should get out while the going was good; trouble was, he had nowhere to go and no means of getting there. His X19 had somehow been removed from the car park, he'd called the Centre numerous times to get someone to collect him, but either the phones were off or nobody was answering. It was all most perplexing. So there he sat, watching pallid goldfish flitting around a miniature plastic treasure chest.

A woman strode across the lobby accompanied by a young man in Orthodox Jewish garb. T'ar'iq briefly considered giving her the old sexy tongue-flick but couldn't muster sufficient enthusiasm. In truth, he was a bit demoralised. Britain was a great deal more complicated than he'd imagined: the tongue thing never worked for a start, not even from cockpit of his X19. His boss treated him with disdain; he'd fallen out with his hero; and he hadn't managed to kill anyone. Who was he kidding anyway? He was no assassin, he was not "the Ghoul", not even "the Djinn", just T'ar'iq, a simple cobbler from Egypt who'd only managed to slaughter a bunch household-pets and the odd hedgehog. No wonder the English idiom for a substantial quantity of rubbish was a great many cobblers.

Mournfully, he fingered the .22 in his jacket pocket. He should just dump it into the tank - give the fish something new to play with. Perhaps if they swam in and out of the trigger-guard vigorously enough, they might even manage to fire it one day.

At that moment, the young man in the Orthodox outfit turned his head and the two locked eyes. To his shock and delight he recognised Kohl, the young master, in one of his brilliant disguises. A final chance to make amends. He would offer the young man his excellent little gun. T'ar'iq felt for the pistol and leapt to his feet.

Cole's eyes widened in stunned recognition - it was Nasir's pistol-packing, name-swapping, cosmetic-wearing psycho, with a huge bandage round his head. And the man was either happy to see him or that was a gun in his pocket, or worse – both. He certainly had no desire to get dragged off at gunpoint to explain himself to Nasir in person, so he gripped a protesting Laura's arm and ran her to the lift. The doors were just closing as he thrust her inside and squeezed in after. Through the fast diminishing gap he could see T'ar'iq sprinting across the lobby behind them.

'What the hell are you doing?' objected Laura.

'Can't explain, just trust me, there's a guy out there you really don't want to meet.'

With a jolt, the lift began its ascent. The doors opened at the first floor. An Indian nurse pushed a wheelchair-bound old woman into the lift. The elderly woman gulped a life-sustaining whiff of oxygen and gazed curiously up at the couple. Laura smiled compassionately. Cole stood stiffly against the wall in his tight black suit glowering under the Streimel. He looked pale and tired and there were black rings of fatigue around his eyes giving them a sunken cadaverous appearance under the brim of his fur hat. He was trying hard to ignore the old woman but her bright, bird-like

gaze was just too intense, he nodded brusquely down at her and she repaid him with an ear-piercing shriek.

‘What is it Mrs Bunce?’ asked the Indian nurse.

The old woman pointed a quivering finger. ‘I...I knew it. It’s him.’

‘Who? Who is it, Mrs Bunce?’

‘Him.’

Cole shifted uncomfortably. Had he just been accused of farting in the lift? Laura tittered.

‘He’s come for me. I knew he would. Can’t you see him standing there? It’s Death and he’s come for me.’

‘Calm down Mrs Bunce. It’s just a visitor.’

‘You can see him too?’ said Mrs Bunce suspiciously. She gulped oxygen from the mask in her quivering hand.

‘Of course.’

The old woman seemed relieved. ‘Well, what’s he thinking of, coming to a hospital looking like Death?’

The lift doors opened and the cantankerous Mrs Bunce was wheeled away accompanied by an apologetic smile from her nurse.

Cole turned to the delighted Laura. ‘I feel like death too,’ he sighed.

Cole stood miserably on the threshold in his preposterous suit and gigantic fur hat as Laura flung open the door to room twenty-three. She appeared behind him with a dramatic flourish: ‘Ta- dah!’ But something was wrong, Fellowes wasn’t laughing, in fact he looked positively grim.

In the blink of an eye the two of them were grabbed by strong, tattooed hands, hauled inside and the door slammed shut.

‘Bingo!’ said a harsh voice.

‘Get your filthy hands off me,’ objected Laura, before she was slapped hard across the face. The blow sent her Gucci sunglasses skittering across the lino.

‘No, no, no. That is not right. That is no way to treat a lady,’ advised Luxton, bending to retrieve the glasses. ‘Teach Rodders some manners, Breeze.’ Breeze dutifully punched Laura’s assailant in the solar-plexus. Rodders doubled-up and slid to the floor.

‘I do apologise, my love. But we do not, generally speaking, duff-up women. This probably gives you entirely give you the wrong impression. My name, by the way, is, Lionel. Feel free to call me Lionel.’ Luxton offered his hand, which Laura accepted in her own immaculately manicured grip.

‘Thank you, Lionel. That’s quite all right and very charming but could I be an awful bore and ask that your bruiser not pull my companion’s arm off?’

Cole was struggling furiously but Nelson had him in a half-nelson.

‘Let go, Nelson, but stand across the door.’

‘Thank you, Lionel. I take it that you’re not from Welfare Services or the YMCA or anything?’

Luxton nodded, then gestured to the ensuite toilet at the far end of the room. ‘That’s right, my darling, we’ve got urgent business with your friend here, so why don’t you just pop off to the bathroom, sort your makeup or hair, or something? We’ll be out of your way before you know it.’

‘Don’t be such a sexist twat,’ snapped Laura.

‘Hello...?’

‘If you’re not friends of my brother, you can all piss off, right now before I call the police.’

Luxton sighed. ‘I was merely being considerate of your finer feelings, my love, but now I am going to have to ask you to keep quiet and behave. My business here is with this evil prick in the silly hat.’

Luxton produced a pair of rubber surgeon’s gloves from his pockets and snapped them on.

‘Bat.’

Flick handed over the instrument and with a mighty swing, Luxton slammed Cole in the stomach.

The blow knocked the wind out of him sending him sprawling to the floor.

‘Stop it, you mad bastard,’ screamed Laura flinging herself at the gangster. But Rodders was too quick; he gave her another backhand across the face. Laura stopped dead, shocked by the unaccustomed violence, but quickly collected herself before aiming a hard, straight-legged kick between Rodders’ legs.

Nelson grinned in admiration as the unfortunate Rodders slid to the floor, clutching his groin.

Luxton raised an eyebrow.

Laura shrugged: ‘I had brothers,’ she explained.

‘Lugger, be a gent and give this lady a sniff of your bouquet.’

The leather-clad heavy scowled and shoved his lilies under her nose. ‘Ooh er...’ said Laura, pretending to quake with fear before catching sight of the sawn-off shotgun in amongst the blooms.

‘Oh...’

‘Yes... “oh”. Now you can shut it - and stop kicking my boys in the bollocks,’ said Luxton.

Laura silently took stock of the situation: the room was full of tough, tattooed, armed men; it was clear that they meant business. Cole writhed on the floor nearby gasping for breath, but at

least her brother was intact; he lay there quietly, propped up on his pillows, powerless to intervene. Two grungy hippies cowered over by the window trying to make themselves look as unobtrusive as possible. For some reason, there was a Yamaha home organ by the far wall alongside an antiquated floor polisher. If she got the chance, she might be able to hurl one or other of these two items through the window and raise the alarm.

‘Please, Mr Luxton. What have I done?’ whimpered Cole.

‘You gave my daughter Aids, you filthy evil little shagbastard.’ Luxton smashed him hard on the elbow with the bat.

‘I can explain,’ squealed Cole.

‘No you can’t. You’ve given my lovely Debbie a death sentence, you’ve killed her you nasty...’

Luxton hit him again.

‘...piece...’ and again.

‘...of excrement.’

The TV audience cheered wildly. Cole twitched and hauled himself to his knees.

Luxton hit him again across the back.

‘You’re killing him,’ shouted Laura.

‘He’s killed my daughter, so I’m killing him. That is the general idea.’ Luxton thumped the bat across Cole’s kidneys, flattening him to the lino.

‘How on earth can you say that? How can you be sure?’ screamed Laura.

‘Because he told my boys, that’s how.’

‘It’s true Miss,’ rumbled Breeze, ‘told me to my face. “I’ve got Aids,” he said.’

‘All right, boys, my arms are getting tired.’ Luxton stepped away from his recumbent victim.

‘Anywhere but the face. Hit him where it ain’t going to draw blood.’

Rodders now stepped forward with his own bat at the ready. The day hadn’t gone well for him so far and he was looking forward to inflicting a bit of pain on someone who couldn’t fight back.

It had taken T’ar’iq some time to track down the young master after he’d had ducked into the lift. He’d scoured every inch of the First floor and much of the Second. Now he peered through a crack in the door to room twenty-three and was horrified by what he saw: Kohl lay there on the shiny grey lino, battered and bruised. A ratty-looking thug in olive green T-shirt and combat trousers stood over him wielding a baseball bat, about to strike. Without a second thought, T’ar’iq fumbled in his pocket for the pistol, cocked it, kicked the door wide and fired.

The .22 slug took Rodders high in the right forearm where he sported an intricate Lion and Unicorn tattoo. He squealed and dropped the bat, which clattered onto the floor by Cole’s head. For the third time, Rodders slumped to the floor, clasp ing his injured arm; a neat hole drilled through the tattooed Unicorn’s rump.

Lugger was first to react to the unexpected intrusion, he raised his lillies and aimed at the intruder. Just as he pulled the trigger, Laura elbowed him in the stomach and the gun went high. Buckshot

atomised the blooms and blew a fist-sized cavity through one of the false-ceiling tiles, bringing a good chunk of plaster down onto Luxton's crinkly head.

Cole tentatively opened an eye, and taking advantage of the diversion, dragged himself painfully under Fellowes' bed.

In the doorway, T'ar'iq held his pistol steady, aiming for the centre of Lugger's forehead. Wisely, Lugger dropped his weapon and raised his hands. T'ar'iq stepped into the room like Clint Westwood out of one of those Easterns.

Laura recognised the man with the pistol; it was the one Cole had warned her about in the lobby. She didn't know whether to be relieved or even more alarmed by his sudden appearance.

Luxton gazed at the interloper, noting the thick turban of pristine white bandages, then shot a glance at the discarded Streimel at his feet. 'What is this?' he said, 'Stupid Fucking Hat Day?' T'ar'iq ignored him. He was feeling quite pleased with himself again. Perhaps he did have some talent after all.

The well-built black man in the singlet gingerly took a step forward, hands outstretched in a gesture of appeasement before crouching to examine his colleague's wounded arm. To T'ar'iq's surprise the man began to chuckle.

'Why you laugh?'

‘Have a look at this, boys.’ Nelson held up Rodder’s bleeding forearm, indicating the small round entry wound. The huge, one-eyed bruiser grinned with delight. ‘Hey, Rodders, your Unicorn’s got a brand new bumhole.’ But the joke was wasted on Rodders, who’d already fainted.

Luxton rubbed his head. His crinkly salt-and-pepper hair was now dusted with a coating of white powder lending him a certain unexpected gravitas. ‘I am not happy. Not happy at all. Who the fuck is Ali Baba here?’

‘Hey,’ objected T’ar’iq, waving the pistol, ‘I am man with gun, so I am asking with the questions.’

‘Fair enough,’ said Luxton, ‘what is it you want to know?’

T’ar’iq thought for a moment. ‘Ok... how you make it with English girls?’

‘Somebody please tell me who this tit in the turban is, and what is he doing in the middle of my job?’

‘His name’s Cole,’ piped up a voice from under the bed.

‘Oh nice try, son,’ replied the exasperated Luxton. ‘You are Cole and you’re the one getting killed just as soon as we’ve sorted out this dickhead.’

T’ar’iq smiled modestly. ‘I so sorry, I not “Ghoul” any more.’

‘No, it’s all right. You can be Cole now,’ insisted the voice from under the bed.

‘I not Ghoul - I not even Djinn, I just T’ar’iq.’

‘This is a really bad time for you to decide not to be Cole,’ replied the muffled voice. ‘That’s Cole, Mr Luxton. He’s the guy you really want.’

T’ar’iq caught sight of the beautiful young girl who’d spoiled the thug’s aim, her incredibly blue eyes now wide as saucers. He considered flicking his tongue at her and dropped his guard for an instant. The door burst open again, cracking him in the back of the head, knocking him off

balance and sending the pistol skittering across the floor towards the bed. Cole held out his hands to welcome the dull black object as it span across the lino but at the last moment a size-fifteen boot interrupted its progress. Breeze bent and scooped up the weapon. The big man stayed low, crouching under the bed, covering Cole with the pistol. At the same time, Lugger retrieved his sawn-off from the floor and rammed it firmly against the base of Laura's spine, using her body to shield the weapon from the newcomer's gaze.

'What the hell is going on in here?' demanded Constable Lister from the doorway. 'I just heard an explosion.'

He scanned the room. A moustachioed little Arab stood before him, rubbing the bandages on the back of his head. Clearly he'd just taken a good wallop from the edge of the door. Well, that was nice - a bit of a bonus there.

The place had certainly filled since he'd been away: a bunch of yobbos had arrived with flowers; in the centre was a right stunner with a vile-looking greaser of a boyfriend standing close behind her, one hand draped over her shoulder, other hand on her arse probably, lucky bugger. The two hippies were still mooching about at the window looking shifty. Over by the bed was a confused-looking, white-haired old geezer with a hearing aid. Someone sprawled on the floor unconscious, while a muscle-bound black man swiftly and expertly wrapped him in a large white hospital towel. Nearby were a couple of blood spots on the lino along with a redundant baseball bat. All very suspicious.

The Constable gazed up at the jagged hole in the false ceiling. He could see all the way through to the aluminium ventilation duct above the tiles. 'Oy, there's a bloody great hole in the ceiling. And why is that man unconscious?'

The elderly gent with the hearing aid raised his hands and grinned. 'It's a fair cop. You've got us bang to rights, Constable Sherlock.'

'Lister.'

'It's obvious that nothing escapes your gimlet-eye, Constable Lister.'

'Well?'

Luxton picked up the baseball bat. 'We've been a bit naughty, me and the...the Round Robins.'

'Round Robins?'

'Walthamstow's Premier League Softball team.' Luxton indicated Fellowes on the bed. 'That young gentleman...'

'Claude.'

'Yeah... Claude, who's bust his leg, is our star pitcher. Me and the team came over to cheer him up and then of course someone had the bright idea that we play a little innings.'

'In a hospital?'

'Childish, I know.'

'Very irresponsible, sir.'

'I can see that now,' agreed Luxton. He nodded to the unconscious Rodders, 'Edgar, our second baseman, just took one on the cranium which has temporarily stunned him. Then Tarquin, the big lad by the bed, with one eye, put the next one through the ceiling. A home run of course, but we've gone and lost the ball now.' Luxton chuckled good-naturedly. 'We've certainly learned our lesson, officer - never play softball indoors, far too dangerous.'

Lister gazed slowly around the room. Finally, he nodded at the supine Rodders. 'You'd better get him seen to then.'

'All in hand, officer, medics are on their way.' confirmed Luxton.

Lister sniffed. 'And you realise that you're going to have to report that damage to the hospital authorities?'

'Of course.'

'Well, so long as there's no policemen in here.'

'I'm pretty sure I can guarantee that.'

'Good, there's no police allowed in this room other than Detective Sergeant Miller or me. Is that understood?'

'You'll get no argument from us, officer.'

Lister nodded and was about to leave when he suddenly stopped and turned. 'One more thing,' he eyed Luxton, 'you should know better, a man of your age.'

He closed the door an instant before Luxton exploded.

'That cheeky cozzar bastard, I should have just shot him. Oy, Breeze, how old do I look?'

Breeze straightened up. 'Couldn't really say, boss.'

Luxton pouted. 'Can't say because you don't know, or can't say because I might kill you?' Luxton shook his head in disappointment sending puffs of powdered white plaster wafting into the air. 'I am not happy, not happy at all. We've fucked about here long enough. Give us that peashooter, Breeze, I'm going to pop this bastard straight away and then we're all going home. Get under the bed and drag him out.'

Lister strutted purposefully back down the corridor. The lift doors opened to reveal a three-man crash team in white coats pushing a sheeted gurney. Lister stepped aside not wishing to have his ankles skinned again. 'You lot know where you're going?' he asked helpfully.

The senior medic, a well-built man in his late fifties with a buzz-cut briefly explained: ‘Accident in one of the private rooms...uh...possible preliminary odourama.’

Lister nodded, ‘That’d be room twenty-three. Whole bunch of yobbos in there and one of them’s took one on the nut from a baseball, believe it or not. Out cold.’

‘Sounds like the room,’ agreed the medic, turning urgently to his assistants, ‘right, I’m going to need a tachigram, a statistician and a bollock steroid – thirty-five mils. Scat.’ With that, the team thundered away down the corridor. Lister was happy to have been of service, chuffed that he’d been able to give the pros a heads up.

Beneath the bed in room twenty-three, Cole had managed to squirm his way to the far wall and refused to budge. Breeze peered underneath and attempted to talk him out. ‘Come on, son, you’re gonna die anyway. Come out and die like a man. A little .22 in the head is gonna be a lot less painful than what we could do to you. Don’t make me humiliate you.’

Actually Breeze was pretty certain that Luxton was going to shoot Cole in both kneecaps and then in the cock but there was no need to tell him that.

Luxton depressed the little black button on the pistol grip to release the magazine. It dropped into his palm and he counted the remaining slugs. Eight - not bad. He quite fancied this dinky little weapon. The Arab had excellent taste in weaponry, if not headgear. He wondered whether he should put one into the rest of the witnesses too, but decided against it. They were an all right bunch, apart from the dozy musicians. In fact, he quite liked the blond kid and his sister; they’d done nothing to annoy him and were too savvy to grass. That deranged Arab might even make a

useful member of his crew; not much up top, but no compunction about pulling a trigger when he needed to.

T'ar'iq rubbed his throbbing head through the bandages. 'If there is no object, may I please to be excused to the W.C. I must be inspecting my intelligence.'

Luxton nodded his assent. 'Yeah, but pat him down first, Breeze.'

As T'ar'iq gratefully scuttled off to the en-suite toilet to inspect his skull for fresh damage, Luxton slapped the clip home and thumbed the weapon's slide-stop bringing the slider back into battery. A small but lethal, full metal-jacketed round now sat in the breech. He advanced purposefully towards the bed...

The door crashed open again. Three men in white coats and stethoscopes stood behind a sheeted gurney. Without missing a beat they flung back the sheet, hauled out the automatic shotguns concealed there and cocked them.

The medic with the buzz-cut nodded curtly at Fellowes and aimed his weapon. 'Drop that...if you don't mind, Electrolux.'

Lowering his pistol, a baffled and frustrated Luxton squinted at his antagonists. 'I know you...I recognise you.'

Using Laura as a shield, Lugger aimed his sawn-off at the man with the buzz-cut. 'You've aged a bit,' observed Tatham, two steady blue eyes behind twin cylinders of blue-steel. Luxton scoured his memory to place this new face. 'I do know you, you're Tatham, Sidney...no, Stanley Tatham. Well, Stanley, I hate to tell you, but you're in the wrong place.'

'I don't think so.'

‘You are not sodding doctors. You’re Heavy; armed robbers, so what the fuck are you doing in a hospital, busting in on my job?’

Tatham’s eyes never wavered for a second as he inclined his head. ‘We just done the blood-bank downstairs.’

For a moment Luxton’s pale eyes lit up, then he frowned. ‘You’re having a giggle.’

‘Yeah, little joke, couldn’t resist, sorry about that.’

‘All right, you’ve had your laugh, now piss off, you’re interfering with a proper job. You’ve insulted me and crossed the line. This is family business.’

The gun never wavered. ‘Sorry an’ all that, Mr Luxton, but so is mine.’

Luxton’s shrewd eyes darted to Tatham’s companions. ‘I know you too.’

One of the men, who wore patent leather trousers under his white coat, grinned broadly. ‘Aye, I’m Ben Swank, the evilist fuckin’ bastard in Poofland – that’s Engerland, for they’s of you what don’t know that.’

‘And you?’

John Roberts started. He wasn’t used to being singled out by notorious Gang Leaders. ‘You might of seen me around,’ he replied defensively. ‘Swank and me done the Parson’s Green bank-job and Texaco Garage shootout a few years back...very big score.’

‘Nah,’ Luxton shook his head emphatically, ‘you’re talking bollocks, mate. That was Big Lenny “Longstretch” Langstaff from the Hoxton mob.’

‘No, it was Swank and me.’

‘Was it cock. I never even heard of you before. It was Big Lenny and he’ll be very pissed off that you’re trying to half-inch his thunder. You’re lucky he’s still inside - get’s out sometime in 2014, I think.’

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake,’ mumbled Roberts. As usual, the credit for his work was going to someone else. Roberts hadn’t even wanted to come on this one. He’d given up blagging after the Parson’s Green job; he and “the Mrs” now lived quietly in Chigwell with a nice place on the Costa del Sol. He had money on the stock market and was content. But he owed Tatham a solid and so had agreed to do this one last bit of Heavy work.

‘I don’t blame you,’ continued Luxton in a milder tone, ‘every tasty Firm in the country tried to nick the credit for that little job. But...’ Luxton tapped his nose, ‘...I have it straight from the horse’s mouth that “Longstretch” pulled that one. So, you just stick to holding up old ladies and you’ll do fine. OK?’

‘Or old men...’ riposted Roberts, jerking up the shotgun.

Luxton stared at him venomously for a moment. Cheeky cunt in the grey slacks.

‘Credit where credit’s due, Mr Luxton.’ protested Tatham. ‘I got the inside track on the Parson’s Green caper from my boy, ‘cos he was right there in the middle of it - same as this young lad on the bed. Swank and Roberts were the team that pulled that one off.’

Luxton shot a curious glance at Fellowes.

‘It’s true, Electro,’ confirmed Fellowes, ‘these two gentlemen did in fact carry out that particular...blag. I can vouch for it because I was in the getaway vehicle, as it happens.’

Roberts glanced over at the young man on the bed; a few years older to be sure, but it was unmistakably one of the kids from the black cab. He turned to Swank in wonder: ‘I don’t believe it, it’s the ballsy little driver.’

‘No,’ corrected Fellowes, ‘not the driver, I was the very good-looking, calm, collected one in the passenger seat.’

Swank shook his head. 'Nah, don't recall you, but I remember the tennis player and a wee sweaty bastard behind the wheel. Right ballsy he was - rock.'

Roberts agreed enthusiastically. 'Yeah, sweating away but wouldn't budge an inch when we told him to keep straight on. Told us to go fuck ourselves 'cos his mate's tennis match was more important. Now, there's a kid with minerals, I'd love to see how he turned out.'

'Ah... so you don't remember me at all then?' said Fellowes, somewhat offended.

'Oh, aye, I do now,' Swank grinned, 'wasn't you the one that wet yourself?'

Fellowes was speechless. Luxton's boys were sniggering now, and to his dismay, so was his sister. What's more, he could have sworn that he heard a stifled guffaw from under the bed.

'Don't be offended, son,' said Roberts kindly, 'it's not everyone that can keep their heads in a shootout; all that adrenaline pumping, bullets flying. It's no shame to brick-it if you're not cut out for it.'

To Cole's amazement it seemed that he suddenly had some well-armed and determined allies in the room - admirers even. It was the perfect moment to reveal himself. As he scabbled out from under the bed Breeze grabbed him and pinned his arms to his sides in a powerful bear-hug.

'Hey, there he is; the ballsy one. The one we was tellin' you's about - the driver. How're ye doin', laddie?' said Swank excitedly.

'Not great...' wheezed Cole, as the air was slowly crushed out of him.

Tatham jerked his weapon at Breeze. 'Let him go now, big fella, and there'll be no damage.'

Luxton shook his head slowly. 'I've got a lot respect for you, Tatham; I've always heard good things. And I respect your crew, especially now it turns out that "Longstretch" might have

been telling a few porkies about the Parson's Green job. I'm glad you've all enjoyed a nice little stroll down memory-lane, but I'm now asking, very respectfully, that you and your team piss off out of it.'

'With all due, Mr Luxton, I can't do that. These young lads are mates of my boy. They done him a big favour that day.'

Luxton exhaled, before coming to a decision. 'All right, Stan. If that's the way it's got to be. But this Cole gave my Debbie the Aids, so I've got to do 'im, and you...?' Luxton shrugged, '...well, you've just got to do what you've got to do.' Luxton raised the pistol to Cole's temple.

Laura gaped horrorstruck, it was clear that Luxton was deadly serious and there was about to be a major bloodbath. 'For God's sake somebody do something,' she begged.

Tatham's mind reeled. He may have been a crim; a ducker and a diver, but he was still a man of principle; one accustomed to dealing in absolutes; black and white; right or wrong. The dubious comparative morality of this situation was proving too much for him and he was running out of time. On the one hand he was here to pay a debt on behalf of his son, on the other, Luxton had a clear obligation to his daughter. Who the bloody hell was in the right?

Luxton flicked off the safety. Cole screwed up his face in preparation for the bullet's impact.

Tatham now took a step forward and placed the twin barrels of his shotgun against Luxton's head.

Lugger raised his sawn-off and aimed at Tatham.

Swank in turn, covered Lugger.

Nobody breathed.

With a click, the bathroom door opened. T'ar'iq reappeared smiling, an even thicker turban of white hospital towels wrapped around his head. 'It is good news, my brain, she is fine. I am only being small pain in the head,' he announced cheerfully.

'In the arse, more like,' murmured Breeze.

'Stand still,' snapped Luxton.

T'ar'iq obeyed and quickly took stock of the new situation. There were now three white-coated doctors in room, all armed to the teeth. Everyone seemed to be pointing weapons at everyone else in a kind of weird daisy-chain of gun-metal, starting with Kohl, who was about to be shot in the head with the .22. Britain was a far more dangerous and confusing place than he'd ever imagined; worse than the Lebanon actually.

Fellowes' mind whirled. There must be some way out. In a moment, Luxton's trigger-finger would tighten, a tiny metal projectile would emerge at 2000 feet per second setting off an unstoppable chain reaction of death and destruction. He ruefully recalled having once compared Cole to a weird neutron of enriched Uranium bouncing through life, setting off a chain reaction of mayhem. Well, he'd been absolutely right, his friend had really done it this time.

His friend?

Was Cole really his friend? True, they'd propped each other up over the years, each supplying from time to time what the other lacked. But was that friendship? On Cole's part though there had always been an agenda; an underlying self-interested purpose. Fellowes racked his brains for

evidence of one selfless act in all the time he'd known Cole. He couldn't think of one. But then, what had he ever really done for Cole that had not been for his own amusement? Perhaps that was all that friendship or even love amounted to; just a series of self-interested responses from two parties locked in a symbiotic relationship of quid pro quo; a survival dance; a waltz of self-interest.

For his own part he'd been so consumed with self-loathing that he'd disengaged from life. It had been a lonely existence. And Cole had been the perfect foil because he expected nothing and judged no-one; especially not himself. Cole was the only real connection he had to the real world. They were bound together by their missing parts like one-legged men with their arms around each other's shoulders, walking in step. They were Yin and Yang; Chin and Chang. Fellowes' life, rather than flashing before his eyes, shuffled past like some interminable slide show. None of it was of any consequence. Not when compared to the unthinkable, the unforgivable – the murder he'd committed; not just any old murder, but his own flesh-and-blood. And how could one atone for such a Biblically gargantuan crime?

And suddenly it was clear.

On that day by the river long ago and by that one unfathomable act of Blutbruderschaft; that naked, pointless, childish gesture of mingled blood and brotherhood Cole had unknowingly given him a great gift. Cole had given him a way to make himself whole again; to take away the pain...

So, he resolved to sacrifice himself: not a messy suicide; no vomit on the pillow or faeces across the bedspread. But there would be blood. A tiny trickle, no more than a few teardrops. But this act

would be a thing of resonance, perhaps even redemption, bringing the two of them full circle in the Danse Macabre they had begun what seemed a lifetime ago.

All his senses were magnified now, with Zen-like clarity Fellowes could see Luxton's finger take up the first pressure on the trigger. His sister's blue eyes widened. A bead of sweat trickled down Tatham's forehead. Luggler swallowed convulsively. Even the rock-steady Breeze tensed his huge bulk, ready to throw himself to one side at the instant the guns went off. He could hear the braying TV audience over his own harsh breath.

'I see a way out,' he announced.

Luxton flicked his gaze across to the bed, slowly releasing the first pressure on the trigger.

'There is no way out, son.'

'Then what have you got to lose?'

'Go on, I'm listening.'

'I need a knife; a sharp one.'

The heat inside the factory was a tangible, sticky thing, like skin on custard. Len forced his way through it, walking slowly like a man in a dream.

He made his way, unblinking, through the rows of pulsing steel behemoths as the machinery pushed, shoved hammered and shaped the molten metal around him. Sparks flew in the red stained air. Dark silhouettes clambered and busied themselves on the machinery, like a vision of hell. Not for Len though, he carried his own portable hell within him.

Len paused before a chunky hydraulic guillotine and depressed the flat-topped red button. A rotating amber light began to flash on the control panel. Thirty seconds later a heavy steel block smashed down onto the lower plate with all the thunderous power of a Norse God. Len could still feel the vibration in his gut as the block rose again.

He pushed aside the meshed safety screen, spread his oily hands and placed them, palms down, on the lower plate.

When the blow came it was surprisingly painless, considering.

‘Ow, Jesus Christ, Charles.’

Reaching up from his bed, Fellowes struck out with Flick’s razor-sharp knife, the blade carved a long gash through Cole’s extended palm. Tendons on Breeze’s neck bulged as he held the young man’s wrist to prevent Cole flinging his tainted blood around the room. Cole stood transfixed, staring at the wound as though the mutilated hand belonged to someone else; a pained and confused expression on his face.

Fellowes now turned the finely- honed eight-inch blade on himself. With one quick stroke he lacerated his own right palm, then clasped Cole’s dripping hand in his own, squeezing hard as their blood mingled in a gory handshake.

Breeze, impressed by the solemnity of the moment, released Cole’s wrist and stepped away.

Fellowes turned to stare directly into Luxton’s eyes. ‘I told you, Electro; Cole does not have Aids. My life on it.’

‘Fuck me,’ whispered Luxton.

Cole and Fellowes remained like that for a long while - hands clasped together in the silence of the room. Droplets leaked through the gaps in their fingers and pattered down like a spring shower of scarlet rain across the pure white bed sheet.

There was a small metallic click as Luxton made the little pistol safe. Only Breeze noticed that his boss's hands were trembling as he handed the pistol back. Breeze, never one to shy away from stating the obvious, nodded slowly. 'I reckon your Debbie must be all right then, boss.' The men around the room exhaled, as if released from a terrible dream, and relaxed their weapons. With the release of tension came the sounds of laughter. 'I telled ye he was Rock, that 'un,' announced a gleeful Swank.

'No you didn't,' replied Roberts, 'you said he was the one that kakked himself.'

Luxton shook his head in admiration mixed with relief as he gazed at Fellowes. 'Hat's off, son, I've gotta hand it to you ...' he grinned as he caught his own words, '...no pun intended.'

'None taken.' Still clasping hands, Fellowes glanced up at his friend. Cole's head was twisted upwards at an unnatural angle and he was smiling, staring serenely through half-closed eyes at the ceiling.

Cole inhaled, savouring every breath, minutely aware of each beat of his rapidly slowing heart. He was saved; brought back from the brink by Fellowes' extraordinary gesture. Life was amazing, beautiful and what's more, he was experiencing a vision. In the air above him, floated the blurry image of his mother's face, smiling down, like the good witch in the Wizard of Oz. His dear old Mum; loving, doting ... what?

What the hell was his mum doing here? Had he died and gone to heaven? Had Luxton shot him after all?

Cole released his friend's hand, opened his eyes wide and stared. It was his mum all right, in full close-up on the ceiling-mounted TV. 'Bloody hell, that's my mum,' he blurted, pointing up at the screen.

'Nah, that's never your Mum. Don't start going all psycho on us,' chuckled Breeze, 'that's the clever lady who's gonna win the cruise boat. I got money on her.'

'He's imagining things 'cos he's in shock,' observed Swank, 'they get a bit hysterical like that after ye threaten to blow they brains out. He's no sweatin' though,' he added helpfully.

T'ar'iq unwound the white towel from his head and began ripping strips as makeshift bandages for the two young men. Laura gratefully sat on her brother's bed and ministered to his wound while Cole excitedly wound a piece of towel around his own bleeding palm. 'Fuck off, it is my mum, I swear.'

Luxton shook his head. 'Swank's right, you're in shock son. That lady is not your mum, she's been on the TV for weeks, so she's famous, which means that she's not your mum. Her name's Julia something.'

'Yes, Julia, Julia Cole. It's my mum, I can't believe it.'

Luxton pursed his lips.

'Come to think of it, he might be right, boss,' said Breeze, 'her name's Julia Cole. And she's mustard. I got a pony on her winning the boat; five to one with Ludgate Lozzer.'

‘I got three hundred notes on her, as it happens,’ grinned Tatham, ‘she’s the fucking Bamber, ain’t she?’

Luxton would have preferred to get going but it turned out that the gangsters all had significant investment in the final outcome of A.B. or C – the smart money was on Julia Cole.

‘Turn the volume up then,’ he said, before turning to Cole, ‘And you. Don’t get too comfortable because you are not completely off the hook. You might not have given my Debbie the Aids but you’re still due a spanking for shagging her in the first place. Understood?’

Cole shot a glance at Tatham, who considered the equity of the ruling, before nodding: ‘Sounds fair to me, Mr Luxton.’

Luxton commandeered the remote and settled back in the Parker Knoll, content for the moment.

‘All right then. Best of luck to your mum then, son.’

This group of violent men, who only seconds before had been intent on blowing each other’s faces off, now jostled apologetically for arse-room around the blood-spattered fringes of Fellowes’ bed.

‘...C- Louis the Fourteenth,’ declared Adrian Scobie on screen.

‘Wrong,’ pronounced Luxton, ‘he’s fucked it. Ade there, is going home by bus.’

‘You sure?’ asked Tony Revels.

‘Absolutely, Tony,’ confirmed the confident Scobie.

‘I see.’ Revels turned to the camera. ‘Ade,’ he announced, ‘you are absolutely...rrrrrrriiiiiiii...ong.’

Luxton laughed, the TV audience gasped as Revels piled on the agony: 'Which means that you're on your way home, no matter where, and all you get from us is your...' he swung his mike towards the audience.

'...bus fare,' they roared in a delighted singsong.

Adrian Scobie sat catatonic in his box, fixed sickly grin welded to his face. The camera zoomed back in on the implacable Tony Revels.

'So, Adrian, with that incorrect answer you have lost, let's see: a Sony Walkman, a Commodore home computer, a Goblin Teas-made, a Sinclair C5, a collection of Yazoo albums, the Bang and Olufson Hi-Fi, a cuddly brown bear, a complete set of crystal style glassware and three-hundred-and-twenty-pounds cash. I'm sorry, Adrian, but that's the game - bus fare, mate. The right answer was B. by the way, Louis the Seventeenth.'

'Cunt - I could have told him that,' lied Luxton.

In his empty office Nasir placed the phone back on its cradle. Over the past forty-eight hours all the remaining primates had been despatched and the virus cultures destroyed. Sulheiman and Ahmed had returned to the Middle East on fake passports while he remained behind to clean up the loose ends: incriminating papers, vehicles, invoices, bills of lading and equipment. And now there was a weird silence about the place. A silence made more profound by the absence of machine hum and the chunter of living creatures. But there was more to it than that. He cocked an ear. Yes, that was it - there was no bird song either. He'd been to Belsen long ago and inspected the mass graves. No birds sang there either, even thirty years after the terrible events. It was the same quality of silence; as though they sensed evil and kept well away.

Nasir shivered. This was no time for absurd superstition. He'd made his choices and he would live with them. The phone call had been a message from Salah: the vial had been broken at the Wall - in some kind of a scuffle - Saleh had seen it with his own eyes. The virus had been released; the angel of death was loose in Jerusalem and the gates of Gehenna opened.

His work was done, it was time for him to go.

Sulheiman and Ahmed had dumped the gold Sierra at Heathrow's long-term car park before departing for Libya. Nasir scooped up the keys to T'ar'iq's beloved X19 and left the deserted building. Poor T'ar'iq, such a fool - one of the few loose ends that didn't require tying up - he knew nothing.

Nasir opened the car door and slumped wearily into the beige, bucket seat. There was a brittle crack and a tiny hiss as a jagged shard of broken glass speared his left buttock. With a leaden feeling of despair he knew precisely what it was without even turning to look.

'Sudden death,' said Tony Revels. He waved his mike at the two remaining competitors. 'You know how it works. Just the two of you on the buttons now. Is it A, B or C? Because....'

'...it's one of those three,' chanted his obedient flock.

Revels inspected the glittering question cards. 'Now, listen carefully - you have just five seconds to select your button - JFK once famously said: "Ich bin ein Berliner." Ein Berliner is A- a sausage, B-a doughnut or C- a large dog?'

There was a split screen close-up of both Craig and Julia, faces puckered in extreme concentration.

The bearded contestant winked at the lens before punching a button. Julia dithered.

'Craig's locked in. Time's running out. Julia, you must answer.'

Julia stabbed down with her thumb as the camera cut back to Tony Revels' pancaked face. 'Let's just take another quick look at that Star Prize shall we?' he grinned.

The Cabin Cruiser somersaulted onto the screen in a cheap optical effect. The bikini-clad girls on board waved gaily. 'Yes, Tony,' said the chucklesome voice-over, 'whoever said there's no such thing as a free launch?'

The camera cut back to Tony Revels looking genuinely puzzled. 'Eh?'

'Come on, Cole's mum,' chivvied Breeze from the foot of the bed.

Tony Revels recovered himself and stared intently into the lens. 'Boat...or bus? Now, Craig, you pressed first and you picked A. - a sausage. Well, Craig, did JFK really say: "I am a sausage?" Did he say that? Is that what he said?'

Craig grinned and nodded vigorously.

'You think so? You seem pretty confident. Are you confident? Are you really? No room for worry? Not the teensiest weensiest little doubt in your mind? No recriminations?'

A tiny but distinct furrow appeared on Craig's brow. He shifted uncomfortably in his box.

'A sausage? Hmm. And that's what you think? The question is: are you right? Are you correct? Will you be catching the tide today or will you be catching the last bus home?'

Craig mouthed something from his box but the mike was too far away to pick it up. Whatever it was made the audience gasp and almost threw Tony Revels off his stride. 'All right, Craig, calm down. You picked answer A- the sausage. Oh Craig, Craig, Craig...Craig...you are absolutely wrrrooooooo...riiiiiiiii...wrrrooooooo...ong!'

In the box behind Revels, the chubby, bearded contestant gaped for a second, then vomited.

'The bastard's puked,' crowed a gleeful Swank.

Revels raised his eyebrows at the audience. ‘Well, there’s a thing.’ He grinned broadly. This was bloody good TV.

Nasir gingerly retrieved the broken fragments from the seat beneath him. His pale-green linen trousers were damp with spilt sera and a smidgeon or two of his own blood. He retrieved a sodden scrap of paper from between his legs - an old shopping receipt from Tesco’s - and examined it. On the reverse, hurriedly written in biro was the word: “Sorry”. Cole’s signature was scrawled underneath. Of course Cole had betrayed him - it was clear now that the precious vial had never even left for Israel. He should have never had trusted that creature. And now that spawn of Shaitan had confounded everything that he and his companions had worked for. Nasir had been hoisted by his own petard - contaminated by his own masterwork. As a virologist Nasir understood that there was nothing to be done, death was now inevitable. He could predict each stage of the dreadful disease as the virus inexorably embedded itself in his system, turning his own cells against themselves, like a foul cuckoo laying its eggs in another’s nest, but he could do nothing to stop it. He knew he only had another day or so before the fever would incapacitate him; time enough though to wreak a terrible vengeance. He was a Supercarrier now; a human bioweapon; his own delivery system.

He would go out and mingle with the folks in the Rum Duck, infecting the inhabitants of this small village as surely as *Rattus Norwegicus* spread plague. He especially hoped that Gilbert Fowler would be there, propping up the bar as always, still chuckling to himself over that pathetic ‘Curry night’ epithet of his.

And after the Rum Duck, he would pay a visit to Waughstone Hall. Give Aubrey something more serious to worry about than a Tulip Blight.

Then he recalled Aubrey's face that night at the hospital and his gentle, heartfelt quote from the marvelous Kahlil Gibran. No, on second thoughts, Aubrey for one, did not deserve to die. But then who did? – that swine Gilbert Fowler, probably. And those rapacious, land-thieving Israelites for whom the virus had been designed.

But what if it was Allah's will that his terrible weapon had so misfired? Perhaps this Cole was not a creature of Shaitan after all, but an instrument of God sent to confound a Godless act? Who could say? Nasir would have the answer from Him soon enough.

Soon he would be with his beloved wife Leila and his adored children, Abbas and Saheer, in paradise. How he longed to see them. Would he embrace them after all this time with blood on his hands?

Nasir sat bowed and motionless for the longest time before coming to a decision: he would remain here at the Centre and his hellish virus would die with him and within him.

He returned to the main block and prepared a syringe, then selected a heavy sledgehammer from the maintenance room and walked back outside into the sunlight where he began pounding at the masonry in the doorway of the breezeblock annexe. As the bricks crumbled and fell away he was surprised to find himself weeping. Like the door to the annexe, he'd sealed off the gate to his memories so firmly and for so long that he was amazed to find it now opening so easily.

'Your children are not your children. They are the son's and daughters of life's longing for itself...their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.' He smiled at the very words; comfort enough there for anyone who understood...

He climbed through the opening in the brickwork, threw open the door and stepped inside. It was pitch-black and filled with the lingering smell of corruption. He could sense the decayed body of Chris Semel still on the bed nearby. He found his way by touch to the old sofa at the back of the room and lay down. With steady fingers, he located a vein in his forearm and swiftly injected himself with a small but serviceable dose of Potassium Chlorate. His dead wife's name on his lips, Nasir fell into a dreamless sleep...

'A doughnut you said? Is it? Is it really? Quite sure? No room for doubt at all? It's too late now of course. But exactly how sure are you? Would America's greatest president really compare himself to a jam filled pastry; a doughy confection with a hole up the middle? Would he, Julia? Would he really do that? Does that sound probable? I don't need to remind you that there's an awful lot riding on this.'

'Well, fucking don't then. Just get on with it, you numpty,' grumbled Luxton from the depths of his recliner.

'Let's just recap,' continued Revels, 'Craig answered A. - a sausage, and he was wrong, we know that. So the right answer is either B. or C. - a doughnut or a large dog. You answered B. - a doughnut. You're with me so far? Nervous now?'

Julia, sitting calmly in her box, nodded almost imperceptibly, a flicker of irritation creasing her pale face. 'A little, Tony.'

'I'll bet you are. I'll bet you are...'

‘That’s done it,’ said Breeze, ‘that cozzier’s still sniffing around and this place looks like a bomb’s just gone off.’ He and Nelson hoisted the unconscious Rodders onto the vacant gurney before covering him with a sheet.

Luxton held up a restraining hand. ‘Put the anchors on, we are not quite finished here yet. Congratulations are firstly due to the Shagger, for his Mum’s result, followed by a right good kicking...hold up, where is the little bastard?’

Luxton’s men peered wildly round the room for signs of Cole. Flick checked under the bed. Lugger stuck his head into the en-suite bathroom. ‘Not in here, boss.’

Breeze emitted a deep rumbling chuckle despite himself. ‘He’s only gone and legged it, boss.’

Luxton stood in the centre of the room hands on hips, shaking his powdery head, baffled. ‘Would you credit it...right in the middle of his own mum’s quiz show? What kind of a son is that, for God’s sake?’

‘Ah well,’ said Fellowes squeezing his sister’s hand, ‘we’re not entitled to choose our families, just our friends, I think.’

Reilly was incandescent. ‘You’re telling me you have no corroborating statement? You got nothing from the hospital witness. And now he’s just disappeared?’

‘We have his details and an excellent description.’

‘Claude Balls. That’s the name he gave you?’

‘Yes.’

‘9 Letsby Avenue, Catford?...I think not.’

‘The address is definitely fake. We have ascertained that.’

‘Oh really?’ said Reilly. ‘Well done. Excellent detective work.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

Although impervious to irony, even the thick-skinned Detective Sergeant could tell that this was going to be an uncomfortable meeting - an interview without coffee. He knew that the two things Reilly hated most were being in uniform and sitting at his desk in Scotland Yard. And he was now having to do both. Well, serves him right the silly sod, thought Miller. Reilly was a man who clearly didn’t appreciate modern police methods. The sooner he retired and pissed off with his “K”, the better. Reilly simply didn’t understand that whatever the witness provided could be useful: even a fake name and address. It might mean nothing to the ordinary person; it might seem inconsequential, but to the trained mind it might be the signpost that leads to the next signpost and so on which ultimately would enable him to assemble the complex pieces and with a great deal of effort, experience, technology or what anyone else might refer to as crime fighting wizardry, combined with a little dab of luck, would allow him to finally identify the culprit.

‘Claude is not exactly a common name these days... why would someone refer to themselves as Claude, I wonder? It might be a clue, sir.’

‘It’s a joke, Miller. He was taking the piss. Didn’t you see that? It’s one of those pathetic schoolboy jocular names, like Norma Stitz, Eileen Dover or Sir V. Ette which thanks to you, is now a great deal less hysterical or improbable than Sir Patrick Aloysius Gaylord O’Balloch Reilly.’

Miller bit his tongue and then his cheek. ‘We have the name of the man who signed him in and paid for the private room, an Arab gentleman. A Mr Nasir.’

Reilly brightened momentarily. ‘And...?’

‘Turns out to be a fake name too, sir.’

Reilly massaged his temples. ‘I can’t see how the hell I’m going to survive this. Do you even know what happened down there, Miller? Shots were reported, the Forest and Gloucester Div. sent a whole bunch of uniforms over to investigate but some local tit by the name of Lister stood outside the room for hours and refused to let them in. On your orders, as it turns out.’

Miller smiled. ‘As you are aware, sir, I have no actual authority over the Forest and Gloucester lot. But if certain individuals recognise the preeminence of a higher duty who am I to disabuse them of...?’

‘Sounds like you’ve been talking to a lawyer. Which is fine, because you need to, given your criminally negligent mishandling of the situation and the state of that hospital room. I understand that at least three weapons were discharged – two shotguns and a .22 pistol - and, judging by the various blood types spattered about, at least four people may have been killed or injured while your man stood guard outside preventing real coppers from entering.’

Suddenly life was turning sour for Miller. He felt like a victim of Clause Twenty-eight. ‘But, sir, you explicitly told me not to let the local lot anywhere near the witness. I only... did...I did...what you ordered...’

‘I do not recall telling you to go down to Gloucester, sit on your fat arse in the cafeteria all afternoon, stuffing your face with hot dogs and Coke, chatting up every student nurse in sight, then lose my only witness in the middle of a ruddy great shootout.’

Miller nodded and stared at his shoes.

Reilly adjusted his tie. ‘I can’t even begin to describe the nastiness, the sheer awfulness of the jobs that will now accrue to your mate at the Forest and Gloucester Division.’

Miller shrugged. Lister's problems were none of his concern. He brightened, remembering his ace in the hole. 'At least we still have "The Ghoul" in custody, sir. He must have given us something by now.'

Reilly gazed at his subordinate with undisguised loathing. 'Yes, he has, as a matter of fact.'

Miller couldn't resist a smug little grin. 'Well then we don't really need the witness after all? All's well that ends well.'

'All is not well. He's provided us with a three-hundred-thousand quid law-suit and a large quantity of raw egg.'

'Egg?'

'All over our faces.'

Miller was lost for words. 'But...I...who...how ...who?'

'You sound like an owl, Miller. Owls are generally considered wise. It doesn't suit you at all.'

Reilly sighed heavily. 'It seems that Watson and Crow gave your suspect the bucket-and-book treatment all right - on your instructions they hit him around the head with a zinc piss-pail for two days straight, then forced him to recite the West London phonebook. I have a list of all the names he gave, right here.'

Reilly dug in his desk and produced a small stack of closely typed papers. 'Everyone from Aaron to Adams along with their phone numbers. And all utterly pointless. There was no confession, he denied all knowledge of the charred finger bone - which cannot be linked to a victim - and we can't directly connect him to the visiting Cards. Without a witness, everything you have on this suspect is circumstantial. He was released three hours ago without charge. And now he's going to sue our bollocks off. It's a disaster.'

'But he's the Ghoul, sir. I know it in my water.'

Reilly shook his head. ‘An own-ghoul I think.’ He grimaced at his own gallows humour, rose and buttoned his uniform jacket. ‘The press-wolves are gathering, Miller, there’s a pack of them downstairs right now, baying for blood... and I’m afraid I’m throwing you to them.’

Miller watched impotently as his career walked smartly out of the room.

Julia Cole stood on the bridge of the ‘A.B. Sea-Reveler’ and gazed down on the light dancing over the wavelets. She’d been aboard for five weeks in preparation for the maiden voyage but still felt out of place here in the millionaire neighbourhood of the Antibes marina. Claude, the mahogany brown, drop-dead-gorgeous helmsman, had been a Godsend though. He was everything that Len had not been: capable, competent and solicitous. And he never took any shit from the crew, not where Madame Cool - as he so adorably referred to her – was concerned. Plus, he looked fucking great in a light blue singlet and white shorts.

She watched in admiration as he chivvied the workmen hauling the last of the dry stores on board.

With fuel pumped, compass tested and engine primed, it was time to cast off. Only one thing remained to fill Julia’s limited-edition, hand-crafted Staffordshire Potteries’ Cup o’ Happiness; one final item of cargo - a sack of flesh and odd metal components. She anxiously scanned the Antibes harbourfront for this supranumerary.

There he was now, with an armful of maritime maps; the man she’d married all those years ago; the man he’d once been, not the man he’d become.

Her Len.

Len sprinted up the gangway and swept his wife off her feet, careful not to snag her on either of his steel hooks. In his teeth was a single red rose.

Julia screeched, giggling like a schoolgirl and turned to the helmsman. ‘Capitaine Double-Hook est retournay. Allons ‘y, silver plate, Claude.’

She took the rose from Len’s teeth and gazed at it in wonder.

With a grin, Claude gunned the powerful Johnson twin inboard engines.

Fellowes toyed with the bloody pink-hearted slab of beef before him and inspected his sister across the pristine expanse of tablecloth. He knew exactly what she was about to ask.

‘So have you been yet?’

‘No.’

‘Why not, for God’s sake?’

‘I’m not sure that I really want to know.’

‘Charles, you need to know. You must find out.’

‘Do I deserve to know?’

Laura’s fork froze in mid air. ‘What kind of a question is that? Apart from anything else, we deserve to know - Aubrey, Antonia and I.’

Fellowes screwed up his eyes. ‘You were there, you saw what I did, you know what he’s like. We must assume that I am, most likely, HIV Positive.’

‘You seem to want to believe that, Charles.’

‘I suppose I do.’

‘But why? You acted to save your friend. Do you think what you did has no meaning if it doesn’t turn out to kill you? Do you think that diminishes it in any way? Is that it? My God, Charles, that’s absolutely the worst, most demented form of conceit. Why are you so full of self-loathing? What gives you the right to sit there so utterly self-absorbed, wallowing in your own self pity? If I wasn’t enjoying this claret so much I would chuck it all over you, I really would.’

Fellows pushed away the ravaged plate. An East India Club waiter discreetly whisked it away while another brought the menu. Fellowes considered it for a moment.

‘Ah, Sago pudding, that takes me back. I think I might have the Sago.’

Laura shuddered. ‘I don’t know how you can bear that stuff. It’s like something they scrape off a fifteen-year-old’s sheets.’

‘It reminds me of my school days.’

‘Which were so happy and carefree?’

‘I’m not allowed to get away with anything am I?’

‘Not when you’re being so maudlin and evasive. Aubrey and Antonia are desolate. They don’t understand why you won’t see them. And neither do I.’

‘You saw what I did.’

‘You risked your life and saved your friend. A wonderful, selfless gesture.’

‘That’s what you think you saw.’

‘What did I see?’

‘An utterly selfish act. I saved myself.’

‘I’m lost, Charles.’

Fellows took a deep breath. ‘You remember that day, when Cole rescued you from the monkey?’

‘Chimp.’

‘Something peculiar happened down at the river. I think Cole became a sort of brother; a blood brother if you like. The bit of me that’s been missing all these years.’ Fellowes had no appetite, but took a sip of Claret.

‘You’re talking gibberish, Charles. Peter’s dead. Your brother died a long time ago, nothing can bring him back.’

Fellowes glared at his sister. Words long withheld came tumbling out. ‘That’s so easy for you to say. You haven’t had to live with the guilt; the utterly debilitating, paralysing guilt of knowing that you were responsible for his death. Every time Antonia looked at me, I sensed that she could see Peter there and I knew she was silently blaming me. Each moment Aubrey spent in my company was agony for him because he was secretly wishing that it was me who’d fallen into the road and not saintly bloody Peter. It’s why Aubrey buries himself in his hothouse and Antonia hides behind her preposterous religion.’ He spat the last word with venom. ‘Guilt is a crippling, wasting disease which has stunted this family into a grotesque twisted caricature of itself. There’s no vaccine. The only surefire nostrum for guilt is redemption. But the redeeming act must balance the weight of the sin – a life for a life, Lor.

Across the table Laura began to weep silently. The Club stewards pretended not to notice the small drama unfolding within the confines their dignified oak-paneled walls.

‘Oh Christ, Charles.’ She dabbed at her eyes with the edge of the tablecloth. ‘That’s what you think?’

Fellowes face was grim, jaw set. ‘That’s what I think.’

‘How much of that journey do you really remember?’

‘All of it. How could I forget? Every moment is etched into my memory.’

‘Where was I?’

‘Where ...what?’

‘Where was I?’

‘I...don’t know.’

‘I was there in the car. So where was I?’

‘I don’t bloody know, Laura.’

‘Think hard.’

‘Peter and I were on the back seat. That’s all I recall.’

‘Antonia was in the passenger seat, Aubrey was driving. So where was I, Charles?’

‘I...I suppose you must have been in the back too.’

‘I was.’

Fellowes shrugged. ‘So?’

‘You were sitting on my lap. I was eight, remember, you were only five. We didn’t worry about seatbelts in those days. Peter was picking on you, as usual. He was a bully. I’m not saying that, given the chance, he wouldn’t have grown up to become a fine human being, but at six he was a bully and a prick. So I got fed up and gave him a shove.’

Fellowes’ jaw dropped. ‘But I remember my arms reaching out to push him.’

‘Mine - I had my arms around you. They were my arms you saw, Charles.’

‘You...?’

‘It was me.’

Fellowes screwed up his face, concentrating on that distant memory, clawing for detail.

‘I was sent away to that school in France a few months later; they couldn’t even bear me in the same country. It was...excruciating for Aubs and Antonia and you were right about that - it crippled them. Crippled us all really because you, you poor sod, seem to have gone through life

blaming yourself.’ Laura twirled the stem of one the purple Irises in the sweating silver vase. ‘So much damage we’ve all done to ourselves. But you were right, we don’t choose our families, do we?’

Her brother sat frozen. Finally he exhaled. ‘I...I don’t know what to say. This is a lot to take in, Laura.’

Laura smiled. ‘That’s an understatement. I wish I’d known. I wish...I wish I’d been able to make your life happier, Charles. But I suppose that’s what Cole did for you.’

Fellowes nodded. ‘My fool.’

His sister chuckled, ‘In his funny hat.’

Fellowes smiled at the memory. ‘In his funny hat.’

‘And so where did he resurface?’

‘God knows, I don’t’

‘And you may have thrown away your life for no reason and for a fool. Do you know, at one time he might have been in love with me?’

‘Ah, now you’re the one being conceited. He certainly fancied you, that was never in doubt, but you mustn’t be too hard on him; in a funny kind of way he may have been the most honest of us all.

At least with Cole we knew where we stood. He was so obvious in his motivations, like a baby really; so utterly unencumbered by our own grown-up guilt that he was almost an innocent.’

‘Is doing wrong only wrong if you believe it to be so? Is belief the thing rather than the deed? Is that where you’re headed, Charles?’

Fellowes squeezed his temples between the fingers and thumb of his right hand as he stared at the glistening, globular petals. ‘Oh, fuck it, I don’t know. Ask Aquinas.’

‘I’d rather ask a question.’

‘Do.’

‘What does it mean if you go through life believing yourself to have done wrong but haven’t at all?

What does that make you?’

‘A bigger fool than Cole.’

‘St Cole,’ corrected his sister, ‘patron saint of chancers, debauchers and degenerates.’

‘Well, look at us. We all thought we were so much better, smarter, more worldly. We thought we knew something and it turns out we knew nothing, not even about each other.’

‘We don’t talk. That’s what families are all about.’

‘You always have a glib answer to everything.’

‘That’s my defence, Charles.’

‘Yes. I see that now...’

The steward placed a small dish of Sago pudding in front of Fellowes, who prodded it gingerly with a spoon. ‘So, what now?’ he said.

‘We forgive ourselves; get on with our lives and try not to let the past blight our futures. Besides, a bit of blight can be a good thing, ask Aubs; seems to work for his tulips. It might be a good start if you saw him and...you know, actually talked.’

‘You don’t think it’s too late or anything?’

Laura smiled broadly. ‘Oh, it’s never too late. That’s the other thing about families, Charles.’

Watery Picadilly sunlight glinted off twin rows of uniform buttons as Miller observed the couple through hooded eyes.

The young man leaned heavily on his stick and he and his companion slowly descended the marble stairs.

It was Claude Balls all right.

Miller's fingers crept to the truncheon and cuffs on his belt as the two of them approached.

But there was no belt, just the full-waisted, brass-buttoned maroon carriage-coat.

Miller touched the brim of his ridiculous cockaded hat with his other hand and swung open the door.

'Thank you, so much' said the young man, handing him a fiver.

Fellowes limped down onto the wet pavement and inhaled the sour London air.

God, it was good to be alive.

END