

# the Greasy Spoon



a novel by  
Stephen Braiden

# THE GREASY SPOON

By

STEPHEN BRAIDEN

**WW** VIEBERS  
VERLAG

Yves Steiner r.i.p

For the South London Massive

Copyright © 2013

Publisher:

Wiebers Verlag  
Brussaer Weg 27  
D 12109 Berlin  
Germany

ISBN: 978-3-942606-54-7

Cover: Jane Weimann

[Braidon](#), Stephen.  
The Greasy Spoon

All rights reserved

**WW** WIEBERS  
VERLAG

You know how it is, you always find things when you're not looking for them. I was sorting through some old books recently, in a half-hearted way, when I came across a dog-eared and greasy Indian cookbook. I leafed through it's pages wondering whether it was worth keeping, until, stuck between a recipe for onion bhaji and "what to do with Ladies fingers", I found a photograph.

It was a small picture, taken on a cheap camera. A colour photograph, but the colours were varying shades of brown and grey which gave it the quality of a sepia print. There were two people by a roadside, a man and a woman. I recognized them immediately, it was Tom and Brigid and they looked terrible. It wasn't just the quality of the photograph, they really looked rough, even Brigid. They were leaning and reaching across the road as if getting to the other side was their ultimate goal in life, which, I guess, at the time it was. Both of them were laughing kind of manically. Next to them was a hand painted sign, huge and imposing, with a big arrow pointing across the road. It said, in big, unequivocal letters;

COOKED BREAKFAST

EVERY DAY

HOME COOKING JUST LIKE YER MA'S!

It all came flooding back, what a breakfast that was! A special breakfast, a breakfast unlike any other. It wasn't just the food, although that was great. No, what made this such a breakfast to remember were the circumstances. It was what led up to it, it was the whole story. I sat down and the images came pouring into my head. A red Datsun stuffed to the roof, a unicycle, garlic, mountainsides, pints of Guinness lined up on a bar, a walking stick, a Gypsy Kings tape and a woman with hair greasier than the sausages and rashers she was serving.

That was our breakfast at the Greasy Spoon but the story starts with Cheryl.

\*\*\*

I knew it the moment I saw her. I said to myself, 'Don't even think about it, don't let it cross your mind '.

When something like that happens, well, you're lost aren't you? You're already thinking about it, it's already crossed your mind.

Someone pointed her out to me and told me her name,

"That's Cheryl, she's going to be working with us."

She had orange hair and she was beautiful.

Was there anything I could've done? Not really. Later maybe, but you can't protect yourself from things you don't understand, things that are out of your control, things that are going to happen anyway.

\*\*\*

Me and Emma both applied for the job at the same time. There was some debate later about who'd seen the advert first. We helped each other with the application forms. I didn't think I was all that well qualified but then again nor was she. We didn't really know what they wanted. "Support Worker", what was that supposed to mean? Emma knew someone who did it. Helping people who'd been in asylums. Loonies and that. I'd met enough of them to consider myself suitable.

"It's not exactly loonies" said Emma, as we pondered over the forms, surrounded by cups of tea and ashtrays, "I think it's more, like, people with learning disabilities"

As if I knew what that meant.

"What? Like dyslexia and that? Like not being very good at sums? They don't put you in a loony bin for that do they?"

She shrugged. Anyway it was a job and after the last year I was getting desperate. Hours in offices, hours of paper frustration. Can't do this, can't do that. Can't afford it, sorry. We sent off the forms the next day.

If only we'd known what we were doing.

We had interviews on separate days. I thought I'd messed mine up because when they asked me what my hobbies were, I said "listening to records".

"What did you say that for?" Emma asked me afterwards.

"It's true, innit?"

"I dunno if honesty is always the best policy in these cases"

"Well, you know what I mean, they can take me as they find me"

"Yeah well, anyway, what about all this 'Normalisation' stuff?"

"Yeah, what was that all about?"

"Something about making people, like, normal"

"I don't know if either of us is really in a position to do that"

"Nah, 'specially not you!" She punched me on the leg.

We both got the job. We should've smelt a rat. The first thing we had to do was to go on an induction course at Dulwich Hospital where we were taught about "Normalisation" and met some of our co-workers. They were a mixed bunch. Everyone had a different idea about what normal meant. There was an Irish bloke in a leather jacket with long straggly hair. His name was Declan,

"My idea of normal right, might be different to yours" he said pointing at a stern looking middle aged black woman.

"Yes my boy, for a start I don't find it normal to point your finger at someone, in fact I find it rude!"

"What I mean is," he continued undeterred "It's normal for me to get home at midnight and to put Led Zep on full blast like it might not be that normal for you"

"You can say that again"

I began to wonder why I'd been worried about my interview, it looked like they'd just taken everyone who'd applied.



There were six houses in a specially built close; Rowell Close. After two weeks someone with a spray can and a sense of irony had changed it to Bowel Closed. How did they know? No one lived in our house yet, they were still all in hospital. They organised a kind of party where we met all the members of 'the team'. A sandwiches and lemonade sort of affair. Everyone was standing around making conversation. Trying to suss each other out. It wasn't exactly relaxed. In fact it was quite tense. Declan ate all the sandwiches.

That was where I first met Cheryl. She was standing in a corner laughing with some other people. She had orange hair. I don't remember much else. She had orange hair and she was beautiful.

'Don't even think about it, Don't let it cross your mind' .

It wasn't really orange, of course, she was wearing extensions. It still looked great though. I mean, she stood out from the crowd. She would've stood out from any crowd though, orange hair or no orange hair.

We were introduced and she smiled at me. I made some crap joke about the sandwiches, in a kind of dream, and went to talk to Declan. Trying to act normal. Trying to pretend that nothing had happened. I made a point of ignoring her, I even stood with my back to her, as if that would do any good.

Later, she remembered it differently.

"You were dead unfriendly, just walked off and left us there"

"I was shy"

"I knew you were nice though, I could see it in your eyes"

She always knew the right thing to say.

Declan broke the spell, he was standing next to a woman with long brown curly hair and a black leather jacket. It could have been his sister.

"This is Brigid" he said.

All that happened on one afternoon.

\*\*\*

Tom wanted to know everything when I got in.

"Have you met any weirdoes yet?"

I told him about Declan but he seemed unimpressed.

"Are there any good looking birds?"

I didn't say anything.

"Whose turn is it to cook tonight then?" asked Douglas.

Those evenings were nice and I have to admit I miss them. It was nearly always the same during the week. We'd gather in the sitting room in the early evening and watch soap operas after which someone would cook some kind of meal. Our menu was severely limited. If Douglas was cooking it was a choice of spaghetti with tinned tomatoes and uncooked carrots or coagulated rice with kidney beans, tinned tomatoes and uncooked carrots. I hate raw carrots at the best of times, but swimming in cheap brand tinned tomatoes is just too much. The thing about Douglas was that he was so hyper-sensitive you just couldn't say a thing. I always used to leave a pile of rock-hard carrots at the side of my plate, but he never seemed to notice. How can you be so sensitive and insensitive at the same time? I never worked that one out.

If Douglas' cooking was predictable, Tom's was positively one-dimensional. He had one recipe, if you could be so grand, and it was beans on toast with a fried egg on top. Sometimes, if it was someone's birthday or some other special occasion, the F.A. Cup final springs to mind, he would embellish the dish by putting grated cheese on the toast. There were two good points about Tom's cooking. One was that it actually tasted really good, all that practice at making the same simple meal had given him a sort of Zen-like skill, and the second was that he hardly ever cooked, so you really didn't get a chance to get bored of it. It would have been excruciating night after night, but every three weeks or so made it something to look forward to. My cooking was no better, but at least it was a bit more adventurous. I used to buy cook books in jumble sales and try exotic recipes from foreign lands. We usually didn't have all the ingredients so I would improvise. Sometimes it worked, but even I have to admit that my prawn cocktail with chopped hot dog sausages instead of prawns was pretty much inedible.

After dinner, we would get stoned. Someone would make a cup of tea, and one or two of the others would roll a joint. We often had visitors, three or four a night, but somehow they always managed to arrive after we'd finished eating. It was uncanny. Tom rolled very strong joints which he smoked half of before he passed them on. Sometimes the smell was so strong you'd feel out of it before you even took a drag. It used to drive Grant crazy. He'd sit next to Tom virtually foaming at the mouth. Douglas made very weedy spliffs with Marlboros which were very unpleasant to smoke. Grant took the piss out of him about it once and he stayed in his room for a day afterwards, so we were always very careful what we said. Douglas was getting weirder. I'd known him for years, we used to live in the same village and I got to know him when he came home from boarding school during the summer holidays. We played cricket for the local village team together. He was a stylish opening bat, which didn't quite fit with the general mode of play. I used to bowl as fast as I possibly could without too much thought to accuracy, which did. We listened to the Buzzcocks and the Undertones together. He'd been unemployed since he left university with not quite the right sort of degree, and he'd sunk lower and lower into the mire. He gave up on any attempt at getting a job, rarely went out and stopped changing his clothes. He spent whole days in his room smoking roll ups and reading Beckett. He could still be funny in an ironic sort of

way, but somehow the spark had gone out of him. He listened to the Smiths too much and hated all the acid house and hip hop that Tom played at full volume every moment he was home. It was weird living with those two, like sharing a house with Yin and Yang.

\*\*\*

Then we went to Durridge Park. We had to get a train out to Dartford and then a bus. Me and Emma spent the journey trying to guess what our clients would be like. We'd been told that the people we would be working with were our 'clients' and that they had 'learning difficulties' although we still didn't really know what that meant. They showed us a film on our induction course about an old guy who was now living in his own home after having been in a hospital for thirty years. He seemed alright, just like any old geezer you might meet in the pub at lunchtime. He had his own garden which he'd planted with vegetables. We hoped our house would be full of people like that. Each of us was to be assigned a key client, today we were going to meet them for the first time. I was nervous.

"So what's yours supposed to be like?" asked Emma as we got on the bus.

"I dunno" I replied "All I know is that his name's Bill"

"Mine's called Irene, she's supposed to be nice"

"I wonder what that means"

We met Nicola, our House Manager, at the bus stop. She was a ruddy faced woman who'd been a nurse in Donegal. I had the feeling she'd never been to London before. She'd certainly never met anyone like Cheryl before, but then again nor had I.

"Where is she?" Nicola looked at her watch.

We stood around, cold and miserable, waiting for Cheryl to show up. She arrived half an hour late.

"I'm sorry, my daughter's sick, I had to find someone to look after her"

I didn't know she had a daughter.

We walked up the road a bit and through some big gates and there we were in Durridge Park. It was huge, a collection of bleak brick buildings on the side of a hill. As we walked up the path an air of gloom descended on our little group. Nicola tried to be jolly. We went into one of the buildings following her like a herd of sheep, down some dingy corridors and into ward seven.

It was full. There were people everywhere. They all seemed to be walking round aimlessly, bumping into things and each other. There were people in pyjamas, people in suits, people in wheelchairs and people wearing crash helmets. Some were shouting, some were crying and some were talking to themselves. A small group of women in nurses uniforms sat in a corner smoking. When they saw us come in they stood up. One of them came over to us while the others started trying to look busy.

"Can I help you?" the nurse asked Nicola as if she hoped the answer would be 'no'

"Yes, we've come to visit Bill and Irene" said Nicola smiling a bit too much.

"Bill who? We've got loads of Bills in here"

"Bill Edwards"

"Oh you mean Teddy. We call him Teddy 'cos he looks just like a teddy bear"

"Yes well, and, erm , Irene?"

You could see that Nicola didn't approve.

"Oh she's over there, the one in the wheelchair"

She pointed, we looked. There was a woman sitting in a wheelchair in the middle of the chaos. She was staring at the ceiling and moaning. Emma went over to say hello.

"And Bill?"

The woman craned her neck.

"Where is he now? Ah, there he is, by the chairs"

He was sitting on the floor near where the women had been.

You couldn't see his face because he was looking at the ground. He picked up something from the floor and put it in his mouth, then he took it out and pressed it between his fingers. I couldn't see the similarity with a teddy bear.

Me and Nicola went over while the others waited around awkwardly in the middle of the room. When we got near he looked up. His eyes were black with dirt from the floor and he was chewing something. Brown dribble ran down the side of his mouth.

"Hi Bill, I'm Nicola" she said cheerily.

He walked off.

"What was he eating" I asked, trying to sound professional while feeling sick.

"Cigarettes, he eats cigarette ends."

"Oh, right" I thought I better say something else so I asked, "Does he speak much?"

"No, never. He's autistic. Finds it hard to er...relate to other people"

"So what am I supposed to do then?"

She smiled.

"Try."

We wandered from ward to ward in a daze. Declan attempted to be funny. We laughed nervously. Only Cheryl kept her cool. As we were leaving she said,

"I'll see yer later, I'm getting a lift from me boyfriend"

I didn't know she had a boyfriend.

She got into a flash looking red car. I felt a strange sort of relief. Now I could relax, now it was out of the question. I could really forget it.

\*\*\*

Of course I didn't forget it, but as late summer became autumn, I managed, at least, to concentrate on some other things. Like coming to terms with being responsible for Bill, watching Tom and Emma splitting up, and getting to know Brigid. She wasn't like the people I knew. She was from some no nonsense part of Dublin. She wasn't posing, she wasn't pretending to be anything she wasn't. Brigid told it like it was.

"This Normalisation shit's just a load of bollocks, eh?"

As we carried a client to the toilet.

"We're just skivvies, and them lot don't give a toss"

While mopping up sick.

"Let's face it, Bill's never gonna go down the shops, buy a packet of fags and smoke 'em"

Too right, but we had to act like he would. Like it was a remote possibility.

We got on, we went out drinking beer. Emma, Brigid and me. Sometimes Declan came along too, but he was a pain in the arse if truth were told. Brigid came to our flat. She asked Douglas what he did all day. He went red. She took the piss out of Tom. It was great.

Tom and Emma had been together a few months, I'm not sure how long really, a long time by our standards. She was too good for him. Everyone knew that. Everyone except Tom that is. He just told her one night. That's what she said anyway. He just said he didn't want her any more. Sam said he couldn't love because of some trauma in his childhood or something. He never said a word to me about it, but then again I never asked him. I wonder why not? It was never the right moment I suppose.

He started asking me lots of questions about Brigid though. I noticed that alright. About a month after he'd split up with Emma we all went to a party in Brixton. Tom was being especially oily around Brigid,

"Who's the plastic Irishman?" She whispered in my ear.

"That's my flatmate, Tom. His dad's Irish"

"He thinks he's God's gift don't he?"

About five minutes later they disappeared together. Emma spent the rest of the evening sobbing on my shoulder. That was always the way with Tom though, he had all the fun and I was forever picking up the pieces. He was a bastard but I couldn't help but envy him sometimes. I just wished I'd had the balls.

A few days later I went to work with Emma. We cycled together through South London in the early autumn drizzle, weaving in and out of the traffic, ignoring lights and stopping at a news agents to buy a pack of Camels and a newspaper. When we got to work there was some sort of panic as usual because an Agency worker had gone out with Bill and they weren't back yet. Cheryl was going crazy. She was good at it.

"If I have to stay late and fill in another one of those fuckin' forms I'm gonna kick her stupid head in." She snarled, a little unreasonably, I thought. "I hate these bleedin' sleep-overs and I hate these moronic Agencies, fuckin' useless, she just sat around all morning reading the Sun, so I told her right, hang on, I love this tune...." She went over to the radio and turned it up as far as it would go...

"OPEN OUR EYES...GIVE US THE LIGHT..."

The bass boomed. Suddenly we were in an acid house party except we weren't, we were in number six Rowell Close.

"So where was I? Oh yeah." Cheryl knew how to talk over a din. "So I says to her right, I goes, look man, take Bill up to the post office willya? And while yer at it can ya get me twenty Bensons? Right? So she's gone "Oh alright then." I mean the cheek of it, I nearly smacked her one there and then."

The music pumped.

Emma gave her a cigarette and she carried on cursing the job, the house manager, all agency staff, the health authority, the residents, and even Elroy, her boyfriend, who was supposed to have come round the night before to bring her "a bit of a puff" to help her sleep. Emma talked soothingly while I made a cup of tea. I stood in the kitchen pondering on the nature of madness and normality and failed to arrive at any conclusion. The doorbell rang, it was the police with Bill and the Agency girl, she was in tears, and he had a gleam in his eyes. The girl sat in the office and between sobs and sips of tea she told Emma the story. I only caught half of it because I was busy preventing Bill from stealing everyone else's tea. It seemed that in the Post Office some bloke had been smoking a cigarette, minding his own business when Bill had made a lunge for it. This time he must have forgotten to wait until it had been stubbed out or maybe he was just desperate. Anyway, apparently she grabbed him just as he put the lit ciggy in his mouth. It's hard to say who must have been the most surprised, the poor punter who was peacefully standing in line, waiting to cash his Giro, or Bill, who had suddenly stubbed out a Rothmans's on his tongue. The story got a bit hazy after that, but it seems that all hell broke loose, the agency girl and Bill were wrestling on the ground and the geezer was going apeshit, running around screaming and trying to kick Bill but only succeeding in connecting with the girl's left knee. I wished I had been there and was bloody glad I wasn't.

Cheryl scowled and rolled her eyes to the ceiling. She asked the girl for her cigarette money back, called a cab, and left.

The rest of the shift was pretty quiet. Fred shat himself, but that was our fault for not taking him to the toilet in time. It was still bloody horrible, though. I wondered if I'd ever get used to cleaning up shit or wiping an adult's arse. It was just extremely unpleasant, no two ways about it. After we'd put everyone to bed and tidied up, Emma and me drank a cup of tea, smoked and chatted about work, Cheryl, Brigid and Tom. There was a lot to say.

\*\*\*

Tom. Dark hair, skinny. Oh God, I suppose I have to admit it, good looking. Depends on your taste really. Seemed to be a lot of people with that kind of taste. Selfish, arrogant, funny, charming, blah blah.

\*\*\*



RIGHT ABOUT NOW...  
YOU ARE ABOUT TO BE POSSESSED...  
BY THE SOUNDS OF...  
MC ROB BASE...AND DJ EZ ROCK...HIT IT!

It was Saturday night and Tom was pumping...

IT TAKES TWO TO MAKE A THING GO RIGHT...  
IT TAKES TWO TO MAKE IT OUT OF SIGHT

He was jumping around the sitting room, a spliff in his mouth and a manic grin on his face.

"Come on you lame fuckers, let's get out of this shit hole!"

Douglas was sitting on the sofa, reading the sports page of the Guardian.

"I don't think I'm goin' out tonight" he mumbled quietly. I was surprised Tom heard him.

"Aw come on man, it's Saturday night and we've already got two parties."

"Yeah come on, I'll buy yer a drink"

Tom's mood was catching and I'd just been paid.

"Fuckin 'ell hear that?" Tom sat on the sofa and picked up the other part of the paper. "I don't think I'm goin either."

"You can buy yer own bloody drink." I laughed. "You get more a day than I earn in a week."

"Yeah, but he only works one day a week." Douglas was laughing too by now and twenty minutes later we were all in the pub with pints in front of us and I was considerably lighter in the wallet. Grant was there and Sam, Jo was coming later. Emma was at work, she had a sleep-over. Loads of our neighbours were there as well as hundreds of faces I'd seen at parties but couldn't put a name to. Tom seemed to know them all. He would smile and nod to people all night. It was one of those things that made you like him and hate him at the same time. I'd feel this kind of pride about being his friend, about living with him, and then I'd hate myself for it.

Grant was on good form. He was telling stories about the time he and Jo and Mushroom Mike worked in Holland picking bulbs or something. He told the one about how Mushroom Mike had got so stoned one night that he'd fallen asleep with the joint still going and had burned his tent down. We'd all heard it many times before, of course, but it was still brilliant, especially the part about how he'd woken up in the morning and found himself surrounded by a circle of ash. I didn't believe a word of it, but that didn't matter one bit. It was just a great story.

Jo arrived, she had news of a party too, some sort of a rave in a railway arch. The choice seemed clear to me but the debate wasn't so straight forward. Grant was really keen to go to some nurses' party where he thought he would 'score'.

Tom had the idea that he would be able to do a bit of DJing at one of his parties and was even talking about going home to pick up a couple of records. The decider was when Jo mentioned that she knew some guy who was going to be working at the door of this railway arch party and that at least three of us could get in free. We decided that we would split the costs of whoever had to pay and so the matter was settled.

It wasn't that far to the location. We all had bikes except Douglas who had had a flat tyre for the last two months. He rode on Grant's rack, an experience which could be described as uncomfortable but never boring. We took a side road off the Walworth Road and another right. Jo ahead, as she knew where the party was, me and Grant just behind. Grant was jumping the kerb, cutting across us and "testing his brakes" as he called it, which involved heading for some stationary object, maybe a parked car, at full speed and slamming on his brakes at the last moment. Douglas was not amused but me and Jo were. Tom and Sam were a bit behind having some heavy conversation about Emma.

We came to a railway bridge and Jo stopped. We locked our bikes to some railings and walked together along the side of the railway, Douglas rubbing his arse. There were a few other people around but not a huge crowd. I started having second thoughts about this party. To get to the door you had to climb over a small wall and walk across some planks that had been put over a large puddle of water. Jo's friend was at the door, an enormous black guy who she kissed on the lips. Grant nudged me and whispered in my ear that it looked a good bet for a freebie. The geezer waved us all in and we were in a dark and dingy passageway. It was great, there's nothing better than bunking in free to a gig, it gives you a high before you even start. The passage was narrow and lit only by a U.V. light that showed up everybody's dandruff. It was full of people, some going in, others going out, and some just standing around. Tom saw a mate of his, Stewart from Glasgow. They started talking and caused an instant traffic jam.

"What's it like then?" asked Tom. Stewart shrugged.

"S'awreet."

Armed with this useful information we struggled on through a doorway and into the main room. Inside the arch somebody had built a big wooden skateboard ramp which was serving as a dance floor. At the top of the ramp were an array of slide projectors which were pointing at various angles onto the walls and onto a big piece of cloth that was hanging from the ceiling. Sometimes the slides would switch off and a strobe light would flicker across the room making the dancers look like they were in slow motion. It wasn't full yet, but quite a few people were dancing. The DJs were down at the other end. Just after we arrived they played "Moments in Love" and Tom was in heaven.

"Kickin' man, I love this tune" he disappeared onto the dance floor.

Grant nudged me,

"Got any Rizlas?"

I gave him a packet and we went to find somewhere to sit down. Jo and Sam were standing in a corner talking to some friends. Then I realised someone was missing.

"Where's Doug?"

"Dunno." Grant surveyed the room.

Just then a big cloud of smoke billowed across the dancers and Tom

disappeared from view.

"Must be in here somewhere." He started to put the papers together. I scanned the crowd. There was no sign of my flat mate.

"Did you see him come in?" I asked.

"He was behind me, I dunno."

Grant's mind was on higher things, so to say.

"Not bad, is it?" I said just as a slide of clouds appeared on the far wall.

"sawright, I hate this fuckin' music though."

I loved it but I wasn't in the mood for an argument so I changed the subject.

We smoked together and watched the dancing, pointing out people we knew. Dancing had changed a lot recently along with the music. It had a new kind of fluidity about it. People pushed their hands out in front of them in strange twisting shapes. I wanted to dance myself, so I told Grant that I was going to look for Douglas and headed back towards the entrance. I asked a few people if they had seen him but nobody had, so I went over to talk to Sam and Jo. They were smoking a joint together and talking to some guy who worked on a community arts project with Sam. I couldn't exactly understand what it was he actually did. He was some kind of 'performer,' whatever that meant. I had an image of him in my mind doing backwards somersaults through burning hoops, but I knew that couldn't be right. Sam and him were talking about acrobatics and people they both knew and I could see that Jo was getting a bit bored. She took me aside.

"I've got an E if you're interested" she said.

"Sure am" says I.

"Hang on here a minute."

She rushed off into the crowd and I stood around feeling a bit dumb. Sam and her friend were really chatting, I couldn't have broken into the conversation if I'd wanted to. I took the time to look around the place and suss out how I was feeling. More people had arrived and the music was faster than before, more housey and the dancers were really going for it. A lot of them were obviously on an E. You could tell by the way they were constantly grinning and dancing so energetically and, so well. I was pretty out of it myself, having been stoned even before I came out, and then having drunk a couple of pints, but it was nothing out of the ordinary. I just felt good. I noticed a huge banner on the wall. It was a heart, painted with U.V. paint, big and red and pink, with veins running through it. I tried to decide whether it was beautiful or revolting, but I couldn't. I waited impatiently for Jo and eventually she came back. She gave me a piece of rolled up paper.

"Fifteen" she said.

"Brilliant, nice one Jo, thanks."

She gave me a bottle of water and I put the pill on my tongue. It tasted bitter, and I swallowed it as quickly as possible. Jo was brilliant in these situations. She was a real party person, she always knew where a good rave was to be had and she always knew some dealer or other. We got on really well because we had the same idea of a good time. We'd never fancied each other though. She seemed to be attracted exclusively to black guys and although she was good-looking, she somehow wasn't my type. This was understood between us which really made things a lot more simple. I asked her if she'd seen Douglas and she said she

thought he'd been with us when we came in. We gossiped a bit about people we knew and the latest goings-on in Eastenders. I went to find the bar, a bench behind which a young Spanish girl was selling orange juice and water. It suited me fine as I didn't feel like drinking beer. I was wondering when something would happen with the E. It's always the same with those kind of drugs. You take them, then you spend half an hour waiting for something to happen, cursing the dealer, checking all your responses, wondering if each strange sensation is the beginning of the rush. Sometimes, of course, you get paranoid, like what if this is rat poison? Or oven cleaner? Or some such shit. That's why it's always good to have someone around who's on the same stuff you are. Tonight I knew it was going to be OK because Jo was next to me filling my ear with a load of drivel about world peace, the environment, and people "getting it together." She had some kind of theory, but I'm fucked if I knew what it was.

It happened quickly that night. Sam passed me a joint, and I took two drags and suddenly I was on cloud nine. Immediately I recognized the opening riff of one of my favourite songs. Only at that moment it was all-time favourite song. The greatest song ever written. The best record ever made. The kickingest tune in the whole world. I leapt onto the dance floor.

BROTHERS

SISTERS

ONE DAY WE WILL BE FREE

FROM FIGHTING, VIOLENCE, PEOPLE CRYING IN THE STREET

WHEN THE ANGELS FROM ABOVE

FALL DOWN AND SPREAD THEIR WINGS LIKE DOVES

AS WE WALK, HAND IN HAND

SISTERS BROTHERS

WE'LL MAKE IT TO THE PROMISED LAND.....

I was in the middle of the crowd. We were all shaking, grooving, exactly to the same beat, the same rhythm, the same feeling.

OH YEAH

OH YEAH

I was in the music. Completely absorbed and taken over by it. It filled every bone in my body, every muscle, every cell. This was the place to be, not in some fancy nightclub in the West End. Nah man, this was it, here, with a hundred strangers in a railway arch somewhere off the Walworth road.

I looked up and saw Tom grinning at me like a demon

"You on one?" he asked

"Yeah."

"Fuckin wicked man"

"Yeah, beautiful."

We both laughed and danced manically next to each other.

OH YEAH

OH YEAH

I was singing along with all my heart, dancing like I was possessed. Jo and Sam were there too, and Stewart, I think. We all danced in and out and around each other and it felt like the summit of everything life had to offer. I danced on and on getting really hot and enjoying the feeling, drinking orange juice and smoking the spliffs that were being passed around the dancers. The music was fantastic, every track better than the last. Suddenly the lights went out and the music ground to a halt. A huge groan of disappointment went up from the crowd which was replaced by screams of joy as the opening piano chords of "Real Wild House" thundered out, smoke poured across the floor and the strobe came on.

I'M A REAL WILD ONE

It was bloody mental.

\*\*\*

After a while I went and sat with Tom and we smoked a spliff together. I had no idea how long I'd been dancing, and I didn't care. We didn't talk much, we just quietly smoked and occasionally grinned at each other I looked at the heart on the wall and decided it was beautiful. It seemed to be throbbing, in time with the music, in time with my body. In fact, there was a kind of rhythm going on in the whole room. It wasn't just the booming bass drum. It was the hi-hat chikka chikka, it was the people's bodies, legs, arms, even their fingers, even the ones who weren't dancing. And it was this big day-glo heart. I started to think about what Jo had been saying earlier and decided that she was right. If only everyone could feel like this. If only all the politicians, the businessmen, the police. If they could feel what we were feeling at this moment that would be it. no more war, no more fighting. If only the whole world was "on one." It was simple really. I turned to Tom.

"Wicked innit?"

"Yeah man, it's beautiful." I wondered if he meant the heart. I guessed he was thinking and feeling the same things as me. So I said

"It should always be like this."

"Things would be a lot more bleedin' simple, that's for sure."

A look of pain crossed his face, and I realised he wasn't where I was at all. A huge wave of sympathy came over me. Here was a human being, one of my own mates. Here he was in this situation where all was as one, where everything and everyone was understood, and he was unhappy. I had to do something.

"You alright?" I asked.

"Oh man" he half groaned "You know, I can't stop thinkin' about Brigid."

So, that was it. Suddenly all was clear. It was about Brigid. I'd thought it was something really serious like not believing that the world was basically one big happy family, waiting only for the right chemicals to enter our bloodstreams before we were able to solve all our problems and walk hand in hand into the sunset. This was easy.

"Well, what's the problem?"

"She reckons she's goin' back home" he sighed.

"What yer talkin' about?"

"What I said, I saw her last week and she just says, out of the blue like, I'm thinkin' of goin' home"

"Well maybe she was tired or something"

"Nah, ya fuckin' wally, home, back to Ireland"

"What? for a visit?"

"No, for good like"

"But she's only been here a couple of months"

I wasn't that happy about the idea either.

"Yeah, I know"

"Oh no man, that's bollocks"

"Yeah"

"But why? What you been doin' to her?"

"Nothin'"

"Maybe that's why she's goin', maybe she's frustrated"

"Fuck off !"

"I'm sorry" I grinned "I just can't believe it you know, it's weird"

"Yeah well" he shrugged "That's what she says"

"Maybe it was just a spur of the moment thing, you know what I mean? Maybe she won't really go. It must be pretty difficult when you first come to London and that"

"She says she hates the job"

"I can understand that alright. She probably just had a bit of a bad shift or something. I wouldn't take it personal"

"Yeah, yer could be right"

I smiled at him full of confidence in my powers of perception.

"You know it."

He seemed a lot more cheerful.

"That fuckin heart thing's wicked innit?"

I felt an intense surge of feeling for Tom. I put my arm around him.

"You're fuckin brilliant man, did you know that?" I meant it too.

"Yeah" he said honestly.

"I mean, you can be a right pain in the arse sometimes, but you're a wicked geezer. You know that."

"Thanks man. You're alright too. Thanks for listenin'."

"Of course" says I. "What are friends for?"

We sat in silence while he rolled a hefty joint. I felt this enormous love for all my friends, for the whole of humanity. Jo and Sam came over holding hands. We all hugged and kissed each other as if this was the usual way we greeted. We discussed how wicked, wild and beautiful the party was and how nice and friendly the people all were. It was true, everyone was smiling at each other. A couple of people had just come up to me while I was dancing and had shaken my hand. "Nice one mate." One guy had said. He was a huge geezer with a tattoo of a snake curling round his neck. He was the type of guy I usually crossed the road to avoid. Sam told us that all the football hooligans had been taking Es and now they'd stopped fighting. They all went to raves together. Even Chelsea, even Millwall. That was the power of the E. We were all suitably impressed.

"Where's Grant?" I asked, suddenly I realised I hadn't seen him for ages. I wanted all my friends around.

"He went to his nurses' party." said Sam.

"Oh no!" We all groaned.

"He'd really love it." I said.

Of course he would. Anyone would.

"What about Doug?" asked Tom. Oh shit, I'd forgotten all about Douglas. I was suddenly overcome with guilt. I could feel myself starting to come down from the high cloud I'd been in until that point.

"I went outside to look for him, I think he must've gone home."

Sam always took it upon herself to look after the welfare of others, even when she wasn't on Ecstasy.

That was typical of Douglas. Come to a party and then leave before he'd even got to the door. He couldn't have afforded an E, of course, and none of us were that rich that we could have subbed him 15 quid. Maybe we could have had a whip round. It would have been good anyway. We would have all told him what a great guy he was and how much we loved him, really, and how easily all his problems could be solved if only he had the right attitude. It was only a long time after that I realised that those were probably all the reasons that he hadn't come. Bloody Douglas, I thought, he always managed to bring you down even when he wasn't there. I rolled a fat one, took two drags, and immediately felt better. I started chatting to Jo, thanking her profusely for bringing us here and discussing the whole music party drug scene. And then it happened. I heard the first two notes and screamed,

"Oh man, TEARS!"

I was on the dance floor in a flash and so were the others. I could feel the rush all over again as the bass slammed out.

I'M A REAL GOOD ACTOR  
THIS IS A HEAVY ROLE  
OUR LOVE'S THE SCRIPT  
AND YOU CARRY TOTAL CONTROL  
LIKE A CLOWN, I'VE BEEN SMILING  
WHENEVER PEOPLE ARE AROUND  
BUT WHEN THE CURTAIN COMES DOWN AND THE CIRCUS IS THROUGH  
NO ONE IS LEFT BUT ME, YOU, AND ALL MY TEARS

I shut my eyes and thought of Cheryl. I was a real good actor alright and the chance of tears seemed very high. I wished she was there. I wished she would just suddenly appear. At that moment I knew I'd have the confidence to just take her in my arms and tell her everything I'd wanted to say ever since we'd met. She was crazy, and she was hard, but that was just because of the life she'd had, if someone were to give her some real love it would all be different. It was clear. I just had to get her on her own and tell her how I felt. "Tears" was followed by "The Sun Rising" and I went off into a dream as I danced. Cheryl and me were in a field, it was midsummer and the sun was rising over some distant hills. We were at a party, we were dancing, and we were totally in love.



I danced on to the next couple of tracks, but somehow I didn't have the energy I'd had earlier, and when someone suggested we go I wasn't that unhappy.

We stumbled out into the daylight, rubbing our eyes. It was freezing, and I realised how sweaty I was. Sam had the idea of going round to their place to "chill out" so we got on our bikes and headed back towards Camberwell. I was amazed at how many people were out and about at that time on a Sunday morning although I had no idea what time it was. I couldn't get over how bright it was. It was a cloudy morning but somehow the sky seemed totally white. We stopped at a news agents for cigarettes and Rizlas. We piled into the shop forgetting to lock our bikes and bought juice, chocolate, papers and chewing gum. There was a bemused looking old Asian guy behind the counter, and we started chatting to him.

"What time do you start work?" asked Tom, obviously appalled that anyone had to work at such a time.

"Seven o'clock" said the man.

"Oh man! Seven o'clock on a Sunday morning!" Tom was outraged. "That's not right, you should be out raving at that time."

The shopkeeper was about sixty and probably couldn't remember the last time he went "raving," if, in fact, he'd ever been "raving" at all. He looked even more puzzled.

"Listen man" continued Tom, like he'd known the geezer all his life. "Next week get someone else to come in, or just close the shop, you deserve to have a good time." he sounded like some bloody Messiah.

"Yes, well, I'll have to see" said the man, obviously wondering what kind of weirdoes he was dealing with.

"Just do it man" said Tom and strode out of the shop without paying. Sam apologized, paid, and told the geezer that Tom was under a lot of stress. Me and Jo got the giggles and had to leave quickly. We found Tom outside, chatting with an old woman at a bus stop. We dragged him away and started cycling home. Halfway up the hill, we realised we'd forgotten to buy cigarettes. Sam said she'd go back alone, but me and Tom felt we were in this together, so Jo went home to put the kettle on while Tom and me played a game of smiling at passing car drivers and checking their reactions. Mostly they just frowned and stared straight ahead. A couple of people waved at us. It was brilliant.

Back at Jo and Sam's we drank tea, smoked joints, listened to music and watched the telly with the sound turned down. We listened to chill out classics like "Keep on moving," "Wishing on a Star," and the whole of "What's going on." No one said much except to comment on the God-like genius of Marvin Gaye. Eventually I fell asleep on some cushions on the floor and woke up a couple of hours later when Emma came home from work. She was mighty disappointed that she'd missed out on the party of the decade, especially as everyone told her about it five or six times.

In the evening, me and Tom went home, which wasn't too much hassle as it was next door. We popped into Dirk's flat and scored some blow. Dirk was a German guy who lived in the flat under Sam's. He was very friendly, very sharp, and an excellent businessman. He charged a little bit too much sometimes, but it was just so convenient to have a dealer next door that I never complained. Tom always complained but it didn't make any difference. Dirk was surrounded by an air of mystery. There were lots of stories about him being wanted by Interpol and how he was on the run from the police in Germany, but no one knew the truth. I don't

even think his name was really Dirk. His letters used to be addressed to D. Jones, Grant saw one once. Dirk Jones? I don't think so! It was intriguing, but it wasn't as if you could ask "Hey Dirk, what's this I hear about Interpol?"

We lived in a group of beautiful old Georgian houses at the top of a hill. Somehow they'd got into the hands of the local council, been too expensive to keep up and had fallen into disrepair. The original tenants had slowly moved out, and we squatters had quickly moved in. There were some beautiful flats. Dirk's was particularly palatial, with high ceilings, wooden floors, and big windows. We tested the wares, listening to some spaced out dub reggae and chatting sporadically. I left Tom there telling Dirk all about the previous night and went home. I had to get up early for work the next day. When I got home, Douglas was in his room with the door shut. I was really curious about what had happened the night before, so I knocked and went in. He was lying in bed reading and smoking a roll-up. Same as it ever was.

"Alright?" I asked, feeling a bit awkward.

"Not bad" he replied, as if that wasn't what he meant at all.

"What happened to you last night then?"

"I went for a piss before we went in, and when I came back, all you lot had disappeared, so I told this bloke on the door that I was a friend of Jo's. He told me to fuck off."

"What?!"

"Yeah, he reckoned I was the twentieth person who'd tried that one on."

I wanted to laugh but couldn't, typical Jo.

"So what d'ya do?"

"Came home, of course."

"You should have waited. We would've gotcha in."

I wanted to tell him all about the party, about what he'd missed, about how great it had been, about how we would have bought him an E, but I couldn't. He looked so down, I felt guilty about having had such a good time.

"Anyway, I met Grant on the way home, and we went to the nurses' party."

I felt a huge surge of relief. He had had a good time after all.

"Oh yeah, so how was it?"

"Hideous."

The look on his face told me not to ask any more questions about it. So, feeling like a clown at a funeral, I went to bed.

\*\*\*

Douglas, tall, dead skinny. Fair hair, straight, lank. Nicotine stained fingers. Big old shapeless jumper, colourless. It was strange when he laughed, didn't make a sound, just sort of shook. Big toe sticking out of his sock. Played the guitar all day in his room, must've been good after all that practice, hard to say cos he always stopped when someone walked in. The tea and biscuits man.

\*\*\*

When I think back to those times, I see those beautiful big Georgian houses shining in the sunshine. The long summer evenings sitting out on the roof looking out over London, the cold winter nights huddled around the fire. The parties, the people, the feeling. We were free, we were poor, we were innocent, we knew it all.

Our neighbours were a colourful bunch. Terry "the truth" and Cosmic Clive lived downstairs. A strange couple thrown together by fate. They lived together and hated each other. They'd come around and have arguments in our living room. One time they sat on opposite ends of the sofa not speaking.

"What's the problem?" I asked innocently.

"Ask him" Terry nodded toward his flatmate.

"He's sulking 'cos I switched the telly off, he was watching filth" said Cosmic.

"What were you watchin' Tel?"

"A nature documentary"

"What's so filthy about that?"

"It was something about ants right, and what happens to them when there's a forest fire"

"Yeah, and?"

"He was watching all these ants frying" said Cosmic "he was getting off on it"

"I wasn't getting off on it"

"You were, you were goin' "woargh, look at that!""

"It was interesting, that's all"

"Getting off man, creamin' your jeans!"

Despite this ability to make an argument out of nothing, they continued to live together, and it was hard to imagine them apart. Terry got his nickname through his amazing story telling skills. "Terry's tall tales" as Tom called them. He announced once that he was leaving London, getting away from "that prat Cosmic", going to make a new start in Lowestoft.

"It's all sorted man, got myself a little cottage by the sea, lovely. You can come and visit sometime if yer like."

"Yeah, sure, sounds nice"

A week later he was back.

"What happened?"

"It was terrible, didn't you hear about it on the news?"

"Hear about what?"

"The Typhoon man, there was this fuckin' major hurricane type thing. Ripped the roof right off my house. There was a big flood, I had to jump on a plank of wood and row to the shore. That's the end of my little cottage. I was lucky to make it out alive."

It was difficult to believe. It was high summer and we'd had nothing but good weather recently. We listened sceptically and later, after a bit of research found out

that it was all lies.

"So what really happened in Lowestoft Terry?" I asked him the next time we met.

"Well, to be honest, it's a bit like, dodgy, know what I mean?"

"Not really, what d'ya mean, dodgy?"

"Well, I don't want anyone calling me a racist or whatever"

We assured him that we wouldn't call him a "racist".

"Well, you see, I wasn't livin' alone. I was sharing with this Jewish bloke. I ain't got nothin' against 'em like, don't get me wrong alright, but this geezer was, like, hard line. He wouldn't let me go shopping on Saturday and all the food had to be specially prepared like. He wouldn't even let me listen to any reggae. You know I like a bit of reggae in the evenin'"

I didn't know that, I'd never heard him talk about reggae before.

"Anyway I couldn't hack it man so I come back. Even Cosmic ain't that bad"

Cosmic Clive was pretty bad though. He'd got his name through his constant references to astrology. He'd say things like,

"I saw that Pisces woman the other day, she's havin' problems with her boyfriend, Saturn in Aries y'know"

He was really extreme. One day he was a vegetarian, the next telling us he was going shooting in Scotland. He was violently anti drugs when I first met him, wanting to clean the scum off the streets and so on. Then he became a dealer. He wanted to beat Doug up once because he'd heard him listening to The Pet Shop Boys. Conclusive proof of being a "Bum Bandit" apparently. The next year he went on a Gay Pride march wearing a dress. He'd spent some time on an island off the coast of Ireland doing "Primal Therapy" which seemed to involve beating up everyone else on the island. He claimed to have thrown one unfortunate bloke off a cliff for being "gamesy", whatever that meant.

Then there was "Little Terry". He wasn't really a neighbour. I don't know where he lived. Sometimes he stayed with Terry the Truth and Cosmic and sometimes with Loopy Lee. I don't think he really had a home as such. He was about seventeen and sniffed glue. He was a brilliant artist, he'd come round and draw these amazing psychedelic comic style pictures in our sitting room. We kept some paper and felt tips for him. He was small and skinny and always looked like he'd just woken up. He was fine unless he'd been sniffing but when he had he was useless. He'd sit on our sofa and stare at the wall for hours without saying anything. We told him to give it up. Tom even told him he couldn't come round glued up anymore but, like he said, who were we to talk.

One day he told us he'd formed a band.

"Oh yeah, what they called then?"

"The Rat People, it's from this film I seen where all these like half rat half people they're livin' in the sewers right, and they come out and attack the normal people. Y'know bite 'em and that."

"Got any songs then?"

"Yeah, we got one called "Hate thy Neighbour"

"Oh thanks, that's us ain't it? Whatcha wanna hate us for?"

"Not you lot, the others."

"Well couldn't ya just make it "Hate some of your neighbours"? Just so we don't go gettin' paranoid thinkin' it's about us"

He thought it over,

"I dunno, it don't sound so good does it?"

"Yeah well, got any more?"

"Yeah, there's "Why do Skinheads like Ska?"

"Stormin'" Tom liked it "That's brilliant Terry. When's the single out? I wanna buy it already. How's it go?"

Terry stood up and started nodding his head,

"Why, Why, Why do skinheads like ska, Why, Why, Why, do skinheads like ska, 'Cos they're fuckin' stupid man!"

There was a pause,

"Is that it?" Tom was a bit disappointed. "Yeah, well, good title anyway."

"Wanna hear another?"

"Erm..."

But there was no stopping him now.

"Thirty six B"

"What? like the bus?"

"Yeah"

He drew a big breath

"Queensparkharrowroadroyaloakpaddinton (gulp)

Edgewardroadmarblearchparklanehydeparkcorner (gulp)

Grosvenorroadvictoriavauxhallbridgeoval (gulp)

Camberwellnewroadcamberwellgreencamberwellchurchstreet..."

He paused. We sat there in open mouthed amazement. Then he let out a blood curdling scream,

"PECKHAAAAAAAAAAM!"

He sat down.

"That's fuckin' awesome" said Tom when we'd all recovered. "Doesn't it go on to Hither Green though?"

"Nah man, this is one of those ones that stops at Peckham Bus garage."

\*\*\*

The next morning I struggled into work feeling like my brain was made of dough. I went through the motions, feeding, cleaning, lifting, talking, everything as in a dream. My limbs were heavy and my energy was gone, left behind on Saturday night's dance floor. Midway through the morning Cheryl rang.

"Can ya get an agency? I'm not coming in today."

I was disappointed.

"What's up?"

"I can't say really, well, I'm not feelin' too good, you know what I mean?"

I did know what she meant, only too well and I wanted to tell her I wasn't feeling too hot myself. Somehow it wasn't the time.

"Shall I come round?"

She only lived five minutes from work, and I had guessed by now that whatever was wrong with her wasn't contagious. She said no, she'd be alright, and I put the phone down feeling sad that I hadn't been able to do my gallant rescue of damsel in distress act. Cheryl wasn't really that fitting for the role anyway. If only I'd recognized that sooner.

We had lunch, Rice and Peas served by Rose, a very large woman from the agency who used to take nips of rum in the kitchen while she cooked. We never said anything, partly because there was a certain sort of solidarity between the workers born out of shared suffering and shared disregard for the management, and partly because her cooking was so good. After lunch, Rose watched Neighbours and Home and Away while I washed up, took Bill and Fred to the toilet and filled in the day book. On days like that it was really hard to think what to write. Sometimes I felt like making stuff up, like "Earthquake this morning, two residents slightly hurt, we need some new light bulbs" or "Fred visited by the Pope, asks if he can come round every Tuesday, told him I'd have to OK it with the House Manager" and so on. Since I'd got into trouble once for writing that Bill had "crashed out" I didn't think it would go down that well.

Cheryl rang again just as I was getting ready to go.

"I've decided I'm gonna cook you rice an' peas tonight, d'ya wanna come round?"

I couldn't tell her I'd just eaten two platefuls of the stuff.

"Yeah, sounds great."

"What time are you finishing?"

She knew the answer to that one.

"Well, I was just about to leave."

"Great, so you can come straight round."

"Yeah, sure." My heart was pounding.

"Oh, and could you be an angel and bring some rice and some Bensons?"

"No problem, anything else?"

"Erm, one minute, oh yeah, a pint of milk."

I went by the supermarket and got what she'd ordered and a box of chocolates in case she really was ill although she'd sounded perfectly healthy on the phone.

Cheryl lived in a flat on an estate on the other side of Crystal Palace hill. It wasn't that bad I suppose, it just felt like nowhere. When I got to the flat Cheryl invited me in as if I was an old friend from Australia who'd just turned up unannounced. She didn't have orange hair anymore. When she saw the chocolates she kissed me on the cheek.

"Oh man, you are really a wicked geezer, not like some I could mention."

She sat me down on the sofa. There wasn't that much room between the piles of ironing. Her six-year old daughter Natasha was lying on her tummy on the floor, watching television. There was music playing as well. Cheryl's tone changed from silk to sandpaper.

"Oi you, show some respect!"

Natasha looked shyly at me.

"Say hello then, you little brat!"

"Hello" the girl said, almost inaudibly.

"Hi Tash," said I, a little too cheerily. "How's it going?"

"Alright" she whispered and looked back at the screen. I wished I'd thought of bringing something for her. I made a mental note for my next visit.

"She's such a little bitch." said Cheryl venomously. I felt awkward and didn't know what to say.

"She knows exactly what's going on, she knows I don't need it so she does it just out of spite."

A list of questions formed in my mind. What's going on? What don't you need? What's she doing, apart from being a bit shy? I didn't feel like I could ask any of them though.

I looked at Cheryl. So beautiful. She had high cheekbones and big dark eyes. I wanted to reach out to her to take the pain away. She was like a cat. She had the same beauty, the same expression, the same claws. I decided to take a different tack.

"So are you feeling better?"

"What? Oh yeah, that. Well, to tell the truth, I wasn't really ill as such."

This was getting more and more mysterious. I remembered her boyfriend and started to panic.

"Where's Elroy?"

I tried to make the question sound as natural as possible. I failed.

"To be honest, my dear, I don't give a fuck." She lit a cigarette. "That man is history."

She pronounced each syllable as if it were a separate word.

I began to get the picture and was filled with a weird mixture of excitement and dread.



"Here." She gave me a roll of silver paper. "Skin up, I've just got to make a phone call".

She left the room and I went to work. Natasha stared silently at the TV. I finished the joint and lit it, expecting Cheryl to reappear at any minute. I stared out the window. We were on the fifth floor of a medium sized block. Lights were on in other flats across the estate. In one window I could see the flicker of a television. I wondered if I should make conversation with Natasha, but I couldn't think what to say. She was watching a cartoon. We sat in silence and I smoked the joint alone. I got extremely stoned and started to think about what I should do about Cheryl. She was obviously under a lot of stress. She'd just split up with her boyfriend. I wondered why. Was it permanent, or just one of those lover's quarrels that they seemed to have on a regular basis? How should I act? Go down on one knee and tell her all, or play it cool? I ran through the possibilities in my mind. Eventually Cheryl came back.

"What happened to that spliff?"

"Erm..." I stared guiltily at the ashtray.

"Oh well, better build another one, eh?"

She seemed more cheerful. We chatted a bit about work. When she heard that Rose had been working she said

"Oh no, man! So you've already had Rice an Peas, why didn't you say so?"

I struggled to think of an answer, none came so I told her about Saturday night instead.

"Oh wow man, that sounds blindin'! We gotta go together sometime, I know this geezer, he's got the best E in South London."

It was sounding good. I felt a thrill of anticipation at the idea of going out with Cheryl on an E. Just then the doorbell rang. It was a friend of Cheryl's called Sonya.

"We're just going into the kitchen, I'm gonna make yer dinner."

I rolled another spliff while she was out of the room. Tash had fallen asleep where she lay in front of the telly. She looked unutterably sweet. I couldn't imagine why Cheryl said all those things about her. I watched the News and some programme about South American Indians. I was starting to feel sleepy myself. The women were still in the kitchen. Sometimes I heard their voices and the chink of glasses. Eventually I decided to go. I went into the kitchen. There was no sign of cooking. Cheryl was holding a glass of brandy. She looked as if she's been crying.

"Erm, I think I'd better get going." I said.

"Oh no man, I haven't started cooking yet."

Cheryl put her glass down. Sonya smiled at me. I felt a bit foolish.

"Well, I've got to get back to Camberwell, and I'm a bit knackered to be honest."

"Oh shit."

I could see tears in Cheryl's eyes.

"I'm sorry. Look, I'll see you at work on Friday and we'll get something together for next weekend, yeah?"

"Yeah alright" she said. "Thanks for the chocolates."

Sonya smiled at me again.

"He's a blindin' geezer this one Sonya" said Cheryl.

As I cycled home, I wondered what on earth I was getting myself into. I felt this strange frightened excitement in the pit of my stomach. It was exhilarating and terrifying.

When I got home, Grant and Emma were around. They were watching a wildlife documentary with my flatmates. Everyone was stoned.

"This is just what I need" said Grant "A bit of mindless education."

Emma asked me where I'd been, and I told her I'd been at Cheryl's and that she'd split up with Elroy.

"Really? She must be dead upset."

"That's putting it mildly."

"Poor woman, maybe I should go and see her tomorrow." Tom was unusually quiet. Just before I went to bed, I asked Grant about Saturday night. Douglas winced, so did Grant.

"It was hideous."

He didn't elaborate.

I left them all watching a fly laying its eggs under the skin of some poor unsuspecting buffalo, and hoped I wasn't going to have bad dreams.

It wasn't really a problem, of course. I was too stoned to dream. That's a weird side effect of smoking blow. I guess you do dream really, it's just that you don't remember them when you wake up. What does that mean? If your dreams are trying to tell you things about yourself and your life, what happens when you just block off that information for months, years at a time? Douglas said it caused personality disorders. Tom said you could receive all that information anyway subconsciously as it were. Grant said but you're subconscious anyway, so Tom said it was kind of sub-subconscious. Douglas looked sceptical. Grant said it was all bollocks anyway because dreaming was just a form of entertainment for your brain like going to the movies and was about as relevant. Then Tom and Douglas started listing all the movies which were relevant to everyday life. It was a long list which reached it's end only when Tom started to deconstruct "The Wizard of Oz." I thought he was doing quite well until Grant said,

"What about Roger Rabbit, then?"

That's another side effect of smoking too much blow. You can spend dangerously large portions of your life sitting around talking bullshit.

\*\*\*

I started seeing more and more of Cheryl. She'd often invite me round after work and we would smoke blow and watch TV together. I didn't really watch TV. I was watching Cheryl. Even if I wasn't looking at her I was watching her. I was observing her, trying to understand her. Trying to feel what she was feeling, trying to fit into that feeling, trying to be what she wanted me to be. Tash didn't seem to mind, she quickly got used to me being around. Sometimes I read stories to her, sometimes she fell asleep leaning on my shoulder. One day she looked me in the eye.

"I'm stupid"

"No you're not, Tash" I was shocked.

"Yes I am. All the black kids is stupid"

"Rubbish"

"It's not rubbish"

"Whatcha talkin' about?"

"At school right, there's black kids and white kids and Paki kids"

"Not Paki kids"

"Yeah" she smiled sweetly "There is some Paki kids. Faroukh and Mina and..."

"No," I interrupted "I mean They ain't called Pakis"

"Yeah," she nodded, still smiling "They are"

"They're Asians"

"No they ain't, they're Pakis"

"Oh well, whatever," I gave up "Who told you that all black kids are stupid?"

"Someone said it to me"

"Who said it to you?"

"My Mum".

With my second wage cheque I bought a car, a scrapper Renault that Grant had found and done up. Actually done up is a bit of an overstatement, but it went. I was proud to show it to my friends but ashamed to show it to Cheryl. She was OK about it though.

"Aah, it's sweet" She smiled

"Yeah, well it's a load of crap really"

"It goes don't it? Anyway it wouldn't suit you to have some flash BMW"

I remembered Elroy's car and wondered how to take that remark. I'd never be Elroy number two though. I had to try to appeal in a different way. By being the good guy. By being nice.

I started doing little errands on my way home from work, a bit of shopping, picking Tash up from school. I'd arrive in the middle of a crisis.

"Can yer run down the chemist? Me sister's got a migraine"

"Yeah sure"

"Thanks man, you're a diamond"

Yes Cheryl, whatever you say Cheryl. Anything to be called a diamond. Anything to be wanted, to be needed. Anything to hear her tell her friends "I don't know what I'd do without him". That was nice, I'd do anything for that. Anyway, I didn't really mind. Tash was great and it was a brilliant feeling to hang out with Cheryl and her mates. My world seemed so drab in comparison. Cheryl was an event. Everything was either completely good or completely bad. It was like having all the controls turned up full; colour, volume, brightness, contrast. Nothing in between, no shades of grey. I stopped thinking about anything else. I started to see everything through her eyes. What would she think about this, what would she say about that. When I looked at my life through her eyes It didn't look too good. I avoided any possibility that she might see how I lived, that she might meet my friends. I became ashamed of who I was.

\*\*\*

On a cold day in November something really strange happened. I got a letter from the bank containing a credit card. I hadn't been that serious when I'd applied for it, I just thought I'd give it a try. Anyway, it seemed that my lack of a proper permanent address wasn't a problem, as long as I was in full-time employment, which I suppose I was, although I wasn't sure how long I'd remain that way. I pulled it out of the special wrapping and held it in my hand. It was a weird feeling. I was used to seeing myself as an outcast, a dirty squatter, a dope smoking reject, and here I was holding the very symbol of the get rich quick capitalist society I despised and which I thought I'd long ago rejected. It felt good. I thought about all the things I could do. All the things I could buy. Tapes, records, clothes, a new ghetto blaster, maybe a new bike. For a while I went crazy imagining all the things that were suddenly in my reach. It's a good thing we didn't live near any shops, or I would have just gone out there and then and gone on a wild shopping spree. I was the only person I knew who had such a thing, apart from Jo. I wondered how I would tell the others. I felt a strange distance had suddenly appeared between me and them. Douglas lived on the thirty-five pounds a week he got from the dole, unimaginably. Grant did the occasional bit of mechanical work, usually undercharging for his services, and Tom worked now and then as a dispatcher, usually making about thirty or forty quid a day. It was all illegal cash in hand type stuff. Here I was suddenly part of the establishment. They were going to call me a yuppie, there was no doubt about that.

The first thing I actually did was go to Safeway and buy a week's supply of groceries including toffee yoghurts all around. I knew that would put them in a good mood, even Doug. I bought all kinds of things we couldn't usually afford like some real fish instead of fish fingers. Some Mcvities Chocolate homewheat biscuits instead of the Safeway ones we usually had. Some Crunchy Nut corn flakes and some exotic juice which was a mixture of eight different fruit juices including mango, passion fruit, kiwi, and banana. I was shocked when I saw the bill, but it was a special treat, a celebration. It wouldn't be like this every time, I told myself. From now on, I would shop in the same way as before. Sometimes I'm amazed at how easily I can fool myself. This event put me in a good mood all day. I cooked a big curry in the evening which was followed by the toffee yoghurts. It was great.

\*\*\*

Brigid really was leaving. She was going to work until Christmas and then go back to Dublin.

"But what ya gonna do there?" I asked her one day at the hand-over.

"Oh, I dunno, sign on I suppose, live with me mum for a bit"

"Doncha like London then?"

"It's alright, ya know, but it's so, like, impersonal. It's so unfriendly. Anyway that's not the main reason. The fact is I can't stand this fuckin' place. I didn't come here to change fuckin' nappies ya know."

"Well, it ain't all bad, I mean, we have a laugh don't we?"

"Yeah, it ain't youse lot. I mean, that's the best thing. It's just the rest of it."

I plucked up courage to ask what what was on my mind,

"And what about Tom? What's happening there?"

"Well, there ain't really much future in that is there?"

I could tell that there wasn't anything else to be said.

Cheryl arrived for the late shift and Brigid went home. It was exciting to work with Cheryl although, to be honest she, didn't really do that much work. Today she was on form. Smiling and happy, jumping around the sitting room singing along to Todd Terry's version of Weekend.

...ONE THING I CAN'T TAKE IS TO SIT HOME ALL ALONE  
DO WHAT YOU LIKE MY DEAR, BUT I'M NOT STAYING HOME  
NIGHT AND DAY, I WAS PATIENT  
BUT I'VE HAD ALL I CAN TAKE  
TONIGHT'S THE NIGHT THE TIME IS RIGHT  
MAYBE I'LL FIND A FRIEND TO SPEND THE WEEKEND  
TONIGHT IS PARTY TIME IT'S PARTY TIME TONIGHT....

She sang it with a gleam in her eye. She sang it like she meant it, like she knew what effect it would have on me. She was brilliant with everybody, caring, patient, she didn't even get upset when Jane dribbled her dinner on her new jeans. It was Friday evening and she was going out after work. We washed everyone and put them to bed. Bill got up immediately and wandered around the sitting room looking for cigarettes. We drank a cup of coffee together. It was strange in the house after everyone had gone to bed, well, nearly everyone. It was really quiet after all the noises of the day. Most of the residents in the house made some sort of noise, although none of them could speak. The day was filled with grunts and squeaks, moans and groans, expressions of satisfaction and pain. You got used to it, and when it wasn't there, you kind of missed it. Cheryl made a phone call. She came back into the room.

"Blindin' man, Annette's takin' me to an Acid house."

"Oh yeah?"

My attempts at nonchalance were getting a bit strained.

"Yeah man, she's got some E too."

"Brilliant."

Only it wasn't bloody brilliant, I was on a sleep-over. I would be lying in the office on a sofa bed trying to sleep while Cheryl was out having a wicked time. I felt glum.

"Listen man, why don't you come along?"

Twisting the knife or what?

"I got a bleedin' sleep-in, ain't I?"

"Don't worry about that, man. You can phone in sick, and they'll send an agency."

Before I had time to protest, or even really think about it, she was in the office and on the phone to the on-call manager. My mind was racing. What if they found out? that was probably a sacking offence. This was it, the thing I'd been hoping for for months. What would it be like? I was taking a step into a world I didn't know. It was exciting and scary. Cheryl came back.

"No problem mate, I told them you'd got food poisoning or something so you had to go home, they're sending that Jenny woman."

"Wicked!"

"Annette's comin' at eleven."

I spent the last half hour on cloud nine. Walking about the house trying to find things to do to keep myself busy. I washed up every last cup in the place and even folded the tea towels. At quarter past eleven we were in Annette's flat. She was Cheryl's best friend. Very beautiful, very glamorous. Her flat was immaculately tidy. What I remember were the deep pile rugs and gold mirror tiles in the bathroom. Annette was wearing a fur coat, was it real? I asked myself. Sam would've had a fit. I sat on the sofa, confused. I didn't know what was going on. Cheryl kept telling Annette about what a great geezer I was. That was nice. They talked a lot about some bloke called Barry. Seemed he had been heavily involved in decorating the flat. I wondered if he was some kind of builder. Then it turned out that he'd got something to do with the car too. We smoked a monster spliff. A tape of The Garage Sound of Deepest New York boomed out of the hi-fi stack. Cheryl sang along to every word of "You're gonna miss me when I'm gone." I got a bit impatient while they were talking about clothes, and embarrassed when they started to give me advice about how my wardrobe could be improved.

"A nice shirt, you know what I mean, jeans are alright, but those shoes... I reckon a big baggy T-shirt...Nah girl, something elegant you know, something,er, tasteful..."

I was glad when we finally left. We got into Annette's Golf and headed off into the night. It was brilliant. Speeding through the dark streets, music pumping. Cheryl in the front slagging off Elroy, Annette rapping rudely over "Break for love." We crossed the river and headed out East. Down the Mile End Road, onto some backstreets, and into a dark desolate warehouse zone. We started to see other cars obviously heading in the same direction. We were stared at by men at traffic lights. Their expressions changed when they saw me in the back. I imagined them thinking, hmm two beautiful black chicks in a tasty motor, hang on, what's that

scruffy git doing in the back? Lucky bastard! We arrived, parked, and walked up to a large warehouse building. There was a long queue of people in baggy jeans and big Day-glo T-shirts waiting at the door. Annette strode straight past them and up to the door.

"We're friends of Gary." she said. I stood behind nervously, feeling the resentful stares of the people in the queue.

"Alright" said the bouncer "Just you two."

"And him." Annette pointed at me. The bouncer looked doubtful. I felt like an idiot. She pouted at him.

"Go on" she said "He's my brother."

It was brilliant. The doorman laughed, totally disarmed, and waved us in. Inside Cheryl and Annette were laughing.

"Hey girl, you know you still got it."

"And you know that!"

"We've got to use what we've got to get what we want." They chorused.

We found Gary, he was standing in a corner surrounded by a small posse who were twitching to the beat. Greetings and hand slaps all round. I felt strange. Gary was a big geezer with a scar on his cheek which was visible even in this light. Cheryl whispered in his ear. We got the tabs, swallowed them straight away with a coke.

"C'mon, let's look around" said Cheryl. "Maybe there's some tasty blokes here." I hoped not.

The building was some kind of photographic studios by day and was a huge warren of corridors and small rooms. There were two big rooms with crowds of people getting down. We dived into a crowd and started to dance. "That's How I'm Livin'" came on and we went crazy. After a couple of songs the women disappeared to get a drink and I was left alone on the dance floor. I danced on, I could feel the drug in my veins. It was a really nice sensation, like being tickled from inside. Someone handed me a spliff, the music went weird, and great. There were some strange female vocals, like a sort of middle eastern chant and, underneath, what sounded like a plumbing system being dismantled. A smiling boy next to me shouted "Voodoo Ray, Voodoo, Voodoo, Voodoo Ray." Where was Cheryl? I wanted to thank her for bringing me here, for arranging the E. I wanted to share it with her. I thought about my friends. I wished they had been there. I felt a peculiar mixture of sadness and happiness. I danced on. It was all too complicated. The whole situation with Cheryl, I was out of my depth and I suddenly knew it. I felt an intense yearning for simplicity, for straightforwardness. I thought of Brigid. Then I realised that I needed a drink. There was a bar selling water, coke, and orange juice. I had a juice with ice, it was fantastic. The world was suddenly a different place. I went to look for Cheryl. I found Gary and his posse in the same corner. Annette was there. No one knew where Cheryl was. I danced with Annette for half a song and was passed a killer spliff. Feeling better I went off again and danced on my own. It was alright, who cared? What would happen would happen. I felt the E take hold once again and there I was, lost in the music.

\*\*\*



How long had I been dancing? Two hours? three? more? I've no idea. I just remember that at some point, just as I heard the first notes of "Reachin'," there was Cheryl in front of me grinning and dancing.

"Blindin' man."

"Wicked!"

"Better than a sleep-over, eh?"

"You ain't kiddin'"

Then it was over. Annette wanted to go. Gary had finished his business for the night and he stood next to Cheryl with his arm around her waist. I suppressed my jealousy and told myself quickly that they were old friends. On the way back I sat in the front with Annette, Cheryl slept on Gary's shoulder behind. Half way down the Mile End Road we hit a pigeon. I felt sad.

"Oh shit man, we killed it."

"Never mind." said Annette.

"Who gives a fuck" mumbled Gary.

I felt stupid and weak.

"I think it's sweet, caring about God's creatures" said Annette.

"I bite they fuckin' heads off" said Gary.

Cheryl and Annette laughed and I joined in, I had to really. I wished I'd kept my bloody mouth shut.

Crossing the river we were stopped by the police.

"Fuckin' bastards, every bleedin' time." Cheryl was livid.

Gary was quiet. I wondered what he had on him, a load of blow for sure. Any E left over? Where was it all? Shit, this was it, big time.

I really wasn't worried about myself. I was clean. Cheryl was calling them all the names under the sun. If she talked to them we were done for. I was shaking. Gary stared out of the window like we were in a normal traffic jam. Annette got out of the car. I could see the copper look her up and down.

"Dirty fuckin' old Bill bastard." Cheryl hissed.

We waited in the car for what seemed like an eternity. Suddenly the policeman smiled at Annette in a slimy kind of way. She sauntered back to the car and he watched her leerily from behind.

"No fuckin' problem." She smirked as she got back into the drivers seat.

"What happened?" asked Cheryl.

"I just asked him if he's heard of Barry Rivers, that's all."

"Cool man."

"Nice one." Gary murmured.

The copper watched us drive away.

I wondered what the hell kind of a scene I had got into. We went back to

Cheryl's flat and smoked spliffs. We talked about the club, how great it was and what wicked music they'd played, then about the incident with the police and they began to reminisce about similar brushes with the law in the past. Cheryl told a story about an argument with some store detectives in Croydon.

"I mean, I hadn't even touched a thing."

"You was goin' to though weren't ya?"

"Alright, maybe I was going to, but the point was, I hadn't you can't trouble someone about what they're gonna do, can ya?"

Gary told a story about jumping over a fence and landing on an Alsatian. We laughed.

"They never fuckin' got me though. When I seen the look in that dog's eye, man, I ran like the devil was after me."

They laughed long and hard. Cheryl wiped her eyes.

"Oh man, I'd have given anything to see that, you with this monster beast bitin' the bum out of your trousers!"

I laughed along, but somehow I couldn't find it as funny as they did.

"You know something" said Gary "We may not have much money now, but if we had all the money we've spent we'd be fuckin' millionaires."

"Innit though" Annette agreed.

They left, and I was finally alone with Cheryl. We watched kid's TV and she told me about Barry Rivers. He was a builder, of sorts. He owned some building firm and lived in Bromley. He was a family man who'd met Annette on the street. I wasn't quite sure what that expression meant. Anyway, he paid for everything, flat, car, clothes, the lot.

"I mean, what's she gonna do? Say no? tell him to fuck off?"

I couldn't think of anything to say. It was all totally beyond my experience. I began to feel I'd led a sheltered life, something I'd never felt before. Then Cheryl started to reminisce.

"I've known Annette and Gary for ages, since we was kids. We was in an 'ome together. It was fuckin' horrible I'll tell ya." She paused, and lit a joint. "I was lucky 'cos I got into this family, but Gary was there for years, nobody wanted him, see. Poor little bastard. Annette couldn't get out either 'cos the boss of the place, well, he had his eye on her if you know what I mean."

Cheryl had shut the curtains, but I could see it was light outside. We watched the TV with the sound turned down and listened to tapes, house music of course, "House music all night long."

Cheryl seemed sad.

"You don't know what it's like, sometimes it's like...sometimes I just wish...sometimes I just hate being black."

I looked at her. There were tears in her eyes. I felt all of her sadness descend on me like a weight. I wanted to be positive, to expound on the glories of black people, to invoke the names of Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, Bob Marley, Smokey Robinson, Maya Angelou and on and on. I realised it would be ridiculous, me, a dumb-assed white boy, what did I know about it? What could I know? I would

never know. I felt, instead, an overpowering empathy towards her. Nothing to do with black, white, skin politics. Nothing to do with past experiences. Nothing to do with anything other than the feeling of being with another human being in need. I did what I would have done with anyone in the same situation. I went over to her and took her in my arms. For a moment it was exactly the right thing. She sobbed quietly on my shoulder and we shared her sadness like sadness should be shared. It didn't last. I felt her stiffen and push me away. Gently, but enough. She sat on the edge of the sofa and re-lit the spliff which had gone out. I felt it was now or never, I had to tell her what was on my mind.

"Cheryl" I began

"Please don't"

She turned her back to me.

"I've got to tell yer something."

"Don't say it."

She sounded desperate.

I was so stupid, I couldn't stop. It was like being on a roller coaster.

"I'm falling in love with you."

Silence. then she muttered

"Oh Fuck."

"I'm sorry."

No, that wasn't right. You don't tell someone that you're falling in love with them and then apologise. That was crap but it was too late. It was out of control. I had no idea where this ride was going, but it seemed that we were going to crash. There was a long silence while Cheryl finished the joint and I tried out various lines in my head that might somehow retrieve the situation. I rejected them all, whatever I thought of just wasn't right. Stupid, dumb, naive, I wished I could go back in time and just cancel out the last ten minutes. I opened my mouth to speak for the ten or twelfth time, but before I could make matters worse, Cheryl spoke.

"Why does it always have to be this way?"

It wasn't a question for me, she was asking herself.

"You meet some geezer, everything's cool, he's a real nice bloke, you get on really well. Everything's fuckin' hunky dory and then he has to go and fall in love. Every fuckin' time."

I wanted to say something but she carried on, like she was making a speech she'd made a hundred times before.

"You're a really nice geezer, fuckin' blindin', one of the best, but what do you think it means bein' with me? It ain't that easy, you know. I can be a difficult bitch, you don't know the half of it. You think that Elroy didn't try? You think that guy gives up easy? I've had him in tears. I've had him wantin' to break my neck. You just don't 'have a clue."

"Well, let me find out."

She smiled at me in a way that made me want to crawl over hot coals for her.

"There's another thing. I've just split up with Elroy. We was together for three

years off and on. I just ain't ready for more right now. I need a bit of time, you know what I mean?"

There was a light at the end of the tunnel.

"I don't mind waiting."

She smiled, sighed, and shook her head all at the same time.

"What about Tash? "She stared at me. "I want the best for her, something different from what I had, y'know? I don't want her havin' to say "Mornin' Uncle So and So" to a different bloke every day. She needs a dad. You've seen how she is, but what she don't need is twenty different dads."

I stared at the telly. I wanted to go home. I was exhausted. It was mid-morning and I hadn't slept for at least twenty-four hours. I wanted time to think about it all. At the moment it was all just a huge mess in my brain.

"Here" She handed me her hash. "Build us a nice one, I'm gonna crash out on the sofa if you don't mind. You can take those cushions from the chairs if you want."

She went and got a blanket and spread out on the sofa. I skinned up and lay on the floor on the cushions and watched the Chart Show. Everything was nice again, we laughed at Kylie together, and I felt good. I could wait. I'd show her what a brilliant person I could be. These good times were worth any amount of bad ones. I'm gonna make you love me.

Cheryl fell asleep before the end of the Chart Show. She looked like an angel. I couldn't sleep, try as I might, and after a while, I decided to go home. I got my things together as quietly as I could and tiptoed towards the door, but just as I turned the handle, I heard a whisper from the couch.

"See ya later mate."

\*\*\*

I walked up the hill to Crystal Palace. My car was still at Rowell close. It was cold and grey, London in March. There were loads of people waiting at the bus stops. Women with kids, gangs of thirteen year olds, old men and women in grey coats. I felt strange, detached from it all, like a visitor from another planet, planet E. I thought about how different my Friday night had been from any of theirs. I wondered if the old ones had experienced something like that in their youths, falling in love with French girls after being shot in some field in Normandy. The kids had it all before them, they were getting ready, flirting and posing and mucking about. I wondered if any of them could've understood the highs and lows I'd experienced since they went to bed last night. When I got home, Tom was up and about, fixing his bike in the hall while listening to Public Enemy. He was in a good mood.

"Alright?"

"Not bad."

"Where you been then, ya dirty stop out?"

"Went to "Labyrinth" with Cheryl and her posse."

Like that it sounded dead cool. I wasn't gonna tell him everything, just the good bits.

"That's that woman from work, innit?" He tightened a wheel nut. "That's it; finished. I'm gonna fuckin' fly. I think I'm gonna go to work on Monday."

He was really in a good mood. I didn't have the energy to find out why though.

"Listen man, I'm crashin' out for a bit, if anyone comes by I ain't in, alright?"

"That's a roger, big man."

"Roger yer fuckin' self." We laughed.

I liked Tom when he was in a good mood. Well, not too much of a good mood actually, cos then he could be a right arrogant arsehole, but a bit of a good mood was okay. I went to bed, smoked a "Good Nighter" and fell asleep to Aretha Franklin.

When I woke up, it was dark. I went into the sitting room. Douglas was there watching "Blind Date."

Same as it ever was, letting the days go by.

"Now then." He greeted me.

I liked that, it was one of our old Lincolnshire expressions. When he said "Now then" to me, it was like a recognition of our shared past, an acknowledgement of something special between us.

"We've been invited next door for dinner."

"Who by?" I asked warily.

Emma's invitations weren't worth the paper they weren't written on. I didn't feel that much like waiting all night for a cheese sandwich.

"Don't worry, we've been invited by the whole flat. Sam's cooking."

"Tom comin' too?"

"Yeah, all of us, they're getting a video."

"Stormin'!"

That was just what I fancied after last night's excursion, slobbin' out in front of a video.

We watched the rest of Blind Date. It was brilliant as ever. Some tall skinny bloke in glasses chose this huge fat funny black woman who offered to reach the parts the other girls don't reach. When the screen went back, the look on his face was something to see. He gave her a really big hug and the audience wet themselves. So did me and Doug. It was fantastic when Douglas laughed, maybe because it didn't happen that often.

"What do ya reckon?"

"No chance, she's too much of a handful for him."

"You can say that again."

When we got next door, Tom was already there, smoking blow with Emma and Jo. They were listening to one of Emma's tapes. Sam was in the kitchen doing something with some lentils. I thought of offering to help but decided against it. Being a new man was all very well, but being bossed around in someone else's kitchen just didn't appeal on this particular occasion. We joined the others in the sitting room. Emma's musical tastes were eclectic, to say the least, and the tape we listened to that evening was no exception. The Last Poets "It's a Trip," Prince "If I was Your Girlfriend," "Do you know the way to San Jose," Joni Mitchell, Salt-n-Pepa. I liked nearly all of it although I have to admit that I've never been that keen on Donovan who suddenly came on singing a song about witches or something. Jo winced, Tom laughed, but Doug said it was alright and we should be more open-minded. Emma said thank you and we sat through it. It didn't matter that much anyway because Tom was busy telling some gory tale about a crash he'd seen up town. I decided to change the subject,

"What's the video then?"

"Chinese Ghost Story" said Tom, like we'd know what he was talking about.

"Chinese what?" asked Doug as if Tom had just mentioned some particularly unpleasant skin disease.

"Stewart told me about it, supposed to be wicked."

"Yeah" said Emma, "I read about it in City Limits."

"It's not a Kung Fu film, is it?" Douglas wasn't that keen.

I could understand his reservations. Tom's taste in movies couldn't be described as impeccable and a recommendation from Stewart wouldn't have had me running to the video shop. Not that it was far to run. Big Ron's Video Emporium was across the road in a ground floor flat. He used to be a council tenant but had given up paying rent when all the squatters moved in. Now his flat was a video shop. He was a genuine South London villain, not big time, but big enough for our community. There was a story that one of our neighbours, Loopy Lee, overslept one day and forgot to take a video back on time. Ron kicked his door in and set fire to his guitar. I reckon it was true, because I saw this half burnt out guitar lying on a skip a few days later. Emma wanted to make a sculpture out of it, Tom wanted to nail it to the door of the video shop as a warning. He thought Big Ron would approve, but before we had a chance to test his theory, some kids got hold of it and finished the job. Sam took a wicked photo of it burning away on the pavement.

It was dinner time, we all trooped into the kitchen and helped ourselves. It was something called "Lentil Bake" which Sam had got out of an organic cookbook I'd given her for her birthday. That made me feel sort of involved. There were also enormous amounts of wholemeal rice which somehow managed to be both glutinous and hard at the same time. The lentil thing was a bit dry, but luckily there were layers of tomatoes in it which helped. The whole thing was extremely tasteless and I couldn't help but notice that everyone was putting large amounts of salt and pepper on it. Emma, Doug, and Jo were very polite, asking Sam what spices she'd used, saying how great vegetarian food was, and how you really don't need meat to make a meal interesting. The spell was broken by Tom, of course, when he asked if he could have some tomato ketchup. Doug called him a philistine, Emma said it was bloody typical and I noticed that Sam was a bit upset. I could see his point, and if he'd got some, I probably would have had some too. At the same time, though, I was pissed off with him. Why couldn't he just eat it up like the rest of us? It was obvious that it would upset Sam, was it really such a big sacrifice to make to make someone else happy? That was Tom, though, if he's cooked, he wouldn't care a bit if you poured curry powder all over it, so he couldn't understand why Sam was upset now. He didn't get his ketchup though, and we all ate as much as we could, politely refusing offers of second helpings on grounds of being "so full," and "I couldn't possibly eat any more" and so on. Only Douglas had another plateful, but he probably hadn't eaten a full meal for days. Of course, this gave him a distinct moral advantage over Tom as well, but I'm not sure if that advantage, normally so easily won, was worth the effort of ploughing through that rice again. I don't know why I felt sorry for Sam though, she was such a hardliner over food. Everything had to be free-range vegetarian biodegradable. She even called me a fascist once for preferring smooth peanut butter to crunchy. It was a bit strange because her dad had made his fortune in the frozen poultry business.

I made a cup of tea, which wasn't as easy as it sounds, because Emma and Sam both wanted different types of herbal tea, Douglas wanted Earl Grey, and Jo insisted on P.G. tips "so strong you can stand your spoon up in it." Me and Tom fancied a coffee but they only had some sort of de-caffeinated Kaffee Hag type thing. Luckily Emma remembered she had some Nicaraguan coffee she'd bought in an effort to make the world a better place. At this moment, by a circuitous route, and not at all in the way she'd intended, she'd succeeded.

We got comfortable. Jo and Tom skinned up, and we watched the film. It was wonderful. A weird mixture of horror, romance, and comedy. Lots of scenes stolen from Western films and moments of pure originality like a Taoist rap scene and an underwater kiss. It was kitsch and stupid and scary and funny, beautiful and revolting and unlike anything I'd ever seen before. The audience was pretty quiet most of the time apart from Sam who kept asking what was going on just at crucial points when you didn't feel like going into a long explanation, or when you weren't supposed to know. It's pretty hard to explain why a thousand year old ghost, now residing in a tree, is attacking a bearded Taoist swordsman at the best of times, let alone when you are trying to figure it out for yourself.

After the movie, Jo went out and Doug went home to bed. The rest of us sat around and chatted. Sam told us all about her current community arts project. It was pretty hard to follow. Apparently some artists from Sheffield had come down and were organising an event in Deptford on a council estate. It was something involving a giant spider which was being made by kids from a local primary school. It would be paraded through the streets to represent "Women's Energy."

"I've got to run all these workshops at the community centre" Sam told us. I wondered what that meant but was scared to ask in case I sounded ignorant.

"Whose idea was the spider?" asked Tom.

"This woman, Ros McKay, from Sheffield, she's brilliant, a really powerful woman, she studied puppet making in Switzerland."

I thought about powerful women, what would Cheryl say to Ros McKay I wondered. "Bollocks mate," probably. I wanted to laugh but I couldn't, so I went to the toilet to be on my own and I sat in there and tried to imagine what Cheryl was doing at that moment. Sleeping? Raving? Drinking Brandy and Babycham? I was glad that the subject had changed when I got back to the sitting room. Now they were talking about feminism and Tom was making an almost plausible case for men being the new victims since the rise of the women's movement.

"It's obvious innit?" he was saying. "All those adverts for jobs in City Limits. I couldn't go for one of them."

"Course you can" said Sam.

"No man, 'cos I just ain't a one legged black vegetarian lesbian, am I? Don't matter which way you look at it."

"Come on" said Emma "It's not as if you want any of those jobs anyway."

"No, but if I did."

"And what about all those jobs in the city, in banks and in the civil service and all that?"

"I don't want one of them either."

"Well, what do you want?"

"I want to have a good time, and I want to be rich."

"I don't want to be rich."

"Me neither."

"Why not?" I had to say something. "What's wrong with being rich?"

"I don't think it makes you happy, that's all."

"Not like being poor, eh?"

We all laughed.

"Look at Sam's dad, he's rich, inne? And he's dead unhappy."

"It's not quite that bad" said Sam. "Anyway, the point is that women are oppressed on this planet and a couple of adverts in the City Limits don't change that."

"Yeah, OK," conceded Tom, "but what about you two?"

"What about us?"

"Are you gonna tell me that you're any more oppressed than us? We're living in a concrete situation too, you know."

Tom always quoted reggae records when he was trying to be political. He'd usually start going on about "Babylon," "I and I," and "Unity of jah people" and so on. It really got on my nerves.

"Come on, there's women being beaten, raped, forced to go on the streets, you know all this stuff. I don't need to say it." Emma had a way of getting to the point.



"Yeah" added Sam. "We get oppressed every time we go out of the house, whistled at, condescended to, put down. You're a man, you just can't imagine what it's like.

"So what are we supposed to do?"

"Stop whining about City Limits and give us some support."

"It is difficult for us too, you know." I tried to formulate my thoughts. "You've got your all-women meetings and parties. You've got a shared purpose, a shared enemy if you like. What have we got? The last place I'd want to be is at an all-men meeting."

"Yeah right," said Tom. "All we've got is a load of guilt."

"Some people should feel guilty" Emma looked at Tom.

"Well," said Sam, "It's up to you to organise. there are all-men's groups too."

"Imagine it" Tom winced. "A load of sociology lecturers sitting around drinking chamomile tea and learning to knit."

We laughed at the idea of Tom knitting.

"Anyway," he continued "You know what Marley said eh? No woman, no cry."

"I used to think that meant if there weren't any women there wouldn't be any crying." said Emma.

"What does it mean actually?" asked Sam.

I tried to explain,

"It means don't worry darlin', we'll make it."

"How patronising!"

"Not really."

"Well," asked Emma "what's all that stuff about her cooking porridge?"

"And WE shall cook only porridge" sang Tom "Of which I'll share with you."

"That's very nice of him I must say."

"It sounds a bit like living with Doug."

When we stopped laughing, Sam said

"Seriously, though, how's it going with old Dougie boy?"

"He seems alright at the moment." said I.

"You didn't see him last week though." said Tom. "He's OK at the moment, but Monday and Tuesday he just stayed in bed all day."

I realized with a pang of guilt that I hadn't noticed at all. True, I'd been at work and I'd been so immersed in Cheryl that I hadn't had much time to think about the comings and goings of my flat mates.

"Well," said Emma, "It was raining all day on Monday, I felt like staying in bed myself."

"Yeah, but the difference is, you didn't, did you?"

"He really needs some professional counselling" said Sam.

"He really needs a kick up the arse" said Tom.

"If he could just get some kind of job, maybe it'd help him get a bit of self confidence." I tried to think positively. "It's such a downer to be so poor all the time."

"Remember his last job though."

"What was that?"

"On a building site about six months ago, he lasted about a week, hated it, something happened to his leg."

"What?"

"The same old thing that always happens when he has to do something, the old Doug leg problem, the old war wound. He even got it when he had that interview at the Job Centre." said Tom.

"Poor sod" said Emma.

"I've got some phone numbers of some really good therapists, maybe I'll give them to him." said Sam.

"I keep wanting to mend that coat of his" added Emma.

"What about those socks?"

"Rather you than me."

"The thing is," I wanted to really tackle the problem somehow, "It doesn't matter what you say or do. you can fix his socks, give him phone numbers, kick him up the arse, none of it will make the slightest difference cos only one person can help Douglas and that's Douglas himself."

Tom and Sam agreed, but Emma said

"That just sounds like an excuse for not doing anything."

"Yeah, maybe" I was exasperated. "But what exactly do you suggest?"

"I don't know" she answered. "But there's got to be something we can do".

That was it, back to square one, the way it always was when we talked about Doug. Nobody had the answer, but we all wanted to do something in our own particular way. I wondered if he knew we discussed him like this. What would he have thought? It was a bit weird, but you couldn't just ignore someone who seemed to be cracking up right in front of your face, especially when that person was an old friend.

\*\*\*

Christmas approached in it's usual promising threatening way. This year I would actually have some money to buy presents. That would be novel. I was sad about Brigid going, but not as sad as Tom, who just moped around the house moaning about being dictated to by a bunch of Christian do-gooders.

"Why can't I celebrate when I want to? I just don't feel like celebrating right now. I reckon I'm gonna fuck off to Morocco or somewhere where they don't have Christmas"

"Yeah, yeah Tom, tell me about it"

"It's bollocks"

"You're just pissed off because Brigid's going away aren't ya?"

"Well, it hasn't improved my mood"

"You can always visit her can't ya? it ain't that far to Dublin"

"I dunno, maybe"

"Why not?"

"I'm thinkin' about it, alright?"

I suppose the seed was sown.

\*\*\*

Sometimes I'd imagine how it would be. I'd wake up in the morning and there she would be, lying beside me, sleeping in that sweet way she had. I'd get up and make us a coffee, then I'd take Tash to school. I'd come back to find her still in bed, waiting for me. We'd spend the day in bed. Then what? Same again the next day, and the next. I'd live there. We'd live together. We'd do everything together. I could look at her face all day. Nothing to stop me. If she was upset, I'd comfort her. I'd walk down the street knowing she was mine. We'd go on holiday together, I'd show her things, take her places. She'd smile at me, she'd appreciate me. I'd be different. Better. Everything would be different. Better. We'd spend all day in bed together. One day.

\*\*\*

We had a kind of Christmas and farewell party at Rowell close. It was in the Day Centre. Not exactly my idea of a party location. Not exactly my idea of a party. Nicola presented Brigid with some chocolates and Declan made a sort of speech and that was it. Afterwards we went to the pub. I sat between Brigid and Emma. There wasn't any problem. Emma put all the blame on Tom. Cheryl was there drinking rum and coke.

"I think it's completely out of order Brigid, you pissin' off and leavin' us alone" She said.

"Innit though" I agreed

"I reckon she's got some geezer waitin' over there"

I felt tension on both sides.

"Maybe she's tryin' to get away from someone here" diplomatic Declan.

"Yeah, I am actually" Brigid looked at him seriously.

"Oh yeah, very interesting, who is it then? Anyone we know?"

"Someone we all know very well"

Emma squirmed.

"Go on then, spill the beans, who's to blame?"

Declan leant across the table. Brigid grinned, looked him in the eye and said,

"You"

We all laughed, and I felt Emma relax next to me. We got drunk and Cheryl sat on my knee which was nice but strange. Emma gave me a funny look. Brigid announced that we would all be welcome any time we wanted to visit Dublin. She gave us all her address and phone number. I wondered if anyone would ever use them.

I worked over Christmas because we got paid double. We did just the same things, ate turkey, watched telly, drank wine. We weren't supposed to, but Nicola was back in Donegal. The only difference was that we had to cut up the Christmas dinner and feed it to the people who couldn't feed themselves. Maybe that happens in a lot of households, I don't know.

New year was crap. Tom made us go all the way to Camden for some party that was a total flop. We stood on an empty dancefloor drinking cans of Tennents wishing we were anywhere else but there. I wondered why I hadn't done something with Cheryl. I would've but I was trying to be cool.

"If you have a shit New year it means you're gonna have a good year" grinned Tom

"Bollocks!"

"Nah, really. We should've gone over to Dublin though. I bet that's good crack"

"Well, anywhere other than this shithole" I said gloomily.

It was cold and boring in January. We didn't have any heating in our flat of course but there was free electricity because me and Tom had jammed a nail across where the main fuse was supposed to be. Work wasn't the same without Brigid, nor was Tom. Douglas stopped going out at all.

I gave up trying to be cool and spent a lot of time at Cheryl's. There was always something to be done, someone to be taken somewhere, something to be picked up from somewhere else. I did it all gladly. I was waiting, I was being good.

One day Cheryl was on the phone . She was in a state.

"Oh fuck, so what happened? .....yeah, and then?.....Oh no man, I don't believe it..... fuckin' typical.....Where is he now then?"

I sat and waited for her to finish, wondering what was going on. Eventually she put the phone down.

"Give us a smoke" she was nervous.

"What's up then?"

"It's Paul, you know Tash's Dad"

"What's wrong?"

"Oh I can't tell yer. He's like..... coke you know what I mean?"

I did and I didn't.

"He's really fuckin' strung out" she continued " I've gotta go and see him as soon as possible"

So I took her. It was late afternoon and getting dark. We didn't talk much. I wanted to know about what was happening but I didn't think I should ask. Cheryl was not forthcoming. We went an unfriendly estate in Streatham and I parked the car.

"I'll only be a while" she said as she got out of the car. "I've just got to give him something"

"Alright" I smiled.

"Thanks mate" she shut the door.

I had two tapes in the car. Two C90s. I had listened to both of them all the way through by the time she got back.

Was I angry? Was I hurt? Was I confused? I was all of them but most of all I was good. When she came back I acted as if it was totally normal for me to sit in my car waiting for someone for three hours. She was apologetic though.

"Oh shit man, I'm sorry"

"Is everything OK?"

"Yeah, it's OK now. I sorted him out"

I didn't know what that meant and she didn't tell me.

\*\*\*

Sometimes we went to visit Cheryl's mum. She wasn't her real mum but she did more for her daughter than most mothers I knew. Whenever Cheryl wanted to go out she'd take Tash round and leave her there, sometimes for a whole weekend. Me and Cheryl's mum got on well, I think she thought I was a good influence. It's hard to say really because I couldn't understand a word she said. She had a thick Jamaican accent and spoke very quietly. Her house was always full of children, grandchildren, cousins, neighbours, music and food. It didn't matter what time we arrived, she'd always have a pot of curry lamb on the stove. Cheryl would translate,

"She says do you want some plantain with that?"

"Oh, er, it's OK thanks" I'd mumble

"Don't say that, you'll upset 'er"

"Oh, I just didn't wanna be any trouble"

"It ain't no trouble, it's already on the cooker. She reckons you need fattening up. Mum, he says yes. Oi Tash! what you playin' at?"

I'd sit there surrounded by screaming kids. Eating, feeling guilty, confused and proud.

\*\*\*

There was this bar called "El Sombrero" down on Church street. It was supposed to be a Mexican restaurant but it was really only popular because it stayed open until two in the morning. Grant had a phase of going there every weekend. That was before he got banned for skinning up on the bar. I was in there one night with Grant and Mushroom Mike who'd just arrived back from Brittany. It was snowing outside and the place was packed, we were squashed against the bar, sweating in our coats and shouting above the din, when Grant saw some people leaving.

"Quick, let's grab a seat"

We pushed our way over, and, after a bit of an argument with someone else who'd had the same idea, sat down. I was just taking a sip of my beer when Grant nudged me in the ribs.

"What ya doin'?"

"Look what's on our table" he whispered in my ear.

There was nothing on the table apart from a thousand beer bottles and a big overflowing ashtray but I saw what he meant. We were sharing it with three women. They were all pretty, sort of foreign looking, dark hair and eyes. It seemed very unlikely to me that they would have the slightest interest in us but Grant was slavering like a dog. I hated it when he got like that. We carried on drinking and bullshitting, Grant continually eyeing up the women. I was surprised when I got back from the toilet and found Grant sitting on his own and Mushroom deep in conversation with the girls. I grinned at Grant.

"What happened?"

"I dunno, they just started talking to him. Fuckin' unbelievable"

We waited for a couple of minutes and then Grant tapped Mushroom on the shoulder.

"Aren't ya gonna introduce us then?"

"Oh er, right, well I don't know their names" Mushroom looked flustered.

"Good evening, I'm Grant" He leant across the table.

The women smiled politely and said their names.

"And where are you from?"

"Espain" said the boldest of the three. I wanted to escape but couldn't. I still had half my beer and I'd just been to the toilet.

"Oh yeah, I know it well. Which part?"

"Pardon?"

"Which city?"

"I'm from Madrid, and they're from Sevilla"

"Oh yeah, I got pissed in Seville once, fuckin' ratarsed"

The woman smiled sweetly at this fascinating piece of information and carried on talking to Mushroom. The other two were deep in conversation. Grant looked at me and rolled his eyes. I pretended not to notice.



"He's a sly one that Mushroom" Grant shook his head.

I grinned.

"Leave it out, why don't you just let him get on with it?"

Mushroom Mike was anything but sly. He was completely harmless. If he had a fault it was that he was too good natured. That and the fact that his brain was somewhat addled by years of psychedelic abuse. He didn't get his name for nothing. Grant leant across the table again.

"Is he boring you?" he asked aggressively.

"No he isn't" said the bold one from Madrid. Mushroom looked embarrassed, the other two looked nervous.

"I was just wondering, 'cos he can be a right boring arsehole sometimes"

"There's only one boring arsehole around here" said the woman.

Grant sat back and looked at me for encouragement. I didn't give him any. Then, without warning, he picked up the ashtray and poured the contents on to Mushroom Mike's head. There was a shocked silence. The women looked at each other in amazement. Mushroom stood up and tried to brush the dog end out of his hair. Other people in the bar looked over. Grant giggled manically.

"You wanker!" said Mushroom and he fled for the toilet. The girls started gibbering in Spanish and I was left alone with Grant.

"What the fuck did you do that for?"

"Just a joke, you lot got no sense of humour that's all"

"Jesus, that guy's supposed to be your friend. You don't do that to your friends"

"Don't be so boring"

Mushroom came back with his hair wet, he'd tried to wash it in the toilet sink. The girls were sympathetic to him for a couple of minutes and then left. Not before calling Grant some things in Spanish which didn't sound too complimentary. We sat around in silence for a while before going home. When we parted Mushroom gave Grant half his hash. I never understood why.

\*\*\*

We'd be somewhere. Cheryl and me. Anywhere, supermarket, club, on the street. People would look, they'd stare. You could see them. Double take. What? I loved it. Standing next to her, being with her. On top of the world. She told everyone how nice I was, how good I was, how she didn't know what she'd do without me. Deeper and deeper, in love with you I'm falling. Falling.

\*\*\*

Grant came round one night when we were already stoned. He had some cans of a new sort of Guinness that tasted like draught, or so he claimed. We weren't convinced. Tom made a big scene about how the only real Guinness was to be had in Ireland and how we could keep all of this poxy English shit which was a bit rich considering he'd spent his whole life in London. He was the only one of us who had, in fact. He grew up in Camberwell and sometimes on Sundays he'd sneak off to his mum's house for a decent meal and a hot bath. We used to take the piss, of course, but we all envied him. He would come back in a really foul mood swearing that this time was definitely the last. His mum used to give him a hard time, ask him when he was going to get a proper job and all that kind of stuff the rest of us only got every six months or so, if at all. Grant used to say that he wished he had a mum round the corner to give him a tongue lashing and some roast potatoes. The part that we didn't get was that Tom did have a job which was a lot more than a lot of people we knew. True, he was only a cycle dispatch rider, and a very occasional one at that, but he always had enough cash for dope and records. Tom was alright and you knew he was always going to be alright. He was that type of guy.

Because Tom's dad was Irish, and lived over there, he claimed to have some sort of spiritual link to the place, although as far as I could tell he was as South London as they come. The Guinness discussion, if you could call it that, rumbled on.

Grant loved winding Tom up and this was a perfect opportunity.

"So tell us then, Seamus, which pub in the whole of Ireland serves the best pint of Guinness?"

"Well, there's a couple in Dublin, of course, and Galway..."

"Yeah, come on, give us some names"

"Of course, it's probably changed since I was last over."

"Those things don't change, come on, I really want to know."

"Yeah? why?"

"Well, I'm thinking of going over, maybe at Easter, thought I might visit Brigid."

"Bollocks!"

"Straight up. You wanna come?"

"Fuck off!"

I changed the subject by pointing out, not unreasonably, that Grant was always going on about some travel plan or other.

"What happened to Zimbabwe then? You told me that was all set. I thought you were gonna buy your ticket this week. "

"I'm doin' both" said Grant, typically, and we all laughed. Somebody asked for skins, I made a cup of tea, and normality returned.

The next day I worked an early shift. At breakfast Nicola came in. She gave out the nine o'clock medication. All the residents in our house were on some kind of medication, some for constipation, some for epilepsy, depressants, anti-depressants, and some other things whose use I could never fathom. Occasionally we had some problems, like the time when Emma accidentally gave Bill a triple dose of some hectic depressants that had been in the wrong box. He slept for forty hours solid and wet the bed. I tried to wake him to change the sheets, but to no

avail. When he woke up, he ate four bowls of porridge and was promptly sick. We all thought Emma was in big trouble, but Nicola was understanding about the whole thing. Good job it wasn't Cheryl.

The medication proved too much of a temptation for one agency worker, an Irish guy called Brian. I've never met anyone who looked so shifty, and I've met some dodgy types. I took a dislike to him the moment I met him. Emma and Astrid thought he was nice because he was always charming in an especially slimy way whenever women were around, he even tried it with Nicola. For awhile he was the bees knees. Cheryl didn't fall for it, though.

"He's a junkie." She declared one day. "I've seen loads of 'em like that, you just gotta look into the geezer's eyes."

Even I thought that was going a bit far, after all we didn't have any evidence aside from a vague feeling shared by me and Cheryl. One day Nicola called a staff meeting.

"Some medications gone missing." She announced as we sat around wondering when we could go home. It didn't seem like a very big deal, maybe it had been put in the wrong place or something. Somebody made that suggestion.

"No, it's been happening over a period of time, we're setting up an investigation. I want you to be especially careful about medication, and to keep your eyes on the keys at all times."

That was a bit impractical as the keys were used for a lot of things, residents' money, front and back doors and for the sleep-in room, where we went sometimes for a cigarette, to make a phone call, or just to escape the mayhem in the house. I said as much.

"This is a very serious business." said Nicola. "The police may have to be called in. Someone has been stealing drugs from this house, and you are the people responsible for those drugs."

"So that's it." said Cheryl. "I suppose you think it's one of us."

"Could be an Agency." said Emma.

"Or Rose" said Declan.

I tried very hard not to burst out laughing at the idea of Rose sneaking into the sleep-in room and scoffing anti-epilepsy drugs.

"What's been taken?" I asked. I thought it might help to know.

"I can't tell you that, I just want you all to keep a look-out, and if you see anything suspicious I want to know immediately, OK?"

She went off to another meeting, and we were left to speculate as to who the culprit might be. There were seven permanent members of staff in our house, Cheryl, Emma and me, Declan, two black women in their mid-forties, Florence and Pearl, and Astrid who was from Norway. She was extremely efficient and tidy. When she finished cleaning up after the residents, she'd start cleaning up after us. She wasn't a suspect in my mind. Neither were Florence and Pearl. They had both been nurses, and Pearl was a member of some evangelical church. She even got upset if you said "Damn." She burst into tears once when Cheryl said "Jesus Christ." Declan was a bit of a headcase and had some unpleasant habits, but beneath his leather jacket he was really quite conservative. He wanted to be House Manager one day. I didn't think it was any of us. In fact, I really thought it was just some administrative error. Cheryl was really outraged,

"I'm writin' to the bleedin' union, she can't make accusations like that without any proof, it's out of order."

"Well, it's a serious matter, innit." said Florence.

"It's a scandal." Pearl wrung her hands.

"I bet she thinks it's me." Cheryl said bitterly.

Probably, I thought, but I said nothing.

A couple of weeks later, after a great deal of conjecture and a lot of rumours, Nicola called another meeting.

"The matter of the medication has been resolved."

She sounded like she had been rehearsing her speech.

"Who was it?"

Declan could be really undiplomatic, but what do you expect from a person who listens to AC/DC every night.

"It was an Agency worker. I'm not mentioning any names, but they won't be working here again."

"Where will they be working then?" asked Emma.

"In a Chemist, probably" said Declan.

Some of us giggled.

"It's not a laughing matter."

Nicola always went red in the face when she got angry.

"And are we gonna get an apology then?" I wanted to know.

"What for?"

"We were as good as accused of nickin' the residents' drugs."

"You thought it was me, didn't ya?"

Cheryl was also spoiling for a fight.

"Of course not" Nicola went even redder "It's procedure, that's all"

She looked uncomfortable. There was obviously more to this story than she was prepared to tell us. I wondered if we were witnessing a case of institutional racism, a personal vendetta, incompetence or all three. The meeting broke up with people still grumbling to themselves and a guessing game started as to which of our Agency staff it could have been. Cheryl quickly solved the problem.

"It was that Brian."

"No, not Brian, he's such a nice boy." Pearl couldn't imagine it.

"Yeah, I saw 'im myself a couple of weeks ago."

"What?"

"We was on a late shift together and he asks for the keys right, says he's got to make a phone call to 'is girlfriend or some such shit, anyway, I got my eye on 'im, never did like the little toe rag. So I waits two minutes and then I goes in, there he

is with all the medication spread out on the bed and some of Bill's red bombs in his hands."

"Whatcha do?"

"I says to 'im like "what's your game?" and he goes "Oh, I'm thinkin' of studyin' to be a nurse, so I just wanted to find out the names of some of these medicines.". So I just says "well, we've got a book for that," but after that I knew."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"Nah man."

"I mean, she thought it was you. You was under suspicion like, we all were"

"You think they would've listened to a word I said? They'd think I was making I up to save myself. All you lot thought he was God's gift, didn't ya?"

I could sense that Astrid and Florence still weren't totally convinced.

"Anyway, I knew he'd get caught sooner or later, you only gotta look on the rota and check it with the dates the stuff went missing, I mean, it don't take Sherlock Holmes, does it?"

Sure enough, Brian never appeared again, and other Agency staff told us he'd stopped working for the Agency altogether. Everyone was very nice to Cheryl for a while after that, even Nicola.

\*\*\*

Strangely enough it seemed that Grant was serious about the idea of going to Ireland. Emma wanted to go too. I went round to see her on a Saturday evening and found my flatmates there. Tom announced that he'd been round to Grant's that afternoon and was going as well. He made it sound as if Grant had invited, well, actually, begged him to go along because he didn't want to be surrounded by women.

"Bloody cheek" said Emma. "I'm not going to surround him"

"You and Brigid" said Tom, quite cool I thought.

"What do we need another bloke for?"

"Well, you know, what about if the car breaks down?"

"Yeah, what about it?"

"Well, who's gonna push it?"

"We can push it, we don't need you."

"Is that why you're goin' then? As a spare car pusher?" asked Jo, grinning.

"No man." Tom obviously wasn't that keen on the job description. "You know, it's just different, like, havin another geezer there, that's all. Anyway, we can visit my Dad, he lives in a really wicked place in county Sligo."

"Ah" said Doug. "Yeats country."

"Yeah right."

"Sounds like a fun trip." said Jo with a smirk. "Did Yeats write anything about pushing broken down Datsuns over the mountainsides?"

"You know it won't break down" said Emma somewhat overconfidently, "and Grant'll fix it if it does anyway."

"Anyway Grant wants us to come round tomorrow afternoon to plan it all." Tom said.

"So what are you doing?" Emma asked me.

"I dunno, maybe I'll go up to me mum's or something, I ain't really decided yet. How long is it?"

"A couple of weeks."

"I'm gonna be the only one here" said Jo. "I think I'll have a party."

"And me." added Doug a bit gloomily.

"Oh you can come too" said Jo. "Actually, there's a big rave on at the Academy at Easter weekend."

That sounded good. Maybe I'd stay in London after all. I couldn't bear the idea of being away from Cheryl. All I wanted was to be near her. Maybe I could go on holiday with her. At the same time I had the feeling that it could be good. Maybe getting away would help me see things more clearly. Help me understand what was happening. It would show her I had my own life. She might even miss me, that wouldn't be bad. I had read somewhere that you are more attractive when you hold back, when you withdraw. Where did I read that? In a Cosmopolitan someone had left at work. Who'd left it? Cheryl probably. Circles. Emma was reading a book

called 'Women who love too much'. Sam had given it to her for Christmas. Nice Christmas present.

Later that night Tom took me aside,

"Listen man, why don't you come to Ireland with us?"

"I dunno Tom, it's gonna be a bit crowded innit?"

"Aw, there's plenty of room"

"What's gonna happen? All this fuckin' bizarre love triangle shit, know what I mean?"

We were both a bit pissed.

"It'll be alright, I really wanna see Brigid"

"And Emma?"

"Well, she wants to go" he shrugged.

"I dunno, I mean, I know it'd be a laugh and that"

"A right laugh"

"I'll think about it"

He slapped me on the back and went off to get another drink. 'Bastard!' I thought.

\*\*\*



So I had this idea. It was a pretty typical idea for me, but I thought it was great.

I decided to invite Cheryl round for dinner. I'd get the others out of the way, tidy up, cook some nice grub and she'd see what an amazing bloke I was. I doubted whether anyone had done that for her (or should I say tried that one on her?) Anyway, the more I thought about it the better it seemed, and, when I casually mentioned the idea at work, Cheryl's reaction was even better than I'd hoped.

"What a sweet idea!" She said as she folded some towels "Don't be making anything too fatty though, I've got to watch my figure you know!"

I just laughed in an off-hand kind of way, as if to say, "Well, that's hardly a problem" and "I wouldn't dream of it" at the same time. I'm not sure what it actually sounded like though.

The next time I mentioned it, she didn't seem so excited. She had a lot to do that week, babysitting for a friend and taking care of her sister. The next week she was sick, although that didn't stop her going to an all night blues in Stockwell. Finally, I got her to agree to a date. It was a Sunday evening when Tom would be at his Mum's and I got Emma to invite Doug to some Alternative Cabaret thing in Deptford. Perfect. I had the whole thing planned out, roast chicken with rice and some salad, because of the fat issue. I got some white wine, which I thought would be kind of classy. Tidying up was a major headache, but I managed to hide a lot of stuff behind various bits of furniture and I even got one of those blue toilet things to stick in the cistern. I'd told her to come at 7 because I wanted to have plenty of time before Tom or Doug came back. I had a feeling something would happen to stop her coming, but on the other hand I couldn't believe she'd let me down at this late stage. At 6.30 I was in a fever of excitement, anticipation and fear. I lit loads of joss sticks to cover the last remnants of the odour of Doug's socks.

Then Grant 'popped by'.

"Alright mate?!" He stood at the door grinning. I had to think fast.

"Errm, I'm just going out, Emma's going to this Cabaret thing in Deptford."

"Nice one, let's get going then. What's all that smoke? " He peered round the door. "Wow man! Looks really tidy, you expecting visitors?"

"Nah Man, just tidied up, you know. Anyway, why don't you go on ahead, I'll catch ya up."

"It's ok, I'm not in a hurry."

I wanted to scream "Please! Just Go!" but couldn't of course. So I grabbed a jacket and went downstairs with him, praying that Cheryl wouldn't turn up early. Luckily that wasn't very likely.

When we got downstairs we unlocked our bikes and set off down the hill. After a couple of seconds I stopped and pretended to look at the chain on my bike. Luckily Grant sailed obliviously on, gathering speed down the long slope.

I turned my bike around and locked it up again, hands fumbling. I raced upstairs and got to the door to hear the phone ringing, ran inside and answered.

"Hey man, you sound kinda out of breath" It was Cheryl.

"Er yeah, I er...." I couldn't think of a reason.

"Anyway, listen man, I'm gonna be a bit late, and can I bring Tash?"

She was coming!

"Yeah, sure, no problem"

"Cool, see you in about half an hour then"

I went in the kitchen, turned the oven down, sat on the sofa and smoked a spliff. Grant wouldn't come back, he'd only notice I wasn't there when he got to the bottom of the hill and he wouldn't bother to ride all the way back up again.

At about 8.30 the doorbell rang. I had just about given up on Cheryl and was sure it was some stoned neighbour looking for skins so I was surprised to see Cheryl and Tash.

"Hey, brilliant, come in!" I said, but Cheryl stayed where she was.

"I'm sorry I can't tonight, I've gotta go and look after Annette, she's havin' some trouble with Barry"

That lead in the stomach feeling.

"Oh, errm, well, do you wanna come in?"

"Nah sorry man I can't, she's waiting downstairs. But listen, can you do me a really big favour and look after Tash? I daren't ask me mum cos we ain't seein' eye to eye at the moment. It'd really help me out."

"Yeah sure" What the hell else was I going to say? "Alright Tash?"

Tash smiled shyly up at me and I felt a weird kind of pleasure at this chance to be a hero again.

"Thanks man, you're really savin' my bacon. And, erm, could you just drop her off at school in the morning before 9?"

"Yeah, no problem"

"Brilliant man, Alright Tash, you do whatever he says right? I don't wanna hear about any nonsense, right?"

Tash nodded.

"Ok I gotta run, we'll do this dinner thing soon, I promise"

And she ran down the stairs leaving Tash and me staring at each other.

We ate the chicken, which Tash seemed to like a lot although it was a bit dry. She left the salad though and hardly touched the rice. I didn't eat that much, but I drank a lot of wine and after dinner I smoked a big spliff while we watched telly.

Suddenly Tash said "I'm gonna call you 'Dad'"

I looked over at her and she was smiling her sweetest smile.

"No Tash, you can't call me that. You've already got a Dad"

"No I ain't"

"Yes you have, his name's Paul"

"I call 'im Paul, and anyway I never see 'im"

"Well, I ain't your Dad and you can't call me that"

"Yes I can, Dad"

"Tash, please"

"Dad, Daddy"

I felt terrible. What could I do? I couldn't let her call me Dad, but I knew exactly why she wanted to. And the worst part was that I wanted to be her Dad in a way.

She said it a few more times and I just ignored her and then it was time for bed. I took a couple of cushions from the sofa and a spare blanket and made a kind of bed in my room. I couldn't leave her in the sitting room on her own, what about when the others came back?

"I don't wanna sleep there Dad" She said when she saw the pile of cushions and blankets. I thought it looked quite comfy.

"Ok, I'll sleep there and you can sleep in the bed and please don't call me Dad!"

I was beginning to lose my patience and I hated myself for it.

"You sleep in the bed"

"Ok whatever"

At least she hadn't called me Dad this time.

"And I sleep in the bed"

My irritation turned to blind panic.

"No Tash, no way, we are not sleeping in the same bed!"

"I slept in bed with Errol"

"Maybe, but you aren't sleeping in bed with me"

She began to sob. Not real crying, I could see that but still...

I began to realise what a dangerous situation I was in. She only had to tell Cheryl that we'd slept in the same bed and I'd be dead. Cheryl had told me a story about some guy who'd tried that with one of her friends' kids and who'd been beaten to a pulp by a gang of her mates. It didn't matter what I did, I was totally in Tash's hands. Luckily she didn't seem to realise this, and with a bit more sobbing she went and lay on the cushions.

"Read me a story" she demanded.

So I read her Winnie the Pooh, and after two pages she was asleep.

I didn't sleep that well myself, and getting her to school on time was a groggy nightmare. That was the last time I tried asking Cheryl round for dinner.

\*\*\*

Grant, what was he like?

\*\*\*

The next Sunday me and Tom got up at about midday and drank a cup of coffee together.

"What you up to today, man?" He asked me.

"Dunno, I'm not working, haven't really made any plans."

"Fancy coming round to Grant's?"

"What for?"

"Me and Emma are goin' round to talk about Ireland."

"What's that got to do with me?"

"Nothin', I just thought you might like to give yer old uncle Grant a visit on a Sunday afternoon."

"Yeah well, why not?"

Why not indeed? We jumped on our bikes and rolled down the hill. It was sunny and quite warm. I always liked cycling around London on a sunny Sunday afternoon. No traffic, no stress, no hurry, everything cool like it should be. I was feeling refreshed and recovered from Friday night and I was happy to be among my friends. They might piss me off sometimes, but I felt at ease with them all. I wondered if I could ever feel that way about Cheryl's gang. We cycled down Coldharbour Lane towards Brixton, stopping at a paper shop to get biscuits, cigarettes, and a Sunday paper.

We took a right, past some council blocks, under a railway arch, and there we were, chez Grant. It was a little tumble-down house at the end of a terrace, right up next to the railway line. When a train went by, Grant's TV reception would go haywire. It happened once during a penalty shoot-out in the F.A. cup between Liverpool and someone. I had to switch on the radio to find out the result. In fact the whole house shook on these occasions and the wide crack running down the outside wall always lent an air of impermanence and adventure to the place.

We had to climb over a bath tub that Grant had left lying in the path in order to get to the front door. He invited us in to a room full of car parts, dead televisions, and pots of paint. That was his kitchen.

"Fancy a cuppa?"

The jovial host.

"Why not? We've got some biscuits."

"Radical. I'll whack the kettle on then."

Emma was already there, sitting cross legged on the floor.

"What's this Chinese Ghost film like?" asked Grant "The bloke next door's got it on video"

We spent the next few minutes trying to describe 'The Chinese Ghost story'. It was far from easy.

"There's this spirit woman, right, and this tax collector bloke falls in love with her but this tree with this enormous tongue tries to get him."

"Ugh! That tongue!"

"And there's this Taoist geezer who does this sort of rap and there's all these decomposing bodies under the house and..."

"Sounds wild, I guess I'll just have to see it myself."

"Yeah, it's wicked but I'm fucked if I can tell you what it's all about."

Eventually they got on to the business in hand. Emma and Grant wrote lists of things to do and buy on pieces of paper, but Tom said he'd remember it all because he had a photographic memory. A teacher told him once at school.

"What was the teacher's name?" asked Emma.

Tom couldn't remember.

Grant had this map he'd got at a jumble sale. It was from before the war and had all the English place names like Kingstown instead of Dun Laoghaire.

"Where the fuck is Dun Leery?"

"It's near Dublin innit?"

"Yeah, just South somewhere." Tom started at the map. "At least I think so."

"What do you mean you think so? Yer only comin' cos you told me you knew yer way around Ireland like the back of your hand."

"And to push the car if it breaks down." Emma added.

"It ain't gonna break down while I'm around" Grant assured her. I had to say something.

"It's the place they call Kingstown on the map. that's the old colonial name for it."

"Useless fuckin' map!"

Tom was really pissed off.

He was supposed to know everything about Ireland, and there was I, some bloody Lincolnshire yellow belly who'd never even been there, showing him up in front of his mates. I knew what he was thinking and I didn't mean it that way. I just happened to know.

"How do you know that?" Grant asked, genuinely impressed.

"I dunno, just picked it up somewhere."

"What do you think Emma, maybe we should ditch Tom and take this geezer with us. Specially seein' as he's got a credit card."

"Yeah" said Emma. "Why not? You aren't doing anything else, there's plenty of room in the car."

It suddenly seemed like a good idea, it'd be a laugh, us four in the car together, bombing round Ireland visiting Tom's dad, seeing Brigid again, drinking Guinness. I looked at Tom.

"Go on" he said. "You know it makes sense."

"Alright." I said. "I'm aboard."

"Have you got a sleeping bag?" Grant asked.

I had, of course.

"That's great, if we split the ferry and the petrol four ways instead of three it's gonna be even cheaper, have you got the dosh?"

"You know that, and we can use my card for petrol. What about you, Tom?"

"I'm gonna go to work every day for the next two weeks and the Monday and Tuesday after. We're leaving on the Wednesday, right?"

"Yeah, right" confirmed Grant. "And early, right, none of this four o'clock in the afternoon after a couple of spliffs shit."

"Aye aye skipper" said Emma laughing.

"Are you gonna write to yer dad?" I asked Tom.

"I'll phone him sometime next week, but I'm sure it's no problem. He owes me a favour or two."

We chatted on about Ireland for a while and I began to feel that I'd made the right decision. It'd be a real gas. Having Emma around was sure to stop Grant and Tom from squabbling too much, and I was really happy about the idea of seeing Brigid again. It was perfect really, time to get away from London, to get some perspective about what was going on with Cheryl, with Doug, with my life.

The subject changed.

"What's that bathtub doin' on your path?" Tom asked Grant. I nearly broke my bloody neck trying to get my bike past it."

"Lovely innit? I found it in the street. I reckon it's Victorian."

"So what are you going to do with it?" asked Emma. You've already got that shower contraption upstairs."

"I thought I might stick some wheels on it, maybe a little go-Kart motor, take it down Safeways next time I do me shoppin'"

"Yeah, good idea, reckon it'd get an M.O.T.?"

"No problem, you fill up the plug hole with a bit of Polyfilla, and Bob's yer uncle, you've got yerself a little amphibious wotsit."

"Yeah, wizard wheeze, Granty boy."

"I'd pay good money to see that.

Grant was in his element, letting his imagination roam.

"Of course, there's no reason why it shouldn't fly, too."

"What a load of old bollocks."

"It isn't bollocks, that's what they said to the Wright Brothers probably."

"Yeah, like "Hey Orville, that thing's a load of old bollocks, mate!"

We were all laughing so much we could hardly speak, except Grant, who seemed to be making a serious attempt to explain his theory.

"What you do" he explained, like we were a class of below average eleven year olds, "Is get yerself a hang-glider, attach it to yer bathtub, drive into the wind, and there you are, floating on high. The propeller's the same one you use when it's a boat. You could go around the world with that thing out there."

"Fuckin' Leonardo DaVinci or what?"

"You may scoff."

"Thank you, I will."

"That's what all we geniuses have to endure."

"Must be a right pain in the arse being a genius."

"Nah, actually, I've changed my mind, I'm gonna bury it in the back garden, have myself a little fishpond. then I can do a bit of fishin' when I get in from work of an evenin'."

"It won't be much of a challenge if they're stuck in a bathtub, will it?"

"Well, it's quite a big bathtub. Maybe I'll get some big old trout and do a bit of trout tickling."

"There's a law against that, ain't there?"

"Only in rivers and lakes, it doesn't mention bathtubs."

"Well it wouldn't, would it."

I was exhausted. All that laughing added to the dope we'd smoked made me want to go straight to sleep. It wasn't far to our house, but it was all uphill, and being stoned makes any distance seem ten times as far. We drank another cup of tea, watched some typical Sunday evening crap on TV, and went home. When we got back, Tom and me ate a cheese sandwich. We'd only eaten chocolate biscuits all day.

"No wonder I was feeling weird." said Tom.

It couldn't possibly have been the forty-three joints he'd smoked since breakfast, that was out of the question.

"Listen man, I'm really glad you're comin'."

He spoke with his mouth full of cheese and bread. I noticed a crumb stuck to his lower lip.

"I knew you'd see my point of view."

So that was it. He thought he'd managed to convince me to come along. It hadn't been my decision at all. It was a load of rubbish, but I just didn't have the energy to argue. I went to bed feeling resentful. It was typical.

\*\*\*



A few days later we took the residents to the Day-centre where they went a couple of days a week in order to experience something other than sitting in front of the television. On that morning I was taking Bill and David to music therapy. David was blind and supposedly deaf, but we had noticed that he definitely reacted whenever James Brown was playing. He would rock back and forth and grin, occasionally making a sort of yelping sound. Me and Brigid tried playing all kinds of music, but only James Brown had that effect. Nicola didn't really believe it and said if anything, that it was probably the vibrations from the bass which, admittedly, are quite extreme. One time though we were in a supermarket when "Sex Machine" was playing over the tannoy. David went crazy even to that tinny sound, so I was intrigued to find out what it was all about. I suggested taking him to Music therapy to see if we could develop this interest in some way.

The Music therapist was a well-spoken woman with a long ponytail, glasses, and sensible shoes. Declan fancied her but I couldn't understand why. He always tried to be on shift on Monday mornings so he could go see her. She used to "improvise" on the violin, while about six or seven residents of various community homes hit drums, shook rattles, blew whistles or shouted at the top of their voices. Eat your heart out Stockhausen. Bill got hold of a drum stick and started hitting things, drums, radiators, walls, floor, windows, people. As I struggled to get the stick off him I thought that maybe he'd invented a new musical instrument. Whack a person over the head with a stick and enjoy the wide variety of sounds produced.

None of this activity, interesting as it was, helped to explain the James Brown phenomenon. It remained a mystery.

That evening, as I was relaxing at home, there was a knock on the door. I answered it and was confronted by a hippie holding an oar.

"Erm, I'm looking for the hobbit."

I was a bit confused.

"Do what?"

"Hobbit, y'know, he's livin' here."

"Sorry mate, I don't know what you're talkin' about."

"Kind of a short geezer, long 'air."

"We ain't got no hobbits or nothin' like that."

"Maybe he lives downstairs."

Well, I thought, why not knock downstairs then?

"Know what I mean? I ain't never heard of 'im."

He seemed reluctant to go.

"Got any hash for sale?"

"No man."

I was wondering how to get rid of this weird visitor.

"Wanna buy an oar?"

"What do I want a fuckin' oar for?"

"It's a good one."

"I don't care if it's a bloody designer label, Olympic standard, supersonic, world record oar, I ain't got a boat."

"I can get yer one."

This was getting surreal.

"I live on top of a hill, the nearest water is Dulwich pond, I don't need or want an oar or a boat!"

"Alright, alright, keep yer 'air on."

"Yeah well..."

"If yer see Hobbit, tell 'im Merlin called, alright?"

"Yeah, no problem."

I shut the door and went to tell Tom the story. We spent the whole evening giggling about it.

"I don't fuckin' believe it, Merlin."

"Hobbit!"

We pissed ourselves.

When Doug came out of his room, we told him what had happened. He didn't seem to find it as hilarious as we did.

"What did he look like?"

"Like a wizard who's lost 'his canoe."

"Did he say anything else?"

"Like what? Which way to Camelot?"

"Did he mention me?"

"Not unless you've changed your name to Hobbit."

"You sure?"

"Of course I'm sure, what are you on about?"

"I just think you should be careful with those kind of people, that's all."

"What kind of people? Nutters? Acid casualties? Wizards?"

"I don't like it. I dunno, it's weird."

"It's weird alright."

I changed the subject. I didn't know what Douglas was worried about, and I couldn't understand why he should take such a trivial incident so seriously. We had loads of peculiar callers, junkies, nutters, people looking for drugs, people looking for squats. Sometimes we let them in, made them tea, gave them spliff. It was understood that it was part of living where we did. It was open house. Neighbours would call round at any time of the day or night, borrowing skins, blow, ciggies, bike tools, milk, that was normal. Tom let this bloke in once called Gabriel, I don't know why. He started telling us that we were living in the last days of civilisation. That seemed pretty reasonable. Then he told us that Ronald Reagan was "the beast", six six six and so on, that was even more reasonable. He told us we had to

read the book of Revelations in the bible and we'd see that the world was headed for Armageddon. Tom got really into it, especially when he showed us that credit cards had a hologram on the which showed a six six six if you held it at a certain angle. Gorbachov had a mark on his head which meant that he might be the beast too, it wasn't quite clear yet. One time he tore up a Marlboro packet in an attempt to prove that you could see K.K.K. in the red and white pattern. It was only when he started to hint that this organization might be our saviours in the final battle between good and evil that Tom told him to piss off.

There was a woman called Lizzie who used to grab men's balls. She'd come up to you on the street and ask if you wanted a girlfriend. As she was incredibly ugly, the answer was inevitably "no." Then she'd attack. We never let her into the flat although she called round a few times. When I complained to Sam and Emma about this behaviour, they said that she was a "strong woman taking control". I did not agree.

A Danish bloke came round one day. Straight from Copenhagen. Ferry, Train, Bus, up the hill and into our flat. He didn't know anyone. Someone on the ferry had told him about our houses. We felt proud, it was like being famous. We cooked him dinner, poor sod, got him stoned and let him sleep on the sofa. He did the washing up before he left in the morning.

On my way to work the next day I noticed the oar had been left on the landing outside our door. I worked with Cheryl. She was in good form. I wondered if there was still a possibility to persuade her to go away somewhere.

"I'm goin' to Ireland with Emma and some mates." I told her.

"Are ya gonna see Brigid?"

"Yeah, of course."

"Wicked, she's blindin', man, I miss her around here."

"Yeah, me too."

"Tell her to get her arse back over here, we need her."

"Why don't you go over there and see her yourself?"

"You're kiddin'"

"Why not?"

"What about Tash?"

"You could take her too, or leave her with your Mum."

"Nah man, what would I do over there?"

"Well, what about goin' somewhere else?"

"Nah I ain't goin' nowhere mate."

"Why?"

"Cos if you go away, you gotta come back."

This was a bit beyond me.

"Whaddya mean?"

"I might like it."

"And?"

"Then when I come back I might not like it here anymore."

I couldn't get to grips with her reasoning somehow, and anyway I could sense that that was the end of the subject as far as she was concerned, so I let it rest. Cheryl's view of the world was so different to mine sometimes. I could follow her line of thought up to a certain point and then it was lost and I was left feeling strange and confused. It made sense, and it didn't make sense. I always wanted to say "Yes, but..." but she would make it clear that the conversation was finished and that she didn't want to explain any further. It was frustrating and fascinating and it drove me crazy. Falling.

I took her home after work and we spent a really nice evening getting stoned and eating curry goat. Tash asked me loads of questions about my house and my family. She said she wanted me to take her to the country to see some horses. I made a half-promise that I would,

"One day."

"One day never comes." she said.

I felt like a bastard.

"Don't let her bully you." Cheryl laughed.

"Sometimes you have to wait for good things" I said and caught Cheryl's eye. She smiled.

"That's right, so you just have to wait and see what happens."

"I hate waiting." said Tash.

I knew what she meant.

I drove home feeling good. Maybe it wasn't such an outrageous idea after all. Tash was on my side and I had felt like Cheryl was beginning to melt a little. The good times were worth any number of bad times. There was still a mountain to climb but at least I was on the way. I told myself to be patient and to see what happened.

I had an appointment to meet Emma uptown. She wanted to get a Rough Guide to Ireland.

"But we've got Tom." I said "You couldn't get a rougher guide than that!"

\*\*\*

Emma, small, pretty, not beautiful except on rare occasions, then breathtaking. Childish, astute, spaced-out, strange. She was great at work, she came at problems from another angle. She painted odd little pictures of blobs and stick people. She invited people to dinner and forgot to buy any food. Joni Mitchell and Salt-n-Pepa, Jazz and country blooz. She saw things nobody else did, She got upset over things nobody else understood. She thought she wasn't interesting, compared to who?

It was a beautiful day, clear and bright, a bit windy but not too cold. The clouds flew across the sky and London was in its glory. I cycled up the Walworth Road singing "Once in a Lifetime" to myself;

You may find yourself living in a shotgun shack,  
past the market,

You may find yourself living in a beautiful house with a beautiful wife,  
through a red traffic light,

Letting the days go by, water flowing underground,  
past the Labour party headquarters,

You may ask yourself "How do I work this?"  
tattoo parlour on the left,

Same as it ever was,  
Elephant and Castle,

Water dissolving and water removing,  
up St. George's Road,

There is water at the bottom of the ocean,  
Imperial war museum,

Into the blue again after the money's gone,  
round the roundabout,

Same as it ever was here comes a twister,  
and up onto Westminster bridge.

The tide was high and flags fluttered in the breeze. I stopped on the bridge and looked both ways up and down the Thames. Those were the days when I loved London, the days when I couldn't imagine living anywhere else in the world. It could be hard and cold and full of strangers, It could be pretentious and snobbish, violent, expensive and shallow, but sometimes it was simply the centre of the known universe. I had ten minutes to kill, I knew that Emma would be at least a quarter of an hour late, it was understood. So I sat on my bike and smoked a cigarette. I thought about all the boats that had been up and down the Thames, all the cars, buses, carts and wagons that had been over this bridge and the others, the people who had stood where I was now. How many millions of hopes, dreams, plans and schemes. I looked down at the river, water under the bridge. I felt sad. There is water at the bottom of the ocean, same as it ever was, letting the days go by. I was beginning to feel dizzy, so I looked up. There were the Houses of Parliament, mocking us all. I felt an overwhelming sense of frustration. Those

people there who didn't know or care about any of us, whose only interest was the continuation of their own power, who wanted only to create a society in which the rich got richer and the rest of us could go to hell, they didn't have a clue. None of them could imagine what it felt like to be me, sitting on my bike with the wind in my hair. I wouldn't have changed places with them for all the money in the Bank of England.

I was woken from my dream by a tap on my arm and when I looked round I saw a middle-aged Japanese man holding out a camera. For a moment, I thought he was trying to give it to me, but I realised what he wanted when he said

"Photo, photo, please."

He stood stiffly grinning with his arm around his wife, Parliament in the background while I tried to work out how the camera functioned. He eventually came over and showed me which button to press. I felt stupid, like some member of a forgotten tribe who'd never held a camera before. I took the picture and they thanked me profusely bowing and smiling. I found myself bowing back, I don't know why. I cycled off feeling strange. I'd just entered someone else's life for a couple of minutes. People I'd never see again, whose culture and language were a complete mystery to me, who lived on the other side of the world and lived a life totally unlike mine. Hello snap good-bye. Baby, baby it's a weird world.

I met Emma in front of the Virgin Mega Store. We were both late of course, but I managed to arrive first so it didn't matter. She was wearing a donkey jacket and a woolly hat and looked really sweet although I knew that to say so would have caused an almighty row.

"Nice hat." I said instead.

"Oh thanks" she was pleased. "I got it at a jumble sale."

We went into the Mega Store and got lost. She went to look for some Irma Thomas tape in the Jazz and Blues section, while I went to look at the Dance singles. We eventually met again in the video department.

"Let's get out of here" she said. "I hate this place."

"Really? I like it, lost in music and all that."

We got outside, and I must admit it was a kind of relief. We went across the road and into a bookshop to look for guide books. I found a big coffee table book full of glossy colour pictures of Ireland. It was wonderful. I spent ages poring over its pages while Emma went off to find the Rough Guide. She came back looking disgusted.

"Fuckin' seven quid!"

"Shit." I commiserated, although I wanted to say "What did you expect?" I had an idea.

"We can all give yer something towards it."

"Forget it, I'm goin' to Foyle's"

"What, is it cheaper there?"

"Yeah" she smiled. "Much."

We walked around the corner and along Charing Cross Road. The pavements were full and everyone seemed to be in a hurry to get somewhere. We got to Foyles' and found the travel section. I quickly got lost in a book about the Andes.

Then Emma was tugging at my sleeve.

"Come on." She seemed to be in a hurry.

"Look" I wanted to show her a picture of Macchu Picchu.

"Let's go."

"Alright, alright, you paid then?"

"Yeah yeah, let's just get out of here."

Suddenly I realised what was going on.

"Oh my God, you could've told me." I whispered as we fled. That was Emma, she never failed to surprise. One minute all sweetness and light, the next ripping off books on the Charing Cross road.

"Anyway, they deserve it." she said when we were safely round the corner in Old Compton street. "They treat their workers like shit, they aren't allowed unions or anything."

"If you nicked stuff from every shop that doesn't have unions, you'd never have to spend money again." I pointed out.

"Yeah, well, they're especially bad. Shall we have a coffee?"

"Yeah, let's go to the Cafe Espana."

"Of course."

The Cafe Espana was at the other end of the Old Compton Street. It didn't look that special from the outside and inside it wasn't much better, but we loved it. There were some stools against the wall opposite the counter and four tables crammed into the back flanked by benches which offered the bare minimum of leg room. There was a young guy behind the counter and a woman who appeared to be his mother who came and went. The boss seemed to be an older bloke who sat at one of the tables gossiping with his cronies in Spanish. Every now and then, he'd bark out an order to the young guy, who took no notice whatsoever. Every expense had been spared in the decoration of the place, but it had a great atmosphere. Much more than the posher places at the other end of the street. All kinds of strange people frequented it, market boys, dispatchers, crooks, and queens. We sat next to a woman wearing a sequin dress. She was at least fifty and had bright red lipstick and heavy mascara. She stared at Emma as if she'd come from Mars. We giggled and ordered cappuccinos and tortilla sandwiches.

"I'm really looking forward to the holiday." Emma said as she sipped her coffee.

"Yeah, me too. I can't wait to see Brigid." I agreed.

"Tom wants to visit his dad, too."

"It's supposed to be beautiful where he lives. Have you ever met him?"

"No, but I've heard plenty about him. Tom's always going on about what a great geezer he is."

"Don't I know it, I wonder what he's really like."

"A bit of a bullshitter, I reckon, if he's anything like his son."

Emma always talked like that about Tom. It made you wonder what she saw in him in the first place. I realised that I was the same. In fact, everyone moaned

about Tom all the time, but we all still hung out with him. I decided to point this out.

"We all slag Tom off but we all like him really, why is that?"

"Oh God, I don't know. You just can't help it I suppose. He just kind of gets under your skin." She sighed. "I should know."

"I know, the number of times he's pissed me off, you know, when you say to yourself "I really don't need this shit." I mean it's unbelievable that we're still mates, really."

"You're telling me." She took another sip of her Cappuccino. "The thing is, you can have a really good time with Tom, and those times you kind of forget what an arsehole he can be."

I knew exactly what she meant. For a moment I thought about telling her about Cheryl. I decided not to. Not yet, anyway. I looked at Emma. She was sad.

"I was stupid, I mean, expecting something different. It's not as if I didn't know Tom, I knew what he was like. I dunno what I was thinking of."

I tried to think of what to say. I wanted to change the subject. I thought about telling her the hobbit story but it didn't seem appropriate at that moment.

"I'm sure he's feeling bad about it too."

I realised how pathetic this sounded about a quarter of a second after I'd said it.

"So he bloody well should."

She smiled like she'd just said something funny. Then after a short while she said,

"You know what Sam says about Tom don't you?"

"I can imagine, something uncomplimentary"

"She says he's incapable of love"

"Yeah, I heard that"

"You don't agree?"

"I dunno, it just seems a bit much, you know what I mean?"

"Maybe it's true"

"Yeah, maybe. I reckon it's more complicated than that though"

"You mean it was my fault"

"No, it's nobody's fault"

There was a pause while I struggled to find something comforting to tell her, everything that came into my head was hopelessly clichéd. My thoughts were disturbed by the noises of the café. The Boss was shouting at the woman in Spanish. It sounded like she'd upset him although I couldn't work out why. Emma looked up from her sandwich and said,

"You know, he's a come and go kind of guy."

"Who?"

"Tom, he comes, and then he goes." She smiled sweetly.



I laughed a bit but felt uncomfortable. What could I say? It was a bit of an exaggeration. I didn't feel as if I was any better. Sitting here with Emma as she complained about Tom made me feel like a fraud. I suddenly wanted to change the subject before she started telling me I was different, not that type of geezer, "sensitive" maybe, or even worse. The truth of the matter was that I would have acted in exactly the same way as Tom if I'd had the guts. I was just too afraid of hurting people's feelings. I could never hack it when women started crying, so I avoided such situations as much as possible. Tom just didn't give a shit, or so it seemed. The strange part was that it seemed to make him more attractive, not less, whereas I, who was always being praised by my feminist friends for my new man credentials, wasn't in the same league. It had got to the stage where I hated to be told how caring and understanding I was. I wanted to be called a Bastard for once because it seemed to me that Bastards had more fun.

Emma interrupted my train of thought.

"Do you reckon he's gonna try it on with Brigid when we get there?"

She was staring across the room like she was in some kind of dream.

"Well, I suppose it's not impossible."

I wondered if it was the right thing to say.

"I don't mind, I mean they're free, aren't they?"

"Yeah."

I shrugged, wondering if she meant what she said.

"I really don't give a fuck."

"Yeah, well, I think Brigid's a bit too sussed to fall for Tom's blag, you know."

There was a pause. I wondered if she took that to mean she hadn't been.

"Maybe." Emma smiled a little. "I really like Brigid."

"Yeah, she's cool."

"Do you fancy her then?"

I was taken aback.

"Nah, she's just a mate, like you."

Emma smiled.

"What about Sam?"

"Do us a favour."

"What's wrong with her?"

"Nothin', she just ain't my type, y'know."

"Who's your type, then?" Emma had a twinkle in her eye. "What about Cheryl?"

I tried, very unconvincingly, to pretend I didn't know what she meant.

"What d'ya mean?"

"Oh, come on, you spend every spare minute around there, and she's always going on about you"

"Really?" That was a nice thought.

I felt uncomfortable, but at the same time, I could feel an opportunity to unburden myself approaching. I couldn't stop now, I had to say something.

"Well..." I began.

"So what's happening? Are you, like, together then?" Emma, straight to the point.

"No man, it ain't that simple."

"No?"

"Not with Cheryl."

"Yeah well, I can imagine it wouldn't be exactly..." She searched for the right word, "straightforward."

"No, you can say that again."

Emma sat back and grinned and I smiled back at her. I could feel heat coming from my face and I realised I must be bright red.

"Have you told her then, I mean, what's happening? Y'know, what stage are you at?"

"I don't know really, I mean, it's not so easy to describe, we're kind of working on it."

"What?"

"Well, she sort of wants me to wait a bit."

"What for?"

"She's only just split up with Elroy, y'know."

"That was before Christmas wasn't it?"

"Yeah, but, I dunno, she reckons she needs some time."

"Hmm, well," Her tone changed and she became serious. "You've got your hands full there, boy."

"I realise."

"She is very beautiful though, I mean, I can understand."

"Yeah, she is."

"And crazy"

"Yeah, you're not wrong"

"Well good luck!" She smiled at me, and I felt like I had found a real ally.

It was such a relief to have finally spoken to someone about the thing I had been most busy with for the past three months. I felt great. The sharing of this intimate secret had created a kind of extra bond between Emma and me.

"Remember" I said. "Don't tell anyone, especially not Tom."

"Come on" she smiled "Do I look like that kind of girl?"

"Nah."

"People notice things though, I mean it's pretty obvious"

I'd never thought that anyone paid attention to where I was or what I was doing. It was nice in a way. We grinned at each other and I felt good. We ordered more cappuccinos (or should that be cappuccini?) and I told her the Hobbit story. She was suitably amused.

"What about the oar?"

"That's another weird thing. He left it on the landing, outside our door."

"Probably just wanted to get rid of the bloody thing."

"Yeah, Doug reckons it's some kind of sign, though."

"What kind of sign?"

"I dunno, like he's put his mark on the house or something."

"What, like a spell?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"Spooky!"

"Doug's real serious about it."

"Oh my God! Whatever next?"

"That's what I thought."

We paid and left. It was getting late, and we cycled home together through the rush hour traffic. It was fun to be the fastest thing on the road.

When I got home the oar was still there, Doug was in his room, and Tom was out at work. I made a cup of tea, skinned up, and watched some early evening telly. Tom burst in a little later full of the streets. He slung his bike into the hall and dropped his bag on the sitting room floor before falling into a chair.

"I'm fucked." He looked it. "Wicked day, though, I got a couple of EC4 wait and returns, Loadsafuckinmoney!"

"Nice one."

I was on a different level, having spent such a relaxing day. I just couldn't compete with his intensity.

Doug appeared, he didn't look too hot.

"Erm, I'm gonna get some food together, you want any?"

"Stormin'" said Tom, a little more enthusiastically than was warranted by the offer. Doug and I looked at him to see if he was being sarcastic.

"I'm starvin', all that shootin' about burns up the old calories, you know." He said by way of explanation.

"Please" I nodded at Doug and he disappeared into the kitchen. I grinned at Tom when we were alone.

"No really, it's true, starvin' marvin!"

"Yeah right,"

"I'm just poppin' round to Dirk's, want anything?"

"Yeah, can ya get us a sixteenth?"

"No problem"

He went out, whistling.

While Tom was away I watched the local news which was mostly about crime, and then the Channel Four news which was about the fall of Communism. Tom arrived at the same times as the dinner.

"Wicked timing" he said. I bit my lip.

What a creep he could be! Little Terry came round after dinner. He didn't say much, just sat on the sofa staring at the wall. No one took any notice, it was normal. 'Normalisation'. Tom decided to give us an in-depth analysis of the World News.

"It's cool man, imagine all those years of havin' to wear grey clothes and never listenin' to any music, thinkin' the Beatles are cool and all that. And now, suddenly, they can have raves and wear groovy keks and get down."

"I don't think there are any raves in Warsaw yet." Sometimes Doug took Tom too seriously.

"Yeah, well, there will be. Wicked , man. I'd like to take a load of E over there and say "hey, guys, check it out." Blow their minds like."

"They've still got border guards, though."

"I wonder what's goin' to happen. I mean they ain't just gonna get into capitalism are they? They must realise that it's load of crap."

I wanted to get the conversation onto politics.

"They don't know though, they ain't had it." Said Tom.

"They'll probably all turn into Thatcherites."

Douglas rarely took the optimistic standpoint.

"But they've had all that education about Lenin and Marx, about sharing, about an egalitarian society. They ain't just gonna forget all that, are they?"

"Don't be too sure" said Doug.

"They're just gonna want to party for a year or two I reckon." Tom said with a grin.

Then he lit a joint.

\*\*\*

On my way to work the next day, I noticed that the oar had disappeared. I worked with Pearl, who told me all about her daughter's latest illness and a Christening she'd been to recently which sounded more like a major festival with mountains of food, rivers of drink, and distant relations flying in from various corners of the globe. I told her I was sorry I'd missed it. After work I went to see Cheryl. She was in a manic mood, running from one room to another, folding clothes, making beds, drinking coffee, and carrying on three conversations at the same time. Her sister was there, and after a short time, Annette turned up with a geezer named Lee. The sister was telling a story about some problem with the Old Bill.

"I was just standin' there near this car with Charmayne and Karen. We wasn't doin' nothin', just chattin' like."

"I told you not to hang around with that Charmayne. Man, you ain't got no sense, you know she's trouble."

"She's alright, too many people cuss' er, that's all."

"I like it man!" Cheryl laughed. "That's right girl, you gotta stand up for ya friends."

"So what happened then?" Annette asked.

"So like I said, we was standin' there, not doin' anythin', not troublin' nobody, right, and this police car comes up and they starts aksin' us all these questions tryin' to make out we was touchin' this car like."

"Soddin' typical."

"So what you say then, girl?"

"I told 'em I weren't doin' nothin' and they ain't got no evidence so they better stop troublin' us cos' it's harassment innit?"

"Love it!"

"I bet they liked that, harassment, good one!"

"You know what, though, they didn't do nothin' to Karen, just tol' er that she was keepin' bad company."

"Bad company! Black company more like! You know they ain't gonna say nothin' to a little white girl like that."

"Innit, though. Bastards!"

"Anyway, then they says to me "We know who you are, we know your brother, a right little troublemaker.""

"Oh man, you know what I mean? You can't even walk down the street without gettin' pull up on every corner just cos something Louie done when he was a kid."

"And what he done since."

They all laughed although I didn't get the joke. Then we drank a coffee and Lee rolled a spliff with some sensi that made my head spin and Cheryl told her sister off for being "extra." Tash fell asleep on the sofa and I wished I could be alone with Cheryl. I decided to wait until all the others had gone. It was a long wait. They spent a long time reminiscing about a reggae club they used to go to together and some people I'd never met. The sister went home by cab, and eventually, as I was

starting to fall asleep, so did Annette and Lee.

"Alright?" said Cheryl as she came back from seeing them out of the front door. "You wanna kip on the couch? I'm gonna sleep with Tash."

"Yeah sure, you wanna smoke a last one?"

"Nah man, I've got an early tomorrow."

I must have looked disappointed.

"What's wrong?"

"I dunno, I er, I just thought it'd be nice to have a bit of time with you, on our own like."

Cheryl sighed.

"Oh no man, don't start that, it's too late."

"I ain't startin' anythin'. I just thought it'd be nice to be on our own for once, you know, to talk."

"We been talkin', ain't we? I thought it was a really nice evenin'. Annette and Lee are really old mates of mine."

"Yeah, I ain't got nothin' against them, I mean Annette's really cool and all that. It's just different to be on our own together."

"I told you about all that, didn't I?"

"Yeah sure, but maybe we could go out together, somewhere nice, for a meal or something."

"Yeah, well, maybe, we'll see. Right now I've gotta go to sleep."

She left the room, and after I'd smoked the joint alone I crept out of the flat making as little noise as possible. I wanted to be cool about it all, but it hurt. Somewhere deep inside it hurt. It was stupid, but I had this sick feeling in my stomach. Stumbling, slipping, falling. I knew all along that I should be careful about Cheryl, but somehow it had got out of control. There wasn't anything I could do about it now but stay away from her. I drove home, and as the orange South London suburbs passed by, I resolved not to have any contact with Cheryl at all until this feeling was somehow under control. I sighed and pressed my head up against the window as I sat at the lights on Dog Kennel hill.

Doug was still up when I got in. He was watching some American sitcom. I was surprised to see him up as it was after three o'clock. I didn't really feel like talking and I had to get up for work at seven, but I couldn't just ignore him.

"Alright?" I said, as cheerily as I could. He grunted.

"What you doin' up at this time? Been out?"

"I couldn't sleep."

"Oh." I could hardly wait to get to bed.

"You see what happened?"

"No, what was it?"

My mind filled with possibilities. Flood, roof collapse, bike stolen. Maybe his dole cheque hadn't arrived. No, that was next week. Flood was a major hazard. The

plumbing was antique and the roof was full of holes. We'd had one the previous winter. I remember it well because "American Werewolf in London" was on telly, and we decided not to do anything about it until after the film. It was a case of priorities.

"It's gone."

"What's gone?"

"The oar."

"Oh yeah, I noticed that this morning."

"I don't like it."

"Well, someone probably tripped over it or something."

"No, it's weird, someone took it."

Well, I thought, what do you want me to do, go out and find it again? I didn't say that though.

"I don't think it's that important, you know, it was just some oar that an old hippie left on the stairs, know what I mean?"

"No, it's too..." he shook his head "It's too fuckin' mysterious."

I was faced with a choice. Either I stay up for another two hours discussing this subject which, although ridiculous to me, held some deep significance for Doug, or I go to bed. I was tired. I was stoned. I had my own problems and I was going to get three and a half hours sleep.

"I gotta crash man. Why don't we talk about it tomorrow?"

"Yeah sure."

I could hear he wasn't too happy about that idea, but I just didn't have the energy. I went to bed feeling guilty and depressed.

We often congratulated ourselves on having stress-free lives. Not like all those yuppies and businessmen having ulcers and getting heart attacks, not us. We were the cool ones, taking it easy, hanging out. I don't know though, living under threat of eviction, holding out for the next dole cheque, watching your friends crack up, not knowing what the next knock on the door might bring. That's stress, isn't it?

\*\*\*

Talking of stress, I was late for work the next day and got a earful from Astrid, who'd somehow managed to get all the residents up and ready for breakfast before I arrived.

"Oh man, you a bad boy." Rose winked at me while Astrid was doing the medication. "She love it though."

"What?"

"Playin' the martyr. She play it for all it's worth."

I laughed and felt better.

"Man, you look like shit. What you been doin'? Burnin' the candle at both ends, eh?"

"Something like that."

"I know all about that. Boy, I could teach you a few lessons."

"I reckon you could too." We both laughed.

"Listen', she takin' Bill and Fred to Day centre in a minute. you can get your head down for an hour or so, I'll hold the fort."

"Ah thanks, Rose, you're a diamond" I wanted to kiss her.

"I know I am. You know what they say about diamonds?"

"No."

"A diamond just a rock that been under pressure!"

She kept her word, and after Astrid finally went out with the men, I went into the sleep-in room and crashed out. Rose was going to wake me by turning up the music full blast if anyone like Nicola unexpectedly arrived. I was so tired that even under those conditions I fell asleep within minutes.

It wasn't music that woke me, but the telephone ringing next to my head. It was Cheryl.

"Did I wake you up or something? You don't sound too on the ball."

"No no, I was just checking something in the Day Book."

"Yeah, well, anyway, what happened to you last night?"

"I went home."

"What you do that for? I was really looking forward to seeing you at breakfast, so was Tash. She asked where you were"

"I dunno, I just felt like goin' home."

"What you doin' after work? Feel like comin' over? Tash really wants to see you, you ain't gonna disappoint her twice in one day, are you?"

"No Cheryl."

"What do you mean, 'No Cheryl'? Last night, you wanted to be with me, today you don't wanna come round. I don't understand you."

"I just need a bit of time, you know, I need to think."



"That's your problem, you know that. You think too bloody much." I laughed.

I had a feeling, the feeling of being twisted around someone's little finger. I tried to stand my ground.

"I meant what I said last night. I want to see you on your own, go out for a meal or something."

"Yeah sure, that'd be nice."

I couldn't believe my ears.

"Is that a yes?"

"Yeah, I been thinkin' too, you ain't got a monopoly on it, you know."

We giggled.

"There's just one snag though."

"What's that?"

"Well, if we're goin' to some fancy restaurant I think we're gonna have to get you some new threads, know what I mean?"

"Yeah sure, when then?"

"I'll pick you up after work, we'll go to Croydon, find something nice."

"Alright, see you at three then."

"Yeah, later."

That was it. I put the phone down and went back to work feeling great. I joked with Rose, cared for the residents, who'd only been a nuisance earlier, and even flirted with Astrid when she got back. Cheryl arrived with Annette who said she'd see us later, and we drove off to Croydon, music pumping, Cheryl looking so good I felt proud to be by her side. She knew all the shops, although there were some we couldn't go in because of some trouble in the past. I didn't ask. Cheryl had a great way of shopping. She'd look around for thirty seconds and then say "That" and pick out some piece of clothing while I was still trying to work out which department we were in. We went to Next where I got some impossibly stylish Italian trousers and to another place where she chose three shirts and a cardigan. I paid with my card trying not to think about how on earth I was going to afford it all.

"Lovely." She said as we staggered out, arms full of shopping bags, "You need shoes too of course, but that'll have to wait 'til next time."

We walked down the street, and I tried to imagine what Grant would say if he could see me. He'd laugh, but Tom would be jealous. That was a nice thought.

"Ooh, look at that."

Cheryl was pointing to a shop window, at first I didn't see what she meant. It was a women's clothes' shop, there wouldn't be anything in there for me. Then I saw it, a dark red tight-fitting cocktail dress. We went up to the window.

"Innit lovely though?"

She looked like a little girl in a sweet shop.

"Yeah, it's nice." I had to agree.

"Shall I try it on?"

"Yeah, why not?"

"Just to see what it looks like."

"Sure."

We went in and Cheryl emerged from the fitting room and stood in front of the mirror. It looked good, it looked very good. She looked better than anyone I'd ever been in the company of. It was painful. I had to take a step back and swallow. Everyone else in the shop looked at her. My heart was beating hard.

"It's nice innit?" She smiled at me.

"Lovely" I managed to say.

"Oh well, next time, maybe."

She went into the cubicle to change. She came out and hung the dress lovingly back on the rack.

"Ain't you gonna get it then?" I asked.

"I'm skint mate, I had to buy clothes for Tash this month, she come first, you know. There ain't that much money left after rent, phone bill, electric, know what I mean?"

I didn't say anything. It wasn't right that something so beautiful should be denied to the world just because of money.

"How much was it?" I asked.

"It weren't cheap."

"Yeah, but how much?"

"Hundred and twenty quid."

It wasn't cheap but it had gone too far. I couldn't have stopped myself if I had wanted to, and the truth was I didn't want to.

"Let's get it."

"Oh no man, no way."

"What do you mean, "no way?" You want it, you look fuckin' great in it, it's your dress."

"Only if you let me pay you back."

"Forget it Cheryl, it's a present."

"You're too sweet."

She gave me a hug and we bought the dress.

"Good thing too, I need something smart to stand next to you in your new trousers."

We drove home. Soul to soul, laughing and flirting. I felt like I was nearly there, I could see the summit, it was finally going to come true.

When we got to Cheryl's, Annette was there, and Tash, and I had to show them my new things which was embarrassing.

"What a difference" Annette said smiling. "You wouldn't recognize the geezer."

you a lucky girl, Cheryl, you better keep your eye on 'im or some other bird's gonna get in there."

"I know, I'm a bit worried mate."

They laughed together and I felt uncomfortable. Then they went into the kitchen for "girl talk" and I watched telly with Tash. She was in a good mood and full of stories.

"Do you know Daryl?"

"Daryl who?"

"Daryl, silly, you know, he's in my class."

"What's he look like?"

"He's ugly."

"Oh, that Daryl, the ugly one in your class."

"Yeah, do you know him?"

"No."

"He tried to kiss me." she giggled.

"That's nice."

"It was horrible."

"What did you do then?"

"I lick 'im on his nose."

"That *is* horrible."

"He deserved it."

"Why?"

"Cos he wanted to kiss me."

"Well, licking is kind of kissing innit?"

"You're funny."

"I'm funny! You go around licking people who want to kiss you and you call me funny!"

"Licking ain't like kissing."

"Licking? like this? " I stuck my tongue out.

"Naw, like this." She punched me on the leg.

"Aah, my leg, aah, ouch, I'll never walk again."

She laughed.

"You know Daryl?"

"I've got a pretty good idea of him by now, he's in your class, he's ugly, and he's got a red nose."

"He's my boyfriend."

Annette and Cheryl were still in the kitchen. The phone rang a couple of times. I could hear Cheryl laughing. I went to see what was going on.

"Erm, don't you think we should be getting ready?"

"In a minute, I've got to 'ave a bath first."

I went back into the sitting room. We watched more T.V. Then Tash said

"You love my mummy, don't you?"

"We're friends."

"You want to kiss her."

"Sometimes. You love her too."

"Sometimes, not when she's shouting."

I smiled at her.

"I know what you mean."

"Sometimes she just shouts and shouts all night."

"She's got lots of problems."

"I know."

"She has to worry about money, bills, clothes for you."

"She don't buy me no clothes."

"Of course she does."

"She don't."

"Where do you think your clothes come from? Father Christmas?"

"My granny buyd 'em."

"Not all of them"

"Yeah, my granny buys all my clothes, she said if it was left to Mummy I'd be nude."

She giggled at this semi-rude word. Then she came over and whispered in my ear,

"You want to be Mummy's boyfriend, like Daryl."

Someone arrived, there was more talking and laughing from the kitchen. It was getting late and Cheryl didn't seem to have had her bath yet. Then she came in.

"Hey squirt." She glared at Tash. "Pyjamas, now."

The girl ran off to her room.

"Don't you think we should be goin'? I mean, it's gonna be a bit late."

I tried to sound as reasonable as possible.

"Alright, alright, don't start hasslin' me, I'm having a chat with Annette and Sonya."

"Yeah, but we're supposed to be goin' out to a restaurant."

"I don't know if I want to go with you if you're in that kind of mood."

"I'm just sayin'"

"Yeah yeah, I know."

She walked out. I wondered if I should follow her, but why? She already knew what I wanted to say. Then Sonya came in.

"Alright?"

"Yeah, great."

"You comin' to the party?"

"What party?"

"Lee's havin' a party tonight, didn't Cheryl tell ya?"

"No."

"We're all goin', Cheryl's gonna wear some new dress she got today."

My stomach turned over.

"She didn't tell me nothin'."

"Well, you comin' anyway?"

"Nah, I don't think so."

"Ah, go on, it'll be great, Gary's gonna D.J."

"I'm not in the mood, really."

"Alright then." She shrugged and walked out.

I sat and stared at the television. I don't know what was on. I rolled a big joint, smoked it, and lay on the sofa trying to sleep. I couldn't think what else to do. After a long time Cheryl came in.

"You comin' to Lee's party, or are you gonna sulk all night?"

I stared at her. I wanted to say something but no words came to my mouth. Eventually I managed to speak.

"I ain't goin'."

"Suit yerself."

She left the room. I pretended to be asleep when Annette came in to try to persuade me to go, and after I heard them all leave, I waited twenty minutes before picking up all my new clothes and going home.

\*\*\*

I woke to the sound of the Smiths, just what I didn't need. It sounded like Doug was having a session. I remembered the night before and felt sick. It was early afternoon, and I toyed with the idea of getting up and doing something to take my mind off the pain. I stared at the ceiling. It was covered with streamers and Christmas decorations I'd got cheap from Woolworth's one January. The whole room was like that, overflowing with brightly coloured, glittering junk. Posters and postcards covered every patch of wall, which was good, because I'd never got around to painting over the boring blue and white striped wallpaper left by a tasteless previous occupant. My clothes were in two old suitcases I'd borrowed years ago from a girlfriend. On the floor was a black carpet I'd found in a skip, dead impractical, but it looked great every couple of months or so when I hoovered. When Loopy Lee saw my room he said "Wow man, a real soft drugs room." I'm not sure what he meant but I took it as a compliment. Then he drew a picture of a stick man on the wall and wrote; "Dance like an Insect!" I always used to look at it when I needed cheering up. It didn't work this morning though.

My bed was an old builders palette and a mattress of very dubious origins which had the orthopedic qualities of a sack of potatoes. Next to the bed was an upside down milk crate covered with a bit of Indian material which served very well as a bedside table. There was a candle on it, a couple of joss sticks and two books, "The Directory of Possibilities", and "One Hundred Years of Solitude" which Doug had lent me. It was going to take one hundred years to read at the rate I was going. I kept losing track of the plot and had to go back a couple of pages to find out what was going on. I seemed to have been on page fifty two forever. Doug was always asking me how I was getting on and what I thought of it. I usually said something non-committal like "very interesting" or "yeah, great". Once I told him I was taking it slowly because I was enjoying it so much. He gave me a funny look, but it stopped him asking for a while. My tin was there too. We all had a tin, and we used them to express ourselves. Emma's tin was hand-painted by a friend of hers from Brighton who made shoes, Grant's was a biscuit tin too big to leave the house. Tom had recently been given a sort of leather pouch thing by some admirer which didn't really count. Sam's was a real work of art, a sort of Indian jewelry box covered in depictions of tantric rituals. Mine was an old cigarette case with a map of the world embossed on the front. I could feel this kind of dull pain in my stomach, it got worse when I thought about the night before. I wished it would go away. I tried to think about something else. There wasn't anything else to think about.

I looked at my tin. It was calling me. I struggled for a moment with my conscience. I knew that smoking first thing in the morning meant an end to any meaningful activity for the day. But oh, what the fuck, I deserved it, I needed a treat, and I couldn't think of what the day had to offer that was worth getting up for anyway. I made a coffee first, just to show myself that I could do something. Then I retired back to my room, put on an Otis Redding tape, and smoked a little number. It had the desired effect. Numb out, dumb out.

When I made it out of my bedroom, it was dark. I went into the sitting room where Doug was pouring tea. I wondered if I looked as bad as he did, and decided I probably did.

"Alright?"

"Alright."

"What's happenin' then"

"Nothin', just waiting for Blind Date, want a cuppa?"

"Nice one."

I noticed that there were some Hob Nobs. I helped myself to a couple and dunked them in my tea. It was hot and sweet and exactly what I needed at that moment.

"Where's Tom?"

"Dunno, he went out with Grant somewhere."

"Anythin' happenin' tonight?"

"I think there's some sort of party in Kennington."

"Oh yeah? Anyone we know?"

"Something to do with Tom."

"Are ya goin'?"

"Dunno, I'm a bit skint at the moment."

"When's the old giro then?"

"Next week."

"Don't cost nothin' to go to a party, does it?"

"Yeah, I don't know, I'm not really too sure about goin' out at the moment."

"Why not?"

"There's too much weird stuff going on."

"Like what?"

"Tom saw that geezer yesterday."

"What geezer?"

"You know, that wizard geezer."

"What, Merlin?"

"Yeah, he was round at Dirk's talking some strange shit."

"I reckon he always talks strange shit, I doubt if he could talk normal shit if he wanted to."

"I don't like it, I'm thinking of getting away from here for a bit."

"Yeah, well, maybe it's a good idea."

"I've got to get out of London for a bit."

"Got anywhere in mind?"

"I don't know, when my dole cheque comes, just out of London, away from all this stuff."

I was going to ask "what stuff?", but Cilla was on introducing the victims and the contrast between the world of Blind Date and Doug's paranoia was too much to juggle. We watched and laughed and cried. For an hour we both forgot our problems as we reveled in the self-inflicted misfortunes of others. The thing about Doug was that although he could bring you down when you were up, he could also bring you up when you were down. Partly because you could always compare your situation to his, and partly because he knew the territory so well. He was at home

in the depths of despair.

I cooked some kind of uninspired meal afterwards which Doug seemed to enjoy. Tom arrived just as we finished, he looked relieved.

"It's OK, I had a kebab."

"Where ya been?"

"Out and about, hangin' out with Grant."

"What's he up to? I haven't seen 'im for ages."

"Same as ever. You boys comin' to this party tonight?"

Tom grinned at me, I tried to grin back.

"What's the story?"

"It's Patsy and that mob."

"Who's Patsy?"

"You know Patsy, she's one of that Grove crowd, something to do with the art college. Jo knows her."

"Sounds good. Who's goin'?"

"Everyone man, Grant, Sam, Jo, Emma, Stewart, it's gonna be a roadblock!"

"Alright alright, what do ya reckon Doug?"

"No, I, er, I don't think so."

Tom shrugged. I thought it over, I wasn't in a party mood but then again the idea of just sitting around at home with Doug was hardly an uplifting one. I needed some distraction, something to relieve the pain.

"I'm meeting Grant in the Grove at ten."

"You'll never get a seat." said Doug gloomily. Tom just grinned.

"Who cares?"

I cared when we got in there. The place was heaving. Tom was flitting around from one table to another, chatting up women and bullshitting men. I was finding it difficult to hide my misery. I tried to listen while Grant told a story about some friends of his called the "hot knife squad" and some infamous party they'd given in Wimbledon.

Tom joined us.

"Alright then chaps?"

"Yeah, not bad, we're just re-living Grant's finest party moments."

"Sounds interestin'"

"It's a lot more fun to talk about than it was to experience." said Grant with a grin.

Then we talked a bit about Ireland. Tom reckoned he'd already got enough money. Grant didn't believe him and they had a bit of an argument about how much we needed. Grant could be extremely adventurous, but when it came to money he was, in Emma's words, "Caution on legs." Tom was naturally optimistic,



and always reckoned he could survive on far less than was actually necessary. This optimism could be a really positive thing, but when it came to money it was simply a pain in the arse. It just meant he'd run out before everyone else, and spend the rest of the time scrounging from whoever he could. I knew from past experience that person would probably be me.

We went to the party. It wasn't far to cycle and it was easy to find. A big terraced house on the way to the Oval opposite some council blocks. There were loads of people arriving and we met Sam and Emma at the door.

"Jo's comin' later, she's got some new geezer." explained Emma.

"I don't think she wanted anyone to know" said Sam.

"Hey everybody" shouted Grant "Jo's got herself a new shag!"

Some people looked over and smiled, Emma went red, Sam said "Shhhh" and me and Tom laughed.

"Lucky Jo!" Shouted someone we couldn't see, and then "Who the fuck is Jo, anyway?"

We laughed, and went in to the party. There were already tons of people there, loads of them I knew from the Grove and a couple of our neighbours. There was a big room, completely empty, where music was booming out and a few people were moving about preparing to dance. We went on into the kitchen where Grant immediately found some cans of Red Stripe which he handed around as if he was the host. Tom disappeared, and Sam started talking to a lesbian couple she'd met at Deptford Women's centre. Grant went to find the toilet and I was left alone with Emma.

"How's it goin'?" She asked.

"Yeah well, pretty shitty to be honest."

"What's up?"

"Well, I don't know if I feel like talking about it right now."

"Is it something to do with Cheryl?"

"Yeah, it's kinda fucked up, you know what I mean?"

"What do you mean, "fucked up"?"

"It's over."

"I didn't think it had even started."

"Well it hadn't, not really, I mean it's difficult to describe, I just don't think it's such a good idea."

"But you were so into it the other day."

"Yeah, I know."

"So what happened?"

"She's just bad news."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't really go into it, it's just never gonna work"

When I said it, it became true.

"Shit man, I'm sorry."

"Yeah well..."

"I mean, I didn't think it'd be easy, not with Cheryl."

"No, it wasn't."

"Maybe something'll happen, I mean, maybe it isn't as serious as you think."

"Yeah thanks, but, well, I ain't that optimistic really."

I wished I could tell her everything. What had happened, How I was feeling. I wanted to let it all out but it wasn't the place, it wasn't the time.

Grant came back and started rolling a joint. Emma tactfully changed the subject.

"Did ya see "Blind Date" tonight?" and we rapped on about TV for a while, Grant claiming he only watched nature documentaries and programmes about Africa.

"I watch anything about Africa, doesn't matter what it is, news, sport, music, if Neighbours was set in Lagos, I'd watch it."

A large guy with a beard was rummaging around looking pissed off.

"Where the fuck is my beer?" He growled.

"I dunno mate, where did you leave it?" Asked Grant sweetly.

We all stood with one hand behind our backs.

"Left it here, six fuckin' cans of Red Stripe."

"Red Stripe" said Grant with a twinkle in his eye. "I saw a geezer with a can of Red Stripe goin' into the dance room."

"What's he look like?"

"Skinny bloke with black hair."

"Thanks mate."

"No problem" said Grant, as the man disappeared with an evil look on his face.

"Poor Tom" said Emma giggling.

"We better move before he comes back" said Grant "Let's check out the upstairs scene."

So we fought our way upstairs, carefully looking out for the beard. The whole place was full now, and we had to carefully step over kissing couples and people making spliffs on the stairs. I looked into the dance room from the stairs and saw Tom bopping around with his can. There was no sign of the beer man. We found a bedroom that was full of people's coats. Dirk was in there talking to a couple about Morocco. We sat and listened and finished our cans as quickly as possible. I wanted to go downstairs again, but Grant was into chatting with Dirk for a bit. Morocco is, as he mentioned, part of Africa. I was restless, pissed off, I thought about going home but decided against it. I went to the toilet, which took a long time as the queue went halfway down the stairs. I met Stewart while I was waiting and we talked about football. Tom was still dancing when I finally got downstairs.

"Fuckin' hell!" He said. "Some massive bloke wanted to kick my 'ead in"

"What for?"

"Reckoned I nicked his beer."

"What happened?"

"I told him Grant gave it to me and he went off to look for 'im." I laughed, although I had the feeling this joke was getting a bit out of hand. Then through the speakers chimed the sound of Big Ben;

IT'S UPON THE HOUR

TO COME AMONGST YOU AND AMAZE YOU

WITH ABSOLUTE INCREDIBLE OUT OF THIS WORLD TYPE SOUNDS

LOOK OUT; HERE WE GO!

The room erupted. Me and Tom in the middle of it all, jumping up and down and rapping along:

I NEVER FANCIED NANCY BUT THE STATEMENT SHE MADE

HELD A PLATE OF WEIGHT BUT I EVEN STRESSED IT TO WADE

DID HE TAKE ANY HEED NAH THE BOY WAS HOOKED.....

I HEARD SHOVIN' IS WORSE THAN PUSHIN'

BUT I'D RATHER KNOW A SHOVER THAN A PUSHER

'COS A PUSHER'S A JERK

SAY NO GO

SAY NO GO DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT

SAY NO GO

Don't even think about it, don't let it cross your mind. Sam and Jo were there too and I looked around for Jo's new man. She grinned at me and passed me a joint and we danced around some more. I tried to dance out of my sorrow. The Jungle Brothers came on and Monie Love and I was off. Emma was there bopping around and laughing with Jo. Cosmic Clive and Little Terry were in a corner. I saw a beautiful woman from the Grove. I didn't care. She was dancing stiffly, scared to lose her cool. I felt sorry for her, and had an urge to go over to her and tell her to relax, not to worry about her image, to get into it. I thought better of it. Then the music got a bit mellow, and I thought about Cheryl. The horrible stomach feeling returned and I decided to get out of it. I went into the kitchen, but couldn't see anyone I knew. I looked around for something to drink. Some people were doing Tequila slammers on the table. I hung around at the edge of the group and was eventually offered a go by a bloke with a Soul II Soul T-Shirt. I banged the glass on the table and poured the foaming liquid down my throat. I immediately wanted to giggle. I felt suddenly light-headed and somehow on another level. I had another.

"Alright?" asked Mr. Soul II Soul smiling. I realised I had an idiotic grin on my

face.

"Yeah, wicked, nice one mate."

I left the kitchen and went to dance a bit more. At first it was a lovely feeling, but it left me wanting more. I didn't really feel I could push my luck that far so I concentrated on getting into the groove. Somehow I couldn't, the tequila took me away. I wasn't at this party at all, I was just an observer. Alien, alienated, sent down from some other planet to spy on the human race. What a strange race they were too. A bunch of sweating smelly bodies. I couldn't see the connection. Where did I fit in to all this? Where were my friends? Jo was in a corner necking with her new geezer, Little Terry and Cosmic Clive were having an argument and Sam was dancing with her friends but there was no sign of the others. After a while I became curious about them and went upstairs to find Grant sitting in exactly the same place I'd left him. Next to him, rolling a joint, was the bloke with the beard. I was a bit surprised, but they seemed to be getting on fine. I caught Grant's eye and he smiled.

"Let me introduce my mate Tony, he knows Vince from the hot-knife squad."

"Oh yeah, that's nice."

I hoped it didn't sound too ironic. Tom and Emma were sitting quietly on the floor chatting together.

"Hey man" Tom greeted me "Where ya been?"

"Groovin'" I shrugged. "hangin' out."

I had a moment of paranoia wondering if Emma had been telling Tom all my secrets.

"Nice music eh?" said Tom. "Fuckin' De La, firin', man."

"Do you want some spliff?"

Emma winked at me as I took a drag and sat down.

What are friends for? To give you a spliff when you feel like shit.

"Hey Tony man, do you know some wizard geezer called Merlin?" asked Grant

"Dirk knows 'im" said Tom.

"Where is Dirk?" I wanted to know.

"Gone to the garage for supplies."

"Yeah, he's bringing me some beer." said Tony.

I wondered if I should ask him about what had happened but thought better of it.

"Shame about that" said Grant, completely straight-faced. "Ya shouldn't leave yer beer around like that though. I mean, there's so many dodgy types at parties like this."

I nearly choked on my spliff and had to hand it to Tom. Tony just nodded like he'd learnt his lesson. Emma smiled sweetly. It was agony. Luckily Grant changed the subject.

"So what did happen to that oar then?"

"I gave it to Dirk, he wants to get a canoe or something." said Tom.

"You gave it to Dirk?" I couldn't believe it.

"Yeah, why not?"

"Doncha know Doug's having kittens about that thing?"

"Fuckin' hell, what am I supposed to do about it?"

"Well you coulda told 'im, he thinks it's been spirited away by Merlin or something."

"Oh my God, the whole thing is so bloody stupid."

"Yeah, to you maybe." interrupted Emma. "Doug really believes it's got some, like, special meaning."

"I'm sorry." Tom nodded his head. "I just can't get into it. I mean, it's completely weird."

"Maybe we should put something else there instead" suggested Grant. "Like a totem pole, or a dead rabbit or something."

We all laughed except for Tony, who didn't know what on earth we were talking about.

"Oh no man, just imagine old Doug's face if he stepped out the door and saw a dead rabbit looking up at him, or a horse like in "The Godfather."

"You boys are sick." said Emma, and of course, she was right.

\*\*\*

Stewart came in with a woman who turned out to be Patsy, whose bedroom it was. I wondered if we were supposed to leave, but no one made a move. Tom and Stewart started a conversation about football which quickly became a discussion of Scottish independence.

"It's our oil." said Stewart.

"What is?"

"North sea oil, it's Scotland's oil."

"I thought it was Norway's."

"Half of it is, but the other half belongs to us."

"What are you talkin' about, us? It's Shell and BP and all those multi-nationals, don't make no difference whether Scotland's independent or whatever, they're the ones who make the profits."

"We'd nationalise it, wouldn't we? It'd be a socialist state. Nae fucker votes Tory up there."

"Yeah yeah, dream on."

"Listen, yer for a united Ireland, eh?"

"It ain't the same."

"Of course it is, Ireland should be free and so should Scotland."

"What about Wales?"

"Yeah, sure, Wales too."

"What about Cornwall?" asked Grant

"Well, er..."

"Or Cheshire for that matter."

"Sarf Lahndun!" said Tony. "Free fuckin' Sarf Lahndun."

"Right on!" said Grant and we all laughed.

Dirk came back with beer, cigarettes, skins, and munchies. It was like Father Christmas had just walked in. We all started drinking, smoking, and eating at the same time.

"All politicians are bastards anyway." said Tom with his mouth full of Mars bar. "It doesn't matter if they're Scottish, Irish, English, or fuckin' Venezuelan, know what I mean?"

"Where the fuck is Venezuela anyway?" asked Patsy like she wanted to change the subject.

"Just past Turnham Green I think, it's on the District Line." Said Grant, and for a half second she wasn't sure.

"You know what you should do if you're getting depressed about some politician?" asked Dirk.

"Shoot the bastard?"

"Nah man, I'm serious."

"So am I."

"Nah really, what you do is imagine them going to the bog."

"You what?"

"Yeah, just imagine Thatcher sitting on the bog, and you can't take her serious any more."

"Is this that filthy German humour they're always warning us about?"

"It's cool" Tom was giggling. "Imagine the Queen."

"The Queen on the bog!" We all killed ourselves except Patsy.

"Do you think the Queen wipes her bum?" asked Emma innocently.

"Nah, she's got some Lady-in-Waiting or whatever who does it for her." Said Grant.

"Really?"

"Yeah, 'My Lady of the Royal Chamberpot' or something."

"Stop it." Tom screamed, he was lying on the floor, shaking. Emma was cackling and even Tony was amused. He slapped Grant on the back.

"You're a laugh, you are." He said.

Only Patsy looked unamused.

"You lot are out of order" she said.

"Yeah, great, innit?" said Grant.

"You shouldn't talk about the Queen like that."

"You're joking."

"I mean it, it's not nice."

"Aw, come on, it was only a joke" said Stewart.

"It's bad taste."

"The royal family's bad taste." said Tom.

"No they ain't, they're human beings too."

"That's just the point innit." I said.

It went quiet while everyone tried to think what to say. There was a long awkward silence which was suddenly broken by Tony.

"Well, I'd give that Lady Di one any day."

Patsy burst into tears and ran out of the room.

"Aren't you gonna look after her?" Tom asked Stewart

"Give me a break, man."

"What did I say?" Tony looked perplexed.

"Not the right thing." said Emma.

Dirk was still laughing.

"You English are fuckin' crazy" he said.

"Ain't they just" agreed Stewart.

Then Patsy stormed back into the room.

"Get out!" She screamed.

"What?"

"Get the fuck out of my room, you bastards!"

"Alright, alright."

We slowly stood up and collected our things. As we left, she slammed the door so hard that the key fell out of the lock. Grant picked it up, looked at it for a minute, then quietly locked Patsy in her room. He put the key on the floor by the door and we went downstairs. Ten minutes later Emma had an attack of conscience and went upstairs to let her out. Somehow the key was missing and the door was still locked.

"Never mind" said Tom. "She'll be alright."

"Yeah," agreed Stewart. "Fuckin' royalist."

"She just needs to chill out" said Grant. "And now she's got the perfect opportunity."

We forgot about Patsy and went and had a dance. The party had thinned out, and Tom and Grant took the chance to express themselves on the dance floor. "Stop this Crazy thing" came on, and Grant jumped around like a dervish on speed. He didn't dance very often, but when he did it was full on.

"Radical man" he grinned. "Dance like an insect!"

Then he did his "Insect Dance" which was actually more like an elephant dance. It came to an undignified end when he slipped on some beer and fell on Cosmic Clive which nearly caused a scene. Me and Emma shared a spliff while Tom talked to Little Terry in a corner.

Then it was time to go, so we did.

"How's little Terry?" I asked Tom.

"Fucked".

"Do you think Patsy'll be alright?" asked Emma as we unlocked our bikes.

"No problem" said Grant "They can always kick the door in."

I must admit I had horrible thoughts of her starving to death in her room or suffocating or something. I had a picture of Tom and Grant in court trying to explain why they'd murdered someone for standing up for the monarchy. It was probably treason. I had a vague feeling that treason still carried the death penalty. That's the stuff I was thinking. I must've been out of it.

As we cycled home the sick feeling returned. Cheryl was in my head. It didn't matter how many stupid parties I went to, or how many of Tom and Grant's pranks I witnessed, she'd always be there. I could get as drunk or as stoned as I liked but I'd never escape.



Tom went off to his mum's the next day, he wanted to do some washing before we set off. Doug watched telly and I went to work. Same as it ever was. Not much was going on as it was Sunday evening. Some of the residents' parents came to visit. They sat around not knowing what to say to each other. Feeling guilty that they hadn't come last week, or wiping the dribble from their offsprings' chins. It was a pretty depressing sight. Florence was there and we went about our work with a kind of mechanical efficiency. I kept hoping the phone would ring. There was a constant pain in my stomach. I'd think about Cheryl and it would get worse. Dinner was sausage and chips, most of which we hoovered off the floor afterwards. I was just about to start getting David ready for bed when the phone rang. I answered it.

"Hello."

"It's me" came a child's voice. It was Tash.

"Who's me?"

"Me, silly."

"I'm not silly. Did you want to talk to silly? He's not here at the moment, can I leave a message for him?"

"Are you coming to see us?" My heart sank.

"No."

"When are you coming?"

"I don't know."

"Why aren't you coming?"

"Maybe you should ask your mum."

"She said you're being silly."

"She's the expert at that."

"Are you gonna take me to see the horses?"

"Not for a while."

"One day?"

"Maybe."

"Tomorrow?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I've got to work."

"Have you got a headache?"

"No, why?"

"You sound like my mum when she has a headache."

I heard Cheryl's voice in the background.

"What are you on about? Here, give me that. Hello? Are you there?"

"Yeah."

"What's wrong with you?"

Suddenly I stopped being sad and felt only angry.

"You know what's wrong with me."

"No I don't. is it about that dress?"

"Partly."

"For fuck's sake, I'll give you the money, didn't I say that?"

"It's not really the point."

"Well, what is the point then?"

"Don't do that again."

"What?"

"Gettin' Tash to call, it's not fair."

"She wanted to talk to you, she's been hasslin' me all day."

"You're out of order, Cheryl."

"What did I do?"

"You know what you did."

"No, I don't, tell me."

"I don't think I want to see you for a bit, I can't handle it."

"Yeah, right."

She sounded sad, but I didn't know if it was genuine or not. I couldn't tell any more.

"Well then, see ya sometime."

"Yeah, see ya, Cheryl." I hung up.

I smoked a cigarette in the sleep-in room alone before going back to work. I told Florence to say I wasn't there if Cheryl rang again. She did, three times.

"Man, can that girl cuss, she didn't believe me, not a bit." said Florence, as she came back the third time.

"I'm sorry."

"Ain't you should be apologisin', it's her."

"Yeah, well, thanks anyway."

"You want to take my advice and stay well away from that Cheryl, she ain't nothin' but trouble."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. I'm tryin'"

Luckily I didn't have to work with Cheryl before my holiday and the one time we might have seen each other at a hand-over I said I had a Dentist appointment and went home early. I didn't want to see her, but I was thinking about her all the time. I was in constant pain. She didn't phone again which left me feeling relieved and a little disappointed. I was sick. The only thing that kept me going was the trip to

Ireland.

The night before we left Doug dropped a bombshell. Tom came into my room as I was busy thinking about packing. I hadn't done anything yet, but I was seriously considering it.

"Have ya heard?" He asked hectically.

"Heard what?"

"About Doug."

I tried to think if I had heard anything about Doug recently.

"I don't think so."

"You'd know if you had."

"What's goin' on?"

"He's only decided he wants to come."

"What, to Ireland?"

"Yeah, well, part of the way at least."

"There ain't room, is there?"

"Not really."

"What's Grant say?"

"Doug reckons he said it's OK"

"Jesus!"

"Yeah, exactly."

"He ain't got any dosh, 'as 'e?"

"Nah, he owes Sam half 'is dole cheque."

"What, a two-week holiday in Ireland on thirty quid?"

"Something like that, yeah."

"What about the ferry?"

"He didn't exactly say he wants to come to Ireland, he keeps goin' on about gettin' out of London, just like, anywhere. It's somethin' to do with this Merlin business, I reckon'. He doesn't want to stay here alone, know what I mean?"

Put like that it didn't sound so unreasonable. Somehow, though, I had a bad feeling about the idea.

"Sounds shady to me." I said.

Tom nodded.

"Yeah, me too."

I got on with packing and Tom went off and listened to the Pogues at full volume. I spent a long time deciding whether to take any hash along. It would be a good opportunity to cut down I told myself. Grant and Tom would both have some so it would always be around. I decided not to take any and felt immediately proud

of myself. Grant came round a bit later.

"Alright chaps? I just wanted to check that you're all set."

"Yeah, no problem."

We were all in the sitting room drinking tea.

"I reckon we should set off as early as possible."

"I thought we were taking the night ferry."

"Yeah, but it'd be good to have a bit of time in the mountains."

"What mountains?"

"North Wales, there's some tasty places up there, we could stop off on the way to Holyhead."

"Yeah, cool."

"So what are your plans then?" Grant asked Doug.

"I, er, just wanna come along for a bit, to, er, get out of London."

"Yeah, but where are you thinkin' of goin'?"

"I'm not bothered really, just out of London."

"Alright. it's gonna be a bit of a squash in the back, though."

"I don't mind."

"We'll drop you off somewhere nice, like Coventry." said Grant.

Me and Tom laughed and Doug sort of smiled. Maybe it'll be alright, I thought. Then Grant changed the subject.

"I saw Stewart yesterday."

"And?"

"Yeah, he reckoned he met Patsy's flatmate in the Grove."

"And? What happened then?"

"Apparently she jumped out the window and broke her neck, she's lying in King's College Hospital on a life support machine."

"Nah!"

"You're jokin'!"

"No, it's true."

"Bullshit!"

"The Old Bill are looking for some geezer who's like, skinny with dark 'air, dead ugly, and reckons he's Irish."

"Can't be me then." said Tom.

"Why, cos' you don't reckon yer Irish?"

"Nah, 'cos I'm fuckin' stunnin' lookin'"

"Yeah yeah, you'll look good in those prison togs."

"What really happened?" I asked.

"Oh, it's pretty borin' actually, seems this flatmate was already pissed off with Patsy, she'd had a go at a few other people about fuck all. So, when she saw the key and realised that she was locked in her room, she put the key in her pocket and left her to chill out like."

"When she let her out then?"

"Next afternoon, she kept apologisin' and sayin' she didn't know what came over her and all that."

"Bet she still likes the Queen though."

"Probably."

It struck me how infantile these games were. Weren't we getting a bit old for such shit? I couldn't imagine Grant ever changing though. Sometimes it seemed like part of him was stuck at the age of fourteen. Fourteen year olds can be fun but they can also be a right pain in the arse.

Emma and Sam came round and we got stoned and talked about our holiday. Little Terry turned up and drew a picture of an inter-galactic battle. It was quite impressive. He told us that the Rat People were going to play a gig . We wondered if the world was ready. At one point Sam told Doug that he had a dirty neck which was pretty embarrassing. He took it quite well, considering. We arranged to meet round at Emma's flat at nine o'clock the next day which seemed a touch optimistic to me. Then we crashed out.

\*\*\*

Me and Tom made a big effort and got to Emma's at about ten. Grant was sitting in the kitchen drinking coffee. It was a sunny morning, and we were all excited and keen to get on the road.

"Where've you chaps been?"

"Er, took a bit longer than we thought."

"Yeah, well, only just got here myself, Emma's just nipped down to the Chemist to get some woman's thing."

"What woman's thing?"

"I dunno, I mean, you don't ask about that kind of stuff, do ya?"

"Maybe she's gettin' condoms." said Tom. "you can't get them over there."

"Yeah, probably, you got yerself a good supply?"

Jo came in wearing a dressing gown. She yawned.

"Alright? You lot not ready yet?"

"We're waitin' for Emma."

"And Doug."

"What's he up to?"

"He's waitin' for his dole cheque"

"Oh fuckin' 'ell, better 'ave another coffee then."

We sat around for a while with Jo. She made us all toast and we told her the Patsy story. Tom and Grant didn't agree on quite a few important details, like who'd actually locked the door.

"She's an arsehole anyway." was Jo's opinion. "Good party though."

Emma came back and Tom went back to our's to see what was up with Doug. Not much was happening in the direction of leaving. I started wishing I'd stayed in bed for an extra hour or two. Sam came back at about eleven, she'd been to some early morning dance workshop. I had to admire her energy.

"I thought you lot'd be half way to Tipperary by now." she said.

"We're waiting for Doug's dole cheque."

"He's probably got it by now, I saw the postman down the road."

"What's he playin' at then?"

"Maybe he's gone to the Post Office to cash it."

"We can do that on the way" said Grant. "I'm goin' over to see what's happenin'."

Just then Tom came back.

"It ain't come."

"Oh Jesus!"

"He wants to wait for the second post."

"Oh my God! You got any more coffee in that pot?"

"He owes you some money, don't he?" Grant asked Sam.

"Yeah, thirty-five, I mean, I could really do with it. I'm going down to Brighton tomorrow."

"Maybe you better start changin' your plans."

We drank more coffee, smoked, and listened to Burning Spear. The sun shone in through the kitchen window. It was a nice scene, sitting around with my mates, hangin' out. I would've really enjoyed it under other circumstances. Then, eventually, there was a sound at the door and something was pushed through the letter box. Grant jumped up and opened the door.

"Excuse me, are you the second post?"

It was, and we decided to put all our stuff in the car. Grant had a tent, which he put on the roof rack with his unicycle. It looked a bit tight when everything was in. I went to see what Doug was up to. He was sitting on the sofa smoking a roll-up like it was just another day.

"Did it come?"

"No."

"Well, what are ya gonna do then?"

"I dunno."

"We're all ready to leave."

He looked at me as if I'd said something really hurtful.

"I want to go."

"Yeah, well then, alright, let's go."

"I've gotta wait for my dole cheque"

"Well, it ain't comin' before tomorrow mornin' is it?"

"Maybe I can get a counter cheque down the dole office."

"That'll take forever, even if it happens, which I doubt."

"I can't stay here."

"Well, whatcha gonna do then?"

"I've got a fiver left from that money Sam lent me."

"And?"

"I just wanna get out of London."

"So do I!"

He stared into space.

"You know what I mean?" I said "I've gotta go, they're all waiting downstairs."

I walked toward the door. Doug jumped up and grabbed his guitar and a carrier bag which were in the hall and ran down the stairs in front of me.

"What you bringin' that for?" asked Grant when he saw the guitar.

"I'm gonna do some busking."

"I don't know if we can fit it in, it's a bit, like, cramped."

"I'll hold it."

"Let's just go, eh?" said Tom.

So, with difficulty, we got in. Tom had to sit in the front because he was going to read the map. I don't know why anyone had to read the map as we were going straight to the motorway, but I wished I'd thought of it. I was squashed in the back with Emma, Doug, and the guitar. By the time we reached Camberwell Green, I was already thinking of getting out and hitching. We crossed the river at Vauxhall, and went through Victoria, where we got some funny looks from people at a traffic light. No one said much, the euphoria of setting off had been dampened by all the hanging around and now Doug's mood enveloped the car like a fog. We swept round Hyde Park corner, up Park Lane, Marble Arch and into the Edgware road where there was a huge jam.

"I'm a bit peckish, actually" said Emma as we crawled along.

"Yeah, me too." agreed Tom.

We stopped in Kilburn, where all the shops had names like Reilly's and Fitzgerald's.

"Here we are" said Grant. "In Ireland already, that didn't take long, did it? It looks just like London though."

We bought some sandwiches and rolls in a bakery called Flanagan's. The woman who served us had an accent so thick that Tom didn't know what she was saying.

"She must've been from Cork." he explained, embarrassed. "That's the only accent I have a bit of trouble with."

"Some fuckin' Irishman you are." said Grant. "Can't even understand your own people."

"Maybe she had a speech impediment." Suggested Emma.

We all laughed for the first time since we'd been on the road. The mood lightened after that although Doug remained silent. We were, after all, off on holiday, and even his sombre presence couldn't bring us down forever. We got on the Motorway, and Tom and Grant had an argument about what music we should listen to. Tom wanted 808 State,

"It's perfect man, it's like techno, technology and all that."

"Fuck technology, I wanna listen to the Bhundu Boys." replied Grant. "And it's my car."

"What about the radio?" said Emma.

We tried that, but it was all rubbish.

"Where the fuck are we?" Tom was shocked. "Can't they even get any pirates out here?"

"Hey Doug," shouted Grant over the sound of radio interference and the car which was doing pretty well for an old scrapper Datsun loaded to the roof. "We're outside London now, just give us a shout when you see where you wanna stop."



Doug mumbled something.

"Say what? I can't hear ya mate."

"I said not yet."

"Ya got any idea where?"

"I dunno, a bit further."

While they were talking, Tom had taken the opportunity to put on a tape of hip hop mixes and we cruised along listening to various people assuring us that they were the best rappers on the planet.

I'M THE KING OF ROCK, THERE AIN'T NONE HIGHER  
THOSE SUCKER MCS SHOULD CALL ME SIRE...

Tom turned to Grant.

"Hey Granty, you gotta call me sire."

"Sire? Dire more like."

"Why do they always have to go on about how great they are?" asked Emma earnestly.

"I dunno" Tom shrugged. "Sounds good, don't it?"

"Sounds bloody stupid to me" said Grant. "I mean, imagine if I went on like that, about how great I was all the time."

"You do, don't ya?"

We bombed along, listening to hip hop, the Bhundu boys, and Stevie Wonder, talking crap and waving at other cars. Doug a brooding presence behind his guitar. Somewhere past Birmingham we stopped at a service station where Emma bought a Gypsy Kings tape.

"Now we can listen to my choice of music." She said.

"What about here then?" Grant said to Doug. "You can get a lift wherever you like."

"Er, I don't..." Doug looked down at the tarmac.

"We ain't really stoppin' again until we get to North Wales, if it's still light by then. Otherwise it'll be Holyhead. I mean, if you got any ideas, just say, you know what I mean."

There was a silence while we all stood around the car waiting to see what was going to happen. Me and Tom stared into the distance, Grant unnecessarily checked the oil, and Emma rolled a cigarette. Nothing happened, so without saying anything, we all got back into the car and drove off. It was dead uncomfortable. Grant was getting pissed off, and Emma kept staring at Doug like she expected him to say something which, of course, he didn't.

"Hey, Mr. Driver, can you put my tape on?" asked Emma eventually, and we sailed on to the sound of 'Bamboleo'. Somehow the contrast between the music and the mood in the car made it all seem stranger than ever.

We turned off the motorway and onto an "A" road, and in a short time we were in Wales. The landscape got more and more scenic as the sun got lower. We stopped just after sunset in a valley surrounded by high hills. It was quite cold. Grant jumped over a gate and into a field which sloped steeply upwards. Some sheep were standing around. They looked a bit surprised at this strange invasion of their territory. We scrambled up the hill. There were rocks lying around and a couple of weather beaten trees. In the twilight, the place had a strange, otherworldly atmosphere. We sat on a boulder, watching the last rays of the sunset while Tom rolled a joint.

"It's lovely here." said Emma.

"Yeah, beautiful" I agreed.

"Not a bad spot for a little house" said Grant. "Just whack a few of these rocks together, tasty."

He got up and wandered off.

"It's even nicer in Ireland" said Tom.

"I can't wait." Emma smiled. "It's so wicked to get out of the city, I mean, you forget how different it is."

We sat and listened to the silence which was broken only by the occasional sheep. Then Grant came back.

"'ere Dougie boy, look what I've found."

"What is it?"

"Come and look."

We all followed him over the brow of the hill. There was a rock, bigger than all the others, jutting out from the slope. A tree was growing next to it, and the combination of the tree roots and the rock had formed a kind of cave. There was a lot of wool around, which made it seem as if the sheep used it sometimes as a shelter.

"There ya go." said Grant. "That's yer accommodation problem for tonight sorted, pretty cosy eh?"

"Erm..." Doug frowned.

Tom grinned.

"You're mad, you are."

"Why? It's a perfectly nice little spot, I'd sleep there, what's wrong with it?"

"Well" said Emma "It's a hole in the ground innit?"

"Yeah, you could say that, but it's a nice hole in the ground."

Grant turned to Doug.

"You could kip here, then hitch on to Colwyn Bay, or Bangor or wherever and do a bit of buskin'."

"It's a bit cold."

"You got a doss bag, ain't ya?"

"Yeah."

"There ya go then, no problem."

He really meant it. I tried to work out in my mind whether it was acceptable to suggest to a friend that they should sleep in a cave. I wouldn't have been that keen on the idea, but I believed Grant when he said he'd do it himself. He just had different ideas about some things. I guess if you're prepared to do it yourself there's nothing wrong with suggesting it to someone else. It did seem a bit weird though, and it didn't do anything to improve Doug's mood.

It was dark now, and we drove on towards Holyhead. I thought about Cheryl and felt the sharp stabbing pain in my stomach. I wondered when, and if, it would ever go away. Grant told us a story about how he'd lived in a cave in Israel for six months. He had to admit that the weather was a bit different in the Middle East. Tom told us about his time in the caves in Granada where he'd lived with a Norwegian hippie who always wiped his bum with a stone.

"He lived in this cave in Granada in the summer, and then he went home in the winter and lived in another cave somewhere in Norway."

"I bet that was cold."

"Yeah, minus twenty or something, he reckoned he liked extremes."

"Sounds like a right nutter."

"Yeah, he was, kind of, although in another way he was really together. He was some kind of electronics expert, and he worked for a few months of the year in Norway and made enough money to live for the rest of the year. Mind you, he didn't have that many expenses like."

"Yeah, I bet he saved a lot on bog paper for a start off."

We paused before the bridge to Anglesey.

"Last chance for the mainland" said Grant.

Doug didn't say anything, so we continued. It was very dark, and I wondered what Doug was thinking of. It seemed like he wanted to come to Ireland, but that just wasn't possible. He only had a fiver. Maybe he was hoping that one of us would offer to lend him the money. We were all quiet again as we approached Holyhead. We came to the ferry terminal. There was still half an hour before our boat sailed. The waiting area was brightly lit which was a shock after the dark road. Me and Grant went and found a toilet in the passenger's waiting room. There was a caff selling coffee in styrofoam cups. A couple of families were in there eating sweets, a drunk lying on a bench, and a nun drinking tea. Two space invader machines made a racket. I was glad to get out of the place.

"What are we gonna do?" I asked Grant as we walked back to the car.

"I dunno, but this is really gettin' on my nerves."

"We can't just leave him here, though."

"You wanna take him to Ireland?"

"Nah, but." I found myself lost for words. "It's fuckin' awful."

We got back into the car. The silence was deafening. I stared out of the window at the other cars and trucks. A couple of policemen walked past with a dog.

"Oh shit." said Grant. "D.S."

"Whatcha got then?" asked Tom.

"More than I wanna eat in one go."

"Me too."

"I haven't got anything" said Emma.

"You can do the talking then."

Grant turned round and looked at Doug.

"We're getting on the ferry in a few minutes, what are ya gonna do?"

"I dunno."

"What do ya mean, you don't know?"

"I want to go to Ireland."

"Be real! You've only got a fiver, you can't afford the ferry."

"I thought maybe somebody might lend me it."

"And what then?"

"Then I can do a bit of buskin'."

"Why don't ya do yer buskin' on this side?"

It was very quiet for a couple of minutes which seemed like hours. Then, suddenly, without saying anything, Doug opened the door and got out of the car.

"See ya" said Emma.

He didn't reply. We watched him walk across the tarmac to the waiting room, guitar in one hand, plastic bag in the other.

"Oh shit." said Emma. "Maybe we should bring him along."

"Don't even think of it." Grant shook his head.

"What's he expect?" asked Tom. "He says he wants to get out of London, so we take him along, and then he decides he wants to go to bleedin' Ireland. I mean, it's emotional blackmail innit?"

"Yeah, but look at him."

Emma pointed out of the window. Doug was just entering the brightly lit building.

"Who'd want to spend a night there?"

"Emma, get real, he's a big man, he's not our responsibility."

Then it was time to drive onto the ferry. We stared into the room as we drove by, and there was Doug, sitting on the bench next to the drunk, gazing at the floor. It was a heart wrenching sight.

\*\*\*

Brigid. Long curly brown hair. Smooth cheeks. Sparkling eyes. No Shit. She could drink us all under the table. She was strong but she wasn't hard, she was fun but she wasn't stupid, she was clever but she wasn't smart. Everyone loved her. Of course they did.

\*\*\*

Once we got onto the ferry we found the bar and slumped down with a strange feeling of tiredness, guilt, and relief. Grant went off to look for the Duty Free shop. A group of building workers started eyeing Emma up, but luckily she fell asleep, blissfully unaware of their attentions. I really envied her ability to sleep anywhere at any time, especially at that moment. My mind was still full of the Doug story, but I really wanted to talk about something else.

"You 'phoned your Dad yet?" I asked Tom.

"Nah, I thought I'd wait 'til we get there, cheaper innit?"

"So he don't know we're comin' then?"

"Yeah, well, he's done the same thing to me a few times."

"Yeah?"

"One time he just turned up at my door, in Camberwell. It was before you and Doug moved in. He's stood there at the door and 'e goes, like, "Son, I've got some news for yer." And I'm like, What?! Know what I mean?"

"Yeah, so what was it then?"

"He goes "I'm gettin' married." and I goes well, you know, like "congratulations" or whatever, "so when is it then?" and he goes "Next Saturday if you ain't doin' anything like." So I says "well, I'll have to look at me diary."

"So what was it like?"

"A bit weird to be honest, there were all these Actor types reminiscing about playing in some Shakespeare play in Hull, or Portsmouth or whatever. I met this beautiful girl there though and I was snoggin' her in the garden when she told me she was fourteen! I had to like get myself a bit under control sharpish."

"And what's his wife like?"

"Hard to say really, I mean she was a bit pissed, so was I, and I was kinda distracted by this babe, I dunno, she seemed alright, a bit sort of theatrical. I was pleased for him y'know 'cos he seemed happy."

"So you don't think they'll mind when we all turn up?"

"Nah, I mean, he can't say anything really. They sent me some photos of their house about a year ago sayin' I must come over sometime and all that. That was only the second letter I've ever got from him in my whole life."

"Yeah, but they ain't expectin' a whole load of South London ravers to turn up on their doorstep are they?"

"It's alright really, they've got a big house and anyway, like I said, he owes me a few favours."

Grant came back with a bottle of whiskey.

"It's a present for Brigid's mum."

"You creep!"

"Well, you can't just turn up empty-handed, can ya?"

"My Dad'd appreciate that kind of present."

"Yeah, well, the shop's still open."

Tom went to get another bottle.

"I'm just worried about one thing, though." said Grant.

"What's that then?"

"Well, she might get the wrong idea. I mean, giving someone a bottle of Jameson's is like saying they're an alkie, innit?"

"I don't think so."

"Look at that." He held the bottle up to the light. "Beautiful."

He put it back on the table and considered it, like someone puzzling over a chess move. Some Nuns sitting at the next table looked over disapprovingly. Grant grinned at them and they looked away.

"You know what?" He said at last "I think we better ask Brigid first, you know, just in case it ain't kosher, like."

"Yeah, sure."

I was getting tired. I tried to find a comfortable position in my seat.

"Maybe we should just have a little taster, what d'ya reckon?"

"You can't give her a half empty bottle, that would be an insult, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah, but Tom's gettin' another bottle and anyway, we don't even know if we're gonna give it 'er, do we?"

Grant had a twisted kind of logic that was sometimes impossible to argue against. This was one of those times. Anyway, I thought, it might help me sleep, which would be no bad thing. Tom came back to find us swigging away on Brigid's Mum's "Present."

"What's the story? I thought that was for Brigid's Mum."

"Yeah, well, we can always get another one" said Grant, licking his lips. "Have a taste, it's bloody marvellous."

And it was. I fell asleep pretty quickly, the whiskey and the movement of the boat overcoming the discomfort of my position. 'There is water at the bottom of the ocean'.

The first thing I saw when I woke up was the bottle standing on the table. It was less than a quarter full. Grant was lying with his head back, snoring. Emma was awake, reading the Rough Guide. Tom lay on the floor with his leather jacket over his head.

"Morning" said Emma cheerily.

"Yeah" I replied, as the world came into focus.

"We're nearly there."

"How d'ya know?"

"Cos of the time, and I heard someone say they'd seen land."

"What? Like "Land ahoy" type of thing?"

"Something like that. Are you responsible for that?"

She pointed at the bottle.

"Not me, honest, I only had a couple of swigs."

The leather jacket moved and Tom appeared from under the table.

"Alright cats?" he looked remarkably fresh.

"Yeah, and you?"

"I'm OK, I could do with brushin' me teeth though. Do ya reckon there's a cup of coffee to be had around here?"

"Ain't ya got a hangover?"

"No, why?" Then he saw the bottle. "Shit man, I only had one swig."

"That's what they all say" Emma smiled.

"Nah, I just crashed out about the same time as you." He said to me.

"Oh fuck, poor Grant!" I said.

"He's fuckin' mad" said Tom and went off to brush his teeth and find some coffee. A little later we docked. Grant woke up with a start. He stared around the room in wide-eyed panic and then tried to go to sleep again.

"Hey Grant, wake up, we're there."

"Where?"

"In Ireland."

"Is this Ireland?" He opened his eyes a crack. "I don't like it."

Tom came back.

"Come on, stop pissin' around."

"I'm not pissin' around, I've got stampeding horses in my head."

"Well anyway, we've got to go and get the car."

"OK" he got up suddenly and marched off to the toilet.

All the other passengers had gone to their cars or to the gangways. We sat alone in the bar, it reeked of stale tobacco and beer. In the end, Tom went and got Grant out of the toilet where he'd fallen asleep. He gave me his keys and I drove off the ferry. As we went through customs, a policeman waved us down.

"Oh fuck." said Tom.

He got something out of his pocket and put it in his mouth, I thought it was a sweet. I rolled down the window.

"Are ya alright there lads?" said the cop

"Yeah, we had a bit of difficulty startin'. It's an old motor like." I explained.

"It sounds fine now."

"Yeah, it's alright once it gets goin'"

"OK then, enjoy yer stay."

"Thanks."



And we drove off.

"Shit!" said Tom.

"What happened? I asked.

"I only ate my fuckin' dope, didn't I?"

"How much was it?"

"Dunno, about an eighth I reckon."

"Oh my God!"

"Maybe you could bring it back up" suggested Emma "try putting your fingers down your throat"

"Agh, fuck off!" Tom was not amused.

Grant was snoring on the back seat as we headed into Dublin. It was a beautiful sunny day and it was exciting to be in a different country. We were all suffering from lack of sleep and Tom kept going on about needing a coffee.

"Let's go to Bewley's." He said. "It's too early to phone Brigid, and it's a fuckin' great place anyway."

"Do you know where it is?" I asked.

"Yeah, sort of, er... it's in the centre somewhere. Just get into the centre of town and I'll remember."

"Sure."

After a lot of wandering around, we finally found the place. Tom hadn't been there since he was a kid, so he didn't really know where it was. Emma wanted to ask someone, but Tom wouldn't let her, he kept saying that it was around the next corner. Grant had sort of woken up. He stumbled along with a dazed expression, groaning occasionally. It really was a nice place though, full of wood and coffee smells.

"That's what I remember." Tom told us as we sat down, "the coffee smell."

"Well, this really is a good tip" said Emma.

There were some old men reading newspapers, shopgirls gossiping before work and two businessmen in suits who looked at us warily. Me and Emma had toast with our coffee. Tom had a cooked breakfast including black pudding. Grant went and drank his coffee at another table claiming that Tom was trying to make him "puke."

"Oh shit" said Tom after he'd finished eating "I'm feeling a bit weird."

"It's not that surprising really, is it?" Emma grinned.

"It's not my fault, is it? I didn't know what that Old Bill was gonna do."

"Nah it's bad luck innit?"

"The worst thing is that now Grant's the only one who's got any blow."

"Well, at least someone's got some."

"Maybe we can score here, we'll ask Brigid."

I had a picture of us stumbling up to Brigid's house, Grant hungover and Tom stoned out of his box and immediately asking where we could score. Just the kind of visitors you don't want. Just the kind of visitors we were.

Emma went and phoned Brigid. It was about nine o'clock and the shopgirls and businessmen had gone. The old men were still reading their newspapers. Grant rejoined our table.

"How's it goin'?"

"Could be better. Coffee was good though."

Emma came back.

"I spoke to her mum, it seems Drimnagh isn't that, like, central."

"What'd she sound like?"

"Dead friendly, like Brigid."

"Did she give ya directions then?"

"Kind of, she said we should head south and then ask someone."

"Oh great."

"It can't be that difficult. I mean, it ain't that big a city, is it?"

We left and spent a bit of time trying to find the car. Tom, who by now didn't have a clear idea of what planet he was on, had given up all responsibility for directions. I hadn't paid that much attention of the way, being more interested in the destination than the path. A Taoist would never had made the same mistake. Grant was useless, although he seemed to be coming round. He claimed to have been asleep right up until the moment he smelled Tom's breakfast. So it was left to Emma to decide where the car was. Unfortunately, her sense of direction was a little wayward at the best of times. We found it on a street we'd already walked down, more by luck than anything else.

"Thank God for that" I said, relieved.

"I knew it'd be along here somewhere." Said Emma brightly.

\*\*\*

We drove south for a while before pulling up next to a geezer who was walking his dog. I rolled the window down which took a bit of time because there was only one handle for all the windows, and it had to be located from the floor. The man stood and stared at us with a puzzled expression. Eventually I managed to get the window open.

"Excuse me, could you tell us the way to Drimnagh please?"

"Drimnagh?"

"Yeah, it's south somewhere."

He looked like he didn't know where it was but seemed determined to help.

"Ah now, you'll want to be headin' south. You're alright at the moment. Now, Drimnagh, hmmm, is it the Wicklow Road yer wantin'?"

"Could be." I shrugged and smiled.

"Yer best bet is to carry on 'til the big road and ask someone there."

I got the feeling that he meant that the people at the "Big Road" were somehow more cosmopolitan, more worldly-wise than on this one.

"Yer from London, eh?"

"Yeah."

"That's a big city now."

"Pretty big, yeah."

"Lovely girls, though." He winked at me.

It seemed like he wanted to get into a discussion.

"Lovely, lovely girls."

He gazed into the distance with a faraway look in his eyes, then his dog tugged at it's lead.

"Yeah, right, well, thanks anyway."

"Take it easy now." He waved. "And give my regards to the ladies."

"Yeah sure, see ya."

At the big road we asked an old woman, on the grounds that she'd probably lived in Dublin all her life and would be sure to know the way.

"Oh" she said "That's a long way."

"Yeah?"

"Oh yes, it's a terrible long way."

She sounded as if she thought we should maybe change our plans.

"How far is it?" I asked.

"Well, of course I don't know how fast yer car is now." She looked at the car. "I'd say it'd take a while."

"So what's the best way?"

"You take this road" she pointed "until yer hit the canal and then yer follow the canal until yer get to the little houses and it's past them. You'll have to ask someone there 'cos I'm not sure after that."

We missed the canal somehow and ended up in a housing estate. There was no choice but to ask someone else. This time it was a mother pushing a pram.

"Yerl have to go back the way you came, when yer get to the canal, follow it until the little houses, then there's a roundabout and yer more or less there."

"I wonder what "more or less" means" said Grant as we turned around. "And what are these "little houses" that everyone keeps going on about, must be some kind of local landmark or something."

We found the canal and drove along it looking for the little houses.

"That might be them" Emma pointed.

"They're not really that little, are they?"

"What about those?"

"Nah, there's only two, it sounded more like something you'd notice."

We found out that we were going the wrong way along the canal when we next stopped to ask directions. We did another U-turn and went back the way we came. By this stage the occupants of the car were getting a little frenzied through a combination of exhaustion, frustration, dope and hangover. We stopped making sense. All attention was focused on the Holy Grail of "the little houses". Then, eventually, we saw them. Well, Emma was sure, I thought she was probably right, Tom wasn't convinced and Grant was adamant that those couldn't possibly be the ones. The argument was raging when Tom suddenly said,

"That's it."

"What?"

"Brigid's road."

"Where?"

"We just passed it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, of course I'm sure, turn round."

We did, and Tom, strangely enough, was right. We pulled up outside Brigid's house in a state of near delirium.

"Sometimes, when yer stoned, you see things better." explained Tom.

"Bollocks!"

"Yeah man, you're more, like, focused."

I looked at Tom. Focused wasn't the word that sprung to mind. The house was a semi-detached council house surrounded by many more of the same design. Brigid opened the door before we'd even got through the garden gate.

"How are ya? We've been wonderin' if yer'd had some problem."

"Oh no" said Tom. "No problem."

"Bullshit" said Grant.

"Well, erm, it wasn't that easy to find" explained Emma.

Then Brigid's mum appeared. She was wearing a track suit and looked remarkably youthful. She was definitely the healthiest person in our group. She shook our hands and Grant started being charming, asking if she was Brigid's sister even though she'd just been introduced. Some small boys were standing in the road staring at us.

"Yer must be shattered" said Brigid's mum. "Come on, and I'll get the kettle on."

We trooped into the house. I heard the boys giggling. I can't say I blamed them, I would've done the same in their position. Tom sat in an armchair with a dazed expression on his face. Grant went into the kitchen to give Brigid's mum a hand, and the rest of us sat in the sitting room. We tried to tell Brigid the Doug story, but it didn't really get across. She didn't know him that well, and I guess it just sounded bizarre.

We washed and rested, and Brigid's mum made a big fuss over us. It was nice. Brigid had been on the dole since she got back to Ireland, and I think she was starting to get a bit bored.

"It's alright around here but, y'know, yer see the same faces everywhere yer go. I mean, I was brought up here, played out on that road just like those boys ya saw just now. I know everything about all of them. It's a bit different to London."

We had to agree, the idea of having spent your entire life in one house was just as alien to me as if she'd said she'd been brought up in Siberia. I just couldn't imagine it. I wondered what it felt like. It must be nice to have a place where you really feel at home, I thought. When I said this to Brigid, she dismissed the idea.

"To be honest, it's just dead borin', I mean, I can tell you loads of stories about Mrs. Wotsit down the road and that but they ain't that interestin', ya know."

Her mum came in and heard the last part.

"She's not been the same since she went to London, put ideas into her head it did."

"Oh please" said Brigid, and she blushed a little.

Grant saved the day.

"Yer mum's been telling me all about her marathons." he said.

"Sorry?"

"She runs all these marathons, international, like."

"Well, not really." It was her turn to blush. "Me last one was in Sheffield."

"Well, that's abroad, innit?"

"I suppose so, but it's just a hobby, you know."

I looked at Tom who was sleeping on the sofa and wondered what she thought of us, a bunch of people in their twenties who had trouble standing, let alone running. The idea of running a marathon made me feel tired in itself.

\*\*\*

We had a good time in Dublin. Brigid and her mum looked after us night and day. Cooked us breakfast, made us tea. We went to Howth on the DART which wasn't quite as impressive as we'd been lead to believe. Howth was nice though, windblown seaside. It had a sort of harbour wall thing which we walked along, salty wind in our teeth. There was a pub, of course, and we drank Guinness and glowed by the fire. A couple of blokes started talking to us. Telling us stories about smuggling and shipwrecks. As the evening wore on and we got more drunk, one of them produced a guitar and they began to sing beautiful songs. Maybe we were just pissed, but the mood of melancholy and yearning seemed to touch us all, even Grant. They sang 'She moved through the fair' and I nearly wept. After 'The band played Waltzing Matilda' Brigid said we had to go. She had sobbed gently through the whole song. Tom put his arm around her and we stared into the black depths of our pints. It was a nice kind of sadness though, it felt somehow healthy.

I still thought about her of course. I thought about her all the time but it seemed far away. It seemed further away every day. I couldn't imagine her in Dublin doing the things we were doing. It was another world. What was she doing now? Would she be missing me? Had she found someone else? I didn't know, I couldn't tell.

We drove down to Wicklow one afternoon when it was almost sunny, and lay in a field looking up at the sky, wrapped in our coats and trying to ignore the damp. I had a long chat with Brigid about work. Somehow I couldn't bring myself to tell her all about recent events.

"So how's Cheryl?" She asked.

"Oh you know, same as ever."

"Yeah well, I didn't think she'd change, not that one. I miss her though, there's no one quite like her"

"You can say that again!"

I looked her in the face, checking for signs, there weren't any.

"Doncha miss London?" I asked

"Yeah, sometimes. I can't say I miss Rowell Close though"

"Everyone misses you"

"Really?"

"Yeah, of course"

"That's nice of you to say, I didn't mean that I don't miss the people. It's the job, you know, all that puke and shit. I don't miss that one bit"

Yeah, but I'm still doing it I thought.

On the way back we saw loads of burnt out wrecks of cars at the side of the road.

"Must be some bad drivers in this country" observed Grant.

"It's joyriders" said Brigid. "Sometimes they're only, like, twelve or thirteen. A couple were killed up here only last week."

No one made any jokes as we drove past the blackened frame of a car that had rammed into a tree.

Brigid took us to the oldest pub in Dublin which seemed to be under a car park.

We saw men with beards and Arran sweaters. Emma wanted to take a photo and didn't seem to understand when we said it was a bad idea. Tom spent a lot of time flirting with Brigid, and Grant charmed her mother. I don't know which was the more nauseating. Emma didn't seem to mind too much, she borrowed Brigid's walkman and went around singing "Raspberry Beret" loudly and with little feeling for melody. One day Grant took his unicycle out into the road where he was immediately surrounded by the small boys who all wanted a go. There was nearly a riot. Their legs were too short so they contented themselves with chasing him up and down the street. They loved it when he fell off, but then again, so did we. We all drank, and loved, Guinness. It really was a completely different experience, even Grant admitted that.

One night we went to a party which was a little strange. It was in a terraced house and consisted of about fifteen people who all seemed to know each other intimately, and us. We sat on the edge of a sofa waiting for the party to start but it never did. Even Brigid didn't know anyone, apart from her sister who'd told us about it. They played some nasty reggae with lyrics about the abominations of the "botty men" which didn't lessen the tension. Tom turned to Grant,

"Skin up man."

"Skin up yerself."

"I can't, can I?"

"You tellin' me I'm the only one here with any blow?"

"Well, maybe we could all give yer a bit of dosh and make it, like, communal."

"Nah man, that's my percy stash."

"Percy who?"

"It's like, mine percyonally, know what I mean?"

"It's cool-Percy Stash.!"

We all giggled.

"Sounds like a comic character, Percy Stash, like Fat Freddy."

"What's he look like?"

"He's definitely got a moustache."

"Kinda Mexican."

"Nah man, Percy. He's gotta be some upper class twit."

"You gonna skin up or what?"

Grant made a spliff and I noticed that most of the people at the party were hovering around, like they suddenly found these strangers much more interesting than before. A woman even started talking to Emma. We smoked the joint. Emma passed it to the woman and it was gone. Tom was pissed off.

"Call this a party?"

"Yeah well, it's what yer used to, innit?"

"Man, they need a few kickin' DJs over here."

"And you're the man for the job."

"Could be."

Emma and the woman were talking about abortion. Tom rolled his eyes. Luckily Brigid decided it was time to go. As we were leaving a guy came up to me and whispered something in my ear. I wasn't sure what language it was.

"Sorry?"

"Yeah, ya didn't understand that, did ya? Cunt!"

He walked off. I was shocked and I told the others when we got outside.

"Shall I go and sort him out for ya?" Grant joked.

"Don't worry about him" said Brigid.

"Do yer know him then?"

"No, but I heard him in the kitchen, mouthing off about the English and all that. There's always one."

I felt like I'd been in some way assaulted. I hadn't done anything to this bloke, but he had spoken to me with such hate in his voice, hate I couldn't feel for a total stranger.

And you may ask yourself, how did I get here?

"What was the story about the dope?" asked Tom.

"There's a bit of a drought at the moment" explained Brigid. "Everyone say's it's 'cos of the I.R.A., y'know kneecapping dealers and all that."

"I thought that was just smack dealers."

"I don't know."

"Probably just an excuse for a price rise."

"Good job that I've got Percy along then innit?" said Grant with a grin.

Brigid's Mum was dead nice to me the next day. She'd heard about the incident of the night before and was determined to prove that it was not a fair reflection of the Irish. Not that I thought it was.

"It's terrible, I'm really sorry, there's very few like that, mind. Headbangers I call them."

It seemed a strange word for her to use. I appreciated the thought though. I wanted to ask her about her husband, but that subject seemed to be off-limits. I had caught a glimpse of his back once as he disappeared out the door. Neither Brigid or her mum spoke to or about him. He was a kind of non-presence. When we asked Brigid about him, she simply said she hated him. He came in from work, ate his dinner, and went to the pub. It was weird. Both women were so open and friendly, I couldn't imagine how they lived like that. There was obviously a story behind it all, but it remained a mystery.

Brigid decided to come with us to Tom's Dad's house. Tom still hadn't phoned, he seemed to be putting it off for some reason. We set off on a grey drizzly morning. Brigid's Mum made us all sandwiches and said good-bye as if we were going to China rather than Sligo.



\*\*\*

ENJOY THIS TRIP  
ENJOY THIS TRIP  
AND IT IS A TRIP  
COUNTDOWN IS PROGRESSING  
UNO, DOS, UNO DOS TRES QUATRO...

We were in the car heading out of Dublin listening to S'Express at maximum volume, singing along and acting daft.

I'VE GOT THE HOTS FOR YOU...!

Emma and Brigid were bouncing on the back seat and Tom was dancing in the front. It sounds impossible, but he was coming as close as you can. It was great. We were quickly out of Dublin and onto the road West. No one minded the weather, which was grim. We all had this feeling that we were off on an adventure. Our first stop was to be Mullingar, where Tom wanted to visit his Gran.

"Do you think we'll see any leprechauns?" Asked Grant

"Fuck off!" Brigid laughed.

"No really, where do they live? Not in Dublin, I guess."

"They've all moved to Australia. They got jobs there as garden gnomes."

"My gran believes in all that." said Tom seriously.

"What about them goin' to Australia?"

"Nah, she calls them "the little people," reckons they're all over the place."

"Must be some hereditary problems in your family."

"I like it when people believe in things like that" said Emma earnestly.

"It pisses me right off" said Brigid. "Everyone thinks we're a bunch of drunken, superstitious numbskulls who believe everything we're told. It's bullshit."

"People have a pretty good impression of the Irish, I think."

"Anyway" Grant lit a cigarette "You do get loads of people running off to some church because they saw a statue crying or whatever."

"Yeah, I know, but we aren't all like that."

This was obviously a subject close to Brigid's heart.

"Irish people are great." Said Grant. "Dead friendly, and they know how to have a good time."

"That's another stereotype" said Brigid, laughing. "We aren't all fookin' friendly, alright."

"That's true" I said, although Brigid was one of the friendliest people I'd ever

met.

"It just annoys me, yer know, when people in London say "Ah, yees Irish must be this way and that way. We're all different just like yees are all different."

When we got to Mullingar, Tom tried to phone his Gran. It turned out she was in some old people's home on the outskirts of the town. We dropped him off there, a dark brooding place attached to a hospital, and went into town.

It wasn't exactly the postcard image of Ireland we'd all been expecting. There was a Cathedral with a corrugated iron roof. I'd never seen one like that before. It was fitting somehow.

"What a kip!" said Brigid.

We didn't know what "a kip" was, but we could tell it wasn't that good.

"Pity the poor sods who have to live here." said Grant as we walked up the High Street looking for a Cafe.

"Half of them are probably some distant relations of Tom's."

"That explains why they all look so unhappy."

We drank coffee in a hotel and looked at the weather forecast in the newspaper. It was not optimistic. When we picked Tom up from the home he looked drained.

"Shit man, that was depressing."

"Yeah, it weren't a bundle of laughs where we were either."

"It's incredible though, I just walked in and she recognized me straight away. I haven't seen her for about seven or eight years. It's horrible though, like a ward with about fifteen old people all lying in bed. She's the only one who can walk about. There were all these sort of nun nurses telling her not to get excited."

"Poor thing." Said Brigid.

I wondered if she meant Tom or his Gran.

"She's well on the ball though, she told me everything about the family. She knows what they've all been up to. She's not that keen on Kitty though."

"Who, or what, is Kitty?"

"Me old man's wife."

"Yer step-mother like?"

"I haven't really thought about it yet but yeah, I suppose that's what she is."

"ave you phoned yet?"

"Nah, better do it next time we get a chance."

There were some cars ahead travelling very slowly. Grant pulled up behind them and started weaving about looking for a chance to overtake.

"What're they up to?"

"Maybe it's a tractor or something."

"Maybe someone's pissed."

There were a lot of curves in the road and Grant couldn't get past.

"Shit man, they're only doin' about ten miles an hour."

"We'll never get there at this rate, give 'em a hoot."

Tom reached across and sounded the horn. A head turned in the car in front and a woman gave us a dirty look. When the opportunity came, Grant pulled out and screeched past. When we got to the front of the queue, we found out what was going on. The last car we passed was a big, old, black hearse.

"Oh fuck!" Said Grant. "That was well out of order."

"That's bad man." Tom shook his head.

"We better start getting used to not being in London."

"Yeah, it's a different world out here."

"They have funerals in London, don't they?" said Brigid.

We decided to stop in Carrick on Shannon so Tom could make his phone call. We realised we'd missed the town as we drove across the bridge.

"Is that it?" asked Grant. "It looked bigger on the map."

"I remember it bigger." said Tom.

"Maybe it shrunk."

We turned round at the railway station which was a little way out of town.

"I remember this place" said Tom. "I arrived here once when my Dad was living near here. I had to walk into town with all my stuff and meet my Dad in a bar 'cos he didn't want to wait out here for me."

"What, he wouldn't wait ten minutes at the station for ya?"

"I dunno, he just wanted to like, meet in a bar."

"How old were you then?"

"About thirteen, I'm not sure."

I wondered about Tom's Dad. He sounded a bit strange to me. We sat in a bar while Tom did the phoning. Grant drank whiskey. We were getting hungry. Brigid's mum's picnic was a distant memory. Brigid asked the barman if there was anything to eat. He said we could have soup or toasted sandwiches so we had both. Tom came back looking hassled.

"Good job you got some food."

"What d'ya mean?"

"Yeah, well it don't look like they've got any food in, me dad said something about having to go to the supermarket tomorrow."

"And? Is it cool or what?"

"Yeah, sort of, it'll be alright when we get there."

"What'd he say then?"

"Well, I think he was a bit surprised, y'know about it bein' so many people like."

"Oh shit!"

"It's alright" Tom grinned. I've still got that bottle of Jameson's, remember."

"What, you think that'll do the trick?"

"Sure. It ain't him. I reckon it's this Kitty." He shrugged. "I dunno."

The barman came over to ask if Tom wanted anything to eat.

"It's a bit quiet innit?" Said Grant in a friendly way.

"Yeah, and it won't get much livelier."

"Not many visitors then?"

"Not at this time of year. We get a few in the summer alright, Yanks, Germans. They do these river cruises, y'know."

He was a nice guy. Young, with glasses and spots.

"So what do the youngsters get up to around here then?"

"There aren't any."

"What? None?"

"My last year at school, there were twenty in my class, there's two of us left now."

"What happened?"

"They're all gone. Australia, the States, London, there's nothin' for 'em here. I'm only here 'cos my Dad owns this place, otherwise I'd be on the next boat too"

"I'll have a soup and a toasted sandwich." Tom said. "Cheese please."

"No problem." He walked away.

"My God!"

"It's incredible."

"That's what it's like in this country" said Brigid. "It'll be completely empty one day, except for a few holiday homes."

"Yeah," said Grant "and the IRA. Just terrorists and tourists."

We finished our meal not knowing whether to be more concerned about the future of Ireland or the future of our holiday.

It was getting dark as we drove on towards Sligo but you could see the shapes of hills around, and it was exciting to be leaving the flat midlands. We managed to get lost in Sligo. An amazing achievement in a town with only three streets.

"Shall we ask someone the way?"

"They'll probably say it's past the little houses."

Then we climbed for a long time. We were all a little nervous about what awaited us. We drove around the side of a hill, and we could just make out a lake below us on our left-hand side.

"It must be pretty spectacular around here when you can see." said Emma.

No one else spoke as we went downhill, crossed a river, and pulled up outside a pair of iron gates.

"This must be it." said Tom.

"Are you sure?"

"Well, it fits the description, and there aren't that many other possibilities around here."

Tom's dad opened the door. He was in his fifties, tall and thin like Tom but with a lot less hair. You could see similarities in his face especially as he smiled, but his eyes were duller and his features sharper. The first impression though was his voice. It was deep and rich, which contrasted with his son's nasal cockney whine.

"Ah son" he gripped Tom's shoulder's dramatically. "How are you?"

"Yeah, not bad" said Tom, embarrassed.

"Welcome." Tom's Dad addressed the rest of us. "I'm Connor, but most people just call me Con."

"Grant."

They shook hands, then Brigid, Emma and me.

"Well" said Con, "Come in, I'm afraid we're a little chaotic. We weren't expecting visitors and Kitty's been a bit under the weather recently. You've eaten then?"

Tom assured him that we didn't need food as we trooped in. The house was big, but the rooms were quite small. The sitting room where we sat was full of things. Books, ornaments, paintings, and too much furniture. It all looked antique and possibly valuable. An open fire blazed in the hearth. There was no sign of Kitty.

"Please, sit yourselves down, you must be exhausted after your journey." The voice was round and smooth, the Irishness there, but understated. Tom talked about his visit to the nursing home, and Con looked uncomfortable.

"She's very difficult these days." He said.

"But really on the ball." Said Tom.

"Ah, she's a little confused, you know. She's been very ill."

"When did you last see her?"

"Well, it hasn't been easy, what with work and Kitty being unwell and everything."

You could tell it was a touchy subject somehow, and I wished Tom would get on to something else. I looked at the others. Grant was sitting on the edge of his chair with his mouth open. Emma and Brigid sat on a sofa trying to look relaxed and not succeeding.

"Where's Kitty?"

"The poor dear, she's cleaning up in the kitchen, she got into a panic when she heard you were coming."

"She don't have to worry about us."

That was true. A bunch of South London squatters weren't likely to be upset by a bit of mess, we'd seen it all in our time. Grant tried to ease the tension.

"We've got a present for yer both."

"Yeah" said Tom rummaging in his bag. He pulled out the bottle "Here."

Immediately the atmosphere changed.

"Ah, that's lovely." Con smiled warmly for the first time. "What a nice thought, thank you. Wait a minute, I'll just get Kitty."

He left the room, and we exchanged grins and glances. Con re-entered with his wife. She was a large woman with big black eyes and black hair. I wondered if it was natural.

"Ah, Tommy"

She gripped his hand and gazed at him as if he were the Prodigal Son. No one called him Tommy apart from Emma sometimes when she was taking the piss. We were all introduced again. She was wearing an apron over her long black dress which looked more like a costume than everyday clothing.

"Well" said Con "I think we ought to celebrate the arrival of our guests."

"Oh yes" said she "Of course."

She went back into the kitchen to get some glasses.

"Nice place you got here" said Grant as we sipped our whiskies.

"Ah, but you should have seen it when we first arrived" Con had lit a cigar. "Shocking."

"Well, it's not bad now."

"It used to be a post office, that's why it's such a strange shape. We've got two of everything, two kitchens, two sitting rooms, two bathrooms. In the middle is a big room that used to be the actual post office part. We haven't got round to decorating it yet."

"And what's it like around here?" I asked. "It was dark after Sligo."

"Oh" said Kitty mistily "It's the land of heart's desire."

"It's a pleasant enough spot alright." said Con. "You've got Ben Bulbin on the one side of the valley and Glencar Lake of course. Do you know Ben Bulbin?"

I had to admit I didn't.

"It's the most famous mountain in Ireland." said Tom.

"Well, not quite" said Brigid. She and Con smiled at each other.

"And which part of Dublin are you from?" He asked pleasantly.

"Drimnagh."

"Hmmm, let me see now, is that on the way to the airport?"

"Oh no, it's on the other side."

"On the south side?"

"Well, it's South."

"That must be nice, can you see the mountains?" Asked Kitty.

"On a clear day" Brigid smiled, "If you stood on the roof like."

"I was brought up in Scotland" said Kitty. "I have to live near mountains."

Strange, she sounded like she'd spent her life in the home counties.

"Yeah" said Brigid nonchalantly. "It's nice."

We drank the whiskey while Con and Kitty told us about their theatrical successes.

"We were down in Cork last summer with Mike Ryan."

"Oh yes, Mike! What a lovely man."

"We did "The Playboy," marvellous production."

"Such a lovely cast."

"Brendan was down there, you remember Brendan Quinn, son?"

"Er, not really." Tom looked a bit embarrassed.

I wondered if he was embarrassed about not knowing Brendan Quinn or the nauseating tone of the conversation. Grant tried to change the subject, but when he asked about the furniture, whether it was really antique, where they'd got it and so on, it sounded like he was trying to case the joint.

Kitty showed us our rooms. The "girls" were sharing a big double bed at the back of the house. You could hear the stream outside which added to the Old World feel. Our room was full of books and dust.

Kitty and the "girls" went to bed quite early and the men sat up finishing the whiskey and chewing the fat. Connor went into one about Irish politics. He told us that all the country's problems were due to a few "lunatics" who messed things up for the rest. Then he told us that the average Irishman was a country yokel who wouldn't know what to do with a vote if he got one, all Ireland's troubles were caused by the bureaucrats, the church and Ian Paisley, and that they had been better off under the English. He told us one moment that the country needed modernising and the next that it was in danger of losing all its traditions. Tom tried to make a few points about the famine and the Easter Rising which were treated with disdain. Grant just agreed with everything, which was no mean feat, and I kept quiet.

"Your average Irishman is a romantic" said Connor, contradicting something else he'd just said about how they had "no soul."

"He runs off to Australia looking for work and spends every evening sitting in some pub singing "Carrickfergus" or worse still "The Soldier's Song."

"The Soldier's what?" Tom was pissed.

"The Soldier's Song." Connor looked a bit annoyed.

"What's that then?" his son slurred.

"It's the national anthem innit?" asked Grant innocently.

"That's right."

You could hear the disappointment in the father's voice. Tom went red. He was quite red already what with the whiskey and everything. He went redder. There was an awkward pause before Connor continued his tirade. Tom didn't say much for the rest of the evening, and it was left to Grant to save the situation by promising to have a look at Con's Rover which had mysteriously conked out and was standing in the drive outside. I really wanted to give Tom a hug or something



as we went to bed, he looked so down. I didn't, though. I mean, I couldn't somehow.

\*\*\*

It wasn't raining the next day, which was a bit of a surprise. We went for a walk by the lake after breakfast. Connor came along and kept us amused with stories about some giant geezer, called Finn McCool. Emma told Tom he should use that as a DJ name. He didn't even smile. Grant found a walking stick in a hedge. It was beautiful, an old branch that had been carved and polished. It was light and fitted the hand perfectly.

"Be careful now" said Con. "There's probably some poor old feller hopping around on one leg round the next corner. "By Jaysus, where's me owl sick, I just stopped to wather these bushes here, they were lookin' thirsty altogether.""

We all laughed, even Tom.

It was a spectacular place. Big hills on either side changing colour as the clouds passed over the sun, green grey black brown. The lake was smooth, surrounded by reeds which rustled in the breeze. Grant wanted to go fishing, but the rest of us wanted to climb the mountains. We did neither. We ended up in a pub in Sligo.

Kitty had said she wanted to go shopping when we got back, so Grant spent a couple of hours fixing the Rover, seems it wasn't so serious after all, and we drove in tandem into town. Tom went with them so we had a chance to gossip.

"Oh my God! All this theatre stuff's gonna do my head in" said Brigid.

"Poor Tom!" said Emma. I know he's a bastard and I hate him and all that, but really!"

I told them about the Soldier's Song.

"Flippin' eejit"

I didn't know if Brigid was referring to Tom or his Dad.

"That Kitty's a bit weird as well, bloody Lady Macbeth or whatever character it is she's playin'."

"It's a strange scene alright." said Grant. "I reckon he must've married her for her money."

"What money?"

"What do you think? That Rover cost a few grand, and I know houses are cheap in this country, but that's a bloody mansion."

"She used to live in Hendon" remarked Emma.

"How do you know that?"

"She told me at breakfast, they sold her house in Hendon after they got married, and bought this one for about a quarter of the price. She seemed sort of proud about it."

"There aren't any mountains in Hendon, are there?"

"What a load of old rubbish "I have to live near mountains"" Brigid snorted.

"Did you see the other kitchen?" asked Emma

"No, why?"

"It's incredible. There's all these piles of dirty plates, bin bags lying around, loads of old tins and rotting vegetables. It's disgusting."

"Fuckin' weird."

After a trawl round the supermarket we ended up in a pub. It was Con's idea. It was a fantastic place full of little wooden compartments or "cubby holes" as Emma called them, and a big open fire.

We drank Guinness around the fire while Con talked to some guys at the bar. Eventually he brought one of them over.

"This is Frank Daly, he used to live in London. He's a poet."

He didn't really look like a poet, but what do poets look like? He looked like all the other guys in the bar. A bit like a bedraggled gamekeeper. I tried to imagine him in London but I couldn't.

"So which part of London are yer from?" he asked us in a friendly way.

"Sahf" said Tom in the correct accent.

"I lived in Stockwell there for a while and on the Brixton Road. Do you know the White Horse?"

Of course we did. It was where they had cabaret on Wednesday. I'd been there recently with Emma. We had seen a feminist comedian, a Marxist brass band, and a gay juggler. I was just about to tell him about it when he asked

"So you know the "Black Hands" then?"

White horse, black hands?

"Who are they then, a band?"

"A band?" He looked at us pityingly. "No, they're a bunch of knife merchants."

"What?" said Emma "They sell knives?"

"They don't sell them, they give them to you." The poet laughed at his own joke. "Mad, bad, and dangerous to know."

"There's three of them then?" said Grant and we all giggled, although I found this poet dude a bit disturbing. He had a kind of glint in his eye, especially when he said the word knife. Luckily Con started asking him about his poetry.

"So when's the book coming out, Frank?"

"Well, I can't say, you see. I'm on me last poem, the one that sort of summarises all the others in the collection, as well as having a life of its own. It's a long piece based on seaweed."

"Sorry?" said Grant.

"Seaweed." Said the poet.

"Oh right."

"It's just a case of tying up the loose ends."

I had a picture in my mind of Frank trying to tie pieces of seaweed together but I had a feeling that wasn't what he meant.

The poet went off back to the bar and Con charmed us with stories about his life in London. He managed not to mention Tom's mum and made it sound as if he'd been with Kitty all along. They'd worked in the theatre together in the sixties and seemed to have shared a stage with every minor celebrity in the British Isles.

Strangely enough, they were all "lovely" and "sweet." I began to wonder if there was anyone in the acting profession who could be described as even slightly unpleasant. It seemed not.

Grant was the hero of the hour for fixing the car. Kitty had taken a shine to Emma, and Brigid was admired for her drinking capacity. Me and Tom sat on the edge of the group and I tried to think of something to say to him. Con got on the subject of W.B. Yeats. Turned out he was buried up the road somewhere under Ben Bulbin. Tom knew all about it. He even knew what was written on his gravestone. Something about horsemen, I think. That got him a few cultural knowledge points and I could tell his dad was pleased.

"Do you know "The Stolen Child?" asked Connor.

"Erm," Tom pretended he did but he'd just forgotten it at that moment.

"Oh yeah" Brigid piped up. "the Waterboys."

"Sorry?" It was Con's turn to be puzzled.

"There's this Waterboys song where this old geezer recites the poem, it's one of me favourites."

"Well, the waterfall is just up behind our house, and sometimes, when the wind comes from a certain direction the water goes back up the mountain."

"That's strange." Said Emma. "Is that what the poem's about?"

"It's about fairies or something" replied Brigid.

"It's about a child who's called away to the land over the mountain, a land free from all the cares and worries of this world" explained Con.

"I'd like to see this waterfall with the water going up instead of down" said Grant. "Sounds wicked."

Somehow we managed to get home. We were all pissed, but Tom's dad knew the way like the back of his hand and we just followed. We listened to Brigid's Waterboys tape in the car and we had to admit it was pretty good. It was certainly the right thing for the place. She showed Emma the cover.

"That Mike Scott's a ride and no mistake." Said Brigid.

"A ride?" Grant was scandalised.

"Yeah, he's gorgeous."

"Is that the one in the funny hat?" asked Emma

"Yeah, my dream man."

"He is pretty tasty."

"Tasty? A ride? What if we were to talk about some woman like that? You lot would go mad."

"Why? If that's what yer think."

"Anyway we don't do it all the time like you lot."

"Whaddya mean all the time? I haven't said anything like that for ages, too worried I'd get me balls cut off by some rampant feminist."

"Well, yer shouldn't be such a wimp."

Yeah, that was it, either a wimp or a macho, which way to go? I thought about it as they rambled on. I had definitely been too much of a wimp with Cheryl. The problem was, it just wasn't in my nature to be a macho. I wondered if I'd ever work out what it was that women want us to be. Then it occurred to me that they might not know themselves. Brigid knew alright, she wanted Mike Scott. Would Tom do instead?

I stared out of the window into the black night. There weren't that many houses, just the dark shapes of the hills barely visible on either side. The Waterboys sang about the stolen child. It was great.

\*\*\*

The next day it drizzled. It drizzled all day. Wet, soggy, damp drizzle. We went to a sculpture park and I took some dark drizzle photos of the others climbing on wooden horses and pretending to eat giant art mushrooms. 'Water dissolving, water removing'. Tom was trying to be on his own with Brigid. Emma kept getting in the way and I tried to get Emma alone, partly to help Tom and partly because I wanted to talk. Grant ran off into the woods. I think we were supposed to go and look for him but nobody could be bothered. While Tom was explaining something very interesting about a tree to Brigid, I said to Emma,

"I wonder what happened to Doug?"

I hadn't actually thought about it that much since we'd left Dublin, what with all the other events of the past few days, but it was a good opener.

"I hope he's alright." She bit her lip.

"Yeah, probably, who knows?"

"What a scene!"

"Oh God, when we left him there." I shuddered at the memory.

"I know, it was terrible really, I mean he is a mate and all that."

"Yeah, but what were we supposed to do?"

"I dunno, he's just one crazy mixed-up guy."

"Do you think he's really ill?" I asked.

"What? You mean, like, mad?"

"I dunno. Mad's an extreme word"

"Madness is like death"

"What?"

"It's like a part of you is dead. A part of your personality just dies"

"Maybe it's not dead, maybe it's changing"

"Well, he could do with a change, whatever it is"

"He's in a rut"

"Depressed"

"Yeah, but you know something? He ain't got a monopoly on it."

Sometimes when we talked about Doug it made me angry.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, 'cos Doug's like, depressed, it's as though the rest of us aren't allowed to be."

"It makes us all feel like we're normal or something."

"Which ain't exactly the case, is it?"

"What's that anyway? normal?"

"Yeah, well, I'm not much of a one for normalisation and all that but I wouldn't

exactly describe myself as happy either."

"Because of Cheryl?"

"Among other things."

"I mean, I gotta say, I don't think she was really the one for you."

"Yeah, maybe."

"I can understand the attraction, you know, but she's too much, she's just, well, too nutty."

"You're not wrong."

"Someone else'll come along."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, there's loads of brilliant women in the world, you know."

She smiled at me. I smiled back.

"Yeah, I know."

Tom and Brigid were a little way ahead by now, they seemed to be discussing something animatedly. I wondered what Emma was thinking.

"You don't mind about those two?" I asked.

"Not really, well, I can't, can I?"

Grant reappeared and started slagging us off for being boring. Brigid said she was fed up with being rained on, so we drove off to find a pub. Was it my imagination, or was Emma sitting extra close to me in the back of the car?

In the pub, Tom went into one about getting old.

"I'm twenty eight right?"

"Yeah, just about on yer last legs" said Emma.

"Nah, what I mean is, I reckon I'm gonna keep on rockin' 'til I'm about thirty five"

"Why thirty five?"

"Well, you can't go on much more than that, can ya?"

"Why not?"

"I don't wanna be one of those sad old geezers you see in the corner of raves, know what I mean?"

"You already are."

"Yeah yeah. Footballers and that right, they all retire about thirty five."

"Alright, so you're gonna retire at thirty five, so what? That's ages yet."

"Not really, I reckon that gives me about three hundred saturday nights left"

"Do what?" Grant frowned.

"Fifty a year right, that's Three hundred and fifty, then you're gonna be ill, or on holiday sometimes. Some are just crap, you know like last New year, you can't count them. So that's, yeah, roughly three hundred"

"Seems like loads" said Emma.

"Not to me"

"Better make the most of what little time you've got left then" I said with a grin.

"I intend to"

"What you gonna do about it then?" asked Grant.

"I ain't gonna go to any more crap parties for a start"

"Yeah Tom, dream on."

"I dunno, I just feel like somethings gotta change, I wanna stop wasting so much time"

I wondered what Brigid had been saying to him.

Kitty cooked us a meal that evening. It felt like a sign of acceptance. It took an incredibly long time and Con had to go into the kitchen every now and then to make sure everything was alright.

"Poor thing." He explained. "She wants to make it perfect for you all. She never takes that much trouble over me."

Emma asked him what he'd been doing while we were out.

"Oh, I had one or two things to do in the garden. I've got to clear that patch on the left hand side. Terrible weather though. Do you like gardening?"

"Erm, not really, I always think it's more something for old people."

There was a very awkward silence.

"I like it" said Grant "I've got a little garden behind my house. I'm thinkin' of whackin' a few veggies in there. I'm gonna have a pond too"

"What, that old bathtub?" said Tom, trying to keep the conversation going.

Grant then gave us a long description of how he was going to turn his back yard into Kew Gardens. By the time he'd finished Con seemed to have forgotten Emma's comment.

We watched some rubbish on telly. Con kept calling to Kitty in the kitchen.

"It's Bill, lovely old Bill Lawrence, he's still playing barmen" or "Kitty dear, what was the name of that sweet girl you shared a room with in Chester? She's in some terrible sit-com."

Sometimes he gave a running commentary on the action.

"Now you see the old feller there, the one on the bicycle, they had to pay him danger money for that. His agent said "Old Harry wants an extra fiver for sitting on that thing, he's got Hamlet coming up at the National and we don't want any mishaps at this stage in his career.""

He could be quite amusing sometimes.

\*\*\*



We were pretty active in Ireland. When we weren't in the pub that is. There were hills to be climbed, valleys to be explored, sights to be seen. Con took charge of our itinerary. He told us which mountains were the best to climb although he himself never seemed to get out of his car. He sent us to one mountain, well, hill actually, which was supposed to have a good view over the bay. 'Spectacular' he called it. It was called sleeve something, whatever that meant. We tumbled out of the car at the foot of the hill. It didn't look too far to the top. On the peak was a rocky outcrop.

Grant immediately disappeared, saying he wanted to scale the north face because it would be more difficult. The rest of us ambled up the side of the hill, not saying much. It had just rained so the grass was wet. It had always just rained, or it was about to rain, or it was actually raining, and everything was always wet.

"Well, there's one thing this country'll never be short of, and that's water" I said.

"That's true enough" Emma agreed.

"Just imagine" said Tom, as we swished through the sodden grass, "If Ireland could export water, it could become one of the richest countries in the world"

"How'd they do that then?" asked Brigid.

"Well, they could take it in tankers or something, you know, send it down to Saudi Arabia or wherever. They'd make a bomb"

"Nah"

"Yeah, or they could make a pipeline. I'm surprised no one's thought of it"

"They probably have, and they decided it's a daft idea"

When we got to the bottom of the rocks we had a rest. We sat on some damp boulders and looked at the view. It was beautiful, of course. We were looking eastwards, back inland. Hills and mountains valleys and lakes. There were thousands of lakes. We tried to count them but couldn't. To our left you could just see a small part of the sea.

I looked up at the rocks above us. It didn't look far to the top and it looked like a simple climb. I wanted to get up there. I wanted to see the view from the peak. I wanted to see the sea.

"Shall we go on then?" I asked.

"A bit further" said Emma.

"Erm..." said Tom looking at Brigid.

"Oh I'm grand here" She said, looking into the distance.

So me and Emma set off. Walking, at first, between the rocks, then clambering over them. They were wet and mossy and slippery.

"I don't know about this" said Emma, a little worriedly, "I'm not sure if it's all that safe"

"Don't worry, just take it nice and slow. You can't fall far anyway"

"Oh, very reassuring I must say!"

It got steeper and the climbing became more difficult. It wasn't possible to tell where the top was. I could feel Emma's interest waning but I really wanted to reach

the peak.

"Shall we just stop here? She said after a particularly difficult rock had been scaled.

"Oh no man. It can't be far now. I really want to get to the top. Grant's probably up there already"

"Is that supposed to be an incentive?"

We carried on a bit further but I knew her heart wasn't in it. I was starting to get obsessed. If I get to the top of this mountain everything'll be alright I thought. I never do those things, I always give up. I'm not giving up this time. This time I'm going all the way to the top. We were nearly there, you could tell. There was a narrow ledge and a boulder above. It was a bit too high to see what was next but I knew it was the top. That was it. Get over this boulder and we were on top of the mountain. Emma came panting up behind me.

"Shit, that's enough" She sat down with her back to the boulder and swung her legs over the ledge. "Ooh, it's quite along way down"

We peered over the ledge. There were rocks going down fifty or sixty feet. Then there was a mixture of rocks and grass. We could see Tom and Brigid, two tiny dots, sitting where we had left them. We'd come a long way.

"Helllooo!" Emma called down but they didn't seem to hear.

I threw a small pebble over the edge. It bounced from rock to rock.

"I wouldn't like to do that" said Emma.

"No, me neither. What about the next step?"

"I'm staying here"

"I want to get to the top"

"I'll wait for you"

"OK"

I studied the boulder. How was I going to get up there? There didn't seem to be any foothold or place to grip. It was smooth and damp with patches of dark green moss. I inched my way along the ledge looking for a way. It got narrower. I had to flatten myself against the boulder. Then I saw it, there was a crack running across. I could get my foot in there and somehow heave myself over the edge. It worked, I peered over the boulder and saw there was a handhold. I pulled myself up, got my other foot into the crack and I was on top. It was the top. I could see all around. I could see the sea, the mountains, the lakes. I was in the sky. On top of the world.

"That's it!" I shouted down to Emma.

"What?"

"The top. It's the top. Come on, it ain't that difficult. There's a crack round the side there"

"It's OK"

"What?"

"It's OK. I'm alright here"

"But it's fuckin' wicked up here"

"What can you see?"

"Everything! The sea. I can see the sea. It's brilliant"

She didn't say anything.

"Aren't you comin' up?"

"No really, I'm alright here"

I gave up. If she didn't want to come up she didn't want to come up. I couldn't force her. I couldn't understand it though. After coming all this way it seemed strange not to take that final step and stand on the summit. It was really different. It wasn't like being on the ledge, it wasn't like being nearly at the top.

I gulped the air and the view and felt exhilarated. It wasn't so high but the fact of having this boulder on the top made it really feel like a peak somehow. I was pleased with myself. This is just the sort of thing I never do, I thought, I never go through with anything. I never make it to the top. I never even try.

I looked over the edge to see if Grant was to be seen. He wasn't.

Then it was time to get down. I found my hand hold and lowered my left leg over the edge searching around with my foot for the crack. I couldn't find it. I started to panic. I wouldn't be able to find it because I had to keep my right foot on top of the boulder. I glanced over my shoulder. There was a long drop under me onto a rock. I wanted to just let go.

"Emma?" I tried to sound calm.

"Yeah? You coming down?"

"Yeah, I need a bit of help though, can you come round this side?"

She came slowly along the ledge.

"Oh my God! what's happening?"

"Can you see the crack?"

"Where, oh yeah, you mean this one?"

"There is only one"

"What do you want me to do?"

"I'm going to lower my leg down and I want you to put my foot into the crack, alright?"

"Alright. Are you OK?"

"Not really. I'm fuckin' terrified actually"

I lowered my left foot down again and Emma grabbed it.

"Lower" she said

"I can't"

My right foot was beginning to slip.

"A bit more"

My hand was hurting and my right leg was bent double. I tried to ease my right foot down and it slipped. I grabbed the hand hold with both hands and for a moment I was dangling over the edge. Emma grabbed my foot and jammed it into the crack.

"Fuckin' 'ell!"

"You alright?" She asked

"Yeah it's OK. That was a bit fuckin' close though"

I made it on to the ledge, heart pounding in my mouth.

"Shit! Thanks Emma, you saved my life there"

"Nah, you would've been alright"

"I'm not so sure about that"

I felt shaky and shocked. If she hadn't been there I would've fallen and if I'd fallen....

We were very careful on the way back down.

"Was it nice up there?" she asked

"Yeah, fantastic. It was like being on top of the world"

"But wherever you are, you're always on top of the world"

I thought about it. She was right, of course.

"It doesn't always feel like it though"

\*\*\*

Me and Tom were sitting in the car somewhere in Ireland. We were waiting for the others who were shopping or something. We listened to a tape of old soul classics. The Temptations were singing "Papa was a Rolling Stone".

"That's my song" said Tom "Fuckin' wicked. First time I heard that song I thought Shit! Someone's actually written a song about my life, know what I mean?"

"Yeah, but it's not like your Dad ever did any store front preachin' is it?"

"Nah, but actin's kind of the same"

"What d'ya mean?"

"Well, it's all, like, lyin' you know, pretence, pretending to be something you ain't"

A few sarcastic comments crossed my mind but I didn't say any of them. Instead,

"I could never work out whether they sing 'alone' or 'a loan'"

"What's the difference?"

"'All he left us was alone' like, on their own, or 'All he left us was a loan' like they'd have to pay interest on it or something"

"Maybe it's a play on words or whatever"

"Pretty good one if it is." We laughed.

"I reckon I'd be lucky if my dad left me a loan. More likely to be a load of bad debts"

"And a nice house"

"He can keep it, it's probably Kitty's anyway"

"Yeah, probably"

"You know what Sylvia Plath said?" He asked.

I didn't even know he'd heard of Sylvia Plath.

"Something about Daddy you're a bastard"

"Nah Man, she said "They fuck you up, yer Mum and Dad""

"I thought that was some bloke, what's his name, Henry something or other"

"Nah, Sylvia Plath. Sam told me about it, brilliant innit?"

"Well, your Mum ain't fucked you up has she? All she's done is give you clean clothes and roast potatoes"

"Yeah but,"

"I dunno Tom, I reckon you should like, talk to your Dad, you know, tell him a few things about what you think"

"It ain't that easy, old Kitty's always around and, well, I don't think he's that into diggin' up a load of shit from the past"

"It ain't the past though is it? I mean you can't go through yer whole life feelin' fucked up about yer Dad"

"Yeah, maybe you're right"

"You know what was the first tune that I thought was written for me?"

"He's Misra Know it all?"

"Fuck you!" We laughed. "Nah man, The Buzzcocks "What do I get?""

"Oh Man, that is a killer tune!"

"You know that!"

After a pause I asked him,

"So what's happenin' with yer DJing then?"

"I dunno, I need a few more records"

"You should get into it"

"I am into it"

"I mean start doin' it properly, do a few parties and that"

"It ain't that easy y'know, there's loads of DJs out there. If you don't know the people who're puttin' the party on, you ain't gotta chance"

"Maybe you should organise some parties yerself"

"What? On me own?"

"Well, we could do it together. We could find a place, somewhere like that railway arch or something, squat some place, hire some stuff, P.A. and that. Know what I mean?"

I was thinking aloud but it all seemed to fit into place.

"Yeah, maybe"

Tom was still to be convinced.

"When we get back we'll look into it, check out some places. We could get Jo involved, she'd get enough people on her own. I reckon it's a brilliant idea"

"I know a couple of other DJs, maybe someone's got some decks. I'd have to get a few more tunes myself though"

He seemed to be coming round to the idea.

"Just imagine, it'd be kickin'"

"Alright, when we get back we'll make some plans"

"Let's not tell anyone"

"No, not yet, they'd only take the piss"

"Yeah right, Our secret"

Our secret! A month before I would've thought twice about planning to go down the shops with Tom but this was brilliant, this was going to be great. It just felt right somehow. What had changed?

\*\*\*

We met this bloke in a pub. He was about our age and was wearing a suit and tie. He just came over and sat at our table. He had dandruff.

"How are ya?" He said. Seemed friendly enough.

"Alright"

"Not a bad pint here"

"Yeah, very nice"

"Very nice indeed I'd say"

He sat back in his chair while we waited to see what was next. He smiled mysteriously and sipped his pint.

"You're on holiday I think"

"Yeah"

"Were yez in Donegal yet?"

"No, we've just been round here, round Sligo like" said Tom.

"It's beautiful up there, wonderful landscape so it is"

"Yeah, I'd like to see it"

"Which way is that?" asked Emma "West?"

"North, up the coast, it's not far. Do ya like fishin' at all?"

"Erm, well I don't think so, I've never really been"

The idea of Emma fishing was an amusing one.

"Yeah, I'm into it" said Grant.

The man smiled.

"Ah now, there's some grand fishin' around here, beautiful beaches too, long, empty, sandy beaches"

"Do you work for the Tourist board by any chance?" asked Brigid grinning.

"Well, not exactly, but you could say I'm in the trade. One minute" he reached inside his jacket pocket and got out his card "Here ya are" He gave it to Tom, who happened to be sitting next to him.

"What's that then? B.H.A?"

"That's Bundoran Holiday Apartments. I'm a representative"

"Ooh, how posh!" said Emma.

"Well, not really" he smiled, "Actually I've got a proposal for you all"

"Oh yeah, what's that then?" Grant asked suspiciously.

"It's a little business idea, I think it could be, er, mutually beneficial"

"Yeah, so what is it then?"

"OK, it's like this. We've got some holiday cottages up near Bundoran, on the road to Donegal. Very nice, fully modernised, all mod cons. We're selling time

shares"

"I don't think we're really the people you're looking for" said Tom.

"I know that. These places aren't cheap but that's not important. You don't have to pay any money"

"What? You're givin' 'em away or what?"

"No no, it's like this, every time someone goes and looks round I get commision, thirty quid a throw, doesn't matter whether they sign up or not"

"That's not bad"

"Yeah, it sounds easy enough but it's not so simple finding people, no one's got any money you see"

"Well, that includes us" I said.

"But that's the beauty of it you see. You don't have to pay a penny, all you have to do is turn up"

"And.."

"And pretend you're interested"

"What do we get out of it then?" Grant wanted to know.

"We split the winnings"

"What's the catch?"

"There is no catch, I reckon we should do it this way, two couples and a single, just to make it believable like. That's three times thirty, ninety quid, Forty five for you, forty five for me. You'll get shown around by my boss, Mr Dooley. Yer look around, act like you've got to think it over and there ya are, no problem. Mine's a pint if yer goin' to the bar" he said to Tom, who'd just stood up, "And if yer goin' to the jacks I'll have to decline"

"I was off to the bog actually but I'll get some drinks on the way back" said Tom, laughing.

"Good man"

We looked at each other. What kind of a scam was this? The bloke sipped his pint some more.

"Anyway, what's yer name?" Grant asked.

"Michael Dooley, it's on me card"

"Like your boss?"

"Yeah well, actually he's me uncle"

"Yer gonna rip yer own uncle off?"

"Ah well now, he's a bit of an ol' bastard and, as you know, times are hard"

Tom brought the pints over and Michael Dooley told us lots more about the delights of the locality, how it was an angler's paradise and so on. He started having whiskey chasers with his pints and told us the same story twice. Something about how his uncle had 'done the dirty' on him. Even the second time of telling it wasn't exactly clear how.



As we were leaving he said,

"Don't forget, you've got me number, it's on the card, forty five quid, just give me a bell"

We did it. I don't know why. Tom thought it was a good idea and Brigid said it would be a laugh. The idea of making a tenner each for nothing probably had some influence on our decision too. We didn't tell Con. We just said we were going on a drive up to Bundoran.

"That's a nice drive up the coast there" he said.

And it was true. It was the usual weather. Sunny with scattered showers or, more accurately, showery with scattered sun. We saw Ben Bulbin from the other side and it just looked like a normal mountain which was a bit disappointing. Michael was waiting for us in a pub in the town as arranged. It was a carefully planned operation,

"Here's the plan," he said conspiratorially "You follow me, I'll drop yer off, introduce yer to me uncle, then I'll meet yer here afterwards and we'll split the loot."

We drove out of town following his red cortina down a twisty country lane. The houses stood in the middle of nowhere. It felt like the sea was somewhere nearby. They were white. Freshly painted unnaturally bright white. Two bungalows surrounded by fences and immaculately trimmed lawns. Mr Dooley was there and Michael introduced us. He seemed like a nice old man. I began to feel guilty about ripping him off. Michael gave us a wink and drove off.

"Which one would yer like to see? They're both the same"

"That one" said Tom and Brigid at the same time both pointing at different houses. They were supposed to be a married couple.

"Ladies choice" said Mr Dooley smiling, and we went into the house on the right.

"They're brand new, built last year, all mod cons. Double glazing in all windows, fully carpeted, as you can see"

We could see alright. Pink carpets in fact. Pink carpets to go with the pink wallpaper and pink flowery patterns on the three piece suite. It was nauseating. The kitchen was yellow which was a relief but you wouldn't want to live with it. You wouldn't even want to look at it.

"Washing machine, fridge freezer, Electric cooker, Toaster....."

Mr Dooley senior rattled on. I couldn't believe he really thought we were potential tenants. Upstairs was more of the same. We walked around like a bunch of zombies as he demonstrated light switches and plug sockets. One of them didn't work. Mr Dooley was apologetic.

"Someone'll be in to fix that tomorrow"

"Oh, it's alright" I said "Don't worry about it"

Grant nudged me in the ribs. Then, thankfully, the tour was finished and we went outside into the open air. Mr Dooley was still telling us something about the lawn as we got into the car.

"Thank God that's over" said Brigid as we drove away.

"We didn't even ask him how much it cost" I said.

"I feel awful, poor old man" said Emma.

"Serves him right for having such terrible taste" said Grant "Now let's go and get our dosh, we've earned it"

When we got to the pub Michael wasn't there. We got ourselves a drink and sat down to wait. We'd waited about an hour before Brigid went and asked the barman if he knew where Michael Dooley might be found.

"He says we should try Riordan's, it's just up the street"

We finished our pints and set off. It wasn't far. He wasn't there either.

"He was here about two hours ago" we were told "said he was going to the bookies next door"

We went to the bookies. Four old geezers turned round and stared at us as we walked in. The bloke behind the counter was friendly though.

"He didn't have much luck today, you could try O'Briens, he's usually there if he's not here or in Riordan's. He'll be drowning his sorrows. It's up here on the right"

We thanked him and left.

"Fuckin' bastard" said Tom "We better catch him before he spends all that money"

"It's only a tenner each" said Brigid

"I don't care, it's the principle of the thing"

"I bet he's pissed it all away" said Grant.

"What? Ninety quid in two hours?"

We found O'Brien's and sure enough, there was Michael Dooley, sitting at the bar looking somewhat the worse for wear. Suit crumpled, shirt open, tie at half mast. He seemed surprisingly pleased to see us.

"How are ye?"

"Grand" said Brigid, "We've seen most of this town by now"

"Ah, it's a terrible shitehole, isn't it?"

"So, what about our money then?"

"Yes, I'll have it for yer tomorrow, as agreed"

"You said you'd give it to us this evening"

"No, I'm sorry darlin', I've got to get it from me uncle first"

"Well, you'll just have to get it out the bank" Brigid said firmly.

"Ah now, it's not that easy ya see. The bank's closed. I've got a bit of a cash flow problem meself"

"Come on" said Tom, losing patience, "You promised to pay us this evening"

"Ah" Michael Dooley sighed "I can see I'll have to be honest with you. The truth is, I was robbed"

"What?" Grant, incredulous.

"I didn't want to give you good people a bad impression of this place y'know, but I was mugged this afternoon as I was getting out of my car on my way here"

Hard to believe, but he did, at least, look like he'd been recently done over.

"Oh, how terrible" said Emma "What happened?"

"Oh, just some young fellers, you know how it is. If you get the reputation as a successful businessman, you become a target for all the layabouts and hoodlums"

"Have you got a reputation as a successful businessman?" Emma, deadpan.

"Well, you know how it is in a small place like this, rumours, gossip, envy, jealousy. Terrible so it is"

"So, you had the money from yer uncle" said Tom "and now it's gone, stolen like. Is that right?"

"That's right, I'm sorry I wasn't exactly, er, straight with you at first but I didn't want you to think that Bundoran is a terrible place, full of criminals and gangsters and so on"

"Where did it happen?"

"Outside Riordan's, I'd just got out of me car there and I was pushed to the ground, given a couple of kicks and me wallet was gone. It was all so quick, I never got a look at them"

"Did you go to the police?" asked Emma.

"There's no point in that, they'd just laugh, y'know how it is"

"One minute" said Brigid, frowning, "Did you lose all yer money?"

"Oh yes, every cent, it's a good job I've got a tab here or I wouldn't even be able to get a pint to soothe me nerves"

"So, how come you went to the bookies?"

He wasn't expecting that.

"Erm, Oh, I was just going to pick up some winnings"

"So, you have got some money then"

"No, there was a, um, steward's inquiry, I can't get them until tomorrow"

"But yer man there, he said you'd lost today"

"Oh, er, well.... I can see I can't pull the wool over your eyes any longer, the truth is, I had a tip. A real hot tip, and I thought we could double our takings, increase our profit margins yer might say"

"And?"

"Fell at the last, three lengths clear"

"And you put all our money on that?"

"More or less"

"Great" said I, "Some businessman you are"

"It was a calculated risk, no risk, no gain"

"And now?" asked Tom "What happens next?"

"Oh, I'll have yer money tomorrow, we can meet here at lunchtime"

"We haven't got time to go chasing around the country for forty five quid" said Brigid.

"I'll tell yer what, I'll do ya a deal, seein' as how you've been a bit unlucky today. I'll make it sixty. Thirty for me and sixty for you, how about that?"

We agreed. What else could we do? But as we left the pub Grant said,

"There's no way we're coming back tomorrow"

"Sixty though, that's twelve quid each" said Tom.

"If you think we're ever gonna see that money..."

"Yeah, you're right, but what can we do? We can't let him just get away with it"

It was getting dark. We walked past a house that was being renovated. There were some bricks on the pavement.

"That gives me an idea" said Grant, "bricks"

"What you gonna do? brick 'im?"

"No. We know where his car is though don't we?"

"Yeah, by Riordan's, just down here somewhere"

"Everybody grab as many bricks as you can carry"

"Why? What's the idea?"

"We're gonna immobilise him"

"What?"

"Take his wheels off"

We walked down the road carrying armfuls of bricks, luckily it wasn't far and there wasn't anyone about. We found Michael Dooley's red Cortina easily enough and dumped the bricks while Grant went to get the Datsun. He pulled up alongside the Cortina and we got to work with jack and wheelbrace. We'd got both the back wheels off and were about to start on the front when Emma said,

"Uh Oh, Old Bill"

A police car pulled up behind the Datsun and an oldish policeman got out.

"What's happening here?"

"We're just swapping wheels" said Tom, like it was a perfectly normal thing to be doing in Bundoran at twilight.

"Hmm, that's Michael Dooley's car isn't it?"

"Yes, he asked us to do it for him, these wheels are, erm, better"

Tom pointed at the Datsun's wheels. They didn't look better. They looked worse.

"Faster" said Emma."better grip"

The policeman shrugged, and looked at Michael Dooley's car which was half

perched on the bricks.

"Where is Michael?"

"Oh, he's just gone to get some tools"

"Well, say hello from me" said the policeman.

"Sure thing"

He went and got into his car and drove off. We finished the job.

"What are we gonna do with the wheels?" I asked

"We'll dump 'em somewhere"

As we drove past O'Brien's we saw Michael Dooley staggering out. It was worth all the hassle of the day for that moment. The wheels were dumped on the side of the road a couple of miles outside town. We got back to Con and Kitty's late and had to make up stories about our day at the seaside over a dinner of frozen pizza.

\*\*\*

Con told us about a road which went up the side of Ben Bulbin, so after breakfast we drove to the top of the mountain. The road ended in a peat bog and Grant parked the car in a ditch. I took a photo of it.

"Do you think it'll get out again?" inquired Emma.

"We can always walk down" replied Grant with a grin.

It was very windy up there. You could see the sea, a thin strip of silver to the west. Emma did some handstands and the rest of us jumped up and down. I'm not sure why, it just seemed the right thing to do at the time. I took some more photos. There were huge clouds rolling in from the sea. They hit the top of the mountain and crept towards us. It was pretty spectacular.

"We better go, we're gonna be in the middle of a cloud in a minute." shouted Grant.

He stared the car. It was stuck in the ditch. We all laughed.

"I can just see the headlines "Tourists saved in dramatic Mountain rescue, Car stuck in Ditch." Said Tom.

"I'm no fuckin' tourist!" Said Brigid.

"That's even worse."

We rocked and pushed the car and eventually got it back on the road. The cloud had fallen and we were in a soft mist. Water dissolving, water removing.

"You Wally, Grant."

"No problem, just a bit of survival practice for you all."

"Let's go to the sea" said Emma. "It's not far."

We drove down the mountain and out of the cloud, through the valley and came to the coast. It was still windy and the sky was grey. The tide was out and the beach was full of seaweed.

"This must be where that poet geezer hangs out."

"Yeah, I can see what he was on about."

Grant went for a paddle and Tom and Brigid went to look for shells. It didn't really look like that kind of beach, and it wasn't much like Tom to go looking for shells, but I didn't say anything. I sat on a rock with Emma.

"I love the sea." She said.

"Yeah." I tried to think of a meaningful reply "It's great."

That wasn't it.

"I used to go to the beach after school, when we were little we used to play games there, but when I got older I just used to like sitting on my own and staring. You know, staring out to sea."

At that moment, I found Emma's strangeness incredibly attractive.

"Me and Doug used to go to Skegness but you couldn't do much on the beach 'cos it's mostly mud. One time I wrote "Jimmy Pursey is our leader" in the sand."

"Who's Jimmy Pursey?"

"The singer from Sham 69"

"Who are Sham 69?"

"Just some crap band. Doug was always taking the piss out of me about that."

"Sounds like you deserved it."

"I guess I did."

This wasn't right. Somehow we'd got from Emma's poetic thoughts to my teenage embarrassments. I wished I hadn't mentioned it.

"You boys are so funny."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean writing somebody is our leader in the sand."

"Well, girls would probably write something about the Bay City Rollers or Duran Duran or whatever."

"David Essex."

"What?"

"Yeah, David Essex was my teen dream." It was hard to imagine.

"Then I sort of went overnight onto Joni Mitchell after one of my friends lent me a tape."

And that was it, Emma was born.

"What if they'd lent you a Sham 69 tape? History could've been completely changed."

"Yeah, maybe, I don't think so though, when I heard Joni Mitchell it was like, this is what I've been waiting for, you know, this is it!"

She looked out to sea. You could see islands in the distance, and, to the north, mountains. Grey shapes against a grey sky rising from a grey sea. I wanted to kiss her. I didn't. She sighed and the spell was broken. Sensible thoughts rushed into my head. What was I thinking of? This was Emma, one of my best friends, someone I'd known for years. Why did I suddenly want to kiss her? What had changed?

Grant was standing in the distance with his trousers rolled up.

"What does he look like?" Emma shook her head.

"He just needs a knotted handkerchief on his head don't he?"

"He's mad that boy."

"You're not kidding."

"That's what we like about him though, isn't it?"

Tom and Brigid were nowhere to be seen. I was curious to know what was going on. I guess Emma was too, but we didn't mention it.

Grant came back and sat next to us on the sand.

"Fuckin' wicked fresh air!"

He started rolling a joint. Always a good response to anything healthy like fresh air.

"There's a shipwreck out there."

"Where?"

"Over there near the tide line" he pointed.

"I can't see anything."

"Well, it's mostly buried, it's probably something from the Spanish Armada."

"Yeah, probably."

"Nah, straight up. I'll show yer after this spliff. Loads of 'em were wrecked off this coast. There might be some, like, treasure aboard. A few doubloons or whatever."

Me and Emma giggled.

"Yeah man, we can take 'em down the pub, how many doubloons for a pint of Guinness?"

"Maybe there's some skulls and whatnot."

"That'd be nice" said Emma.

"You lot are just so negative, we might be on the verge of one of the archaeological finds of the century and all you can do is take the piss."

"But it's so unlikely."

"I'm gonna go and have another look at it anyway."

"Alright, alright, after this spliff."

When we got to the spot it was a bit of a disappointment. There was a piece of wood buried in the sand. It looked like part of a boat, but hardly a galleon.

"It's a bit small, isn't it?"

"Well, they didn't just have big ships, did they? This might be the one they used to land after the main ship had like, sunk or whatever. They probably put all their valuables on a little boat and headed for the shore."

"All their doubloons and that."

"Yeah, they're probably here under the sand, I wish I had a metal detector."

I was really glad he didn't. You had to admire his imagination, though, and the way that once he got hold of a subject he just wouldn't let it go. I wasn't like that. I usually got bored after five minutes. I stared at the piece of wood. Grant was digging in the sand around it. Then he gave a tug and a piece snapped off in his hand. Me and Emma laughed.

"It's just a bit rotten, probably been here for centuries."

Emma started digging too, out of sympathy I guess. I wondered whether to join in, but thought better of it. I stood up and looked around, taking in the sea air. I caught sight of two figures on the shore. It was Tom and Brigid, and they were kissing. I looked away quickly, and then checked that Emma hadn't seen. She was busy with Grant who'd now found a rusty nail.

"This could be five hundred years old" he said, holding it in the palm of his hand



like some religious relic.

"Or five years old." said Emma, matter-of-factly.

"I'd go for the five years myself" I intervened unnecessarily, but just to keep the conversation going. I didn't want Emma to look up, to see what I'd just seen. I don't know why, but it seemed important at that moment. I did a bit of digging too. The sand was cold and wet and full of little stones that cut your fingers. It was like a penance. I suddenly felt a great empathy with Catholicism. We cleared a space around the piece of wood without finding anything else of interest.

"What the fuck are you lot doin'? Buryin' a bone?" Tom was standing behind us.

"We're lookin' for doubloons" I explained.

"Oh right, I should have guessed. Any luck?"

"Not yet, but we found an ancient nail."

"Far out."

The hole was quite deep by now, but the tide was coming in and it was filling with water as fast as we dug. Grant stood up and surveyed the scene.

"Oh fuck it, we need to come back with the right equipment."

"Yeah, never mind, eh?" said Emma with obvious relief.

We went back to the rock where Brigid was sitting smoking a cigarette.

"Having fun?"

"Sort of."

Grant explained how we'd nearly found a hoard of Spanish treasure.

"Are yer sure it wasn't just some old fishin' boat?"

"Yeah, could've been I suppose" Grant shrugged. "But that's not so interestin' is it?"

We piled into the car and drove off to find a pub. The car was full of sea smells. My hands felt cold, wet and raw from the sand.

"Did you find any shells?" Emma asked Brigid innocently.

"Er, well, not really."

There was an awkward silence. Then Grant put on a Pogues tape and normality returned.

We sat by the fire in the pub, drying our clothes and drinking Guinness.

"Have you noticed the, er, side effect of all this Guinness?" Whispered Grant conspiratorially.

"What, bein' constantly half-cut?" Asked Brigid.

"No, I mean the colour of something."

"What? the colour of what thing?"

"You know, they're, like, black"

"What's black? What are you on about?"

"You haven't noticed?"

"Noticed what?"

"Maybe it's just me then."

"You mean your shits" said Emma a bit too loudly.

The barman looked over.

"Shhh!" Grant went red.

"Yeah, I noticed that, really black they are."

"Me too." Tom was grinning.

"Oh Jesus you lot" Brigid was laughing.

We all sat there giggling like a load of schoolkids who'd just said a rude word.

"Do you think it's alright?" asked Emma earnestly.

"Yeez are just not used to it" explained Brigid.

"Do all you lot have the same thing then?"

"I dunno, I've never really thought about it."

"Imagine, the whole country's full of people doing these weird black shits."

We collapsed at the thought. I had tears in my eyes. A bloke came over from the bar. I thought he was gonna tell us off or something.

"Are yer on holiday?" He asked. We held back our giggles.

"Sort of" said Brigid, wiping her eyes.

"Is it for the Fla?"

Luckily Brigid didn't find this question incomprehensible.

"Is there a Fla?"

"Saturday in Drumshanbo. It'll be great crack now."

"Ah that's great, where's drumshanbo?"

"Down the road, Lough Allen."

"Is it all day?"

"All weekend, but the judgin's on Saturday, they'll be comin' from all around."

"That's grand."

"Yeah, well, see yer there."

"Yeah, see ya, thanks for tellin' us."

He retreated to the bar probably wondering what sort of weirdoes he'd just met.

"What the fuck's a Fla?" asked Grant when he was out of earshot.

"Fla, F.L.E.A.D.H. It's a sort of music festival, lots of fiddle dee dee music."

"Wicked!"

"Sounds great, shall we go?"

"Yeah, maybe we can get your dad to come" Emma said to Tom.

"What's this about judgin'?"

"Oh, they have some kind of competition, for the kids mainly, who's the best dancer and all that."

"Stormin', we gotta go."

And so it was decided that we would go to the fleadh in Drumshanbo on Saturday. There was never really any question. Although we didn't know what it was, or how to spell it, it sounded like something not to be missed.

When we got back, there was a bit of a weird atmosphere in the house. We told Con about the fleadh, but he didn't seem all that excited about it. Strange, I would've thought it would be just his kind of thing. Emma offered to cook dinner, but Kitty wouldn't let her. She didn't seem that keen for anyone else to go into the kitchen for some reason.

"Do you like fish?" she asked.

It sounded like just the thing after a day by the sea.

"Yeah, great, are you sure there's nothing we can do to help?"

"No no, it's fine, no problem."

"The kitchen's her hideaway, that's where she goes to get away from yours truly." Said Connor cryptically. We laughed nervously, not knowing whether it was meant to be a joke or not.

Grant told him about the "Spanish Galleon."

"That's what I could do with right now, finding a load of treasure, it's about the only thing that'll get us out of this mess."

We all wanted to ask "what mess?" but we just waited for him to explain further. He didn't.

Dinner was Fish Fingers, baked beans and mashed potatoes. It wasn't quite what I'd been expecting when Kitty asked if we liked fish, but it was nice enough. While we were eating Con announced that, as the next day was to be our last, they would like to take Tom out on their own. He suggested that we could take a walk in a place called "The Swiss Valley." which was on the side of the mountain and all meet up later because there was a pub he wanted to show us called Ellen's. It was supposed to be a special place for some reason. It sounded like a good plan.

\*\*\*

We had a nice time in the valley, it was quite sunny and warm. Grant went and chased some sheep while I chatted to Brigid and Emma. We stopped and lay in the grass.

"I wonder how Tom's getting on," said Emma. "Poor sod."

"You get the impression his dad would prefer Grant as a son." said Brigid.

"Yeah, it's terrible innit?"

"I wonder what he was on about last night."

"Who?"

"Con, Connor, all that stuff about being in a mess."

"Seems like they're skint or something."

"But they try and live like Lords of the Manor, don't they?"

"Yeah, what's that all about?"

"God knows."

"I wonder why he doesn't want to come to the fleadh."

"I reckon it's her, there's something really funny about that woman."

"Like what?"

"Like she's hiding something, I dunno, it's strange."

"It must be weird if you've been an actress or actor or whatever all your life and then you end up here" said Emma.

"It's not as if they've exactly given up acting is it?"

"You know what I mean though, the bright lights and all that"

"Yeah, well I don't think they were ever that famous"

"Well" said Brigid "it's a long way from Broadway"

"It's such a beautiful place."

"Yeah, but could you imagine living here?"

"Not really."

"I'd go mental."

"You'd be in good company then."

I thought about London. It seemed so far away. The constant struggles, hassles, worries and pain. The traffic, noise, pollution, street scenes, culture, raves. I had a longing for this life, for this stillness, for this calm.

"London's fuckin' mad." I said.

"What?"

"I mean, it's no way to live really, is it?"

"Sure, but you'd be bored out of your skull after two weeks livin' around here."

"Yeah, but there must be something else."

"Maybe somewhere in the country but near a city."

"But then you end up in the suburbs."

"That might be alright" said Brigid.

I was surprised. The suburbs were a vision of Hell for me. A place of twitching curtains and shopping centres, commuting to work and washing your car on Sunday. I'd never expected anybody I knew to say anything positive about them. It made me see Brigid in a new light. Maybe she wasn't really one of us.

"Ah nah, man, some shithole like Surbiton or Bromley or somethin', I'd rather die."

That was putting it a bit strong, but wasn't far from the truth.

"It could be nice, your own little house, you know, garden and that. You could go to the city when you wanted and you could be out in the country when you felt like that."

"I dunno." said Emma.

I wished Tom had been there, he would've had something to say about the suburbs. I realised at that moment he and Brigid were on a road to nowhere and it made me a little sad.

We sat in silence looking at the view above and the grass below. I tried to imagine Cheryl here in this field and it made me smile. For the first time I was able to think about her without feeling the pain in my stomach. It was a relief. What had that all been? I was mad to think that it could have worked. It was obvious really. We were so different. She would never be here in this field. I would never have been able to share this with her. Why didn't I see it at the time? The hectic, stress, her person, my blindness, my weakness. I saw what I wanted to see until I finally couldn't ignore reality. I wondered if she'd ever loved me, I couldn't know, she probably didn't know. Not like I'd loved her anyway.

Grant appeared in a corner of the field and started waving at us, he seemed to want to show us something.

"What is it now?"

"Probably found a shipwreck or something."

"Yeah, or some ancient Iron Age monument."

"Better check it out anyway."

So we went over to him.

"What's goin' on?"

"Come and look at this."

He led us into the next field and a little way up the hillside. There was a wire cable running up the hill to a support and then out of sight over the brow of the hill. The lower end just lay on the ground.

"What is it, telephone?"

"Electricity?"

"Nah man, it's an old cable car." Said Grant.

"What, a ski lift?"

"It's from some old mines, Tom's Dad told me there used to be some on top of the mountain. I can't remember what they were mining up there, but they must've used this to bring whatever it was down."

We were genuinely impressed and even more so when Grant picked up the end of the cable and gave it an almighty yank. The wave moved up the cable until it reached the support, then it bounced back and disappeared halfway down the hill. We all had a go.

"Imagine, if we could pull this tight, we could play a note on it, It'd be the biggest guitar in the world!"

Some of Grant's discoveries were interesting, some were ridiculous, but this one was truly awesome. There was something about the scale of it, as well as the strange aura that always surrounds industrial relics that was fascinating. We tried to pull it tight, but we just weren't strong enough.

"You could get it going again, and do tourist trips up the mountain."

"I like the musical instrument idea."

"You could play notes they'd hear in Australia."

"Wicked find, Granty."

That was what was so great about Grant. We would've just sat in the grass and gone home. He was always on the lookout for something, and occasionally, he found it. He could drive you crazy sometimes, I should know, but it was times like these that made me realise why I hung around with him.

We went to the pub where we were meeting Tom and the others. He looked relieved to see us when they arrived. Con suggested we should get some fish and chips before we went to Ellen's pub. We had a couple of pints first though while Grant tried to describe the cable car thing.

We ate our chips in the next village. It wasn't far from the sea, and the wind smelt of salt as we sat on the cars eating and laughing, hair in our faces and grease on our lips. Tom put a tape of Marvin Gaye on and we danced round the car to "How Sweet it is to be loved by you", chip bags in hand. We got some grins from people going into the chip shop and Con even did a couple of steps until brought up by a frown from his wife.

It was getting dark as we wound along narrow lanes towards the sea. Tom and Brigid were in the other car and we sang along to "Let's get it on" and "What's goin' on". I wanted that drive to never end. If there is a heaven, it is something like the feeling of driving down an Irish country lane, belly full of chips, ears full of Marvin Gaye, at twilight.

I was quite disappointed when Con's car pulled up ahead of us.

"Is this it?" Grant looked out the window.

There were a couple of cottages, small and squat, the last of which seemed to be the pub. There was a tractor parked outside.

"Well, the road ends here, so it must be." Said Emma peering out into the gloom.

We could hear the sea when we got out. There were a couple of small boats next to the pub.

"Probably from the Armada" I quipped, Grant grinned, and we followed the others inside.

To describe Ellen's as small would be an understatement. It was tiny. Once we seven had added to the three compulsory old fellers at the bar, the place was full. We squeezed round the only table, and Con went to the bar.

"What'll you have?" The question was irrelevant. We waited for our pints.

"Wicked place." Said Grant, looking around.

"It's so small" Emma looked worried. "What's going to happen if anyone else turns up?"

"They always seem to manage." Said Kitty. "We came here with the whole cast of the Scottish play last autumn, and the sound man, and the lighting boys, and half the audience."

"Which Scottish play?" Asked Grant.

"The one by Shakespeare."

"Oh, MacBeth." Said Emma.

There was a silence. Kitty looked a bit upset.

"Which other one could it be, MacHamlet?" I tried to joke.

"MacOthello"

"MacMidsummernight's Dream"

"MacMuch Ado About Nothing."

Even Kitty had to laugh at that one, but not too much. Con came over with a couple of pints and put them on the table.

"What's going on here? You people can't be left alone for two minutes without some hilarity breaking out!" He grinned and sat down.

"We're just talking about Shakespeare's Scottish plays." Explained Grant.

"I thought there was only one, and we can't talk about that."

"Why not?" Asked Brigid.

"You know, because of the old curse, you can't say the word, MacThing, it's terrible bad luck, or so they say. I think it's a load of old nonsense, but Kitty's a believer, aren't you dear?"

She nodded.

"Suspicious lot, actors, I knew a feller who wouldn't change his socks during a run. We did three weeks in Scarborough once, high summer, a heat wave, by the middle of the second week it was an emergency. We hid them while he was on-stage. He went berserk and called us all the names under the sun. The next day the theatre burnt down."

"Nah, you're kiddin'."

"True as I'm sitting here, personally I think it was an act of desperation on the

part of the local sanitation department."

We all laughed, except for Kitty, who smiled thinly.

Con collected the rest of the drinks.

"So what do you think of Ellen's?" He asked as he sat down.

"It's lovely" said Brigid.

"It's so wee" Emma was the only person I knew who could get away with a word like that.

"Have you seen the Dance Hall?"

"There's a Dance Hall?"

"It's through there."

Con pointed to a door that I had presumed was the toilet. Me and Grant went and had a look. The "Dance Hall" was a room slightly larger than our sitting room at home. It was bare, apart from a minuscule stage at the far end and a bench along one wall. We returned, suitably impressed.

"There'll be some music later." Con told us "According to the barman."

"I can hardly wait." Grant smiled.

We drank a couple more pints and talked a lot more rubbish. Con kept us amused with more theatre stories, and Grant told a series of appalling jokes. A few more people came in, mostly old men. Con greeted them all with "How are ya Paddy?"

I couldn't believe they were all called Paddy, it seemed too much like a stereotype, but they all responded as if they'd known him all their lives.

"Do you know all these people?" Emma asked.

"Not at all. I think I met one of those old fellers the last time we were here."

"Are they really all called Paddy?"

"I don't know, I'd say about half of them probably are and the other half don't mind too much, or they're deaf."

The musicians arrived. A fiddle player, and accordionist, and a guy with one of those Irish drum things. They didn't seem to be in too much a hurry to start. Con went and bought them all a drink.

"Are yer on good form tonight, lads?"

"Not yet, but we will be after a pint, I'd say."

I noticed he didn't call them Paddy.

Me and Tom went off to find the toilet. It was in kind of a shed out back. The dark and the wind were a contrast to the cosy scene in the pub. There was some graffiti in the toilet; Wayne and Joe Melbourne '86 got pised here.

"They must've been pised" said Tom.

It spoilt the atmosphere a bit though to know that a pair of dyslexic Australian backpackers had stood where we were now relieving ourselves.



"Brilliant place though" said Tom, reading my thoughts.

"Yeah. I'm looking forward to the gig."

"Should be rockin'."

"What's up with old Kitty?" I asked. "She doesn't seem to be getting into the swing of it all."

"I think she was a bit pissed off about that Macbeth thing."

"Yeah, but really."

"It's a big deal to some people, I dunno." He shrugged. "She's a bit nutty."

"Yeah, seems like. How was your day?"

"Oh, weird"

"Why what happened?"

"Well, we just drove around for a bit and then went to a pub for lunch. That was it really. My dad was givin' it all this 'My son' shit, you know, introducin' me to total strangers, 'this is my son from England' and that"

"Oh God"

"Yeah, and then he starts goin' on about his will, and how he wants to leave the house to me when he dies."

"And what's Kitty say to that?"

"She didn't look too happy about it."

When we got back, the band had squeezed themselves onto the stage and had started playing. A couple of the old geezers were already hopping about from one foot to the other. The music was pretty much what you might expect, a bit of "fiddle dee dee" as Brigid would say. I liked it, and me and Emma went into the Dance hall to listen. We drank another. We'd drunk so much that it stopped making any difference. We were drunk and that was that.

One of the old geezers came in from the bar. He had a strange little badge on his lapel.

"See that?" Said Emma.

"Yeah, I wonder what it means."

"Maybe he's some sort of IRA man" she whispered in my ear.

"I doubt if they'd go around wearing badges."

Brigid appeared. We asked her about the badge.

"He's a teetotaller."

"What?!"

It was unimaginable in our sozzled state that anyone could even be sober let alone teetotal. It was like meeting a Muslim in the Vatican, wrong religion.

"You're not drinkin' tonight" she said to the man.

"Not for twenty-five years" he replied proudly.

"I can't tempt yer to a little tippie then?"

"Ye can tempt me alright, but not to drink." His eyes sparkled.

"Get away now" Brigid laughed. "Fresh as a daisy y'are."

"Where yez all from?" He asked.

"Dublin, these lot are from London."

"I think yer got a problem" he looked at his watch. "Last bus to London left an hour ago."

"Is that right now? Looks like we'll have to walk then."

"It's been done before."

"I can imagine."

"Would ye like to dance? Me usual partner's off in Hollywood makin' a fillum."

"I'd be delighted."

They jigged about in the middle of the room, not really together, he just held her hand every now and then. One of the other old guys took this as an invitation to come over. He bowed slightly as he asked Emma "for a Twirl." She laughed and said yes. I watched for a while, thanking God there weren't any demon old women there to fend off. The girls were enjoying themselves, though. The men were really chivalrous. They didn't even seem to mind the fact that Emma had absolutely no idea about Irish Country Dancing whatsoever.

I went back into the bar to report. Con was talking to an old bloke who had the shiniest skin I'd ever seen. He was completely red, as if he'd scrubbed himself with a hard brush for a couple of hours before coming out. Maybe he had. It wasn't much of a conversation anyway because he was almost totally deaf and had no teeth. A guy leant over from the bar.

"Yer man there, he's ninety-two, birthday last week."

"Is that so? Well done there yerself." said Con. "By Jeez now, I wouldn't mind lookin' that fit at ninety-two."

Tom and Grant were deep in conversation about something. Kitty was sitting in the corner looking a bit sour.

"What's goin' down in the Dance Hall?" Asked Tom.

"It's rockin'. Emma and Brigid are groovin' with some of the old fellers."

"Wicked, let's 'ave a butchers"

Tom went off to have a look, Grant went to the toilet, and I was left alone with our hosts. I felt awkward. Con leant across the table..

"It's fair old crack, wouldn't you say?"

I had the feeling that it was the first time since our arrival he'd addressed me directly.

"Fantastic."

"Yes, it's not your average pub."

I noticed that his accent completely changed when he spoke to me. A thought

about actors always acting flashed through my head.

"It was worth the whole journey to see this place." I said, truthfully.

"For sure, you're not in the West End now."

"You can say that again."

I made some sort of excuse and went back to the Dance hall, where Tom was now dancing with Brigid, who was attempting to teach him some steps much to the amusement of the old fellers. Emma's style had improved and she was now dancing on her own. She saw me and beckoned me to join her. I was just wondering how to avoid this difficult situation when Grant made his entrance, and what an entrance it was. He appeared at the doorway on his unicycle and launched himself into the centre of the room just missing the teetotaller, did two circles around an astonished-looking Tom and Brigid and jumped off. There were whistles and cheers from the crowd, which by now consisted of me, Tom, the girls, seven or eight old guys and a couple of old women. Somehow the band managed to keep playing. The teetotaller shouted "more" and Grant set off again for a couple of circuits of the floor. Then one of the old blokes offered him a pint as he passed and he poured half of it over himself to the great amusement of the spectators. Next time he managed to cycle while drinking which earned him another ovation. Then all the audience wanted a go. Con came in and made sure everyone knew we were with him and someone bought him a drink. The barman had a go, unsuccessfully, and then asked Grant if he could come back next weekend. The teetotaller told me and Tom that he'd never seen anything like it and that it was nearly as exciting as the time last year when a German woman had come in and showed them all her tattoo.

"Where was it?" asked Tom.

"Oh, on her shoulder."

"Could have been more interestin'."

"But it wasn't bad now, beautiful skin she had."

After everyone in Ellen's had a go, and Con had explained that he was Grant's agent, and the barman had given us all free drinks, and Brigid and the teetotaller had had one last, mighty dance, it was time to go. We poured out into the road laughing and giggling. Grant cycled around in the road, hit a bump and fell off. Everyone roared. The only person who'd stayed in the bar the whole time was Kitty. We were just too far gone to think anything of it. Tom and Brigid came with us in the Datsun on the way home which may have been a mistake. I was more worried about how Grant was going drive in his condition.

"If I can handle one wheel I'm sure I can handle four" he said.

"But you couldn't exactly handle the one" pointed out Emma.

Somehow he managed. Everyone was in high spirits, joking and laughing, and going over the events of the evening. We were still giggling as we got out of the car. Con and Kitty had got back before us and had disappeared inside. The door was standing open.

"Ooh, weird." said Emma.

"Marie Celeste" joked Grant.

We went in and Brigid went off to the toilet while the rest of us sat in the dining room. Emma started making coffee. She found some biscuits next to the kettle and

absent-mindedly took a bite from one. We sat around the table. The hilarity had given way to a nervous tension. Con came in, he didn't sit down.

"Would you like a coffee?" asked Emma in a friendly way.

"No thank you, would you like a biscuit?" Con said coldly.

"Oh thanks, I've just had one actually."

"I can see."

"Is it alright? To have a biscuit like" asked Tom nervously.

"No, it isn't alright."

"Sorry."

"What do you people think? This isn't some sort of hotel."

"Well, we could get some more tomorrow."

"That's not the point. We can't afford all this."

All what? I wondered. A couple of biscuits?

"Can't you see? We simply can't afford it." Con was almost shouting by now.

Brigid came in looking uneasy.

"Would you like a biscuit." Con offered sarcastically.

"Er, no thanks."

"We're in debt up to our eyeballs, and you people think you can just come here and do what you like."

"It can't be that bad." said Emma.

"Yes it can."

"Well, maybe you should do something about it."

Grant kicked her under the table. I know because the table moved.

"Oh yes, and what do you suggest?"

"Well, maybe you could go busking."

There was a pause. I thought he was going to explode. There was electricity in the air.

"Fuckin' Hell!" he said through clenched teeth, and he moved towards the door.

"Con" said Tom "We'll talk in the morning eh?"

"We aren't going to see each other in the morning."

He stormed out, slamming the door.

\*\*\*

There was a silence while we waited to see what would happen next. We stared at each other in shock. Grant was the first to recover.

"What the fuck!"

"Jesus." Brigid shook her head.

"Was it my fault?" asked Emma.

"Well" Grant looked at her "I don't think it exactly helped, telling him to go busking. Didn't you notice me kickin' yer?"

"Oh God! I'm really sorry, it just came out."

"What were you thinking of?"

"I don't know, I just couldn't take it all seriously. You know, it all seemed sort of silly somehow."

"Yeah well, he took it seriously alright."

"It ain't your fault" said Tom. "There's some other shit goin' on."

"That's not all" said Brigid. "I met Kitty upstairs."

"Yeah? What happened?"

"She told me to fuck off."

"What?!"

"She just saw me and said "Fuck off."

"Oh Jesus!" Tom was outraged. "That's it, let's get out of here."

"One minute." Grant tried to calm him down.

"No man, fuck it, she can't do that, she can't tell Brigid to fuck off for no reason, it's out of order."

"Yeah, sure, but..."

"But nothin', I don't wanna stay 'ere."

"And where we gonna go?"

"I don't give a shit, we can sleep in the car, you've got your tent, let's just fuck off man."

"Let's just have this coffee. I'll make a spliff, and we'll think about it."

Grant skinned up, and we went over the possible causes of our hosts' sudden strange behaviour. Emma kept apologising for upsetting Con, and Tom still wanted to leave. It was cold and wet outside, and I can't say I was crazy about the idea of sleeping in the car. It was uncomfortable enough just sitting in there. The idea of breakfast with the Burtons was equally unappealing.

"It'll be different in the morning." said Grant.

"Yeah?!" Tom was unconvinced.

"Everyone was just pissed tonight, they'll regret it tomorrow."

"I should hope so, I mean, I'm pissed, but I don't go around telling people to fuck

off, do I?"

I felt that Brigid was the one who'd been insulted. We had treated the place a bit like a hotel, although all our offers of help with cooking and washing up had been rejected. She'd been told to fuck off for absolutely no reason, though.

"What do you think, Brigid?" I asked her.

"Well, I'm still a bit, you know, shocked like but I don't think we should go, imagine leaving it like that?"

"The thing is" said Grant "They're both fuckin' alxies, but the difference is that he can handle it and she can't."

"I didn't notice her drinking any more than anyone else." I said.

"That's 'cos we were all pissed the whole time ourselves, but I can tell you why she didn't want anyone in the kitchen with her. It wasn't only that it was a mess, she was neckin' bottles of wine in there while she was cookin'"

"How do you know that?"

"I saw her one time through the door."

It was a good theory, and we were only too willing to believe. After all, it was a comfort to know that it wasn't really our fault. We were the victims of Kitty's illness. We stopped feeling guilty and outraged and started feeling caring and compassionate. All thoughts of leaving were dropped. Grant made one last spliff.

"That's the end of Percy."

"Alas, poor Percy, he served us well!"

"I knew all the time about that MacBeth thing" said Emma "I just wanted to wind her up." She grinned.

"You're fuckin' mad."

Coming from Tom that was a kind of compliment.

We all slept in the girls' room, somehow we didn't want to split or be separate in the morning. Me and Grant slept on cushions on the floor, and the others top and tailed in the bed. There was a lot of giggling and whispering. It was like being twelve again.

I felt a bit rough in the morning, but it could have been worse. We all went downstairs together to find Con sitting at the table with red eyes and a cup of coffee. He'd been crying. It was moving seeing him weeping, especially as he put so much store on appearances. For the first time since we'd met him, we were seeing a real person, and it was quite a shock.

"Please, sit yourselves down, would you like a coffee? I'm so sorry about last night, it was unforgivable, I haven't slept a wink, I was so worried you'd just go."

Grant took control.

"We're just goin' for a little walk before breakfast, clear the old heads like."

"Yes, of course."

Tom went and sat at the table and we shuffled out onto a grey, misty morning. Ben Bulben couldn't be seen. All around was the sound of water, running, dripping and splashing in the hedgerows. Water flowing underground. We walked in silence

for a while. It was good to get some fresh air, even this damp soggy sort.

"Poor Tom." Emma broke the silence.

"Yeah, now he's getting some long-lost father speech" said Grant.

"I wonder what he's saying?"

"Oh , you know, probably a lot of stuff about wanting to turn back the clock and do it all differently and all that."

It was a relief to get away from the house and the strange scenes of the last few days and we started planning the next part of our journey.

"I'm up for this fleadh thing." said Grant.

"Me too" I added "Too good a chance to miss."

"I can't say what it'll be like" Brigid was cautious. "But it could be good crack."

"Well, it's got to be at least interesting" Emma commented decisively.

So that was it, we would pick up Tom and our stuff and drive to Drumshanbo, wherever that was, and take it from there.

"If it's shit, we can always go back to Dublin."

"Just one thing though" said Brigid. "I'm not into havin' breakfast with those two."

"Me neither" I agreed.

"They might say they're sorry and all that, but it's just been too weird, yer know?"

It started to rain harder and we decided to turn back. We'd been out for an hour, not really long enough to sort out the problems of a lifetime, but as Grant pointed out, they'd never have enough time for that. We became more and more apprehensive as we approached the house wondering what kind of scene awaited us there.

Tom and his Dad were both sitting as we had left them, the only difference was that now Tom had red eyes too.

We quietly packed our things into the car, and Kitty appeared to say good-bye. Con apologized again and again and tried to get us to stay for breakfast. He hugged Emma and Brigid and shook hands with me and Grant. Kitty smiled unconvincingly and said to Brigid

"Don't worry about last night, my bark is worse than my bite, you know."

There was a silence while we tried to work out what she meant.

Then Tom and his Dad embraced stiffly, like people who had never touched before. Tom got into the car and turned to Grant,

"Let's get the fuck out of here man."

Con and Kitty stood in front of their lovely house waving as we drove away. I was the only one who waved back. Once we'd rounded a couple of bends, we heaved a kind of collective sigh.

"What the fuck was that about?" said Brigid to no one in particular. "My bark's worse than my bite, what is that supposed to mean?"

"God knows" Tom shook his head.

No one asked him about his talk with his dad. He just looked out of the window every now and then and said "Shit!"

"I don't know about anyone else, but I'm starvin'" said Grant.

"Yeah, me too." agreed Brigid. "Let's find a caff in Sligo."

So we did, and after a dismal meal, we carried on towards Drumshanbo. Grant put on a tape of Zairean music. Tom didn't complain. After some miles we passed a sign that said "Sli-Route."

"What the fuck's that? The sly route?" asked Grant.

"It's Gaelic, no idea what it means. I never paid any attention in Irish class" said Brigid.

"Let's take it anyway, let's take the sly route to Drumshanbo."

"Too late, we've missed the turn."

"Shit!"

"Whatever route you take is gonna be a sly one anyway." said Emma taking us all back to normality. The normality of piss-takes and put-downs, bad jokes and wise cracks. That was where we lived, you knew someone liked you if they could be bothered to wind you up. It was nice to be home.

Drumshanbo was buzzing. Lots of people in the streets. It was a small village of two streets, a church, a school, and eight pubs. There was nice scenery around, not that we could see it. You could just feel it somehow. We parked by the church and went to a pub to find out what was going on. The answer was "not much."

"Everyone's in the school." the barman told us surprisingly.

"What're they doin' there?" asked Tom.

"It's the judgin', you know, the kids competition."

We went to the school, which was packed. It seemed like the whole county was squeezed into its three classrooms. In each room sat three stern looking judges taking notes while a child played the penny whistle, fiddle, or danced in a small space in front of them. In the background stood various parents and relatives urging their offspring on with an intensity that would've raised the dead. The children were concentrating as if their lives depended on it, which maybe they did. The standard was, to my untrained ears and eyes, incredibly high. Six and seven years olds who could hardly hold a fiddle bashing out reels and jigs, fingers a blur, lips pressed tight, furrowed brows. The judges looked on critically, and didn't smile. We drank tea from plastic cups, amazed at what we'd witnessed.

"Time for a pint." said Grant.

We tried out a different pub where a couple of old guys were playing the fiddle in a corner. We went up to the bar and met an Englishman. He was in his late thirties I'd guess. A sort of hippie with a pony tail and embroidered waistcoat. He had bad teeth but was otherwise quite presentable.

"Good crack, eh?" He grinned.

"Not bad" Grant answered.

"You're tourists then?"

"Sort of."



"Where ya from?"

"London."

"Oh, terrible place."

"I like it."

"No man, once you've lived out here you couldn't go back to all that."

"All what?"

"The noise, the pollution, the crowds. all those people."

Grant shrugged.

"It's great."

"The dirt, the smell, all that hassle man."

"So what do you do here then?"

"A bit of this and that, you know, a bit of carpentry, jewellery, whatever comes my way."

"And you can live on that?"

"Well, I sign on too."

"Isn't it a bit, you know, boring?" asked Emma.

"You call this boring?"

He gestured towards the corner where the fiddlers were going at it like men possessed.

"Yeah, but it ain't always like this is it? I guess it's pretty grim on a wet Tuesday morning in November."

"Ah but," he smiled knowingly. "There's always the vibe."

"What's that then? A disco?"

"No, I'm talkin' about the vibe man" he held his hands out palm upwards. "Can't you feel it?"

"Erm,"

"It's here, it's all around."

"In this pub?"

"In Ireland. This is a land of magic, you know."

"Oh right" said Tom. "You don't happen to know a geezer called Hobbit, do yer?"

The hippie stopped smiling.

"Are you takin' the piss?"

"Not really, maybe a little bit."

There was a woman next to him wearing what looked like a sack. She smiled at us which wasn't as pleasant as it sounds.

"You're lost" she said to Tom.

"No I'm not, I'm in Drumsomething or other"  
"I don't mean physically, I mean spiritually"  
"Oh God, that's all I need"  
"Would you like some help?"  
"What kind of help?"  
"I can help you find the way"  
"What? You got a map or something?"  
"I could do a reading for you"  
"What you gonna read? My horoscope? My palm? My tea leaves?"  
"The cards"  
"Playing cards?"  
"Tarot cards"  
"Oh my God!"  
"Oh Jeez!" Brigid rolled her eyes.  
"I'll do it" said Emma.  
"Be real Emma" said Tom  
"I'll do it for all of you" said the woman.  
"What? We've all got the same future or something?" asked Grant  
"Just the immediate future"  
"Let's do it" I said "It'll be a laugh"  
"Oh alright then" Tom shrugged.  
"Good, One of you has got to cut the pack."  
She put the cards on the bar. Tom was the nearest.  
"This is turning into one of the weirdest days I can remember" He said as he cut.  
"Alright," the woman said, "The top five cards will tell us about your near future"  
"How long is that then?"  
"Oh, I don't know, let's say the next month or so"  
She didn't seem very professional.  
Tom turned the first card over,  
"What's that?" he frowned.  
"Seven of swords" said the woman.  
"Is that good then?"  
"It's the drinking card"  
"Wicked!"

"Well, that's appropriate" said Brigid.

"Yes," The woman said, "The cards don't lie"

"I'm convinced" said Grant "Let's have a go"

He picked a card.

"Seven something"

"They all sevens or what?" said Tom. "Looks a bit boring"

"That's a good one" said the woman.

"Was the last one bad then?"

"Well, not exactly"

"Drinking card can't be that bad" Grant grinned.

"Not sure about that" said Emma.

"This is the seven of cups" said the woman earnestly.

"Sounds like another drinking card" said Grant.

"A decision, a change for the better, you have to decide what you really want."

" I already know what I want"

"What's that then?"

"Another pint!"

"My turn" said Emma reaching for a card. "Ooh, what's this? The Moon, how nice!"

"Very good," The woman smiled. "The subconscious"

"Yeah right," said Grant "have a drink or two and then make the decision to lose consciousness, makes sense to me"

"Mysticism, hidden instincts. Are you a very spiritual person?" The woman asked Emma.

"Erm, well, I don't know really, a bit yeah"

"I want another go" said Grant "Your card's much better than mine"

"I thought it was supposed to be for all of us" I said, "Go on Brigid, you next"

"Oh Jeez! Go on then"

She took the next card and started laughing.

"Sorry everyone, either you've got it or you haven't"

"Let's have a look" said Emma.

"The Empress, you can call me your highness if you like"

"Lovely" The woman said "A very good card"

"Oh God, how sickening" said Grant.

"Fertility, harvest, the Earth Mother" The woman continued undeterred.

Brigid snorted.

"Away with yer now!"

You could tell she was pleased though. It was my turn. I felt suddenly nervous, somehow I didn't want to do it.

"You do it Tom, you're nearer"

"Alright"

He looked at the next card.

"Shit!" He put the card back. "Can I have another one?"

"What was it?" asked Emma.

"Shit!" said Tom again.

"What's that then?" said Grant "the shit card or what?"

Tom turned it over.

"Fuckin' Death!"

"Oh my God!"

We all looked at the woman waiting for an explanation.

"Oh it's not as bad as you think" she said cheerfully, "it doesn't necessarily mean death as such"

"But it could do?"

"Well, it could, but it really means transformation, change, going from one life to another"

"Why isn't it called the transformation card then?" Tom wanted to know.

"Does that mean one of us is gonna die?" asked Emma a little worriedly.

"Oh, I doubt it" said the woman "something will probably change for one, or all of you"

"It wasn't my card" said Tom "it was his."

He pointed at me.

"Oh thanks Tom" I said "I thought these cards were for all of us"

"They are" said the woman soothingly "I'm sure it just means a new start for you all."

Tom looked unconvinced.

"It's a load of rubbish anyway" said Brigid flatly as if that would calm us down.

"We better have another drink then before we all kick the bucket" said Grant. So we did.

More people came in and the pub was soon full. We decided that we had to eat something because we had a long night ahead of us. It was getting dark as we wandered down the main street looking for a chip shop. There wasn't one. All we could find was a Spar mini-market which was just closing. They seemed to have a selection of the worst food imaginable. Instant mashed potatoes and tinned carrots.

Emma brought some white sliced bread and processed cheese. We went back to the car where Grant had some mayonnaise and garlic and we ate sandwiches, cutting the garlic into thick slices with a penknife. No one thought about the consequences, it just gave some flavour to the otherwise drab ingredients.

"Death by garlic overdose" said Grant "she didn't see that on the cards"

We tried out a few other bars, they were all full and each had some kind of musical performance. In one pub were a lot of drunken men singing songs about the 'Troubles'. Brigid advised us to leave, and we ended up in a big place with a stage and a dance floor which was full of people over sixty. There was some fierce dancing going on with old ladies who you'd normally consider helping across the street jumping and kicking like teenagers. It was great.

Tom and Brigid disappeared somewhere, and Grant went to get a drink. I was alone with Emma.

"What a place." I said. "What a day."

"What a holiday."

"Yeah, I don't think I've ever had one like it."

"Or will again."

"I don't know if I'm so sad about that" she said.

"Well, it hasn't been all bad."

"It's been pretty bad for me."

"What, with Tom and Brigid, you mean?"

"Yeah, that, and..."

"And what?"

"Well, you."

The dancers were whirling, Grant was standing on the edge of the crowd holding his Guinness. I felt my drunkenness.

"What do you mean, me?"

"You're avoiding me." She looked like she was going to cry.

"I'm not avoiding you, what are you on about?"

"Don't you know?"

"No, what is it?"

"I'm in love with you, you idiot!"

It was as if everything else had gone into slow motion. I stopped hearing the music. Emma and I were now in our own world bound together by the declaration she had just made. I wanted to say "no, you're not, you're in love with Tom. We're friends remember, how can you suddenly be in love with me?" But another part of me was flattered and the part of me that had been wounded by Cheryl was crying out to be held, to be comforted, to be healed. That's my excuse, I suppose, and why, seconds after she'd called me an idiot, I kissed her. We're all weak and we're all selfish, and we all do weak and selfish things. What is worse, using someone as an emotional crutch, or using them to try and win back someone else? She was the

one who used the word "love." Absurd, it would have been better if we'd just honestly told each other what we needed and made some kind of pact, but life's not like that. It's a mess of lies and deceptions, and the people we most deceive are ourselves.

We kissed a bit more. It was nice actually, and once we'd started I didn't want to stop. Luckily we'd both eaten the garlic, so that wasn't a problem. We shared a cigarette, and watched the dancing. An old lady next to us smiled. I prayed she wouldn't say anything. She did.

"That's grand to see, young love."

I tried to smile back, hoping she'd go away. She did. Grant returned trying to hard to act casual. Then Tom and Brigid were there asking if we wanted a pint. I was aware of Emma's head on my shoulder and felt strange. Luckily everyone's attention was taken by an old guy who was standing in the centre of the dance floor. A space was cleared around him and he put two sticks down on the floor in a cross. He then proceeded to dance a kind of sword dance over and around the sticks. It was terrible, the worst dance I'd seen in Ireland, or anywhere else for that matter, a succession of lumbering kicks and hops. Everyone was laughing except the dancer who kept up a frown.

"He must be the landlord" said Grant "No one else would get away with it."

"Yeah" said Brigid. "Or the priest."

This performance was followed by three women who seemed to be grandmother, mother and daughter. They were as good as the man had been bad. They twirled around in and out, behind and in front of each other, linking arms, never dropping a step. I wondered why they weren't internationally famous.

"They must practice at home every night" said Brigid. "Maybe they haven't got a telly."

There was no following that, and shortly afterwards the pub closed. Others were still open and there was music floating down the street as we walked back to the car, but we were all too tired or drunk or both to carry on. Grant said that he was going to camp in the cemetery because it had always been one of his ambitions. It seemed like a strange time to fulfill that ambition but no one felt like arguing. Somehow it worked out that Tom and Brigid were sleeping in the back and me and Emma in the front. She gave me a kiss on the cheek as I was getting into my sleeping bag. I couldn't sleep. It was incredibly uncomfortable, and from the outside I could hear music and the occasional shout of revellers in the village. From the back seat came slurping sounds and whispers until Brigid suddenly said "No!" Then all was quiet. I tried every position possible trying to get comfortable, all in vain. I wished the night would end and we could get back on the road again. Maybe I did sleep a little bit eventually. I noticed it gradually getting light, the music in the pubs stopped and then, after a tractor had driven by, Grant appeared.

"How was your night?" I asked him as I disentangled myself from the sleeping bag.

"Damp."

"Well, it couldn't have been much worse than being in here."

There were some groans from my fellow sufferers. Tom and Brigid got up, as it were, and went off to different corners of the churchyard to piss.

"We better get out of here before the God squad arrives." said Grant.

"Oh shit, yeah, it's Sunday, still they ain't gonna all be rushing to church after last night, are they?"

"I wouldn't bet on it, you know what these Catholics are like, have yer fun on Saturday, confess on Sunday."

"Well, that sword dancing guy should be begging forgiveness."

"Yeah, twenty thousand Hail Marys mate, and don't do it again!"

Emma had to be woken up, seemed she'd slept well. There's always one.

\*\*\*

We drove along listening to "Purple Rain." It was strangely appropriate, fitting both the weather and our mood. When it finished, Tom rewound the tape and we listened to the whole thing again.

I NEVER MEANT TO CAUSE YOU ANY SORROW  
I NEVER MEANT TO CAUSE YOU ANY PAIN....

It was a kind of exquisite sadness. The grey rain outside, a downpour of thoughts in my head.

I NEVER WANTED TO BE YOUR WEEKEND LOVER  
I ONLY WANTED TO BE SOME KIND OF FRIEND  
BABY I COULD NEVER STEAL YOU FROM ANOTHER  
IT'S SUCH A SHAME OUR FRIENDSHIP HAD TO END....

The words took on a kind of tortured significance. They seemed to have been written specifically for me, for this moment. I realised that they could have equal meaning for Emma too, and Tom, and maybe even Brigid. No one said a word until it finished. Even Grant seemed to recognize that this was a special moment. When the final chord faded away Tom said,

"Fuckin' killer tune."

"Yeah" Emma agreed "Good old Prince."

"We used to have a dog called Prince" said Grant, attempting a wind-up. Nobody could be bothered to rise to the bait.

"Oh God" Brigid moaned. "I feel like shit."

"Me too."

"My mouth feels like the Sahara."

"I'm stinkin'. I haven't changed clothes for three days."

"I bet we all reek of garlic."

"Oh shit yeah, I'd forgotten about that."

"I don't think I can make it all the way to Dublin."

"No man, I'm starvin'."

"I'd like to stop in Mullingar" said Tom. "Just to say good-bye to me Gran."

"Oh shit, not Mullingar again."

"Why couldn't she live somewhere nice?"

"Yeah Tom, have a word with her, tell her what a dump Mullingar is."

"Sure, I'll suggest she move to some old folk's home in Jamaica."



"Anywhere, as long as it ain't Mullingar."

"Well, at least we can get some breakfast there."

"A cup of coffee."

"Somewhere to brush yer teeth."

"What we need" announced Grant "is a greasy spoon"

"Yeah" agreed Tom, "full breakfast, bacon, egg, sausage, the works"

"Fried tomatoes" said Emma

"Mushrooms" I added

"And black pudding" said Grant.

Everyone groaned.

"How much further Grant?"

"Dunno, thirty or forty miles."

"Oh no!"

It seemed a huge distance. I thought of trying to sleep to make the time go by. I leant my head against the window and shut my eyes. I felt Emma snuggling up to my shoulder. It felt nice, but I didn't want it. Why not? Why couldn't she just do that as a friend? But she wasn't doing it as a friend. If she's done it two days ago, it would have been fine, but now, well, it was different. But why didn't I want this other thing? She was lovely, a great person. I should be flattered. I was, but I just didn't want it. I really wanted her to be "some kind of friend." Maybe it could work like that, maybe we could be friends who were kind of lovers too. Could that work? It went round and round in my head. And you may ask yourself, how did I get here? There was no way I was going to sleep. I opened my eyes and started silently out at the rain. We passed through a couple of villages. The others weren't talking either. Tom put Brigid's Waterboys tape on. He must be in love I thought to myself.

They were singing a song about fishermen when Tom suddenly shouted,

"Stop!"

"Oh yes!" screamed Grant as we slid to a halt at the side of the road.

"What's goin' on?" I asked.

"The greasy spoon" said Grant

"Where?"

"Look" Tom pointed, and there it was, the sign;

COOKED BREAKFAST

EVERY DAY

HOME COOKING JUST LIKE YER MA'S!

"Oh Jesus, I don't believe it" said Brigid. "We're saved."

We piled out of the car, grabbed our toothbrushes, and went inside, pausing only while I took a photo of Tom and Brigid next to the sign.

It was like somebody's living room. It was somebody's living room. That somebody was a woman of indeterminate age, stout, heavily made up and with dyed black hair slicked down flat on her head with enough grease to oil a tank. We had a fit of giggles when she left the room.

"Just like yer ma!" Said Grant

"Not my ma!" Brigid replied, laughing.

"I'm havin' everything" said Tom.

"Yeah" Grant agreed, "Sausage and bacon and egg and tomatoes and mushrooms and beans and black pudding and fried bread."

"By the way" Tom said "I seem to be a bit, er, financially embarrassed. Can anyone help me out?"

"I knew it" Grant was triumphant "I knew you'd run out of dosh. Well, sorry mate, can't help yer old son, you'll just have to watch while I tuck in"

Tom looked at me pathetically, like a dog in the rain.

"Alright" I caved in "I'll buy yer breakfast"

"Oh man" Grant groaned "You give in too easy, you could've had him washing up for a month!"

A couple came in with their young son, about ten years old or so. They stared at us as they sat down. I suppose we were quite a sight but I was past caring. The greasy woman took our orders and we took it in turns to go to the bathroom to wash and brush our teeth. It was a bathroom too, luckily. The woman and her family obviously lived there. Their toothbrushes hung next to the sink. It was a bit of a weird feeling, suddenly being in a strangers bathroom but it was so great to brush my teeth that I soon forgot it. These people were certainly enterprising, they had just turned their living room into a dining room, and now they were doing a roaring trade saving peoples lives on the main Sligo to Dublin road. Well, not too much of a roaring trade actually. There were us, the family and a truck driver who turned up while I was washing. When I came back he was already in conversation with the family.

"So it's to Drumshanbo yer goin'"

"That's right" replied the dad

"But the fleadh was yesterday"

"We know, we're goin' for the fishin'"

We were all listening after the mention of Drumshanbo.

"Is it Lough Allen then?"

"I'd say so"

"I'm wonderin' how many fish are left in there"

"The same as ever I'd imagine"

The father looked like an insurance salesman. You could tell he didn't want to get into a long conversation with this truck driver who looked like he'd had an even

worse night than us. He looked like he always had that kind of night, but you could tell that he had something to say and nothing was going to stop him.

"Is there some sort of pollution problem?" The father asked warily.

"Oh no, haven't you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"About the beast"

"Beast?"

The child looked silently on, mouth open.

"There were these three fellers see, fishin' in a boat, couple of weeks ago, night fishin'. Well, only one of them made it back"

"What happened?" The father was genuinely interested now, despite himself

"Well, yer man, the survivor like, arrives in the town, first thing in the morning, soaking wet, calling for the guards. So, somebody finds a policeman and yer man tells him that his two pals are dead in the lake. "Well, says the cop, how'd it happen?" "It was terrible," says yer man, "we was fishin', and I'd just got a bite, when suddenly something came up from under the boat, lifted us clear out the water. Threw us in the air, so it did, and we all dropped into the lake. I managed to swim out but not before I'd seen this huge black thing slipping back under the surface. That was the last I saw of me two mates.""

He talked about it as if he'd been there himself.

"Ah come on now, you're kidding" said the dad

"It's as true as I'm sitting here, yer can ask Mary"

The truck driver nodded towards the door, indicating that the greasy woman would back up this unlikely tale.

"And," he continued "there's been lots of sightings since. People from the town go down there in the evening and there's a fair few who've seen the monster by now"

Mary came in with our breakfasts. Big platefuls of all the things that Grant had desired. We tucked in like we hadn't eaten for weeks.

"Isn't it true Mary?" asked the truck driver.

"What's that?"

"About the beast of Lough Allen"

"Oh yes, it was in the paper last week"

Grant choked on his sausage, Brigid rolled her eyes, the father looked genuinely concerned.

"I'll tell you one thing" said the truck driver.

"What's that"

"You wouldn't catch me on a boat on Lough Allen. I wouldn't even fish from the shore. Nobody knows whether the thing can walk on land or not it hasn't been seen walking yet but that doesn't mean it can't. Maybe it's just waiting for the right moment."

I imagined the monster waiting for the right moment. My mouth was full of sausage and egg. I wanted to burst. It was agony. I could feel tears in my eyes. The truck driver finished his bacon sandwich, drank the last of his coffee and, having ruined the family's holiday plans, left. We couldn't laugh though, because the family were still there eating their breakfast in silence wondering what horrors awaited them at Lough Allen. The food was great, almost as good as the entertainment. After the breakfast we drank coffee and smoked. Tom complained about instant coffee and Brigid called him a snob. We all went and brushed our teeth again.

"Looks like we had a close shave there" said Grant after the family had trooped off dismally.

"Especially you, sleeping in that churchyard"

"Oh Jeez" said Brigid "I've never heard such a load of rubbish"

"Well, it was in the paper"

"Of course it was, if a sheep crosses the road it gets in the paper round here. Some old feller had a few too many whiskeys that's all"

"Well, it was a good story anyway"

"All I need now is a shower" said Brigid

We sat there enjoying the surroundings. There was a plastic Virgin Mary lamp on the mantelpiece which Grant wanted to steal.

"That'd be sacrilege" said Brigid.

"Aw, don't start givin' us all that religious shit" said Grant

"I don't mean that. I just mean this woman's just saved our lives. It wouldn't be very nice to repay her by nickin' her stuff would it?"

Grant looked guilty.

"Alright, I've got to admit it, that was the best breakfast I can ever remember."

It wasn't an overstatement but it was unlike Grant to give up so easily.

"I wonder what old Michael Dooley's up to now" said Brigid.

"Probably still walking around looking for his wheels"

"Oh God, and the Bundoran police are probably looking for us"

"I doubt it, they've got more important things to do, like chasin' all those muggers"

"We've met some characters on this trip"

"That tarot woman"

"The poet"

"Con and Kitty"

Even Tom laughed.

"Bloody strange country you live in" said Grant to Brigid.

"Not at all, we just happened to meet all the weirdoes. You could live in my

house in Dublin for a year without anything unusual happening"

"That's hard to believe. I've got the impression the whole place is full of eccentrics. Waiting round every corner they are"

"Well, look where you come from. It's not that normal where you lot live either"

"That's true" I had to agree.

"We wouldn't live there if it was" said Tom.

"Where are we now by the way?" Emma asked

"Somewhere near Longford, wherever that is"

"Pretty near Mullingar" said Tom

"How long are yer gonna be with yer gran?"

"I dunno, twenty minutes, I just wanna say goodbye y'know"

Tom's attitude was admirable, but it was so unlike him that it made me wonder what was behind it. He normally gave the impression of not giving a shit about anything or anybody. The rest of us were unsympathetic though, we all wanted to get to Dublin as soon as possible, have a shower, lie in a real bed, change clothes. The idea of waiting around in Mullingar was distinctly unappealing. Tom must've felt our mood or maybe he was just too lazy to go through with it, because when we drove off he said,

"Let's not stop in Mullingar"

"I thought you wanted to"

"Nah, let's just get back to Dublin, I'll phone to say goodbye"

"Sure, whatever you say"

I drove because Grant said he was "shagged". It was nice having something to concentrate on. There wasn't that much conversation in the car. Everyone was wrapped up in their own thoughts. The weather improved, which is to say it stopped raining and, as we reached Dublin there were even gaps in the clouds.

\*\*\*

Brigid's mum welcomed us as if we'd just got back from a war. Hot cups of tea and showers all round. At one point she asked Brigid,

"What's that oniony smell?"

"We were eating garlic last night"

"Have they got vampires up there in County Leitrim then?"

"No but they've got another type of monster"

We told her about the Beast of Lough Allen.

"Well I'm sure it wouldn't have come near you lot, not with that stink!"

We didn't do anything that evening. No Guinness, no hash. We just sat around with Brigid's mum and watched telly. At one point there was a knock at the door. Brigid's mum answered it.

"It's for you" she told Grant, grinning.

"Me?" Grant pointed at himself.

"Yes, you, Go on now."

He got up, looking puzzled, and went to the door. It was the small boys. They wanted to know if he was coming out with his "One wheel yolk".

"Aren't yer goin' out to play?" Brigid teased.

"Give me a break. Anyway, look what happened last time."

I wondered whether he meant last time in Dublin or last time in Ellen's bar.

Me, Tom and Grant slept on cushions in the sitting room. It was bliss.

When I woke up I lay on the cushions enjoying the cosiness. Suddenly everything seemed clear in my head. I wasn't going back to Rowell Close. I'd sign up with the agency. Then I could work where and when I liked. I wouldn't have to work with Cheryl, or Emma. I'd regain my freedom. Tom and me could get this party thing together. It was all so simple. I began to look forward to getting back to London. It was time for a change. For the first time in months I could see where I was going and it didn't look so bad. Sometimes you find things when you're not looking for them. Tom stirred,

"You awake?" I whispered

"Yeah, just about"

"Sleep alright?"

"Like shit, I had some fuckin' weird dreams"

"No blow"

"Yeah, maybe"

"Whatcha dream about then?"

"Oh something about my gran"

He didn't explain.

We got up late and ate toast with Brigid's mum. She'd already been for a five

mile run. I felt like a scumbag again. While Tom was calling his gran we planned the day.

"Ferry leaves at ten" said Grant "So we've got a bit of time for sightseeing"

"There's a place I should show yez" said Brigid.

"Yeah?"

"The Hell Fire Club"

"What's that?"

"It's like this old ruin on a hill. There's a great view of the city"

"Sounds cool"

Just then Tom came back looking like shit.

"What's up? We've been making plans"

"Well, you better change them"

"Why? What's happened?"

"She's dead"

He slumped in a chair and started to sob. Both Brigid and Emma went and put their arms around him. Me and Grant sat there wondering what to say. There wasn't anything to say. Brigid's mum made a cup of tea. After a long time and a couple of sips of tea, Tom could speak again.

"I should have gone there yesterday"

"You weren't to know"

"Yeah, but for the sake of a quarter of an hour...."

He stared blankly out into the room. Then he started to cry again. I felt terrible and I could see that Grant felt bad too. We'd made it clear that we weren't into stopping in Mullingar. We'd prevented him seeing her for the last time, and all because we were feeling a bit uncomfortable and wanted a shower.

"I'm really sorry Tom"

I wanted to hug him too but there wasn't room with the girls on either side.

I'd never really seen Tom crying before. He'd been close a couple of days before with his father and once when his bike was stolen. This was different though, he was weeping uncontrollably. I felt sad, helpless, guilty and embarrassed.

We drank more tea and Tom decided he'd take the train back to Mullingar. There was a strange silence as we packed our things. After all the highs and lows of the last two weeks we were numbed. I moved automatically, in a dream. It was time to say goodbye to Brigid's mum. She, too was crying by now, although she managed a smile when Grant kissed her on the hand. In town I got a hundred quid from a bank with my card and lent it to Tom. It was the first time I could remember lending him money without begrudging it. I was glad for the opportunity to do something useful. We saw him off at the station where Brigid gave him an extra long hug. I found myself wondering what would happen after the funeral.

We still had some time to kill, so we went to the Hell Fire Club. It was another one of those sunny-cloudy-rainy-sunny days and from the hill we watched the

clouds pass over Dublin. The sun's rays spotlighted various parts of the city. It was quite beautiful. There was an old ruined building up there. Brigid said that some people called the Hell Fire Club used to meet there but she wasn't sure when, or what they did at their meetings. Grant climbed on the roof. No one laughed. He climbed down again. There was a strange hollow feeling among us. Emma and I sat apart and Brigid stared out over the city. We stayed there until sunset exchanging few words. Together but somehow divided.

"What about that woman?" said Grant eventually.

"What woman?"

"The one in the pub, the tarot card woman."

"Oh God" said Brigid "That was just nonsense"

"Yeah, but the death card, know what I mean?"

After sunset we went to Dun Laoghaire for our last pint of real Guinness. Grant stared at his pint as if it were a crystal ball.

"I'm gonna miss this" he said wistfully.

"Me too" I agreed.

"Well, yer can always come back, it's not so far you know" said Brigid. No one answered.

We sat in the same bar on the ferry back. I recognised the stains on the carpet. It wasn't the sort of place you'd want to go back to but we were beyond caring. Grant fell asleep straightaway and I sat next to Emma, near but oceans apart.

"I'm looking forward to getting home" she said.

"Yeah me too" I glanced at her and smiled.

"I wonder what happened to Doug"

"He's probably sitting on his bed reading some book"

"Yeah probably. It's going to be strange seeing him though. I feel really bad about what happened"

"Me too. There wasn't much else we could do though was there? I mean, imagine if he'd come"

"It would've been weird"

"It was weird enough as it was"

"What do you mean?" She looked me in the eye.

"Well, all that stuff with Tom's dad and that"

"And? Anything else?"

"Yeah well, with us"

"So, what is with us?"

I felt uncomfortable and it wasn't just the chair.

"I dunno, Emma, I mean I really like you of course...."

"But..."



I stopped for a moment, waiting for the right phrase to appear in my head. It didn't, or maybe it did.

"You know, I've just been burned"

"Yeah, I know"

"I just don't think I'm ready for something else right now"

It was the truth, but it wasn't the whole truth.

"I kind of knew that all along"

She smiled sweetly and I felt a pang of regret.

"You saved my life"

"When?"

"On the mountain, I would've fallen if you hadn't been there"

"I don't think so"

"I know it" I shuddered at the thought.

"You would've got down somehow"

"I dunno, I had this urge to, like, just let go"

"Well, maybe you can do the same for me one day"

"Alright, it's a deal. Anyway, I just wanted to say thank you"

"You're welcome" she grinned

"You're the only one I talked to about all that Cheryl stuff you know"

"You could've picked someone else"

"No I couldn't, there wasn't anyone else"

"What about Tom?"

"You're joking"

"Don't you talk to him about that sort of thing?"

"He talks, I listen" I smiled at her.

"The funny thing is, I feel sorry for him right now"

"Me too"

"I don't just mean about his gran"

"What else?"

"Oh, all this shit with his dad" She paused and lit a cigarette, "and with Brigid"

"What d'ya mean?"

"It isn't gonna work is it? I mean, she lives in Dublin and he lives in London, and..... I don't know, they're really different aren't they? I was really glad when she went back but now.....now I think it's kind of sad really"

"What's brought this on?"

"I don't know, I just saw how he was with her, You know, how he treated her. Sam was wrong about Tom, saying that he couldn't love and all that. It's not true. He just didn't love me.....and nor do you"

I didn't deny it.

"Someone will Emma, you're a very loveable person"

"Thanks" She smiled. "We're still mates aren't we?"

"You know that"

"I'm going to try and sleep now"

She put two chairs together and curled up. I looked at her and envied her ability to be comfortable in any situation.

She'd saved me. She'd got me down from the mountain. I'd never forget that.

I wasn't going to sleep so I went out on deck and watched the sea.

\*\*\*

The first thing we found out when we got back was that Little Terry was dead. Jo told us as we walked through the door. No one had believed it at first because the story had come from Terry the Truth. He'd been riding a moped, glued up, and had fallen under the wheels of a lorry. The Rat People never did get to play a gig.

Doug was missing too, luckily Emma had his mum's number. We waited in the kitchen while she phoned.

"He's probably in Aberystwyth buskin' in some shoppin' centre or something" said Grant.

"Yeah, I hope so"

The call seemed to take ages. Eventually Emma came back.

"It's alright"

"What happened? Where is he?"

She told the story.

"He called his mum from Holyhead, wanted to borrow some money to get to Ireland. She says "OK, but you've got to come and collect it in person",he went, and she had him checked into a hospital. He's there now."

I have to admit it was a relief.

\*\*\*

I resigned from work on my first day back. Nicola was nice about it. I wondered if she guessed why. We gossiped a bit about the other members of staff until she finally got on to the subject that I was interested in.

"Cheryl's been off work for a couple of weeks" she told me.

"Oh yeah?" I tried to sound uninterested.

"She's pregnant."

It took some time. I wanted to ask 'how long?' but couldn't really. Anyway it didn't matter any more. I wasn't upset, but I wasn't unmoved. I felt a little sad. What had she gone and done now? She'd been the queen of my life and now she felt like a footnote. I tried to imagine her. What was she thinking? What was she feeling? Somehow I couldn't anymore. I'd lost contact. I'd lost the thread. What had happened? Where did my love go? Maybe it hadn't been real.

Maybe it had all been in my imagination. Just my imagination, running away with me. Had I just been kidding myself all along? Whatever, I didn't feel pain, I felt numb.

The day of the funeral it rained. Tom had just got back from his gran's graveside and didn't want to come at first. I knew he would though. He'd loved Little Terry.

"You know something?" He said on the bus to the cemetery "I can't fuckin' cry any more. I've been fuckin' crying for the last week, with my dad, with Brigid, about my gran, about myself. I can't any more"

Emma put her hand on his shoulder and I looked out into the grey streets. It was strange, all that everyday normality. People shopping, waiting for buses. It didn't seem right. Didn't they know what had happened?

There weren't that many people there when we arrived. Just a few of us from the Grove and Terry's mum who was being comforted under an umbrella by Sam. Everyone was wearing black. Black jeans mostly. Stewart had a suit on. Nice touch.

Some vicar bloke made a speech, I dunno, I wasn't listening. Emma cried on Stewart's shoulder, I remember that alright. That was the first time I noticed anything between those two. After the coffin was in the earth I stood under a tree with Tom and Grant smoking.

"What happens now?" said Grant.

"I dunno"

"I mean, it's not like we can just go home is it? You know, just go back to acting normal, like nothing's happened"

"I wanna get pissed" said Tom

"Yeah, me too" I agreed

"I've got me duty free Jamesons at home" said Grant and that was that.

We all went back to Grant's, Emma, Stewart, Sam, Jo, Tom and me. We sat in his living room drinking whiskey in dark silence. You could hear the cars splashing in the the rain outside.

"Fuck!" said Tom at last "That was the worst fuckin' week of my life"

"Unbelievable"

"Poor little fucker"

"Yeah," agreed Grant "Terry never had a chance"

"He never had a hope in hell"

"We should all thank our lucky stars" said Jo.

"Whatcha mean?"

"That our lives might be hard but we've all got a chance"

"A chance of what?"

"A chance to do something different, to do something better. A chance to escape."

No one said anything for a while. When would that chance come? What kind of chance would it be? There was a kind of openness between us, like there was nothing to hide, like we were naked.

"It's all bollocks!" said Tom eventually.

"Come on Tom" said Emma.

"Whatcha mean 'come on'?"

"You've got to let yourself grieve" said Sam.

"I am lettin' myself grieve, whatcha think I'm doin'?" Tom shouted

"Alright, it's alright, we're all here" said Jo.

Emma started sobbing, Stewart put his arm round her. I suddenly thought of Cheryl and said,

"It'll never be the same again"

I didn't know what I meant, it just came out.

"What won't?" asked Grant.

"Nothing, nothing's gonna be the same. Not after..."

I broke off. Not after what? Little Terry? Ireland? Douglas? Emma? Cheryl?

It was quiet again, everyone was waiting for me to finish. They looked at me expecting more. But there was nothing more to say.

\*\*\*

I put the photograph in my pocket, I wasn't going to lose it again, and went to call Emma,

"Hello" I recognised Stewart's accent.

"Alright? Is Emma there?"

She came to the phone,

"What a surprise"

"I just wanted to get in touch"

"Are you coming down to London?"

"Maybe"

"We're going to Amsterdam next week to see Tom"

"He's still there?"

"Yeah, still DJing. He's got a job in some club"

"That's great, what about Grant? What's he up to?"

"Oh, he's off on tour with that Circus thing, doing something with fireworks. Sam's with them too"

"Sounds perfect, I can just imagine it, and you?"

"Oh, just the usual, you know, all the typical support worker stuff. It doesn't change much. I'm applying for a House manager post in Southwark. I should have a chance. I mean, I've got the experience"

I told her about the picture.

"I had to call yer when I found it"

"I'm not even on it"

"Yeah, but, you know what I mean"

"Yeah, it was some holiday, well, not just the holiday, there was loads going on at that time wasn't there?"

"I wanted to say thank you"

"What for?"

"Getting me down the mountain"

"Oh that, it wasn't really a mountain was it?"

"Seemed like it at the time"

"Yeah, true"

"One day I'll pay you back"

"One day never comes" she said, laughing, and I saw Tash's face before me, clear as day.

I wonder if she ever got to see the horses.

I hope so.

**STEPHEN BRAIDEN** (b.1961)

Has worked as a social worker, cycle dispatcher, English teacher, hospital porter, adventure playground worker, actor and dj. He was a songwriter and guitarist in various best forgotten bands in the early eighties and wrote and produced the album 'Until You Get Dizzy' by The Tea Leaf Family. He now lives and works in Berlin.

‘The Greasy Spoon’ is his first novel.

[Start of the book](#)

[Beginning of the novel](#)

# English Publication of the [Wiebers Verlag](#):

Poster: [The Roman Empire](#) by Eva and Sven Wiebers

Translated from German  
By Stephen [Braiden](#)

The millennial history of the Roman Empire is described demonstratively in short paragraphs. The poster shows the regents of the republic and the emperors of the different dynasies well-arranged at time-lines and contains the dates of their times of reign.

Seize 59,4 \* 84 cm; 38 historcal portraits.

